

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

HAER No. AL-80-C

HAER  
ALA  
37-BIRM,  
38C-

PHOTOGRAPHS

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

ADDENDUM TO  
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WRITTEN HISTORICAL & DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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ADDENDUM TO  
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Location: To south of Pratt Highway, Pratt City, Birmingham, Jefferson County, Alabama. To reach the cemetery from Pratt Highway, take the right-of-way clearing at the gas line, just west of the old Birmingham Southern Shops and Yards. About midway to Pratt City, turn west, cross a steep gully and begin looking for depressions in the leaf covered, heavily overgrown terrain.

Date of Construction: c. 1880

Builder/  
Engineer: TCI

Ownership: USX

Significance: This cemetery provides evidence of the exploitative nature of southern industry. By 1900, black workers formed 65% of the coal mining labor force and 90% of convicts working at the Pratt Mines.

Period of Significance: 1880-1914

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

Description: This cemetery includes an unknown number of graves in a portion of land delineated on historic maps of the industrial site. The cemetery lies just to the east of the earliest Pratt mining slopes, convict camps, coking operations and the Birmingham Southern Railroad Shops and yards. The graves are unmarked and revealed only by depressions in the landscape. Unmarked, densely overgrown, and abandoned, the cemetery is primarily known to neighborhood residents and to those residents who once lived in the neighborhood. An iron fence surrounds a single grave. Clearing of the site would be necessary to accurately access the full extent of the graveyard which Pratt City natives refer to as the "old convict graveyard."

## HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

To meet the pressing demand for labor in the early days, the Pratt Coal and Iron Company (later TCI) employed state convicts. The practice of working convicts outside the prisons, begun in Alabama in 1866, was common across the South well into the 1900s. Private companies paid state and county governments a certain amount each month for each convict. The company built prison facilities and clothed and fed the men, who were required to work 10 hours a day and fill a quota. TCI continued the practice until 1914, and other District mining concerns worked convicts until 1928.

In 1883, a new Alabama law required the state penitentiary physician to reside where the greatest number of convicts were confined. Thus Dr. Russell M. Cunningham moved to the prisons at the Pratt mining camp to take care of some 1,000 inmates a year. His attention to sanitary conditions, hours of work, diet and recreation resulted in the reduction of the mortality rate from 18 percent in 1881 to two percent in 1884. In reports to the state inspector of mines in 1883 and 1884, Cunningham recommended a stockaded convict town be built, with 50 cabins, a hospital, adequate bathing arrangements, guardhouses, a cook room, kitchen and space for outdoor recreation, so that the welfare of the prisoners would approximate that of the free miners. His findings and recommendations created a stir among lessees of convicts and led to improvements in sanitation and living conditions at the mines.

Prison facilities were enlarged in 1888 after TCI signed a 10-year contract for 500 to 600 convicts with the State of Alabama. An 1888 Sanborn map of the Pratt mines shows a complex of frame structures including a prison, convicts' kitchen, convicts' dining commissary, bathhouse and kettles to boil clothes. By August 1906, probably the era of maximum use of convicts at the Pratt Mines, 906 state convicts (described as able bodied males, age 16 and over from 23 county and state prisons) resided here. Of these, 300 worked at No. 1.

Until January 1914, Cunningham retained charge of medical services for convicts employed by principal mining contractors throughout the state and served as company physician for the Pratt Company and TCI. At Ensley he constructed a private infirmary, the Cunningham Hospital, to serve his large industrial practice. During this period, he also launched a successful political career, serving as state senator (1896-1900), lieutenant governor (1901-1904; 1905-1907), and acting governor of the state (1904-1905). Throughout his political career, Cunningham worked for reform of the convict lease system, inspection of coal mines and regulation of mine sanitation.

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