

How Many Tunnels?

By Bryan Seip – Montour Railroad Historical Society

During the summer months, many Montour Trail patrons enjoy their brief respite from the sun and heat as they pass through the tunnels on the Trail. How many tunnels are there on the Montour? Let's count them up – Jeffreytown – Enlow – Peacock - McConnell – Bishop – National - Greer – that makes seven tunnels, right? Well, not exactly.

The first tunnel, at Trail mile 7.2, was actually the last one built and was known by two different names. The railroaders called it Jeffreytown for the settlement at the eastern portal, but it is also known as Enlow Tunnel, for the town located to the west. It was built in 1926 as part of a realignment project that eliminated several sharp curves on the Montour's main line. The original railroad followed Montour Run as it looped around the hillside. The tunnel eliminated about a half-mile of track and some sharp curves by burrowing under the hill for 575 feet. This tunnel is the only straight bore on the Montour.

The next tunnel was probably the first one to be built, but does not exist anymore. It was bored through the hillside at Peacock, at Trail mile 19.2. Part of the 1913 extension of the railroad, it had a wooden liner, a curved bore and was about 600 feet in length. This tunnel had numerous problems, including rock falls and water seepage, as the ground was unstable and very wet. After only a few years, around 1918, it was determined that the tunnel was too difficult to maintain and there had been too many blockages of railroad traffic, so it was daylighted, which means digging out the roof and making it an open cut through the hillside instead of a tunnel. As you travel through what is now Peacock Cut, you will notice that the hillside still stays very wet and rocks litter the ditches and occasionally roll out onto the trail surface. The Trail Council is still fighting a battle against Mother Nature.



A 1979 view shows a train in Peacock Cut. Originally bored as a tunnel, it was daylighted around 1918.

Gene P. Schaeffer photo

At Mile 25.0 in Cecil Township, another tunnel was built in 1913. Bored through a hill on the McConnell farm, it was thus known as McConnell Tunnel. It was also called Bishop Tunnel, for the nearby community and a few years later, when National #2 mine was opened nearby, it became more widely known as National Tunnel. Also built with a wooden liner, the concrete portals and liner were added in 1928. It has a curved bore and crests a hill inside its 623 foot length. Pulling trains over the hill inside the tunnel meant that engineers had to keep full power on their train while transiting the tunnel. Smoke, steam and later diesel fumes made it an unpleasant trip and the crews tried many solutions, like water-soaked bandanas over their noses, to help them breath while inside the tunnel. Trains were often down to a few miles an hour going through the tunnel, so as you walk or ride this tunnel, try holding your breath and see how far you can make it.



**Aaaah – fresh air. A train exits National tunnel, trailing a cloud of diesel exhaust.
Gene P. Schaeffer photo**

The final tunnel was bored through the ridge above Chartiers Creek at Trail mile 28.6. It also has a curved bore and was the shortest on the line at 235 feet. As with the others, it had a wood liner until concrete was added in 1922. A nearby tunnel had been previously bored through this ridge to carry the Pennsylvania Railroad and was called Bell Tunnel after the landowners of this area. Needing a different name, the Montour called their tunnel Greer, for another nearby landowner. The railroad now operating through Bell Tunnel actually calls their tunnel “Greer”, as did some old topographic maps – a misnomer that adds to our tale. This is a tunnel with only one name, but seemingly with two locations.

The answer to our original question, as Trail patrons know, is just three. But the tales and stories are as numerous as the number of coal trains that have passed through those tunnels in the past 100 years.

The Montour Railroad Historical Society, one of the Friends of the Montour Trail volunteer groups, is undertaking the placement of interpretive historic signs at various locations along the Trail.