

1-1-2009

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### Recommended Citation

Hill, James B. Jr. (2009) "History of the Development of Monte Sano," *Huntsville Historical Review*. Vol. 34: No. 1, Article 6.

Available at: <https://louis.uah.edu/huntsville-historical-review/vol34/iss1/6>

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# History of the Development of Monte Sano

JAMES B. HILL, JR.

## Early Years 1815-1920

The development of Huntsville on the bluff above Hunt's Spring began with the settlement of a community that can be traced to 1805. Early on, affluent residents and visitors came to Monte Sano Mountain to escape the summer heat. Small cabins were constructed with cedar and poplar wood and native stone. The first permanent non-Indian resident of Monte Sano Mountain was Thomas Martin, who came to Huntsville in 1808 from Fairfax, Virginia. He purchased a large tract of land on the north end of the mountain. In 1815, Martin built a house for his bride a few feet from Cold Spring. The water was furnished to the house through hollowed cedar logs. Mr. Martin made a bathtub for his bride carved out of a limestone rock. It was five feet long, 19 ½ inches wide and 12 inches deep. Not only was it the first bathtub in Huntsville and the Mississippi Territory, but it was the first in the nation!

According to the October 1934 issue of Valve World, a trade magazine published by the Crane Co. of Chicago, Thomas Martin's bathtub (ca. 1815) remained in the Martin home on Monte Sano for nearly a half century. Sometime before the Civil War, Martin moved it to a home he had built at the corner of Jefferson Street and Holmes Street in Huntsville, the present-day location of the Federal Court House. The tub was uncovered during a 1934 excavation for the post office (the same building as the court house) and for a while was in the possession of John C. Standard (?) of Huntsville, now deceased. Whether or not it still exists is not known. Valve World pointed out the discovery of the old tub brought to light "the hoax perpetrated upon the public by H. L. Mencken in an article in the New York Evening Mail." He alleged the bathtub was unknown to the world until the 40s of the last century, and that Adam Thompson invented it in Cincinnati.

Seven years later in the Chicago Sunday Tribune, Mencken admitted that his former article was a "piece of spoofing to relieve the strained war days."

"Apparently," the article concluded, "there is no evidence of an earlier tub in this country, so that the old Martin tub may be accepted as the first bathtub in America."

As early as 1814, Dr. Thomas Fearn and his brothers, Col. George Fearn and Robert Fearn, planned a real estate development. The mountain soon became known as Monte Sano, from the Latin words "mount" for mountain and "sanitos" for health. Dr. Fearn was probably the one who selected that name. By 1827 a health colony was located near Cold Spring, where Dr. Fearn promoted the medicinal benefits of the spring water and clean mountain air.



Dr. Thomas Fearn

(Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library)

In 1830, the Reverend James Rowe, a Methodist minister, along with his wife Malinda, established Rowe's Female Academy. Students were encouraged to take their lessons on the mountain "where the air is salubrious and a chalybeate spring is only one mile away." Although Reverend Rowe was retired from the ministry, he was genuinely interested in the Methodist Church and the religious training of his students. It is well documented that John Wesley, the father of Methodism, promoted physical health as well as spiritual well-being. He carried literature about health, along with religious tracts, in his saddlebags.

The college was located on the north bluff, on the original Lookout Drive at the north end of Cooper Street. There is a historical marker on the front of the property. With the establishment of Reverend Rowe's Academy, the population of the mountain began to increase. In 1833, the town of Viduta was established. Primarily, it was intended to be a summer retreat for the wealthy.



Reverend James Rowe

(Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library)

Reverend Rowe's Academy closed in 1834, one year after the death of Malinda Rowe. Her broken-hearted husband lost interest in the school. Reverend Rowe lived his final years in nearby Athens with his son and daughter-in-law. His wish was to be buried next to his wife on the academy property, but the terrible winter of 1869 prevented his body from being brought to the mountain. Reverend Rowe was buried in Athens.

Attempts to bring education to Huntsville were not always successful. Two other schools located in downtown were the Huntsville Female Seminary, founded in 1832, and Huntsville Female College in 1851. Both taught subjects every young lady of the time needed to know: English, Latin, a modern foreign language, fine arts etiquette and, of course, sewing and housekeeping. After five years, a young lady received an MEL or an AM degree.

In 1833, Dr. Fearn and his brother George purchased 80 acres of land on the top of the mountain above Cold Spring. Sixty-seven lots were laid off, and by the end of the year, they had sold 38 of those lots. Until then, access to the mountain was by wagon until one reached the foot of the bluff. At the bluff, travelers commenced by horseback over Indian trails. With the sale of lots, money was raised to construct a primitive road.

In 1835, Col. George Fearn bought 362 acres of land on the northeastern bluff where he built his home. This area was to become an important part of the development of the mountain in both the near and distant future.

This first road on a map was simply identified as Road to Huntsville in 1859. Over the years, the other names for the road were Monte Sano Pike, Monte Sano Turnpike and Toll Gate Road. To protect the title, a group of four local men had bought the right of way for the Monte Sano Turnpike for \$150. The names of the four men were Rison, Echols, Patton and Newman. Incidentally, these are the names of four Huntsville streets today.

This road began at the NW corner of Maple Hill Cemetery. It proceeded eastward, just north of Randolph Street, reaching the top of Monte Sano at the intersection of A & Y streets. (Lookout and Fearn). It was a private road that became a toll road. A tollgate was installed on the road approximately one-fourth mile from its beginning at the cemetery, and it became known as Tollgate Road. Bankhead Parkway was constructed ca.1936. It began at the east end of Pratt Avenue, four blocks north of Tollgate Road. Tollgate Road now ends at its intersection with Bankhead, having a length of 1¼ miles. From that intersection, the Bankhead Parkway was built just north of the abandoned section of Tollgate Road. Fearn Street, as it is known now, comes up from Bankhead, connects with the last one half mile of Tollgate at the hairpin curve, and follows the old roadbed to the intersection with Lookout Drive.

By 1878, nine families had summer homes on the mountain. A local newspaper advocated further development of a Monte Sano community, beginning with a hotel. In 1884, further interest in building a motel was motivated by a yellow fever epidemic in Huntsville. A sanctuary in a location known for an abundance of healthful air would provide an escape from the grip of death.

An influx of wealthy northerners was beginning to make significant contributions to the Huntsville economy. Among them was a New Yorker, Michael O'Shaugnessy. On April 13, 1881, he leased a building near the depot that had once been used as the machine shop of the Memphis & Charleston Railroad. He established a successful cottonseed oil factory, and soon his brother, James F. O'Shaugnessy, was encouraged to leave New York for the prosperity Huntsville had to offer. James was impressed with the area and soon began to plan large-scale land developments in Huntsville. He bought the land on the northeastern bluff of Monte Sano from Col. George Fearn, and built an elegant residence on what for many years was to be known as O'Shaugnessy Point. It was reported that guests from all parts of the United States came to visit. A newspaper dated April 11, 1890, reported that the loss of Col. J. F. O'Shaugnessy's house on Monte Sano by fire was an artistic loss to the south. There was not another such home in the southern states. The Monte Sano State Park was built in this area.

Michael J. O'Shaugnessy came to Huntsville from New York after the Civil War. He built a large home on what is now the northwest corner of Meridian St. and Oakwood Road. He named the estate Kildare after his family home in Ireland. Following the O'Shaugnessys, another prominent owner of Kildare were the McCormicks of Chicago, who made Kildare their winter home. The McCormicks were part owners of the Cyrus-McCormick tractor/farm implement company. On June 2, 1943, Mrs. McCormick sold the home at auction for \$11,900.

In 1944, Michael O'Shaugnessy returned to Huntsville after 48 years to visit old friends and Kildare. He was saddened to see his old home in disrepair. The house is still standing after many hard years and several owners.

The North Alabama Improvement Company was organized on January 17, 1886. Michael O'Shaugnessy was chosen as president and John L. Rison served as secretary. A month later on February 18, 1886, work began on the Monte Sano

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Hotel. The stockholders included: James P. O'Shaughnessy, J. R. Stevens, W. R. Rison, A. Campbell, J. W. Ford, W. P. Taylor, A. R. Jones, G. M. Harris, Henry McGee, Charles Halsey, William L. Halsey, W. P. Newman, Milton Humes, J. J. Dement, A. F. Murray, W. F. Struve, J. B. Laughlin, Ernest Dentler, A. W. McCullough and Robert Coxe. Several of the shareholders were local businessmen that became Huntsville's leaders into the twentieth century.

The hotel was located on 27 acres of land between what is now the boulevard and the west bluff. Today this property is known as Old Chimney Road. The hotel was a three-story wooden structure was a fine example of Queen Anne architecture. The ground floor porch wrapped around the building to take advantage of every view, and observation towers on top of the building offered views for the more adventurous guests. All of the 233 guestrooms had an outside exposure to allow lots of clear sunlight. The hotel was heated by steam and lighted by gas. Water was pumped up from the Big Spring in downtown Huntsville. The hotel was formally, and finally, opened on June 1, 1887 with S. E. Bates as the first manager.

A celebration ball was held on June 2nd with 400 guests in attendance. On July 1 there was a concert. A few days later another ball was attended by 400 people. Many of the guests had to dance on the porch for lack of room inside. By August 24, the hotel had registered over 1,000 guests. About that time 300 soldiers from Ft. Barancas in Pensacola, Florida, came to the mountain to recover from yellow fever, and they remained until the arrival of cold weather. In 1898, a large group of Spanish-American War veterans came to Huntsville, to recover from malaria. Many were sent to the mountain.



Monte Sano Hotel  
(Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Library)

Out-of-town guests of the Monte Sano Hotel came to Huntsville by train. Two well-dressed coachmen in a tally-ho carriage met them, while similarly dressed attendants greeted them at the door when they arrived at the hotel. Resort activities included horseback riding, bowling, billiards, croquet and lawn tennis.

The grounds were beautifully maintained and well-equipped with boardwalks. There were 14-mile buggy and carriage rides around the mountain that featured such names as Shelter Rock, Wildcat Glen, Vanishing Falls, Brigans Cavern, Hell's Half Acre, Chalybeate Spring, Alum Spring, Magnesia Spring, Cold Spring, and Inspiration Point. At the conclusion of the 1887 season, which ended in October, the hotel declared a profit! Only poor winter weather prevented year-around operation.



Horseback Riding on Monte Sano Mountain  
(Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Library)

With the first season over, it was time to take stock of improvements in the operation. The tally-ho service that brought guests to the mountain was too costly and not very satisfactory. Another means of transportation had to be found. By February 1888, plans for a railroad were underway. A right-of-way was granted to the Huntsville-Beltline and Monte Sano Railroad. In the language of the railroaders, it was a dummy line, meaning it had only one destination. The railway was planned and constructed in an astonishing six months, and began operation on August 7, 1888. The train made a round trip every weekday and two round trips on Sunday. Early in its operation, the train wrecked when the brakes failed coming down the mountain. No one was seriously injured; however, it did affect business for both the train and the hotel as wary customers looked elsewhere for entertainment. A new train was bought at a cost of \$15,000. To assure riders they needn't worry about the possibility of a runaway train, the owners declared it safe, "noting there had been 'crowns' broken, fair ladies bruised on the pike through faulty harness, bad driving and balking horses." That was all in the past.

Following the success of these early years, a two-story "cottage" was built on the edge of the west bluff. It was named Memphis Row because the hotel had more guests from Memphis than any other place. Originally, it was designed with a dance floor and a poolroom. The plans were changed when 36 more guestrooms were added and 1892 became one of their most profitable seasons. On June 7, 1893, the railway announced it would not run due to the Chicago World's Fair, which was expected to attract vacationers away from the Monte Sano resort. It did not appear to hurt business, because in August, 1894, a record number of guests registered at the hotel.

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The success would be short-lived. Unfortunately, the Chancery Court would not allow the Monte Sano Hotel to open for the 1895 season, and in 1896, due to litigation among the stockholders, the hotel was closed. It reopened June 16, 1897, but the railroad did not operate and would never operate again. By order of the court, equipment was to be liquidated and proceeds distributed among the creditors. In 1896, the crossties and rails were sold, and the balance of the equipment was scrapped.

Even without railroad transportation, the hotel enjoyed a successful 1898 season, due to the arrival of the Spanish-American War veterans. One military ball attracted 250 people who, for the first time, danced under electric lights. The summer of 1900 was the last season for the Monte Sano Hotel. It had been in operation for 13 years, but suffered from insufficient transportation, lack of guests, and financial problems. In spite of these obstacles, interest in the hotel remained high, and on several occasions, plans were made to reopen it, but due to a lack of money, the Monte Sano Hotel remained closed forever.

It seemed that by 1908 the days of the Monte Sano Hotel had come to an end. Horace E. Garth, an invalid living in New York, decided to move to Monte Sano Mountain in the hope of improving his health in the mountain air. In 1909, Mrs. Winston Fearn Garth, (Lena) a wealthy Huntsville citizen, bought the fully equipped hotel and its 27 acres for \$20,000. The Garth family occupied it until Horace's death in 1920. The hotel remained closed for over 20 years. Mr. John Hale and his family lived in a caretaker's house located on the south end of the property and Mr. Hale occasionally took visitors through the former hotel. Inside, with all the furnishings intact, the place was covered with dust and cobwebs.

On March 9, 1944, the executor of the Garth estate sold the buildings for salvage to the Mazer Lumber & Supply Co. of Birmingham for \$9,000. Contrary to the erroneous story that the Monte Sano Hotel burned to the ground, it took two months to dismantle the buildings. The furnishings were sold to individuals and antique dealers. For another 20 years the land remained vacant, except for a lone chimney. In the 1960s, Cecil Ashburn developed the land into choice building lots.

An interesting footnote to the hotel's history comes from the guest registry. It contained such names as William H. Vanderbilt of Newport, Rhode Island, Jay Gould of New York City, William Waldorf Astor of New York City, and Helen Keller from Tusculumbia, Alabama.

With the arrival of residents, guests, and civilization in general, there came a need for a church. The only evidence of the earliest church is a stone marker now located beside the sidewalk at the entrance to the Monte Sano United Methodist Church, 601 Monte Sano Boulevard. It was once located at the front of the Monte Sano Union Chapel, a small white frame building on the SW corner of Monte Sano Boulevard and what is now Old Chimney Road. In 1943, the Monte Sano Union Chapel became a Methodist Church, a member of the North Alabama Conference, Huntsville District. The newly-named Monte Sano Methodist Church merged with the Evangelical United Brethren in 1968 to become the Monte Sano United Methodist Church.

The stone marker (ca.1892) bears a Celtic cross on the north side and the



words, "The Church of the Holy Innocence." This name was probably inspired by the Episcopal Feast Day of that name, referring to the slaughter of innocent infants of Bethlehem by King Herod. On the east side it reads: "Jesus Christ the Chief Cornerstone" and "Out of the mouth of babies and suckling thou has perfected praise" taken from Matthew 21:16 of the Bible. On the west side it reads, "May 30th<sup>AD</sup> 1892. Suffer the little children to come unto me and forbid them not for of such are the Kingdom of God," a quote from Luke 18:15.

This church never actually existed, except in the mind and heart of a grieving mother by the name of Mrs. Lucy Beirne Matthews. She was the daughter of Colonel George P. and Eliza Hill Carter Gray Beirne. According to the original survey made in 1859 of Viduta on Monte Sano, Colonel Beirne owned lots 17 and 18. Madison County Court House records show that in 1887, they were still owned by Colonel Beirne. These lots are on the southeast corner of what are now Lookout and the Boulevard. Mrs. Matthews began raising funds for an Episcopal Mission, a memorial to her infant daughter, Eliza Gray Matthews. Today there is a beautiful stained glass window in the sanctuary of the Church of Nativity in memory of Eliza Gray Matthews.

On February 23, 1892, Episcopal Bishop Jackson laid a cornerstone for the building intended as an Episcopal mission. This date differs, however, from the date on another stone placed some three months later that has inscriptions on three sides. Construction was started; stone walls were stacked up to about six feet, but unfortunately, the building was never completed. A stone house on this site may have portions of the original structure incorporated into it.

On December 12, 1896, Sidney J. Mayhew and his wife, Fannie Mayhew, sold, for \$1.00 a 40 x 75 foot parcel of land to the Trustees of The Monte Sano Union Chapel located on the northeast corner of Lot No. 26 (identified on Viduta plat). Mr. Mayhew was a builder and lumber dealer, as well as a trustee, and perhaps he built the church. His summer home on Monte Sano, one of the oldest on the mountain, still stands on the corner of Dennison and the Boulevard, and is presently owned by Tom and Martha Gale. Mr. C.L. Nolen, a trustee, had a home that was perhaps located on the street named for his family. O.K. Stegall, another trustee, had his summer home built near the south end of what is now Cooper Street. This house was dismantled in the early 1960s. The other trustees, W. R. Rison and Daniel Coleman, also had summer homes on the mountain.

The little white church was a landmark on the Boulevard for over 60 years. There is very little information about the activity at the Monte Sano *Union* Chapel for the years 1897 through 1930. With the closing of the hotel, one can imagine a lot of the activities on the mountain slowed down. All indications are that the church remained non-denominational, as the name Union implies. There was no minister regularly assigned or employed. The pulpit was mostly filled by lay ministers or lay readers with visiting ordained ministers every now and then. James Lawrence Cooper recalled that his grandfather, Lawrence Cooper, a layman, preached there on occasion. The Cooper family owned a summer home on Lookout Drive as early as 1908, and Cooper Street is named for them. In the 1920s, Miss Evelyn Crick visited the chapel when her family spent summers on

the mountain in their house on Cooper Street. She often played the old pump organ for services. Only summer residents used the church building, and it was winterized many years later.

There were no large developments on Monte Sano between 1900 and 1920. By 1920 there were approximately 30 homes on the mountain. Eight or ten families lived on the mountain year-round. The houses spread mostly along A (now Lookout Drive), B (Nolen Avenue) and X (Boulevard), as they were identified on the plat of Viduta. A few of these homes were located further south on the Boulevard.

## The Middle Years 1920 – 1950

The post World War I economic boom of 1920s promoted another major effort to develop a community on Monte Sano Mountain. On September 9, 1925, the Mountain Heights Development Co. was incorporated. The officers were: D. C. Monroe, president; M. M. Hutchens, vice-president; and Herbert Johnson, secretary-treasurer. The directors were: Ira Terry, James C. Conner, I. A. Burdette, J. Emery Pearce, Raymond Jones, Sam Thompson, and S. A. Terry. With the exception of Mr. Burdette, they were all Huntsville businessmen. The purpose and activity was the same as the North Alabama Improvement Company - to turn the mountain into a popular summer resort.

James O'Shaughnessy was a member of the North America Investment Company, located in Brunswick, Georgia. It had mortgaged 2,030.28 acres on Monte Sano, to William Pope Anderson, a wealthy financier from Cincinnati, Ohio. Mr. Anderson had to foreclose on the mortgage. On June 21, 1894, at an auction held by the District Court of Equity in Tusculumbia, Alabama, Mr. Anderson was the highest bidder and bought the property from the court for \$43,906.72. When Mr. Anderson died on November 26, 1897, the property was inherited by his wife, Mrs. Julia Worthington Anderson.

On April 1, 1925, the Mountain Heights Development Company purchased the 2,030.28 acres from the estate of Julia Worthington Anderson. The price was \$25,000. The company paid \$10,000 in cash and two notes for \$7,500 each, secured by a mortgage of the property. The notes with interest at 6% were due April 1, 1926, and April 1, 1927, respectively.

The *Huntsville Times* reported that the plans of the Mountain Heights Development Co. were the "most extensive development of the century." The company spent approximately \$100,000 for surveying, grading streets, and a reservoir with a water system. The plans included, once again, a resort hotel. The Monte Sano Manor was to be built on the west bluff of what is now Crescent Circle.

Mr. D. C. Monroe, of Monroe Printing Company, served as president of the Mountain Heights Development Company. He wrote the following letter, a look back at the heyday of the Monte Sano Hotel, as well as an explanation of his enthusiasm for the new project:

Dr. W. L. Williams  
Huntsville, Ala.

I will try to reply to your question, i.e. 'Why did you become interested in Monte Sano?'

While employed at the old Monte Sano Hotel, in 1890-92, I made it a point to get out on the boardwalk in the evenings to view the beautiful sunsets, and it was there that I heard comments from our guests. Many of them had visited beauty spots of the world. Their expressions of delight and admiration for the surpassing beauty of Monte Sano made an impression on me that I have never forgotten.

It has been a prevailing belief that we, citizens of Huntsville, must take our children to Monte Sano for the summers if we were to avoid the many ills that are common to children.

My family and I endured the many hardships accompanying these summer seasons for more than thirty years.

At times I would have to ride a horse to and from Huntsville, up and down the steep rough road. These slow, tiresome trips offered plenty of time to think and scheme for better facilities for making the trip and for the general development of Monte Sano.

I have never quite given up this idea of a development of this wonderful spot that might bring pleasure and healthful benefits to our community.

There have been many others with the same desire, no doubt, but nothing has ever been done about it. No one has seemed sufficiently interested to take the initiative. It has appeared like it was up to me, so I proceeded to try to interest others.

On two occasions, 1924 and 1925, I invited representatives of our local clubs and Chamber of Commerce to join me, at my expense, to explore Monte Sano. They finally gave me the time to take them to the many points of interest on the mountain plateau.

Several in the party had never seen more of the Mountain than that part surrounding the old Hotel, but after seeing more of the beauties and advantages of this natural resort, they became very enthusiastic, and it did seem that we were going somewhere, but interest subsided.

In July 1925, I visited Florida, when real estate activities were at their peak. I saw, on what the investors were basing their hopes, and I compared the many advantages of North Alabama with what was attracting people to Florida, and upon my return home I determined that Huntsville people should be awakened to their superior advantage and possibilities. At this time I succeeded in getting others to see as I did, in a possible development of Monte Sano, and altogether, we proceeded to organize what is known as Mountain Heights Development Company.

Our first plans were to acquire the land on Monte Sano that had not been available for over forty years, and other lands to give us a clear right-of-way for a new automobile road to the mountain.

We were about twelve months in acquiring the land we had selected. This makes us realize that it will take some time to put over the entire plans, for they are possible and while we hope they will prove profitable, one way or other, to our entire community, and with the able assistance of your experienced sales organization, we feel assured of success.

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Seven days, later on October 18, the Monte Sano Construction Company was incorporated. The officers and directors were the same as in the Mountain Heights Development Company, with the exception of S. A. Terry and James Conner, who were not on the Board of Directors of Monte Sano Construction Company. Mr. W. P. Dilworth and W. L. Williams were added to the construction company board. On the same date, the Mountain Heights Development Company deeded 7.47 acres to Monte Sano Construction Company.

On November 5, 1926, for the payment of \$1,000, the Anderson Estate released 80 acres to the Mountain Heights Development Company. Six days later, on November 11, 1927, an additional 41 acres were deeded. The initial plans of the development contained about 200 acres, approximately 10% of the 2,000 acres purchased from the Anderson Estate. The 200 acres were located at the extreme southern section of the Monte Sano plateau, extending from Inspiration Point to the intersection of Monte Sano Boulevard and the north section of Panorama Drive. With the release of this acreage, the Monte Sano Construction Company could sell lots and proceed with the development of the First Division of 48.47 acres.

The company built a gravel road approximately one mile long from the new highway to the top of Monte Sano. It was officially opened July 4, 1927. Madison County agreed to pay one-half of the cost on the condition that the company complete the new hotel within two years.

The 200 acres was the planned area of development before the economic crash of October 1929. The Anderson heirs transferred the mortgage on the Monte Sano land to the Tennessee Valley Bank on March 28, 1929. The more or less 2,000 acres of land previously owned by the North American Investment Company would remain the property of the Mountain Heights Development Company and the Monte Sano Construction Company, but mortgaged to the Tennessee Valley Bank. This large portion of Monte Sano began approximately one mile east of the Boulevard to the Monte Sano State Park, then east-southeast to O'Shaugnessy Point, including the adjoining slopes.

The developers realized that transportation to the mountain would be a key factor to ensure success. A paved highway constructed across the south side of Round Top Mountain into Big Cove was the first step. This new road replaced the 1870 toll road that went across the south side of Round Top Mountain.

At the turnoff to the gravel road, a very impressive archway was erected. It was composed of two rough hewed wooden beams supported by large sandstone pillars on each side. Each pillar had an electric light on top. There were signs made with letters cut out of metal and painted white and placed on the wooden beams. On the front side of the sign were the words "Monte Sano Welcomes You." On the back side, visible as one descended the mountain, the sign read "Live Life Longer on Monte Sano." This became the slogan for all of the promotions.

Maps were drawn showing well-planned streets and building lots. Most of the lots were 50 feet wide and 200 feet deep. The 50 x 200 foot lots were priced at \$450. The lots on the west bluff overlooking the town were priced at \$1,250. The area to be developed began on the south end where Monte Sano meets Round Top. This first area of development would extend on the plateau north to just beyond the northern intersection of Panorama Drive and Monte Sano Boulevard.

On the southern end at Inspiration Point, a large open-air dance pavilion was erected. Further out, on the extreme southern end of the point, a wooden observation platform was constructed. About 150 to 200 feet from the pavilion toward the point, a wooden water tank was installed on a steel tower. The front cover of the February 2004 *Monte Sano Telephone Directory* showed a picture of the observation platform. It appeared to be an aerial photo but was actually made from the top of the water tank tower. On the grounds around the pavilion were benches and tables for picnics, and a children's playground with swings, seesaws, and a well with a hand pump near the front gate to the fenced area.

It was not until 1929 that the water system became operational. A concrete reservoir had been constructed at Sadler's Spring. The water was pumped up to the tank from the reservoir. Water lines had been laid on the Boulevard as far north as the intersection of the Boulevard with Wildwood and Belcrest. On Panorama, the south side had a water line to the intersection of Belcrest. On the west side, it extended to the intersection of Wildwood. The Alabama Power Company had constructed a substation below Inspiration Point about half way from the top to Sadler's Spring below. They had run electric lines in the same area as the Mountain Heights Development Company had laid water lines.

At this time, the Boulevard had been completed all the way to the north end of the mountain. The last quarter mile replaced X Street (now Monte Sano Boulevard) ending at A Street (Lookout Drive). The Boulevard had been surfaced with creek gravel. At this time it was the only road on the mountain that had been surfaced. The south section of Panorama had been cleared and graded as far east as Belcrest. The west section of Panorama had been cleared and graded as far north as Wildwood. Portions north of Wildwood had been partially cleared to the intersection with the Boulevard. No work had been done on Highland Plaza, Huntsville Avenue (now Hutchens) or the northeast section of Panorama Drive. Thompson Circle was not on the plat.

When the New York Stock Market crashed in October 1929, all the work on Monte Sano stopped. (It was this way all over the United States and to a large extent the world economy was affected.) There were two pieces of road construction equipment abandoned where they had been in use on the mountain. One was in the parking area at the pavilion. The other one was in the woods just off of Spring Street, now Belcrest Drive. They remained there until World War II, when the Mountain Heights Development Company sold them for scrap steel. A basement had just been dug for the new hotel on Crescent Circle. The work was abandoned, leaving a large hole in the ground. The company could not fulfill the commitment they had made to Madison County.

By 1929, eighteen homes had been built in the area. During this period the first brick home on the mountain was built by the Robinson family at 3123 Panorama Drive. One other house was approximately 60% completed. Another one had only the basement and stone foundation completed. There were 30 houses on the north end making a total of approximately 50 on all of Monte Sano. Most of the 18 completed houses on the south end were built for year-round living, and two of them had central heating - the Thompson home at 5510 Panorama

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Drive and the Orrendorf home at 1711 Monte Sano Boulevard. At the time they were built, however, there were no house numbers or street markers. Houses were identified only by the owner's name!

Unfortunately, property values dropped to a fraction of the original price. Serious efforts by the company to sell the lots had limited success. For example, at an auction on June 20, 1932, two lots with a total front footage of 85 feet, which are now identified as 1511 Monte Sano Boulevard, sold for \$40. The purchaser put \$10 down and signed a promissory note for \$30.

Dr. William H. Burritt's home was built on Round Top in 1932-34. It was razed by fire on June 6, 1936 and was rebuilt. Dr. Burritt willed this real estate to the City of Huntsville. The 127 acres on Round Top Mountain, with the mansion, became the Burritt Museum after his death in 1955. Over the years more facilities were added for education, recreation, entertainment and social activities. It is today known as "Burritt on the Mountain – a Living Museum."



Entrance to Burritt on the Mountain  
(Courtesy Huntsville-Madison County Public Library)

In 1933, the mountain, Huntsville and the entire Valley began to feel the economic impact of the Tennessee Valley Authority. The construction of Wheeler and Guntersville Dams brought employment opportunities. Several houses on the mountain were rented to construction workers employed to build the Guntersville Dam. The Rural Electrification Administration (REA) brought electricity to the north end of the mountain. The south end of the mountain had been served by the Alabama Power Company. The TVA, furnishing less expensive hydroelectric power, replaced the Alabama Power Company. Huntsville Utilities, a department of the City of Huntsville, became the distributor of electric power to the entire area.

The Monte Sano State Park was first conceived through the initiative of a group of Huntsville citizens. J. B. Mitchell, the County Agent, was the leader. The others included John J. Sparkman, the Eighth District representative in Congress, and Robert Schiffman, a local businessman. The group was able to obtain the cooperation of Sam F. Browser, regional planner of parks and recreation for the TVA, and Col. Page S. Bunker, of the Alabama Forestry Commission.

Madison County Commissioners voted on April 15, 1935 to appropriate \$18,000 to purchase 1,992 acres of land located on the top and on the slopes of Monte Sano. The county deeded the property to the State of Alabama for park purposes. This was about 90% of the land that the Mountain Heights Development Company had purchased from the Julia Anderson Estate for \$25,000 on April 1, 1925. The other 10%, or 200 acres, was the amount of land that was planned for development on the south end of the mountain by the Mountain Heights Development Company and the Monte Sano Construction Company.

Actual construction of the park began on August 5, 1935, when the first two companies of the Civilian Conservation Corps arrived and moved to the site. On August 14, 1935, an additional company of the "CCC" arrived. Each company had 175 men. The two companies located on Monte Sano built the State Park. The Monte Sano camp was located in the east block of Highland Plaza, one company on the north side and one on the south side of the street. The stone entrance to the camp from the Boulevard still stands. The Mountain Heights Development Company gave the Federal Government the use of the land for an indefinite period of time. A third company of the CCC was camped on McClung Street, on property owned by the city adjacent to Maple Hill Cemetery. That company worked to control soil erosion in the rural areas of the county. Each company had separate barracks, headquarters, mess hall, infirmary, workshops, etc. The buildings were from World War I; they had been disassembled and brought in on trucks and reconstructed.

With the additional members of the camp, the population of the south end of the mountain was increased approximately five times. Sadler's Spring could no longer supply the water. A water line connected to the city water line was laid from the eastern end of Hermitage Street to the top of the mountain. It was connected to the company's system in the 5500 block of Panorama west. Due to the rock and rugged terrain, at that time it was not feasible to lay the line beneath ground. The pipe was on top of the ground and covered with dirt. The mound of dirt made it an easily identifiable path and it was used as the shortest walk to town.

All the buildings in the camp were of frame construction, which created additional concern for more adequate fire protection. The camp erected a water tank on the corner of Wildwood and Woodard Streets. A few years later, the company's tank and tower located on Inspiration Point collapsed due to the heavy ice formation brought on by the leaking wood tank. The CCC tank served the mountain residents for some 20 years, long after the camp left. The city continued furnishing the water to the residents on the southern end of the mountain. The residents took care of the pump and were responsible for maintenance of the system. The residents on the northern end, which included the old Viduta plat and surrounding areas, continued to depend on private wells and in some instances the springs.

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Many of the young men from the camps on the mountain attended services at the Monte Sano Union Chapel. The church, having been closed for several years, was reopened by a Methodist minister, the Rev. T. J. Williams, in the early 1930s.

Each CCC company had a commanding officer and an adjutant who were in charge. They were Army Reserve officers called to active duty when the need arose. Men from the National Park Service developed the plans and supervised the construction of the park. The initial construction included six miles of road, a public lodge (tavern) and parking area. Other facilities included 11 cabins, a picnic area with 24 grills and 40 tables. The picnic area had an overlook shelter. The 18 miles of foot trails and 8 miles of bridle paths had 10 trailside shelters. A horse barn, a service building and a superintendent's lodge were built, and a complete water and sewage system was installed. The long-range plans proposed an administration building, a swimming pool with necessary parking areas, a bath house and beach, group camps, trailer camps, the possibility of a golf course and extension of the cabin layouts.

Construction of the park was near completion on August 25, 1938. An all day celebration was held and the activities began with a parade in downtown Huntsville. After lunch there was a tour of historical points. A motorcade was formed at the Court House that proceeded to Monte Sano State Park. The Honorable W. B. Bankhead, Alabama's senior U. S. Senator, addressed the crowd. The entrance to the park from downtown Huntsville is by way of the Bankhead Parkway, named for Mr. Bankhead in appreciation of his work to get the park built. A tour of the park and a barbecue were concluded with a pageant, "The Parade of Progress," which highlighted Huntsville's history from 1805 to 1938. That night, the Queen's Ball was held at the Russel Erskine Hotel.

During this period, the children living on the south end of the mountain attended Huntsville City Schools. They were few in numbers, as most of the residents left the mountain by the time schools opened for the fall term. On the north end, the children went to Rison School, a Madison County school, which furnished bus service. Mr. Sam Schrimsher, a long time mountain resident, drove the school bus.

In 1940 Monte Sano Boulevard was straightened, the grade improved and paved with asphalt. At the park, a dude ranch was opened for riders to enjoy the wooded trails. Breakfast and dinners were served.

On July 3, 1941, the *Huntsville Times* published an extra edition, reporting the long anticipated news that an Arsenal and an Ordnance Plant would be built on approximately 33,000 acres of land in Madison County. Madison Pike would serve as its northern border and it would extend south to the Tennessee River. Huntsville and Monte Sano would never be the same. Construction workers moving into Huntsville made an increased demand for rental housing. Vacant houses, including summer homes on the mountain, were rented year-round. In 1942, mail service was brought to the mountain for the first time. The service began by adding the mountain to Huntsville Rural Route 4.

On February 17, 1948, a fire destroyed the tavern in the Monte Sano State Park. Only the rock walls were left standing. The tavern had become a popular



place for both young and old. It had served meals from hamburgers to full dinners, and there was a dance floor and a Nickelodeon (juke box). It was the “big band” era. There was a smaller room suitable for private meetings and social events.

At the end of World War II, Huntsville Arsenal, the chemical warfare plant, was closed, and the property was put up for sale. Redstone Arsenal, an ordnance plant that furnished the explosives and loaded the ordnance, was also closed. The economy and population growth slowed. This was reflected in a lack of development on the mountain.

In June 1948, the Russians barricaded U.S. access to Berlin due to “Autobahn repairs.” The Marshall Plan initiative to feed the people and rebuild war-torn Europe was just underway. The U.S. and Great Britain began the historic Berlin Airlift which transported food and fuel to the residents of Berlin. A number of historians agree that this was the first public confrontation of the “Cold War.”

Redstone Arsenal was reactivated in October 1948 when the Office of Chief of Ordnance designated Redstone as the center for rocket research and development. Monte Sano was about to experience the largest and most complete development to date. The Korean War, beginning in June 1950, further increased the activity at Redstone Arsenal. In 1952, the U.S. Army Missile Command moved to Redstone.

## The Cold War Years 1950 – 1990

The decade of the 1950s brought a population explosion to the development of Monte Sano. It was not like the two previous efforts, as a summer resort for tourists as well as local residents with summer homes, but as a suburban neighborhood that would attract families that were headed by young to middle-age professionals. They were permanent, year-round residents that built or bought homes in all areas of the mountain.

Among these new residents were German families headed by scientists and rocket engineers. Dr. Arthur Rudolph (later Chief, Saturn Systems) purchased 36 acres on Panorama Drive. Building lots were sold for \$200 to \$300 to members of the Dr. Wernher von Braun team. A number of the leaders of the team made their homes on Monte Sano. They included Hans Maus (Chief of Staff), Dr. Eberhard Rees (Deputy Chief of Staff, later Chief of Staff, Marshall Space Flight Center), Konrad Dannenberg (Deputy Chief, Saturn Systems), Kurt Debus (Launch Director), Dr. Ernst Geissler, Dr. Ernst Stuhlinger and Helmut Hoelzer (Laboratory Directors). Additional members of the Dr. Wernher von Braun team who have resided with their families on Monte Sano are Anton Beier, Herbert Bergeler, Ernst Euterneck, Dr. Karl Hager, Dr. Rudolf Hermann (UAH), Heinz Hilton, Otto Hirschler, Otto Hoberg, Walter Jacobi, Richard Jenke, Klaus Juergensen, H. H. Koelle, Hermann Kroeger, Hans Lindenmayr, Hannes Luehsen, Heinz Millinger, Fritz Mueller, Erich Neubert, Leopold Osthoff, Werner Rosinski, Heinrich Rothe, Rudolf Schlidt, Fridtjof Speer, Wolfgang Steurer, Werner Tiller, Arthur Urbanski, Georg von Pragenau, Friedrich and Ruth von Saurma, Werner Voss, Hermann Weidner, and Walt Wiesman.

These German residents spearheaded the increase in population on Monte Sano, adding to the educational and cultural environment.

Previously planned streets were now being completed. Sunrise Terrace, the northeastern section of Panorama, became a choice area. New streets were built primarily on the north end of the mountain in the area just south of Nolen Avenue and adjoining the State Park's west border. These streets were given names that recalled the mountain's Indian heritage – Choctaw, Cherokee, Chickasaw, etc. In the central area of the mountain just off of the Boulevard, Carroll Circle, Mae Drive, Georgetta Drive, and Read Drive were developed.

Mr. Sam Thompson, one of the original members of The Mountain Heights Development Company's Board of Directors, began once again to sell building lots. For 25 years "Mr. Sam" never gave up his hope that the slowdown caused by the Depression would be reversed. The company still owned substantial property on the northeastern and the northwestern sections of Panorama Drive and on what is now Hutchens Avenue. They built houses for sale on this property, perhaps the largest number of houses on the mountain to be built for sale by one owner. By 1966, the Company had liquidated all of its property.

The organization of the Monte Sano Civic Association in 1952 became a strong force for the good of the community with its slogan, "Improvements Toward Better Living." Through the years, the Association has been an advocate before the city government and other powers that be. Under its leadership, the community swimming pool was built along with other recreation and social facilities.

The Rocket City Astronomical Association (now the von Braun Astronomical Association) was formed in 1954. Shortly thereafter, a 16-inch reflecting telescope was obtained from a California observatory. With the assistance of state, county and city governments, and contribution of materials from local merchants, the Association members completed their dream. At the dedication ceremony, Dr. von Braun remarked that it was "...one of the finest astronomical observatories in the South."

The mountain was annexed into the city on April 14, 1956, by Act #86 of the Alabama Legislature. This was the key to the successful development of Monte Sano Mountain. With it came a much-needed takeover of the community water system as well as extending service to areas previously using individual wells or springs. In 2007, the installation of a sewer system on the mountain connecting to the city system was completed.

In 1959, the first fire station and the elementary school were built. A new fire station was built in 1991. The school has had several additions and renovations. Every year Monte Sano Elementary School has been rated academically among the top of the city elementary schools.

On April 2, 1958, President Eisenhower recommended to Congress that a civilian agency be established to direct non-military space activities. A few months later he signed the National Aeronautical and Space Act of 1958, which created the National Aeronautical and Space Agency (NASA). On July 1, 1960, the responsibility of all the Army's space missions, along with personnel, buildings and equipment, were assumed by the George C. Marshall Space Flight Center,

which officially opened at Redstone Arsenal on the same date. Monte Sano, along with all areas of Huntsville, benefited greatly by the increased number of high paying professional jobs. Along with the Army Missile Command and NASA came many civilian contractors offering comparable employment.

In February 1959, Rocket City Television Co. broke ground for WAFG, Channel 31 UHF at 1000 Monte Sano Boulevard. In July 1963, Huntsville's lone TV station was sold to Smith Broadcasting, Inc., and the call letters were changed to WAAY. On November 28, 1963, WHNT Channel 19 signed on the air. The Educational TV station was dedicated on February 9, 1967.

In May of 1961 a 70-foot-tall concrete cross on the west side of Round Top Mountain was started. It was a project of the Huntsville Ministerial Association. The Monte Sano Methodist Church bought property in the 600 block of the Boulevard, constructed a new building, and opened for services in 1962. In addition to facilities for Christian worship services and Sunday school for all ages, there is a large campus with a ball field and a well-equipped playground that is used by the entire mountain community. Today the church sponsors scouting programs for boys and girls and offers the facilities to other youth groups.

For a time, the original building of the Monte Sano Union Chapel was rented to the Monte Sano Baptist Church until the Baptists erected a new building in 1966. The original building of the Monte Sano Union Chapel, located at the corner of the Boulevard and Old Chimney, was demolished in 1968, after 72 years of service. The Johnson/Perkins family had worshipped in the building for over 30 years. The small tract of land (40 foot x 69 foot) was deeded to David and Lois Perkins, who owned the adjoining property.

In the early 1970s, the population growth of Huntsville, as well as the mountain, leveled off. The Marshall Space Flight Center had a key role in the moon landings. The end of these programs brought a slowdown in NASA and in all space-related industries. The slowdown was short lived as National Air and Space Administration (NASA) and Marshall played a leading role in the development of the Space Shuttle, Skylab and the Space Station. While NASA and the US Army remained the largest employers, the Huntsville area has attracted a number of other high-tech industries. The number of residents on the mountain stabilized. During the 1980s, a proportion of the employees of the new industries settled on Monte Sano. In the meantime, residents who had moved to the mountain as young and middle-age professionals were now retiring. Most chose to remain on Monte Sano.

New streets were built which included Viduta Place, Railway Avenue, Castlegate Boulevard, and Becket Drive. During this same period, many of the older homes were remodeled and enlarged.

In the years since 1815, when the first non-Indian built a home near Cold Spring and became the first permanent white resident, the mountain has changed in many ways. With paved streets, churches, the school, fire station, city water and sewers, the State Park and so much more, the mountain remains a wonderful place to enjoy nature while rearing a family. It seems appropriate that the slogan should remain, "Live life longer on Monte Sano."

## Hill: History of the Development of Monte Sano

Author James Hill was born in Columbia, Tennessee and has lived in Huntsville since the age of two. He served as a pilot in the 9<sup>th</sup> Army Air Corps in WWII and graduated from college at Bradley University in Peoria, Illinois. His family has been in the jewelry business since 1886 and Mr. Hill retired from J.B. Hill and Son Jewelers in 1989. Mr. Hill has been a resident of Monte Sano, off and on, since 1930.

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