



Around 1900, David H. Moffat and his Denver business associates established the Denver, Northwestern & Pacific Railway with the goal of constructing a more direct route from Denver to Salt Lake City, Utah, to compete with the Denver & Rio Grande Western Railroad's Tennessee Pass Route. Construction began in 1902. The climb from Denver to the Continental Divide required 33 tunnels that are closer together than any other tunnels on any other line in the U.S. The Continental Divide was crossed at Rollins Pass at an elevation of 11,676 feet. Moffat was unable to raise sufficient funds to replace the pass with a lower-elevation tunnel before he died in 1911. The DNW&P came out of receivership in April 1913 with a new name, the Denver & Salt Lake Railroad, at which time the tracks had reached Craig, Colorado, which was its final terminus, less than half the distance to Salt Lake City.

The Denver business forces behind the lower-elevation tunnel continued and, in 1914, a Denver bond issue was approved to finance the tunnel, but was struck down in a court decision. In 1920, a bill was introduced in the state legislature, which in 1922 created the Moffat Tunnel Improvement District and the Moffat Tunnel was completed in 1927. In 1931, the D&RGW acquired the D&SL, and in 1932 began construction of the Dotsero Cutoff, which connected the Moffat Tunnel Route to the D&RGW's Tennessee Pass Route. Construction of the cutoff was completed in 1934, giving Denver a much more direct link to Salt Lake City and the west (compared to the route through Pueblo and Tennessee Pass).

Westward view of the DNW&P (later D&SL, then D&RGW, and now Union Pacific) line 8 miles east of the Moffat Tunnel. The stream is Boulder Creek, which the grade follows from the plains to the tunnel. The following photos progress westward up Boulder Creek and up the line.



Westward view of the DNW&P (now Union Pacific) line 5 miles east of the Moffat Tunnel East Portal, where the tracks cross to the south side of Boulder Creek.

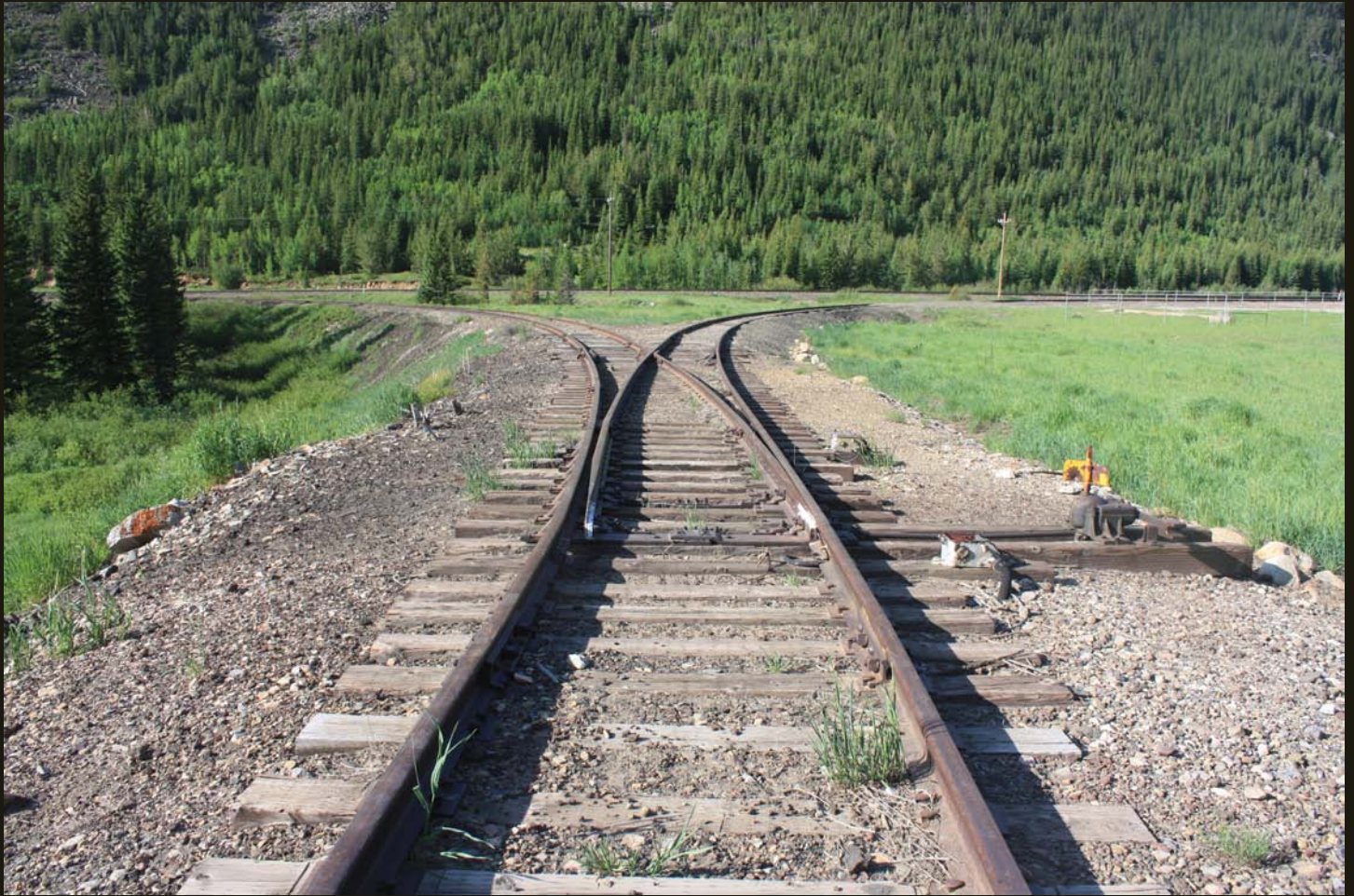


A moose crosses the DNW&P (now Union Pacific) line 4 miles east of the Moffat Tunnel East Portal. The snowcapped mountains in the distance are on the Continental Divide.



A half mile east of the Moffat Tunnel East Portal, where the first switchback on the original DNW&P Rollins Pass Route took the grade out of the valley of Boulder Creek and cut back eastward up the north side of the valley. The grade then cuts back westward through seven major switchbacks and numerous bends to climb the grade to the Continental Divide at Rollins Pass. The sinuous grade from here to Rollins Pass is more than 20 miles of rail distance to cover a horizontal distance of 4 miles.

In this eastward view, the Forest Service road in the foreground and its straight continuation toward the left distance is the grade above the first switchback on the original DNW&P Rollins Pass Route. The main road that curves down to the right is a new road, not a railroad grade.



This wye is a bit less than a half mile east of the Moffat Tunnel East Portal and is essentially on the grade of the first switchback on the original DNW&P Rollins Pass Route. In this southward view of the wye, mainline is in the distance and the Moffat Tunnel East Portal is a bit less than a half mile to the right. When the Moffat Tunnel was completed, the Rollins Pass Route from here up to the pass was abandoned (previous photo 700 feet east of here) and the first switchback was re-aligned as a standard turning wye, seen here, to turn helper steam engines after they assisted trains up the grade to the tunnel.



The end of the wye, same location as the previous photo, on the grade of the DNW&P Rollins Pass Route.



Eastward view of the DNW&P (now UP) mainline and the west branch of the wye; the first switchback of the DNW&P Rollins Pass Route is in this view but was re-graded as a turning wye when the Moffat Tunnel was completed.



Construction of the Moffat Tunnel began in 1923 with a small pioneer tunnel 8 feet in diameter, which was completed in 1926; the last blast of dynamite was set off by President Calvin Coolidge pressing a key in Washington, an event broadcast by radio from the heart of the mountain. The pilot bore later became the Moffat Water Tunnel, which still delivers water from the Colorado River watershed to Denver and the Mississippi River watershed. Three more bond issues were sold before the main railroad tunnel was completed on July 7, 1927. The project killed 28 workers. The 6.2-mile-long tunnel is 24 feet high and 18 feet wide, and the summit of the grade is 9,239 feet above sea level, more than 2,400 feet lower than Rollins Pass.

When the tunnel was completed in 1927, the D&SL tracks still reached only to the coal fields at Craig, Colorado, where construction had ended in 1913. So when the Moffat Tunnel was completed, it created only a fast track to a long coal branch. (I can't find any explanation as to why so much treasure and blood were put into the tunnel with no firm plan to complete the route to Salt Lake City.) However, the 1934 D&RGW Dotsero Cutoff finally fulfilled Moffat's dream and made the tunnel worthwhile. The Union Pacific Railroad uses the Moffat Tunnel today to transport coal and freight and Amtrak uses it to transport tourists and cross-country passengers on its California Zephyr.

The East Portal of the Moffat Tunnel, taken from sidings between the tunnel and the wye (first DNW&P switchback).





The East Portal of the Moffat Tunnel. The structure to the left of the tunnel is the outlet of the Moffat Water Tunnel.



The East Portal of the Moffat Tunnel.



The East Portal of the Moffat Tunnel. I don't know what the UP tarp is for.



View out of the East Portal of the Moffat Tunnel.



Water flows out of the Moffat Water Tunnel and adds to the flow of Boulder Creek for downstream use.



Water from the Moffat Water Tunnel adds to the flow of Boulder Creek, but today it doesn't look like much.



The East Portal of the Moffat Tunnel, with the Continental Divide in the distance.