

# ALTAMONT

## A Portion of Red Mountain and Its Park

Birmingham Historical Society



## Summary of Altamont and Its Park

Boston landscape architect and city planner George H. Miller, in his 1911 “Altamont—A Portion of Red Mountain at Birmingham, Alabama, Study for General Subdivision and Arrangement,” created the vision that Jemison & Co. strived to realize in its development of the ridge. Miller’s plan for Altamont, which he describes in a 1912 *Birmingham Ledger* article, provides for both public and private views and incorporates the following elements:

- Grand estates along the crest of Red Mountain\*
- A mountainside parkway with terraces and a belvedere overlooking Birmingham
- A formal allée of trees along the parkway
- A naturalistic area below the parkway “that fits to and takes advantage of and least disturbs the natural”
- A “positive provision for high class maintenance”

In 1921, Jemison & Co. suggested to the City of Birmingham a lease/sale agreement for the land along the north side of Altamont Road so that the view from the crest

of the mountain would not be obstructed by the building of houses.

Significantly, the Olmsted Brothers firm does not list Altamont Park as either an existing or a proposed park in its 1925 plan *A Park System for Birmingham*; however, the plan does list Altamont Parkway\*\* as one link among others in a proposed mountainside parkway along Red Mountain’s northern flank. This longer parkway was never realized, and Altamont Road and Crest Road remain its only links.

In 1927, six years after the lease/sale agreement was first floated, the City acquired the land along Altamont Road—a plat fronting over 3,000 feet on the north side of Altamont Road—for \$64,000 from Jemison & Co.’s Mountain Terrace Land Company. The Parks and Recreation Board platted the land, calling it Altamont (Mountain Terrace) Park.

\* Miller noted that the city would “be enriched by the increased taxable values” of limited residence sites that “enjoy the same air, views and beauty of the parkway.”

\*\* At this time, a parkway was a landscaped road that led to a park or connected parks. It ought not to be confused with a park itself.



**“Altamont—A Portion of Red Mountain at Birmingham, Alabama, Study for General Subdivision and Arrangement.”** George H. Miller, Boston, Massachusetts, November 1911. Birmingham, Alabama, Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts (BPL Archives).

Nearly two decades after Miller’s report, City Forester Hugh H. Sloss, in a 1931 *Birmingham News* interview, describes Altamont Park, its value, and the manner in which its natural environment should be treated. Sloss makes the following observations:

- Altamont Park protects the residences below from landslides and excessive amounts of stormwater.
- The one-mile drive adjacent to Altamont Park offers beautiful views of Birmingham to every citizen and visitor.
- Altamont Park represents a wonderful contrast to the typical, formally planned parks in the city.
- Altamont Park requires a botanical management different from most park designs.
- Altamont Park is and must always be an informal, natural park due to its location and topography.
- Altamont Park’s only type of recreation should always be the enjoyment of the views and natural forest.

From those first several decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until today, the view of the forested slopes of Red Mountain from the city below has been deemed as important as the view of the city itself from Altamont Road. Planners in fact considered Red Mountain to be the most important physical feature of the city and understood the value of keeping it green and wooded in order to “assure to the mountain as seen from the distance a generally thick foliated surface with an evergreen foundation.”

In summary, Altamont Park was intended to remain a natural, forested green space, enhanced only by selective cleaning and pruning. It was conceived as a neighborhood park, whereas Altamont Road, one link in an imagined longer parkway, was meant for the enjoyment of all of Birmingham’s citizens and visitors. Furthermore, preserving as much vegetation as possible on the north face of Red Mountain allows the City of Birmingham to retain its most notable and defining natural feature.



**Cliff Road residences with the forested slope of Altamont Park, *above***, detail from "A Perspective Plan for the Development of Mountain Terrace." Samuel Parsons, 1907. BPL Archives.

## Altamont—A Portion of Red Mountain and Its Park

*“But in Red Mountain Birmingham has got its banks and eminences dominant in presence and affording distinct views, and these should be intelligently claimed as the birthright of all the people, and such development should be provided that any of all the people will forever be free to look to their undefaced beauty, be under its environment, or visit these upland areas and use them as their own, inhale the exhilarating light, clear air, and enjoy the inspiration of the varied distant views. The plans for Altamont, a particular portion of Red mountain which now is to be developed as a high class villa site subdivision makes these provisions in the form of a mountain side parkway.”*

— George H. Miller, *Birmingham Ledger*,  
September 1, 1912<sup>1</sup>

“Altamont—A Portion of Red Mountain” lies in the foothills of the Appalachian Mountain chain, rising nearly 400 feet above Jones Valley below. The mountain was formed some 320 million years ago. Prior to this time, ancient seas covered the future site of Birmingham, laying down deposits of sand, pebbles, lime, and red iron ore. During the Appalachian orogeny, Earth’s plates clashed and raised up the mountain 20,000 feet high. Since then, rains falling and running off the mountainside have eroded the mountain, exposing the minerals that led to Birmingham being located here, along a ridge of the once-gigantic mountain named for the red iron ore long visibly exposed at its crest.



**City view from Altamont Park**, with the Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark, *center*. Louise McPhillips, 2019.



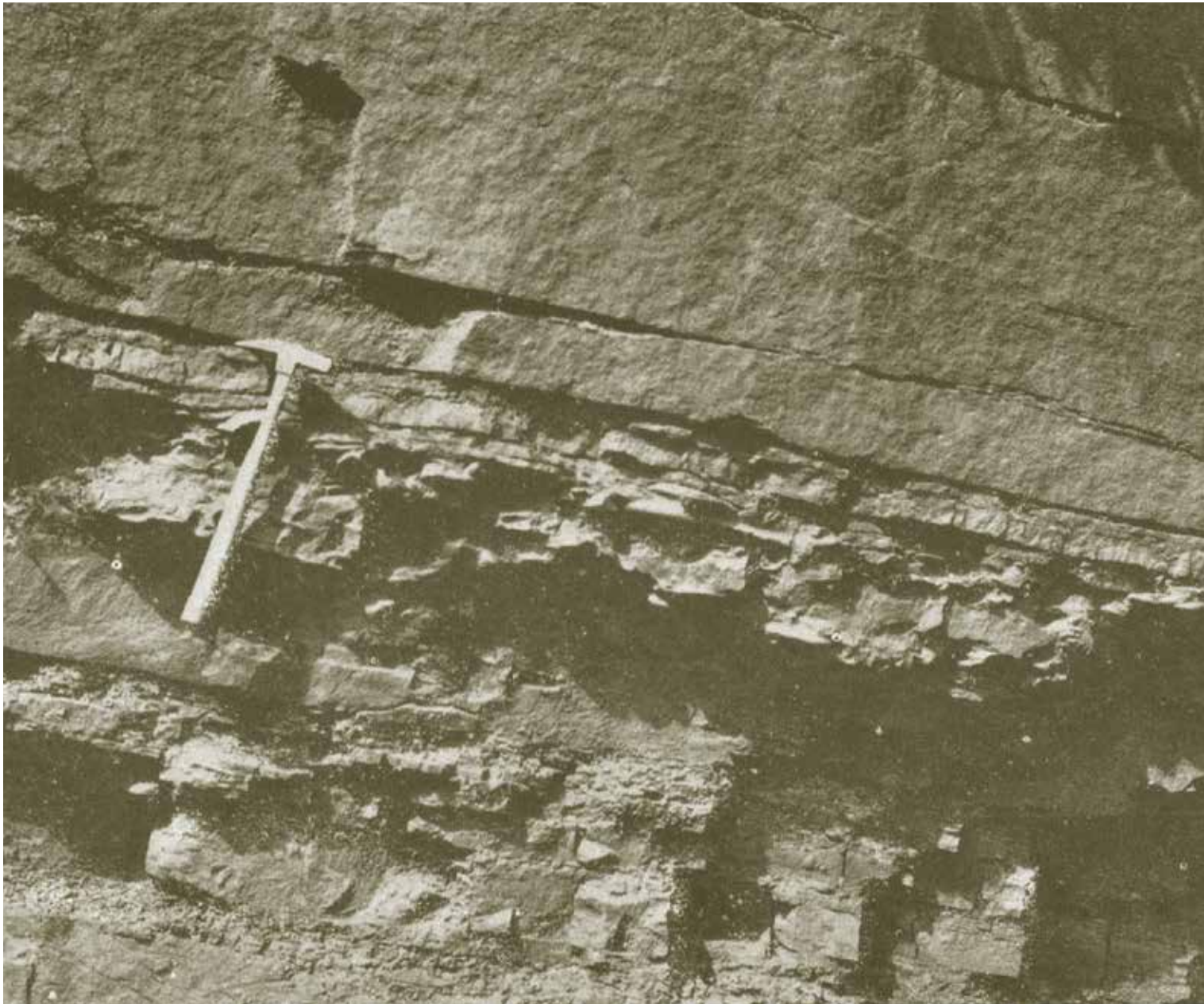
ABOVE: **Limestone quarry, Glenwood.** Plate IX U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) Bessemer-Vandiver Folio, 1927. Courtesy Thomas Denny.



LEFT: **Limestone quarry, Cliff Road Alley.** Louise McPhillips, 2019.

BELOW: **Iron ore quarry, Helen-Bess Mine,** U. S. Geological Survey Bulletin 400, 1910. BPL Southern History.





**Sandstone between red ore seams, Helen-Bess Mine.** Plate XV, USGS Bessemer-Vandiver Folio, 1927. Courtesy Thomas Denny.

At the time Jemison & Co. planned to build residences at Altamont, the crest of the mountain was a rocky “wine-dark, rock-rimmed” summit from which descended “a little hiding stream and silver thread of waterfall that winds down through the park from a cleft in the rocks of the Tip-Top Trail.” Here, broad-leaf blackjack oak, fragrant little pines, Spanish oaks, hickory, dogwood, and redbud trees were found together with lichened rocks with fern and vine.<sup>2</sup>

Limestone deposits underlie the forested slopes on the northern side of the mountain. This limestone occurs in long narrow belts on the flanks of the mountain ridges and is highly fossiliferous. Weathered surfaces are frequently marked with furrows caused by the dissolving action of little rills of rainwater running down the exposed surface. The differing hardness of rock belts probably led to the several trails in today’s Altamont Park that follow the limestone terraces.



“Kelly’s Map of Birmingham,” detail showing Jones Valley, with the industrial city’s grids of streets and avenues filling the flat valley, and the roads of Mountain Terrace and Altamont curving to fit the topography, 1912. Agee Map Collection, BPL.

Beginning in 1905, Jemison & Co. purchased lands to begin subdivision of the highlands of Red Mountain, some two miles from the Birmingham city center.<sup>3</sup> These lands extended along the north face of the mountain to “Altamont”—a narrow ridge consisting of knolls and gaps with Shades Valley located on one side and Jones Valley and the city of Birmingham on the other.<sup>4</sup> The Red Mountain slopes had been mined for red ore and limestone. Bridle paths and trails crisscrossed the mountainside. The Red Gap Branch of the Birmingham Mineral Railroad, in operation by 1890, ran along the base of the mountain’s south face, linking the red ore mines that extended for 16 miles along the mountain to furnaces in the city of Birmingham. At the crest, scars of this mining remained both above and below ground.

Over the next 25 years, several Jemison companies—Highland Realty, Glenwood Realty, Mountain Terrace Land, Mountain Home Land, and Valley View Realty—undertook the daunting challenge of building the first and finest-possible residential neighborhood on the terraces and at the crest of Red Mountain, creating new standards for “high-class real estate” in Birmingham and the city’s finest concentration of residential real estate, typified today by Woodward House, the residence of the president of the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

Birmingham’s industrial, commercial, and residential areas first spread out across the wide Jones Valley floor. The

Elyton Land Co. founded the city in 1871 on 4,150 acres in Jones Valley. Beginning in 1885, anticipating future lot sales in the company’s 1,500-acre tract along the South Highlands of Birmingham, this firm’s engineer, Willis J. Milner, built the Highland Avenue streetcar line, avoiding cuts and fills along the northern flank of Red Mountain and leaving the open ravines (today’s Caldwell, Rhodes, and Rushton Parks). At the line’s eastern end, the firm created Lakeview, a 100-acre destination: a lake with a hotel that opened by 1887. A pleasure resort and a college followed. Then, from 1903 to 1926, the Birmingham Country Club leased the land for its clubhouse and golf links, leading to the area becoming known as “The Country Club District.” (Today, the resort/clubhouse property is operated as the City of Birmingham’s Charlie Boswell Golf Course and the Highland Park Tennis Center.)<sup>5</sup> Birmingham Realty Co., created in 1899 with \$2,000,000 in capital, became the successor firm that continued development of the Elyton Land Co.’s South Highlands properties.

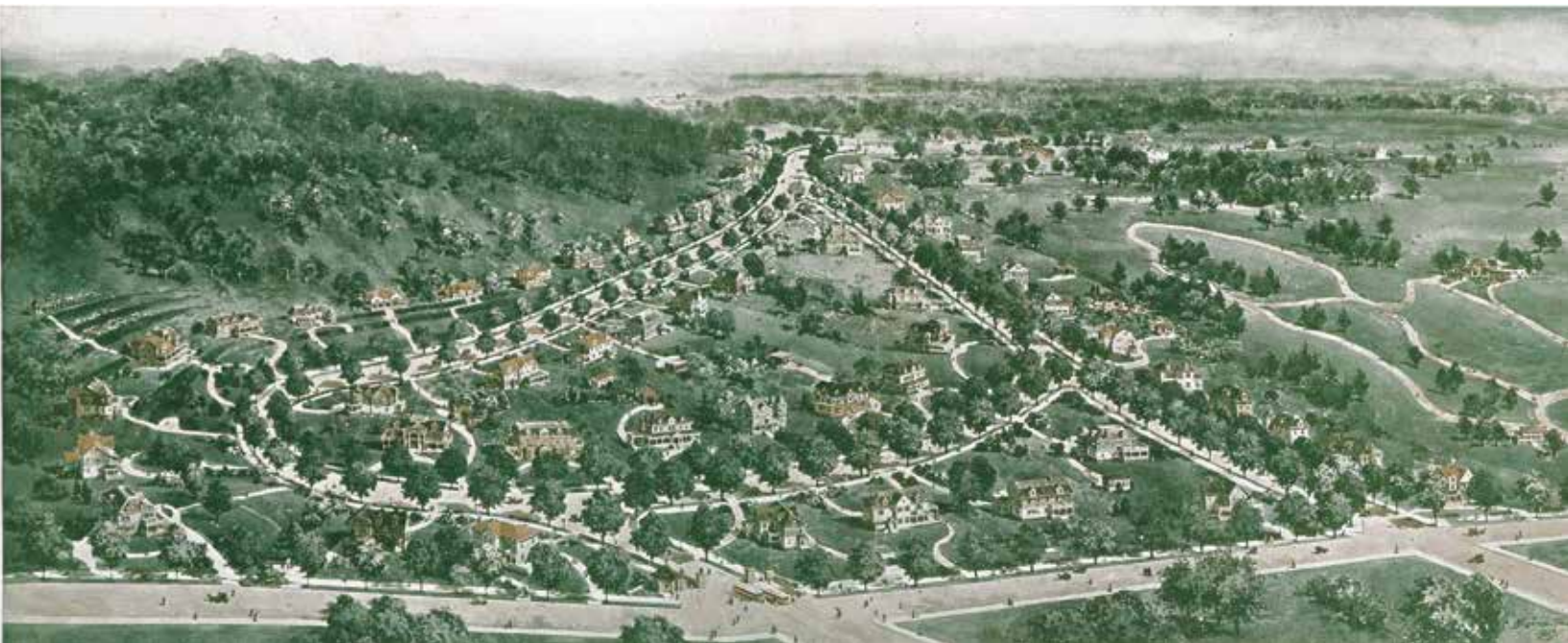
Jemison & Co. envisioned its newly acquired lands as a “new outpost of the fashionable residential section.” These lands were to the east and above the country club. At the time, they were considered very far out. Birmingham Realty Co. and the Avondale Land Co. also owned lands nearby that they would subdivide at the same time Jemison & Co. was undertaking its ventures. Birmingham Realty instigated a policy of leaving a 20-foot strip around its subdivisions, across which access to adjoining developments was not permitted. This requirement led to challenging scenarios for lot purchasers seeking to access Jemison & Co.’s Mountain Terrace and Altamont.

### Jemison & Co. Firms Developing Its Red Mountain Properties, 1905–1920s

On August 15, 1905, Highland Realty Co. purchased three quarter sections totaling 120 acres from the Morgan S. Gilmer Estate of Montgomery. The Mountain Terrace Land Co., capitalized at \$100,000, developed this land, which included 30 acres for Mountain Terrace and 90 additional acres that make up today’s “Altamont (Mountain Terrace) Park” (so named at its acquisition by the City of Birmingham in 1927) and the initial grand estates of Redmont above Altamont and Redmont Roads.

Other Jemison firms active in today’s Forest Park and Redmont neighborhoods included the Glenwood Realty Co., established in 1906 with 40 acres and capital of \$42,000; the Mountain Home Land Co., established in 1907, with 80 acres and capital of \$19,110; and the Valley View Realty Co., established in 1910, with an estimated 20 acres and capital of \$5,000. Officers for these companies were typically Robert Jemison Jr., president; Hill Ferguson, vice president; and A. B. Tanner, secretary and treasurer. The Forest Park Realty Co. was created in 1917 with \$25,000 in capital. Jemison & Co. also developed the 150 acres of Redmont Park from 1924 to 1926.





**"A Perspective Plan for the Development of Mountain Terrace."** Samuel Parsons, 1907. BPL Archives.

## Planning "The Crowning Achievement of the Highland Avenue District"<sup>6</sup>

To plan Mountain Terrace and Altamont, Jemison & Co.'s subdivision of Red Mountain, Jemison & Co. employed America's best planning talent: landscape architects Samuel B. Parsons Jr. of New York (1844–1923) and George H. Miller of Boston (1883–1943).

In 1907, 63-year-old Samuel Parsons of Samuel Parsons & Co. Landscape Architects, St. James Building, New York City, was America's leading landscape architect, having pioneered the field and founded the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA), for which he served as president in the year of his employ by Jemison & Co. Parsons had served the New York City parks for 20 years as horticulturalist and planner. He also headed a firm with national experience in park, estate, and subdivision planning. In 1902, Parsons had designed the 20-acre Glen Iris Park on Birmingham's Southside for Robert Jemison Sr. Glen Iris was the first Birmingham subdivision planned by a landscape professional in the city. (Prior to moving to Mountain Terrace, Robert Jemison Jr. lived in Glen Iris Park, in a residence next to his father's stately home.)

Cornell University graduate George Miller of 6 Beacon Street, Boston, Massachusetts, had worked in Pittsburgh and headed the Boston office of landscape architect Warren Manning in 1906. Miller specialized in industrial town planning.

In 1909, at age 26, he came to Birmingham and worked to design and supervise the multi-year layout and building of Jemison & Co.'s new town (today's Fairfield) built opposite the site of U.S. Steel's future mills. For this project both he and its sponsor Jemison & Co. received much-deserved national recognition.

Miller also designed the residential subdivisions of Central Park and Westleigh for Jemison & Co. and Rhodes Park for the neighborhood park commission headed by the residents living about the park. Miller laid out the Roebuck Auto and Golf Club (today's Roebuck Municipal Golf Course) and the Edgewood County Club grounds (today's Palisades shopping area). Through his many projects with Jemison & Co. and others, Miller greatly furthered the then-new subdivision practice of working "with" the land by contouring roads and amenities to the challenging topography of the Birmingham region.

Common subdivision practice in Birmingham at this time had favored clear-cutting the land, using cut and fill and dynamite, and laying out straight grids of streets and avenues. Robert Jemison Jr. followed this practice in his first subdivisions for the Earle and Bush families, creating roller-coaster streets over the ridges of early Ensley Highlands, but not for his subdivision of Red Mountain.

## Mountain Terrace: A Residence Park, 1907

Mountain Terrace, “the first of the higher hill parks. . . was to be the *avant courier* of a coming regiment,” Jemison & Co. publicists wrote in 1907. The Mountain Terrace Land Co. had been formed on May 31, 1906.<sup>7</sup> Investors from Memphis, Tennessee, supplied half of the initial capital. Samuel B. Parsons Jr. drew plans for the residence park nestled along Crescent and Cliff Roads between Glen View and 42<sup>nd</sup> Street South.<sup>8</sup> In 1907, streetcar service, subsidized by the developers, was extended from Highland Avenue along Clairmont Avenue and up 42<sup>st</sup> Street to the entrance to Mountain Terrace. The promotional brochure *Mountain Terrace: The Residence Park of Birmingham* notes that no “capital was spared

in [the] development and improvements” of this “stupendous and expensive undertaking.”<sup>9</sup> Physical improvements said to have cost \$100,000 were extolled as “superior to those of any other property ever before placed on the market here.” These included asphalt streets laid on concrete base with curbs and gutters, cement sidewalks, sewer, gas and water mains, telephone, electricity, streetlights, a gate house, and entrance gates. Parsons’ extensive horticultural knowledge guided the merger of elegant plantings with the native environment without disrupting the *genius loci* (“the spirit of the place”). Landscape features for Mountain Terrace included terraces planted with hundreds of vines, creeper, and honeysuckle and Cherokee and Memorial roses. Parsons brought linden trees from Europe to plant along Cliff Road.



Seal House on Cliff Road. O. V. Hunt postcard, BPL Archives.

### A Residence Park

A “Residence Park” is an early 20<sup>th</sup>-century American residential development, built before World War I, in which residents “live in the park”—then a new concept for most fast-built, gritty American cities. Designed by landscape architects, new professionals centered in the Northeast, Residence Parks included attention to topography, layout of roads, sidewalks, streetlights, and landscaping, including entrance gateway structures and other amenities. These developments took place before planning and zoning became functions of American city governments, so covenants, architectural standards, and minimum costs were written into the deeds at sale to prospective homebuilders. These parks attracted affluent buyers who could afford these improvements.



ABOVE: 42<sup>nd</sup> Street entrance to Mountain Terrace, with streetcar station, *left*, and the future Altamont Park, *above* the Seal House on Cliff Road. BPL Archives.



RIGHT: Entrance gate. Louise McPhillips, 2019.



**Early Road into Mountain Terrace**, prior to Jemison & Co. subdivision. Bert G. Covell, 1910. BPL Archives.

The 71 lots in Mountain Terrace were first offered for sale in the spring of 1907. Prices ranged from \$1,500 to \$6,000. In October of this year, the New York stock market fell 50 percent. U.S. Steel's acquisition of the Birmingham-based Tennessee, Coal, Iron & Railroad Co. (TCI), a deal brokered by New York financier J. P. Morgan, was the acquisition that saved a major banking concern and helped settle the crisis. In 1913, the U.S. Congress would create the Federal Reserve Bank to help provide a more stable monetary system, but in 1907 it was Birmingham's major industrial firm with substantial manufacturing facilities and 25 percent of the region's lands, rich with iron and coal, that would help solve the banking crisis. Jemison & Co. and everyone in Birmingham were ecstatic over the entry of U.S. Steel into the Birmingham Industrial District. Meanwhile, lots in Mountain Terrace sold slowly.

By May 2, 1908, the Mountain Terrace Stockholder's Report of this date notes that "From the very rugged nature of the property, being on the mountainside, the cost of improving was very heavy." Grading for the Sky Pike (today's Cliff Road alley) alone was nearly \$2,000.<sup>10</sup> (Nearby Chickamauga limestone is known to have been quarried in 1885 and 1886.<sup>11</sup> It appears that limestone was also quarried from the alley prior to the Jemison & Co. subdivision.)

*"The rock row on the upper side of The Cliff Road is a curious and fantastic grouping of great boulders; rugged, antique, suggesting strangely the old Druid ruins of Stonehenge that loom so grey and spectre-like on the Salisbury Plain [in England]."*

— *Mountain Terrace: The Residence Park of Birmingham*, 1907

To support its developments, Jemison & Co. acquired the ability to toot its own horn. *The Jemison Magazine*, begun in May 1910, would chronicle and extol Jemison companies' achievements. The initial issue described Mountain Terrace as "the most highly developed residence property in Alabama."<sup>12</sup>



**Dimmick House at the Cliff Road entrance to Mountain Terrace.** Bert G. Covell, 1910. BPL Archives.

Jemison & Co. officials—Robert Jemison Jr. (4124 Crescent), Hill Ferguson (4183 Cliff), and T. U. Walter (4200 Cliff)—built homes here and continued to construct additional spec homes to improve unsold lots and bit by bit to augment the value of the company's holdings. The Memphis investors, who may not have shared this incremental approach to creating long-term value, showed up at stockholder meetings just to get their dividends.

*"Mountain Terrace occupies a park that was made beautiful by Nature, and the landscape architects who brought this beauty to perfection must share with her the credit for creating what is unquestionably the most attractive place of residence in or about Birmingham."*

—*The Jemison Magazine*, July 1913

By January of 1914, more than \$150,000 had been invested in Mountain Terrace, 24 homes had been built, and 15 of 71 lots remained for sale. *The Jemison Magazine* continued to promote the virtues of this Residence Park and publicize the names of those building very substantial homes here. However, in April 1916, the Memphis investors, who had urged Jemison to remove restrictions on the lots, took control of the company and disposed of the remaining lots at auction.

### Glenwood

Glenwood Realty Co., incorporated in October of 1906 by Jemison & Co. principals, had also engaged landscape architect Samuel Parsons to design "Glenwood." The undated (but thought to be 1907) Parsons design for Glenwood is found in the Jemison Papers at Birmingham Public Library Archives. The Parsons plan shows a series of hillside terraces on this 40-acre tract just east of Mountain Terrace. Lot sales were not announced in this proposed expansion of Mountain Terrace, and the proposed development did not move forward at this time.<sup>13</sup>

## Accessing “Altamont” and Undertaking to Build a Parkway, 1908 to 1910



“**The Big Terraces**—This stretch of Altamont Road is about a mile in length and is practically level. It is already popular as an auto driveway.” *The Jemison Magazine*, December 1910. BPL Archives.

Meanwhile, Jemison & Co. had sought to develop the higher reaches of its Red Mountain property. Inspired by a mountainside drive experienced during a visit to Portland, Oregon, Hill Ferguson advocated building such a parkway here.<sup>14</sup> During 1908 and 1909, by blasting and cutting through hard rock, the firm’s contractors built the initial piece of Altamont Road (today’s Altamont Way between Cliff and Altamont Roads) through the Birmingham Securities Co. subdivision.<sup>15</sup> In March 1886, these 40 acres had been platted as “Forest Hill” in small lots along Pine, Maple, Chestnut, and Cherry Streets. (Chestnut is today’s Cliff Road; Cherry is best known as Cliff Road alley.) In 1886, the lots along Cherry



“**The Grand Canyon**”—The work of blasting this and other cuts on Altamont Road has been in progress for two years and is a splendid piece of work.” *The Jemison Magazine*, December 1910. BPL Archives.



**Road construction crew**, grading to produce a smooth road. BPL Archives.

were to be accessed from the low side of the steep slope. Little homebuilding took place. In November 1909, Birmingham Securities filed revised subdivision plans at Probate Court for lands it called “Altamont.”<sup>16</sup> Thanks to the newly built switch-back, the upper lots could now be accessed along Altamont Road. (Altamont Road was connected to Cliff via the switch-back but was not yet connected at its eastern or western ends to any means of ingress or egress.)

### The Financial Panic of 1907 and 1908

When asked about the effects of the Great Depression of the 1930s, Robert Jemison Jr. reported responding to Margaret Gresham Livingston that it was nothing compared with the hard rock and hard times the firm hit attempting to develop its Red Mountain properties during the Financial Panic of 1907 and 1908. Jemison was 35 years old and just getting started with his first, major, and capital-intensive development, in which he and Ferguson had put up approximately half of the capital. During the Financial Panic, his four-year-old firm relied on loans from a New York bank termed “Clearing House Certificates.”



**Hard rocks** near Altamont Way. Louise McPhillips, 2019.

## Blasting and Cutting the Next Segment of Altamont Road, Platted 1911

Using an army of men, mules, plows, wheel scrapes, and drag scrapes, Jemison & Co. contractor Thomas Worthington built the next segment of Altamont Road, extending it eastward above today's Altamont Park. Construction of the road included rock excavation and cut and fill to lay down a road that hugged the mountainside and instilled a sense of safety. Rock and earth were removed. The excavated rock was not crushed and sold for road construction purposes as was commonly done; it was used to form the "Big Terraces."

On one of the terraces beneath the future Woodward estate, a sandstone belvedere would be built to provide views of the increasingly attractive residential area of Mountain Terrace, with its well-designed residences, and of the grounds of the Birmingham Country Club (today's Charlie Boswell Golf Course). Sandstone for the belvedere was most likely quarried at the nearby Helen-Bess Mine. George Miller's plat for the middle section of Altamont Road would not be filed with probate court until November 1911.<sup>17</sup> He must have been apprised of what Jemison & Co.'s engineers were doing in constructing other segments of the road; however, he was intensely occupied completing the massive undertakings at Fairfield, Cen-



ABOVE: **Limestone layers.** Louise McPhillips, 2019.

BELOW: **City view** from the belvedere. Louise McPhillips, 2019.

tral Park, and Westleigh for other Jemison companies, as well as designs for subdivisions and golf courses in East Lake and Roebuck for Robert Jemison Sr.



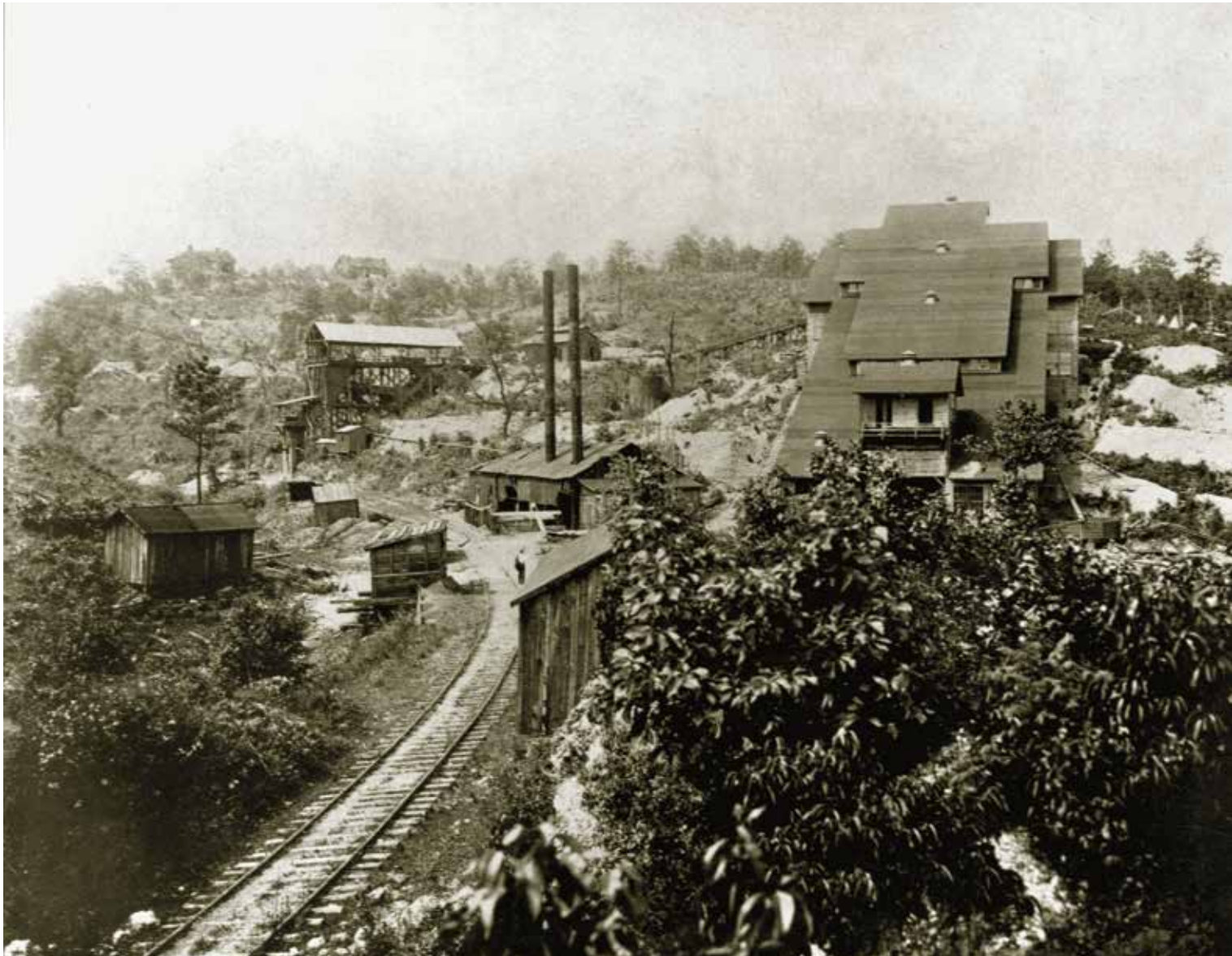
## Valley View, 1910

After extending Altamont Road through the “Grand Canyon” (today’s Altamont Way) and along the mountain-side, Jemison & Co. proceeded to subdivide and sell estate lots along the crest. In July 1910, the first mountaintop estates were platted into 14 lots as “Valley View,” today’s 4200 and 4300 blocks of “upper” Altamont Road.<sup>18</sup> A story is told that close associates of the developers bid for the prospective lots, with Donald Comer gaining the highest point along the ridge for his residence. All residences here enjoy cool, mountain breezes and views of both Birmingham

and Shades Valley. The lots extend from Altamont Road to the crest and then cascade down the ridge toward Shades Valley. Charlestonian Mrs. David Roberts, widow of the Englishman who channeled English investment capital into the development of Bessemer, completed the first residence here in 1910. (Nine years later, the Roberts House became the home of Virginia and Robert Jemison Jr.) By 1912, residences for Jemison’s brother-in-law Hill Ferguson and his wife Louise; Donald Comer, head of the Avondale Mills, and his wife Gertrude; and Jemison associates and



Residence of Belle Sumter (Mrs. David) Roberts, the first built atop “Upper” Altamont, Valley View. 1910. BPL Archives.



Helen-Bess Mine, Birmingham Ore and Mining Co. with residences in Valley View along the crest, 1911. BPL Archives.

bachelors H. G. Seibels and Frederick Larkin had risen along the ridge. Several of the homes were built of the rock found on site. In 1917, Robert Meyer, owner of Birmingham's Tutwiler Hotel—built in 1913 and 1914 by Jemison & Co.—and many other hotels, purchased and continued to embellish the Seibels-Larkin estate.

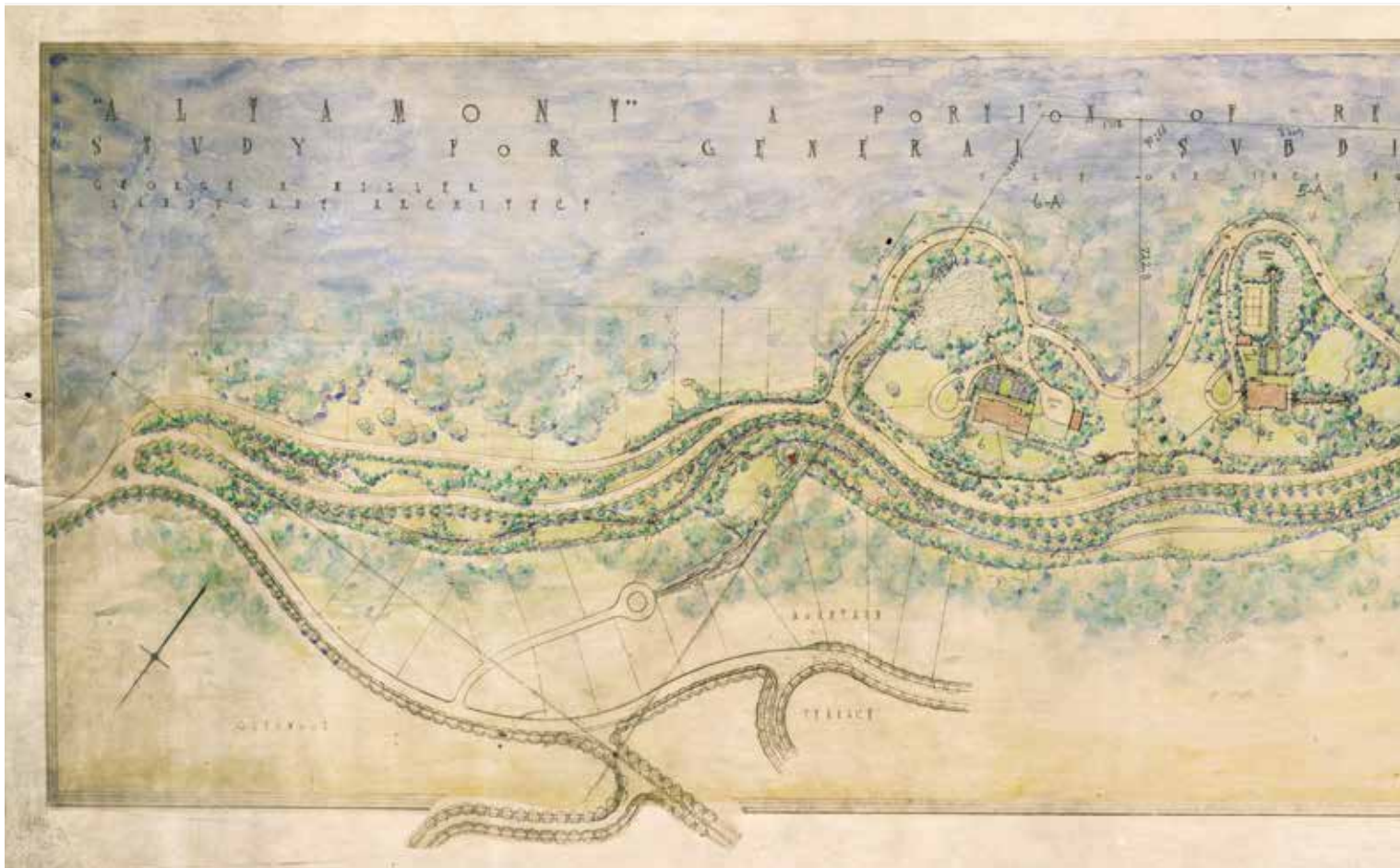
*“Great boulders of stone protrude from the mountain side, and enough of the material is at hand to build many other homes. These residences undoubtedly occupy the most commanding view obtainable in Birmingham. . . .”*

— *The Jemison Magazine*, July 1910

*The Jemison Magazine* touted the virtues of living on the mountaintop, a lifestyle endorsed by the Jemison & Co. officers. In the early days, for those walking along the mountain paths to visit friends in Mountain Terrace, carrying a change

of shoes was necessary. That changed with the construction of a concrete stairway, still extant, that connected Altamont residents to the lower elevations and to the streetcar stop. Cliff Road residents recalled miners carrying lunch pails ascending and descending the steps, which they thought followed a Native American trail.

Meanwhile, mining for red ore and quarrying of sandstone continued at the Helen-Bess Mine below Valley View on the Shades Valley side. Opened c. 1901 by the McCrossin brothers and said to have been named for their wives Helen and Bess McCrossin, the mine was later operated by the Birmingham Ore and Mining Co., with activity continuing through the First World War. Soft and hard ores of both the Big and Irondale Seams and a vein of sandstone sandwiched between them were mined and quarried (*see photograph page 7*). The neighboring Kewanee Mine, which operated until 1907, reopened to support the war effort.



## George Miller's Vision for the Mountain Top, 1911

*“Buildings have helped shape the appearance and character of Birmingham. But man’s response to the powerful topography of the region, to the wealth of trees and plants that thrive in its climate, and to the lure of a Garden City aesthetic have profoundly influenced Birmingham’s developing form. A development prepared by a landscape architect can shape an entire ridge top or valley.”*

— Philip Morris and Marjorie White. “Preface,” *Designs on Birmingham: A Landscape History of a Southern City and Its Suburbs* (Birmingham Historical Society, 1989).

George Miller’s “Altamont—A Portion of Red Mountain at Birmingham, Alabama, Study for General Subdivision and Arrangement,” completed in November 1911, provides the vision that Jemison & Co. sought to fulfill in shaping this portion of the Red Mountain ridge. Miller’s thoughts about this plan were published in a report on park planning to the Birmingham City Commission of September 1912.<sup>19</sup>

Miller’s plan for “Altamont” incorporates the following elements:

- Grand estates for the barons of coal and iron, timber, and slag extending along the crest of Red Mountain
- Provision for private and public views

- Estate access by drives entering from the Shades Valley side of the crest (the future Redmont Road and Woodward estate drive)
- A mountainside parkway with terraces and a belvedere overlooking Birmingham
- A formal allée of trees along the parkway
- A naturalistic area below the parkway, one “that fits to and takes advantage of and least disturbs the natural”
- Paths in the natural area that follow the grades at different levels to permit varied views
- A new vehicular approach to “Altamont” at its eastern end via the future Essex Road
- Places for vehicles to turn around
- “Positive provision for high class maintenance”

*“And so, the city is fortunate in that provision has been permitted for a mountain side parkway in this present and increasingly attractive residential area where the views have an exceptional middle distance composed of the well designed houses, well kept lawns spaces and foliage woodlands of the Country Club and Mountain Terrace sections, and where in a short time parkway*





**“Altamont—A Portion of Red Mountain at Birmingham, Alabama, Study for General Subdivision and Arrangement.”**

George H. Miller, Boston, Massachusetts, November 1911. BPL Archives.

*areas will not have been procurable. Moreover, the presence of the parkway will so further strengthen the desirability of the section that the city will be enriched by the increased taxable values of the residence sites and these values will continue to increase especially when the development goes on of land facing the parkway, and it becomes more apparent that the number of sites for residences that may enjoy the same air, views and beauty of the parkway is limited.”*

— George Miller, *Birmingham Ledger*,  
September 1, 1912

The landscape architect and planner further suggests that the general intent for the future planting of the parkway should be primarily to assure that “the mountain as seen from the distance [is of] a generally thick foliated surface with an evergreen foundation.” He continues:

*“The line of [the] parkway drive fits the topography and present grading and is close to [the] uphill side where feeling of and actual safety will be greater. This will be increased by formal tree planting along the outside of drive level. For this purpose the merits of mountain ash*

*have been considered. And then of Lombardy poplars giving the height effect, but it has been deemed best finally to use the thin trunked globe headed Norway maples with the expectation of foliage heads being gradually trimmed to flattened globes permitting view from vehicles beneath and from hillside paths above.”*

— George Miller, *Birmingham Ledger*,  
September 1, 1912

Miller also suggests a carefully worked-out transition from the formal plantings along the parkway to the naturalistic areas below in which “the lines of paths contribute to the parkway beauty idea” and “follow easy grades and pleasing lines as far out on the ridge of the downhill side as possible fitting to and taking advantage of the existing surface. The paths branch off in places to reach all parts of the parkway [to] vary the elevation of viewpoint, and to accommodate the probable natural direction of pedestrian travel. It will be noted that in one place the path leads to a stairway right of way outlet, directly down the hill, while in another such outlet is by easier gradients and more attractive winding lanes.”

## “Glenwood, the Beautiful,” 1913

Jemison & Co. continued to sell lots in Mountain Terrace and boast of its merits as a premier Birmingham residential address, billing the firm’s new addition as in “the center of social life in Birmingham.” These 20 lots continue westward from 42<sup>nd</sup> Street along Cliff Road as it rises along the mountainside and circles “the Glenwood Loop” to Altamont Road.

Completion of this western connection of Cliff and Altamont Roads was celebrated with fanfare on July 12,

1913.<sup>20</sup> Firm publicists noted that the Glenwood loop presents “a continuous paved highway along the side and top of Red Mountain which is nearly three miles in length and which connects the most desirable residential section of Red Mountain.”<sup>21</sup> That all might not have been well is noted in a newspaper ad that mentioned that lots in Glenwood were selling for half the average price of lots in the area.<sup>22</sup> (Birmingham Realty Co. was offering many lower-priced lots for sale in the area.)



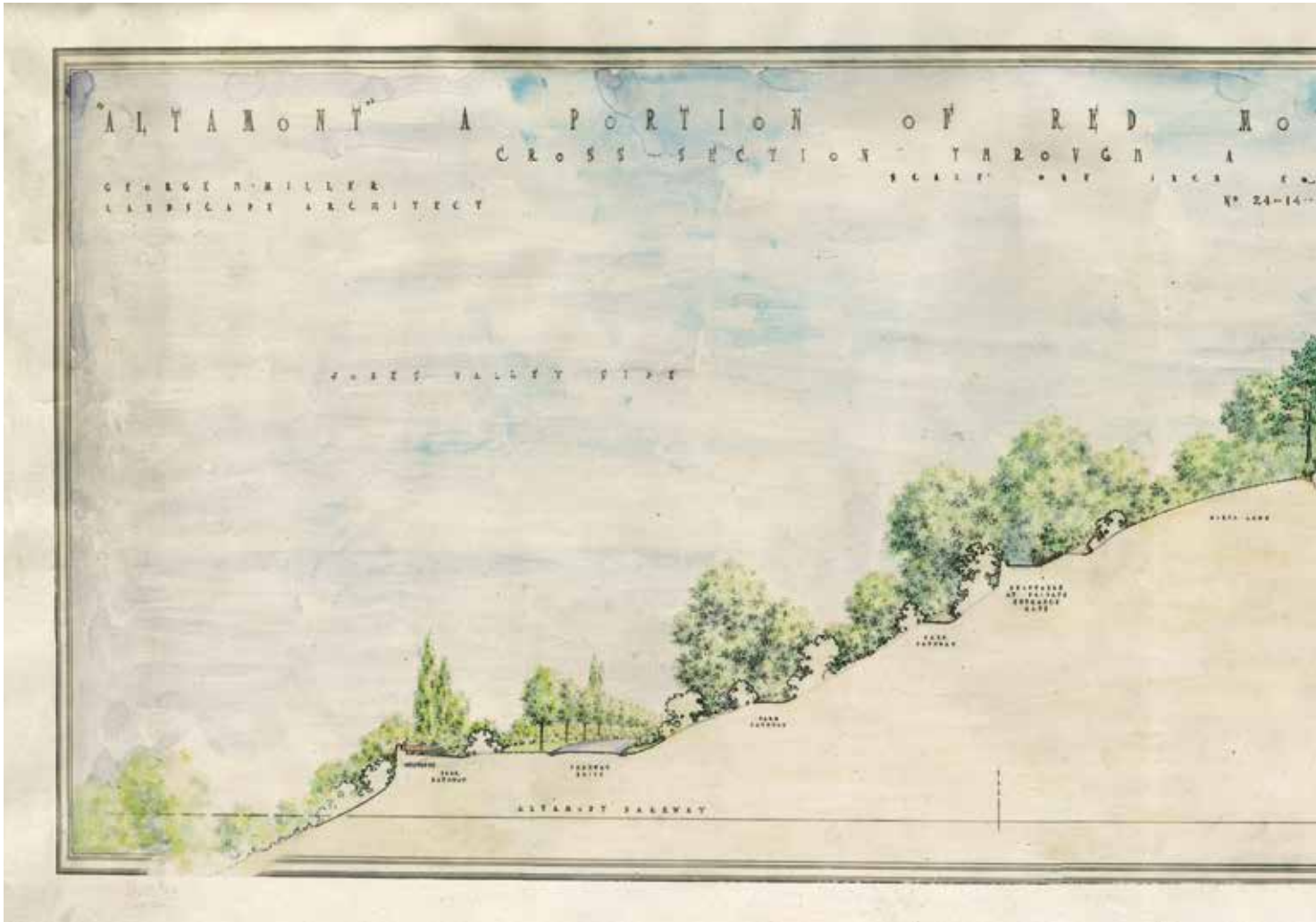
**Mountain Terrace**, as viewed from Glenwood. *The Jemison Magazine*, April 1913. BPL Archives.



**At work building Cliff Road**, up to Glenwood, with the Ferguson House, *on the left*, 1913. BPL Archives.



Cliff Road extension to Altamont, Glenwood, with retaining wall above the quarry, center, 1913. BPL Archives.



Jones Valley Side	Belvedere	Parkway	Parkway	Parkway	Belvedere	North
Altamont Parkway	Park	Drive	Pathway	Pathway	At Private	Lawn
	Pathway				Entrance Gate	

### Forging On at the Crest, 1913–1914

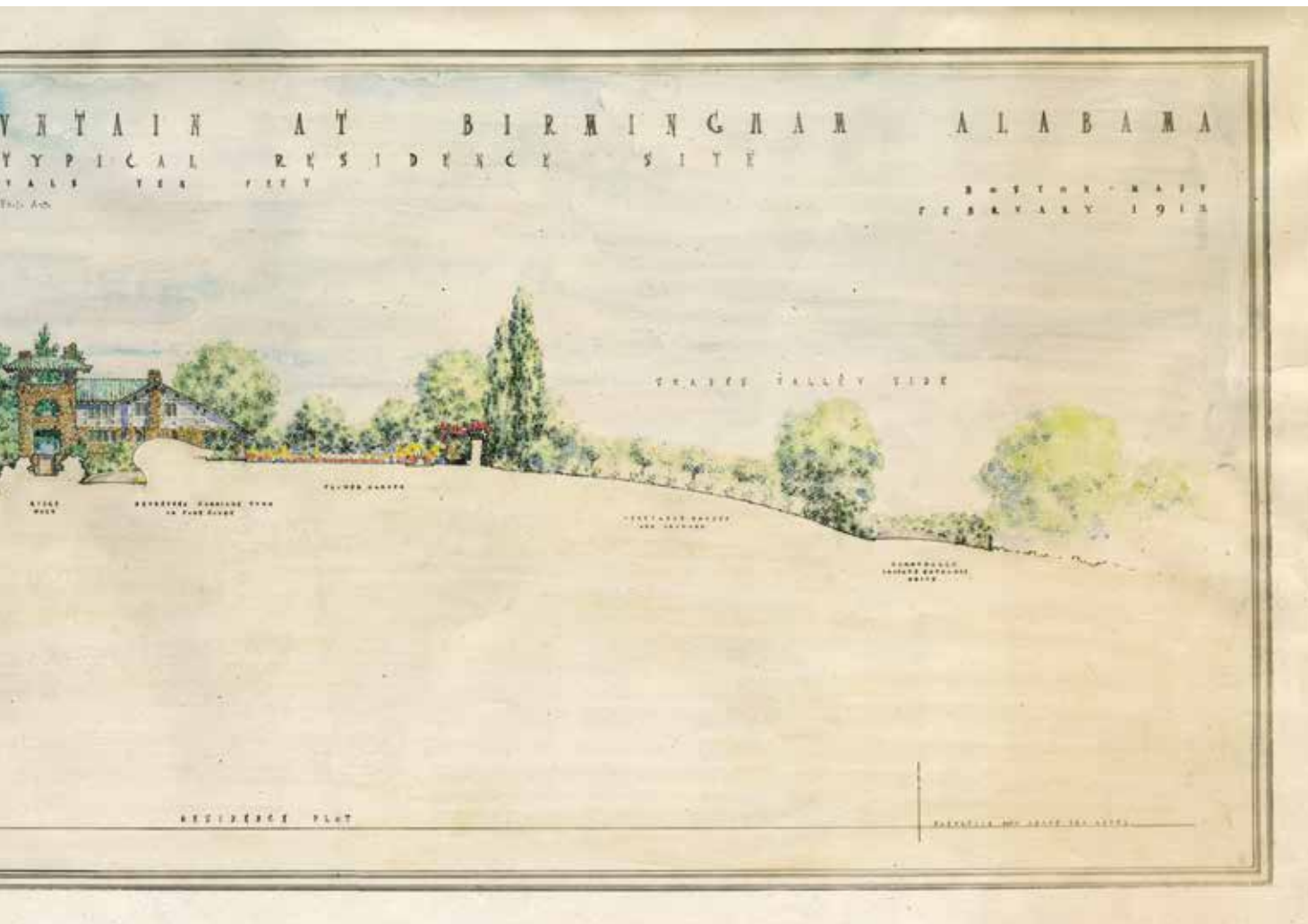
In January 1913, engineer R. E. Meade made a proposal to the Highland Realty Co. to construct Redmont Road, the road initially designed by Miller to access the crest estates from the rear. The first segment of Redmont Road would extend from the Helen-Bess Gap, at the western end of the Woodward Estate, to the western boundary of their property at the quarter section line.<sup>23</sup> Jemison & Co. billed Redmont Road as its new parkway.

On March 5, 1913, Highland Realty Co. deeded lot 10, for one dollar, to Annie Jemison Woodward, Robert Jemison Jr.'s sister who was married to A. H. (“Rick”) Woodward, chairman of the Woodward Iron Co., Birmingham’s most consistently profitable producer of iron. The 10.3-acre Woodward estate lot included one of two knolls at this crest site and a portion of the Kewanee red ore mine on its southern slope.<sup>24</sup> Robert Jemison intended to build his residence on the sec-

ond knoll. During 1914, Mrs. Woodward corresponded with George Miller on the planning for her estate grounds and residence. Miller had executed a cross section through the Woodward estate site that showed the arrangement for a residence sited at the crest with lawns, walks, and belvederes on the Jones Valley side sloping down to the tree-lined parkway with its belvedere. On the Shades Valley slope, a carriage way, flower garden, vegetable garden, and tree-lined drive are shown.<sup>25</sup>

### Redmont: “The Most Wonderful Subdivision in the South”

A year later, Jemison & Co. announced the opening of its newest subdivision “Highland Realty Co.’s Addition–Redmont.”<sup>26</sup> George Miller had projected the development of



Ridge Walk      Belvedere Carriage Turn Of Forecourt      Flower Garden      Vegetable Garden And Orchard      Communally Private Entrance Drive      Shades Valley Side Residence Plot

“Altamont—A Portion of Red Mountain at Birmingham, Alabama, Cross-Section Through a Typical Residence Site.” George H. Miller, Boston, Massachusetts, February 1912. BPL Archives.

seven estates, each atop a separate knoll accessed by a winding drive curving to the rear of the residence. Buffering and protecting the view shed of these crest residences that looked out to the grounds of the country club, Miller left undeveloped the steep land below these estates leading to Altamont Road. His 1911 plan showed walking paths crisscrossing this buffer. While retaining the view shed buffer, cut and fill, a practice favored by engineers, was used to develop the four estate lots offered on this land for sale that Jemison & Co. rightly projected to become commanding sites for residences.

“Within the past month a sub-division had been opened up on the crest of the Red Mountain, above Mountain Terrace, which landscape architects and real estate experts say will be the most wonderful residence sub-

division in the South, and one of the most notable in the entire country....The lots in this sub-division known as Redmont, each contain from four to ten acres, and each of them occupies one of the knolls on the top of Red Mountain. From each house site the ground slopes away in practically every direction.

“To show the difficulty and expense of developing a subdivision of this kind it is interesting to know that on two of these lots alone over 17,000 cubic yards of earth have been moved in order to level them up and present favorable building plateaus. These 17,000 yards would make a fill as big as the 9-story Title Guaranty building [today’s Title Building].”

—The Jemison Magazine, April 1914

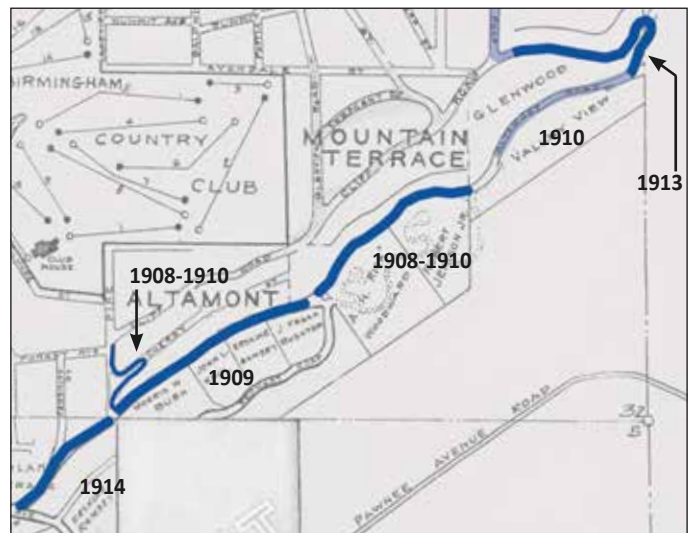


Map of Jemison & Co.'s Properties, 1914. Red outline by Scott Fuller, 2020.

Vehicular access to this area was improved in September 1914 with the extension of Altamont Road to Pawnee Avenue (the future Bankhead Highway–U.S. 78) across lands platted as Highland Terrace. Hill Ferguson worked out this western approach that replaced the access via the switchbacks from Cliff Road.<sup>27</sup>

Redmont Road was dedicated on June 15, 1915, when Birmingham Ore and Mining Co., Valley View Realty Co., and Highland Realty Co., contracted to eliminate future mining of ore to the south of this road where the subdivision of lots was planned in the 1914 plat for this the first segment of Redmont.

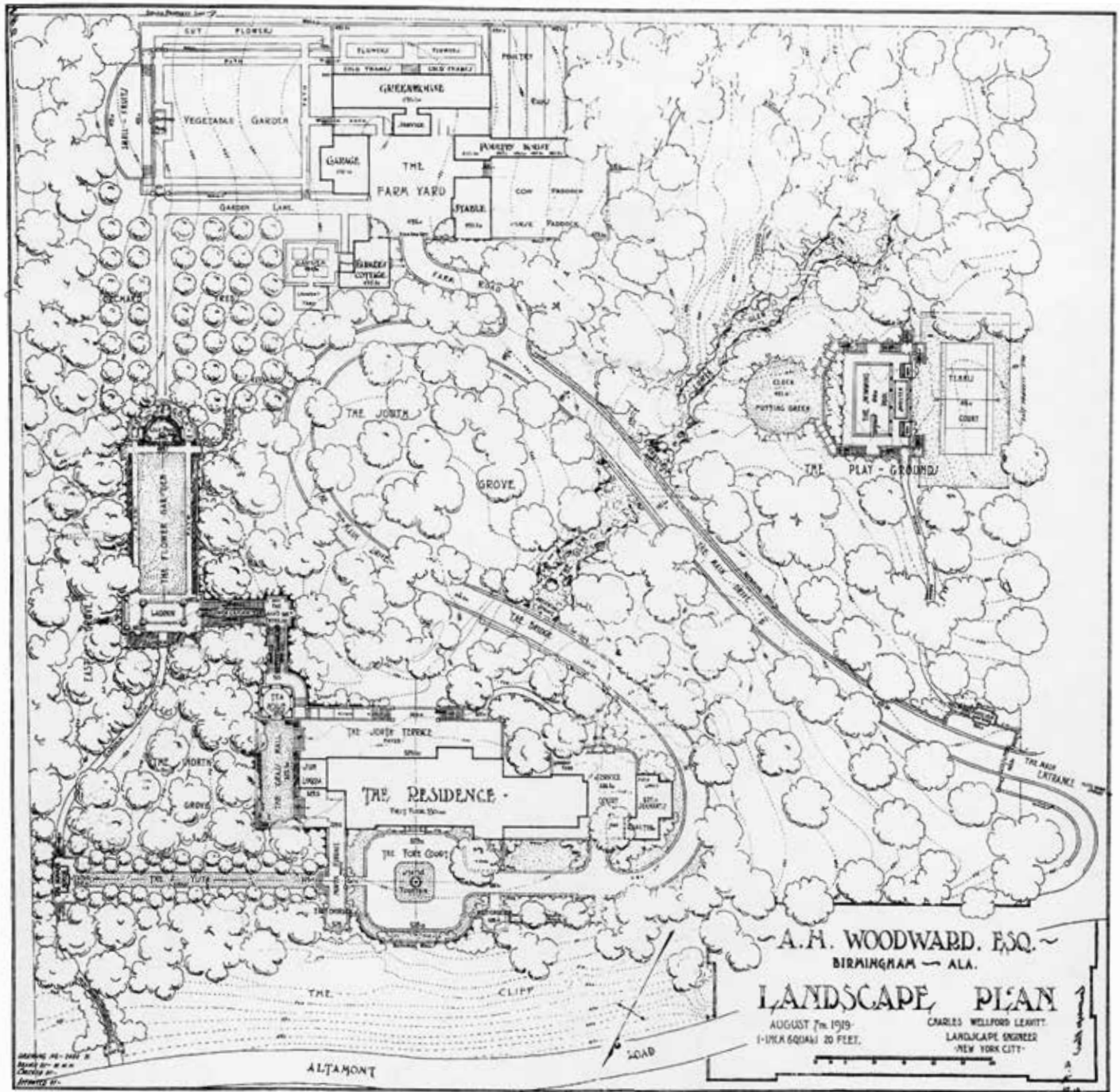
The initial Redmont lots sold to Birmingham's captains of industry: Annie J. (Mrs. Rick) Woodward; J. Franklin Rushon, president of Birmingham Ice & Cold Storage Co.; Solon Jacobs, president of Birmingham Slag Co.; J. M. Caldwell, then an investment banker; and Morris Bush, president of the Shelby Iron Co. and Alabama By-Products. Robert Jemison Jr. reserved a knoll adjacent his sister's knoll for his future estate. The Woodwards and Jemisons proceeded to plan the careful subdivision of their estates and design of their residences, drives, pathways, and gardens, corresponding with landscape architect George Miller. However, actual home building was a different story. Only Caldwell built upon his land before World War I. A servants' house for the Jacobs was



Altamont Road construction dates. Drawn by Scott Fuller, 2020.

completed in 1916 and became their residence. The Caldwells had a tough time building atop their undermined site, completing their residence in 1917 but selling it shortly thereafter to John Kaul, head of Kaul Lumber Co.

The First World War halted residential construction. George Miller, who also designed Kaulton, a finely planned



"Landscape Plan, A. H. Woodward, Esq.," Charles Wellford Leavitt, 1919. Historic American Engineering Record. AL-140.

industrial town near Tuscaloosa for Kaul Lumber, would return in 1920 to design the Kaul's estate grounds. Ore mining resumed at the Helen-Bess and Kewanee Mines, the latter on the grounds of the Woodward estate. New York landscape architect Charles Wellford Leavitt, who had adroitly contoured plans beginning in 1913 for Milner Heights on several Red Mountain knolls east of Altamont and Redmont, provided the plans for the drives, gardens, and outbuildings on the Woodward estate during 1919 and 1920. California architect Reginald Johnson's 22-room Italian Revival-style

residence for Mrs. A. H. Woodward was completed in 1924. To protect their views on the Shades Valley side, in 1925 the Woodwards acquired 16.85 acres of the former Kewanee Mine property, and in 1927 they acquired Robert Jemison's 8.45-acre knoll, making the Woodward homeplace Birmingham's most fully realized grand estate. The provision for the parkway with its natural area below (today's Altamont Park) protects the views on the north side of the property.

## Warren Manning Plans Forest Park, Glenwood, and Mountain Home, 1917–1919

Meanwhile, on November 16, 1917, Jemison & Co., hoping to develop more easily accessible lands and turn a profit, purchased unsold land in the Avondale Land Co.'s Forest Park subdivision and formed the Forest Park Realty Co. with capital of \$25,000. This firm proceeded to subdivide, improve, and successfully sell lots in Forest Park to the north of the Mountain Terrace development. Following its formation, the Forest Park Realty Co. engaged the noted national landscape architect Warren H. Manning of Cambridge, Massachusetts, who knew the Birmingham region well, having prepared and supervised highly successful plans to beautify the city's streetcar railways, prepared a *City Plan for Birmingham* in 1914, and designed recreational facilities for the Tennessee Coal, Iron & Railroad Co., then a major Birmingham employer. Manning was to study the opportunity to link the newly acquired Forest Park lands to Jemison & Co.'s undeveloped properties on Red Mountain: the 40-acre Glenwood just east of Mountain Terrace and the 160-acre Mountain Home lands along the crest of Red Mountain, just east of Altamont Road. Manning's preliminary study for this development was to include advertising matter, literature, and suggestions.

Manning's initial plan made from topographic maps and without revisiting Birmingham was reviewed and critiqued by Robert Jemison Jr. in a letter of February 2, 1918, and by Hill Ferguson in a letter of March 21, 1918.<sup>28</sup> Jemison was concerned that Manning provided for too many large estates that he felt the market would not absorb. He wrote back that the development should be sequenced, "as the market develops," with the first phase to extend Clairmont Avenue as a wide boulevard lined with house sites, thence subdivide Glenwood, and finally undertake the proposed eastern estate sector by extending Altamont Road across the crest through the Mountain Home property and creating a loop by connecting Altamont and Clairmont Roads at their eastern terminus. Ferguson was excited about the extension of the mountainside parkway:

*"One of the very good features of your plan is the proposed Red Mountain thoroughfare which would form a natural and very graceful boundary for the eastern edge of our property and such a highway would really come under the province of the city plan and have to be promoted by the Park Commission or some other official body. We suggest that our property be tied up with this with roads and approaches wherever practicable, . . ."*

—Hill Ferguson to Warren Manning, March 21, 1918

However, Manning's plan was not to be. During the preceding month, Robert Jemison Jr. had been called to Washington D.C. to serve for a year in a World War I agency that built housing for shipyard workers. (For this project, he

reemployed industrial town planner George Miller.) As Ferguson noted in his March letter to Manning, "Mr. Jemison's leaving has gotten us so upset."

In January and February 1919, Manning was once again working on his plans. He proposed that he provide general oversight for a period of two to three years, visiting Birmingham for several days twice each year. He met with Jemison in New York and corresponded with him, providing guidance. Manning's associate, Harold Wagner, was on site in Birmingham supervising the laying out of roads.

Following his return to Birmingham, lacking both sufficient capital and agreement about how to move forward, in September 1919 Jemison sold the proposed 300-acre development, together with its Warren Manning plan, to Birmingham Realty Co. The \$650,000 sale included 210 acres owned by the Forest Park Realty Co., 52 of the original 80 acres of crest real estate owned by the Mountain Home Land Co., and 30 of the original 40 acres of the Glenwood Realty Co. At the time of the transaction, Robert Jemison stated to *The Birmingham News* that the sale was "of advantage to both parties as such deals usually are."<sup>29</sup> Jemison & Co. made a profit from this deal.

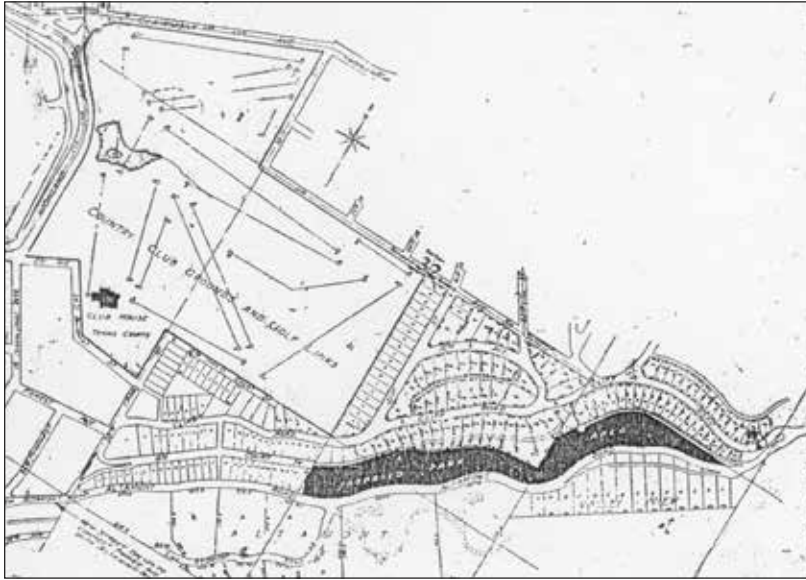
Birmingham Realty moved quickly to subdivide this property, but without benefit of the Manning plan, without the mountainside parkway extension, and without connecting Clairmont to Altamont, thereby providing better access to property at the crest of Red Mountain.<sup>30</sup> Birmingham Realty named its subdivisions the 1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> additions to Forest Park, the original 1909 subdivision by the Avondale Land Co. adjacent Mountain Terrace.<sup>31</sup> These subdivisions hit the market at opportune times, and the blocks of Clairmont Avenue and Essex, Glenwood, Linwood, and Overbrook Roads filled with residences in the mid to late 1920s.

## Birmingham's Economy and Home Building Rev Up, 1924–1926

Jemison & Co.'s big break would come as the Birmingham economy was improving. The Stockham family decided to work with the firm to sell and help underwrite subdivision of the Stockham lands along the upper reaches of Red Mountain's southern flank. The family retained the lands at the crest for their estates. Jemison & Co. subdivided the remaining lands along Red Mountain's upper reaches as the 150-acre Redmont Park, platted in sectors from 1924 to 1926 by the firm's engineers R. A. Meade and Henry Glander Jr., with assistance from Birmingham horticulturalist and newly minted landscape professional William H. Kessler.

Jemison & Co. sold every lot in Redmont Park, and in the late 1920s Birmingham's elite began commissioning the city's cadre of fine architects and landscape professionals to design their grand residences and grounds atop and along the southern flank of Red Mountain.





**Proposed park area.** *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, October 23, 1921. Cornerstone Collection, BPL Archives.

Lots were sold and homes were also built in record numbers as the vacant lots of Mountain Terrace, Altamont, and Forest Park filled during these robust years for the local economy, which witnessed the city's largest sustained period of home building.

Buoyed by their success in Redmont, Jemison & Co. gathered investors and brought Warren Manning back to Birmingham to draw plans for 4,000 acres of today's Mountain Brook from 1926 to 1929.<sup>32</sup>

### **Wooded Slope Opposite Altamont Road Offered to the City to Protect the Scenic Drive and City Views, 1921**

In 1921, the U.S. Post Office refused to deliver the mail to Altamont and Redmont Road addresses, there being so few and widely scattered residences along the crest. Jemison & Co. considered forgoing the 1911 Miller Plan to provide the public gracious views along Altamont Road and to subdivide the area of today's Altamont Park into residential lots. Such subdivision had taken place in Birmingham Security Co.'s adjoining western plat. While four homes had been built here, blocking the views from Altamont Road (in the 3400 and 3500 blocks), other lots remained for sale. Robert Jemison Jr.'s thoughts on this issue and a suggestion for their resolution were expressed in 1921 letters to Birmingham City Commissioner J. Ellis Brown:

*"As was explained to and admitted by the Commissioners the purchase of this valuable park area at a price approximately 50% of the reasonable market value of the property for residential purposes makes it possible for the City to conserve and protect what*

*is now and perhaps always will be the most attractive and beautiful close-in scenic drive in Birmingham, overlooking as it does the wonderful panoramic view of Jones Valley and the business and residence sections of the City with the Country Club grounds in the foreground. This property if improved and sold as residence lots in accordance with the present plans will be as already demonstrated by existing houses now obstructing the above described views, deprive the people of Birmingham for all time to come of a scenic drive and view that is one of the City's principal and most beautiful assets."*

— Robert Jemison Jr. to City of Birmingham  
Commissioner J. Ellis Brown, March 17, 1921<sup>33</sup>

Two days later, in a letter of March 19, 1921, Robert Jemison Jr. wrote again to J. Ellis Brown, suggesting that the City purchase additional lots in Birmingham Securities' 3400 and 3500 blocks along Altamont Road to preserve the public views before homes were built on these lots. Jemison volunteered to help the City acquire these lots for the proposed purchase. The price was estimated at \$50 per front foot.

A few months later, in October of 1921, the lease/sale suggestion for the purchase of the Altamont Road land hit the press. A *Birmingham Age-Herald* story in the Sunday newspaper announced, "ANOTHER NEW PARK FOR BIRMINGHAM." The story included a plat of the "proposed park area" with the caption cited below:

*"Birmingham has acquired her first mountain park by the purchase by the city of a strip of land on the crest of Red Mountain along Altamont Road. This property affords the most commanding view of Birmingham and Jones Valley, and its purchase was made by the city, not alone for [illegible] purposes, but also to preserve this beautiful strip of land so that the view from the crest of the mountain could never be obstructed. Its importance from the scenic standpoint has been compared to that of the strip of land along the Hudson in New York. . . ."*

—"ANOTHER NEW PARK FOR BIRMINGHAM,"  
*The Birmingham Age-Herald*, Sunday, October 23, 1921

In point of fact, the City of Birmingham had not acquired "her first mountain park." Robert Jemison had suggested an agreement whereby the City was to pay the Mountain Terrace Land Co. \$64,000 in five installments for the land along the north side of Altamont Road. The City did not resolve to purchase any land as recommended by Jemison in 1921.

## Olmsted Brothers Extols Virtues of a Mountainside Parkway, 1925

Olmsted Brothers' *A Park System for Birmingham* of 1925 does not list Altamont Park as an existing or proposed City of Birmingham park. It does list Altamont Parkway as a link in a proposed future mountainside parkway that might extend along Red Mountain's northern flank. (Pieces for this parkway had been privately developed along Altamont Road and Crest Road in Milner Heights.) Justification for the City purchasing lands to create this parkway is stated thus:

*"Though it seems impracticable [in 1925 with the extensive mining of red ore then in progress along the mountain] to secure extensive sections of Red Mountain solely for park use, we believe it is feasible—and at very little cost too—to save for public enjoyment a considerable part of the expansive, impressive, and varied outlook from this ridge; and it is opportunity for just that big, spacious outlook which contributes in largest measure to the justifying value of any mountain or hilltop park. . . .*

*"It is already too late to secure a complete crest parkway of this sort, but considerable sections, especially along Crest Road, Altamont Road, and possibly other streets now under construction, are still unbuilt upon and should be purchasable at reasonable figures. Every stretch of protected outlook would contribute to the value of the parkway, be it only a lot or two in width. In the developed sections you should take prompt steps to save what views are still savable."*

— Olmsted Brothers, *A Park System for Birmingham*, 1925

## City Acquires Land Along Altamont Road, 1927

The plat fronting over 3,000 feet on the north side of Altamont Road was sold by the Mountain Terrace Land Co. to the City of Birmingham for \$64,000 dollars. Hill Ferguson noted that "Jemison and I argued to the city commissioners that this road was justified in the nature of a civic enterprise, and the city was well justified in paying the \$20 per front foot for it, rather than have all the view from the road cut off by houses."<sup>34</sup> The deed was transferred to the City on September 16, 1927. It does not include a statement of dedication of the land for park purposes.<sup>35</sup> The City's Parks and Recreation Board engineers had platted the land on June 30, 1927, calling it "Altamont (Mountain Terrace) Park."<sup>36</sup> As platted, the land extends from Altamont Road on the north to the subdivisions of Mountain Terrace and Glenwood on the south. The City did not complete payments for the park until August 5, 1941, when a City resolution instructs a final, and reduced, payment, to the Mountain Terrace Land Co. of "\$22,720 as payment in full under the contract in question."<sup>37</sup>

## The City as Steward of the "Natural" Park, 1931

Parks planning and management represented a serious, even if continually underfunded, commitment of the City of Birmingham to provide recreational opportunities for Birmingham residents. As the Great Depression of the 1930s spread unemployment across the industrial region, community leaders moved parks and recreation to the forefront of local initiatives. Throughout the Depression years, Parks Superintendent Roy S. Marshall, assisted by City Forester Hugh H. Sloss, directed the many local and national programs to improve grading and drainage; to build tennis courts, picnic shelters, and other recreational facilities in parks across the City; and to appropriately manage its "natural" areas.

In May 1931, *Birmingham News* social columnist Dolly Dalrymple interviewed City Forester Hugh Sloss on recent improvements in Altamont and other parks. In this story, Sloss describes Altamont Park, its value, and the manner in which this natural park should be treated.<sup>38</sup>

Landscape architect Birgit Kibelka summarizes Sloss's main statements about Altamont Park.<sup>39</sup>

- Altamont Park is a key strip of land to protect the residences below from landslides and excessive amounts of stormwater.
- It is a key to the one-mile drive with beautiful views of Birmingham for every citizen and visitor.
- The park represents a wonderful contrast to the typical, formally planned parks in the city.
- The park contains "many little paths and trails that point out the easiest walking and most beautiful routes" and offer distant vistas now and then, along with the possibility of enjoying and exploring the beautiful, natural forest.
- The park introduces a different policy of botanical management than that then found in designs of most parks.
- It is and must always be an informal, natural park due to its location and topography.
- \* The park's only type of recreation should always be enjoyment of its scenic and botanical values.
- The park's health benefits are numerous.

Prior to Dalrymple's interview with Sloss, the park had been cleared of "an impenetrable mass of vines and briars from which unsightly and disorderly dead limbs and snags protruded," while existing native shrubs and trees that were to remain were carefully selected and freed from overgrowth to allow beautiful, natural growth and reopen views into the valley below. Dalrymple assesses the selective cleaning and pruning of the forest as magical, yielding "a crystal, sparkling fairyland of dancing, living, vibrating foliage of countless hues."

*“When our skin bleaches pallow under the shade of dark ceilings and incandescent bulbs, a little basqueing under the tempered sunlight of Altamont Park will revive the activity of our skin tissues and supply our vitamin E.*

*“When our blood becomes stagnant and sluggish in our veins the gentle exertion of strolling through our park will stimulate our red and white corpuscles into beneficial action. When our minds become confused and vexed over the incessant encounter with daily problems, Altamont Park will give us relief and relaxation in a form that is lasting and genuine.”*

— Hugh Sloss, City of Birmingham forester, extolling the health benefits of Altamont Park, 1931

## **Developer’s Attempts to Plat Altamont Park Lead to Its Dedicated Status, 1990–2000**

Efforts by a private developer to build residences in the park in 1990 led to the park’s neighbors uniting to insist that the City of Birmingham declare Altamont a “Dedicated Park.” On January 27, 1995, “Altamont Park, Altamont Road” was listed as dedicated by the park board. On January 25, 2000, the park was irrevocably dedicated for park purposes by Ord. No. 00-16 of the Birmingham City Council.

## **Toward a “Fuller Fulfillment,” Spring 2020**

The Jemison & Co. subdivisions of Mountain Terrace, Glenwood, Altamont, and Redmont platted from 1907 to 1914 now lie in the City of Birmingham neighborhoods of Forest Park and Redmont and are listed on the National Register of Historic Places in the Forest Park and Red Mountain Suburbs Historic Districts. Both Forest Park and Redmont are City of Birmingham local historic districts for which Design Review guidelines govern alterations to the historic character and fabric. Altamont Park is located in both historic districts, but in the Redmont City of Birmingham neighborhood.

The Jemison & Co. vision for a “Residence Park” on Red Mountain has been fulfilled and sustained over the century since the first landscape architects applied their skill to Birmingham’s challenging topography. Red Mountain remains a green, forested slope. The tiny and relatively inaccessible piece of the grand parkway planned at the crest protects the views from Birmingham’s grandest estates and downhill residences from landslides, while providing the general public an opportunity to view the city spread out below. And the neighborhood park, totally surrounded by residences and crisscrossed by wooded trails, remains home to copious wildlife, native plants, and lots of non-native invasives.

*“Nature’s plan has been fulfilled, a plan calling for millions of dollars worth of plant materials, a plan specifying tons and tons of fertilizers, a plan which is the*



**Park visitor**, heading up the steps. Louise McPhillips, 2019.

*conduct of talent that money cannot buy. The most skillful labor was employed to contour the ground, carve the rocks, and plant the material. Thousands of years were taken to complete the construction. So when the Park and Recreation Board chose to accept this wonderful gift and assist it to a fuller fulfillment, their wisdom was profound indeed.”*

— Hugh H. Sloss, City of Birmingham forester, *The Birmingham News*, May 31, 1931

Altamont Park was intended to remain a natural, forested green space, enhanced only by selective cleaning and pruning. It was conceived as a neighborhood park, whereas Altamont Road, one link in an imagined longer parkway, was meant for the enjoyment of all of Birmingham’s citizens and visitors. Furthermore, preserving as much vegetation as possible on the north face of Red Mountain allows the City of Birmingham to retain its most notable and defining natural feature.

Map of  
**Altamont Park**  
 and the Surrounding Neighborhoods  
 of Forest Park and Redmont

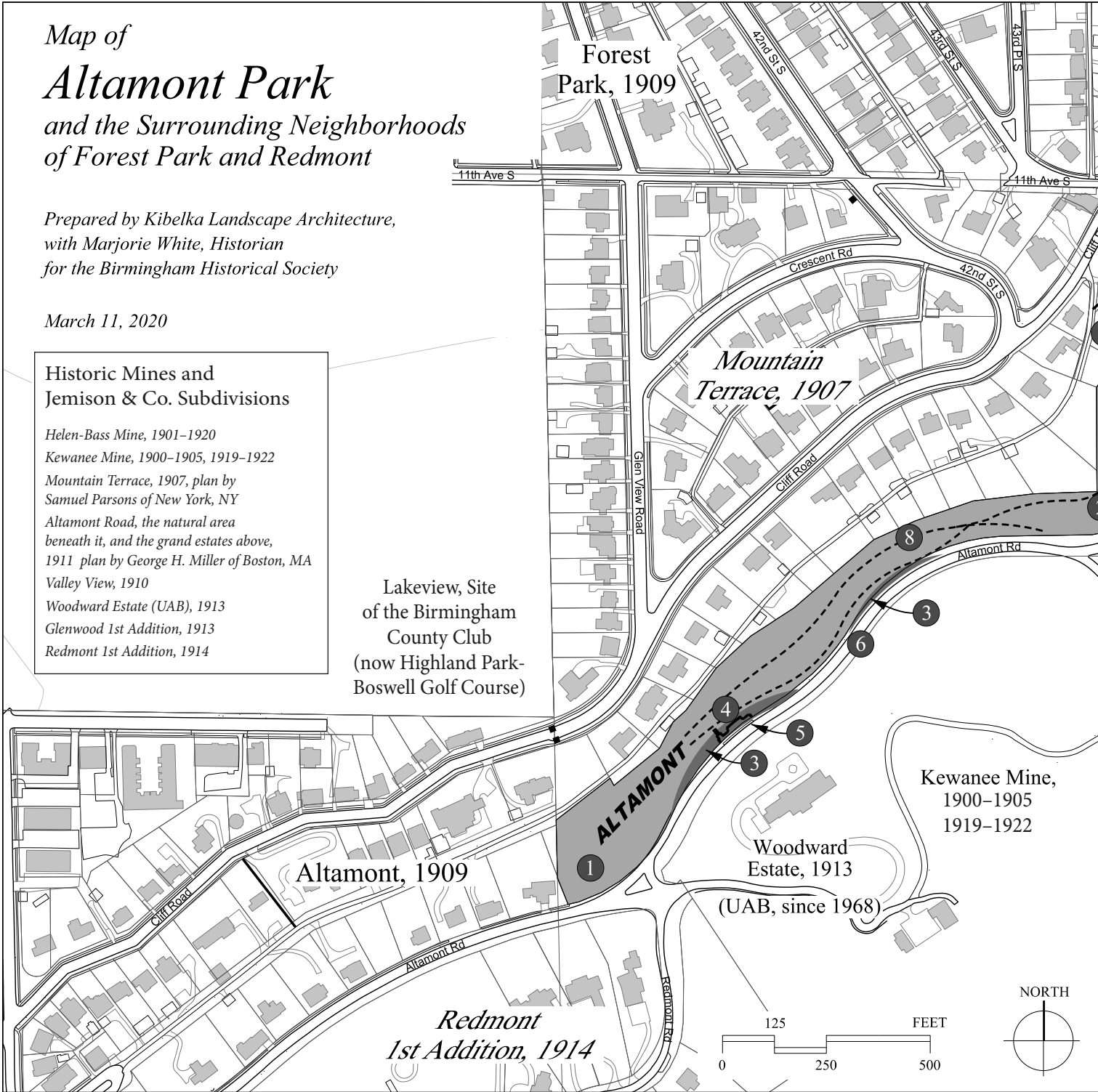
Prepared by Kibelka Landscape Architecture,  
 with Marjorie White, Historian  
 for the Birmingham Historical Society

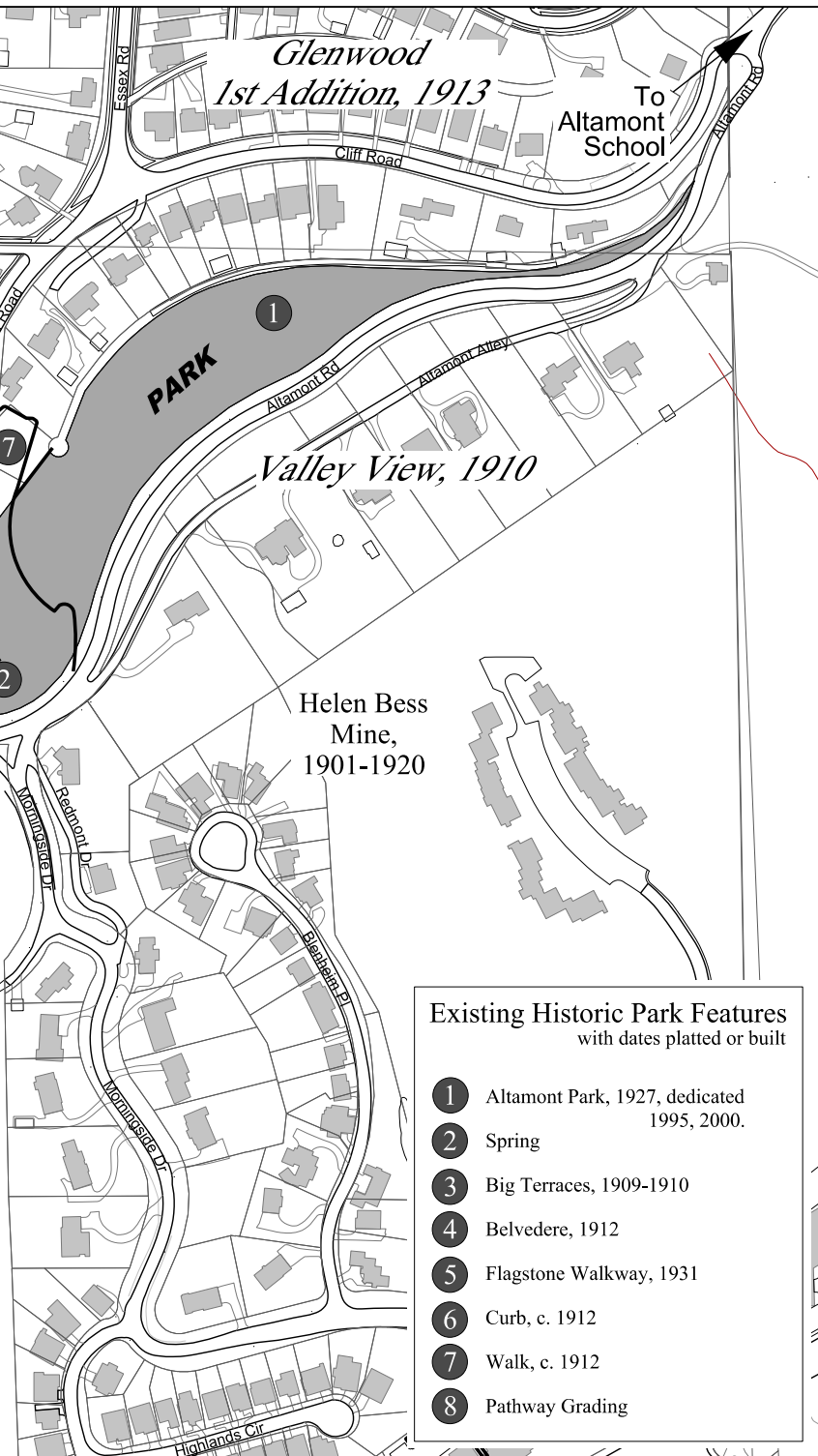
March 11, 2020

**Historic Mines and  
 Jemison & Co. Subdivisions**

- Helen-Bass Mine, 1901–1920*
- Kewanee Mine, 1900–1905, 1919–1922*
- Mountain Terrace, 1907, plan by Samuel Parsons of New York, NY*
- Altamont Road, the natural area beneath it, and the grand estates above, 1911 plan by George H. Miller of Boston, MA*
- Valley View, 1910*
- Woodward Estate (UAB), 1913*
- Glenwood 1st Addition, 1913*
- Redmont 1st Addition, 1914*

Lakeview, Site  
 of the Birmingham  
 County Club  
 (now Highland Park-  
 Boswell Golf Course)





Trying to understand George Miller's 1911 Plan, left to right, Marjorie White, Birgit Kibelka, Katie Tipton, and Gail Cosby. Louise McPhillips, 2019.



Forest Park resident Gail Cosby, pointing out one of the many park trails. Louise McPhillips, 2019.

## Endnotes

- 1 “Red Mountain and Altamont As Striking Civic Features: Landscape Architect George H. Miller Makes Suggestion in Connection with Establishment of Comprehensive Park System in Birmingham,” *Birmingham Ledger*, September 1, 1912.
- 2 This description appears in Jemison & Co.’s promotional brochure *Mountain Terrace: The Residence Park of Birmingham, 1907* (Jemison Real Estate & Investment Co., 1907).
- 3 Jemison & Co. refers to the real estate firms under the direction of Robert Jemison Jr. that were active in the subdivision of today’s Forest Park and Redmont neighborhoods of the City of Birmingham from 1905 through the 1920s.
- 4 The term “Altamont” is defined as “a narrow ridge consisting of knolls and gaps with Shades Valley located on one side and Jones Valley and the city of Birmingham on the other” by George Miller, the landscape architect who prepared the general study for the arrangement of Altamont’s roads, estates, and natural areas during 1911, in a letter Miller wrote to Mrs. A.H. Woodward of July 1, 1914, that is found in the Jemison Papers at the Birmingham Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts (Jemison Papers).
- 5 James F. Sulzby Jr., *Historic Alabama Hotels and Resorts* (University of Alabama Press, 1960).
- 6 *Mountain Terrace: The Residence Park of Birmingham*.
- 7 Mountain Terrace was platted June 25, 1907, by Herman Schoel, civil engineer.
- 8 Today’s Cliff Road was called “The Cliff Road” in the 1907 Mountain Terrace promotional brochure.
- 9 *Mountain Terrace: The Residence Park of Birmingham*.
- 10 The Mountain Terrace stockholder’s reports are found in the Jemison Papers at Birmingham Public Library Archives.
- 11 “Poister v. Gilmer: Action for Trespass on Lands.” This case, which made it to the Supreme Court of Alabama, documents that one George C. DePoister went on the lands of Morgan Gilmer, a resident of Montgomery, during 1885 and 1886, quarried and hauled away 4,000 tons of stone, and left the land rutted. This is the quarry pictured on page 6.
- 12 Original copies of *The Jemison Magazines* are held in the Jemison Papers at BPL Archives. In 2011 and 2012, Birmingham Historical Society reprinted the magazines as *The Jemison Magazine and the Selling of Birmingham, 1910–1914* and *The Jemison Magazine: Birmingham and Mountain Brook, 1926–1930*. They are available for purchase from the Society.
- 13 Jemison & Co.’s Glenwood Realty Co. would later develop “Addition No. 1,” platted May 9, 1913, on 10 acres of this land along Cliff Road. The remaining 30 acres of Glenwood would be sold to Birmingham Realty Co. in 1919 and subdivided shortly thereafter as an addition to that company’s development of Forest Park.
- 14 Olmsted Brothers’ 1904 plan for a park system for the Portland community includes the Terwilliger Parkway, a fully realized greenway that affords sweeping views of the city and Mount Hood. Today, FriendsOfTerwilliger.org is “an active group of volunteers dedicated to protecting and enhancing the historic and scenic character of Terwilliger Parkway.”
- 15 Birmingham Securities Co. was incorporated in 1908 with Hill Ferguson as president. In this capacity, Ferguson helped multiple groups of heirs to several properties to subdivide and sell their lands in a manner cooperative to that of Jemison & Co. Some lots in the “Altamont” property had been sold as part of the 1886 Forest Hill subdivision (“Map of Forest Hill,” March 19, 1886. Marcus B. Long, Civil Engineer) prior to the Jemison & Co. purchase in 1905. For future sale, Jemison & Co. obtained 27 lots along Cliff and Altamont Roads adjacent to its Mountain Terrace property to the east. Other lots in this subdivision had already been sold by the heirs to the Gilmer estate of Montgomery.
- 16 “Altamont, Property of Birmingham Securities Co.,” November 1909, Meade & Huey, engineers.
- 17 “Altamont Road,” Highland Realty Co., November 22, 1911. This plat delineates the central section of Altamont Road located above today’s park and below the Woodward Estate. In September 1911, Miller had completed a study for the eastern end of Altamont Road planning a link to connect the segment below the Valley View subdivision platted in 1910 to Cliff Road. “Study for the Location of a Street Connecting Mountain Terrace and Altamont Parkway, Glenwood,” September 2, 1911. This connection appears on Miller’s grand plan for “Altamont—A Portion of Red Mountain at Birmingham, Alabama, Study for General Subdivision and Arrangement.” of November 27, 1911. It would not be built until 1913 and would not be fully operational until 1920, when Birmingham Realty finally opened the connection to Essex Road.
- 18 “Plat of Valley View Subdivision Property of the Valley View Realty Co.,” July 1st, 1910, Meade & Huey Engineers, Birmingham.
- 19 “Red Mountain and Altamont As Striking Civic Features.”
- 20 Jemison & Co.’s Glenwood Realty Co., formed in 1906, developed this addition to Mountain Terrace, which is called “Glenwood Realty Co.’s Add. No. 1.,” platted May 9, 1913, R. E. Meade, engineer.
- 21 “Glenwood Loop Connecting Cliff Road and Altamont Road” advertisement, *The Birmingham News*, July 9, 1913. George Miller had designed this eastern connection of Cliff and Altamont Roads as “Study for a Location of a Street Connecting Mountain Terrace and Altamont Parkway, Glenwood,” platted September 2, 1911, prior to his study for the grand estates along the crest.



**Naturally wooded slope** on the north face of Red Mountain, Ruffner Mountain Nature Preserve. Gottfried Kibelka, 2019.

Miller's design also projects the easier grade for an entrance road ascending the mountainside from Clairmont Avenue than the existing 42<sup>nd</sup> Street connection. The new road would become Essex Road, finally opened to Cliff in 1920.

- 22 "Have You Bought One of Those Beautiful Glenwood Lots at \$40 the Front Foot?" Glenwood Realty Co. advertisement, *The Birmingham News*, July 11, 1913.
- 23 Cathy Criss Adams, *Worthy of Remembrance: A History of Redmont* (Redmont Park Historic District Foundation, 2002).
- 24 Warranty Deed, Highland Realty Co. by Robt Jemison Jr, Pres (seal) to Annie J. Woodward, March 5, 1913. Map book 8, p. 113. In the 1920s, the Woodwards would acquire additional land along Red Mountain's southern flank, including the second knoll on which Robert Jemison Jr. had hoped to build his residence. Woodward heirs deeded this estate to the Trustees of the University of Alabama in 1968 to serve as the residence for the President of the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Birmingham Historical Society published Ellen Erdreich's *The Red Mountain Residence of Mr. and Mrs. A. H. Woodward* in 1981 and in 1998 documented the residence and the Kewanee and Helen-Bess Red Ore Mines for the Historic American Buildings Survey (HABS AL-924) and the Historic American Engineering Record (Woodward House Site, HAER AL-140).
- 25 "Altamont—A Portion of Red Mountain at Birmingham, Alabama, Cross Section Through a Typical Residence Site," George H. Miller, Landscape Architect, Boston, Mass., February 1912. BPL Archives.
- 26 "Highland Realty Co.'s Addition—Redmont," platted February 28, 1914, R. E. Meade, Civil Engineer. Four of the seven estates along the crest as shown on George Miller's 1911 plan for Altamont are platted. Three of them extended beyond the quarter section of land then owned by Jemison & Co. This latter crest real estate would be subdivided as part of the Highland Terrace development. Meade platted four additional lots on the south side of Redmont Road, not shown on the Miller plan.
- 27 "Highland Terrace, Property of Shropshire & Ranson & R. A. Taylor Estate, a subdivision of the Birmingham Securities Co.," September 11, 1914, Robert Totten, Engineer.
- 28 Catherine Greene Browne published these letters, from Jemison to Manning on February 7, 1918, and from Ferguson to Manning on March 21, 1918, in *History of Forest Park* (Cather Publishing Co., 1992).
- 29 This *Birmingham News* article is quoted by Catherine Greene Browne in *History of Forest Park* without a date for the article other than "at the time of the transaction."
- 30 Today's Altamont School is located on the Mountain Home property that Manning's plan would have developed as a mountain-side parkway.
- 31 "Forest Park," platted March 25, 1909, by B. B. Meriwether, civil engineer, Avondale Land Co., J. F. Leary, President. Meriwether would also plat the Birmingham Realty Co. additions to Forest Park from 1919 to 1927.
- 32 Once again, Robert Jemison Jr. would plan at the highest standards, refuse to compromise those standards, and hang on through challenging times to retain and create long-term value in spite of the Great Depression of the 1930s.
- 33 Letter, Robert Jemison Jr. to City of Birmingham Commissioner J. Ellis Brown, March 17, 1921. Jemison Papers, BPL Archives. This

statement is also quoted in full in Catherine Greene Browne's *History of Forest Park*.

- 34 Hill Ferguson's 1950 hand-written annotation on a copy of the October 23, 1921, news story on the proposed lease/sale. Birmingham Historical Society Cornerstone Collection now at BPL Archives.
- 35 "Mountain Terrace Land Company to the City of Birmingham," deed, September 16, 1927 (vol. 1761, p. 250).
- 36 Birmingham Parks and Recreation Board plat for "Altamont (Mountain Terrace) Park," June 30, 1927. Park and Recreation Plats, Legion Field.
- 37 Resolution of the City of Birmingham, August 5, 1941. Quoted by Catherine Greene Browne, *History of Forest Park*.
- 38 "City Parks Take on Ethereal Touch: Birmingham Helped by Magic Wand in Beautifying Work," Dolly Dalrymple, *The Birmingham News—Age-Herald*, Sunday, May 31, 1931. Courtesy John Morse and Gottfried Kibelka.
- 39 Birgit Kibelka to Marjorie White, email February 26, 2020. Kibelka comments: "Apart from being a wonderful historic account the article shows how benefits of and needs for the park remain the same now as compared to 90 years ago."

## Acknowledgements

The research and publishing of this essay has been assisted by a large number of individuals as we sought to understand how today's Altamont Park and its neighborhood came to be. Searches of the Jemison Papers at Birmingham Public Library Archives (with the invaluable support of Don Veasey and Gigi Gowdy), plats and deeds at the Jefferson County Courthouse, the priceless histories of Forest Park and Redmont by Catherine Greene Browne and Cathy Criss Adams, together with searches of Birmingham Historical Society files on the Woodward House Site, and hikes through the park led by neighborhood residents (in which Gail and Tom Cosby, Birgit and Gottfried Kibelka, Louise McPhillips, Carol Ogle, Brian Rushing, Carol Slaughter, Katie Tipton, Gerry Waters, and I participated) have contributed to the understanding herewith shared. Landscape architect Birgit Kibelka correlated and mapped historic and current Geographic Information System features, researcher Gerry Waters found the deed, subdivision plats and news articles, and Katie Tipton and Julius Linn Jr. provided editorial guidance to produce this piece that was "designed" by Scott Fuller.

Marjorie L. White  
Birmingham, Alabama  
April 2020

Front cover: **Mountain Terrace: The Residence Park of Birmingham**, Cover for the promotional brochure prepared for Jemison & Co. Samuel Parsons, New York, 1907. View looking across the 42<sup>nd</sup> Street entrance to the future subdivisions of Mountain Terrace, Altamont, and Redmont and Altamont Park. The future Woodward Estate and Valley View are *to the left* of the gap, and the initial portion of Redmont is *to the right*. Jemison Papers, Birmingham Public Library Archives.



**Woodward Estate, with Altamont Parkway and Altamont Park, *below***, looking south to Shades Mountain. Jet Lowe, Historic American Engineering Record AL-140, 1993.