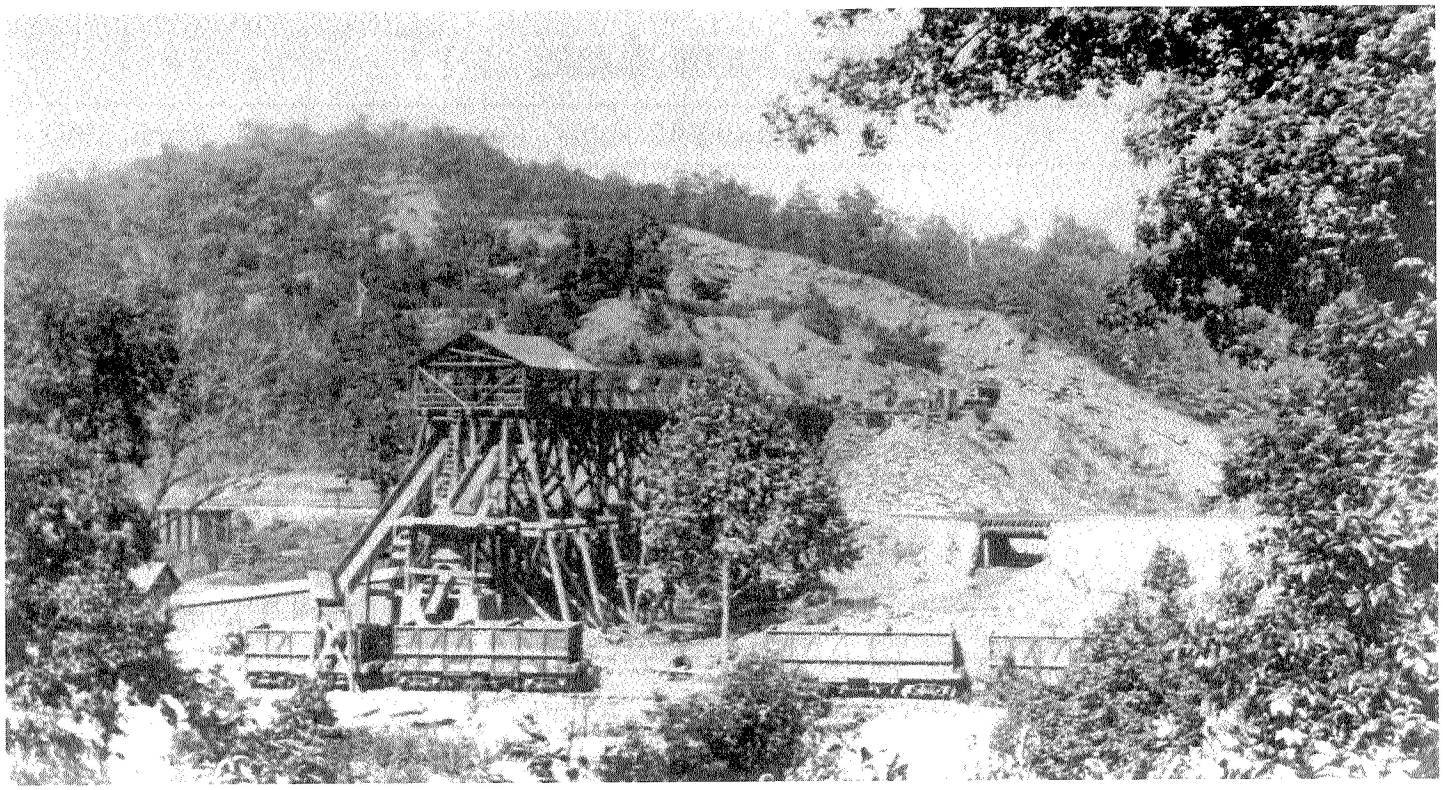


This photo from the Republic Steel Company Scrapbook is labeled "Tipple at Graces Gap, Republic's Spaulding Red Ore Mine, circa 1900." Birmingham Mineral's Red Gap Branch is shown running beneath the tipple along the base of Red Mountain. The ore gons spotted for loading in front of the tipple are on a spur alongside L&N's main line. To the viewer's right—geographically south—the Red Gap Branch connected with the main line and the South Branch at the junction known as "Graces." *(Archives Department collection, Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, Alabama)*

BIRMINGHAM MINERAL RAILROAD'S RED MOUNTAIN ROUTE

Part I of III

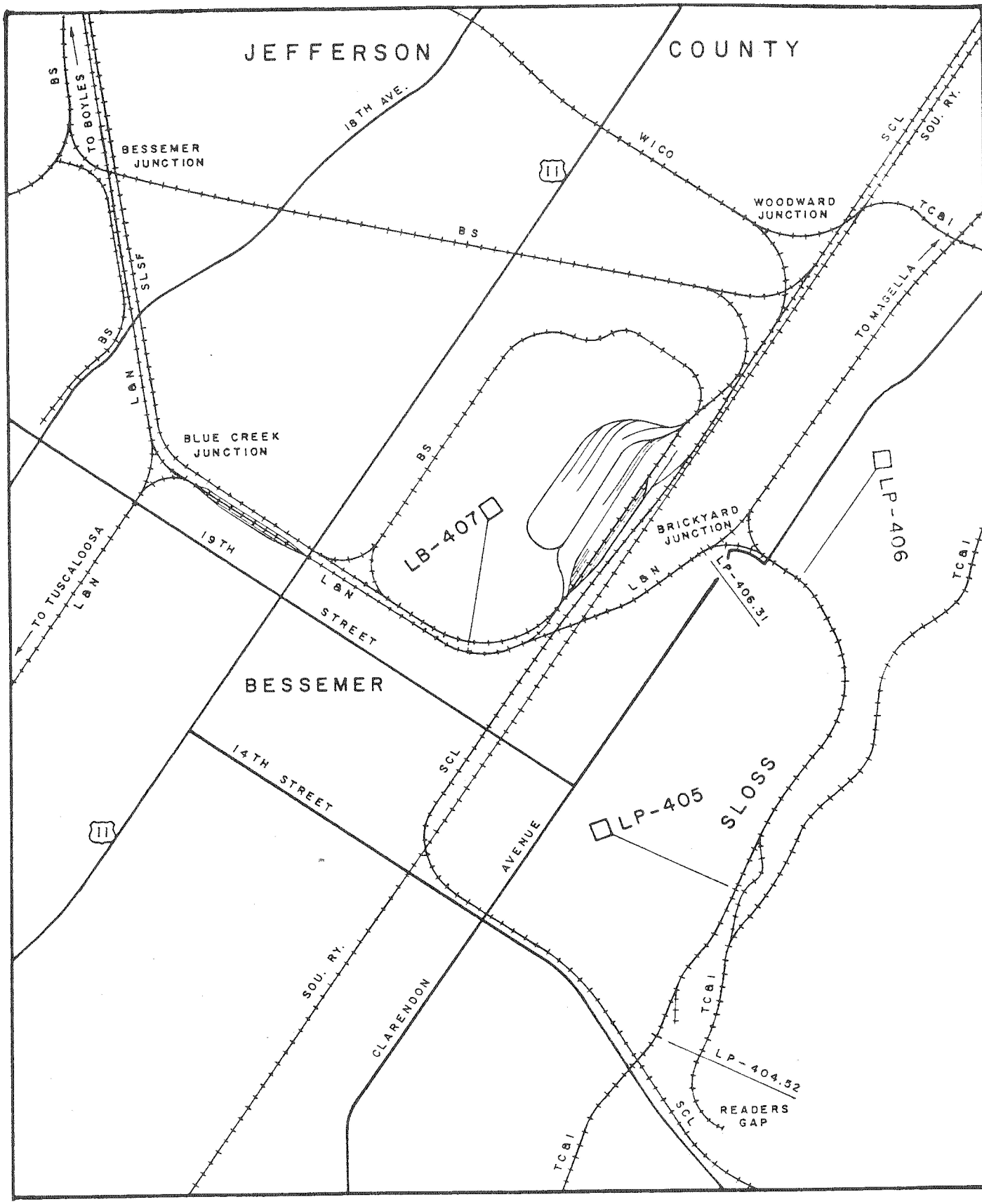
by Lyle Key

For some reason, abandoned rail lines hold a special fascination for most railfans, and while growing up in Birmingham I became intrigued by the remaining traces of the rail lines that had once run along Red Mountain. In the late '50's and early '60's I hiked over most of the right-of-way from Green Springs Highway to the Atlanta Highway, and for some time now I have been doing intermittent research on the long abandoned mineral branches that once extended from Trussville on the east to Ferro (near Bessemer), on the west. The following article covers only those lines of Birmingham Mineral Railroad which were located on or along Red Mountain.

In 1884 when Birmingham, Alabama, was only beginning to develop as an industrial giant, the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company ("L&N") formed a subsidiary company named the Birmingham Mineral Railroad Company ("Birmingham Mineral") to serve the fledgling iron and steel industry of the Magic City. As its name implies, Birmingham Mineral was created to serve the iron ore and coal mines around Birmingham and to haul ore and coal to the blast furnaces that were springing up around the City. The Birmingham Mineral's Declaration of Incorporation was filed with the Secretary of State of Alabama on January 7, 1884, and its Certificate of Incorporation was granted on March 19, 1884.

In those days the ore for Birmingham's furnaces came from nearby Red Mountain which loomed over the south side of the City. The mountain's name came from the deep red color of the iron ore it held in abundance. This is the story of the lines that served the ore mines on the Mountain and formed Birmingham Mineral's Red Mountain Route.

L&N provided the construction forces for its subsidiary, and on January 12, 1884, they began work on the first Birmingham Mineral lines. The North Branch turned out of the S&NA main about three miles south of Birmingham at Magella (in the 1887 edition of *Poor's Manual of Railroads*, the latter location


JEFFERSON
COUNTY
BESSEMER
JUNCTION
TO BOYLES
BS
18TH AVE.
WICO
SCL
SOU. RY.
WOODWARD
JUNCTION
TCRI
TO MAGELLA
SLSF
L&N
BLUE CREEK
JUNCTION
LB-407
LP-406
BRICKYARD
JUNCTION
LP-406.31
TO TUSCALOOSA
19TH
STREET
BESSEMER
14TH STREET
AVENUE
LP-405
SLOSS
CLARENDON
LP-404.52
READERS
GAP
11

was spelled "May-Ella." In the 1888 edition the station name appeared as "Mag-Ella") and ran west along the north base of Red Mountain to Sloss, a distance of nine miles. The South Branch turned out of the S&NA main line about four miles south of Birmingham at Graces and ran west along the southern base of Red Mountain to Redding, a distance of 2.71 miles. In *The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama*, Ethel Armes stated that the South Branch was constructed to haul ore for the then new Mary Pratt Furnace.

These initial Birmingham Mineral lines were opened on June 1, 1884. Both branches were laid with 58 pound rail surfaced on dirt and had a broad gauge of five feet. They were converted to standard gauge in conjunction with L&N's general Southern gauge change between May 28 and May 30, 1886. In 1895 and 1896 the railroad began using slag as ballast.

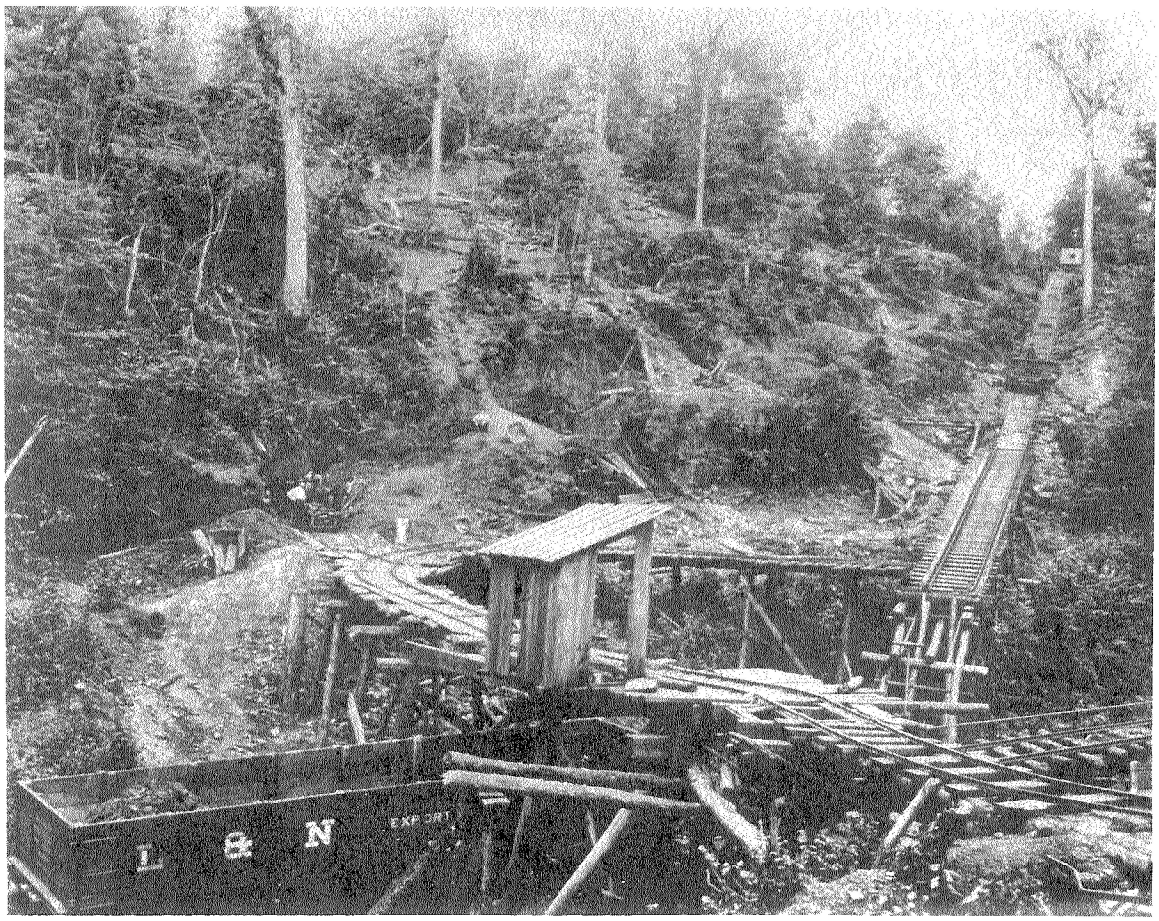
In 1887 L&N track gangs extended the South Branch west from Redding toward Reader's Gap. Reader's Gap is just south of Bessemer on State Highway 150, and Atlantic Coast Line Railroad Company's ("ACL") main line between Bessemer and Parkwood also used this pass through Red Mountain. At Reader's Gap the South Branch looped around to the north side of Red Mountain and met the original North Branch at Sloss.

A new mile-long grade was prepared between Sloss and the point where the North Branch turned south to ascend Red Mountain. This new grade was about 15 feet south of the North Branch grade and about five feet lower. The old alignment of the North Branch was abandoned and the track on the new grade became part of the South Branch. The wye formed at the new junction of the North and South Branches was named "Brick Yard Y." Brick Yard Y thus became the west end of the North Branch which was reduced to a length of 8.02 miles. When the South Bessemer dummy line was built, it passed under a short trestle on the South Branch just south of Brick Yard Y.

The South Branch was then extended northwest to Blue Creek Junction in Bessemer where it would connect with other Birmingham Mineral lines from Boyles on the east and Blocton Junction on the west. A frame building covered with corrugated iron was constructed at the corner of 3rd Avenue and 20th Street to serve as the Bessemer Depot. The new section of the South Branch between Redding and Blue Creek Junction was 8.88 miles long.

Between Brick Yard Y and Blue Creek Junction the South Branch crossed The Alabama Great Southern Railroad ("AGS"). The crossing was initially at grade, but in 1916 AGS double tracked this line, raised it on a fill, and installed a steel bridge over the South Branch. In about 1888 the North Bessemer dummy line was built across the Bessemer Yard. This created ten at-grade crossings in the yard, but they were eliminated around 1902 with the construction of a steel viaduct. Two excellent pictures of that structure appear on pages 78 and 79 of Bill Hudson's *Street Railways of Birmingham.* Around 1910 ACL predecessor Atlanta, Birmingham & Atlantic Railroad Company ("AB&A") laid its line through Bessemer and crossed the South Branch at grade just north of the AGS crossing.

With the completion of the South Branch, the iron ore rich section of Red Mountain between Grace's Gap and Reader's Gap was completely encircled



This photo from the Republic Steel Company scrapbook is labeled "Delivery of ore to L&N [actually to Birmingham Mineral], circa 1900." One wonders if something akin to this incredible tramway inspired Disney World's "Runaway Mine Train" thrill ride! *(Archives Department collection, Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, Alabama)*

by the S&NA main on the east, the South Branch on the south and west, and the North Branch on the north.

The South Branch served ore mines at Ishkooda, Smythe, Redding, Reader's Gap, and Sloss, and the first ore workings on the branch were at Ishkooda. The track serving the mines at Ishkooda turned out of the South Branch about a quarter mile west of the S&NA junction at Graces and proceeded up through a ravine. Operations over this spur were apparently very difficult, and another spur was built up the mountain from Smythe. A depot was erected at Smythe and remained there until 1903 when all mining in the Fossil area (later known as Wenonah) was transferred to the north side of the mountain. At that time the depot at Smythe was moved to Redding.

L&N's valuation notes of 1917 state that the North Branch was constructed to "handle ore from Spaulding, Fossil, and Sloss, all on the north side of the mountain of ore." A small depot was erected at Woodward Junction, where the North Branch crossed Woodward Iron Company's ("Woodward") rail line to its Red Mountain ore mines, and a system of tracks was laid there to accommodate interchange traffic. A spring fed water tank was also installed at Woodward Junction, but it was moved to Winetka after the extensive mining operations in the area caused the spring at Woodward Junction to dry up. The South Bessemer dummy line, later the South Bessemer streetcar line, crossed the North Branch at grade on the west side of Lipscomb.

At various times Birmingham Mineral added several relatively short branches off the North and South Branches to serve ore mines on the west end of Red Mountain. In 1887 a 1.52 mile long section of track for the Fossil and Spring Gap Branches was completed between the junction with the North Branch at Winetka and the mines at Fossil. AGS had built the first spur to the Fossil area, and it closely paralleled the Birmingham Mineral line from Winetka to Fossil. Birmingham Mineral apparently captured the lion's share of the Fossil ore traffic, however, and in 1894, AGS abandoned its competing trackage. In conjunction with an elaborate pageant on the evening of November 10, 1916, Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company's ("TCI") Fossil mining camp was renamed "Wenonah."

In 1903 the Fossil and Spring Gap Branches were extended 1.64 miles east from Fossil to Steinman Mine. East of Steinman Mine, Birmingham Mineral had operating rights over a 1,100 foot long segment of track owned by Steinman Mine. The Steinman trackage in turn connected with TCI trackage which extended east another 4,000 feet to Ishkooda No. 14. At the end of that TCI trackage, one was only about 1.3 miles west of the S&NA main line at Spaulding.

The east-west portions of the Fossil and Spring Gap Branches and the connecting industry trackage extended almost four miles along the north slope of Red Mountain and formed a parallel route between the North and South Branches. In 1888 a half mile long spur was also built from Spaulding Junction on the North Branch to Red Mountain Iron and Coal Company's ("RMIC") mine in the Spaulding area. RMIC's mine was across the S&NA main from Spaulding Mine.

Between 1902 and 1904 Birmingham Mineral added yet another branch in the Wenonah - Ishkooda area: the 1.60 mile long Songo Branch between Spring Gap No. 1 on the Spring Gap Branch and Skyhy. Skyhy was apparently the location of Woodward's Songo Mine, and as the name implies, it was virtually on top of the mountain. The Songo Branch consisted of three east-west segments to the south of the Spring Gap Branch, and it was built on a rugged three percent grade. L&N's valuation notes from 1917 state that "several switch backs" were used on Fossil Hill, and switch backs were apparently used to facilitate the hard climb to Skyhy.

Further to the west, in the Bessemer area, Birmingham Mineral built some similar branches off of its South Branch. In 1889 the railroad built the 1.51 mile long Muscoda Branch from the junction of Sloss to Muscoda. The Muscoda Branch ran southwest with a spur back to the east. In 1897 the 2.47 mile long Reader's Gap Branch was built west along the south side of Red Mountain from Reader's to Ferro. Ferro was the location of TCI's Potter Mine, and it would be the west end of Birmingham Mineral's Red Mountain Route.

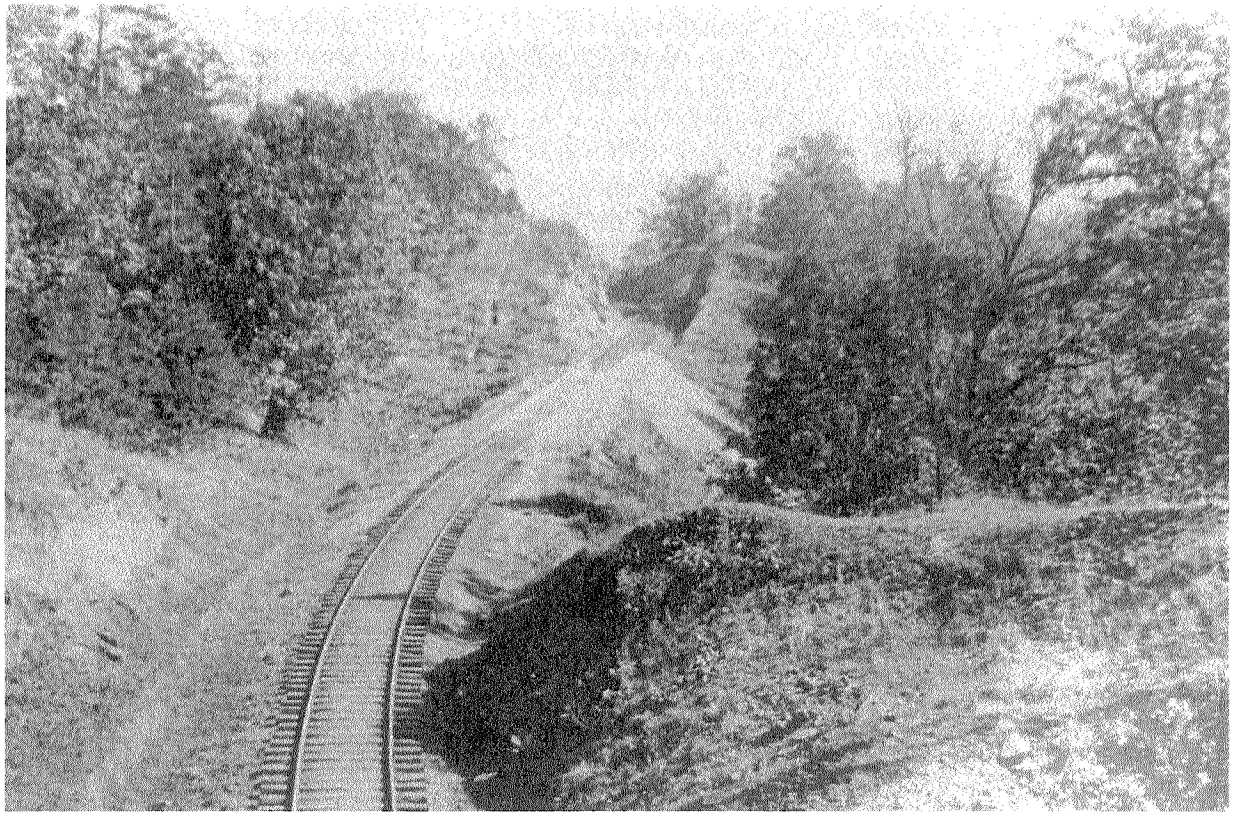
In 1909 ACL predecessor AB&A built its line into Bessemer, and L&N's valuation notes describe how that construction affected the Reader's Gap Branch:

> "In 1909 the AB&ARR built its line into Bessemer and in order to get through Reader's Gap, it was necessary to change the L&N line leading up on Raimund Hill. This line turned out a few hundred feet north of the depot and passing behind the building ascended the hill on a long eight degree curve. This connection was moved about 2000 feet south and a trestle built over the excavation for the AB&ARR, and the space occupied by the original line was graded down some 10 feet and the AB&A RR laid thereon."

West of the S&NA main line there was thus an incredible network of rail lines on and along Red Mountain. You will recall that Woodward also operated a rail line to its ore mines on the Mountain near Lipscomb, and Birmingham Mineral's North Branch was closely paralleled by the AGS's double-track main line, the AB&A main line, and the South Bessemer streetcar line!

Now that we have fully covered the construction of Birmingham Mineral's Red Mountain Route west of the S&NA main line, we'll go back in time to 1887 and review the railroad's construction activity on the east side of Birmingham. That year saw the building of Birmingham Mineral's 6.46 mile long Gate City Branch which extended southeast from Boyles to Woodlawn, Gate City, and Red Gap. Birmingham Mineral was one of several rail carriers that crossed Red Mountain at Red Gap. The Gate City Branch was on the east side of Red Gap and to the west lay parallel tracks of the 37 Irondale streetcar line, AGS (double track), Central of Georgia Railroad Company ("CofG") and Southern Railway Company ("Southern") (paired track), and Seaboard Air Line Railway Company ("SAL").

In 1888 and 1889 the Gate City Branch was extended northeast from Red Gap to the Ruffner Ore Mines, Vanns, and Trussville, a distance of 10.67 miles. This segment of the Gate City Branch ran along the south side of Red Mountain, and north of U.S. Highway 11, the railroad closely followed the current alignment of Interstate 59. The entry into Trussville



This shot of Birmingham Mineral trackage on Red Mountain was taken just after the turn of the century. The precise location is unknown, but the author believes it was somewhere on the section of the Red Gap Branch just west of where Vulcan stands today. Back toward the cut in the center of the photo, it appears that some new fill material has been brought in to repair damage from a slide or washout. *(Archives Department collection, Birmingham Public Library, Birmingham, Alabama)*

was along a route similar to the one followed by the access road between I-59 and that town. The Gate City Branch crossed over Highway 11 just west of Roebuck Plaza at Sadler's Gap, and the old abutments for the railroad bridge survived until the mid-'70's. They were then obliterated by the extensive road work occasioned by the construction of I-59.

After completing the Trussville extension of the Gate City Branch, Birmingham Mineral began to lay rail west from Red Gap along the south side of Red Mountain. This new line was known as the Red Gap Branch, and its junction with the Gate City Branch became Red Gap Junction. Just west of Red Gap Junction, the Red Gap Branch crossed over the previously mentioned streetcar track and five railroad tracks via a frame trestle and multispan girder bridge that together spanned 272 feet.

The Red Gap Branch followed the south side of Red Mountain as far as 20th Street (U.S. Highway 31) where it crossed over to the north slope. The 20th Street crossing was originally at grade, but a 72 foot cut for the roadway was excavated in 1910 to reduce the steep 20th Street grade for general use and for the proposed 39 Edgewood streetcar line. This change in the elevation of 20th Street necessitated construction of a 50 foot long girder bridge for the Birmingham Mineral line. On the west side of the 20th Street crossing, the Red Gap Branch ran just below the site where the Vulcan statue stands today. As the Red Gap Branch continued west along the north side of Red Mountain, train crews had a beautiful view of the Magic City down below. The line proceeded west past Valley View Mine, Green Springs Nos. 1 and 2, and Spaulding Mine. Just south of Spaulding, the Red Gap Branch ended at its junction with the S&NA main line at Graces. The Red Gap Branch thus extended between Red Gap Junction and Graces, a distance of 10.22 miles. This branch of the Birmingham Mineral was completed in 1890.

The west end of the Red Gap Branch appears in a picture on page 46 of Ethel Armes previously mentioned book, *The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama*. The main subject of that picture is Spaulding Mine, but the Red Gap Branch can be seen running along a hillside and under a tipple. The Red Gap Branch's girder bridge spanning 20th Street and the 39 Edgewood streetcar line can also be seen in a picture on page 128 of Bill Hudson's, *Street Railways of Birmingham*.

In those days, Graces was thus a veritable crossroads of commerce with the S&NA main line running north and south, the Red Gap Branch extending to the east, and the South Branch extending to the west. A fairly large frame building was built there in 1904 to serve as the passenger station and agent's living quarters. L&N's valuation notes contain the following passage concerning the track layout at Graces:

> "The connection at Graces was by an ordinary switch, but later on several tracks were laid forming a yard at that place, and on account of the heavy ore movements from the Red Gap Branch, it was arranged in 1903 to place in the main track of the S&N

Table 85—BIRMINGHAM, TUSCALOOSA, BESSEMER AND BLOCTON.

49	101	Mls	November 2, 1929.	48	102
P M	A M	....	LEAVE] [ARRIVE	A M	P M
*2 40	*9 45	0	+...Birmingham...δ	11 10	4 25
- -	.....	....	.....Graces.....δ	- -	.....
2 56	.....	....	.....Redding.....	10 54	.....
3 09	.....	....	.....Sloss.....δ	10 42	.....
3 14	10 10	12	+....Bessemer....δ	10 36	3 58
3 33	- -	22	.....Adger.....δ	1008	- -
3 42	10 35	24	.....Johns.....δ	1005	3 35
3 46	- -	25	.....Sumter.....	1001	- -
3 55	10 47	30	arr....Yolande δ..lve.	*9 46	3 22
4 55	11 35	62	arr.+Tuscaloosa δ lve.	*8 50	*2 35
4 13	A M	37	.....Chamblee.....	9 30	P M
4 19	.....	39	....Blocton Junction..δ	9 24	.....
4 39	.....	45	arr.....Blocton δ..lve.	905	.....
4 44	.....	45	lve.....Blocton....arr.	905	.....
4 56	.....	50	arr.....Ardela.....lve.	8 47	.....
5 01	.....	52	lve...Belle Ellen...arr.	8 42	.....
5 07	.....	50	lve.....Ardela.....arr.	8 36	.....
5 13	.....	56	arr....Seymour....lve.	8 30	.....
5 18	.....	57	lve....Coleanor....lve.	8 26	.....
5 22	.....	58	arr.....Piper.....lve.	*8 21	.....
5 29	.....	56	lve....Seymour....arr.	8 13	.....
5 33	.....	62	.....Garnsey.....	809	.....
5 47	.....	67	....Gurnee Junction..δ	7 53	.....
6 17	.....	77	.....Tacoa.....δ	7 27	.....
6 37	.....	88	.....Oxmoor.....	7 10	.....
6 41	.....	89	.....Graces.....δ	7 06	.....
6 55	.....	94	+...Birmingham...δ	*6 55	.....
P M	.....	....	ARRIVE] [LEAVE	A M	.....

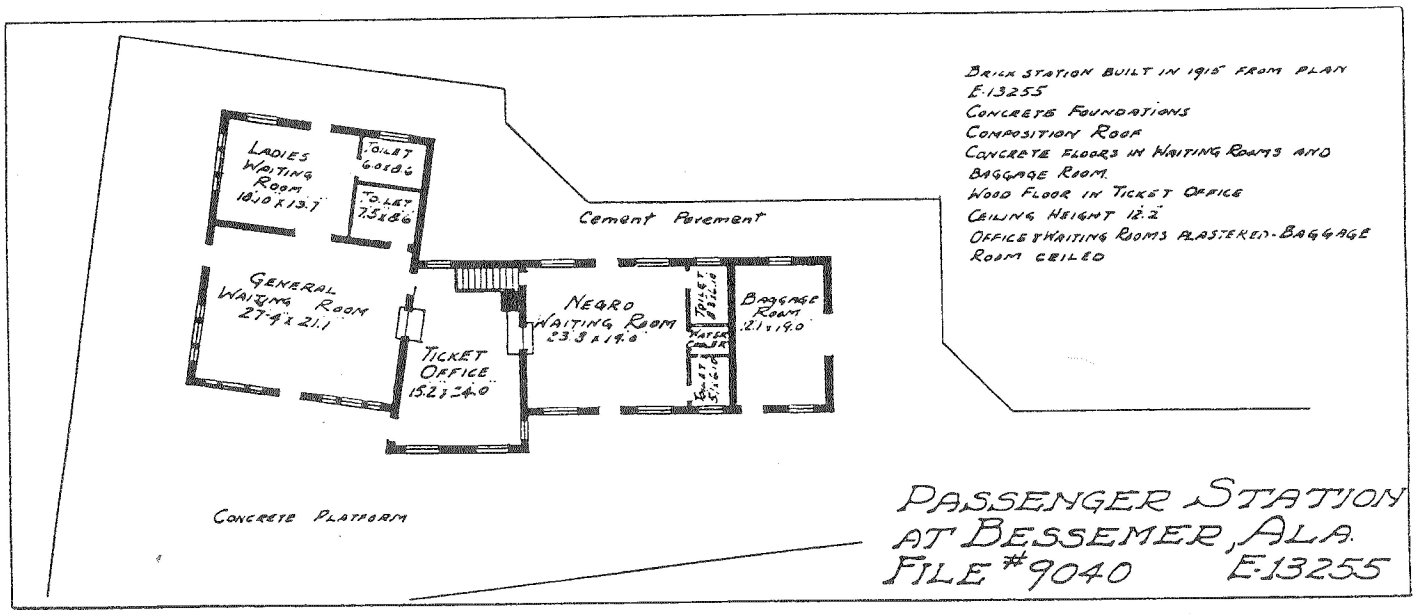
Division two double combination crossovers with moveable point frogs so that ore trains could head straight across the main line to the South Branch, thence to the furnaces."

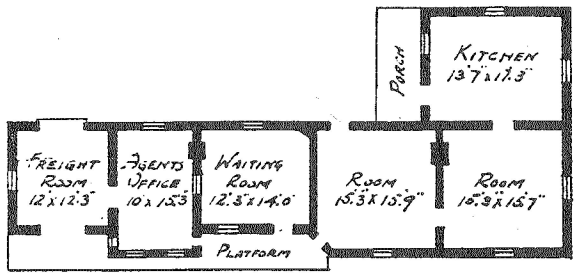
Some of the depots on the Red Mountain Route have already been mentioned, and there were several others. The most imposing building on the Route was the "new" brick and concrete passenger station that replaced the original Bessemer depot in 1916. After World War II this handsome structure was sold to Zeigler Meat Packing Company for use as a warehouse. It was torn down in the early 1950's.

At the time of the 1917 valuation project, type IV frame depots were located at Reader's and Sloss on the South Branch, Wenonah on the Fossil and Spring Gap Branches, and Woodlawn on the Gate City Branch. The depots at Reader's and Sloss were retired in 1924 and 1938, respectively. The Woodlawn depot was eventually sold to a local business called "Rain Drain" and is still standing. A simple type I passenger shelter was located at Spaulding Junction on the North Branch, and boxcar bodies were used as makeshift shelters or depots at Grasselli on the North Branch and Ruffner and Trussville on the Gate City Branch.

Cypress water tanks (24' diameter x 16' high on timber towers with capacities of 50,000 gallons each) were located at Hichmans on the Gate City Branch, Wares on the South Branch, and Winetka on the North Branch. Those tanks were retired as follows: Winetka in 1922, Wares in 1923, and Hichmans in 1933.

Part II in next issue of ***The Dixie Line.***



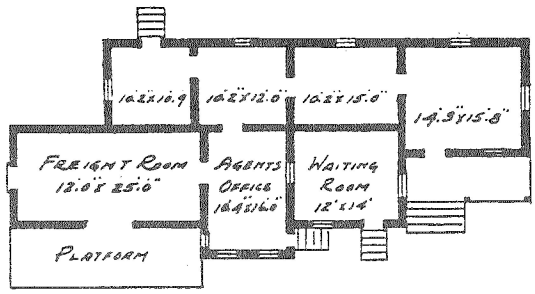


FLOOR PLAN

Frame Station built in 1903.
Wood Foundations
Weather-boarded
Tin Roof
Interior ceiled except Freight Room.

SOLD UNDER A.F.E. #5352 DATED 3/13/29

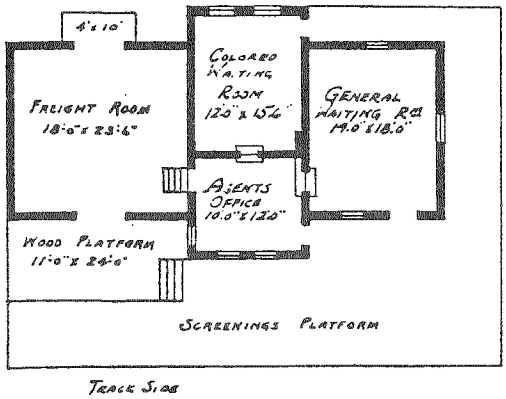
COMBINATION STATION
AT READERS, ALA.
FILE #5225



FLOOR PLAN

Frame Station built in 1891.
Brick Foundations
Tin Roof
Weather-boarded
Interior ceiled except Freight Room

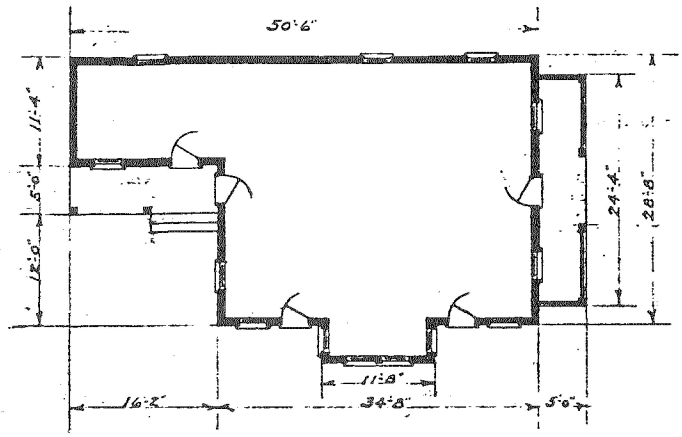
COMBINATION STATION
AT EDGER, ALA.
FILE 5225



Floor Plan

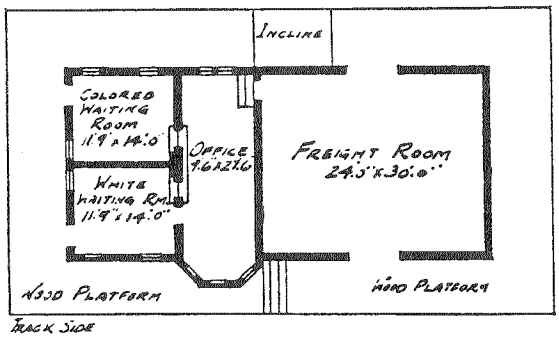
Built 1905
Fourth Class
Asbestos Roof
Frame

Combination Station
at Sloss, Ala.
C-734



Built in 1904
Frame
Exterior, Boards and Battens.
Tin Roof

Passenger Station &
Agents Living Quarters.
Graces, Ala.



Floor Plan

Combination Station
at Gurnee Junction, Ala.
File #1835