

BIRMINGHAM HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Newsletter

November 2007

TURNING ON ALABAMA

Turning On Alabama explores how we got the power to turn on our lights and how that power is generated and transmitted to our homes, farms, businesses and industries. The new exhibit of never-before-seen photos opens November 4 at the Library Gallery of the Central Library and runs through December 30. It features photographs and artifacts documenting the exciting technologies that brought us power and radio from 1920 through 1945, radically transforming our lives.

The photos, shot for company records and never published, reveal:

- How electricity is generated and transmitted to us
- The engineering feats and courage that built the Mitchell, Martin, Jordan, Yates, and Thurlow Dams
- Life in the company villages during construction of the hydro and steam plants
- The founding of WSY, the state's first radio station
- Economic and rural electrification programs

The exhibit is sponsored by the Alabama Power Company and the Alabama Historical Radio Society with the support of the Birmingham Public Library. At the opening reception on November 4 from 3:00-5:00 p.m. radio historical society members will be on hand to share their collection of historic radios and programs.

The Alabama Power Company Corporate Archives, established in 1986 at its 6th Avenue and 19th Street North headquarters, holds more than 20,000 photographs dating from the 1880s to the present, as well as 1,000 cubic feet of records, including legal documents, correspondence, power industry publications, sound recordings, and artifacts, some of which are on display at the archives.



Transformers at a Substation, Gadsden, Alabama, August 4, 1913. Courtesy Alabama Power Company Archives. In these tanks high voltage electricity generated at the Lay Dam on the Coosa River was transformed into lower voltage current. The "stepped down" electrical current is sent to distribution stations throughout the service area for delivery to individual customers.

Bill Tharpe curates the impressive collection. Tharpe, **Dan Bynum** and **Jay Parker** have produced the current exhibition. For more information or to schedule a presentation, call 257-2067.

The Alabama Historical Radio Society collects, restores, and teaches restoration of old radios. The Society also collects broadcasts and literature from radio's early days. Founded in 1989, society volunteers meet each Saturday morning at 9:00 a.m. at their home base in the Alabama Power Company Building in Huffman. A permanent exhibit of historic radios is located at the power company headquarters. The Society owns several hundred radios, the earliest a crystal set dating to 1915. It accepts tax-deductible donations of historic radios. For more information, see www.AlabamaHistoricalRadioSociety.org. Society President **Dave Cisco** and his co-chair **Dee Haynes** are orchestrating the radio society's participation in *Turning On Alabama*.

Society Calendar

November 4, 3:00-5:00 p.m.
Turning On Alabama Exhibition
Opening Reception
Board Room, Birmingham Public Library

November 4-December 30
Turning on Alabama
Images and Artifacts from the Collections of the Alabama Power Company and the Alabama Historic Radio Society
Birmingham Public Library, First Floor
Cases and Library Gallery

November 30, 11:00-3:00 p.m.
Sale of Society Books
at the BPL Local Authors ExPo
Birmingham Public Library

December TBA
Mailing of *Hand Down Unharmd*
to BHS Members

February 19, 2008, 7:00 p.m.
Annual Meeting
The Man Who Brought Olmsted to Birmingham
Birmingham Botanical Gardens

Hand Down Unharmed-Olmsted Files on Birmingham Parks, 1920-1925.

The Society's forthcoming book draws on the brilliant minds of America's finest park planners and their correspondence with Birmingham park advocates, especially our hero lumber magnate M. P. Phillips.

Hand Down Unharmed is Frederick Law Olmsted Sr.'s statement of the essential civic obligation regarding parks and is repeated in his son's first letter of the forthcoming volume as an injunction to the men seeking to establish a park system for Birmingham. The phrase summarizes his family's doctrine of what American parks should be and how they should be operated. The best scenery should be managed by cultivated and public-spirited citizens, serving over long periods of time, to provide parks free of charge for the public. Beauty of landscape justifies the existence of a public park and it is the "first duty" of park system trustees to "hand down unharmed from one generation to the next the treasure of scenery which the city has placed in its care."

The correspondence of M. P. Phillips, Chairman of the Kiwanis Park Committee and later Vice President of the Birmingham Park Board, to Olmsted Brothers remains at the Library of Congress. Over a period of years volunteers—Regina Ammon, Will French, Joyce Lanning, Julius Linn, Heather McArn, Brian Rushing, Joe

Strickland, Kay Worley—have transcribed and reviewed the more than 300 letters and newspaper articles for publication. The volume is presented so that a new generation can appreciate the knowledge and wisdom that the members of the Olmsted firm, then the largest and finest office of park planners in the world, so generously shared with the public-spirited citizens who wanted to establish the best and finest park system for Birmingham.

Editor-in-chief, BHS Trustee **Katie Tipton**, is finalizing her essay on how she edited the letters. Volunteer **Amy Murphy** is developing the index, designer **Scott Fuller** has done a great job emulating typewritten styles of the 1920s, and **Marjorie White** is completing the cast of characters, local and national figures involved in the Birmingham park scene. The 8 x 10, 448 page soft-bound volume is *almost* at press.

Publication of *Hand Down Unharmed* is supported by grants from the Daniel Foundation of Alabama, the Mayfield Ezekiel Slaughter Fund, and the Mary Smith Slaughter Fund.

Hand Down Unharmed is the Membership Publication for 2007. Members paid for 2007 will receive the volume by mail. We will notify you when we mail you your book, hopefully by late December.



UAB in the Streets Volunteers helped us prepare our Sloss Quarters Gardens for fall veggies and a fig orchard. Thanks to the expert stewardship of chief gardener Trustee Sallie Lee, the perennial and veggie gardens made it through the summer drought. The roses, zinnias, four o'clocks, hollyhocks, and cypress vine are now blooming profusely; the herbs are doing great (the garden site is the former location of a concrete mixing plant); and the okra, collards, watermelon, and purple runner beans began having a field day when the thermometer finally dropped.



Birmingham Public Library
Sunday, November 4, 2007, 3-5 p.m.

TURNING ON ALABAMA
Join us for

www.bhistorical.org
Birmingham, Alabama 35222
One Sloss Quarters