

TUNNELING BIG SAVAGE MOUNTAIN

Building a better route west

In the early 1900s lucrative coal and steel traffic sparked the Western Maryland Railway's ambitious westward expansion from Baltimore. Construction took place in two stages: Big Pool, MD to Cumberland (59 miles); Cumberland to Connellsville (87 miles).

In order to compete with the existing B & O Railroad, nine tunnels and over thirty bridges and viaducts were built to shorten the route and lessen the grade

Here at Big Savage, tunneling went well until workers encountered soft, wet mud and sand 600 feet from the western portal. Conventional methods did not stem the flow so air locks used in New York subway construction were brought in. The tunnel was completed in 1912, but the soft material continued to plague the railway, requiring continual repairs.



The sands are still running. Look at the water discharge pipe and you will see the red sand in the ditch. This is the same problem encountered by workers 100 years ago.

Freight train heading west c. 1954. After the rail line was abandoned in 1975, the tunnel's deterioration accelerated. In the late 1990s, the Allegheny Trail Alliance garnered support for the tunnel restoration. Work included extensive rock-bolting of the original liner and installation of a new liner with an aggressive drainage system to minimize the freeze/thaw conditions that damaged the tunnel in the past. It was completed in late 2003.

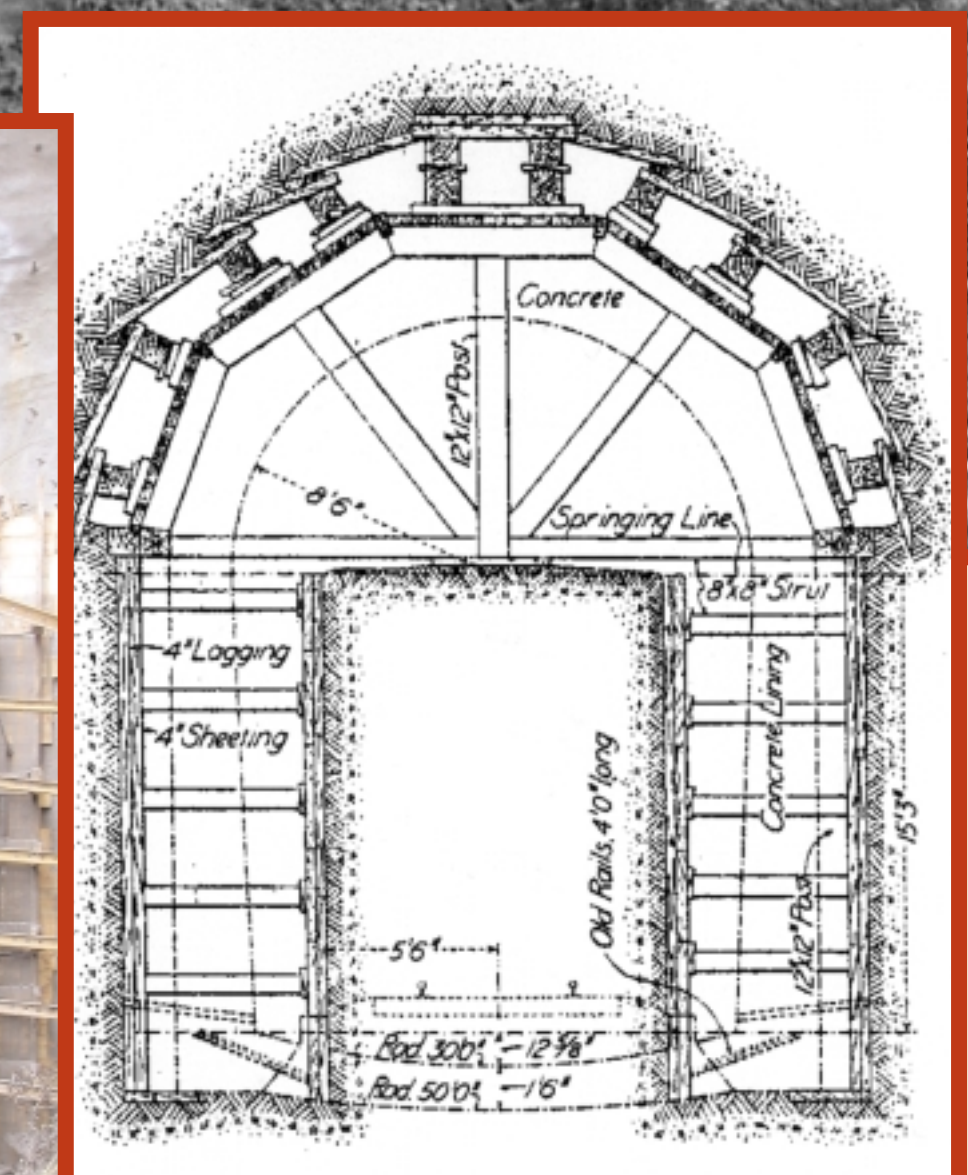


Photo credit Mary Shaw

Cross-section of the tunnel from Engineering Record, December 23, 1911.