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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 Western and Northern Areas**

**HUNTSVILLE BRANCH NUMBER 1 – Bessemer, Hueytown area, Fairfield, Ensley, Pratt City,
ACIPCO, and North Birmingham**

As of March 11, 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 unless otherwise noted. Private property should not be entered without express permission of the owner.

Background: Huntsville Branch No. 1 of the BMRR started in Bessemer at the Blue Creek Junction (a triangular “Y” configuration of tracks still in use today and called a “wye” that enables trains to seamlessly move from one set of tracks to another), then it ran generally parallel to present-day Interstate 20/59 passing near Hueytown, through Fairfield, Ensley, Pratt City, ACIPCO, and North Birmingham then connecting to the southeast portion of Boyles Yard. In Boyles Yard, Huntsville Branch No. 1 could connect to the Louisville and Nashville Railroad (L&N) mainline as well as the BMRR Gate City Branch which ran to Ruffner Mountain and the BMRR Huntsville Branch No. 2 which ran to the northeast out of Birmingham. As indicated below, the entire length of the Huntsville Branch No. 1 continues in use today as tracks of an active freight railroad – CSX Transportation.

Huntsville Branch No. 1 Name: If the Huntsville Branch No. 1 did not go to Huntsville, Alabama, why is it called “Huntsville” Branch No. 1? Research has shown that the route of Huntsville Branch No. 1 (and also Huntsville Branch No. 2) generally followed the route of the old pioneer Huntsville Road (thought to have been the route of an older Indian road). During those earlier times, the route from Birmingham to Huntsville followed present-day Alabama Highway 79 then Alabama Highway 75 then on to Guntersville and Huntsville. (A possible reason was the difficulty of getting up and over, or around, the mountains and ridges north of Birmingham – the route of today’s Interstate 65).

Length of BMRR Huntsville Branch No. 1: According to L&N records, Huntsville Branch No. 1 of the BMRR was **15.74 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 Huntsville Branch No. 1 roadbed for their tracks. Because 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: The designation “[**SIGN**]” indicates that a BMRR site sign has been erected there.)

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 BMRR Huntsville Branch No. 1. Because active railroad tracks still use the former roadbed of the BMRR Huntsville Branch No. 1, 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.

Bessemer: **Lowe’s Home Improvement on 19th Street North** – Huntsville Branch No. 1 began behind the loading dock area in the back of present-day Lowe’s Home Improvement store in Bessemer. From that loading dock area, one can view the still-active Blue Creek Junction (a triangular “Y” called a “wye” – see above) where four BMRR branches came together: Huntsville Branch No. 1, Blue Creek Extension, North Branch, and South Branch. At the north point of the triangle of tracks, Huntsville Branch No. 1 began, and the present-day active freight train tracks that use the old roadbed pass underneath Interstate 20/59, which can be seen from the rear of the Lowe’s loading dock area.

18th Avenue North (portion NORTHEAST of U. S. Pipe facility) – To reach this location, one should exit Interstate 20/59 at Exit 113 and travel southwest on 18th Avenue North. After passing over Valley Creek, 18th Avenue is blocked due to its entering private property. At that location, the BMRR roadbed (with active tracks on it) is the west-most set of tracks. (**CAUTION:** This is private property and must not be entered without permission of the owner.)

Near Hueytown: **Davey Allison Boulevard** – Two sets of tracks cross Davey Allison Boulevard, and the BMRR roadbed is the east-most tracks.
Woodward Road – If you drive on Davey Allison Boulevard toward the interstate, you can turn onto Woodward Road. Traveling on Woodward Road you will be passing through the site of the former Woodward Works (iron works). (**CAUTION:** This is private property and must not be entered without permission of the owner.)

Woodward Road – Multiple Railroad Tracks – Traveling northwest on Woodward Road, ignore the seldom-used tracks that lead into a private facility (at the sharp curve in the road). Just after the next sharp curve to the left, there are multiple tracks (sidings and mainlines) crossing Woodward Road (which becomes “County Road” then “Koppers” after the tracks). In the multiple sets of tracks, the BMRR roadbed is the second tracks traveling northwest on Woodward Road.

Allison-Bonnett Memorial Drive (Valley Road) – The BMRR roadbed is the east-most tracks at this site of multiple tracks.

Fairfield: **Entrance to US Steel Fairfield Works** – After traveling along the entrance road from Valley Road, multiple tracks cross the entrance road just prior to the main plant. The BMRR roadbed is the third tracks (next-to-last tracks) when driving west toward the facility.

Crawford Street – The BMRR roadbed is the second tracks when traveling northwest on Crawford Street (after having driven under the Interstate).

Ensley: **36th Street Ensley** – The BMRR roadbed is under the 36th Street bridge that connects Ensley and Wylam. As viewed from the bridge, the BMRR roadbed is the middle set of tracks. (CAUTION: This is a busy bridge, and caution must be exercised when on it.)

20th Street Ensley (BirmingPort Road) (Alabama Highway 269) – The BMRR roadbed is under the 20th Street bridge in Ensley. This also is the site of the former TCI Ensley Steel Works. As viewed from the bridge, the BMRR roadbed is toward the middle of the multiple sets of tracks. (CAUTION: This is a busy bridge, and caution must be exercised when on it.)

Avenue E Ensley – The BMRR roadbed crosses the northern part of Avenue E near downtown Ensley; however, this northern portion of the street is gated, and the BMRR roadbed is not accessible due to being on private property (Vulcan Materials). (CAUTION: This is private property and must not be entered without permission of the owner.)

Avenue F Ensley – The BMRR roadbed crossed Village Creek on one of the railroad trestles that can be seen looking northwest along Village Creek from the Avenue F bridge over the creek.

Pratt City: **9th Street Pratt** – The BMRR roadbed is the last set of tracks (northwest-most tracks) at the deadend of 9th Street Pratt.

Avenue F Pratt – The BMRR roadbed is the north-most tracks crossing Avenue F Pratt.

Avenue G Pratt – The BMRR roadbed is the north-most tracks crossing Avenue G Pratt.

Avenue T Pratt – The BMRR roadbed is the north-most tracks crossing Avenue T Pratt.

Avenue U Pratt – The BMRR roadbed is the north-most tracks crossing Avenue U Pratt.

Avenue V Pratt – The BMRR roadbed is the north-most tracks crossing Avenue V Pratt.

Avenue W Pratt – The BMRR roadbed is the north-most tracks crossing Avenue W Pratt.

US Highway 78 (Bankhead Highway) – There are multiple bridges over railroad tracks on US Highway 78 between Interstate 20/59 and the Pratt City area. The

BMRR roadbed runs under the northwest-most of those bridges nearest to the intersection of Pratt Highway (2nd Street Pratt). The BMRR roadbed is the north-most set of tracks under that bridge. (CAUTION: This is a busy bridge, and caution must be exercised when on it.)

ACIPCO

(North Birmingham): **16th Street North [SIGN]** – The north-most through tracks (not sidings) between 27th Avenue North and 29th Avenue North is the roadbed of the BMRR. These are the present-day CSX Transportation tracks, and the through tracks to the south of them are the present-day Norfolk Southern tracks. From the early days of Huntsville Branch No. 1, the track charts for the BMRR show “ACIPCO” as a major location and siding on the BMRR Huntsville Branch No. 1. (ACIPCO is American Cast Iron Pipe Company.) The BMRR roadbed still runs beside that facility in the form of the active CSX tracks. (CAUTION: ACIPCO and the BMRR roadbed running beside it are private property and must not be entered without permission.)

North Birmingham: **18th Street North** – The north-most tracks between 27th Avenue North and 29th Avenue North is the roadbed of the BMRR.

24th Street North – The north-most tracks between 27th Avenue North and 29th Avenue North is the roadbed of the BMRR.

25th Street North [SIGN] – The north-most tracks between 27th Avenue North and 29th Avenue North is the roadbed of the BMRR. **NOTE**: On the southeast side of 25th Street at this location and beside the current active tracks, a metal rail of the former BMRR tracks can be seen sticking out from the edge of the asphalt. (When the modern railroad roadbed thickness was increased in order to handle present-day heavier trains, the new roadbed often was added on top of the original BMRR roadbed that still can be seen in many places with its metal rails and ballast rock under the present-day railroad roadbed.)

26th Street North (US Highway 31) – The street overpass between Finley Boulevard (25th Avenue North) and 30th Avenue North crosses over the roadbed of the BMRR. They are the north-most tracks under that overpass. (CAUTION: This is a busy bridge, and caution must be exercised when on it.)

27th Street North [SIGN] – The tracks between 28th Avenue North and 29th Avenue North is the roadbed of the BMRR. **NOTE**: On the southwest side of 27th Street at this location and beside the current active tracks, two metal rails of the former BMRR tracks can be seen sticking out from the edge of the asphalt. (When the modern railroad roadbed thickness was increased in order to handle present-day heavier trains, the new roadbed often was added on top of the original BMRR roadbed that still can be seen in many places with its metal rails and ballast rock under the present-day railroad roadbed.)

29th Street North (west portion – see also next item) – As it leaves 29th Avenue North and makes a turn, 29th Street North passes over the BMRR roadbed (active CSX freight tracks) and runs alongside the BMRR roadbed for approximately two blocks. NOTE that 29th Street North is not marked along here and the street eventually becomes 29th Avenue North.

29th Street North (east portion – see also previous item) – 29th Street North picks up again east of the previous part of 29th Street North, and it crosses the BMRR roadbed just north of 29th Avenue North.

Fred L. Shuttlesworth Drive [Temporarily detoured during construction of street overpass above BMRR roadbed and active tracks] – The BMRR roadbed crosses Fred L. Shuttlesworth Drive between 29th Court North and 30th Avenue (30th Court) North.

30th Court North – The BMRR roadbed is visible to the south as one drives along 30th Court North between Fred L. Shuttlesworth Drive and 33rd Street North.

33rd Street North (Best viewed driving north from 27th Avenue North or 29th Avenue North to the deadend of 33rd Street North at the railroad tracks.) – The BMRR roadbed contains two sets of tracks at this location. The north-most track is the mainline and the south-most track is a siding (which seems to have been there during the period of the BMRR because the switch controlling the siding is a very old one. The switch seems to still be in operation controlling the siding, and the brand name on the switch is “Weir.” Notice the pile of removed (probably BMRR) crossties and old metal rails next to the tracks at the deadend of 33rd Street North. **(NOTE:** While in this area, notice the historical marker and the signs denoting the “March Route for Moral Justice” commemorating the Civil Rights struggle in Birmingham. They are located at the Rev. Fred Shuttlesworth Bethel Baptist Church at the corner of 33rd Street North and 29th Avenue North.)

30th Avenue North between 34th Street North and 35th Street North – [NOTE: According to the street signs, 30th Avenue North runs along both the north and south sides of the railroad tracks (BMRR roadbed). However, some maps show the portion of 30th Avenue along the north side of the railroad tracks as being an extension of 35th Street North. CAUTION: The portion of 30th Avenue along the south side of the railroad tracks terminates in a deadend.] The BMRR roadbed contains two sets of tracks at this location. The north-most track is the mainline and the south-most track is a siding (which seems to have been there during the period of the BMRR because the switch controlling the siding is a very old one – see the 33rd Street North item above for the switch information). **NOTE:** This is the last place where the BMRR Huntsville Branch No. 1 roadbed can be seen before it enters the CSX Boyles Yard which is private property (see next item).

CSX Boyles Yard – NOT DRIVABLE. The BMRR Huntsville Branch No. 1 ended at the southeast portion of Boyles Yard. In Boyles Yard, Huntsville Branch No. 1 could connect to the Louisville and Nashville Railroad mainline as well as to the BMRR Gate City Branch which ran to Ruffner Mountain and to the BMRR Huntsville Branch No. 2 which ran northeast out of Birmingham. The northern portion of Boyles Yard is located in a major “water gap” – see Endnote for an explanation of water gaps.

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.