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## Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.

By Nathan Masters

January 4, 2012

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South portal of the Broadway tunnel, near Broadway and Temple, circa 1925. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive. Used under a Creative Commons license

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Underground passageways hold the power to excite--especially when they're hidden underneath a busy city soaked in sunshine. **News reports** have explored the miles of pedestrian tunnels still buried beneath the civic center. Action films and car commercials often feature images of automobiles speeding through the Second and Third Street tunnels.

Other tunnels in downtown Los Angeles, including L.A.'s first subway, were landmarks for decades but are no longer open for exploration or exploitation.

Built early in the twentieth century and shuttered near the century's midway point, these tunnels were made necessary by simple fact of physical geography: **a palisade of hills** separated L.A.'s historic core from the upstart suburbs to the west.

Beginning in the 1890s, the towns of Hollywood, Colegrove, and **Sherman** began attracting residents and businesses to the once rural Cahuenga Valley. Further west, Santa Monica and Venice drew tourists and pleasure-seekers to their beachside resorts. For these fledgling communities, a connection to downtown--then still the center of commercial life in the region--was vital.

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Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

---

Between 1901 and 1925, Los Angeles bored several tunnels through Bunker and Fort Moore hills. Two remain open to traffic, one is sealed beneath the city, and two others are lost to history. 1928 USGS map annotated by Nathan Masters.

Streetcars, automobiles, horse-drawn carriages, and pedestrians clog the intersection of Broadway and 7th, circa 1920. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library Photograph Collection.

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[Food & Discovery](#)

**Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.**

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

---

---

View looking north at 1st and Hill in 1908, before the construction of the Hill Street tunnels. Steep slopes like this forced streetcars and other vehicles to seek roundabout routes out of downtown. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust / C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

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**Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.**

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

---

---

Construction of the western portal of the Pacific Electric subway tunnel at 1st and Glendale, circa 1926. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust / C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

Several automobile highways and trolley routes traversed the vast, open flatlands between downtown and these destinations, but the steep slopes of Bunker Hill and Fort Moore Hill limited the options out of the city center. For instance, an early Los Angeles

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**Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.**

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

---

---

Bottlenecks like the one on Main Street meant more than just longer travel times to points west; they also translated into congestion throughout the downtown street grid. In response, civic leaders, streetcar operators, and groups like the Automobile Club of Southern California called for traffic relief.

The tunnels pictured below in historical photographs from some of the region's photographic archives were among the early solutions to the city's traffic problem.

The Broadway tunnel began transporting horse-drawn carriages underneath Fort Moore Hill in 1901, the same year that the still-surviving **Third Street tunnel** first connected downtown with the neighboring Crown Hill neighborhood.

Eight years later, as automobile use and streetcar ridership skyrocketed, the city introduced the Hill Street tunnels. Dual tubes for trolleys and autos first bore through the northeastern part of Bunker Hill (sometimes referred to as Court Hill.) Hill Street then intersected with Temple Street aboveground. Automobiles could continue north on Castelar Street (since renamed Hill Street), while streetcars plunged beneath Fort Moore Hill through a second tunnel.

This subterranean shortcut shaved tens of minutes off travel time between Hollywood and downtown Los Angeles when it opened on September 15, 1909. A few days later, local citizens celebrated its opening with a Tunnel Day joyride down Sunset Boulevard, motorcars and horse-drawn carriages racing alongside the Los Angeles Pacific's streetcars.

In 1925, the Pacific Electric completed one of the last major capital investments in its interurban railway system, opening a 1-mile subway between its downtown terminal on Hill Street and the intersection of 1st and Glendale, south of Echo Park. The new subway, which predated the Metro Purple Line by 70 years, made rail travel to Hollywood and the beach cities even quicker.

[Shows](#)

[Arts & Culture](#)

[News & Community](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

---

**Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.**

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

---

---

Motorcars and horse-drawn carriages racing alongside the Los Angeles Pacific's streetcars to celebrate the opening of the Hill Street tunnels in 1909. Courtesy of the Title Insurance and Trust / C.C. Pierce Photography Collection, USC Libraries.

[Shows](#)

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[News & Community](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

**Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.**

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

---

---

1935 view of the northern portal to the Broadway tunnel, near the intersection of Broadway and Sunset. Courtesy of the California Historical Society Collection, USC Libraries.

[Shows](#)

[Arts & Culture](#)

[News & Community](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

**Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.**

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

---



---

Pacific Electric cars in the subway underneath Bunker Hill. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library Photograph Collection.

Despite the new subterranean routes, downtown traffic relief would prove elusive. The local streetcars of the Los Angeles Railway still traveled the downtown streets, and the addition of nearly 1.4 million new Angelenos between 1920 and 1950 had a crushing impact on automobile traffic.

By midcentury, the city saw its salvation in a new network of superhighways. While tunneling was a practical way to introduce new street routes through downtown's hills in the early twentieth century, Los Angeles--a city that had demonstrated its disregard for natural barriers by diverting the Owens River hundreds of miles from its source--later opted for a more audacious plan: **razing the hills altogether**. In 1949, the construction of the 101 freeway through downtown L.A. reduced Fort Moore Hill to a stump and converted the section of Broadway between Temple and Sunset from a tunnel to a freeway overpass.

The freeway's construction also doomed the Hill Street tunnels, although the second tunnel through Fort Moore Hill would survive until 2004 as storage space for the Los Angeles Unified School District's archives.

The Pacific Electric subway line, meanwhile, suffered the same fate as the rest of the region's streetcar system, closing in 1955. Various uses for the abandoned tunnel were proposed. It briefly served as a Cold War fallout shelter in the early 1960s before the City of Los Angeles **purchased it in 1966** as part of the controversial redevelopment of

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Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

---

---

Flower streets was filled in as part of the Bunker Hill redevelopment project. Today, the foundation of the Bonaventure Hotel blocks the subway's former path, rendering the remaining tunnel useless even as L.A. once again embraces underground rail as a solution to its traffic woes.

A streetcar leaves the Broadway tunnel's north portal on its last day of service in 1949. By the time this photo was taken, most of Fort Moore Hill had already been excavated. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive. Used under a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

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[Arts & Culture](#)

[News & Community](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

---

Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

---

---

Demolition of the Broadway tunnel's south entrance in 1949. Courtesy of the Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library.

Shows

Arts & Culture

News & Community

Food & Discovery

Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

---

---

A Los Angeles Railway streetcar bypasses the demolished Broadway tunnel, its entrance arch still standing, in 1949. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library Photograph Collection.

A Pacific Electric car destined for oblivion waits at the west portal to the subway on the line's last day of service, June, 19 1955. Courtesy of the Metro Transportation Library and Archive. Used under a Creative Commons license (CC BY-NC-SA 2.0).

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**Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.**

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

---

---

Angelenos practice an air raid drill in the former Pacific Electric subway in 1958. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Public Library Photograph Collection.

1956 view of the recently shuttered Pacific Electric subway. Courtesy of the Los Angeles Times Photographic Archive. Department of Special Collections, Charles E. Young

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**Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.**

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

---

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The socially and historically complex Terminal Island has become a mono-culture of standardized, containerized commerce. Writer D.J. Waldie recounts a personal history of a once scruffy seaside that is now the nation's top cargo port.

[Shows](#)

[Arts & Culture](#)

[News & Community](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

[Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.](#)

[Lost LA](#)

[Food & Discovery](#)

---

---

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Shows

Arts & Culture

News & Community

Food & Discovery

Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.

Lost LA

Food & Discovery

---

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Food & Discovery

Lost Tunnels of Downtown L.A.

Lost LA

Food & Discovery



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