

Robinson & Cary St. Barns and Trolley Shops



Figure 1. GRTC Complex, birds eye view. Source: Bing maps 2015.

Richmond’s history as the birthplace of the first viable electric street railway system is well known. That history dates back to May 4, 1888 and VMI-graduate Frank Sprague’s development of the first practical method for propelling an electric streetcar. There followed a period of expansive growth in electric streetcar lines in Richmond that fostered dynamic economic expansion and rapid suburban development as the creation of a number of different companies built new lines in the street railway system throughout the city.

At the turn of the 20th century, Richmond was moving forward, recovering prosperity following recent economic depressions, and railroads were a driving force in Richmond’s economic expansion. New interstate railway stations were built, most notably Main Street Station at 15th Street. New streetcar companies were formed to connect sparsely developed neighborhoods with the central city. These streetcar companies laid rails throughout the city as they rushed to replace the more expensive horsecars with the latest innovations in electric streetcars. Investors poured money into these companies to finance the purchase of new equipment and many of the companies experienced cycles of boom and bust, with more than a few ending in bankruptcy or merged into other companies. Owners of large real estate tracts on the outskirts of the city saw the value in the streetcar system and invested heavily in the streetcar companies. When passenger volume did not meet financial expectations, many such real estate investors built lakes and amusement parks at the end of the streetcar lines to draw crowds and passengers to the suburban areas they planned to develop. Westhampton Park and

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Westhampton Lake (now the home of the University of Richmond), Forest Hill Park and Forest Hill Lake, Lewis Ginter's Lakeside Park, and Idlewood/Byrd Park all owe their development to the burgeoning streetcar industry at the turn of the century.

One such streetcar company - the Richmond Traction Company - received its franchise to operate a streetcar line in Richmond in 1895. Shortly thereafter, at the turn of the 20th century, on a four block tract of land at Robinson and Cary Streets, the company built a large complex of carbarns and trolley shops to service its cars (Figure 1). The company merged with eight other companies into the Richmond Passenger & Power Company, which was then taken over by the Virginia Passenger and Power Company, which was itself later taken over by the Virginia Railway & Power Company. The Virginia Electric & Power Company ultimately took over the trolley system in 1925 and operated the trolley and bus routes until 1944 when they were sold to the Virginia Transit Company. The Virginia Transit Company operated the trolleys until 1949 when buses replaced the last trolleys. In 1973, the Greater Richmond Transit Company was created as a new public service company. GRTC continued to use the Robinson & Cary Street Barns until 2010, when it relocated its operations to a new site.

Just as the ownership of the Robinson & Cary Street Barn complex evolved over time, the shop facilities also changed with innovations and the need to retrofit and rebuild older cars to accommodate such advances. By 1903, three major buildings had been constructed on the property. The first car barn building (identified as Car House No. 1, but now referred to as Building 7) was located north of Taylor Street between Cedar (now Davis Avenue) and Robinson Street (Figures 2 and 3). To the east, across Cedar Street, were two additional buildings – a machine and carpentry shop and a smaller paint shop behind it to the east. These two buildings were combined (between 1905 and 1925) and are now known as Building 5 (Figures 4 and 5).

Buildings 5 and 7 are centrally located within the block and are oriented east to west. The buildings are similar in shape and size, one story rectangular buildings that span approximately 84x290 feet. Although the rhythm of the bays differ, they are all separated by brick pilasters with corbelled edges. Both are constructed of brick laid in seven-course American bond and have five arched window openings in the east gable with semicircular arches of double rows of brick headers. Roll up garage doors are located in the west gable. Gable roofs with slate shingles cover the buildings; original rooftop monitors have since been removed.

By 1910, the Richmond City Council passed an ordinance allowing 11 spur tracks (called "fan" trackage) from Robinson Street into the carbarns, effectively moving the switching yard from the yard into the street and allowing more storage space in the barns. City council also authorized the closure of the streets and alleys within the four block complex.

Construction of five new buildings at this time included administrative, repair, and storage buildings. All of these buildings, now known as Building 1, 2, 4, 6, and 8, with the exception of Building 1, were built as rectangular, one story buildings with brick laid in six-course American bond (Figures 6 through 10). Building 1 is two stories with brick laid in seven-course American bond. Most have recessed bays divided by brick pilasters and corbelled top edges with three stepped brick courses. Roofs vary between low pitch gables and flat roofs. Steel tracks are still visible in Building 6 (Figure 11).

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Between 1905 and 1910, residential development quickly followed on the blocks surrounding the trolley barn buildings, followed by the development of much of the Fan by 1930. As Richmond continued to grow, the streetcar lines expanded to outlying areas and pre-existing neighborhoods grew in density.

Around 1920, the Virginia Railway & Power Company constructed four additional buildings at the Robinson and Cary Street complex. These buildings, similar to earlier construction, are brick and mostly six-course American bond. Although the buildings have undergone some modifications, the site configuration and appearance of the car barns and the complex have changed very little since 1920.

By 1930, streetcars had passed their zenith and buses gradually replaced routes formerly served by trolleys. In 1949, streetcars reached the end of the line, with the last revenue run made on November 25, 1949. Streetcar service ceased and the streetcars were sent to the scrap yard. Although buses replaced the trolleys, the buildings at Robinson and Cary Streets continued to be used for bus storage and maintenance. These buildings served as GRTC's headquarters and bus maintenance facility until 2010, when they were relocated to a new site on south side.

The history of the Robinson & Cary Street Barns reflects Richmond's economic, social and land use development. Advances in transportation by the streetcar were so influential in Richmond's development that neighborhood expansion patterns can be credited to the electric streetcar lines. For example, the residential and commercial development of the Fan Area neighborhood was both facilitated and promoted by the railway companies as the streetcars connected residents and business owners to downtown Richmond. The Robinson and Cary Street Car Barn property also is significant for its design, construction, and use of materials. The building complex retains good to excellent architectural integrity and even retains the steel trolley car tracks in some locations. The site remains largely unchanged from when it was constructed. As such, it is the most intact remaining trolley barn complex in Richmond. Not only is the Robinson & Cary Street car barn complex/GRTC Headquarters property a contributing resource to the Fan Area Historic District extension, but it also is individually eligible as the GRTC Headquarters Historic District for the National Register for advances in transportation and architecture with a period of significance of circa 1895-1961.

As a significant historic resource, the Robinson & Cary Street car barn complex contributes to the culture of the Richmond region and Historic Richmond believes that the preservation of the car barns is particularly important. Historic Richmond encourages future developers of the Robinson & Cary Street Car Barn complex to restore, repurpose and reuse the property's distinctive structures and features with an eye to preserving the distinctive character of the property and its historic buildings. Historic Richmond supports any thoughtful development of the complex that promotes the use and safe enjoyment of the historic car barns by the community at large, including city residents, visitors and businesses for economic benefit.

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Figure 2. Building 7, east facade. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.



Figure 3. Building 7, north and west facades. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.

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Figure 4. Building 5, east facade. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.



Figure 5. Building 5, north facade. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.

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Figure 6. Buildings 6, 7, and 8, facing southwest. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.



Figure 7. Buildings 1, 2, and 5, facing southeast. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.

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Figure 8. Building 4, facing southeast. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.



Figure 9. Building 3, facing southwest. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.

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Figure 10. Building 8, north facade. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.



Figure 11. Tracks within Building 6. Source not confirmed.

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Figure 12. Facing south at the corner of Stafford and Cary St. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.



Figure 13. Stafford Street, opposite Grayland. Now owned by Dominion. Source: Historic Richmond, 2015.

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Sources:

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