

Early century residents could get there from here by trolley

By June W. Kennedy

The coming of the electric trolley car lines at the turn of the century played its part in the growth of this community. Thomas Edison's invention of the electric motor and its application to a passenger car on rails had created a wave of enthusiasm.

Thus it was that, in 1905, plans were proposed to build an inter-urban line from Ayer to Forge Village and eventually to a connection with the Boston and Northern Street Railway (later Eastern Mass. Railway) at North Chelmsford.

Several routes were presented, including one to Graniteville, thence to Westford Center via Graniteville Road to Cold Spring Road, thence across the fields to Forge Village Road (due to heavy grades on Graniteville Road), and to the Center, continuing down Depot Street to Lowell Road to Brookside, and on to North Chelmsford.

Reported loud protests against the cutting of shade trees to enable stringing of trolley wires on upper Main Street led to the abandonment of this proposal.

The road was then constructed through Graniteville, and continued straight out through the woods, crossing Nutting Road on stone abutments to Groton Road near the Baretto Monument Works, continuing past the Fletcher Quarries and to the square in North Chelmsford. It opened in June 1906.

Apparently this service was well received from its beginning; cars operated in both directions every 45 minutes. It proved to be a great convenience to patrons from Forge Village and Graniteville.

Local travelers from Westford and Brookside (Nabnasset) were still without such service. Sufficient agitation was generated to convince the Street Railway that a "branch line" should be provided.

Such a line was proposed and laid out from the so-called Triangle near North Chelmsford into West Chelmsford, to Brookside, and to Westford via Lowell Road, Cummings Road to Depot Street and along Main Street to the Common.

Litigation ensued over the crossing of electric cars at Brookside station. The state railroad

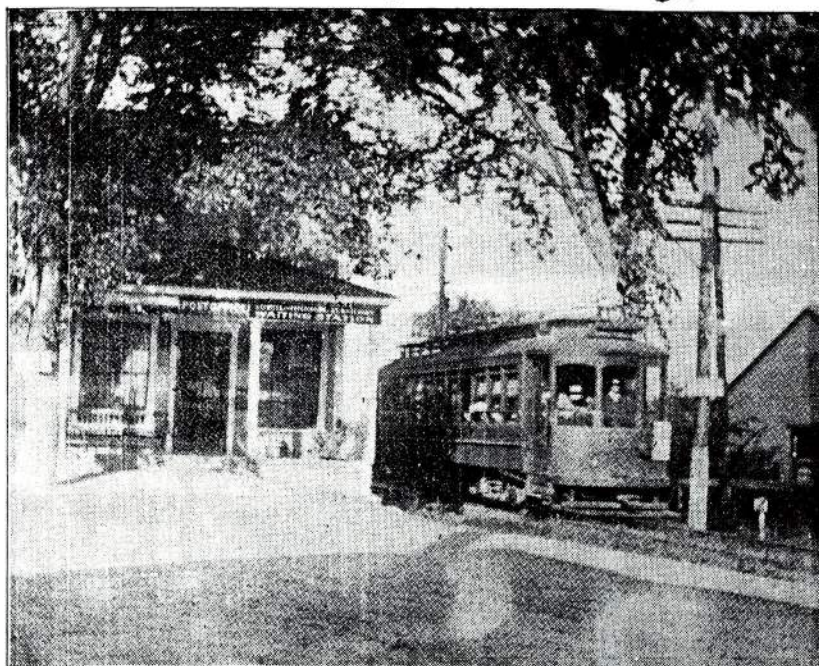


Photo courtesy of June W. Kennedy

The "waiting station" in Forge Village in the early years of this century was a stopping point for the inter-urban trolley line opened from Ayer to Forge in 1906. Eventually the line connected with the Boston & Northern Street Railway, later Eastern Massachusetts Railway, at N. Chelmsford. Cars operated in both directions every 45 minutes.

commissioner's final ruling that no crossing would be allowed there necessitated a change of cars on either side of the Boston & Maine tracks.

Construction continued in the summer of 1906 and the line from the junction on Groton Road to Brookside opened on Dec. 1 of that year. Work continued as weather permitted; on May 25, 1907, the first car on test was run to Westford Center. Road officials and selectmen, Sherman H. Fletcher, Edward Fisher and William G. Edwards were on board. When the first car arrived, the pupils of the grammar school (the present Tadmuck Club building on Boston Road) formed an impromptu reception committee.

Eyewitness account

Elizabeth Cushing Taylor: "The first electric car came to Westford Centre Thursday, May 23, 1907. When Miss Harriet Miller, teacher in the upper room grades 4 through 8, rang the bell to call the pupils in from morning recess, not a child was to be seen. Like the Pied Piper of Hamelin they had disappeared as if by magic.

"Going to the road and looking up the street to the Common and

seeing the figures moving and hearing voices and laughter, the two teachers rushed up to see what was happening. There at the end of the car tracks, just opposite the Unitarian Church, stood this wonderful new electric car and many of the children had never seen one. They were in and out of the doors, feeling of the outside, and demonstrating their joy and approval. What a reception!

"The next Saturday, May 25, 1907, the first car left the Common at 7 a.m. and there was so much noise that soon the two school marms joined the happy group to see the first regular trip made to Lowell. Progress had come to Westford!"

Local speeches in behalf of this new service opined the line to be a great convenience to citizens of Westford, especially the Center. Henceforth the first car left Westford daily at 6:15 a.m., and hourly service was advertised until 10:35 p.m.

The rail superintendent noted that "first class service was being provided patrons of the Spur Line, the cars keeping close to schedule time."

■ TROLLEY-PAGE 12

Early century electric trolley lines

TROLLEY-FROM PAGE 7

Apparently "first class service, with cars on time" did not suffice for this new line to make a profit or even break even. The record indicates that one fare increase was shortly implemented, and another proposed in the first year of operation.

On the second proposal, the Selectmen interceded and advanced a fare schedule of their own with a stern admonition that regular patronage of the line was mandatory, or the line would cease.

The winter of 1909-10 was severe, with much snow and ice; the Street Railway refused to underwrite the expense of clearing the line, and the service was closed until spring. Much of the income came from the transportation of school children in the area, and voluntary collections

from Westford's citizens were regularly taken.

Many town meetings continued articles of appropriation for the "branch line". However, the total income only allowed the barest maintenance; repairs to track and trolley wire were deferred or at best sketchy.

Actually, the service was the least desirable of any means of reaching Lowell or way stations; the B&M at Westford Depot offered service three times a day with a 20-minute ride as opposed to the trolley service of over an hour and two changes of cars.

Abandonment of line

The "branch line", in spite of this adversity, continued through World War I. Shortly thereafter, with lessening of war shortages, better roads and increased use of automobiles, the service was discontinued. The

date of 1920 constitutes official abandonment.

The remaining line from North Chelmsford to Ayer through Graniteville and Forge Village, and the branch to Brookside, continued until 1929. At this time the Eastern Mass. Street Railway took over the through line and provided service until 1932; the Brookside line was discontinued.

From 1932 until 1935, the Eastern Mass. Co. provided bus service for a while in the hopes of retaining some business. It scheduled routes throughout the Westford villages. It was in 1935 that Marinel of North Chelmsford took over the bus service which continued until the beginning of World War II.

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