

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

May 2024

“Tra la, it’s May, the lusty month of May, that lovely month when everyone goes blissfully astray ...” so, Queen Guinevere sang in the Broadway musical *Camelot* in 1960.

It’s May in Birmingham 2024 and all appears blissfully on track, with lots that we are pleased to share with you in this newsletter.



Irina Bokova, former UNESCO Director General, sixth from the right, visited Bethel Baptist Church on April 29, 2024. ANETTE NUNN.

World Heritage comes one step closer to listing Birmingham’s civil rights sites. Under the leadership of historian Dr. Glenn Eskew, a Birmingham native and current Georgia Tech professor (2nd from the right), 12 sites in Birmingham,

Montgomery, Selma, and Atlanta have been approved for the tentative list and will soon be nominated by the National Park Service for inclusion in World Heritage. The multiyear initiative, inaugurated by the Society in 2007, has been strongly supported by Lee Sentell (4th from the left) and the Alabama Bureau of Travel & Tourism.

Supporters of Hale Springs’ application to Forever Wild, left to right, Larry Rodick, President, Friends of Shades Mountain; Ken Wills, Moss Rock Preserve, Mac Martin, Planner, and Ken Grimes, City Administrator, City of Hoover; Marjorie White, Gerry Waters, and Carol Slaughter, Birmingham Historical Society; Carlee Sanford, Director, Jefferson County Parks Cooperative; Tabatha Lacy, Friends of Shades Mountain, at the Forever Wild Commission Meeting, Jacksonville State University, May 2, 2024.

Today the 18-acre Hale Springs parcel is the only site along the Shades Mountain ridge that has escaped subdivision. Its freestone and chalybeate waters on the rocky bluffs have been known for millennia. Olmsted Brothers in *A Park System for Birmingham* of 1925 recommended “the wild and picturesque... precipitous northwesterly face of Shades Mountain” for acquisition as a park. The Friends of Shades Mountain, with the support of the Cities of



Birmingham and Hoover and 700 persons who signed a petition to preserve the springs as part of a proposed Bluff Park Preserve, nominated the property for purchase by Forever Wild. Hale Springs is currently on the short list for consideration. The

Forever Wild Commissioners approved their staff exploring issues of maintenance, public access, and links to planned ridge to valley trails. A report is due back at the next commission meeting on August 1.

At Work on Society Projects

Birmingham Historical Society is blessed to have highly talented, self-starting, and resourceful volunteers contributing to the Society's research and publication efforts.



Gerry Waters, May 2024.

In terms of governmental, legal, or published documentation, there is almost nothing that Gerry Waters cannot find online or at the courthouse. Trained as a civil engineer, Waters fine tuned her research skills working with county commissioner Chris Doss on a history of the Jefferson County sewer system and as research assistant for the Public Affairs Research Council of Alabama (PARCA). She now helps Birmingham Historical Society solve many history mysteries.



Randy Merritt, retired engineer, May 2024.

The Society's move to Highland Avenue introduced us to a soul mate: Randy Merritt, our across-the street neighbor. He loves to stay up most of the night figuring out who lived on Highland Avenue and how our neighborhood evolved and changed over the decades. To date, Merritt has downloaded and sorted by address more than 5,000 newspaper articles. He has an equal number to go to finish this phase of his research. A book is in the works at some point in the future.



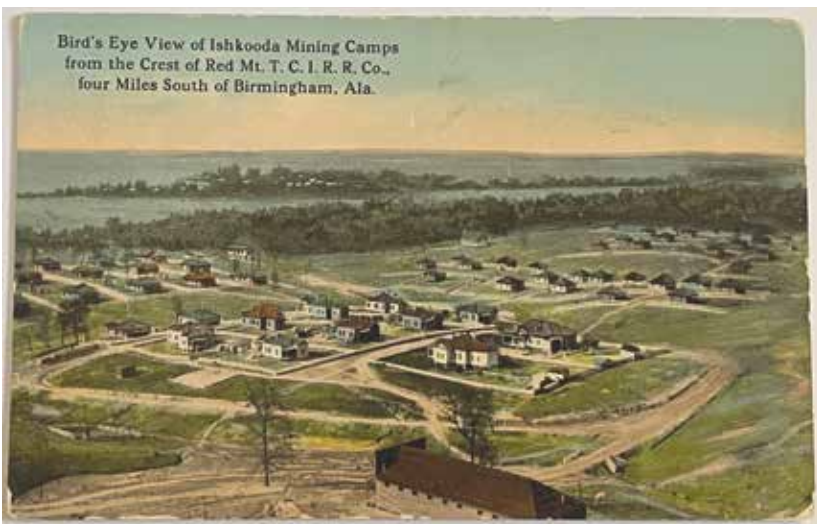
Rebecca Moody, at her computer screen.

Behind the scenes, piecing together and producing post after post for Birmingham Historical Society's online presence at BirminghamHistoricalSociety.com and our Facebook site, is Rebecca Moody. Together with her spouse Bob, she has spearheaded and nurtured historic preservation projects across the city. Her knowledge of people and places and talent with not only the English language but also computer technology have made her invaluable. .



Katie Tipton and Julius Linn, brainstorming potential photography for Birmingham Historical Society's forthcoming *Birmingham By The Book: A Guide to the Magic City*, May 2024.

"Editors are what make writers look good," *Southern Living* authors often said. Thoughtful and decisive, attentive to detail, able to make text clear, coherent, concrete, and precise while remaining courteous and correct --Tipton and Linn have these skills that make for good, yea excellent, editors.



Ishkooda Mining Camp. Postcard view, c. 1912, Merritt Collection.

Birmingham native Will McCullum, a PhD student at the University of Chicago, has been excavating ore miners' housing at the Smythe camp in today's Red Mountain Park. Built in 1890 for DeBardeleben Coal & Iron Co. at a mine later called Ishkooda, the two-room frame residences were set on sizeable lots and surrounded by white-washed fences. They are among the earliest worker housing built in the Birmingham industrial district. And thanks to McCullum we will soon know much more about the lives of the Red Mountain miners who lived at Smythe from 1890 to 1920 when this camp closed.



What's up with the Little Villa?

The City of Birmingham's Design Review Commission sent the developer wanting to demolish the residence and build apartments on the site back to work something out with neighborhood leaders. At present a proposal to use the residence as a gallery is being floated.

Society Calendar

September 22, 5 p.m. The Heritage Society meets at the Birmingham Museum of Art to honor **Margaret Livingston**, Birmingham's first lady of art in her 100th year.

People Saving Places: Historic Preservation Month Activities

The City of Birmingham's Department of Planning, Engineering, and Permits is sponsoring a lecture and training series from Noon to 1 p.m.

May 7, The City's Historic Preservation Program: An Overview, Sloss Furnaces, West Room.

May 14, Historic Window Rehabilitation with Marvin Windows, Sloss Furnaces, West Room.

May 21, Historic Alabama Architecture, Sloss Furnaces, West Room.

May 23, Navigating the City of Birmingham's Design Review Process, Tips for Realtors, Birmingham City Hall, City Council Chamber, 3rd Floor.

May 28, Navigating the City of Birmingham's Design Review Process: Tips for Contractors, Sloss Furnaces, West Room.

For more information, please contact Hannah Garmon, Historic Preservation Manager, at 205-254-2424, Hannah.Garmon@birminghamal.gov.

The Steward House on Highland

When our offices opened at the Altamont Apartments on Highland Avenue, a neighbor, Andy Smith, came in and shared that he had been told that his home once stood on this site. He knew no further details. Thanks to sleuthing by Randy Merritt and Gerry Waters, his tale has proven true.



The Ohio-born entrepreneur Wesley Clinton (W. C.) Steward came to Birmingham by 1878. He was 48 years old. The *Birmingham Iron Age* of January 2 of this year reported that Steward "put in a sidetrack from the South & North Ala. R. R. and erected a handsome highly finished building, furnished with the most approved steam-power, and improved milling machinery, and received the praise of all who patronize him." Miss Ella Steward served as bookkeeper for the mills. Steward and his wife Mary (and his sister Ella) lived at 19th Street and Third Avenue South. Their young son,

Charles Cowin Steward, would later work for the Linn Iron Works. The city directories listed him as both a machinist and an engineer.

By 1886, W. C. Steward became a produce commissioner and president of the Alabama Mutual Benefit Reserve Fund Association. He also branched out into contracting and building supplies, starting the Steward & Eddy Mercantile & Builders Supply Co. for which his sister Ella also kept the books. And he associated himself with the Birmingham Building & Loan Association.



Advertisement, 1883. Birmingham City Directory.

With his business ventures booming, in 1886, Steward bought two lots in block 861 for \$4,000 and took out a mortgage from the Elyton Land Company. In 1890, he built a grand High Victorian style home, the first in this section of Highland Avenue. The home had 3 bedrooms, 2 baths and a spacious attic beneath the high-pitched eaves. The streetcar added a stop called Steward Station. The 1891 Birmingham City directory lists W. C., Ella, and Charles Steward residing at this station.

In 1893, the Financial Panic significantly dimmed horizons for many. By early 1895, the Elyton Land Company foreclosed W. C. Steward's mortgage on his Highland Avenue property and on February 15, 1895 it was sold at the courthouse to the highest bidder for \$1,000. Steward moved to East Lake and went into farming. Son Charles and his wife continued to reside with his family and work at the Linn Iron Works. His fortunes soon took a fortuitous turn.

In 1904, Charles Steward and his partner J. H. Johns opened the Johns & Steward Machine Co. at 1900 Powell Avenue. This firm grew to become today's Steward Machine Co., Inc. Still in Birmingham and still family owned, the 290,000 square foot manufactory provides shop drawings, fabricating, welding, stress relieving, machining, gear cutting, and assembling to clients worldwide.

ABOVE: Wesley Clinton Steward (1830-1914). Photograph 1881. FIND A GRAVE.

Back on Highland Avenue, by 1902 Nathan Miller had acquired the Steward home. The residence and a servants' house are shown on Baist's Property Atlas of this year. In 1902, the City of Birmingham assessed Miller \$600 for the grading, macadamizing, and curbing of the avenue in front of his residence, so it can be assumed that he was living here at this time. Miller complained, saying that the grade of the street had been lowered damaging his property. A lawyer, Miller had served as city clerk and registrar for the decade from 1888 to 1898 so he understood that which he protested. Miller was later in 1906 elected a state senator and from 1919 to 1923 he served as Alabama's Lieutenant Governor.

For reasons unknown, in 1906, Miller moved his Highland Avenue residence to today's 11th Avenue where it remains to this day. Miller and his family lived here until 1930 when they moved to their newly built Georgian style home at 4333 Altamont Road in Redmont. Judge John Aird and his wife Maude purchased the Steward residence and lived here until their deaths in the late 1940s.

Following improvements to the avenue in 1902, property values in this section rose. In 1908, Ed Warren Jr. and J. K. Warren and his wife Nellie who had acquired one half of the Steward's home site sold it for \$15,500. They had acquired it for \$4,500 in 1905. The Seward property would not be built upon again until the Highland Terrace and the Altamont Apartments rose in the 1920s.



Steward House and servants' house, lot 1, block 831, the only house on Highland Avenue between today's Rhodes and Rushton Parks, Baist's Property Atlas, 1902. Birmingham Public Library Department of Archives & Manuscripts.



Steward-Miller-Smith House (1890), one of the earliest and the oldest remaining Highland Avenue residences, now located at 2834 11th Avenue South.

Margaret Gresham Livingston, a volunteer for the newly opened Birmingham Museum of Art in City Hall, 1951 who led the institution for decades. *The Birmingham Post*, June 1945. Join us September 22 for a Tribute to Margaret Livingston, first lady of Birmingham art, during this her 100th year.



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