



Heading down Birmingham Road

A Ride Through the Past On Birmingham Road

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Traveling east from Route 206 along North Pemberton Road's open fields, there's a right turn that's easy to sail by. It's the northern terminus of Birmingham Road. Take it and enjoy a drive through beautiful country and a time from the past.

The first stretch continues through open fields on both sides, with several prosperous farmsteads. Soon you notice signs indicating that hundreds of acres of farmland have been preserved from development. It's a nice feel. The two-lane road has no shoulders, but it feels open. Then, the woods move closer to both sides of the macadam. Traffic is light, and you notice that, unlike the flat lands of much of South Jersey, the terrain starts dipping down. You instinctively slow down as the road starts to twist and drop even more.

At scattered places, modest homes lie back from the road, a few up on bluffs above the streams of the Rancocas that seem to pass under the road at will. Several small ponds abut the road, and a sense of history falls upon you. With no place to stop as the road edges closer in, one might miss a large pond, out of sight nearby, back on the left, surrounded by forest. That is the remains of a large marl excavation pit in the area, a source of employment and activity dating back over a century ago, now a lovely and serene gem from yesteryear.

A sign warns “Road Floods – Watch for Ice.” The ear may detect gurgling waters flowing beneath the road through unseen drains. Indeed, the winding Rancocas and potential overflow from the large pond present the possibility of both flooding and ice.



Former marl pit as seen through the woods, a few feet back in from Birmingham Road.

A few small roadside posters proclaim “Birmingham Pride – No More Development,” suggesting a threat is at hand.

Soon, a small road on the left presents itself, starting to rise to the east. It’s called Brandywine Road. In the early years, the general area was sometimes referred to as New Brandywine, but is now just a few scattered rural homes, encroaching woods, and a deep ravine with a creek at the bottom.

Back on Birmingham Road southbound, next encountered is another branch of the Rancocas, just after which is an open area on the right. It's fenced off, but its most recent use had been as a playing field for workers and local residents. Immediately following is a small stream of water that had been dug by hand in the 1800s to allow construction of several small dams to produce power. They no longer exist, save for some remnants out of sight.

The next appearance on the right is a modest industrial building set well back behind a security fence. The sign says Lanxess Chemicals, and that provides the first sense of what was going on here. Long before Lanxess's predecessors acquired much of the property, Birmingham had been the site of a sawmill, a small iron forge, machine shops, a grist mill, a leather sculpturing operation, and a carpet factory. In the mid-1800s, farmers had been digging marl from their fields in the area for use as fertilizer. The small commercial endeavors gradually went out of business, and land was consolidated for commercial marl digging. The assembled marl site occupied some 500 acres, having been expanded in 1923 when purchased by a major chemical firm, which through successive acquisitions became Lanxess. With marl not having been dug for some decades, and local processing ended, the site is now used mainly as a small distribution warehouse.

And the fenced-off ball field turns out to be on an "island" that had been created when the small canal had been dug on its south side (it was already bounded on the other sides by the meandering Rancocas Creek). Parts of the island itself had reportedly been cleared of marl early on, as were other unidentified locations, and then a modest rural hotel called the Birmingham Inn had been constructed.



Former Birmingham Inn

In its day, the Inn was a highly regarded resort which provided fine food, lodging, and swimming and canoeing opportunities, with visitors arriving by railroad to enjoy the cool fresh air and the rural pleasantries. Eventually running into disrepair, it was briefly used as a county almshouse, suffered several fires, and was finally torn down.

When the marl operation was expanded starting in the 1920s, most of the historic buildings were gone. Only part of the old carpet mill remained as part of the marl processing facility for a while.



Birmingham Marl Plant at its apex when owned by Ionac Chemical Co.

The marl plant itself grew over the decades of operation, at its high point involving processing, research, and warehousing, with the railroad running by it, and a short narrow-gauge railroad operating from the plant out to the marl pit.

Today, however, only a small part of the plant remains, and the railroad and the local Birmingham station are long gone. Most of the few relics from Birmingham's early industrial presence are gone, save for a few foundations and relics out in the woods. Nature has reclaimed its place, and the traveler would never know what had gone on there along the road.

Continuing south over the railroad trail now owned by the county, an intensified proliferation of small signs "No More Warehouses" is evident, and nearly immediately a large warehouse is in sight, facing the extension of Rt. 38 which is technically South Pemberton Rd. Halting at the traffic signal by the warehouse, one is overwhelmed with its intrusiveness. Fortunately, a recent effort to expand the warehouses was halted when local residents voted in new officials.

As the light turns and you move ahead on Birmingham's southern leg, immediate relief is felt from the healing presence of woods on both sides of the road. Then Pemberton Township ends, and you're in Southampton Township, and the road remains narrow, but quickly the vistas on both sides expand with the presence of substantial farms, several of which have major old brick farmhouses set back on their narrow lanes, and the sky widens overhead. A sense of calm and relief arises. And more "farmland preserved" signs proudly provide assurance that no warehouses or much of anything else will ever be welcome there.

Then Birmingham Road comes to an end as it intersects Pemberton Road. A short ride by length, a long drive back into history. One must turn either left or right at that point, but there is a compelling urge to instead turn around, head back north, and be blessed again by the nature and calm of Birmingham Road.