

## ***French Creek Tunnel*** ***Site 5ST1150***

The French Creek Tunnel was a failed attempt to undercut the Sallie Barber Mine and adjoining properties at great depth. The tunnel was a substantial endeavor and is now represented by archaeological features. As a site, the tunnel retains poor archaeological integrity due to natural decay, tunnel drainage, and revegetation. The site lies on French Gulch's south side at approximately 10,200 feet elevation in the McKay Mining District. The steep wall of French Gulch surrounds the site and is vegetated with a thick and young fir and spruce forest. The tunnel drains a considerable volume of water, which has saturated the waste rock dump and promotes thick moss.

### French Creek Tunnel History

The French Creek Tunnel was the brainchild of Mark G. Evans, celebrated Breckenridge mining engineer. Evans was born in 1868, came to Colorado in 1895, and established an engineering practice in Denver in 1900. During the late 1890s, he became involved in Breckenridge's placer mining industry and joined an investment syndicate led by William Lenox and T.W. Giddings, both of Colorado Springs. Evans gained notoriety as engineer for the Gold Pan Mining Company, which employed advanced technology to excavate a massive pit in the Blue River's gravel near Breckenridge. Begun in 1899, the operation was an engineering marvel but an economical failure because the amount of placer gold was insufficient to offset the high costs.

After the Gold Pan failure, Evans turned his attention to the Breckenridge area's hardrock resources. He, Lennox, and Giddings organized the Lincoln Gold Mining Company in 1904 with the intent of acquiring large assemblages of claims and working them at great depths. One group of claims purchased by the company lay on Bald Mountain near the Sallie Barber Mine, on French Gulch's south rim. In 1905, Evans proposed driving the French Creek Tunnel as a deep haulageway to develop several known veins under the group.<sup>1</sup>

Evans realized that the project would be costly but convinced Lennox and Giddings that it would be successful. As an engineer, Evans also saw the tunnel as an opportunity to employ advanced technology. Specifically, he planned on using only electrical machinery, including several rock drills to drive the tunnel. During the early 1900s, electric drills were a new and important development in the mining industry and had seen few applications because of their unconventionality. In contrast, nearly all the drills used at that time were powered by compressed air.<sup>2</sup>

At the beginning of 1905, Evans signed a contract with E.T. Brooks to bore the tunnel. With the electric drills, Brooks was able to push the tunnel to a length of 1,320 feet by July, which was an impressive rate. In January of 1906, Brooks' miners blundered into a zinc vein, which provided the operation with some income. This, unfortunately, was to be the only ore body of significance encountered in the tunnel. Between 2,000 and 3,000 feet, the tunnel reached the target destination and, much to Evans' disappointment, the anticipated ore veins offered little material of worth. In 1908, Evans abandoned the project as a costly failure.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> "Mining News" *MSP* 4/30/04 p304.

<sup>2</sup> "Mining News" *EMJ* 1/19/05, p164; "Mining News" *MSP* 7/29/05 p82.

<sup>3</sup> "Mining News" *EMJ* 1/20/06, p158; "Mining News" *MSP* 4/22/05 p259; "Mining News" *MSP* 7/29/05 p82; "Mining News" *MSP* 5/25/07 p646; Ransome, 1911:104.

### French Creek Tunnel Site Description

The French Creek Tunnel currently manifests as a soggy, saturated, and moss-clad assemblage of archaeological features. The tunnel portal (F1) collapsed and is now a linear area of subsidence that drains water. When miners drove the tunnel, they dumped waste rock in the form of a bench (F2) around 72 by 195 feet in area and used the top-surface for various activities. As the miners continued work underground, they extended the dump northward in a fan-like cluster of lobes 90 feet long and 105 feet wide. Overall, the dump attained the size of 162 by 195 feet in area and 15 feet thick.

In keeping with Evans' penchant for formal engineering, the surface plant was well-appointed and featured a number of structures, all of which collapsed. A log shop building stood on a cut-and-fill platform (F3) graded along the tunnel's east flank. The platform indicates that the building was around 25 by 50 feet in area, and artifacts indicate that the tunnel house enclosed a transformer station, blacksmith shop, and carpentry shop. In decades past, recreationists used the building as a residence then burned it down. The platform is currently blanketed with structural debris, charcoal, and duff, all of which conceals artifacts and shallow buried deposits.

A tram shed extended outward from the tunnel portal for a length of 45 feet and covered the mine's rail line. The structure (F5) consisted of 2x6 posts and plank siding, and it has completely collapsed and is becoming vegetated with moss due to flooding.

Workers graded a cut-and-fill platform along the tunnel's west flank for a frame boardinghouse, now collapsed. The platform (F6) is 33 by 54 feet in area, although the building was 32 by 50 feet in area. The building's south wall currently leans against the platform's cut-bank, the other walls are gone, and heavy duff coverage conceals artifacts.

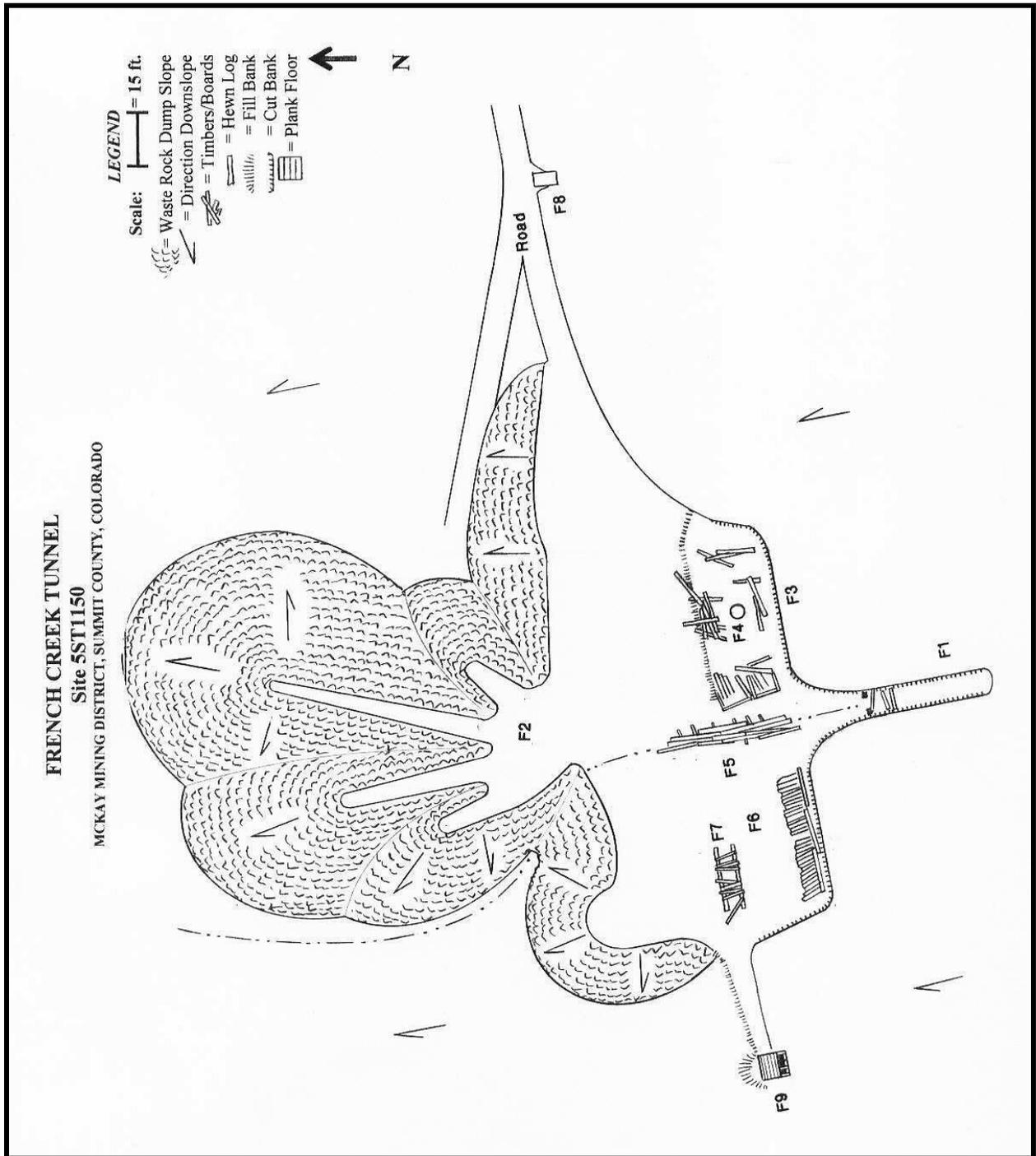


Figure 2.21: Plan view of French Creek Tunnel site.

The surface plant included an explosives magazine away to the east for safety. The magazine (F8) is a front-gabled building 52 by 64 inches in area, 53 inches high at the roof eaves, and 68 inches high at the gable peak. The walls consist merely of several layers of planks, the roof of boards and battens, and the foundation of 3x6 timbers. Workers probably assembled the building in the open and moved it into a recess shoveled out of the mountainside.

Like most substantial mines, the French Creek operation provided the crew with a privy for their personal use. A foundation (F9) currently remains and manifests as a plank deck 8 by 8 feet in area over a pit. A privy building 5 by 8 feet in size stood on the deck, and the building is now gone. The underlying pit is 3 by 8 feet in area, 4 feet deep, and is retained by log cribbing. No artifacts are evident, and meaningful buried deposits are likely.

The site possesses a limited artifact assemblage because most items lie underneath thick duff and moss coverage. The artifacts reflect a few aspects regarding the operation. First, dateable items fall within the timeframe documented by archival sources. Specifically, a combination of wire nails, aqua and amethyst glass, and hole-in-cap and sanitary food cans date to the mid-1900s. Second, a high proportion of electrical artifacts reflects the operation's reliance on electricity. Third, a heavy timber foundation remains from a ventilation blower, and it indicates that the machine had a high capacity. This was necessary to force fresh air into the lengthy tunnel.

### French Creek Tunnel Site Interpretation

Well in advance of the confirmation of ore, Evans planned a surface plant capable of supporting heavy production. The shop was relatively large and equipped with a factory-made forge, and it probably had power appliances. The surface plant included a boardinghouse for a large workforce, which Evans never hired because there was little ore to mine. Instead, Brooks' small crew had the entire building to themselves, which the small volume of domestic refuse reflects. During times of substantial production, miners usually consumed high volumes of explosives. Assuming that this would be the case, Evans provided the surface plant with a magazine capable of storing numerous boxes of dynamite. It seems likely that the space was never filled. In general, it appears that Evans wasted capital on facilities that went unused because the tunnel did not encounter ore in the anticipated volumes. Like the Gold Pan pit and his other ventures, Evans' French Creek Tunnel was an engineering success but an economic failure.

### French Creek Tunnel Site Significance and Management Recommendations

The French Creek Tunnel site is recommended ineligible and no longer a significant resource for several reasons. First, the site retains poor integrity due to natural decay, revegetation, and marshy conditions created by tunnel drainage. While the existing features lend themselves to some interpretation, they are poorly preserved. Further, the site possesses an incomplete artifact assemblage because the conditions destroyed perishable items. Second, the operation was unimportant to the Breckenridge area because it was short-lived and failed to produce ore. Third, due to thick vegetation, the site is difficult to see and does not contribute to French Gulch's historic landscape. Last, the site probably possesses buried archaeological deposits that could yield data. Given that time and funding is limited, however, testing and/or excavation of deposits at other sites in the area should be prioritized over those at the French Creek Tunnel.

Because the site is recommended ineligible and no longer significant, management recommendations suggest no further work.