NPS Form 10-900-b
(Jan. 1987)

OMB No. 1024-0018

United States Department of the Interior
National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form

This form is for use in documenting multiple property groups relating to one or several historic contexts. See instructions in *Guidelines for Completing National Register Forms* (National Register Bulletin 16). Complete each item by marking "x" in the appropriate box or by entering the requested information. For additional space use continuation sheets (Form 10-900-a). Type all entries.

A. Name of Multiple Property Listing

Historic Fire Stations of the City of Birmingham, Alabama: 1906 - 1929

B. Associated Historic Contexts

The Progressive Era in Birmingham, Alabama: 1880 - 1929

C. Geographical Data

City limits of Birmingham, Alabama, including the areas of Ensley, West End, Wylam, Fountain Heights, Downtown Birmingham, Southside Birmingham, Five Points South/ Highland Avenue, Avondale, Woodlawn, and East Lake

☐ See continuation sheet

D. Certification

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this documentation form meets the National Register documentation standards and sets forth requirements for the listing of related properties consistent with the National Register criteria. This submission meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60 and the Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Planning and Evaluation.

Signature of certifying official — Date: 9-13-90

Alabama Historical Commission (State Historic Preservation Office)
State or Federal agency and bureau

I, hereby, certify that this multiple property documentation form has been approved by the National Register as a basis for evaluating related properties for listing in the National Register.

Signature of the Keeper of the National Register — Date: 10/25/90

E. Statement of Historic Contexts

Discuss each historic context listed in Section B.

The Progressive Era in Birmingham, Alabama: 1880 - 1929

The City of Birmingham was planned several years before the city was actually founded. In 1869, a group of investors and promoters of the North and South Railroad Company met in Montgomery, Alabama, to form the Elyton Land Company. The purpose of this newly formed company was to establish an industrial town or "work station" near the rich iron, coal, and limestone deposits of Jefferson County. The Elyton Land Company purchased 4,150 acres of farmland in Jefferson County, including an area known as Jones Valley, the site of present day Birmingham.

Jones Valley, measuring approximately five miles wide and fifteen miles long, is one of the southernmost valleys in the great Appalachian Mountain chain. Surrounded on both sides by Red Mountain, the valley had unusually rich deposits of iron, coal, and limestone. The area was identified as early as the 1830s as a potentially important industrial site, but the lack of adequate transportation across the surrounding mountains kept the area isolated and unproductive.

Railroad service through the area had begun by two separate railroad companies in the early 1860s but was halted due to the Civil War. By 1870 the Alabama and Chattanooga line was completed; running northeast to southwest through the county, connecting Chattanooga with Meridian, Mississippi. The North and South railroad line ran north to south, connecting Nashville to Montgomery. The two railroad lines intersected in the center of Jones Valley at the site of the proposed new industrial city owned by the Elyton Land Company.

In 1870, the Elyton Land Company surveyed the valley and mapped out the plans for the new industrial city. The city was laid out on the grid plan, with the streets running on the northeast to southwest axis following the existing railroad tracks. The Elyton Land Company promoted the area as the new industrial center in the state and actively tried to attract settlers to Birmingham. The Land Company began to sell lots in June of 1871, and by the end of the year more than 100 houses and stores had sprung up and the population was over 800 inhabitants during this early boom period.

Birmingham was incorporated by the state legislature in December 1871. The city charter provided for a mayor elected at large and a board of aldermen elected from wards. The city leaders continued promoting the merits of the area and eventually were able to have the Jefferson County Courthouse moved to Birmingham. It was boosted that Birmingham's population increased to nearly 4,000.

Although the area had a great wealth of iron deposits, the industrial development envisioned by the Elyton Land Company did not develop. A nationwide depression in 1873 and a local cholera epidemic abruptly ended the speculative boom in Birmingham. For the next eight years Birmingham experienced no industrial development or population increase.

Under new management, the Elyton Land Company concentrated less on attracting settlers to Birmingham and more on trying to develop the coal and iron resources. In 1876 the Elyton Land Company and the Louisville and Nashville Railroad Company undertook a joint venture to start an experimental furnace. For the first time pig iron was produced from Alabama coke.

[X] See continuation sheet

Previously, small quantities of pig iron was produced in Alabama using charcoal, but the quality was very poor compared to pig iron made from coke. The experiment proved that quality pig iron could be produced in Alabama. It was not determined, however, whether pig iron could be produced in Alabama in large enough quantities to compete with Pittsburgh pig iron. It was necessary to find large quantities of cheap, good coking coal in the Birmingham area.

In 1878, railroad capitalist James Withers Sloss, mining engineer Truman Aldrich, and capitalist Henry DeBardeleden formed the Pratt Coal and Coke Company to develop a good coke supply. The company purchased large quantities of land in Jones Valley from the Elyton Land Company and soon discovered a rich seam of high quality coking coal four miles northwest of Birmingham. In 1879 the Pratt mines shipped out the first quantity of coal.

Henry DeBardeleden then set his sights on iron. DeBardeleden was able to obtain 20 acres of free land along the railroad tracks from the Elyton Land Company. With the assistance of an iron master, DeBardeleden constructed Birmingham's first blast furnace. The Alice Furnace went into operation in November 1880 and became an immediate success.

The opening of the Pratt coal fields in 1878 and the Alice Furnace in 1880 proved that Birmingham could become a major industrial center. The close proximity of coal and iron assured low transportation costs and the state's black population and state convicts provided low-waged unskilled labor. Birmingham companies could produce high grade pig iron cheaper than any other location in America and completely undersell any European competitor. Steel plants throughout America began using the pig iron made from Alabama coke and Alabama red hematite ore.

During the next ten years Birmingham experienced an amazing period of industrial growth and development as existing companies expanded and new Northern capitol streamed into Birmingham. In 1882 James Sloss purchased 50 acres of land and built the Sloss Furnace, the largest blast furnace in the area. In the following year, the capacity of Sloss was doubled by the erection of a second furnace. In 1885 the Williamson Furnace was constructed. The Woodward Iron Company completed its first furnace in 1888. Construction of blast furnaces also developed in neighboring communities of Ensley, Thomas, and Bessemer. Other iron-related industries also developed in Birmingham, such as rolling mills, foundries, and iron pipe factories.

Examining the amount of coal and pig iron production in Birmingham between 1880 through 1917 clearly demonstrates the dramatic industrial growth Birmingham experienced during this period. In 1872 the entire state of Alabama produced only seventeen thousand tons of coal. In 1890 the fields around Birmingham were producing four million tons of coal. By 1900 Birmingham was producing eight million tons and by 1910 the same area was producing sixteen million tons. Also, in 1872, the entire

state of Alabama produced only eleven thousand tons of pig iron, but by 1900 Alabama was producing one million tons of pig iron. By 1910 the state was producing two million tons and in 1917 produced nearly three million tons of pig iron. Three fourths of the state's production of pig iron was produced in the Birmingham area.

In the mid-1880s and the early 1900s two events of great importance occurred which greatly changed the iron and coal industry in Birmingham. The Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company (T.C.I.) bought almost every independent coal and pig iron producer in the Birmingham area. The T.C.I. purchased the properties of the Alice Furnace Company, the Pratt Coal, Iron and Land Company, and the Linn Iron Works. Within several more years T.C.I. also purchased the DeBardeleden Coal and Iron Company and the Cahaba Coal Company, and large bodies of coal mines. The few remaining companies merged to form three major corporations. During this period T.C.I. greatly expanded iron production in the Birmingham district.

The second important event occurred in November of 1907. The United States Steel Corporation, America's largest steel company, bought all of the T.C.I. stock during a financial panic. U.S. Steel immediately began rebuilding and expanding the T.C.I. plants and equipment, inaugurating new methods, and increasing efficiency and production. During the next 20 years, U.S. Steel invested one hundred million dollars in T.C.I. Alabama steel production continued to grow, from 320,000 tons in 1907 to 530,000 tons in 1910 and 1,225,000 tons in 1916. Although Birmingham could still produce steel at considerably lower cost than Pittsburgh, U.S. Steel raised the price of Birmingham steel to the same level as steel produced in the company's older and larger Pittsburgh plants.

After the purchase of the Birmingham steel mills by U.S. Steel, the Birmingham district was no longer in direct competition with the Pittsburgh mills. Although production continued to be high through the 1920s, no new steel companies or steel entrepreneurs settled in Birmingham. The boom days of competitive speculation were over. With the depression of 1929, furnaces and mines were shut. The city's accelerated pace came to a halt and very few buildings were constructed in Birmingham between 1929 and 1946.

The production of pig iron which catapulted Birmingham to a major industrial center was also responsible for Birmingham's staggering population increase during the same period. Several years after the formation of the city, Birmingham's population was around eight hundred. In 1880, the city population was over three thousand and by 1890 the population increased 748% to twenty-six thousand. In addition, the 1890 population also included an additional twenty thousand people living in urbanized areas outside the city limits. The 1900 population of the city was thirty-eight thousand people and an additional forty thousand living in the nearby suburbs.

By the turn of the century, Birmingham was surrounded on the northeast and west by dozens of small suburban communities that were developed by land speculators to accommodate the city's growing population. The introduction of the street car opened up the city's surrounding countryside for real estate development and speculation. Highland Park and Avondale, the city's first suburban residential communities, were developed east of Birmingham for the city's leading merchants and businessmen. Soon, other suburban developments sprang up along the street car lines; such as East Birmingham, Woodlawn, and East Lake. To the west of the city near the new steel factories working-class suburban developments appeared, such as Elyton, West End, Smithfield, Owenton, Ensley, Thomas, Pratt City, and Wylam.

In 1910, Birmingham annexed many of these suburban communities, increasing the size of the city by forty-eight square miles. The city's 1910 population was 132,685, with sixty thousand in the original city limits and seventy thousand in the new expanded area. Birmingham's population began to level off by 1920 with a population of 178,806. Birmingham was advertised as the fastest growing city in the south, and the largest city of its age.

Since the founding of Birmingham in the 1870s, city residents have enjoyed superior services and utilities provided by private companies and by the city government. The Elyton Land Company furnished the newly created city with its first water system. Initially the water came from a nearby creek, but its resources were not sufficient for the rapidly growing city. The water was then diverted from a spring located six miles to the north. The spring water traveled by gravity through canals and aqueducts to a pumping station in Birmingham. Water came to Birmingham at the rate of five million gallons per day. At this time, over five hundred fire hydrants were installed throughout the city.

In 1880, the Birmingham Gas and Illumination Company was incorporated. This was one of the earliest public utility companies in Birmingham and the first not controlled by the Elyton Land Company. The gas company was contracted by the city to supply the city with "gas, gas lights, electric lights or other illumination works." The company laid the lines and provided 20 street lamps. In 1886 the gas company merged with another company to provid electric lights to the city residents.

The telephone, invented in 1876, was first used in private lines in Birmingham in 1879. The Pratt Coal and Coke Company strung up a line between its two offices. In 1882 the first Bell telephone exchange was established in Birmingham.

The city of Birmingham was also responsible for providing many of the essential services to its residents. The city's early operational budget was divided into three distinct categories: education, services to persons, and services to property. The city was responsible for the education of the city's youth, hiring faculty and staff, maintaining school buildings and furniture. Services to persons included providing

health assistance; maintaining city-owned charities, hospitals, and prisons; libraries; and recreation facilities.

Services to property included the essential housekeeping services to maintain urban property. This included the protection from fire and theft; keeping the streets clean, lighted, and repaired, and cleared of refuse and garbage. The city allocated these services and measured their adequacy in terms of property values and property maintenance rather than in terms of assistance to persons. To perform each service, city employees physically visited, or in the case of fire, were prepared to visit each piece of property in the city.

By the 1880s, Birmingham, as the rest of the nation, was professionalizing its fire department. Most cities, even in the south, had professional fire departments. In 1880 Savannah had four steam fire engines, three one-horse reels, and 4,800 feet in hose; in Charleston there were fourteen steamers and three trucks accompanied with 11,200 feet of hose; and Baltimore boasted trucks, a chief engineer, assistant engineer, and 208 paid firemen.

By 1880, Birmingham too had a professional fire department. Volunteer Pioneer Fire Department No. 1 was founded in December 1871. By 1873, following a devastating fire, the city purchased its first fire engine. The first engine was a wooden hand-pumper and was called "Tom Tate" after the pro team. In 1885 the modern fire department of Birmingham was formed. There were two stations, #1 on the Northside and #2 on the Southside. At this time its first horse-drawn equipment was bought and its first full-time fire fighter was hired, three drivers and four horsemen. Each was paid thirty dollars a month. This new department replaced the three volunteer stations which served the city.

The Birmingham Fire Department had nine horses by 1880; by 1890 it had fifteen horses. The department also employed twenty-one full-time firemen; had two steam engines, two double and one single horse reel; 2000 feet of rubber and 500 feet of cotton hose; and one hook and ladder truck. At least by 1906, when Fire Station #6 was constructed, firemen had begun to reside at the station. In 1909, Birmingham purchased its first piece of motorized equipment. In fact, Birmingham was the first city in the South to do so. By 1616, the last fire horse was sold.

Compared to other southern cities of similar size and population in 1910 (Louisville, Atlanta, Memphis, Richmond, and Nashville), Birmingham only spent 89.8 percent as much capita for civic services. By 1920, Birmingham only spent 63.3 percent as much as other southern cities. Southern cities spent less per capita than did northern cities of similar size. However, Birmingham's education and fire departments were most consistently able to resist the downward pressure of revenue scarcity. In 1910 both departments spent 123 percent more per capita than did the corresponding departments in the other five cities combined. By 1920 these two departments still spent approximately 80 percent as much.

All citizens benefited from the city's services to property, but the downtown businessmen found first-rate services to downtown property absolutely crucial, and they exerted constant pressure to keep these particular services far above the minimum and as near as possible to the standards set by other cities. Only top police and fire protection could guarantee the safety of the stores and merchandise and keep insurance costs down. The businessmen were able to persuade the city to maintain good property services downtown, even when the scarcity of revenue dictated inadequate protection for the city as a whole.

The downtown merchants considered first-class fire protection absolutely crucial because inadequate protection led to higher yearly fire insurance premiums on both the buildings and merchandise. The insurance rate-setting agency, the Southeast Tariff Association (STA), examined the local fire departments for efficiency and loss record and placed each city in a class, from first to fourth. The class established the city's basic insurance premium rate.

In 1891, Birmingham bought enough new fire fighting equipment to climb from second to first class, but revenue scarcity continually threatened to drop it back to second class. In the 1890s and again in 1904 the city fell back into second class, causing a fifty percent increase in insurance premiums. The Birmingham merchants negotiated directly with the STA over necessary improvements to reinstate the first-class rating. To reinstall the first-class rating the city had to install two fire plugs per block in the business district and one fire plug per block in the residential districts. The city also needed more fire fighters, alarms boxes, trucks, engines, and building inspectors. The needed improvements would cost an estimated 48 thousand immediate outlay and an additional 87 thousand per year for maintenance, doubling the yearly fire department expenditures.

The City of Birmingham and the business community met to discuss the problem in 1905. It was decided to do all that was necessary to put the center business district back at its first-class rating and residential areas to receive no new protection and remaining with a second-class rating. The city found itself in a worsening position after the annexation of the suburban area in 1910. The rating for these newly annexed residential areas varied from a second- to a fourth-class rating. The city did improve suburban fire protection by replacing some volunteer stations with full-time suburban departments. In 1911 the city motorized most of the downtown departments, decreasing yearly operating costs while increasing efficiency and providing quicker protection to the suburbs. Still, downtown protection remained superior.

By 1915 the suburbs were exhibiting more electoral strength, and challenged the downtown point of view. After 1916 the suburban leaders were able to demonstrate some increased leverage on allocation to suburban fire protection. It was during this period that many of the suburban fire stations were constructed, providing the prosperous suburban communities with adequate fire protection. By 1929 Birmingham had twenty-four fully-equipped, professional fire stations.

II DESCRIPTION:

All of the fire stations included in the Historic Fire Stations of Birmingham (1906-1929) Multiple Property nomination have several indicative characteristics which define the fire station property type. These common characteristics include age, function, form, material, and location. The property type is then more closely defined by the period of construction. The fire station erected prior to 1920 may exhibit a uniquely different function, form, location, and physical characteristics than the fire station erected after 1920.

The first inherent feature common to all of the fire stations in the nomination is the period of construction. All of the historic fire stations were built over 50 years ago and were constructed during Birmingham's progressive era 1880 through 1929. The oldest remaining fire station included in the nomination was constructed in 1906 and the most recent fire station was constructed in 1929.

Secondly, all of the buildings share a common historic function. The fire station building served as a place to store the fire-fighting equipment, provide an office for the fire station administration, and to provide temporary housing to the fire fighters.

The third feature shared by all of the fire stations is a common form which is closely associated to the above-mentioned functions. The main character-defining feature of all fire stations is the presence of the garage which housed the fire fighting vehicles and equipment. The garage is prominently located at the front of the building and was often the largest room in the building. The garage was typically a wide, open utilitarian room void of any interior decoration or ornamentation. The garage was always entered through large industrial garage doors. A special feature of many of the two-storied fire stations is the presence of a fire pole; a device which provided the fire fighter a quick route from the residential area above to the garage below.

The fire station building usually has an office space located to the side or rear of the garage. The office provides space for the administration of the fire station and may be either one room or a suite of offices, depending on the size of the fire station. Typically, the office is entered through a pedestrian door off the street as well as through the garage.

All of the fire station buildings have a residential component to temporarily house the fire fighters. This private space is usually located to the rear of the garage or on a second floor. The residential area typically contains communal sleeping quarters, bathrooms, kitchen, and lounge. The residential area is usually very utilitarian and void of any decoration or ornamentation.

A fourth characteristic common to all of the fire stations is the use of masonry material such as brick, stone as the predominant building material. Lastly, all of

the fire stations share a similar location near the main transportation artery. All of the fire station garages have either direct access to the main road or indirect access via an alley.

Besides the five characteristics inherent to all fire stations described above, the fire station property type is further defined by characteristics directly associated to the period of construction. A fire station erected prior to 1920 may have a different function, form, location, and physical characteristic than a fire station erected after 1919.

All fire station buildings constructed in the period 1909 through 1919 housed only the fire station function. Whereas, fire stations during the 1920s were often housed with other civic functions such as the police, jail, or the city administration office. Although it was also common for the 1920s fire station to be housed separately from any other function.

The fire stations constructed prior to 1920 always took the form of an early twentieth-century commercial or industrial building. The fire station building was rectangular in shape, and two stories in height with a flat or parapet roof. The windows were usually large, industrial size. Contrasting this commercial form, fire stations constructed in the 1920s most often took a residential form. The buildings were often irregular shaped, usually only one story in height, and covered with a variety of domestic roof shapes. The doors and windows were domestic size.

The early fire stations erected in Birmingham prior to 1920 were typically located in the downtown central business district and situated very close to the street, in a very urban setting. Often the fire station building was connected on one side to the neighboring building. The fire stations constructed after 1920 were typically detached buildings erected in suburban communities outside downtown Birmingham, usually in small neighborhood commercial nodes. These suburban fire stations were most set back off the street on large green residential-like lawns. The yards were often landscaped with flower beds and rock gardens.

The urban-type fire stations built prior to 1920 were very utilitarian in style and often resembled commercial buildings of the period. The fire stations were most often void of any decorative details except for the use of brick corbelling and brick pilasters. Stone highlights were frequently used to contrast the plain brick walls. The main entrance doors and windows were similar to commercial types used during the early twentieth century.

The residential type fire stations constructed in a suburban location after 1920 were designed in domestic styles popular in Birmingham during this period. The primary domestic styles employed in fire station design were Spanish Revival, Tudor Revival, and Renaissance Revival. Unlike the earlier fire stations, these buildings had many decorative elements; including towers, balconies, courtyards, arched wing walls, elaborate pedestrian entrances, and decorative ironwork.

III SIGNIFICANCE:

CRITERION A: COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT AND PLANNING

The historic fire station is significant as documenting the City of Birmingham's growth and development. It suggests the major trends of downtown and suburban growth in Birmingham, and is pivotal to an understanding of the city's governmental development. The fire station resources yield important information about Birmingham's public and utilitarian growth, the city's cultural and economic growth, and its participation in the Progressive Era. As a critically important public building necessary for the very survival of a community, the fire station is virtually always significant documentation of neighborhood development and planning. The stations in East Lake, Highland Avenue, Clairmont Avenue, Ensley, and Avondale are the best examples of the phenomenon. Each played an important part as evidenced by their location, use, and architectural prominence. Each station necessarily made life in the neighborhoods safer, more secure, more predictable and therefore stable.

CRITERION C: ARCHITECTURE

As one of the most important, and the single most visible utilitarian building, the fire station is unique as a public building architectural type. All of the fire stations were built with large garage door(s) to facilitate the removal of the fire trucks and equipment from storage. All of the buildings had a secondary residential area to accommodate the fire fighters. The fire stations were also located at a corner, an alley, or on a major transportation artery.

The differing characteristic of the pre- and post-1920s type of fire station further documents the most basic commercial, single-use type prior to 1920; and the grandiose style of the affluent 1920s complete with landscaped lawns, and Spanish, Beaux Arts, Romanesque, Gothic, and Renaissance architectural influences. Although Warren, Knight, and Davis is the only documented firm represented, it is quite likely others were professionally designed. These trends were typical of all types of public and commercial construction during this period.

IV REGISTRATION REQUIREMENTS:

In order to qualify for listing, the fire station must be at least 50 years of age and built during Birmingham's progressive era, 1880 through 1929. The fire station must be located in the City of Birmingham or one of its incorporated suburban neighborhoods. The building must have been historically used as a neighborhood fire station and reflect construction of the inherent garage area and garage door, an office area, and a residential area. The fire station must also reflect its original access near or on a major transportation artery.

To fulfill the registration requirements for integrity, the building must retain visual integrity of the fire door; and retain the dominant architectural materials, details and ornamentation, and characteristics of style indicative of the period of construction.

G. Summary of Identification and Evaluation Methods

Discuss the methods used in developing the multiple property listing.

G. SUMMARY OF IDENTIFICATION AND EVALUATION METHODS:

Documentation for the multiple property resources began with an interview with the Birmingham Fire Department which identified fire stations within the Birmingham city limits at least 50 years of age. The researcher conducted extensive site surveys of each property and surrounding locale. Birmingham Fire Department scrapbooks (of the Public Library Archives) were researched thoroughly as were the various local histories published. Several general scholarly works were researched to provide context vis a vis governmental development (particularly the fire station) in the nation and the South, and patterns of urban development in Birmingham as compared with other cities and regions.

After extensive site survey and historical research, commonalities of the type were derived. Prediction of research outcome was restricted to presence of the fire door; all other understanding of the type was made apparent after intensive comparing and contrasting of each of the eleven buildings.

☐ See continuation sheet

H. Major Bibliographical References

See continuation sheet.

☐ See continuation sheet

Primary location of additional documentation:

- ☒ State historic preservation office
- ☐ Other State agency
- ☐ Federal agency
- ☐ Local government
- ☐ University
- ☐ Other

Specify repository: _____

I. Form Prepared By

name/title Pamela Sterne King/Historic Preservationist; Steven Kay/AHC Reviewer
organization Five Points South Apartment Improvement Prog. date May 22, 1990
street & number 1407 - 16th Avenue South telephone 205 939-0470
city or town Birmingham state Alabama zip code 35205

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