



In 1878, the Pueblo & Arkansas Valley Railroad, formed by the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe to construct its mainline in Colorado, was building southwestward through Colorado toward Raton Pass (this location), gateway to Santa Fe, the Rio Grande, and ultimately El Paso, Mexico, and the Pacific Ocean. In 1878, the P&AV reached the New Mexico border, which ignited one of the most famous railroad “wars” between the AT&SF and Denver & Rio Grande Ra for access to Raton Pass. Following physical and legal confrontations with the D&RG, the AT&SF gained the right to build over Raton Pass and in exchange the D&RG got the Royal Gorge (Arkansas River) route and became the mountain railroad of Colorado. The AT&SF entered New Mexico and built over Raton Pass (this location) under the name New Mexico & Southern Pacific Railroad. After 1908, the Eastern Railway of New Mexico (1908), together with the AT&SF’s Atlantic & Pacific Railroad (1883), became the AT&SF’s primary transcontinental route. In 2006, the State of New Mexico purchased the segment of the NM&SP (1881) line between Raton Pass (this location) and Belen, where the ERNM (1908) mainline crosses the NM&SP (1881), with BNSF (AT&SF successor) retaining operating rights. Amtrak leases passenger service over the line for its Southwest Chief trains between Chicago and Los Angeles.

In December 1878, the NM&SP crossed 7,834-foot Raton Pass via a series of switchbacks. As the NM&SP pushed southward into New Mexico, work continued on a 2,800-foot-long summit tunnel, which was opened in late 1879. The elevation of the NM&SP (1881) at the Raton Pass summit tunnel is 7,588 feet above sea level, 246 feet lower than the actual pass (and the grade summit over the pass), and the northern entrance to the tunnel is only 100 feet south of the Colorado border. In 1908, to handle increased traffic, the AT&SF build a second tunnel parallel to the original tunnel; the new tunnel was located about 15 feet west of and about 8 feet lower than the original tunnel. The original tunnel was abandoned in 1949. The northern approach to the Raton Pass tunnel begins 13 miles to the north in Trinidad, Colorado, and is double tracked the entire distance from there to the tunnel’s north entrance, where it converges to a single track to enter the tunnel. The northern approach follows Raton Creek the entire way to the pass. The southern approach begins at the town of Raton, New Mexico, where it is double tracked; the double track continues for 6 miles north then converges to a single track that continues for 1.5 miles to the tunnel’s south entrance. Interestingly, the southern approach follows a drainage that is also called “Raton Creek,” although the “Raton Creek” that drains north from the pass flows to the Arkansas River and the “Raton Creek” that drains south from the pass flows to the Canadian River.

The Raton Pass summit tunnel, which is the “new” tunnel built in 1908, is difficult to access. The best I could do photographically is this northwestward view from I-25 in New Mexico, basically standing over the summit tunnel, from which point we can see a tiny section of track (designated by a yellow arrow). That curved, double-tracked section of track is 4,000 feet in the distance in Colorado and 2,800 feet north of the north entrance of the tunnel. This view gives an idea of the basalt-capped mesas that obstruct travel between Colorado and New Mexico and through which Raton Pass is the most direct, lowest-elevation route. I could find no evidence in satellite imagery of the original (1878-1879) pre-tunnel switchback route over the pass.



This is the same view as previous but zoomed in on the tracks; the doubletrack can just be made out.



Westward peek at the single-track NM&SP (1881) 1,700 feet south of the south entrance to the summit tunnel at Raton Pass.



This is as close as I could get to the tracks north of the pass, where a ranch access road in Colorado crosses the tracks 2.25 rail miles north of the north entrance of the railroad tunnel. This tremendous fill grade and the beautiful stone tunnels through it give an idea of the construction feats on the approach to Raton Pass.