

## B. Travis Wright, MPS

travis@btraviswrightmps.com | 720.663.9446

---

Gilpin County  
203 Eureka Street  
Central City, Colorado 80427

Wednesday, April 26, 2023

Gilpin County Historic Preservation Commission and the Gilpin County Board of County Commissioners—

*The most adaptable buildings remain.*

Of all the chronicles documenting the incredible American achievement of the construction and subsequent successes of the Moffat Tunnel, it is this realization that strikes me as truly meaningful: the most adaptable buildings remain. Such an observation not only explains how a company town comprised of hundreds of people and dozens of structures practically vanished over the past century, but also stands as a prescient declaration about the future possibilities of the five remaining cabins at East Portal.

As Vice Chair of the Gilpin County Historic Preservation Commission, under Section 4.1.b.ii of Gilpin County Ordinance 19-01, I am formally requesting a review of this property—the East Portal Camp Cabins at the Moffat Tunnel—to be listed on the county’s historic register as a local landmark.

At the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the track of David Moffat’s *Denver, Northwestern & Pacific Railway* left Denver and snaked through thirty tunnels before reaching the eastern side of Rollins Pass, near present day Tolland and East Portal in northwestern Gilpin County. Stout rail then scaled mountainsides and threaded additional tunnels, reaching the summit of the pass at 11,676 feet above sea level on 2-4% grades before descending into present-day Winter Park. At such high elevations, snow and wind were constants, and the operational costs became unsustainable.

All along, it had been the vision of David Moffat to tunnel through the Continental Divide. Such a tunnel would not only eliminate the trek over Rollins Pass, but also drastically shorten the route where weather could no longer delay trains, passengers, freight, and mail for days, weeks, or even months. Sadly, Moffat died in 1911, yet his vision for a tunnel persisted as an undying idea. However, for more than a decade after Moffat’s death, political headwinds proved to be tougher than the unique geology of what would one day be found inside a shoulder of James Peak.

In June 1921, a tragic flood in Pueblo, Colorado changed the tides of public and legislative opinion about districts. In April 1922, Governor Shoup called for a special session of the assembly to consider two bills: one for Pueblo Flood Conservancy, the other for the Moffat Tunnel. “In order to finance the undertaking a special improvement district was formed and bonds voted. Authority for this action was questioned, but the courts in passing on the matter handed down a sweeping decision which held that the people might tax themselves for anything they were agreed they might want,” penned the contractors, Hitchcock & Tinkler, who ultimately were selected as experts to lead the construction of the Moffat Tunnel.

In 1923, before such a massive engineering project could begin, the infrastructure needed to sustain these efforts had to first be constructed. The contractor designed and planned a completely self-contained environment known as a company town. Such a factory system was well-known and proven in the east and Midwest of the country but was fairly uncommon in the west<sup>ii</sup>. This strategy was a masterstroke of genius, as similar projects elsewhere were plagued with low morale, dangerous working conditions, and unusually high turnover. The antidote was to recreate all the amenities of home *onsite*: a school—with church services on Sunday—a post office, recreation hall with movie theater, athletic club, Elks club, and women’s bridge clubs were to be central fixtures to life outside of boring a tunnel.

At the East Portal, construction began on structures of all types: from the specialized and utilitarian—the compressor house, drill sharpening shops, the powder magazine, repair shops, school, the mess hall; to the more adaptable structures such as a six-bed hospital, bunkhouses, and cottages.

What was known as the “Cottage Village” originally consisted of eleven single-family vernacular dwellings to the north of the town. These cottages had features typical of early twentieth-century homes: low gable roofs, wide eaves, and exposed rafters<sup>iii</sup>, along with an outdoor buffer as cottages had small-fenced yards or were nestled along the edge of a forest. These cottages housed supervisors and administrators, along with their families.

After nearly a century of collective retrospective analysis, it seems fitting the opening ceremony of the Moffat Tunnel on February 26, 1928, was a Sunday—a day typically associated with rest, reflection, and reverence. On that day of solemn dedication and celebration, those who crafted the impossible stood on hallowed ground and formally fulfilled David Moffat’s dream. At this site, those who helped build America for five long years had hewn a magnificent stone cathedral through the heart of James Peak to reveal not only the pillars of the earth but also had managed to pull the Pacific Ocean 150 miles closer to Denver.

Shortly after the first trains glided through the completed tunnel, those most specialized structures at East Portal were dismantled: buildings began to disappear from the landscape. The dormitories and cottages saw adaptive reuse as housing for military sentries guarding the East Portal of the Moffat Tunnel during World War II as more than thirty defense-related trains hurried through the tunnel daily. Aerial imagery taken one year after the formal surrender of Japan shows less than a dozen structures remaining at East Portal.

Following World War II, the dormitories and several other structures were relegated to the history books. The five adaptable cabins then extended their service as housing for families who worked at the Moffat Tunnel through the early 2000s, after which time the cottages became abandoned. While constructed for a temporary purpose, these cabins were well-built and have survived for twenty-times longer than their intended purpose to support the construction of the Moffat Tunnel. Colorado Preservation, Inc. listed these structures as one of Colorado’s Most Endangered Places in 2020.<sup>iv</sup>

Today, Mother Nature and Father Time, along with vandals, exert tremendous and damaging forces on these structures that played a crucial role in the American pageant. Look beyond the broken windowpanes and tattered curtains fluttering in the crisp breezes: these buildings have much to share with subsequent generations and are an essential component of Gilpin County’s incredible history.

As the centennial of the East Portal Camp Cabins approaches this summer, these most adaptable structures have a promising future, and we all share in the honor of writing the next chapter of their history.

Thank you,



**B. Travis Wright, MPS**

Vice Chair, Gilpin County Historic Preservation Commission

President, Grand County Historical Association

2022 State Honor Award Recipient, Colorado Preservation, Inc.

Published Rollins Pass & Moffat Tunnel Historian; Founder, *Preserve Rollins Pass*

---

i Hitchcock, F.C., and C.C. Tinkler. *The Contractors’ Story of the Moffat Tunnel: Not an Engineering Treatise*. Denver: Hitchcock & Tinkler, 1927.

ii 2019 Documentation by Gilpin County Historic Preservation Consultant, Deon Wolfenbarger

iii *ibid.*

iv <http://coloradopreservation.org/2020-list-colorados-most-endangered-places/east-portal-moffat-tunnel/>

v <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HyyOOltP4k>