

Fountain Tunnel
Site 5ST1163

The Victoria Mining Company drove the Fountain Tunnel during the late 1880s or early 1890s as an exploratory operation. The company hoped that the tunnel would encounter deep extensions of Farncomb Hill's rich gold veins, but the effort was largely a failure. Around 10,640 feet in elevation, the site lies on the north side of Dry Gulch, southwest of both the Victoria Mill (5ST1169) and the Wapiti Mining Company Office (5ST372). The gulch floor descends steeply northeast, its walls are abrupt, and the area is forested with second-growth lodgepole pines. The site consists of the tunnel, its waste rock dump, and a platform for a tunnel house. In general, the site possesses a high degree of archaeological integrity.

Fountain Tunnel Site Description

Miners drove the tunnel northwest from the floor of Dry Gulch, and the portal (F1) collapsed, leaving a linear area of subsidence. When miners drove the tunnel, they used ore cars to eject waste rock onto the gulch floor, forming a pad (F2) approximately 100 by 135 feet in area and 8 feet thick. The miners graded most of the top-surface flat and leveled some of the material on the flank for a road. A frame tunnel house, now collapsed, stood at the tunnel portal. Workers erected the structure on a cut-and-fill platform (F3) to enclose the tunnel and a simple blacksmith shop. The structure currently manifests as a scatter of debris and a few other artifacts.

The site possesses an intact artifact assemblage that is typical of small, short-lived exploratory tunnels. Most of the items are associated with the tunnel house platform, and a few artifacts lie scattered across the waste rock dump, including cans that rolled down from a cabin far upslope. A combination of cut nails and hole-in-cap cans assembled with lapped side seams indicate that miners drove the tunnel during the 1880s, and wire nails and hole-in-cap cans assembled with inner-rolled and soldered side seams reflect activity during the 1890s.

Fountain Tunnel Site Interpretation

It appears that the Victoria Mining Company drove the tunnel as a cross-cut to examine at depth the lower reaches of Farncomb Hill's system of gold veins. In general, cross-cuts were horizontal passages oriented 90 degrees to the strike of local geology, and mining interests used them to penetrate a maximum sampling of geological features such as veins, faults, and rock formations. On the east side of Farncomb Hill, the system of gold veins was oriented northeast. To undercut the system and sample as many of the northeast-trending veins as possible, the Victoria company drove the Fountain Tunnel northwest.

According to the site's material remains, the Victoria company kept the exploratory operation simple. The surface plant consisted of little more than a frame tunnel house that enclosed a basic blacksmith shop, which reflects a minimal capital investment. Given the uncertainty of the project results, such a strategy was financially wise. The waste rock dump contains a substantial amount of material, indicating that the tunnel was lengthy, and the lack of an ore storage facility suggests that the tunnel failed to yield ore in meaningful volumes.

Fountain Tunnel Site Significance

The site consists of the collapsed Fountain Tunnel, its associated waste rock dump, and the ruins of a tunnel house. The Victoria Mining Company drove the tunnel during the late 1880s or early 1890s in an attempt to find gold veins known to traverse the area. The tunnel extended northwest while the veins trended northeast, which defines the tunnel as an exploratory cross-cut. The site currently retains a high degree of archaeological integrity and ambiance relative to mining during the above timeframes. The site also lies in an undisturbed setting.

The site is recommended eligible for the NRHP and SRHP under Criterion C for two reasons. First, the site is a sound archaeological representation of an exploratory cross-cut tunnel. During the 1880s, miners who leased claims from the Victoria company proved that the area northwest of the site featured numerous, small gold veins that trended northeast-southwest. By the late 1880s, one of the Victoria company's engineers suspected that the veins probably continued downward at depth. The company then commissioned the Fountain Tunnel as a formally engineered prospect to penetrate the area underneath the veins. To maximize the number of veins encountered, the company oriented the tunnel 90 degrees to the local geology. Unfortunately for the company, the veins did not offer gold ore at depth, rendering the tunnel a failure. The tunnel was, however, the result of planning, engineering, and knowledge of local geology.

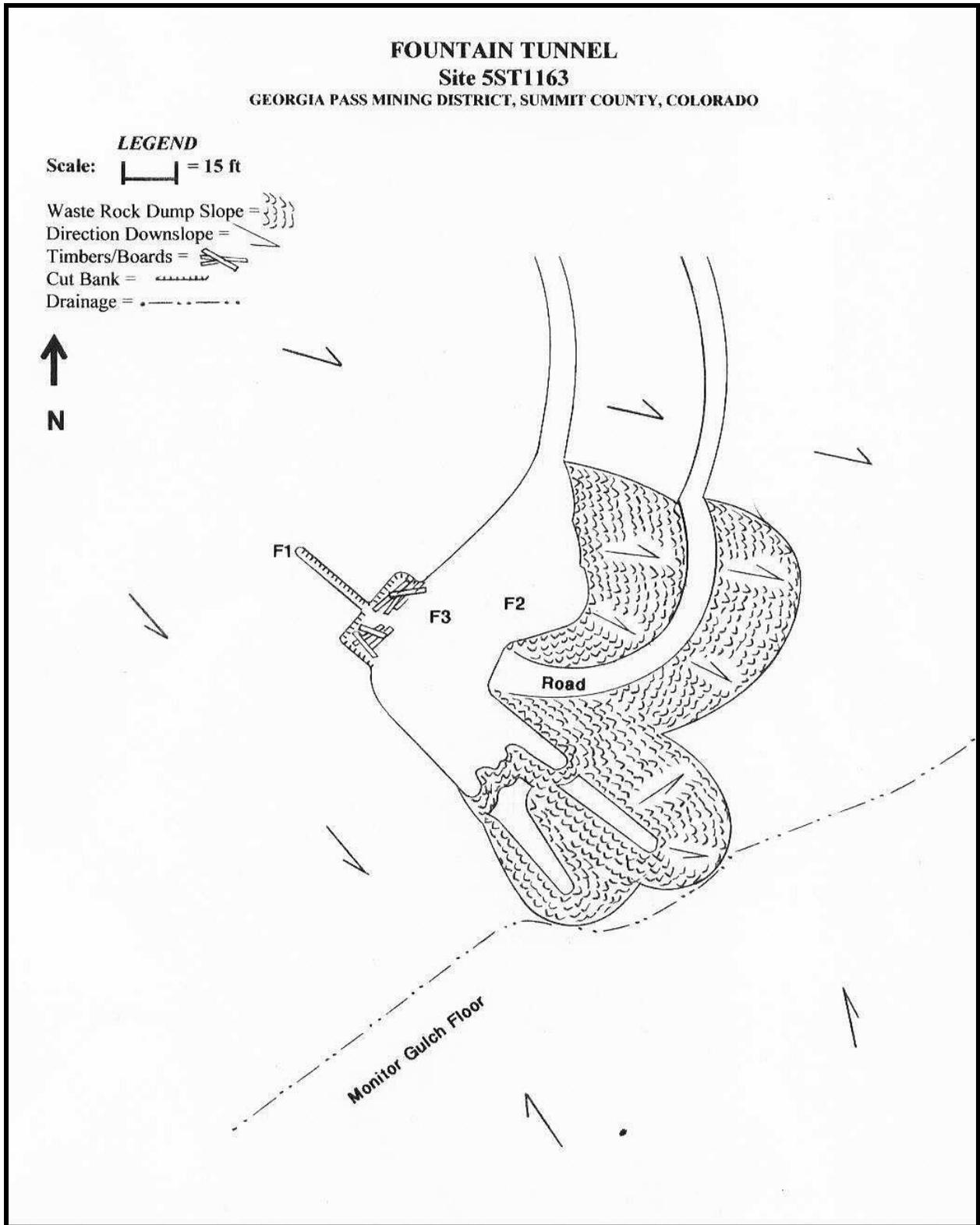


Figure 2.65: Plan view of the Fountain Tunnel site.

The second reason for eligibility is that the tunnel is a component of an important, greater whole. Specifically, the tunnel was part of the Victoria Mining Company's placer and hardrock mining empire. The operation, one of the largest in the western states, produced gold from placer workings and hardrock claims in Dry, American, and Georgia gulches, as well as from elsewhere in the Breckenridge area. The company developed a massive infrastructure, was a major employer, and contributed heavily to the area's economy for years.

Fountain Tunnel Site Management Recommendations

Management recommendations suggest several actions. First, the site and the surrounding setting should be preserved. Because motorized use is known to accelerate the decline of the area's historic resources, the site and environs should be closed to motorized vehicles. Second, the site should be developed as a heritage resource. A self-guided interpretive trail can be routed through the site along the existing historic road, and neighboring resources can be included in an area-wide program.