

# The Gem in Little Egypt: ILLINOIS' TUNNEL HILL STATE TRAIL

By John Greenfield

It feels a bit spooky as I straddle my touring bike, gazing at the entrance to the namesake passageway of the Tunnel Hill State Trail, a hidden gem in southern Illinois. On this mild, sunny afternoon in late November, roots dangle from the shale outside the opening on either side of the path, which is carpeted with russet leaves. Birds cry in the distance and water trickles musically off the rocks. I see the light at the other end of the 543-foot tunnel, but I've been warned that if you're not careful you can get mesmerized when you're pedaling through the darkness within, and crash into the walls.

Most people think of the Land of Lincoln as Chicago skyscrapers plus pancake-flat prairie, but the southern end of the state is completely different. The region, nicknamed "Little Egypt" because it's located at the delta of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, is blanketed by the lush Shawnee National Forest and roller-coaster hills, which makes it a beautiful destination for bicycle travel. Down here the culture seems more Southern than Midwestern. Fried chicken and grits show up on breakfast menus, and the lilting speech of the friendly locals makes me feel like I'm in Kentucky, which is just across the Ohio, instead of in the same state as the Windy City.





Steep rock faces carved out by the early railway builders on either side of the tunnel now shade riders, hikers and joggers.



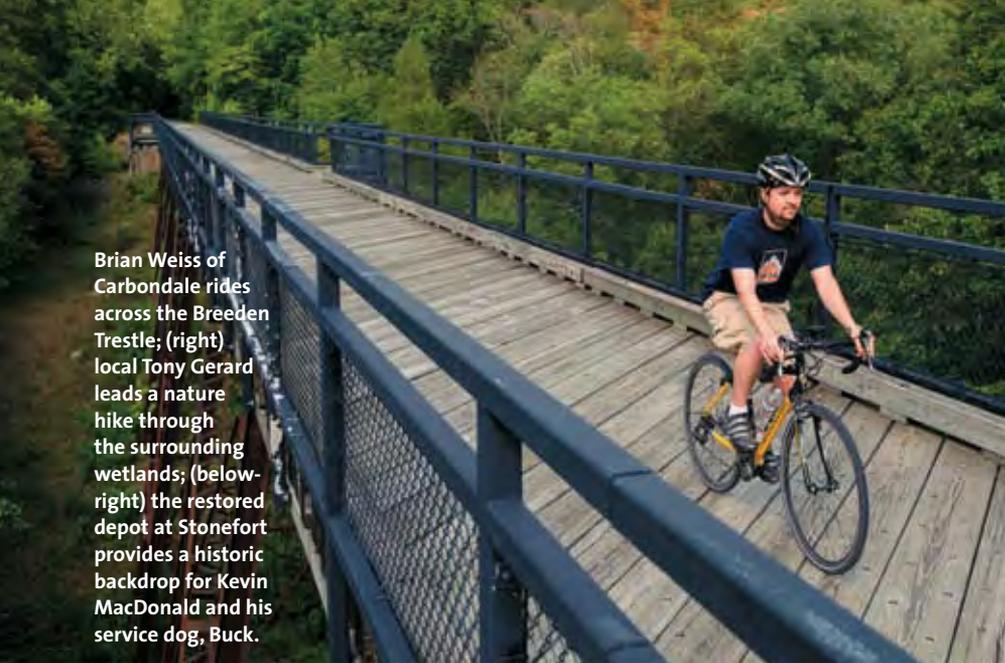
The Tunnel Hill State Trail, a crushed limestone path, stretches 45 miles southwest from Harrisburg to Karnak, Ill., with an additional 2.5-mile spur to Cache River State Natural Area's Barkhausen Wetlands Center. Another recently completed bike trail extends 7.5 miles north from Harrisburg to Eldorado (pronounced "Eldoraydo"). The tunnel, located at the midway point of the main path, is literally and figuratively the highpoint. While Harrisburg is at 370 feet above sea level and Karnak is at 340 feet, the tunnel is at 680. There's a barely noticeable uphill grade to the tunnel from each endpoint. Another attraction of the trail is its 23 trestles, ranging from 34 feet to 450 feet in length.

Prairie flowers and grasses line the Tunnel Hill pathway, and a variety of trees—hickory, oak, cottonwood, tulip poplar and sweet gum—rustle in the breeze. Birds are plentiful and varied along the trail, ranging from doves, bluebirds, and white killdeer (a medium-size plover) to quail and wild turkey. You may see opossums, eastern cottontail rabbits, red foxes, and white-tailed deer too.

The most picturesque section of the path, a 9.3-mile segment from the tunnel to the town of Vienna, crosses several other well known routes: the River-to-River hiking trail from the Mississippi to the Ohio; the American Discovery cross-county route; Adventure Cycling's TransAmerica bike trail; and the Trail of Tears National Historic Route.

"We're very proud of the trail," says Larry Mizell, one of its early boosters. "There's a lot of diversity: flatlands to bluffs to swamps to creeks and a few lakes. The tunnel makes it spectacular."

Brian Weiss of Carbondale rides across the Breeden Trestle; (right) local Tony Gerard leads a nature hike through the surrounding wetlands; (below-right) the restored depot at Stonefort provides a historic backdrop for Kevin MacDonald and his service dog, Buck.



## Taking Roots

The trail's origins go back to Reconstruction, when Ambrose Burnside, an incompetent Civil War general who gave his name to sideburn whiskers, and partners built the Vincennes and Cairo Railroad. Named for its termini in Vincennes, Ind., and Cairo, Ill., the line opened in 1872, when trains began transporting coal, lumber, salt, apples, peaches and passengers. Enterprising locals collected turtles out of nearby creeks and bayous and packed them in barrels to be shipped up to Chicago to be made into soup.

The railroad changed hands several times over the next century, with Norfolk Southern as the final owner. After creation of the interstate highway system in the 1950s, shipping goods to market via truck rather than train became more common, and by the 1960s traffic along the line had slowed to a trickle. Norfolk Southern ended operations on the line in 1988.

Phillip Morris, a rail fan who worked as a barber in Vienna for 50 years, dreamed of running an excursion and dining train on the dormant railroad. "The Norfolk Southern said, 'We're in the freight business, not the tourism business,'" he recalls. "They told me if I wanted to buy it I could have it for seven million dollars.' That's a lot of haircuts." Understandably, Morris didn't buy. Nowadays he runs Kornbread Junction, a dinner theater a stone's throw from the trail in the village of Tunnel Hill.

But others had ideas for the corridor too. Mizell, now the director of a local family-counseling center, was a member

of the Johnson County Revitalization Corporation when the trains stopped running. Much of the corridor was in Johnson County and, he says, "When we heard that Norfolk Southern was pulling up the tracks, we had the idea to build a bike trail. I contacted George Camille, a vice president and lobbyist from the railroad. I bought him lunch and told him the county was going to lose \$30,000 in tax revenue from the railroad leaving. That's how I persuaded him [that the company should donate the right-of-way]. He and I talked to Governor Jim Edgar's office," says Mizell, and the idea took hold.

In 1991 Norfolk Southern donated to Illinois the rail line right-of-way between Harrisburg and Karnak. At the time, says Morris, "I had no idea what a rail-trail was. I researched the John Wayne Trail [in eastern Washington] and the Elroy-Sparta Trail [in southern Wisconsin] and decided this would be a good thing for the community. Rural people don't like change, and there were folks who were against it because they thought people would come from out of town and start stealing things. I said, 'My God, it's hard to steal a plow on a bicycle.' I got people to sign petitions to develop the trail."

To help fund trail construction, the state legislature passed a bill in the early 1990s raising the license plate fee by \$3. Over the next decade the Illinois Department of Natural Resources (IDNR) worked to develop the path, surfacing the trail and installing privy toilets and water fountains at various trailheads.

The first segments opened in 1998 and the trail was completed in 2001.

Bill Reynolds, the IDNR site supervisor for the Tunnel Hill State Trail, agrees with Morris that it took a while for some locals to appreciate the path's benefits. "Early on people were asking, 'Where are all these bicyclists going to come from?' But there's nothing else like it in this part of the state and people come here from all over the world. The trail goes through seven communities and they've all got restaurants and gas stations, so they've had some economic benefits. It's been nice to see the nonbelievers come around to see the value of the trail."

## Trail Charms

After catching Amtrak's Saluki train from Chicago to Carbondale, home of Southern Illinois University, and pedaling 40 miles east, I arrived in Harrisburg. This town of 9,120, county seat of Saline County, was established in the 1820s when James A. Harris built a mule barn and sawmill here. The Saline County Pioneer Village & Museum, located in a former poor house two blocks north of the trail, offers more background on the area.

That night I chowed down on a toothsome pulled-pork sandwich at the Barbecue Barn and enjoyed a pint at E.L.

## Tunnel Hill State Trail

Total trail length:  
47.5 miles  
Trail surface:  
Crushed stone  
County line

- Trailhead
- Parking
- Restrooms
- Tunnel

MAP ILLUSTRATION BY DANIELLEMARCS.COM

0 1 2 miles

## TRAVEL FACTS

**GETTING THERE:** Amtrak is a great option for travel to Southern Illinois. The Saluki, Illini and City of New Orleans trains each stop once a day in Carbondale, 40 miles west of Harrisburg. Amtrak's lines in Illinois offer "roll-on" service, meaning you can bring an unboxed bicycle onboard for an additional \$10. I bicycled from Carbondale to Harrisburg on State Road 13, which has wide, paved shoulders. From the wetlands center I stair-stepped 40 miles northwest on country roads to Carbondale and caught the train home.

Another car-free option from Carbondale is Greyhound, which offers daily bus service to Vienna. Bicycles may be stowed in the baggage area under the bus; bikes must be boxed and there may be an additional charge.

Harrisburg is a 90-minute drive west of Evansville Regional Airport in Indiana, and a 2.5-hour drive southeast of Lambert-St. Louis International Airport. The wetlands center is an hour drive northwest of the Barkley Regional Airport in Paducah, Ky., 3 hours northeast of Memphis International Airport, and 3 hours northwest of Nashville's John C. Tune Airport.

To reach the Harrisburg trailhead from I-57, take State Route 13 east about 24 miles. Turn left on US 45 and head north for 0.15

mile. Turn left on Walnut Street, then right on Industrial Drive. The trailhead is on the right.

To reach the trailhead at Tunnel Hill (the midpoint), take I-24 to US 45 and head north. Turn left on Tunnel Hill Road and look for the trailhead on the right, just before Possum Rd.

To access the wetlands center, take Interstate 57 to State Route 146 and proceed east for about 9.5 miles. Turn right on State Route 37 and continue for 9 miles. Pass through the town of Cypress and look for the center on the left.

### BIKE RENTALS AND

**OUTFITTERS:** In Harrisburg, You're So Vane (618-294-8623, [tinyurl.com/youresovane](http://tinyurl.com/youresovane)) sells handcrafted weather vanes and rents 3-speed, shaft-driven (chainless) cruiser bikes for \$15 a day. All rentals come with helmet and lock. Store visits and rentals are available by appointment only. The store also offers bike shuttle service along the trail at the rate of \$2/mile for one or two passengers.

Sandburn Junction (618-771-2825, [sandburnjunction.com](http://sandburnjunction.com)), a mile south of the tunnel, offers a variety of rental bikes, mostly by Specialized, for \$20 a day, helmets included. The store also does simple bike repairs at no charge.

**WHERE TO STAY:** There are several hotels in Harrisburg. Vienna has a hotel and a nearby B & B Country Schemes B & B

([illinoisbnb.com/display-inn.php?id=17](http://illinoisbnb.com/display-inn.php?id=17)). Contact the Southernmost Illinois Tourism Bureau (800-248-4373, [southernmostillinois.com](http://southernmostillinois.com)) for recommendations.

### PERMISSIBLE USES:

Hiking, jogging, bicycling and cross-country skiing are permitted on the trail. Motorized vehicles, horses and hunting are not allowed. Camping is not permitted on the trail but Shawnee National Forest has three campgrounds within 10 miles of the trail: Lake of Egypt, north of Tunnel Hill; and Teal Pond and Bell Smith Springs, both southeast of New Burnside. Sandburn Junction plans to open a trailside campground in 2013.

**MAPS:** Download a trail map and other trail information at the IDNR website: [tinyurl.com/tunnelhill](http://tinyurl.com/tunnelhill). An interactive GIS map is available at [trailink.com](http://trailink.com), Rails-to-Trails Conservancy's free trail-finder website.

### FOR MORE

**INFORMATION:** The trail headquarters is located in Vienna at 302 East Vine Street, or State Route 146 East (618-658-2168, [dnr.state.il.us/Lands/landmgt/parks/R5/tunnel.htm](http://dnr.state.il.us/Lands/landmgt/parks/R5/tunnel.htm)). Information about the Cache River Wetlands Center is available at 618-657-2064, [tinyurl.com/cacheriver](http://tinyurl.com/cacheriver).

**TrailLink**  
By Rails-to-Trails Conservancy



Shagwell's, a friendly tavern where my helmet on the bar sparked conversation with a couple of townfolk.

Not wanting to miss riding any of the nearby rail-trails, next morning I completed the 15-mile roundtrip on the Harrisburg to Eldorado Bike Trail. On the way north I passed four guys on randonneuring (long-distance cycling) bikes in the middle of a 125-mile "brevet" ride. In keeping with randonneuring's retro aesthetic, most of them had old-timey facial hair. Bearded Miles Stoneman, who lives in nearby Marion, told me the best thing about the Tunnel Hill State Trail is how well maintained it is. "The fountains and the bathrooms are always clean," he said. "I'm not a big fan of big government but I've got to say this is tax money well-spent."

El Dorado is a careworn old mining town with 4,122 residents, according to the last census. Although the town's name appears to be Spanish, it actually was originally "Elder-Reado," in honor of founders Judge Samuel Elder and Joseph Read. (Fun fact: In 1963, before the Beatles became international sensations, George Harrison performed at the Eldorado VFW hall with a local rock band. He was in the area visiting his sister, who lived nearby.)

I turned around and rolled back to Harrisburg to start riding the Tunnel Hill proper.

Heading south from the trailhead at Walnut Street, for the first few miles the route is a mix of paths and sidewalks running through neighborhoods and past farm fields. There were many slope mines in Saline County near the railroad, and black patches marking the former locations of mines, loading areas and coal spills can still be seen from the trail.

Five miles in I passed Ledford, a former coal boomtown with quite a history. Charlie Birger, a Russian-Jewish immigrant who had worked as a soldier and cowboy in South Dakota, came to Saline County to mine in 1912, and then opened a saloon here. After Prohibition passed in 1920, Birger ran a bootlegging and organized crime operation out of Ledford. He became a folk hero after his gang murdered several leaders of the nativist, anti-alcohol Ku Klux Klan, greatly reducing the Klan's power in the region. In 1928 Birger was executed for ordering the killing of West City's mayor.

Three miles past Ledford I stopped in Carrier Mills, another mining and railroad town, to refuel with biscuits and gravy at the Mills Cafe. By coincidence, one of the women I met at the bar the

night before was waiting tables, and the other, an older lady named Joan, was sitting down to bacon and eggs. She invited me to join her and told me about how the tough economic times had impacted the local economy.

Not far from Carrier Mills I pedaled into the Shawnee National Forest. The surrounding terrain gets hilly here, although the trail retains a gentle uphill grade. After a scenic 6.7-mile ride through thick forest, I came to Stonefort. Settled in 1858, the small town boasts a well-restored railroad depot containing three mini-museums—the Railroad Depot Museum, the Stonefort Community Museum, and the Hardware Store Museum. The walls are covered with photos from the area's past, and one of the building's original walls is still visible, featuring names and dates carved into the wood with pocketknives by railroad workers as long ago as the 1890s.

It's another 4.4 miles to New Burnside, a former mining and orchard town of 242 people named for the general. By 1917 it was the nation's largest shipping point for early-harvested apple varieties. South of town, near the Catholic cemetery, four hound dogs approached me but seemed more curious than threatening; a minute later I saw

◀ The Cache River Wetlands Center offers an extra dimension to a visit to the Tunnel Hill State Trail.

The wetlands center has become a popular attraction for locals and visitors alike, including Ryan O'Neal and his son Matthew. This raccoon skull is part of the many displays interpreting the unique natural and cultural history of the area. ▶

three whitetails bounding through the woods.

At points farther on, the rail embankment rose 25 feet above the forest floor. In other places, the path cuts right through small hills, revealing striated sandstone on either side. Rust-colored rocks along the way contrasted nicely with the cobalt sky.

I came to the trail's namesake tunnel 6.2 miles past New Burnside. To maintain a railroad-friendly grade here, the planners burrowed through a massive hill instead of building over it. Originally 800 feet long, the passage was shortened by more than 250 feet when part of it collapsed in 1929. Although pedaling through the dark tunnel was a little eerie, with my headlight on I enjoyed the long, solitary passage.

A mile past the tunnel is Sanburn Junction, a greenhouse/nursery with a trailside snack shop. Since the owners are usually out tending their plants, the store operates on the honor system: Help yourself to chips, sandwiches and ice cream, check the price list and leave cash in the money can. "If somebody steals something I figure they need it more than me," explained owner Brian Aldrich.

I'd crossed several other railroad bridges along the way, but by far the most memorable was the Breeden Trestle, just south of Sandburn. Raised 90 feet above the forest floor on X-shaped girders, it's an impressive bit of engineering. Riding over it provides breathtaking views of the valley below. The setting sun cast a golden glow on the diagonal wooden bridge planks as I crossed and, even though I'm normally not afraid of heights, riding across the bridge was a little unsettling, in a fun way.

I passed through the most surreal scenery of the trip as I pedaled into the forest beyond the bridge. Mighty oaks towered above me. A tiny stream gurgled to my left; moss-covered bluffs rose to my right. A big, freestanding boulder beckoned, and I almost parked my bike to go rock climbing. A crescent moon hung in the sky.



### Local Color

About 9.3 miles south of the tunnel I reached Vienna, where I'd spend the night. Incorporated in 1834, this town of 1,234 is the seat of Johnson County. I grabbed dinner at the Jumbo Restaurant, a truck stop near Interstate 24 that features a hearty Southern-style buffet, with fried chicken, catfish, and corn bread.

In the morning I checked out the trail's headquarters at the intersection with State Route 146 East. Rail fan Phillip Morris donated much of the railroad memorabilia on display here, including lanterns, keys, locks, documents, photos, rail spikes and signaling equipment. The building is located across from a pleasant park that would make a good picnic stop, especially for families with kids. A totem pole stands in the park as a memorial to the hundreds of Native Americans who died on the Trail of Tears, the forced march of the Cherokee people in the winter of 1838–39 from their homeland in the Smokey Mountains to Oklahoma.

A few miles south of Vienna is Forman, once home to a large lumber company and now a ghost town. After the surrounding timber supply became depleted in the early 1900s, the population dwindled, and in 1957 a tornado drove out the remaining residents.

From there I rode 2.8 miles to Karnak, population 619. Like Cairo and Thebes, Ill. (as well as Memphis, Tenn.), it's named for an ancient Egyptian city. The Main Brothers Box & Lumber Company moved here in 1905 and for decades made cypress lumber, egg crates and other containers that were sent to businesses around the country by railroad.

Outside Karnak I took the 2.5-mile spur of the Tunnel Hill State Trail northwest to visit the Cache River Wetlands Center, the endpoint of the trail. The center features dioramas and aquariums depicting the



surrounding wetlands environment, as well as taxidermied specimens of local birds and animals, such as the wild geese suspended from the ceiling. Bright green algae forms a layer on the river beneath a short railroad trestle. Elsewhere ancient cypress and tupelo trees grow out of the water, forming an atmospheric scene reminiscent of a Louisiana bayou.

At the center I chatted with Mollie Oliver, site superintendent for the trail from 1994 to 2005 and now an IDNR natural resource coordinator. "I really enjoyed getting out and maintaining the Tunnel Hill Trail," she said, "learning the history of the communities and the legends of the railroad." Enjoying the natural beauty of the area was another benefit of working on the trail. "This time of year," she said, "with most of the foliage gone, you can really see the river valleys and the bluffs. You can see the forest floor and realize how high up you are." But after my spectacular journey, I'm convinced any season is a great time to visit the Tunnel Hill State Trail.

**John Greenfield** edits the transportation news website *Streetsblog Chicago* and writes a weekly column about walking, biking and transit issues in *Chicago's Newcity* magazine. He has pedaled the entire perimeter of the state of Illinois.