

How San Francisco's Cable Cars Were Saved From Extinction



By [Renee Brincks](#)

San Francisco's cable cars provide a peek into the city's past.



The California Street line at sunset (©Scott Chernis/SF Travel)

Fog swirled over San Francisco's Nob Hill as Andrew Smith Hallidie tested the city's first cable car in August of 1873. Accounts suggest a fear-consumed conductor vanished before the 4 am trial, leaving Hallidie to navigate steep Clay Street himself. So, the entrepreneur hopped on and piloted the car downhill past Portsmouth Square to Kearny Street.

That successful journey inspired the development of San Francisco's [cable car system](#). At its early 1890s peak, eight companies operated 22 lines citywide. Today, three lines remain and the cable cars have National Historic Landmark status. Locals climb aboard to commute to downtown offices, and the museums in motion carry visitors to popular locales like [Union Square](#), [Chinatown](#), [Nob Hill](#) and [Fisherman's Wharf](#). Though they're now a well-known thread in San Francisco's cultural fabric, efforts to eliminate the cable cars trace back to the turn of the century. And, 2017 marks 70 years since community members campaigned to protect the vehicles.

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The Hyde Street Cable Car departing from Hyde Street Pier near Fisherman's Wharf (©Scott Chernis/SF Travel)

Hallidie's original cable cars provided a safer, more efficient alternative to the horse-drawn cars they replaced. Their utility on both slopes and flat streets prompted the construction of more than 50 miles of tracks linking San Francisco's downtown core and outer neighborhoods. By the early 1890s, cable cars departed from the [Ferry Building](#) every 15 seconds during rush hour.

Within two decades of Hallidie's first test, however, electric streetcars emerged as a preferred mode of transportation.

"Transit companies didn't want to keep cable car lines if they didn't have to. Electric streetcars were simpler and cheaper to operate and they brought in more money," said Robert Callwell, retired San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (Muni) employee and local transit historian.

The 1906 earthquake and fire that devastated San Francisco hastened the cable car system's decline, added Callwell, who co-authored "[Of Cables and Grips: The Cable Cars of San Francisco](#)" with the late Walter Rice. As local railway companies pushed to replace cable cars, bribes also turned some city leaders into streetcar advocates.

By 1912, just eight San Francisco cable car lines welcomed passengers. Citizens unsuccessfully fought to save some routes in the following decades until the preservation message went mainstream in 1947. As the city's mayor called to end cable car service, local resident Friedel Klussmann launched a grassroots drive to save the iconic vehicles.

The fledgling civic activist channeled the community's passion for cable cars, according to Darcy Brown of [SF Beautiful](#), a nonprofit that grew out of Klussmann's campaign and continues to spearhead citywide livability and beautification projects.

"One voice can change the world," Brown said. "It just takes one person to inspire their friends, and that's what Friedel Klussmann did."





A cable car climbing up California Street (©Scott Chernis/SF Travel)

Under Klussmann's leadership, the Citizens' Committee to Save the Cable Cars brought local and national attention to the threatened transit mode. Magazines such as *Life* and *Time* covered the debate. Former first lady Eleanor Roosevelt spoke out for the system, as did prominent business leaders and celebrities.

The campaign led to a successful 1947 ballot measure that mandated the maintenance of the city-owned Powell Street lines. Later battles to save routes once owned by the California Street Cable Railroad Company achieved mixed results. In 1964, San Francisco's cable cars became a National Historic Landmark.

"When people think of San Francisco, the first thing that comes to mind is the cable car. It's important to retain that iconic symbol of our city," Brown said. "But, it's also a nod to when this was an advanced mode of transportation. San Francisco was ahead of its time in having cable cars throughout the city."

In 1982, more than a century after Hallidie's Clay Street trial, San Francisco's cable car system was shut down and rebuilt. The ambitious two-year project produced new tracks, restored cars and a rehabbed cable car barn and powerhouse. Today, guests will find the Friedel Klussmann Memorial Turnaround where the Powell-Hyde cable cars switch directions at Hyde and Beach Streets; in Union Square, the cable car lines end at Powell and Market Streets, near a transit plaza named for Andrew Smith Hallidie.

At the cable car powerhouse at 1201 Mason Street (at the intersection of Washington Street), visitors get a behind-the-scenes look of these legendary vehicles. Viewing areas overlook huge wheels and engines that pull the cables, while the free [San Francisco Cable Car Museum](#) features restored cars dating back to the 1870s. The museum also displays mechanical equipment and historic photos that document how cable cars revolutionized San Francisco—and why they remain relevant.

"Cable cars are 19th-century transportation. They're mechanical. There's electricity now, of course, and electronic safety devices that make things much safer than back then, but the system works on gravity and cables," Callwell said. "It's a part of San Francisco history, and it still works today."



Visitors (and sometimes a few locals) use cable cars to get around the city. (©Scott Chernis/SF

CABLE CARS: BY THE NUMBERS

11 miles—Length of underground steel rope that propels San Francisco’s cable cars

9.5 miles per hour—Constant speed of the underground cable that moves the cars

21 percent—Grade of Hyde Street, where cable cars travel between Bay and Francisco

16,800 pounds—Weight of an empty, double-ended California Street cable car

CABLE CAR OR STREETCAR?

San Francisco’s robust public transit system includes cable cars and streetcars, two often-confused vehicles that operate by different means. Cable cars run on tracks built above an underground cable. That cable cycles continuously, driven by motors in the central powerhouse, and a mechanism below the vehicle bed grips and lets go of the cable to make the car go and stop. While today’s powerhouse motors run on electricity, they were propelled by steam prior to San Francisco’s 1906 earthquake and fire.

Streetcars, also known as trolleys or trams, run on steel rails and are powered by electricity fed from an overhead wire. They move faster than cable cars and can typically carry more passengers.

THE BEST OF THE BELL RINGERS

It’s an iconic San Francisco scene: a cable car crawls up a steep Hyde Street slope with the Golden Gate Bridge and [Alcatraz Island](#) in the background. Of course, the sounds of this journey—clacking tracks, clanging bells, the call of a conductor—are almost as legendary as the sights. For more than 50 years, San Francisco’s cable car operators have celebrated their craft at the annual [Cable Car Bell Ringing Contest](#). Uniformed participants present their best musical melodies during the summer competition, with judges rating each on rhythm, originality and style. The winner earns the “Bell Ringing World Champion” title.



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