

Historic Discovery: Couple Finds Long Tunnel Under Alton Home, Experts Interpret Discovery

by Dan Brannan, Content Director
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ALTON - A pair of area residents - Gary and Beth Machens - purchased the Alton home at 322 Langdon Street in December 2020. Little did they know something unexpected would come with this real estate purchase. After noticing the sidewalk near the house starting to slope, Gary Machens made a big discovery - a long underground tunnel.

The tunnel presently has just a slight opening. The Langdon Street home was formerly owned by Henry Brueggeman, a four-time mayor and postmaster of Alton. He died on January 2, 1917. The land was purchased by Brueggemann from August Neermann, then Brueggemann had the home built.

The home was purchased by Brueggeman from August Neermann on April 17, 1890.

Beth Machens said at this point she and her husband plan to secure the area for protection. The couple moved from West Alton to Alton.

Beth Machens estimates the visible area of the tunnel to be 9½ ft. tall by 9½ ft. wide. She said it seems to be about 60 ft. long and she speculates there could be at least another 40 ft. of the tunnel that has not been uncovered. She was uncertain if the tunnel continued under the home's basement or beside it.

“We had noticed before we purchased this home that some soil near the sidewalk was eroding, but we didn’t know the extent of it. Gary decided to excavate the area and when he removed a couple of stones and peered in, he saw the tunnel. He called me at work and said 'you better come home now, you are not going to believe this.'”

Dr. John Lindsay, an area historian, said there were no notations to Brueggeman in the Pfeifferberger papers at the Missouri Historical Archives in St. Louis or any reference in the Alton papers about the architect of the home. In April 1890, a retaining wall was built around the property by James Brannon.

From the 1895 photo of the home, Dr. Lindsay said: “We know the tunnel was already covered up. The tunnel had to precede the home as it was constructed from outside-in. From a Ruger-Birdseye map and drawing from the 1860s, we can see a structure at the site above the tunnel (we are not certain what it is). No other early maps prior to 1890 show anything at the site.”

Dr. Lindsay, and another well-known Alton historian Don Huber, concur that the tunnel was likely for “ice storage, a root cellar (for storage of vegetables, fruits, nuts, or other foods), or powder magazine storage.” Both depute the suggestion that it was a part of the Underground Railroad. Huber said Charlotte Johnson, another well-known historian, concurred the tunnel most likely was not associated with the Underground Railroad.

“Obviously, the tunnel was built before the sidewalk and probably had low steps going down to it,” Dr. Lindsay said. “The home was owned by two Alton mayors - Brueggemann and Lenz.”

“It wasn’t big enough for a horse or carriage house,” Huber said. “It appears it was to store ice or possibly a coal chute. It was a period of time in a lot of places it was illegal to dump coal on sidewalks and you had to get it in a chute in your basement. Charlotte Johnson pointed out to me this morning that in Hunterstown in Alton, a lot of coal was delivered through a manhole in the sidewalk into a coal chute in the basement. I don’t think this tunnel project was ever completed.”

A coal chute is a channel or passage through which coal could be dropped. In older homes, coal chutes are often found.

Dr. Lindsay said research has not ended on the home's tunnel discovery.

“The next step is to go to the Madison County Recorder’s Office,” he said.

Dr. Lindsay thanked the Machens family for their discovery, help, and cooperation, and Lacy McDonald and Pam Bierman at Hayner Genealogy and Local History Library for their help and research to date.

Beth Machens commended Dr. Lindsay and Huber for their historical work. She also added she and her husband love the home.

“We love the view and love Alton,” she said. “We always spent a lot of time in this area and we are looking forward to our future in the house and retirement someday.”

[Chris Rhodes also contributed to this story.](#)