

## Overview of the Impact of the Industrial Revolution on Birmingham, Alabama

### Executive Summary

Sloss Furnaces, located in Birmingham, was one of the Southeast's largest manufacturers of pig iron. James Withers Sloss, a north Alabama merchant and railroad man, launched the Sloss Furnace Company in 1881. Sloss Furnaces produced a type of iron called *pig iron*, which was used as a component in the creation of cast-iron pipe and steel. Since all the necessary components for producing pig-iron could be found in the nearby Jones Valley area, Birmingham was an ideal location. The blast furnaces that were built at the Sloss site brought an influx of immigrants and rural Alabamians to Birmingham to work for Sloss and related industries. The establishment of Sloss Furnaces and related industries thrust Birmingham into the Industrial Revolution.

### The Founding of Birmingham and Sloss Furnace Company

"In 1871, seeking to diversify northern Alabama's economy, several prominent Alabamians founded the city of Birmingham with the explicit goal of exploiting the mineral resources of north-central Alabama (Jones Valley), where every ingredient necessary for making iron and steel could be found within a thirty-mile radius. One of these men was James Withers Sloss, a north Alabama merchant who had brought the L&N Railroad to Jones Valley in 1871 transforming Birmingham from a squalid jumble of tents, shanties, and boxcars into a thriving community. Anxious to tap the rich mineral areas surrounding Birmingham, Sloss and his fellow Birmingham promoters, acquired 30,000 acres and formed the Pratt Coal and Coke Company (named in memory of Daniel Pratt, an early antebellum industrialist). Pratt quickly became the largest mining enterprise in the district." (Utz, Work, Family, Faith 230).

In June of 1881, ground was broken on a new fifty-acre site (Sloss' present site) donated by the Elyton Land Company. The chief engineer, Harry Hargreaves, designed a new type of stove that would supply the hot-air blast for the new furnaces. These stoves, eighteen inches in diameter and sixty feet high, were the first of their kind to be built for a factory of this type. Two blowing engines and ten boilers, thirty feet long and forty-six inches in diameter, were blasted for the first time in 1882. During this period there were approximately 19 blast furnaces in Jefferson County.

"Soon blast furnaces for processing the iron ore mined by Pratt sprung up all over Jefferson County, and pig iron rapidly became big business in northern Alabama" (Utz, Work, Family, Faith 230).

"By the 1880s, Birmingham was booming and due to its rapid growth, had earned the nickname the 'Magic City.' Growth and prosperity continued into the twentieth century. The city seemed to embody the promise of the New South, and the Birmingham District became a magnet for thousands of settlers both black and white. Nonetheless, as historian W. David Lewis notes, 'the status that Birmingham attained as a leading symbol of the New South was paradoxical. The city was deeply rooted in the old plantation system.' Whereas Northern industry was based on free labor, these New South planter-entrepreneurs favored the old southern model of manufacturing built upon the institution of the earlier slave years where whites had complete control and a dependent labor supply" (Utz, Work, Family, Faith 231).

Sloss retired in 1886 and sold the factory to a group of financiers who rapidly expanded the

operation. By 1889, they had re-organized as Sloss-Sheffield Steel and Iron. The group's aim to eventually make steel never materialized but the factory became the largest pig-iron operation in the Birmingham area. They went on to increase their holdings and production of pig-iron and by the time World War I began they were among the largest producers of pig-iron in the world. In the late 1920's, much of the equipment was replaced and the plant was mechanized. This mechanization resulted in almost doubling the production capacity of the plant.

As World War II loomed, the market for pig-iron increased and created even more jobs. During this era of Birmingham's history, approximately 50% of the labor force was employed in the iron, steel and mining industry and approximately 60% of the workers were African-American.

### Early Life in the Magic City

"The majority of the new workers flocking to Birmingham were former farmers and sharecroppers from Alabama and other southeastern states who hoped to escape rural poverty and find jobs and better life for their families. They were frustrated and tired with being kept poor and in debt by landlords who devised a system of sharecropping that allowed them little more freedom than slavery had. In the 1880s, with cotton prices continually dropping, many black farmers had decided that their only real freedom was to leave the farm and head to the mines and furnaces of Birmingham" (Utz, Work, Family, Faith 231).

"[T]he majority of Alabama's African American women participating in the rural exodus of the 1870s and 1880s were accompanying their husbands or fathers in search of greater opportunities in the growing iron and steel industries in the Birmingham District. In order to keep these industries well supplied with cheap labor and to keep control over their employees, companies such as Sloss Furnaces, one of Birmingham's largest iron-producing plants, often built company houses immediately next to their factories...African American women...realized that the way to make the transition from rural life to urban life a success was by making their long-standing customs and beliefs an intricate part of this life-altering transition. Traditional domestic duties such as child rearing, housework and gardening will remain the primary responsibilities, as well as the determination on the part of women to bring in additional income by becoming domestic workers, laundresses, seamstresses, or simply by selling boxed lunches from the stoops of their homes" (Utz, Work, Family, Faith 229-230).

"Sloss Quarters did not become a successful and cohesive community because of the men who labored in the neighboring blast furnaces; it thrived and succeeded because of the women who were determined to make a better life for themselves and their families away from the desperate poverty of their previous rural existence. And like southern white hill farmers from the northern regions of Alabama seeking new lives in the booming textile mills, black sharecroppers embarking on their journeys from the depleted Black Belt region of the South brought not only their possessions, but also the "cultural baggage" of their rural communities as they headed to the new industrial town of Birmingham" (Utz, Work, Family, Faith 230).

One of the ways African American women adapted to urban life was to form or join various social organizations. And while black women formed social clubs for the same purposes that whitewomen did (companionship and to share similar interests), proportionately fewer black women living in the Quarters found time to participate, or preferred to form their own domesticated gatherings, such as

quilting bees and sewing circles” Utz, Work, Family, Faith 241).

“While their husbands toiled and labored in the surrounding mines and blast furnaces (and literally built the city of Birmingham), and while faced with the sting of segregation and discrimination, these remarkable women built strong and lasting family foundations by adapting their rural customs and traditions to their new surroundings...The hard-working rural values and traditions brought in by white farmers-turned-mill workers, as well as black sharecroppers-turned-iron workers, not only allowed them to cope and adapt to unfamiliar surroundings, but assisted in the creation of the industrial world of the New South” (Utz, Work, Family, Faith 259).

“African American church life in Birmingham at the turn of the century reflected its origins in the rural South. City churches held to the similar rural doctrine as divine judgment, and the need for repentance and salvation. This consistency allowed black families from rural backgrounds to assimilate more easily into a society in which the church was such a crucial part. White-controlled mining and manufacturing companies such as Sloss Furnaces, already in control of large portions of the lives of their workers, realized early on the importance of religion in black communities. Perhaps as another way to control their work force or to provide all the community’s needs within the Quarters, Sloss built a church for the workers. New Hope Baptist Church, built in Birmingham’s West End district, traces its beginnings to a congregation, which met in a building owned by Sloss Furnaces” (Utz, Work, Family, Faith 242).

“Music also brought back memories of the land, families, and better times ahead. Black gospel quartets, their roots founded in the rural communities of Alabama, became a popular source of entertainment in the 1920s and 1930s. Recording studios set up makeshift studio in Birmingham hotels and recorded such groups as the Golden Leaf Quartette, and the Sterling Jubilee Singers. By the end of the 1930s, Birmingham will lay claim as one of the two cradles (the other being Richmond, Virginia) of black gospel quartet music. Music tied the families in the Quarters together just as it had bound families and neighbors together in the rural communities” (Utz, Work, Family, Faith 248).

### **Unionization During the Industrial Revolution**

In 1933, the United Mine Workers launched a major drive to organize Alabama’s coal, iron, and steel industries. Union organizers, labeled by the local press as Communists and outside agitators, were threatened, beaten, and run out of town. Nonetheless, Sloss Sheffield ore miners were the first in the state to affiliate with the union, forming Local 109 on July 17, 1933. Because of unionization, Sloss-Sheffield was forced to raise wages and grant fringe benefits. In 1936, the company began giving a one-week paid vacation to all employees who had been in service for five years or more. The sudden revival of the United Mine Workers of America in 1933 was a remarkable story. In late 1932 the UMWA was practically obsolete, yet by the fall of 1933 it was in the strongest position in its history” (Utz, Sloss Furnaces 8).

### **Sloss Furnaces Today**

By 1970 increasing competition, decreased demand for U.S. produced pig iron and increasing environmental regulations forced the shut-down of Sloss Furnaces. Sloss was donated to the Alabama State Fair Authority with the intention that it be developed as an industrial museum. In 1976, after deciding that a museum was impractical the State Fair Authority determined that demolition of Sloss would be the best course of action. Some in Birmingham felt that Sloss was an

## Background Information for Birmingham and Sloss Furnaces

eyesore to be quickly demolished while others believed passionately in the preservation of Sloss as part of Birmingham's early history, "Sloss Furnaces Association" gained national attention as the group lobbied to save Sloss. Eventually, control of Sloss was transferred to the City of Birmingham. In 1977 work to preserve Sloss began and in 1981 its place as a National Historic Landmark was secured. Sloss opened to the public as an industrial museum in 1983. Sloss is the only 20<sup>th</sup> century blast furnaces in the world that is being interpreted and preserved as an industrial museum.

### Work Cited:

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