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Lunar Roving Vehicle

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Introduction to Honors Research

Dr. Susan Friedman

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The Monte Sano Railway

The Monte Sano Railway consisted of one train: a twenty-six-ton Baldwin locomotive. This locomotive was specially designed by the Baldwin Locomotive Company with a body resembling a streetcar and special noise reducers to keep the appearance and sounds of the train from scaring the horses that the townspeople used for their carriages and wagons, as well as to avoid disturbing the people that lived near the railway's tracks. The train had two flat cars and six passenger coaches, which were designed by the St. Charles Car Company to be 42 feet long, rather than the typical 50 or 60 feet long so the train could navigate the sharp curves on its path. One of these coaches had three compartments: a compartment refrigerated with ice to hold fresh produce, a compartment meant for storing the passengers' luggage, and a compartment where the passengers could smoke. The Monte Sano Railway connected with the Memphis and Charleston Railroad— which is the predecessor to the Southern Railway— as well as the Nashville, Chattanooga, and St. Louis Railway (“Monte Sano Railway”).

The Monte Sano Railway was built by Col. James F. O’Shaughnessy and his brother, Major Michael J. O’Shaughnessy after founding the North Alabama Improvement Company in January of 1886 and building a lavish hotel atop Monte Sano Mountain (“Monte Sano Hotel”). James O’Shaughnessy was an entrepreneur from Ireland who decided to capitalize on Huntsville's booming economy after the Civil War (*Monte Sano RR Talk*). The hotel opened on June 1, 1887. The three-story, Queen Anne style hotel boasted 233 guest suites, as well as

automatic fire alarms, electric bells, a ballroom, a wraparound porch with decorative woodwork, a barber shop, a saloon, a pool room, two bowling alleys, and double-decked, bell-roofed observatory that extended above the third story. The hotel also included another building known as “Memphis Row,” which had 33 suites for adult guests when the hotel became too crowded; this building was named due to the number of patrons from Memphis, Tennessee, who visited to avoid contracting malaria and yellow fever from outbreaks along the Mississippi River (*The Huntsville Times*).

The Monte Sano Mountain was a perfect location to build a resort, as the name “Monte Sano” means “Mountain of Health” in Latin; this name was earned because patrons saw a drastic improvement in their health during their time at the Monte Sano Hotel. Guests of the hotel were prominent people or from affluent families (*The Huntsville Times*), many of whom wanted to escape the harsh weather, unsanitary conditions, or the local epidemics affecting their homes (*Hotel Sano Breeze*). One reason the mountain gained the reputation as a place of restoration is due the presence of multiple “medicinal” water springs, which supply the water with minerals the body benefits from, lowering the possibility of getting cholera and diphtheria and preventing mosquito-spread illnesses such as yellow fever and malaria (“Grand Old Mountain”). Another reason for the mountain’s reputation is the cool, consistent temperatures, which allowed people to escape the brutality of summers in the south to prevent heat-related ailments and avoid the drastic change in temperature during the change of seasons, which weakens the immune system (“Monte Sano: ‘Health Mountain’”).

Before the construction of the Monte Sano, the only way to get to the top of the mountain was by a tally-ho—a carriage drawn by four to six horses—that ran from Huntsville’s town square east along Randolph Avenue to the mountain turnpike, then up the winding toll road after

paying at the toll gate (*Monte Sano RR Talk*). Though, this journey often took multiple hours, and was not ideal for patrons of the hotel who were already sick and were visiting the hotel to improve their condition. Therefore, the North Alabama Improvement Company proposed the creation of a railway. However, there was controversy regarding the route that would be built. One proposition was to use the already existing streetcar tracks running south from the Huntsville Depot to the downtown square and Maple Hill Cemetery, then to Fagan Spring and up the mountain, while the other proposition was a more scenic route north of town, which was ultimately chosen due to the congestion in town. On June 13, 1888, Arthur Owen Wilson advocated for the “dummy” or muted railway line at a board meeting and asked to use the track of the streetcar line to connect with the Monte Sano line; he also proposed to remove the track on Randolph Street to lay it on Clinton Street at the close of the first season (*Monte Sano RR Talk*). The first step towards the construction of the railway occurred a few days later, on June 30, 1888, when Huntsville Belt Line and Monte Sano Railroad Company obtained the right of way for the tracks (“Railway Route Bought”). The railway was constructed by railway workers of the Huntsville Belt Line and the Monte Sano Railroad Company hired by the North Alabama Improvement Company, and it was completed on August 7, 1889 (Wilson).

The Monte Sano Railway began at the Huntsville Depot on Church Street. From there, it went south to Jefferson Street, then east on Clinton Street passed Steele Grove and Calhoun Grove towards the mountain. The path dropped down into Fagan Hollow and stopped for water at Fagan Spring. Next, the path ascended around the Button Hole and exited near the intersection of the toll road, turning northeast. It continued east into what became Monte Sano State Park, then turned west at the Overlook. It crossed Nolen Avenue, then to Shelby Avenue with a stop at Laura’s View Station. Finally, it went along Denison Avenue to the intersection of Hotel Monte

Sano, where the tracks were later extended to (Fig. 1). The entire venture on the Monte Sano Railway was approximately eight miles long and took half an hour. The route was described by a brochure from the 1890's as "picturesque and grand, winding its way with comparatively easy grades along the mountain side" (Fig. 2). The train made six trips per day, and it backed down the mountain rather than turning around. Adult passengers paid for tickets at Mr. P. R Stahl that were 25 cents for one way or 50 cents for a round trip; children's tickets for a one-way trip were only 15 cents. Passengers also paid an additional 50 cents for their baggage to be delivered to the hotel (fig. 3).

Fig. 1. Section of the Monte Sano map courtesy W. W. Varnedoe, Jr. 1956 for the Monte Sano



Civic Association. Section of revised: Monte Sano Mountain Heritage Map 1996/2005 by Jane Barr for the Monte Sano Historical Association. Photocopy from Monte Sano Historical Collection.

Fig. 2. 1890's brochure advertising the Monte Sano Railway. Photocopy from the Monte Sano Historical Collection. *The South Pub. Co. Engravers & Printers, 78 Park Place, New York.*

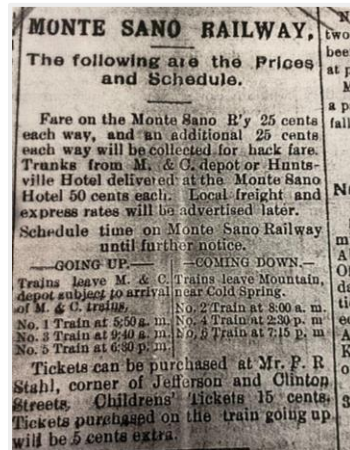


Fig 3. Newspaper Clipping from sometime between 1888-1896 advertising the prices and schedule of the Monte Sano Railway. Photocopy from Monte Sano Historical Collection.

The Monte Sano Railway ran successfully until an incident during the train's return trip down the mountain. The engineer was idling the train when he applied the brakes to test the natural speed of the train. Unfortunately, this caused the "sand-box" responsible for creating traction between the wheels and the track to become choked and stop throwing sand onto the tracks. Without the sand on the tracks, the tracks became "slick" and, despite the fact that the wheels had locked, the train slid almost all the way down the mountain. Near the bottom of the mountain where the railroad crossed the highway, the wheels derailed and the train stopped. No one was injured and the train was not damaged ("Monte Sano Railway"). Even still, this incident enticed fear among guests of the Monte Sano Hotel and, alongside the recession of the 1890's, led to the decline and closure of the hotel in 1900 (*The Huntsville Times*). Despite the multiple attempts to keep the railway profitable, the railroad was not opened in 1893 or 1895. In 1896, the abandoned railroad was sold after going bankrupt, and during the following year the steel rails were scrapped for supplies (Brinkley).

After the Monte Sano Railway closed, the Monte Sano Hotel and the 27 acres it resided on were bought to be used as a private summer home. Later, in 1944, the hotel was bought again and dismantled for resources (*The Huntsville Times*). The only part left of the hotel is the chimney, which can be seen on Old Chimney Road (“Monte Sano Railway”). Meanwhile, the development on Monte Sano Mountain before the Great Depression progressed greatly. Using the slogan “Live life longer on Monte Sano,” a corporation interested in promoting the Monte Sano Mountain was established to landscape and create streets, as well as provide electric lighting, a reservoir and water system, and telephone service. The first road designed for automobiles was constructed with a connection to the streets of Viduta. The road was opened on July 4, 1927, and it is known today as Bankhead Parkway (“Monte Sano: ‘Health Mountain’”). Under the “New Deal” Administration, the next use for the roadbed was during the Great Depression when the Civilian Conservation Corps built the Monte Sano State Park over a period of three years (“Monte Sano: ‘Who Built the Park’”). After much of the track was dismantled, the old railway bed left behind became one the first 500 projects by Rails-to-Trails, a nonprofit organization that transforms unused railway beds into a shared-path trail. Some of the tracks near the picnic area of the park are still there (“Monte Sano Railway”). The North Alabama Railroad Museum replaced this track in 1998 (fig. 4). On August 14 of the same year, the Monte Sano Railway worker’s house, which was originally constructed in 1888 for the foreman in charge of construction of the rail line then used by the men who maintained the line and train, was added to the National Registrar of Historic Places (Brinkley). Laura’s View Train Station was established as an archaeological site and was added to the Alabama Register of Landmarks and Heritage on May 21, 2001 (Warner).



Fig. 4. Members of the North Alabama Railroad Museum (NARM) rebuilding the track left behind in 1998 after the Monte Sano Railway was dismantled

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