



Historic Birmingham Mineral Railroad Signs Project
c/o James Lowery, 3402 Altamont Road South
Birmingham, AL 35205
JLowery2@gmail.com
Home (205) 252-5337
Cell (205) 908-0179
Bham-MRR.com

Historic Birmingham Mineral Railroad (BMRR)

Self-guided “Driving and Walking Tour” – Publicly Accessible Locations of Old Roadbed In Some of the Eastern Areas

GATE CITY BRANCH – Part B – Irondale to Trussville (Gate City Branch Extension/Trussville Branch)

As of February 21, 2016

NOTE: Locations mentioned here use current designations and names, some of which did not exist during the 1884-1988 era of the BMRR.

NOTE: Only publicly accessible locations are included here. Private property should not be entered without express permission of the owner.

Background: The Gate City Branch of the BMRR served the mines on Ruffner Mountain and the blast furnace in Trussville and also came from the Irondale area into the Gate City and Woodlawn areas of Birmingham, then crossed the present-day Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport and entered the railroad yards (Boyles Yard) west of the airport runway. Going in the other direction, the Gate City Branch (Gate City Branch Extension/Trussville Branch) left Ruffner Mountain, went through the Roebuck area, and ended in downtown Trussville. The driving/walking tour for the Gate City Branch is divided into two parts. Part A starts on the Irondale side of Ruffner Mountain and goes through Red Gap, across Oporto-Madrid Boulevard, through Gate City, through Woodlawn, then just beyond the western end of the airport runway. Part B starts on the Irondale side of Ruffner Mountain and goes through part of the Roebuck area, through Sadler Gap on Highway 11 (Gadsden Highway), then to historic downtown Trussville. Both Part A and Part B have the same starting point, but Part A goes generally west, and Part B goes generally northeast.

Length of BMRR Gate City Branch (Part B): According to L&N records, the Gate City Branch (Part B) of the BMRR was **9.44 miles long**. (The entire Gate City Branch was 17.14 miles long.) The total length of the BMRR mainline tracks with all its 31 branches was **253 miles long**, which is equal to the

distance from Birmingham to Mobile! Adding to that its various sidings and spurs to the mines, quarries, coke ovens, furnaces, etc., would put its length well over 300 miles. It was a major railroad!

What To Look For: In many cases, the former BMRR roadbed will be a flat place in the street, often in the middle of a block with a slope leading up to the flattened area, the flattened area of the street (usually about 50 to 75 feet of street), then a slope continuing up the street. In other cases such as where the BMRR roadbed was on the side of the mountain and not crossing a street, often the hill or mountainside slopes up to the roadbed, there is a flat spot (the BMRR roadbed), then the hill or mountainside continues upward. Good examples of this second type of area are the Vulcan Trail and the walking trail below Trinity Hospital.

Locations Where the Old Roadbed Can Be Seen or Now Is Part of Other Structures

(NOTE: The designation “[SIGN]” indicates that a BMRR site sign has been erected there.)

Birmingham/

Irondale:

Ruffner Mountain Nature Preserve

Irondale side – Eastern Trailhead [SIGN] – Starting at the eastern trailhead on Ruffner Road where there is vehicle parking at the gated entrance, walk on the trail to the intersection of other trails.

Lizard Loop Trail – Follow the trail signs to the Lizard Loop Trail and walk it to the point where it separates into an “upper” portion (to the left) and a “lower” portion (to the right). Take the upper portion to the left, and soon you will see the BMRR roadbed coming from the left to the trail as a flat area. From this point all the way to the trail “switchback,” the Lizard Loop Trail is on the BMRR roadbed. On its way to that switchback, it crosses over two cut-stone culverts. At the farthest north (northeast) point where the Lizard Loop Trail loops back to the beginning using the lower portion of the trail (the switchback), pause here and walk the short distance toward the city street. (At this point, the roadbed crosses over another cut-stone culvert.) Just beyond this farthest point of the trail, the BMRR roadbed exits the Ruffner Mountain Nature Preserve on its way to downtown Trussville. As you look out over the houses in this residential area, notice that, when this area was made into streets and residences, the land was terraformed, and some of the BMRR roadbed was obliterated. However, the roadbed picks up again behind some of the houses just past the end of the Ruffner Mountain Nature Preserve (see Autumn Chase Drive below).

Return – Return to parked vehicle using the Lizard Loop Trail and then along same route used to get to the Lizard Loop Trail.

Birmingham

(Roebuck):

Autumn Chase Drive between Lance Way and Half Moon Bend – (NOTE:

There are two separate sections of Autumn Chase Drive. This is the lower section between Lance Way and Half Moon Bend.) As you drive down the hill on Autumn Chase Drive from Lance Way to Half Moon Bend, the street slopes down, flattens out in the middle of the block, then continues the slope down the hill. That flat spot is the BMRR roadbed which also can be seen by looking perpendicular to Autumn Chase Drive and behind the houses.

Near former South Roebuck Ballpark and Swimming Pool at the end of Dogwood Drive [SIGN] – The BMRR roadbed is located in the woods **on private property** near this former neighborhood facility, and the wooded property must not be entered without permission of the owner. The property on

which the former South Roebuck Ballpark and Swimming Pool facility itself is located is owned by the Ruffner Mountain Nature Preserve. **NOTE:** The BMRR historic site sign at this location was installed on an existing wooden post which was a railroad crosstie that previously had been installed vertically in the ground at the entrance to the ballpark, thus re-purposing and re-using a railroad crosstie!

In the woods between the former South Roebuck Ballpark/Swimming Pool and Autumn Chase Drive (see next item) – The BMRR roadbed is located in the woods **on private property** between the former neighborhood ballpark/swimming pool and the lower section of Autumn Chase Drive (see next item). The wooded, private property on which the BMRR roadbed is located must not be entered without permission of the owner.

Willow Lane intersection with Lisa Lane – (NOTE: It is best to park alongside the paved streets near the intersection of Willow Lane and Lisa Lane and walk the short distance to see the BMRR roadbed.) From this intersection, walk up the short slope of the unimproved road to where the unimproved road flattens and makes a turn to the left. Standing on the flatten spot, you are standing on the BMRR roadbed. To your right, coming out of the wooded area and cut into the slope of the hillside is the BMRR roadbed. To your left and extending east/northeast from the flattened area, is the flat BMRR roadbed. (As of December 2014, there was a locked gate across the BMRR roadbed, but the roadbed could be seen extending into the distance.) Lisa Lane and the backyards of the houses on Lisa Lane follow the curve of the BMRR roadbed, and those backyards are contiguous to it.

Gadsden Highway (U.S. Highway 11) near intersection with Medical Park Drive East, “Sadler Gap” – The BMRR roadbed has left the residential area and the Ruffner Mountain area, and now needs to cross Red Mountain in order to get to the Trussville area. It does that by going through **Sadler Gap** (see below) on the Gadsden Highway (U.S. Highway 11). As the Gadsden Highway crosses under Interstate 59 near Medical Park Drive East, it is going through Sadler Gap, and the BMRR roadbed was located about halfway between the two existing curves on Highway 11 at that location.

Sadler Gap – For additional information about gaps such as this, see the [Endnote](#) at the conclusion of this driving and walking tour.

Birmingham/
Trussville:

Gadsden Highway (U.S. Highway 11) near intersection with Edwards Lake Road – From Sadler Gap to Trussville, the BMRR roadbed follows the current route of Interstate 59 to the northeast. This put it near Edwards Lake Road where it intersects with Gadsden Highway (U.S. Highway 11). The BMRR roadbed is not apparent in this area due to development.

Trussville:

Interstate 59 – As indicated above, from Sadler Gap to Trussville, the BMRR roadbed follows the current route of Interstate 59 to the northeast.

Interstate 59 Exit 141 to Trussville – The BMRR roadbed is near the east side of the exit to Trussville, but is not readily visible due to development in that area.

Valley Road – Just after the exit ramp from Interstate 59, Valley Road begins and runs southwest paralleling the interstate. Valley Road generally follows the BMRR roadbed and, in some places, may have used the BMRR roadbed. Just before Valley Road turns before going over the ridge to become Linden Street, we think part of the BMRR roadbed went along parallel to the northwest side of

Valley Road and about 30 feet off the edge of the current pavement. At one place along there, the BMRR roadbed seems to emerge from the woods and follow the roadbed of Valley Road.

Green Drive – On its way into Trussville and to not have to cross the ridge between the Interstate and downtown Trussville, the BMRR took a semi-circular route that roughly follows present day Green Drive then part of Trussville Clay Road. Turn onto Green Drive at its intersection with North Chalkville Road and follow it to Trussville Clay Road.

Limestone Quarry on Green Drive – Using a siding off the main line, the BMRR served the limestone quarry on Green Drive. The quarry operations are closed now, but parts of it can be seen through the trees along the eastern side of Green Drive.

Green Drive and Trussville Clay Road [SIGN] – Just before Green Drive intersects with Trussville Clay Road, the raised area with trees along the south side of Green Drive is the BMRR roadbed. As you turn right onto Trussville Clay Road, the raised area with trees continues into the cleared power line easement, but some of the BMRR roadbed there has been removed. Along here on the east (uphill) side of Trussville Clay Road, the BMRR served a small sandstone quarry that was located a short distance up the hill from the BMRR main tracks. We think that the flat area a short distance up the hill in the cleared power line easement (and in the woods on either side) may be part of the siding roadbed serving that sandstone quarry.

Trussville Clay Road at Dry Creek bridge [SIGN] – As Trussville Clay Road approaches the cut in the ridge, it goes over a ground-level bridge that is not obvious from a vehicle. Closer inspection of the area will show that there is a beautiful stone bridge under Trussville Clay Road crossing over Dry Creek. The original bridge here was the bridge for the BMRR to cross over Dry Creek, and the roadway for vehicles was located up the ridge on the right a short distance above the BMRR roadbed. We believe that, when the BMRR tracks were removed, the vehicle road was moved to the BMRR roadbed, and a wider bridge (the current bridge) was built to accommodate the wider road needed for vehicle traffic.

Ridge Cut – Trussville Clay Road uses the cut in the ridge that was made initially for the BMRR tracks. Originally, only the BMRR tracks used the cut through the ridge, and a wagon road (and stagecoaches? and horses, probably later used by vehicles) was about 50 feet above the level of the railroad bed. That wagon road hugged the slope of the ridge into which it was cut and turned to start paralleling the BMRR roadbed. The remains of that wagon road are still visible on private property and currently cut across the driveway leading up to that property on the west portion of the ridge. (CAUTION: This is private property and must not be entered without permission of the owner.) Later, after the train tracks were no longer needed and were removed, this cut in the ridge was re-purposed and widened, and the vehicle road was moved here to its present-day location. Remains of the wagon road paralleling the BMRR roadbed can be viewed from Moss Rock Ridge (a public road) – see item below.

Trussville Clay Road near Happy Hollow Road [SIGN] – As Trussville Clay Road emerges out of the cut in the ridge, it curves to the right at the intersection of Happy Hollow Road. Trussville Clay road is still following the route of the BMRR, and the street is on the BMRR roadbed.

Trussville Clay Road to Moss Rock Ridge – After Trussville Clay Road leaves the cut in the ridge, it continues on the BMRR roadbed until it has gone past the intersection with Happy Hollow Road. About 75 feet past that intersection, the BMRR roadbed veers slightly to the right into the wooded area and thus leaves Trussville Clay Road but is still running parallel to Trussville Clay Road.

Moss Rock Ridge – Immediately after turning onto the street named Moss Rock Ridge, you will cross the BMRR roadbed and a former wagon/vehicle roadbed. As you look northeast from the street named Moss Rock Ridge, the wide flat area beside the house is the roadbeds: the BMRR roadbed is the slightly raised area on your right (closest to Trussville Clay Road) and the former wagon/vehicle roadbed is the wider flat area on the left. (**CAUTION:** This may be private property and must not be entered without permission of the owner.) Turning and looking in the opposite direction (southwest), the BMRR roadbed continues through the narrow wooded area behind the house facing Trussville Clay Road.

Trussville Clay Road to Parkway Drive – Continuing along Trussville Clay Road to Parkway Drive, the BMRR roadbed parallels Trussville Clay Road, is behind the houses that face Trussville Clay Road, and can be seen in some places behind those houses. (**CAUTION:** Those houses are on private property and the properties must not be entered without permission of the owners.) Continue along Trussville Clay Road until the rise in the road just prior to its intersection with Parkway Drive. (NOTE: The road rises in two places along here; this one is the one closest to Parkway Drive.) At this point, the BMRR roadbed turns toward, and crosses, Trussville Clay Road, thus the raised place in the road.

Trussville Clay Road at Poplar Street [SIGN] – The BMRR roadbed crossed present-day Poplar Street near this intersection.

Parkway Drive – The BMRR roadbed generally parallels Parkway Drive as the BMRR was headed to the blast furnace in Trussville. The BMRR roadbed is not apparent in this area due to development.

Parkway Drive between North Mall Street and South Mall Street – The BMRR served the blast furnace and coke ovens in Trussville at this location, and an historical marker explains the history of the furnace.

Parkway Drive to Gadsden Highway (U.S. Highway 11) -- Alabama Great Southern Railroad – The BMRR roadbed terminated at the blast furnace in Trussville, but railroad tracks continued generally along Parkway Drive until just past Gadsden Highway (U.S. Highway 11) where the tracks intersected with the Alabama Great Southern (AGS) railroad. This section of the railroad along Parkway Drive from South Mall Street to Gadsden Highway was a spur of the Alabama Great Southern railroad which also served the blast furnace in Trussville. The current active Norfolk Southern railroad tracks still use the AGS roadbed through Trussville. NOTE: On its way from South Mall Street to Gadsden Highway, Parkway Drive goes through the historic “Slagheap Village” which is explained on an historical marker at the intersection of Parkway Drive and Gadsden Highway. The slag referred to is from operation of the blast furnace in Trussville, and pieces of the slag can still be seen on the ground in many places in this area.

NOTE: See the Gate City Branch--Part A driving/walking tour for the other portion of the Gate City Branch.

Endnote

Gaps – Gaps (or natural cuts) in ridges and mountains in the Birmingham area were used, and still are used, extensively by the railroads and for streets and highways. Such gaps in a ridge or mountain are cut either by a stream or river (water gap) or by the erosive force of wind (wind gap). Such gaps in the ridges and mountains in the Birmingham area were used by the railroads and the streets and highways (and still are today) to get from one valley into the next. Without such gaps, the extensive railroad system throughout Birmingham and Birmingham's early economic development would not have been possible.

Water gaps are formed when the relatively flat land on which an ancient stream or river was flowing began to be uplifted beneath it. The stream or river maintained its position by cutting down (over a period of millions of years) at least as fast as the land beneath it was rising. Therefore, water gaps are as old as the ridge or mountain in which they are located.

Wind gaps are similar in appearance to water gaps but do not have an active stream in them. Instead, they are formed from wind blowing against the ridge and being funneled through a notch at increased speed. Some wind gaps may have started with a stream in them, but the rate of cutting down did not equal the rate of uplift. Other wind gaps may have begun at the point of a fault in the ridge or mountain.

Both water and wind gaps are evident in the Birmingham area in locations such as the following:

- Boyles Gap (water gap cut by Five Mile Creek)
- Lone Pine Gap (wind gap at a fault in the mountain – provided a route for U. S. Highway 31/old Montgomery Highway, streetcar tracks, and a street from downtown Birmingham into Homewood)
- Graces Gap (type unknown – no stream flows there today, but may have in the past)
- Walker Gap (probably wind gap)
- Red Gap in Irondale (type unknown – no stream flows there today, but may have in the past)
- Sadler Gap (type unknown)

Ongoing Research

Additions to these driving/walking tours may be made in the future as the BMRR is researched further and as additional locations are found where the BMRR roadbed can be seen. Updated versions will be issued incorporating such additional locations.

Acknowledgments

These driving/walking tours would not have been possible without the assistance of local historians who have studied the history of the BMRR and its routes throughout the Birmingham area. I am grateful to the many individuals who are experts in local industrial archaeology and railroad history. They have willingly shared their knowledge and expertise about routes of the various BMRR branches and have helped research locations included in these driving/walking tours. I also greatly appreciate the input from other individuals who have mentioned a site, who have shown me a site such as the BMRR roadbed in their backyards (often with the old BMRR crossties still in place), or who have helped me find a site.