

Connecting the Dots: Tampa's TECO Line Streetcar

By Beth Wilson



When Spanish entrepreneur Don Vicente Martinez Ybor relocated his cigar industry from Cuba to Key West in 1869, he encountered an unexpected business obstacle: no reliable transportation. So he looked north, seeking the same temperate climate as his homeland but better connections. Martinez Ybor eventually settled in 1885 on 40 acres of bayside property in the Tampa area, where the South Florida Railroad had arrived the year before, and the Tampa Street Railway was emerging.

Immigrants from Sicily, Spain and Cuba in search of work and a better life, soon followed. Ybor City was built to house them, and rapidly the small frontier town became a

company town, known as the Cigar Capital of the World. At the industry's peak, some 15,000 tabaqueros, or cigar makers, cut and rolled for hundreds of factories, producing 700 million cigars a year, transforming both the local economy and culture. An electrified streetcar system would expand connections into the 20th century, linking Tampa and Ybor City, and connecting communities over 53 miles of track to stores, parks and, of course, the cigar factories.

A cigar band logo pays homage to past connections on today's TECO Line Streetcar System, while 2.4 miles of new track lead to future ones. Trolley motorman James Michaels relocated from New Jersey to be part of Tampa's new mobility

option operated by the Hillsborough Area Regional Transit Authority – better known as HARTline. In just a few short years, he's watched the community transform through the windshield of the gleaming yellow and red streetcar he steers. Linking Tampa's downtown Convention Center with historic Ybor City along Channelside Drive, Michaels points out not only landmark buildings and tourist attractions, but new residential housing and the sites of proposed development.

"It's all because of the streetcar," Michaels sums up. "Come back to visit soon, and you may not even recognize the place."

Indeed. The project's initial announcement was a magnet for

development. According to the Tampa Downtown Partnership, more than \$800 million in new, privately funded projects are recently completed, newly approved or under construction within two blocks of the streetcar line since its inception. Convention attendees can connect to new hotels. Cruise ships dock in the city's port and visitors can connect to historic Ybor City. Neighbors in new residential buildings along Channelside Drive can connect to work and play at the city's new waterfront entertainment and shopping complex. The look and pace of Tampa is changing. Transformation was always part of the vision.

Two Visions; Single Track

Communities long for investment opportunities that enable multiple goals to simultaneously leverage one another. Seeking to preserve its history, assemble its present-day assets and secure its future, the City of Tampa is banking on an old transportation idea with new connections and plenty of possibilities.

In the 1990s, city officials in Tampa were focused on the future. To balance the area's suburban growth and reenergize the urban core, development efforts focused on three areas. On the west side, high-rise office buildings and a new convention center went up in the downtown's central business district. To the east, a new hockey arena, aquarium and shopping and entertainment complex was created in Channel District, the docking point for visiting cruise ships. To the northeast, a number of eating and entertainment venues were sprouting in Ybor City. For Tampa, the

whole could be more than the sum of its parts if easy connections linked the three evolving destinations.

Meanwhile, a handful of trolley enthusiasts were focused on the past. When an old streetcar from Tampa's early 20th century system – ol' No. 163 – was discovered in its present-day role as a piece of run-down rental property, the Tampa & Ybor City Street Railway Society swung into action. Purchasing the relic, the Society began a restoration project that members hoped would blossom into a rolling history museum, maintaining an important piece of Tampa's past.

Then-mayor Dick Greco, Tampa Electric Company's Tom Ruddell – who founded the Railway Society – and HARTline's then-executive director Sharon Dent saw a connection between the two visions. Literally. And HARTline became the conduit to channel both. A Tampa and Ybor connection could be reborn, but this time along a different alignment

– one with greater opportunities for development and greater potential for significant ridership.

"The visions started to merge, that of the people interested in historic preservation and that of the people interested in the economic revitalization of Tampa," says Dent, remembering how a strategy began to take shape. "The streetcar could be a tool. I could see the value of it from a land-use perspective, and also as a step for the transit agency to move into the multimodal arena. We could broaden the range of products that the transit authority delivered, making transit more relevant to a broader community."

The plan, a unique one with responsibilities shared among HARTline, the City and a co-designed nonprofit corporation, garnered federal and state capital investment, which was supplemented with local gas tax funds to lay the track, build the stations and buy vehicles. Next

Historic car No. 163 became the catalyst to return streetcars to Tampa.



came the day-to-day machinations of the community's new mobility mode. Farebox and advertising revenue were expected to raise one-third of the system's operating budget. A new special property assessment district would cover another third. The final piece of the operations puzzle came in several pieces.

First, a private corporation was eager to be released from its city contract to operate an unsuccessful monorail, and bought its termination for \$5 million. After spending \$1 million to tear down the monorail, the City had \$4 million leftover. If invested, that money could grow

and generate additional revenue. As public agencies, neither the City nor HARTline could take that action. But a new nonprofit corporation that was formed to manage the operation of the system, and a vital second piece could. Tampa Historic Streetcar, Inc., garnered additional private-sector support by marketing naming rights, the third piece. Stations, vehicles, even individual seats on the trolleys could be sponsored to support the endowment fund. TECO Energy purchased the naming rights for the system, seemingly apropos since the utility company had owned Tampa's original streetcar system a century earlier.

explore American streetcar systems, Tampa stood out. The emerging trolley line was to run the same single-track, dual-direction operation as the system he oversaw back in Bendigo. His experience was the perfect fit.

"The Tampa route had so much potential," remembers Borchers. "It was also using a very old type of overhead system that hasn't been used for years and years, and there's really only two of these systems left in the English-speaking world – this one in America and the one I was managing in Bendigo. I had the expertise to manage the geography of the system, the track layout."

Borchers also knew a thing or two about vehicles ordered for the Tampa line.

"The system I was managing had five Birneys. I'd been working on these cars since I was 16!"

Borchers has amassed numerous books and paraphernalia from the original streetcar era. *The People's Railway: J.G. Brill Company. The Cable Car. Chicago Surface Lines. Electric Railway Handbook. The Maintenance Handbook for Transit Men.* A collection of motormen instruction manuals. While some might mistake his library holdings for collectors' items, Borchers points out their relevance to today's systems.

"We still need to teach the same thing that was taught 100 years ago," he says, thumbing through a 1906 copy of the *The Street Railway Journal*. "We're putting turn-of-the-century transportation back on the street."

The concept is old, the mobility is new. The TECO Line runs eight replica Birney cars, built in Iowa by Gomaco (for more on Gomaco, see RAIL #14

Of course, it had been nearly 60 years since streetcars connected the Tampa area. There was no longer anyone around with experience in running such a system. Some 10,000 miles away, however, there was.

Connectivity through Mobility

Tim Borchers remembers being mesmerized by streetcars at age 11. By age 16, he was convinced he was ready to steer a trolley system. His winning bid in the city of Bendigo, Australia, launched his rail career, and he's been working with tramways ever since. During a U.S. visit to

HARTLine's Borchers (left) & Ed Crawford have led the trolley's resurgence.





The TECO Line is viewed as the starting-point for a regional rail network.

– ed.) nearly identical in appearance to those running in the first half of the 20th Century. With a nod to history, the vehicles flaunt the same oak benches and hand-painted ceilings. With the embrace of modernity, each car includes an audio and digital display system, wheelchair positions, bicycle racks and factory-installed air-conditioning.

System planners predicted some 950 daily riders on the line. Since opening day, the system has averaged more than 1,250. With limited operating hours, tourists currently make up a large portion of ridership, with more residents on the line Friday through Sunday. With a recent extension of evening operations, more people are expected to choose the streetcar connection to attractions at St. Pete Times Forum – home to the National Hockey League’s Tampa Lightning. The line’s potential for moving large numbers of people has been tested by a number of special events, including Tampa’s annual Gasparilla Festival last January, when the system provided 10,000 trips in one day.

With all the fanfare surrounding

Tampa’s rail system, one almost forgets that the TECO Line Streetcar system is an element in a larger transportation network for the community. Its zigzag track crosses five HARTline bus routes, including the free connector buses – painted yellow to match the streetcars – linking passengers to the central business district, Old Hyde Park and South Howard, known locally as “SoHo.” The streetcar’s farecard can be swiped on the other buses, making transfers easy. The line’s current southwest terminus is the new Southern Transportation Plaza, an intermodal station providing connections to HARTline bus service, charter bus service and taxis. Streetcars enter this rail roundhouse diagonally, positioning themselves for their eventual continuation along proposed new track into downtown’s central business district.

“Downtown Tampa is slowly but surely becoming a neighborhood,” says Tampa Downtown Partnership’s Director of Transportation and Planning Karen Kress, highlighting recent residential growth as more

people choose an urban lifestyle. “We see the streetcar as integral to this choice, as a mobility option for residents, enabling them to move around.”

Borchers points out that the line is equipped to operate modern light-rail vehicles, a characteristic that means the system can grow with the community’s needs.

“Our line has been built so that one day you could be running replica turn-of-the-century streetcars, and the next day you could be operating 50-mile-an-hour modern trams,” he explains, highlighting original plans that included purposeful sharing of track, and even the potential for a light-rail link from the port to the airport.

“There are no large, modern cities in the developed world today that don’t have a rail system. For Tampa to grow, it needs an efficient transit system. Whether it happens in two, five or 15 years, Tampa will one day have a light rail. This system has not yet realized its full potential.”

Vibrant Again

As the streetcar passes under the expressway, and Channelside Drive turns into 13th Street, the ambiance shifts. The buildings are shorter, closer, constructed of old brick. Wrought iron balconies hang from early-1900s architecture, and globe streetlamps light brick pathways. A sharp right turn takes passengers eastward along 8th Avenue, and toward Centro Ybor, a popular hub of shops, restaurants and clubs. Crossing Avenida Republica de Cuba, the streetcar skirts the parking lot of the Don Vicente de Ybor Historic Inn. Originally constructed by the founder of Ybor City, the grand building is now operated by the National Historic Landmark District's unofficial mayor. That's Jack Shiver, who's inside talking with guests, suggesting some area attractions, and pointing out the nearby streetcar stop.

"I've got information posted right here," he says from the front desk. Route, schedule, fares. He'll even sell you a pass.

Shiver, who grew up "just down the street," talks about the robust city of the 1950s. After life took him out of the area for many years, he returned in the 1980s to shuttered storefronts, uninhabitable buildings and little of the vibrant community he remembered.

"One of the great economic strides forward for Ybor City was the streetcar system," says Shiver, a member and past-president of the Ybor City Development Corporation. "It's been a big part of our reemergence, and it's been our sustaining lifeblood ever since it opened."



The streetcar has been a centerpiece for the revitalization of historic Ybor City.

He describes the visiting cruise ships that dock in Tampa's port, and the flow of tourists eager to see the historic district, to shop and dine, especially when they can connect on an historic streetcar. He also points out the metamorphosis of Ybor City's streets. Restored buildings, new housing development, entertainment, restaurants. And a grocery store – a sure sign that Ybor City is on its way back to being a livable community.

The transportation option is indeed impacting how residents live and work, he adds. As the rapid pace of housing development along the line continues, and more people chose to move to the area, the most

important function of the streetcar line is conveniently moving people. Ybor City has a large number of low-income residents, and as the system expands its operating hours, Shiver says the transportation option will be crucial to workers seeking opportunities in the Channel District and downtown Tampa.

The TECO line is a prudent and powerful investment in the community, he says. And he ought to know one when he sees one.

"I've got as much investment in this area as anybody," he says, describing the numerous Ybor City buildings he has restored and the businesses he operates. "The streetcar is an

important piece of our infrastructure.”

Identity Through Connectivity


The TECO Line Streetcar System is proving to be a valuable economic development tool and an important link in Tampa's larger mobility network. Like many community transportation systems, it is connecting pieces into a greater whole, building a collective identity for the bayside metropolis.

HARTline's government affairs officer Ed Crawford speaks of "place making."

"The art of taking destinations that in people's minds are not part of the same place, and turning them into something that's perceived collectively," he explains. "The streetcar was the link that connected the convention center and Ybor City via Channelside, and made that all into what is now sometimes referred to as the Visitor Crescent."

In other words, a place.

The streetcar's connections shape a new identity for the community. Crawford says that passengers headed to, say, the Florida Aquarium are now likely to combine their excursion with a lunch stop in Channelside, and even dinner in Ybor City. And they will probably discover something new as they ride along the line.

"The trolley connects the dots," says Crawford. "This 2.4 miles is what brings it all together." 



TECO motorman James Michaels doesn't just operate trolleys – he's a guide to Tampa and Ybor City.

Network of Services for Downtown Tampa, Hyde Park, Channelside and Ybor City.

