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Historic Birmingham Mineral Railroad (BMRR)

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

GATE CITY BRANCH – Part A – Irondale to North Birmingham

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 A): According to L&N records, the Gate City Branch (Part A) of the BMRR was **7.7 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 another trail. Take the pipeline service road trail to the left toward the wetlands. The dirt road on which you will be walking going to the wetlands parallels the BMRR raised roadbed which can be seen in many places on the right (northward) about 20 to 30 feet into the woods [**SIGN**]. There are several places where you can leave the dirt road and walk up onto the roadbed. As you walk along the dirt road, especially notice the square stone culverts which were built as part of the roadbed and which still carry water under it [**SIGN**].

Wetlands – The water for the constructed wetlands comes from an artesian well (just upslope from the wetlands) that was installed during the period when active mines were here and that continues to flow at a steady pace.

Buckeye Trail entrance [SIGN**]** – Continue along the gas pipeline service road to the entrance of the Buckeye Trail. Follow the Buckeye Trail a short way up the hill past the kiosk, and, at the first turn in the trail (a turn to the left), look to the right and you will see the BMRR roadbed coming in from the right (flat area) and continuing to the left where part of the Buckeye Trail uses the BMRR roadbed.

Return down the hill to the Buckeye Trail entrance, turn left, and return along the gas pipeline service road.

Return – Return to parked vehicle along same route used to go to wetlands and Buckeye Trail entrance.

Hillside Drive – (NOTE: This is the short “Hillside Drive” located in Irondale. Online maps show other Hillside Drives in the Birmingham area.) (CAUTION: This is NOT a stop, but is a chance to see the raised BMRR roadbed off to the side of Ruffner Road. One should NOT drive up Hillside Drive because it dead ends, and there is no way to turn around without being on private property.) The BMRR roadbed can be seen at the top of Hillside Drive looking up from Ruffner Road. It is the flattened area at the top of the slope and running parallel to Ruffner Road. The small house seen on the flattened area has been built on, or beside, the BMRR roadbed. As of February 2015, the old wooden BMRR railroad crossing post was still standing where Hillside Drive crossed the BMRR tracks.

Irondale side – Western Entrance (Ridge and Valley Trailhead) [SIGN**]** – Drive southwest on Ruffner Road to the Ridge and Valley Trailhead across the street from the Ruffner Park baseball fields on Ruffner Road. The flat area where the trailhead is located is the BMRR roadbed. (Parking at the trailhead is very

limited.) (The Ridge and Valley Trail can be walked into the Ruffner Mountain Nature Preserve to see some of the areas where active mines were located during the era of the BMRR.) The BMRR roadbed exits the Ruffner Mountain Nature Preserve at this point then re-enters it heading to the 16th Street North/Georgia Road area at Red Gap.

Irondale/
Birmingham:

16th Street North, Georgia Road, and Ruffner Road [SIGN] – Near the intersection of these streets, the Gate City Branch approached the **Red Gap** (see below) that is the gap in the ridge where this part of present-day 16th Street North/Georgia Road is located. (As one heads west through the gap, Irondale’s 16th Street North becomes Birmingham’s Georgia Road.)

Red Gap – There is a geological fault under this gap, and, in 1916, a 5.1 magnitude earthquake epicenter was located below this point. As of 1916, it was the largest earthquake known to have occurred in Alabama and is known as the “Red Gap Earthquake.” For additional information about gaps in the local ridges and mountains, see the Endnote at the conclusion of this driving and walking tour.

Birmingham
(Gate City):

Georgia Road [SIGN] – The BMRR followed the north side of what is today Georgia Road as the BMRR went through Red Gap, and, as it exited the gap, it turned north through a currently wooded area. The sloped/raised BMRR roadbed can be seen running beside Georgia Road (north side) starting about .2 mile (2 tenths of a mile) from the 16th Street North/Ruffner Road intersection. The BMRR roadbed emerges out of the wooded area just prior to reaching Oporto-Madrid Boulevard at 68th Street South.

Oporto-Madrid Boulevard at 68th Street South [SIGN] – The BMRR approached Oporto-Madrid Boulevard (which was a dirt street at that time) across from the intersection of 68th Street South. On the eastern side of Oporto-Madrid Boulevard, the flat roadbed is very evident as it comes out of the woods at an angle to Oporto-Madrid Boulevard. Just before the roadbed crosses Oporto-Madrid Boulevard, there is a short drainage ditch and a pipe that goes under Oporto-Madrid Boulevard. In part of that ditch, the big crossties that were part of a small BMRR bridge over that drainage ditch can still be seen.

68th Place South at Oporto-Madrid Boulevard [SIGN] – The BMRR crossed Oporto-Madrid Boulevard at an angle and continued across 68th Place South as the BMRR began a big semi-circular loop through this part of Gate City then south toward the Georgia Road area. (The BMRR tracks across Oporto-Madrid Boulevard remained in place for many years after the tracks had been removed from portions of the Gate City Branch leading to and from the tracks across Oporto-Madrid Boulevard.)

Behind Beulah Lewis Park at 67th Street South and Harve Street South [SIGN] – The wooded, elevated area just past the parking area at the end of 67th Street South along the back (western edge) of Beulah Lewis Park is the BMRR roadbed.

Glasgow Avenue at 66th Street South – The BMRR roadbed is the flattened spot near the intersection of Glasgow Avenue and 66th Street South. The unusually wide area between the two houses here is the roadbed.

Behind former Gate City Elementary School – The wooded, elevated area along the back of the former Gate City Elementary School is the BMRR roadbed

as it runs between Glasgow Avenue and Dublin Avenue, turning as it leaves the Glasgow Avenue area.

Dublin Avenue [SIGN] – As you drive up the hill on Dublin Avenue from Tennessee Avenue to 65th Street South, the street slopes up, flattens out in the middle of the block, then continues the slope up the hill. That flat spot is the BMRR roadbed which is very evident looking in both directions perpendicular to Dublin Avenue.

Brussels Avenue – As you drive up the hill on Brussels Avenue from Center Avenue South to Kentucky Court South, the street slopes up, flattens out in the middle of the block, then continues the slope up the hill. That flat spot is the BMRR roadbed which is very evident looking northeast perpendicular to Brussels Avenue.

Birmingham
(Woodlawn):

3rd Avenue South near intersection with 65th Street South – As you start up the hill on 3rd Avenue South from its intersection with 65th Street South, the street flattens out then continues the slope up the hill. That flat spot is the BMRR roadbed which is very evident looking in both directions perpendicular to 3rd Avenue South.

65th Street South and 65th Street North – 65th Street runs alongside the BMRR roadbed all the way from 3rd Avenue South to just before the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport property at 3rd Avenue North and then along the southeast edge of the airport property. **NOTE** that 65th Street South is divided here with the BMRR roadbed in between the two portions of the street, and the portion being used here is the southeast portion which is the more consistently passable portion. The following locations are along that route, with the BMRR roadbed running parallel to, and along the north edge of, 65th Street:

65th Street South at 2nd Avenue South (a.k.a 2nd Street South)

65th Street South at 1st Avenue South [SIGN]

NOTE: The industrial building currently at this location (6501 1st Avenue South) is where the historic Woodlawn Freight Depot originally was located. The depot has been restored and has been moved to the Heart of Dixie Railroad Museum in Calera where it houses their Boone Library. **[SIGN]** See their webpage at <http://www.hodrrm.org/body.cfm?id=965> for more information.

NOTE: While at the 65th Street South and 1st Avenue South stop in Woodlawn, notice the STOP sign on the north side of the roadbed area. That STOP sign is mounted on a piece of former railroad rail driven into the ground. We assume that the sign post was part of the scrape rails when they were removed from the old BMRR roadbed and were re-purposed for the STOP sign.

65th Street at Division Avenue – At this location, the BMRR roadbed is at ground level (not raised) so it is not as obvious as at some other locations. However, the BMRR roadbed is the narrow area in between the two parts of 65th Street.

65th Street North at 1st Avenue North – At this location, the BMRR roadbed is at ground level (not raised) so it is not as obvious as at some other locations, and a building and parking lot has been built on the former BMRR roadbed.

65th Street North between 1st Avenue North and 3rd Avenue North –

At this location, the BMRR roadbed is at ground level (not raised) so it is not as obvious as at some other locations. However, the BMRR roadbed is the narrow area in between 65th Street North and the buildings bordering it.

65th Street North at 3rd Avenue North – At this location, the BMRR roadbed is at ground level (not raised) so it is not as obvious as at some other locations. Beyond this point, Aviation Avenue was constructed where the BMRR roadbed ran (see next item).

Aviation Avenue – Aviation Avenue was constructed where the BMRR roadbed ran. The route of Aviation Avenue takes it through the cemetery and to the intersection of Aviation Avenue and Messer Airport Highway (also shown on some street signs as Messer-Airport Highway with a dash). The route of Aviation Avenue through the cemetery generally follows the route of the BMRR roadbed.

Aviation Avenue at 65th Street North [SIGN]

Aviation Avenue at Messer Airport Highway [SIGN]

“18th Alley North” – The route of the BMRR roadbed continues through the intersection of Aviation Avenue with Messer Airport Highway and becomes “18th Alley North” as shown on some maps but which has no street sign with that designation. “18th Alley North” was constructed where the BMRR roadbed ran. Continue along “18th Alley North” to its intersection with 50th Street North. Beyond this point, the BMRR roadbed is on fenced private property and is not accessible. The BMRR roadbed is no longer visible until the other side of the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport. Development of the airport in years past has removed most indications of the BMRR roadbed on that property. However, the BMRR roadbed is visible again on the southwestern end of the airport property (see below).

Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport property – NOT ACCESSABLE. The airport property is mentioned here because the BMRR roadbed originally crossed part of what became the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport. As you will see by the next item, the BMRR roadbed “re-emerges” from the airport property at the southwestern end of the main runway.

Birmingham
(Northern area at
edge of Inglenook):

Tallapoosa Street near intersection of East Lake Boulevard – The BMRR roadbed “emerges” from the Birmingham-Shuttlesworth International Airport property at the southwestern end of the main runway. The roadbed crosses Tallapoosa Street just south of its intersection with East Lake Boulevard. Until January 2015, the **rails** of the BMRR were still in place across Tallapoosa Street, but they then were removed. The rails had remained in place crossing the road even though they had been cut off at the edge of the pavement and had not been used in many years! At Tallapoosa Street and looking east on the airport property, the BMRR former roadbed ran through the wooded area that aligns with the route of the BMRR roadbed across Tallapoosa Street.

Ball Street at Vanderbilt Road – As of January 2015, the BMRR rails and old cross-ties were still in the ground and crossed Ball Street at Vanderbilt Road. Some of the rails and cross-ties extended to the west past Ball Street along an unnamed side road leading to the CSX Boyles Yard property. In January 2015,

the rails and crossties were removed from just past the western edge of Ball Street to the beginning of Boyles Yard.

CSX Boyles Yard – NOT ACCESSABLE. As of January 2015, just before the unnamed side road enters the CSX Boyles Yard property, old rails and crossties were still crossing the road. The BMRR roadbed enters the CSX Boyles Yard property and cannot be followed any further because the CSX Boyles Yard is private railroad property. **NOTE:** Many current railroad tracks in, and around, Birmingham use the former BMRR roadbed, so the BMRR can be thought of as having provided the roadbeds for many of today's active railroads in the Birmingham area.

NOTE: See the Gate City Branch--Part B (Gate City Branch Extension/Trussville Branch) 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.