

**The Birmingham-Montgomery Highway  
(Also Part of the Bee-Line Highway)  
By Derric Scott  
2020**

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# The Birmingham-Montgomery Highway

## By Derric Scott

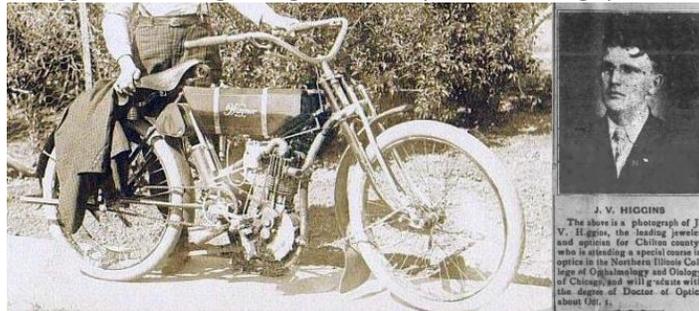
Good roads have been an issue for as long as there has been civilization. Foot traffic, horse, mule, and ox-cart – all these needed passable roads for travel. How communities built and paid for roads changed over time. In the late 1800s to early 1900s it was common for able-bodied men to be required to work a set number of days per year maintain the local roads. Public funding and maintenance of roads began to become common just after the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and various “Good Roads Movement” organizations were formed stressing the need for improved roads. Alabama state and local officials were paying attention.



1903 Ford Model-A and 1903 Cadillac Model-A runabouts, exactly the same bodies, different engines.

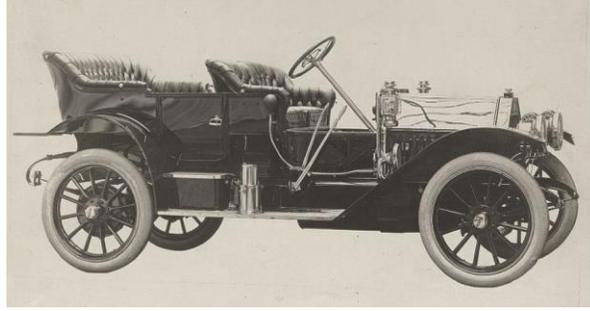
On Wednesday October 7, 1903 a “novel sight was witnessed in Clanton. Two automobiles carrying a party of ladies and gentlemen arrived in town at 4:30 o’clock. They had left Birmingham at 8 a.m., and were en route to Prattville, expecting to reach there sometime the same night. They had found the roads pretty dusty, but had enjoyed a very pleasant run.” No doubt the automobiles they were in were one of the first, if not the very first, seen in Chilton County. It certainly looked like the 1903 Ford and Cadillac above since almost all cars available at that time appeared much the same. They returned back through Clanton on Sunday October 11<sup>th</sup> and in the automobiles were Mr. and Mrs. C. H. Munger and Mr. and Mrs. R. Munger (of Birmingham) and Mrs. W. T. Northington (of Prattville). They stayed over in the Clifton house. They also had recently toured Scotland in their automobiles!

No mention is found of an automobile owned in the county until 1905 when it was mentioned in the newspaper that Mr. E. Ensign of Twin Tree Lumber Company in Maplesville had one. In the next few years some other local citizens bought automobiles, particularly the Doctors in town: Dr. J. P. Hayes, Dr. Joe Johnson, and Judge L. H. Reynolds. By 1910 Dr. J. V. Higgins was riding a Wagner motorcycle and setting speed records to the river!



1909-10 Wagner 3.5 HP motorcycle and Dr. J. V. Higgins (Dr of Optics).

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1911 Buick Model 21, their first 4-door. E M Pinckard had a new Buick in 1911. Judge Reynolds' was likely similar.

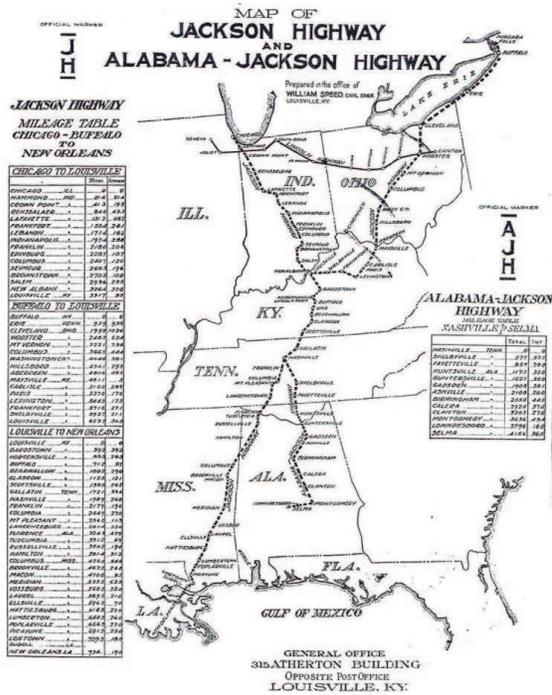
June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 1911 Chilton County Probate Judge L. H. Reynolds traveled in his car to Birmingham. He was the chairman of **the Birmingham to Montgomery Highway Committee** and he was promoting a meeting that weekend in Jemison to finalize the organization and begin the movement. He worked with all the county governments in the path (Jefferson, Shelby, Chilton, Autauga, Elmore, and Montgomery) to generate interest, get commitments for funding, material, and labor to improve and/or build the highway. He said that "in Chilton County we are planning to build our part of the road in a day or two's time by getting all of the people along the line to help. We have ample material for building the finest kind of sand clay roads and if the people who live along the proposed road will volunteer their services we can get enough help to build the road in a short time."

The Birmingham to Montgomery route through Chilton County soon become so heavily used that in 1913 a new organization (the **Birmingham-Montgomery Highway Association**) was formed to upgrade it into a "modern road." Judge L. H. Reynolds was president. In 1914 the plans were finalized and the project in Chilton County began. The entire length of the road was planned to be finished by the summer of 1915.

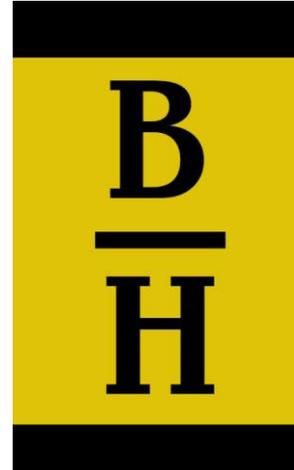
Chilton County was a major segment of the **Birmingham-Montgomery Highway**. Many meetings of the commissions were held in Clanton since it was a central point and the road had to traverse the entire length of the county. Being rural, fund raising for the project in the county was a major issue. Other areas were issuing bonds, but it was felt such an issue would never pass in a rural county like Chilton. Early on, Probate Judge L. H. Reynolds was very instrumental in the project, becoming the \_\_\_ of the state level committee.

At the same time that the **Birmingham-Montgomery Highway** was being constructed, larger national projects were being worked. One was a highway from Chicago to New Orleans. Proponents in Alabama argued for it to be routed through the state and Alma Rittenberry, activist and the leader of the **Good Roads Movement** in Alabama, detailed a plan calling it the "**Jackson Memorial Highway**," because it would roughly follow the path that Andrew Jackson followed in the Creek War of 1813-14 and the War of 1812 from Tennessee to New Orleans. This organization would eventually have severe disagreements and split; the main route would be through Mississippi and called the **Jackson Highway**, however the Alabama route would also exist and be called the **Alabama Jackson Highway**. Most of this highway would later be known better by another name – the **Bee Line Highway**.

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1919 Map of Jackson Highway and the Alabama-Jackson Highway.



Simulated Bee-Line Highway post marker.

With volumes of travelers on roads for the first time, signage had to be developed and installed. All of these named highways were marked by rectangular signs posted along the route, usually using the initials of the name of the highway. By December 1917 signs had been installed for the **Bee Line Highway** – “The marking has been done with yellow bands on telephone and telegraph posts. The forks and turns are marked “R” for right and “L” for left. Midway poles between the turns, about every half mile, are marked “B-M,” meaning **Birmingham-Montgomery Highway**, between those points and between Birmingham and Nashville they are marked “B-H,” meaning **Bee Line Highway**. (Elsewhere there was also the **Bankhead Highway** which used “BH” without the line/dash.)

The exact route of the **Birmingham-Montgomery Highway** through Chilton County isn’t fully known. Various maps from 1914 through 1925 indicate that major stretches of the **Birmingham-Montgomery Highway** were originally routed on both the east and west sides of the L & N railroad. The path took a significant turn to the west in Clanton before turning north again toward Thorsby. It seems clear that this turn would be to cross over the “overhead” railroad bridge, but exactly where it turned back north is unclear. It seems near 8<sup>th</sup> Street, but a little further west. Today in Clanton, 11<sup>th</sup> Street is segmented into two pieces and the northern-most piece has a sign “Highway Ave” – might that be a remnant of this bit of the **Birmingham-Montgomery Highway**? In 1925 one map indicates the road is simultaneously known as **Alabama #7**, the **Bee Line Highway**, and the **Alabama Jackson Highway**.

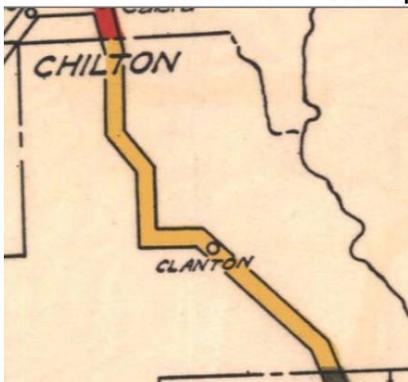
## The Birmingham-Montgomery Highway



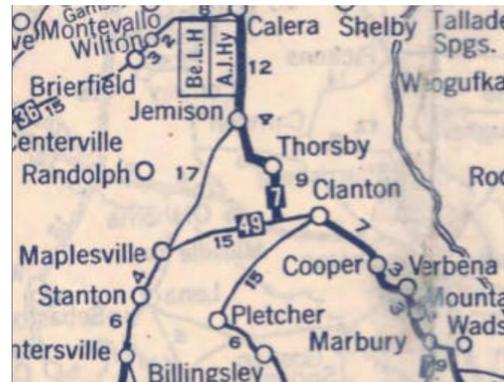
1914 Alabama Road Map,



1922 C. S. Hammond Atlas



1923 Ala State Highway Map,



1925 Map showing Bee Line Hwy & Ala. Jackson Hwy

As time passed the highways needed maintenance; this often wasn't done. By 1920 major improvements were needed and some sections had become almost impassable. The road had become so bad that the Montgomery Advertiser reported that two travelers arriving at the Montgomery Exchange Hotel appeared as "tramps" due to all the dirt and grime. It had taken almost 12 hours to go the roughly 100 miles due to the condition of the road; a trip that should have taken 4 or 5 hours.

In 1923, Senator Adams of Chilton asked the road commission to make a new survey of the section from Thorsby to Verbena. The question at hand was whether to upgrade the old route, which ran west of the L & N RR, especially from Clanton to Thorsby, or build a new route that would follow the east side of the RR. Senator Adams was an advocate to upgrade the existing route.

The work detailed in the highway improvement plans was begun in 1925. Contracts were let to build an 18 foot wide concrete road through the county. Work began at the north county line, south of Calera, based out of a community called Wessington, at that time. They progressed down to Lomax. Then they worked from the south of the county, reaching the Clanton city limits on July 18, 1925. At that point they moved their equipment back to Lomax and again began working toward Clanton from the north. It was to be completed by August 10, 1925.

These construction projects in the mid-1920s effectively moved the route to the east side of the railroad, eliminating most of the annoying and dangerous "at-grade" RR crossings. In the 1922 C. S. Hammond & Co. map it was clear that 3 large sections are west of the RR, Mountain Creek to Cooper, Clanton to Thorsby, and Wessington to Calera. When the major projects were completed by 1926 the route was all on the east side.

All these different organizations, all naming routes that often conflicted with, overlapped, or duplicated each other, had effectively confused the traveling public. In 1925 the Joint Board on Interstate Highways was formed to develop a standard system and the era of the named trails effectively ended when the American Association of

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State Highway Officials (AASHO) adopted the U.S. numbered highway system on November 11, 1926. Practically all the named highways slowly went away in favor of the U. S. Highway numbering system. The **Birmingham-Montgomery/Bee Line Highway** became **US 31**.

Some questions

Exactly where was the first **Birmingham-Montgomery Highway** through Clanton? Maps from the 1914 timeframe show a significant zigzag to the left (west) in Clanton. This clearly seems a left turn over the railroad “overhead bridge” and then some distance later, a significant turn back to the north. Where was this “old highway?” In 1929, an article about the new Cotton Mill says it was “situated between the old **Birmingham-Montgomery Highway** and the L & N Railroad. ... One may go out Eighth Street north from the Wilson Hotel and continuing up the old highway turn off to the mill village.” This seems to indicate that at least near the Cotton Mill area that the old highway was Eighth Street. One tiny segment of road in that area has a street sign saying “Highway Avenue.” Or might it have been further to the west... closer to Littlejohn Road, perhaps?

Where was this BBQ Restaurant? This photo was from a 1946 **Union Banner** and the caption says that the highway being moved to east of the RR was the cause of its demise.



**Bee Line Highway** – Chicago to New Orleans – “*from the Gulf to the Great Lakes*” or “*Lakes to Gulf*”

The northern route was decided at a convention in Evansville, Indiana, Nov 5, 1915. That route was from Danville, Illinois through Cayuga, Newport, Clinton, Terre Haute, Sullivan, Vincennes, Princeton, and Evansville, crossing the Ohio River at Henderson, Kentucky, then south through Dixon, Madison, Ill., Hopkinsville, Pembroke, Trenton, and Guthrie, Kentucky. It will meet the **Dixie Highway** at Springfield, TN. The entire route was finalized before Jan 1917.

## References

**Facebook groups** “*U know u lived in CLANTON as a kid,*” “*WE GREW UP IN CLANTON, ALABAMA*” and others.

**Union Banner:** numerous.

***From Names to Numbers: The Origins of the U. S. Numbered Highway System***, by Richard F. Weingroff, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/infrastructure/numbers.cfm>

**Alma Rittenberry**, Encyclopedia of Alabama article, by Martin T. Olliff, Troy University, <http://www.encyclopediaofalabama.org/article/m-8318>