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Worcester County Wonders: Hidden history in a Clinton optical illusion



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A tunnel entrance hidden in the woods above the Wachusett Dam in Clinton on July 11, 2002. *T&G File Photo*

CLINTON – Once the second-longest railroad tunnel in the state and now in the hands of the Clinton Greenway Conservation Trust, the abandoned Clinton Tunnel is part of the ever-expanding Mass Central Rail Trail, offering walkers, hikers and explorers a trip through history.

Seemingly buried in the woods just off Route 70, the railroad tunnel emerged out to the now-removed trestle bridge over the Nashua River near the Wachusett Dam. It was built after a section of the Central Massachusetts Railroad was flooded during the creation of the Wachusett Reservoir as part of a nearly 9-mile bypass around the body of water.

The first trains began running in the early 1900s after years of hard work carving through solid rock and laying interior brickwork. Many of these workers, roughly 200 of them, worked in four shifts of 50 men each with two 12-hour shifts at each end.

Using only torches as guidance for their picks, axes and shovels, the tunnel was said to be completed in record time with no documented construction deaths.

The darkness of the tunnel not only astounded the workers but the rail passengers as well.

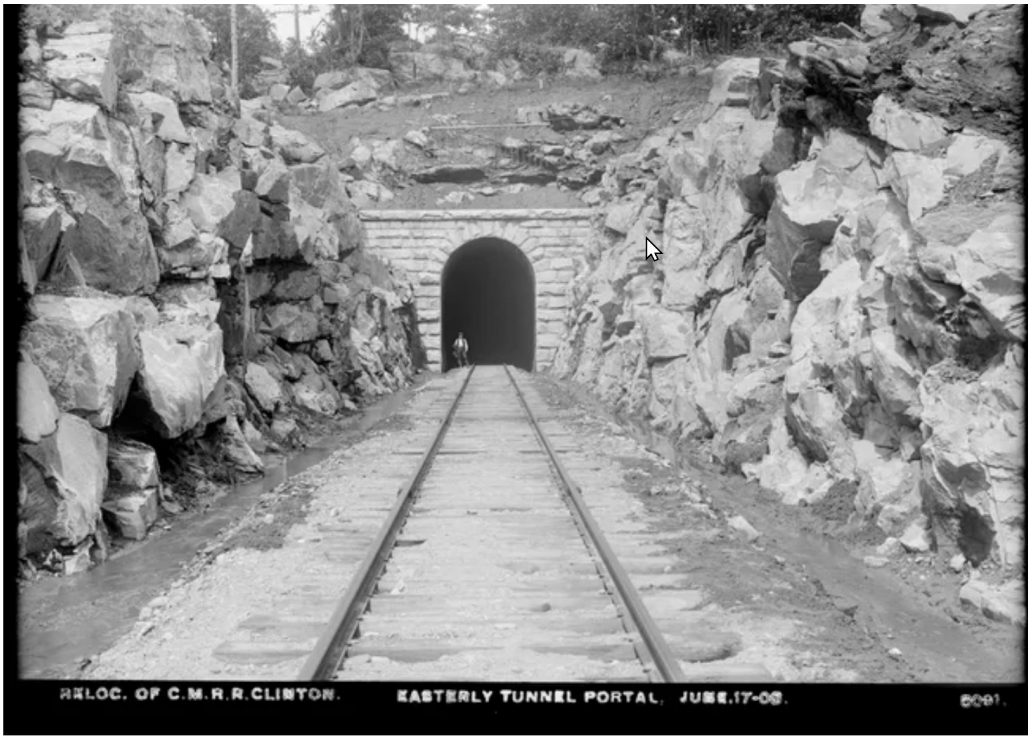
Railroad operations began to dwindle in the 1930s and ceased in the late 1950s, leaving the tunnel to be devoured by nature. In the summer of 1975, the 917-foot-long trestle sitting 133 feet above the river was dismantled, ridding the landscape of what was left of the railroad. In 2026, all that remains are large stone support pillars leading from the woods to Route 70 and over to the reservoir.

Despite its abandonment, inspections done within the last decade prove the tunnel to be suitable for a shared use path.

The railroad trestle over the Nashua River near the Wachusett Dam under construction in Clinton.

The Town of Clinton bought land from the Boston & Maine Railroad in December 2020, with plans to revitalize the tunnel as part of the rail trail, which runs 104 miles from Boston to Northampton.

"The Clinton sections of this trail has arguable the most interesting features of the MCRT as it includes a 1,110-foot tunnel, plus the DCR watershed section of this path abuts the Wachusett Reservoir," CGCT states on its website.



The east portal of the Central Massachusetts Railroad tunnel in Clinton in a 1903 photo. *Boston Public Library*

In 2022, CGCT was awarded additional funding from MassTrails for a trail design that included tunnel remediation and a redesign from the tunnel to neighboring Berlin.

Additional funding was granted by Gov. Maura Healey's administration in 2024, providing $12 million to support 65 trail-improvement projects including Clinton and Berlin.

"An investment in our trails system is an investment in our residents. With increased access to outdoor recreation, we are enabling our residents to



The railroad trestle over the Nashua River near the Wachusett Dam under construction in Clinton. *Provided By The State Of Massachusetts Archives*

immerse themselves in nature and choose sustainable transportation options," said Healey. "This funding not only drives economic growth and reduces emissions but also contributes to the overall health of our community."

As of 2026, 104 miles of the rail trail have been established, across 27 communities. (*error: about 70 miles are now open. CDP*)

When it comes to ghosts, there is a great debate as to whether it's haunted. These allegations are fueled by several aspects of the tunnel, including an optical illusion making it appear shorter than in reality, along with a large temperature drop of roughly 20 degrees once inside the center of the tunnel.

It was roughly five years ago when vloggers from the Boston Undead, Dev and Rick, visited the tunnel as part of their "Deliciously Decayed" travel series to answer that question.

"So, is the Clinton tunnel haunted? No, that's it," Rick said after their visit. "Alright, some people they're not sure because every 10 minutes it feels like you're going to, it just feels like another, you're going to be out of there in five minutes, then 10 minutes, then it's 20 minutes. So, it's supposed to have this disorientating effect to it... it's all science and no ghosts."

Other vloggers and content creators have shared their own discoveries while "ghost hunting" within the dark tunnel, commenting on both the optical illusion and the temperature change that many feel adds to the "creepy feeling within."

A recent visit revealed an unkempt trail, overgrown with lush green, treacherous without the correct footwear. Despite its location on the rail trail, biking through the tunnel is discouraged as it often fills with water and mud. Visibility is extremely limited and a mere iPhone flashlight will not suffice.

When it comes to the best time of year to visit, several locals have advised taking a visit in the dead of winter, where explorers are often met with intricate ice formations along the walls of the inner tunnel.

T&G engagement editor Sarah Barnacle is getting to know Central Mass. by exploring some of the best places to go and things to do in Worcester County. If you have an idea or suggestion, please email sbarnacle@gannett.com.