

PRATT COAL & COKE COMPANY,
PRATT MINES, COKE OVENS
Birmingham Industrial District
Bounded by 1st St., Ave. G, 3rd Pl., &
Birmingham Southern Railroad
Birmingham
Jefferson County
Alabama

HAER No. AL-80-A

HAER
ALA
37-BIRM,
38A-

PHOTOGRAPHS

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, DC 20013-7127

PRATT COAL & COKE COMPANY,
PRATT MINES, COKE OVENS,
& RAILROAD
(USX Pratt City Coal Storage Yard)
Birmingham Industrial District
Bounded by First Street, Avenue G,
Third Place, and Birmingham
Southern Railroad
Birmingham
Jefferson County
Alabama

HAER No. AL-80-A

HAER
ALA
37-BIRM,
38A-

ADDENDUM TO:
PRATT COAL & COKE COMPANY,
PRATT MINES, COKE OVENS
Birmingham Industrial District
Bounded by First Street, Avenue G,
Third Place, and Birmingham
Southern Railroad
Birmingham
Jefferson County
Alabama

WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, DC 20013-7127

HAER
ALA
37-BIRM
38A-

HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

PRATT COAL & COKE CO., PRATT MINES, COKE OVENS & RAILROAD
(USX Pratt City Coal Storage Yard)

ADDENDUM TO
PRATT COAL & COKE CO., PRATT MINES, COKE OVENS

HAER No. AL-80-A

Location: The Pratt City Coke Oven site is bounded by 1st Street/Pratt Highway on the north; Avenue G on the east; 3rd Place on the south; and the Birmingham Southern Railroad on the west, in the Pratt City neighborhood, Birmingham, Jefferson County, Alabama. Access to the site is available through Metal Processing of Alabama, Inc., to the north of the coke ovens along Pratt Highway. Limited access is also available to the site through several streets that dead end into the property such as 1st Place or 2nd Street.

Present Owner: USX Realty, Inc.

Date of Construction: 1879-1900

Builder/Engineer: Multiple.

Project Information: This report is based upon written documentation donated by the Birmingham Historical Society, reformatted to HABS/HAER guidelines.

Description: There are currently two rows of brick beehive coke ovens (diameter 11-13') visible on the site that extend for approximately 1,750 feet along Coal Branch of Village Creek. The condition of a portion of these structures is excellent. Other ovens on the site have fallen in due to natural processes and human disturbance. Some of the ovens are covered with soil and heavy vegetation, thus making a preliminary site investigation inconclusive. Historic maps display a third row of coke ovens that appears to be buried by the stockpile of coal to the north of the existing ovens and a large cemetery.

An active railroad extends six miles to the site of the Alice Furnaces (est. 1880) and the Birmingham Rolling Mills (est. 1879) in the Birmingham city center, past the Smithfield

community and across Village Creek, past the Thomas furnace community and East Thomas to the Pratt City Coke Ovens. The line, formerly operated by the TCI subsidiary Birmingham Southern Railroad, is now part of approximately 100 miles of trackage currently linking USX operations in the District.

Significance: The Pratt coke ovens, the largest, early concentration of coke ovens in the District, played an historically significant part in creating the pig iron boom that made the Birmingham District one of the nation's most important producers of iron. This site also includes the rail link that moved raw materials to furnaces in the Birmingham city center, making the boom possible.

Ovens appear to be intact, but located in dense overgrowth. The railway is currently operating.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

Coke Ovens

Coke ovens at Pratt City were constructed immediately following the opening of coal mining operations at Pratt Mine Shaft No. 1 in 1880. In that year, 316 ovens were operating. McCalley's 1886 Report on the Warrior Coal Fields enumerates 710 coke ovens at Pratt and notes that the waste gases were being used to furnish steam for machinery at Shaft No. 1. The 1900 TCI Description of Plants and Mines enumerates 1,082 ovens at Pratt and notes their sizes as varying from 11' to 13' in diameter. The older ones were mostly of "the 12' beehive type, charged by lorries operated by dinky locomotives running on standard gauge track along the center of the coke oven batteries." Waste gases were still being used to generate steam at several boiler plants at Shaft No. 1, and Slopes No. 3, 4 and 5. The division also included a large number of tenement houses, two merchandise stores, supply houses and an office. At this time TCI operated more coke ovens than any other American corporation except the Frick Coke Company of Pennsylvania.

The coke ovens continued in operation at Pratt until the 1920s. Historic maps indicate an area directly adjacent and to the west of the ovens toward the Ensley furnace site was used as a cemetery.

Railroad

This railroad was constructed c. 1879 to link the Pratt mines to furnaces and rolling mills in the Birmingham city center. Crucial to the development of the Birmingham District was the location and development of the Pratt coal seam. In January 1878 Henry Fairchild DeBardeleben, son of an Autauga County planter and son-in-law and heir to the Pratt industrial fortune -"the one big-moneyed man in northern Alabama," joined forces with mining engineer Truman Aldrich and railroad president James Withers Sloss to form the Pratt Coal and Coke Company, the first large coal company in Alabama. According to Aldrich, DeBardeleben "put the whole power of his fortune, his credit and his tremendous vitality" behind the advancement of Pratt Coal, and the Birmingham District.

Simultaneously with opening of mining operations at the future site of Pratt City, railroad construction was started. The first coal was shipped to Birmingham in February 1879. "Then," historian Ethel Armes quoted railroad pioneer John T. Milner, "and not until then was there any sign of life in the city of Birmingham." DeBardeleben, also quoted by Armes said, "I'll never forget in my life how the very week after we began grading our railroad, the sound of the hammer and the saw was heard again in Birmingham." Armes comments: "But for the opening of these Pratt mines the little town of Birmingham might indeed have utterly collapsed. ...The panic of 1873, like a sharp wind, had blown out of the whole district its stamina...Under the three men who are always spoken of today as the captains of the Old Guard, DeBardeleben, Sloss, and Aldrich, the town began to be builded anew, and gathered forces for its start in the race for leadership of the new industrial South."

Subsequent to the opening of the Pratt Mines and construction of the railroad, DeBardeleben used "cheap" Pratt coal to attract a strong round of investors to Birmingham's city center where the first major industrial operations of the district including the Alice, Sloss and Mary Pratt Furnaces, the Linn Ironworks and the Birmingham Rolling Mills were rapidly constructed, ushering in the pig iron boom of the 1880s.

Condition of Site

The site has had no recent site improvements. It appears the site has not been used other than for coal storage since the TCI-U.S. Steel-Birmingham Southern Railroad operations ended in 1970. Most of the visible coke ovens are located in a wooded area along Coal Branch. A portion of the site to the north of the existing ovens is heavily disturbed due to storage of coal on the site, much of which still remains.

Sources Consulted

Tennessee Coal and Iron Company, Description of Plants and Mines,
1900

Armes, Ethel, The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama, pp. 273-276

McCalley, Henry, Report on the Warrior Coal Field, Geological
Survey of Alabama, 1886

Site Visit, August 10, 1991; ride on railroad, September 9, 1991

Birmingham Historical Society, Industrial Community files, Pratt
City Coke Ovens