

Charlotte LYNX:

A RAIL HISTORY LESSON

Photo courtesy of Joe the Photog

By Rich Sampson

Similar to many cities in the southern United States, Charlotte has experienced a rapid increase in population since the mid-1970s, largely fueled by the region's significant financial and banking sector. But, like nearly every American city, its establishment was fostered by the railroads. The Charlotte & Columbia Railroad first laid its tracks in 1847 and was reorganized in 1852 as the Charlotte & South Carolina. Although General Sherman's Union troops destroyed the route during their march across the south in 1865, Charlotte was already an active railroad hub with the Wilmington, Charlotte & Rutherford, Atlantic, Tennessee & Ohio and the state-built and owned North Carolina Railroad meeting in the upstart town – the latter of which is still in service across North Carolina today (*for more on the North Carolina Railroad, see RAIL #6 – ed*). Ultimately, Charlotte settled into its role as a nexus for consolidated railroads that formed in the southeast in the 1890s, when the Southern, Seaboard Air Line and Norfolk Southern railways brought their flagship trains through Charlotte.

The prominence of railroading in driving Charlotte's economy gradually declined through the 20th Century, and by the mid-1970s, banking had taken root as the region's key economic force. Hugh McColl, a Charlotte financier, formed the North Carolina National Bank, which ultimately became Bank of America. Meanwhile, First Union grew to become the bank known as Wachovia. Measured in terms of the control of assets, Charlotte trails only New York City as the nation's leading banking center. The area also hosts another six Fortune 500 companies.

The rise of the financial services sector, along with steady growth in technology, educational institutions and automotive manufacturing lured tens of thousands of new residents to Charlotte and Mecklenberg County in the 1980s, 90s and 2000s. In 1970, the city's population stood at around 240,000; today more than 671,000 reside in the city, with another 400,000 living in surrounding Mecklenberg



Photo courtesy of the Charlotte-Mecklenberg Historic Properties Commission

County and almost 3 million within the Charlotte-Gastonia-Concord (S.C.) metropolitan region.

With the rapid influx of new population, the region's transportation quickly grew inundated with traffic. The Charlotte Area Transit System (CATS) struggled to meet the demand for transit service through an expanding bus network. Fortunately, the community's railroading heritage presented a foundation for an improved way to connect the booming area.

Following the Trolley

The original Charlotte & Columbia rail line torched by Sherman and his troops eventually was integrated into the Southern Railway system and subsequently acquired by the Norfolk Southern in the late 1990s. Originating in downtown Charlotte, the line heads due south towards Pineville and the South Carolina border. It also parallels the heavily-congested Interstate 75, the region's main north-south arterial, about a half-mile to its west. As transportation planners sketched-out a network of rapid transit routes in the 1980s, the corridor was an easy pick as a top priority. Additionally, Norfolk Southern had discontinued its freight traffic on the line between downtown and Tyvola Road, preferring a bypass route to the west with fewer grade crossings.

Although the south corridor project appeared to be a shoe-in for a quickly-deployed rail transit service, its ultimate realization would take



Photo courtesy of Charlotte Trolley

Streetcar #85 was completely rehabilitated after previous uses as a Air National Guard office and rental property.

decades to achieve. Regional leaders first went to the voters with a massive plan for simultaneous construction of nine rail lines totaling 77 miles – including the south route – in September 1998 that would total \$467 million. Citing the substantial scope and onerous price tag, voters soundly rejected the plan. Stung from the defeat of the proposal, CATS withdrew its rail transit plans and focused its attention on acquiring rights-of-way as they became available for purchase or easement.

As initiative for a regional rail network became less conspicuous,



The Charlotte Trolley operation (above) set the stage for the eventual LYNX system (below) by encouraging transit-oriented development along the former Norfolk Southern rail line.



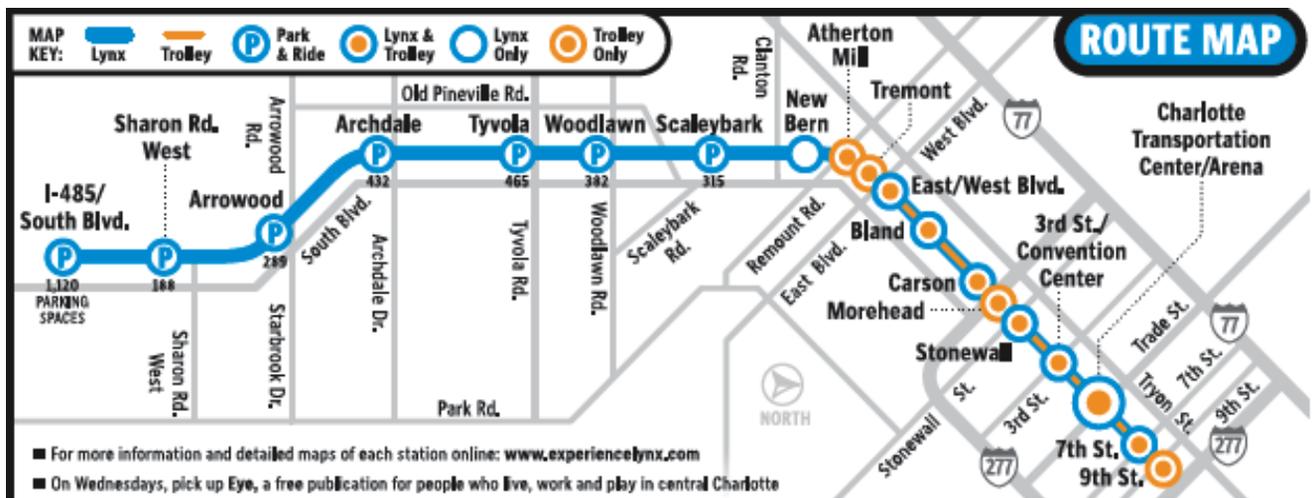
momentum for returning some form of passenger rail to the abandoned route did not stall. Instead, a group of volunteers and community leaders looked to the region’s past for direction.

In 1987, two employees of Mecklenberg County’s planning staff were on assignment in Huntersville – about 15 miles north of Charlotte – came across a structure that appeared to have once been a streetcar. Their curiosity piqued, they discovered the structure located on the property of Daisy Mae Trapp Moore was in fact Streetcar #85, a Charlotte-built streetcar and the last to operate in the city on March 14, 1938. After its replacement by diesel buses, Streetcar #85 served time as an Air National Guard office and as a Huntersville-area diner before being purchased by Moore in 1951 for about \$125 for use as guest quarters and a rental property. Sensing an opportunity to reclaim a unique piece of local history, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Historic Properties Commission purchased #85 from Moore for \$1,000 in 1988.

By 1991, Streetcar #85 had been fully restored to its full grandeur through \$100,000 in support from the Properties Commission. However, local officials considered whether their revitalized treasure could actually return as an operating streetcar. The Norfolk Southern’s former Charlotte and Columbia tracks sat unused in the heart of the city. Surely, it couldn’t be as easy as putting wheels to rails, could it?

In fact, it took about five years of planning and terms-of-use agreements with Norfolk Southern before Streetcar #85 took to the rails once again on Aug. 30, 1996 over 1.8-miles of track between the old Atherton Mill trolley barn – where #85 was housed – and Stonewall Street. Operating with the aid of a diesel generator mounted on a trailing car on Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays, more than 25,000 riders traveled aboard #85 in its first six months of service.

Building upon the momentum produced by the battle-hardened #85 and old rail line, Charlotte officials embarked on a campaign to expand the Charlotte Trolley operation. The



Map courtesy of Charlotte Observer

Charlotte City Council authorized \$16.7 million in 1998 to upgrade a full two miles of the Norfolk Southern line with a new bridge over Stonewall Street, as well as a replaced railbed, tracks, signals and electrification, allowing the Trolley to reach four new stops in Uptown Charlotte, including through the center of the Charlotte Convention Center and past Charlotte Arena. Beyond the enhancements to the rail line's physical infrastructure, the City also purchased three streetcars from Gomaco – replicating the historic single-truck design of #85 – to supplement the work of the antique trolley.

The work – completed on June 28, 2004 – marked more than an improved Charlotte Trolley operation. The project was designed to be compatible with the eventual introduction of light rail trains on the route. Even more impressive, it signaled a newfound synthesis between rail transit and economic development in the region. The City Council created the Historic South End Municipal Service District in 2001 to leverage the investment in the Trolley upgrades into a larger development platform. Along the two-mile corridor, property values have increased by nearly 90 percent and \$600 million in development has occurred on 800,000 square feet of land.

"The vendors along the trolley line were salivating about this coming online," says Keith Parker, CATS' Chief Executive Officer. "And as you've seen in other cities, people get excited and

want to participate in development once it becomes real."

South End developer John Spratley agrees, saying "some argue that the trolley's importance has diminished, relegated to a children's novelty. That perspective misses the broader point, because the trolley is not about what it is today, it is about what it will become, if funded and planned for properly. Furthermore, the trolley is not just about the trolley; it is about a network of historic streetcars interconnecting uptown and its adjacent areas. It is indeed about connecting South End to uptown."

Building the LYNX

Not only did the experience of the Charlotte Trolley repatriate key facets of the city's railroading history, it also convinced the region and its leaders that rail transit existed in the realm of the possible. The long-shelved plans for a regional rail network were dusted-off, although instead a full-fledged deployment of a series of routes, rail transit would follow the lead of the Trolley and take smaller and more practical steps to implementation. And a continuation of the Charlotte & Columbia line south towards Pineville was the perfect launching point.

In 1998, as the City Council approved the Trolley project, Mecklenberg County voters approved a one-half cent sales tax to support a multi-year transit plan. Its first major

effort became the South Corridor light rail line. After more than a half-decade of planning to determine the route's exact alignment, station locations and vehicles, ground was broken on Feb. 26, 2005 for the 9.6-mile route. Investment from federal sources was matched with the local sales tax revenues to \$462 million system.

In line with the large-feline identity of CATS and the city's professional sports teams – the NFL's Panthers and NBA's Bobcats – the new light rail line would bear a similar moniker, LYNX, also a nod to the improved connectivity and mobility presented by the service. Meanwhile, project leaders selected a sleek new vehicle to deploy on the route, Siemens' Avanto light rail cars, which also stood as sharp counterpoint to the vintage style of the Charlotte Trolley streetcars. On Nov. 24, 2007 – only two years after construction began, LYNX opened for service.

The new system was perfectly positioned to capture substantial changes to the region's commuting trends. In the following spring and summer of 2008, gas prices soared to levels not seen in nearly 30 years. The clean, quick and frequent LYNX service proved an enticing option for an increasing number of Charlotte commuters, as an average of 18,600 daily riders were aboard LYNX by the end of March. Initial projections pegged ridership at 9,100 in the first year and climbing to 18,100 in 2025. LYNX had doubled its first year estimates and beat those offered for

almost two decades in the future. For CATS officials, the system's strong start is proof of the region's latent demand for high-quality transit service and is but the beginning of a more expansive transit network.

An Evolving Rail Vision

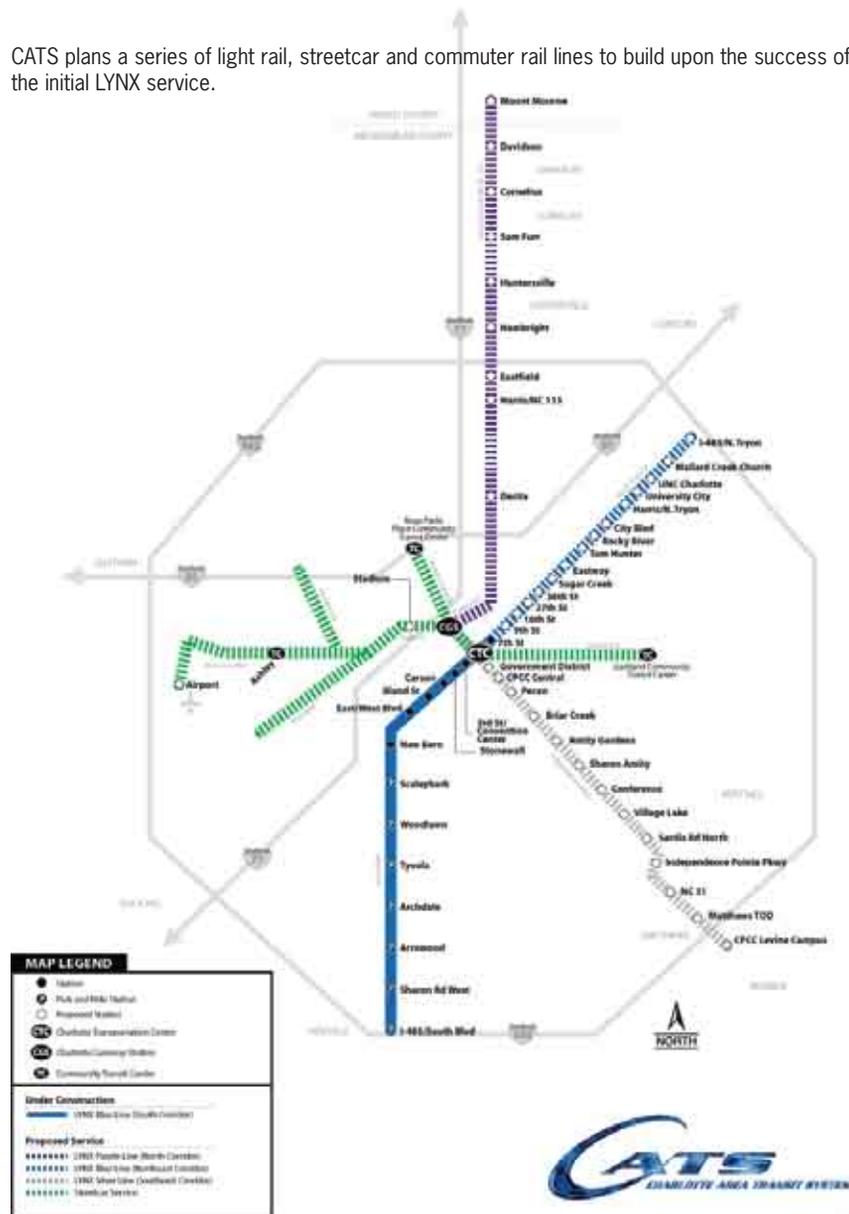
Recalling the heady days of CATS' original rail transit plan as well as the more distant era of Charlotte's railroading heydays, a new effort is underway to deliver the success of LYNX to other communities in the region. A series of five transit corridors emanating from downtown are in various stages of planning to build LYNX into a true regional system.

The existing LYNX route – official known as the Blue Line in anticipation of future lines – will extend northeast from its current terminus at 7th in Charlotte and add 11 miles and 14 stations to reach the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. Planning has reached more in-depth phases of design and study and could be open for service by 2015 should appropriate levels of federal investment be secured to match the local sales tax revenues.

Meanwhile, a new Silver Line route would stretch from uptown Charlotte to the CPCC Levine Campus in Matthews, about 14 miles from the central business district. However, transportation planners will not determine if the line will be constructed as light rail or a bus rapid transit configuration until 2011. Additionally, the Purple Line would provide commuter rail service over 30 miles of existing Norfolk Southern rails to reach Huntersville, Cornelius and Davidson in the northern parts of Mecklenberg County, possibly utilizing diesel multiple-unit vehicles if possible.

Finally, new streetcar lines would expand on the template established by the Charlotte Trolley resurgence. The Center City corridor would head in two directions from Uptown across 10 miles to serve the University Park to the east of the city and Eastland Mall areas in further east. The City Council has already provided \$500,000 in planning support for the project and hopes to begin service as soon

CATS plans a series of light rail, streetcar and commuter rail lines to build upon the success of the initial LYNX service.



Map courtesy of CATS

as 2013. The West Corridor streetcar line would connect Charlotte-Douglas International Airport west of Charlotte with over 6 miles of rail. Planners anticipate this route to present the most challenges to rapid implementation due to the lack of a natural travel corridor to reach the airport.

Not Surprising

At RAIL Magazine, we are fond of the old adage, “the past is prologue.” The story of Charlotte’s arrival at a modern passenger service confirms the wisdom of the phrase. However the specifics of forthcoming rail transit options evolve in Charlotte and

Mecklenberg County, its foundations were secured by a passenger rail legacy that escaped the pages of local history books to author a new approach to regional mobility. From the antebellum founding of the Charlotte & Columbia Railroad to the Lazarusian rebirth of Streetcar #85, the current success of the LYNX light rail service isn’t shocking so much as fitting.