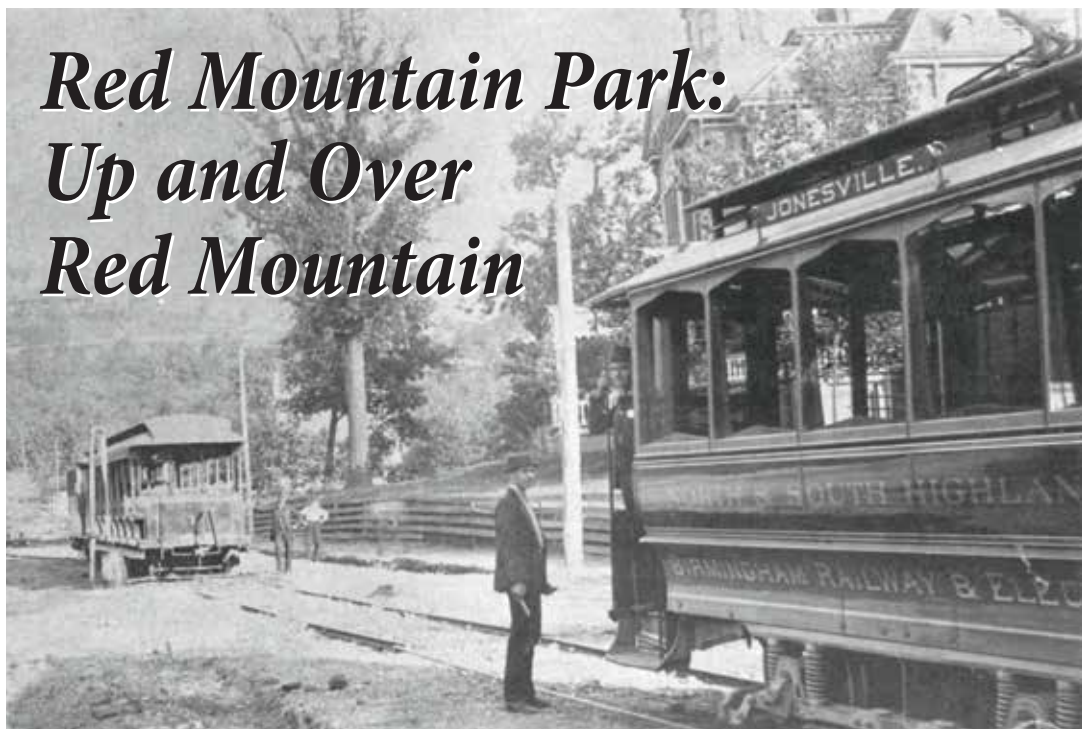


BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

May 2022

Red Mountain Park: Up and Over Red Mountain



South Highland Terminus of the Red Mountain streetcar on 20th Street at 14th Avenue South, with the B. B. Comer Residence in the background. Photograph, Summer 1892. Birmingham, Ala. Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts.

The first Red Mountain Park is not the same as today's Red Mountain Park nor is it the Red Mountain Park that was renamed in the 1930s for Birmingham Mayor A. O. Lane and today houses the Birmingham Botanical Gardens and the Birmingham Zoo. The earliest Red Mountain Park operated in the 1890s along a streetcar route that led from Birmingham's Southside to real estate opportunities "over-the-mountain" in the future community of Homewood in Shades Valley.

B. F Roden & Associates Plan Clifton ... in Shades Valley, 1886

"The Clifton dummy line [a horse-drawn streetcar] will cross Red Mountain on the south and open up a totally undeveloped suburb."

— *Sheffield Daily Enterprise*, Sheffield, Alabama. September 1890.

By the late 1880s, Birmingham area minerals had been located, were being widely mined, and flowed into the many furnaces that lined Jones Valley in which the City of Birmingham lay, ushering in the region's first economic boom. (Jones Valley lies to the north of Red Mountain, Shades Valley to the south.) Speculative land companies formed in droves to buy up and subdivide available lands in Jones Valley and access them by street railways, then the major form of public transportation. The *Street Railway Journal* of May 1900 reported that in 1899 Birmingham street railways carried 10,000,000 passengers. East Lake and Highland Avenue both featured popular routes that led to amusement parks that visitors and prospective lot purchasers were encouraged to visit.

Together with Cincinnati investor Charles W. Van Vleck, M. T. Sumner, and several others, Benjamin F. Roden formed "The Clifton Land Company" on December 31, 1886. John Witherspoon Dubose's history of Birmingham and Jefferson County published in 1887 records that the Clifton company had \$225,00 in stock, with \$35,000 reserved for improvements. Roden served as president, Sumner as Secretary-Treasurer and general manager of the streetcar line.

Roden's new company bought up acreage in the tree-covered, flat, and undeveloped lands in Shades Valley along today's Central Avenue in Homewood. Homewood historian Sheryl Summe notes

Benjamin F. Roden.

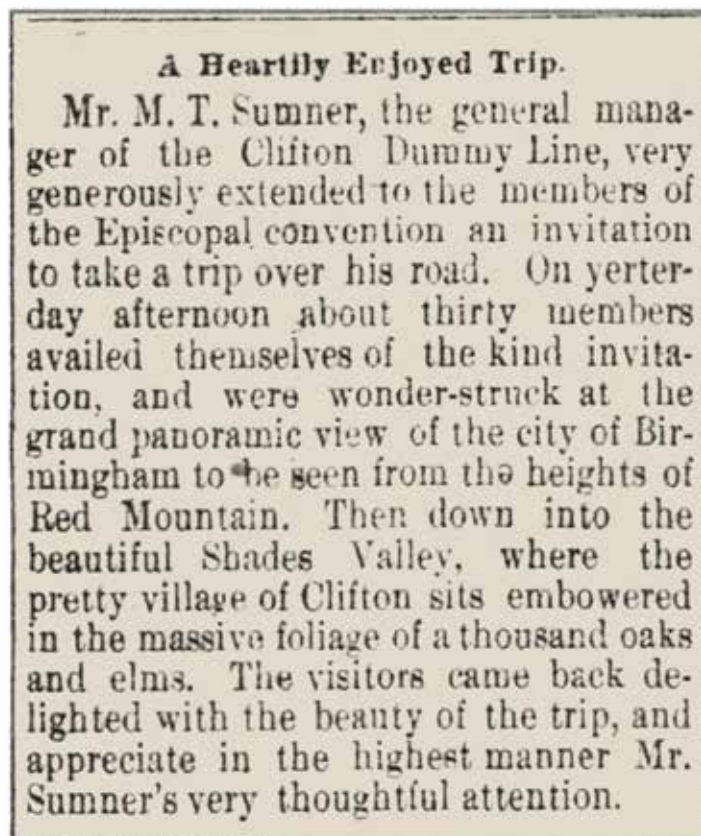
The 27-year-old Benjamin F. Roden arrived in Birmingham in 1871 to join the hardy opportunists who threw their lot with the spanking new city in this then wilderness area. Roden would develop the first street railway in 1884, the industrial and residential town of Avondale, as well as grocery, hotel, insurance, and coal firms.

He was in at the acorn beginnings of all the mercantile, real estate, banking, mining, manufacturing, and transportation enterprises planted in the rough, little wooden town . . . He has accumulated, at the time of his death, on February 23, 1908, large properties, means, and influence.

— Ethel Armes, *The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama*, 1910.

that the only passable road that crossed Red Mountain at this time was at the gap at the site of today's Greens Springs Highway. The Montevallo-Oxmoor Road, the only east-west road in Shades Valley, was a rutted and often impassible dirt road.

Into the wilderness that was Shades Valley, Roden's Clifton Land Company built and operated a street railway by 1889. Initially the Clifton dummy line borrowed stock and mules to pull its single car up and over Red Mountain. The earliest route approached the summit from the east along Highland Avenue and then proceeded up the mountain to give its riders late afternoon and evening views and the opportunity to journey over the mountain. *The Evening News* of May 24, 1889, announced scheduled ascents on Tuesday, Thursday, and Saturday evenings under the supervision of M. T. Sumner, general manager of the railway line. Riders were said to be "wonder-struck" at the views from the heights.



The Evening News, Birmingham, AL, May 24, 1889.



Arriving at Red Mountain Park. Photograph by J. T. Horgan Jr., 1892. BPL Archives.

Developing a Park at the Crest, 1890

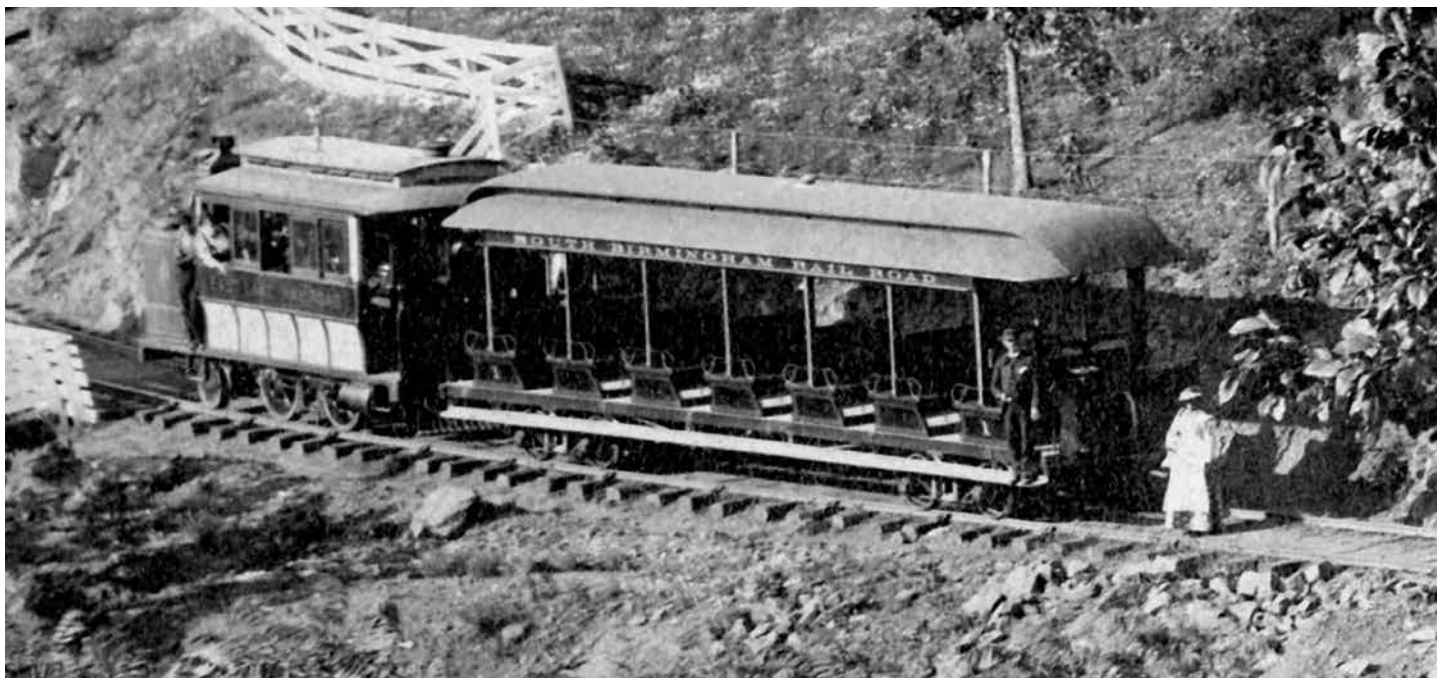
The land in and about Parton's Gap at the crest of Red Mountain through which the streetcar line passed belonged to Birmingham attorney Sterling A. Wood, his wife Ida May Wood, and Norman and Christina Webb. In 1890, the South Birmingham Land Company, a successor firm to the Clifton Land Company, leased a part of this land to build both a station and "a dancing pavilion" at the park site.

According to a *Birmingham Age-Herald* report, "the pavilion was built very substantially to withstand the high winds on the mountain and had hardwood floors throughout. It was of course a familiar site on its great eminence, and practically everyone who has ever visited the city has seen it."

By 1892, an electrified streetcar ran up the mountain from the terminus of the South Highland line on 20th Street, east across 15th Avenue South to 22nd Street, and then up 22nd Street along the north face of Red Mountain, switchbacking down the south face to

Clifton. Advertisements in the summer of 1892 extolled the park's opening. At its 1030-foot elevation, the promontory featured not only fabulous views and the "dancing pavilion" but also an outcrop of Birmingham's legendary Big Seam of red ore.

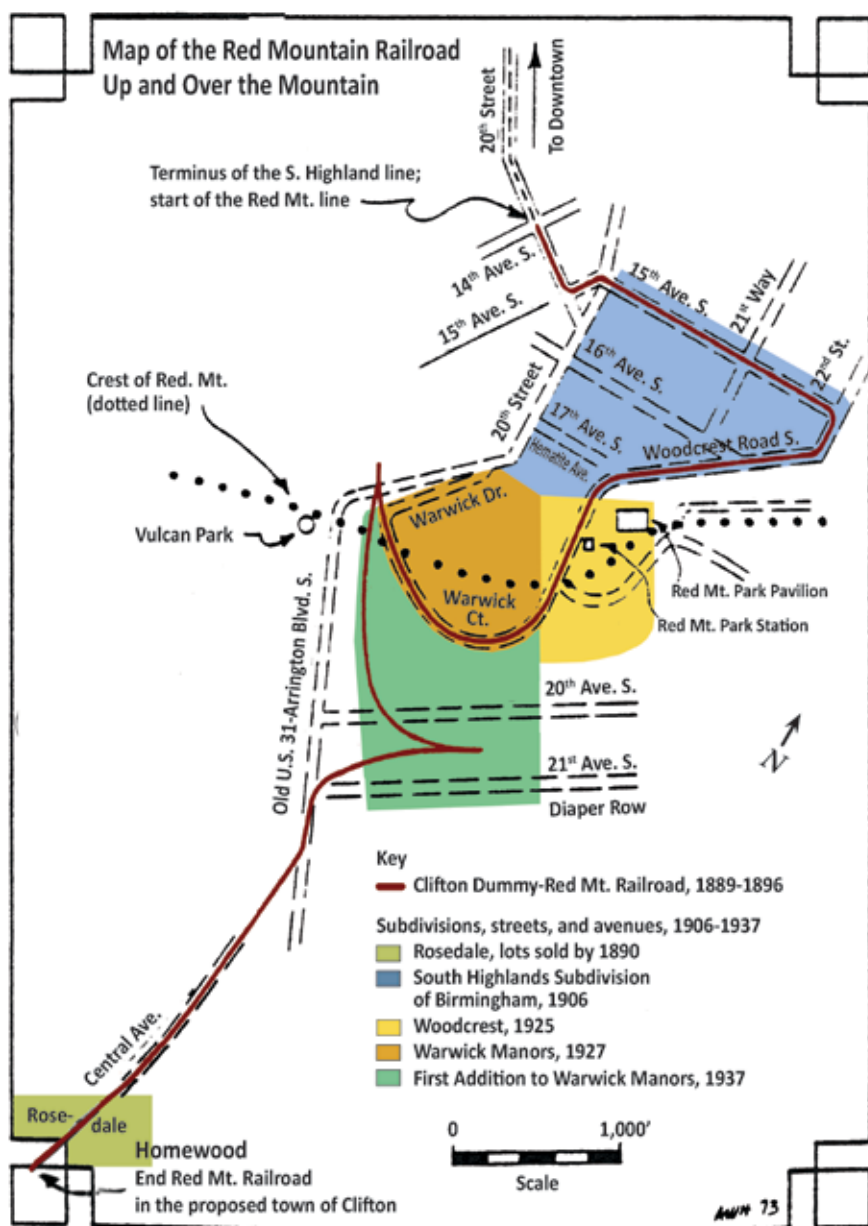
The financial panic of 1893 dimmed prospects for the park and the subdivision of lands in Shades Valley, but by 1895 the streetcars were running once again, and advertisements touted the park's seasonal opening. Streetcar service ran daily under the supervision of a "skilled engineer" Will Augur who oversaw the ascent to Red Mountain's crest. Church, school, and Sunday School picnics were encouraged. The park's concessionaire also ran a lunch stand with cooling, non-alcoholic drinks and lunches at market-rate prices. The park's pure mineral water was offered free. On August 8, 1895, the "Social Gossip" column of the *Birmingham Age-Herald* noted "the use of the pavilion by the Philhedonian club tomorrow evening for a dance."



Detail of Transport to the Park. Photograph by O. V. Hunt, 1895. BPL Archives. An East Lake dummy has pushed the South Birmingham Railroad car up the north face of Red Mountain.



Red Mountain Park at the crest of Red Mountain, overlooking 20th Street. Photograph by O. V. Hunt, 1895. Paths ascend the steep slope to the park's "dancing pavilion" at mountain's summit. Southside's then forested slopes are to the left, to the right and not shown is Shades Valley.



Map of the Red Mountain Railroad Route, adapted from a 1973 drawing by Alvin Hudson, *Street Railways of Birmingham*, Alvin Hudson and Harold Cox, 1976.

RED MOUNTAIN PARK,

The Popular Resort of Birmingham and the Mecca of Strangers, Now Open.

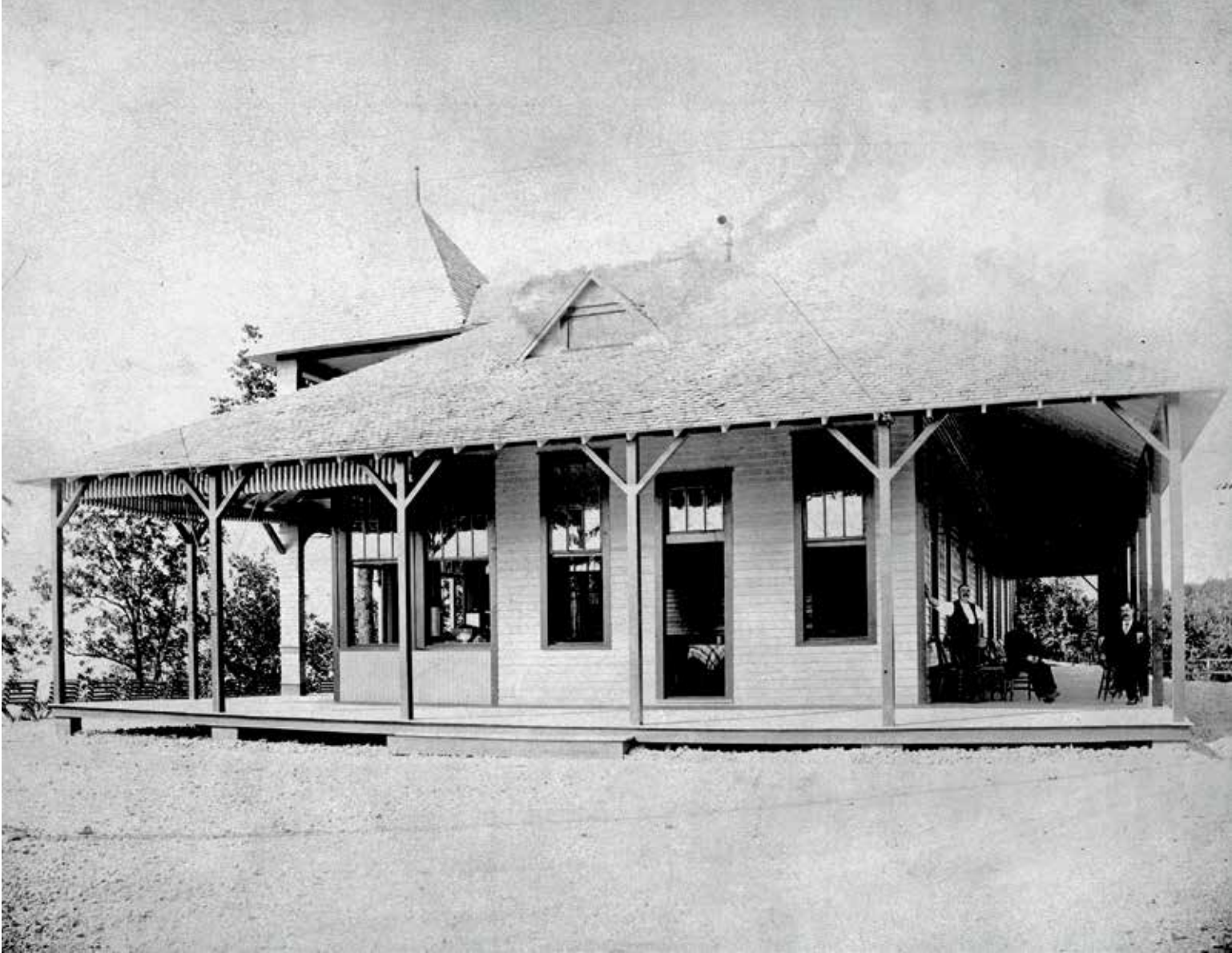
Like a queen on her throne sits Red Mountain park on the summit of the mountain, overlooking the city. This park is a beautiful spot, and so cool and refreshing that the denizens of the city find visits there save them the loss of time and expense of a trip to the springs. From Red Mountain park the city can be seen spread out like a map, and to the far south stretches mountain after mountain.

The elevation of Red Mountain park is 1650 feet above the sea. The day view is superb, the night view beautiful. The light of twenty-four furnaces can be seen at night. The electric lights of the city look like open cotton bolls along the cotton rows.

This beautiful park has been opened for the season by Mr. Will E. Auger, who was formerly lessee of the Highland Avenue and Belt railroad, and is a skillful engineer. He will give the park and the dummy his personal attention and will see that no accident befalls the pleasure seekers. He will offer special inducements to church, school and Sunday school picnics. The swings and other privileges of the grounds will be given free to these picnics. No intoxicating liquors will be sold on the grounds, but an abundance of pure mineral water will be furnished free and a lunch stand, under the management of Mr. Stewart, will have on hand an abundance of cooling drinks, such as sada water, etc., together with palatable lunches, and he guarantees them to be as good as in the city and will be sold at city prices.

The dummy train will meet every other electric car at the end of South Twentieth street, beginning at 2 p. m. every day and running until 11 p. m., and on Sundays from 9 to 11. Fare, 10 cents round trip.

Birmingham Age-Herald, April 21, 1895.



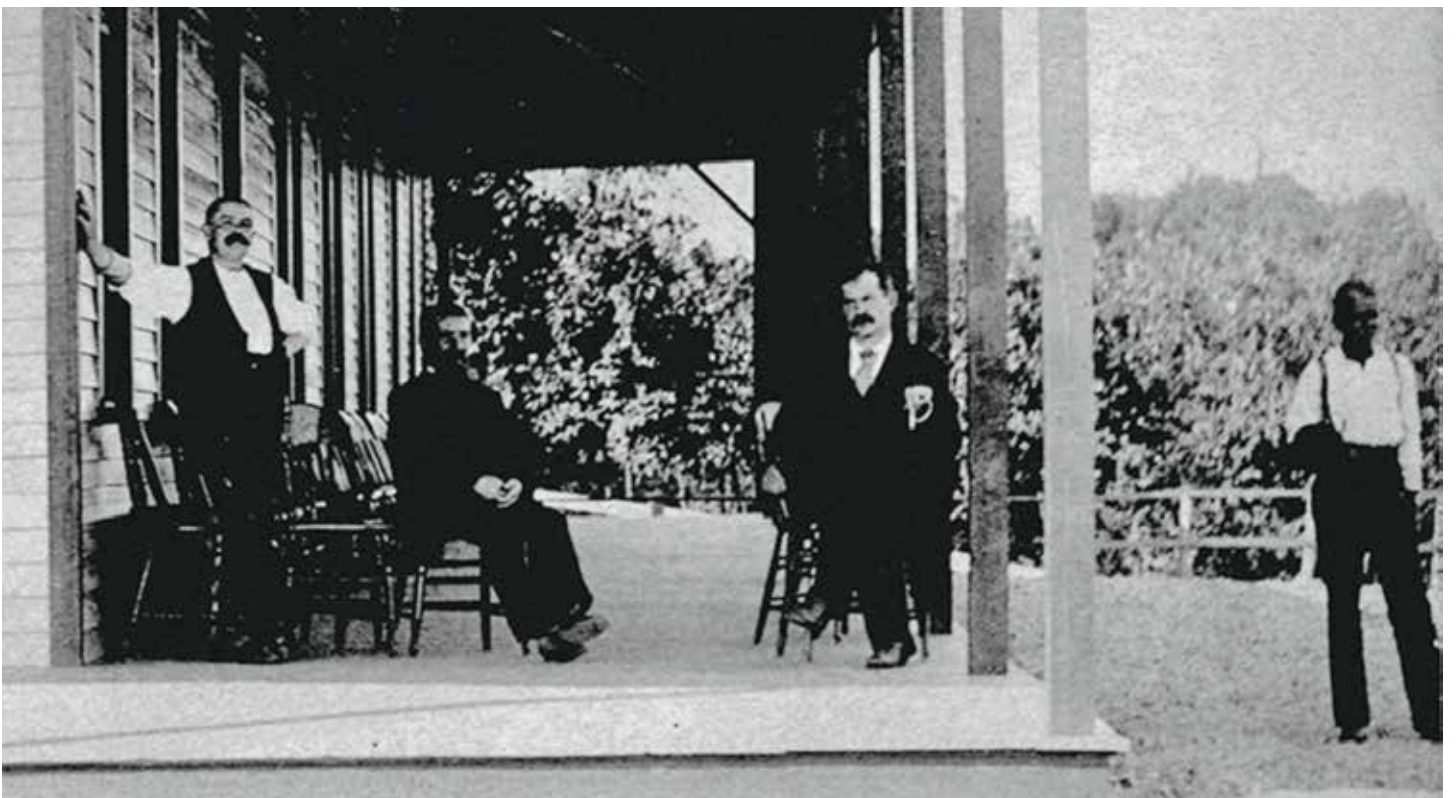
Red Mountain Park Pavilion, also called the Red Mountain Park Casino, and later the residence of Sterling and Ida May Wood, extant 1892-1903. Photograph by O. V. Hunt, 1895. BPL Archives.

Birmingham City Directories list this park “at the summit of Red Mountain” from 1893 through 1896. In 1897, after the park closed, Sterling Wood fixed up the pavilion as his five-room residence. According to Redmont historian Cathy Adams, Wood also commissioned architect Robert Reamer to design a future home to be built of stone for his mountaintop site.

At this time, the Woods and Webbs were also contemplating subdividing and selling their land holdings, especially those across which the Red Mountain streetcar line passed along 15th and 16th Avenues South, into lots and blocks in what became the “South Highlands Subdivision of Birmingham,” the first portion of which

was platted on December 10, 1906. Temple Emanu-El’s Rabbi Morris Newfield was among the early purchasers of property along 15th Avenue and a builder of today’s Newfield-Ullman House at 2150 15th Avenue South. The southernmost avenue of the South Highlands subdivision, today’s 17th Avenue South, was appropriately named Hematite Avenue for hematite, the iron oxide found in the rocks and soils here.

However, before the Woods and Webbs subdivided their mountaintop acreage for residential use, they wanted to enjoy the income from the extraction of the red ore reserves then outcropping at the Red Mountain Park site.



LEFT to RIGHT: **General Manager Will Augur** and owners **Sterling Wood**, **Norman Webb**, and an **employee** (We speculate.) at the park pavilion. Photograph by O. V. Hunt, 1895. BPL Archives.

Leasing the Park Site for Mining, 1903-1908

On January 1, 1903, the Webbs and Woods signed a six-year lease with Will McFarlin & Co. to mine and sell ore from 50 acres of their land at Red Mountain's crest and southern slope. This lease provided that tramways be built to connect to the Louisville & Nashville's Birmingham Mineral Railroad. Begun in 1884 and eventually completed along Red Mountain from Bessemer to Trussville, the line accessed mining operations and carried mined ore to furnaces in Jones Valley below. The Mineral Railroad tracks across the Webb-Wood property along Red Mountain's southern flank were operational by 1889. These tracks connected to the still extant railway that runs below today's Vulcan Park and is known as the Kiwanis Vulcan Trail.

The 1903 lease with McFarlin & Co. provided for mining activity to include construction of a commissary, blacksmith shop, and business buildings. Provisions called for the clearing of trees but Wood's five-room house site [the former park pavilion] was not to be mined until he moved. McFarlin was to begin mining the red ores "as soon as practicable, continuously and without unnecessary delay." By July 1903, six months following the start of the lease, not less than 1,500 tons of ore per month were to be removed or the lessee would begin paying a royalty [20 cents per ton or at least \$300 a month] to the lessors. The mining firm was admonished to preserve the springs on the premises from pollution "in so far as they are able to do" and construct privies and dump all refuse materials "with the view of making said premises suitable for residences after said iron ore shall have been mined and taken therefrom." The latter provisions were unusual in mining leases of the period. Conservative estimates of the value of the royalties that Wood and Webb sought to realize were at least \$20,000, a princely sum for this era.

The *Birmingham Age-Herald* of April 9, 1903, and the *Selma Times* of April 10 reported that Sterling Wood's fine home on Red Mountain burned in early April 1903, shortly after the mining lease was executed. This may have occasioned the 12-day injunction that Wood and Webb brought against the mining firm. For the next eight years, the parties would argue in the Alabama courts over the value of the ore that would have been mined in those 12 days. The case, "Webb, et al. v. McFarlin & Co., et al." went to the Alabama Supreme Court where it was decided December 21, 1911, with a rehearing denied June 1912.

Subdividing the Park and Mine Site, Beginning in 1925

During the mid 1920s with the continuing success of Birmingham's industrial economy, lot sales and residential building proceeded at a steady pace in Jones Valley, along Red Mountain's slopes, and over-the-mountain in Shades Valley. In 1911, the Edgewood Streetcar line was extended up 20th Street from Southside through Lone Pine Gap, passing the future site of Vulcan Park. The line proceeded down Red Mountain's southern flank through today's Homewood to the Edgewood Lake, built to attract residential subdivision here. Homebuilding in Rosedale and Homewood flourished.

"Woodcrest," June 1925

One might assume that Wood and Webb made their fortunes with their mining and subdivision ventures, however the Financial Panic of 1907 took a heavy toll on both investors. Webb committed suicide and Wood never built his grand mountain top manor. At his death his mined-over property at Red Mountain Park was subdivided by his widow Ida May Wood into lots and marketed as "Woodcrest," 25 lots platted June 1925. Purchaser of seven lots lying along Woodcrest and Henrietta Roads in today's Redmont neighborhood was George Barber, who built a residence on the site of the former Red Mountain Park pavilion. A Fritz Wholele design later replaced the early Barber residence.

Mining history buff Thomas Denney surmises that several entries and headers along with timbering supports and air ventilation shafts opened for the earlier mining operation may remain today on or under the current Barber residence.

Warwick Manors, October 1927

By the late 1920s, the Tennessee Land Company, incorporated in 1902, had acquired other sections of the mined over lands along this portion of the south face of Red Mountain. The initial section of "Warwick Manors," 18 lots along Warwick Circle, Warwick Road, and Warwick Drive was subdivided in October 1927. Warwick Road accessed the crest lots on the mountain overlooking 20th Street. The 1889 streetcar track

Ore Mining at Township 18 S., R. 2 W.

In *Iron Ore, Fuels, and Fluxes of the Birmingham District, Alabama*, the United States Geological Survey Bulletin 400 of 1910, Ernest Burchard and Charles Butts describe the ore mining that took place at Wood and Webb's property. Burchard and Butts name this mine as "Township 18 S., R. 2 W." and detail its location and the seams mined. The ore extracted was reported from 29 to 42% iron.

"Southwest of the Kewanee mine [at today's Morningside Drive] there are at present no active mines within 2 miles. This strip of Red Mountain crosses parts of sections 33 and 32, TW 17 S, R. 2W and parts of sections 5, 6, and 1, T. 18 S., R. 2 W. Within five or six years, however, considerable soft ore has been removed from the outcrop of the Big seam just northward of the crest of Red Mountain here. This locality is about opposite the center of the city of Birmingham, and overlooks the residence portion known as South Highlands, which is built on Knox foothills of Red Mountain. Part of the Big seam has been trenched a good part of the distance, and the Irondale seam has been worked on the surface of the outcrop and by drifts on the flanks of five or six ravines that cut the southeast slope of the mountain."

How Red Mountain's Surface Ore Was Mined

A Tennessee Coal & Iron Company study of ore mining along Red Mountain in 1900 provides the following description of surface ore mining. "The general method of mining this ore has been to strip the overburden from the ore at the outcrop as far as it would pay to do so, then mining the ore with open cuts. The method resulted in the mining of the greater part of the soft ore. The soft ore does not require crushing and can be loaded directly into railroad cars." This mining practice was considerably cheaper than digging slopes and shafts into the earth to follow the seams underground as was standard practice after the surface ores had been extracted.

has run along the curving Warwick Circle. Today mining trenches and mined over ravines remain clearly visible in the wooded area below the circle and below Henrietta Road. Sewer lines were extended along 21st Avenue South during 1929; however no subdivision occurred.

First Addition to Warwick Manors, March 1937

A decade later, on March 3, 1937, following the Great Depression that slowed every economic indicator in Birmingham, the Tennessee Company filed a plat for the long-planned "First Addition to Warwick Manors," testing the waters for over-the-mountain homebuilding. The addition included ten lots and a show house at 2029 21st Avenue built by The Lane Park Company. (Elizabeth and Wayne Hester have recently restored this residence.) In the years following World War II, 21st Avenue South and the surrounding neighborhood filled with youthful residents, becoming known as "Diaper Row" At this time and thereafter, the Edgewood streetcar ran along 20th Street South, but buses and automobiles would soon provide the principal means to facilitate suburban home building "over-the-mountain" as the new communities of Homewood and Mountain Brook filled with residences, shops, and stores during the 1950s boom.



Daily News, Birmingham, AL, August 10, 1892

RED MOUNTAIN PARK,
 Seventeenth Avenue and Twentieth Street South.
ELEVATION 1050 FEET.
 BIRD'S EYE VIEWS OF BIRMINGHAM.
 DAY VIEW - NIGHT VIEW.
 TWENTY-FOUR FURNACES IN SIGHT.

<p>North View: Jones' Valley, With Birmingham.</p> <p>South View: Shades Mountain, the Switzerland of 4-17-74 America.</p>	<p>IRON ORE OUTCROPS IN THE PARK.</p> <p>Specimens Given Each Visitor.</p> <p>Mineral Water on Ice.</p>	<p>Two Pavilions, Special Pic- nic Grounds. Music and Refreshments.</p> <p><small>Trains from 2 to 11 p. m. Take South High- land Electric car on hours and half hours, First avenue, city.</small></p>
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The Birmingham Age-Herald, April 21, 1895.

About this newsletter: Thomas Denney located and forwarded the Red Mountain Park ads and the Supreme Court case that details the mining lease at the crest of Red Mountain in today's Woodcrest and Warwick Manor neighborhoods, sparking interest and occasioning additional research to find out more about the first Red Mountain Park, when and where it was and what happened to it. Gerry Waters checked incorporation and subdivision records as well as additional newspaper coverage of the park and the companies active in early subdivision of both Red Mountain and suburban areas. Alvin Hudson and Harold Cox's *Street Railways of Birmingham* provides details of the streetcar routes. Don Veasey located the park photographs by John Horgan Jr. and O. V. Hunt in the Birmingham Ala. Public Library Department of Archives and Manuscripts collection. Julius Linn Jr. and Katie Tipton served as newsletter editors, Scott Fuller as designer. *Marjorie L. White*

Red Mountain Park
 is now open. Take Blue
 line Electric car. Meet
 dummy train every 16
 minutes.

The Birmingham Age-Herald, April 21, 1895.

Birmingham, AL 35232
 P. O. Box 321474
 Birmingham Historical Society

Arriving (from Shades Valley) at Red Mountain Park Station. Photograph by O. V. Hunt, 1895. BPL Archives.

