

Alabama Fuel and Iron Company, DeBardeleben's Last Comeback

The name DeBardeleben and the Birmingham Industrial District go together. In the beginning, Henry Fairchild DeBardeleben (1840-1910) helped make Birmingham "go" in many, many ways. Henry DeBardeleben was a charismatic, visionary entrepreneur who not only started many enterprises which built Birmingham, but he also urged others to do so. And yet, Henry DeBardeleben did not always succeed. For all his successful ventures, he had several significant failures. Yet, he tried again and succeeded, even in the face of those who believed his ideas were likely to fail.

One of these enterprises was the Alabama Fuel & Iron Company, which became the 4th largest producer of coal in Alabama at over a million tons per year during its heyday. DeBardeleben achieved this by mining property (some leased) which others thought was not worth working.



Henry DeBardeleben's life and enterprises are well documented in Birmingham's industrial histories. Ethel Armes "The Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama" has some 220 references to the DeBardeleben name. A good synopsis of his life is found in the Encyclopedia of Alabama, by contributor Dr. James Sanders Day. DeBardeleben was born in 1840, and was orphaned at the age of 10, subsequently becoming the ward of Daniel Pratt, the wealthy owner of the Pratt cotton gin company and namesake of Prattville, AL. Henry served in the Civil War, and married Pratt's daughter, Ellen. Henry and his father-in-law entered the fledgling Birmingham District when they purchased controlling interest in the Red Mountain Iron and Coal Company in 1872. This was the enterprise that built the Oxmoor Furnaces during the Civil War. Eventually this enterprise became the Eureka Company and produced the first coke fueled pig iron in the Birmingham District, on February 28, 1876.

DeBardeleben went on to partner with Truman Aldrich and James Sloss to begin development of the Browne Coal Seam, which they named "Pratt" after DeBardeleben's father-in-law. The Pratt Seam became the basis of much of Birmingham's industrial growth as it was the largest of the three coal fields in the Birmingham District. This group formed the **Pratt Coal and Coke Company** and built a rail line from their Pratt mines to the **Alice Furnace** (1880), one of the anchor industrial enterprises in early Birmingham. This railroad became the basis of the Birmingham Southern Railroad.

As Day notes, DeBardeleben went on to invest and develop a wide range of industrial pursuits. He sold the Pratt Coal and Coke Company to Enoch Ensley of Memphis, and due to health concerns left Birmingham for a year. He returned and founded the **Mary Pratt Furnace Company** (1883) anchoring the eastern end of Birmingham's Railroad and Mechanical Reservation. Again, health issues intervened, and DeBardeleben left for the Southwest. (In the meantime, Ensley developed the Pratt Coal and Iron Company which was acquired by the Tennessee Coal, Iron and RR Co (TCI). Ensley became president of TCI upon reorganization in 1886.)

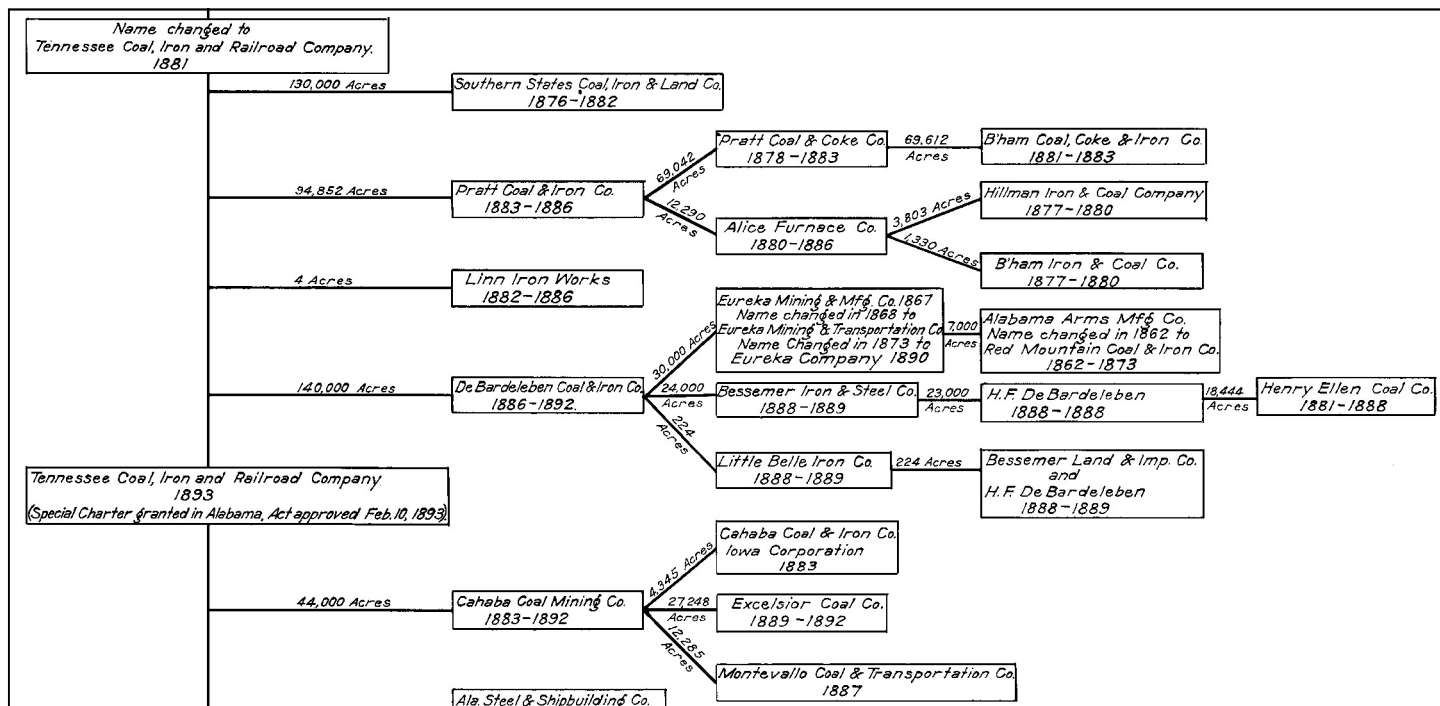
Returning to Birmingham once again, DeBardeleben founded the **DeBardeleben Coal and Iron Company (DCIC)** and started the **Bessemer Land and Improvement Company**. The latter company sought to develop a new steel making center in competition with fledgling Birmingham. Bessemer soon boasted five blast furnaces and a large rolling mill at the same time that the Ensley plant of TCI was being developed. Within a year, all of these enterprises in Bessemer were under the control of the **DCIC**. According to Armes, p. 424, other interests developed by DeBardeleben and part these holdings included Oxmoor furnaces, vast holdings of Red Mountain ore, Champion brown ore, plus coal mines in Helena, Henry Ellen, Blue Creek, Blocton and Gurnee.

In 1891, the TCI had gone through another reorganization and the new president was Nat Baxter, of Nashville. Birmingham had been in "boom" mode since 1886. Mergers and acquisitions continued and DeBardeleben didn't want to be left out. He soon worked a deal with Baxter and the TCI acquired the DeBardeleben Coal and Iron Company, in a stock deal valued at \$10 million. In 1892, the merged companies formalized their organization and became the Tennessee Coal Iron and RR Co. The new version of TCI was capitalized at \$20 million. This included three major organizations: The Tennessee Company, DCIC and Truman Aldrich's Cahaba Coal Mining Company. All told there were 12 companies merged into one, and Henry DeBardeleben had a hand in many of them. The new Officers were Nat Baxter, President, DeBardeleben, 1st Vice President, Truman Aldrich, 2nd Vice President and General Manager plus others who from the TCI.

But all was not well. The Tennessee Company, unknown to DeBardeleben at the time of the deal, was not on sound financial footing. In 1893, there was a general business recession, then called the "Panic of '93". Thus the new company, although rich

in land, resources and new industrial plant construction, was short on cash. The nation's manufacturing business was very slow, which was reflected in the iron business. The TCI managed to get through the crisis, mostly on the efforts of Truman Aldrich in New York raising money on the future value of the company's large volume of unsold pig iron.

By 1894, Henry DeBardeleben "persuaded that another boom was in the wind" (Armes, p. 427) tried to corner the TCI stock on Wall Street and take control of the company. He went to New York and tried to outwit the investors and manipulators of



Wall Street and lost nearly all he had, including his TCI stock. He came home disgraced and resigned from the TCI in late 1894 at the age of 54. Nevertheless, as shown in the above "family tree" of TCI, Henry F. DeBardeleben had a significant part in the growth and development of TCI as well as the Birmingham District in general. (Source: US Steel, author's collection)

Armes "Story of Coal and Iron in Alabama" was published in 1910. Her last significant reference to Henry F. DeBardeleben is "after his resignation [1894]... he embarked on new enterprises and is at present [1910] Vice President of Alabama Fuel and Iron Company, and with his son [Henry T.] has begun the building of another mining enterprise in the Sheffield [AL] District."

The above account of Henry DeBardeleben's businesses is not meant to be complete but to show that so much of the early development of the Birmingham District included DeBardeleben's activity and development skills.

There are three major coal fields in the Birmingham District: The Cahaba, the Warrior (largest) and the Coosa (smallest). The earliest development was in the Cahaba Field, which lies along the valley of the Cahaba River. An excellent reference book is "Diamonds in the Rough: A History of the Cahaba Coal Field" by Dr. James Sanders Day, a professor at the University of Montevallo. Published in 2013 by the University of Alabama Press, this book provides an excellent view of the earliest coal mining in Alabama, predating the development of the Birmingham District. Because of its recent publication, it helps to overlap the "end" of Armes coverage due to her publication in 1910. This book is available in the Birmingham Public Library and is previewed on Google Books. It should be on the bookshelf of anyone interested in the history of railroads and industry in Birmingham.

Day's book covers the development of the Cahaba Coal Field from the early 1840's. It was the coal field that supplied most of the coal mined in Alabama through the time of the Civil War. Although there were a few iron furnaces operating in this time period, they were typically fueled with charcoal rather than coal made into coke. Thus, early coal mining was for heating and limited small forging activities. Truman Aldrich was one of the early industrialists to mine coal with a view toward future development, and the use of geologic surveys. To this end, he enlisted the services and talents of Joseph Squire who did a remarkable job of exploring and particularly of mapping the Cahaba Coal Field.

DeBardeleben had started mining in the Cahaba Coal Field as part of the formation of the DCIC. What appears to be a pro-

spectus of that company dated 1890 show that it mined coal at Henry Ellen, in the Cahaba Basin -- Henry Ellen is named for DeBardeleben in his wife. A second mining site in the Cahaba Field was at Helena. The 1890 summary of DCIC, a new company in development, claims that the two sites, Henry Ellen and Helena contained over 900 million tons of "steam and coking coal, especially suitable for domestic purposes". It may also be noted that these sites were 28 and 16 miles from Birmingham, although both were served by railroads. A third site, at Blue Creek, in the Pratt Seam was served by rail and closer to Birmingham and particularly Bessemer than either of the other two sites.

The Henry Ellen mining sites were acquired by the TCI, and although listed among active TCI assets by 1900, the TCI focused more on its Pratt Field mines, including those developed by DeBardeleben at Blue Creek, but in particular its Pratt Mines. Likewise, by 1900, TCI had contracted the Helena Mines to others receiving royalties for each ton mined. A great summary of the TCI operations in 1900 is provided in "Tennessee Coal & Iron Company, a Description of Plants and Mines", published by the company in 1900. It is available at Birmingham Public Library in the archives, and may be found online.

It seems likely that TCI focused more on Pratt Field mines because they were closer to Ensley, the site of the company's main plant. DeBardeleben's experiences and claims of coal opportunities at Helena and Henry Ellen did not seem to influence TCI's path of development. The sites at Henry Ellen and Helena lie at somewhat opposite ends of the Cahaba Coal Field and may have provided the basis for DeBardeleben's move to that Field when he made his comeback play in the Birmingham District.

Although not much is found about Henry F.'s activities from 1894 to 1905, we do know more about his son Henry T. DeBardeleben (1874-1948). Henry T. graduated college from Howard (Samford) and owned by the TCI. He then joined Watts Iron and Steel Syndicate in 1896, and Woodward Iron (and related) companies until 1904. He went on to Bon Air Coal and Iron in Tennessee, Woodstock Iron and Steel in Anniston, then President of Russellville Iron Ore and Metal in 1909-1910. Thus one might think that Henry F. had a good idea of what was going on in the iron industry by following the successful growth of his son's career, as outlined above from "Biographical Dictionary of American Business Leaders, Volume 1", by John N. Ingham.

Son Charles F. (1876-1941) likewise graduated from Alabama Polytechnic and went to work for the TCI. He joined the **Bessemer Coal, Iron & Land Company**, becoming superintendent of its coal operation. He was a stockholder in the Little Cahaba Coal Company and opened the Piper Mines. He then joined his father in the founding of Alabama Fuel & Steel Company. (Cruikshank, Birmingham and Its Environs, p. 370)

Henry F. DeBardeleben again entered the Birmingham District as a business owner in 1905 with the development of the Alabama Fuel & Steel Company. Henry F. was President, with Henry T. as Vice President and Charles F. as VP and General Manager. In 1908 the company changed its name to Alabama Fuel & Iron Company, with new financial input from Nashville banker Jesse M. Overton, who became President; Henry F became Vice President, and Charles F retained his position as VP and General Manager. (Day, pp. 83-87) Henry T. remained a stockholder but no longer participated in the management of the company. He did remain in the coal business with the Maryland Coal Company which eventually became DeBardeleben Coal Corporation. (This was a separate significant enterprise with coal lands in Walker, Cullman and Fayette Counties Alabama.)

Alabama Fuel & Steel began its operations in 1905 by opening two mines at Margaret, in St. Clair County, AL. This site was served by (an extension of the original?) Central of Georgia RR spur that served Henry Ellen sites, noted as "12.00 miles, Margaret to Margaret Jct, 1906" in ICC summaries. In 1906, it opened two mines at Acton, in Shelby County, with rail service provided by an 7.5 mile spur of the L&N RR extending northeast from Helena.

As noted above the company changed its name in 1908. Banker Jesse Overton served as President at arms length from Nashville. In 1910, Henry F. DeBardeleben died and Charles F. took over the day to day operation and management of the Company. Jesse Overton subsequently died in 1921 in an auto accident.

In 1921, the Company opened two mines at Overton, in Shelby County, AL, with rail service provided by a new spur from the Central of Georgia, 7.3 miles from McCombs, near Lovick (which is west of Henry Ellen) to Overton. ICC records indicate the line was built between April 1921 and October, 1923. Other ICC records state a 9.8 mile branch "McCombs along the foot of Shades Mountain with a 3 mile branch (ICC FD 1142).

Operations at Acton ended in April, 1926, and the L&N RR received permission from the ICC to close the Acton spur line in September, 1927. (ICC FD 6463). Records indicate that others subsequently mined this property.

Operations at Overton ended in the mid-1930's according to Day's Diamonds in the Rough. The abandonment proceedings

