

Newsletter

February 2010

The Roads to Mountain Brook

Please join us on Monday, March 1, for the annual meeting of the Birmingham Historical Society at the Mountain Brook Elementary School Auditorium, 3020 Cambridge Road, Mountain Brook. The meeting begins at 7 p.m. Our speakers, Marjorie White and Richard Anderson, will explore the design intent and impact of Jemison & Co. planning upon the creation of a remarkable residential district.

White and Anderson, historian and geographic documentation specialist, will highlight information culled from study of the *General Plan* for Mountain Brook of March 1929, as well as associated letters, photographs, and maps now held as the Jemison Papers at the Birmingham Public Library Archives. Anderson's analysis meshed the 1929 plan with the current roads from Geographic Information System (GIS) data. The results establish that today's road alignment and location of bridges and intersections are essentially those Jemison & Co. planned in the late 1920s.

Paul Dolinsky, Chief of the Historic American Landscapes Survey (HALS), a documentation branch of



Golf Links Bridge, Overbrook Road at Cherokee. Photograph 1928, Jemison Papers, BPL Archives.



Entrance Gates to Mountain Brook Estates, Mt. Brook Parkway at Cahaba. Photograph 1928, Jemison Papers, BPL Archives.

the National Park Service located in Washington, D.C., will be in town to review and comment upon the study and the exceptional quality and integrity of the 1929 plan. Dolinsky will also advise on documenting historic Mountain Brook for HALS.

What does this mean? We all know that Mountain Brook is different. We know that in driving the historic roads one experiences homes, views, stream banks, and giant rocks as great beauty unfolds. What we may not know is that our experience did not just happen. It was designed, with excruciating care. That's the story we look forward to sharing: how naturalistic design philosophy; talented, seasoned, multi-discipline designers; a far-sighted and experienced developer; and big-pocket investors worked together at the height of the 1920s' real estate boom to shape Mountain Brook. . . so that even when the crash came and few homes had been built, the character of the community survived, and remains today. The meeting talks and this newsletter address features of that character.

Naturalistic Design Philosophy

"There is beauty and individuality in everything that grows and it is to the advantage of everyone to discover that beauty and not to replace it with something artificial and expensive." Warren H. Manning, regional planner and landscape architect, trained in the office of Frederick Law Olmsted, who in the late 1920s headed a leading planning firm whose clients included the National Park Service, cities, and major corporations, including U.S. Steel. Manning completed a city plan for Birmingham in 1916.

Each estate has distinctive features...Nature has already designed and built the owner's wild garden... one needs only to assist Nature to retain and intensify its beauty. Egbert Hans, landscape architect in the employ of Warren H. Manning Associates, Boston, Massachusetts.

"Let us develop the resources of our land, call forth its powers, build up its institutions and promote all its great interests and see whether we, in our day and generation, may not perform something worthy to be remembered." This Daniel Webster quote, from an 1825 speech at the Bunker Hill Monument, served as the Jemison & Co. creed. In the 1920s, Robert Jemison Jr. was a Birmingham developer with extensive local commercial and residential experience that included the planning for Central Park, Fairfield, Forest Park, and Redmont. He had worked with leading city planners during World War I.

Reverence for place was key to the development approach for Mountain Brook. The resulting 1929 plan

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The Plan: Roads, Bridges, and Entrance Gates

Warren Manning was responsible for the *General Plan*, pictured opposite. The Manning plan included the siting of roads and bridges, lot lines for residences, reservation of and deed restrictions to preserve open space, and the inclusion and location of other community features such as the village, school, riding academy and trails, country club and golf course, and showcase house and mill. Manning's firm also produced promotional materials for Jemison & Co. The plan covered 2,500 acres of Jemison lands and more than 2,000 acres of adjoining lands, then in ownership friendly to Jemison interests. The real estate development was the largest, as well as the finest, undertaken in the region. By comparison, the well-planned communities of Hollywood and Redmont Park together comprise 320 acres.

Manning began his planning in September 1926 and culminated it in the final plan of March 1929. Over many months and through many, many, many revisions, the siting of, and grades for, the roads, reservations of open space, and lots were worked out incrementally. The seasoned team was outside on the mountain slopes locating routes and lots with string. When major decisions were to be made, Robert Jemison called together his investors, who met with his planners at the site to review the alternatives.

The **planning team** consisted of Warren Manning; Manning's on-site representative, landscape architect Carl Lutender; Birmingham landscape architect and horticulturalist William Kessler; civil engineer Henry Glander Jr., and real estate professional Will Franke, as well as others in the Jemison firm. A forester also assisted. Henry Glander Jr. supervised the actual road construction, which included the grading, paving, drainage, and bridge building. This work was performed by private contractors, including Harbert Construction Co.

The final roads were aligned to showcase the landscape in an attractive and engaging manner. Curves were favored, contours followed, and long straight-aways discouraged. Banks were sloped back to ensure visibility, and they were planted. One Jemison & Co. source lists 14 miles of roads paved with concrete by January 1928. Continuing the naturalistic aesthetic, brown wooden signs designated road names.

Roads Designed in the 1920s: Balmoral, Beechwood, Brookwood, Cambridge, Canterbury, Cherokee, Culver, Dell, Eastview (now Briarcliff), Hastings, Heathermoor, Mountain Brook Parkway, Overbrook, Overhill, Pine Ridge, Southwood, and Watkins.

Roads Realigned, Widened, and Paved in the 1920s: Cahaba/Pumphouse, Leeds (now Old Leeds), and Montevallo.

Stone-Veneer Bridges Designed and Built, 1927–1929: Henry Glander Jr. and William Kessler engineered and detailed these bridges, specifying locally quarried stone laid in random masonry patterns. Bridges were constructed at Canterbury Road (1927, stonework by W. D. Rainey); Montevallo Road (1927, concrete structure by Jefferson County); Beechwood Road (1928); Cherokee Road (Golf Links Bridge, c. 1928); Watkins Road (1928, stonework by Henry Garner); Mountain Book Parkway (three bridges, 1928, with stonework by Henry Garner); and Heathermoor Road (1929).

Entrance Gates Designed, Built, and Planted: William Kessler designed and provided planting plans for these masonry gates that delineate the boundaries of and provide a welcome to Jemison & Co.'s Mountain Brook. Primary entrances were designated from: Cahaba Road at Mountain Brook Parkway and at Cherokee Road; Leeds Road at Cherokee Road; Montevallo Road at Overbrook and Canterbury Roads; and Overbrook Road at Mountain Brook Parkway. Entrance gates were also built leading to the Riding Academy Rink and to the Stable at today's Chester and Brook Manor Roads, respectively.



Montevallo Road Entrance Gate at Canterbury Road, above, and Bridge at Mt. Brook Parkway and Overbrook Road, left. Photographs by Holly Morgan, 2008.

General Plan for Mountain Brook, March 11, 1929, right. Jemison Papers, BPL Archives.

Preservation of Natural Features

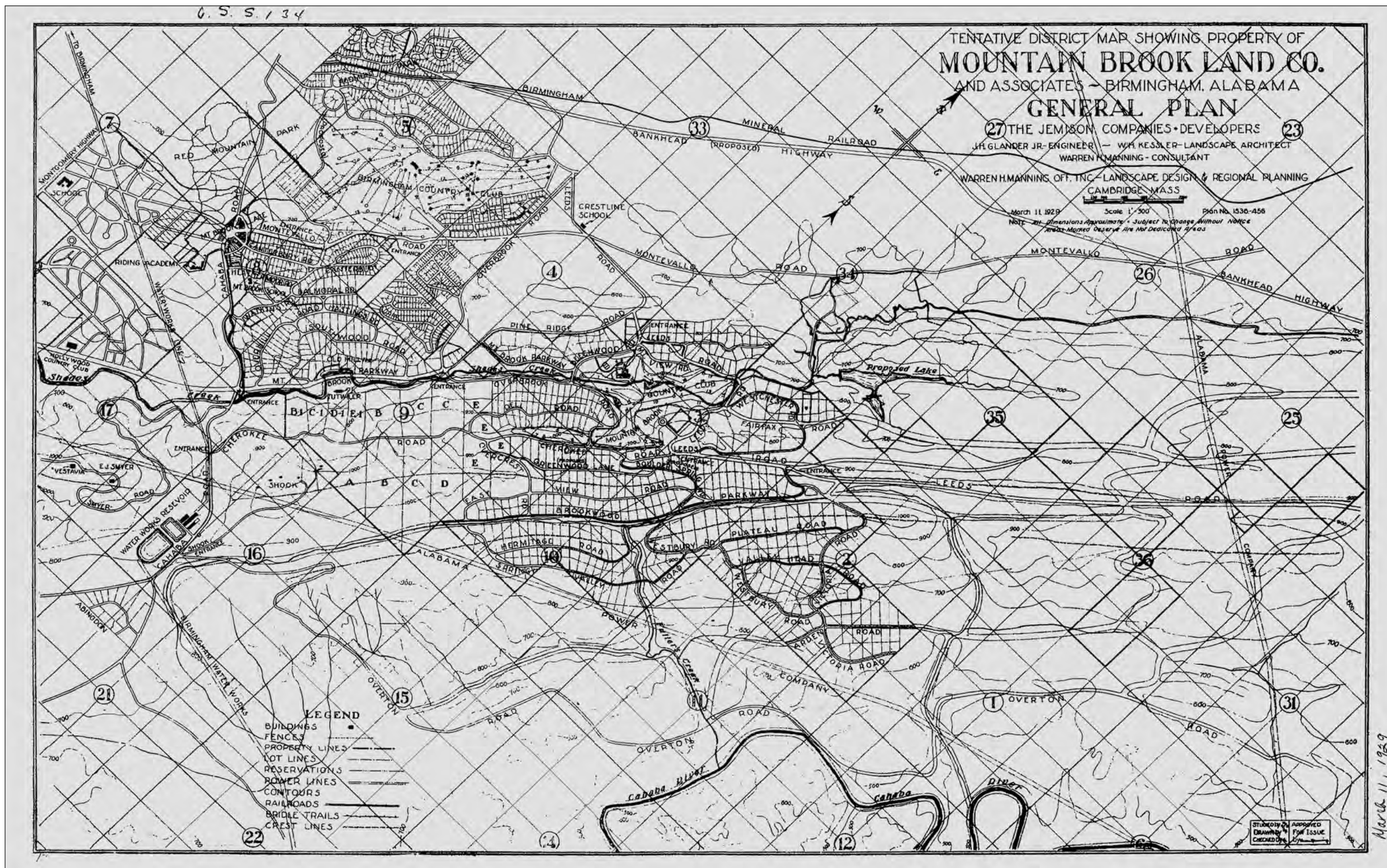
Streams, cliffs, narrow gaps, ridge ponds, steep bluffs, distinctive hog-back ridges, aged trees, and boulders—the preservation of these features was deemed important in uniting new development with the natural landscape. Manning's 1929 *General Plan* specified the following measures.

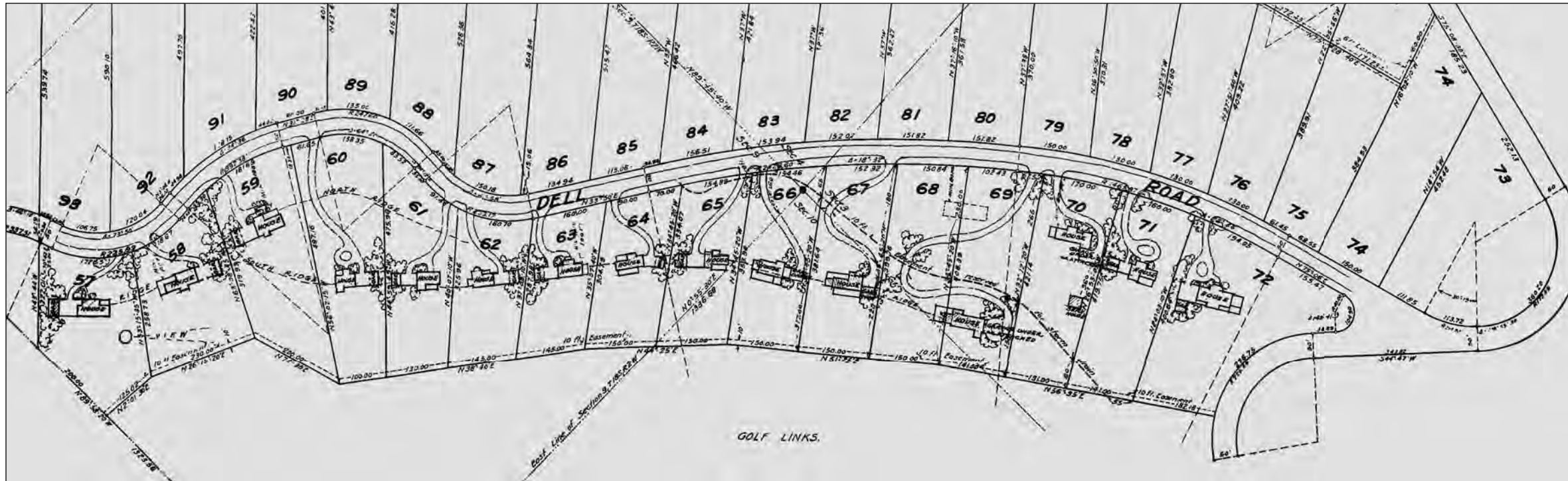
Formal preservation was achieved by two means: reservation (setting aside and withholding from sale) of the floodplains of area creeks for open space and recreational development, and deed restrictions governing the subdivision of certain key lots, *lots A-E on the plan below*.

Trails were built in the floodplains along Watkins and Shades Creeks (today's Jemison Park) as well as along Fuller's Creek in the future Brookwood Forest area. Facilities for golf, swimming, and riding were built at the future Mountain Brook Club. New facilities for horseback riding included a 20-acre riding academy, designed by Manning, and 29 miles of bridle trails. Manning also suggested to George Gordon Crawford, whose 1,500 acres adjoined Jemison & Co. lands, that he donate land surrounding the Civil War furnace ruins for use as a future park, today's Irondale Furnace Park in Cherokee Bend.

Today's Jemison Park along Mountain Brook Parkway is protected by design decisions made to route the parkway away from the creek and build lots on only one side of the creek, as well as by deed restrictions on adjoining property: the large lots that extend from the creek up the face of Shades Mountain to Cherokee Road. Manning planned these key 35- to 60-acre lots as home sites for Jemison's investors in the Mountain Brook venture. The market crash of 1929 came before the investors built the grandest estates planned for the development. The deed restrictions remain and protect Jemison Park.

The Major Investors: Murray Brown, President, Goodall-Brown Dry Goods Co.; Victor Hanson, publisher, *The Birmingham News*; Lindsey Morton, President, Phoenix Portland Cement; Erskine Ramsay, engineer-inventor-real estate investor; and Eugene A. Yates, general manager, Alabama Power Co. in 1926. George Gordon Crawford, president of TCI-U.S. Steel and lawyer Joseph Forney Johnston also employed Warren Manning to plan adjacent lands. Coal company executive Herbert Tutwiler and Coca-Cola franchisees Crawford and Allen Johnson purchased key estates, as did TCI executive Francis Crockard.



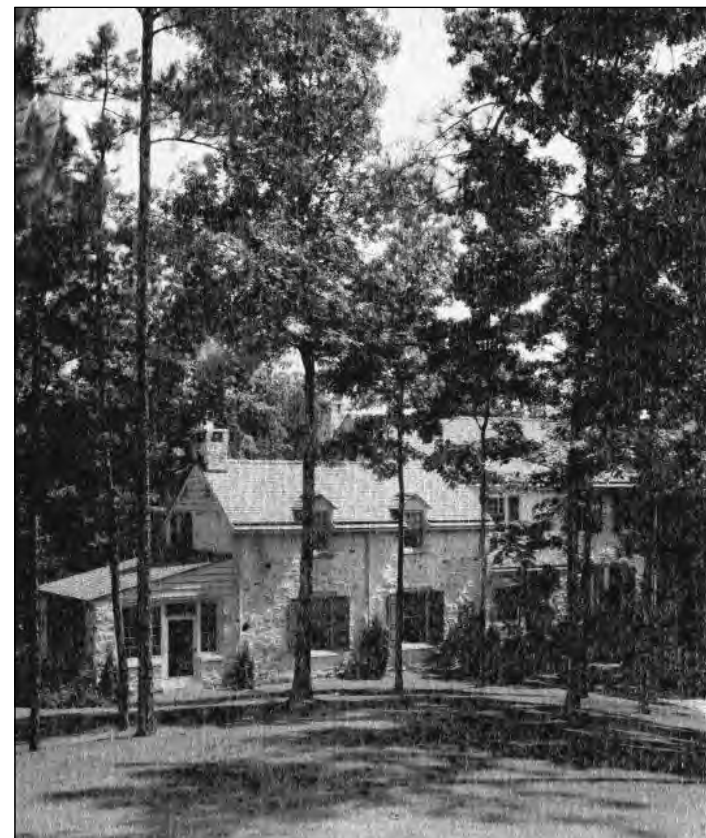


Dell Road Sector, October 1928, Jemison Papers, BPL Archives

The Siting of Homes

Whether the residential lots were large or small, special distinction and value were considered to the end that hardly two lots are alike. The designers stated that thought was given to each house site so that the house and the lot might be worthy of each other. Topographic and unusual landscape features—springs, rock formations, trees, shrubs, and views—determined lot boundaries, not geometric lines. William Kessler worked out the driveway approaches after the lot and house sites had been determined.

To set the tone for the new residential district, Manning suggested building a Mt. Vernon replica similar to an interpretation of George Washington's residence that had been built in Raleigh, North Carolina. Manning drew plans for the setting, gardens, and planting plans for Mountain Brook's Mt. Vernon. Because Washington's Mt. Vernon estate included a mill, Manning suggested the reconstruction



J. S. Larkin House, set amidst the native landscape. Photograph 1928, Jemison Papers, BPL Archives.



Mt. Vernon Replica-The Tutwiler House and the "Old Mill," Mt. Brook Parkway, above. Photographs 2008 by Holly Morgan.

of the former Perryman mill along Shades Creek as part of the plan. Manning had recently redeveloped his 1640 family manse near Reading, Massachusetts as well as a mill on Rock Creek in Washington, D.C., into tea houses, then highly popular gathering spots. William Kessler drew the plans for the "Old Mill," and it opened in 1927 to serve tea and encourage lot sales. When the first lots in Jemison's Mountain Brook were offered for sale, they sold for less than lots then being sold in Woodlawn (there being no public transportation to the new development). Jemison told his salesmen to call them all "estates." Hence the first sectors of Jemison's Mountain Brook to be marketed and sold became known as "Mountain Brook Estates."



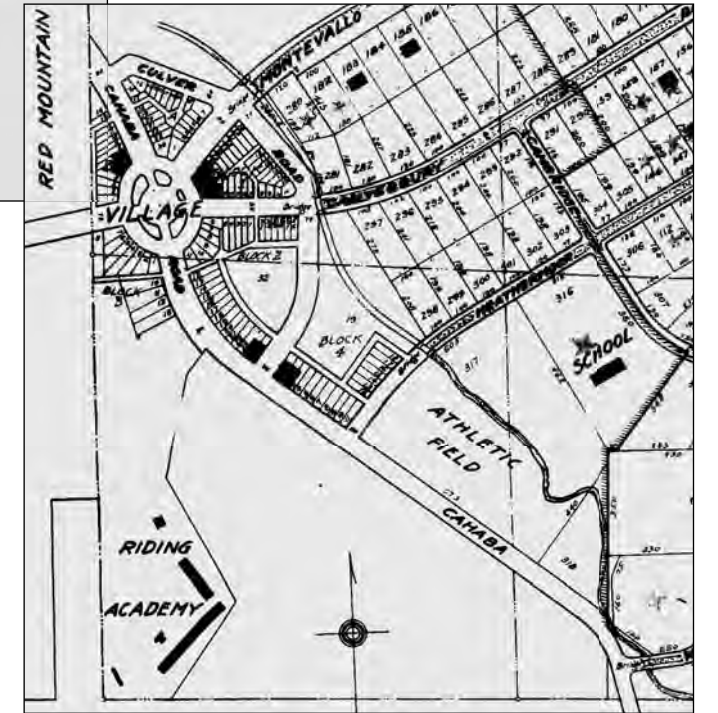
Mountain Brook Estates Building, 1928. Photograph by Holly Morgan, 2008.

Village Centers

Born and bred in New England, where his family had lived since the 1600s, Manning firmly believed in village centers—small areas to provide services to residents. He designed preliminary plans for two: today's Mountain Brook Village and a civic center at Brookwood and Leeds Roads. Only the former made it into the March 1929 *General Plan* and was built. Jemison & Co. built the Mountain Brook Estates Building that houses today's Gilchrist, Pappagallo, and Harrison's.



Mountain-Brook Village, Bird's Eye View, 1927. Illustration, Jemison Papers, BPL Archives.



Mountain Brook Village Map, 1929. Jemison Papers, BPL Archives.

NATURALISTIC DESIGN PHILOSOPHY continued from page 1

established strategies to showcase the natural environment and harmonize improvements with existing surroundings. The strategies included:

- Preservation of protected natural beauty
- Road and lot alignment determined by topographic features
- Reservation of floodplains along area creeks for scenic value, recreational use, and storm water management
- Use of native materials in construction, especially locally quarried stone and wooden signs, posts, and rails