



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 Southwest Areas

NORTH BRANCH – Southwest Birmingham, Lipscomb, and Bessemer

As of December 16, 2015

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 North Branch of the BMRR was one of the BMRR’s earliest branches, and it served facilities in the southwest area of Birmingham, in Lipscomb, and in Bessemer. It provided some passenger service in addition to freight service and had a passenger depot located next to the freight depot in Bessemer. It connected the South & North Alabama Railroad (L&N but not BMRR tracks) to the Huntsville Branch No. 1 of the BMRR. As was the case with most of the BMRR branches (and continues to be the case with today’s active railroads), it used the tracks of other companies’ railroad lines 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. Therefore, this driving and walking tour begins on some of those other tracks before arriving at the beginning of the BMRR North Branch in southwest Birmingham. During the BMRR’s era, an L&N passenger station (named “Union Station” and different from the Birmingham Terminal Station) was located in the block next to today’s Amtrak station, and it used the same platform roof structure that is still in use today by Amtrak. The passenger trains on the North Branch probably stopped at the L&N passenger station on their way through the area in downtown Birmingham designated “Reserved for Railroad Reservation” (includes the Railroad Park area).

Length of BMRR North Branch: According to L&N records, the North Branch of the BMRR was **8.02 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: Freight trains of today still use the BMRR North Branch roadbed for their tracks. Because all the locations included in this driving/walking tour are crossings of active railroad tracks, the roadbed will be very evident, which is not the case with some other BMRR branches that no longer have active tracks. Because this branch of the BMRR roadbed contains active tracks, it crosses many streets; the streets featured here are the major streets crossed. CAUTION: Only in a few places listed in this driving/walking tour is there a public area suitable for walking to view the railroad tracks. Railroad right-of-way is private property and must not be walked on.

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

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 railroads in the Birmingham area. This is the case with the entire length of the North Branch. Because active railroad tracks still use the former roadbed of the BMRR North Branch, most of this driving and walking tour involves viewing the BMRR roadbed as one drives across active railroad tracks. Only in a few places is there a public area near the railroad tracks suitable for viewing them.

Birmingham: **CSX Boyles Yard** – NOT DRIVABLE. Other companies' railroad tracks came out of Boyles Yard in north Birmingham and ran (for purposes of this driving and walking tour) through downtown Birmingham in the areas designated "Reserved for Railroad Reservation" (tracks next to Railroad Park) and "Reserved for Mechanical Enterprises." The BMRR used those tracks on its way to the BMRR North Branch.

"Reserved for Railroad Reservation" (tracks next to Railroad Park) – On the map originally laying out the streets in downtown Birmingham, the area from west of Railroad Park to beyond Sloss Furnaces to the east was designated "Reserved for Railroad Reservation" and "Reserved for Mechanical Enterprises." This driving and walking tour begins here with the non-BMRR former L&N South & North Alabama Railroad tracks (but used by the BMRR). It left this area and turned southwest on its way to the beginning of the BMRR North Branch.

Amtrak Station – This tour begins at the Amtrak station in downtown Birmingham that is located in the block next to where the original Union Station was located and uses the same original platform roof structure that was there for Union Station. For passenger service, the BMRR used the L&N Union Station and left there on non-BMRR tracks before reaching BMRR tracks farther along. (NOTE: To view the platform roof structure of the former L&N Union Station, usually a person may go onto the platform when the Amtrak train is arriving or departing.)

6th Avenue South overpass at 8th Street South – The railroad overpass on 6th Avenue South was not a BMRR overpass but was used by the BMRR to get from Boyles Yard and downtown Birmingham to the BMRR North Branch via the L&N South & North Alabama Railroad tracks.

University Boulevard at 6th Street South – The trains and railroad tracks that can be seen going along the northwest side of University Boulevard at 6th Street South are on the non-BMRR former L&N South & North Alabama Railroad roadbed on its way to the beginning of the BMRR North Branch.

Green Springs Avenue west of I-65 – Going west on Green Springs Avenue (sometimes shown on street signs as one word, “Greensprings”), the bridge west of the I-65 interchange goes over the non-BMRR roadbed (but used by the BMRR) on its way to the beginning of the BMRR North Branch.

Graces Gap – After the BMRR left the non-BMRR South & North Alabama Railroad tracks (see “**Beginning of BMRR North Branch**” below), the South & North Alabama Railroad continued on its southerly route through a gap in red Mountain called “Graces Gap.” Even though the BMRR North Branch did not go through historic Graces Gap, information about that gap is included here because of its significance in providing a way for the north/south railroads to get from one side of Red Mountain to the other side. “The gap was named for Baylis Earle Grace, who owned the land and farmed there until it was purchased in 1862 for the first commercial mining and metal-making enterprise in Birmingham.” (Spencer, page 150) In Red Mountain Park, the Graces Gap Overlook observation platform at the end of the Redding-Ishkooda Trail provides a view of this gap in Red 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.)

Birmingham
(Southwest area):

Beginning of BMRR North Branch (in former Magella community) – Between Green Springs Avenue and Martin Luther King Jr. Drive, the BMRR North Branch roadbed has begun by leaving the roadbed of the South & North Alabama Railroad. Historically, this area was known as “Magella.”

NOTE: From here to the end of this driving and walking tour, all locations will be the BMRR North Branch roadbed.

Martin Luther King Jr. Drive at Grace Hill Cemetery (near Nassau Avenue) – The active railroad tracks crossing Martin Luther King Jr. Drive at Grace Hill Cemetery (near Nassau Avenue) are on the BMRR roadbed.

Birmingham
(Mason City/
Southwest area):

12th Street SW between Northland Avenue and Palmer Avenue – The active railroad tracks crossing 12th Street SW between Northland Avenue and Palmer Avenue (near Shadowlawn Memorial Park cemetery) are on the BMRR roadbed.

Birmingham
(Powderly):

24th Street SW/Ishkooda Road – (Both 24th Street SW and Ishkooda Road are listed here because the name changes at the railroad tracks.) The active railroad tracks crossing 24th Street SW/Ishkooda Road between College Avenue and Nabors Road are on the BMRR roadbed.

31st Street SW/Wilson Road – (Both 31st Street SW and Wilson Road are listed here because the name changes at the railroad tracks.) The active railroad tracks crossing 31st Street SW/Wilson Road between Cedar Avenue and Lindbergh Street are on the BMRR roadbed. **NOTE:** If traveling south on 31st Street SW, the first set of railroad tracks you will encounter (near Jefferson Avenue and Bessemer Avenue) are not on the BMRR roadbed – continue on to Cedar Avenue.

Birmingham
(Wenonah):

40th Street SW/Spaulding Road – (Both 40th Street SW and Spaulding Road are listed here because the name changes at the railroad tracks.) The active railroad tracks crossing 40th Street SW/Spaulding Road between Willow Avenue SW and Rutledge Avenue are on the BMRR roadbed. **NOTE:** If traveling south on By Williams Sr. Drive/Midfield Street in order to get to 40th Street SW, the first TWO sets of railroad tracks you will encounter are not on the BMRR roadbed – continue on to Willow Avenue SW. See also next item.

At the 40th Street SW/Spaulding Road railroad crossing – Mineral Avenue paralleling the BMRR roadbed near this railroad crossing can be explored, if desired. Mineral Avenue is interesting going in the northeast direction because it is split into two parts by the railroad tracks. The southeast portion of Mineral Avenue is about two blocks long and can be accessed by turning onto it from Rutledge Avenue. The northwest portion of Mineral Avenue also is short and can be accessed by turning onto it from Willow Avenue SW. Mineral Avenue also runs beside the tracks on the other side of 40th Street SW/Spaulding Road as the tracks go in the southwest direction, but there it is not split into two parts.

Lipscomb:

Avenue H at Avenue K (in Lipscomb) [SIGN] – The active railroad tracks crossing Avenue K at Avenue H in Lipscomb are on the BMRR roadbed. This is one end of a linear park extending for several blocks along the railroad tracks through downtown Lipscomb.

Across the street from Lipscomb City Hall (5512 Avenue H) [SIGN] – The active railroad tracks running beside Avenue H in Lipscomb are on the BMRR roadbed. This is one end of a linear park extending for several blocks along the railroad tracks through downtown Lipscomb and across the street from the City Hall. **NOTE:** There is a set of railroad tracks crossing 5th Street NORTH, but those are not on the BMRR roadbed.

Bessemer:

32nd Street South between Clarendon Avenue and Patton Court – The active railroad tracks crossing 32nd Street South are on the BMRR roadbed. The same is the case for the crossings at **31st Street South** and **30th Street South**.

Dartmouth Avenue at Carolina Terrace and along Carolina Terrace (“Brickyard Y” or “Brickyard Junction”) – The active railroad tracks now enter what was known as the “Brickyard Junction” or “Brickyard Y” and the active tracks still use the northwest side of that triangular “Y” junction. (Such a junction is now referred to as a “wye”.) The tracks along the southern side of that triangular “Y” junction and running alongside Carolina Terrace (see below) are still in place and are connected to the active tracks with a present-day track switch, but they end in a patch of grasses, so they may not be used often.

Carolina Terrace – While in this area, explore the Brickyard Y by driving along Carolina Terrace which runs along the southern side of the triangular “Y” junction. Notice how Carolina Terrace and the tracks running alongside it curve on their way to Dartmouth Avenue. This is typical of a “Y” (now wye) intersection to allow the tracks to intersect at a gradual angle. (See also item immediately above concerning this side of the “Y” triangle.)

Dartmouth Avenue at Carolina Terrace – Notice that the entrance to the business (currently Suburban Software Systems) at the intersection of Carolina Terrace and Dartmouth Avenue is at the southeast point of the “Y” triangle. The

landscape plants (shrubbery) along the northeast edge of the parking lot of the business are planted along the northeast side of the Brickyard Y triangle. Notice that BMRR metal rails and the ends of a few crossties can still be seen embedded in the dirt underneath the landscape plantings (shrubbery).

The NORTH BRANCH continued on into downtown Bessemer with the North Branch and the South Branch (which was coming from Red Mountain and the present-day Red Mountain Park) both using the same tracks from the Brickyard Y on into downtown Bessemer. The South Branch had entered the Brickyard Y at the southeast point of the “Y” triangle.

Because the trains on the North Branch did not end their journey here at the Brickyard Y but instead continued on into Bessemer (or the other direction to Red Mountain), this driving and walking tour will continue into Bessemer along the present-day active tracks which previously were shared by the North Branch and the South Branch. Both the North and South branches passed by the L&N Passenger Depot and the L&N Freight House in downtown Bessemer, thus providing service to those facilities. Both the North Branch and the South Branch then continued to the intersection with the BMRR Huntsville Branch No. 1 and the Blue Creek Extension at the Blue Creek Junction (also a “Y” or “wye” intersection) in Bessemer (see below).

Carolina Avenue at railroad underpass (BMRR North Branch and South Branch) – The active railroad tracks crossing Carolina Avenue and then continuing through the underpass (underneath the other active tracks) are on the BMRR roadbed. (Note the small railroad bridge over the creek beside Carolina Avenue – its cut stones appear to date from the time of the BMRR.)

22nd Street North at 1st Avenue North (BMRR North Branch and South Branch) – The BMRR roadbed has come through the underpass beneath the other active tracks. At this location, the spur leaving the BMRR roadbed and going north was once a segment of the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad’s main line between Birmingham and Manchester, Georgia.

20th Street North at 3rd Avenue North – Former BMRR Passenger Depot and Freight Depot in Bessemer (BMRR North Branch and South Branch) – During the era of the BMRR, a BMRR passenger depot and a BMRR freight depot were located where 3rd Avenue North terminates at 20th Street North in downtown Bessemer. Both of those depots were located in what is now a parking lot between the termination of 3rd Avenue and where 4th Avenue crosses the railroad tracks. From this point, going in a northwest direction and located a block east of 20th Street North, the active railroad roadbed on which the **southwestern-most** set of tracks is located is the BMRR roadbed.

4th Avenue North one block east of 20th Street North (BMRR North Branch and South Branch) – The active railroad roadbed on which the **southwestern-most** set of tracks is located is the BMRR roadbed.

5th Avenue North one block east of 20th Street North (BMRR North Branch and South Branch) – The active railroad roadbed on which the **southwestern-most** set of tracks is located is the BMRR roadbed.

8th Avenue North one block east of 20th Street North (BMRR North Branch and South Branch) – The active railroad roadbed on which the **southwestern-most** set of tracks is located is the BMRR roadbed.

9th Avenue North (Bessemer Super Highway) overpass near 20th Street North (BMRR North Branch and South Branch) – The **southwestern-most** set of active railroad tracks running under this overpass use the BMRR roadbed.

Lowe’s Home Improvement (rear loading dock area – formerly 20th Street North) (BMRR North Branch and South Branch) – From the rear loading dock area of the Lowe’s Home Improvement store, one can view the wye that was the “Blue Creek Junction” where four BMRR branches came together: North and South branches coming in at the southeast point of the triangle, Huntsville Branch No. 1 at the north point of the triangle, and the Blue Creek Extension at the southwest point of the triangle. All parts of this wye are still in use today by active freight trains running on former BMRR wye roadbed. CAUTION: The entire wye is railroad right-of-way, and railroad right-of-way is private property and must not be walked on.

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.

Sources

North Branch information:

Key, Lyle. "Riding the Red Mountain Route" *The Dixie Line*. L&N Historical Society, April 1997. pages 12-15

Graces Gap information:

Spencer, Thomas. *Five Star Trails: Birmingham*. Menasha Ridge Press, 2014. page 150

General gap information:

Lacefield, Jim. *Lost Worlds in Alabama Rocks: A Guide to the State's Ancient Life and Landscapes*. Second Edition. The Alabama Museum of Natural History, 2013. pages 250-251

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.