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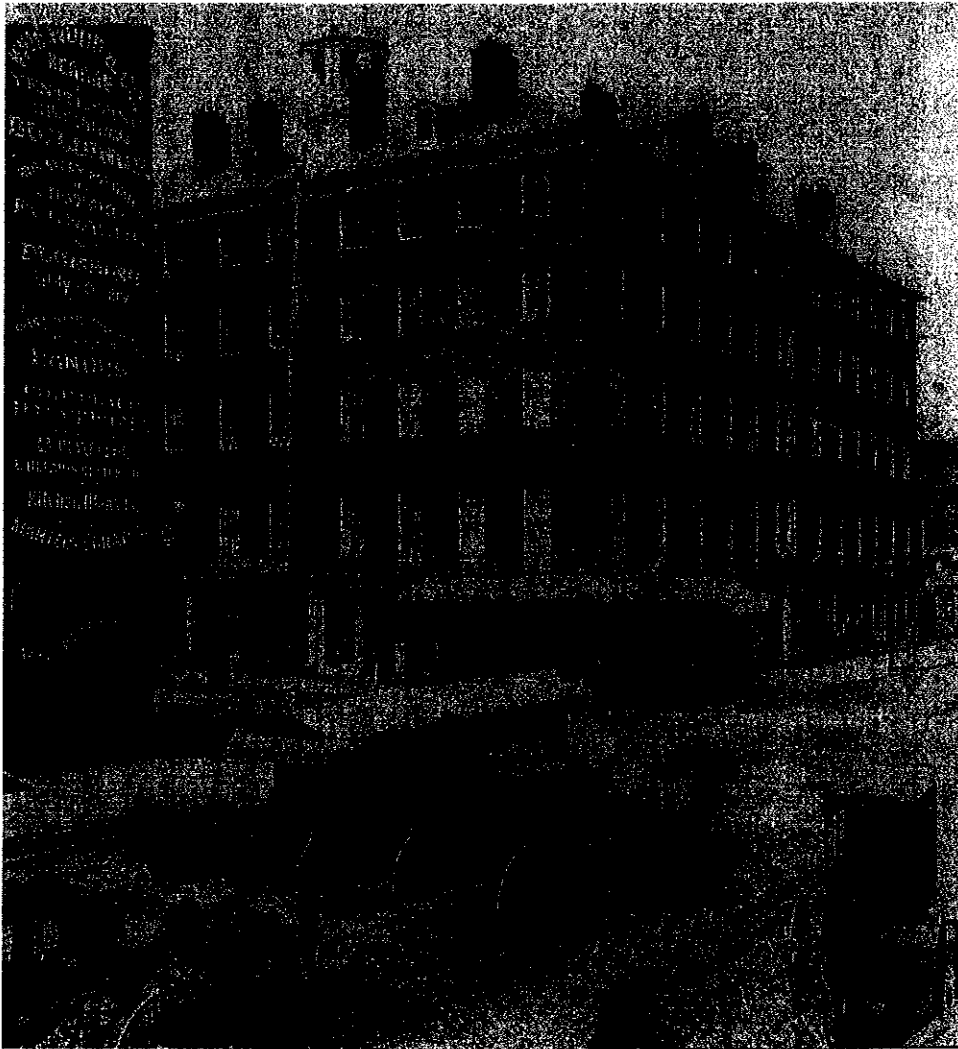
## Fade to Gas: The Conversion of Baltimore's Mass Transit System from Streetcars to Diesel-Powered Buses

AARON MICHAEL GLAZER

In July 1940, Bancroft Hill made a \$1.75 million dollar bet on the future of mass transit. Hill, then president of the Baltimore Transit Company (BTC), placed an order for an additional 108 streetcars, to run over the extensive rail lines already in place in Baltimore.<sup>1</sup> It was a formidable wager even for the BTC, as it was a time of extensive transition for the urban transit industry. Cities all over the United States were switching to either all-bus or to trackless trolley operations, and though Baltimore hedged its bets by ordering fifteen diesel-powered buses, the Baltimore Transit Company had made a firm decision to keep the majority of its transit operation on streetcar lines. The new additions were top-of-the-line PCC streamliner cars that provided riders with smooth rides, better lighting, and rubber cushioning. Throughout World War II, Hill's wager paid off greatly as the number of riders on BTC line skyrocketed. Yet by 1958 only two streetcar lines remained in Baltimore, and the cars that ran on those lines were rapidly wearing out. By 1963 the last of Hill's great streetcars were pulled out of service, and Baltimore joined the ranks of so many other American cities whose population was moved by gasoline-powered vehicles alone.<sup>2</sup>

Baltimore was not an isolated case—many cities saw the same gradual shift, and many arguments have been advanced to explain the fall of the streetcar. One standard line argues that independent conglomerates, dominated by petroleum, rubber, and automotive companies, bought out local transit firms and converted their streetcar lines to less efficient bus lines. Another places blame on the growth of city planners, who saw the streetcar as a hindrance to the free flow of traffic.<sup>3</sup> Not long after Hill's original commitment to streetcars, both these factors went to work on the streetcar system in Baltimore. National City Lines, Inc., a holding company whose owners included General Motors, Firestone Tire and Rubber, and Standard Oil, took control of the formerly independent Baltimore Transit Company. Baltimore City, meanwhile, began hiring traffic planners to help alleviate downtown congestion. Nevertheless, it is impossible to credit either group with the transition to buses. Baltimore approved the plans to exchange streetcars for

*Aaron Michael Glazer graduated from the Johns Hopkins University in May 2002. This paper won first prize in the Maryland Historical Society's Undergraduate Essay Contest.*



*By the 1880s, Baltimore commuters traveled city streets in horse-drawn trolleys. (Maryland Historical Society.)*

motor coaches too easily and too quickly for it to be solely a product of National City Lines' influence. Instead it arose out of a combination of things: the desire by city planners to clear congested downtown streets, financial incentives given to Baltimore City, and, of course, National City Lines' desire to use buses instead of streetcars any time it could.

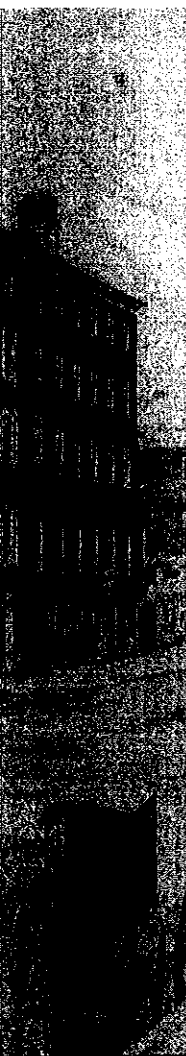
Mass transit in Baltimore developed early in comparison with other cities.<sup>4</sup> Omnibuses began service from railroad stations to local hotels in the early 1840s. By 1859, Baltimore had an early form of local rail transport in the form of a horsecar line, an omnibus-type carriage pulled by a horse along specially cut grooves in the road. Public transportation continued to grow throughout the late nineteenth



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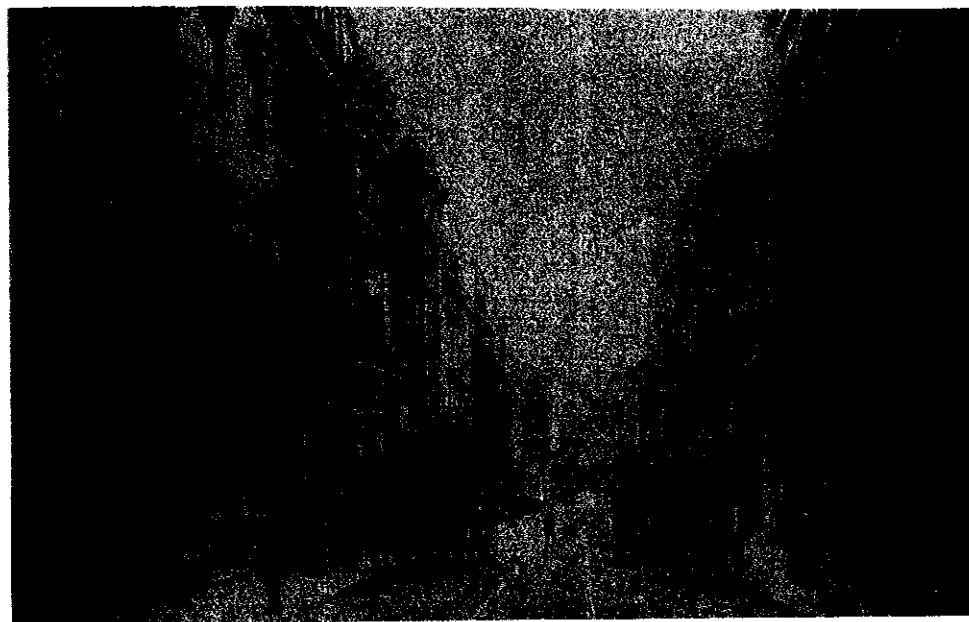
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The Lexington Street shopping district, c. 1880. (Maryland Historical Society.)

century. When Professor Leo Daft was commissioned to install the first commercial electric railway on the Baltimore and Hampden horsecar line in 1885, Baltimore was at the forefront of public transportation.<sup>5</sup> By that time streetcar lines ran throughout the city and all the way to Pikesville, Towson, and Woodlawn. The next two decades saw the arrival of cable and trolley cars. Around 1900, all private companies providing mass transit combined into one, United Railways and Electric. The 1900s saw still more growth.<sup>6</sup>

From 1910 to 1930 streetcars hit an enormous slump. The introduction of gasoline-powered automobiles significantly reduced transit riders. Independent operators introduced "jitneys," small buses that fought the rail lines for customers. Shortly after their introduction in February 1915 jitneys multiplied tenfold, and soon hundreds worked the city, stealing passengers otherwise likely to use streetcar lines. In the 1920s, widespread prosperity led more people to purchase private cars and rely less on mass transit. United Railways and Electric Company (UR&E), the main transit company in Baltimore, introduced gasoline-powered buses, further eroding streetcar ridership. By July 1922, UR&E's Charles Street bus line was so well used that it placed double-decker buses on the route to cope with the influx of passengers. Through the 1920s, the UR&E purchased new cars and made many attempts to revitalize the streetcar system, but the company itself was already in financial trouble. Despite its efforts to cut costs—and the beginning of the Depression, which greatly slowed automobile sales—beginning in July 1931 the company went into the red "with monotonous regularity, month after month." In 1932 it lost

nearly \$2 million and went bankrupt. UR&E emerged from receivership on July 9, 1935, as the Baltimore Transit Company (BTC). BTC arose with a \$50 million capitalization, and bondholders, who had formerly expected fixed interest payments, had been converted to stockholders, whose dividends relied on the company's profitability.<sup>7</sup>

On solid financial ground, the reconstructed Baltimore Transit Company was in a strong position to regain control of the transit system with its streetcar lines. It introduced a new streetcar, the Presidents' Conference Committee (PCC) Car, the newest, cleanest, and most comfortable streetcar to date.<sup>8</sup> In addition, BTC began using trackless trolleys, electric streetcars that ran on wheels instead of tracks. Service improved significantly, and the number of transit riders grew. Some transition from streetcar lines to buses occurred, but the company generally stayed with streetcars. From 1935 to 1941, revenue passengers for the BTC rose from 121,436,000 to 142,892,000. Although the numbers did not return to their peak of 180,525,000 reached in 1930, the BTC made significant progress in regaining passengers and proving the viability of a mass transit system in Baltimore.<sup>9</sup>

Mass transit received its largest boost ever with the coming of World War II. Baltimore, a center of war production, greatly prospered during the war. By mid-1941, the State of Maryland had received over \$1 billion in federal contracts, with much centered in Baltimore's industrial area. Fifty thousand people worked in defense plants, and a large portion of them rode the streetcar to work. Shortages in rubber and steel prevented severely hampered automobile production and made people more reliant on the transportation system. Gasoline and rubber restrictions also pulled buses off many routes, resulting in a higher dependence on streetcars.<sup>10</sup> In 1941 the BTC carried 164,592,000 passengers, by 1943 that number had risen to 271,842,000, an increase of 40 percent. In 1945, the year the war ended, it moved 263,573,000 revenue passengers. The war had increased transit use, and specifically, streetcar use.

During the war years, the BTC was in excellent financial shape. From 1941 to 1942, operating income rose 33 percent, from \$1.5 million to just over \$2 million. After interest was paid, the BTC netted \$245,429 in 1941. By 1944, operating income was over \$2 million for a net income of \$1.2 million after interest paid; in 1945 net income reached \$1.5 million, a rise of 29 percent from 1944 and 534 percent from 1941.<sup>11</sup> With the war, profits increased significantly, seemingly validating the importance of mass transit and portending an excellent future, provided the BTC could continue to draw customers after the war.

Bancroft Hill, a Baltimore native and president of the Baltimore Transit Company during the war, had been described upon his appointment as "a champion of the streetcar, urging its use instead of buses as the most economical and quickest transportation where traffic is dense." Hill "recognized the value of buses in some situations" and "whenever an extension of service is contemplated and the ex-



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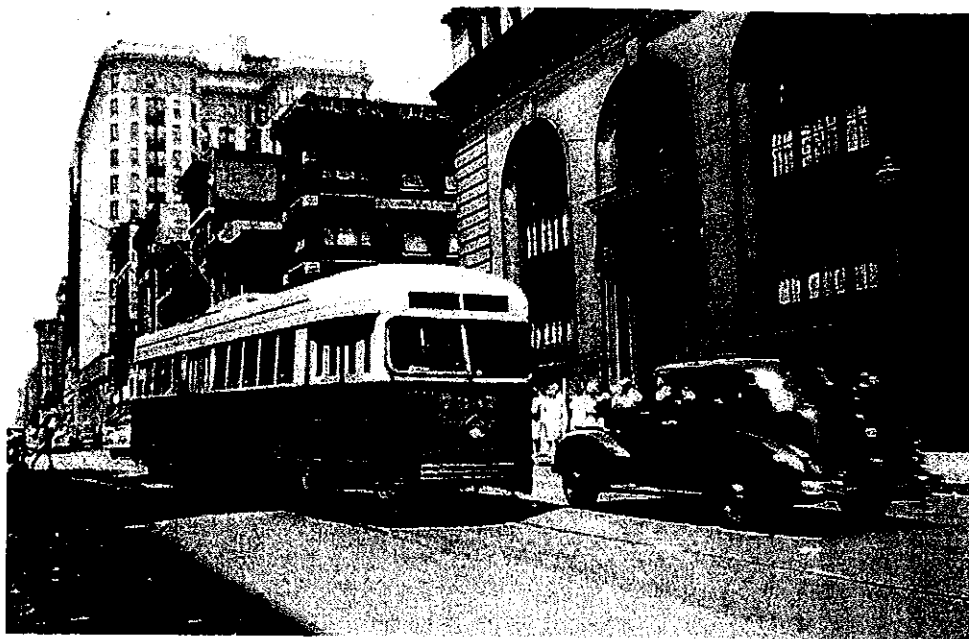
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PCC streetcar number 6 on Baltimore Street, c. 1945. (courtesy Baltimore Transit Archives.)

pected patronage is not enough to justify the laying of track and erection of wires, he has favored bus service." Hill placed an order in 1940 for 108 new streamlined streetcars and fifteen new buses, showing that while he was willing to use buses, the BTC strategy was heavily tilted in favor of the streetcar. After the war, street railways "having done an excellent job under extreme wartime handicaps, remained the most important factor in the public transportation picture." Though "some lines had been turned over to trackless trolleys and others to buses, the total track-age figure in 1945 was about three-quarters of the 400 odd miles that have been in operation [in 1899]."<sup>12</sup>

Bancroft Hill's thinking seems to represent the natural progression of streetcars. Although their removal had begun as early as 1935, and in 1942 the No. 23 Back River Rail Line was replaced with a bus line,<sup>13</sup> they still served a vital purpose for the Baltimore Transit Company, running on a vast majority of the routes.

In 1944 a subsidiary of National City Lines, Inc., purchased 30 percent of the stock of the Baltimore Transit Company and gained control of the system. American City Lines (ACL) was a holding company, owned by National City Lines (NCL) as well as General Motors, Standard Federal Engineering Corporation (a subsidiary of Standard Oil Company), Firestone Tire and Rubber Corporation, and Mack Manufacturing Company. The "supply" companies owned approximately 25 percent of ACL stock; the remainder was controlled by NCL. Those companies also owned a controlling interest in National City Lines, Inc. On August 24, 1944,

American City Lines requested permission from the Public Service Commission to purchase 11 percent of the preferred stock of the Baltimore Transit Company. Both American City Lines and its parent National City Lines were under the control of E. Roy Fitzgerald, the president of both corporations, and two other Fitzgerald brothers, Ed and Ralph, vice-presidents. National City Lines already had control of a number of local bus and streetcar lines in cities such as St. Louis, Missouri; Jacksonville, Florida; Tulsa, Oklahoma; El Paso, Texas; Jackson, Mississippi; and Kalamazoo, Michigan.<sup>14</sup>

On September 15, American City Lines upped the ante, agreeing to purchase 30 percent of the Baltimore Transit Company. Unbeknownst to most, American City Lines had already purchased a significant portion of BTC through a newly formed subsidiary called Baltimore City Lines, which now controlled 10 percent of the BTC. American City Lines wanted to purchase the stocks from the Baltimore City Lines and also from the Fitzgeralds, who had individually purchased a significant portion of the stock.<sup>15</sup> The Maryland Public Service Commission, a state agency charge with overseeing public transportation, approved the request on September 22, 1944. Soon thereafter, American City Lines completed the purchase and the transformation of the Baltimore Transit Company was underway.

National City Lines, and, by nature, American City Lines, had a reputation for being "bus-oriented." A week before the PSC approved the request, a *Baltimore Sun* article characterized the relationship between National City Lines and various companies: "It was further learned here that nearly half of National City Lines' own stock is owned by the Yellow Truck and Coach Manufacturing Company (a subsidiary of General Motors, Inc.); Mack Trucks, Inc.; the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company; and the Phillips Petroleum Company." When E. Roy Fitzgerald testified in front of the Public Service Commission, requesting approval, "he said the suppliers . . . hold about 25 percent" of American City Lines.<sup>16</sup> According to later court records, Fitzgerald related the stock figures accurately but neglected to mention the contracts most of NCL's operating companies had with the supplier companies. The *Evening Sun* realized what had been omitted and ran a clarifying editorial. "They also have an agreement with National City Lines, the parent company, under which the latter is required to buy most of its buses, tires and trucks from the manufacturing companies. . . . It has also been reported that it is a practice of the American City Lines to substitute buses for trolley service." The *Sun* then ran a series of stories chronicling National City Lines' takeover of the St. Louis transit system. The paper reported that since the acquisition a former Mack Truck manager had been made president, and E. Roy Fitzgerald had been named to the board. It continued, "National City is also credited with the recent modernization of most of the company's properties and the construction of a new, large bus garage."<sup>17</sup> Without a doubt, National City Lines was oriented toward busing. The building of a bus garage and the lack of improvement in the working of streetcars reinforced this idea.

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The National City Lines purchase engendered additional fears among citizens dealing with the financial situation of the Baltimore Transit Company. On September 12, 1944, the *Sun* published an excerpt from a letter by local attorney Louis P. Bolgiano. "It seems to me that the present management has given very good service to the city at minimum expenditures of salaries, wages, etc., and has kept its employe[e]s satisfied and courteous to the public. The present management has also given exceptionally good service throughout the war period and have placed the company in a position in which they have a large surplus on hand that can be expended."<sup>18</sup> It was the surplus that greatly concerned the public, who were opposed to the purchase. If the American Transit Company increased its holdings, they would be in a position to declare the dividend and to give out the entire \$6,044,660.68, which was presently reserved for repairs and future purchases.<sup>19</sup> Citizens had reason to be concerned, the *Sun* reported. "Mr. Fitzgerald said he believes that earnings will permit a dividend in the future. He pointed out that although maintenance and equipment reserves put aside now are large, there will be no need for such large reserves after the war and surplus funds can be used for dividend purposes."<sup>20</sup> While Fitzgerald was unwilling to say so, he hoped to greatly increase profits in order to get a larger return on his investment.

On the surface there was little shift in the Baltimore Transit Company after the purchase by American City Lines until several months had passed. On April 26, 1945, at the annual stockholders meeting, E. Roy Fitzgerald was elected to the board, joining C. Frank Reavis, counsel for American and National City Lines, who had been elected some months earlier. Hill was reconfirmed as president.<sup>21</sup> It seemed that the Baltimore Transit Company would continue as before.

But only two months later, in June 1945, the BTC had a new president. Fred A. Nolan, an American City Lines employee replaced Bancroft Hill, whose term would expire on July 1. Nolan had been head of the Los Angeles transit system, which the Fitzgeralds had recently acquired. Harry S. Sherwood, an editorial writer for the *Evening Sun* marked it as "an increase in the power of the Fitzgerald brothers and the American City Lines in the company management."<sup>22</sup> Although the ACL originally had expressed no interest in being involved with local management, it had now installed its own director as president of the company. The severity of this action indicated that not only were the ACL's pronouncements not to be trusted, but that it also had a plan for where it wanted to take the Baltimore Transit Company.

Seemingly ready to continue improving the transit system, American City Lines petitioned on September 14, 1945, to purchase more holdings in the Baltimore Transit Company, and in doing so invoked the ire of a number of Baltimore residents.<sup>23</sup> On November 7, a group of concerned citizens, under the name "Transit—A Baltimore Committee," filed a petition to stop the American City Lines' acquisition of more shares. The committee called the American City Lines "harmful to the public interest" and called for an investigation into three areas: instabil-

ity and public unrest due to the ACL administration; ACL's lack of experience in operating urban transit systems in peacetime; and the affiliation between ACL and supplier companies.<sup>24</sup> Although it is unclear who the members of the committee were, their criticism reflects an underlying unhappiness with ACL/NCL in Baltimore. The committee would have had difficulty in proving its first and second claims, as Baltimore had experienced little, if any, public unrest and NCL had had experience dealing with large transit systems in St. Louis and Los Angeles. The third sensitive area had not yet become reality in Baltimore, for the NCL had yet to employ its position to purchase goods from the supplier corporations. Nor had Baltimore had time to examine the leadership of the NCL, as Nolan had been in control for only four months, not enough time for anyone to notice a shift between local BTC management and NCL management. The discontent instead reflected a larger uncertainty regarding the future of the transit system in view of NCL's rapid shift in attitude and over introduction of a plan to convert a large number of streetcars into motor buses. The request to purchase additional shares was denied, and ACL retained its 30 percent of the stock. In 1946 the American City Lines officially merged into its parent company, National City Lines.

In 1946, the Baltimore Transit Company, under the control of National City Lines' Fred Nolan, presented its plan to change the majority of Baltimore's remaining streetcar lines into motor buses. Conversion called for rapid removal of more than half the streetcar lines in the city, and eventually complete dismantling of the streetcar system.<sup>25</sup> By way of City Ordinance 393 in 1946, the Baltimore City Commission granted its approval. The ordinance had two major provisions. First, it supported the proposed conversion plan. "The Company will with reasonable diligence and as . . . soon as necessary equipment can be obtained therefore proceed to carry into effect its Conversion Program substantially as sent for in its plan dated November 1, 1945, providing for the conversion from streetcar operations to free-wheel operation of approximately 58% of the Company's single track streetcar mileage." Second, the city procured money it felt it was due. For many years, the city had believed it was being cheated out of taxes owed by the Baltimore Transit Company and had gone so far as to file a suit to claim them. The legislation finally settled that dispute. The Baltimore Transit Company agreed to pay the city \$2,500,000 immediately, and to pay a 2 percent tax on the gross revenues from motor buses.<sup>26</sup> Two million dollars of the settlement was allocated to paying over streetcar tracks, and the remaining \$500,000 was to settle the city's claim that the BTC had underpaid its taxes. Before this ordinance, buses in the city had been nearly tax free, and the city had lost substantial revenues. After the city council approved the plan seven to one with one abstention,<sup>27</sup> the conversion plan still required the approval of the Public Service Commission, which was to examine it in April 1946.

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case was filed in an effort to stop it. The Republican City Committee chairman, Paul Robertson (who was at the time running for public office), claimed the ordinance "unlawfully undertakes to impose a tax without authority of law." A week earlier, before the ordinance had passed, he had filed a complaint requesting the city be restrained from entering into an agreement in relation to the conversion plan. He claimed that the settlement would cost the city more than \$32 million.<sup>28</sup> Although the suit was dismissed, Robertson's case did reflect popular opposition on the issue. Hoping to garner votes for an upcoming election of the House of Representatives, Robertson was looking for an issue to attract public support, and he accurately sensed discontent among citizens, both for the conversion plan and the monetary dealings that came with it.

The Maryland Public Service Commission, following hearings to determine the feasibility and desirability of the BTC's conversion plan, accepted it on Wednesday, October 10, 1946. The PSC approved nearly the entire proposal (it did not allow the Sparrows Point and Gay Street lines to convert to motor buses), thus beginning the end of streetcars in Baltimore. The conversion plan projected the change of nearly every downtown corridor from streetcars to motor buses. Some outlying trolley tracks remained, and streetcars were permitted to run on Guilford Avenue and Lombard Street in downtown.<sup>29</sup> Now, the Baltimore Transit Company simply required the arrival of the motor buses it had on order, and the conversion could get underway.

On June 22, 1947, the conversion plan swung into full force. Three streetcar lines were removed and service on at least three others was significantly reduced. In 1948 all the streetcars were removed from a main thoroughfare, West Baltimore Street, along with seven other lines. The firm removed one line and truncated another in 1949, and 1950 saw the transition of five lines from streetcars and the cutting of one more. In 1952 four more lines were removed, followed by an additional three in 1954. By 1958 only two streetcar lines remained. Throughout this period, the number of transit riders decreased exponentially. In 1947, 248,554,000 revenue passengers traveled on BTC lines; in 1954 the number had fallen to 140,479,000, at a time when the city population was increasing.<sup>30</sup> Those streetcars that remained were in horrible condition. The outsides were covered with dents and painted orange-yellow. Inside, "some windows could not be raised; others rattled in their frames; bell ropes were broken; in many places, the rubber flooring had worked loose, rising in humps; there was usually a gap of several inches between the sets of doors at front and center, letting in the wintry air; and some of the roofs leaked."<sup>31</sup> November 3, 1963, marked the final day of streetcar service in Baltimore. The Baltimore Transit Company had succeeded in converting its transit system from streetcars to the inherently inferior motor bus system.

To claim that National City Lines, Inc., came to Baltimore with the intention of dismantling the streetcars to replace them with inferior buses first supposes that



The number 13 streetcar at North Avenue and St. Paul Street opposite the Centre Theater c. 1944. (Courtesy Baltimore Transit Archives.)

motor buses are inferior. A number of examples demonstrate this to be so. First, Baltimore City itself has after a fashion returned to streetcars with the light rail system it introduced and is in the process of expanding. Light rail systems are, in essence, streetcar systems, although they usually employ platforms for loading and unloading. Melbourne, Australia; Cologne, Germany; and Bristol, Great Britain still run streetcar systems successfully. Much of Boston's green-line rail operates as a streetcar system. In addition to modern-day examples of successful streetcar systems, it should be recognized that buses themselves were flawed. One historian, David St. Clair, analyzed data from 1935 to 1950 and determined "the streetcar was more economical than the motor bus, at least on the more heavily patronized lines."<sup>32</sup>

Representatives for both the city and National City Lines frequently argued that buses were, overall, less expensive to maintain and purchase. That argument did not hold up in Baltimore, as became readily apparent by 1949. There were substantial increases in the cost of maintenance, leading one stockholder attending the 1949 stockholders' meeting to ask, "When buses were first discussed we were told that maintenance would go down, but the cost has gone up. Why?" The president replied "that the company had to make improvements in its road beds, that

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rolling stock needed maintenance and that the same thing applied to some buses." When asked whether a reduction in maintenance costs could be expected, "Mr. Haneke said he thought that the cost would remain at the present level."<sup>33</sup> Maintenance expenses for the transit company were on the rise, even though ridership was on the wane, prompting cuts in both streetcar and bus routes. Bus advocates also argued that buses were less expensive to purchase. While that was indeed the case, buses only lasted, on average, eight years in Baltimore City, compared with the thirty to thirty-five-year life span of each streetcar. Moreover, they were significantly less efficient. Seattle transportation engineer E. E. Van Ness noted that, "The internal combustion bus, partly due to its many points of wear, has very poor efficiency: about 10 percent at the wheels. The electric trackless trolley, on the other hand, has a wheel efficiency of about 83 percent."<sup>34</sup> Finally, buses were originally untaxed by the city of Baltimore, making them less costly to run than streetcars. The city council rectified that with the conversion plan. Economically, buses turned out to be a poor investment for the Baltimore Transit Company.

The largest benefit, according to both the BTC and the City of Baltimore, was the decongestion of city streets. The BTC argued that removing streetcars to allow one-way streets and reduce obstacles for automobiles would improve the speed of mass transit and encourage riders. Upon the approval of the conversion plan, Nolan claimed:

Our own company also has cause for rejoicing because our only hope for making our service sufficiently attractive to meet automobile competition lies in relief from traffic congestion. Good transit services can contribute greatly to the solution of the traffic problem in Baltimore, if it can attract passengers. But a transit system which just crawls cannot attract passengers, and, hence, cannot do the job it ought to do and can do if it has a chance.<sup>35</sup>

But in 1946, when experimental bus lines were put in place, congestion was not relieved. "Buses and taxicabs continue to slow the flow of automotive movement by failing to draw to curbs to take on and drop passengers," said one newspaper article. In 1952 when Douglass Pratt, another NCL employee, took over as president, he listed as one of the four greatest problems facing the transit company the congestion of downtown streets.<sup>36</sup> Traffic congestion was still holding up buses in 1957. In response to questions regarding poor service, an *Evening Sun* article cited the standard response from the BTC to bus delays as "at peak hours, the bus has been held up in traffic congestion."<sup>37</sup> The great decongesting of downtown Baltimore never occurred. Buses were unable to fulfill that promise. Baltimore easily could have sustained the streetcar system it once had, especially had it followed the advice put forth by Bancroft Hill that streetcars used in tandem with motor buses would improve both systems.

Since it is likely that Baltimore's streetcars could have remained viable, National City Lines, Inc. must have had an incentive behind its conversion plan. On the surface, NCL represented conversion as a benefit to its customers, because it would reduce street congestion, provide more flexibility, and be less costly. In the Baltimore Transit Company's annual report for 1945, Fred Nolan set out the objectives of the plan:

That the overall traveling time of public transit passengers should be reduced to a minimum; that public transit lines should be located as to provide the most convenient access to all parts of the area and still make economically frequent intervals on each route; (and) the planned transit system should furnish service with the particular type of vehicle which will provide the highest quality of service at the lowest cost.<sup>38</sup>

It was designed to encourage more people to take mass transit, to keep the number of revenue passengers high permit the BTC to remain profitable. In November 1945, when Nolan proposed the conversion plan, it did not make economic sense to move to buses. That year the Baltimore Transit System netted more than \$1.5 million, and in 1946, when the Public Service Commission and the Baltimore City Commission approved the conversion plan, it earned over \$1.2 million.<sup>39</sup> The number of revenue passengers hit a high, with 263,573,000 in 1945 and dropped only slightly to 262,256,000 in 1946. Even following the end of the war, with the beginning of mass-layoffs in Baltimore and the end of gasoline quotas, mass transit maintained the levels it had during the war. More than 245 million people rode the mass transit system in 1947 and 1948. Before the war, the Baltimore Transit Company had attracted, at most, 164 million riders.<sup>40</sup> These are not the figures of a transit company desperately seeking to salvage itself.

If ridership was not in decline, what about the matter of congestion in downtown streets? The answer is that, in general, the Baltimore Transit Company seems to have kept its customers happy. By 1946 traffic congestion in downtown had become a problem. The *Sun* observed, "Traffic congestion is going to get increasingly worse . . . until we have in actual operation regulations that will give us better use of the streets . . . and adequate places to park when we wish to do business, shop, or attend some place of amusement."<sup>41</sup> The paper did not address a lack of transit service, as it would begin to do in the 1950s. It was concerned only with traffic congestion. In all likelihood, the Baltimore Transit Company itself was not much concerned with congestion either, but it made use of the city's desire to free more driving space to implement the original plan of the National City Lines and convert the streetcar system to buses.

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system. Bancroft Hill, who was always portrayed as a moderate in terms of converting the city, hardly would have proposed a plan that would result in the elimination of streetcars entirely. Also, Fred Nolan had no time between his election in July and the proposed plan, which emerged in November, to undertake an analysis of Baltimore's transit system and determine what type of vehicle was preferable for which line. Instead, Nolan used the fact that Baltimore City wanted to end congestion to further his company's original plans, converting the system to one of motor coaches furnished by his "supplier" companies, who owned a portion of its stock.

Although E. Roy Fitzgerald testified at the original Public Service Commission hearings that "his sole interest in acquiring B.T.C. stock is to help this city in its transit problems," and denied "that he is bus-minded," National City Lines' primary interest in Baltimore City was to convert the existing streetcar transit system. During those hearings, he denied any special advantage to the parent companies, saying that National City Lines and its subsidiaries bought supplies at the lowest competitive price, and that his company employed the type of vehicle most satisfactory for the job.<sup>42</sup> Yet that is exactly what he and his company did not do. Before leaving, Bancroft Hill ordered one hundred new Ford buses for the lines that were being converted to buses. Upon the Public Service Commission's approval of the conversion plan, newly installed President Nolan announced that he had received National City Lines' authority to receive priority on two hundred buses that the company had on order for its western division—two hundred buses from General Motors Corporation. "Mr. Nolan also sent off an order for 400 new buses to General Motors Corporation," wrote the *Baltimore Sun*.<sup>43</sup> There are no reasons given for the switch to GM buses. The move was especially unusual in light of the expected arrival of the sixty-five remaining Ford buses from the order placed by Hill. Contrary to his statements to the Public Service Commission, Nolan no longer selected the best vehicle for the job. He selected the best vehicle with which to replace streetcars and simultaneously fulfilled his real purpose—funneling orders to the larger supplier companies.

There is evidence that in addition to the General Motors purchase, the Baltimore Transit Company entered into an agreement with Firestone Tire & Rubber Company. In 1951, the "Commission to Study and Report on the Transportation System Operated by the Baltimore Transit Company" submitted its report on the status of the company. In that document, one commissioner dissented from the overall report. As part of his separate report, Commissioner Herbert Levy included the following information:

After the National City Lines acquired effective control of the Transit Company, it terminated its contract with the United States Rubber Company and entered into a new contract with the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. . . . According to the uncontradicted testimony of Mr. A. Earle Courts, who was

purchasing agent when the substitution was made, the United States Rubber Company had been furnishing excellent service under its contract, under the circumstances then existing, and there was no reason for the substitution.

Fred Nolan submitted a contract with the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. Upon analyzing the contract, A. Earle Courts determined that there would be a \$28,000 savings with Firestone Tire and Rubber Company. No opportunity was given to United States Rubber Company to produce a competitive bid, which according to Courts, might very well have made a bid that could have saved more than \$28,000 per year—saved using Firestone. The report concludes that while in previous administrations, Courts had been given a large measure of autonomy in deciding contracts, Nolan personally dictated what contracts were to be made.<sup>44</sup> In this case, Nolan determined that a contract with the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company was in the interest of the Baltimore Transit Company, although he had little solid evidence to support his decision. By 1949 stockholders, too, were expressing concern. An April 14, 1949, *Sun* article covered the annual stockholders meeting, where stockholder Joseph V. Manganaro stated, "It is the fear of the minority stockholders that the company's first interest is to create buying orders for equipment and buses. A company can be milked that way."<sup>45</sup> The Baltimore Transit Company was indeed being milked, its reserves spent to purchase new buses and replace the functional existing system.

In 1947, in a criminal case entitled *The United States of America v. National City Lines, et al.*, the Justice Department brought suit against National City Lines and its various supplier stockholding companies, charging them with violating the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. The court determined that Federal Engineering Corporation (a subsidiary of Standard Oil), General Motors Corporation, Phillips Petroleum Company, Firestone Tire and Rubber Company, and Mack Manufacturing Company had all bought stock in NCL. "The operating companies of the defendants . . . use large quantities of buses, tires, tubes, and petroleum products, which are manufactures and handled by the supplier defendants, such as Phillips, Standard, General Motors, Mack, and Firestone." The government's case argued that from January 1, 1937, onward, the defendants "engaged in an unlawful combination and conspiracy to acquire ownership . . . in a substantial part of local transit companies . . . and to restrain and to monopolize the aforesaid interstate commerce in motor buses, petroleum products, tires, and tubes sold to local transportation companies in cities, counties and towns in which National, American, and Pacific have ownership, control of a substantial financial interest." The government further argued that the defendants had violated Sections 1 and 2 of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act.

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can and Pacific who have, in turn, caused their operating companies to purchase practically all their requirements in tires, tubes, petroleum products and buses from the supplier defendants to the exclusion of products competitive with them. . . . National City Lines, American City Lines, and Pacific City Lines would not renew contracts with others for purchase or rental of materials and equipment without the consent of the supplier defendants.<sup>46</sup>

What happened in Baltimore occurred throughout the country, and the federal government had taken notice. NCL and the various companies were sued in both civil and criminal court in an attempt to rectify the damage the companies had caused to local mass transit.

On April 9, 1949, the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Illinois indicted the defendants on a charge of conspiring to monopolize "the sale of buses, petroleum products, tires and tubes used by local transportation systems in those cities in which defendants National, American, and Pacific owned, controlled, or had a substantial financial interest in," in violation of Section 2 of the Sherman Anti-Trust Act. Each corporation was fined five thousand dollars, and each individual one dollar. E. Roy Fitzgerald, president of the National City Lines and a board member of the Baltimore Transit Company, was indicted, along with individual representatives of the various companies. The district court decision showed that National City Lines had been conspiring with the suppliers to guarantee that only they supplied the materials. "In return for . . . investments, the supplier defendants received supply contracts which obligated the City Lines defendants and their existing and future subsidiary operating companies to obtain substantially all of their requirements of motor buses from General Motors and Mack, their requirements of petroleum products from Phillips and Standard, and their requirements of tires and tubes from Firestone." General Motors obtained a contract requiring National & Pacific to buy 85 percent of their new buses from GM for companies they had owned in 1939, and 41.5 percent from companies acquired in the future. GM sold its investments in NCL in 1949 and their contracts were canceled upon the conviction in 1949. By that year, all the companies with the exception of Firestone had divested themselves from National City Lines.<sup>47</sup>

Baltimore Transit Company never appears in the records for the civil or criminal cases. In 1954, the NCL conceded and made an agreement with the U.S. government in the civil case, listing all the companies that could do business with the "supplier" companies in the future. Thirty-five separate companies were listed, but the Baltimore Transit Company was not among them. It is never cited, nor are any specific restrictions applied to it. Part of this may result from the fact that NCL only owned 30 percent of it.<sup>48</sup> From 1954 on, National City Lines was restricted from entering into contractual agreements such as it previously had with the supplier defendants, but in Baltimore the damage had been done. Four hundred Gen-



Brill bus on the number 20 line, Baltimore and Calvert Streets, c. 1960. (Courtesy Baltimore Transit Archives.)

eral Motors buses were on the streets and Firestone Tire & Rubber Company had been given a contract without competitive bidding.

National City Lines was never found guilty of conspiring to purchase transit systems with the intent of converting them to motor bus lines in a court of law, as representatives for General Motors frequently point out. However, Bradford Snell, assistant counsel for the Senate Anti-trust Subcommittee, produced a report analyzing the transit system. Presented in 1974, the report, entitled *American Ground Transportation*, noted that in 1932 General Motors formed a holding company known as the United Cities Motor Transit, whose function "was to acquire electric streetcar companies, convert them to GM motor bus operation, and then resell the properties to local concerns which agreed to purchase GM bus replacements." Although the company stopped its actions in 1935 as a result of pressure from the American Transit Association, Snell argues that in 1936 GM organized National City Lines to the same end. "The method was basically the same as that which GM employed successfully (previously): acquisition, motorization, and resale." He takes the argument one step further, saying that GM deliberately designed a bus that would discourage ridership. "GM's dieselization program may have had the long-term effect of selling GM cars," he writes. Snell argued that General Motors was the driving force behind National City Lines' removal of streetcar systems.<sup>49</sup>

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There is some reason to question Snell's argument. First, unlike the United States in the 1949 court case, Snell did not have to prove that the various companies, and specifically General Motors, employed such techniques. Much of his argument is based on the testimony of officials with less hard evidence to back up such an extreme accusation. Finally, some of the data he uses are incorrect: the monetary figures he gave are skewed, according to both General Motors and the court cases. Nevertheless, Snell's arguments do have some validity, especially in relation to GM's use of National City Lines as an organizing force to convert streetcars to bus systems. His evidence, especially that with regard to General Motors' earlier endeavors to accomplish similar results, seems to prove what the court cases could not, that General Motors and other supplier defendants set out to purchase and eliminate streetcar systems in local transit companies.

General Motors still stands by its argument that, although it was found guilty, in reality there was no conspiracy to acquire transit companies and convert them to buses. A letter written to the *Legal Times* responded to an article citing the National City Lines case. The author was a former member of General Motors' legal staff, and part of his duties entailed drafting letters "that tried to set the record straight." He argued that rail-based transit enterprises began failing as early as World War I, and "the conversion to demonstrably cheaper and more flexible use transportation began at that time, long before General Motors had anything to do with the bus business, and the conversion continued thereafter throughout the country for purely economical reasons." He presented the same argument refuted earlier, that buses were cheaper to operate, more reliable, and safer, and therefore streetcars were stepping into oblivion on their own accord.<sup>50</sup> At least in Baltimore, these facts were not the case. Although the transit system failed in the early 1930s, by the mid-1940s it was achieving new heights, breaking records, and staying well above its passenger numbers set prior to World War II. The motivation for National City Lines conversion of the Baltimore streetcar system could not have been one of transit economics, because the system was doing well.

While National City Lines may have come to Baltimore originally with the purpose of converting the streetcar system to buses, it could not have accomplished the task without the cooperation, and even encouragement, of the Baltimore City Council. The city administration approved the legislation and passed it on to the Public Service Commission with at least an implied recommendation that they allow it. The city engineer actually helped draft the plan. Although he was working with a different purpose than the National City Lines officials, he, too, wanted to remove streetcar lines, although for a different reason.

Henry Barnes was a traffic expert from Denver hired as a city engineer. Barnes's purpose in coming to Baltimore was to reduce the traffic congestion that plagued downtown. His solution was to turn a number of downtown streets into one-way thoroughfares. Streetcars were an impediment to his project. "Barnes is quoted as

saying that the only thing which he had against streetcars was that they traveled in the streets." Barnes and other city engineers argued that streetcars ran directly down the middle of the roads, blocking valuable space and increasing congestion as they stopped to pick up passengers.<sup>51</sup> City administrators backed him. In the previously mentioned legal case to stop the conversion plan, the city solicitor detailed the advantages of converting to buses:

Adoption of buses will ease congestion and enable designation of various traffic arteries as one-way streets; operation of trolley lines on many city streets precludes their being designated as one-way streets. The capital investment to reroute and re-layout of trolley tracks to fit into a one-way street scheme makes such a plan impractical; general widening of existing streets is economically unfeasible; development of subways is too costly.<sup>52</sup>

It was not possible to turn a road with a streetcar into a one-way street, as most lines ran both ways, and the expense behind a mass conversion would have been phenomenal. As early as 1935, Baltimore City was proposing the rerouting and elimination of trolleys to ease congestion. A report to the Baltimore Traffic Committee submitted in August 1935, suggested the elimination of streetcar operation on Charles, Calvert, East Fayette, and Hanover Streets to ease backup and traffic congestion. A 1939 BTC pamphlet explained that "In order to cooperate with the plans of the City Traffic committee and with the approval of the PSC, several transit lines will be rerouted to facilitate the movement of free-wheel vehicles in congested areas." When the final opportunity to create one-way streets and reduce congestion arose, the city obliged and aided the proposal, thinking it could ease the congestion of downtown and encourage more economic endeavors without having to make much investment on its own.<sup>53</sup>

Finally, there was a monetary incentive behind the city's acceptance of the Baltimore Transit Company's conversion plan. Although the plan had originally been submitted in November 1945, the city had opposed it on the grounds that the Baltimore Transit Company had been paying insufficient taxes and that city regulators had no tax authority over the buses used. In 1944 the city council heard a proposal to foreclose on the Baltimore Transit Company if it did not collect the back taxes it was owed.<sup>54</sup> It finally worked out the agreement in order to side-step the problem and the pending court case, by arranging for the city to receive \$2.65 million from the Baltimore Transit Company. Half a million dollars of that was earmarked for back taxes, \$150,000 for taxes for the following two years, and \$2 million for the cost of replacing the streets after the conversion plan. For Baltimore City, the conversion plan was an opportunity to force the BTC into an agreement on its taxes. In the agreement, it levied a 2 percent tax on all future gross receipts from buses. It brought BTC company attorney Harry Baetjer to the coun-

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cil to guarantee that the future taxes would be paid. "The company," said Baetjer, "will not contest the two percent tax. We understand that it is a minimum tax and is in addition to any tax that must be levied against the company."<sup>55</sup> For city commissioners, the conversion plan guaranteed a new source of income for the city. They were benefiting economically as well as easing the congestion downtown and so wholeheartedly approved of the conversion plan.

The conversion plan to change the Baltimore Transit Company from streetcars into an entirely motor bus-based system resulted mainly from ties between National City Lines and various suppliers companies but would not have succeeded without the support of the Baltimore City Commission and the city engineers. Baltimore, as did many other cities throughout the country, lost its streetcars to a combination of capitalism and the dream of an improved city. Unfortunately replacing streetcars had only negative effects on the city. Congestion did not improve significantly as hoped, and with buses on nearly every line the Baltimore Transit Company fell into oblivion, losing more and more riders each year until it finally sold out to the municipality. A 1955 report to the mayor of Baltimore presented the status of transportation:

The present policy of the City appears to be directed more towards the encouragement of the automobile movement rather than towards the establishment of a balanced transportation program. Both City agencies and the Baltimore Transit Company must share the blame for this situation. The City, through decentralization of responsibilities and the absence of any effective means of control, has failed to incorporate the mass transit system into the total organization for transportation. The Company has failed to press for recognition of its vital role, and, judging by past performance, lacks the imagination and motivation to do so.<sup>56</sup>

With the loss of its streetcar system, the Baltimore Transit Company had lost its ability to provide adequate—not to mention exceptional—service for the city of Baltimore.

#### NOTES

1. "Baltimore Transit Company," *Baltimore Sun*, July 28, 1940.
2. Michael R. Farrell, *Who Made All Our Streetcars Go?: The Story of Mass Transit in Baltimore* (Baltimore: Baltimore NRHS Publications, 1973), 171.
3. There is an extensive historical debate over the demise of urban streetcar lines, spawned mostly by Bradford Snell's report to the U.S. Senate in 1974, entitled "American Ground Transport," in which he argued that outside forces purchased local transportation companies and systematically dismantled their streetcar systems, replacing them with less effective motor buses. For a more recent view of this argument, see Stanley I. Fischler, *Moving Millions: An*

*Inside Look at Mass Transit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979). An opposing view is presented by Mark Foster in *From Streetcar to Superhighway: American City Planners and Urban Transportation, 1900-1940*. Foster places blame upon the professionals who planned city growth.

4. All information on the origin of mass transportation is taken from Fischler, *Moving Millions*.

5. *Ibid.*, 24.

6. All information on the origin of Baltimore City public transportation is from Baltimore Transit Archives, <http://transarc.bluemoon.net/>, November 22, 1999.

7. Farrell, *Who Made All Our Streetcars Go?*, 123, 125, 143, 147.

8. *Ibid.*, 149.

9. Annual revenue Passenger statistics from Baltimore Transit Company, cited in Abel Wolman, et al., *Report to the Mayor of Baltimore by the Committee on Mass Transportation* (Baltimore, December 1955), 6.

10. Baltimore Transit Company annual reports, 1941-45. By order of the Office of Defense transportation, they discontinued or cut nine bus lines in 1941; similar orders were in effect for the remaining war years.

11. Baltimore Transit Company Annual Reports for 1942 and 1945.

12. "Stores Quits Transit Post, Hill Gets Job," *Baltimore Sun*, February 14, 1936; "Transit Firm Plans 2 Million in Improvements: Buys 108 New Streamlined Trolleys and 15 New Buses," *Evening Sun*, July 2, 1940; Farrell, *Who Made All Our Streetcars Go?*, 164.

13. Baltimore Transit Company pamphlet, February 11, 1942.

14. "Chicago Firm Would Acquire Transit Stock," *Baltimore Sun*, August 25, 1944.

15. "Holding Firm Agrees to 30% Stock Limit," *ibid.*, September 15, 1944.

16. "St. Louis Streetcars Make Profit for Holding Company," *Baltimore Sun*, September 14, 1944; "Holding Firm Agrees to 30% Stock Limit," *ibid.*, September 15, 1944.

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18. "Bolgiano Backs BTC Trustees," *Baltimore Sun*, September 12, 1944.

19. "B.T.C. Moves to Safeguard Reserve Fund," *ibid.*

20. "Holding Firm Agrees to 30% Stock Limit," *ibid.*, September 15, 1944.

21. "Head of City Lines Put on B.T.C. Board," *ibid.*, April 25, 1945; "B.T.C. Board Re-Elects Hill as President," *ibid.*, May 11, 1945.

22. "New Baltimore Transit Chief Takes Office Next Week," *ibid.*, June 29, 1945; "Nolan's Election Marks Power Shift in B.T.C.," *Evening Sun*, June 13, 1945.

23. "A.C.L. Seeks to Enlarge Its B.T.C. Holdings," *Baltimore Sun*, September 14, 1945.

24. "End Asked of New Interest in B.T.C.," *ibid.*, November 7, 1945.

25. "Route Changes and New Services in Transit Programs," *ibid.*, October 10, 1946.

26. Baltimore City Ordinance #393, 1946.

27. "Council O.K.'s Transit Bill," *Baltimore Sun*, May 16, 1946; "Final Action the B.T.C. Due," *ibid.*, May 14, 1946. The one abstention was from a councilman who was a consulting engineer for the transit company.

28. "Court to Get B.T.C. Plan," *ibid.*, May 22, 1946. "Dismisses Transit Suit By Robertson," *ibid.*, May 29, 1946.

29. "Shift Awaits Bus Delivery," *ibid.*, October 10, 1946; "Route Changes and New Services in Transit Program," *ibid.*, October 10, 1946.

30. Dismantling data from Farrell, *Who Made All Our Streetcars Go?*, 166; Wolman, et al., *Report to the Mayor*, 6.

31. Farrell, *Who Made All Our Streetcars Go?*, 171.

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47. *United States v. National City Lines, et al.* No 49. C 1364 (134 F Supp. 350; 1955 U.S. Dist LEXIS 2748); 1955 Trade Cas. (CCH) 68, 158.
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