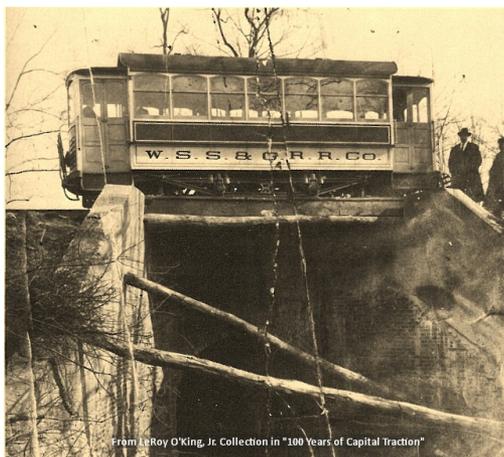


**HISTORIC
BERWYN HEIGHTS**

WASHINGTON, SPA SPRING & GRETТА RAILROAD

The Washington Spa Spring & Gretta Railroad (WSSGRR) was a streetcar that served Berwyn Heights from 1912 to 1921.



Incorporated in Maryland in February 1905, and granted permission to enter the District of Columbia in February 1907, WSSGRR started running from 15th and H Street, NE to Bladensburg in 1910. An extension to Gretta, on the eastern edge of Riverdale, and Berwyn Heights, opened in the

spring of 1912, using novel Edison-Beach storage battery cars that seated 20 - 35 people, and ran up to 25 miles per hour.

Launching WSSGRR took five years and overcoming many obstacles. Its completion is testimony to the persistence of the man largely responsible for it, U.S. Congressman Samuel S. Yoder (1841-1921). Yoder had a strong incentive to see the project through. Like other wealthy residents of the capital city, he invested heavily in suburban real estate. During the first decade of the 20th century, the real estate market was booming as Washington's growing population pushed out of the city to settle in less cramped and less expensive communities beyond its border. Starting in December 1905, Yoder and several associates began to buy up properties in Berwyn Heights.¹ Most belonged to the Jacob

Tome Institute and comprised about two-thirds of the available land in Town.² Jacob Tome (1810-1898) was a banker from Port Deposit, Maryland, who had financed the real estate dealings of James E. Waugh (1840-1895), one of the original developers of Charlton Heights. After Waugh's death, the properties passed to the Tome Institute.

Yoder collaborated with a group of entrepreneurs from Bladensburg and Hyattsville, who were also interested in developing the regions to the east of the District, which had seen little growth compared to other Washington suburban communities.³ These Prince Georgians owned large tracts of land, ran businesses, and held leading positions in local and state government. Benjamin D. Stephen, son of renowned Maryland lawyer Nicolas Carroll Stephen, owned Gretta, a big estate east of Riverdale. His son would develop it as the Gretta addition to Riverdale. Fillmore Beall was a state delegate and judge at the Prince George's Circuit Court. James C. Rogers was an attorney in Hyattsville and, with his brother J. Harris Rogers, the inventor of an underground wireless radio system, later platted several subdivisions along Edmonston Road, including Edmonston and Rogers Heights. J. Enos Ray, Jr. was a state delegate and Speaker of the House of Delegates. Marion Duckett, with his better known son, T. Howard Duckett, ran a real estate, insurance & loan company, and had interests in the Washington, Baltimore & Annapolis Railroad. T. Howard Duckett would go on to help establish the Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission (WSSC) with headquarters in Hyattsville.

All were convinced that a streetcar was needed to help attract people from Washington to their communities, and incorporated WSSGRR in Maryland on February 14, 1905. The proposed route began "at the District line, on the Baltimore and Washington Turnpike; then running with the Pike through the Town of Bladensburg to the Edmonston Road; thence with said road or near thereto northerly to Gretta."⁴ In order to connect to Washington's streetcar net, however, the company needed permission from

Congress to enter the city. Congressman Yoder proved instrumental in obtaining this permission.

Congress passed Senate Bill 3668 authorizing WSSGRR to enter the District on February 18, 1907.⁵ It did so in response to pressure from the East Washington and Northeast Washington Citizen Associations, which had advocated for better streetcar connections in their part of the city for many years.⁶ Yoder, whose principle residence was located just a block from the U.S. Capitol, at 203 Maryland Avenue, was a member of the East Washington Citizen Association, and worked with it to push the legislation through Congress. Speaking to the Association after passage, he attributed the legislative success to Association's efforts.⁷

Passage of the bill signaled the green light to formally organize WSSGRR and constitute a board of directors. In April 1907, Benjamin Stephen was elected President; Samuel Yoder, Vice President; Fillmore Beall, Secretary; Nelson Ryon, Treasurer; and James Rogers, General Counsel. Also on the board of directors was William W. Poultney, who worked closely with Yoder in other ventures, William P. Magruder, J. Enos Ray, and J. Harris Rogers. In the optimism of the moment, initial plans called for the streetcar to eventually extend its line to Baltimore and Gettysburg offering transportation to tourists and serving the rich farming communities around Frederick.

It is clear from a close reading of the bill and accompanying reports that the Commissioners of the District of Columbia would have preferred the extension into the city to be constructed by an existing streetcar company on account of the easier connections afforded into the center over existing lines.⁸ For several years, the District Commission and Congress had been encouraging consolidation of the hodgepodge of the city's streetcar companies.⁹ The bill that passed had fairly stringent requirements WSSGRR had to meet before it could open for business. This included widening Bladensburg Road from 60 to 90 feet to accommodate WSSGRR's tracks; paying for the road widening with its own funds unless Congress decided to appropriate them; and beginning

construction of the line within one year and transport passengers within two years.

As it turned out, these requirements could not be met. Congress did not approve the money for widening Bladensburg Road. And WSSGRR could not meet the deadline set in the authorizing act because the road project required the removal of a stone wall and abutments of a railroad viaduct, a difficult and expensive undertaking. Nonetheless, with the unwavering support of Washington's citizens associations, Congress was moved in March 1909 to amend the original act and grant the streetcar an additional year to widen Bladensburg Road and build the line - at its own expense.¹⁰

When WSSGRR submitted its first report to Congress in December 1909, as required by the act, Yoder presented it as President. The report also shows that Yoder owned 267 of the 270 shares issued. There is no reference to the men who were elected to serve on the board of directors in 1907.¹¹ It is unclear whether they were still involved with the management of streetcar at that time. It is known that Yoder was the principle promoter and financier of the streetcar and that he lost much of his fortune when WSSGRR failed to become profitable.¹²

Nineteen ten was a good year for WSSGRR. Service finally started between Washington and Bladensburg on August 27. The line was 4 miles of single track and used overhead wire for power. Electricity was purchased from the Washington Railway & Electric Company (WRECO), which ran a connecting line from 15th and H Street to the White House and owned the new Bennett Road power plant on the Anacostia River. In October that year, WSSGRR began testing a battery-powered car for use on the extension to Berwyn Heights.¹³ It was designed by Thomas Edison and Ralph Beach and built by the Federal Storage Battery Car Company. The test appears to have been successful because there were plans to convert the entire line to storage battery cars and to turn the old Carleton Mill on Bladensburg Road into a charging station.¹⁴

In October 1911, the company obtained permission from the Maryland Public Service Commission (PSC) to issue \$50,000 in bonds to finance construction of the extension. Yet again there were difficulties with track construction. The Chicago contractor defaulted, and four miles of rough track with too steep grades had to be rebuilt. Nonetheless, the PSC authorized another \$50,000 bond issue in March 2012 for the purchase of four storage battery cars. The extension to Berwyn Heights was taken into service shortly thereafter.¹⁵

Unfortunately, the battery-powered Edison Beach cars proved unreliable. They had trouble climbing “The Heights” to the terminus at 58th Avenue and Berwyn Road. Former Berwyn Heights Commissioner Charles Worden recalled that passengers were sometimes asked to help push the cars up the steep incline from Good Luck Road when the battery charge went low.¹⁶ In August 1912, the first lawsuit was filed. Represented by Charles Benedict Calvert, several patrons sued for \$1,000 each in damages because the streetcar routinely failed to carry them to their destinations past Bladensburg.¹⁷ In October of the same year, the company was renamed the Washington Interurban Railway. A complaint to the PSC and another lawsuit were filed in May and June 1913, alleging that service between Bladensburg and Riverdale was sporadic and no cars at all went to Berwyn Heights.¹⁸

In October 1913, the Washington Railway & Electric Company (WRECO) agreed to formally operate the line, electrified it, and physically connected it to their White House loop at 15th and H Street.¹⁹ WRECO was then the largest streetcar company in D.C. and already operated the busy Maryland line running through Mount Rainier, Hyattsville, and Berwyn on the western side of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad. WRECO briefly tested running through cars from the downtown terminal to Berwyn Heights but, after concluding there was not enough demand, let the service lapse again.

In June 1914, the vendor who had supplied the storage battery cars

to WSSGRR filed to foreclose on its mortgage, resulting in the appointment of John Yerkes and Guy Scott as receivers. It was at this time that Yoder lost control of the company. The franchises were sold at auction in December 1915 and the company was bought by WRECO in March 1916 through a subsidiary.²⁰ Even under new ownership, the service remained substandard and buses replaced the trolleys on the extension in 1921, and on the main trunk in 1923.²¹

- 15 O. King, Pages 102-103.
- 16 "Wheels," Berwyn Heights Bulletin, October 1972.
- 17 Hyattsville News Column, *Washington Times*, August 31, 1912, Page 7.
- 18 "Hyattsville Has Real Estate Boom," *Washington Times*, June 1, 1913, Page 7.
- 19 O. King, Page 103.
- 20 "Annual Report Washington Interurban Railway Co.," House of Representatives, U.S. Congressional Series Set, 62nd Congress, 3rd Session, Volume 138, Document No. 1328.
- 21 "Interstate Street Cars," *Washington Times*, July 26, 1916, Page 8. Also: "Schedule Not Followed," Letters to the Editor, *Washington Times*, March 16, 1919, Editorial Page.