

Major roads and highways seem permanent and unchanging

They are there when we are born, When we learn to walk, ride a bike,
We learn to drive on them They take us to work, shopping, to entertainment.
The only changes paving maybe improvements like widening.
But roads and routes have undergone major changes in the past, and no doubt will again.
Historically, the major thorough-fare through our county is US Hwy 31.

We know roads have been very important, basically, forever.

Foot, horse, wagon traffic all needs roads. But automobiles seem “new.”

It is surprising how early our civic leaders began discussing and working on improving the dirt/mud roads to better accommodate automobile traffic.

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Would it surprise you to know that one of our early probate judges, Judge L. H. Reynolds, took a road trip to Birmingham, **IN HIS CAR**, in June of 1911 to promote road improvement?

He was chairman of a group that wanted to build/improve the road route from Birmingham to Montgomery for automobile traffic. He proposed that people living there would work on the road. This was a movement that was happening across the nation. Even though automobiles were in their infancy, people already wanted to use them to travel between our major cities.

Scouting parties for road routes were big deals, with notable speakers and events along the way.

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He was successful in getting the route improved, which meant a “fine sand clay surface.”

However, in a few years it was in more need of work. Judge Reynolds was part of a new organization formed to “build a modern road” in its place – the Birmingham-Montgomery Highway.

This major project was finished by the end of 1915!

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At this time, nation-wide efforts were being worked on to determine major routes between our country’s largest cities. There was a major political battle over the route from Chicago to New Orleans. Alabama leaders fought mightily for the route to come through Birmingham and Montgomery. They weren’t 100% successful, as the major route through Mississippi was eventually chosen. However, they did get the Alabama option included/built as an alternate route. This route was drawn to roughly follow Andrew Jackson’s route in the War of 1812 from Tennessee to New Orleans

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It was referred to as the **Jackson Highway** and the route thru Alabama as the **Alabama-Jackson Highway**. However, by 1917 it was better known as the “**Bee-Line Highway**.”

It was in this time period that the necessity for road markings became very evident. Signage was developed for all the different “routes” that were being drawn and promoted by various groups. The Bee Line Highway was marked with small square signs with B-L.

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After this quick overview let’s narrow down to Chilton County.

The exact route through the county, especially Clanton, isn't known. However it is clear that it originally, in the 1915 – 1925 timeframe that the Birmingham-Montgomery Hwy / Bee-Line Highway took a major "jog" to the west in the town of Clanton.

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It crossed from the east side of the RR to the west side and then turned north again some distance later. Exactly where couldn't be found. Several of the old maps support this. The B-L Highway didn't cross back over the RR to the east side again until Thorsby. In fact, the route crossed back and forth over the RR several times in the county.

1914 map showing clear westward jog.

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1923 map showing clear westward jog.

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1925, last map showing west jog. Also 3 route names for it: **B-L Hwy, Ala-Jackson Hwy, and AL Rt 7**

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1922 Rand McNally Auto Trails maps included accommodations and auto information.

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However, the road and travelling conditions had again deteriorated. A MGM Advertiser story in 1924 indicates two travelers arrived in Mgm from Bhm and from their appearance were thought to be tramps. It took them 12 hours to go less than 100 miles, which should have taken 4 or 5 hours.

035 – Mgm Advertiser story on travelers.

040 – Mgm Advertiser page on concrete road

So another ambitious road project was begun. All the dangerous and annoying RR crossing was simplified in the mid-1920s when the route in Chilton Co was redesigned to almost be totally on the east side of the RR. By 1926 the current, familiar, route was completed. Notably, it was also completely constructed of concrete!

045 – 1926 map – FINISHED.

Also important at this time, the US Government designed the "US Highway Numbering System" which fairly quickly replaced all the clever "named highway" routes such as Bee-Line, the Jackson Highway, etc. The highway thru Chilton County became known as US 31.

047 – 1925 map again

Returning to the route of the B-L Hwy thru Clanton, I suspect that the zig-zag was because of the "overhead RR Bridge" and the travelers could avoid another at-grade RR crossing. It is unclear where it turned back north. However, when the Cotton Mill was constructed in 1929, it was mentioned that it was built between the old Bhm-Mgm Hwy (out 8th Street) and the RR/Hwy 31.

Perhaps a clue – a small part of 11th Street is named "Highway Avenue" and it reconnects to 8th St.

055 – Google map, Highway St

Of course a major re-routing of the road was not without consequences. A 1946 UB article show this

060 – Abandoned BBQ restaurant