

Deciphering the legend of William & Mary's underground tunnel system

By **Benjamin West** - February 19, 2019



The James Monroe statue on William & Mary's campus. (WYDaily file photo)

In 1965, the summer Bob Dylan “went electric” and the Beatles were gearing up for their second U.S. tour, 14-year-old Jay Nedry found himself descending a staircase to the basement of Monroe Hall on the William and Mary campus, following close behind an older kid.

They were looking for an entrance to a set of tunnels rumored to run under the Old Campus, connecting most buildings.

Their plan was simple: get to the girls' dorm.

“Not that we had any clue what we were going to do if we were able to get into the girls' dorm,” Nedry said.

Monroe Hall, built in the 1920s, had a basement door leading to the tunnels, supposedly locked at all times, Nedry said. But on that day, it wasn't. And the tunnels were real.

"About 150 yards in from Monroe hall, we find a guy with a cot and a lantern and a little bookcase," Nedry said.

The man was a student, taking summer classes but unable to afford room and board.

"He would come up at different times and shower and use the bathroom and go to classes and spent the summer down there," Nedry said.

A few years later in 1969, Nedry began a 2-year ROTC program at William & Mary. But he said he broke his back multiple times between 1970 and 1972 and couldn't finish his first year of course work.

Nedry attended James Madison University for two years but dropped out to tour with his band, the Roadducks. After 40 years, thousands of miles and thousands of shows, Nedry decided attend William & Mary once again.

He graduated in 2018.

Information about the tunnels can be difficult to track down. WYDaily reached out to numerous historical societies in the Williamsburg area. They responded cordially, but most stated that they had no information to provide. WYDaily also reached out multiple times by email to Susan Kern of the William & Mary Spotswood Society, but received no response.

Most information about the tunnels is designated to unreliable blog posts scattered about the internet, and quick references [in William & Mary's digital archive](#).

"The tunnels are steam tunnels — brick walls and cement floors with steam pipes and electrical conduits," a paragraph in the Mailbox section of the [fall 2006 William & Mary alumni magazine](#) states, "I would not advise anyone with any sense at all (not me, apparently) to venture into them without permission."

Portions of the tunnels are thought to date back hundreds of years, possibly to the construction of the Wren Building, which started construction in 1695.

Modern tunnel references date back to an [Oct. 3, 1924 issue of The Flat Hat](#), the school's student paper, when the tunnels were discovered entirely by accident.

“While excavating a sewer pipe to be laid to Monroe Hall during the past summer, workmen uncovered an old subterranean passage leading from the Main Building to a point near Lake Matoaka,” the article states.

A [May 6, 1958 Flat Hat issue](#) tried to uncover the purpose of the underground passageways leading to some incredible possibilities.

“One source said that it was used as a means of escape from the Indians and another stated that several Confederate soldiers escaped through it during the Civil War. Still others believe that escaped slaves were smuggled through it in the pre-Civil War period,” the article states.

Both articles ultimately report the tunnels were most likely used for drainage.

Listed in the [2018-2019 William & Mary Student Handbook](#) among locations “closed to all but authorized employees,” the tunnels are officially off-limits for students or members of the public. But this hasn’t stopped some people.

A letter to the editor from from a [March 30, 1990 Flat Hat issue](#), penned by a long-graduated student, tells about one such series of expeditions.

“Tunneling was indeed dead for many years,” the letter states, “but this noble pursuit was briefly resurrected from 1977- 1980 by myself and several cohorts.”

The letter goes on to state that the tunnels “lead to several dorms and administrative buildings as well as the Wren building.”

It goes on to describe a gated entrance to a crypt under the Wren building, usually locked up tight.

“If you look around you may also notice a circuit breaker for the president’s house. I have ‘dim’ recollection that we played a quick prank.”

The letter wraps up with some humorous tips for “those of you considering this pursuit,” the first of which reads:

“Don’t go to a sorority party after exiting the tunnels all sweaty and dirty. For some reason we felt a bit out of place, and they didn’t appreciate us doing this.”

One of the more outlandish claims about the steam tunnels was something from the 1970s.

“The (Wren) crypt features several tombs, one of which had been broken into long before I visited it. The predominant rumor regarding that particular tomb in the 1970s was that it was the resting place of James Blair and that his bones had been stolen by a fraternity,” the 2006 alumni magazine states.

A [2010 blog post on William & Mary's official website](#) makes reference to another, unidentified blog post where the author walks into a student's room and “found a genuine human skeleton.”

Though by far the most interesting fact about this rumor is that it's actually true, well, partially true, Nedry said.

“This happened when I was a sophomore, I know the guys who did it,” Nedry said. “They got Lord Botetourt's thigh bone from the crypt underneath the Wren Building.”

Nedry was referencing Norborne Berkeley, 4th Baron Botetourt, whose statue is housed in the Swem library. A reproduction of the statue stands in front of the Wren Building.

“They had the bone in Old Dominion Hall,” Nedry said. “Guys could come in and actually look at it, and kind of like, semi-venerate it like you're going to a cathedral or something.”

Nedry declined to identify the culprits. He said it was a serious matter, and that William & Mary was extremely upset when they found out.

“The bone was taken and thrown into Crim Dell (pond), never to be spoken of again,” he said.

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