

THE WASHBURN TUNNEL

Prior to there being tunnels, or for that matter ferries, across the Houston Ship Channel, travelers would float the waters in skiffs, canoes, rafts, or whatever means they had. The practice continued even after there was regular ferry service offered by the Pasadena Ferry which started operations on December 20, 1921. For one thing it was less expensive to row yourself, than to pay the ferry toll, because money was scarce. The Pasadena Ferry was set apart from earlier ones since it was motorized and could carry automobiles. In 1918 there were ferries at Lynchburg, Penn City, Cedar Bayou, Greens Bayou, Zavala, Market Street, and Goose Creek. The Pasadena Ferry plowed the waters of the ship channel carrying passengers and autos until it was replaced by the Washburn Tunnel in 1950. The last pilot for the Pasadena Ferry, which carried only pedestrians, was Elmer Clayton. The Pasadena Ferry, which could carry 36 automobiles, had been retired two years earlier.

The Washburn tunnel, located beneath the Houston Ship Channel, was the first dry land vehicular link across the ship channel between the 69th Street Bridge and the Gulf of Mexico. The Washburn Tunnel is located between the cities of Pasadena on the south with Galena Park on the north. As Shaver Street exits Pasadena, there is a traffic circle where it is joined by Red Bluff Road on the east and West Richey Street entering from the southwest. Just after the circle, lies the south entrance to the tunnel. Upon leaving the tunnel at the north side of the ship channel, there is a Roundabout, with Clinton Drive joining from the west. Past the Roundabout the street is named Federal Road. The Washburn Tunnel headquarters and maintenance slips are located just south of the traffic Roundabout on the north side of the Houston Ship Channel on Federal Road.

Prior to the completion of the tunnel in 1950, the only passage across this sixty mile stretch of the ship channel was by ferry, and the ferries seemed to be far and few between, if not somewhat unreliable. Trench type tunnels began to develop about 1840 and continued to grow in popularity until the 1980's. Talk of placing a tunnel under the Houston Ship Channel began as early as 1940, but by 1945 there were nine sites being discussed for two tunnels. It appears that the locations favored by the population and the politicians were the Spellman's Island site, near Morgan's Point, and the Pasadena-Galena Park site. Both won out in the long run. The Pasadena-Galena Park site would eventually become the Washburn Tunnel and be the first built under the Houston Ship Channel. Built about the same time, the Baytown Tunnel carried auto passengers from north of Morgan's Point to Baytown until the Hartman Bridge replaced the need for a tunnel in that area. The Baytown Tunnel was removed and sunk in the Gulf of Mexico for a fish reef.

The Washburn Tunnel followed approximately the same route set forth by the Pasadena Ferry. Harry L. Washburn had served as County Auditor for forty-one years, was honored in the Tunnel naming by the Harris County Commissioners Court to the chagrin of many Pasadena and Galena Park residents, who wanted the tunnel named for their respective cities.

The years between 1945 and 1948, when the tunnel studies and construction commenced, saw bond elections, speeches, name suggestions, name calling, protests and various political

maneuvers during the process. The Washburn Tunnel was touted as being the first tunnel to have automatic ventilation control and a brilliantly illuminated interior. Additionally, the 3009 foot interior would be lined with glazed tile while the roadway would be paved with paving bricks. Bricks were chosen over paving for the ease of repair. Control stations, were to be located at various intervals, and were to house policemen, for the full control of any situation that may arise. Although, the police manned control stations have yet to be documented, it was reported that three patrolmen would be on duty, at all times in the tunnel in addition to a wrecker, which would be used to remove disabled vehicles.

Upon its completion during May 1950, the Washburn tunnel became the nation's only toll free tunnel, and utilized the highest technology in tunnel engineering, ventilating, and lighting available at the time. It was estimated that 10,000 automobiles would use the tunnel daily to transport workers, delivery drivers, salesmen, visitors, and sightseers from one side of the channel to the other. This number was expected to increase during the week-ends. Although the Lynchburg Ferry survived the opening and later use of the tunnel, other ferries along the ship channel, such as the Pasadena-Galena Park and the Morgan's Point ferries were made extinct. The tunnel opened the window of opportunity for the 100 plus industries along the channel in 1950, by offering access to a multitude of potential employees and resources on both sides of the channel. The Houston Ship Channel has grown since 1950 to be lined with enormous oil refineries, chemical plants, factories, storage facilities, shipping terminals, manufacturing locations, importers, exporters, and related businesses by the end of the twentieth century.

Renovations to the entrance, interior and roadway over the past twenty years have not significantly altered the design or aesthetics of the original tunnel. Interior tiles were cleaned, re-grouted and polished; a new concrete roadbed was laid to replace the crumbling bricks. New and more modern electronics, mechanical systems, and surveillance cameras were installed in addition to the ventilating system being renovated as well. During 1987 the tunnel was closed to traffic for four and one-half months for major repairs, the longest closure in its fifty-seven year history. The County also offered two gallons of gas for stranded motorists in the tunnel until 2006, when the offer dropped to one gallon of gas.

Today, the Washburn Tunnel is open for business 24/7 except from Midnight to 4:00 p.m. on Thursdays. This time is reserved for routine inspection, cleaning, and maintenance. Otherwise the tunnel handles approximately 30,000 motor vehicles per day and has outlived it's sister tunnel connecting to Baytown near Morgan's Point, which was opened in 1953 and removed in 1995 to facilitate the deepening of the Houston Ship Channel. The Washburn Tunnel was nominated to the National Register of Historic Places in 2007.