

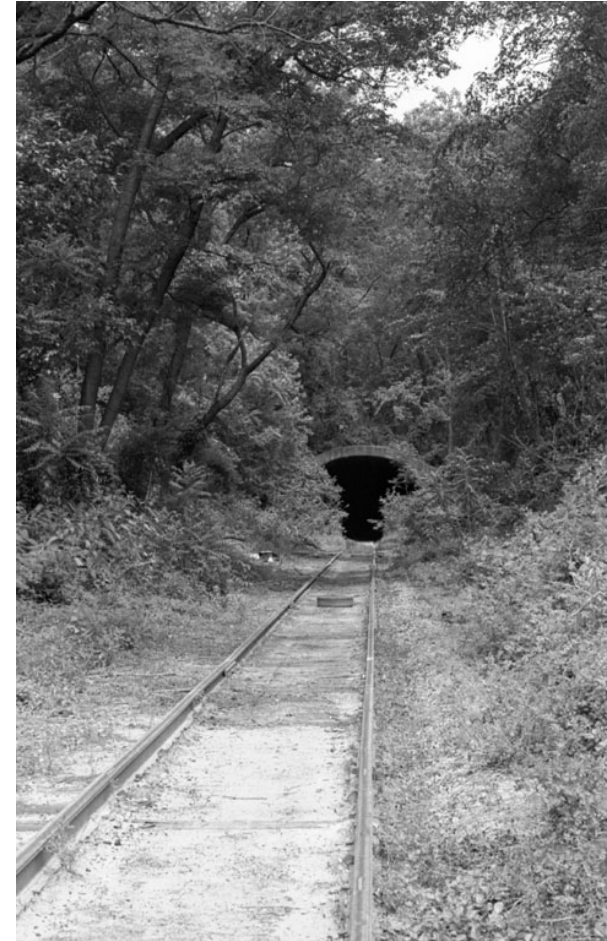
The Church Hill Train Tunnel

Trinity United Methodist
Church

Contemporary Class

Jim Scott

October 17, 2010



All unattributed images are by Jim Scott.

The Tragedy

The Church Hill train tunnel collapse wasn't the worst disaster in Richmond history, but it may be the most enduring.

4 to 25 people died, and all but 2 are still buried where they fell, along with their train.

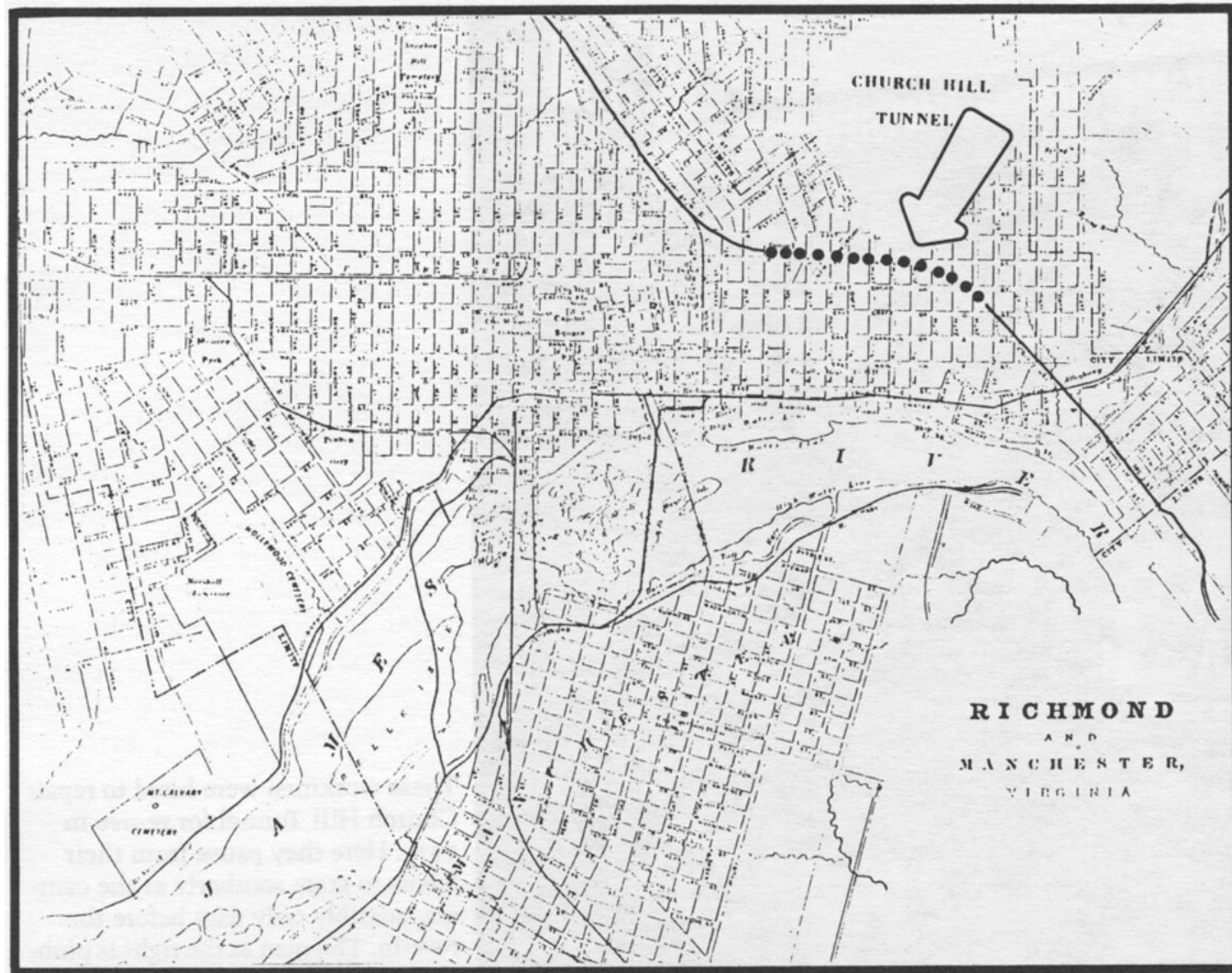
The Reason For the Tunnel

The purpose of the tunnel was to provide a rail connection between the James River Docks (to the south, at Rockett's Landing) and the C&O terminal (to the northwest).

Before the tunnel, freight had to be carried by other means over the one mile distance between the railroad terminal and the docks.

The tunnel would be one of the longest in the country, more than 3900 feet long.

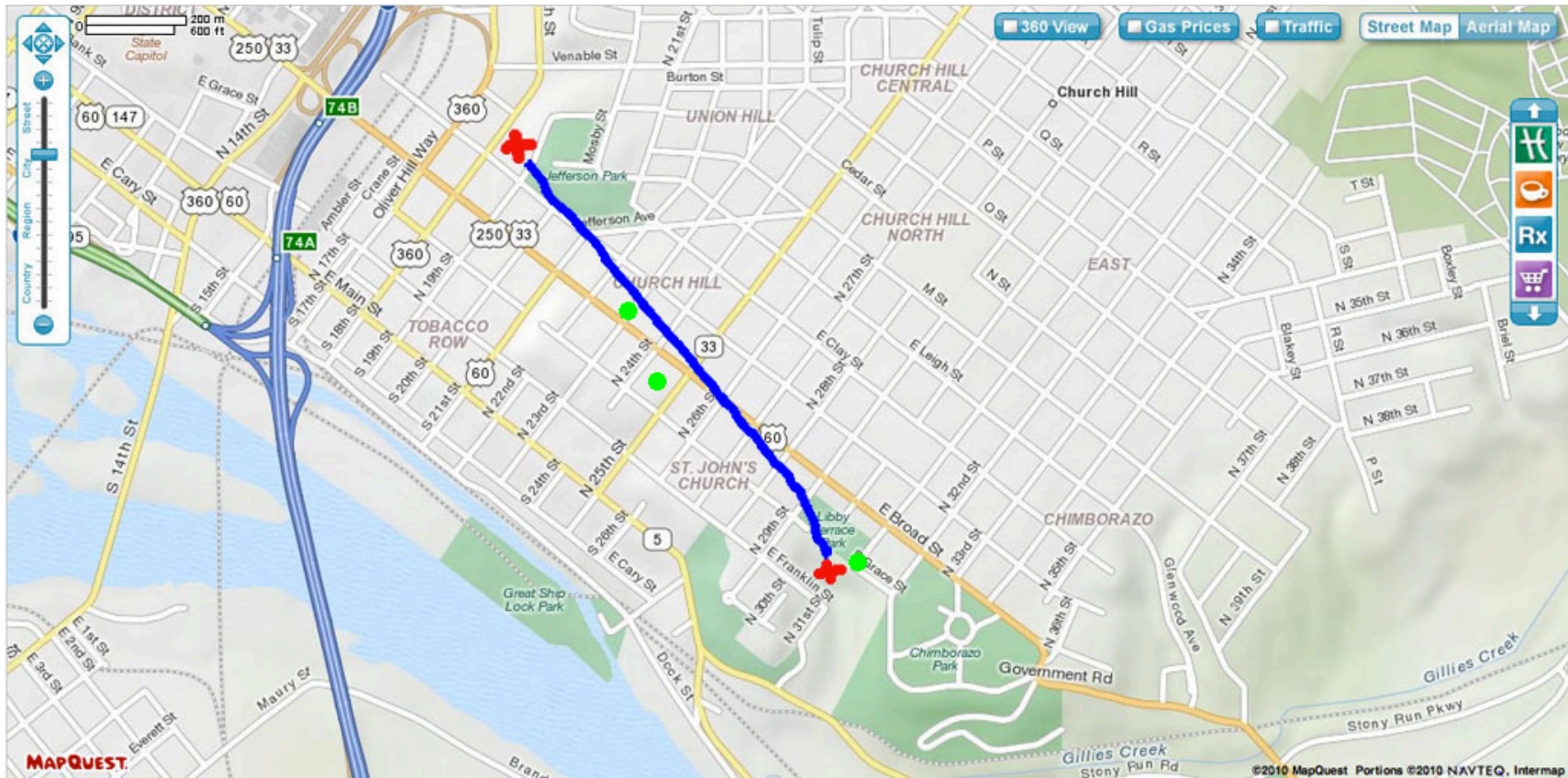
This 1894 map shows the route of the tunnel.



Scalded to Death by the Steam, Katie Letcher Lyle, p. 119

This is the route of the tunnel on a Mapquest map.

The three green dots, from left to right, are (1) Where a friend lived as a child; (2) St. John's Church; (3) Giant Gaston sinkhole of 2004



<http://new.mapquest.com/>

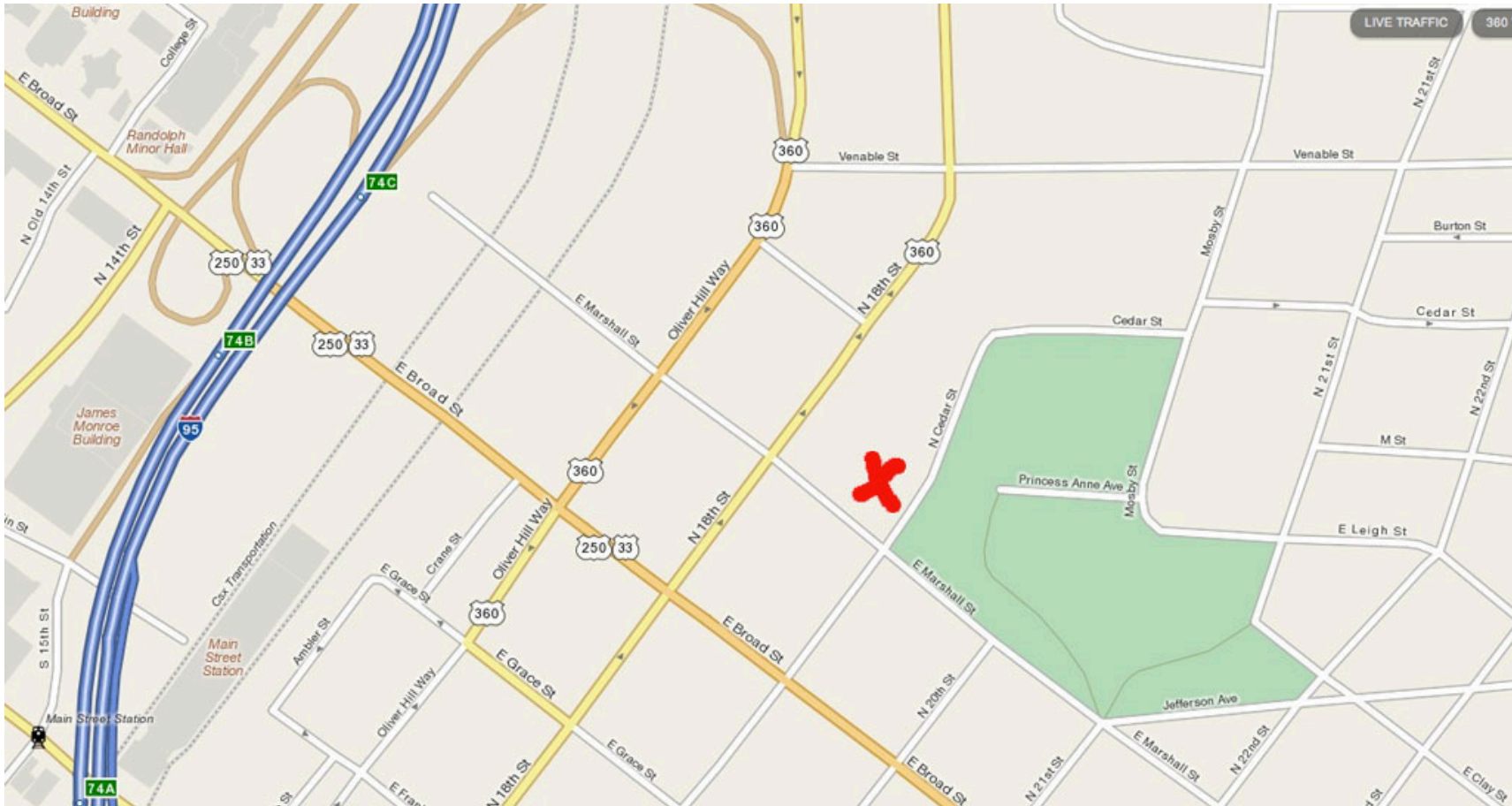
2004 Gaston Sinkhole

31st & Grace Streets



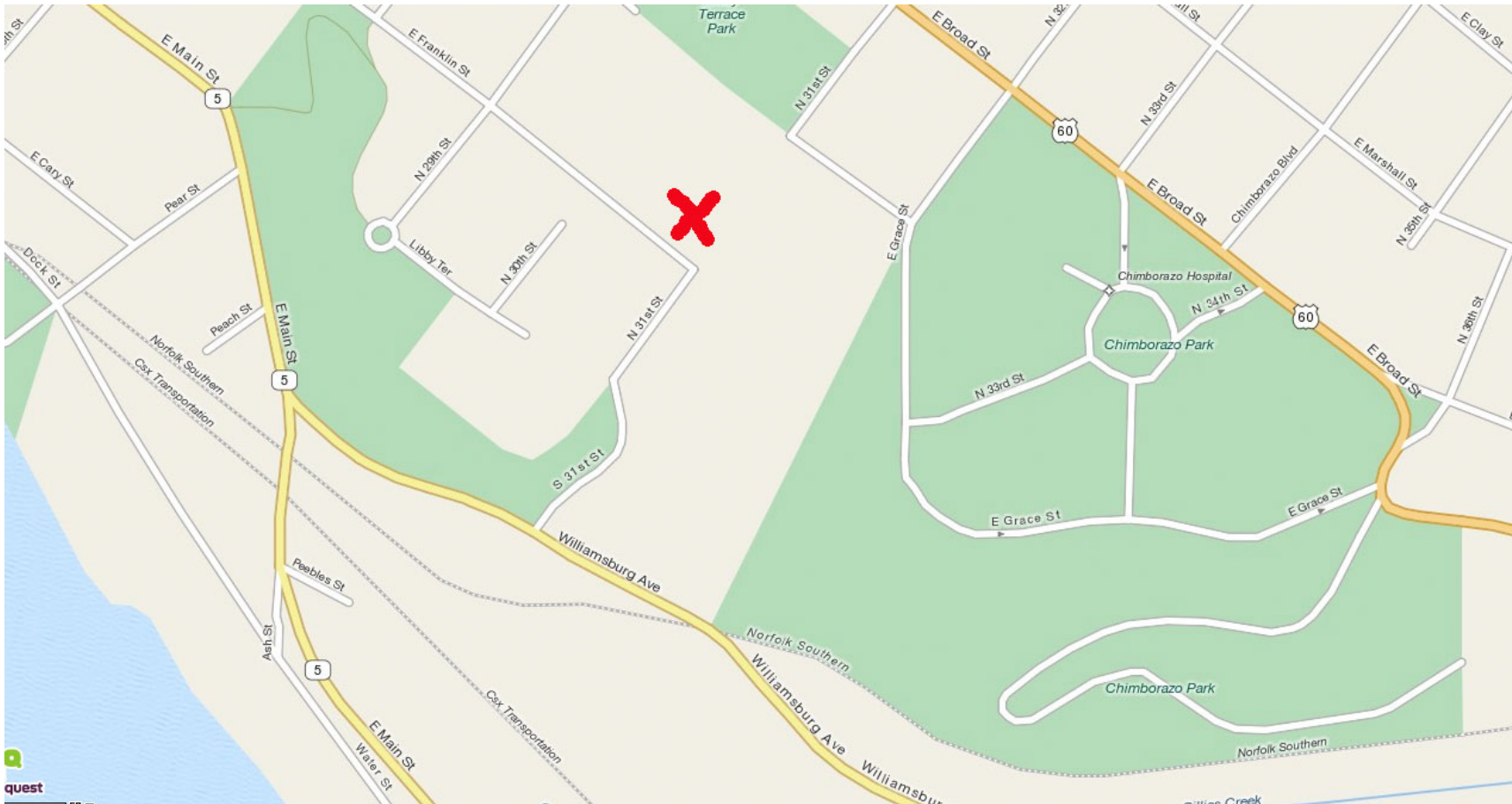
http://chpn.net/news/2010/08/30/grace-and-31st-streets-2004_13910/

The west portal of the tunnel is near 18th & Marshall Streets. The green area is Jefferson Park.



<http://new.mapquest.com/>

The east portal is in a wooded area just north of the intersection of N. 31st & E. Franklin Streets. Libbie Terrace Park is at top center, and Chimborazo Park is on the right.

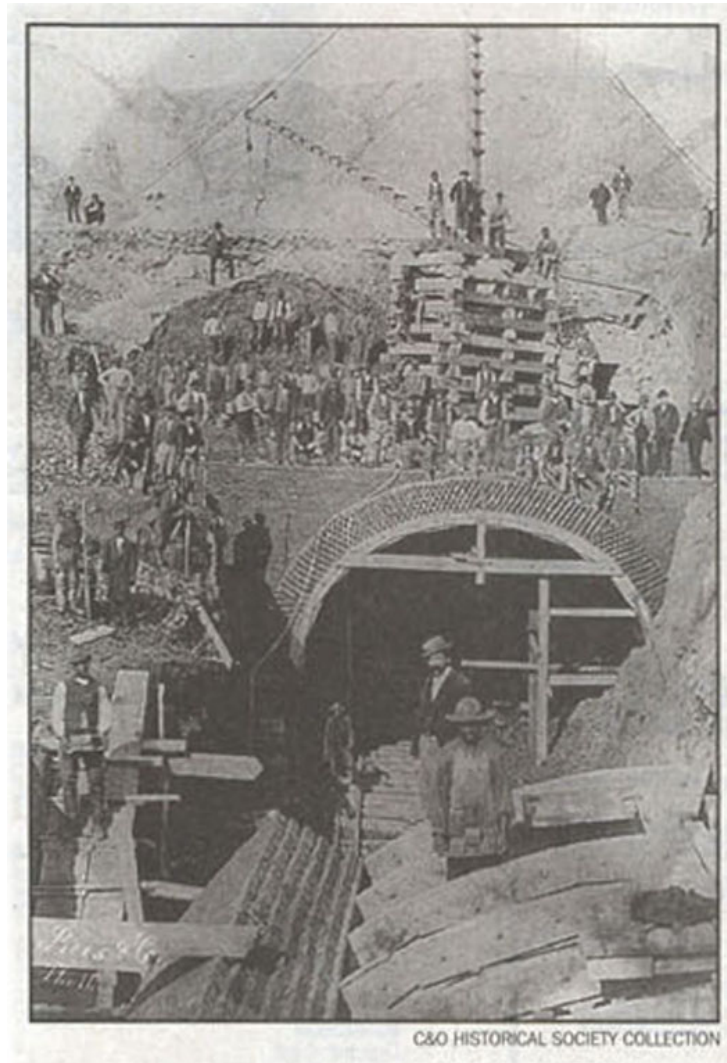


<http://new.mapquest.com/>

Time Line

- February 1, 1872 – Tunnel construction began, with digging from both ends and from three shafts along the route.
- May 21, 1872 – Two workers were partially buried by an earth collapse in the middle shaft.
- May 22, 1872 – An assistant engineer inspecting the archwork was knocked unconscious by a falling chunk of clay.
- May 24, 1872 – Two more employees were hit by falling clay.
- May 25, 1872 – James Bolton, an assistant engineer inspecting Shaft 2, was killed by a large piece of falling clay.
- January 1873 – Cracks appeared in yards above the route, gas lines broke, and the gas burned for a night before the city could cut it off.
- January 13, 1873 – A dangerous fissure appeared on 24th Street, and residents were evacuated.
- January 14, 1873 – A spectacular cave-in occurred across Broad Street from St. John's Church. Half a city block fell into the middle portion of the tunnel. The site became Patrick Henry Park.

Construction of the eastern portal, 1872.

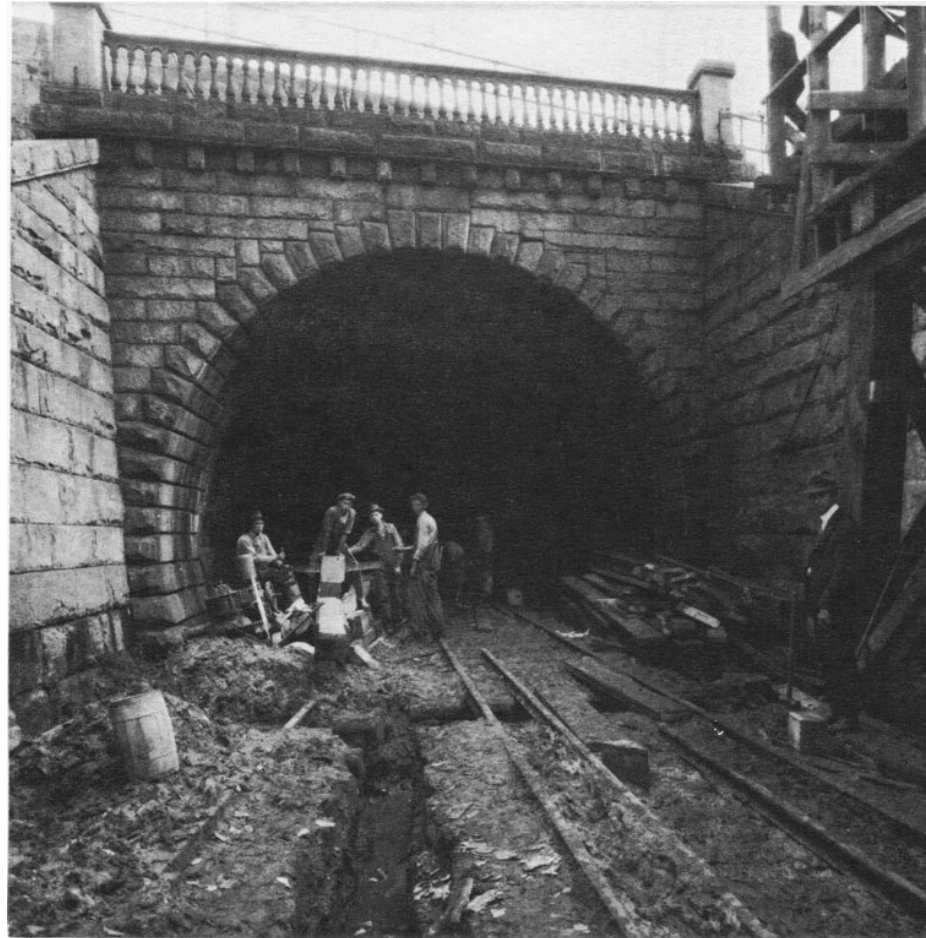


Richmond Times-Dispatch, July 5, 1998, p. A10

Time Line (continued)

- December 11, 1873 - The tunnel opened for service, 71 days late.
- 1873-1901 - The tunnel was in active use for about 27 years.
- 1901 - The tunnel became inactive when the viaduct opened.
- 1901-1925 - The tunnel was unused for about 25 years.
- September 1925 - Repairs to the tunnel began.
- **October 2, 1925 - The tunnel collapsed.**
- October 8-11, 1925 - The engine was reached from above. Mason's body was recovered.

Workmen repairing the west portal in 1925,
possibly only days before the collapse.



Scalded to Death by the Steam, Katie Letcher Lyle, p. 120

This is C&O locomotive 231, the one that lies buried in the tunnel. In this picture, it's pulling a passenger train through Orange, VA, in 1925, less than a year before the disaster.



Photo from the Chesapeake and Ohio Historical Society.

Removing debris after the collapse,
at the west portal.



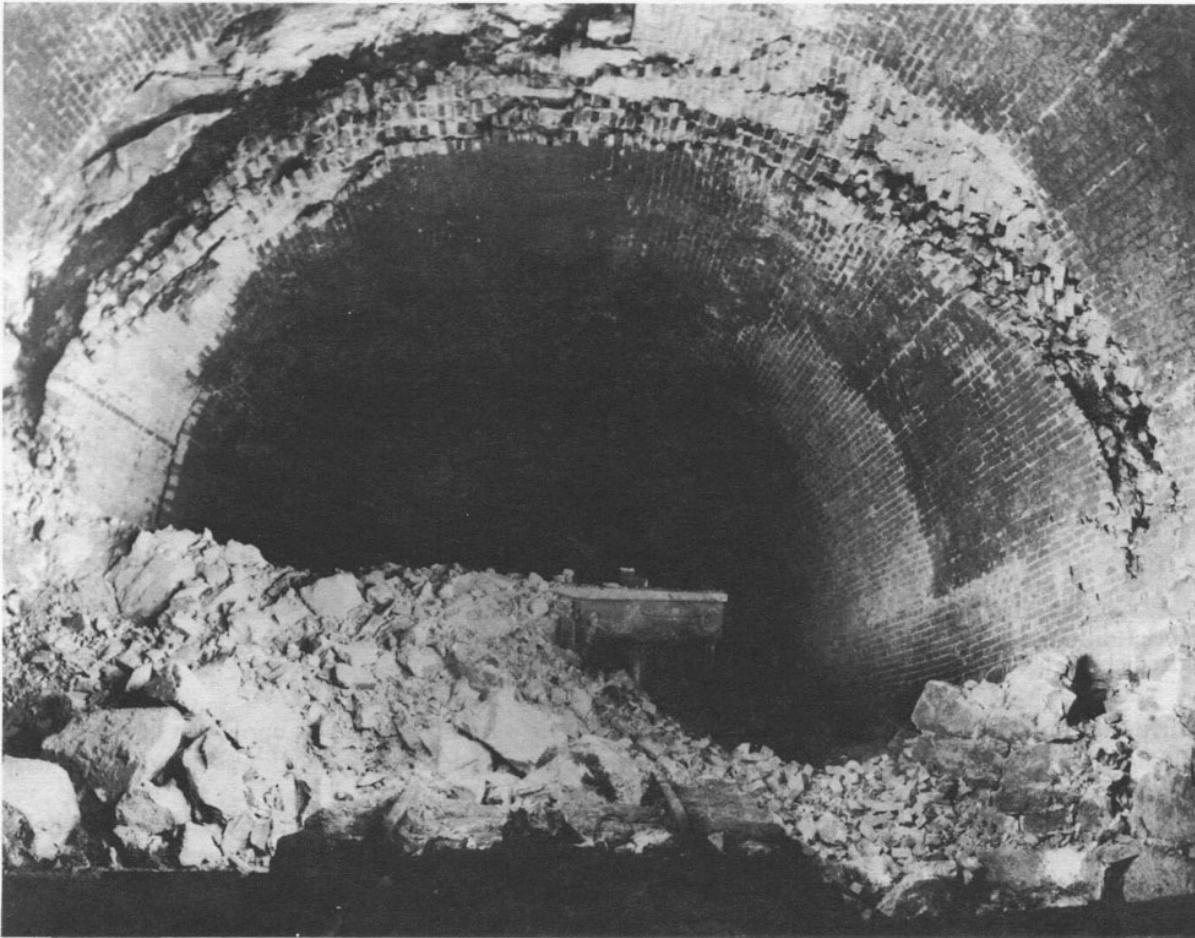
<http://www.vahistorical.org/news/richmondunnel.htm>

The roof at the west portal was shored up to prevent further collapse.



<http://www.vahistorical.org/news/richmondunnel.htm>

Only the last flatcar was visible.



This would be well into the east end of the tunnel.

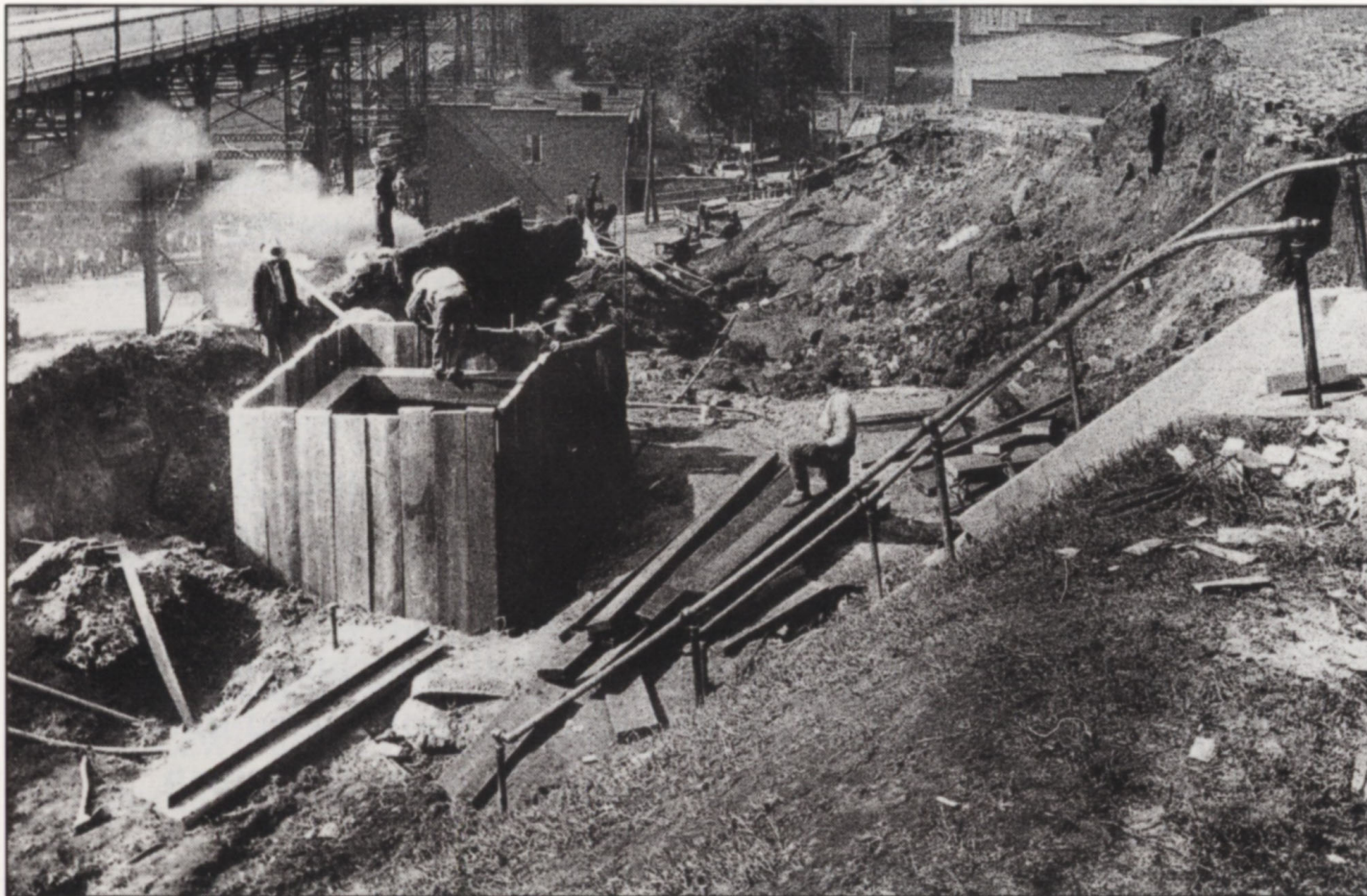
Rescue was attempted from this end as well as from above, but was abandoned at this end because of poisonous gases.

Shafts were dug from above the west end, in an attempt to reach the engineer and other workers.



<http://www.vahistorical.org/news/richmondunnel.htm>

This view of a rescue shaft shows the steps at Jefferson Park, and the old Marshall Street Viaduct to the left.



Richmond Illustrated, David D. Ryan, p. 73

The Crew and Workers

Buried, died, body recovered:

- Tom Mason, engineer

Escaped, died later:

- Benjamin F. Mosby, fireman

Presumed still buried:

- H. Smith, black laborer
- Richard Lewis, black laborer
- Unknown number of others

Escaped, survived:

- G. C. McFadden, conductor
- C. S. Kelso, brakeman
- Most of the work crew

A Virginia Historical Society web page has a picture of this memorial sign, but doesn't say where it's located. It may no longer be there.



http://www.vahistorical.org/news/tunnel_photos.htm

The Causes of the Collapse

A State Corporation Commission report said, “Horizontal braces not being emplaced as work progressed, the tunnel walls were defective; drainage ditches had been cut . . . below the foundations of the walls and the vibrations from the locomotive caused the walls to slip from their foundations.” The blue marl clay and general water seepage were other factors.

The west portal was sealed off in 1926.



Scalded to Death by the Steam, Katie Letcher Lyle, p. 122

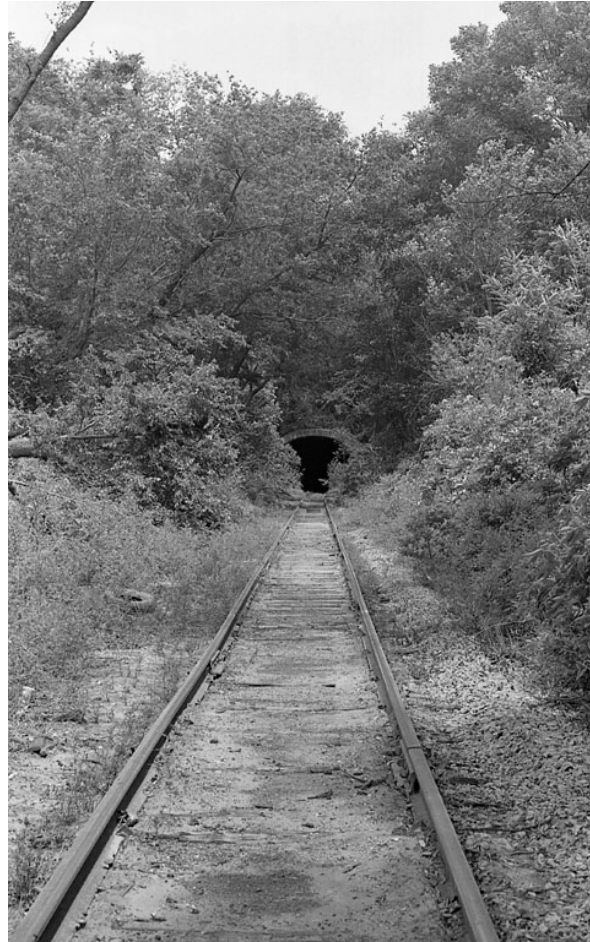
I explored the site around 1980.
This was what the west portal looked like.



A close-up shows the date on the wall.



At the east portal, the tracks still led clearly into the tunnel.



Entering the east portal of the tunnel.



I walked part way in before encountering a little water. There was a bit of trash, especially old tires.



Then I turned around and looked out.



As I walked farther out, the tracks went by this building,
which no longer exists.



In 1995, Patricia Cornwell posed inside the west end of the tunnel, which was one of her fictional crime scenes.



Richmond Times-Dispatch, July 16, 1995, p. G1

In 1998, RTD reporter Mark Holmberg, along with a veteran caver and a photographer, explored the east end of the tunnel.

A tunnel, a train, a tomb

Crawling into the belly of a Richmond legend

TWO MEN KNOWN TO BE DEAD; TWO INJURED; SEVERAL OTHERS MISSING AS TUNNEL COLLAPSES

OVER 200 LIVES AT RISK AS TUNNEL COLLAPSES

**ARTICLE BY MARK HOLMBERG
PHOTOS BY P. KEVIN MORLEY
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF**

The arched ceiling drips like a leaky dam. Cracks riddle the brickwork, which sags overhead like a clay guillotine as we crawl through the belly of one of Richmond's greatest legends, the Church Hill tunnel.

Despite the cool dampness, we're sweating a little.

Would we find any hint of the death train or of the bodies said to be buried beside it more than 3,000 feet away? Or would we join them, perhaps, in the city's deepest graveyard?

Kids play basketball 80 feet above us at the 30th Street park. But down here it's tomb-quiet, like when you're wearing headphones and the music stops.

We crawl on, hugging the fill that was supposed to keep the tunnel — and the ground above it — from collapsing. Clearly, it had settled, giving us our scant crawling room.

Years ago, during the great cave-in of 1925, more than 200 men had stamped on the tunnel floor below us, running for their lives in the opposite direction.

"The lights went out, hell began to reign in the tunnel," carpenter George Raborg told the Richmond Times-Dispatch shortly after he escaped. "Some of them yelled that they had knives and would cut anybody that got in

their way. Others were praying — you never heard such praying."

The men ran blindly, tripping over the rails and smashing into shoring timbers and each other, Raborg said.

"It was like being in a bottomless pit without knowing what had happened or what was going to happen."

◆ ◆ ◆

Nearly 75 years after the great cave-in, the tunnel of misery remains alive, like a 4,000-foot snake writhing beneath the city.

A portion of Jefferson Park above the tunnel — near the buried train — gave way in 1982. A decade ago, the 16-foot-thick snake kinked its back below 29th Street, swallowed a tennis court and may have helped tip two houses. And earlier this year, an old brick pharmacy almost directly above the East Marshall Street portion of the tunnel was torn

THE HOLE
Times-Dispatch reporter Mark Holmberg (above) prepared to crawl through the hole in the tunnel's eastern wall.

GHOSTLY TRACK
The first 80 yards of the tunnel (left) led to the wall built to seal off the eastern end.

PLEASE SEE **TUNNEL** PAGE A11 ►




Richmond Times-Dispatch, July 5, 1998, p. A1



Holmberg held the ladder while the caver, Bill Biggers, examined their entrance point. This was a hole someone had poked into the top of the wall that seals off the buried part of the east end of the tunnel. Previous visitors had used the knotted strap to the right of the ladder to climb in.

Richmond Times-Dispatch, July 5, 1998, p. A11

They went in.



Richmond Times-Dispatch, July 5, 1998, p. A11

They crawled along the space between the rubble and the top of the tunnel.



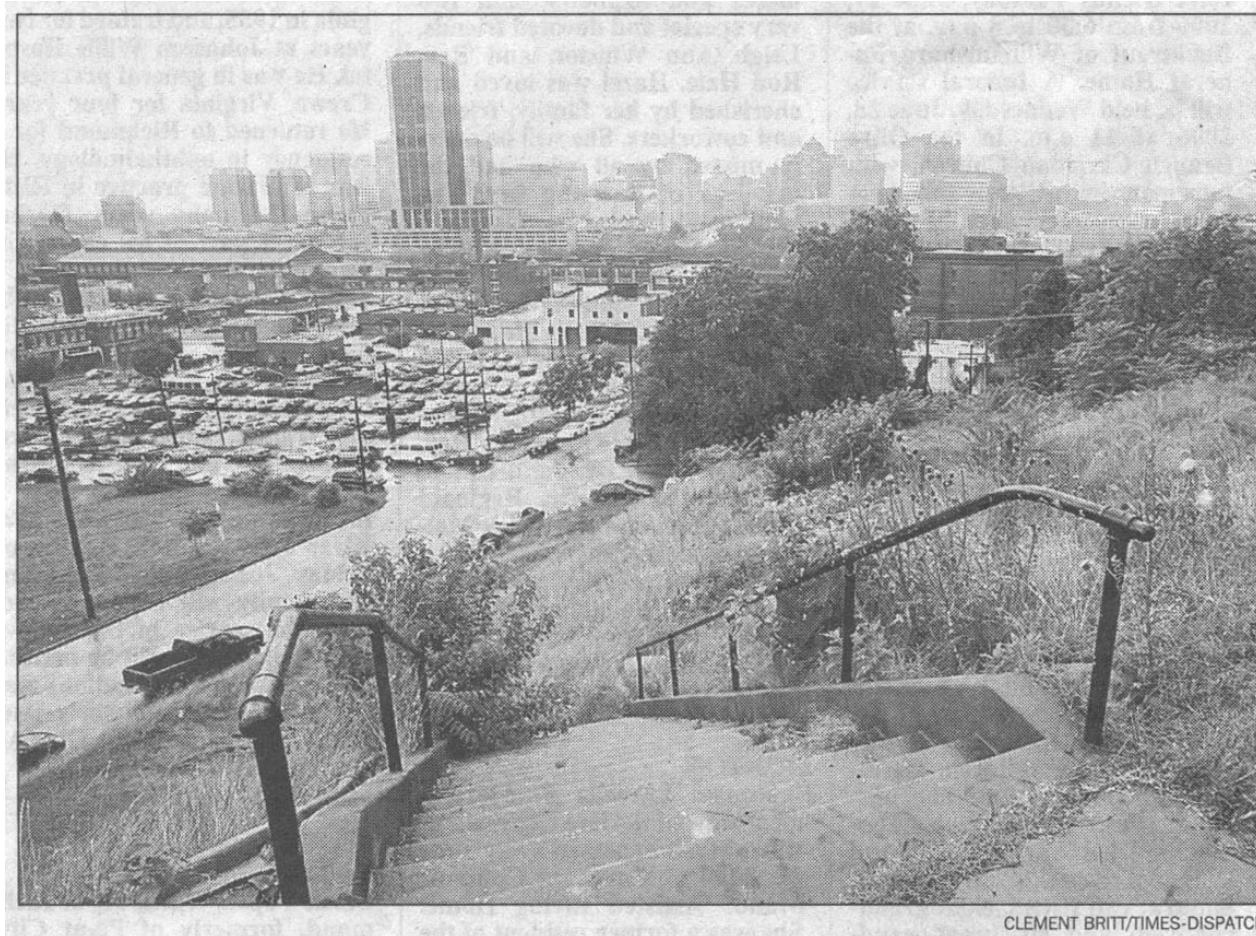
Richmond Times-Dispatch, July 5, 1998, p. A11

The masonry was sagging at this point, but they crawled on another 100 feet, stopping about 500 feet into the tunnel, or about 1/8 of its length.



Richmond Times-Dispatch, July 5, 1998, p. A11

In 2006, an attempt was made to dig straight down near the west end, from about this spot in Jefferson Park. The diggers encountered a lot of water, and halted “temporarily”. As far as I know, the project has never been resumed.



Richmond Times-Dispatch, June 27, 2006

This is the view today from the top of the Jefferson Park stairway. The west portal is down the hill at the right.



This is the view from the same point,
looking south.



This photo and the following photo of the west portal were posted by someone on Google Earth.



<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/17176145>

These Google Earth photos must not have been taken recently, because they show the area being dry and not so overgrown.



<http://www.panoramio.com/photo/17175925>

I revisited the tunnel in July 2010. The approach to the west end was swampy and weed-choked.



Instead of going beyond this point, I backtracked and went up a slope to the right.

The red arrow points to the tunnel entrance.



This was the best I could do, looking down on the wall that seals off the west end. The date “1926” is hard to read from this angle.



The east portal is even more overgrown today.



Google Earth didn't have any photos of the east portal, so I posted this and the next photo. Note the attempt by CSX to fence off access to the tunnel.



Inside, it's flooded and spooky. Echoes make it sound as if someone is at the other end.



Stalactites hang from the ceiling.



There's at least a foot of water.



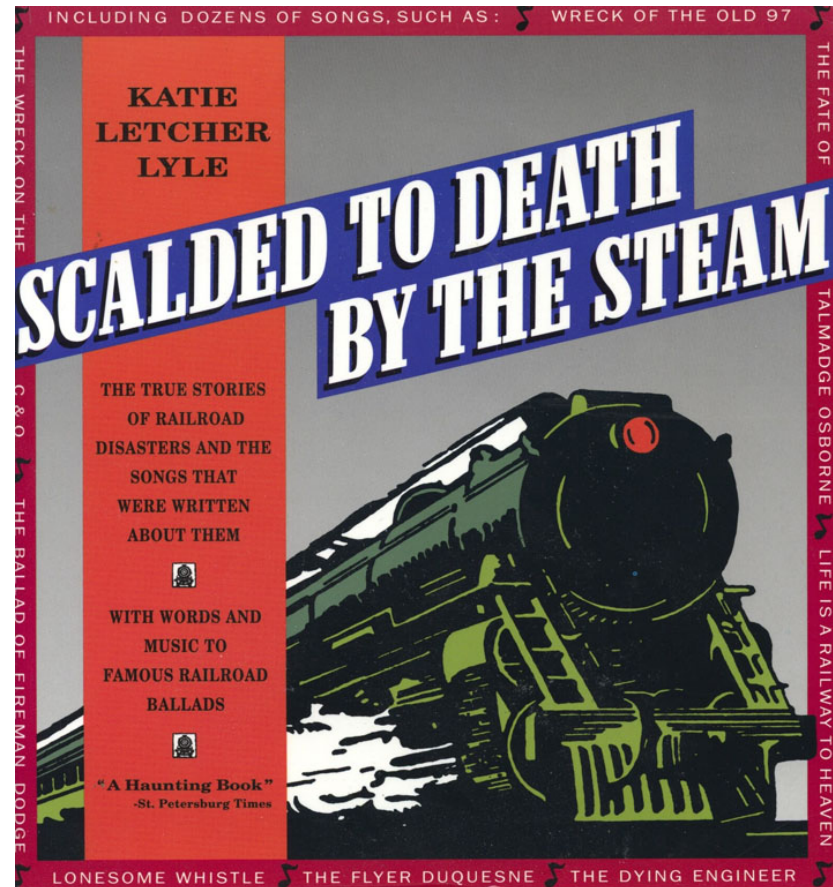
This well-lighted photo of the end of the tunnel was taken in 2005 by explorers from an organization called “VT Underground” that explores steam tunnels and storm drains. They reported that the water was waist-deep.



<http://www.vtunderground.com/other/churchhill.htm>

Some of my information and pictures came from this book of stories and songs about railroad disasters.

The song lyrics on the next slide came from this book.



Scalded to Death by the Steam, by Katie Letcher Lyle, 1991, cover

“The Train That Will Never Be Found”

By Llewellyn Lewis & Billy Pierce

*Remember the Church Hill Tunnel
Near a mile under Richmond.
There's a story I want to tell you
of a train that'll never be found.*

*On a bleak afternoon in the autumn
When the skies were overcast
A train and its crew were working
In the tunnel performing their tasks.*

*None ever dreamed of danger,
Of a death that was hoverin' near-
They were happy while they were working
For the loved ones home so dear.*

*When all of a sudden a tremble,
A large gap in the slimy clay-
Then the earth claimed a few in its
clutches,
In the darkness the rest groped their way.*

*Many shovels and picks were diggin'
For their pals in the buried train-
But the cold slimy clay held its victims.
Soon their hopes were found in vain.*

*Many hours did they search for their comrades
Who might live in the cold, cold cave,
But they never found one who was living
Way down in their untimely grave.*

*Chorus:
Brothers keep shovelin',
Pickin' in the ground.
Brothers, keep listening
For the train that's never been found.*

In 2009, Richmonder Russell Lawson was runner-up in the American Songwriter lyric contest, with a new song about the Church Hill tunnel tragedy.



<http://www.americansongwriter.com/2009/08/lyric-contest-special-the-ghosts-of-church-hill-tunnel/>

“Church Hill Tunnel” by Russell Lawson

*Our Daddy worked for the C&O
He loved those trains and the places that
he'd go
Richmond town was where we settled down
The only home we'd ever know
Twenty years he rode the lines of steel
As loader-brakeman, then as engineer
When he'd come home we'd stay up through
the night
And hear his tales by candlelight*

*Chorus:
A moon of bones shines down on the tracks
Where Church Hill Tunnel has fallen in
The C&O man says Daddy's gone
And won't be coming home again*

*Momma told us that we'd better pray
When Mrs. Mason came around that day
The killer tunnel that ran beneath the clay
Had stole her Tom and Dad away*

Chorus

*That Church Hill Tunnel claimed so many
lives
The railroad sealed it so no one else would
die
A locomotive engine still buried deep inside
Train whistles still make Momma cry*

Chorus

In late September 2010 I revisited the west portal again, and found that it had been cleared! A worker told me that they were doing storm drain work.



In addition, it appears that a company, Historic Housing LLC, is developing apartments on both sides, and might be planning to use the access to the west portal as a parking lot.



<http://www.richmondneighborhoods.org/news/GoldenHammerWinners2008.html>

Church Hill Tunnel Deserves a Memorial

On March 31, 2010, a letter to the editor appeared in the RTD under the heading above. It was written by Walter S. Griggs, Jr., a VCU Associate Dean. He summarized the history of the tunnel, and pointed out the difficulty of finding it today. His letter ended thus:

“Surely after nearly 100 years it is time for the City of Richmond and public-spirited citizens to come together and erect a fitting memorial or a marker to those who died and are buried in the cold, slimy ground along with the train that will never be found. Memories, without reminders, do not last forever.”



A Virginia Historic Marker?

I've contacted Dr. Griggs, who has written extensively about the tunnel, and we're planning to work together to get a Virginia historic marker posted near the west portal of the tunnel.

