



Historic Birmingham Mineral Railroad Signs Project
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Historic Birmingham Mineral Railroad (BMRR)

Self-guided “Driving and Walking Tour” – Publicly Accessible Locations of Old Roadbed in the Helena and West Blocton Areas

HELENA AND BLOCTON BRANCH – Helena and Blocton (near present-day West Blocton)

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 Helena and Blocton Branch of the BMRR began north of Helena, Alabama, and served numerous mines of the Cahaba Coal Field and briefly coke ovens at a place called Falliston near Helena. The BMRR Helena and Blocton Branch did not reach into Birmingham, but instead the BMRR used tracks of the South & North Alabama Railroad (S&NA) to get from Birmingham to the beginning of the Helena and Blocton Branch. The actual beginning of the BMRR Helena and Blocton Branch was at Tacoa about a mile north of Helena, and the branch ran southwestward to Gurnee Junction where the Helena and Blocton Branch terminated. Here it connected to other BMRR branches (Brierfield, Blocton, and Birmingham Branch and Woodstock and Blocton Branch) that took the BMRR to Boothton and Blocton (now West Blocton area). The BMRR, also provided passenger service in the Helena area from Tacoa to Blocton with stops along the way and using Southern Railway tracks from Gurnee Junction to Blocton. Other railroads in the area provided passenger service into Birmingham. The passenger depot is still located in today’s Old Town Helena area beside Buck Creek but is not in the original location and has been re-purposed as a restaurant. Because the coke ovens (built about 1876) near Old Town Helena currently are not publicly accessible, they are not part of this driving and walking tour. The South & North Alabama Railroad (S&NA) and its successor the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company (L&N) maintained a major freight and loading yard in Helena near today’s Old Town Helena.

Length of BMRR Helena and Blocton Branch: According to L&N records, the Helena and Blocton Branch of the BMRR was **9.96 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 some of the old roadbed in Helena for their tracks. In locations included in this driving/walking tour where the street or road crosses active railroad tracks, the old railroad roadbed will be very evident, which is not the case in other locations that no longer have active tracks. CAUTION: 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

Birmingham to

Helena:

Background – See the Background section above for information concerning how the BMRR in Helena connected to the railroads in Birmingham.

Old Town Helena:

Helena Road/Alabama Highway 261 – Going south on Helena Road/Alabama Highway 261, as Old Town Helena is approached, the **SECOND** set of active railroad tracks is the former Louisville and Nashville Railroad (L&N) roadbed. The BMRR Helena and Blocton Branch connected with the L&N about 1 mile north (or to the right) at a place called Tacoa.

Railroad Avenue and Helena Road/Alabama Highway 261 – To the **east** of this location, was one of L&N's biggest freight yards in the Birmingham area. Looking **west** from this location, one can see an old iron railroad bridge carrying active freight train tracks crossing over the other active freight train tracks. (See also below.)

Old Town Helena – Take some time to explore the following historical and railroad-related sites in the areas on either side of the BMRR roadbed:

- **Iron railroad bridge** over the L&N roadbed (see also above) still carries active tracks of the former Atlanta, Birmingham and Atlantic Railroad (AB&A) which became part of the L&N and ultimately now CSX.
- **Freight House and Depot [SIGN]** (currently The Depot Deli and Grill) was built in 1872 and originally was located on the south side of the L&N tracks, but now is located on the other side of the L&N roadbed next to Buck Creek and has been re-purposed as a restaurant.
- **Red L&N caboose** houses the City of Helena Welcome Center. At the Amphitheater marque **[SIGN]** near the caboose, a BMRR sign has been installed.
- **Alabama Historic Ironworks Commission historical marker** next to the caboose describes the Central Iron Works.
- **Helena Museum** is located one block south of the railroad tracks at the intersection of 1st Avenue East. Through an impressive array of photographs and artifacts donated and collected locally, this museum tells the history of Helena and Helena's significant involvement in the iron

industry of the Birmingham area. Included are many photographs and artifacts of the Birmingham Mineral Railroad in that area. Take note of the following items displayed in the museum's parking lot:

- Concrete mine entrance portal from the Eureka Number 4 mine. The portal structure was moved to the museum when the Helena High School was built on the mine site.
- Mine tram car from a local coal mine; restored by Bob Yuill. This tram car was assembled from components found during the site work for the Helena High School, which sits directly on the Eureka Number 4 mine site.
- Mining equipment.
- Fossil tree trunks from local coal mines. (These fossils are over 300 million years old.)

NOTE: The museum has limited times when it is open, so check their website or call (205) 369-1448.

- **Buck Creek** (located between the two sets of active railroad tracks) was a waterway used during the BMRR era to provide water for industrial operations in the area.
- **Old Town Helena** contains many shops and restaurants.

Hillsboro

Walking Trail:

Hillsboro Trail [SIGN] – This is a City of Helena walking trail that uses the BMRR roadbed for portions of the trail. The BMRR portion of the trail begins about one-half mile north of Appleford Road in the Hillsboro Community of Helena. The trail goes under Appleford Road where there is a trail entrance, goes under Highway 52, passes by the Helena High School, continues to Stonecreek Drive at Bentmoor Drive where there is another trail entrance, and then continues to the Helena Middle School, where the trail officially ends.

Appleford Road – This street in the Appleford subdivision of the Hillsboro Community crosses over the Hillsboro Trail and, therefore, crosses over the BMRR roadbed. There is access to, and parking for, the trail from Appleford Road.

Concrete Mile Marker – On the west side of the BMRR trail, about one-fourth mile north of Appleford Road, a square mile marker can be seen adjacent to the trail. This most likely is mile 409.

Shelby County Highway 52 near intersection of Hillsboro Parkway – Highway 52 near its intersection with Hillsboro Parkway crosses over the Hillsboro Trail and, therefore, crosses over the BMRR roadbed.

Hillsboro Parkway – On its way from Highway 52 to Helena High School and Helena Middle School, Hillsboro Parkway parallels the BMRR roadbed in the form of the Hillsboro Trail, but the trail is not visible from the Parkway until it emerges out of the woods near Helena High School. At one point, Hillsboro Parkway crosses over the Hillsboro Trail and, therefore, crosses over the BMRR roadbed.

Hillsboro Parkway at “rear” (bus/stadium) entrance to Helena High School – On the northwest side of Hillsboro Parkway (across the street from the “rear” school entrance), the BMRR roadbed can be seen as the Hillsboro Trail.

Stonecreek Drive [SIGN at entrance to trail] – Stonecreek Drive crosses over the Hillsboro Trail and, therefore, crosses over the BMRR roadbed. There is

access to the trail from Stonecreek Drive near its intersection with Bentmoor Drive.

Helena Middle School – The Hillsboro Trail terminates at the Helena Middle School and can be accessed from the north side of the school.

Helena High School: **Helena High School** is built on the site of the former Eureka Number 4 mine which was served by the Atlanta, Birmingham and Atlantic Railroad or the AB&A. (The concrete mine entrance portal from the Eureka Number 4 mine was moved to the Helena Museum when the Helena High School was built on the mine site. See also information above about mine tram car in museum parking lot.)

Highway 91: **Shelby County Highway 91 (Coalmont Road)** – On its way from Helena to Coalmont and to locations beyond Coalmont, the Birmingham Mineral Railroad route roughly paralleled today's Highway 91, crossing it at one point along that route. For most of the way along Highway 91, but the BMRR roadbed is not visible from the highway. Along that route, the BMRR served the various mining camps and operations in that part of the Cahaba Coal Field.

Coalmont and
West Blocton:

[Places where the Blocton portion of the Helena and Blocton Branch can be seen are being researched currently and will be added to this driving and walking tour at a later date.]

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.