



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 and Southern Areas**

RED GAP BRANCH – Irondale to West Homewood

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 Red Gap Branch of the BMRR came from the Irondale area then ran between Eastwood Village and Century Plaza, turned to go along Cresthill Road, continued along Montclair Road, crossed Montclair Road at Country Club Road (at Ramsay Park), continued between Sterling Road and Carlisle Road (where it was the boundary between the city limits of Birmingham and Mountain Brook), went through English Village and continued out of English Village down Red Mountain Lane, ran along the south face of Red Mountain above and behind the houses on 20th Avenue South (above “Diaper Row”), then (using a bridge) crossed over Richard Arrington Jr. Boulevard (formerly Montgomery Highway and Highway 31). Here the BMRR crossed over to the north face of Red Mountain, ran along the mountain below Vulcan Park and The Club where the Vulcan Trail now uses the old roadbed as the trail, continued to Green Springs Highway following it through Walker Gap (crossing back to the south side of Red Mountain), went through part of the west Homewood area, and connected to the South & North Alabama Railroad. (Just after that connection, the BMRR South Branch began at the South & North Alabama Railroad and served the area that is now Red Mountain Park).

Length of BMRR Red Gap Branch: According to L&N records, the Red Gap Branch of the BMRR was **10.22 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.)

Irondale:

16th Street North, Georgia Road, and Ruffner Road [SIGN**]** – The Red Gap Branch began in this area and is named for **Red Gap** (see below) that is the gap in the ridge where this part of present-day Georgia Road is located.

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.

Former Lion Park – Recently converted to the streets and infrastructure for a subdivision entered from Montevallo Road in Irondale – The BMRR Red Gap Branch roadbed exited Red Gap and ran through the woods on the west side of a new subdivision at the end of YMCA Way (listed on most maps as Lion Park Drive) off of Lawrence (Lawrence) Avenue. The BMRR roadbed ran along the former park area, but that has now been converted to a subdivision, and the roadbed was along what is now the western boundary of the subdivision. As the subdivision is built-out, it is not known at the current time what will be the access possibilities in the future for seeing the BMRR roadbed as it existed along the rear edge of the new subdivision. NOTE: Before the subdivision construction began, a wall of rock could be seen which was cut into the hillside to make the flat area for the BMRR roadbed. At the other (north) end of the BMRR roadbed, there were piles of approximately 37 big cut stones that were part of the bridge (trestle) footing taking the BMRR above the other tracks in Red Gap. As part of creating the new subdivision, the City of Irondale had those cut stones which were over 100 years old removed, and we assume that they plan to re-purpose them for other uses.

Laurence (Lawrence) Avenue between Montevallo Road and Duke Avenue – Flat portion of street halfway up the hill is the BMRR roadbed. This end of the BMRR roadbed has come out of the woods at the upper edge of the former Lion Park (now a subdivision—see above) on its way through this residential area. A house on the north side of Laurence (Lawrence) Avenue has been built on the former BMRR roadbed. On the south side of Laurence (Lawrence) Avenue, the roadbed can be seen as a wider than normal side yard between two of the houses.

Birmingham:

Oporto-Madrid Boulevard between Crestwood Boulevard and Interstate 20 [SIGN**]** – BMRR crossed here, but evidence of the roadbed is no longer visible. There is a photograph of a BMRR steam locomotive on a bridge going over

Oporto-Madrid Boulevard which was a dirt street at that time and was named “Oporto Road” (see Bham-MRR.com website to see that photograph). In this area, where the present-day I-20 and its circular on-ramp are located, there was a large mining camp serving the nearby Hammond Mine.

Crestwood Boulevard at entrance to Aldi (and former rear entrance to Century Plaza parking lot) – The BMRR turned in this area to cross Crestwood Boulevard (Highway 78) and head toward Montclair Road.

Cresthill Road at Crestwood Boulevard [SIGN] – The BMRR headed toward Cresthill Road.

Cresthill Road – The BMRR paralleled Cresthill Road in the woods behind the houses on the northwest side of Cresthill Road.

Southcrest Road – As you drive up the slope on Southcrest Road from Cresthill Road, the street flattens out in the middle of the block then continues the slope up. At that flat spot, the elevated wooded areas on either side of Southcrest Road is the BMRR roadbed.

Southhall Road – The BMRR roadbed is located behind the houses on the southeast side of Southhall Road between Southcrest Road and Del Ray Drive.

Montclair Road near intersection with Cresthill Road [SIGN] – The BMRR continued southwest and began paralleling Montclair Road.

Pamela Street – As you drive up the slope on Pamela Street from Montclair Road, the street flattens out in the middle of the block then continues the slope up. That flat spot is the BMRR roadbed. Also, at that flat spot behind the houses on either side, the partially grassed and wooded areas on either side of Pamela Street is the BMRR roadbed.

Del Ray Drive – Near the area at the intersection of Del Ray Drive and Pamela Street, there was a spur off the BMRR that served the Dago Mine. CAUTION: The former Dago Mine and access to that area is on private property, and that property must not be entered without permission of the owner(s).

Sunshine Drive – As you drive up the slope on Sunshine Drive from Montclair Road, the street flattens out in the middle of the block then continues the slope up. That flat spot is the BMRR roadbed.

Walking trail below Trinity Hospital [SIGN] -- The upper portion of the trail that runs beside the two ponds is the old BMRR roadbed, and, on the lower trail, two original stone culverts can be seen with the upper trail (roadbed) on top of them. Those original stone culverts are over 100 years old and still serve as outlets for the water from the ponds above! A great piece of history easily seen and enjoyed.

Behind Levite Jewish Community Center [SIGN] – The beginning portion of the walking trail behind the main building is the BMRR roadbed. NOTE: This is a private-use trail—check with the office for permission to walk the trail. (Installed BMRR sign is in parking lot near Montclair Road.)

Behind office building at 3940 Montclair Road – In the past, a parking lot for this building was constructed on the BMRR roadbed, complete with asphalt (some of which can still be seen), concrete curbs (some of which can still be seen), and wooden steps leading up to the parking lot (still there, but dangerous). Viewable from the current parking lot behind the building is a stone culvert built as part of the BMRR roadbed and still with water flowing through it. That original stone culvert is over 100 years old and still has water flowing through it! A great piece of history easily seen and enjoyed. CAUTION: The BMRR roadbed is private property and must not be entered without permission of the owner.

Morningside Drive [SIGN] – As you drive up the hill on Morningside Drive beside the Crestline Post Office, the street slopes up, flattens out just past the back of the Post Office, then continues the slope up the mountain. At that flat spot, the elevated wooded area on the east side of Morningside Drive is the BMRR roadbed. From the parking lot BEHIND the Post Office building, the raised BMRR roadbed can be seen in the wooded area. (The roadbed also continued across to the west side of Morningside Drive, but it is not as evident on that side due to development.)

Montclair Road at intersection with Country Club Road [SIGN] – BMRR turned here and went across present-day Montclair Road as it entered the Mountain Brook area.

Mountain Brook:

Public right-of-way and private park in triangle at intersection of Montclair Road and Country Club Road (across the street from Ramsay Park) – Homeowners at 3612 Country Club Road have made a nice wooded park out of the BMRR roadbed at this location in the sharp angle of the Country Club Road intersection. One can park at Ramsay Park, walk across the street, remain on public right-of-way before the brick entrance pillars with “3612” on them, and see (and walk on) the raised roadbed of the BMRR. The roadbed is covered with “red rock” gravel that is shale which was super-heated (“cooked”) deep underground before it was uplifted and became part of local coal mining operations – generally not liked by coal miners during the era of the BMRR due to its hardness but today used for road material and landscaping. Plant fossils often can be found in this material.

Oxford Road between Carlisle Road and Sterling Road [SIGN] – The BMRR roadbed is very apparent here in the middle of the block. Driving up from Sterling Road, the street slopes uphill, flattens out for a few feet in the middle of the block, then continues the slope up to Carlisle Road. Standing on the flat spot and looking west, one can readily see the wide area (the BMRR roadbed) between the backyards of the houses that front on Sterling Road and Carlisle Road. At the same place, looking east, the roadbed is not evident because, as has happened in a lot of places along here, the BMRR roadbed has been incorporated into the backyards of the houses, generally through a process called “quit claim deeds.”

Mountain Brook/
Birmingham:

In the Woods Paralleling Carlisle Road – From the Montclair Road intersection with Country Club Road, the BMRR roadbed is the dividing line for the Mountain Brook and Birmingham city limits. Carlisle Road follows the route of the BMRR, but the roadbed cannot generally be seen well along here because it is in the woods down the slope and behind the houses on Carlisle Road, especially on its way to English Village.

Hedona Mine – On the upper side of Carlisle Road (and below Argyle Road) at the deadend of Berwick Road was the Hedona Mine which moved its iron ore down the ravine and onto the BMRR. This area originally was referred to as “Hedona.” **NOTE:** This is private property and must not be entered without permission of the property owners.

English Village [SIGN] – The BMRR roadbed enters English Village at the Birmingham/Mountain Brook city limits, crosses Cahaba Road at Henhouse Antiques, then continues west on Red Mountain Lane. As far as we can tell, there was not a passenger “station” in English Village, but Hedona was a “whistle stop” on the BMRR. There was a loud and dusty loading facility in what became English Village not far from where the Henhouse Antiques building is now. Part of the reason the railroad was finally taken out was complaints by the neighbors about the noise and disruption of the train and the loading facility. There is a photograph from March 1954 of the BMRR tracks in English Village about 4 months before they were removed.

Red Mountain Lane – This street uses the BMRR roadbed. If one drives to the end of the street, just past the condominiums (which are built on the roadbed) the flat area in the woods is the continuation of the BMRR roadbed. A few years ago this wooded area of the BMRR roadbed could be walked all the way to the Elton B. Stephens Expressway – see next item for current status.

Birmingham:

22nd Street South – Recently, two houses have been built on the roadbed next to the Elton B. Stephens Expressway at the very end of 22nd Street South. Driving up to those two houses will put you on the BMRR roadbed.

Woodcrest Lane South / 20th Street South / Woodcrest Road – Generally known as “Woodcrest Road” (but on many maps listed as “Woodcrest Lane South” then becoming “20th Street South” as it goes up the mountainside), this street crosses the BMRR roadbed as the street goes up the hill from 21st Avenue South. The crossing is generally at the upper end of the first curve (left-hand curve) going up the hill. The BMRR roadbed is not very evident probably due to grading and filling when the street was extended from the top down the mountainside.

Richard Arrington Jr. Boulevard South (formerly known as Montgomery Highway and Highway 31) – The BMRR crossed above this major street and above the streetcar tracks leading into Homewood. To get over the street and the streetcar tracks, the BMRR used a railroad trestle/bridge that was built in 1889 and that curved as it came from the south face of Red Mountain (below Warwick Court South and Warwick Drive South) to the north face of Red Mountain. Concrete footings and tall stone abutments related to the bridge are still visible on the east side of Richard Arrington Jr. Boulevard. This gap in the mountain was referred to as **Lone Pine Gap** (see below). On the west side of the street, the stone steps lead up to the elevated portion of the BMRR as it continued below Vulcan Park and has become the Vulcan Trail. (See below for more information about the Vulcan Trail.) In Vulcan Park (part of which is built above the Lone Pine Mine), there is an interpretive sign at the top of the sidewalk overlooking Richard Arrington Jr. Boulevard which mentions the BMRR and its crossing there.

Lone Pine Gap – Lone Pine Gap is a “wind gap” created by the erosive force of wind at a fault in the mountain. 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. (For additional information about gaps such as this, see the Endnote at the conclusion of this driving and walking tour.)

Vulcan Trail (east entrance and parking lot) [SIGN] – The Vulcan Trail is built on the BMRR roadbed, and along here (next to The Club) it hauled the iron ore extracted from the Valley View Mine. Remains of concrete loading structures can still be seen beside the trail. When you walk the Vulcan Trail, be sure to turn and walk on the trail from the trailhead below the Vulcan statue back toward Richard Arrington Jr. Boulevard to the top of the stone steps in order to see the elevation of the BMRR bridge and roadbed as it crossed Richard Arrington Jr. Boulevard. The current western end of the Vulcan Trail can be accessed from 11th Place South. **[SIGN]** The western end of the Vulcan Trail **[SIGN—Sign removed temporarily until downed tree is removed]** terminates before it reaches Green Springs Highway. (There is an unimproved, dirt trail extending past the terminus of the official Vulcan Trail, but the Birmingham Park and Recreation Board sign indicates that that part of the trail is not yet open. The City of Birmingham is hoping to complete that trail on the BMRR roadbed as it goes west to Green Springs Highway.)

Green Springs Highway – The BMRR continued to Green Springs Highway which it crossed just north of the crest of Red Mountain. The BMRR went over Red Mountain west of, and paralleling, Green Springs Highway as it used **Walker Gap** (see below) to get to the other side of Red Mountain. At this point, the BMRR is crossing back to the south side of Red Mountain on its way to the mines in the Oxmoor Valley area and Red Mountain Park. The specific route from the end of the Vulcan Trail to Green Springs Highway is not currently accessible, but, if the Vulcan Trail is completed in the future to Green Springs Highway, the location of the BMRR roadbed at Green Springs Highway will be where the trail terminates.

Walker Gap – For additional information about gaps such as this, see the Endnote at the conclusion of this driving and walking tour.

Birmingham/
West Homewood
area:

After going over Red Mountain through Walker Gap near Green Springs Highway, the BMRR went through part of west Homewood, and connected to the South & North Alabama Railroad. The route took the roadbed through several curves (in order to “hug” the side of the mountain) north of Oxmoor Boulevard and Oxmoor Road before connecting with the South & North Alabama Railroad southwest of Barber Court and West Oxmoor Road. Because of extensive development throughout the years in this part of Birmingham and Homewood, the BMRR roadbed is not generally visible in this area, but the following locations indicate where the roadbed went through this area and where buildings or streets are located now. (There are a few locations, as indicated below, where we think part of the former BMRR roadbed is still visible.)

Green Springs Highway (crest of Red Mountain to Valley Avenue) – (As indicated above, this is Walker Gap.) The BMRR roadbed was where several buildings and businesses are located now along the west side of Green Springs Highway as it approaches the crest of Red Mountain from the north, goes over the mountain, and starts down the south side of the mountain and through the intersection with Valley Avenue.

West Valley Avenue – Before it would have reached the intersection of Green Springs Highway and Valley Avenue, the BMRR curved around the

end of the ridge, ran toward today's I-65, and crossed West Valley Avenue just east of the bridge over I-65.

West Valley Avenue, continued – After crossing I-65, the BMRR roadbed ran parallel to, and just south of, West Valley Avenue through the rear of the Wells Fargo Bank parking lot. The BMRR roadbed was destroyed by the building of the parking lot, but the trees in the wooded area behind the parking lot probably were alongside the BMRR roadbed.

Vulcan Road – After leaving the Wells Fargo Bank parking lot, the roadbed crosses Vulcan Road, but, as is the case in most of this area, it is no longer apparent.

211 Summit Parkway (Crescent Centre) – The eastern half of the Crescent Centre building is situated on the former BMRR roadbed.

Summit Parkway (Comfort Inn) – After leaving the Crescent Centre property, the roadbed crosses Summit Parkway, but, as is the case in most of this area, it is no longer apparent. The Comfort Inn building is situated on the former BMRR roadbed.

West Oxmoor Boulevard (Centurion Square) – The only publicly accessible location where we think part of the BMRR roadbed can be seen is in the woods looking up from the rear driving/parking area behind the Centurion Square buildings. Along most of that rear parking area, half of the roadbed seems to have been cut away to make room for parking, but in the woods up from the eastern end of the parking area, more of the roadbed seems to be intact. CAUTION: The wooded area is private property and must not be entered without permission of the owner.

Aquarius Drive – After leaving the rear of Centurion Square, the roadbed ran along Aquarius Drive which seems to have been built on the roadbed all the way to the intersection of Aquarius Drive and West Valley Avenue. Therefore, as you drive on Aquarius Drive, you are driving on the former BMRR roadbed.

West Valley Avenue at intersection with Montevallo Road – The BMRR crossed West Valley Avenue at Aquarius Drive, and then crossed the northwest part of the intersection of West Valley Avenue and Montevallo Road. The BMRR roadbed went through what are now self-storage buildings located just west of the Montevallo Road/West Valley Avenue intersection.

West Oxmoor Lane – The BMRR roadbed went through the industrial building that is now located at the end of West Oxmoor Lane. The flat area in the woods just to the west of the entrance of that building probably originally was part of the BMRR roadbed. At this point, the BMRR has arrived at the tracks of the South & North Alabama Railroad and is about to connect to those tracks.

West Oxmoor Road – Along the back edge of the first buildings on West Oxmoor Road to the west of West Oxmoor Lane (Mayco Industries property), the BMRR roadbed connected to the South & North Alabama Railroad (see below). (NOTE: The Mayco Industries property is gated and is not accessible to the public.)

BMRR Red Gap Branch Termination at South & North Alabama Railroad –

At this point, as the Red Gap Branch connected to the South & North Alabama Railroad, it has reached its western-most point. (In many places in the

Birmingham area, the South & North Alabama Railroad roadbed is still in use for active railroad tracks.) As was the case with most of the BMRR branches (and continues to be the case with today's active railroads), the BMRR used tracks of other companies' railroad lines to connect some of its branches, to get from the various BMRR branches to iron industry facilities throughout the Birmingham area, and to connect to rail lines taking products beyond the Birmingham area. From here to the southwest, the BMRR will use its own tracks and the tracks of other railroads to reach the mines and iron industry facilities in the Oxmoor Valley. Almost immediately after the Red Gap Branch entered the South & North Alabama Railroad, the BMRR South Branch began at the South & North Alabama Railroad, and, from there, the South Branch ran through present-day Red Mountain Park and then into downtown Bessemer.

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.