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URBAN DEVELOPMENT AND THE STREETCAR:
THE CASE OF WINNIPEG, 1881-1913

H. John Selwood

The importance of streetcar systems in shaping cities has been widely accepted.¹ Receiving far less attention have been the factors shaping streetcar networks. Too frequently, this has led to misleading or incorrect conclusions about the true nature of urban development processes occurring during the streetcar era. Examination of extensions to Winnipeg's streetcar network indicates that they reinforced rather than initiated the patterns of growth.

Intuitively, it can be argued that transportation is a service and its availability will be stimulated in response to demand. Thus it can be expected that streetcar service links points where demand exists. In accounting for the evolution of a streetcar network it therefore seems logical to enquire into the pattern of development that existed prior to route expansion. In the Winnipeg case it can be clearly demonstrated that streetcar lines were in fact largely routed in response to pre-existing patterns of demand. Although an element of speculation was apparent, routes were not extended at random but, wherever possible, tapped the central city market and serviced established employment nodes and other attractions on the urban fringe.

The accompanying series of maps illustrate these points. They show the built up area of Winnipeg at various dates and subsequent extensions to the streetcar system.² Figure 1 indicates the built up

¹See, for example, G. M. Smerk, "The Streetcar: Shaper of American Cities," Traffic Quarterly, 21(1964), pp. 569-584.

²The development maps were drawn from H. A. Hosse, "The Areal Growth and Functional Development of Winnipeg from 1870 to 1913," M.A. Thesis (University of Manitoba, 1956). The streetcar data was compiled from W. E. Bradley, "A History of Transportation in Winnipeg," Historical and Scientific Society of Manitoba Transactions, Series III, 15(1960), pp. 7-38.

area of Winnipeg in 1881, the year before streetcar service was introduced to the city. When first installed the line merely ran a short distance along Main Street, but in 1884 a branch line was extended westwards into an area shown on the map to be devoid of any development. However, by 1884, significant growth had occurred in that area. There had been a westward extension of the residential sector, the Provincial Legislature had been established at the foot of Kennedy Street, and the original Fort Osborne Barracks located in the same vicinity.³ The streetcar service was not therefore taking the initiative in that direction. Figure 2 indicates just how much development had occurred by 1884. Obviously, extensions to the streetcar system had not kept pace with urban expansion, but had responded to it.

The same conclusion can be drawn from an analysis of the sequence of events up to the turn of the century. Further examination of Figure 2 indicates that extensions to the streetcar system undertaken by 1901 still remained almost entirely within the area of the City built up by 1884.

The only significant anomaly occurs south of the Assiniboine River where a line, built in 1892, is shown to extend well beyond the developed area southward to the Red River along Osborne Street. Figure 3, illustrating urban expansion to 1901, would indicate that this line was indeed built in advance of general development in that area - by then known as Fort Rouge. The question arises as to whether it was a purely speculative route. To some extent it was, but this was not the promoter's preference.

This was the first electrified line to be constructed in Winnipeg and the city fathers, fearful of the innovation, denied the promoter permission to operate his "revolutionary" system in the city centre.⁴ He was left with no alternative but to install the new equipment in an outer locality if he was to convince people of its

³Ibid., p. 10.

⁴Ibid., p. 11.

Fig 1

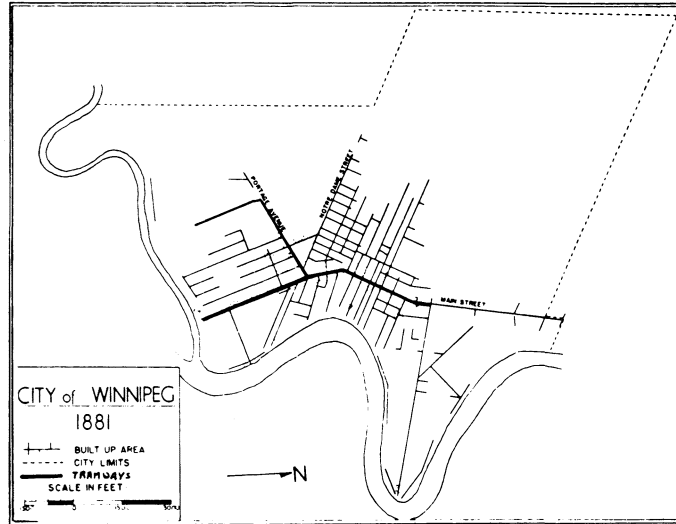


Fig 2

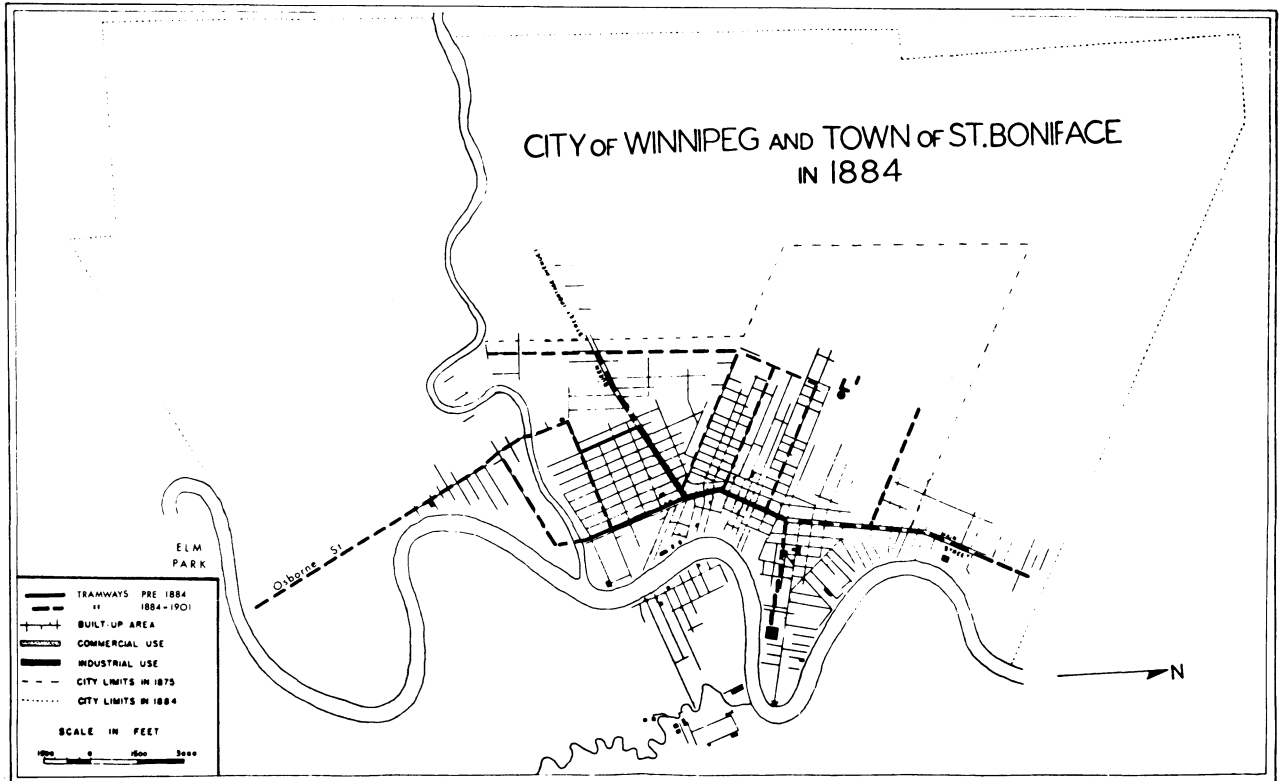
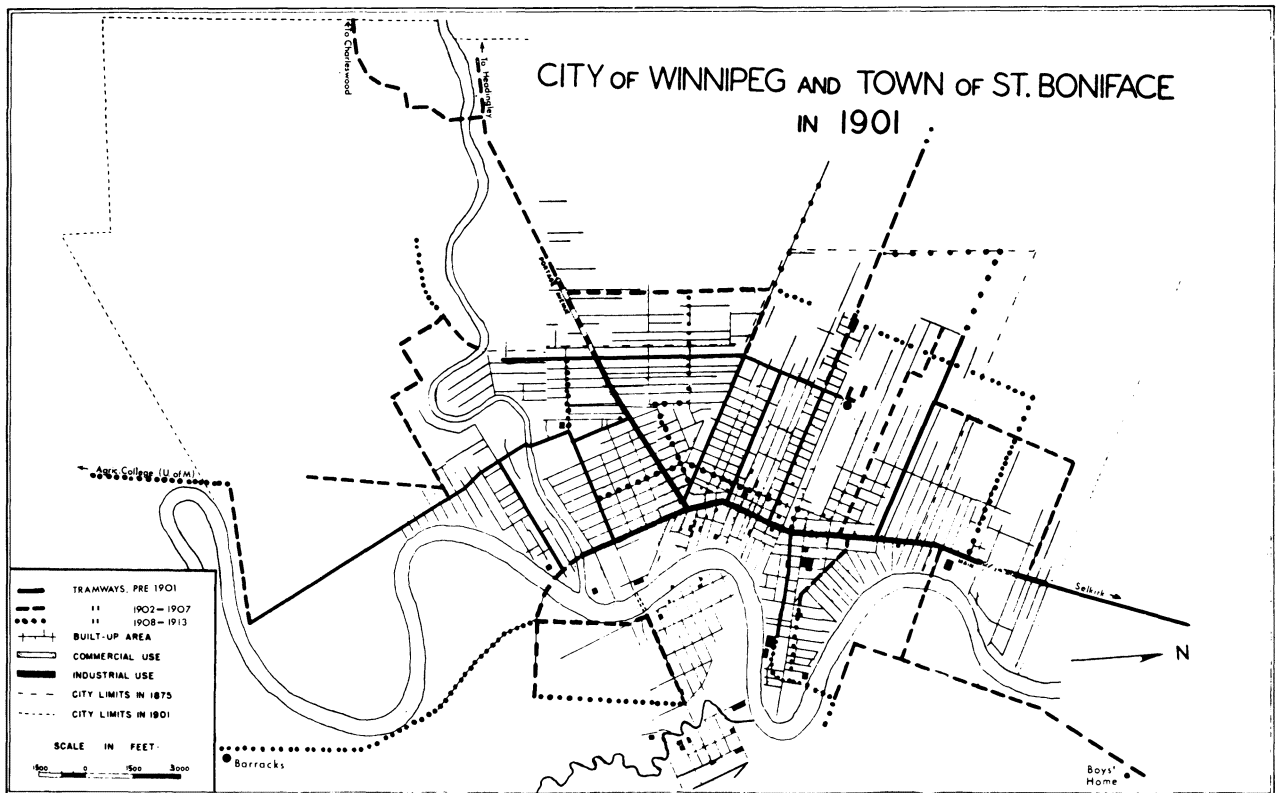


Fig 3



safety. The route selected minimized his speculative risk.

By the early 1890's, Winnipeggers had taken to camping and picnicking along the Red River's banks in large numbers. One of the more popular spots was Elm Park. The promoter, recognizing the existing demand, terminated the Osborne Street line at a point just across the river from Elm Park and, to support his venture, also established River Park on the near bank where he operated a fun fair and race track. Thus he sought to ensure maximum use of the full length of the streetcar line even though it passed through completely undeveloped land. It is worth noting that for some years after it was first installed, service out to River Park was provided only during the summer months.

Year round service extended only along River Avenue out to Osborne Street,⁵ Figure 2 indicates that this inner area of Fort Rouge

⁵Ibid., p. 17. See also a report in the Winnipeg Tribune, October

was a long-established suburb having been adopted as a high-class residential area in the early 1880's. Only after the Canadian Northern Railway had built its yards and maintenance workshops in Fort Rouge did the area along the more distant part of the Osborne Street line see extensive residential development and better streetcar service.⁶

Although in the first decades of the twentieth century there were very substantial additions to the streetcar system, these followed much the same pattern as before (see Figure 4). A good proportion of the new trackage lay within the city limits where, as shown by Figure 3, there had been very considerable residential expansion by the turn of the century. The franchise agreement between the streetcar company and the city in fact stipulated that the company not be required to extend service into areas where a minimum residential population density did not already exist.⁷ The company was also slow to respond to petitions for additional routes into populated districts on the grounds that patronage would not be sufficient to pay for the service.⁸

Nevertheless, the period did see streetcar service carried well beyond the built up area to the north, south and west of Winnipeg. Significantly, these lines were known as inter-urbans, suggesting that their outer terminals were other development foci. Thus, the western extensions linked the villages of Headingly and Charleswood with the city centre, while the northern line provided service to the town of Selkirk. The southern line eventually reached the village of

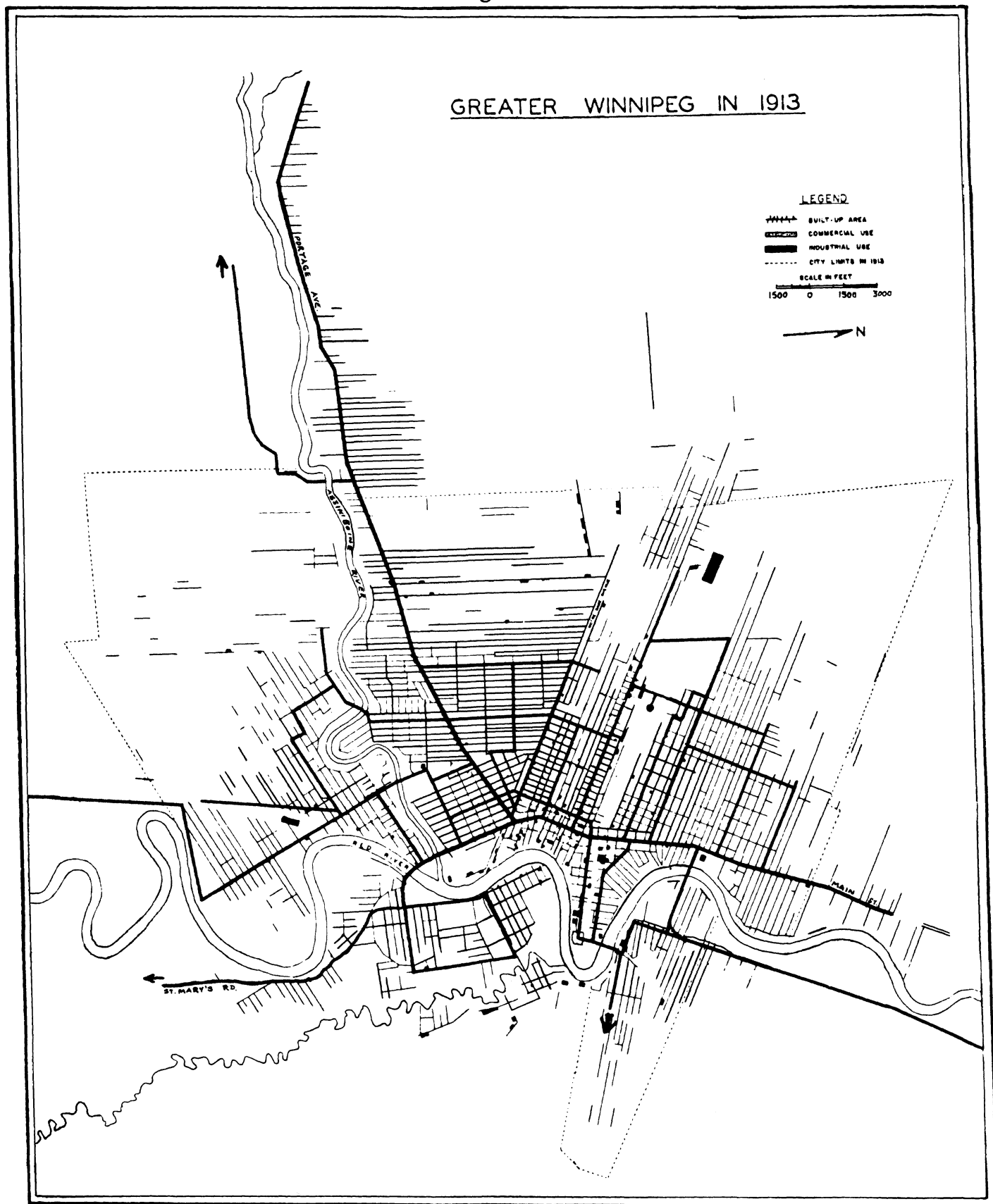
1909, of South Fort Rouge rate payers demanding ". . . a car service that will carry you through to the terminal and not throw you out at the barns."

⁶The Fort Rouge shops were built in 1905. Communication with Mr. B. Rettie, Real Estate Manager, Canadian National Railways, 12 April, 1977.

⁷See City of Winnipeg By Law 543, Sec. 15.

⁸See footnote 5 and Winnipeg Tribune, Sept. 20, 1909. Many proposals and petitions were submitted for service extensions to outlying points that were never acted upon. For example: to Richot, see Winnipeg Free Press, Dec. 6, 1909; Oak Bluff, Sanford and La Salle, see Winnipeg Tribune, March 4, 1914; St. François Xavier and Pigeon Lake, see Winnipeg Free Press, Mar. 14, 1910.

Fig 4



St. Norbert. East of the Red River streetcar lines did not extend to outlying villages but terminated at points capable of generating traffic - a home for boys in the north and an army barracks in the south.⁹

Another noteworthy point about the inter-urban routes was that they ran parallel to the main river system which had originally attracted the densest agricultural population and latterly had assumed importance as recreational and residential districts. The Headingly line, most successful in generating subsequent growth, passed by areas that had already gained the greatest popularity among both richer and less well-to-do Winnipeggers. Entertainments, such as country clubs, race tracks and riverside picnic grounds, were all well attended before the streetcar improved access to them.¹⁰ The much more profitable Selkirk line gained revenues generated from carrying freight, its "moonlight specials," and other excursions to the river front recreation grounds at the Selkirk terminal.¹¹ However, peripheral zones of the city received a level of streetcar service much inferior to that of the inner areas and it was only when local demand increased that service improved. Without demand, the service languished and was eventually withdrawn.¹²

These findings thus support the original hypothesis that pre-existing development shapes transportation systems. What is often overlooked by mobile contemporary society is that during the streetcar

⁹Bradley, "History of Transportation in Winnipeg," p. 23.

¹⁰M.G.M. Ferguson, A History of St. James (Winnipeg, 1967), p. 100. Spur lines gave direct service to the St. Charles Country Club and Kirkfield Park Race Track. See Bradley, "History of Transportation in Winnipeg," p. 33. Despite these attractions the Headingly line consistently lost money. See financial statements in Winnipeg Electric Railway Company Annual Reports to 1914.

¹¹Winnipeg Electric Railway Company, Annual Reports.

¹²Service to Headingly was discontinued in 1930, see Bradley, p. 30.

era people thought less than is common practice today of walking or cycling¹³ considerable distances to work, recreational, and other facilities. That such facilities should be established at what are now considered to be isolated points and without the convenience of streetcar service therefore should not be so surprising. Of course, with improved access the pattern of linkages was reinforced and further growth encouraged. However, the mere existence of a streetcar line was no guarantee of subsequent development. Only when there were other attractions to generate demand was the streetcar really effective in shaping the city.

¹³Cycling became a very popular mode of transportation in Winnipeg in the 1900's. See Hosse, "Development of Winnipeg," p. 113; and A.F.J. Artibise, "An Urban Environment: The Process of Growth in Winnipeg, 1874-1914," Canadian Historical Association, Historical Papers 1972, p. 125.