

History of the Steam Trenches on State House Grounds

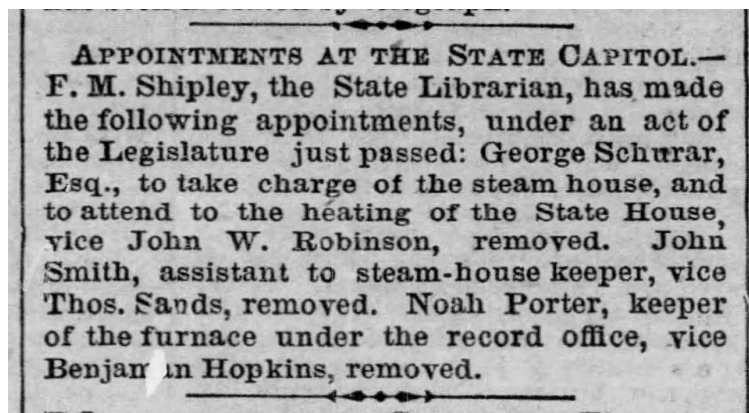
Maryland Commission on Artistic Property

Maryland State Archives

September 19, 2025

The curatorial office of the Maryland Commission on Artistic Property of the Maryland State Archives, which is entrusted with the interpretative history of the Maryland State House, has been questioned by the public and the press for decades about the existence of a network of “secret” tunnels in Annapolis, including or connecting to, tunnels under the State House from the 18th century. While tunnels do, in fact, exist under the State House, research shows they were only designed and built as a means to provide heat to the building itself and the other buildings within State Circle.¹

In 1858, the State House and its grounds underwent major renovations and improvements,² one of which was to heat the entire building with steam.³ In order to achieve this, a steam house was built on the north end of the grounds, a short distance away from the building. Completed in 1860, the total cost of the new structure, with the construction of an underground arched tunnel to the State House,⁴ was \$10,000.⁵ The care and maintenance of the steam house was managed by a keeper and an assistant keeper of the steam house.



The Baltimore Sun, July 6, 1861, page 2

¹ This report pertains to pre-20th century tunnels on the State House grounds. Additional unrelated pedestrian tunnels were built in 1948 to provide access for staff between the State House and the Court of Appeals building. These pedestrian tunnels were expanded in 1975 to include access to the Department of Legislative Services Building as well as the Senate and House buildings. They were most recently renovated in 2024, but their routes remained the same.

² The General Assembly appropriated \$50,000 for all of the major changes to the State House

³ Session Laws 1858, Chapter 105

⁴ Radoff, Morris L. *Buildings of the State of Maryland at Annapolis*. Annapolis: The Hall of Records Commission, 1954., p 124

⁵ House Documents, 1860, Annual Report of the Comptroller, Statement B, p.5

The steam house remained in use until the major renovations of the State House between 1876-1878 rendered it unnecessary. The building itself, however, remained on the grounds until 1882-3.

Letter from Annapolis, Md.
[Correspondence of the Baltimore Sun.]
ANNAPOLIS, MD., Dec. 28, 1877.
*The Executive Archives—A Star Chamber En-
tiresol—The State House Repairs—The Circuit
Court.*

Mr. Samuel Brooks, the messenger to the Governor, has commenced preparations to remove the executive chamber from its temporary quarters on Church Circle to its permanent apartments, in the State House. The removal, it is expected, will be completed by to-morrow night. The adjutant general's department will be removed at the same time. The adjutant general's former office has been converted into a private apartment for the Governor, a room long needed for the transaction of such business as is not proper to be heard in the publicity of the executive chamber. The adjutant general's room is now the former armory, which department in these piping days of peace has been relegated to the deserted steam house, which, in turn, was superseded by heaters placed in the cellar of the State House itself.

There is already talk and stir as to what the Legislature will do in regard to the alleged action of the board of public works in spending \$130,000 to repair the State House when only \$32,000 had been appropriated for that purpose by the Legislature. On dit that the furniture and furnishing alone of the State House cost \$30,000.

The intermediate terms of the Anne Arundel County Court will commence here on the 21st of January. This is the term for which Judge Yellott's trial for drunkenness has been placed.

The Baltimore Sun, December 29, 1877, page 4

Architect Geroge Frederick determined that building a cellar for a boiler room in the State House itself could better heat the building than the existing 1860 system. In his testimony on the various repairs to the State House in 1878⁶, he provided a description of the 1858 steam tunnel:

*The Building had no cellar. It had a little cuddy hole twenty feet wide and fourteen feet in length. Little tunnels two-and-a-half feet wide and two feet high ramified from a point in the hole, which were filled with water pipes. I groped my way on my hands and knees at great bodily discomfort into these tunnels as far as I could.*⁷

⁶ An investigation was conducted into the cost of Frederick's repairs because they far exceeded the amount appropriated by the Legislature (\$32,000), the final cost was \$111,388.29. Frederick and all his sub-contractors were questioned by the select committee about their work and its cost.

⁷ Report of the Select Committee appointed by the House of Delegates, January 9th, to Investigate the Repairs upon the State House, 1878." Document O of the House of Delegates, March 15th, 1878. Annapolis, 1878

The firm placed in charge of installing the new heating apparatus in the cellar was Bartlett, Robbins & Co.⁸ The initial law from 1876 (Chapter 194) that was passed for making repairs and improvements to the State House was still in effect; and minor adjustments and repairs continued to be made to the heating system. In January 1879, the heating apparatus failed because the pipes froze. The heating system was also not able to function properly during times of high winds due to the height and construction of chimneys. To address these issues, Bartlett, Robbins & Co. proposed removing the boilers from the State House and moving them to the cellar of the Record/Land Office⁹:

*In accordance with your verbally expressed desire we submit herewith a proposition for removing the heating boilers from the State House building to the situation on the accompanying plans in the cellar of the Record Office, and to construct a flue of sufficient dimensions in that building to give proper draft to boilers, and to construct a brick trench of the dimensions shown on the drawings, from the Record Building to the State House Building. And to connect the boilers together and to the apparatus in the State House by means of cast flow and return pipes of the dimensions and situated in the position shown upon the drawings...and to make the necessary repairs to the pipes that have been broken by frost.*¹⁰

Bartlett, Robbins & Co. wrote to the Board of Public Works again in 1880:

During the construction of the apparatus in 1876, we feared, from the position of the smokestack, such a result and verbally suggested to the Board of Public Works the propriety of placing the boilers in the Record Building where a suitable shaft could be erected at a sufficient distance from the main building to not be influenced by the action of the wind upon that building...

Our great personal interest in the matter arises from the fact that the defective operation of these stacks leads the Public to suppose that the Heating Apparatus is improperly constructed which opinion does our reputation great injustice and we appeal to your Honorable Board to shield us against this unjust influence as well as to protect the safety of the building and the interests of the State by taking some action in this matter.

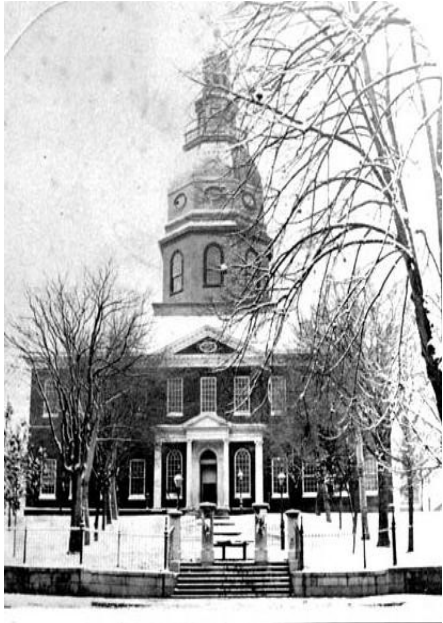
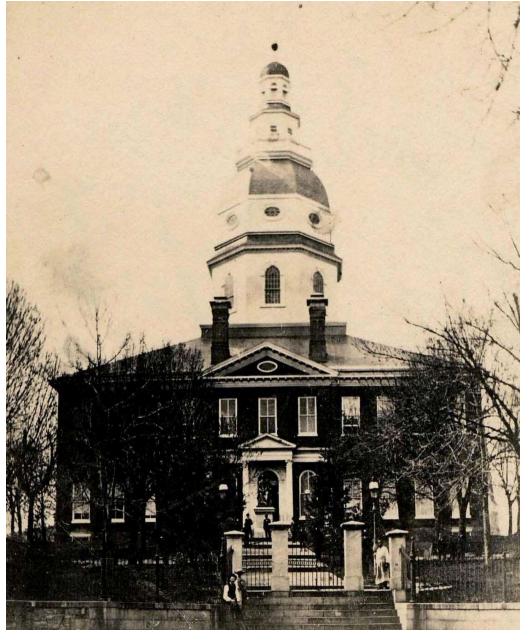
Presuming an estimate of the cost of such change might be of

⁸ The cost for this was \$8,629.25, Comptroller of the Treasury, (Paying Warrants), MSA S 703-45, 1878, Oct 3, No 74, Chapter 406.

⁹ The building was also commonly referred to as the Comptroller's Office.

¹⁰ 24 September 1879 - Proposal from from Bartlett, Robbins, & Co. to Board of Public Works regarding heating apparatus in the State House (MSA S 42-7, 12,687-7)

advantage we have prepared one to carry out the change contemplated in our proposition of September 24th which would at present owing to the enormous advance in materials amount to Forty eight hundred dollars (\$4800.00) although some modifications of this price could be made if the bricks which comprise the old Boiler House were used to construct the trench from [the] Record Building to State House.¹¹

	
<p>State House, c.1875 Maryland Center for History & Culture</p>	<p>State House, after 1876 Maryland State Archives</p>

Views of the chimneys of the State House before 1875 and after 1876 indicate the installation of the heating apparatus in the cellar of the State House. These chimneys were eventually removed in 1974.

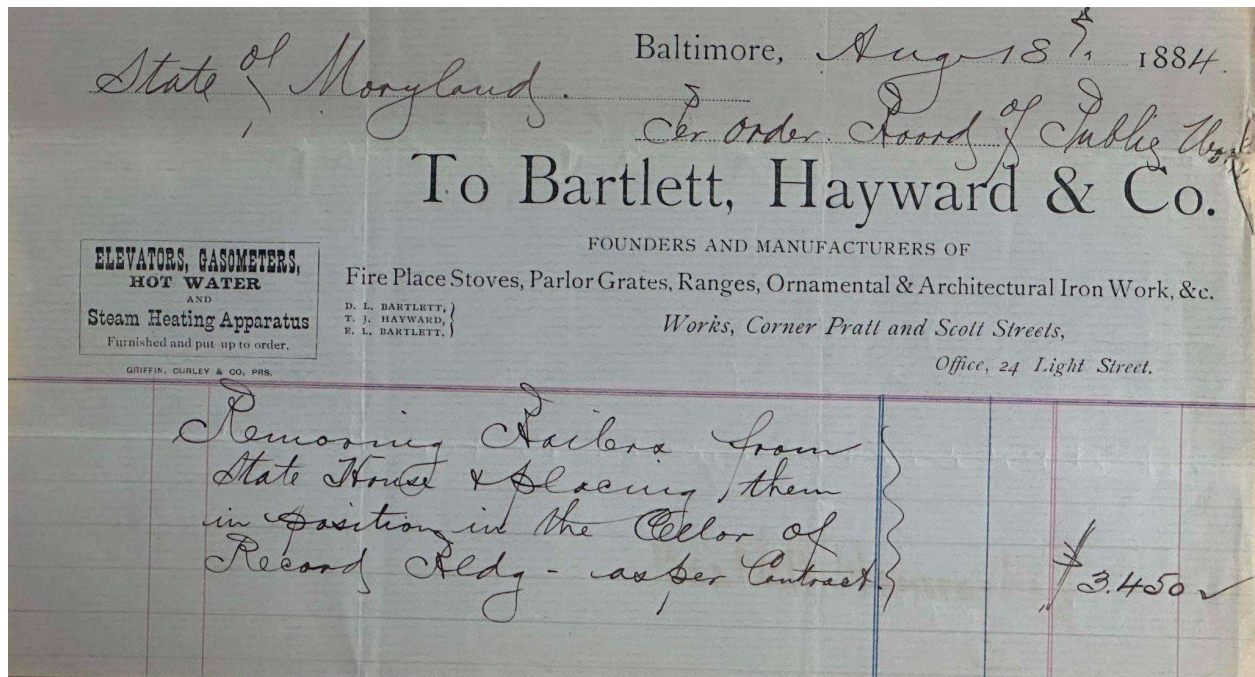
Despite some minor issues and repairs, the heating apparatus remained in the cellar of the State House until 1884. Lawmakers, still fearful of the building catching on fire if an accident ever occurred with the boilers, ordered them to be removed and placed in the basement of the Record Office/Land Office in 1884. In order to heat the State House from the Record Office, a new underground steam tunnel/trench would have to be built.

Be it enacted by the General Assembly of Maryland, That the board of public works be and it is hereby authorized and directed to contract with some suitable and competent person or persons to remove the said boilers of the heating apparatus from the state house, and place them in the cellar of the record office building, and to do all the work and to

¹¹ 8 March 1880 - Letter from Bartlett, Robbins, & Co. to Board of Public Works regarding heating apparatus in the State House (MSA S 42-7, 12,687-7)

furnish all the material necessary to completely provide for the successful heating by said boilers of the state house and the said record office building, and for this purpose the sum of thirty-four hundred and fifty dollars¹²

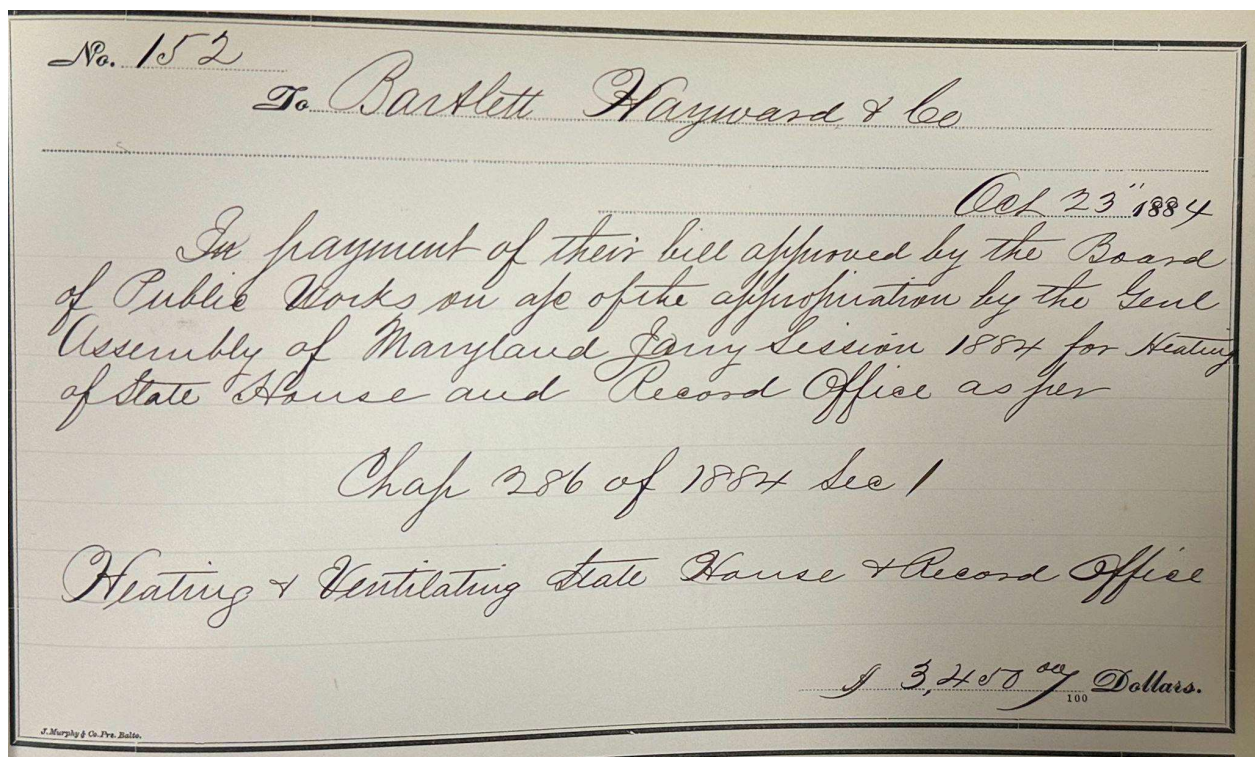
The contract was awarded to Bartlett, Hayward & Co. of Baltimore.¹³



Board of Public Works (General File) 1875-1979, S42

¹² Session Laws, 1884, Chapter 286, Section 1

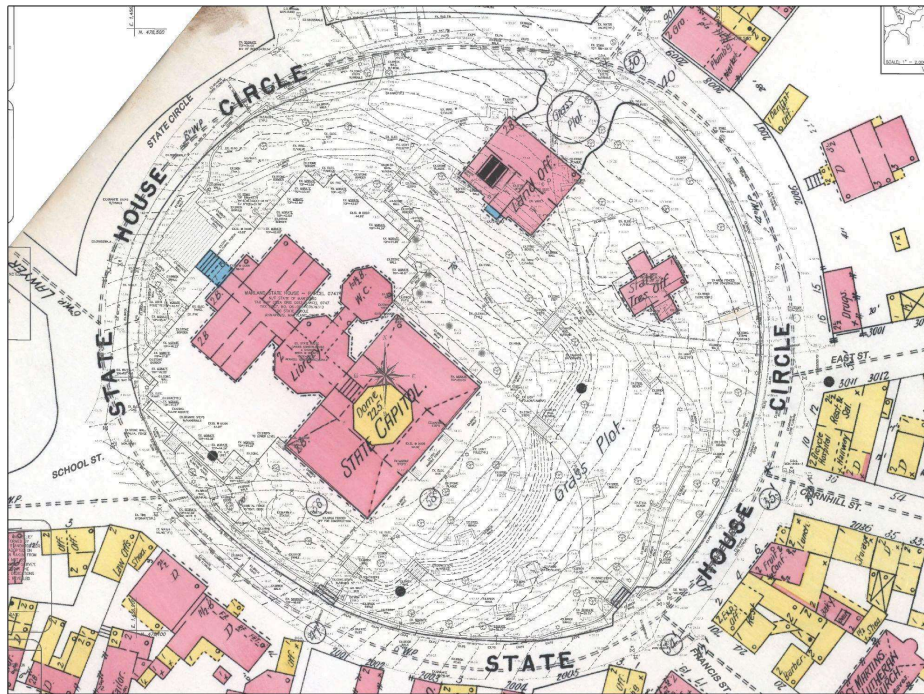
¹³ Unfortunately, there is not an itemized line item or descriptions for building the new brick trench/tunnel on their invoices or the receipts/paying warrants in the state records. This would have been an assumed part of the work to complete the job and simply wasn't accounted for.



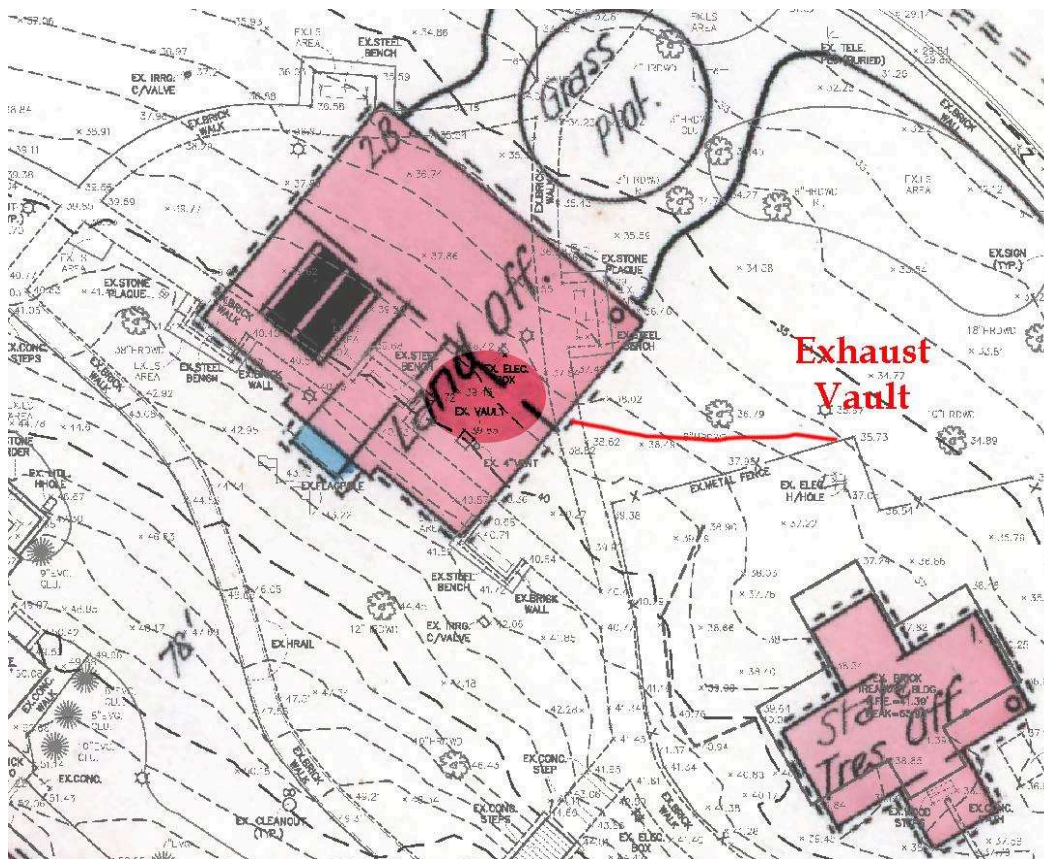
Comptroller of the Treasury (Paying Warrants), MSA S 703-56

This steam heating system provided heat to the State House and the 1886 Rectangular Annex and the Record/Land Office. In 1900, the Record/Land Office building was ordered to be torn down, but this heating system continued to function until the new central heating plant at the foot of Bladen Street was completed in 1903.¹⁴ The bricked trench built in 1884 that had connected the Record/Land Office to the State House remained. At some point, a manhole cover was placed over the location where the exhaust vault existed in the basement of the Record/Land Office building, which was now exposed on the surface.

¹⁴ This building remained on the State House grounds until it was torn down in 1906.

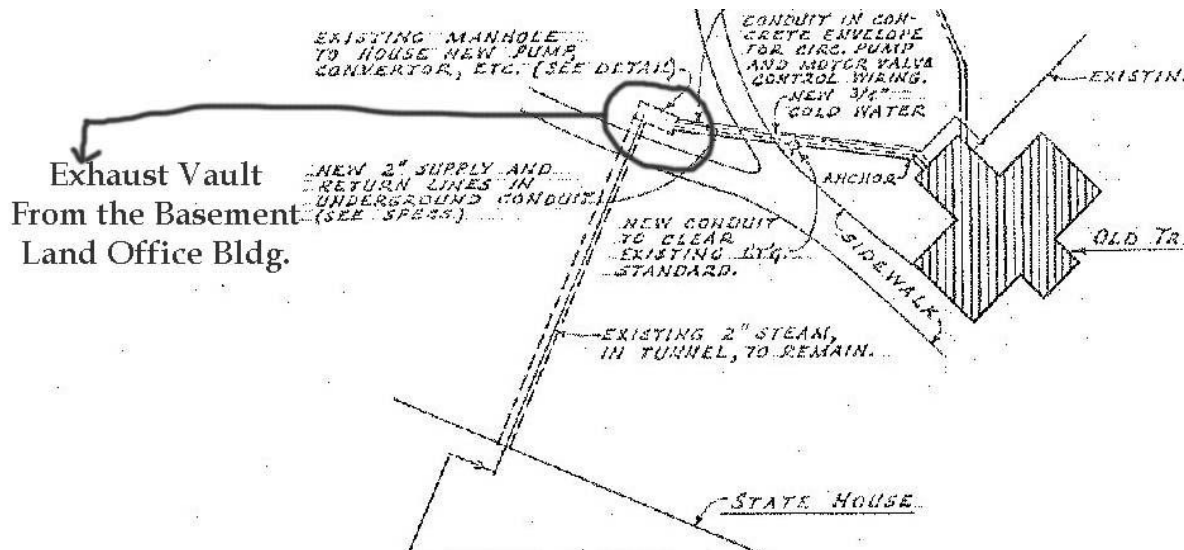


State House Grounds, 1897. Sanborn Map overlaid on a modern utility survey



Detail of State House Grounds, 1897. Sanborn Map overlaid on a modern survey

In 1949, the bricked trench was reused to provide upgraded heating to the recently restored Old Treasury Building.¹⁵ A detail of a plot drawing showing the new underground pipe conduit that connected to the Old Treasury Building (repository room) from the 1884 steam trench vault area is below.



Detail plot plan shows an underground heating conduit running between the Old Treasury Building and the State House. MSA SE 10-11, 1951

In 2024-25, during the restoration of the Old Treasury Building, a new steam-HW converter and circulating pump were installed.

Record documents indicate that at one time a 15-psi steam supply and return line with underground pipe conduit was routed from a manhole north of the State House to the Old Treasury Building – and that these lines and conduit were removed. Also, that the existing manhole and existing low-pressure steam line between the State House and the manhole remained and were connected to a new steam-HW converter and circulating pump in the vault below the manhole.¹⁶

In conclusion, there have never been any underground passenger tunnels on the south side of the State House grounds. A bricked infrastructure trench from the cellar of the State House to the basement of the Record/Land Office was built in 1884. The length of this bricked trench is 181'. The starting height of the trench from the State House is only about 46" while its width is 55". These dimensions alone clearly indicate that the bricked trench was not intended to be used by people to walk between the two buildings.

¹⁵ Radoff, Morris L. *Buildings of the State of Maryland at Annapolis*. Annapolis: The Hall of Records Commission, 1954., p 126

¹⁶ MWCB, Old Treasury Building - Historic Structures Report, 2022