

From Trolley to Trail: A Brief History

After the Civil War, America's cities created new transportation systems that enabled them to prosper and grow. During this time, major rail lines were built to connect Washington, DC with other cities. Smaller electric streetcar or 'trolley' lines connected Washington with its outlying areas. In 1890, the Georgetown and Tenallytown Railway Company operated trolley lines from Georgetown to Montgomery County, using High Street and Tenallytown Road (later to become Wisconsin Avenue).

At about the same time, the Tenallytown and Rockville Railroad extended the line north to Bethesda (Alta Vista). At the end of the line they built a Victorian era 'trolley' park, Bethesda Park, as an incentive for evening and weekend line usage. By the summer of 1893, it was one of DC's most popular amusement parks, complete with roller coasters, daredevil aeronautic performances, a dance hall, and hotel. In the fall of 1896, Bethesda Park was destroyed by a hurricane and the park was closed, never to re-open.

In 1897, the two railroads merged and by 1900 they completed an extension to the county seat of Rockville. At the turn of the century, trolleys transported people to DC for work and carried throngs of city dwellers to the country for the annual agricultural fair in Rockville. Trolleys moved goods from Georgetown shops to those living in the farming communities along the line and took local produce from these county farms to the DC markets. Trolleys made it possible for local students to attend the new suburban schools, as well as secondary schools in DC.

Washington Railway and Electric Company acquired these merged railroads in 1902. Washington Railway eventually became part of Capital Transit Company. In 1935, the Rockville line ceased operation, leaving gasoline-powered buses to become the only mode of public transportation serving this corridor until the Metrorail Red Line extension to Shady Grove was opened in 1984.

The new Bethesda Trolley Trail utilizes much of the original trolley right-of-way. Since the opportunity for this rail-trail was first identified in the 1978 Countywide Bikeways Master Plan, the County has been requiring new land developments to dedicate land and construct portions of the trail. In 2004, the County Council authorized funding for the Department of Public Works and Transportation to design and construct many of the missing trail segments.

Wherever possible, the Bethesda Trolley Trail utilizes low-impact urban design principles of environmentally-sensitive "green design."



Photograph courtesy of Gladys Smith Clements

In the 1890's, Tenallytown trolley cars, such as this one, made their way from Georgetown to the District boundary at Western Avenue using overhead electric power. An elaborate underground electric system was required for all downtown trolley systems; however, at that time, Georgetown was not considered 'downtown'.



Photograph by Lewis Reed, from Charles Brewer Collection, Fairfax, Rockville

In this photograph dated 1910, a trolley heads south from Rockville toward Tenallytown through open farmland. This view, south of Montrose Road where it intersects with Rockville Pike, shows the Villa Roma restaurant and hotel in the foreground, and Old Georgetown Road in the background.

Passengers board car # 596 heading to Rockville in 1908. These distinctively styled cars, popularly known as "Rockville" cars, were also used on Washington Railway's Maryland line. Note the 'cow catcher' on the front.



Photograph of the Red Leathers boarding a trolley from the Charles Brewer Collection, Fairfax, Rockville



This map shows the original trolley routes that connected city and county. The Rockville line started as a double track to the District line, switching to a single track for the rest of the way. In addition to the station stops shown, sidings or passing tracks allowed one trolley car to pull over so that another, coming in the opposite direction, could pass.

BETHESDA TROLLEY TRAIL

A new urban greenway linking Bethesda and Rockville for bicyclists, runners and pedestrians.

THE MONTGOMERY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC WORKS AND TRANSPORTATION BIKeways PROGRAM
For Information Call: 240-777-7220

Status of Trail Development

The Bethesda Trolley Trail is one of eight rails-to-trails conversions in the Washington, DC area. Today, the BTT is continuous over six miles through use of three trail types: off-street shared-use paths, on-street links using residential streets, and sidewalks. To meet urban bikeway standards, improvements are planned for the following areas:

- along Bou and Chapman Avenues,
- along and across Rockville Pike and future Montrose Parkway,
- adjacent to NIH and Old Georgetown Road (Charles - McKinley Streets)
- south of NIH and in Battery Lane Park.

Tips for Trail Users

Families and Recreational Users: Enjoy the BTT between Edson Lane and Charles Street, while taking care at street crossings.

Fast-moving Bicycle Commuters: Reduce speed and exercise caution while using busy sidewalk and trail sections north of Nicholson Lane and along Old Georgetown.

All Users: The BTT along the south edge of NIH is narrow and hilly, but recently paved, very beautiful and well lit at night.