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*Alum Spring on Monte Sano
in the 1890s*



THE ROMANCE AND REALISM OF MONTE SANO

by Frances C. Roberts

Because of the natural beauty of this mountain called Monte Sano, there have been numerous legends and true stories recorded in the annals of local history.

Perhaps the most romantic legend associated with the mountain concerns its name. For thousands of years before white settlers came to claim the land, numerous Indian tribes enjoyed living in the scenic Tennessee Valley. According to legend, an Indian maiden named Monte was torn be-

tween her love for a young white man and an Indian brave to whom she was betrothed by her father, an Indian chieftain. There are two versions of the end of this story. According to an unknown bard who recorded the legend in verse, Monte chose her Indian childhood sweetheart who had pleaded with her to say no to her paleface

Dr. Roberts originally presented this paper at a reunion of CCC workers held Saturday, June 14, 1980, at Monte Sano State Park.

suitor, thus the name, "Monte Sano." ¹ The other ending to the legend is more tragic. According to this version Monte said no to her Indian lover and, to avoid the wrath of her father, she and her paleface suitor leaped to their deaths from Inspiration Point in order to be united in "the happy hunting grounds of the hereafter." ²

Actually the name Monte Sano means "mountain of health" in Italian which goes back to the Latin basis of mont (mountain) sanitos (health). According to tradition, Dr. Thomas Fearn, one of Huntsville's pioneer physicians, gave the mountain its name because it was a healthful area where families could spend their summers and escape various types of illnesses which seemed to occur during the hot summer months. ³

Apparently John Martin was the first permanent settler on the north slope of the mountain. In 1814 he purchased eighty acres which included the east half of the southwest quarter of section 28 in township 3, range 1 east. Within this area, a health colony was established by 1827. It included a row of small log cottages and an inn where families from Huntsville came to escape the heat during the long summer months and to recuperate from illness. ⁴

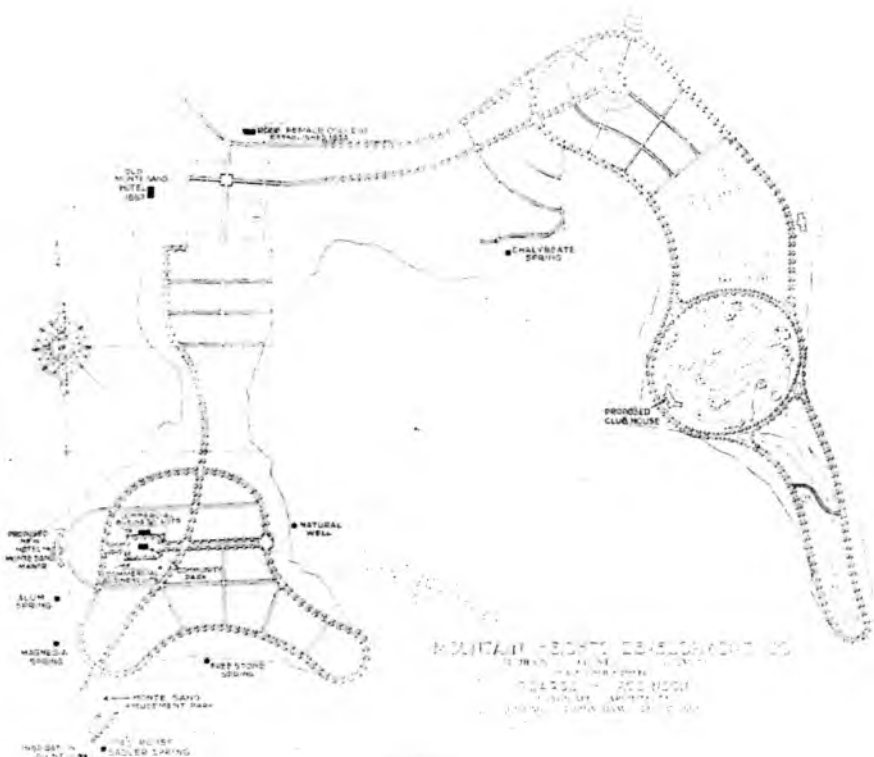
The Reverend James Rowe, a Methodist minister at the Huntsville station, decided to build a school near this colony in 1829. By February of 1830 all the necessary buildings had been constructed, and classes began at the Monte Sano Female Seminary under the direction of the minister's wife Malinda. Four years later, this successful school was closed due to

the death of Mrs. Rowe at the early age of thirty-four. ⁵

In 1833, the town of Viduta was platted which included the school and earlier settlements that had been formed on the north slope of the mountain above Cold Spring. This undertaking was sponsored by Dr. Thomas Fearn and his brothers, George and Robert. They were assisted by Dr. Alexander Erskine, John Brahan and Bartley M. Lowe. The town was laid off in sixty-seven lots of one acre each. The streets ran north and south and east and west in such a way that the lots, divided by alleys in the back, faced on them. Within a short time thirty-eight lots had been sold to some of Huntsville's most prominent citizens including Samuel Chapman, Dr. Samuel Breck, Preston Yeatman, John M. Taylor, Dr. David Moore, Dr. Thomas Fearn, George P. Beirne, Arthur F. Hopkins, Bartley M. Lowe, Robert Fearn, Thomas G. Percy, Dr. Alexander Erskine, and John T. Smith. ⁶

Throughout the ante-bellum period Huntsville families who could afford summer homes on Monte Sano Mountain lived there during the summer months. In 1859, the Monte Sano Turnpike Company constructed a toll road to the mountain to provide better transportation for this summer resort. ⁷

During the Civil War only a few families lived on Monte Sano, and the Union troops visited the area occasionally in search of food supplies. In 1862 a coal mine was opened by Jonathon Broad, an Englishman, who contracted with Baker and Conway to deliver coal to their marble works for distribution to local residents of Huntsville. After the Union troops established a camp at the foot



This plan for the development of Monte Sano Plateau was published in 1927 by the Monte Sano Construction Company. It shows the locations of the various springs and the natural well, the old Monte Sano Hotel and the proposed new hotel, and the old female school. Viduta was located at the northwest corner of the plateau, while the "dummy line" ran parallel to and below the crest along the northern edge.

of the mountain along Fagin Spring, they commandeered the mine to secure coal for their tents and barracks. Thirty soldiers were sent to work in the mine, and Broad was forced to haul the coal down the mountain to the camp. ⁸

For twenty years after the Civil War Monte Sano's development remained fairly dormant because of the lack of funds, but in the mid-1880's a number of northern land developers discovered the potential for

profit in the beautiful Tennessee Valley. In 1886 they backed the formation of the North Alabama Improvement Company which included a number of local financial leaders of Huntsville. M. J. O'Shaughnessy of New York served as president of the company; Samuel H. Breck, vice president and general manager; J. R. Stevens, President of the First National Bank, treasurer; and J. L. Rison, President of Rison's Bank, secretary. Besides these officers, the directors included M. J.

O'Shaughnessy's brother, J. F. O'Shaughnessy; Milton Humes, a Huntsville attorney; William P. Newman, local real estate and insurance agent; and Dr. George M. Harris, local cotton manufacturer and hardware merchant.⁹

These men had a vision of transforming Huntsville into the "Queen City of the South" by developing the city as an industrial center and Monte Sano Mountain as a health resort and vacationer's paradise. They purchased more of the acreage on top of the mountain and built a two hundred room hotel on the west side which overlooked the town of Huntsville. This structure was designed in the Queen Anne style of architecture with broad porches surrounding it. It was heated by steam and lighted by gas. A grand ballroom could accommodate large groups for

formal as well as informal occasions, and a band played nightly from June 1 to October 31.¹⁰

The grounds around the hotel were beautified with beds of natural flowers and shrubbery, trees and promenade walks were developed. Fourteen miles of drives around the mountain were made to provide scenic views which, according to the hotel's advertisements, "pleased the eye and let the soul of man rejoice." Adjacent to the hotel was a livery stable containing trained horses, buggies and carriages which were made available to guests for riding or driving. Billiards, croquet, lawn tennis and other amusements were available. Trails connecting all springs and the bottomless well were maintained for hiking.¹¹

M. J. O'Shaughnessy bought

The O'Shaughnessy house, located on the eastern side of the mountain near O'Shaughnessy Point, burned in March 1890.





The toll gate keeper's cottage on the Monte Sano Turnpike, photographed circa 1890. The toll gate can be seen at the left.

and remodeled the Robert Fearn home on O'Shaughnessy Point overlooking the east side of the mountain. A number of new homes were built along the west and north side of the mountain near the old town of Viduta.¹²

A railroad built by the Huntsville Belt Line and Monte Sano Railroad Company and known as the "dummy line" was constructed to carry guests from the railroad station to the mountain. It was not too successful since travelers were afraid of the railroad bed's steep slopes.¹³

For a period of ten years the Monte Sano Hotel flourished, but the depression years of the 1890's took their toll on tourism, and the hotel was forced to close shortly after 1900. It was then purchased by Mrs. Laura Garth as a summer home for her family.¹⁴

The next period of develop-

ment on Monte Sano came in 1926 when a group of local businessmen bought 2200 acres of mountain property for \$42,000 and began to promote the sale of summer homes on the mountain. They also envisioned the building of a new brick hotel with grounds to include a golf course and swimming pool. Leadership for this project was furnished by D. C. Monroe, Herbert Johnson, Morton M. Hutchens, Sam S. Thompson, J. E. Pierce, W. P. Dilworth, I. A. Burdette, E. A. Terry, Raymond Jones and Ira M. Terry. This dream dissolved with the depression of 1929. In order to keep from losing their investment, they borrowed \$24,000 from the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and gave a mortgage on the property for this amount.¹⁵

This was the status of the land titles on most of Monte Sano Mountain in 1935, when a drive began to develop it as a

state park. J. B. Mitchell, county agent for Madison County, working with the Chamber of Commerce contacted Sam F. Brewster, regional planner and designer of parks and recreation areas for the T.V.A., to ask his advice concerning the Monte Sano site as a park. Brewster thought that the location was ideal, but pointed out that an adequate water supply should be developed to take care of increased use which would naturally follow.

of park construction. It was Brewster's belief that two Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps could be placed on the mountain to do the actual construction of the park. ¹⁶

At this point in the development of the project, the County Commission was urged to purchase the property in order that it could be developed by the T.V.A. and maintained by the state.



One of the Civilian Conservation Corps camps erected on Monte Sano.

When the owners of the Monte Sano Construction Company were contacted by the Chamber of Commerce committee, they learned that 1,992 acres could be purchased for \$18,000. The remaining 400 acres could be used by the company to secure the \$24,000 mortgage held by the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. Col. Page S. Bunker, Alabama Commissioner of Forests and Parks, and Sam Brewster of T.V.A. conferred on the matter

With some reluctance the County Commission finally agreed to furnish the \$18,000 if the developers would allow two camps to be built on their land rent free. The city then came forward to provide additional water to the camp site by extending the McClung Street pipe to the top of the mountain and taking over the water system from the Monte Sano Construction Company. ¹⁷

On August 16, 1935, the first ninety-eight C.C.C. boys arrived from Knoxville, Tennessee, under the direction of Lieutenant C. B. Burgoyne. A day later they were joined by one hundred more, thus bringing the total to about two hundred men who were ready to go to work. Two camps, numbers twelve and thirteen, were constructed on Monte Sano to serve the needs of five hundred C.C.C. recruits.¹⁸

struction Company in 1927, was widened and blacktopped, thus giving two entrance routes to the park.¹⁹

To celebrate the official opening of Monte Sano State Park, dedication ceremonies were held on August 25, 1938. The program for this occasion began with a parade in downtown Huntsville followed by a motorcade which proceeded from the Courthouse to the amphitheater near the public lodge



This photograph of Monte Sano Boulevard was probably taken on July 4, 1927, when the road was officially dedicated and opened.

Within three years Monte Sano Park was completed. A road, now known as Bankhead Parkway, was constructed by W.P.A. workers to connect Pratt Avenue with the entrance to the park. The old road from the parkway to the old town of Viduta was improved and named Fearn Street. Monte Sano Boulevard, which had been constructed across the top of the mountain by the Monte Sano Con-

struction Company in 1927, was widened and blacktopped, thus giving two entrance routes to the park.¹⁹

At two-thirty p.m. the official dedication took place with Robert K. Bell serving as master of ceremonies. The Honorable William H. Bankhead gave the principal address after which a barbecue dinner was served in the picnic area. At seven p.m. a pageant depicting the history of Huntsville from 1805 to 1938 was presented. Authored by Weston Britt and

directed by Nancy Pierce, the cast consisted of local citizens whose forebears were among those who contributed to the development of the community.²⁰

Once again Huntsville residents became interested in building summer homes on the mountain. Although a water supply had been provided by the city in 1935, it still was inadequate to serve the needs of any increase in population.

Not until after World War II did the full development of Monte Sano as a year round residential area take place. Although Huntsville experienced some growth during the war as a result of the establishment of Redstone and Huntsville Arsenals adjacent to the city limits, the population on Monte Sano remained static. In 1944, the Monte Sano Hotel building was torn down and sold for the valuable timber it contained.

After gas rationing was discontinued and transportation facilities returned to normal, the Mountain Heights Construction Company became active in promoting the sale of lots on the mountain. A number of the German families who came to Huntsville from Fort Bliss, Texas, to work in the missile research field chose to build homes on Panorama Drive. Between 1945 and 1956 numerous lots were sold and construction of homes proceeded more rapidly than the water supply could accommodate. Shortly after Monte Sano became a part of the City of Huntsville in 1956, municipal services were extended to residents living on the mountain. In 1957, a large 150,000 gallon reservoir was constructed on top of the mountain, and water pressure was increased by the installation

of a pumping station. In 1957 a fire department was constructed, and an elementary school was built in 1959. As yet no full scale sewage system has been developed for the mountain, nor has a natural gas line been extended to that area of the city.²¹

The Monte Sano Civic Association was organized in 1954 to promote activities which would insure the development of a well-rounded type of community life on the mountain. This group has remained active in most civic affairs, particularly those related to slope development.²²

By 1978, only a few lots remained vacant on top of Monte Sano. On the eastern part of the mountain, Monte Sano State Park continues to provide recreation for several hundred thousand people who come to enjoy the beauty of the scenery and the fresh cool air. There are 1,436 residents on the mountain that are housed in 498 homes, apartments, and trailers. Eighty-seven percent of the 484 homes are owned by those who live permanently on the mountain.²³ Although there are still a few places where visitors can gain a beautiful view of the valley, many of the scenic spots such as Inspiration Point have now become part of the yards of home owners who have built along the edge of the mountain.

The dream of the development of Monte Sano as a health resort has been realized, not as the pioneers envisioned it but as a healthy residential community where family life can be enjoyed and where visitors are always welcome to enjoy the recreational facilities of a state park.

Footnotes

- 1 *Official Program of Monte Sano State Park Celebration*, Huntsville, Alabama, August 25, 1938.
- 2 "Historic Romance of Monte Sano," by Pat Jones, *Huntsville Times*, March 25, April 1, 8, 15, 22, 29, May 6, 13, 1934.
- 3 *Ibid.* Miss Katie Steele, granddaughter of Dr. Thomas Fearn, related this story to me on April 25, 1935, while on a visit to Huntsville.
- 4 "Historic Romance." Miss Fannie Cabaniss who was interviewed by the author of this article told me this same story on a number of different occasions.
- 5 "Historic Romance," *Huntsville Times*, April 8, 1934.
- 6 Government Tract Book, p.154; Plat Book I, pp.22, 23; Deed Book B, p.190; Direct Index to Property A-Z, 1810-1919, Madison County Probate Record Office, Madison County Courthouse, Huntsville, Alabama.
- 7 "Historic Romance," *Huntsville Times*; *Williams' Huntsville Directory, City Guide and Business Mirror*, vol.1 - 1859-60. Huntsville, Ala.: Coltart and Son, No. 10 Commercial Row, 1859. (Reprinted by Strode Publishers, 1972)
- 8 "Historic Romance," *Huntsville Times*, May 6, 1934.
- 9 *Huntsville Alabama, Queen City of the South: Industrial, Mechanical, Agricultural, Mineral Resources, ETC.* Issued by North Alabama Improvement Company and printed by Caldwell Printing Company, Birmingham, Alabama, 1888.
- 10 *Ibid.*
- 11 *Ibid.*

- 12 "Historic Romance," *Huntsville Times*, May 13, 1934.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Ibid.*
- 15 *Live Life Longer on Monte Sano, Mountain of Health*, Huntsville, Alabama, issued by Monte Sano Construction Company, compiled and published by D. C. Monroe Printing Co., Huntsville, Alabama, 1927.
- 16 *Huntsville Times* (Monte Sano Edition), August 21, 1938.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 *Ibid.*
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Official Program, Monte Sano State Park Celebration*, Huntsville, Alabama, August 25, 1938.
- 21 Information obtained from Water Department, Fire Department and the City Board of Education office, Huntsville, Alabama, July 6, 1980.
- 22 *Monte Sano, Mountain of Health*, prepared and distributed by Monte Sano Civic Association (no date).
- 23 Statistics furnished by Community Development office of the City of Huntsville, Alabama, June 13, 1980.



Typical homes on Monte Sano, 1927