

Howard Tunnel

by Roger E. Shaffer

When the engineers planned the route to be followed by the Northern Central from Baltimore to Harrisburg, there was only one location where they found it practical to bore a tunnel. This bore was named "Howard Tunnel."

The identification marker on the east end of the tunnel shows "Howard - Built 1840." On the west end the identification reads "Howard Tunnel - Rebuilt 1868". The tunnel is located 50.6 miles north of Baltimore, between Glatfelter's Station and Brillhart.



(Photo: Encyclopedia Britannica)

It is one of the oldest railroad tunnels in the United States, but not the first. "The first railroad tunnel in this country was constructed by 1833, four miles east of Johnstown, Pa. for the Allegheny Portage Railroad, now part of the Pennsylvania Railroad." (Association of American Railroads, 1948) A second source agrees, "Another very early tunnel in the United States built 1831-33 was on the Allegheny Portage rail road four miles above Johnstown, Pa."

The ends of the tunnel are constructed of large cut stones similar to those masterpieces of hand craftsmen used widely in railroad construction work, such as bridges and retaining walls. The interior arch is entirely of brick construction of at least three layers.

Originally there was single trackage through the tunnel, but "in the early 1870's the Northern Central double tracked its line from Baltimore to York." (Pennsylvania Railroad 1846-1946)

At the time of construction there was no problem caused by trains passing in the tunnel. However, as freight cars increased in size, problems arose. Increased height of box cars was the start of problems due to the curvature of the arch of the tunnel. Whenever it was known that a freight train with a car exceeding the limits of the tunnel needed to pass, it was necessary to dispatch two car inspectors. They needed to be on hand at the tunnel at the time of the freight's arrival in order to make it possible for the higher car to pass. The car inspectors would insert heavy jacks between the trucks and the car body. By this means they were able to tilt the car sufficiently to permit it to pass through the tunnel. By the time the line from Baltimore to York

was again made single track, the high car problem no longer existed. By then, through freight traffic had practically disappeared from the old Baltimore Division, using instead the Low Grade Route along the Susquehanna River through Columbia, Pa.



As a youngster, one of the experiences connected with Howard that I recall very vividly was that during daylight hours, train crew members would turn on the lights in passenger coaches as the train passed through the tunnel. Even though the tunnel was not a long one, the use of lights was a standard procedure.

There were several trains of special interest which passed through this tunnel. One particular train that was originally scheduled to use that route but did not was the one carrying President-Elect

Abraham Lincoln to Washington for his First Inauguration. Instead of using the Northern Central route from Harrisburg, the route to Washington was changed while the Lincoln Party was still in Harrisburg. This was done because the Pinkerton Investigators discovered that there was trouble brewing in Baltimore and that riot-inclined people were awaiting the arrival of the train at the Northern Central Station. So to avoid possible conflict, the train was rescheduled to return to Philadelphia from Harrisburg, then to proceed to Washington. The train passed through Baltimore late at night, after the crowds had dispersed, and the train continued safely on to Washington.

The Funeral Train of President Lincoln did its originally planned route on the Northern Central from Baltimore to Harrisburg. The train passed Hanover Junction ("U" Tower) April 21, 1865 at 5:55 P.M., which means the train went through Howard just a short time later.

The train carrying the body of President Warren G. Harding back to Washington passed through the tunnel, and a bit later by Hanover Junction at 7:16 A.M. on August 7, 1923. (I had, for many years, a nickel that I had placed on the track for the train to pass over it, but it has since disappeared, so no, nickel today.)

Another train of interest through the tunnel was the one carrying King George VI and Queen Elizabeth of England. The train passed Hanover



Junction on June 8, 1939, at 8:32 A.M. (They must have been at breakfast at that time, for the picture which I took of the passing train's observation car shows no persons on hand.)

Another President's body was carried by train through Howard Tunnel -- William McKinley. He was assassinated at the Pan American Exposition in Buffalo, N.Y. on Sep. 6, 1901, and died there on Sep. 14. The train bearing his body traveled south from Buffalo through Williamsport, PA, arriving at Harrisburg at 4:50 P.M., and then on through York, Howard Tunnel, Hanover Junction (approximately 6:00 P.M.) and Baltimore to Washington D.C.

After funeral services in Washington, the funeral train left Washington at 9:00 P.M. returning via Baltimore, Hanover Jct. (approximately 11:00 P.M.), Howard Tunnel, York, Harrisburg, Altoona, Pittsburg, and, on to Canton, Ohio, arriving at noon on Sept. 18, 1901. The concluding funeral services were conducted with burial in Canton, Ohio.

I. – 1980

II. – Rev., 1998

III. – Rev., 2002 (addition)