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SAN FRANCISCO CABLE CARS

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The designated "San Francisco Cable Cars" National Historic Landmark, consists of the cable cars themselves, the mileage of track and cable which remains today (approximately 10 miles on 8 different streets), and the building at Washington and Mason Streets which serves as both the power house and the car-barn, as well as the turning mechanisms which one finds at the ends of the various lines of track.

Since the cars can only move in one direction, when one of them reaches the end of the line, it must be turned around. This is accomplished by driving the car on to a swivelling circular section of the pavement and then having it rotated by the driver and/or passengers. The power for the system of underground cables is supplied from a building at Washington and Mason Streets. There, in the building that also serves as the car-barn and now a cable car museum, a series of electrically driven wheels keep the cables of San Francisco moving beneath the streets at a steady pace. When the cable car is to be moved along, the driver engages a gripping mechanism which grasps the cable and moves the car along the street. When he wants to stop, he releases the grip and engages a brake, if the car is on grade.

The cable cars of San Francisco constitute one of the city's most identifiable symbols and because of their "quaintness" draw many tourists to the city each year. Only San Francisco retains this form of street railway which once was used in many other American cities. The San Francisco cable car system consists of the following: 1) Rails on which the cars run. 2) Cars which run on the rails. There are 39 cars in the fleet. 3) Roundtable turnarounds at the end of the lines. This is necessary since the cars can only run in one direction. 4) A moving cable between the tracks and below ground, covered over at ground level, with a narrow slot left so that the clutch mechanism from the car can reach through and grasp the moving cable. 5) A car-barn and repair shop at the corner of Washington and Mason Streets, which also contains the huge winding mechanism to keep the cables continuously moving throughout the city of San Francisco.

The two-storey building is a simple brick commercial structure with little of particular architectural note. A pair of string courses serve to separate visually the first from the second floor, while the large windows throughout the building are topped by segmental arches at the upper floor and a much more flattened segmental type of arch at the ground floor. This theme carries through except at the two corners of the building on Mason Street, where a round arch is used, creating a visual pin for the structure on that street. The rear of the building is "pinned", so to speak, by a huge mass of brick acting as the smokestack.

The San Francisco Cable Cars are the only ones still operating in a United States city. As a system of traction locomotion designed to accommodate even the steepest of grades, the cable cars have remained useful in this very hilly city, while they were replaced in places less hilly by electric street railways, and then trolleys and buses. San Francisco cherishes the system as a quaint reminder of its past, as one of its prime tourist attractions, and in fact as the virtual trademark of "the city by the Bay."

History

Andrew S. Hallidee, an Englishman who build aerial cables for use in the mines of the western U.S.A., devised the contrivances used in San Francisco. He arranged a system by which the heavy cables, laid underground, would draw the cars up the steep hills of San Francisco. The first underground cable track was laid from Kearny Street over Nob Hill to Leavenworth, in August 1873. In a relatively short time, eight companies had put down 112 miles of cable track in the city, and other cities, such as New York, Washington, D.C., Cincinnati, Boston, and Chicago, soon had their cable car system.

But electric street cars were replacing cable cars almost everywhere by the early 1890's, except on steep grades. It is this condition which prevails on many of downtown San Francisco's streets, some of them known for their very steep pitches, that prolonged the life of the cable car there. Recent proposals and attempts to remove the last remaining vestige of cable car transportation in San Francisco have always produced an outcry from an enraged citizenry that has come to look upon the Powell Street line, for instance, as a beloved institution and an irreplaceable part of the city's atmosphere and life. As the last of its kind, and now a symbol of a departed era and yet a landmark of San Francisco, the cable cars have an unusual significance.

The boundary of the designated San Francisco Cable Cars Landmark, consists firstly, of a building at Washington and Mason Streets, and secondly, of about 10 miles of streets, all that remains with active cable car tracks, of the once more extensive system throughout San Francisco. The building serves a dual function: 1) as a car-barn, it stores the equipment which runs on the tracks, and 2) a power-house, it contains the winding mechanisms for the cables that pull the cars.

The tracks today run on eight streets in the "Nob Hill," "Chinatown," and "North Beach" sections of the city. These streets are: 1) Hyde Street, between Beach and Washington Streets. 2) Washington Street, between Hyde and Powell Streets. 3) Powell Street, between Market and Jackson Streets. 4) Jackson Street, between Hyde and Powell Streets. 5) California Street, between Van Ness Avenue and Market Street. 6) Mason Street, between Washington Street and Columbus Avenue. 7) Columbia Avenue, between Mason and Taylor Streets. 8) Taylor Street, between Bay and Chestnut Streets.

The lines cover approximately five acres. " The acreage of the building at Washington and Mason Streets is approximately 1/2 acre. Fronting approximately 150 feet on each of those streets, the boundary of the building is a 150 foot square at the northwest corner of Washington and Mason Streets.

References

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[Cable Car Heritage](#)

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[How Cable Cars Work](#)

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