



The Moffat Tunnel was the dream of David Moffat of the Denver, Northwestern & Pacific Railroad. The DNW&P originated in Denver and was planned to terminate in Salt Lake City, Utah. The original DNW&P crossed the continental divide at 11,676-foot Rollins Pass via a series of switch back loops and a steep 4 percent grade. Snow removal on the original line made it unprofitable to operate, and Moffat was unable to raise sufficient funds to replace the pass with a lower-elevation tunnel before he died in 1911. However, the Denver business forces behind the 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 and on April 29, 1922, the Moffat Tunnel Improvement District was created.

Construction 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 (Mississippi River watershed). Three more bond issues were sold before the tunnel was completed on July 7, 1927. The project excavated 750,000 cubic yards of rock and killed 28 workers. The resulting tunnel is 24 feet high, 18 feet wide, and 6.2 miles long. The summit of the tunnel is at 9,239 feet above sea level.

The tunnel shortened the distance between Denver and the Pacific coast by 176 miles, but only in theory, because the DNW&P, which had shortened its name to the Denver & Salt Lake, never completed its route to Salt Lake City. In fact, no DNW&P/D&SL tracks had been laid since 1913, when the tracks reached the coal fields at Craig, Colorado. So when the Moffat Tunnel was completed in 1927, it created only a fast track to a long coal spur. (I can't find any explanation of why so much treasure and blood were put into the tunnel with no firm plan to complete the route to Salt Lake City.) Finally, in 1931, the Denver & Rio Grande Western acquired the D&SL, and in 1932-1934 constructed the Dotsero Cutoff, which connected the D&SL to the D&RGW mainline. Finally, Moffat's dream had been realized and Denver had a direct transcontinental link to the west. After 1934, the Moffat Tunnel route became the D&RGW mainline, the Tennessee Pass route became a secondary route, and the original narrow-gauge Marshall Pass route was abandoned.

In this view of the West Portal, part of the Moffat Water Tunnel can be seen at the right. 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.