

Historical Context

Public Transportation in Virginia

1867

On April 23, Black Richmonders conducted ride-in protests against the city's segregated streetcars. The predecessor to Richmond's electric streetcar system, the horse-drawn streetcars did not allow Black Riders.



1888-1949

First electrically-powered trolley was constructed in Richmond! The Richmond Union Railway set the example for future electrical-powered streetcar systems when it started operations in 1888, gradually replacing the horse drawn carriages in use since 1860.

In VA, streetcars operated in Charlottesville, Danville, Fredericksburg, Lynchburg, Newport News, Norfolk, Northern Virginia (Alexandria to Fairfax), Portsmouth, Petersburg, Radford, Richmond, Roanoke/Vinton, Staunton, and Tazewell for six decades.

Richmond maintained an electrically-powered streetcar system for the longest period...being the last to close down in 1949.

1899

The first automobile appeared on Virginia's streets in Norfolk in 1899. (VA Museum)

1906-1934

The Great Falls and Old Dominion Railroad was an electrified railway with passenger service from Georgetown to Great Falls starting in 1906. It became the Great Falls Division of the Washington & Old Dominion Railway (W&OD) in 1912. The connection to Great Falls closed in 1934.

1950

Private streetcar companies in Virginia closed down as cars became more affordable, and as operating costs of urban rail systems climbed faster than revenues. By 1950, the bus and private car became the new ways to commute to work. As shopping centers were developed in the suburbs, retail stores moved away from the downtown core...Virginia's streetcar lines closed without getting involved in the supposed Great American Streetcar Scandal.

1955

On March 2, 1955, Claudette Colvin, a 15-year old, refused to give up her Montgomery (AL) bus seat to a white passenger. NAACP decided against using her case to challenge segregation laws. (Biography.com, "Claudette Colvin," January 11, 2021)

On December 1, 1955, African American seamstress Rosa Parks was arrested for not vacating the first row of the "colored section" on the Montgomery (AL) Cleveland Avenue bus.



White and black passengers sat side by side in Norfolk buses, April 24, 1956 as racial segregation on intrastate transportation ended under U.S. Supreme Court decision. (AP)

1956

On June 5, 1956, a Montgomery federal court ruled that any law requiring racially segregated seating on buses violated the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. (Biography.com, "Montgomery Bus Boycott," January 27, 2021)

Congress passed the Interstate Highway Act. Virginia's first superhighway was the Emporia bypass, a portion of Interstate 95 that opened to traffic on September 8, 1959. (VA Museum)

1957

The first air-conditioned buses – the "Frosty Fleet" – began operations.

1971

First federally subsidized intercity passenger railroad, Amtrak launched. (Federal DOT)

1980

James City County received first Section 18 Federal grant in the country for non-urban public transportation. The James City County Transit Company was created to take advantage of Federal and State revenues.

1983

Ferry service began with Tidewater Regional Transit with service between Norfolk and Portsmouth.

1986

The inaugural meeting of the Potomac and Rappahannock Transportation Commission (PRTC) was called to order at the Log Cabin Restaurant in Stafford County. PRTC was initially formed as a parent organization for the Virginia Railway Express (VRE) - in partnership with the Northern Virginia Transportation Commission.

1990

July 26, 1990: American with Disabilities Act (ADA) signed into law. (Federal DOT)

1992

Virginia Railway Express starts service

1999

Peninsula Transportation District (operating as PENTRAN on the Peninsula) and the Tidewater Transportation District Commission (operating as Tidewater Regional Transit (TRT)) on the southside of Hampton Roads merged on October 1.

2003

OmniLink local bus service becomes the first flex-routing bus system in the country, and possibly in the world, to introduce mobile data terminals and global positioning satellite tracking on its buses. Daily average ridership surpasses 7,500 riders.

2006

Passage of enabling state legislation to create a Regional Authority known as Williamsburg Area Transit Authority. Executive Director hired to lead transition to creation of Authority.

2007

WAT introduced the Surry Connector. Its purpose is to provide commuting employees transportation options, transit to rural area not served, mitigate ferry space needs and reduce congestion.

2009

Virginia becomes the 18th state to sponsor Amtrak Regional service with the expansion of Amtrak's Northeast Regional from Washington to Lynchburg.

2010

Blacksburg Transit eliminates paper route schedules and goes fully digital by launching BT4U next departure texting service.

2011

Light rail has been operational in Norfolk, when a 7.4 mile system called "The Tide" started operations on August 19.

Radford Transit started service on August 8.

2012

City officials endorsed and 62% of the voters in Virginia Beach supported extending light rail from Norfolk to Virginia Beach's Town Center

GRTC added the first Compressed Natural Gas (CNG) powered vehicles to its CARE fleet.

2013

HB 2313 passed that allocated dedicated funding for transportation to the Northern Virginia and Hampton Roads regions.

Three regional agencies (PRTC, NVTC, GWRC) and the Virginia Department of Rail and Public Transportation (DRPT) on behalf of the Commonwealth of Virginia officially launched Vanpool Alliance, a landmark program that will bring additional federal funding to a region extending from Arlington to Caroline County.

2016

Virginia Beach voters subsequently defeated a second advisory referendum to extend light rail into the city.

2018

GRTC opens first Bus Rapid Transit line beginning GRTC Pulse service on June 24.

2019

Blacksburg Transit is awarded the APTA Outstanding Transit System of North America award.

For first time, OmniRide launches new service outside of Prince William area – two new routes from Stafford to Pentagon and Stafford to L'Enfant Plaza DC.

2020

Virginia's first all-electric public transit buses were launched.

Governor Northam signed the Hampton Roads Transportation Funding law. This legislation established dedicated funding for a high frequency regional core network to transform bus service.

Omnibus bill HB1414 passed the General Assembly; it restructured transportation funding and generated more revenue and programs for public transit.

The Central Virginia Transportation Authority was signed into law with a 15% dedicated allocation to GRTC.

The COVID-19 coronavirus took hold across the world and affected all aspects of daily life including transit ridership. Transit fares are waived across the commonwealth so that rear boarding is possible.

On May 30 a Pulse bus was set on fire during protests in downtown Richmond. following the death of George Floyd. The engulfed vehicle was deemed a total loss but no one was injured.

In June, BLM protests swept across the country with active protests in the streets of many urban cities. These protests catalyzed more deliberate conversations and actions regarding equity in transportation and transit including infrastructure, service, and funding.

2021

Delegate Delores McQuinn sponsored HJ542, the Transit Equity and Modernization joint resolution tasking DRPT with a two-year study.