The Journal of Spelean History

Volume 31, No. 4

October-December, 1997

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Front Cover

J.A. Truitt proudly poses among formations in Bluff Dwellers Cave, Noel, Missouri.

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Production

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Printing:
D. C. Grotto
Potomac Speleological Press
Historical Background of the Francis McKinney Award of the Southeastern Regional Association of the National Speleological Society

Larry O. Blair

Although this award has been presented for only 21 years as of the writing of this article, the spelean historian can appreciate the fact that it is necessary to document the events and background for the formation of this solemn and prestigious award as part of our caving history. The purpose of this short article is to document for posterity the formation of this event. It is not my intent to present the criterion for the award. That information can be obtained from the current elected officers of the Southeastern Regional Association.

Some Background on Francis E. McKinney - The Person

As recorded in Francis’ obituary, he was “an ebullient and hard-working caver. Francis joined the Society (National Speleological) in 1958 and was made a Fellow in 1971. While attending Auburn (University), and working in Huntsville (Alabama), he caved extensively in Alabama, being the second person down Fern (July 9, 1961). In recent years he caved primarily in East Tennessee and Puerto Rico. As an active caver over a long period of time Francis held numerous grotto and regional offices and served as editor for the Bulletin.”

Francis was very active in the Oakridge Community Playhouse. He had received the Gold Pin honor from the Auburn Players. He wrote and directed plays. In September, 1962 he opened the regular season at the Rocket City, Huntsville Little Theatre with “Desk Set” directed by himself. He also served on the playhouse board of directors.

Francis graduated from Auburn on June 1, 1962 with a BS in math and went to work for NASA’s Marshall Space Flight Center working in the aeroballistic laboratory in the aerodynamics analysis branch. While at Auburn he belonged to a friendship type of club called the “First Hundred.” In this organization Francis and other members kept in touch with a series of letters circulated among themselves.

By the summer of 1962 Francis had completed five years of caving. He had just participated in two expeditions to Fern Cave, Alabama. Fern’s 426-foot measured depth was the nation’s deepest shaft at that time. He acted as the leader of the second trip to the cave.

Francis made four trips to cave the Rio Camuy System of Puerto Rico to map and explore. On March 26, 1975 Francis fell about 75 feet to his death while exiting the Ventosa entrance passageway located near Bayaney. He died at about 9:35 PM from a rupture of the aorta. His accident was caused, it is thought, from the failure of an upper Jumar sling made of low abrasion resistant polypropylene ski rope.

Thus one of SERA’s and TAG’s most active and enthusiastic cavers passed into history.
Idea for an Award and its Formation

After the death of Francis there was a series of letters sent back and forth among the various grottos of SERA and the SERA officers as well. It had been suggested at the 1975 SERA Cave Carnival in Monterey, Tennessee, that the region memorialize Francis by presenting the “SERA Francis McKinney Award.” During the SERA Winter Business Meeting, held in Huntsville on February 7, 1976, this suggestion was voted on and passed by a vote of the attending grottos. In SERA each attending internal organization has an equal vote in all business no matter how large or how small their membership may be.

The Award was to be similar in spirit to the Lew Bicking Award and was to be presented yearly on a merit basis to an outstanding SERA caver. Originally the Award was to be given at the Summer Cave Carnival, however, the presentation location was quickly changed to the banquet held yearly during the Winter Business Meeting. This meeting is hosted by a different internal organization and is held in a different area in the southeast each winter, usually in February. It was felt that it would be a more befitting occasion to present the Award in such a surrounding as opposed to a more “party type” atmosphere.

The Award was the first merit award presented by the Region. There is a plaque located in the NSS headquarters in Huntsville, upon which the name of each recipient is engraved.

Recipients of the Francis E. McKinney Award

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
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<tr>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Gerald Mori</td>
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<td>1978</td>
<td>Lin Guy</td>
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<td>1979</td>
<td>Cato Holler</td>
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<td>1980</td>
<td>Steve Hudson</td>
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<td>Buddy Lane</td>
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<td>William W. Varnoe, Jr.</td>
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<td>1985</td>
<td>David Parr</td>
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<td>Jim R. Whidby</td>
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<td>1988</td>
<td>Frank L. Hutchinson</td>
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<td>Bill Torode</td>
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<td>1990</td>
<td>Richard Schreiber (posthumously)</td>
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<td>1991</td>
<td>Larry E. Matthews</td>
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<td>1992</td>
<td>Larry O. Blair</td>
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<td>Ed Strausser</td>
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<td>Mike Doughly</td>
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<td>Laurie Adams</td>
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<td>1997</td>
<td>Bill Walter</td>
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Class photo of Francis E. McKinney from the 1958 Auburn Glomerata.
Sources


National Geographic, June 1964, pp. 810-812.


Personal collection of letters between grottos and officers of the Southeastern Regional Association (SERA) of the National Speleological Society.

Speleotype (newsletter of the East Tennessee, Holston Valley, and Smoky Mountain Grottos), Vol. 10, No. 3 (special Francis McKinney issue.)

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Jim Whidby of Knoxville, Tennessee and Robert E. Tanner of Marietta, Georgia for certain source materials used in this article. Also, thanks to Robert Tanner for furnishing the photograph of his college classmate.

Note: The author was Vice President and then President of SERA from 1976 to 1978, the first two years of the formation and presentation of the Award. I was also on the Award Committee in 1981, 1982, and 1983, and was asked to sit in on the Committee during 1984 and 1986. During those years I acquired the letters and other papers referred to above. The original documents have been turned over to the officers of SERA while photocopies were retained by myself.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this article to the memory of my father, Webster Waddell Blair, who was stricken by a series of illnesses as this work was being written. He was taken from our home in October 1997 and went through a series of stays in the hospital and nursing home. He was never to return again. He passed away on December 2 at the age of 88. A finer father no one has ever known.
Pheltius Valentine Simons - Pioneer Owner of Mammoth Cave

Stanley D. Sides, M.D.
Cave Research Foundation

Abstract

The history of the first owner of Mammoth Cave, Valentine Simons, has been shrouded in the mystery of a distant time. Pheltius Valentine Simons (circa 1776-1829) was granted a land warrant for $80 dated September 14, 1798, for 200 acres including two unnamed saltpeter caves (Dixon Cave and Mammoth Cave). Simons' claim was entered in the Warren County Survey book a year later, about the time he sold the property to John Flatt, probably a relative by marriage through Flatt's wife, Patience Logsdon. Simons most likely claimed the land, on behalf of Flatt, for the purpose of saltpeter mining, as the land survey is positioned to capture only the caves, and not to secure agricultural land. Simons moved on to favorable agricultural land northwest of Brownsville, away from the unhealthy environment in a river valley. He married Annie Durbin on February 8, 1803, and became a prominent landowner in Edmonson County. Valentine and Annie Simons had ten children, and became progenitors of the long line of Simons families of Sunfish, Kentucky. An attempt will be made to incorporate genealogic research into a speculative reconstruction of a portion of his life in Kentucky.

Introduction

The story of Valentine Simons, the pioneer owner of Mammoth Cave, is lost in the haze of the remote poorly-documented past. Recent genealogic studies allow speculation on the history of the life and times of Valentine Simons, but much uncertainty persists as to the accuracy of these records. This paper is an attempt at a synthesis from a wide variety of sources of his relationship to other individuals and families important to the early history of the cave region.

Simons Family Origins

At the end of the 18th century, Kentucky, the 15th state, began attracting land and opportunity hungry pioneers from the original 13 colonies. Following the 1803 Louisiana Purchase, sparsely settled Kentucky further became a borderland of migration to the lands west of the Mississippi River. Frayed social cohesion from a diverse, dynamic population led to families cooperating to lessen the difficulty of living in remote central Kentucky.

The laws of the State of Maryland in the late 18th century denied Catholics the right to vote or hold office. As Kentucky became safer from Indian attack after the Revolutionary War, Maryland Catholics in large numbers began migrating to Kentucky, settling near Bardstown (Baker, 1997) and north of Boonesboro (Logsdon, 1997). Members of three pioneering families, the Logsdons, Durbins, and Simons, are closely related by marriage and by the Catholic religion. Intermarriage among these three families, and naming children the same as parents makes it difficult to completely untangle the
genealogy of these families. However, these families are central to the development of the Mammoth Cave Region (Carson, 1994).

The Simons family of Kentucky, and later of Illinois and Missouri, descended from John Simon who came to America from Germany, in 1753 (Carson, 1993). He apparently settled in Maryland, near its border with Pennsylvania. His wife was probably Catherine Simons. By 1790, John Simons was found on the tax list of Jefferson County, Kentucky, having arrived in the 1780s with neighbors from Maryland and Pennsylvania. In 1797, 1799, and 1800 John is found on the tax list of Warren County with his son, Valentine Simons (Carson, 1993).

Valentine Simons and Mammoth Cave

Valentine was probably born in Maryland or Pennsylvania around 1776. Pheltius Valentine Simons is likely his full name, as tax records used both names. The location of his family home in Warren County in 1797 is unknown, but was presumably near Green River. On September 14, 1798, the 22-year old Valentine received a land grant for 200 acres in Warren County that included two saltpeter caves-- Dixon Cave and Mammoth Cave (Sides, 1985).

Legend indicates that John D. Houchin discovered Mammoth Cave while chasing a wounded bear. Born in 1788, he was only nine or ten years of age when the reputed discovery was made in 1798. It is much more likely that the cave was found by men searching for caves from which to mine saltpeter for producing gunpowder. That Valentine Simons chose his property containing two saltpeter caves was no coincidence. Caves containing large amounts of saltpeter had been reported in the Green River Valley in Imlay in 1792 who wrote: "Sulphur is found in several places in abundance; and nitre is made from earth which is collected from caves and other places to which wet has not penetrated. The making of this salt, in this county, is so common, that many settlers manufacture their own gunpowder. This earth is discovered in greater plenty on the waters of Green River, than it is in any other part of Kentucky" (Sides, 1985).

Valentine claimed his land in an area sparsely populated, but some settlement had already occurred. James Sturgeon took a military land claim for 200 acres in the Northtown area east of Mammoth Cave as early as 1790. Only military land claims were allowed south of the river until 1795. That year, the Kentucky General Assembly granted settlers rights to land south of the Green River. The act stated, "Whereas a number of people have settled themselves on the vacant land South of Green River, under a belief that they were no longer liable to be taken by military warrants, and that the legislature would grant them settlements therefore, on paying a moderate price for same; and it is therefore thought proper to pass an act for that purpose." The law provided for the sale of 200 acres at thirty cents per acre to each "housekeeper or other free person above the age of twenty one years, who shall have settled himself or herself" on the unsurveyed land (Ramage, 1977).

Valentine Simons recorded his claim to the 200 acres in Warren County Survey Book A on August 18, 1799. He did not receive a deed to the property until he paid a final payment of interest and principal on the land of $70.93 when clearing title with subsequent cave property owners on July 31, 1812. Nevertheless, he sold the property by contract to John Flatt for $116.67 and other considerations shortly after the claim was recorded in 1799.
In the 1986 Barren County Genealogy Quarterly, James H. Simons, a distant relative of Valentine, is quoted as saying, “There is some evidence that he (Simons) and two of his brother-in-laws were taking saltpetre from the cave before he acquired the warrant, and since it was hard work, and saltpetre was selling for but 17 cents per pound, and since, I believe, Valentine was a lazy man, he never had anything to speak of, he sold it to Flatt” (Warnell, 1997).

The land survey shows Simons claimed a pie-shaped property (Figure 1) running along the river, then to a corner on the ridge top near the present day road junction of the Flint Ridge Road and Mammoth Cave Hotel Road. The property is centered on the Dixon Cave and Mammoth Cave, with no land claimed with agricultural potential. In the 18th century it was felt to be unhealthy to live along rivers. Malaria and other insect-borne illnesses were feared as untreatable. In addition, an unhealthy “miasma” was felt to emanate from swamps and rivers. Therefore, Simons most likely chose the property for John Flatt or other relatives specifically for mining of saltpeter.

Valentine Simons and John Flatt were most likely related by marriage. Flatt was born in Hampton, Virginia, circa 1759. His wife Patience Logsdon, was born around 1765. She is likely related to Valentine Simons, or his future wife, Annie Durbin. Annie (Nancy) Durbin was the daughter of John Durbin and his first cousin, Ann Logsdon. Annie was born around 1780 in Madison County, Kentucky, in the Catholic community north of Boonesboro. Two of her brothers, Augustin (Austin) and Thomas are listed on the Barren County tax lists between 1800 and 1805. It is known that they were mining saltpeter from Flatts Cave (Carson, 1993).

John Flatt manufactured saltpeter at Mammoth Cave, then called Flatts Cave, until 1807. Before 1808, Flatt sold the property to George, Leonard, and John McLean. Patience Logsdon Flatt died in Barren County on September 15, 1815. Her husband died in Greene County, Illinois, on April 6, 1841, at the age of 82 (Carson, 1993).

Valentine Simons served as surety on the Catholic marriage bond of Martin Webb and Margaret Painter in Hardin County, north and west of Mammoth Cave region, on May 14, 1799. He may have already moved to present day Edmonson County by this time, having left Mammoth Cave searching for farmland on which to settle. Four years later, at about age 27, Valentine married Annie Durbin in Barren County, on February 8, 1803 (Carson, 1993).

The Simons of Sunfish, Kentucky

Annie and Valentine moved west of the Mammoth Cave area to Hardin County, north of Green River. They left the Green River valley to move to the broad uplands in the headwaters of Sunfish Creek, near where today a road junction is named Sunfish. Their first son, Silas Zachariah, was born in 1804. There followed nine more children. This was land of agricultural value. Simons continued to expand his land holdings, and owned 350 acres of the newly formed Edmonson County by the 1826 tax list (Carson, 1993).

Valentine Simons apparently died in the year 1829 at Sunfish, at about 53 years of age. No will has been found, and it is assumed his oldest son, Silas, inherited the family’s property on Sunfish Creek. Other Catholic families settled in the area, and five years later St John the Evangelist Parish
Figure 1. Kentucky Land Grants South of Green River, Book 11, Page 47. Certificate 2428: Beginning at a sycamore tree on the bank of the river, running South 45 East 180 poles to a hickory, thence South 40 West 198 poles to a stake, thence North 45 West 78 poles to a stake on the river, thence up the river North 150 poles, thence North 20 East 52 poles, thence North 48 East 60 poles to the beginning, containing 200 acres including two saltpeter caves.
was formed. This church remains today, south of Sunfish.

In 1829-1830, a large migration of pioneer families from central Kentucky to Illinois and Missouri occurred. Widow Annie Simons left Sunfish, and with several of her children moved to Richland County, Illinois. She was living with a daughter in Olney, Illinois, in 1853, presumably 73 years old (Carson, 1993).

Pheltius Valentine Simons and Annie Durbin Simons are pioneer settlers of Edmonson County, and progenitors of the large Simons family of Sunfish, Kentucky. Historically and culturally, this has had far greater significance than Simons' brief pioneering ownership of the world's longest cave.

Literature Cited


Presented at the Sixth Annual Mammoth Cave National Park Science Conference, Mammoth Cave National Park, August 1, 1997.
The Role Which Bat/Saltpeter Cave Has Had In Past History
(Note: This section about the history of the cave was compiled by the Arkansas Speleological Survey)

Below is an abstract of an article about the cave which appeared in the Arkansas Gazette Sunday Magazine, November 29, 1959.

The cave was known before the War between the States, the earliest date in the cave that has been found is 1828 (?-I don't remember whether this is true or not). During the War, the Confederate Army used the cave as a source of saltpeter for gunpowder. When their supplies of powder were cut off, the Confederates mined guano, which contains calcium nitrate, from the cave and mixed it with wood ashes and water. This process changed the calcium nitrate into potassium nitrate, and the saltpeter crystals were obtained by evaporating the nitrate solution. The Confederates had a large number of large iron kettles for use in this process, pieces of which are now used in the Buffalo River Valley for wash kettles and livestock watering troughs. None of the kettles are now intact; during latter stages of the War the operations was raided by Federal troops who destroyed the works and broke all of the kettles with sledge hammers (It is also said by local people that a steam engine was pushed over the hill and some of it remains there today).

For many years after the War the cave served as a sort of community hall; in it were held social functions from dances to revivals. Many people, both local and otherwise, have explored both levels of the cave, but few have seen it all.

Another article about the cave appeared in the May 5, 1931 Arkansas Gazette.

The following is from an NSS copy of a cave manuscript by Mary L. Gibson supported by WPA funds from 1935 to 1940:

The Journal of Spelean History
Fayette Edgmon took out 40 tons of bat guano for fertilizer and sold it for $45.00 per ton, in the spring of 1931.

Numerous bats: guano covers floor 10 to 15 feet deep; dry; layer of crystalline saltpeter near the base.

Also known as Deadman’s Cave because a man was killed in the entrance about 1900.

During the Civil War, the gunpowder plant at the cave was said to be worth $100,000. William Burnett in charge—plant erected using mainly Negros. Burnett organized a company and contracted with Confederate States for sale of gunpowder. --Ruins at base of old smokestack remain.

Bat/Saltpeter Cave is mentioned many times in the Newton County Homestead, publication of the Newton County Historical Society. Listed are some:

Vol. 2, No. 2, September, 1960. page 45
Vol. 5, No. 1, April, 1961. pages 42 and 55

An article appeared in the Ozarks Mountaineer about 1959 or 1960.
The "Cave Spring" Methodist Church of Verona, Tennessee

Doug Plemons

A new cave recently discovered by Nashville and Southport Grotto members on Bethberei Road in rural Marshall County, Tennessee has been identified positively as the site of the former "Cave Spring" Methodist Church that was later moved to Verona and became the Verona Methodist Episcopal Church in 1880. The writer is grateful to the references to the church and the cave itself found in Vol. III, No. 2, Fall 1972 edition of the Marshall County Historical Quarterly. In addition to this article, I am working on a much larger paper on Fox Cave Park which will of necessity include the history of exploration of this cave, which will be called Gallagher Cave after the current landowner, as there are too many "Cave Spring" caves in the Tennessee Cave Survey.

Caver references to the site began in the fall of 1996 when the writer located a large karst window alongside Bethberei Road. However, the cave was in full, roaring flood at the time and was very nearly completely underwater. I was impressed with the sheer amount of water being carried through the cave. The entrance was at the bottom of a 30-foot deep sink and featured a cave river emerging from one corner of the underhung bluff which disappeared into a breakdown pile on the other side. Previously, I had heard from Nashville Grotto member Jerry Perkins about a cave with a big river somewhere in the vicinity which he and others explored about 500 feet with no end in sight. A later conversation with Jerry confirmed the location as the same cave I saw in flood.

I did not return to the cave until the summer of 1997 when John DeGroff and I met the landowners, the Gallaghers, and were allowed to visit the cave during a period of time when there had been no rain for the previous weeks. In the meanwhile, I had the fortunate occurrence to meet the owners of Fox Cave Park, and was allowed to cave under their land, right across the road from the Gallagher Cave. Under that land there exists a fair portion of cave-- no less than 300 feet of easily penetrable cave in at least three separate cave segments, explored in two trips during the spring of 1996 and the summer of 1997. There is much more under their land and I hope to see it all at sometime in the near future!

Before we even got to the large entrance I gaped at the previous year, we located a narrow chimney in the woods next to the Gallagher's tractor shed. This entrance led to a large river cave which was explored downstream for 1000 feet with no end in sight, and with breakdown blocking the way upstream towards the bigger entrance. An old well casing was discovered wedged sideways in a huge pile of breakdown that had apparently collapsed on top of it. The cave is incredibly active. There were a few areas of formations.

The upstream cave contained the same cave river, only much deeper. A low airspace and a swimming passage followed by a sump were discovered by Perkins' crew a few years before; John and I, not having wetsuits, went only a few hundred feet upstream. Huge tree roots hanging out of the ceiling of the cave indicated the shallowness of the overburden. This monster cave river lay only a few feet underneath the rolling, sinkhole scarred surface of the Bethberei area. Since there was no humanly penetrable way to connect with the downstream cave, this portion would be called Gallagher...
Cave South. In drier weather perhaps this cave can be extended quite a bit further.

However, the true intent of this article is to relay the historic record surrounding the cave, found in the Marshall County Historical Quarterly references.

The MCHQ article itself comes from references in the Tennessee Historical Quarterly (Fall, 1967, pp. 307-308), the History of Tennessee Conference by Cullen T. Carter, and the record of the Verona Methodist Church, among others.

“We do not know exactly when the ‘Cave Spring’ Methodist Church was started,” begins the MCHQ article which often quotes the recollections of a former resident of the area (this apparently from the THQ reference). “(Thomas Burr Fisher, 1844-1922) grew up within sight of the locus of the community--Cave Spring church and school of which he said.”

Here my life began to unfold and to appropriate what was offered from without, when I reached the age of five years, I insisted on going to school. My four brothers and two sisters were going, so why shouldn’t I go?

There were three men living within one mile or less of Cave Spring, who had large families. Uncle Elihu Hunter had 9 children, Uncle Johnathan Thomas had 8 and my Father 8. We used to have subscription schools. When a teacher would come into the community to make up a school, he would be told to see these 3 men and if they agreed the school would be assured.

The school house built it was not long until a Sunday School was organized, then appointments for preaching were made and a church was born, sharing the same building with the school. This was the community center...the church grew, numbering at one time 275 members.

From this obscure reference we can probably guess that the Cave Spring Church and School were built about 1850, near the community’s major source of water, the cave. As with many settlements during the formative years of Tennessee, a spring was a necessity, and often whole communities sprang up around them. The town of nearby Farmington got its water and beginnings from the large springs, shown today on the Farmington topo map in the middle of town. The Bethberei area, which includes the former Cave Spring site, is to the northwest of Farmington.

The school house had been built near an ancient fracture in the earth’s crust, Cave Spring, an idyllic spot: This (cave spring) was a bold stream of water about 25 feet below the surface, which had
been disclosed by some natural catastrophe in unknown ages past, by
the caving in of the earth and rocks to one side, leaving a large
irregular opening or sink down the side of which a rugged path led
down to the water. In the hot dry summer the water would cease to
flow out, and only stand in pools far back in the cave. To get water
we would have to carry a bucket and a lighted torch or candle,
stooping half way to the ground part of the way to pass under the
overhanging rock. In other parts the rock overhead was so lofty you
could not reach it.

This described intimately the karst window I located in the fall of 1996 and which Jerry
Perkins and crew had explored the year before. In many old accounts of cave exploration the size of
the cave is exaggerated greatly, but not in this one. The "lofty"ceiling in Gallagher Cave South is
sometimes 20 feet overhead, not exactly the world’s largest borehole, but pretty amazing to those
with a torch or a candle for illumination. The residents apparently did not penetrate the downstream
portion of the cave until many years later, and what they would have seen there would have been even
more amazing. Gallagher Cave itself sports a wide borehole with the cave river filling it up from wall
to wall. The ceiling is 30 feet or more in places.

The Cave Spring Church was still in existence in 1878 when Allen Tribble was appointed to
the "Cave Spring Circuit," Franklin District, Tennessee Conference. The fact that the circuit was
named after the congregation there at Cave Spring Church suggests that the church may have been
the largest in the area.

About 1880 the church was divided with part of the membership establishing a church in
Farmington and the other part moving to Verona. The Cave Spring Church was torn down and part
of the material used to build the new church. Also, some of the pews were moved to Verona. The
church was erected next to the school lot in Verona and contained a one-acre lot. The church deed
was dated July 28, 1880.

The old Cave Spring Church stood across the road from where the Gallagher residence stands
today, and only the Thomas Cemetery remains on the site now. Only three burials are recorded from
the site, those of Johnathan Thomas (1798-1884), his wife Susan (1807-1858), and a daughter, Nancy
Jane Thomas (1834-1858). It is said that Nancy Jane requested to be buried beside "the church she
loved."

The Cave Spring (but not the church) is seen on the 1899 W.M. Carter “head of household”
map of Marshall County, Dist. 16. The “Meth. church” and the “School” are also marked at a
crossroad in Verona.

The Methodist Church of Verona is one of the many “Cave Spring” church-community sites
that existed in rural Tennessee during the 19th century.