

## Swannanoa Gap Tunnel <sup>[1]</sup>

### Swannanoa Gap Tunnel

by Rich Weidman, 2006; Revised by SLNC Government and Heritage Library, October 2023

See also: [Gaps](#) <sup>[2]</sup>



Imprisoned African American laborers stand alongside the tunnel's railroad track. Image courtesy of TheRailProject.org.

<sup>[3]</sup> The [Swannanoa Gap Tunnel](#) <sup>[4]</sup>, a 1,832-foot-long railway tunnel through Swannanoa Mountain near [Asheville](#) <sup>[5]</sup>, was completed on 11 Mar. 1879. After chipping away the final barrier, workers tunneling from opposite sides of the mountain were elated to discover that the two tunnels lined up perfectly. James H. Wilson, chief engineer of the [Western North Carolina Railroad](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, immediately sent a telegram to [Governor Zebulon B. Vance](#) <sup>[7]</sup> stating that "daylight entered [Buncombe County](#) <sup>[8]</sup> this morning through the Swannanoa Tunnel." The first train finally steamed through the tunnel into Asheville on 3 Oct. 1880.

Plans for the Swannanoa Gap Tunnel were drawn up after the [Civil War](#) <sup>[9]</sup> in an effort to make Asheville a railway hub for North Carolina's western counties. The tunnel, which cost about \$120,000 to build, was cut with the help of [nitroglycerine](#) <sup>[10]</sup>, marking an early use of the explosive in engineering.

The tunnel was largely built by imprisoned African Americans from across the state. According to the 1887 reports to the North Carolina Bureau of Labor Statistics, "the state's convict labor crews were overwhelmingly dominated by black men who in most cases had only been convicted of minor infractions of the law." Due to the use of explosives many cave-ins occurred throughout construction, killing at least 300 people.

#### Additional Resources:

Black Lives Built Western North Carolina Railroad, Buncombe County Special Collections: <https://specialcollections.buncombecounty.org/2017/09/22/black-lives-bui...> <sup>[11]</sup>.

The Railroad and Incarcerated Laborer Memorial Project: <https://therailproject.org/> <sup>[3]</sup>

#### References:

Lou Harshaw, *Trains, Trestles, and Tunnels: Railroads of the Southern Appalachians* (1977).

Mitzi Schaden Tessier, *Asheville: A Pictorial History* (1982).

Rhine, Zoe. "Black Lives Built Western North Carolina Railroad," *Buncombe County Special Collections*, 2017, Black Lives Built Western North Carolina Railroad – Buncombe County Special Collections.

#### Image Credit:

"Incarcerated Men Chained Together During a Meal Break on the WNC Railroad." Postcard. Image courtesy of TheRailProject.org <https://therailproject.org/> <sup>[3]</sup>.

**Subjects:**

[Gilded Age \(1876-1900\)](#) <sup>[12]</sup>

[Places](#) <sup>[13]</sup>

[Railroads](#) <sup>[14]</sup>

**Authors:**

[Weidman, Rich](#) <sup>[15]</sup>

**Origin - location:**

[Buncombe County](#) <sup>[16]</sup>

**From:**

[Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.](#) <sup>[17]</sup>

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**Links**

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