

This drawing, from the MPS archives, shows a cross section of the entrance to the tunnel, which does not survive.

URBAN SPELUNKING

Urban Spelunking: The old Keefe Avenue School tunnel

OK, humor me while I look into another public school tunnel. This time, it's the one at Keefe Avenue School.



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My recent [walk through the pedestrian tunnel at Vieau School](#) on 4th and National in Walker's Point has sparked discussion of other such "subways" around Milwaukee, including one at 13th and Wisconsin, which had a lovely Art Deco railing.

Another one mentioned by a few folks especially sparked my interest. It is one that ran under Finn Place, between 16th and 17th Streets, connecting the north end of the Keefe Avenue School playground with Lindbergh Park across the street.

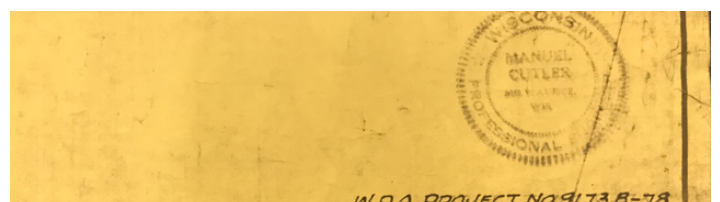
The tunnel at 13th and Wisconsin. (PHOTO: Courtesy of Milwaukee Public Library)

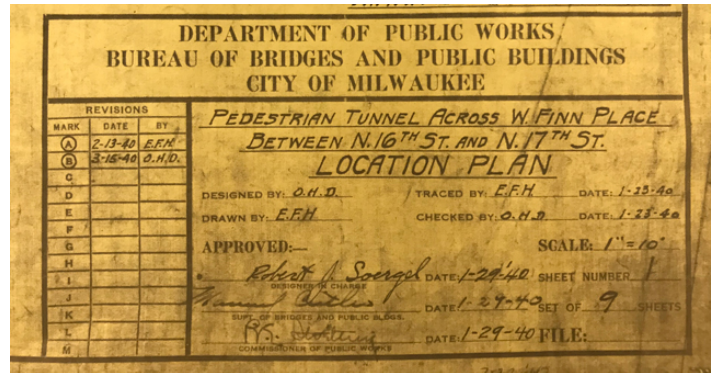
Keefe Avenue School was built as Davis Street School in 1917, to plans drawn by architects Van Ryn & DeGelleke, who did many buildings for MPS. An addition in 1930 enlarged the school by basically filling in the gap created by the wings of the original U-shaped building and then growing northward. The result is a building that looks like it's made of two Tetris pieces.

Interestingly, the school's boiler room was constructed a distance from the building – connected by a long tunnel, suggesting that the initial school plan allowed room for expansion. Indeed, the addition brought the back of the building closer to the boiler room and a 1961 addition closed the gap entirely, connecting the boiler room to the north end of the building.

Finding the beginning of the tunnel on a timeline is quite easy.

In the MPS Facilities and Maintenance archive, there is a blueprint of the tunnel, dated January 1940. The plans note that it was a Works Progress Administration (WPA) project, bearing the number 9173B-78.





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Designed by the City's Department of Public Works, which drew plans for the city's playgrounds (rather than by MPS' architectural department), as well as for the bridges and public buildings, under Commissioner R. E. Stoelting. The designer in charge was Robert J. Soergel, though the actual designer of the project is credited only by the initials "O.H.D." This was common on DPW drawings of the day.

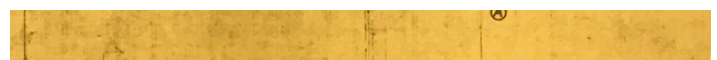
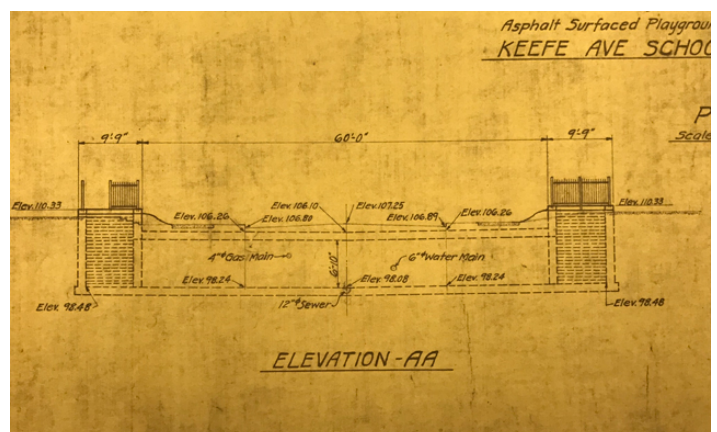
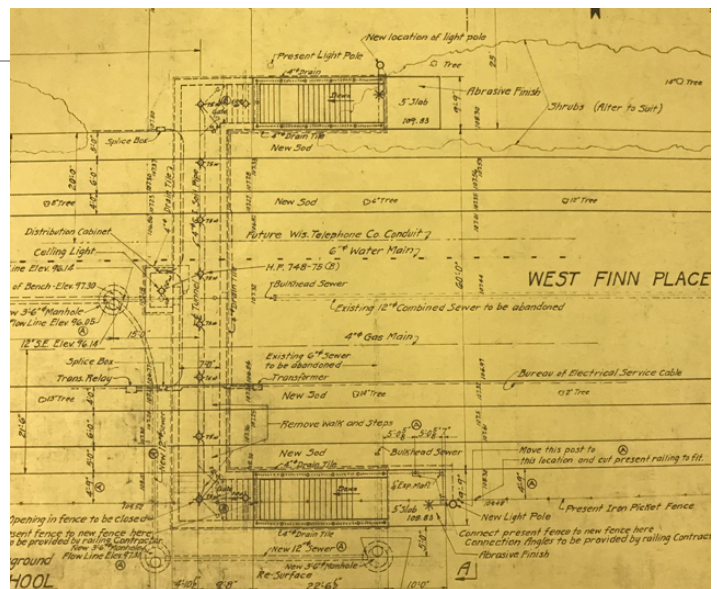
The view from above (above) and a cross-section (below).

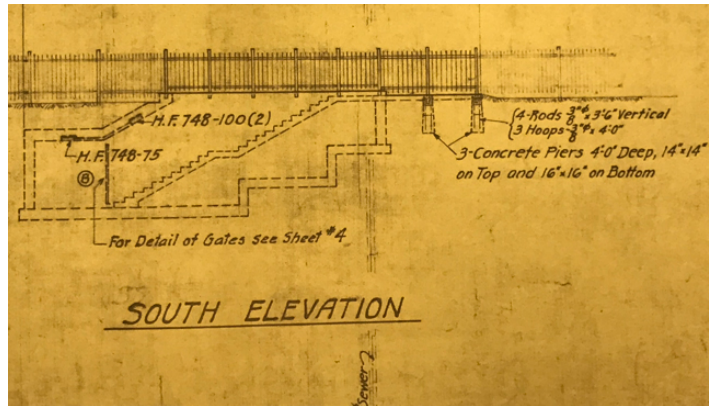
The tunnel plan was shaped like a blocky letter C, with the long side being the subterranean tunnel and the two shorter sides being the staircases, which at street level were fenced with a rail on three sides. Gates at the bottom of each set of steps could close off the tunnel.

This basic design mimicked the tunnel on Wisconsin Avenue pictured above more so than the Vieau School tunnel, which instead of open staircases as entrances/exits, had buildings with doors that could be locked.

In 1949, the afternoon newspaper wrote, "Lindbergh Park at W. Finn Pl. and N. 16th St. has a pedestrian tunnel leading under W. Finn Pl. to the playground of the Keefe Avenue School to the south. The park is used by the school children almost as much as the playground. The built the tunnel so the children would not have to cross the street. The park was dedicated to Charles A. Lindbergh a few months after he flew the Atlantic in 1927."

What's harder to ascertain is exactly when the tunnel was closed.





When Parkman Junior High (now Douglas) was built on 18th Street between Finn and Nash in the early 1950s, Finn Place was vacated between 17th and 18th Streets, but the tunnel was still in use, based on comments on Facebook from former students who remember the underground passage.

And site plans in the MPS archives (above) still show the tunnel in late 1968 and early 1969. While on a 1968 aerial shot of the playground (below) one can spy the south entrance to the tunnel, it appears to be covered up. One Facebook commenter who attended the school in the early '60s remembers the tunnel but says he doesn't remember seeing open at that time.

By the time another aerial photograph was taken in 1976, Finn Place has been vacated between 16th and 17th Street, too, erasing the need for the tunnel, which, indeed, appears to have vanished completely from the landscape.

Considering that the former street path was completely redone (as you can see in the image), it seems likely that the tunnel was filled in at this point, an opinion supported by staff members in MPS' construction department.

If you have close-up photos of the tunnel or its entrances, please email me. I'd love to see, and share them.

