

Greer Tunnel

By Bryan Seip - Montour Railroad Historical Society

Greer Tunnel was one of three tunnels bored by the Montour Railroad during the Mifflin Extension project running from Imperial to West Mifflin in 1913-14. Bored through a rocky ridge along Chartiers Creek, it is the only Montour tunnel to have bridges at both ends. On the west, the railroad crossed over Chartiers Creek on a three-span open deck bridge and on the east side it crossed over an existing branch of the Pennsylvania Railroad on a through-truss bridge. The Pennsylvania had previously built its own tunnel through the ridge on a lower level, which is still in use by the current Pittsburgh and Ohio Central Railroad.

Many structures or features on railroads are named for a landowner or nearby community. The Montour's tunnel was located on farmland owned by the Bell family. However, the tunnel on the Pennsylvania RR was called Bells Tunnel, so another name was needed for the new Montour tunnel. Just to the south, land along Chartiers Creek was owned by the Greer family and their name was used for the newer tunnel.

A bit of confusion was added when a U.S. topographic map was published showing the Pennsylvania RR tunnel as "Greer" and labeling the Montour tunnel as "Montour". After the Montour had been shut down and abandoned for many years, some employees of the current Pittsburgh & Ohio Central RR call their tunnel "Greer" instead of "Bells", adding to the misinformation.



A 1950 view shows a loaded coal train westbound through Greer Tunnel and over the Chartiers Creek bridge. William N. Poellet, Jr. photo

Greer Tunnel is 235 feet long, the shortest of the tunnels on the Montour. It is 18 feet wide, 21' 6" high with an arched ceiling and carried a single track. It has a slight curve as it followed the winding right-of-way along and through the hillside.

Like the other two tunnels of the 1913 expansion project, it was built with a wooden liner. It was considered a wet tunnel with ground water often dripping inside. In 1922, a concrete liner and portals were poured with a brick facing installed on the arched ceiling. Thus, the date stamped on the portals reads 1922 even though the tunnel was constructed nine years earlier.

The Montour Railroad used the tunnel until the end of 1980, when railroad operations were discontinued in this area. The main rails were pulled up and the line was abandoned.

Peters Township purchased all the Montour Railroad right-of-way in the township in 1985, with the intent of repurposing it into a linear park and recreational trail. The township developed and paved 3.5 miles of trail from Rt. 19 to Brush Run Road, naming it the Arrowhead Trail. The three remaining sections were left idle until the 1990's, when the Montour Trail Council entered an agreement with Peters to construct and maintain those unpaved sections, connecting them to the larger Montour Trail system. The mile-plus section along Chartiers Creek from Valley Brook Road to and through Greer Tunnel and into Cecil Township was finally opened for trail use in 2008.



Montour diesels lead a train out of the east portal in 1979. Gene P. Schaeffer photo

After a century of existence, Mother Nature and her freeze-thaw cycles began to take a toll on the tunnel. Water dripping through the hillside eroded some of the rock and the bricks lining the tunnel roof became loosened, with bricks and rocks occasionally falling

onto the tunnel floor, which was now the trail surface. Several years ago, plans were considered to fix this problem. A scaffold with a plywood top was installed to temporarily protect trail users from falling debris. Finally, a plan to install a metal liner inside the walls and ceiling was approved and the project was scheduled for the summer of 2023.

During preliminary inspections for this project, it was found that the eastern concrete portal had developed some separation from the bedrock of the hillside. This unstable condition forced the Trail Council to close the tunnel for repairs before the liner project could begin. Holes were bored through the portal into the bedrock to install anchors to keep the portal in place, with further repairs becoming a part of the liner project. The tunnel was reopened for traffic for a short while.

However, the liner project would involve heavy construction equipment using the trail as the only access to the tunnel and remaining at the site. Safety considerations forced another complete closure of the trail and tunnel until the liner project could be completed.

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