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End of the Line: The Rise and Fall of Street Railways in Birmingham

by Robby Ballard

“THE STORY of transportation in Birmingham is fascinating... I wonder if the people who live in Birmingham today... can imagine a Birmingham when a pair of extra mules stood all day at the foot of Twentieth Street hill to be hitched to each car in order to furnish the extra power needed to get the car up the hill.”¹ So spoke T.G. Brabston, the superintendent of transportation of Birmingham Electric Company, in 1937. Tasked with ensuring that the residents of Birmingham had adequate transportation to suit their needs, Brabston, speaking to a reporter from the now defunct *Birmingham News-Age Herald*, discussed the arrival of their newest and most lauded fleet of thirty-four petroleum-powered busses. Acclaimed a year earlier in a July 20th edition of the *Birmingham Age Herald* as “...a revelation in comfort and convenience...,” the busses would eventually spell the doom of Birmingham’s street railway services. It seems that, even in 1937, owners of the Birmingham street railway system were looking for an exit. In 1900, the system served a total of ten million passenger trips, whereas in 1948, the system served an annual total of ninety-three million passenger trips and could carry commuters all the way from Irondale to South Bessemer.² The system’s final run, on the evening of Saturday, April 18, 1953, marked the end of an era that many thought Birmingham would never see. The system had an inextricable impact on Birmingham



SOUTH 20TH STREET HILL, LOOKING NORTH

South 20th Street Hill, Looking North, 1908. Courtesy of Birmingham, Ala., Public Library Archives.

ham and the surrounding areas, profoundly affecting the city, even up to the present day. The closure of the system was not without precedent, however. Trends, both national and regional, shuttled Americans further away from community-based public transportation and into the driver’s seat of private automobiles. The capitulation of the Birmingham street railway system, which, while in operation, affected long-lasting implications for the both city’s design and racial demographics, was an inevitable outcome resulting from shifting expectations from consumers, governmental regulations, the city’s intractable

1 James Saxon Childers, “Mule Drawn Cars to Busses in 50 Years,” *Birmingham News-Age Herald*, March 7, 1937.

2 Alvin W. Hudson and Harold E. Cox, *Street Railways of Birmingham* (Forty Fort, PA: Harold E. Cox, 1976), 44, 56.

stance on segregation, and the unwillingness of private concerns to provide public services.

Located in an area abundant with resources, including the three elements necessary for the production of steel (limestone, coal and iron-ore), Birmingham has always shown great potential, as well. Following the Civil War, industrialists sought new opportunities within the relatively untapped southern regions of the United States. In fact, in 1871, maps of Jefferson County still failed to mention the presence of Birmingham, no lodging for visitors was available in Birmingham, and there were no dependable railroad links to the city. Despite all of this, advertisements throughout the United States and Europe heralded the riches to be made in Birmingham.³ Unfortunately, it was not only Birmingham's natural resources that piqued the interest of investors, but also the region's availability of inexpensive, unorganized black labor pools. Many potential investors felt that utilizing black labor resources would provide them with a competitive advantage over northern industrialists who contended with strikes, labor regulations and labor unions on a regular basis.⁴ Labor concerns would remain at the forefront of the industrialists' minds as, even up until the Great Depression, many refused to allow their workers to grow corn on their plots for fear that they would hold secret union meetings behind the stalks.⁵

“ THE SYSTEM HAD AN INEXTRICABLE IMPACT ON BIRMINGHAM AND THE SURROUNDING AREAS, PROFOUNDLY AFFECTING THE CITY, EVEN UP TO THE PRESENT DAY.

3 Leah Rawls Atkins, *The Valley and the Hills: An illustrated History of Birmingham and Jefferson County* (Tarzana, CA: Preferred Marketing, 1996), 53.

4 W. David Lewis, *Sloss Furnaces and the Rise of the Birmingham District*, 2nd ed. (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1996), 31.

5 Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2013), 15.

Despite the somewhat sordid reasons for its development, the city and its surrounding areas grew exponentially over the following decades.

The city and its surrounding areas formed quite quickly, following the convergence of two major railroads in the Jones Valley region of Jefferson County in 1871. Although sporadic setbacks did occur, such as a cholera outbreak in 1873 that caused much of the Birmingham area to turn into a glorified ghost town, the Birmingham region prospered. Within thirty years of its founding, Birmingham would, almost by miracle, be the 100th largest city in America, thus earning its nickname,

the Magic City.⁶ Developers laid out settlements in an east-west orientation along the base of the iron-ore rich Red Mountain. While the central business district, characterized by wide avenues laid out on a grid pattern atypical of other southern cities at the time did exist, the relatively far flung nature of settlement in the area, and the demands of industrial owners to provide their workers with access to the factories, necessitated a public transportation system early on in the region's history.⁷

The decentralized population and abundance of wide open spaces allowed Birmingham to pioneer usage of steam engine street cars at a time when the engines proved too dangerous, cumbersome or impractical for other large, more congested cities. From the outset, Birmingham possessed the nation's largest streetcar network run on steam engines; only Los Angeles' system approached the size of Birmingham's. While mule drawn carriages were utilized primarily in the city's center, the steam engine streetcars

6 Hudson and Cox, *Street Railways*, 7.

7 Ibid., 9.

serviced areas far flung from the central business district, allowing those areas to prosper as well.

In the formative years of Birmingham's public transportation, over a dozen companies operated street railways in the area. Similar to other major cities in the United States at the time, Birmingham lacked a centralized municipal authority to coordinate its public transportation opportunities. Electric utilities saw streetcars as a way to capitalize on their investment in infrastructure by providing electric streetcars. The multitude of different streetcar companies and the diverse equipment they used caused a great deal of confusion for the citizenry and the government alike. For example, property rights became an issue as many farmers in the area refused to make way for the new streetcar systems. One farmer refused to demolish his barn that sat in the middle of one line's right of way. Equally stubborn, the railway company laid its tracks such that trains would pass through the barn, rather than go around it.⁸ At another point, two companies became embroiled in a dispute over whether one should be allowed to cross its tracks over the tracks of the other, the Birmingham Railway Company. The dispute reached such levels that locals kidnapped and held a night guardsman in captivity while work on the disputed intersection was complete.⁹ Other suspicious events, including companies removing the rails of their competitors during the night and replacing them with their own to secure a coveted route, occurred frequently throughout the early years of Birmingham's public transportation. Although characterized by shady business practices and dubious dealings, creation of street railways in Birmingham had a profound and long lasting impact on the city.

The industrial sector of Birmingham's economy

affected the city in such a profound way as to defy any possible explanation, other than that the city simply would not exist had the industrial demands not been present. The industrialists of Birmingham placed a high degree of concern and importance on maintaining the segregation of their employees. As one Sloss Furnaces executive noted in 1896, employing African Americans worked to their benefit considering "...our negroes trade 65% to 70% of their earnings in the Company store."¹⁰ The business interests encountered problems with this, however, as providing adequate housing for the African American employees proved troublesome. Thus, utilizing an effective means of public transportation worked to these industrialists' interests as African American laborers could live elsewhere, commute to their work, and still spend the majority of their earnings in the company store. Additionally, while African Americans and whites would work side by side in steel mills, they were expected to live in separate areas of the city.¹¹ The foundry and mill owners wanted to keep their workers segregated, however they needed them available to work. Thus, maintaining an effective public transportation facilitated their needs.

In Birmingham, as in many American cities, the accessibility of venues to the populace primarily determined the viability of recreational opportunities at the turn of the 20th century. With the ubiquity of the automobile several decades away, the availability of public transportation determined whether attractions were accessible to the population. Often times, public transportation concerns would even fund the creation of public amusement parks so as to encourage more travel on their lines. Several parks

⁸ James Saxon Childers, "Mule Drawn Cars to Busses in 50 Years," *Birmingham News-Age Herald*, March 7, 1937.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Lewis, *Sloss Furnaces*, 191.

¹¹ A turn of the century *Birmingham News* article summed up the prevailing attitude quite succinctly, noting: "The taste of blood makes them [African Americans] reckless. They will readily, surely give vent to their hatred of some white men, and sooner or later kill white men." Quoted in Lewis, *Sloss Furnaces*, 249.

in Birmingham, including Avondale Park, Lakeview Park, East Lake Park, and Red Mountain Park, were founded by transportation companies in order to increase ridership to the city's outskirts.¹² In addition, the parks would lure visitors by offering either special promotions or events. The park located atop Red Mountain featured a luxury hotel and casino, the Red Mountain Hotel, as well as concerts in summer evenings wherein park owners promised turn of the century patrons free ice and water, a novel marketing campaign for the time. Additionally, as of 1900, East Lake Park, at one hundred acres in size, boasted the largest manmade lake in the South, a theater and pavilion, a casino, a restaurant, a tea garden, and baseball and football clubs.¹³ The parks mirrored the city's segregationist leanings as well. Two of the five parks owned by the streetcar lines served African Americans, while the other three served whites only.¹⁴ In addition to parks, many neighborhoods sprang forth from the streetcar system. Neighborhoods such as Redmont, Edgewood, Forest Park, Avondale, Lakeview, East Lake, Gate City, and Highland Park sprang to life either by direct investment from the streetcar companies or as a direct result of their proximity to streetcar lines. Just as the streetcar lines profoundly affected residential neighborhoods in Birmingham, so too did they impact the industrial sector.

With the coming of electrically powered street railway networks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, fewer companies would be able to afford the infrastructure costs associated with this new means of locomotion. The Birmingham Electric Railway Company, founded in 1890, began consolidating various railway

companies shortly after its inception as these companies found themselves unable to handle the skyrocketing infrastructure costs. It faced an uphill battle, however, in convincing the local population of the enhanced safety and efficiency that electrically powered streetcars could provide when compared to their steam powered counterparts currently in use throughout Birmingham. Exacerbating this problem of public coercion, a serious issue occurred after the streetcar network in Montgomery, Alabama had

“ PETTY BATTLES OVER THE PROPER WAY FOR AFRICAN AMERICANS TO BOARD STREETCARS ... EMBROILED THE COMPANY IN LENGTHY AND COSTLY BATTLES WITH THE CITY GOVERNMENT.

been electrified a year earlier. In 1891, the horse belonging to the mayor of Montgomery stepped on an exposed current carried in a ground level rail and died instantly.¹⁵ The Birmingham lines converted, however, to cleaner and quieter electricity, and the end of the steam engines in Birmingham approached. Aside from some frightened mules and various dogs presumably angered by the first run of an electric street car in Birmingham, the first trip along the Highland Avenue line succeeded in winning over the public and ironically marked the beginning of a new, troubled era for Birmingham public transportation.¹⁶

Following the successful implementation of electric railways in Birmingham, more substantial consolidation continued. In 1901, the Birmingham Railway, Light and Power Company, organized under the leadership of famed real estate developer and local business mogul,

12 Hudson and Cox, *Street Railways*, 216. The Red Mountain Park noted should not be confused with the modern nature preserve of the same name.

13 Ibid., 44.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid, 35.

16 Ibid, 36.

Robert Jemison, following the merger of fourteen individual railway companies that could not handle the rising infrastructure costs.¹⁷ Despite an ensuing series of setbacks including both car-barn and office fires, the system seemed primed for further success.

In 1915, however, the automobile came to Birmingham in force, fueled by the inexpensive Ford Model T and the sprawling nature and wide avenues that made automobile driving both easy and practical. Revenue decreased for the streetcar business until the United States entered World War I in 1917. Although revenue from ridership increased, operational costs also soared as a result of the decreased supply of materials available to non-war related industries. The Birmingham Railway, Light and Power Company sought a fare increase to cover its deficits. However, foreshadowing future troubles, the city commission of Birmingham denied the request, foretelling future struggles the company would face with the city. The war-related difficulties remained following the armistice, and riders often refused to pay fares, and sometimes even attacked or threw stones at the streetcars, as the quality of service declined precipitously because of the refusal to increase fares¹⁸. Compounding the Birmingham Railway, Light, and Power Company's troubles, the city of Birmingham initiated strict demands for more extensive implementation of Jim Crow laws in the 1920s. Arguments over the appropriate size of signs indicating segregated



Birmingham Railway, Light and Power office in downtown Birmingham, Alabama, 1910. Courtesy of Birmingham, Ala., Public Library Archives.

seating onboard streetcars as well as petty battles over the proper way for African Americans to board streetcars so as to cause minimal disturbance to the white passengers embroiled the company in lengthy and costly battles with the city government.¹⁹ Additionally, the introduction of jitney services offered the first substantial competition the streetcar system had faced.

Jitneys, a mode of transportation smaller than a bus but larger than a private vehicle, began operating in the city in the early 1920s, and thus drained the Birmingham Railway, Light and Power Company of valuable passengers. In exchange for increasing the stringency and enforcement of Jim Crow regulations on streetcars, the city banned jit-

17 George M. Cruikshank, *A History of Birmingham and Its Environs*, Vol. 1 (Chicago: Lewis Publishing, 1920), 149.

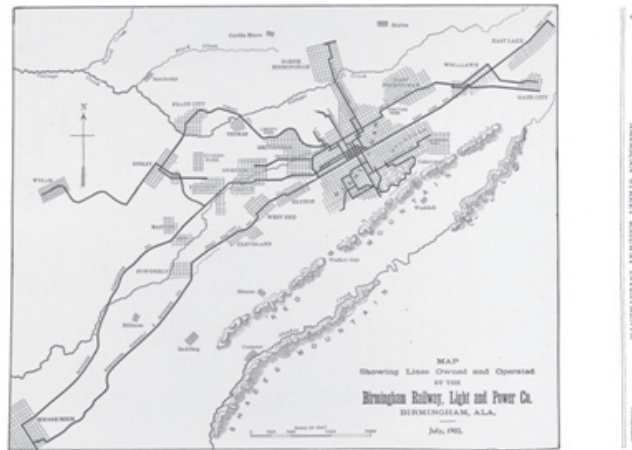
18 Hudson and Cox, *Street Railways*, 48.

19 Ibid., 52-3.

neys in 1923. Although some jitneys operated by private individuals attempted to skirt the ban by disguising themselves as private taxis, their trade all but ended.²⁰ Unfortunately, however, the extensive financial damage as a result of both the jitney's as well as the inability to increase fares to the streetcar system forced the company into bankruptcy. Reorganized as the Birmingham Electric Company, the system continued operation

throughout the 1920s, but faced severe cutbacks during the Great Depression. The economic collapse of the Great Depression struck a terrific blow to Birmingham's main industry, and pushed the city into a steep decline. While Birmingham attained the highest rate of illiteracy in the country, and as its murder rate earned it the title "Murder capital of the World," Franklin D. Roosevelt deemed Birmingham "the hardest-hit city in America" as a result of the Great Depression.²¹ Although the profitability of streetcars had somewhat rebounded following the jitney ban, facing intense difficulties and serious deficits, the Birmingham Electric Company wisely refused to discontinue its rail service in order to remain solvent. Just as foreclosure and dismantling seemed imminent, however, the United States' entry into World War II saved the company from collapse.

World War II, and the tire, gasoline and travel restric-



Map of the lines owned and operated by the Birmingham Railway, Light and Power Co., Birmingham, Alabama, July 1903. Courtesy of the University of Texas Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

tions that accompanied it, helped the Birmingham streetcar network reach its greatest heights. Wartime demands for steel goods sent Birminghamians back to work in droves. In 1942, the system served an average of six million passenger trips per month.²² The streetcar system saw little infrastructural improvement during the war due to rationing of industrial parts, however, and the operators knew that the end of the war would signal the end of the pas-

senger influx. Thusly, the Birmingham Electric Company made providing as high quality a service as possible their primary goal.²³ Post-war safety improvements and equipment upgrades could not, however, stop national trends from affecting the demise of the network.

The United States government began systematically favoring the construction of roads over the maintenance and expansion of American cities' public transportation infrastructure prior to World War I, and continued this practice through the end of World War II.²⁴ As automobile interests lobbied more and more for greater roadway expenditure, the federal government began effectively subsidizing the use of automobiles with its seventy-five million

²⁰ Ibid., 53.

²¹ McWhorter, *Carry Me*, 14.

²² Hudson and Cox, *Street Railways*, 56.

²³ Ibid., 56.

²⁴ James Howard Kunstler, *The Geography of Nowhere: The Rise and Decline of America's Man-Made Landscape* (New York: Touchstone, 1994), 90.

dollar Federal Road Act of 1916. Simultaneously, the federal government provided public transportation concerns with precious little funding.²⁵ As public transportation companies in cities across America struggled to remain solvent, municipal governments neither allowed transit companies to discontinue unprofitable routes, nor would they allow them to raise their rates.²⁶ Cities across America ripped their streetcar lines from the pavement and replaced their routes with gasoline-powered busses. Indeed, the interests of automobile manufacturers reached a pronounced tempo in 1950 when General Motors was indicted by a federal grand jury for criminal conspiracy. The company had systematically purchased over one hundred streetcar lines in California before dismantling and replacing them with busses. As a result, the company was fined five thousand dollars, which “was about equal to the company’s net profit on the sale of five Chevrolets.”²⁷ In addition to automobile interests, federal regulations promoted the closure of streetcar systems in America.

As the solvency of the Birmingham Electric Company became more and more precarious, owners of the company sought an exit. While the Birmingham Electric Company supplied power for the city of Birmingham and some of its inner suburbs, the Alabama Power Company supplied electricity for the surrounding areas. Indeed, the Birmingham Electric Company purchased much of the electricity it sold to consumers from the Alabama Power Company. Thus, in 1950, a merger of the two seemed both reasonable and inevitable. The Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), however, only approved the merger after the Alabama Power Company agreed to sell off the streetcar system. The ruling, enforced under policy adopted by the SEC

as a part of the New Deal in order to aid the automobile industry, “forced higher operating expenses on independent transit facilities and spurred conversions from trolley to bus service.”²⁸ In fact, only one major utility company, New Orleans Public Service, escaped the SEC mandate. Having already closed its streetcar networks in Huntsville, Anniston, Tuscaloosa, Gadsden, Florence, Sheffield and Tuscumbia, the Alabama Power Company sought to avoid reentry the streetcar business. Thus, the SEC’s decision was a welcome solution to Alabama Power’s problem.²⁹ Although the Alabama Power Company enjoyed an easy exit from an industry in free-fall, the system’s closure, all but finalized in the 1950 ruling, was tinged with racism.

Although jitneys had been outlawed in 1923, pub-



Streetcar loading passengers in Downtown Birmingham, Alabama.
Courtesy of Birmingham, Ala., Public Library Archives

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 91-2.

²⁸ Hudson and Cox, *Street Railways*, 59-60.

²⁹ Ibid., 60.

lic busses began taking prominence on Birmingham's roads in the post-war period. Additionally, many illegal jitney companies still operated under the city's radar. A Birmingham *Post-Herald* article from 1952 noted that "[s]uggesting that transit has reached a crisis is almost an understatement."³⁰ Another *Post-Herald* article from 1950 noted that a transit spokesman, in a city council meeting in Birmingham, promised a "complete modernization" of the Birmingham transportation system, which "...means that almost all streetcar service will be replaced by busses or tackles trolleys."³¹ The city councilors applauded his statement, and praised the Birmingham Electric Company for its previous removal of several streetcar lines. Although replacing streetcar lines with busses had been characterized as a safety and efficiency conscious endeavor since the process began in 1936, the motivations for replacement often sprang from apparent racism, as well. A 1936 Birmingham *Post* article announcing plans for the Birmingham Electric Company to begin removing streetcar lines and to replace them with busses noted curtailing the operation of "negro jitneys" as a reason for the change. The "negro servant trade," the article contends, preferred the illegal jitney service over the streetcar system because the jitneys "charge as a rule only five cents, and carry their passengers directly to their destination, whereas the street cars miss some of the houses in Forest park and on top of the mountain by nearly a mile."³² The Birmingham Electric Company reasoned that bus service would cut back on the jitney trade. Whether the jitney

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services truly caused an unsustainable financial burden to the Birmingham Electric Company or not, the motivations for transition to bus service clearly maintained racial undertones.

A 1935 redline map for Birmingham lists the neighborhoods of Forest Park and Redmont, both on the city's south side, as "still desirable" and "best," respectively.³³ Mortgage lending companies used redline maps in the mid twentieth century to classify the racial makeup of cities. The maps deemed areas of African American concentration as undesirable for resale, and thus lenders hesitated to provide mortgages for those areas. More desirable areas had fewer African Americans, and, thusly, the lenders readily loaned to clients in these areas. Redline maps serve as important documents classifying the racial makeup of cities, and help explain

the pattern of the discontinuance of Birmingham's streetcar system. Considering that both, the popular view in the mid-twentieth century dictated that bus transportation far exceeded streetcar transportation in terms of cleanliness, efficiency and safety, as well as the institutionalized segregation in Birmingham during the mid-twentieth century, the predominantly white neighborhoods would, theoretically, be the first to receive bus transportation, while the predominantly African American neighborhoods would be the last. Indeed, the sequence of the conversion of Birmingham's streetcar network to busses holds this to be true. White neighborhoods, such as Forest Park, Redmont, Lakeview and Avondale received bus transit first. Neighborhoods such as Ensley, Wenonah, West End and East

30 J.H. Rutledge and J.D. Rees, "Many Cities Find Transit Business a Bumpy One," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, April 8, 1952.

31 "BECO Promises Action to Improve System," *Birmingham Post-Herald*, October 10, 1950.

32 "BECO and City Agree on Buses," *Birmingham Post*, March 9, 1936.

33 "Redline Map for Birmingham, Alabama," NARA- Residential Security Maps, 1933-1939 - Maps and Charts, National Archives and Records Administration, accessed August 2, 2015, <http://catalog.archives.gov/id/6082401>

Lake lost their streetcar service last, and, coincidentally, were classified on the redline map of 1935 as being centers of “negro concentration.”³⁴ The cancellation of streetcar service in predominantly white neighborhoods prior to citywide closure indicates that the population of Birmingham, as a result of the bus-line’s ability to reach closer to homes, truly did see bus transportation as a preferable means of public transportation. Not surprisingly, the system remained segregated until the very end.

By 1953, the streetcar network in Birmingham had been gutted. As line after line closed, the network became a shadow of its former self. The city turned out, however, to celebrate the final run of a streetcar in Birmingham. The last photograph taken on board a streetcar in Birmingham, as car #812 made its final journey from Ensley early in the morning of April 19, 1953, shows a crowd of white passengers smiling as they huddle together and collectively bid farewell to relic in the making. Barely noticeable, however, in the almost empty “colored” section of the car, stand two African Americans. No white passengers stood in the “colored” section of the streetcar.³⁵ Crowds cheered as the streetcar reached the end of its line.³⁶ The Birmingham Transit Company, formed after Alabama Power’s acquisition of the Birmingham Electric Company, sold the remainder of Birmingham’s fleet to transit concerns in Vancouver, Canada, Mexico City and Toronto.³⁷

As the majority of Birminghamians abandoned public transportation and, instead, opted for private automobiles throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the transit infrastructure in the city floundered.³⁸ Although the city, seeking to spur further development in Birming-

ham’s revitalizing downtown, requested proposals in 2008 for a planned thirty-three million dollar streetcar system in order to spur further development in the city’s downtown, which many business leaders lauded, the plans floundered as civic support waned. The federal conviction of the mayor spearheading the proposal did not help matters either, and the plan was subsequently abandoned.³⁹

From its early days of mule drawn wagons traversing dirt roads in a relatively lawless village in the American Deep South, the streetcar network of Birmingham grew to be the largest of its type in the country. Mirroring the magic growth of the city around it, the network grew by leaps and bounds. Finally, just as the city it called home stood at the doorway of unprecedented racial strife, the streetcar network in Birmingham ceased operation. The system’s effect on the city remains visible through the parks, neighborhoods, and roads it either influenced or created. The streetcar network in Birmingham not only allowed, but also encouraged, the city around it to grow as fast and as well as it did. Although national trends, racism and a lack of interest in maintaining the system all contributed to its closure, the streetcar network in Birmingham indisputably defined the city, and helped form it into its present form.

34 Ibid.

35 Hudson and Cox, *Street Railways*, 61.

36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.

38 Ashley Creek, “On the Bus: Part One,” *Weld for Birmingham*, November 6, 2013.

39 Jimmy Debutts, “Transit Authority Soliciting Streetcar Proposals,” *Birmingham Business Journal*, April 30, 2008; “Streetcars Can Bring in New Money,” *Birmingham Business Journal*, March 2, 2008.