
Original Paper

An Archaeological Research Needs Assessment for Historical Tunnels in Huntington, West Virginia

Dr. Michael Jessee Adkins

Adjunct Instructor, Ohio University, Athens, Ohio, U.S.A.

Abstract

The underground tunnels in Huntington, WV have been the subject of urban legends for many decades. The city is home to a few confirmed pedestrian tunnels and other historically significant basement features. However, there is little evidence verifying the existence of many of the fabled underground tunnels associated with popular downtown buildings such as the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center, the Frederick Building, and other historic locations. This study examines published sources and presents new interview data to assess the evidence for the existence of subsurface architectural features. The locations, narratives, and contexts associated with the tunnels and other features are described. Gaps in existing knowledge are identified and recommendations for future research are presented from a historical archaeology perspective. Additional oral history narratives describing personal experiences with the tunnels are needed to better understand the cultural significance of the sites. Given the longstanding public interest in this topic, efforts to record and publish video footage of the tunnels would be beneficial, and the economic value of tunnel tourism warrants consideration. Future studies aimed at identifying, photographing, mapping, and assessing subsurface features are needed to establish a historically accurate understanding of Huntington's subterranean architecture.

Keywords: tunnels, history, archaeology, Huntington, West Virginia

1. Introduction

A secret history of tunnels is hidden beneath the city of Huntington, West Virginia. Rumors of their existence have abounded for decades. As a child, I remember hearing first-hand accounts of adventures who dared to explore the tunnels. I also recall lively stories about how some of the passageways were once the domain of a Generation X party scene. Many prominent business operators have staunchly denied the existence of the tunnels while other people have provided solid evidence confirming their locations. As a researcher, I examined published sources and conducted new interviews of first-hand witnesses to gain a better understanding of the history, context, and implications of Huntington's mysterious underground history.

Founded by business tycoon Collis P. Huntington, the city began to take shape in the late 1800's. Mr. Huntington saw the economic potential for connecting the Eastern railroad system to the Ohio River. During that period, the river was one of the main transportation routes within the Eastern U.S. It made good sense for railroads to connect to the river to allow for the streamlined transportation of important commodities such as coal, building materials, and all sorts of commercial goods. Huntington quickly emerged as a transportation hub and the city grew in the footsteps of the Industrial Revolution. Houses, businesses, manufacturing facilities, and educational institutions sprang into existence with their own architectural elements. McMillan (2003) noted "Huntington is fortunate in its architectural history; its people contributed their expressions, wants, and sentiments of the period, and they have left us with an exceptional treasure" (p. 7). Underground tunnels are part of Huntington's rich architectural history, and they deserve attention from historians, scholars, and community members.

Tunnels have been a natural part of city infrastructures since the dawn of civilization. They are often created for utilitarian purposes but their dark, underground, and out of sight nature have inspired an aura of mystery throughout the ages. Joseph Platania (1996) noted "some of the most intriguing reasons given for tunnels underneath Huntington include bootlegging, a secret courier service and a getaway

route for members of the mafia” (p. 19). There is also a longstanding belief that a tunnel connected the city’s theaters and a hotel to the bank of the Ohio River and it “was used by performers to transport their props, baggage and other equipment, including animals from riverboats to the theaters” (Platania, 1996, p. 19). However, there is a lack of historical data confirming the existence of many of the tunnels and there is a gap in the literature describing the various uses of Huntington’s tunnels. Additional research is needed to better understand Huntington’s historical underground architectural features.

2. Historical Sources

Most of what is publicly known about Huntington’s tunnels comes from Platania (1996) who described popular rumors of tunnels and revealed the existence of several confirmed tunnels in the downtown area. “The rumors say there were tunnels connecting such prominent buildings as the Hotel Prichard with a private club across Ninth Street, connecting the Fredrick Hotel with the Keith-Albee and the Keith-Albee with the Cinema Theater” and he noted there was “a rumor that the Coal Exchange Building was connected by a tunnel to the West Virginia Building two blocks away” (Platania, 1996, p. 19). In an effort to separate fact from fiction, Platania gathered eyewitness accounts and historical records to confirm the existence of some of the subsurface features.

Platania (1996) verified the existence of a tunnel connecting the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Building, at 502 Eighth Street, to the Sidney L. Christie Federal Building, at 845 Fifth Avenue. I contacted William Powell, a Public Affairs Officer for the U.S. General Services Administration (GSA), for additional information about the federal government’s tunnel. The GSA is tasked with managing the maintenance and performing real estate duties associated with federal properties. Powell said, “there is a small maintenance tunnel between the Sidney L. Christie U.S. Courthouse and the Huntington Federal Building, which was built in 1959-60 as part of construction for the latter building” (personal communication, April 1, 2024). Powell added “the tunnel isn't accessible by the public and for security reasons, we cannot allow access to it for photographs” (personal communication, May 28, 2024). However, the tunnel was accessible to the public before terrorism concerns emerged and the uses were mundane. Platania (1996) explained, “in bad weather and at other times, government employees from the former post office building, federal court, IRS, and other agencies could walk through the tunnel into the federal building on Eighth Street and use its snack bar” (p. 26).

Platania (1996) also confirmed the existence of a tunnel connecting the basement at 825 Fourth Avenue, the Morgan-Lewis Arcade, to the basement of the City Annex Building that once stood at 824 Fifth Avenue. The City Annex Building no longer exists but the Morgan-Lewis Arcade is still standing and has been home to several retail establishments throughout the years. It has been called by several names throughout history to include the Lewis Arcade, named after former owner Walter Lewis, and the Morgan Arcade, named after former owner J. Hanley Morgan. It has also been referred to as “Reuschleins’/Lewis Arcade” (National Archives Catalog, 2007, p. 19). The original plan for the construction of the Morgan-Lewis Arcade included a passageway, under the alley, connecting two buildings (To Complete Plans for Lewis Arcade this Week, 1924). City officials also granted a franchise request and permission to connect the two buildings by means of an underground tunnel (Commission Grants Lewis Franchises, 1924). The tunnel was used for “federal government operations” associated with a company called Zenith Optical during World War II (Platania, 1996, p. 20). Although the Fifth Avenue City Annex Building no longer exists, and the site is now a paved parking lot, the tunnel may indeed still be underground in some form. It is unknown if the passageway is still connected to the basement of the Morgan-Lewis Arcade, if it has been sealed, or if the Fourth Avenue building still has a legal easement to what is now a separately owned parking lot. The historic value of this tunnel and the Morgan-Lewis Arcade is worthy of further research.

A historical record shows a tunnel extending toward the Ohio River was accidentally discovered during the remodeling of the Foster Building, located at the corner of Ninth Street and Third Avenue (Platania, 1996). The building was designed by prominent architect James Stewart and businessman B.W. Foster was the original owner (McMillian, 2003). Having been completed in 1894, it has been the home to many businesses throughout the years including a hardware store, dry goods store, and the Marshall Hall of Fame Cafe. The building did not originally have a basement, but it was later remodeled, during the 1960’s, and a basement was created by removing dirt, rocks, and debris “using mining techniques

such as conveyor belts” and the tunnel was discovered through this process (Platania, 1996, p. 27).

The Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center, formerly known as the Keith-Albee Theater, has undoubtedly garnered the most public attention regarding its subsurface features. Having opened in 1928, the theater was an opulent example of Art Deco, Mexican Baroque, and an eclectic mix of architectural styles. It has been a popular venue for live performances, movies, and the Marshall Artists Series associated with Marshall University. There is a longstanding belief that tunnels extend from the basement of the Keith-Albee to other businesses to include the Frederick Building, located across the street (Platania, 1996). The theater has remained a valued architectural asset for the community. Efforts to repair, restore, and revitalize the theater are currently underway with the help from generous donations from community members. Robert Plymale is the current President of the Board of Directors for Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center Incorporated, a nonprofit organization with deeded ownership of the Keith-Albee property, and he noted “there are long interconnecting hallways in the basement that are ‘tunnel-esque’ in appearance, but they do not extend beyond the structure of the theater” (personal communication, April 8, 2024).

The Frederick Hotel opened in 1906 and was widely regarded as an architectural gem. It was “designed in the neoclassical style by two prominent Huntington architects, Edwin Alger and James Stewart. The building’s well-preserved facade is attributed to a special hard pressed brick used in its construction” (Lost Huntington, 2018, p. 1). The hotel boasted 150 guest rooms and offered a variety of office, meeting, and entertainment spaces. “Despite its age, the Hotel Frederick lobby still contains the elegance and nostalgic grandeur that was once the talk of the town” more than a century ago and “there is still a rich sampling of historic beauty to be seen by those looking for a glimpse into Huntington’s past” (Past, Present and Future Plans for the Frederick, 2013, p. 1). There are “persistent rumors of a tunnel” running under Fourth Avenue, connecting the Frederick Building and the Keith-Albee (Lost Huntington: Frederick Hotel, 2018, p. 1). The Frederick Building no longer serves as a hotel, but it has become home to modern restaurants, businesses, and apartments.

Marshall University students created a television show series, and it aired on WSAZ, Channel 3, from approximately 2007 to 2012. The show, *Up Late with Jamie LoFiego*, had an episode where students explored the Keith-Albee theater, to include the basement. They discussed the historic features of the building, noted the rumor of a tunnel connecting the theater to the Frederick Building, and they showed video footage of a small tunnel (MarshallUpLate, 2008). It extended from the basement of the theater, under Fourth Avenue, toward the Frederick Building. It is difficult to ascertain the size of the tunnel from the video. It is unclear if it was tall enough to walk through or, perhaps, if it was the upper part of a tunnel that had been mostly filled in. However, the video is credible evidence that a tunnel existed during that time.

The Herald-Dispatch newspaper published a story about utility workers encountering a void under Fourth Avenue between the Keith-Albee and Frederick building (Work Closes Off Part of City - Utility Upgrades, 2008). Photos were also posted online showing members of the Huntington Sanitary Department investigating the void, to include supervisor Mark Deem examining video footage gathered from a specialized camera sent into the cavity (Wolfe, 2008). The nature of the void was not reported in the newspaper coverage. However, the location of the void corresponds to the location of the tunnel shown in the video produced by Marshall University Students (MarshallUpLate, 2008).

3. First-Hand Perspectives

I interviewed eight people, during the year 2024, who were eyewitnesses to subsurface architectural features in Huntington. Candidates for the interview process were selected through convenience sampling and snowball sampling. The interviews occurred through a combination of in-person meetings, electronic messaging, and/or phone calls. All of the participants consented for me to use their names and narratives as part of this project. They each happened to be in the right place, at the right time, to observe parts of the city’s underground architecture.

My father, Danny Adkins, worked in the basement of the Keith-Albee theater during the late 1970’s. He was employed by the Pied Piper music store and was tasked with helping to set up some of the audio and visual effects for a haunted house basement tour. He recalled seeing old dressing rooms featuring

intact, but unlit, light bulbs dotting the sides and tops of mirrors. He passed by a small library of highly organized stacks of vintage sheet music before noticing a passage leading away from the basement. It was a tall brick tunnel with an arch shaped ceiling. He was surprised by the dryness of the passage as he walked through it to eventually reach a dead end where he could hear the faint sound of moving water. Recently, he spoke with a friend who worked for the City of Huntington during the late 1900's. The friend explained that utility workers were instructed to fill all voids beneath the city, to include the tunnel connecting the Keith-Albee to the Frederick Building. This work was undertaken because some tunnels were being accessed by members of the public, without authorization, and used as a venue for partying and illicit activities. Rocks and other debris were used to fill the tunnels and eliminate the city's underground problems.

Danny Young remembered working in the basement of the Keith-Albee theater, with Danny Adkins, during the late 1970's. He described a maze-like tunnel system, arch-topped doors, and intricate architectural designs adorning the basement. He also observed molds, stored in the basement, that were once used to create the plaster figures that are part of the main interior showroom. Young noted that it would be easy for someone to become lost in the complex system of basement passages.

James Slone worked in the Frederick Building during the 1980's. He performed maintenance within the building and noted that being in parts of it was like going back in time. He recalled a tunnel extending from the basement of the Frederick Building toward the Keith-Albee. The tunnel was located behind a freight/maintenance elevator shaft. The trick to accessing the tunnel was to take the freight/maintenance elevator to the basement, then send the elevator up. Then, walk through the shaft and into the tunnel. He remembered the tunnel was damp, likely rat infested, and he never walked through to the other side.

Nick McCormick worked in the Keith-Albee theater during the late 1990's and early 2000's. He was aware of stories about a tunnel connecting the building to the Frederick Hotel, and he explored some parts of the theater basement. He estimated that he was able to access an underground space slightly in front of the theater, perhaps under the sidewalk, but was prevented from accessing all parts of the basement because he did not have the keys to several locked doors. He was told there were some corridors that were damaged and subsequently closed due to flooding.

Nicholas Pauken recalled using a stairwell/passageway to access a ballroom-style feature associated with the Morris Building, at 841 Fourth Avenue, during the early to mid-2000's. During that time, the room appeared to have wood paneling, a red dome or arched ceiling, and the floor had some standing water. Pauken noted the room appeared to have been used as a bar at some point and his impression was that it was once a classy joint.

Ryan Zipperian was aware of the folklore about tunnels associated with the Keith-Albee theater, from a young age, because his mother worked for the company that owned the theater. He recalled hearing a story that Richard Nixon once used a tunnel, connecting the Frederick Hotel to the Keith-Albee, during a campaign visit. As an adult, he also worked in the theater intermittently throughout the 2000's and was the co-host for the *Up Late with Jamie LoFiego* show, having appeared in the video showing a tunnel beneath the theater (MarshallUpLate, 2008). He clarified that the tunnel in the video was a small utility tunnel extending toward the Frederick Building, and it was not a pedestrian tunnel. He and his production crew did not locate a walkable tunnel during the time the episode was filmed. However, he explained that it is possible that a walkable tunnel may have existed in the past and it may have become inaccessible at some point. Zipperian noted the Keith-Albee theater has a rich history and he was in favor of efforts to promote the history and preservation of the building.

Doug Evans had a first-hand perspective of the basement of the Galleria, located at 945 Fourth Avenue, during the early 2010's. He recalled seeing the remains of a vintage bowling alley and was aware of urban legends suggesting tunnels once connected the building to other locations. He didn't see a tunnel while he was there, but he did review the architectural blueprints for the building, and they did not include plans for a pedestrian tunnel. Evans explained that some of the urban legends may have come into existence due to coal chute infrastructure. He noted that coal was a common source of heat during the 1900's and many of the buildings were equipped with tunnel-like chutes used to move coal into the basements of buildings. This century, coal is rarely used for heat within the city and a number of people

may have confused the old coal chutes with pedestrian tunnels.

Donnakay Allen worked for a restaurant located in the Frederick Building during the late 2010's. She remembered seeing basement passageways connecting several businesses within the building and described them as cold, damp, and not well-lit. She was also aware of the old tales that a tunnel extended toward the Ohio River and noted there may be an access point to Huntington's underground tunnels at Heritage Village, the city's former train station located next to the Ohio River. She suggested that the tunnels should be recognized and valued as part of Huntington's history.

All the participants had a personal perspective of subsurface architectural features. Collectively, their experiences cover several decades and provide historical insight into Huntington's tunnels. Their descriptions of underground history can serve as clues as future researchers seek to better understand the spatial characteristics of historic basements and tunnels. The memories of what they experienced were characterized by a sense of appreciation, fascination, and curiosity about Huntington's underground history. Their perspectives mirror the feelings of the larger community by valuing cultural resources.

4. A Forgotten Past

There are people who, by nature of their position, would be expected to know of the existence of certain tunnels but they have denied they exist. For example, Derek Hyman, who was the President of the Greater Huntington Theater Corporation, with access to the Keith-Albee theater, acknowledged a rumor that there was a tunnel connecting the Keith-Albee to the Fredrick Building and to the Cinema Theater, but he said, "this rumor is false" having personally explored "both sides of the wall" (Platania 1996, p. 20). John Hankins, who was an owner of the Frederick Building, said he had not discovered evidence of the existence of a tunnel connecting his building to the Keith-Albee (Past, Present and Future Plans for the Frederick, 2013). William Ritter, a prominent businessman with ties to the Frederick Building, maintained that there was nothing to the rumors associated with tunnels in Huntington (Platania, 1996). Robert Plymale, the President of the organization that currently owns the Keith-Albee discussed Platania's (1996) article about the tunnels and said "I can neither confirm nor deny the assertions made in that article, but I can verify that there are no tunnels presently in the Keith-Albee and that I have never known of any evidence to the contrary" (personal communication, April 8, 2024). Additionally, city officials, including the Mayor of Huntington and employees of the Huntington Sanitary Board, would presumably be aware of tunnel infrastructure but they did not respond to any of my requests for information on this topic. I can only speculate on why they did not respond but there may be well-intended reasons for not disclosing information about underground infrastructure. Perhaps city leaders are hesitant to discuss the tunnels because they don't want to encourage trespassing, they may be concerned about the liability for injuries, they may want to avoid the re-establishment of an underground party scene, or they may have valid security concerns. However, some tunnels and architecturally significant basement features certainly existed and some still exist in some form. Therefore, all of the valid concerns should be weighed against the community's desire for historical knowledge and the academic responsibility to provide historical transparency.

An important question to consider is: How can the existence of a tunnel be forgotten? The individuals who persistently denied the existence of tunnels may have been right. Or, they could have been speaking their own truth from their unique perspectives. The structural history, especially as it relates to maintenance and remodeling, is not always known to the owner(s), manager(s), or occupant(s) of a building. Real estate usually changes hands many times throughout the lifetime of any given property. This leaves open the possibility that tunnels that previously connected two points may have been sealed during prior remodeling or renovations, without current or future stakeholders ever knowing about it. Another possibility, noted by Platania (1996), is that some of the city's sewer and water infrastructure may have been mistaken for pedestrian tunnels because some of the early sewer tunnels "were big enough to walk through" (p. 27). Similarly, old pedestrian tunnels may have been converted for use in the city's current sewer and water infrastructure.

5. Videography and Economic Value

Given the longstanding public interest in Huntington's underground architecture, efforts to record video

footage of the features and disseminate the videos to a public audience are warranted. For example, the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center Incorporated could grant permission for and facilitate an all doors open tour of the Keith-Albee, particularly in the basement, where researchers could record video footage of the architecture and passageways. Videos could then be posted on popular online platforms, such as YouTube, to satisfy public curiosity. This type of project would be well-suited for students attending Marshall University due to their proximity to, and affiliation with, the theater. Such efforts should try to include the basement of the Fredrick Building and other historically significant properties.

Some people in Huntington are standing on money and they don't even know it. There are potential economic benefits associated with the tunnels and there should be an effort to evaluate the plausibility of refurbishing and reopening some of them. If they were to be reopened, they could be a source of revenue for tourism and a venue for Halloween events. Additionally, it is completely possible that long forgotten easements, or rights of way, were granted for tunnels connecting key properties within the city. If they exist, such easements could be lucrative opportunities for existing businesses should an underground tourism venture come to fruition. Given the public interest, history, and mystery of the tunnels, they have the potential to be a significant source of revenue.

6. Conclusions

The tunnels and other underground features within the city of Huntington are an important part of our history and they have been the subject of public curiosity for decades. There should be a robust effort to identify, map, photograph, and assess the subsurface architectural features to include historic basements and the tunnels within the Downtown Huntington Historic District and other areas within the city. Insight into the subsurface architecture associated with the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center located at 925 Fourth Avenue, the Cinema Theater located at 1021 Fourth Avenue, the Fredrick Building located at 940 Fourth Avenue, the Galleria located at 945 Fourth Avenue, the Army Corps of Engineers Building located at 502 Eighth Street, the Sidney L. Christie Federal Building located at 845 Fifth Avenue, the Morris Building located at 841 Fourth Avenue, the Foster Building located at 843 Third Avenue, the Morgan-Lewis Arcade located at 825 Fourth Avenue, the site of the former City Annex Building located at 824 Fifth Avenue, and other locations is needed. Researchers need to determine, for the historical record, if there was or was not a pedestrian tunnel connecting the Keith-Albee to the Frederick Building and a tunnel extending from the vicinity of the Frederick Hotel to the bank of the Ohio River. Additionally, oral history data related to the subsurface features would be helpful to better understand the history of the sites. There should be an effort to interview people with knowledge or experience regarding the existence of tunnels and the uses of underground features. For example, if some tunnels were used as a Generation X party venue, then the people who used them could provide valuable insight into their location, previous condition, and cultural context. Similarly, city employees who may have witnessed underground passageways can also provide valuable insight. Qualitative research projects, aimed at gathering interview data, would be a substantial step toward better understanding Huntington's subsurface history.

A meticulous search of historical documents may also yield important information. There may be additional newspaper articles, referencing the tunnels, stored on microfilm or archived in local libraries. There may also be city government records granting permission to create tunnels. Most importantly, a search of all deeds and documented easements concerning the noted historic properties may reveal publicly accessible records related to the tunnels. A good starting point would be to review all the historical deeds associated with the Morgan-Lewis Arcade, located at 825 Fourth Avenue, and the former City Annex Building, located at 824 Fifth Avenue. There was a known tunnel connecting these two locations (Platania, 1996) and this infrastructure was approved by city officials (Commission Grants Lewis Franchises, 1924). An examination of the historical chain of deeds associated with the properties may yield additional information of value to historical researchers. This method can be repeated for all the properties of interest to historians.

The Huntington Sanitary Board may also have records or insight into this matter. In fact, the city employees who maintain the sewer system have unique knowledge, skills, and abilities that could aid researchers as they unravel the mystery of the tunnels from a historical archaeology perspective. For example, the city employees are skilled at identifying the various components of the underground

utility systems. They know how to dig around such systems without causing damage, and they have specialized video equipment that can be used to remotely examine small tunnels or spaces without a human entering the environment. Therefore, a partnership between the Huntington Sanitary Board's key employees who maintain the sewer system and archaeological researchers would be essential for understanding the subsurface architecture.

In conclusion, there is a notable gap in scholarly research addressing the history and significance of Huntington's tunnels. Additional research is needed to map the confirmed locations of tunnels, examine the physical state of the structures, assess their historical significance, and disseminate the findings to the public. Additional efforts should be made to determine if long forgotten or sealed tunnels can be rediscovered and described for the historical record. For example, efforts to gain a historical archaeological perspective of the tunnel(s) associated with the Keith-Albee Performing Arts Center may include using ground penetrating radar to map subsurface features in the space between the theater and the Frederick Building. Moreover, extensive deed research, an examination of city infrastructure records to include sewer system maps, and a physical examination of the basement architecture of the Keith-Albee and the Frederick Building may produce important information that can help the community better understand the history of the sites. Similar approaches aimed at documenting the spatial characteristics and physical conditions of subsurface features can be applied throughout the Downtown Huntington Historic District. Ultimately, a collaborative effort involving community members, city officials, and historical researchers is needed to shed light on Huntington's underground architectural mysteries.

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