In 1868, more than 20 years after the Erie rejected the idea of a tunnel, Clinton Stephens designed a tunnel through the Shawangunk ridge between Wurtsboro on the west and Bloomingburg on the east for the New York and Oswego Midland Rail Road (later the Ontario and Western [O&W] Railway). Stephens had previously done considerable work on the Erie Canal and had also contracted with the Erie Railroad. Construction of the so-called High View Tunnel began in 1868 and was completed in 1871. Work was started at both ends of the tunnel simultaneously. When both teams met in the middle, they were only a few feet off. This was quite an engineering feat at the time, especially since the tunnel is curved near the east portal (Skye, 2009).

The now-abandoned High View Tunnel cuts through Shawangunk Mountains just south of a high wind gap—1 mi southwest of Wurtsboro, Sullivan County. Elevation of the floor of the gap is ~1000 ft; the mountain rising to knobs ~1200 ft immediately to the northeast and southwest. Just to the southeast, and also on the line of the tunnel is a narrow spine ridge—~100 ft higher than the floor of the gap. The elevation of both portals is ~840 ft, and therefore ~230 ft of rock lies above the deepest part of the tunnel. Original length of the tunnel was 3,857 ft, cut through solid rock. The rock was excavated using steam-powered drills and black powder.

The southeast portal of the tunnel is situated several hundred feet northeast of the former High View Station. The Martinsburg Formations exposed at the portal and in cuts to the south is predominantly evenly interstratified, thinly bedded gray shale and siltstone, exhibiting only slight internal deformation. Bedding strikes N35W and dips very gently west dipping. Bedding in the Martinsburg shale here strikes N34°30.0′W/74°27′30.6′N and dips 41′SW. Numerous large, angular quartzite blocks fill the cut just beyond the existing portal, a result of a “botched attempt” to block the original portal that shortened the tunnel ~20 ft (Houck, 2006).

The High View Tunnel was originally “jerry-built” with little regard to safety and geologic conditions (Wakefield, 1970, p. 45). Particularly troublesome were a pocket of clay encountered in the course of construction (probably related to deep weathering in the Martinsburg at the northwest-dipping contact with the Shawangunk), the fractured (jointed) nature of the Shawangunk quartzite, and constant water problems. In 1878 the Midland installed brick lining in parts of the tunnel, but leaving large rooms of solely rock bore construction between three lined segments (Wakefield, 1970, p. 45; Houck, 2006). In 1897, seventeen years after taking over the tunnel from the Midland, the O&W Railway attempted to further strengthen the arching of the tunnel. (The local press reported, however, that the men performing the work were exposed to almost unbearable gas and smoke conditions (Wakefield, 1970, p. 47).)

Northwest portal of the abandoned O&W High View tunnel about 0.8 mi southwest of Wurtsboro (GPS 41°34.0′W/74°26.0′N). The Shawangunk conglomerate here strikes 33°SE and dips 46°NW. Note the iron, brick, and crushed stone (from interior cut) linings of the tunnel exposed in a botched attempt to shorten the tunnel sometime in the past.

Engineering department drawing showing details of brick lining built to protect trains from persistent roof rock falls in the O&W High View-Wurtsville (“Bloomingburgh”) tunnel. The August 30, 1878, Liberty (NY) Register reported “. . .the Midland is doing a good job in the tunnel, the O&W people a very poor one” (Wakefield, 1970, p. 47).