

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Peter C. Kohler. *Capital Transit: Washington's Street Cars, The Final Era 1933-1962*. Colesville, Md.: National Capital Trolley Museum, 2001. 445 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-9712936-0-1.

Reviewed by Zachary M. Schrag (Department of History, Columbia University)
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Days of Green and Cream

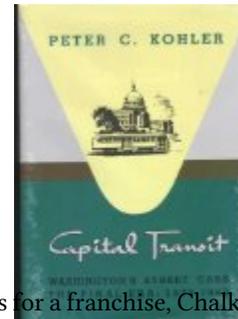
Capital Transit is written for people already fascinated by the history of street railways in Washington, D.C. General readers curious about the role of streetcars in the life of the city are likely to be disappointed, but dedicated streetcar fans will find in the book all manner of information, from maps of individual routes to descriptions of milestones in track renewal to a set of thirty-three color photographs of streetcars on the streets of Washington, published here for the first time. Starting with an individual streetcar's serial number, one can often trace its progress from factory to junkyard, learning along the way its dimensions, color schemes, division assignments, and routes.

>From its creation by merger in 1933 through the late 1940s, Capital Transit was known as one of the finest transit operations in the country. Bowing to Congressional mandate, it powered its cars downtown through conduits in the street, sparing monumental Washington the visual clutter of overhead wires. From 1937 to 1946, the company deployed hundreds of PCC cars, the most modern available. And during World War II, it carried hundreds of millions of riders each year, making a vital contribution to the war effort. But after the war, securities laws forced Capital Transit's parent company to separate its transit operations from its electric power operations, which had been subsidizing the streetcars. The transit company was purchased by Louis Wolfson, apparently the only investor who realized that a company with \$7 million in cash reserves might be worth a \$2.2 million purchase price. Wolfson stripped the company of its cash and so strained labor relations that the union launched a 51-day strike in 1955. The now-despised Wolfson agreed to sell the company to O. Roy Chalk, who renamed it D.C.

Transit. As part of the negotiations for a franchise, Chalk agreed to convert all streetcar operations to bus routes, a task he completed in 1962. The company's final decade as a bus operation is beyond the scope of this book, for Kohler cares only for streetcars.

In his introduction, Kohler pays tribute to an earlier work, Leroy O. King's *100 Years of Capital Traction*.^[1] Indeed, Kohler follows the basic format of King's book and other enthusiast texts, combining a chronology of events with hundreds of photographs and a series of technical appendices. Whereas King, true to his title, covers a century of surface rail transit in the capital, from the first horse-drawn cars of 1862 to the running of the last electric streetcar in 1962, Kohler focuses on the last three decades of streetcar operation, providing more detail about rolling stock and ways and structures for that period than King possibly could.

At times Kohler transcends his reference format and his focus on equipment, breaking up the narrative with stand-alone essays on such topics as the persistent exclusion of African-Americans from jobs as motormen, the welcoming of white women into those same jobs during World War II, debates about underpasses, the work of maintaining the system, experiments with piped-in radio and air-conditioning, and, touchingly, the origins of the National Capital Trolley Museum. These essays—some of which are presented as separate appendices, while others are interspersed throughout the chronology—provide a sense of the human side of streetcar operations that is often missing from the chronology. Unfortunately, several of these essays are omitted from the table of contents, requiring readers to hunt through the book for them. Nor do any of the essays take on the questions of decision-making by business executives, engineers, and public of-



ficials that could explain the rise and fall of the streetcar in Washington.

A more general problem, in both the main text and the supplementary essays, is a lack of footnotes. Though Kohler does include a one-page bibliography and scattered citations within his text, for the most part the reader must take his facts and figures on faith, diminishing the book's function as an authoritative reference source. In addition, the book suffers from uneven production values. While the photographs, both color and monochrome, are nicely reproduced, line art, including maps and streetcar plans, is jagged and blurred, victim of shoddy digitization. Most of the book's text is set in a sans-serif font that makes for wearisome reading. And

the index, a vital tool for any reference work, is difficult to use, with individuals, for example, listed not by last name but by first name, or, in some cases, title. Thus, John F. Kennedy appears not under K or even J, but S, for "Senator."

In the end, *Capital Transit* is a book of few surprises. It offers an astonishing amount of technical detail in a single package without attempting to provide an interpretive framework that could make sense of that detail.

Note

[1]. Leroy O. King, *100 Years of Capital Traction* (College Park, Md.: Taylor Publishing Company, 1972).

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