TWO INDUSTRIAL TOWNS: PRATT CITY AND THOMAS
Birmingham industry began with the discovery of a high-grade coking coal in 1879. This mineral wealth, touted far and wide by entrepreneurs such as Enoch Ensley, pictured with an 11-ton lump of coal en route to the New Orleans World Exposition of 1884, attracted industrial investment to Birmingham.

By 1886, Pratt mines were the largest and most extensive mines in the state. Coal was either shipped via rail to market or charged in massive masonry ovens to form coke, the fuel for making iron. By 1898, Tennessee Coal and Iron Co. (TCI) was the nation’s second largest producer of coke. U.S. Steel acquired TCI in 1907 and developed Pratt City as a regional shipping point.

By 1887, three railroads had extended trackage into Pratt Mines. The privately developed community that grew like topsy adjacent to the mines and company quarters became Coketon, Pratt Mines and finally Pratt City, the state’s earliest and largest mining boomtown.

Just to the east, Pennsylvania ironmaster Samuel Thomas blew in two iron-producing furnaces and constructed residences for furnace labor. The furnace town, noted on O’Brien’s map as Enniskyleen, an attempt to spell Thomas’ hometown in Wales, became Thomas, Alabama, headquarters of Republic Iron and Steel’s Birmingham operations.
PRATT CITY

These men made it happen. Alabama’s first industrialist, Daniel Pratt, put up the money. Scottish mining engineer and executive Erskine Ramsay and hundreds of miners extracted the black gold.

Ramsay, like many others, speculated in real estate adjacent to the mines. By 1894, papers for 38 subdivisions had been filed. Locals explained the hodgepodge of disconnected streets by saying: “Ramsay was drunk the night he laid out the streets.”

By 1887, streetcar service had reached Pratt Mines over tracks extended from Birmingham via Thomas to the emerging industrial center at Ensley. This streetcar line, known as the Carline, became the major traffic artery and major element of community organization. At the points it intersected the grids of streets, a series of triangular districts developed. Here small neighborhood businessmen and women opened shops and stores. First Street which extended to the Commissary and industrial operations on Irish Hill also developed as a commercial section.

By 1890 Pratt City boasted 4,000 people drawn from all across the South, northern industrial centers and foreign nations to find work. This Southern salad bowl of ethnic industrial culture included Southerners—both black and white—Englishmen, Scots, Irishmen, Frenchmen, Russians, Germans and Austrians. They lived in clumps and pockets scattered in and about this small town.

As mining, coke and shipping operations expanded, Pratt City also developed as a regional center for the outlying coal mining towns. On Saturday mornings, miners and their families poured into Pratt for goods and groceries and to catch up on current events and gossip. Pratt merchants did “a heap of trade.” Commerce with a personal service flourished here from the 1880s through the 1930s.

Pratt City’s architecture, though called into existence by modern industrial development, reflects neither its ethnic nor racial composition. Its buildings—the frame residences, one and two-story brick shops, banks and lodges—are those of a flourishing rural town in the South at the turn of the century.

That small town, small scale, friendly, sociable atmosphere of a turn of the century town still characterizes Pratt to this day.
PRATT CITY SITES

INDUSTRIAL
Pratt Mines, in operation 1871 - 1920s
North and west of 1st Street District
Slope No. 1 and earliest coke ovens, just to the west of 2nd St.

TCI Commissary and Dispensary
Now Dixie Hatchery
Pratt Highway (QC 69) at Sheridan Rd.

Site of Birmingham Southern Shops
and TCI Transportation Center
Across Pratt Highway from Commissary

RESIDENTIAL
Irish Hill
Early cottages (1890s-1910s)* built by Scotch-Irish miners on
Hibernian bet. Sheridan Rd. and Ave. W.

Section also called North Highlands and Shaft Hill. To west of
Sheridan Rd. was located Shaft No. 1 and the convict prisons which housed
many early miners. St. James Methodist Church was founded here in
1878.

Old St. Catherine Church (1919)
729 Sheridan Rd., named for Rev. Joseph
M. Sheridan, an early pastor of this church.

Fraternal and Greenwood
Cemeteries, est. 1880s
Crest of Sheridan Rd.

Drifttracks
Early black housing located bet. Hwy. 78 and Ave. W. to north and
south of Hibernian
Home place to many current black leaders

Mt. Moriah Church, est. 1890
1330 Beall St.

St. Mary’s Primitive Baptist Church
Hibernian

Roberts Cemetery
Ave. W just before intersection with Hwy. 78.

George W. Scott House (1900s)
Cherry Ave. off Hwy. 78, Smithfield Estates
Scott School, named for this black
educator, is on Hibernian.

East Highlands
Substantial cottages built for physicians and prosperous miners, Pratt
City’s “rich folks”
Pratt Hwy. bet. Alder and Ave. W

Downtown Pratt
Early frame cottages built by
Englishmen, Frenchmen, Italians,
Austrians, Russians and native Southerners
in the vernacular styles of the era, highly
ornamented with decorative millwork
To the south and west of Carline bet.
Avenues W and F.

Old Methodist Church, est. 1880
(1902)
300 Ave. U

Pratt Elementary (1920)
306 Ave. U

Kelly Ingram House
508 Ave. U

Coke Oven Quarters Site
To the south of 3rd Way and north of site of Slope No.1 and the coke
ovens, active 1880 to 1920s

Frenchtown
Black housing developed by August Fayette
9th St. to 15th Way, Avenues W to S

Fayette House (1909)
910 Ave. W

Tuxedo Heights
Post World War II veteran housing
(1940s)
Off Ave. W bet. 5th and 6th Places

COMMERCIAL
The Bottom/1st Street District
Central core of businesses with
highly decorative brick buildings
(1890s-1900s) which served as both
grocery, hardware, furniture, drug, dry
goods and clothing stores, banks,
restaurants, theatres, professional offices
and residences for proprietors. These in-
cluded Berthons, Levy’s, Goldsteins, Bon-
f fields, Keys, Mannings, Prigots, Sparks and
Vanns.
Earliest commercial center in Birmingham
area

W.D. Young Building (by 1891)
1st Street at Ave. U
Earliest and largest mixed-use commercial
building in Pratt built by Young, a plumber-
turned developer.
Office suites on the 2nd floor served early
physicians including Dr. E.H. Carraway who
later opened a clinic nearby.
Vann-S.T. Key Furniture Bldg. (1902) 904 1st St.
Pratt City Savings Bank (c.1928) 900 1st St.
Pratt City Service Station (by 1928) 830 1st St. Continuously used as a service station for 60 years
Eagles Hall (by 1902) 120 Ave. U Ground level served retailing, the great room above theatrical and masonic gatherings.

Pratt Mines Station
Major shopping and community center (1910s-1920s)
Shops, stores, civic building and masonic halls located about the triangular space created at the former intersection of two streetcar railways, the Tidewater line running down Ave. U and the Ensley-Thomas line running along the Carline. Area merchants included Johnny (the Shoe Fixer) Tortamum; Cale, Turner, King and White druggists; Gregory, Reynold and Giattina dry goods merchants; Hill, A & P and Bruno grocers.
Carline at Ave. E

Ezell Station
Another neighborhood commercial center (1920s)
Carline at Ave. T

John J. Nichols House (by 1902) 717 Carline In 1910 Nichols, a clerk at a Pratt City dry goods store, owned this residence free of debt.

Ida Station
A neighborhood district (1920s) housing a variety of commercial functions to meet the needs of nearby residents. Small businesses included Gaston and Curry Cleaners, Katapodis and Pearlus Cafes; and Grafeo and Brookline Grocers.
Carline at Ave. G

Italian Hall (by 1928) 329 Ave. G One of three remaining fraternal halls, currently owned by the Ruth Lodge

First Baptist Church, est. 1879 Ave. G

Tudisco Grocery and Residence (by 1911) Carlisle and Ave. E One of several Italian neighborhood businesses operated by the same family for more than 60 yrs. Others included the Monellas, Milazzos, Campalettes, Contorups, Costellos and Schilecis.

*Indicates date of construction.

THOMAS

Experienced ironmaster David Thomas (pictured), together with his sons Samuel and Edwin and industrialist Robert Sayre, purchased the 2,000 acre Williamson Hawkins plantation in 1886. This superb industrial site had an abundant supply of limestone, water from Village Creek and seams of coal and iron—all the necessary ingredients for production of iron. And the Pratt coal supply could not have been closer.

By 1890, the Pioneer Mining and Manufacturing Company had blown in two “family designed”, state of the art furnaces and constructed a two street town for furnace personnel. Other laborers were hired from surrounding farms.

Republic Steel acquired the Thomas site in 1899 and expanded plants and the town. Republic rented housing to job holders whose tasks required them to live close to the furnaces. Laid out in the 1880s along wide tree-lined streets, the residences along 1st and 2nd Streets and the commissary were closely modeled after worker communities in Pennsylvania. In contrast Republic company housing, built at the turn of the
century, showcases Southern industrial types including board and batten and frame shotguns, pyramidal cottages and bungalows.

Housing in Thomas solidified a clear-cut class structure. At the head was the superintendent’s house set on a large plot among stately trees and magnificent gardens. Houses along First were surrounded by picket fences with large yards, coal and outhouses in back. Landscaping individualized the look of sameness. Foremen and young bosses lived here, along “silk stocking row.” Along Second, “cotton stocking row,” lived mechanics and other skilled labor. Housing for semi-skilled and day laborers was along Third and Fourth, “bare legged row.” Here many Italians put down their American roots. Joe Bruno, Alabama’s leading grocery store magnate, was born here. Black workers lived from Fourth to Eighth.

Many furnace workers lived just outside the company town in East Thomas, where railroad shops and yards were located. Near St. Mark’s Catholic Church, founded 1905, Italians congregated and established successful businesses.

By 1912, 550 workers and their families lived at Thomas. Houses were fenced, streets and sidewalks graveled and tree-lined. In the 1920s, company gardeners maintained crepe myrtle and calla lily plantings in the medians and parks on most streets.

Early Thomas residents describe their community as closely knit. All the men worked at the plants...“from can ‘til can’t.” Children rode the streetcar to schools in Pratt. Community life revolved about the churches, the commissary and the front porch. A sense of community identity was further reinforced by geographic isolation. Thomas remains today totally hemmed in by plants and railroads.

THOMAS SITES

INDUSTRIAL
Site of Pioneer-Republic Blast Furnaces and Coke Plant, in operation 1888-1971; currently owned by Wade Sand and Gravel Company, Birmingham

Frisco Railroad Yards and Roundhouse
To east of 78, East Thomas

RESIDENTIAL
Site of Superintendent’s House
Subdivided and redeveloped in the 1950s when the town of Thomas was sold to private owners along Thomas and Ohio Circles.

Foremen Housing (late 1880s)
1st and 2nd Streets
Built of brick and frame by the Pennsylvania based Pioneer Mining and Manufacturing Co. in the Victorian Gothic style of worker housing built for the Thomas companies in the 1860s and 1870s in Hokendauqua and Alburtis, Pa.

Thomas Baptist Church (since 1934)
Originally Thomas Presbyterian, est. 1891
153 1st Street

Thomas Commissary (1890s)
2nd Street

Worker Housing (1900s-1920s)
3rd and 4th Streets

Worker Housing (1910s-1920s)
4th through 8th Streets

Mt. Hebron Baptist Church, est. 1906
501 5th St.

St. Mark’s Catholic Church, est. 1905
(1937-39)
16th Ave, W at 10th St, W

Ross Store and Residence (1920s)
16th Ave, W at 10th St, W
Operated by Louis Ross as a family grocery for years. Other Italians in the area included the Brunos, Molas, Pocapinos, Russos, Odos, Nanacocoys, Schilecics and Centauros.
Birmingham Historical Society is completing a survey of the historic resources of Pratt City and Thomas and making final recommendations for the listing of Historic Districts on the Alabama and National Registers of Historic Places, the state and the nation's official listings of properties worthy of preservation.

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