



When the Southern Pacific laid its first tracks in the early 1870's and built southward from northern California through the Central Valley then over Tehachapi Pass to southern California, its destination was El Paso, Texas, to build the southernmost transcontinental route identified in the 1855 Pacific Railroad surveys. Once over the Pacific Crest at Tehachapi Pass, the most direct route would have been to build southeastward to Cajon Pass then eastward over San Geronimo Pass on the 1855 "Southern Pacific" transcontinental route (this route was finally built in 1967). However, LA business interests persuaded the SP to build instead a more difficult route southward over Soledad Pass to LA, then east to San Geronimo Pass and El Paso.

The primary difficulty for the route to LA from Tehachapi Pass was not the re-crossing of the Pacific Crest at Soledad Pass, but instead it was Newhall Pass farther south on the drainage divide between the Santa Clarita and Los Angeles rivers. In 1861, a landowner and surveyor named Edward Beale was appointed by President Lincoln to be the Surveyor General of California and Nevada. Beale was awarded the right to collect tolls in the pass and built Beale's Cut, a summit cut that eventually deepened to 90 feet and allowed wagon traffic between the Central Valley and LA to negotiate the steep approaches to the pass. However, Beale's Cut would not "cut it" as a railroad route, which needed much lower grades. The SP required a 6,940-foot-long tunnel to cross the divide, and on March 22, 1875, over 1,500 mostly Chinese laborers commenced construction at the south end of the San Fernando Tunnel (this location). Many of the workers had recent experience working on SP's tunnels on the western approach to Tehachapi Pass. Due to the sandstone composition of the mountain that was saturated with water and oil, frequent cave-ins occurred and the bore had to be constantly shored up by timbers during excavation.

The north end of the tunnel excavation commenced in June 1875, but was abandoned due to frequent cave-ins caused by oil soaked rock and was moved a little to the west. Water was a constant problem during construction and pumps were utilized to keep the tunnel from flooding. Track was laid during the tunnel dig and was used to remove dirt and rock by horse pulled cars. Workers digging from both the north and south ends of the tunnel came face to face on July 14, 1876, and the first train passed through the tunnel on August 12, 1876. On September 4 Charles Crocker notified the SP that the track had been completed between San Francisco and LA, and the following day the rails were joined ceremoniously with a golden spike at a point about 20 miles north of the tunnel called Lang. Thus LA was connected to the national rail network.

After the SP line was completed, Beale's Cut continued to be used for wagon and later automobile transportation passage over Newhall Pass until construction of the Newhall Tunnel in 1910. Newhall Pass remains a main traffic route for Interstate 5 (Golden State Freeway), State Route 14 (Antelope Valley Freeway), Sierra Highway (old U.S. 99), Foothill Boulevard, and San Fernando Road. Metrolink's Antelope Valley Line and the Union Pacific Railroad (SP successor) continue to use the San Fernando Tunnel.

This is as close as I could get to the south end of the 1876 San Fernando Tunnel and the photo is taken through a chain link fence. Note the deep cut approach to the tunnel. Ramps for the Interstate 5 - State Route 14 Interchange loom overhead.



Southern approach to the south end of the 1876 San Fernando Tunnel and the Interstate 5 - State Route 14 Interchange.



Beale's Cut 1872.



This is as close as I could get to the north end of the San Fernando Tunnel by car. The north tunnel entrance is a half mile south of this southward view of the SP (now UP) route at Newhall, California.



An abandoned spur in Newhall, one mile north of the north end of the San Fernando Tunnel. The SP (now UP and Metrolink) line is visible between the first two trucks.