

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

August 2023

Bluff Park – Then & Now



ABOVE AND RIGHT: Taking in the view on Sunset Rock, 1900. Photograph *Bluff Park Hotel Scrapbook*, Harvey Copeland Collection, Birmingham, Alabama Public Library Archives. All illustrations in this newsletter are from this scrapbook unless otherwise noted.

On February 15, 1826, Jefferson County's first legislator, General Thomas Farrar, a lawyer who resided in Elyton by 1821, acquired Sunset Rock and the nearby springs. Well versed in English literature, he had carved the famed poetic inscription upon the rock. The Masonic Lodge he founded in Elyton in 1822 bears the Farrar name. In 1935, the Lover's Leap rock and a pathway to it was dedicated to the public by its owner Jonas Schwab, a dedication later confirmed by a court decree of January 1964.

For more than 200 years, people have come to the bluff of Shades Mountain in today's Hoover. Here they find cooling breezes, free-flowing springs, spectacular views, and a beautiful place to enjoy them.

A Native American trail linking settlements on the Cahaba and Warrior Rivers passed over the bluff (following today's Patton Chapel and W. Oxmoor Roads). Jefferson County's earliest residents followed this trail. By the 1850s, the bluff hosted a summer resort community with cabins, and later boarding houses and a hotel. The Hale Springs Survey, the first subdivision along the bluff platted in 1885, provided homesites for summer and year-round cottages . . . and for "The Bluff Park," a "private parc." In the 20th century along Shades Crest Road and Park Avenue, the residential community known as Bluff Park with its homes, churches, and tiny commercial centers grew. By the 1930s, Shades Crest Road had become a scenic drive and residents documented both homes and the "Beautiful Scenery" along the bluff. Today, many of these residences remain in historic districts along Shades Crest Road and Park Avenue. So do the bluff, the springs, the refreshing breezes, and the beautiful place with its spectacular views.

As the City of Hoover explores possibilities for future parks and preserves the opportunity to save the last remaining publicly accessible viewpoint along Shades Mountain presents itself. The proposed future Bluff Park Preserve might include the original "Bluff Park," Lover's Leap-Sunset Rock, and the site of Tip-Top Grill.



It is being gradually discovered that there is no summer resort near Birmingham quite equal to Shade's mountain. For climate, for drinking water, for general health and comfort as well as "for view," it is far and away in the lead of any place near or around the city. . . . It is as good as the seashore any day. . . . Then the beauty of the place is beyond compare.

— Ethel Armes, *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, July 8, 1906.



Bessemer Oxmoor Ensley Birmingham

View Showing Shades Valley, Red Mountain, and Birmingham in the distance, 1908, illustration by Brandon, Nashville.

That Ridge Road [Shades Crest Road] little narrow, sandy way, white as a stream, winds along the very crest of Shade's mountain for three or four miles before it takes the plunge down into the valley. It is pleasantly shadowed by rows of slender little hilltop trees, blackjacks and chestnut oaks –and by fantastic forms of the great boulders that rear up their vine-wreathed heads for the mysterious green gloom hundreds of feet below. On the one side of this slope descends, sharp and

This view showcases the valley, the hills, and the furnaces and foundries of the Birmingham District, then emerging as the industrial capital of the South.

steep, a precipitous incline down into those green and violet depths, over to the town of Oxmoor town of little white cottages and tall, black furnace stacks, across the silver curve of the Louisville and Nashville tracks to the full rise of Red mountain on beyond and the clouds of smoke that speaks Birmingham, Bessemer, Ensley and Pratt City.

— Ethel Armes, *The Birmingham Age-Herald*, July 8, 1906.

Gardner Hale and Hale Springs

In 1848, Daniel Pratt, Alabama's first and highly successful industrialist, recruited Massachusetts native and cotton mill operator, Gardner Hale, to manage his cotton gin manufactory at Prattville. In 1863, Hale purchased 320 acres on Shades Mountain, including the springs still known as Hale Springs. Hale lived and farmed here from at least 1870 until his death in 1880.

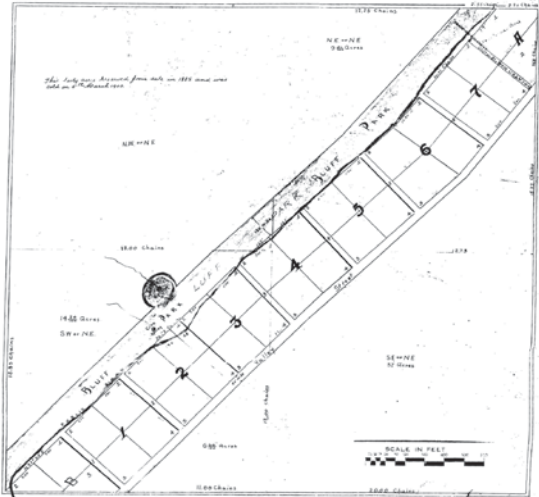
In 1885, Hannah Williams, Hale's daughter, and executor of his estate, hired men to clear and survey Hale's land along the bluff, preparing it for subdivision. Jefferson County surveyor James A. Roy mapped the property as the Hale Springs Survey. In August 1885, the *Birmingham Iron Age* carried this advertisement for the sale: "Park and grove of more than half mile will be reserved, free to purchasers of lots, including the right of way to the springs." Lands sales on September 15, 1885, also provided for nine blocks divided by cross streets, Valley Street, and the Shades Crest Road. The plat shows the Hale Springs and Bluff Park along

the crest. The sale of this and other Hale lands netted \$1,525.05, the largest portion of the \$2,557.62 estate. Due to title issues, the original 1885 survey was not filed until November 9, 1901. By this time, cisterns and wells provided water to residents and the springs below the bluff were considered "practically worthless." On March 5, 1900, the surface rights to Bluff Park were sold to the highest bidder: Daniel Pratt Hale's wife, A. M. Hale, and the mineral rights to T.C.I. for \$7 and \$5 respectively. The bluff side community became known as Bluff Park.

THE BLUFF PARK of 1885 is described as "set aside as a private Parc [French for park] for the use of the original purchasers family use & rights to Park and Water privileges, and named as follows E. M. Mayes, H. O. Williams, Eliza A. Morgan, J. W. Bush, Anna Terrell, and D. P. Hale." The mountaintop community of Hale Springs long known for its free-flowing and medicinal waters became known as Bluff Park.

The State of Alabama
Jefferson County } Know all men by these presents, that I the under signed Grantor as Administrator for the estate of Gardner Hale in the year 1885, here by granted bargained, sold and conveyed 6 cross streets 16 feet wide each, the 7th street closed by terms of sale, and Valley Street 30 feet wide and adjoining blocks on the South East & extending parallel with seven blocks and two Fractional Blocks and marked from one to seven, inclusive & A & B, respectively Bluff Park is set aside as a private Parc for the use of the original purchasers family use & rights to Park and Water privileges, and named as follows, E. M. Mayes, H. O. Williams, Eliza A. Morgan, J. W. Bush, Anna Terrell, and D. P. Hale. The Streets are conveyed to the public for its use and benefit. The Blocks are mostly uniform being 100 feet front and 420 feet across. The irregular blocks are numbers 3 and 6 and Fractional Blocks A and B. An additional space and circle of 100 feet in diameter with center near the Chalybeate Spring so as to connect one fifth of circle to the lower Bluff Park line on side of Shades Mountain, all of above survey being in the Northeast quarter of Section Four Township Nineteen, Range Three west, in Jefferson County Alabama. No street between blocks 3 & 2. Bluff Park is One hundred and fifty feet (150) feet wide and extends full length of blocks on West side of same.

Mrs H. O. Williams *LS*
Administratrix



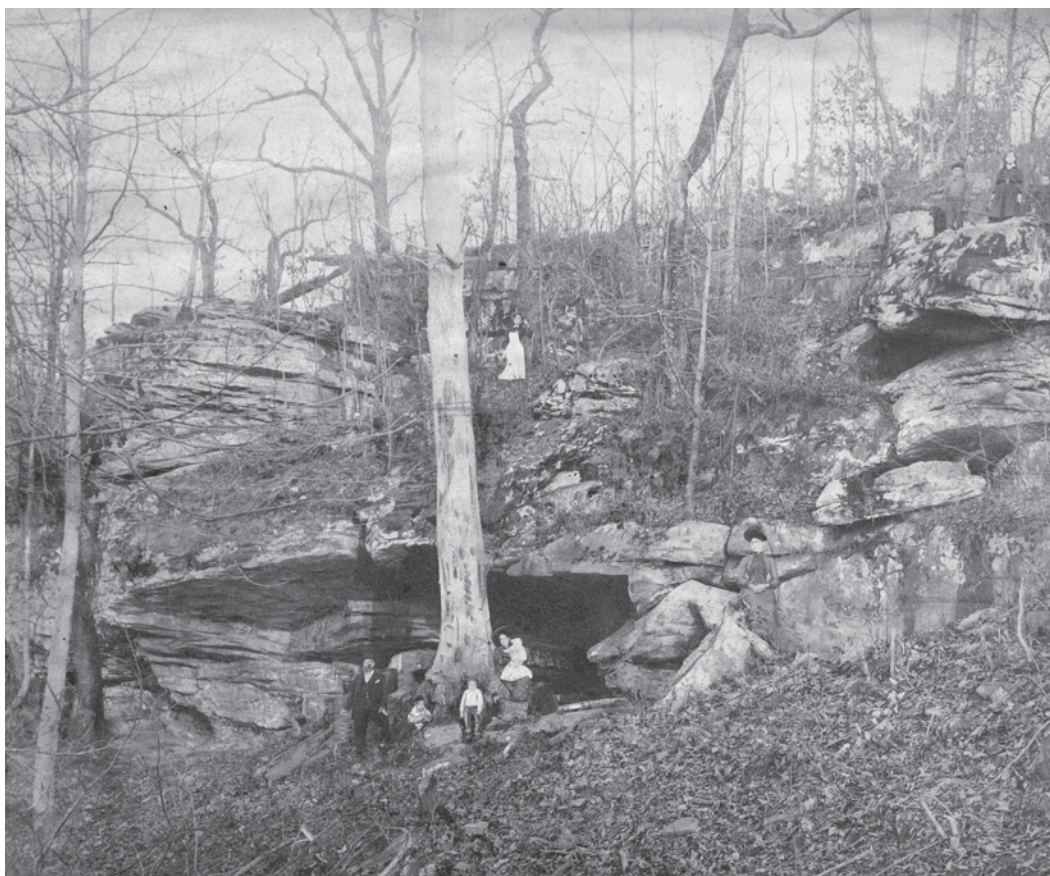
State of Alabama
Jefferson County } I, James A. Roy a civil Engineer acting singly & in my profession hereby certify that I surveyed and subdivided the property shown on the within map, and that Gardner Hale Springs Survey on said County and State, and that the distances and angles shown on said map are true and correct according to the survey and subdivision of same.

James A. Roy
Civil Engineer

State of Alabama
Jefferson County } I, James A. Roy a Justice of the Peace in and for said County and State hereby certify that H. O. Williams Administrator of the estate of Gardner Hale, whose name is signed to the foregoing or map, and who is known to me, acknowledged before me this day that being informed of the contents of the foregoing plat or map, with files, names, blocks and lots as therein laid out, marked and numbered, he voluntarily adopted the same on the day the same were made 26th day of October and 1901.

James A. Roy *(LS)*

Hale Springs Survey, 1885, Birmingham Map Book 4, Page 117, map filed November 6, 1901, Jefferson County Office of Probate.



"The analysis of water from your Springs received. Like the water of Hot Springs of Arkansas your waters contain a very small percentage of mineral salts, but the contained salts are such as are usually considered most efficacious medically. This is particular true of the iron, magnesium and alkaline (potassium and sodium) salts.

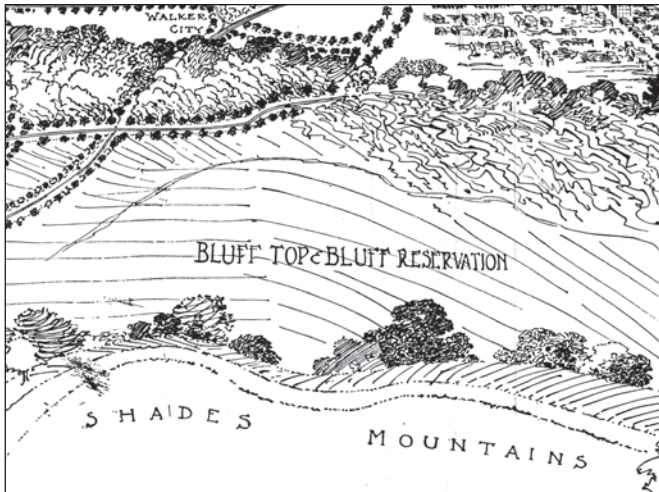
It ought to be a good table water and a good tonic."

— Eugene Smith, Alabama State Geologist, to D. P. Hale, January 20, 1900.

Cave Spring, c.1900. The freestone spring, pictured, lies 100 feet below the bluff, nestled under a large rock outcrop. The chalybeate spring is 100 feet below this. Before wells and city water, the free flowing and medicinal waters from these mountainside springs provided refreshing and healing waters. Called Mountain Springs, Linthicum, and Spencer Springs, in 1863 they became and remain known today as Hale Springs.

Shades Crest Road, a Scenic Drive Along the Bluff

Prepared in 1916 by national planner Warren Manning under the leadership of then Mayor George Ward, *The City Plan of Birmingham* projects both residences and a scenic drive along the bluff of Shades Mountain and preservation of the bluff lands below. At home at Vestavia on the bluff from 1926 to 1940, Ward dedicated his bluff lands as a park at his death. The park remains today on the property of the Vestavia Hills Baptist Church, its once kudzu-covered lands now under restoration as a forest preserve. Moved in 1976 to its park site along U.S. 31, Ward's Temple of Sybil welcomes motorists to the community of Vestavia Hills.



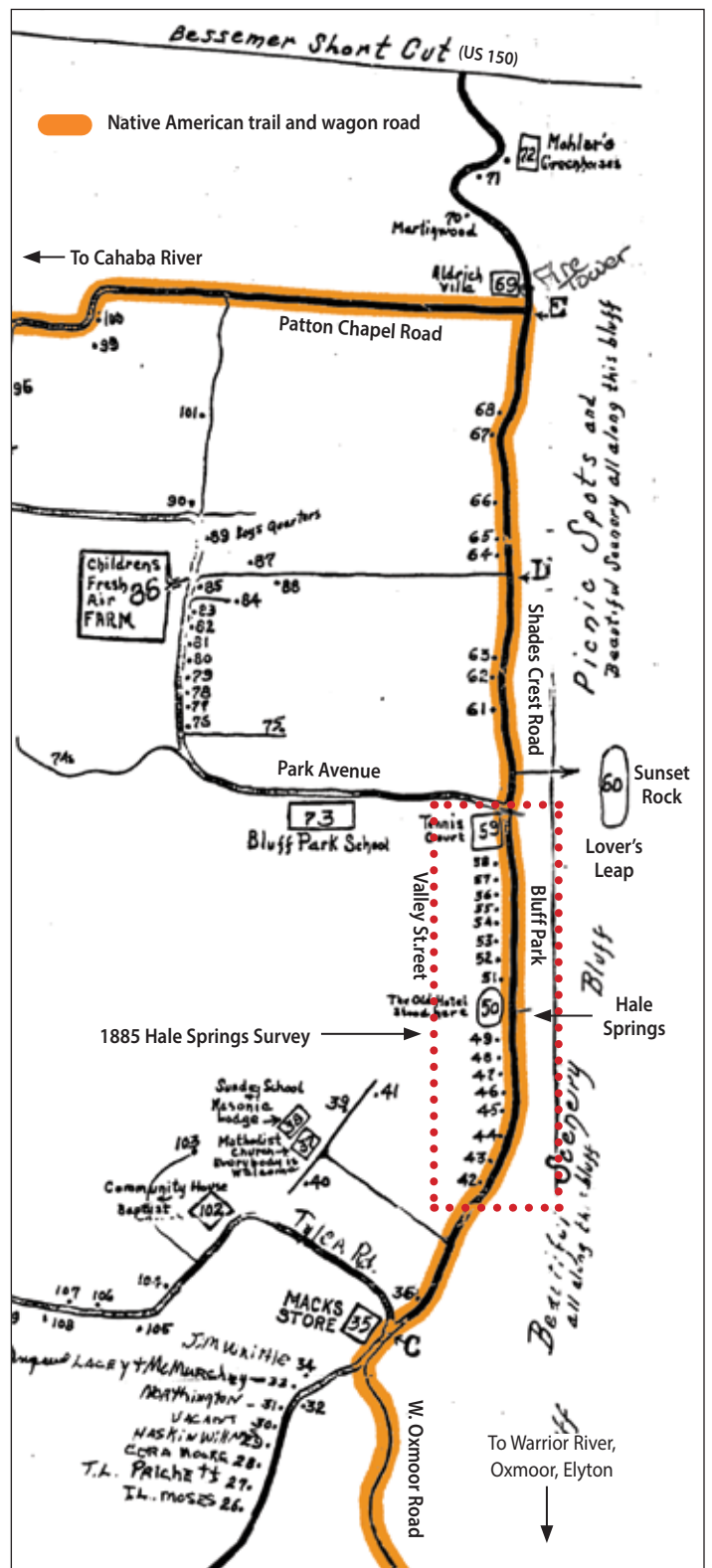
Bluff Top & Reservation, *The Future Greater Birmingham District, The City Plan of Birmingham*, 1916. [A reservation is highly scenic land.]

From his mountaintop abode, George Ward campaigned unceasingly to make Birmingham and its surrounding countryside an increasing beautiful place. Beginning in 1934, working with the Birmingham Civic Club, the first Blossomtime drive to beauty spots is organized. Patterned on New Orleans' and Mobile's Azalea Trails, Birmingham's springtime motorcade saluted the native dogwood. Participating motorists traveled from the Birmingham City Hall to U.S. 280 and across the bluff to Bluff Park, ending at Aldrich Villa on Patton Chapel Road.

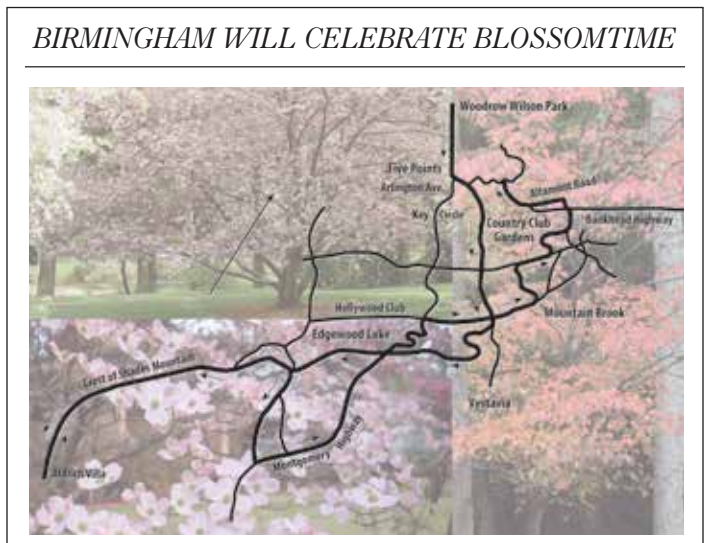
The annual Blossomtime festival attracted increasing numbers of participants and grew to become a week-long countywide cultural celebration during which many civic groups hosted events that drew visitors from across the region. A pageant on the grounds at George Ward's Vestavia was always a highlight of the festival.



Scene along Shades Crest Road, looking east, c. 1900.



Directory of Bluff Park Section of Shades Mountain, by Shades Cliff Community Club, September 12, 1938. Unfortunately, the reverse side of the directory that identifies the numbered properties has been lost. [Typeset identification added in 2023.]



Blossomtime Route Map, with view of spring foliage along the drive from the city center up to George Ward's estate at Vestavia and then across Vestavia Drive and Shades Crest Road along the bluff of Shades Mountain to Aldrich Villa in Bluff Park, April 1934.

In 1938, the Shades Cliff Community Club prepared a "Directory of Bluff Park Section." Extending from Tyler Road to the Bessemer Short Cut [US 150]. The map shows residences, stores, churches, a community house, Masonic Lodge, the Fresh Air Farm, and the site of the Old Hotel [the Bluff Park Hotel, across from the Hale Springs which are not shown]." Large script cites the Beautiful Scenery, Picnic Spots, and Lover's Leap, the latter site, with George Ward's guidance, dedicated to the public in 1935. Hale Springs and the 1885 Bluff Park have been forgotten. The Jefferson County tax assessor described the site as "rocky, vacant, very steep mountainous acreage."

The Proposed Bluff Park Preserve: The 1885 Bluff Park, Tip Top Grill, & Sunset Rock

The proposed Bluff Park Preserve includes three historic sites: the remaining section of the 1885 “Bluff Park” including the Hale Springs and the sites of Lover’s Leap–Sunset Rock, and the Tip Top Grill. The preserve is located along Shades Crest Road at its intersection with Park Avenue.

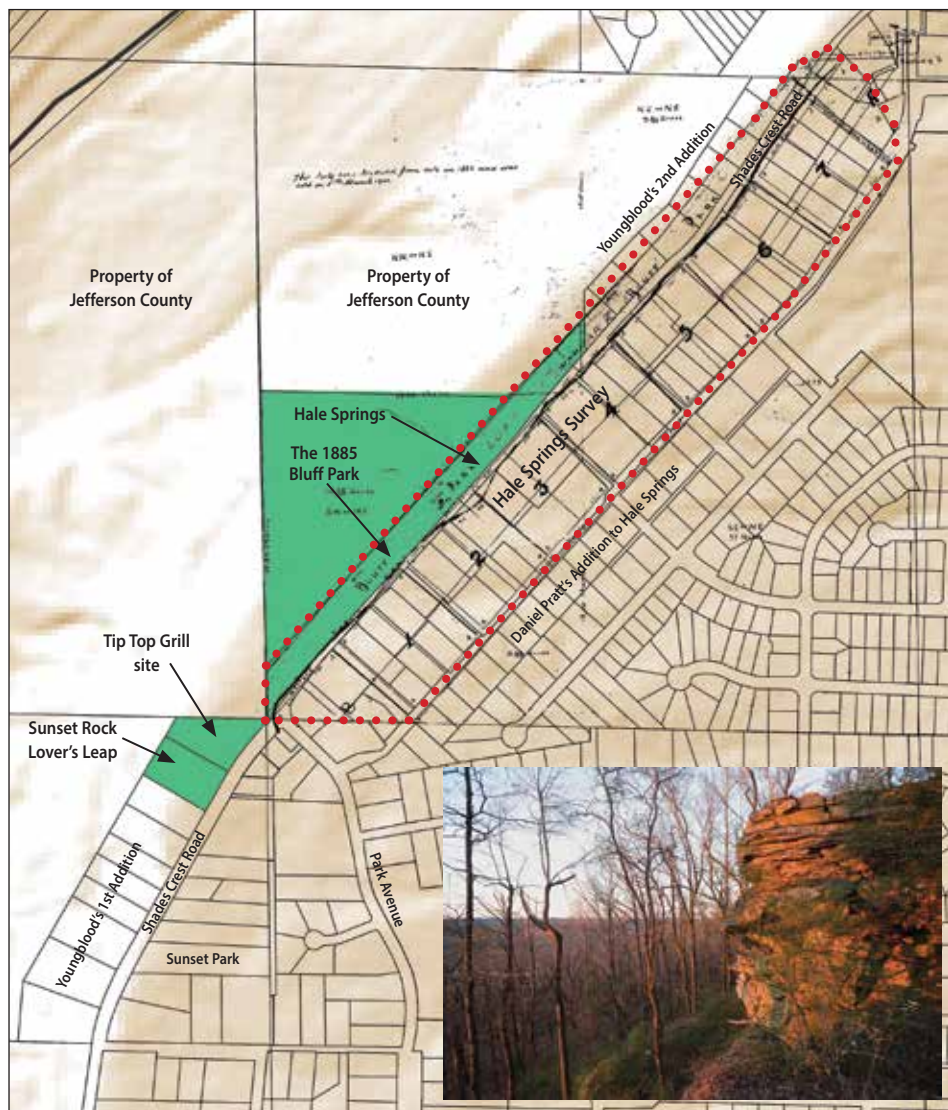
Properties in the Preserve

Bluff Park as shown in the 1885 Hale Springs Survey

Hale Springs, the free and chalybeate springs, 100’ and 200’ below the bluff. The springs are located directly opposite 669 Shades Crest Road, the site of Gardner Hale’s home, later operated as Liberty Hall, a popular summer resort, prior to the opening of the Bluff Park Hotel of 1910 to 1925.

Tip Top Grill site, 588 Shades Crest Road, Lot 11, Youngblood’s First Addition to Bluff Park. The service station, opened in 1968, was later converted into food service as the Tip Top Grill operated through 2021.

Lover’s Leap and Sunset Rock, 586 Shades Crest Road, Lot 10, Youngblood’s First Addition to Bluff Park. Site and path to it and the rock dedicated for public use by Jonas Schwab in 1935.



Historic Districts

Shades Crest Road Historic District, est. 1993, with 65 properties extending about a mile from 601 to 937 along Shades Crest Road, with residences dating from 1890 to 1905 including 617, 769, 873, 877, 889, 913, and 917 SCR and also 625, 633, 637, 641, 645, 657, and 697 SCR built by Gardner Hale descendants.

Park Avenue Historic District, est. 1998, including 51 properties extending from 457 to 597 Park Avenue in the Crestview and Crescent Heights sections, platted in 1908 and 1907 from Gardner Hale’s land with residences built by Hale descendants at 538, 540, 544, and 545 Park Avenue, the Bluff Park Elementary, and the Independent Presbyterian Church’s Fresh Air Farm, est. 1923, at 501 Park Avenue.

Proposed Bluff Park Preserve, showing the original Bluff Park in the Hales Springs Survey of 1885 and other properties proposed for the preserve. Map using GIS data by Birgit Kibelka, Marjorie White, and Scott Fuller. Birmingham Historical Society, 2023.

INSET: **View from the bluff across Shades Valley**, Hunter Nichols.

Other Subdivisions

Daniel Pratt’s Addition to Hale Springs, 1891.

Sunset Park Subdivision, platted 1910 by J. Cary Thompson, a Birmingham developer. While not fully realized, the subdivision included large lots across Lookout Boulevard from the bluff.

Youngblood’s 1st Addition to Bluff Park, 1962.

Youngblood’s 2nd Addition to Bluff Park, plat filed 1974, with residences built beginning in 1979 in the 1885 Bluff Park.



View from Tip Top Grill, looking across Shades Valley to Ross Bridge and beyond to Red Mountain, Photograph by Scott Stephens, with Cliff Brane.