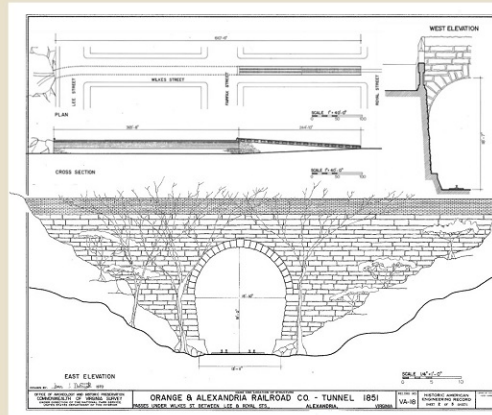


Wilkes Street Tunnel



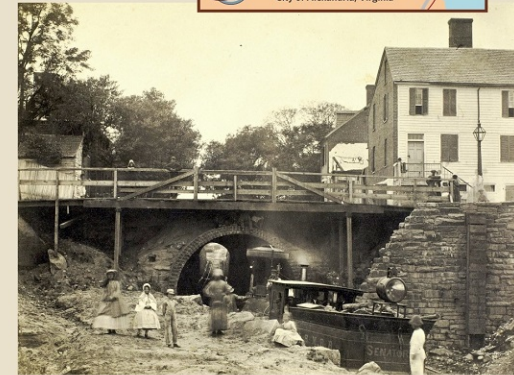
The Wilkes Street Tunnel was part of the eastern division of the Orange & Alexandria Railroad, founded in 1848 to promote trade with western Virginia. The Orange & Alexandria inaugurated its track in Alexandria on May 7, 1851 with a run from the north end of Union Street to the Wilkes Street Tunnel. Thus, the tunnel linked the railroad to warehouses and wharves along the waterfront. Located nearby, the Smith and Perkins Foundry manufactured locomotives for the Orange & Alexandria and other railroads.

The Wilkes Street track continued in operation until 1975 when declining industrial activity along the waterfront no longer warranted rail service. The tunnel is one of Alexandria's few surviving 19th century transportation sites.



Historic American Engineering Record, (HAER) 1970
Library of Congress

These scale drawings of the Wilkes Street Tunnel were drawn in 1970 for the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) and show typical cut-and-cover tunnel construction. The tunnel was cut through the bluff overlooking the Potomac River and covered over to continue the streets above. After the sides were built up with stone, the arch would have been constructed over wood falsework from both sides using a centering technique to form the brick barrel vault. The tunnel was deepened after World War I to accommodate taller boxcars.



The Tunnel, Alexandria, Andrew J. Russell, 1863
The Huntington Library, San Marino, California, photoCL 301 (25)

The Wilkes Street Tunnel runs for a block between Lee and Fairfax Streets, where it continues for another block to Royal Street as an open cut trench. The photo above, taken in 1863, shows the *Senator*, a 54,000 pound locomotive used by the United States Military Railroad (U.S.M.R.R.) about to enter the tunnel. Prior to its service in the U.S.M.R.R., the *Senator* was the *Thornton* of the Concord Railroad. It was built by Amoskeag Locomotive Works of Manchester, New Hampshire, in 1853.



Railroad construction workers, Andrew J. Russell, 1862/3
Library of Congress

Groups of free and formerly-enslaved contraband laborers were employed by the United States Military Railroad (U.S.M.R.R.) to repair tracks damaged by Confederate raids. This series of Civil War-era photographs shows workers attempting to straighten rails and return them to working order in front of the Wilkes Street Tunnel. The photographer, Andrew J. Russell, enlisted in the Union Army in 1862 where he served with the 141st New York Volunteers until he was reassigned to the U.S.M.R.R. Construction Corps under General Herman Haupt. He documented and photographed many railroad construction and engineering activities in Alexandria including rail-straightening, prefabricated bridge building, experimental boat construction, and a new technique to transport railcars by water that was the precursor to the modern intermodal system.

The Orange & Alexandria line was one of many Alexandria railroads taken over by Union forces at the onset of the Civil War. While this northerly section of the railroad was incorporated into the U.S. Military Railroad, the length of track south of the Rappahannock River remained in Confederate hands. Both sections played a major role in the strategies of North and South, as well as a decisive element in the Confederate victory at the Second Battle of Manassas or Bull Run. The Wilkes Street Tunnel gave the Union army access to the wharves for shipping military supplies on car ferries south to Aquia Creek, terminus of the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad.

