



This open sided Cumberland Electric Railway trolley car is transporting passengers from Narrows Park to Centre Street in Cumberland.

Trolleys: the Forgotten Rail Lines of Allegany County

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Steam engines were the titans of Western Maryland's transportation industry in the first half of the 20th century. Much of the region's growth was due to its location as a railroad center for carriers like the Baltimore and Ohio, the Cumberland and Pennsylvania Railroad, the Georges Creek and Cumberland, and Western Maryland Railway. But not all rail transportation was cost effective because labor intensive steam locomotives, when used for passenger service, often failed to earn a profit and electric railways proved to be more efficient and environmentally friendly. They were called streetcars, or trolleys, or interurbans if they connected towns to one another. Allegany County boasted several street car companies that provided decades of service to residents.

Local service began amidst great excitement when the Cumberland Electric Railway inaugurated operations on July 4, 1891, as it transported passengers along North Centre Street to Narrows Park. Fares were five cents. The company speculated its street car service would be enhanced by a recreational complex, so a decision was made to purchase 15 acres of land in an area formerly known as Seiss' Picnic Grove, at the western end of the Cumberland Narrows near the present day Starlight Skating Rink along U.S. Route 40. Development of the area included a soda fountain, dance and roller skating pavilion, and bandstand. Kirkstetler Amusement leased the land in 1914 and improved the facilities by installing a roller coaster, merry-go-round, and miniature railroad. Large crowds patronized the park

for summer events, causing the trolley company to add extra, open sided cars to handle the traffic.

Two Cumberland Electric Railway lines also extended southward to Virginia Avenue via Wineow Street, and the other used Maryland Avenue. Another line served the west side crossing the Western Maryland Railway's tracks and following Greene Street to the Dingle turnaround. A branch line offered service to Lee Street, crossed Washington Street to Fayette Street, where it turned west and terminated at Rose Hill Cemetery. An extension of the Cumberland Electric Railway occurred in 1925, when South End service was provided through the B&O underpass thereby giving city residents an efficient mass transit system totaling nearly nine miles. During its heyday, the company employed 35 full time workers and several extra, part-time rail crews during summer months.

Smaller trolley lines were incorporated in 1901 in surrounding towns. The Frostburg, Eckhart, and Cumberland Railway Company operated between Frostburg and Cumberland. The Lonaconing, Midland and Frostburg Railway Corporation and the Westernport and Lonaconing Railway Company completed service to George's Creek. Consolidation of the trolley lines occurred in 1902 when the Cumberland and Westernport Electric Railway was formed. The C&WE provided service from Cumberland to LaVale, Eckhart, Frostburg, Midland, Lonaconing, Barton, Westernport and all intermediate points. Coal miners were frequent passengers whose commute to work was made easier by trolley service. Fares were reasonable; Cumberland to Westernport was 90 cents while a Frostburg trip cost 30 cents. Allegany County's mass transit system was efficient and affordable, but trends developed that made trolleys the forgotten rail service of Western Maryland.



Photo courtesy Paupe Collection

This early 20th Century photograph shows the stone bridge in the Cumberland Narrows that was constructed in 1834 and used until 1932.

The economic prosperity of the 1920's meant that automobiles were becoming more affordable and an accompanying need to upgrade roads to accommodate the surge in automobile traffic spelled doom for electric systems. Trolley ridership began to decline in the late 1920's to the point that service was terminated between Cumberland and Frostburg in 1927. Cumberland's streetcars managed to hang on until 1:30 am on May 16, 1932 when the last car entered the service barn on North Centre Street, thereby closing another chapter on local transportation history. The abandoned Narrows Park facilities, a victim of the Great Depression, survived until 1946, when they too were torn down.

Today, only a few visible reminders of Allegany County's trolley system remain. The C&WE terminal on Water Street in Frostburg still stands with cornerstone intact, and trolley tracks occasionally peek through blacktop surfaces on city streets in Cumberland, providing a glimpse of a mass transit system that disappeared more than seven decades ago.

