

DARBY'S HIDDEN TUNNEL

Hidden beneath Chester Pike between Cherry Street and Greenwood Road is Boone Tunnel, constructed by the Baltimore & Ohio (B&O) Railroad Company between 1883 and 1885. The Boone Tunnel is situated at the nexus of the Collingdale, Darby, and Sharon Hill boroughs of Delaware County, Pennsylvania.



Boone Tunnel southwest portal and retaining walls, looking northeast. October 15, 2021.

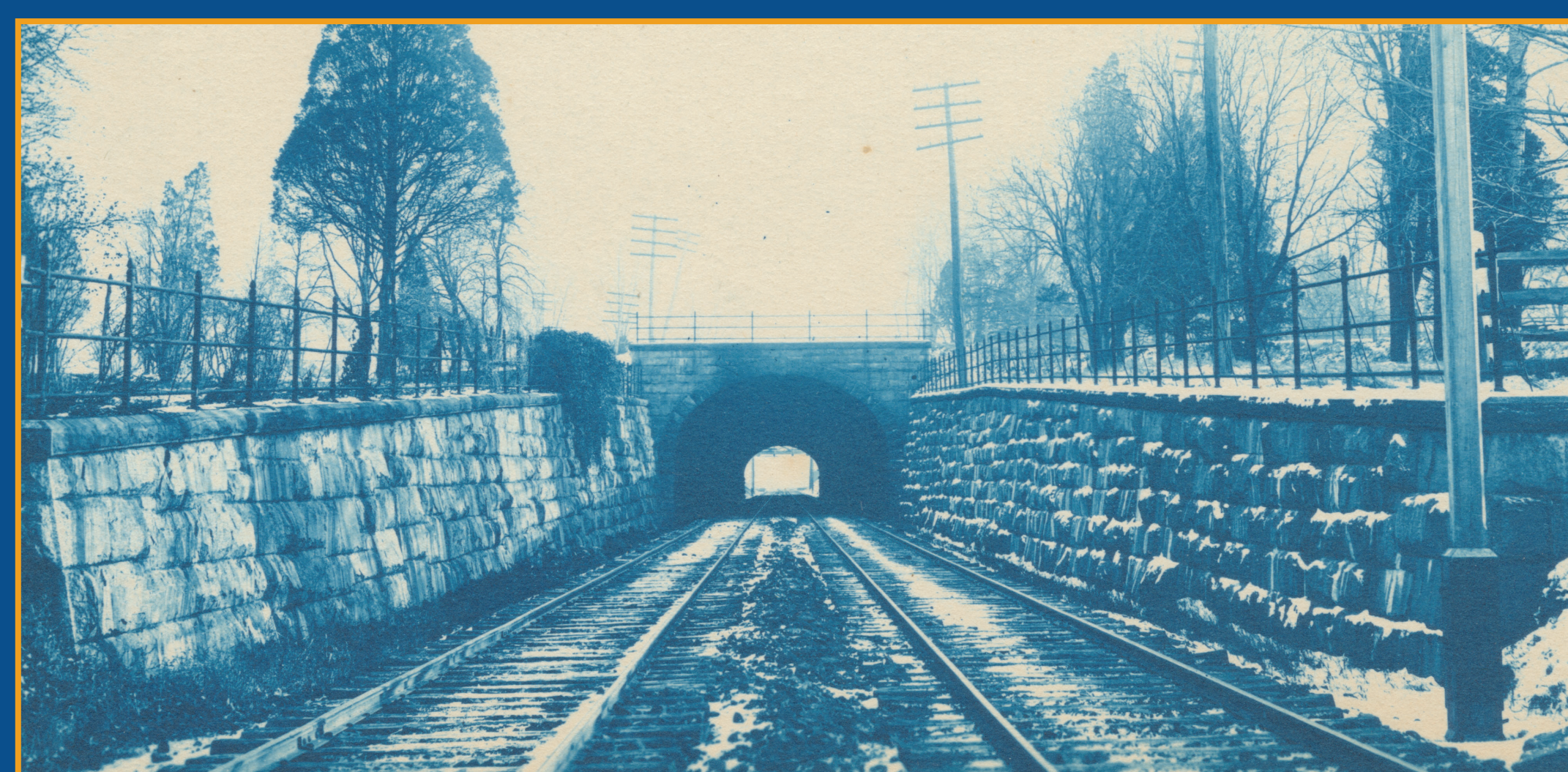
RAILROAD COMPETITION IN THE NORTHEAST CORRIDOR

Throughout the nineteenth century, railroads sought to dominate their competitors and secure access to the lucrative markets along what is today the Northeast Corridor, which stretches between Washington, DC, and New York City. The B&O was the first operational railroad in the United States and successfully constructed lines from Baltimore, Maryland, westward to the Ohio River Valley and beyond; however, the company struggled to access the Northeast Corridor.

In 1838, the Philadelphia, Wilmington & Baltimore (PW&B) Railroad completed tracks along the Delaware River, but no lines or stations served this area of Delaware County until 1872, when the PW&B moved its tracks inland and constructed a station in Sharon Hill at the corner of Sharon Avenue. This station spurred the residential development of Sharon Hill by wealthy Philadelphians. Both the B&O Railroad and the Pennsylvania Railroad, a direct competitor of the B&O, used the PW&B's tracks under lease agreements. In 1881, the Pennsylvania Railroad gained control of the PW&B, securing sole ownership of this coveted north-south route between Baltimore and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

THE B&O'S ROYAL BLUE LINE

Stung by the Pennsylvania Railroad's success, the B&O was forced to find an alternative route north. It constructed its own line, known as the Philadelphia Branch, from the east side of Baltimore to the eastern side of the Schuylkill River in Philadelphia through Delaware County, northwest of, but generally parallel to, the PW&B tracks. Construction of the line began in 1883, with the first regular Baltimore–Philadelphia passenger trains commencing in September 1886. The resulting route allowed the B&O to offer both passenger and freight service between Washington, DC, and New York City via Baltimore and Philadelphia. To navigate the topography of region, the B&O constructed three tunnels in the Philadelphia area, including the Boone Tunnel. The B&O marketed passenger service along the route as the Royal Blue Line, with passenger trains painted in a distinctive royal blue color. For nearly 70 years, it was the B&O's most prestigious rail line.



Boone Tunnel, looking northeast at the southwest tunnel portal and retaining walls, 1891 (Photo courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia)

Boone Tunnel is 30 feet wide, approximately 18 feet, 5 inches tall, and 627 feet long, with rough-cut stone retaining walls at the approaches and brick rings on the interior. The portals are stone, with stone voussoirs and prominent keystones with the date 1885. The tunnel was constructed using the cut-and-cover method, which involves digging a trench, constructing the tunnel in the trench, and covering the top of the completed tunnel with backfill material.

DEVELOPMENT NEAR BOONE TUNNEL

Before the construction of the railroads, this area of Delaware County was mostly undeveloped. The main thoroughfare was the "Queens Highway," which follows the path of present-day Chester Pike. Prior to construction of the B&O Railroad, Maximillian LaRoche and Jacob Boon established the Collingdale Land Company and purchased land north of the tracks from Clifton Avenue to Springfield, extending as far north as Bartram Avenue. Once the B&O's route was completed, the area grew rapidly, as new residents could now take a train from the Collingdale station at Clifton Avenue into Philadelphia.



Collingdale Station, March 1891 (Photo courtesy of the Library Company of Philadelphia)

By the early 1890s, residential and commercial development for predominantly wealthy white residents accelerated around the area's railroad stations—the extant Sharon Hill Station, along the Pennsylvania Railroad at Sharon Avenue, and the Collingdale and "Boon" stations along the B&O Railroad, neither of which are still standing. In 1892, the Chester, Darby and Philadelphia Railway Company built trolley lines along Chester Pike, on top of Boone Tunnel, spurring additional growth in the east ends of Collingdale and Sharon Hill, and the west end of Darby. The populations of Darby and Collingdale boroughs nearly doubled between 1900 and 1910. By 1929, the area was nearly completely developed with industrial buildings along the railroad tracks and a mix of single-family houses, duplexes, and rowhouses in the Collingdale, Darby and Sharon Hill boroughs. Commercial buildings were along Chester Pike adjacent to the tunnel.

DECLINE OF THE B&O RAILROAD AND CURRENT OPERATION OF THE LINE

Due to the rising popularity of vehicular and air travel in the mid-twentieth century, passenger railroad service declined across the country. The B&O Railroad ceased passenger service on the Philadelphia Branch in 1958, but freight service continued. In 1987, the B&O merged with the Chesapeake & Ohio Railroad, which ultimately came under ownership of CSX Transportation. CSX currently owns and operates freight traffic along the former alignment of the Philadelphia Branch and the Royal Blue Line, including through Boone Tunnel.



This display was created by CSX Transportation and given to the Darby Free Library pursuant to stipulations required in a Section 106 Memorandum of Agreement between the Federal Railroad Administration, Maryland State Historic Preservation Officer, Pennsylvania Historic Preservation Officer, Maryland Department of Transportation Port Administration, and CSX Transportation to mitigate the adverse effects of the Howard Street Tunnel Project. The project includes track lowering and arch modification at the Boone Tunnel to allow for double stacking of freight along the Interstate 96 rail corridor between Baltimore, Maryland and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.