The Southern Pacific Railroad's Coast Line had its origin in the San Francisco & San Jose Railroad, which was opened between those two cities on January 16, 1864. Some of the founders of the SF&SJ then organized the Southern Pacific Railroad Company, which was incorporated on December 2, 1865, and authorized by Congress to build south through the San Joaquin Valley to the California state line at Needles, where it would meet the AT&SF-controlled Atlantic & Pacific Railroad (ultimately completed in 1883). The original organizers did no construction, but in 1868 sold the SP along with the SF&SJ to the Big Four of the Central Pacific. Early in 1868, the SP started its first construction, which was a line south from San Jose to reach southern California via a route that would cross the Coast Range southeast of San Jose to reach the San Joaquin Valley. However, this line was superseded as the SP's southern main line when the SP started constructing the SP (1876) line to southern California from the the SP's Western Pacific (1869), which the CP had purchased from the SF&SJ in 1867. However, the SP line south of San Jose -- the future Coast Line -- was continued southward to access agricultural areas in the Santa Clara and Salinas valleys and to ultimately reach LA via a coastal route. On March 13, 1869, the line was opened to Gilroy (30 miles south of San Jose), to Pajaro (Watsonvllle Jct.) on November 27, 1871, to Salinas on November 1, 1872, and to Soledad, 90 miles south of San Jose, on August 12, 1873. There the terminus remained for 13 years while construction forces concentrated on completing the SP (1876) and SP Sunset Route (1883).

In 1886, work finally resumed south from Soledad, and trains were operating to King City on July 20, to Paso Robles on October 31, and to Templeton on November 16, 1886, extending now 170 miles south of San Jose. During 1887, the line was continued another 15 miles south through the high valleys of Atascadero and to Santa Margarita, where further progress involved heavy construction on the crossing of the Santa Lucia Mountains (including this location), the most formidable obstacle on the Coast Line. It is 8 miles as the crow flies from Santa Margarita across the Santa Lucia Mountains to San Luis Obispo, but to traverse that distance took six tunnels, a spectacular horseshoe curve, 15 miles of grade and trackage, and 7 years before the line was opened into San Luis Obispo on May 5, 1894. Then came 7 more years of construction along the Pacific shore, providing a scenic route but offering many engineering difficulties in completing the line into Santa Barbara in 1901 (where the SP had completed a line from the south in 1887), thus opening the SP Coast Line from San Francisco to LA.

Northward view of the SP Coast Line (1894), 4 rail miles south of Santa Margarita at Cuesta Siding, on the northern approach to Cuesta Pass, the high point on the SP Coast Line.

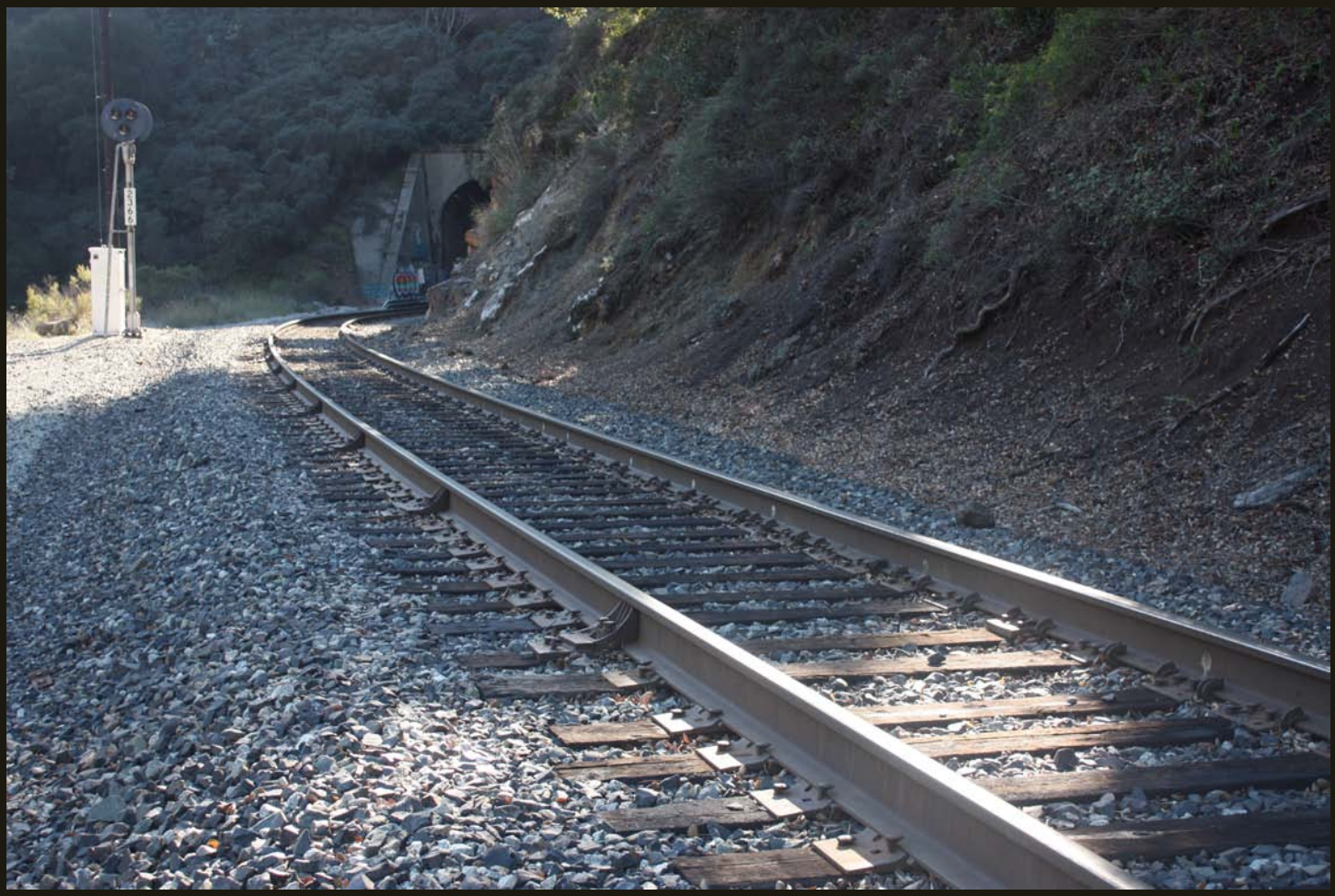
Northward view of the SP Coast Line (1894), one mile south of the previous location and 5 rail miles south of Santa Margarita, on the northern approach to Cuesta Pass, the high point on the Coast Line. U.S. Highway 101 crosses overhead.

Southward view of Cuesta Pass summit tunnel on the SP Coast Line (1894), a few steps south of the previous location. In the 5 rail miles south of Santa Margarita, the grade has climbed about 300 feet (the elevation of the tunnel entrance is 1,346 feet above sea level), and it was a steady climb with a few broad curves. Now the line enters the 3,600-foot-long summit tunnel, the other side of which holds the tunnels, bends, and cut grades that work down the 1,100+ vertical feet to San Luis Obispo.

A closer southward view of the Cuesta Pass summit tunnel on the SP Coast Line (1894). Note the groundwater draining from the tunnel, which penetrates the water table.

South entrance of the Cuesta Pass summit tunnel and the top of the Cuesta Grade between here and San Luis Obispo.

Southward view of the south entrance of the Cuesta Pass summit tunnel. Note the bend and signal in the distance, the next tunnel is just around the bend.



Southward view of the entrance of the next tunnel south of the summit tunnel, same bend and signal seen in previous photo. The tunnels and bends south of here are difficult to access (except by rail).

Eastward view of the SP Coast Line (1894), same location as previous, with a slope of the Santa Lucia Range and U.S. Highway 101 in the distance.