

Lancaster's Streetcar Suburbs,

1890-1920

Gary R. Hovinen

We usually associate the movement of people to suburbs in search of lower density environments with the period after World War II and sometimes as well with the 1920s. But even before the automobile age, people may have preferred suburban locations where cheaper and more abundant land made possible larger building lots and where a less dirty and less noisy environment was found. Until the 1890s, the major limiting factors were the central location of most jobs and transportation technology that was insufficient to enable mass commuting. The electric streetcar, developed first in Richmond, Virginia, in 1887, was the most important transportation breakthrough before the automobile, since it enabled great numbers of people to commute longer distances at a relatively low cost. Lancaster, in 1890, was one of the first cities of its size to adopt the new innovation.

My purpose in this article is to examine the premise that the streetcar quickly encouraged first the subdivision of land and shortly thereafter the widespread building of houses in the suburbs outside the legal limits of Lancaster City. In the 1890s, much buildable land remained within the city, especially in the northeast and southwest sections. At the same time, the developed area of the city was very densely populated. Did the advantages of cheap, more abundant land outside the city, made accessible by the streetcar, encourage land speculators to become active and large numbers of people to buy houses there in newly subdivided areas? Furthermore, what classes of people located in Lancaster's streetcar suburbs? Were the new suburbanites middle class or were other classes also involved? Finally, how many suburbanites commuted daily to the city?

As a clue to the thinking of influential community leaders in the 1890s about the potential of the streetcar in leading to lower density development, we can examine the news media. An article in the Lancaster New Era of July 14, 1891, suggested:

Lots are far cheaper in the outskirts of the city than nearer its centre, and larger grounds can be secured the same money, while the quick and cheap communications with the business portion of the city renders the distance no objection whatever. Building operations will certainly extend themselves along the lines of street railway travel, for to most, some easy distance from the dust and din of the busy city is more desirable as well as healthier than the turmoil and heat of the thickly settled portion.

To discover the extent to which suburban land speculation and development resulted from the streetcar, various sources can be used. Newspapers and previous publications (Denney 1970, Shindle 1976, Cummings and Rohrbeck 1977) provide information on extension of the streetcar network from 1890 on. Early subdivisions outside the city are filed in the Register of Deeds office at the new county courthouse. At the same office, one can obtain information from the index of deeds on landownership transfers and then examine deedbooks in the old courthouse for more specific information. County atlases from 1875 and 1899 also provide information on landownership as well as on existing subdivisions and residential buildings.

Other sources provide information on class or socioeconomic status and commuting characteristics of early suburbanites. City and county directories list the names of residents and their type and place of employment. Tax assessment lists at the County Historical Society provide data on property values.

Extension of Electric Streetcar Network

Before the electric trolley suburban horsecar lines were constructed to Millersville in 1874 and to West End Park in 1888. A cable car ran along Old Philadelphia Pike to the Conestoga River in Lancaster Township beginning in 1888. John C. Hager, with real estate holdings in the West End of the city and in Lancaster Township, was president of the Millersville Street Railway Line. Hager was one of the principal promoters of the electrification of the city lines by September 1890 and of the West End and Millersville lines by June-July 1891.

By September 1891 streetcar promoters were proposing a new line out Marietta Pike to the West End Addition in Lancaster Township, where John Hager owned land, then south to join the existing Columbia Avenue line. The newspaper reported considerable speculation about suburban residential building activity that would occur once the streetcar line was finished.

Long-distance lines to Columbia and Lititz, completed in 1893 and 1895, made additional land to the west and north of the city ripe for subdivision and development. In the latter case the Pennsylvania Railroad Company refused to grant permission for a trolley to cross its bridge just north of the city, so a horse-drawn omnibus had to transport passengers from North Duke Street in the city to a point in Manheim Township on the other side. Given the inconvenience to passengers and the loss of potential revenues, the trolley company decided to build an indirect line to Lititz via New Holland Avenue and Rossmere. The Rossmere Belt Line was completed in early 1895 and remained part of the long-distance Lititz line until 1907, when agreement with the railroad finally established a more direct line avoiding Rossmere. But the Rossmere Belt Line continued in use as a suburban line, since the trolley, as will be noted later, had given rise to suburban development.

In 1894, various electric lines in Lancaster County were merged into a single system owned by the Pennsylvania Traction Company, which developed grandiose plans for additional lines. But in 1896 the company went bankrupt owing to overcapitalization during a national financial recession. This halted additional building of electric lines until 1900, when the Conestoga Traction Company was formed. Between 1900 and 1913 new lines were built to communities throughout the county, and a direct line to Rocky Springs Amusement Park was finished by 1903.

Subdivision and Building Activity

To investigate in more detail the link between land subdivision and construction of houses, one can examine the suburbs where residential development took place between 1890 and 1920, the streetcar period. For purposes of this study, suburbs are defined simply as areas outside the city boundary but within possible range of places of employment within the city, where residential development may take place as a result.

Table 1 indicates the progression of subdivision and development activity as streetcar lines were extended outside the city. Table 2 shows the relation between dates of subdivision for selected suburban tracts and dates of trolley line openings. Examination of these two tables suggests that trolley line openings, or the anticipation of trolley line construction, often encouraged subdivision of suburban tracts in hopes of selling building lots. In many instances, such as the Herr Tract in Lancaster Township (subdivided by 1899), Fordney Road, Keller Tract, and Eden in Manheim Township, Sunnyside in West Lampeter Township, and Fairview in Lancaster Township (see map), these speculative ventures did not lead quickly to residential development. Apparently, abundant land closer to Penn Square, either within the city or just outside the city boundary, provided

TABLE 1. *Maximum radius of subdivision from Penn Square*

<u>Maximum radius from Penn Square</u>	<u>Year</u>
7/8 mile	1875
1 5/8 mile, Herr Tract, Lancaster Township	1900
2 1/4 miles, West Lancaster, Lancaster Township	1910
2 7/8 miles, Eden, Manheim Township	1920

Maximum radius of development from Penn Square

<u>Corridor</u>	<u>1899</u>	<u>1920</u>
East King Street	1 1/2 miles	2 miles
Rossmere	1 3/8 miles	1 1/2 miles
North Queen Street	1 mile	1 3/8 miles
Columbia Avenue West	1 1/8 miles	2 1/4 miles
Manor Avenue	7/8 mile	1 1/8 miles
South Queen Street	7/8 mile	1 mile

TABLE 2. *Subdivision and Trolley Line Opening Dates*

<u>Subdivision</u>	<u>Date Subdivided</u>	<u>Trolley Line Opening</u>
1. Clark's Eastern Addition, Lancaster Twp. (East)	1879	1890 (cable car by 1888)
2. Clark's Eastern Addition, by John C. Hager	1892	1890
3. Rohrer's Addition Lancaster Twp. (East)	1892	1890
4. Rossmere, Manheim Township	1895 (Nov.)	Early 1895
5. Real Estate & Improvement Co., Rossmere	Unknown	Early 1895
6. Columbia Ave. and Race, Lancaster Twp. (West)	1897	1891
7. West End Addition, Lancaster Twp. (West)	Unknown	1892
8. Keller Tract, Manheim Township	1895	1895
9. Fairview, Lancaster Twp. (West)	1904	1891
10. West Lancaster, Manor Township	1906	1893
11. Sunnyside, West Lampeter Twp.	1912	1903

sufficient building opportunities to satisfy demand. But in some cases, subdividers succeeded in selling lots to people interested in land investment but not immediate building; the case of Fairview, now known as Bausman, will be documented later. In a few instances, mainly involving suburban tracts just outside the city, subdivision led rather quickly not only to sale of lots but also to development of a significant portion of those lots.

Case Studies of Streetcar Suburban Development

Three indicators of the nature of Lancaster's early suburbs are occupational or socioeconomic status of residents, median assessed property values, and commuting characteristics. Using these indicators, one quickly sees that Lancaster's suburbs before 1920 were not simply homogeneous, middle-class areas and differed markedly from each other.

The West End of Lancaster Township, developed mainly during the streetcar period of 1890 to 1920, was the home of many high-status people who commuted to places of employment in the city. Some of the most prestigious suburban estates were found along Columbia Avenue, whereas others were located to the north. Promoters of the West End included John Hager and John Hager, Jr., and G. B. Willson, the owner of the Wheatland estate. The Hagers, as already noted, were active promoters of residential development along the street railway lines; they first subdivided their landholdings in the West End Addition of Lancaster Township and then sold building lots to many middle- as well as upper-status families. G.B. Willson was the person responsible for the subdivision of land and sale of lots along Marietta Avenue. He and Judge J. Hay Brown, who had common landholdings, exercised influence to have the streetcar and public utilities extended to the Marietta Avenue area, which became one of the most prestigious suburban residential districts outside Lancaster.

But the West End contained some lower-status people as well (see Table 3). Factory workers and day laborers inhabited the Rider Avenue area of the West End, not far from some of the most prestigious suburban estates, including the Hagers', along Columbia Avenue. The housing units along Rider Avenue were generally modest and semidetached and were rented, in contrast to the rest of the West End, where houses were generally owner-occupied. Overall, the West End had the lowest percentage of tenant occupants of any of the suburban areas studied — 33.8 percent of the heads of household in 1908.

By 1908, the West End had the highest median assessed property value for those properties containing housing (\$2,000) of any of the suburbs studied. The rather mixed nature of the district was indicated by the range from high to low, from \$400-\$500 along Rider Avenue to a maximum of \$25,000 along School Lane Avenue.

TABLE 3. *Socioeconomic Status of Streetcar Suburbs*

	<u>West End, Lancaster Township*</u>	<u>Rossmere</u>	<u>East End, Lancaster Township</u>	<u>West Lancaster, Manor Township* *</u>
Households	63	64	130	—
1908				
1918	93	74	205	9
Social group breakdown, 1908 (heads of household)				
Professional	8 (11.8%)	1 (1.6%)	7 (5.4%)	—
Owner, entrepreneur	15 (22.1%)	—	3 (2.3%)	—
Sub-managerial	6 (8.8%)	4 (6.3%)	5 (3.8%)	1 (11.1%)
Clerk	1 (1.5%)	4 (6.3%)	8 (6.1%)	1 (11.1%)
Agriculture, Self-employed	3 (4.4%)	1 (1.6%)* * *	2 (1.5%)	—
Shopkeeper	4 (5.9%)	2 (3.1%)	15 (11.5%)	—
Hawker, peddler	1 (1.5%)	—	—	—
Skilled worker	7 (10.3%)	32 (50.0%)	36 (27.7%)	6 (66.7%)
Semiskilled worker	—	1 (1.6%)	5 (3.8%)	—
Unskilled laborer	8 (11.8%)	11 (17.2%)	20 (15.4%)	—
Retired, no occupation, unknown	15 (22.1%)	8 (12.5%)	29 (22.3%)	1 (11.1%)

* Includes Columbia Avenue west to Abbeyville Road, south and east to Rider Avenue, north to Marietta Avenue

* * Social group breakdown data are for 1918.

* * * Agricultural laborer.

TABLE 4. *Commuting from streetcar suburbs*

<u>Area</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>No. commuting to central city</u>	<u>No. working locally</u>	<u>Retired or unknown</u>
West End	1908	29	7	32
East End	1908	23	17	90
Rossmere	1908	2	24	30
W. Lancaster	1918	3	—	6

The East End in Lancaster Township, which developed mainly after 1890, also consisted of a mixture of classes but was somewhat lower in overall status than the West End. It was the largest of the streetcar suburban developments.

In the East End the median assessed property value was \$1,400 in 1908, reflecting lower overall socioeconomic status. The range was also less than in the West End, from \$500 to \$5,000. The more expensive detached houses were along East King Street and on Cottage Avenue, where they tended to be owned by the heads of household. In general, however, the percentage of rental occupancy was much higher than in the West End (53.8 percent). On Clark Street, many inexpensive row houses were rented to people of low socioeconomic status. John C. Hager, Jr., one of the principal promoters of the West End, was also one of the principal sellers of lots for residential building in the Clark and Orange Street area of the East End.

Rossmere developed after 1894 as a basically working-class suburb (see Table 3) with little evidence of commuting to places of employment in the city; rather most people were employed in local factories, including the large Stehli Silk Mill, the Safety Buggy Company, and the Hubley Manufacturing Company. Promoters of Rossmere were John Hiemenz, a local realtor, and a company which he headed, the Real Estate and Improvement Company. After acquiring 80.9 acres of land in the area around the Pennsylvania Railroad Cutoff in 1893, the Real Estate and Improvement Company attracted the Hubley Manufacturing Company and the Safety Buggy Company to Rossmere the following year. Then, in early 1895, the Rossmere Belt Line was built, making the area a potential streetcar suburb. John Hiemenz, presumably encouraged by the streetcar line, in late 1895 purchased another tract of land which he immediately subdivided into sixty-one building lots and called Rossmere; he quickly succeeded in selling many of the lots.

But most of the houses in Rossmere were not built until 1899 to 1901, and the catalyst was the arrival of Rossmere's largest factory, the Stehli Silk Mill. The Lancaster Board of Trade had actively sought a silk mill for the Lancaster area, and in 1897 John Hiemenz donated the necessary land as well as foundation stones and bricks for construction of the mill in Rossmere and promised that he would not provide free any other land and bricks for a competing silk mill for at least five years. The Stehli Company of Zurich, Switzerland, built its mill in 1898, and many of Rossmere's residents after 1898 worked there; eventually the firm employed 1,200 workers at the Rossmere site, which developed into one of the largest silk mills in the world.

Incomplete evidence from the city and county directories suggests that most residents of Rossmere by 1908 worked locally, whereas both the West End and West End experienced considerable commuting to the central city by streetcar (see Table 4). Rossmere, although a streetcar suburb, was thus distinctive as a more self-contained area in an employment sense. The factories created Rossmere, since residential development followed

their establishment. But the streetcar enabled outward commuting for those interested and, more importantly, allowed residents to obtain goods and services in the downtown or elsewhere in the city. It is likely that many people also commuted from the city of Lancaster to Rossmere to work at the local factories.




Most houses in Rossmere were modest rental units built by two builders. The median assessed property value for property with houses was \$1,000 in 1908, with a range from \$900 to \$2,200, reflecting a lower overall socioeconomic status than the West End or East End. By 1908, 87.5 per cent of Rossmere's resident heads of household were tenants, giving it by far the highest tenant proportion of the suburban areas being studied.




West Lancaster in Manor Township was the smallest of the streetcar suburban developments, having no residents in 1908 and only nine households in 1918. Served by the Columbia Avenue trolley line, it was subdivided in 1906 but did not experience building until shortly before World War I. Unlike the previous suburbs, it was not contiguous to Lancaster City, being located $1\frac{1}{4}$ miles from the boundary. Clearly, the streetcar encouraged the creation of West Lancaster, since there were no employment opportunities and the few employed residents by 1918 mainly commuted to work in the city. Subdivision by a local landowner followed the streetcar line opening by thirteen years. In 1918, the median assessed property value for property including housing was \$1,450, with the range being \$1,000 to \$2,125. There were no rental occupants in 1918.

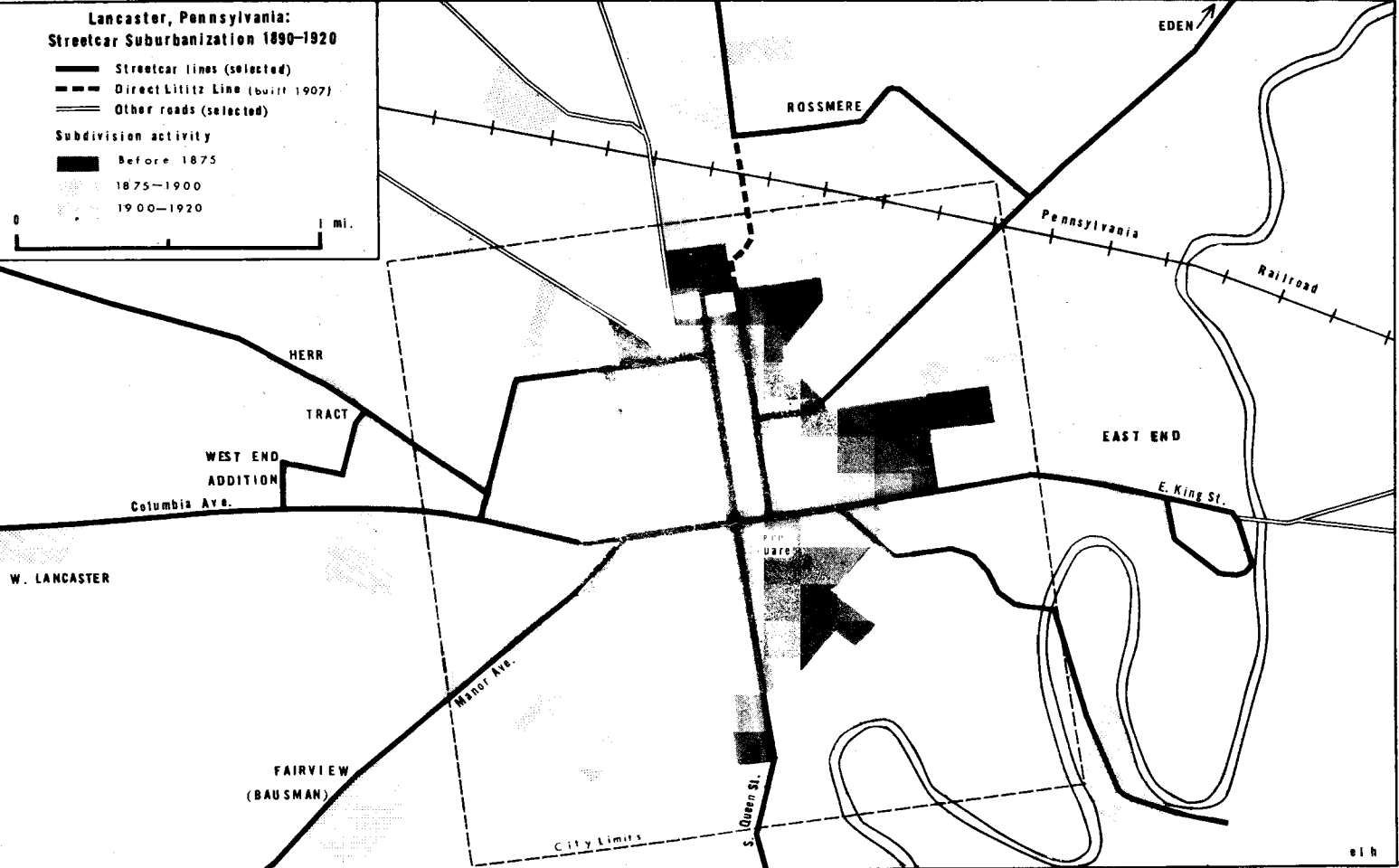
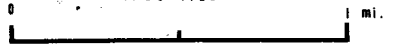
In the other three suburbs, discussed previously, additional development occurred between 1908 and 1918, the East End experiencing the greatest amount (see Table 3). But, unlike West Lancaster, Rossmere and the East End and West End were well established suburban districts by 1908 as a result of developments during the earlier part of the streetcar period. As noted above, they were all contiguous to Lancaster City, in contrast with West Lancaster, and thus provided building lots for those interested in a suburban location at an earlier date.

The four suburbs investigated thus differed to some extent in their socioeconomic composition and their economic relations with the central city. Although streetcars facilitated the outward movement of the middle class to detached houses in the suburbs, the three suburbs of the West End, the East End, and Rossmere each had by 1908 unskilled laborers as well as somewhat higher-status skilled factory workers as residents, usually occupying rental row houses or semidetached houses. Rossmere was a working-class suburb with considerable employment opportunities so that residents worked largely in local factories; the streetcar undoubtedly facilitated commuting to Rossmere from the city of Lancaster as well as making possible some commuting from Rossmere to the city. The East End and West End were more heterogeneous than Rossmere, since they consisted of higher-status, middle-class owner-occupier families in addition to differing numbers of lower-status renters. They also differed from Rossmere in the great extent of commuting to the central city and the relatively fewer local employment opportunities. Finally West Lancaster, without local em-

**Lancaster, Pennsylvania:
Streetcar Suburbanization 1890-1920**

-  Streetcar lines (selected)
-  Direct Litzitz Line (built 1907)
-  Other roads (selected)

- Subdivision activity
-  Before 1875
 -  1875-1900
 -  1900-1920



ployment opportunities, was wholly a commuting suburb of very small size by 1918 where lower middle-class workers owned their own detached house.

In addition to commuting from the above suburbs, some commuting to the city of Lancaster apparently also took place from more distant county communities located on long-distance streetcar lines. A 1908 brochure of the Conestoga Traction Company claimed that hundreds of wage earners commuted daily from half a dozen county towns to the city of Lancaster and thus "earned town wages while having the comfort and advantages of rural life." Insufficient information in the county directories prevented the documentation of this commuting pattern for selected communities.

The streetcar also encouraged speculative subdivisions which did not experience development before 1920. One such area that was investigated in more detail was Fairview, located along Millersville Pike in Lancaster Township, an area that subsequently came to be called Bausmar after development took place beginning in the 1920s. Fairview was subdivided by Edward Larter in 1904. The subdivision plan proclaimed that it was Lancaster's newest suburb and was situated along the Millersville trolley road. Larter had purchased thirty-two acres from the estate of a deceased person. Between 1906 and 1912 he succeeded in selling twelve subdivided acres of lots to people mainly interested in land speculation. Only one person had built on a lot by 1912. In the next year, the Lancaster Trust Company offered for sale an additional forty-eight acres of building lots in the Fairview area. By 1920, 252 lots had been purchased, including eighty-three lots by a man from Brooklyn, New York, but only one lot was developed. Apparently, enough building opportunities were found closer to Lancaster or within the city itself to satisfy existing demand by the beginning of the automobile period in 1920.

Conclusion

Subdivisions immediately outside the city boundary were the first to be developed, whereas those somewhat farther out generally remained undeveloped during the streetcar period of 1890 to 1920. The outlying subdivision of West Lancaster in Manor Township, as noted, experienced a small amount of development late in the period. Larger building lots and less polluted environments were not enough to overcome the disadvantage of longer commuting journeys and poorer services, particularly when buildable land existed within or just outside the city. At the same time, subdividers sometimes did succeed in selling large numbers of building lots for purposes of speculation, as the example of Fairview (Bausman) shows. Bausman and other outlying subdivisions were eventually developed, sometimes after a new subdivision plan was prepared, during the early automobile period after 1920.

Commuting characteristics varied widely among the streetcar suburban developments that did occur. The early suburbs except for West Lancaster in Manor Township were not simply bedroom communities. In Rossmere, most residents worked locally. The East End and West End in Lancaster Township had some employment opportunities, but most people commuted to jobs in the city.

Finally we have also seen that the class or socioeconomic status of the streetcar suburbs varied. The early suburbs were by no means simply middle-class communities. Rossmere was largely working class, with many factory or lower paid service workers inhabiting rental housing. The East End and West End also had lower paid people inhabiting rental housing, although middle-class families predominated and, particularly in the West End, there were some upperclass or elite inhabitants. West Lancaster in Manor Township, the smallest of the streetcar suburbs, was also the most uniformly middle class.

To conclude, we can see that the premise stated at the beginning of the article is only partially correct. Outside the city streetcars encouraged much more land subdivision than actual development.

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