

# The Historic Huntsville Quarterly

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Volume 14 | Number 4

Article 2

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6-21-1988

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### Recommended Citation

Rohr, Nancy (1988) "Blevins Gap: A Road Less Traveled," *The Historic Huntsville Quarterly*: Vol. 14: No. 4, Article 2.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/historic-huntsville-quarterly/vol14/iss4/2>

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# BLEVINS GAP:

## A Road Less Traveled

by Nancy Rohr

Long before there was a state of Alabama or even a town of Huntsville, Indians and animals had carved out a road for themselves over the Green Mountain Range which lies to the south and east of this valley near Huntsville. If early risers in the southernmost part of town look up toward Green Mountain when the first ray of sunlight appears, they can see the exact location of the old road. The sun will be shining on them through the rim of a pass, while the rest of the valley remains dark behind higher elevations. This is Blevins Gap. It was the logical place for a road because it is only 1200 feet high while the elevations on each side measure 1400 feet or more. Today there is little to show for the site. It is a forgotten part of the past.

When settlers and traders began to come into the valley from the east, they followed this old road perforce, because it was the only road. It became the connecting link with the Owens Cross Roads, Big Cove, New Hope, and Guntersville areas and on toward Atlanta.

It wound down the mountain to a point just east of the present Grissom High School, then turned slightly north to connect with the Four Mile Post Road, which was another very old thoroughfare. (Bailey Cove Road was originally part of Four Mile Post Road.)

Early in the nineteenth century, the Blevins brothers, John and William, and their father Dillon, came to the Madison County area looking for good farmland and

pleasant homesites, as all typical settlers did. It is interesting to note that their forebears had been with Daniel Boone on the Wilderness Trail.<sup>1</sup>

Judge Thomas Jones Taylor recalls in his **A History of Madison County** that John and William bought land as early as 1809. The land office records indicate that their land was along what is now Whitesburg Drive and Four Mile Post Road in Huntsville. John also purchased property in Little Cove in 1809, 1810, and 1811. The family bought the gap itself, not for farmland - it was too rocky - but to insure easy passage over the mountain. Records show that John bought more land in 1833, 1835, and 1838, and that William Blevins owned a house in town on Clinton Avenue. However, Alabama deed books show, too, that by 1819 the family had begun to look elsewhere for even more land, and at least part of them had moved on to Shelby County, Alabama.<sup>2</sup>

There are numerous references to Blevins Gap Road in books and in records, even

up to the present. One of the most intriguing was an account written by Lucius Bierce, uncle of the writer Ambrose Bierce. Lucius, after graduating from Ohio University in 1822, traveled extensively on foot and on horseback through the southeastern United States.

Bierce chose to "ramble" into the interior of the young nation, and his travels took him through what is now West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina, the northern part of Georgia, and into the newly formed state of Alabama.

On April 5, 1823 he climbed Sand Mountain, stopping for the night at Brown's Tavern. The next day he passed by Gunter's Landing, the Big Honey Comb Spring, and the Paint Rock River. After walking 29 miles that day, he spent the night by the Flint River, sleeping in the rain.

On April 7, 1823 he wrote in his logbook:

leaving Flint, which is the boundary between



Blevins Gap from the Big Cove area east of Green Mountain.



The old Blevins Gap road today seems hardly more than a wide footpath; however, in years past, the road was used by wagons and buggies, as well as by pedestrians. At one time, a stage-coach regularly traveled the road.

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Decatur [a county from 1821-1825 in the area between the Flint and Tennessee Rivers]<sup>3</sup> I went five miles when I came to Blevins gap, an opening in an otherwise impassable mountain, and after wading through creeks and mud holes, eight miles farther I came to Huntsville, the county seat of Madison County, being the first village I have seen for two hundred and eight miles and containing the first brick dwelling house I have seen since leaving Virginia.

The day he arrived in Huntsville there had been a jail break and no one would

take him in for the night. He had to walk on to Mooresville for a bed.<sup>4</sup>

Early local records refer many times to the road through the gap. At a meeting of the Orphan's Court between 1810 and 1817, the minutes stated: "...David Cobb and James Neeley be appointed overseers over a road leading from John Bunches and by Armistand Bealers, by Dillon Blevins and crossing the mountain at his gapp [sic] and on the Stick Sholes [sic] of the Flint River."<sup>5</sup>

In his account, Judge Taylor related that "Below Huntsville a road has been opened through Blevin's Gap," apparantly in the 1820's.<sup>6</sup>



This rock retaining wall on the east side of the old Blevins Gap Road has been in place since before 1875, the year Madison County stopped maintaining the portion of the road which crossed the mountain gap.

It was the old English county system to require every able-bodied male from the age of eighteen to work ten days each year on the county roads in their own neighborhoods. According to this arrangement, an apportioner was appointed in each precinct. He saw to it that the appointed overseer for each section of county road did his job accordingly. From the Madison County Commissioners' Minutes, it is known that in 1831 Noah E. ? was appointed overseer of "the road from the foot of the mountain at the North and South line of Blevins Gap to ? S. Teagues."<sup>7</sup> So the responsibility for maintaining the road is made clear as established by law. The road

is shown clearly on the Madison County Map for 1850.

In 1857 the Blevins Gap road was described in the Minutes as starting from "Whitesburg near Cooper's place to within 200 yards of the top of the mountain to the cave road."<sup>8</sup> Later, in July of 1857, S. J. Esslinger was "appointed to oversee Blevins Gap Road from the Pike at Gafree's old place to within 200 yards of the top of the cave road."<sup>9</sup>

At the fall term in 1859, Andrew Esslinger was appointed overseer of the road from the Turnpike to the top of the mountain, and John Hale was appointed overseer for the second half to Vienna (New Hope).<sup>10</sup>

During the War between the States, Madison County suffered in many ways. The entries in the Commissioners' Minutes were clearly written for 1861, as they had been previously. Each section of each road was listed in the volume, mile for mile. However, there was a blank space for the name of each overseer! No one had the time or inclination to work on the road systems!

There were at least two Civil War incidents reported in the Official Records regarding activity through or near Blevins Gap. In 1864 Captain Robert S. Richart of the 12th Indiana Cavalry reported a skirmish in the Big Cove area to his commanding officer. On June 30 the guerrillas were driven into confusion. The Southerners fled "...into the hills near Blevingston [sic] Gap, a distance of two miles from the scene of the fight."<sup>11</sup>

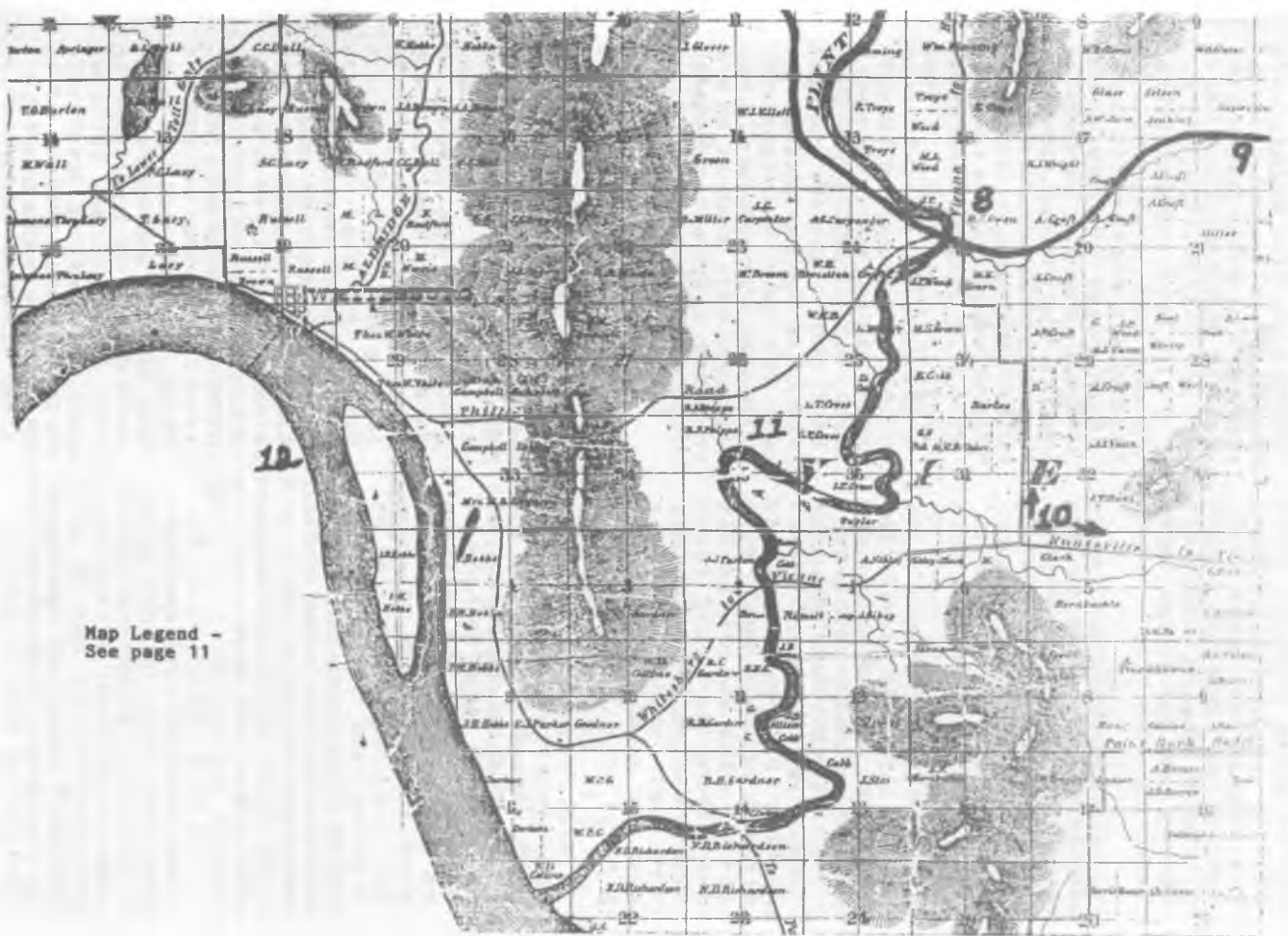
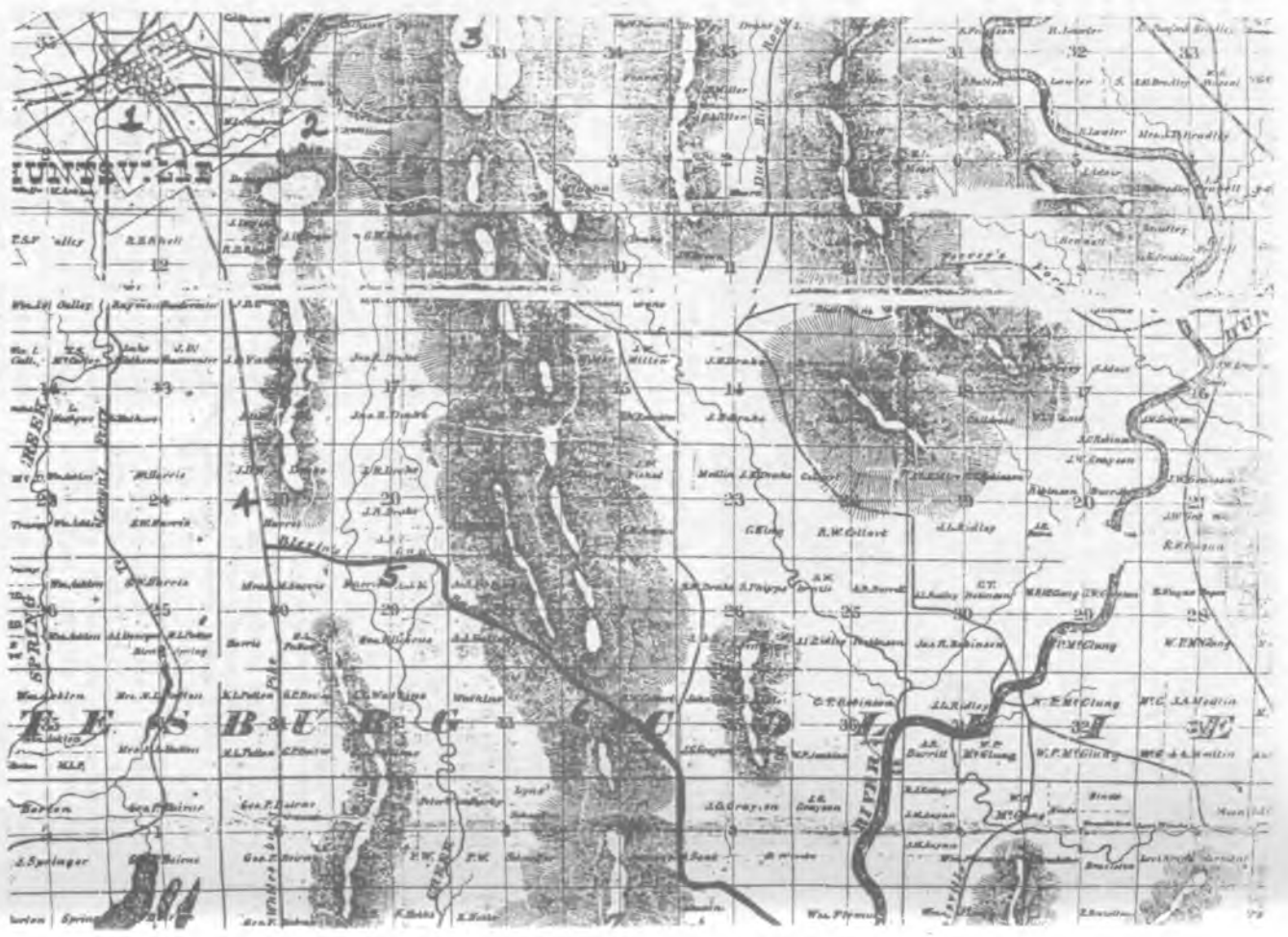
Again, from the Official Records, on April 5, 1865 Lt. Col. John W. Horner wrote to his commanding officer: "I have the honor to report that on the evening of the 3rd instant I started with a force of 65 men from the Eighteenth Michigan Volunteers Infantry on a scout in the direction of Vienna (New Hope). Starting at 6 p. m. on that day we moved out on the Whitesburg road four miles, where we filed to the left and crossed the Huntsville Mountains into what is known as Big Cove."<sup>12</sup> The sight and sounds of 65 fully attired mounted military men must have caused quite a clatter and stir on the quiet road in the woods.

There was a local story, told by more than one person of the Big Cove area, that two luckless Northern soldiers, or deserters, caught stealing horses, were killed and their bodies hidden in limestone sinkholes by a young Southern boy. The location of these sinkholes was supposedly near the road. No bodies have ever been found to verify the story, but that does not mean people are not still looking for them.

The Official Military Atlas of the Civil War shows clearly three different maps of the Madison County area with Blevins Gap Road drawn in as the only way out of Huntsville to the southeast and over the mountain.

Madison County, to its credit, was one of the first Alabama counties to pay off its indebtedness after the Civil War. The Commissioners' records take up again with an entry that Levi Esslinger was appointed overseer for the work on the west side of Blevins Gap Road, and James Grayson was in charge of the eastern section in 1868.<sup>13</sup>

The duties of the overseer must have sometimes been more demanding than anticipated. In February 1870 William Nichols was appointed overseer of the Whitesburg side of the road.<sup>14</sup> However, in August 1871 it was "ordered by the Court that the Resignation of Wm. Nichols overseer of the Blevins Gap Road from the Turnpike near Coopers old stand via Esslingers to the top of the mountain at Blevins Gap be relieved by this Court for



Map Legend -  
See page 11

the following reasons. First that he is inefficient and unworthy for the trust im\_? (impovered ?) in him as an overseer of the roads."15 County road work was taken seriously even then.

In the 1873 records for September, overseers for the road through the Gap and over the mountain were Robert Miller and W. Esslinger.<sup>16</sup>

At that time, however, the transportation needs of the area were changing. The people living farther to the northeast of Huntsville and on top of Monte Sano were becoming more numerous and vocal. So the county road builders made plans to build a road that would serve more needs. The resulting Big Cove Turnpike would reach both those on the mountaintop and those in the Big Cove area and beyond.

Alas for this history; it must be reported that in the minutes of November 6, 1875, it was "ordered by the Court that by agreement of all parties concerned now in open court that the Petition to discontinue the public Road known as the 'Blevins Gap' road be discontinued as a public road from this date" across the mountain. Nevertheless, on both sides of the mountain, the roads would be open from their sources to the foot of the mountain.<sup>17</sup>

Later overseers for these sections were appointed and road expenditures were itemized. Names included James Esslinger, Peter Fyne, Henry Peevey, and W. C. Bailey.<sup>18</sup> The last reference in the county "Road Book" to Blevins Gap Road is June 9,

1900, when Mack Webster was appointed to oversee the road "from the toll gate on the Pike to Websters."<sup>19</sup>

In 1893 county minutes became more organized with the use of precinct maps showing and naming roads. Although the road through the Gap is not shown, the 1893 map does show an intersection with Whitesburg Pike and Blevins Gap Road where Four Mile Post Road currently begins. So, certainly, it was still in use as a reference point. There are different existing maps printed in 1870, 1878, 1888, 1889, 1890, 1892, and 1893 with the road indicated, going through the Gap and over the mountain. Although the county did not maintain this section of the road, it appears to have been in common usage.

By 1921 the notation of the Blevins Gap Road had disappeared from the map prepared by G. W. Jones and Sons. The Commissioners' Minutes showed a change in their "Road Book" system, and there is no mention of the road again until the 1960's. A portion of the old road did remain, however, as a street leading east off the present Bailey Cove Road, which was then a part of Four Mile Post Road. That part of the old Blevins Gap Road dead-ends at a creek at the foot of the mountain. In the 1960's the city, apparently in an attempt to tidy up street names, was planning to change the Blevins Gap street name to the name of a resident in that neighborhood. At that time, Blevins Gap Road would have been lost forever if it had not been for one determined citizen. Ruby Webster



Champion, a lifelong resident of the area, petitioned the city to keep the original name because of its historical significance. And the city complied.

There are no further written records about the history of Blevins Gap Road. However, there are several people in the community who recall stories or events from their own experiences or family history.

One local character, Wash Anyon, an alleged bootlegger, often came to Huntsville from the Big Cove area during the years of Prohibition. He was known to travel by way of Blevins Gap Road and was always welcome on this side of the mountain because he never traveled without his brown jug of moonshine in hand.

Mr. L. M. Taylor used the roadway as a young man in the 1920's to hunt squirrel and possum. Many other local hunters certainly must have traveled the road without being aware of it.

For many years in the 1920's, John Hays' grandfather drove his cattle from fields in the Big Cove area through the gap to pasture near Huntsville for the winter.

Mrs. Winston Bailey recalls that her mother-in-law told her that her first visit to Huntsville as a new bride was in a horse and buggy driven over the road through the gap.

Ruby Webster Champion, who was instrumental in keeping the Blevins Gap street name, was born in the family home at the foot of the mountain. Among her many interesting stories is one that her mother told her about the stagecoach that used the old road. The driver would always unhitch his team of horses and water them at Webster's Spring after the trip over the mountain, and again on the way back.

As a young man, Mr. R. T. Lyle was a member of the Big Cove baseball team. The team had to go wherever the

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**See Map, pp. 8-9:** 1875 Map of a portion of southeast Madison County, showing the old Blevins Gap Road (heavy black line) running east from Whitesburg Pike, crossing Green Mountain at Blevins Gap, and continuing southwardly to the Owens Cross Roads area and on toward Vienna (New Hope). For easier comparison to modern landmarks, familiar locations are numbered on the map as follows:

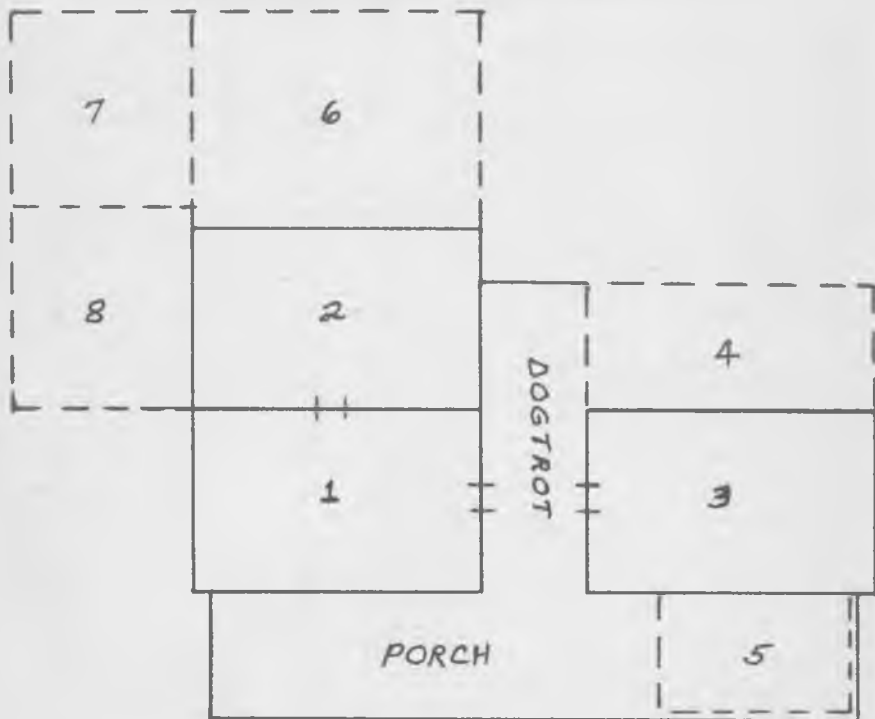
(1) Huntsville; (2) the later Big Cove Road, now U. S. Highway 431 South; (3) Monte Sano; (4) Whitesburg Pike, now U. S. Highway 231 South; (5) old Blevins Gap Road; (6) Blevins Gap; (7) Green Mountain; (8) Owens Cross Roads; (9) old Blevins Gap Road continues eastwardly to the present Old Gurley Pike; (10) old Vienna (New Hope) to Huntsville road; (11) Flint River; (12) Tennessee River.



A painting of the childhood home of Ruby Webster Champion. The Webster home, now demolished, was located at the foot of the gap on the Huntsville side of Blevins Gap Road. The painting depicts the home after several additions were made. The porch posts were the original posts made of cedar logs.



An earlier view of the home, which was built in 1900, shows the original board and batten oak siding and rock chimney. Mrs. Champion's uncle, Harve Bailey, is standing at the corner of the house.



Rough sketch of the floorplan of the Webster house is taken from an outline drawn by Mrs. Champion. The original three rooms were (1) the front room, (2) kitchen, and (3) side room, with an open dogtrot connecting the two sides of the house. The two new side rooms (4 & 5) and a new kitchen (6) were added first; then in 1942, the two bedrooms on the left (7 & 8) were built.

[ED. NOTE]: The dogtrot type of house was built in Alabama from about 1800 until well into the twentieth century. Several are still standing in Madison County, the earlier ones being constructed of logs. The dogtrot was the ultimate in natural air conditioning, sometimes causing a draft (weather conditions permitting) similar to a chimney draft and producing a cooling breeze, even on a hot, still day. The enclosed center hall type of houseplan is based on the same principal. The Webster house is typical of many of the homes built by pioneers and by later immigrants to Madison County.

competition was offering a game and a challenge. He clearly recalls using Blevins Gap Road once around 1914 to come to Huntsville to play baseball. He and the other members of the team walked over the mountain. He says the Big Cove team soundly defeated Huntsville, and there are not a lot of people around to dispute his word. Mr. Lyle is a young 92 years old.

The foregoing information is all that is currently

available about Blevins Gap and the road across the mountain, which were such important parts of the growth of Huntsville. How much more unknown history about the area there is, we can only guess. Pioneers may not be using the road now, but the gap is still there. Look up, and admire its low, inviting way across the mountain. Although today it is a road less traveled, for a period of time, history did pass that way.



#### FOOTNOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Robert L. Kincaid, **The Wilderness Road** (New York: The Bobbs Merrill Co., 1947), p. 678.

<sup>2</sup> Margaret Cowart, **Madison County Land Records** (Huntsville, Ala.: privately published, 1979), pp. 121, 174, 177.

Dorothy Scott Johnson, **Madison County Alabama Deed Book** (Huntsville, Ala.: Johnson Historical Publications, 1976), pp. 2, 3, 37, 60, 66, 68, 71, 84.

<sup>3</sup> John Robert Kennemer, **History of Jackson County** (Winchester, Tenn.: Southern Printing & Publishing Co., 1935), pp. 20-22.

<sup>4</sup> Lucius V. Bierce, **Travels in the Southland, 1822-1823** (Columbus, Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 1966), pp. 92-96.

<sup>5</sup> Dorothy Scott Johnson, **Madison County Orphans' Court Minutes, 1810-1817** (Huntsville, Ala.: privately published, 1972), p. 3.

<sup>6</sup> Judge Thomas Jones Taylor, **A History of Madison County and Incidentally of North Alabama** (University, Ala.: Confederate Publishing Co., 1976) p. 71.

<sup>7</sup> **Madison County Commissioners' Court Minutes**, Vol. 7827, p. 29, unpublished, Elbert Parsons Law Library, Huntsville, Ala.

8 Ibid., 7829, p. 82.

9 Ibid., p. 88.

10 Ibid., p. 179.

11 **War of Rebellion, Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies**, Series I, Vol. 39, Part 1 (Washington, D. C.: Government Printing Office, 1901), p. 241.

12 Ibid., 49, p. 510.

13 **Madison County Commissioners' Court Minutes**, 7830, p. 205.

14 Ibid., p. 427.

15 Ibid., 7831, p. 165.

16 Ibid., p. 440.

17 Ibid., 7832, p. 78.

18 Ibid., pp. 78, 305; and 7833, pp. 17, 550.

19 Ibid., 7835, p. 133.

