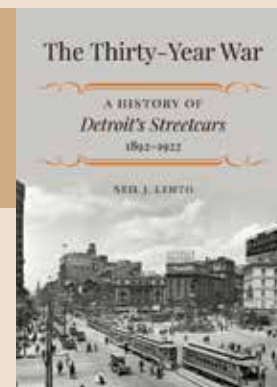


The Thirty-Year War: A History of Detroit's Streetcars, 1892–1922

By Neil J. Lehto, published by Michigan State University Press (2017), hardcover, 327 pages, \$39.95

<http://msupress.org>



Reviewed by Amanda A. Page

“Speramus meliora; resurgent cineribus,” translated means “We hope for better days. It will rise again from the ashes.”

—*Detroit's motto*

Woodward Avenue—bustling with people and streetcars, flagged by long-since-raised buildings—is depicted in the cover photo of this informative historical reference detailing the interaction between industry and government in Detroit. *The Thirty-Year War: A History of Detroit's Streetcars, 1892–1922* presents a factual account of the early 1900s when Detroit was in the midst of a struggle involving the classic capitalist clash between the city and the corporate owners of the streetcar franchises.

History and municipalities are an obvious combined labor of love for author Neil J. Lehto, a municipal law attorney. The extensive research required to describe Detroit's streetcar past is evident in the details presented in the book's many stories and recitations. The author's passion for history is also evidenced by a previously penned historical investigation about the mysterious death of a famous Canadian artist, titled *Algonquin Elegy: Tom Thomson's Last Spring*. Lehto loves a deep dive into historical events and is thorough in his investigations.

The Thirty-Year War begins with the author citing his vast and extensive sources for his historical summary, including first-hand accounts, biographies, newspapers, magazines, Detroit Common Council records, state and federal court reports, and records from the state legislature and state

Constitutional Convention. We are then given a glimpse of the cast of characters in this drama-filled battle for control of a young Detroit's booming streetcar profits. The names play out like a map of Detroit's streets and buildings: Woodward, Hendrie, Pontchartrain, and Dequindre.

The book then goes back to 1630 for a detailed history of the formation of the ferryboat system in Massachusetts Bay and continues on to the numerous United States Supreme Court cases that formalize the common law of public utility franchise.

As with any detailed historical account, Lehto tells the story of Detroit's formation and its founding fathers. In 1701, Antoine de la Mothe Cadillac secured the French fur trade and built a fort to protect le detroit du Lac Erie: “the strait of Lake Erie.”

Ever since, the straight story of Detroit has been about the constant struggle between the genius of its people and the folly of its leaders. (p 6)

This statement still holds true in the political climate of present-day Detroit. This book is a densely packed resource offering

insight into the city's past struggles with public transit, an issue that continues to be relevant today.

Between 1892 and 1924, the City of Detroit and private corporations clashed over who would control the streetcar franchise. The book details the creation of the city's street railway system; the interplay with local, state, and federal governments; and oversight of the streetcar franchise.

The strong underpinnings of *The Thirty-Year War* are apparent in the immense notes section with information Lehto compiled to support his analysis; at 50 pages, it could be its own book.

After all of Lehto's heavy lifting, this book provides a comprehensive telling of not only the history of Detroit's streetcars, but of the city's creation and foundation. ■

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