

Portion of Colton's Map of Alabama, 1855, showing Jackson and Jefferson Counties.

BIRMINGHAM

As It Was

In JACKSON COUNTY, ALABAMA



By JAMES F. SULZBY, JR.

Copyright 1944
James F. Sulzby, Jr.
Birmingham, Ala.

*To the memory of my father,
James Frederick Sulzby, Sr.*

SET UP, PRINTED AND BOUND BY THE
BIRMINGHAM PRINTING COMPANY
BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

ii

iii

Photography by
PATRICK M. LANIER

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

IN PRESENTING this historical sketch of a community once known as Birmingham, Jackson County, Alabama, it is with hopes that it will further the realization that such a place did once exist and that its memory will remain alive throughout the years to come.

In this way I wish to express my appreciation for valuable information and assistance from Peter A. Brannon, of the Department of Archives and History, State of Alabama, Montgomery, Alabama; Associate Justice Virgil Bouldin, of the Alabama Supreme Court, Montgomery, Alabama; John R. Kennamer, of Woodville, Alabama; and Mrs. Mary Gochenour McEdwards, Birmingham, Alabama, who assisted me with secretarial work.

It will be noted that references are found among the last pages of this book.

THE AUTHOR.

Birmingham, Jefferson County, Alabama,
December 24, 1943.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENT.....	v
HOME, HILL AND HEATH.....	1
BEAUTIFUL OF SITUATION.....	4
POST ROADS AND OFFICES.....	7
RAILS AND MINERALS.....	13
THE GROGSHOP.....	17
MEN OF THE TIMES.....	21
WAR TIMES IN THE VALLEY.....	31
COFFEY'S STORE AND RASH.....	36
REFERENCES	43

HOME, HILL, AND HEATH

ONE HUNDRED YEARS have passed since the establishment of the settlement in Jackson County, Alabama, called Birmingham. Alabama was one of the first states in America to think upon the name with confidence, this confidence developing into the basis for friendliness and brotherhood which has lasted for a century, both in war and peace.

Throughout the nation by 1834, there were one town, two townships, a borough in Pennsylvania, and a town in New York claiming the name.¹ Today the ten states that have cities, towns or villages carrying the name Birmingham are Pennsylvania, Kansas, Ohio, New Jersey, Missouri, Michigan, Kentucky, Iowa, Illinois, and Alabama.²

Where did the name Birmingham originate? The origin of the name is untraceable, although the spelling of it is found in many forms. Dugdale,³ the English historian of Warwickshire, adopts the name "Bromwycham", and regards it as of Saxon derivation. Hutton,⁴ the famous historian of Birmingham, England, regards "Bromwycham" as the proper name and has the fanciful etymology of Brom (broom), wych (a descent), and ham (a home), which put together make "a home on the hill by the heath".

Centuries before Jackson County was established and the name Birmingham existed in Alabama,

Birmingham, England, was considered a place of great antiquity and was long celebrated for its work in metal. The Staffordshire border of the town abounded in iron and coal. This English town was considered peculiarly healthy, for part of it was situated in the highlands away from the smoke-filled valley. The surrounding country was very fertile, consisting of dry, sandy soil, and its market was, in consequence, exceedingly well supplied with all the essentials of subsistence.⁵ This substantiates the interest and enterprise of "a working people" developing an industrial community and town.

The community in Jackson County reflected the same initiative and enterprise as its namesake in England, although the Alabama town lived only a few years. Even though the original Birmingham in Alabama was short-lived, the name did not die, for soon another part of North Alabama, namely, Jefferson County, adopted it permanently. This section of the state enlarged upon plans for "a home on the hill", a city of which Alabama can be proud. It was truly a "home" idea at first, for it was not until 1876 that coal in the new area was found to be suitable for iron-making purposes, which later became an essential factor of subsistence.⁶

An interest was reflected in 1871, when the Elyton Land Company adopted the great name of Birmingham for the new town in Jefferson County,

Alabama, which later became the leading industrial city and area of the South.

On January 26, 1871, when a group of corporators held a meeting at the office of Josiah Morris and Company, in the city of Montgomery, Alabama, they organized the Elyton Land Company by the election of five directors. At a meeting of the directors held on the next day, Colonel J. R. Powell was unanimously elected president of the company, and the property previously purchased by Mr. Morris was formally transferred to the company. After adjournment of the board of directors, the convention of stockholders reconvened and adopted by-laws, among which was the following: "The city to be built by the Elyton Land Company near Elyton, in the County of Jefferson, State of Alabama, shall be called 'Birmingham'."⁷

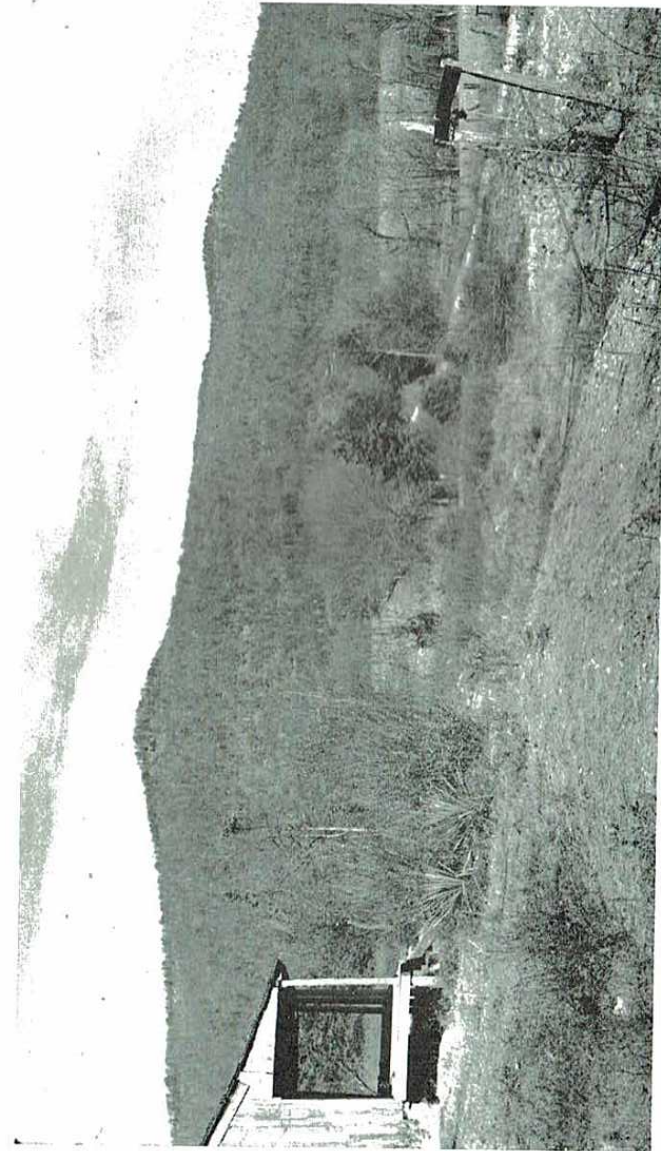
The name Birmingham was adopted by the Elyton Land Company at a time when the name was already appearing on several Alabama state maps, namely, Colton's, Tuomey's and Smith's Geological Survey, each indicating Birmingham in Jackson County. Jackson County officially claimed the name of Birmingham in 1845 for a picturesque community, which carried the name only a few years. These few years have served as a beginning of Birmingham in Alabama which has always been "a home on the hill by the heath".

BEAUTIFUL OF SITUATION

JACKSON COUNTY forms the northeast corner of the state, and became a county in 1819 while the legislature was in session at Huntsville. The county was named for General Andrew Jackson, who was on a visit to Huntsville at the time the county was organized. It covers 1,150 square miles. The river valley in Jackson is from four to fifteen miles wide and very fertile. There are several other smaller rich valleys. This county has been called the Switzerland of Alabama. Crops in this county are diversified. Much grain and stock is raised, and many fine orchards produce a large variety of fruit.⁸

In the northeastern part of the county, in Coon Valley, on the banks of Coon Creek, was located Birmingham—a thriving community, apparently, of many homes, farms, a store, postoffice, churches, coal mine, and a tannery. It was located four miles west of Stevenson, on the old road from Stevenson to Princeton, where the road divided; one leading to Little Coon Valley and the other to Big Coon Valley. This Big Coon Valley road was on the route to Princeton, Alabama, which was approximately 25 miles away.

Birmingham community as a natural situation was unsurpassed. The prophets have spoken of Pisgah's



Coon Valley, showing the Cumberland Mountain in the background. Between the two high points of the mountain, overlooking Birmingham, is located the old coal mine which supplied coal during the War Between the States. In the picture, Coon Creek may be seen on the right-hand side of the road.

summit, from whence the whole land of Canaan might be seen; and of Mount Sinai with rugged sides, towering peaks and divine associations; but that site in Jackson County, whereon the first-known Birmingham community was begun, is not a whit inferior to any of the descriptions of Bible history. As for natural beauty and scenery, this part of Jackson County cannot be surpassed and can be further described as "beautiful of situation".

The view from the site where the postoffice once stood is almost as extensive as the sea. At a distance in all directions may be seen the blue summits of the Cumberland Mountains, which go to make up the Appalachians. The building in which the postoffice was located is at the base of the nearest peak, which is locally called the Cumberland Mountain. Climbing to the summit of this mountain the view transforms.

A few miles to the south, the Tennessee River's majestic curvatures may be traced as it flows through the bosom of the fertile valley of the same name on toward the Ohio. At a distance of a few miles to the north may be seen the Cumberland Plateau, where Sewanee, Monteagle and Tracy City have their settings. These mentioned places have made Tennessee state famous for its coal and minerals, as well as serving as inspirational points for the early days of the Tennessee Company as far back as 1852.⁹

Nearer at hand are the many coves and hills of milder elevation, whose tops are crowned with romantic forests, which go to make a scene equivalent to the beauty of the western states. But, look downward, and you then realize that under the beauty lies the power and strength of black diamonds—coal, the life of the valley. Outcroppings of coal may still be seen. Coal has been mined from this very mountain, which goes to prove that wherever the name Birmingham is breathed, coal abounds.

POST ROADS AND OFFICES

ON MAY 13, 1820, which was exactly six months to the day after Jackson was created a county, an act of Congress established the first postal road route in the county. It extended from Huntsville by Jackson Courthouse and Lawrie's Ferry, to Ross and Washington, in Tennessee.¹⁰

The second route was from Bellefonte, Jackson County, by Gunter's Landing to Blountsville, Alabama.¹¹ The third one to be established ran from Bellefonte, in Jackson County, by Larkinsville and Larkin's Fork of Paint Rock River, Newmarket, Hazel Green, to the cross roads in Madison County and Athens, in Limestone County, Alabama to Elkton, in Giles County, Tennessee.¹²

The fourth route was also included in the above Act of Congress and extended from Larkinsville to Woodville, Jackson County.

The fifth route was from Bellefonte, in Jackson County, by DeKalb Courthouse, and Cherokee Courthouse, to Jacksonville, Benton County, Alabama.¹³

The sixth and seventh routes under the same-mentioned act dated July 7, 1838 were: from Winchester, Tennessee, by Crow Creek, Coon Creek, and Bolivar, to Loving's in Wills Valley, Alabama; from

Bellefonte by Langston and DeKalb Courthouse to Paris in DeKalb County, Alabama.¹⁴

The eighth route established was from Bellefonte, Jackson County, by Larkinsville and Trenton, to Louisville, Alabama.¹⁵

These given points were necessarily postoffices, and the mail was carried by riders on horseback. Some of the routes listed above extended through the state; therefore, they were covered by relays of riders. Mail delivery, being considerably slower than today, often took from one to two weeks. Over some of the post roads there was very little mail carried; therefore, these were only temporary as the volume of mail was not heavy enough to justify their continuance.

It is noted that Bellefonte has been mentioned on most of the postal routes in Jackson County up to April 4, 1842. The reason for this is that Bellefonte was the county seat as well as being the oldest and largest incorporated town in the county.¹⁶ It was located approximately six miles northeast from the present town of Scottsboro. Bellefonte enjoyed a large river trade and was considered a thriving community. It was located on the principal stage road leading through north Alabama by Huntsville on to Tennessee. After the courthouse was constructed in 1828, many prominent professional and business men located there. Stores were built (six in number), which were operated very successfully. One

leading merchant was William A. Austin, who later played an important role in the establishment of the Birmingham community. Other businesses and buildings located at Bellefonte were as follows: drug business, blacksmith shop, inn or tavern, church, Masonic hall, and the Academy. Professional work, covered by lawyers and doctors, was of great importance, as it was at Bellefonte where the legal work of the county was transacted and the sick brought for treatment. A number of large plantations were located in the vicinity of the town, which made trading very active. But after the War Between the States, the county seat was moved to the town of Scottsboro. At the time Bellefonte was incorporated in 1821 there were approximately 200 people living there, but it had only 72 inhabitants in 1870.¹⁷

Even with all the prosperity for many years, the people fought the idea of the railroad coming through the town to take the place of the stage coach, so when the Memphis and Charleston Railroad was built through Jackson County, Bellefonte found itself about two miles from the railroad. As long as the principal traveling was done by stage coach and post roads were used for the mail, Bellefonte enjoyed the prestige of receiving mail directly from all routes that entered Jackson County, at least up to 1845.

Soon another postal route was announced for Jackson County. This route extended from Bolivar,

Alabama, by the way of Coon Creek and Crow Creek to Winchester, Tennessee.¹⁸

This mail route crossed the Cumberland Mountains by Coon Creek near where the Birmingham community was located. A few months after this postal route was established, A. C. Austin, of Coon Valley, applied for a postoffice, and on the application the name Birmingham was indicated as the name of the office. Soon the application was approved by the Postoffice Department in Washington, and on December 29, 1845, the Birmingham postoffice was opened, with the applicant, A. C. Austin, as postmaster.¹⁹ The community at once took the name of Birmingham, and mail was soon delivered to the address of Birmingham, in the home of Mr. Austin.

Birmingham settlement was never incorporated into a town, even though there were at least seventy-five families using the facilities of the postoffice. In the immediate vicinity was located a store, a blacksmith shop, a gin, a tannery, two churches and a school. Dr. J. L. Prince and Dr. P. H. Helton were doctors in the community.

Located twelve miles to the northeast from the Birmingham community was Bolivar, the second largest town in Jackson County. It was the starting place for the postal route, which extended to Winchester. Before this postal route was installed the people of the Birmingham community had to go

either to Bolivar or Bellefonte to transact their postal business. Roads to these two towns were almost impassable.

Bolivar was equally as old as Bellefonte, the county seat, and nearly as important. People settled in and around Bolivar in 1819. Bolivar enjoyed the trade of wealthy farmers, who owned large plantations in that section. In the town were stores, a Masonic lodge, postoffice, an inn, a school, and offices for several lawyers and doctors. The town was located about nine miles northeast from the present town of Stevenson.

Bolivar prospered for over thirty years, until the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad was built through Jackson County. This railroad formed a junction at Stevenson with the Memphis and Charleston Railroad, and immediately Stevenson aroused the interest of people for miles around. People started moving to the new railroad town of Stevenson. The Masonic lodge moved to Stevenson, and soon stores began losing the trade of the wealthy farmers. The mail route from Winchester to Bolivar as a post road was discontinued in 1853, and soon the postoffice closed its doors. Later the town of Bolivar became a memory with only a few houses left to tell the story of a prosperous town.²⁰

Vernon K. Stevenson was the founder of the town of Stevenson in 1853, even though there were settlers who had lived there for 25 years or more. Brick

stores were being planned and built, a large brick hotel was nearly completed, and people were buying lots and building houses. The Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad was constructed in 1851-1852 and the Memphis and Charleston Railroad was constructed in 1853-1854. The Bolivar Masonic lodge was at home in a new two-story building, and it appeared distinctly that Stevenson enjoyed prosperity at the expense of the surrounding territory. Certainly Mr. Stevenson had much to be proud of in his venture of laying out a town and seeing it prosper.

The establishing of the town of Stevenson also had effect on the Birmingham community, and especially the postoffice. The railroad was covering about the same territory as covered by the post route from Bolivar to Winchester, and Birmingham was left off the railroad; which meant the mail had to still be sent out to Birmingham from Stevenson. The people were beginning to go to Stevenson to do much of their shopping, and while there transacted much of their postoffice business. The receipts of the Birmingham postoffice became lower and lower until the office was closed July 24, 1853.²¹

Paint Rock Valley, in Jackson County, was gaining momentum in popularity, and large farms were changing hands. New people were moving into the valley. Soon A. C. Austin moved to Princeton,²² the largest settlement in Paint Rock Valley.

RAILS AND MINERALS

THE NAME of Birmingham was given to the community by Anthony Crockett Austin, a worthy farmer, who took much interest in prospecting for minerals. Even before A. C. Austin settled in this valley in 1825, it was generally conceded that all the mountains in and around the vicinity would be more valuable than the farm lands.

For many years the pioneer settlers on Coon Creek had an idea that the Cumberland Mountain, overlooking the Birmingham community, was rich in minerals. Dr. P. H. Helton, pioneer doctor, would often go to the mountain and get lead, out of which loads were made for his guns.²³ Saltpeter in small quantities had been found from time to time. At this time coal had not yet been discovered in the mountain; nevertheless, the name Birmingham fitted the place. It was truly "a home on the hill by the heath" location.

The suggested name of Birmingham in the creation and naming of the postoffice had relation to the railroad promotion, then very active through this mountainous region thought to contain rich mineral deposits.

The Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad was chartered in the State of Tennessee on the 11th of December, 1845, and Birmingham postoffice was

created two weeks later. This Tennessee charter called for the railroad to go through Jackson County, Alabama. It was not until 1873 that the name Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad Company was changed to Nashville, Chattanooga and St. Louis Railway.

The railroad did not come down Big Coon Valley, as probably anticipated, but ran down Crow Creek Valley.²⁴ Crow Creek Valley had a much broader floor and the laying of the railroad did not interfere with the farm lands. However, the topography of Crow Valley did not surpass that of Coon Valley. It is true that Crow Valley was more densely wooded, and since the first engines were wood burners, this fact was another convincing element in deciding the location of the railroad.

Another reason the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad Company included Crow Creek Valley was in order to take in the Cumberland Plateau, where Sewanee, Monteagle and Tracy City are now situated. Prospecting for minerals had been very common for several years; however, it was not until 1851 that a roaming Irishman, by the name of Leslie Kennedy, tramped through the country from the coal fields of western Pennsylvania to the mountains of Tennessee, to work on the construction of the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad, where he saw outcroppings indicating the presence of coal. This was the inspiration behind the idea to develop the move-

ment to mine coal. Soon the Sewanee Mining Company was organized, and in 1856 the first coal was shipped from the Cumberland Mountains over the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad Company line.²⁵

It stands to reason the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad Company made no mistake by locating the road down Crow Creek Valley to include these mineral regions of middle Tennessee, rather than to have left them off, as a result of locating the road down Big Coon Valley. Truly this Birmingham suffered the loss; but, at a later date, another Birmingham enjoyed success at the expense of the loss.

The Sewanee Mining Company's name and operations were merged with the Tennessee Coal and Railroad Company at the session of the Tennessee Legislature of 1859-1860. After several other mergers and many ups and downs, the company is today the successful subsidiary of the United States Steel Corporation, doing business as the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company, and is the largest industry in Birmingham, Jefferson County, Alabama.

Had the railroad gone down Big Coon Valley, probably Birmingham would have been a thriving town today in Jackson County. Every opportunity would have been given for the development of the community, for several people in the valley had wealth. The mountain overlooking the Birmingham community did have deposits of coal, and more so than the Cumberland Plateau at Sewanee, Tennes-

see. The fact is that the quantity of coal at the Sewanee mines was so small that operations had to be extended eastward a few miles to take in other coal fields.²⁶ If the quantity of coal at Birmingham had been small, then large scale production would have ceased altogether. Today coal is being mined from the Cumberland Mountain, part of which faces Crow Creek Valley, about four miles from where the Birmingham community was located. This is part of the mountain that overlooks Big Coon Valley and the valley extends for a distance of twelve miles.

The most important use the coal of the Birmingham district was put to was during the War Between the States. Located near Scottsboro, in Jackson County, was a blast furnace which made iron for the Southern Cause beginning in 1861.²⁷ The capacity of this furnace was eight tons per day. Coal was supplied to this furnace as long as possible until it was put out of commission by the Federals. Hauling of coal was done by wagons.

One of the mines in close vicinity of Birmingham was operated by John B. Gordon, but he closed the coal mining business as soon as the shots rang out. Gordon was soon heading the "Raccoon Roughs", which was enlisted of the Sixth Alabama Regiment.²⁸

It may be said that since the day mineral was discovered in the Cumberland Mountain, overlooking Coon Valley, the deposits have been used wisely and justly to the interest of a cause, and to the advantage in every case of Birmingham, in Jackson County.

THE GROGSHOP²⁹

AMONG THE almost forgotten institutions of a past era in the state's history, and especially near the Birmingham community in Jackson County, is that of the country grogshop, which was known in those days as "The Crossroads Grocery", a name derived from the enterprising spirit of the keepers of such places to locate where the roads brought the most trade.

As far back as 1833 one of these road stores was operated in Big Coon Valley, on the road to Princeton, by James Lowery Allison. It was at the foot of Cumberland Mountain, convenient to the farmers near Birmingham, who did not care to go to Bellefonte or Bolivar or Princeton to trade.

This store was the rendezvous of the rustics of the leisure type, especially after the crops were put away. This trysting place was the weekly scene of friendly chats, trading of horses, current events, gross hilarity, and often rough-and-tumble fights.

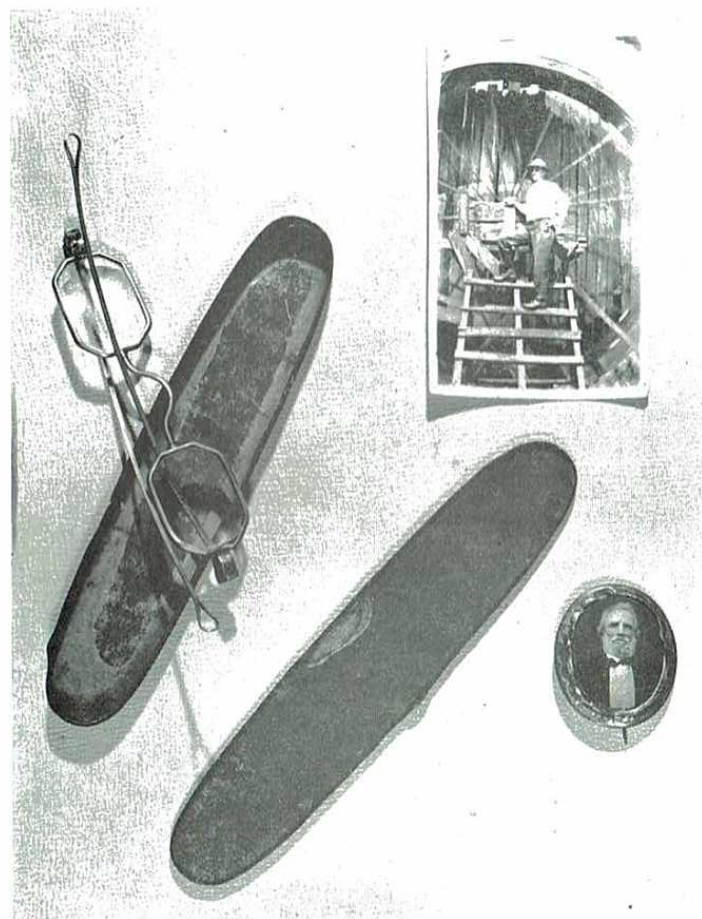
Speaking of fights, there were many that took place, but as recollections indicate, there were fewer shootings and stabbings in the early days of the state than now. The test of manhood many times was demonstrated in agility, strength, and the force of the fist, but no fights were ended without the

participants shaking hands, thus indicating the feeling of the people.

Saturday nights usually brought fresh accessions to Mr. Allison's store from the neighboring population, and as a result, the store remained open unusually late that night. Shopping was used as an excuse to visit the store, but more often the valley folks came down on Saturday night just to meet their friends. Especially was this true since Mr. Allison operated a distillery near the store. Whiskey and brandy were always to be found.

The water from an extra large spring supplied the distillery with cool water. The brewing room was located on the same side of the road with the store, the foundation of which stands today. Of course, in those early days there were no laws against the distilling of spirits, and it must be remembered that not all of the spirits manufactured by Mr. Allison were consumed for pleasure, since often the doctors prescribed such products as medicine.

Near the distillery was located a water mill, which was used for the purpose of grinding corn and wheat. Approximately fifty feet up in the mountain the water leading from the big spring was dammed behind a constructed wall of brick and stone. The water was sent to the water wheel by means of an overhead trough, and it was only during extra dry periods that this mill did not serve satisfactorily.



The brooch contains the picture of James Lowery Allison, one of the pioneer residents and merchant in Big Coon Valley. The glasses and metal case belonged to him and were used throughout his life. The photograph is that of the old water wheel of the mill owned by Mr. Allison. The young man in the photograph is Allison Bell, grandson of J. L. Allison.

When the water flow seemed inadequate to supply the power to do the grinding, another mill across the road was put into service. This mill was operated by mule power, much like the present sorghum mill. This system, however, was much slower than the water power.

Just across the road, directly facing the store, was the tannery, also owned by Mr. Allison.

With so many enterprises in addition to farming, it was quite necessary that supplies and merchandise be secured with a great deal of difficulty. Mule teams were sent to Nashville to get the necessities that could not be found nearer.

The attempted efforts to revive "The Grocery" of the good old times, after the return of the men from the War Between the States, proved abortive; and thus vanished those popular institutions. Mr. Allison, just prior to the war, closed all of his business enterprises, being able to foresee the difficulty to operate during the approaching conflict.

There are few memories more pleasant to be reminded of than this old-fashioned "grocery", which has been discussed as a great meeting place for the men of the day, when Birmingham was the postoffice at the crossroads where Big Coon Valley began near Coon Creek.

The spring at this location still flows, and the passersby are invited to enjoy the water, and while

resting under the shade of the trees, they can be reminded that it was here that such a famous meeting place was located—the place that made Big Coon famous. Many elections were participated in at this spot, since it was the voting place for District Nine.

Truly, Mr. Allison was happy with such a location.

MEN OF THE TIMES³⁰

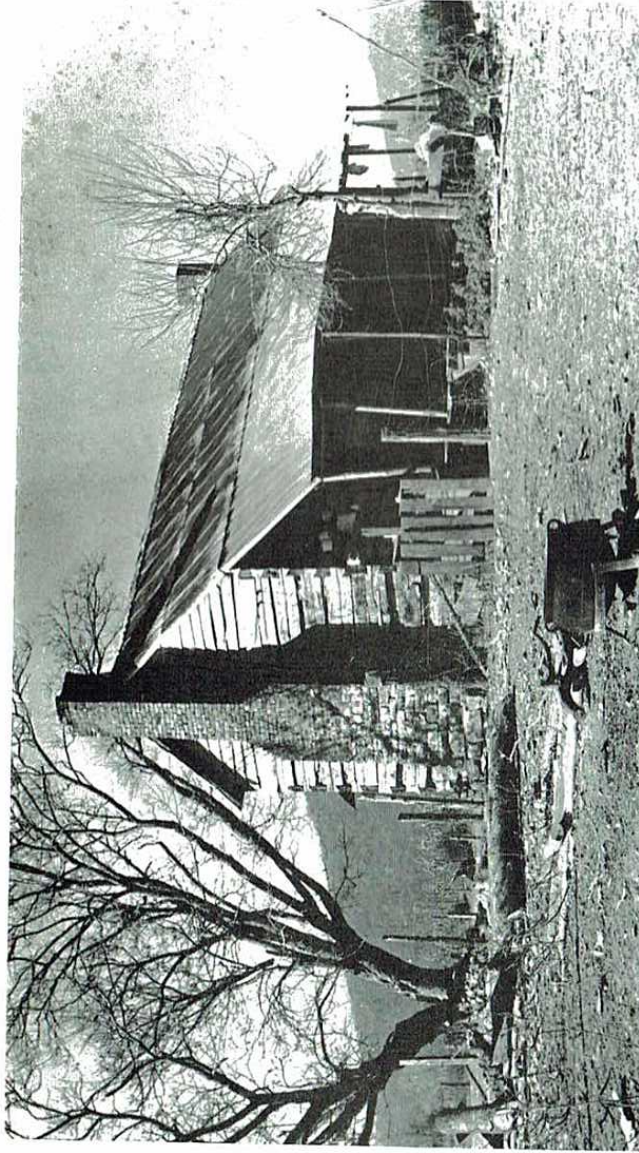
THE PEOPLE who made Birmingham a place on the map, lived and loved, prospered and progressed, and shall never be forgotten. Up and down the hills and valleys they went on foot and horseback, visiting with each other, going to church, trading eggs at the grocery store, or attending a funeral of a life-long friend and neighbor.

Many are the interesting and noble persons who have sought their livelihoods from the soil of Coon Valley. One of these was Anthony Crockett Austin, at one time a very important figure in the early days. Even though he was engaged in stock raising after coming to the county in 1832, Austin did find time to become interested in a postoffice, and in 1845 became the postmaster for the community. He lived in a log cabin near Pleasant Springs. It should be understood that Austin never depended on his income from the postoffice, for in 1847 he received \$10.59 for the year's work, and in 1848 the first nine months netted him \$10.66.³¹ The log cabin in which the postmaster lived also served as the location of the postoffice. This old log cabin near Pleasant Springs was used as a foundation for a neighborhood, later to be endowed by the humanities of a humble people. Austin moved to Princeton, Jackson County, Alabama, in 1853, leaving the community at

a time when large plantations were making this part of the county appear very attractive.

William A. Austin, brother of Anthony Crockett Austin, in 1832 was operating a mercantile business at Bellefonte. He acquired a large plantation, consisting mainly of "bottom land", which was located at the head of Big Coon Valley, near the forks of the road. One of the forks led through Big Coon Valley, and the other wound through Little Coon Valley. At the foot of the mountain William Austin located a fine two-story brick home, consisting of six rooms, and porches up and downstairs. The material for the brick was obtained from a nearby field, made by hand and burned on the place. From the porches the whole plantation could be viewed. One of the best-known objects in Coon Valley is the old plantation bell, which hangs from the rafters of the upstairs porch. Just to the rear of the house a fine spring supplies water. This house and land were owned by Mr. Austin until his death in 1875, at which time R. A. Coffey purchased it from the Austin Estate. This place is now owned by John N. Coffey, son of R. A. Coffey.

William A. Austin was a Republican, and so was David Tate; and these two staunch Republicans saved Big Coon Valley from the destruction which was wreaked on the rest of the South. Although the valley was primarily a Democratic voting area, these two men bargained with the Yankee Republicans,



This log cabin, built in 1817, is said to have been the first building in Coon Valley, and was once occupied by A. C. Austin. Pleasant Springs is located about fifty yards to the rear of this house. Now owned by John N. Coffey.

and succeeded in getting them to pass the valley by. David Tate was made the first judge of the county after the War Between the States.

James Lowery Allison, father of J. J. Allison and Sallie Allison Bell, present-day inhabitants of the valley, located his store at the foot of the mountain in 1833, and then built his two-story log home on top of a hill less than a quarter of a mile away. This particular location was known as Allison Precinct 9, or the "Allison Box", the voting place for the community.

In addition to the store Mr. Allison operated a tannery, a distillery and two grist mills, one of which was powered by water and the other by horsepower. The distillery (or "still" as the men called it) was located on the edge of the branch, supplied by water from the spring up in the mountain. This branch was often milk-white from the mash.

The tannery, owned by J. L. Allison, was a wonderful place to the small boys of the community, for it was here that the cobbler, Mr. Henderson, made the yearly pair of shoes for the folks nearby, and the little boys were given odd pieces of leather to use as whips, lacings, and playthings.

The store, operated by Mr. Allison, was supplied with merchandise purchased in Nashville, Tennessee, and hauled through the country by wagon. Charles Allen was a clerk in this store from the time of its establishment. After a few years Allen sold his per-

sonal effects and joined the '49 *Gold Rush* in the adventurous West.

The name of William I. Longacre is woven into the history of Birmingham, Jackson County, and runs through it like a silver thread, unbroken for many years. He came to Jackson County from Nashville in 1833. His education included a fair knowledge of English grammar, arithmetic, religious writings, and geography, with a smattering of the classics—for in his library were found works by Latin authors. One book especially of great interest was the "*History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century*", by J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, published in approximately 1830, in which was pasted on the front page a book mark on which was printed, "Wm. I. Longacre, Birmingham, Jackson County". Under this was written in Latin the following: "*Lege ut discas*".

Wm. I. Longacre had visions of great possibilities in the Coon Valley, and he purchased a large tract of land and built a beautiful two-story brick home in 1843 at the foot of the Cumberland Mountain, in the middle of the Birmingham community, listing as his address Birmingham.³² At the time that Stevenson was becoming prominent, Longacre opened a store there, and was very successful in his business ventures.

William Longacre established his family cemetery near his home on a little hill looking over the valley.



William I. Longacre home, built in 1843, originally did not have the front porch, but rather a side porch on the far end. This house was later owned by Dr. P. H. Helton. Charles H. Coffey is the present owner and occupant.

Other family cemeteries in the valley were those of the Knights, Allisons, Champions, Matthews, Austins, and Heltons. These tiny plots, with ten or twelve monuments enclosed by a stone wall, covered with roses and creepers, make a restful picture.

In 1859, Dr. P. H. Helton, for whom the Helton Memorial Church was named, bought the Longacre home, and lived there until his death in 1899. Dr. Helton was a highly esteemed figure in the valleys and he kept his skill from no one, treating Yankee and Rebel alike during the Civil War period. In peacetime, the doctor was a busy man and one greatly respected. Dr. Helton's daughter, the mother of the Coffey boys, now living in the community was born in the old Longacre home.

The valley folk were a very religious people. The church nearest the old Longacre home was known as the Cumberland Presbyterian Church. Another was the Friendship Baptist Church, and there was also the New Hope Church, both of which are no longer standing. These three churches served the community for many years. The circuit riders who came through the valley to hold revival meetings held them in these churches. Reverends Brown, Bailey Bruce and Castiller were the circuit ministers who served the people. On the other side of the mountain was the Centennial Baptist Church, a one-room building constructed in 1821. This place of worship is still standing. W. M. Chandler served as pastor of this church

until his death recently at the age of eighty-four. It will be noted that all but one of these churches are of the Baptist denomination, and it is estimated that 95% of the valley folk over a period of years have clung to the Missionary Baptist faith.

The Cumberland Presbyterian Church, at Pleasant Springs, served also as the schoolhouse. Here Mr. Tom Thurman assigned the lessons and wielded the birch rod. All three of the Coffey boys now living in the valley well remember attending this school, sitting on the long hard benches for instruction, and playing hookey and pranks whenever they could. Many were the pigtailed that the Coffey boys dipped in the old inkwells and the benches bore the marks of hard usage by the jackknives of the boys.

The religious influence has made certain that the valley would be law-abiding. Even so, one would expect much more violence than has taken place there. As far as the records show, no hold-ups or criminal acts have ever occurred. The nearest thing to violence was the occasion when a Negro by the name of Joe Green insulted a white girl in the community. He was spirited away and never heard of again, thus indicating that the people were almost fanatical in their adherence to the law.

Of course, the people of the Coon Valleys elected their own officers. Some of the prominent men of the territory held high offices. The title of justice of the peace has been held by Levi Rash, 1826;

William Rash, 1829; John Austin, 1850; R. C. Austin, 1859, and Robert Austin, 1868. Three years before he became justice of the peace, Levi Rash was active in the office of constable, resigning on July 12, 1824. William A. Austin was commissioner of oaths in 1865, and was installed on August 7 of that year. Lee Gentry served as sheriff, and his brother, A. G. Gentry, was the county tax collector. One of the county commissioners was Sam Shipp, a farmer and a fine man in the valley.³³

The substantial citizens in Jackson County were farmers and family men, since the community is a rural one. Some of these old settlers living in Big Coon Valley and Little Coon Valley during the years 1836 to 1866 were William Matthews, Buck Wynn, George Potts, Thomas Wynn, William Lovelady, Jackson Grider, Sam McCrary, Augustus Sentell, James Matthews, Laxton Rash, Nye Allen, Jim L. Bean, and Almond McCrary. These men were considered the backbone of the community. Good fathers and family men all, they were honest, fair, and devoted to their valley.

Two of the better known citizens of Birmingham, Jackson County, were Curtis Hayden and Jim Champion. Both of these men ran grist mills which, in a small way, were spots for social gatherings. Mr. Hayden's son became a doctor, one of the many that the valley produced. From Wilkes-Barre, North Carolina, Jim and Tom Knight moved into Birming-

ham, bringing their possessions in a "steer" wagon belonging to J. L. Allison, the storekeeper. They were twins and founded one of the valley's splendid families. Another one of the characters of Jackson County was Jake Williams. He was a farmer who worked his land and took care of his own business. After he drew his pension for service in the War of 1812, he spent the remainder of his life sitting by leisurely and entertaining anybody who would listen with tall tales about his hunting prowess and the ghostly inhabitants of the cedar woods. Everyone liked his stories, especially the small boys and girls, although the girls were sometimes scared out of their wits by a particularly gory tale.

The children of the community played in and around the caves near their homes. One of the most famous of these is one called Rainbow Cave. It is so named because, at certain times of the day, a rainbow appears shining in the dripping water. It was here that during the Civil War, the settlers made saltpeter. The old fire-stained kettles still remain, and the rainbow still flashes as it did almost a century ago, when the children gazed at it in open-mouthed wonder, and the Rebels gave it a hurried glance as they went their way with the precious saltpeter.

One of the humorous figures in the community was Isaac Matthews. He ran a tanyard in Little Coon Valley about four miles from what is today

Rash, Alabama. He stayed here during the war, in which he didn't participate; because, as he said, he "had to stay home and take care of the women and children".

The community spirit was typified by the system for keeping up the road. Each man would be required to work nine days on the road or else pay \$9.00 for not doing actual work on it. In this way the road was kept up by those who really used it, and at a nominal cost. This common labor leveled any false ideas of "class" which the inhabitants might have, and made for a brotherly feeling throughout the valley. The feeling among the people indicates that perfect harmony existed, showing that the Southern spirit of generosity and goodwill towards one another was in existence in Jackson County. This is evidenced by the fact that the living relations of the old settlers speak very well of their actions and spirit.

As the traveler looks at the washed-out tracks of the old road, he can visualize the wagons, carts, and horsemen who once traveled through the valley. The road leading through Big Coon Valley and Little Coon Valley kept close to the base of the mountain as if it were seeking shelter. If this old clay road could tell its story, it would speak of a rustic people who loved nature, who were well accustomed to the hardships of life, and who loved God and man.

The history of the Coon Valleys naturally carries with it a history of the rise and growth of Birmingham, and embraces the memories of the fathers of many of the families that have made up the population of the community.

WAR TIMES IN THE VALLEY

THE RICH Tennessee River Valley in North Alabama which, before the War Between the States, could have easily fed an army of 100,000 men for an indefinite length of time, became a desert, after the tread of contending armies, and from purposed and cruel devastation on the part of the Federals.

So it was at Birmingham that chimneys in every direction stood like quiet sentinels, and marked the sites of once prosperous and happy homes, many of which were reduced to heaps of ashes. No cattle, hogs, horses, mules or domestic fowls were in sight. Only the birds seemed unconscious of the ruin and desolation which everywhere reigned supreme. Many of the best citizens had disappeared, nearly all the able-bodied men had entered the Confederate service, and a large proportion of the old men, women and children had been forced to make real sacrifices, for they understood that the desperate struggle against immense odds for Southern independence was at hand.

During the war period all merchandise and provisions were much dearer than gold. Especially was this true of salt, coffee, tea, quinine and leather goods. During the years 1864 and 1865 coffee was unheard of among the people at the Birmingham community, and as a substitute for coffee, a few of

the families used parched corn meal, rye, barley, okra seed and sweet potatoes cut up. Sorghum furnished "long sweetening".³⁴

The raising of livestock of all kinds received special attention among those families who had any stock left on hand. Isaac Matthews, an old-time resident of Little Coon Valley, was too old to fight for the *Cause*, and he remained at home and operated the only tannery in the community. Along with his tannery duties, Matthews was able to supply the people with a limited supply of meat. Many times he would drive his stock and cattle, along with those of his neighbors, to the adjoining Cumberland Mountain, in order that the Federals would not use the mules for wagon trains or the cows and hogs for food. During the war Mr. Matthews kept the local people supplied with shoes made of carefully tanned skins of cows, mules, horses, goats, pigs, and dogs.

Salt was very scarce, and was the highest-priced article during the war, and the people of the Birmingham community found themselves without it. In 1863 salt became so scarce that the people, in some cases, had dug up the floors of the smoke houses, and placed the soil in a hopper, with a trough or other vessel underneath to catch the seeping water, which had been poured on the salty earth in the hopper. This water, or rather brine, was then boiled down low, and the remaining moisture evaporated by exposure to sunshine, leaving the salt in the bottom of

the vessel. At one time when the community had no salt, Isaac Matthew made a trip to Knoxville, Tennessee, in an effort to obtain a load. He was not able to obtain a full wagon load, but he did return with several large sacks of the precious mineral.³⁵

The same method used for obtaining salt from the smokehouses was also used during the war in making saltpeter from the soil dug up in caves.³⁶ The making of saltpeter became quite an important job. This mineral was found in satisfactory quantities in the Cumberland Mountain, overlooking Birmingham.

While the people back home were making every sacrifice for the *Cause*, it should not be forgotten that they had to help one another. Spinning wheels were kept busy, and every spare yard of cloth was divided among the neighbors. This same spirit has always existed in Coon Valley.

Truly the people back home worked hard during the war, for conditions demanded such. Many families had representatives who were doing actual fighting as soldiers. William J. Matthews, James M. Bean, Thomas Grider, John Steel, Berry Roberts, Turner Coats, William Malone, Henry Ferguson, James Grider, and Isaac Matthews were heads of families who had relatives in the conflict.

Like other portions of the Tennessee Valley, Jackson County was laid waste by the ravages of the war. The courthouse and several dwellings in Bellefonte

were burned, and later the courthouse records were moved to Sand Mountain for safekeeping.

The conduct of the citizens of Jackson County, and especially the people living in the vicinity of Stevenson and Birmingham communities, in harassing supply trains, bushwhacking detachments, was such that officers of the Federal forces were almost ready to declare that Jackson County deserved its independence.³⁷

The Fourth Alabama Cavalry was organized in December, 1862, by Colonel A. A. Russell, of Doran's Cove, Jackson County. It was created by uniting six companies of the old Fourth Alabama with troops who had seen much hard service under General Forrest.³⁸ All of the men of the Birmingham community who served in the conflict were members in this regiment together.

From where stood the Birmingham postoffice, combats could easily be seen in Coon Valley, between the Birmingham community and the town of Stevenson, which was about three miles away. Soon after the Thirty-second Alabama (Infantry) was organized at Mobile, in April, 1862, it saw action at Bridgeport and the Stevenson area. Stevenson was captured, with valuable stores, and then the Thirty-second moved on into middle Tennessee, part of the time under General Nathan Bedford Forrest.³⁹

A regiment of Sherman's Army under the command of Colonel Kryzyanowski of Michigan, was

stationed at Stevenson during the winter of 1863-1864 with headquarters in the town. General Sherman ordered that all forage and provisions in the country around Bridgeport and Bellefonte be collected and stored, and no compensation be allowed rebel owners.⁴⁰ General Bragg sent Colonel Russell at the head of about seven hundred soldiers, mostly infantry, with three cannons. They crossed the Tennessee River from the south and engaged the Union soldiers in and near Stevenson. After an all-day fight, the Union soldiers were forced to retreat as far as Winchester, Tennessee.⁴¹

The result of the War Between the States on Birmingham was that life had to start anew, and this was more than some of the people could cope with. The people had suffered to such an extent that many, wanting to move from the valley, left for other regions.

It could be said that Birmingham, Jackson County, Alabama, was another casualty of the war.

COFFEY'S STORE AND RASH⁴²

BIRMINGHAM, Coffey's Store, and Rash are three different names, but they are the same in location, characteristics, style and personages. The community, while serving under each of the above names, experienced the happiness and satisfaction that accompanies a nature-loving people; for nature itself adds the enjoyment of peace of body, mind, and soul. Along with peace came the effects of the War Between the States, as experienced by Birmingham. When the settlement was known as Coffey's Store, men of the community volunteered their help in the Spanish-American War, and since the name has been changed to Rash, as it is known today, World War I and the World War of today have presented their challenges.

After the War Between the States, the Birmingham community was left practically in ruins, and the people had to exercise great energy and ingenuity to obtain the common necessities of life to start anew. Soon small houses found their way up again near standing chimneys that remained to tell of the destruction of much more elaborate houses than the people were able to reconstruct. The turbulence of rehabilitation, represented in the struggles of reconstruction, had followed; and now the eyes of the

people were once more turned to the ways of peace and re-establishment of prosperity.

The community once again needed the services of a postoffice. After the death of William A. Austin in 1875, R. A. Coffey, brother of John R. Coffey, of Mexican War fame,⁴³ purchased the farm and beautiful brick home, which was formerly occupied by Mr. Austin, from the Austin Estate. R. A. Coffey, a prosperous merchant who had been in business at Bellefonte and Stevenson, began improving the farm land, made certain repairs on the house, built a large barn; and, most important of all, began the construction of a two-story building, near the forks of the road, to accommodate the needs of a new general mercantile business.

In connection with the store, R. A. Coffey made necessary plans for a postoffice and soon made application. During the latter part of 1875 the postoffice was formally opened under the name of Coffey's Store. Mr. Coffey served as postmaster until his death in April, 1896.

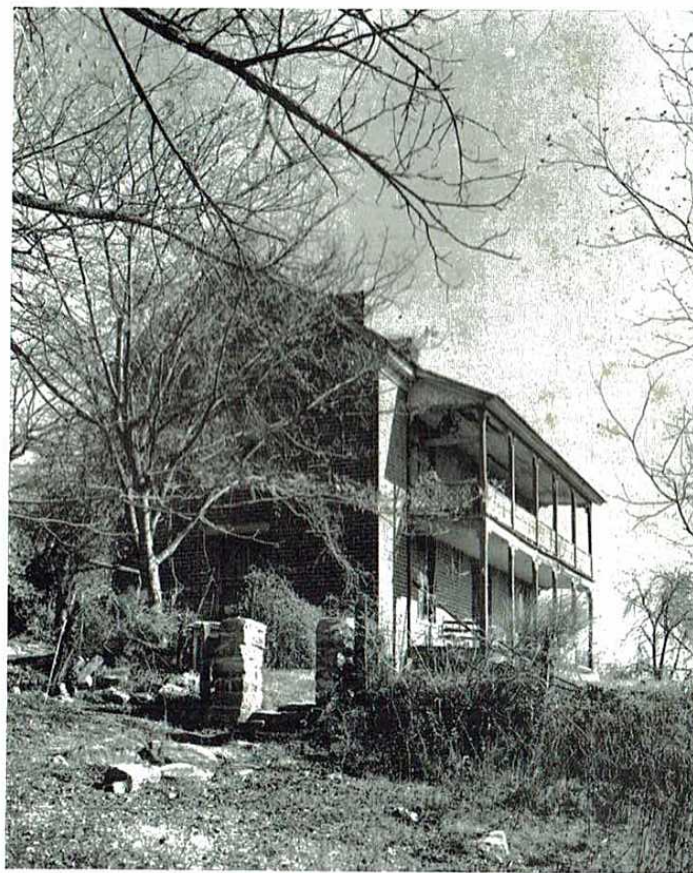
Soon after the death of Mr. Coffey, Thomas F. Russell took over the operations of the postoffice, and moved it to his residence, which was approximately three miles from the Coffey's Store location. Mr. Russell's place was southeast of the community, and far too distant to serve the needs of the locality. Mr. Russell fully intended to move the postoffice

back nearer the original location but, due to ill health, he never did.

Coffey's Store community could boast of a blacksmith shop, a grist mill, sorghum mill, school, two churches, two fraternal lodges, a store, coal mine, and especially fine farming. The people of the settlement had the services of two resident doctors, namely, Dr. J. L. Prince and Dr. P. H. Helton.

The road at the base of the Cumberland Mountain, which served Coffey's Store as well as Big Coon Valley and Little Coon Valley, was improved, and the people were able to travel back and forth from Stevenson without much difficulty.

Another tract of land which Mr. Coffey acquired from the Austin Estate before his death was the adjoining acreage just northeast of the old Austin homeplace, on which was located the famous spot known as Pleasant Springs. Much attention was manifested from time to time in interest of public gatherings, and especially those connected with politics. It was at Pleasant Springs that such men as Governor William C. Oates, Hon. W. R. Cobb and General Joseph Wheeler sounded their political views, and begged of the people their votes and support. Many religious meetings were held near Pleasant Springs, for it was here that the Cumberland Presbyterian Church was located. Though an old log house served as a church building, many fine revival services were held there, in addition to the



William A. Austin home, later known as the Coffey home, was built in 1844. It is located in the center of the Birmingham community. Note the old hand-cast plantation bell on the upstairs porch. (Replica of which may be seen on Title Page). This house is now owned by John N. Coffey.

regular services of the church. The old-fashioned meetings called for a dinner spread at noontime, and the springs made a wonderful place for such gatherings. Reverend Bailey Bruce often conducted revival services at this particular place for the whole community.

During the days of Coffey's Store, lodge work was very popular in the community. Big Coon Lodge No. 75, I. O. O. F., was organized in September, 1873, by S. G. Grimmett. Some of the members of this lodge were: G. W. Allen, J. L. Gentry, J. F. Potts, D. N. Patterson, J. D. Patterson, David Tate, William Matthews and Wiley Matthews. The other lodge in the locality was the Knights of Pythias, which had on its roster several prominent men of the community, including R. A. Coffey.

After the death of Thomas F. Russell the postoffice was closed, and again the district was without the services of a rural postoffice.

Within a year I. M. Sentell, a very popular and useful citizen of that part of Jackson County, decided to petition for another postoffice. Mr. Sentell was a friend and neighbor of Thomas F. Russell, and knew the workings of a postoffice, having assisted Mr. Russell on many occasions. In the latter part of 1905 permission was granted and the postoffice was opened at the residence of Mr. Sentell.

The postoffice was named Rash in honor of L. R. Rash, the next-door neighbor of Mr. Sentell. I. M.

Sentell was postmaster until 1918, at which time C. M. Russell took over the assignment. Mr. Russell kept the postoffice for five years. The office was then put in the hands of E. R. Hurston, who remained as postmaster only for one year. P. H. Coffey then followed Mr. Hurston for three years until his death in 1927.

While P. H. Coffey was postmaster, the location of the office was changed to the present site, which is less than a mile from the original site of the Birmingham location. John N. Coffey assumed the responsibility of the postoffice after the death of his brother, and operates it today, in addition to his general grocery and mercantile business at Rash.

There is very little left to remind us of a once distinguished and inviting community, with its intimate friendships and pioneer experiences. Never in the history of this part of Jackson County has there been a feud among the people, nor has there ever been a murder or a hanging. The reputation of the people of this community for over a hundred years has been that of unceasing devotion for one another. The people have always been religiously inclined, and responsive to any worth-while cause. The expansive fields of corn and cotton have made the people indifferent to fame; instead, they are active sharers in the success that accompanies those who love God's nature.

The Birmingham, Coffey's Store, and Rash location has been in County District Eight since Jackson became a county, and instituted the district plan of organization. Recently rural electricity has given the community a sense of transformation. A new consolidated school has been constructed, and serves as a prodigious factor for development. The people of the district have modern conveniences just as other modern communities have today, thus indicating that there has been a turning point in the history of the settlement. The natural setting is still one of beauty.

Yet, in rethinking the days of nearly a century ago, it is quite natural to visit the eight cemeteries within the radius of a mile or so, any one of which represents the names of families who suffered hardships along with the successes in their respective careers to make the community one of smiling fields and happy homes. Perhaps some of these early founders visioned a great industrial city, filling the valley that lies on either side of Coon Creek; but they passed away and were buried with the details of their plans unrecorded.

Today Pleasant Springs is beautiful, with a steady flow of sparkling water from the base of the Cumberland Mountain. The Presbyterian Church was torn down in 1904. No more political rallies are staged there. As one stands upon the white limestone rocks over the entrance of the cave-like spring, there

are memories of the statesmen who have spoken their part about the issues of the day. Also the setting serves as a reminder of the generations of people who were born there, lived nearby, and are resting in peace among their beloved hills. The visitor knows that these people loved the mountain from which the water flowed; the mountain top with its coal, and the valleys with their flourishing crops. Fine people have breathed God's air here for over a hundred years.

Birmingham in Jackson County should never be forgotten.

REFERENCES

1. Mitchell and Hinman's *An Accompaniment to Mitchell's Reference and Distance Map of the United States* 1834, p. 19.
2. *Postal Directory* for 1943.
3. Sir William Dugdale (1605-1686) was born at Shustoke. Studied with Sir Symon Archer, who was employed in collecting materials for a history of Warwickshire (County in which Birmingham, England, is located today), Dugdale wrote the *Antiquities of Warwickshire*.
4. James Hutton (1826-1897) was an English writer and theologian. Joint editor of the *National Review* 1855-1895, and part owner of the *Spectator*, a liberal weekly. Hutton was a member of the Royal Commission, and a famous scientist.
5. Brook's *Universal Gazetteer* 1839, p. 5.
6. Armes *Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama*, p. 261.
7. Caldwell's *History of Elyton Land Company*, p. 5.
8. Miller's *History of Alabama*, p. 334.
9. *Blast Furnace and Steel Plant Magazine*, August 1939 issue; see article on History of Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Co., p. 791.
10. Act of Congress, May 13, 1820, U. S. Statutes at Large, vol. 3, p. 581.
11. Act of Congress, Mar. 3, 1825, U. S. Statutes at Large, vol. 4, p. 100.
12. Act of Congress, June 15, 1832, U. S. Statutes at Large, vol. 4, p. 547.
13. Act of Congress, July 2, 1836, U. S. Statutes at Large, vol. 5, pp. 103, 104, 105.
14. Act of Congress, July 7, 1838, U. S. Statutes at Large, vol. 5, p. 280.
15. Act of Congress, Apr. 14, 1842, U. S. Statutes at Large, vol. 5, p. 473.
16. Owen's *History of Alabama*, p. 698.
17. Brewer's *Alabama*, p. 283.
18. Act of Congress, Mar. 3, 1845, U. S. Statutes at Large, vol. 5, p. 784.
19. Official records furnished author by Postmaster General, Washington, D. C.

20. Kennamer's *History of Jackson County*, p. 150.
21. Official records furnished by Postmaster General, Washington, D. C.
22. Kennamer's *History of Jackson County*, p. 143.
23. Information given to author by John N. Coffey, grandson of Dr. P. H. Helton.
24. Information in letter received by author from Judge Virgil Bouldin, Associate Justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, Montgomery, Alabama, and native of Jackson County, Alabama.
25. P. G. Shook's *Random Notes and Recollections*; see article on Early Days of the Tennessee Company, by A. M. Shook, p. 11.
26. *U. S. Steel News*, Magazine dated August 1937, article titled "Tennessee" in Alabama, p. 2.
27. Armes' *Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama*, p. 183.
28. Brewer's *Alabama*, p. 287.
29. Contents of this chapter were related to the author by J. J. Allison, 84 years of age and the son of James Lowery Allison.
30. All personal information was obtained by the author through personal interviews with the following people: John N. Coffey, C. H. Coffey, I. M. Sentell, Mrs. J. Lee Morris, J. J. Allison, Frank Bell, Mrs. Frances A. Wynn, John Mason Arnold, and W. B. Sentell.
31. Official records in Postal Directories for respective years.
32. Campbell's *Southern Business Directory*, Part I, 1854, p. 19.
33. Information supplied by John Robert Kennamer, Woodville, Alabama.
34. Miller's *History of Alabama*, p. 230.
35. Related to author by Mrs. J. Lee Morris, daughter of Isaac Matthews, and W. B. Sentell.
36. Armes' *Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama*, p. 183.
37. Brewer's *Alabama*, p. 284.
38. Miller's *History of Alabama*, p. 169.
39. Brewer's *Alabama*, p. 640.
40. Fleming's *Civil War and Reconstruction in Alabama*, p. 75.
41. Kennamer's *History of Jackson County*, p. 59.
42. Information supplied by John N. Coffey, postmaster of Rash, Ala.
43. John R. Coffey, when living in Bellefonte, enlisted in the Mexican War, and was made a Colonel. See Smith and DeLand's *Northern Alabama*, Vol. I, p. 98.

*"Isn't it better to have lived, and died
than not to have lived at all?"*