The Association

The American Spelean History Association is chartered as a non-profit corporation for the study, dissemination, and interpretation of spelean history and related purposes. All persons who are interested in those goals are cordially invited to become members. Dues of $8 are due January first of each year. Meetings are held in conjunction with the annual convention of the National Speleological Society and sometimes at West Virginia's Old Timers Reunion.

Front Cover

Visitors to Penn's Cave, Pennsylvania, exit the cave through the artificial entrance to Lake Nitanee.

Officers

President:
Dean H. Snyder
3213 Fairland Drive
Schnecksville, PA 18078

Vice-President:
Carolyn E. Cronk
1595 Blueberry Hills Road
Monument, CO 80132

Secretary-Treasurer:
Robert B. Hoke
6304 Kaybro Street
Laurel, MD 20707-2621

Trustees:
Larry E. Matthews, Marion O. Smith,
Gary K. Soule, Jack H. Speece

Production

Editor for this issue:
Dean H. Snyder
3213 Fairland Drive
Schnecksville, PA 18078

Proofreaders:
Gary K. Soule
Lois M. Soule

Printing:
D.C. Grotto
Potomac Speleological Club Press
The Tombigbee Railroad Survey Visits Saltpeter Cave

Charles A. Lundquist, University of Alabama in Huntsville
William W. Varnedoe Jr., NSS Huntsville Grotto, Alabama

Abstract

Inscriptions scratched into a rock in Saltpeter Cave (AL 136) record a visit on June 8, 1887, by the "Tombigbee R.R. Survey." Perhaps drawn by curiosity or a cool escape, this survey party apparently departed from its assigned tasks to view the natural wonders of this cave with its easy entrance. In doing so the party left a lasting record of its membership in the date of the visit. It also marked an event in the fascinating history of transportation problems and opportunities in the corner of Alabama, Mississippi, and Tennessee where the headwaters of the Tombigbee River approach the northward bend in the Tennessee River.

The Questions

In 1995, the owner of Saltpeter Cave, AL 136, contacted a Huntsville NSS member about an 1887 railroad survey inscription in the cave. The owner found the inscription curious and thought it might be of interest to the speleological community. Therefore on April 8, 1995, the authors visited the cave. The pertinent inscriptions were located, copied and photographed. They are on a head-high rock about two feet high and five feet wide. Figure 1 is a tracing of an enlarged photograph. Only the inscriptions apparently related to the June 8, 1887, visit are reproduced. Figure 2 is a resulting tabulation of the names recorded.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>M Morton</th>
<th>A G Dancey</th>
<th>GS or CS Oneal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>S B Johnston</td>
<td>R Mitchell</td>
<td>J J Powell</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
SALTPETER CAVE
ALI36
TAPE & COMPASS SURVEY
BY THE HUNTSVILLE GROTTO, NSS
3 JAN 1970
BILL TORODE
HAROLD TINSLEY
JOHN MINOR
ERIC STEENBURN

LENGTH 1640'

Figure 3
AL 136 has 1,640 feet of passage mapped by Torode et al. in 1970. Figure 3 is a reproduction of their map with the location of the Tombigbee R.R. Survey inscription added. The site is well into total darkness beyond a minor constriction. The cave is in Lawrence County near the Morgan County line. It is roughly on a line from Moulton to Decatur, the respective county seats.

These Tombigbee R.R. Survey inscriptions raise some natural questions. What were the historical circumstances of this visit? Beyond just their names, who were the survey members and from where did they come?

The Setting

To appreciate the 1887 inscriptions, an understanding of the setting is instructive. The cave is near the corner of Alabama, Mississippi and Tennessee, where the headwaters of the Tombigbee River approach the northward bend of the Tennessee River (Figure 4). From early times, the course of the Tombigbee River to Mobile, a port on the Gulf of Mexico, has seemed to offer a water route much shorter than northward downstream on the Tennessee to the Ohio River and hence to the Mississippi River and on to New Orleans.

Initially Florence and Tuscumbia, on opposite sides of the Tennessee, were at its navigable headwater. Water travel upstream was not possible between there and Decatur because of the Muscle Shoals near the city of that name. Before the Civil War, steamboats operated on the Tombigbee only during high water. Columbus, Mississippi was the approximate headwater for navigation on the Tombigbee. Before the coming of railroads, horse drawn wagons often carried commodities to and from these river ports.
The successful establishment of railroads in the eastern U.S. suggested to the people of Alabama and Mississippi that railroads might provide an improvement for their transportation needs. They went to work, and on December 15, 1834, the Tuscumbia, Courtland and Decatur Railroad began operations, carrying cargo and passengers around the Muscle Shoals of the Tennessee River. It was one of the earliest railroads charted west of the Allegheny Mountains. Its success motivated continuing talk of another railroad from Decatur to Columbus, Mississippi, on the Tombigbee. However, economic factors and the Civil War delayed efforts toward that objective.

The Tombigbee Railroad Survey

On June 8, 1887, the cave inscription in AL 136 attests that a party was in the field surveying a route for a Tombigbee R.R. This is confirmed the next day by an item in the Thursday, June 9, 1887 issue of The Moulton Advertiser: "THE C & D. Before this number of the Moulton Advertiser reaches many of its readers, the survey of the proposed Columbus and Decatur Rail Road will have been completed. The Surveyors passed through our town last Saturday, going toward Decatur, and they were traveling at the rate of five miles per day. We also learn that another surveying party, from Gainesville, is following immediately after the Columbus crowd." Near the end of the article they add, "... the rattling of the surveyors' chain through Moulton has caused a wonderful advance in real estate. Corner lots, side lots, middle lots and back lots, almost worthless ten days ago are now held at fabulous prices."

An earlier letter mailed from Gainesville, Alabama, by "OCCASIONAL" and published on May 12, 1887, in the same newspaper gives further details about several railroad ventures in progress at the time. Among these, OCCASIONAL says, "I find the people of Aberdeen are very anxious to have an outlet to Decatur via Moulton, and your end of the line have a surveying party now in the field, which begins to look like business. Columbus voted a tax of $100,000 to their Tombigbee road a few days since ... with its final terminal point at Decatur." The progress of this activity was a frequent subject in this paper over some time, often under the heading "Railroad Racket." The cave inscription provides not only a confirming footnote to the "Railroad Racket," but also names of some survey members.

The People

Who were the people who inscribed their names in AL 136 and from whence did they come? The first question is difficult because the inscribers used only one or two initials, not their full name. Nevertheless, the U.S. Census of 1880 or of 1900 is a place to start a search. In spite of the passage of 13 years, the 1900 Census is more useful because it has a more complete soundex index.

For an uncommon name such as A.G. Dancey, a search of the 1900 soundex for Alabama and Mississippi yields a few scattered A--- Dancey entries and one Albert G. Dancey, born March, 1858, who was a resident of Lowndes County, Mississippi. Columbus, the reported origin of the survey, is the county seat of Lowndes. This association with the A.G. Dancey of the inscription is strongly reinforced by a reference in the abstracts of the Columbus City records. An item in September 1887, three months after the T.R.R. Survey, mentions A.G. Dancey as "Civil Engineer and Surveyor." The 1880 Census lists A.G. Dancey, age 21, a policeman, with the family of his father, C. Edwin Dancey, the mayor of Columbus. Thus A.G. Dancey is quite firmly identified as this resident of Lowndes County. The 1900 Census shows that he married in about 1888 to a woman named India.

Another 1900 soundex search yields a Sam B. Johnston, also a resident of Columbus as the most likely S.B. Johnston of the inscription. He was single, born in August, 1855, and the proprietor of a hotel with 43 boarders, some of whom were railroad employees. He was apparently active in the affairs of the city as he was mentioned several times in the city records, for example in an 1890 petition...
for a gas light on Monroe and Webster Streets. His brother, Toby W. Johnston, a lawyer, was a Columbus City alderman during the early 1880s when C. Edwin Dancey was mayor. He is shown as a tailor in the 1860 Census, when both boys were in his household, as a banker in the 1870 Census. Hence the Johnston and Dancey families were both prominent in Columbus.

M. Morton is another probable inscription identification. The 1900 Census for Vernon City, Lamar County, Alabama, lists a Mardis Morton, born in January, 1851, with railroad bridge crew as his occupation. Lamar County, Alabama, is adjacent to Lowndes County, Mississippi, and is on the survey route. Columbus is the closest major city to Lamar County. In the 1880 Census, Mardis is listed as a blacksmith. His father, Milton R. Morton, was a machinist and mechanic in the 1870 Census, when Mardis was still in his household. Mardis married a woman named Zilla about 1875.

Incidentally, there is a Matt E. Morton mentioned in the Columbus City records who could be an inscription candidate. However, the 1880 and 1900 Census records both list Matt E. Morton (exactly in that form) of Columbus as a female, born in December, 1828, the daughter of Matilda Morton. A 58-year-old female is a rather unlikely member of the railroad survey unless, possibly, she was the party cook. Mardis Morton with his railroad occupation seems a much better probability for the survey.

The other survey members have been harder to firmly identify. For example, there is a J.J. Powell in Lowndes County, outside Columbus in the 1880 Census. He was unmarried, age 29, but was listed as a physician. If he maintained that profession, he is not a likely member of the survey. In Webster County, Mississippi, the 1900 Census shows a Joe J. Powell. Webster is two counties west of Lowndes and Joe J. could well have migrated westward between 1887 and 1900. Joe J. Powell was born in November, 1863, and married about 1891.

For R. Mitchell and G.S. or C.S. Oneal there are several candidates in the census records, but little reason to associate any with the T.R.R. survey. Surely in any such survey there would have been members who cut brush, drove stakes and carried equipment. There would be little recorded evidence of such short term employment.

The Final Results

From the home citations for the identified members, it is clear that the survey came from Columbus, which is consistent with newspaper reports. The member ages and marital status at the time of the inscription are summarized in Figure 5.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age on June 8, 1887</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mardis Morton</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>married 12 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albert G. Dance</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam B. Johnston</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe J. Powell?</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>single</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mardis Morton is the senior individual identified. In Figure 1, the title and data seem to be written in the same style as the M. Morton which is centered directly below the title. Hence, some leadership role in the party might be inferred for him.

The Journal of Spelean History
Albert G. Dancey and Sam B. Johnston were single young men from influential Columbus families. Perhaps they represented the interests of the Columbus establishment that was promoting the venture.

For whatever reasons, the Columbus to Decatur direct railroad was never completed. Perhaps it was not a serious endeavor, as there are examples of other railroad companies in this time period that were unscrupulous. The quotation from the Moulton paper shows how real estate prices could be influenced by just the passage of a survey team. One has to wonder if the correspondent, OCCASIONAL, might deal in real estate somewhere along the line.

In the early 1900s, a series of locks and dams on the Tennessee River made water shipping possible over the Muscle Shoals. These are now part of the Tennessee Valley Authority. Finally, in the 1980s, a federally funded Tombigbee Waterway became a reality, linking the Tennessee River, through Columbus, to Mobile.

References


5. The Moulton Advertiser, Thursday, June 9, 1887, p. 2. col. 3.


7. 1900 US Census, MS Lowndes County, ED 57 s 7.

8. Eva Byrd Hudson, Minute Book I, Transcribed from the original in Columbus City Hall, MS, 1976, p. 10 in original, p. 4 in transcription.

9. 1880 US Census, MS Lowndes County, ED 99 s 22.

10. 1900 US Census, MS Lowndes County, ED 58 s 31.

11. Eva Byrd Hudson, ibid, p. 316 in original, p. 16 in transcription.

12. Eva Byrd Hudson, Ledger of Mayor C.E. Dancey, transcribed from the original in Columbus City Hall, MS.

13. 1860 US Census, MS Lowndes County, p. 140.


15. 1900 US Census, AL Lamar County, Vernon, ED 43 s 7.
16. 1880 US Census, AL Lamar County, ED 132 s 3.
17. 1870 US Census, AL Sanford County, Vernon, p. 381.
19. 1880 US Census, MS Lowndes County, Columbus, ED 98 p. 20.
20. 1900 US Census, MS Lowndes County, Columbus, ED 58 s 5.
22. 1900 US Census, MS Webster County, ED 102 s 4.

In the Cave of Buddha

Chang Ying-Teng, Poet Laureate
Second Ming Reign (1398-1402) of Emperor Chu Yun-Wen
submitted by Bill Torode

While looking for cave articles in the *New York Times* I came across “In the Cave of Buddha,” in the December 11, 1927, Section 5, page 17, Sunday Issue. This poem is carved in a marble tablet inbedded in the wall at the entrance to the Nanhsiang Buddhist cave temples. The Buddhist caves at Nanhsiang Tangshan, China, are carved in sandstone and extend more than a half mile into the hillside.

The night wind sweeps past pine
Land and rocky door
Overhead on the cliffs brow
Cranes have nests.
Hushed stillness makes footsteps
Re-echo like hoofbeats
While the stars twinkle in the
Clear bottomless dome
And the Monks, preparing longevity
Charms, call to one another
Within the ghostly caverns.

*The Journal of Spelean History*
A 1863 Description of Nickajack Cave, Tennessee, by John White Geary (1819-1873), Governor of Pennsylvania from 1867 to 1873

by Tom Metzgar

It was the year 1863, and the divided nation was deeply embroiled in a bloody civil war. After the September 19th and 20th Battle of Chickamauga, Tennessee, Union General William Starke Rosecrans withdrew his battered army to Chattanooga, where he inexplicably allowed the Confederates to occupy the area's high ground and surround the low lying town, cutting off supplies. President Lincoln and Secretary of War Stanton sent troops from Mississippi and Virginia to reinforce Rosecrans' weakened army, and, they hoped, to extract him from his predicament. Commanding the 2nd Division, 12th Corps, Army of the Cumberland, was a Pennsylvania native, Major General John W. Geary, under Brigadier General Joseph Hooker.

Hooker determined to open the famous "cracker line" to bring supplies to the starving Union troops occupying Chattanooga. During the night of October 28th-29th, 1863, Confederates under General James Longstreet attacked Geary's troops at Wauhatchie, on the western foot of Lookout Mountain, Tennessee. Though the Union army repelled the attack and opened Hooker's cracker line, Geary paid a dear price for the victory. During the wee hours of the morning of the 29th, his 18 year old son, 1st Lieutenant Edward R. Geary, sighted a piece of field artillery as his father watched. Yelling "fire," Edward was shot through the forehead by a southern sharpshooter taking advantage of the Union artillery muzzle flashes to reveal choice targets. On November 2nd, Gen. Geary wrote a lengthy letter to his second wife, Mary Church Henderson, at her New Cumberland, Pennsylvania home. It was their fifth wedding anniversary. The pained General was an avowed family man who dearly missed his wife and large extended family. He acknowledged the receipt of five letters from home, including one intended for Eddie. The third paragraph of General Geary's letter contains a brief report about his visit to Nickajack Cave, a description which under any other circumstances would have been much longer and more detailed, given Geary's propensity for flowery accounts of the landscape.

On my way hither about 10 miles above Bridgeport, I encamped at Shell-mound, a place which takes its name from a large mound on the bank of the river composed entirely of muscle shells. Another curiosity which attracted our attention at that place was "Nickajack Cave." Accompanied by our dear son Eddie I visited it, and viewed one of the most prodigious grottos known upon the Continent. Within it is a large stream and a beautiful lake of crystal water. Upon the lake Eddy with a party of friends penetrated on the lake some three miles and returned much delighted. It was, indeed, one of the most extensive and beautiful places of the kind I have ever visited, and would well justify an extended description did I feel so disposed to do so. Some other times perhaps I will, but I cannot now in my sorrowing condition.

From this date on, many of the General's frequent letters to his wife dwell upon Edward's untimely death. A letter dated May 9, 1864, from "Pea Vine (10 miles west of Dalton, Ga.)" once more mentions Nickajack Cave:
On the 3rd instant I concentrated my Command at Bridgeport and marched to Shellmound 6 miles. This is where the famous Nickajack Cave has its location. Very many of the officers and men visited and explored it, and enjoyed great pleasure while doing so. For my own part, I could not willingly go into it, and consequently did not go to it. When we advanced on Wauhatchie in October last on the night of the 27th of that month my dear Edward was with me, and we together explored it. Never shall I forget that night. I remember him more vividly in that cave than any where else, and when I wish to see his manly face, enlivened with all the vivacity which the scene excited, I have only to refer to Nickajack Cave, and his smiling face is with me. But he is gone, and now a bright angel in Heaven. And perhaps may approve the honest endeavors of his father in crushing this most infamous rebellion.

Geary’s strong association of Nickajack Cave with his favorite son may well have ended his underground adventures. Sadly, none of Edward’s letters appear to have survived, so we cannot read the youthful Geary’s account of his caving experience. After the war, the tough and rugged General was elected governor of Pennsylvania for two terms. Twice wounded in action (including being struck by a cannon ball in the chest), Geary was a nearly unapproachable strict disciplinarian with a strong interest in self-promotion. Contrasting with General Geary’s unforgiving character and harsh demeanor, his later political achievements included pushing for a 40-hour work week, Negro rights, and mine safety.

The energetic Geary packed enough feats and activities into his 53 years to last several normal lifetimes. He had been Territorial Postmaster of California, Mayor of San Francisco, Governor of the Kansas Territory, and a host of other occupations ranging from farmer to attorney. During his career as a civil engineer in the mid 1840s, he surveyed railroad routes near Kentucky’s Green River. Quite possibly, unpublished Geary family papers found at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia might contain accounts of visits to Mammoth Cave and other nearby attractions. In a letter to his wife dated February 18, 1864, Geary mentions taking a railroad through familiar territory from Louisville to Nashville, dining at Cave City “near the Mouth of Mammoth Cave, Ky.” However, he did not enter the cave.

An elaborate tombstone marks Edward Ratchford Geary’s grave in the Delmont Presbyterian Cemetery in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, next to the grave of Edward’s mother, Margaret Logan Geary (1823-1853.) Governor Geary visited the graves of his son and first wife every time his travels took him to southwestern Pennsylvania. Geary and his second wife, the twice widowed Mary Church Henderson Geary, are buried in Harrisburg’s Mount Kalma Cemetery.

Nickajack Cave lies along the Tennessee River in Marion County where the boundaries of Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee intersect. Historically one of the most heavily visited and frequently written-about of Tennessee’s innumerable caves, its gargantuan entrance is partially submerged by the Tennessee Valley Authority’s Nickajack Lake.

Bibliography


The Demise of Sheiah Waters

Larry E. Matthews

In 1869, Sheiah Waters explored extensively in Higgenbotham Cave (now known as Cumberland Caverns) in Warren County, Tennessee. Tom Barr's *Caves of Tennessee* (1961) reported the local folklore that Waters was ambushed and killed nearby in 1870. In 1990, I located the McGarr-Waters papers at the Tennessee State Library and Archives, which contained documents that clearly proved that Waters was still alive as late as December 9, 1887. Subsequent research by Marion O. Smith resulted in the discovery of Waters' obituary in the February 4, 1894 issue of the *Nashville Daily American* newspaper. Based upon this new information, I located Waters' grave in the Nashville National Cemetery. Waters' house at 407 Fatherland Street in east Nashville is no longer in existence.

This past year Sheiah Waters' name was located in another Warren County cave, Hubbards Cave, by Joe Douglas.

ASHA Treasurer's Report

Fred Grady, ASHA Secretary-Treasurer

Year ending 1998: Income $352.00 Expenses $338.03
Cash on Hand about $3200.00
Year to date 1999: Income $262.00 Expenses $114.21

The Journal of Spelean History
Before the Civil War: Saltpeter-Military Service

Submitted by Bill Torode

Before he became President of the Confederacy, Jefferson Davis (US Secretary of War 1853-1857) wrote to Joseph Henry (Superintendent of the Smithsonian Institution) asking for a report on the manufacture of saltpeter.

Professor Joseph Henry replied (December 4, 1856) that the natural supply of saltpeter from our western caves was too small to be of importance, even in time of peace, and would be entirely inadequate in the time of war. The old methods of the artificial production of saltpeter had fallen into partial disuse. Due to the low price of foreign saltpeter, there was no necessity at present to seek other methods of production, but the Smithsonian would undertake investigations if appropriations were made available.

H. K. Craig, Colonel of Ordnance, (January 7, 1857) stated that the military service was wholly dependent on foreign supply.

Jefferson Davis (February 12, 1857) suggested to the President that an appropriation of $10,000 be expended for research for a more efficient method of manufacturing nitre.

A message from President Franklin Pierce (February 14, 1857) recommended an appropriation of $10,000 to the US House of Representatives, for research for a more efficient method of manufacturing nitre.

Bibliography


An 1854 Missouri Cave Rescue

Tom Metzgar

The following item appeared in The Indiana Weekly Register of Wednesday, February 1, 1854, Volume 2, Number 31, page 2, column 3. Jonathan Row and his son S.B. Row edited and published this newspaper at Indiana, Pennsylvania.

PERILOUS ADVENTURES IN A CAVE- On Tuesday the 3rd inst., while the steamer Flag was aground near St. Genevieve, Capt. Gray the pilot, accompanied by an Englishman, undertook to explore the great cave situated three miles from above that place, taking with them a lamp, ladder, &c. They entered the cave about eight o'clock on Tuesday evening, and had advanced a distance of nearly two miles when their lamp was unfortunately broken and extinguished! After groping their way for a length of time, they found an upward passage or
chimney, so nearly perpendicular that Grey (sic) found it impossible to
ascent it. The Englishman, however, clung to it as his last hope of
deliverance, promising his companion, if he reached the top in safety,
to mark the spot by tying his handkerchief to a tree and then to go for
assistance. Fortunately, he made his egress in safety. It was not yet
day, so he was unable to take observations, but marking the place, as
agreed he proceeded to the village for the assistance, and returned
early on Wednesday morning with two or three others. He vainly
attempted to find the place of his egress. They then proceeded to the
mouth under the guidance of the Englishman, found the place where he
left his friend, but he was not to be found. The Captain in his
uncertainty of the escape of his companion, felt impelled to renew his
efforts to extricate himself, and groped on till exhausted nature
compelled him to give up in despair. The party in search returned for
further assistance, and were eagerly joined by the officers and crews of
four steamers. At two o’clock on Wednesday they entered, and
proceeding to the place where captain Grey (sic) was last seen, they
divided, and proceeded in different directions, continued the search till
three o’clock on Thursday morning when to the great joy of all, he was
found. He had sat himself down to die. He had not only worn his gloves
completely out; but his fingers were torn to the naked bone, in his vain
efforts to extricate himself. The flesh was worn from his knees, and his
boots, toes and pant legs were also demolished. He was found at the
distance of three and a half miles from the mouth of the cave, greatly
exhausted. He is now on board his boat doing well. he was forty three
hours in the cave. This great cave has many outlets or chimneys, as
they are called, one of which is said to be five miles from the mouth.

St. Louis Dem.

I stumbled across this cave article while searching for unrelated genealogical information. Possibly, some Missouri speleohistorian has chanced upon this same account from the St. Louis Democrat and has positively identified the cave.

This mid-nineteenth century cave rescue reveals that despite advances in technology and knowledge, human nature remains the same. These two 1854 cavers were guilty of several basic errors repeated innumerable times since then. They wandered into a large cave without a map or a guide familiar with the site. They lacked proper and adequate clothing and equipment. They especially failed to take backup lighting. Upon experiencing a problem, they panicked. The person sent for help didn’t take time to carefully note his path. The person left in the cave didn’t remain at the agreed upon location. The search party was poorly organized and unfamiliar with the cave.

Stever Knutson reprinted an 1885 example of a similar incident in American Caving Accidents 1990 (NSS News, December 1990, Part 2, Volume 48, Number 13, page 332). That incident occurred in Westmoreland County’s Bear Cave (PA). As Knutson asked in his report, “Are we doomed?” We hope to continue educating people about caves and safe and enjoyable caving. Caving is like swimming. You have to learn some basic skills before you enter the water. Each generation has to be taught how to swim, but somehow, most through mandatory training in high schools, we all learn how to swim and thus save ourselves from drowning. However, caving isn’t part of the required curriculum in school. We cavers have some responsibility to pass on our accumulated knowledge to succeeding generations of cavers so that they, too, can cave safely.
Historic Caves of the Matterhorn Revisited

Dr. Cato Hoiler, Jr.

Following the 1997 International Congress of Speleology in Switzerland, the author had the opportunity to spend some time in Zermatt climbing and investigating some historic caves of the region.

During an ascent of the Matterhorn, a shallow cave was visited on the east face near the Hornli Ridge at an elevation of 12,500 feet. I was informed that due to its strategic location, this grotto had been used as a bivouac on numerous occasions by climbers overtaken by nightfall or inclement weather. Later research showed that in 1868, three years after the first ascent of the Matterhorn, a small wooden hut, protected by dry stone walls, was constructed out from the cave mouth to increase the shelter's capacity to accommodate seven or eight stranded climbers. Over time the hut fell into a progressive stage of disrepair. In 1884, several desperate mountaineers burned the door of the cabin for warmth. Later, the roof was destroyed by wind. The ledge in front of the cave developed a split and the few remains of the hut were ultimately tossed over the side of the mountain. The only sign of the old hut today is a couple of wooden timbers back in the shelter. A new structure known as the Solvay Hut was established in 1915 above the site of the old hut at an elevation of 13,130 feet. It stands today as the highest emergency shelter on the mountain. With its sturdy bunks, pit toilet, and solar powered emergency radio, it is a far cry from the primitive cave hut. However, those early mountaineers who had been forced to seek refuge in the remote cave, had undoubtedly been more than thankful for its presence on the mountain.

The second historic cave visited lies a few miles south of the mountain across the Italian border between the villages of Val Tournanche and Breuil. Known as the Gouffre Des Busserailes, it consists of an impressive glacial gorge, quite narrow and sinuous in nature, so as to prevent one from seeing much daylight after entering. The cave is approximately 320 feet long, and the depth from the top of the walls to the river below is 110 feet. It was first entered by the noted Alpine guide Jean-Antoine Carrel, in November of 1865, just four months after he had successfully led the second ascent of the Matterhorn, the first from the Italian side. Carrel had himself lowered into the chasm by two other guides, and the group was so thrilled at what they had discovered, they decided to construct a plank walkway, so that everyone would be able to explore its depths. Edward Whymper, the first person to conquer the Matterhorn, was equally impressed upon visiting the cave and referred to the water sculptured caverns as “marmites” in his classic treatise Scrambles Amongst the Alps in the Years 1860-69. For a small fee, one may still visit this Alpine marvel and enjoy its waterfall and caverns.

Spelunking Socialists and Students

Annette McCoy Oeser and James Kenneth Oeser

Ruskin Cave, Dickson County, Tennessee, has been noted at least since 1808 and 1810, when deeds listed a “great cave” as a landmark of the property. Ruskin was home to a socialist commune in the late 1890s and to Ruskin Cave College (RCC) from 1904 to 1918, closing after many of the student body went to war. Graffiti in the cave shows that it has been visited by numerous people, including some adventurous individuals who belly crawled over 200 feet to reach the back portion of the cave.
One hundred students and two faculty members from RCC have been identified as traversing the crawlway, since their names and/or initials are found past that point. Ten identifiable trips are noted which contain names or initials and a date. Two trips were led by faculty members: R. J. Kelly and Virgil B. Hatley. Kelly’s group (one faculty member, six students) contained at least four females while Hatley’s group (one faculty member, seven students) contained at least five females. The socialist commune found its home at Ruskin from 1896-1899. The cave was named after the noted British socialist John Ruskin, who never visited the colony. The socialists used the cave extensively for canning, food storage, and dances. Several socialist names appear before and after the crawlway. C. W. Broeg, the stonemason for the commune, chiseled his name before the start of the crawlway. Other socialists entered the back of the cave on September 9, 1899, before the colony dissolved and the cave property sold.

Caves and Civil War Armies in the Chattanooga Region

Marion O. Smith

Slides will be shown emphasizing saltpeter and other caves in southern Tennessee, northeast Alabama, and northwest Georgia, and their relationship with movements of Civil War armies. On or near the routes the armies traveled were caves worked by the Confederates for saltpeter or springs with associated caves. Some of these caves were visited by Union troops during the Chickamauga-Chattanooga campaign of 1863, while others were entered by railroad guards or transient soldiers later in the war. Two of the caves, Lookout and Nickajack, were heavily visited by men from both sides.

Ralph Waldo Emerson and Mammoth Cave

Joseph C. Douglas

Although historians of American caves have long known that Ralph Waldo Emerson visited Mammoth Cave sometime in the 1850s, recent research in his journals and letters has yielded additional information about his trip to Kentucky and the cave. Of particular interest is Emerson’s lengthy letter to his wife Lydian which details his two tours into Mammoth Cave in June of 1850. Emerson was impressed by the natural features of the cave as well as the theatrics and other elements of the tour. The Mammoth Cave experience made a lasting impression upon Emerson and provided the seeds of ideas which later emerged in his essay “Illusions.”

Lost Caves of Harrison and Crawford Counties

John Benton

Harrison and Crawford Counties, bordering the Ohio River in southern Indiana, have long been known to cavers. Some 800 plus caves for the side by side counties are listed in the ICS (Indiana Cave Survey) database. Famous show caves, such as Wyandotte and Marengo Caves are here, as well as the 20-mile plus Binkley Cave System. At least 18 caves in the two counties have been physically closed or sealed so that present entry by cavers is not possible, due to natural cave in, sealed during highway construction, bulldozed shut by the owners, flooding, quarrying or just not being able to locate the entrance. I will document the existence of these once open caves, with newspaper articles, photos, word
of mouth and hand me down stories; these caves await being rediscovered by cavers who may find a
way in. From the clues we know about, some of the lost caves may prove to be quite extensive and/or
very beautiful.

The Saltpetre Mining History of Virginia Caves: An Inventory and
Compendium in Progress

David A. Hubbard, Jr.

There is a rich history of the use of Virginia caves for the extraction of saltpetre. A history
preserved not only in documents, but also as physical evidence in many caves of the Commonwealth of
Virginia. Historic documents, oral local lore, and physical evidence and artifacts have collectively
and individually led to the rediscovery of historically mined saltpetre caves. Much of the evidence of
saltpetre mining in caves is readily observable with minimal impact to a cave and its resources, an
impact limited to one’s careful passage through the cave. Artifacts and mining evidence reveal a wide
array and variation in tools used, sediment types exploited, where mining occurred, if and where cave
waters were collected for leaching, where leaching was conducted in-cave, types of leaching vats, and
even who worked these sites and when. Ongoing research indicates no less than 94 caves were
historically mined for saltpetre within the present geographic bounds of Virginia. Historic mining
generally occurred over three periods: immediately prior to and during the American Revolution, prior
to and during the War of 1812, and during the Civil War. The inventory of Virginia’s saltpetre caves
also entails the compilation of a compendium of previous documentation. Older photographs and slides
of saltpetre mining evidence and artifacts in Virginia caves are sought for duplication and inclusion in
the compendium. The physical mining evidence and artifacts of Virginia’s saltpetre caves are
protected by the Code of Virginia.

Charles Darwin’s Interest in Caves

Frederick Grady

The well known naturalist Charles Darwin noted only a few small sea caves in South America
during his nearly five year trip around the world in the early 1830s. His correspondence and published
writings indicate a knowledge of and interest in various aspects of speleology. Prior to publication of
The Origin of Species, Darwin requested information about cave adapted species and in The Origin of
Species, he devoted two pages to this subject. He was also interested in paleontological and
archaeological cave sites as evidenced by correspondence and publications. Unfortunately poor health
prevented possible field work in caves by Darwin after his return from his voyage.
Abstracts of the Papers Presented at the History Session, 1999 NSS Convention in Filer, Idaho

The Rediscovery of Heiskell Cave: a Confederate Nitre Bureau Works

David A. Hubbard, Jr. and Marion O. Smith

Heiskell Cave is the Civil War era name of a cave located in the Rose Hill area of Lee County, Virginia, within the Confederate Nitre Bureau’s District No. 1. Payroll records for a saltpeter mining operation in this cave are known from October, 1862, through August, 1863. The exact location and modern name of this cave remained a mystery to saltpeter history researchers for some fifteen years until November 1994, when the names of three Civil War miners were matched between payroll records and cave wall inscriptions. The inscriptions “John R. Fitts 1863,” “A.P. Waterman Mar 7 1863,” “A.P. Waterman March 10 1863,” and “1863 Andrew J. Milbourn CSA March 24 1863” were found on the walls of Jones Saltpeter cave and correlate with the Heiskell Cave payroll records of John R. Fitts (laborer) January-August 1863, Alfred P. Waterman (laborer) February-August 1863, and Andrew J. Milbourn (laborer) January-April 1863. Other mining evidence observed includes piles of rocks culled from sediment, old sediment levels on walls, mattock marks, torchperch sooting, talley marks, and old leach vat cast piles.

Jones Saltpeter Cave is once again closed to visitation by cavers and researchers alike.

Beyond the Sump: The Burnley Map of Carver’s Cave

Greg Brick

Carver’s Cave is a sandstone cave approximately 35 meters long located at the foot of Dayton’s Bluff near downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. Containing a spring-fed lake, it became the “baptismal font” of Minnesota caving when explorer Jonathan Carver visited it in 1766-67 and subsequently published his account, one of the first descriptions of a cave in the Upper Mississippi Valley. Since then, the cave has gone through the cycle of talusing-shut and being dug open again several times per century.

Carver’s Cave was most recently reopened with a front end loader in 1977 by city officials and was thereafter secured with a steel door. Since then, a two-meter thick deposit has accumulated below the bluff, burying the door and deepening the lake. Although still accessible today through a small opening, the cave will again be lost to view early in the next millennium.

The 1913 reopening of Carver’s Cave by Colwell, however, generated the most publicity. At that time, a journalist named Burnley drafted a conjectural map showing large rooms beyond the sump at the rear of the cave. Probing the sump with poles today, there is good reason to believe that Burnley’s room existed. After failed scuba and pumping efforts to crack the sump in the 1990s, local cavers have resorted to trenching the talus in the hope of draining the lake that fills the cave, and exposing the rooms.
The Baumannshöhle, in Rubeland, Harz, Germany, is one of the most important caves in early scientific literature. First mentioned 1546, it was the first natural cavern from which a picture of its interior (1654) and a map (1665) was made. It also was the first cave to be protected by decree and for which a guide was appointed (1668). In the 18th and 19th century it was the focus of investigations by numerous scientists, and appeared in many publications and in most of the natural science overviews. Here I report about a description published in 1763 by Johann Friedrich Zuckert (1731-1778), a physician and author, so far unknown to speleological literature. Zuckert appears to have been a critical observer. He not only described the individual flowstone figures, taking account of previous reports, but he also discussed the question of their formation, showing a thorough knowledge of the chemistry of his time. Furthermore, he deals with the bone deposits in the cave, however, without identifying them as bear bones, even though Horst (1656) and Bruckmann (1734) had already stated that the bones from the Einhornhöhle were bear. Walch (1769) was the first to acknowledge Baumannshöhlen bones as bear bones. In 1774, Epser suggested that they belonged to the ice bear, and in 1794, Rosenmuller finally realized that they represent an extinct species: Ursus spelacus, the cave bear. Using the most recent survey of the Baumannshöhle (Fricke, 1998), we were able to identify many of the historical flowstone figures discussed by Zuckert.