

AYLESBURY: A CENTURY OF PROGRESS

THE CHAPOCHAUG TUNNEL



he history of the Chapochaug tunnel begins in 1854 when engineers from the Aylesbury-Newbury Railroad surveyed the hills south of the Miskatonic River, looking for a way to shorten the length of the trip between the two towns and to avoid the flood-prone route south of Miles Ridge. The surveyors determined that a route through the ridge known as Chapochaug Mountain would be economical, requiring only slight grading and construction – so long as a mile-long tunnel could be dug.

Financial troubles at the railroad delayed the start of construction until 1858. Initial work was begun in that year and a pair of sighting towers were erected to align the tunnel (which was to be dug from both sides). A collapse in the east tunnel and the start of the American Civil war again stopped construction until 1864, when a new team of architects was brought in on the project. Work progressed slowly; the rock under the mountain being unexpectedly resistant to conventional excavation techniques and the tunnel was put on hold. It was not until after the development of dynamite in 1867 that the excavation could resume. Work on the tunnel was completed in the spring 1869, the tunnel opening a few months later. The tunnel was used for passenger traffic until 1892 and for freight traffic in 1903 when the route was replaced by a new line paralleling the Aylesbury pike.

The tunnel was notorious and widely condemned as unsafe. Thirty-five men died in the construction of the tunnel, including eleven from a single accident. The east side of the diggings were also prone the build-up of noxious gasses, resulting in the frequent collapse of diggers (their deaths at home, it is alleged, are not included in the above total) and necessitated the construction of three ventilation shafts through the rock above. Even after completion the tunnel was subjected to numerous accidents; a railroad employee checking the tracks was struck and killed by a train; two local boys were struck just inside the tunnel entrance; an engineer fell to his death from a car; another was somehow decapitated when he climbed onto the coal-car.

The most horrific accident, one that caused the end of regular passenger service, was the wreck of February 20, 1891. The engineer, for reasons unknown, attempted to stop the train mid-tunnel. The train derailed, killing eighteen passengers and three crew. A rock-fall in the eastern ventilation shaft in the fall of 1901 derailed the train again, this time killing two crewmen. This final accident was enough to cause the Boston and Maine railroad (who had purchased the Aylesbury-Newbury railroad in 1881) to close the tunnel for good.

The tunnel remained a dangerous place even after its closure. Local children and teens were drawn to explore its dark places (in no small part due to the rumors of it being haunted) and in the intervening years at least three disappearances have been linked to it. The only definite death in the tunnel since its closure was in 1909, when Harrison Porter of Dean's Corners apparently fell down the western ventilation shaft. Local youths continue to utilize the tunnel as a place to dare each other to walk its length or as a rendezvous away from prying eyes.