Grandmother’s Garden at Sloss Quarters Today and Yesterday

Grandmother’s Garden

Built and maintained by
Birmingham Historical Society

With the assistance of the Alabama Cooperative Extension Service (ACES) and
Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark: A Monument of the City of Birmingham

Grandmother’s Garden at Sloss Quarters recreates early 20th century home gardening practices using the plant materials and methods of the period. The term “Grandmother’s Garden” refers to the “old-fashioned” mix of vegetables, medicinal and kitchen herbs, and perennials that were commonly found in home gardens throughout Birmingham prior to World War II and the advent of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.

Today’s garden lies atop land that the Sloss company used to house its employees, pile up and crush slag, make slag concrete, and sell coke. Of these former operations, remnants of the coke bins with their brightly painted advertisements remain beneath the First Avenue North Viaduct. Slag underpins the garden plots.

The photographs that follow illustrate the evolution of Sloss Quarters from the 1880s to today.

Aerial View, Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark, looking west showing the City Furnaces No. 1 and No. 2, cast sheds, stoves, and stacks. Photograph by Jet Lowe, 1993, Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) AL-3-137.
The Sloss Furnace company built its first two furnaces in 1882 and 1883. These furnaces made iron . . . and slag, then considered a waste product. Due to the impurities in Birmingham iron ores, slag production often equaled that of iron.

The furnaces that smelted the iron ore ran 24 hours a day. Men were needed to keep them operating. These workers also made coke from coal in the ranks of ovens pictured on this map. The smelting of iron and the burning of coal to produce coke also produced smoky and smelly emissions.

The map also shows two- and three-room houses located to the north of First Avenue North and west of 32nd Street in Blocks 466 and 467. By 1883, the company owned 48 tenements here to house its laborers and managers close by operations. The area of Birmingham Historical Society’s house and garden is outlined in red.

All the years that I had lived within a stone’s throw of the belching black puddling-furnaces, I had not noticed any unusual noise. Of course, our household ran by the blowing of the whistles. We were hustled out of bed by the 7:00 whistle; Daddy came to lunch when the big one blew at 12; he was back home again when the 3:00 whistle sounded. Whistles, snorting trains, and even big machinery clanking within the mill were commonplace to me. I had taken them for granted, as I had sunshine, as I had my father’s and mother’s faces.

—Edith London Ward, from her Diary, 1881–1933
This is the only known photograph of the original Sloss Quarters, which were nearly 30 years old by the time the photograph was made. It was made as part of a survey of conditions in Birmingham-area industries for a New York welfare organization. The Sloss village with its 14 two-room houses, 22 three-room houses, and 6 four-room dwellings was found to be woefully lacking.

The village of the Sloss-Sheffield company in central Birmingham, with a slag dump for a rear view, blast furnaces and beehive ovens for a front view, railroad tracks in the street, and indecently built toilets in the backyards, is an abomination of desolation. The houses are unpainted, fences are tumbling down, a board is occasionally missing from the side of a house.

—James Fitch, The Survey Magazine, 1912

This view looking east along First Avenue North from the Birmingham city center near 21st Street shows the furnaces and coke ovens spewing forth the black soot that workers and the company stated put money in dinner pails and vibrancy in the local economy.

The immense and continually growing slag pile illustrated by Douglas also caused many problems and obstructed local traffic. As part of the settlement of this issue, a first concrete viaduct was built to carry First Avenue North from 22nd Street to 25th Street. And Sloss began figuring out how to use that slag. Crushing and selling it for road and railroad ballast headed its initial list.
By the early 1920s, Sloss was crushing and delivering its slag. Birmingham furnace slag was found to be an acceptable substitute for gravel as ballast under street paving and also under railroad and street railway tracks. A porous material, it drained well and gave a firm roadbed as it aged.

Sloss housing has been cleared from its initial site west of 32nd Street, which is then filled with piles of crushed and raw slag, in the left in the photograph. Workers are dumping slag to serve as road ballast. Behind the slag truck is the Sloss Commissary. (The slag piles shown are on the site of today’s garden.)

Workers smooth the crushed slag and repave First Avenue North with cement. This view looks across the intersection of First Avenue North at 32nd Street toward the newly built, and still extant, Sloss Commissary and Vault, and company housing then located to the east of 32nd Street.
The Site of Sloss Quarters, 1930


This view from the first First Avenue Viaduct (completed 1915) shows the newly built Sloss slag crushing and ready mix concrete plant. Railroad tracks lead to the top of the coke bins, on the left. The general office building, on the right at 32nd Street, is catty-corner from the Commissary. Today’s coke bins are under the railroad tracks, left. Ruffner Mountain can be seen in the far distance, center to right. The concrete plant is on the site of today’s garden.


Railroad boxcars filled and refilled the bins, bottom left. The slag crushing plant appears, center. In the distance, center right, is the Terminal Station. First Avenue is to the far left of the bins, out of the photograph; today’s garden site is to the right of the bins. The bins remain today.

*Right:* Sloss Ready Mix Concrete Truck, 1930. Patterson Collection, Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark, PA 1884.1.1.

This truck advertises Sloss’s new and most profitable by-product: ready mixed concrete. The concrete made with furnace slag at the site was used to build the coke bins, among many other structures in and about the driving distance of the vehicle pictured along the 32nd Street flank of the Sloss Commissary.

*Far left:* Coke Bins and Advertisements, View from First Avenue North, c. 1930. Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark.


In 1924, the Sloss concrete plant was the “first strictly commercial central concrete mixing plant in the world.” Sloss engineers pioneered pre-mixing and delivering concrete to the job site, a process that was quickly emulated.
Sloss Furnaces and the Quarters Site, 1950s


Everyone’s memories of the Sloss furnaces in operation were most probably of the dramatic tapping of the fiery, molten slag, an event that shot flames and fumes high into the sky every eight hours. By the late 1940s, slag was tapped from the furnaces and was transported by rail to cool on nearby piles. This dramatic illustration captures the excitement of the pour, but not the smell.

Aerial View of the Sloss Furnaces and Quarters, c. 1952, showing the 1950 First Avenue North Viaduct and the U.S. Pipe Headquarters. Photograph by Bill Ricker, Birmingham, Ala., Public Library Archives.

This aerial view shows the furnaces, the cement plant, and the newly completed, new First Avenue North Viaduct leading along the elevated First Avenue North from 26th Street to 32nd Street past the furnaces, left, and cement plant, right. Headquarters for U.S. Pipe are under construction, center top. U.S. Pipe, a major user of Sloss iron, acquired the Sloss company in 1952 and moved its general offices to Birmingham, constructing the new office building pictured here, now the Birmingham headquarters of STERIS Corp. In the early 1950s, all Sloss company houses were sold and either moved or scrapped for lumber.

Using a Pickaxe to Plant a Mulberry on the Former Slag Pile Site, 2015.
Sloss Shuts Down, 1972

Operations at the Sloss City Furnaces closed in 1972. Four years later, in 1976, the Historic American Engineering Record (HAER), the documentation division of the National Park Service, conducted its first recording project of a large-scale industrial site. Under the direction of Alabama native and HAER chief Eric DeLoney, HAER brought architects and historians to Birmingham to research, measure, draw, and figure out how the furnace site worked, why it was significant, and what might be done to preserve it. HAER’s recording project led to the site’s National Historic Landmark designation in 1981. One of those HAER drawings shows facilities that were extant at several periods of time on and near the site of today’s Sloss Quarters.

Sloss Quarters Begin Again, 1983

Duncan House, the Offices of Birmingham Historical Society, 2017.

Sloss Furnaces reopened as a museum of the City of Birmingham in 1983. In 1984, Randall Lawrence, then director of the Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark, advocated “to reestablish worker housing at Sloss as one of the major goals of the museum master plan . . . proposing that we assemble a collection of buildings which reflect the diversity of workers’ communities in the Birmingham District.”

In 1985, Birmingham Historical Society moved a six-room cottage to the site of the original Sloss Quarters and located its offices there. Sloss moved an additional three-room house to the Quarters site in 1999, providing examples of housing for managers and workers.

Today’s Grandmother’s Garden began in 2006, as a project with the Alabama Cooperative Extension System (ACES). Initial planting efforts broke the tiller blades! In 2007, today’s raised beds were laid out. Underlaid with porous slag ballast, the site has great drainage, and plants that like alkaline soil love the former site of the Sloss Quarters and the slag crushing and concrete plants.

Basic slag has been used as a secondary fertilizer in southeastern states for 75+ years. Sloss sold “Farmer’s Friend.” Its usefulness was primarily to amend acid soils, similar to that of ground limestone.

Grandmother’s Garden employs both soil testing and hands-on experimentation to determine what will do best on the site. Although some soil has been added to structured beds, several varieties have been planted in “native” soil. Many herbs do quite well, since many tolerate a range of soil pH.

Families living, working and gardening at Sloss learned what worked through trial and error. We employ their learned knowledge along with our own experimentation in Grandmother’s Garden today.

Sallie Lee, Urban Regional Extension Agent
Alabama Cooperative Extension System
UAB archaeology students conducted a four-week investigation of the Quarters under the direction of Jun Ebersole and Bruce Bizzocco in 2012. The dig yielded copious evidence of how residents in the quarters lived in the years from the 1920s to the 1950s. They found 1,900 items that included many kinds of soda bottles, dishes, and two sets of World War II dog tags. Future digs hold promise of teaching us more about life in the Quarters.

In 1917, the Sloss company acquired additional blocks of property to the east of 32nd Street and existing houses. The company also built new houses of three, four, and six rooms here in the 1920s. Living conditions for workers and their families improved substantially. Many Sloss Quarters residents resided here until the 1950s when the Sloss Quarters were disbanded. The commissary, vault, and doctor’s office and untold numbers of artifacts underground remain from this, the second site of the Quarters.

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