

# Snohomish County History Series

*29 miles over 29 years*

## The Seattle-Everett Interurban Railway, 1910-1939

### Interurban Route Map

By [Frederick Bird](#)  
(Written in May 2000)

In their heyday in the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, electric rail systems, called "interurbans," flourished all over the United States. They filled a crucial niche in regional transportation systems before fading away against the onslaught of the automobile, only to rise again in popularity as the century closed as one solution to automobile congestion.

The longest lasting interurban line in Washington connected Seattle with Everett for 29 years—over a distance of 29 miles. The *Everett Daily Herald* was prophetic about the eventual comeback of interurbans when, on February 20, 1939, the newspaper covered the last run of that rail line:

"The Everett-Seattle Interurban, the last in the state of its kind, will be but a memory, having served long and well, to be replaced at last by modern modes, which too, in all probability, will eventually pass away." (1)

It would be another 57 years before the first successful public vote in the Everett-Seattle area would officially reconsider the value of those "modern modes" and switch tracks partially back to rail transportation, to the modern interurban, now called "light rail." (2)



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Asahel Curtis photographed Two American Car Company interurbans in 1907. According to Warren Wing in *To Seattle by Trolley*, Fred Sander purchased these cars new. In 1910 Stone & Webster sold them to Seattle where they remained in service until 1940.

### Roadless vacuum filled

At the dawn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the automobile and all its subspecies were still a novelty. More rare still were decent roads. Mud farm tracks were the norm and paved roads (brick at first) would come slowly. Regular stream-driven railroads, of course, ran between most cities but passenger service, competing for track space with freight trains, was not frequent enough to satisfy the growing demands of the new suburban commuters. In the central Puget Sound region of Washington, the geography of railroad routes hugged the coast north of Seattle, bypassing the growing hinterlands and adding to the passenger service gap. Waterborne travel via privately owned "Mosquito" (3) fleets serviced coastal communities but did not offer convenient travel options to the multitude of people moving out to the subdivided, cutover timberlands of the inland suburbs.



**EVERETT Terminal:** The dispatcher's cupola is still attached to the original Everett interurban terminal -- the cupola is the blue bay-window-like structure in the middle of the second floor. Today, the building, located at the northwest corner of Pacific and Colby Avenues, houses medical offices. The third floor was added in later years.

Interurbans were created to meet this need. These self-propelled railcars were larger and more powerful versions of the electric street railways or streetcars, already hard at work in Seattle. Strong but economical motors powered by electricity from overhead lines allowed the interurbans to climb steep hills and reach speeds of 70 miles an hour on flats. The larger cars sat 40 passengers comfortably. A 1988 article in *The Herald* of Everett said, "The cars were ornate and luxurious with inlaid mahogany interiors, leaded windows with colored glass, black leather seats and brass fixtures." (4) At their height of popularity in Washington, interurbans provided service around Spokane, Walla Walla and Yakima, between Mt. Vernon and Bellingham, between Tacoma and Seattle, between Everett and Snohomish, and, of course, between Everett and Seattle.



In Snohomish County the old interurban route is owned by Snohomish County Public Utility District No. 1, which runs power lines along the right-of-way.

In the 1990s, Snohomish County and the cities of Everett, Mountlake Terrace and Lynnwood built about a 13-mile pedestrian and bicycle trail, called the **Interurban Trail**. It starts at its north end (pictured here) just west of the Everett Mall at the south end of West Mall Dr., and runs south to about 226th St. SW in Mountlake Terrace.

## Entrepreneurship

Fred Sander was a turn-of-the-century Seattle entrepreneur who made his mark in local trolleys and trains. Credited with building the Yesler Way cable car line in 1888, and also the Grant Street Electric Railway from Seattle to Georgetown (just north of the current Boeing Field [King County Airport]), he also constructed the first six miles of the interurban line from Seattle to Tacoma. By 1900 he was looking north for opportunity in the undeveloped territory between Seattle (pop. 80,000 in 1900) and Everett (pop. 7,800). (5) He founded the Everett and Interurban Railway Company, later reorganized as the Seattle-Everett Interurban Railway Company—the addition of the "Seattle" moniker helped to attract investment. (6)

Starting in Ballard, Sander's new rail line reached six miles north to Bitter Lake (now 130<sup>th</sup> Street) in King County by 1906. A year later he extended the line Hall's Lake in Snohomish County (212<sup>th</sup> Street). In Ballard, the line ran up 15<sup>th</sup> Avenue to 85<sup>th</sup> Street and east from there to a point just beyond Greenwood Avenue, where it turned north on a private right-of-way. (7) Both passenger and freight traffic contributed to the line's initial success. Most freight was hauled in the dead of night to avoid interfering with passenger car schedules.

## Consolidation

Just as Sander was getting the business rolling, a powerful new player, the Boston-based firm of Stone & Webster, entered the scene. Stone & Webster was a consultant-management company that specialized in the systematic acquisition of both electrical utility companies and electric streetcar and interurban lines throughout the United States. In the Seattle area during the last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it bought out and consolidated most of the streetcar business and all of the local power companies into an enterprise called Puget Sound International Railway & Power Company. Except for populist bumps on the road when Seattle took back the power business to form Seattle City Light in 1902 (8) and bought out the city trolley system in 1917, Stone & Webster dominated the regional transportation and power business for the next half century. (9) It would eventually change its name to Puget Power and Light, and in a merger with Washington Energy in 1997, rename itself Puget Sound Energy. (10)



**Ronald Place**, just east of Aurora Ave. at N. 176th St., offers one of the last views of the original Pacific Highway (Aurora Ave.), first paved with bricks. The Ronald interurban station was to the left, just beyond the bank drive-in building.

In 1908 Stone & Webster bought Sander's company, renamed it the Seattle-Everett Traction Company, and quickly set about extending the line north almost 14 miles to Everett through territory much of which was still covered with old growth timber. (11) At the same time they changed the south end of the line. Sander's original route through Ballard was too long for efficient service into downtown Seattle. A new route was laid out south down Greenwood Avenue, continuing on Phinney Avenue to 47<sup>th</sup> Street where it jogged over to Fremont Avenue and down the hill and eventually across the Fremont Bridge. (12)

Crossing the ship canal, the route continued south along Westlake Avenue to 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue and the lobby of the Shirley Hotel, between Pike and Pine, which served as the first depot. The depot moved in 1919 to a converted trolley barn at 6<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Olive. In 1927, the owners relocated the depot one last time to a new building at 8<sup>th</sup> Avenue and Stewart—the site of the current Seattle Greyhound Bus Terminal. (13)



Looking south along **Echo Lake** just below North 200th St., the old interurban right-of-way, is still clearly visible on the left.

The original Everett depot was a small building at the corner of Colby Avenue and Wall Street. In 1910, Stone & Webster moved the depot one block south to a new two-story brick building at the northwest corner of Colby and Pacific Avenues. (14) This structure still stands, though it has been modified by the subsequent addition of a third floor. A notable feature of the original depot, a dispatcher's cupola, is still in place on the north side of the building. The cupola is a triangular-shaped bay window that allowed the dispatcher to see out into the train yard. (15)

## Off to a good start, then...

Stone & Webster completed the line to Everett in 1910 and launched the inaugural run south on April 30<sup>th</sup> with a carload of company officials and Everett civic leaders. (16) There were 30 stations along the 29-mile route. Trains left both depots every half-hour from 5 a.m. until 7 p.m., and hourly after that, until almost midnight. Except for the depots at either end, all the stations were "flag stops" where passengers waved down the passing interurban. At night, customers turned on a light to signal the train to stop. (17) Most stations had little traffic, which was just as well since there was a tight schedule to keep—one hour and 10 minutes each way. Between Silver Lake (112<sup>th</sup> Street) and Alderwood (196<sup>th</sup> Street) in Snohomish County the interurbans often attained speeds of 55-60 miles per hour, but when they reached the Seattle city limits at 85<sup>th</sup> Street, their speed plummeted because city automobile and trolley traffic invariably got in the way. South of 85<sup>th</sup> Street, the interurban used city trolley tracks and was contractually forbidden from picking up local (intracity) passengers. (18)

Ridership had its ups and downs from the beginning. The line was popular at first, but in 1915 passengers switched to rural buses because of the more flexible routes. America's entry into World War II perked up the interurban economy as soldiers were hauled back and forth. (19) Business was also helped by the transportation of paving bricks for the construction of the nearby Bothell-Everett Highway (State Route 527). (20) The Playland amusement park at Bitter Lake and the Snohomish County fairgrounds near Silver Lake additionally increased ridership, although this demand was seasonal.



One of the very few archaeological remnants of the Everett-Seattle interurban still visible, other than the right-of-way itself, is this bridge abutment which dominates the southwest corner of Aurora Ave. and North 155th St.

Interurbans, however, remained a marginal business because of ever-increasing competition from cars, trucks and buses, and the construction of roads to serve them. Even Stone & Webster saw the light of convenient and flexible bus service and starting their own bus line in 1915. In one case, however, buses actually increased interurban ridership. Stone & Webster also owned an interurban line that ran from Mt. Vernon north to Bellingham, and when they offered connecting bus service between Everett to Mt. Vernon, linking the interurbans, traffic on both lines increased. (21) Still, the handwriting was on the proverbial wall. Plagued by maintenance challenges and declining ridership, Stone & Webster closed the Mt. Vernon-Bellingham interurban in 1930. Termination of interurban service south from Seattle to Tacoma followed closely.



Leaving Seattle the interurban ran north on city trolley tracks as far as N. 85th St. where it turned on to a private right-of-way, pictured here at its southernmost visible site, on N. 86th St., between Evanston and Fremont. Seattle City Light maintains the right-of-way in King County.

## End of the road

In 1932, the George Washington Memorial Bridge (Aurora Bridge) opened. Buses had speedy, direct routes into downtown Seattle that the interurban could not match. Then in 1936, the Seattle Municipal Railway started to convert from streetcars to electric buses. Without Seattle to help defray city track maintenance costs, expenses for the interurban system, now called the North Coast Lines, increased. The Depression was the last straw.

The company's decision to abandon the service, announced on January 20, 1939, had been expected. The headline in the *Everett Daily Herald* said simply, "Once Busy Interurban Line to Discontinue Service." The article went on to say, "The Everett-Seattle Interurban, once part of an ambitious dream of railroad builders to girdle the state with electric railways, has succumbed to changed transportation methods." The caption to an accompanying photograph of an interurban car said it more gracefully: "The line, which once traversed beautiful stands of virgin timber and skirted limpid lakes, will be abandoned and the customers along the right of way will be served by sleek gasoline-burning buses, whose coming years ago foretold the doom of the Interurban cars." (22)

On Feb. 20, 1939, the line's last day, the *Herald* grew even more poetic: "Tuesday morning the sun will beat down on two parallel steel rails winding south from Everett, shiny and still. Another monument to man's winning of the West will be hushed, the last remnants to be slowly dulled by rust and buried from sight by the encroachment of nature." (23)



"Waiting for the Interurban" in Fremont is one of Seattle's favorite examples of civic art, but the wait could be a long one since the interurban didn't run on N. 34th St., but continued south across the Fremont Bridge.

## Back to the future...

Three decades later, in 1968, Seattle-area voters considered the first of several opportunities, then entitled "Forward Thrust," to solve the problems of ever-increasing automobile pollution and congested highways by reinvesting in more modern interurbans—called "light rail" to distinguish them from the regular "heavy" railroads. Voters turned the measure down then, and again two years later. Twenty-five years passed before the Regional Transit Authority once more placed a transportation program on the ballot. Voters again declined. In 1996 voters finally approved a pared-down new transit program for the region, called [Sound Transit](#), that included a light rail system from the SeaTac Airport through downtown Seattle and north only to the Northgate area. (24)

## The Interurban Trail

After abandoning the North Coast Lines interurbans in 1939, Puget Power kept the right-of-way and converted it to a power line corridor. Title to segments of the corridor was passed to Seattle City Light and Snohomish County Public Utility District No. 1.

Except for a portion of the interurban route buried by Interstate 5 just north of Lynnwood, most of the original route from N. 85<sup>th</sup> Street in Seattle to the Everett Mall is still recognizable. In the mid-1990s, Snohomish County and the cities of Lynnwood and Everett opened an 11.8-mile pedestrian and bicycle trail, called "[The Interurban Trail](#)," which runs from the Everett Mall to Lake Ballinger on the Snohomish-King County line. Future links to other trail systems are planned.

<b>Trolley Links</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Interurban Route Map</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Issaquah Valley Trolley</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Yakima Valley Trolleys</a></li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Association of Railway Museums</a></li> <li>• <a href="#">Oregon Electric Railway Historical Society</a></li> </ul>

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 "Everett-Seattle Interurban line to Sing 'Swan Song'." *Everett Daily Herald*, 20 Feb. 1939, p. 1.
- 2 *Regional Transit history and chronology*. Seattle, Washington: Sound Transit. Available from [www.soundtransit.org/facts/history.html](http://www.soundtransit.org/facts/history.html). Accessed 12 May 2000.
- 3 The term "mosquito" devolved from the early morning and evening commuter runs of the boats—prime mosquito-biting time.
- 4 May, Allan. "Interurban." *The Herald*, 1 May 1988, sec. A, p. 1
- 5 Wing, Warren W. *To Seattle by Trolley*. Edmonds, Washington: Pacific Fast Mail, 1988, p. 13.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 80
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 8 Seattle City Light – a brief History. Seattle, Washington. Available at [www.pan.ci.seattle.wa.us/light/aboutus/history/ab5\\_brhs.htm](http://www.pan.ci.seattle.wa.us/light/aboutus/history/ab5_brhs.htm). Accessed 14 May 2000.
- 9 Wing. p. 15 & 19.
- 10 Dunphy, Stephen H. "Puget Sound Energy ready to plug in." *Seattle Times*, 5 Feb 1997.
- 11 Wing. p. 21.
- 12 According to Walt Shannon, 90, the last living Everett interurban motorman, before the Fremont Bridge was built in 1917 (concurrently with the opening of the ship canal), the interurban crossed the west end of Lake Union on a wooden trestle bridge that ran south from the foot of Stoneway Avenue. Shannon was interviewed on May 4, 2000. Leslie Blanchard's *The Street Railway Era in Seattle, a Chronicle of Six Decades* (Forty Fort, Penn.: Harold E. Cox, 1968, p. 91) offers an excellent photograph of the Stoneway Bridge. Shannon also noted that Seattle's beloved civic art statue, "Waiting for the Interurban," in Fremont is not in the right place. The interurban ran on Fremont Avenue, not on 34<sup>th</sup> Street where statue was placed. Shannon died in 2003.
- 13 Wing. p. 21.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 31
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 22
- 16 *Ibid.*, P. 21.
- 17 Moriarty, Leslie. "Ex-motorman recalls the age of the trolley." *The Herald*, 31 July 1997.
- 18 Shannon interview.
- 19 Wing, 79-81.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 81.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 83.
- 22 "Once Busy Interurban Line to Discontinue Service." *Everett Daily Herald*, 20 Jan. 1939, p. 1.
- 23 "Everett-Seattle Interurban Line to Sing 'Swan Song'." *Everett Daily Herald*, 20 Feb. 1939, p. 1.
- 24 *Regional Transit history and chronology*. Accessed 15 May 2000.