Except for the Statue of Liberty in New York harbor, no other figure in America is comparable to the statue of Vulcan, god of fire and metalworking, that stands atop Red Mountain in Birmingham, Alabama.

Conceived in 1903 by the Birmingham Commercial Club (now the Chamber of Commerce) as an exhibit from the district at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis, the famed Italian sculptor, Giuseppe Moretti, was entrusted with the work. Using iron made at Sloss furnace, Mr. Moretti had the figure cast from patterns of his own design at McWane Foundry, then located at First Avenue and Fourteenth Street. The anvil, block, and hammer were made by the Williamson Foundry Company which was across the street from McWane.

Because of the massiveness of the figure, it had to be cast in parts and the floor of the foundry was turned into the casting area. Although the legs went very well, the great torso had much shrinkage resulting in several cracks. Moretti had the workers fill the cracks with cement and to common knowledge, they have never been detected. The statue weighs 120,000 pounds, is 56 feet high and the metal in its body varies from three-fourths to two inches in thickness. The feet are six feet long and the head is seven and a half feet high and seven feet across. The spearhead that was originally in the right hand weighed 250 pounds and the hammer in the left, 300 pounds.

The cost of the project was $27,000 which included a round trip ticket to the Exposition. Seven railroad cars were required to transport Vulcan to the Exposition where it was bolted together. The statue created such a sensation that it won the grand prize as the most outstanding exhibit.

On March 28, 1905, three rail carloads of parts arrived back in Birmingham and Vulcan was stored until a decision could be made about what to do with it. For a time the statue was erected at the Alabama State Fair Grounds, but in 1935 Thomas H. Joy, one of the state’s leading engineers and builders, and J. Mercer Barnett, past president of Kiwanis International, proposed the Kiwanis club sponsor placing the statue on top of Red Mountain. For more than two years, Joy devoted himself to the carrying forward of the plan. The Tennessee Coal and Iron Division of the United States Steel Corporation offered a five-acre plot and the Works Progress Administration (WPA) provided the manpower to develop the area into a park and to erect a 215-foot high pedestal of native stone on which Vulcan would stand.

To make the statue as indestructible as possible, concrete reinforcing rods were extended well into the pedestal and legs and body of the statue. The lower cavities were filled with concrete for more stability. Once ensconced in this lofty position, the statue became a focal point for many activities and projects. The most notable was the removal of the spearhead in his right hand and replacing it with the Light of Life and Death. The red and green lights burn alternately signifying traffic fatalities. Installed in October 1946, it burned red for the first time ten days later and has been a grim reminder through the years that death often awaits the careless moment.

This effective safety promotion has received nationwide attention and was adopted as a statewide Junior Chamber of Commerce Traffic Safety Symbol.

A true example of technological achievement, Vulcan looks over the city and reminds citizens and tourists that the work done by the hands of American workers can endure for many lifetimes.