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# The Strangest Cave Trip in History? The Quaker Exiles and Their 1777 Visit to Indian Echo Caverns, Penna.

© by Bert Ashbrook

As the British army marched toward the City of Philadelphia late in the summer of 1777, Congress and Pennsylvania officials suspected the city's pacifist Quakers of aiding the enemy. When twenty prominent Quakers refused to take a loyalty oath, Pennsylvania summarily exiled them to Virginia. During their deportation under an armed guard, the prisoners stopped for a surprising diversion: a visit to the best-known cave in Pennsylvania at the time, now known as Indian Echo Caverns. This paper describes the circumstances of what may have been the strangest cave trip in American history, recorded in two of the exiles' journals.

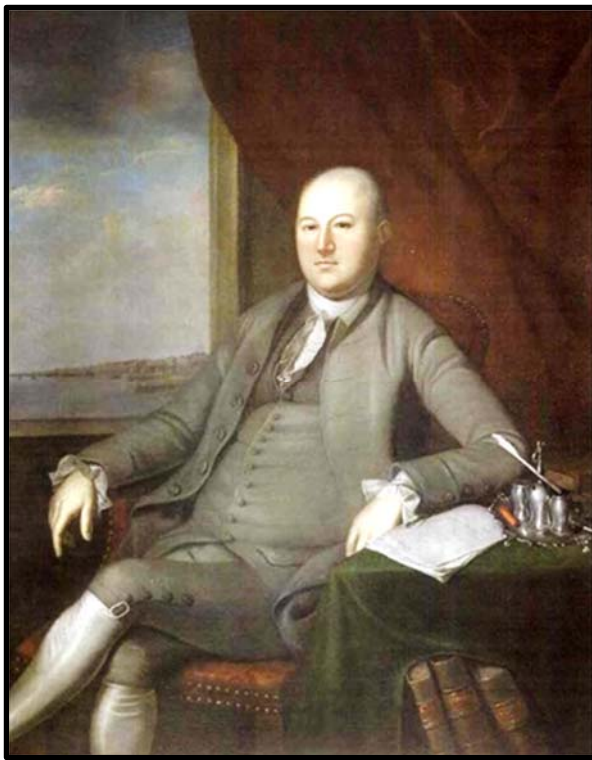
During the last week of August 1777, all of Philadelphia was nervous. More than 15,000 British regulars and Hessian mercenaries had just made a surprise landing only 60 miles away in Maryland, and everyone knew why: General Sir William Howe, commander of all British forces in North America, was intent on capturing the American capital. Although Philadelphia may have been the cradle of American liberty, in reality the population of the city and of Pennsylvania was deeply divided. Patriots controlled the government, but there were many "non-associators" who withheld their support for the war effort. These included not only loyalists, but also religious minorities like the Quakers, whose pacifist beliefs were sometimes a reason (or perhaps an excuse) for refusing to serve in the militia, for refusing to pay taxes to support the war, and for refusing to take Pennsylvania's loyalty oath. Although the Quakers had helped found William Penn's colony in 1682 as a haven for religious tolerance, nearly a century later the Quakers themselves were resented for practicing their own faith and their apparent loyalist sympathies.<sup>1</sup>

Both the Continental Congress and Pennsylvania's Supreme Executive Council, the dozen ardent patriots who effectively governed the Commonwealth, were meeting in Philadelphia that week. With the British army marching toward the city, both bodies were especially worried about traitors and spies. As George Washington and the Continentals paraded south through the city on their way to intercept the British advance, word came to Congress from American Major-General John Sullivan about some papers his forces found after a minor skirmish with enemy on Staten Island. The papers purported to come from a Quaker regional synod—the "the Yearly Meeting of Spanktown"—and they indicated that the Friends had been providing intelligence to the British. No matter that Spanktown (near present-day Rahway, New Jersey) had no yearly meeting and that the papers would later prove to be forged: with an attack on the city seeming imminent, Congress promptly "recommended" that Pennsylvania secure its non-associators, and it named eleven Quakers in particular.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See generally Neva Jean Specht, "'Being a Peaceable Man, I have Suffered Much Persecution': The American Revolution and Its Effects on Quaker Religious Identity," *Quaker History*, vol. 99, no. 2, pp. 37–48 (Fall 2010).

<sup>2</sup> I use "Quaker" or "Friend" as a convenient shorthand for the accused citizens, although three among those eventually exiled were not actually members of the Religious Society of Friends.



**Thomas Wharton, Jr., President of Pennsylvania's Supreme Executive Council.  
Painting by Robert Wilson Peale**

The Supreme Executive Council, led by its president Thomas Wharton, Jr. (1735–1778), was all too willing to comply. Before the week was out, the Council had not only ordered the arrest of the eleven, but also had added another thirty Quakers to the list of suspected traitors. The 41 were highly regarded citizens, and neither Council nor Congress offered any reason or evidence for their attainder. However, cognizant of the Quaker's social position (and perhaps also the febleness of the charges), Council did offer

most with the option of house arrest if they would give written promises of loyalty and of no communications with the enemy.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the Quakers were quickly rounded up and imprisoned in the Mason's Lodge in Philadelphia, but a few avoided arrest by breaking with their faith by signing the loyalty oath. Among those adhering to their Quaker principles was Thomas Wharton Sr. (1730/31-1784), the wealthy older cousin of the Supreme Executive Council President. Prisoner Wharton Sr. appealed to President Wharton Jr. and to Congress to allow the Quakers to appear and fight the charges. But Council and Congress each pinned responsibility on the other, with the result being that neither would let the Quakers offer a defense. Both bodies were frantically preparing for the British attack, and neither could afford to let its judgment to be questioned—not even in the name of liberty and justice. Instead, Council (with Congress's approval) quickly ordered the Quakers to be deported to remote Staunton, Virginia, in hopes that they would quickly disappear from both sight and mind. The Quakers for their part publicized the Council's hypocrisy, and in early September, Council devised a face-saving way out: some Quakers were pardoned due to health or age, others were allowed to leave the Commonwealth voluntarily, and the remainder could be discharged by merely affirming a simple oral oath:

<sup>3</sup> *Minutes of the Supreme Executive Council of Pennsylvania*, vol. XI, Harrisburg: printed by Theo. Fenn & Co. (1852) (hereafter "*Colonial Records XI*") pp. 283–84; Thomas Gilpin, *Exiles in Virginia, with Observations on the Conduct of the Society of Friends during the Revolutionary War*, Philadelphia: published for the subscribers (1848) (hereafter "*Exiles in Virginia*") pp. 35–37; James Donald Anderson, "Thomas Wharton, Exile in Virginia," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 89, no. 4 (Oct. 1981) (hereafter "*Thomas Wharton*") pp. 425–27; James Pemberton et al., "To the President and Council of Pennsylvania. The Remonstrance of the Subscribers," broadside in the Library of Congress Printed Ephemera Collection call no. Portfolio 144, Folder 32 (Sept. 5, 1777); Israel Pemberton, *An Address to the Inhabitants of Pennsylvania, by Those Freeman, of the City of Philadelphia, who are now confined in the Mason's Lodge by Virtue of a General Warrant*, Philadelphia: printed by Robert Bell (1777). On the social standing of one of the Quakers, see, e.g., Thomas Gilpin Jr., "Memoir of Thomas Gilpin," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 49, no. 4 (1925).

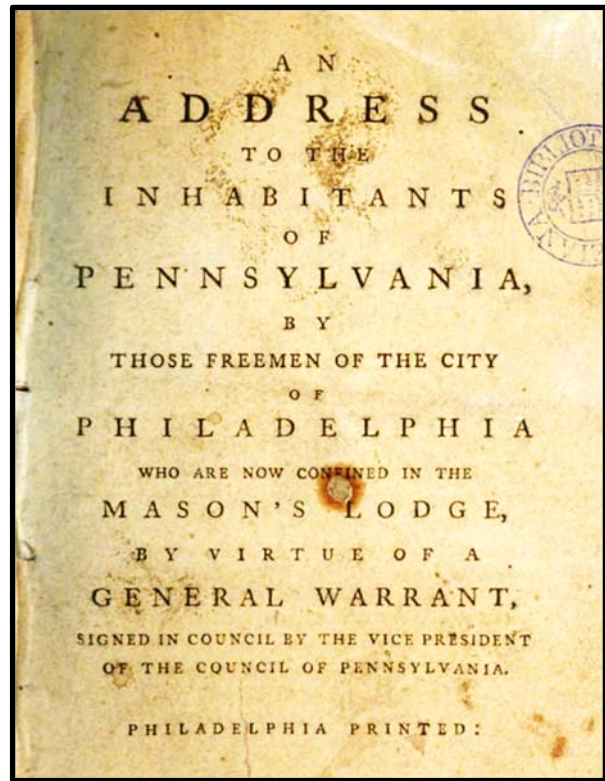


**The Freemason's Lodge,  
where the Quakers were confined**

I do Swear (or affirm) that I will be faithful & bear true allegiance to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, as a free & independent State.<sup>4</sup>

Council clearly misjudged the Quakers. Although a few took the deal, twenty stood by their faith and refused to affirm even the modified oath. With no room left for negotiation on either side, the exile became inevitable. While the Quakers' actual deportation was delayed for the want of wagons to carry them—all available vehicles having been appropriated by the Continental Army to help oppose the impending British attack—Council did negotiate the terms and conditions of their deportation and exile, perhaps out of deference for the prisoners' social standing or in response to the growing public skepticism.<sup>5</sup>

On September 11, 1777, General Howe outmaneuvered George Washington at the Battle of Brandywine and scored a decisive victory in the largest battle of the war. The British army now stood only 25 miles from Philadelphia, with precious little to stop them



**The Quakers publicized the Council's  
hypocrisy and its refusal to let  
them try to prove their innocence**

from occupying the capital. Yet in the city—even as the cannons could be heard from the battlefield—a crowd spent the day protesting and impeding the deportation of the twenty Quakers. It was not until late in the day that a convoy of wagons carrying the Quakers finally left the city under armed guard. To avoid Howe's army, they detoured to Reading, arriving there on September 15. There the Quakers obtained writs of *habeas corpus* from the Chief Justice of Pennsylvania, Thomas McKean, but the Supreme Executive Council ignored the writs and ordered the deportation to resume, albeit with a revised destination: Winchester, Virginia.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> *Colonial Records XI*, pp. 287–95; *Exiles in Virginia*, pp. 38–39, generally 65–133; *Thomas Wharton*, pp. 427–32.

<sup>5</sup> *Colonial Records XI*, pp. 295–98; *Thomas Wharton*, pp. 432–33; *Exiles in Virginia*, generally pp. 65–133; Sarah Logan Fisher, “A Diary of Trifling Occurrences,” in Nicholas B. Wainwright, ed., *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 82, no. 4 (Oct. 1958) pp. 411–465.

<sup>6</sup> *Colonial Records XI* pp. 308–09; *Exiles in Virginia* pp. 41, 154, generally pp. 133–58; *Thomas Wharton* pp. 434–36; James Donald Anderson, “Thomas Wharton, Exile in Virginia,” in *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 89, no. 4 (Oct. 1981) pp. 425–77.

The wagons of prisoners and their baggage finally left Reading on September 21 and arrived at Lebanon that night. The next day, September 22, 1777, the Quakers reached Hummelstown for a midday dinner. That afternoon, while some of the prisoners proceeded directly to their night's lodging at Harris's ferry along the Susquehanna River, others set out for a short diversion from the late summer heat. A mile south of town, along the eastern bank of a meander of Swatara Creek, the Quakers scrambled down a steep path to the water. There, they found the gaping entrance to the best-known cave in the Commonwealth at the time, today known as Indian Echo Caverns. They toured the cave and then caught up to their fellow prisoners at Harris's ferry.<sup>7</sup>

The next morning, the Quakers crossed the Susquehanna River, and for the next several days they kept a leisurely pace south through

the Cumberland Valley. Back at home, however, things were anything but leisurely. That week, the Supreme Executive Council fled Philadelphia, and the British army finally entered the chaotic city on September 26. Two days later, the Quakers crossed the Mason-Dixon line out of Pennsylvania, passed through Maryland, and arrived at Winchester, Virginia, to begin their term of exile.<sup>8</sup>

\* \* \*

Today, Indian Echo Caverns is a popular tourist destination near the borough of Hummelstown in Dauphin County. In 1777, the Quakers would not have come through Hummelstown (then part of Lancaster County) but for General Howe's unexpected choice to land his army in Maryland, which in turn necessitated the exiles' roundabout route to Virginia.



**On September 22, 1777, a Group of the Quaker exiles visited Indian Echo Caverns, in present-day Dauphin County, Pennsylvania**

<sup>7</sup> *Exiles in Virginia*, pp. 143–44, generally pp. 133–58; *Thomas Wharton*, pp. 435–36.

<sup>8</sup> *Exiles in Virginia*, pp. 42, 144, generally pp. 133–8; *Thomas Wharton*, pp. 436–37.

There are two contemporaneous accounts of the Quakers' visit to the cave on Monday, September 22, 1777. The first is a personal diary kept by one of the exiles, James Pemberton (1723–1809), who had been ill during the trip and who did not visit the cave. Pemberton writes:

9 mo: 22 Second day

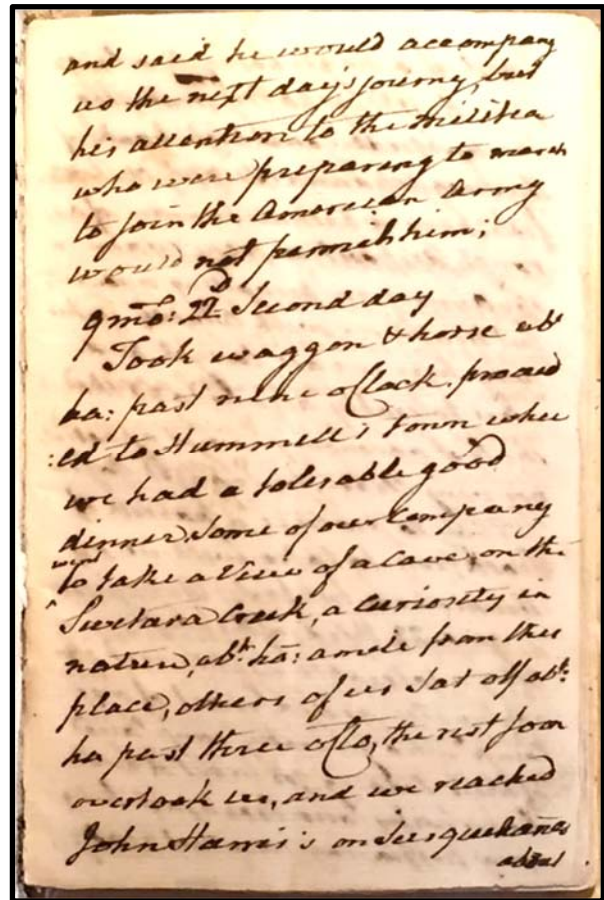
Took waggon & horse ab<sup>t</sup> ha: past nine o'clock. proceed :ed to Hummell's town where we had a tolerable good dinner. Some of our company went to take a view of a cave on the Swetara Creek, a curiosity in nature, ab<sup>t</sup>: ha: a mile from thee place, others of us sat off ab<sup>t</sup>: ha past three o'Clo, the rest soon overtook us, and we reached John Harris's on Sessquahana abt. Sun sett . . .<sup>9</sup>

The second is a journal that “was kept by those of the company who were members of the Society [of Friends].”<sup>10</sup> It was a collective work, and the individual author of the account of the cave is unknown:

22d day of 9th month.—We left Lebanon about ten o'clock, dined at Hummeltown: while there several of our company went about a mile to see the great cave, a subterranean cavern supported internally by limestone rocks, through which the water dripping in many places, forms pillars, or petrifies. The water turns to stone any object on which it falls, as straw, leaves, &c.

We crossed the Swatara creek, and reached Harris's Ferry in the evening . . .<sup>11</sup>

It seems remarkable to modern sensibilities that any group of prisoners being transported under guard would have been permitted to split up so that some might explore a cave. Yet in reading the Quakers' journals, it is apparent that they were not considered a flight risk. Before leaving Philadelphia, most had been temporarily paroled to wind up their affairs, pack their baggage, and say goodbye to family and friends. During overnight stops on their deportation to Virginia, some local



**James Pemberton's diary from September 22, 1777, courtesy Pennsylvania Historical Society**

officials insisted on their confinement, but just as often they had to split up at night to find lodging in private homes. In Winchester, they were initially confined, but soon they were granted liberty to roam the town. While the Quakers had offered passive resistance and fought their exile on legal grounds, none physically resisted the authorities. In short, the prisoners were men with reputations and principles, and despite the accusations of treason, Council and their guards trusted them.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>9</sup> James Pemberton manuscript diary, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia), call no. Am.0247.

<sup>10</sup> *Exiles in Virginia*, pp. v, 175, 197.

<sup>11</sup> *Exiles in Virginia*, p. 144.

<sup>12</sup> After several months in Winchester, two of the twenty exiles did leave without permission, one of whom returned to Philadelphia. However, the two escapees were not actually members of the Society of Friends.

The Friends' going "to see the great cave" implies that Indian Echo Caverns was well known by 1777, and indeed at that time the cave was the best known in the Commonwealth (and perhaps in the nation). The cave was shown on the finest map of Pennsylvania then available, William Scull's 1770 *Map of the Province of Pennsylvania*.<sup>13</sup> Scull's map was printed in Philadelphia and shows the roads used by the Quakers, and it is conceivable that the travelers might have carried Scull's map with them. Because they departed intending to go to Staunton Virginia, it is also conceivable that they could have used the best regional map available at the time, Lewis Evans' famous 1755 *Map of the Middle British Colonies, in America*.<sup>14</sup> Indian Echo caverns is the only cave depicted on Evans' map, but that map was

drawn at such a small scale that it would have been less helpful in route finding.

The Quakers' description of dripping water, pillars, and the petrification of calcite in the cave is all consistent with the cave today and with the only other written description of the cave predating their visit, that of the leader of the Ephrata Cloister in Lancaster County, Peter Miller (1709?–1796). In 1783, Miller wrote a detailed description of the cave for presentation to the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. In it, Miller discussed a visit to the cave "about thirty years ago," *i.e.*, in about 1753. The encrustation of straw and leaves by flowstone, as described by the Quakers, has not been personally observed by the author in the cave, but it may indicate that



**William Scull's 1770 map of Pennsylvania shows Indian Echo Caverns near the road traveled by the Quakers from Lebanon to Hummelstown to Harris's Ferry (Harrisburg) on September 22, 1777**

<sup>13</sup> William Scull, *Map of the Province of Pennsylvania* (1770); Bert Ashbrook, *Caves of Pennsylvania in the Eighteenth Century*, Wallingford, Pa.: Greyhound Press (August 2013) (hereafter "*Caves of Pennsylvania*") pp. 23–27.

<sup>14</sup> Lewis Evans, *A General Map of the Middle British Colonies, In America* (June 23, 1755); *Caves of Pennsylvania*, pp. 17–21, 29.

the Quakers traveled to the end of the known passage, where a second entrance described by Miller (and since closed) might have admitted leaves and straw.<sup>15</sup>

The two journal entries for September 22 imply that the Quakers' cave trip must have been a quick one, despite the vagaries of eighteenth-century timekeeping. Hummelstown is about 17 miles from Lebanon, so a 9:30 or 10:00 a.m. departure that morning might have put the party in Hummelstown around 2:00 p.m., assuming a four mile-per-hour pace for the Quakers' horse-drawn wagons. If a tavern needed an hour or 90 minutes to provide dinner to twenty Quakers plus guards, it seems unlikely that the meal would have ended before about 3:00 or 3:30 p.m., which is consistent with Pemberton's diary entry saying that his group set out for Harris's ferry at half past 3:00 p.m. Assuming 12 hours of daylight around the equinox and Pemberton's judging the hour based on local noon, sunset should have been approximately 6:00 p.m. To overtake Pemberton's group, the group that visited the cave would have had to travel a mile to the cave, procure lighting and visit the cave, return to Hummelstown, and then travel the ten remaining miles to Harris's ferry, all within only two or two and a half hours. That only allows for a short cave trip, perhaps only half an hour. However, given the known extent of the cave in the eighteenth century (before the North Canyon would be discovered in 1837<sup>16</sup>), the Quakers could have seen the entire cave in that short time.

Coincidentally, the Quakers made two other cave related connections during their

deportation and exile. First, while in Reading the Quakers met with a young Continental Army officer, Alexander Graydon (1752–1818). After the war, Graydon would go on to serve as Dauphin County's first prothonotary. As such, Graydon received a request from the Rev. Jedidiah Morse (1761–1826), known as the "father of American Geography," for information about the county including its caves. Graydon's response on March 5, 1789, described Indian Echo Caverns—the same cave that the Quakers visited—and Morse would later incorporate it into his famous geography texts.<sup>17</sup>

Second, Quaker Isaac Zane Jr. (1743–1795), the proprietor of the Marlboro Iron Works south of Winchester, was the brother-in-law of exile John Pemberton. Zane's father met with the exiles in Reading, while Isaac Jr. interceded to have the place of their exile moved from Staunton to Winchester, where he could better help them. Six years later, Zane Jr. would take Thomas Jefferson to visit a cave on Zane's land, and Zane would later measure the temperature of the cave at the behest of the future President. Jefferson in turn described Zane's Cave and its temperature in Query V of his *Notes on the State of Virginia*.<sup>18</sup>

One of the Quakers, Thomas Gilpin (1727/28–1778), who died while in exile in Winchester, has additional connections to cave history. Thomas's son Joshua Gilpin (1765–1841) wrote an extraordinary journal of a trip through southwestern Pennsylvania in 1809. In it, Gilpin describes Panther's Den cave in Washington County.<sup>19</sup> Joshua's eight-year-old son Henry D. Gilpin (1801–1860)

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Miller, "Description of the Grotto at Swatara," communicated by William Barton (read March 7, 1783), *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, vol. 2 (1786), pp. 177-78; *Caves of Pennsylvania*, pp. 33–35.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Harris, *A Biographical History of Lancaster County*, Lancaster: Elias Barr & Co. (1872) pp. 257–58.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Graydon, *Memoirs of a Life, Chiefly Passed in Pennsylvania, within the Last Sixty Years*, Harrisburgh: printed by John Wyeth (1811) pp. 269–70; *Caves of Pennsylvania*, pp. 55–56.

<sup>18</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Frank Shuffelton, ed., Penguin Books (1999) p. 25 (Query V); Roger W. Moss, Jr., "Isaac Zane Jr., A 'Quaker for the Times'," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 77, no. 3 (July 1969) pp. 300-01.

<sup>19</sup> See Bert Ashbrook and Tom Metzgar, "Searching for Two Historical Caves in Washington County, Pennsylvania," *Journal of Spelean History*, vol. 55, no. 2, series no. 160 (Sept. 2021) pp. 30–35.

accompanied his parents on the 1809 trip and would later become the Attorney General of the United States. In 1827, Henry traveled to Virginia to find his grandfather Thomas's grave, among other things. Henry's extraordinary letters home to his father Joshua about that trip describe visits to Weyer's Cave (now Grand Caverns), Madison's Cave, and the Natural Bridge. One letter includes a map of Weyer's Cave that Henry copied from a mysterious map hanging in an inn in Staunton.<sup>20</sup>

\* \* \*

In the spring of 1778, with the long winter at Valley Forge finally coming to an end and with the British still occupying Philadelphia, it was clear that the Quakers could no longer pose any threat. Perhaps also the irony of their banishment without a trial was harming the patriots' claim to be fighting for liberty. Whatever the reason, the Supreme Executive Council unilaterally discharged the Quakers (with Congress's consent) and ended

their exile in mid-April. The exiles had been in Winchester for nearly eight months. On April 30, with George Washington's permission, the Quakers crossed enemy lines into British-occupied Philadelphia, where they received a warm reception from family and friends. Although they were free from further legal problems, even after the British abandoned the city and the Supreme Executive Council returned that June, their reputations and affairs were both left in shambles.<sup>21</sup>

The exile of the Quakers from Pennsylvania "formed one of the gravest violations of individual rights and English common law by the patriots during the course of the War of American Independence."<sup>22</sup> The actions of the Supreme Executive Council follow a familiar and unfortunate historical pattern of curtailing civil rights during wartime. Yet in the midst of it all, the bizarre circumstances of the Quakers' visit to Indian Echo Caverns make that cave trip among the strangest in history.

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<sup>20</sup> Joshua Gilpin, "Journal of a Tour from Philadelphia thro the Western Counties of Pennsylvania in the Months of September and October, 1809," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 51, no. 4 (1927) p. 383–34; Ralph D. Gray, "A Tour of Virginia in 1827," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 76, no. 4 (Oct. 1968). On the mystery of the map of Weyer's Cave in the inn in Staunton, see Bert Ashbrook, Jim McConkey, and William Halliday, "Henry D. Gilpin and the Mystery of the Weyer's Cave Map," in progress.

<sup>21</sup> *Colonial Records XI*, pp. 435, 460–62, 472–73; *Thomas Wharton*, pp. 444–46; *Exiles in Virginia*, pp. 42–45.

<sup>22</sup> *Thomas Wharton*, p. 425.

# A New Chapter and Interpretation of the Croghan Legacy at Mammoth Cave

by David Sholar

Dr. John Croghan's purchase and subsequent development of Mammoth Cave as a world class tourist attraction is perhaps the most important period in Mammoth Cave's history. It continues to impact Mammoth Cave to the present day. The recent discovery of Croghan's mark in Mammoth Cave adds an important new chapter to the Mammoth Cave Story.

The Croghan Family had connections with Mammoth Cave region going back to the late 1700s. William Croghan Sr., John's father, had been a surveyor on the Green River years earlier. It has been suggested that the Gratz family interest in Mammoth Cave may have been aroused by William Croghan Sr., from his surveying in the Green River area.

From 1810 to 1813, John Croghan was a student at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Medicine. In the fall of 1809, he went to Philadelphia to become the private pupil-apprentice of Benjamin Rush M.D. John was the pupil of Dr. Rush for three years. Rush was a signer of the Declaration of Independence and was an ardent proponent of the abolition of slavery. Late in his life, he was also the treasurer of the US Mint.

The Croghan family was well connected to many people at the highest levels of business and government in America. John's uncle William Clark, of the Lewis and Clark Expedition, had been well acquainted with Dr. Rush for a long time. John Croghan attended The College of William and Mary, in Virginia from 1807 to 1809. This was the same school attend by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and other future presidents.



**Dr. John Croghan (1790–1849)**

John was very active in the social and cultural life in Philadelphia. The wealthy Gratz family members traveled in these same circles.

Around this time (1810), Charles Wilkins and Fleming Gatewood had acquired Mammoth Cave and were expanding the saltpeter operation, using large rectangular boxes. The technology for these boxes came from Frederick Ridgley, M.D., part owner of Great Saltpeter Cave near Lexington. Ridgley was Charles Wilkins' brother-in-law. Charles Wilkins showed the Eye Draught Map of Mammoth Cave (circa 1808-10) to Ridgley. Ridgley made a copy of the map and sent it to Dr. Benjamin Rush of Philadelphia in 1811.

Charles Wilkins also had a family connection to Thomas Jefferson. William Short was Jefferson's unofficial adopted son (actually his wife's nephew). He became Jefferson's personal secretary. William Short was also a

brother-in-law to Charles Wilkins. A copy of the Eye Draught Map of Mammoth Cave shows up in the second edition of Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, edited by J.W. Randolph in 1853.

This map would be seen by several people who will become an important part of Mammoth Cave history as early as 1811. They were John Croghan and Hyman Gratz.

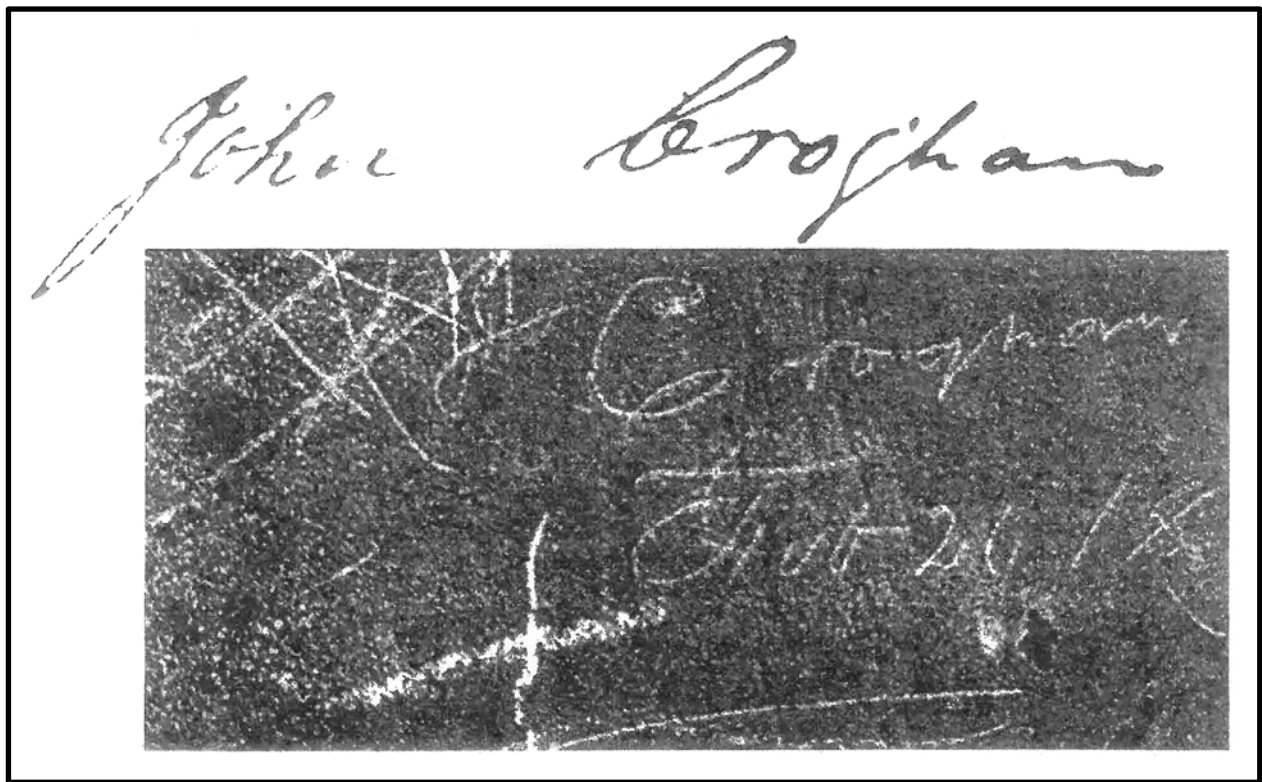
John returned home to Louisville on occasion, including the summer of 1812. This is about the same time Hyman Gratz was in the area to acquire half interest in Mammoth Cave. During the fall and winter of 1812/1813, John returned to school and graduated from the Medical School of the University of Pennsylvania, receiving his Doctorate on April 1, 1813. He remained in Philadelphia until June 24th. By November of that year, John had established his medical practice.

By 1815 it appears that Dr. Croghan may have curtailed his medical activities.

In 1815, Dr. John Croghan was traveling on the Green River. He had probably been sent to check on properties owned by his father near Mammoth Cave. His father owned land in Edmonson County. John was 25 years old. Having heard about Mammoth Cave from Benjamin Rush and being aware that a few years earlier Hyman Gratz had purchased half interest in it, he stopped by Mammoth Cave.

The last battle of the War of 1812 was fought in January 8th, 1815. The Treaty of Ghent was ratified by the Senate on February 17th. John was at Mammoth Cave on February 26th.

By this time, mining activity at Mammoth Cave had ceased. The saltpeter bubble had burst about a year earlier. Slave workers that had been leased had been returned to their owners. Fleming Gatewood and family members had been gone from the operation for several years.



**John Croghan's signatures: on paper and in Ganter Avenue, Mammoth Cave**

Archibald Miller Sr. had stayed on to oversee the property. His brother-in-law John Holton was probably around as well.

John arrived at the cave at the end of February 1815. It was probably a dismal sight: trees cut down as far as one could see, muddy wagon ruts leading to the cave entrance, with boiling pots and other processing equipment strewn about.

John would not have entered the cave alone. He would have met Miller or Holton at the house on the hill before they walked the path to the cave. Archibald Miller was about the same age as John.

They entered the cave on February 26, 1815. Passing through the Narrows, they soon reached the Big Room (Rotunda). To the right was the Big Bat Room (Audubon Ave.) and to the left was Main Cave (Broadway Ave.). Passing by the second set of leaching boxes, they climbed a crude ladder up into the Haunted Chambers (Gothic Ave.). While tourism had not yet officially begun at Mammoth Cave, names and dates left in the cave prior to 1815 indicate that Gothic Avenue was already a popular place shown to people who came to the cave.

After being shown these large passages, they toured some of the smaller wilder places in the cave. From Main Cave they went behind a large rock on the right side of the passage into a room with a wooden bowl was apparently left by prehistoric people. From there, they went left into the passage that would later become known as Ganter Ave (Indian Avenue on the Bishop Map). John's guide pointed out names

of people had left their mark, including Hyman Gratz and Gatewood family members in 1812.

Dr. John Croghan wrote his name in Ganter Avenue near its intersection with Flint Alley in 1815 when he was 25 years old ("J Croghan, Feb 26 1815"). This was 24 years before he would buy Mammoth Cave from Franklin Gorin and A.A. Harvey.

It has been written that John perhaps learned about Mammoth Cave while in Europe in 1832-33. Visitors may have asked him about it; however, he was well acquainted with Mammoth Cave long before that time. Historian Harold Meloy recognized a Croghan name in Gothic Avenue dated 1825, John Croghan's little brother Nicholas. Nicholas was 25 when he came to Mammoth Cave. A year later, Nicholas died, probably from cholera.

In short, John Croghan had known about Mammoth Cave long before he went to Europe. He probably sent his brother Nicholas to Mammoth Cave while on business for him in Edmonson County. Upon John's father's death in 1822, he inherited most of his father's properties. If not before, John had learned about Mammoth Cave while in Philadelphia as a student of Dr. Benjamin Rush.

John Croghan explored Mammoth Cave before Mammoth Cave was world famous and before tourism took root. Little did he know that Mammoth Cave would change his life or that he would change the course of its history. Twenty-four years later, John Croghan would own Mammoth Cave.

# Charles W. Wright and the Caves of the Mammoth Cave Region

by Joseph C. Douglas and Marion O. Smith

If you investigate the history of Mammoth Cave and the surrounding area of south-central Kentucky, you will eventually run across Professor Charles W. Wright, whose path intersected Mammoth and neighboring caves in interesting and important ways in the 1850s and 1860s. After having collected bits of information on Wright for the last few years, and despite the numerous gaps in our knowledge, this paper gives an outline of Wright's speleo-biography and a review of his association with, and writings and lectures about, Mammoth Cave and environs. We will (hopefully) highlight the ways Charles W. Wright was a significant, if underappreciated, figure in the history of the Mammoth Cave region. While today known primarily for his early guidebooks, his connections to Kentucky caves ran deep (pardon the pun). To his contemporaries his "cave knowledge and experience are so well-known as to be extraordinary."<sup>1</sup> Yet there is also a major anomaly in his otherwise relatively reliable writings about Kentucky caves, which we call the "problem of Colossal Cavern."

For someone who contributed much to the literature of Mammoth Cave, scholarly study of Charles W. Wright and his work is

surprisingly lacking.<sup>2</sup> Basic biographical information is unknown. We do not know his middle name or his birth date. We have no image or description of the man. But by piecing together clues in the historical record, his life is not a total blank. He was born around 1831 in Columbus, Indiana (Bartholomew County), one of four children of Charles Aquith Wright, a native of Maryland, and Laura E. Franklin, supposedly a descendant of Benjamin Franklin and a New York native. Around 1837, the family moved to Springfield, Ohio. After Charles's father's death, around 1841, his mother moved the family to Dayton, Ohio.<sup>3</sup>

We know nothing about Charles Wright's education and medical training, but by 1851 he was a medical doctor, teaching at the 16-week summer School of Medicine in the short-lived Medical Institute of Cincinnati. Around this time, he also helped his brother John Franklin Wright establish his own medical career, acting as preceptor for his studies following the death of his previous mentor. John Franklin Wright soon became a successful physician and wealthy landowner in the family's old hometown, Columbus, Indiana.

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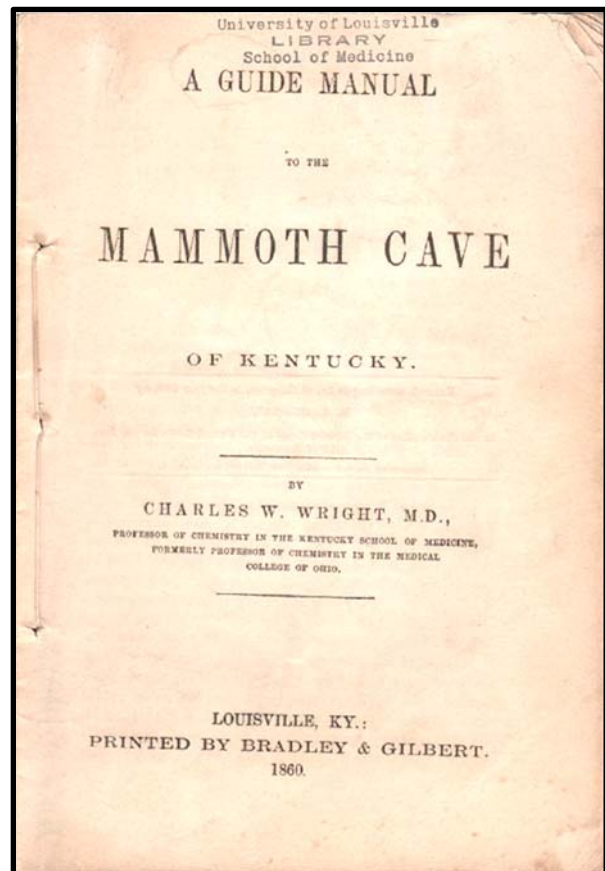
<sup>1</sup> *The Courier-Journal*, Louisville (Aug. 1, 1866) p.3.

<sup>2</sup> Exceptions include Harold Meloy, "Medics at Mammoth Cave," in William R. Halliday, ed., *Journal of Spelean History*, vol. 5, no. 4, series no. 20 (Fall 1972) pp. 81–87, 84; Bob Thompson, "Mammoth Cave Hotel Registers," in Carolyn E. Cronk, ed., *Journal of Spelean History*, vol. 37, no. 1, series no. 123 (Jan.–June 2003) pp. 27–32, 30.

<sup>3</sup> See 1870 Census, Indiana, Bartholomew, Columbus, dwelling 458 (Charles W. Wright); see also *id.* dwelling 331 (John Franklin Wright). A Columbus, Indiana visitor to Mammoth Cave, giving an account of the cave tour for the hometown newspaper, called Charles Wright "a former resident of this city." Col. John A. Keith, *The Columbus Republican* (Aug. 20, 1874) p. 1. We know far more about his brother John Franklin (1830–1906) than Charles W. See "John F. Wright" in *Biographical Record of Bartholomew County Indiana*, published by B. F. Bowen (1904) pp. 265–67; "Death Relieves Well-Known Man," *The Republic*, Columbus Ind. (June 16, 1906) p. 1; see also John Franklin Wright in *Indiana Death Certificates, 1899–2011*, Year: 1906, Roll 2 [in original], Ancestry.com. John Franklin's first medical mentor was a brother-in-law, Dr. T.E. Mason. There is also a biography of Charles W. Wright's second cousin, Dr. John Wright of DeWitt County, Illinois, which indicates he studied under Charles W. Wright in Cincinnati in the early 1850s.

Charles Wright's early professional interests included the medicinal use of plants. In 1852, he published a short article on the "Peculiar Effects of the Root of the *Podophyllum peltatum*, or May Apple." In September 1853, when the rival Ohio Medical College was reorganized in Cincinnati, Wright was appointed Professor of Chemistry, a post he may have held for two or three years. On September 18, 1855, he married Lucy L. Evarts in Louisville, Kentucky. By July 1856, when Wright published a paper in the *American Journal of the Medical Sciences* on the medicinal effects of *Liquidambar styraciflua*, American Sweet Gum, he had changed colleges, now being Professor of Chemistry in the Kentucky School of Medicine, an institution founded in 1851 in Louisville. For the next fifteen years, until 1870, Wright worked and made his home in Louisville. Following the end of the 1869–1870 academic term, Charles W. and Lucy Wright moved to Columbus, Indiana where he set up private medical practice; Charles then fades from the historic record; it appears that he died in Ohio, on March 2, 1919, and was fittingly interred in Louisville's famous Cave Hill Cemetery.<sup>4</sup>

His internment there was fitting because Charles W. Wright was an author, lecturer, explorer, and popularizer of Kentucky caves as well as a chemistry professor and medical doctor. At Diamond Cave (originally called Richardson Cave), he participated in the initial exploration of the new cave on July 15, 1859, along with Dr. James T. Andrew, John Bell, George Bliss, Professor Tobias G. Richardson, Jessie Coates, and Theodore H. Low. Using "ropes and Indian ladders," the men descended a crevice-like pit and found a well-decorated series of cave passages and



***A Guide Manual to the Mammoth Cave,* by Charles W. Wright (1860)**

chambers, which was immediately developed for public display as a tourist site. On the initial trip, members of the party named various features for their fellow explorers, such as Low Avenue, Andrew Cascade, Wright Avenue, and of course Richardson Cave. Wright Avenue, named for Charles W., was the main passage extending from Andrew Cascade to Diamond Grotto, and contained numerous features of beauty and interest, especially attractive "tubular" stalactites. Unfortunately for Charles W., the name did not stick. It is not in the 1860s maps or guidebooks. At least one cave feature

<sup>4</sup> Otto Juettner, *Daniel Drake and His Followers: Historical and Biographical Sketches*, Cincinnati: Harvey Publishing Co. (1909) pp. 208, 256, 290; *Biographical Record of Bartholomew County Indiana*; "Death Relieves Well-Known Man;" 1870 Census, Indiana, Bartholomew, Columbus; Charles W. Wright, "Peculiar Effects of the Root of the *Podophyllum peltatum*, or May Apple," in L.M. Lawson & George Mendenhall, eds., *The Western Lancet*, Cincinnati: T. Wrightson (May 1852) pp. 405–06; *Ohio Medical and Surgical Journal*, 6 (1): 88 [1853]; Charles W. Wright, "On *Liquidambar styraciflua*," *The American Journal of the Medical Sciences* (July 1856) pp. 126–127; Kentucky, County Marriage Records, 1783–1965, Ancestry.com; *Louisville Daily Journal* (Aug. 30, 1864) p. 2; *Louisville Daily Express* (Aug. 30, 1869) p. 2; "Charles W. Wright," <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/98519622/charles-w-wright> (visited July 2, 2021).

near Diamond Grotto may also have been named by Wright: “Mason Grotto .°.°. after Miss Stella Mason, of Cincinnati,” since the Wright family was linked by marriage to the Mason family in Cincinnati. On August 19, 1859, Professor Charles Wright authored a lengthy article on “Richardson Cave” in the *Louisville Daily Courier*, announcing its discovery and describing the cave in detail. This first account by Wright later served as a major source for the anonymous *Guide Book for the Diamond Cave, Barren County, Ky.*, published the following year, 1860.<sup>5</sup>

The same day Wright’s article appeared in print, Friday August 19, 1859, Richardson Cave “formally opened to the public,” welcoming its first tourists. As detailed in the *Louisville Daily Courier* a week later, Professor Charles W. Wright led the premier excursion of twenty visitors, eleven men and nine women, all Kentuckians from Louisville, Covington, and Owensboro, to Diamond Cave. Afterward, Wright took the twenty cave tourists to see a new passage which he had recently explored in that other cave, Mammoth Cave. The unnamed newspaper writer related:

Besides visiting and exploring Richardson Cave, the above parties were the first visitors to a new discovery made by Prof. Wright and Dr. [J.T.] Andrew, in the Mammoth Cave. This avenue was discovered about two weeks ago, and is remarkable for its size and the gypsum formations which are found in it. It is about a half a mile in length, fifty feet in height[sic], and from fifty to two hundred feet in width.

This avenue has received the name of Blackburn Arcade, in honor of the beautiful

and accomplished Mrs. F.A. Blackburn, of Covington, Ky.

Mrs. Blackburn, incidentally, was one of the twenty tourists who attended the trip, along with her husband and another [presumed] Blackburn relative. Interestingly, Wright doesn’t mention Blackburn Arcade in his Mammoth Cave writings; today we do not know which passage Wright and Andrew explored and named.<sup>6</sup>

Blackburn Arcade was not the first exploration at Mammoth Cave in which Charles W. Wright had participated. The previous year, in August 1858, Wright was witness to one of the most famous episodes in Mammoth Cave history, the exploration of the Maelstrom, a 100+ foot deep pit at the end of Croghan’s Hall, which at the time served as the terminus of the Long Route. Kentuckian William C. Prentice, accompanied by Professor Wright and a party of supporters, traveled the long underground miles to the Maelstrom. Prentice eventually managed to descend the shaft, make a very brief exploration, and safely ascend, under the watchful gaze of Wright and the others. Wright was apparently not overly impressed by Prentice’s exploration efforts at the bottom of the pit. In his first book, Wright wrote that the Maelstrom had not been explored but passages could be seen at the bottom when a light was lowered down the shaft. In his second, 1860, book Wright changed the text to suggest that possible passages at the bottom of the Maelstrom “have been imperfectly explored.”<sup>7</sup>

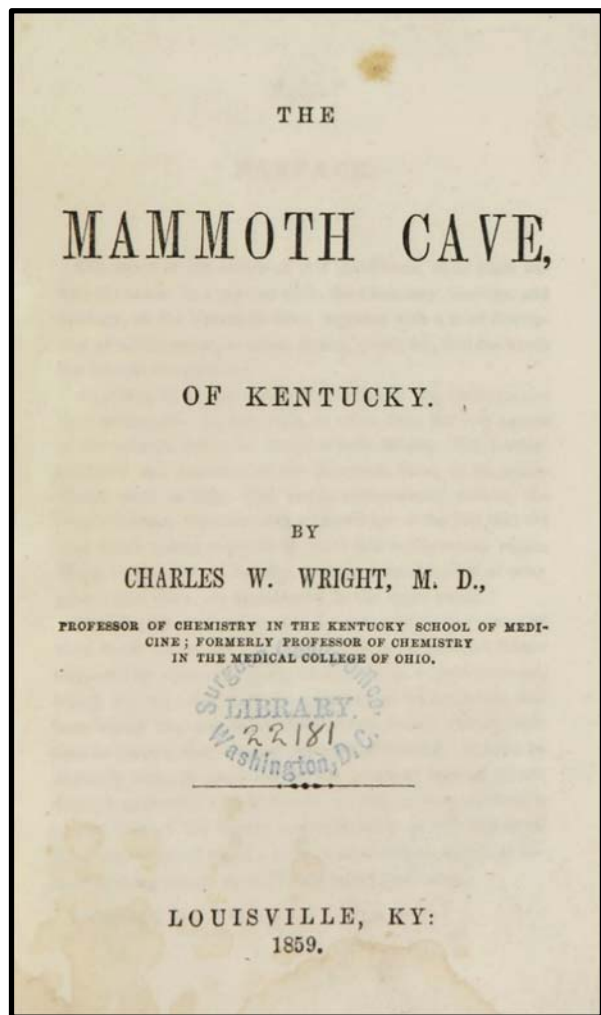
<sup>5</sup> *Guide Book for the Diamond Cave, Barren County, Ky.*, Glasgow, Ky.: Charles G. Smith, printer (1860) p. 4; Dora [pseudonym], “My Visit to the Diamond Cave,” *Louisville Daily Journal* (Apr. 21, 1860) p. 3; Charles W. Wright, “Richardson Cave,” *Louisville Daily Courier* (Aug. 19, 1859) p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> “Letter from Mammoth Cave,” *Louisville Daily Courier* (Aug. 26, 1859) p. 1; Michael Sutton & Susan Hagan, “Blackburn Arcade,” *Mammoth Cave Gazetteer*, Cave Research Foundation (Feb. 2004).

<sup>7</sup> For Prentice and the exploration of the Maelstrom, see “Fearful Adventure in the Mammoth Cave—the Maelstrom Explored,” *Louisville Daily Journal* (Sep. 11, 1858). This article was reprinted many times both in 1858 and in 1862 following Prentice’s death; see e.g., *Louisville Daily Journal* (Oct. 10, 1862); Charles W. Wright, *The Mammoth Cave, Kentucky*, Vincennes, Indiana: Harvey, Mason, & Co. (1858) pp. 53, 54; Charles W. Wright, *A Guide Manual to the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, Louisville: Bradley and Gilbert (1860) p. 47. Wright registered at the Mammoth Cave hotel on August 19, 1858. “Mammoth Cave Hotel Register,” vol. 1 (1858-1860), Special Collections, Western Kentucky Univ., Bowling Green, Ky.

We do not know how Charles W. Wright originally developed his interest in caves or when he first visited Mammoth Cave. Nor do we know where he got the idea of writing a Mammoth Cave guidebook, although the project was no doubt welcomed by the cave's management. But a January 1858 *Louisville Courier* announcement of an upcoming public lecture by Wright on Mammoth Cave noted that he had "spent much time upon the subject in preparing the material for his forthcoming book upon the Cave." A later article noted that Wright had "spent a number of months in studying the caves and caverns of this and other Western states." It seems likely that in late 1857 or early 1858 he visited Mammoth Cave and took the two main tour routes, the "Short Route" and the "Long Route," multiple times, and that he recorded notes. He completed his book manuscript by July and published *The Mammoth Cave, Kentucky* sometime in the second half of 1858. It was the first guidebook to appear since 1851 and of course contained the most recent information. In that regard Wright's book compared favorably to the Alexander Clark Bullitt's *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave* (1845), while it was better organized than Reverend Horace Martin's *Pictorial Guide to the Mammoth Cave, Kentucky* (1851). Wright's book soon supplanted the earlier volumes.<sup>8</sup>

*The Mammoth Cave, Kentucky* has everything necessary for an influential guidebook, including a coherent structure. The Preface plainly states the purpose of the book—to introduce to the general public, "in a popular style, the Chemistry, Geology, and Zoology of the Mammoth Cave, together with



**1859 edition of *The Mammoth Cave, of Kentucky* by Charles W. Wright.**

a brief description of all the rooms, avenues, domes, rivers, &c., that are worth the trouble of seeing." It also strongly encourages readers to personally visit the cave, which would, Wright wrote, stimulate strong emotions. The author also places the cave experience within the prevalent cultural idea of the sublime.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> "Lecture on the Mammoth Cave," *Louisville Courier* (Jan. 26, 1858) p. 2; "Prof. Wright's Lecture," *Louisville Courier* (Nov. 15, 1858) p. 1; Charles W. Wright, *The Mammoth Cave, Kentucky*, Vincennes, Indiana: Harvey, Mason & Co. (1858); Alexander Clark Bullitt, *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave in the year 1844, by a Visitor [sic]*, Louisville: Morton & Griswold (1845); Rev. Horace Martin, *A Pictorial Guide to the Mammoth Cave, Kentucky*, New York: Stringer & Townsend (1851). Wright visited White Cave on the Mammoth Cave property, which he described in both of his guidebooks. His discussion of Dixon's Cave, which he calls "Dickson Cave," suggests he was also personally familiar with it.

<sup>9</sup> Charles W. Wright, *The Mammoth Cave, Kentucky*, p. 3.

In terms of coverage, the 68-page book is quite thorough. Wright first discusses the current proprietor (Larkin J. Proctor), the cave guides, the cave band, appropriate clothing to wear, and the cave's location. This is followed by sections on the meteorology of the cave, the chemistry of the cave's origins and later mineral development, mechanical forces such as sedimentation and collapse, and hydrology. The remainder of the text is a descriptive guidebook of the features seen, first on the Short Route, and then along the Long Route. Historical and other notes are interspersed in these sections, such as the story of the use of the cave by consumptives (tuberculosis patients), or how Green River water levels affect the rivers inside the cave. The passage guide section, while overwhelmingly positive in its praise of the cave generally and in feature descriptions, is fairly accurate in that there are few large-scale errors. Its effusive nature does allow exaggeration to creep in. While describing Rhoda's Arcade, Wright states that "in point of beauty there is no avenue superior to this." This is misleading. Similarly, Lucy's Dome, located at the end of Rhoda's Arcade, is probably not "over three hundred [feet] in height, being the highest dome in the Cave." But these are minor errors of description, not fundamental errors of type. Wright is correct in that Rhoda's Arcade is a fine passage and Lucy's Dome is both high and impressive. Still, his effusive style and tendency to exaggerate opened him up to criticism. In 1866, one unnamed British visitor used Wright's upbeat guidebook as a literary foil for his own generally bleak assessment of Mammoth Cave, with its long monotonous passages and atrocious hotel, criticizing Wright's lack of candor and calling the writer "clever and imaginative."<sup>10</sup>

Charles W. Wright gave several public lectures on Mammoth Cave in 1858 which

conveniently helped support his book. On January 30 he gave a free public lecture at the Kentucky School of Medicine, reportedly at the request of the students. This was a general lecture on the cave's chemistry, geology, and biology, to be "illustrated by a fine collection of Cave specimens." That fall he set up "a course of five lectures on the Mammoth Cave, commencing on Saturday, the 13th of November, and continuing every Saturday thereafter till the course is completed." For whatever reason, it appears the number of lectures was ultimately reduced to three or four. Still, for a single \$1 admission one could attend all of the more specialized talks, which were also given at the Kentucky School of Medicine. The first talk was on the chemistry of Mammoth Cave and was well-received. It included experiments as well as specimens. The second of the talks, given on November 20, 1858, focused on cave animals. The last of the lectures, given December 4, covered cave geology and also gave general information and advice for would-be visitors. These lectures enthusiastically promoted visitation to Mammoth Cave, and interest in caves in general, as well as drummed up book sales.<sup>11</sup>

LECTURE ON THE MAMMOTH CAVE. — We are gratified to learn that Prof. Wright, of the Kentucky School of Medicine, intends giving a series of lectures upon the Mammoth Cave. Prof. W. has thoroughly investigated this wonderful curiosity, and is unquestionably better able to delineate its mysterious features and characteristics than any one else. The first lecture will be given Saturday night, in the auditorium of the Kentucky School, corner of Fifth and Green streets.

**Advertisement for a Charles W. Wright  
Lecture on Mammoth Cave,  
*Louisville Courier* (Nov. 10, 1858)**

<sup>10</sup> Charles W. Wright, *The Mammoth Cave, Kentucky*, pp. 45–46; see also *id.* pp. 5–67; "The Mammoth Cave of Kentucky," *The Times*, London (Dec. 28, 1866) p. 8. The unnamed British visitor did admire the famous rivers.

<sup>11</sup> "Lecture on the Mammoth Cave," *Louisville Courier* (Jan. 26, 1858) p. 2; "Lecture on the Mammoth Cave," *Louisville Courier* (Nov. 10, 1858) p. 1; "Lectures on the Mammoth Cave," *Louisville Courier* (Nov. 10, 1858) p. 4 (also appearing on November 11, 12, and 13); "Prof. Wright's Lecture," *Louisville Courier* (Nov. 15, 1858)

The Mammoth Cave Hotel Register shows that Charles Wright was again at the cave on June 28, 1859, although the exact purpose of the trip is not certain. Wright's second guidebook was published in 1860 under the title *A Guide Manual to the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*. In it, he made modest revisions to his earlier publication, giving updated information on the new proprietors (the Owsleys), the guides, and the cave's atmosphere, among other changes, the last reflecting Wright's own research interests. While sometimes referred to as an expanded version of his first book, it is similar in length. Both his 1858 and 1860 works are available free on-line, the first in the University of Kentucky Libraries' Special Collections Research Center and the second through Google books. Taken together, they document and preserve the names and descriptions of passages and features in Mammoth Cave known in the period. Many of these place-names were not known or included in earlier literature; Mick Sutton and Sue Hagan's *Mammoth Cave Gazetteer* confirms that Wright gave the first known use of many names in Mammoth Cave. Examples include Rhoda's Arcade and Lucy's Dome, among many others. Because both of Wright's books were much read and soon reprinted, they became foundational in structure and content for the numerous later accounts of the cave which

appeared in the decades following the Civil War.<sup>12</sup>

Much of the Mammoth Cave nomenclature which Charles W. Wright first introduced is still in use today. This brings us to one particular name. Anyone with a basic knowledge of historic Mammoth Cave knows of Wright's Rotunda. Located beyond the S-Bend, it is a very wide spot at the intersection of Main Cave with Black Chambers and Fox Avenue, although on the ground it appears to be an enormous chamber, with large pillars on the east side. Known since the early days of the cave, by the late 1850s it was part of the standard tourist Short Route. It did not lack a name, but it received a new one anyway. Sutton and Hagan note that, "Wright (1860) evidently named it for himself." This seems correct; the first appearances of "Wright's Rotunda" in the literature are in Wright's own 1858 and 1860 books. He certainly did not discover the passage; perhaps we could say he appropriated the space. The name then stuck. A man of some accomplishments, it seems modesty was not Charles W. Wright's strongest trait.<sup>13</sup>

Between his two guidebooks, Charles W. Wright wrote a short scientific paper entitled "Atmosphere of the Mammoth Cave," which appeared in the April 1859 *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*. The

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p. 1; "Lecture on the Mammoth Cave," *Louisville Courier* (Nov. 20, 1858) p. 1; "Lecture on the Mammoth Cave," *Louisville Courier* (Dec. 4, 1858) p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Charles W. Wright, *A Guide Manual to the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, Louisville: printed by Bradley & Gilbert (1860); Michael Sutton and Susan Hagan, "Rhoda's Arcade," & "Lucy's Dome," *Mammoth Cave Gazetteer*, Cave Research Foundation (Feb. 2004). Wright's *The Mammoth Cave, Kentucky* was reprinted in 1859 (under the title, *The Mammoth Cave, of Kentucky*), while *A Guide Manual to the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky* was reprinted in 1867 and 1870. Large sections of it were also published as "Natural Curiosities," *Democratic Advocate*, Westminster, Md. (Aug. 2, 1873) p. 2. According to William R. Halliday, an uncredited version with additions appeared in 1881. See "Book Notes," in William R. Halliday, ed., *Journal of Spelean History*, vol. 3 no. 1, series no. 9 (Jan.-Mar. 1969) p. 17. Michael Sutton, Susan Hagan, and Ray Mansfield, "Charles W. Wright," *Bibliography of Mammoth Cave and the Mammoth Cave Region*, Cave Research Foundation (Aug. 2013); see also Harold Meloy, "Medics at Mammoth Cave," p. 84.

<sup>13</sup> Michael Sutton and Susan Hagan, "Wright's Rotunda," *Mammoth Cave Gazetteer*; Charles W. Wright, *The Mammoth Cave, Kentucky*, pp. 29, 30; Charles W. Wright, *A Guide Manual to the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, pp. 28, 29. Horace Hovey gives a different explanation for the name, suggesting that Dr. Robert Montgomery Bird named the chamber after Dr. C.A. [?] Wright. Horace C. Hovey, *Hovey's Hand-Book of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, Louisville: John P. Morton & Co. (1909) p. 46. But this seems unlikely for several reasons, including that in his own book, Bird did not use the name Wright's Rotunda. Anonymous (Robert Montgomery Bird), *Peter Pilgrim: or a Rambler's Recollections* vol. II (Philadelphia: Lea & Blanchard (1838) pp. 132, 136.

article is based on Wright's own observations in the field, that is, in the cave. It also became the source of the new section on the same topic in his revised 1860 guidebook. In it, Wright discusses various aspects of the cave's atmosphere, including the proportions of oxygen and nitrogen, the stable temperature, various humidity regimes and their effects, the absence of ammonia and ozone, and in non-bat areas, a scarcity of organic material. Steeped in a medical tradition in which atmospheric miasma and illness were linked, Wright averred that cave air was purer than external air, and thus salubrious. In his discussion, after the specific consideration of several types of

ailments, he admitted that the effect of the cave environment upon illnesses, while often positive, varied greatly. He additionally suggested that for unspecified ailments requiring silence and darkness, "the Cave, above all other places, possesses pre-eminent advantages." While of limited scientific or therapeutic value, the paper is an example of how Wright's interest in caves affected his professional career.<sup>14</sup>

We know little about Charles W. Wright's life during the American Civil War except that he continued to live in Louisville and teach at the Kentucky School of Medicine.



**Wright's Rotunda, Mammoth Cave**

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<sup>14</sup> Charles W. Wright, "Atmosphere of the Mammoth Cave," *The Boston Medical and Surgical Journal* (April 14, 1859) pp. 220–21. An earlier, shorter version of the article appeared in the *Buffalo Medical Journal and Monthly Review of Medical and Surgical Science*, Buffalo: Commercial Advertiser (1858) pp. 668–69.

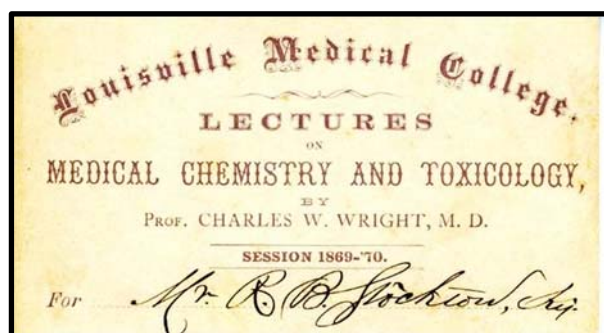
But afterward, in the summer of 1866, Wright renewed his close association with the caves of the Mammoth Cave region. He returned to the Mammoth Cave property twice in June of that year, staying at the hotel on June 6 and June 14. The specific purpose of these trips is unrecorded, but he likely took the opportunity while there to work on planning an event for late July at the site. Wright, along with Larkin J. Proctor, the new Mammoth cave proprietor, and others, helped organize and execute a large-scale excursion of about four hundred people to Mammoth Cave, including fifteen or twenty members of the press. The excursion was a grand finish of the annual Saengerfest celebration, a popular German-American festival in Louisville organized around the many Saengerbund (choral) societies in the Ohio River region. The Saengerfest tourists visited Mammoth Cave, of course. One participant wrote, “the temples of the old cave from its entrance to the maelstrom were made to reverberate with the concerted music of male and female voices. Nearly every crowd of tourists had its quartette of singers, enhancing the pleasures of their underground travels in a high degree.” In addition, some of the celebrants went to nearby Proctor Cave. At Proctor, just opened as a tourist cave a few weeks prior, Charles Wright and Larkin Proctor personally led the visitors through its underground passages. At night the tourists

dined and danced at the Mammoth Cave Hotel. All in all, it was deemed a successful event.<sup>15</sup>

After 1866 we do not have any sources concerning Charles Wright and the caves of the Mammoth Cave region, beyond continued reprints of his *A Guide Manual to the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*. But before we close the book on Wright, there is a last subject we have to deal with which we have purposely avoided: the “problem of Colossal Cavern.” So far, we have established that Charles Wright was, if not a great cave explorer like Stephen Bishop or T.E. Lee, at least a skilled and enthusiastic writer and lecturer, keenly interested in caves, whose underground observations were fairly reliable, if not accurate to cartographic standards. His guidebooks show he used available sources; much of his knowledge was transmitted to him from people like the Mammoth Cave guides, but that, properly, he also obtained information firsthand.

What then are we to make of Charles W. Wright’s 1859 newspaper account of the exploration of Colossal Cavern in Kentucky, which at first reading appears to be pure fiction? Why would Wright write a made-up cave narrative and try to pass it off as authentic? How much does this impugn the reliability of his other works, or he as a person? Part of the “problem of Colossal Cavern” is that it seems out of character.

On August 2, 1859, the *Louisville Daily Courier* published a lengthy article written by Charles W. Wright titled, “Mammoth Cave—Colossal Cavern—A New Discovery.” This is not the same Colossal Cavern known today on Flint Ridge, which was opened and developed in the 1890s and later connected to Mammoth Cave. No, Wright describes the supposed exploration of a new cave in the fall of 1858 by Larkin J. Proctor, proprietor of Mammoth Cave at the time, and two unnamed assistants, which



**Charles W. Wright continued his medical lectures after the Civil War**

<sup>15</sup> “Kentucky School of Medicine” [advertisement], *Louisville Daily Journal* (Aug. 30, 1864) p. 2; Bob Thompson, “Mammoth Cave Hotel Registers,” p. 30; “Closing of the Saengerfest,” *Louisville-Courier Journal* (Aug. 1, 1866) p. 3.

reportedly exceeded Mammoth Cave in length. “Not less than forty miles,” wrote Wright, who claimed he had personally seen the cave afterward and had given names to the cave and its features. The cave purportedly had an entrance located 150 feet above the Green River in Edmonson County with large passages extending eleven miles to a second entrance in Barren County. In his typical hyperbolic style, Wright describes huge and impressive passages, like “Green River Avenue,” magnificent calcite formations and gypsum flowers in “Stillo Avenue” and the “Floral Temple,” and near the cave’s end, a gigantic dome called “Procter’s Dome.” Colossal Cavern had its own subterranean river too, called *Mysterium*, still unexplored, which “gives an echo louder than that of any river in the Mammoth Cave.”<sup>16</sup>

The problem is, there is no cave matching Wright’s description and location, except Mammoth Cave. It is worth pointing out that Wright’s description of Colossal Cavern includes numerous comparisons to Mammoth, with the new cave always judged as equal or superior. But Wright’s Colossal Cavern also has disturbingly numerous parallels *with* Mammoth Cave. Aside from a few obvious differences, like the two entrances, and different passage names, Wright’s description of Colossal Cavern could be a description of Mammoth Cave. Even Larkin J. Proctor and the other two explorers were from Mammoth Cave.

So, while Wright’s Colossal Cavern account might be purely fictional, we will raise the possibility that it might be a disguised account of real explorations by L. J. Proctor in Mammoth Cave which he or Wright (or both) did not want to openly reveal, for whatever reason. Perhaps Wright’s *Mysterium* River in Colossal Cavern is the same as his controversial *Mystic* River in Mammoth Cave which he first wrote about in his guidebooks. Regardless of whether Wright’s account of Colossal Cavern was totally invented or merely disguised, it was widely reprinted in newspapers across the United States.<sup>17</sup>

The Colossal Cave story did not damage Wright’s public credibility at the time, which may be good for us to think about now. Even if he wrote one fictional, or fictionalized, cave exploration tale, his other contributions to the Mammoth Cave region should probably not be diminished. In the 1850s and 1860s, he visited, lectured on, and wrote about several Kentucky caves: Diamond, Mammoth, White, Proctor, and probably others. He helped explore Diamond Cave and parts of Mammoth Cave. More broadly, he helped popularize the burgeoning cave tourism industry before and after the Civil War. His guidebooks, newspaper articles, and scientific paper on cave atmosphere remain significant historical sources. Charles W. Wright was an important and influential figure in the history of the Mammoth Cave region.

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<sup>16</sup> Charles W. Wright, “Mammoth Cave—Colossal Cavern—A New Discovery,” *Louisville Daily Courier* (Aug. 2, 1859) p. 2.

<sup>17</sup> “New Discoveries of Mammoth Caves,” *Louisville Daily Courier* (Aug. 22, 1859) p. 1; Michael Sutton and Susan Hagan, “Mystic River,” *Mammoth Cave Gazetteer*; Stanley D. Sides, “History of Exploration at Mammoth Cave,” in Horton H. Hobbs III et al., eds., *Mammoth Cave: A Human and Natural History*, Cham Switzerland: Springer Int’l Publishing (2017) p. 65.

# C.E. DeGroff's 1892 Stereographs of Marble (Marvel) Cave, Missouri

by Bob Thompson

Marvel Cave is a National Natural Landmark located in Silver Dollar City amusement park in Branson, Missouri. The cave has been a major draw for tourism in the area since 1907 when author Harold Bell Wright wrote about it in his classic novel, *Shepherd of the Hills*.

This historic cave has drawn the attention of photographers since the early 1900s. Some of the earliest views of the cave were printed as postcards by names such as Lee Earl, George E. Hall, Edna Waltz, Payne, and Blake. All had photography studios within a few miles of the cave in the Notch/Branson area. Before the cave was developed and opened as an attraction in 1894, photographs were taken by the few who braved the awesome depths of the huge sinkhole entrance on a crude ladder. One of these daring and adventurist photographers was C. E. DeGroff.

Charles E. DeGroff was a traveling photographer from Warrensburg, Missouri. He was noted for taking the first pictures of Marble Cave (now named Marvel Cave) in 1892. DeGroff was born in Wisconsin, educated in New Jersey, and homesteaded in the Missouri Ozarks.



**Inside Marvel Cave, 1913. including Genevieve Lynch (second from left), photographer Charles E. DeGroff (with hat), and botanical illustrator and amateur scientist S. Fred Prince (second from right). Courtesy Velma A. Bass Collection**

In the 1880s and 1890s, DeGroff traveled widely as a photographer across the Dakotas, Kansas, Oklahoma and Missouri. He was fascinated with the Ozarks and Marvel Cave, eventually settling in Notch, living in a log cabin on Indian Creek between Marvel Cave and Fairy Cave.

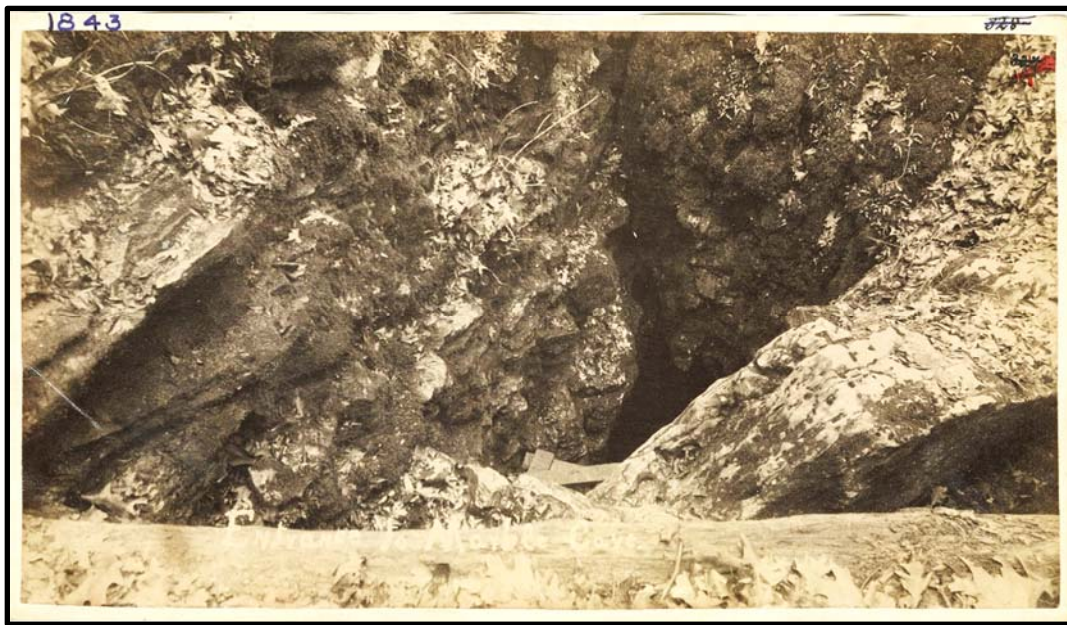
*DeGroff's Stereo. Views of Marble Cave.*

Price 25c each, \$3.50 per set of 15.

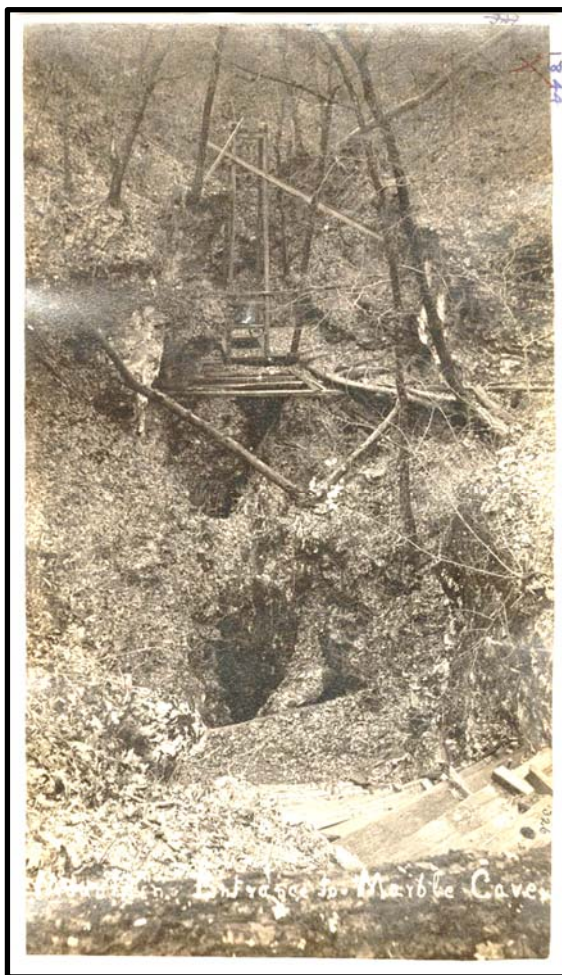
No. 1 Entrance to Cave. No. 2 Fern Glen, (Entrance to Cave.) No. 3 Entrance to Grand Amphitheatre. No. 4 Spring Room Sentinel, (Amphitheatre.) No. 5 Over Springs, (Spring Room.) No. 6 Table Rocks, (Dining Room.) No. 7 "She" (Mother Hubbard Room.) No. 8 White Throne, (Amphitheatre.) No. 9 Interior White Thorne. No. 10 Elephant Room. No. 11 Bric-a-brac Room. No. 12 Legend Rocks, (Amphitheatre.) No. 13 Entrance to Register Room. No. 14 Top of Waterfall (900 feet below surface.) No. 15 Blonde's Throne.

Marble Cave is in the Southern part of Stone Co., Mo., and rivals in size and grandeur the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky. The nearest railroad communication is Marionville, Mo., on Main line of St. L. & S. F. R. R., from which a stage line runs daily. For copies of views address

C. E. DEGROFF,  
Warrensburg, Mo.



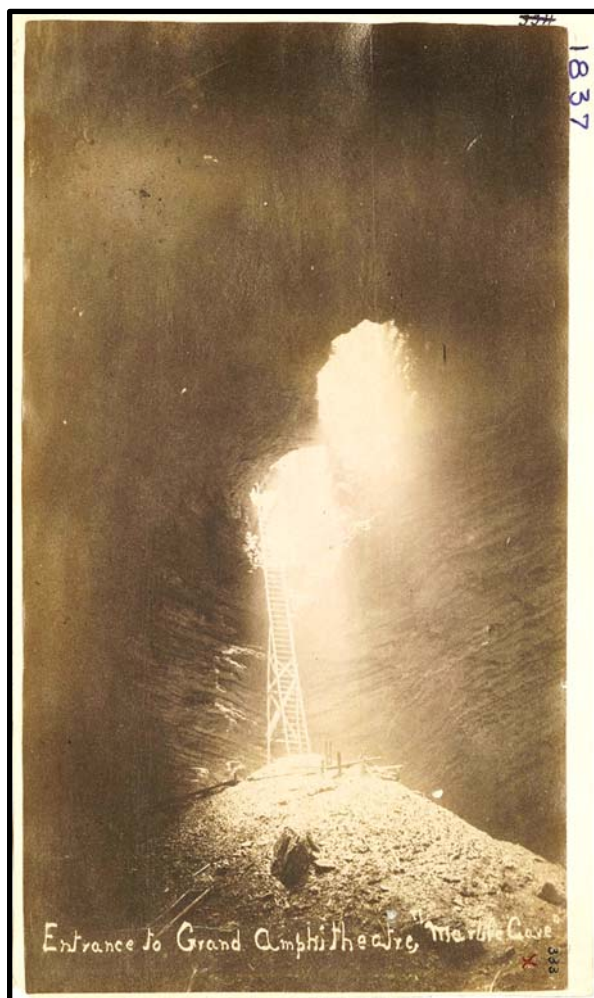
**No. 1. Entrance to Marble Cave**



**No. 2. Mountain Entrance to Marble Cave**

DeGroff was in partnership with two other men in running two photograph studios, one in Guthrie, Oklahoma (Mitchell & DeGroff) and one in Warrensburg, Missouri (Stone & DeGroff). He went to Oklahoma to take some of the first pictures of the “opening of the state” and traveled about in Missouri photographing schools and students. Portrait and group photos were made in his Warrensburg studio. DeGroff published a photo book in 1891 of his then home town, *Pertle Springs and Warrensburg, Mo.* The entire book was illustrated with his photographs.

The idea of taking photographs of Marble Cave came one day in 1892 as DeGroff was taking photographs of school children in Lamer, Missouri. He was experimenting with “flashlights” and took a picture of a school group in a hotel at night. The owner of the hotel asked if it would be possible to make a picture in a cave and suggested he go to Marble Cave. After he was given a letter of introduction by the hotel owner, DeGroff proceeded to Galena, Missouri, on a stagecoach to meet Truman S. Powell. Powell was editor of the newspaper, the *Galena Oracle*, and his family lived near the cave.

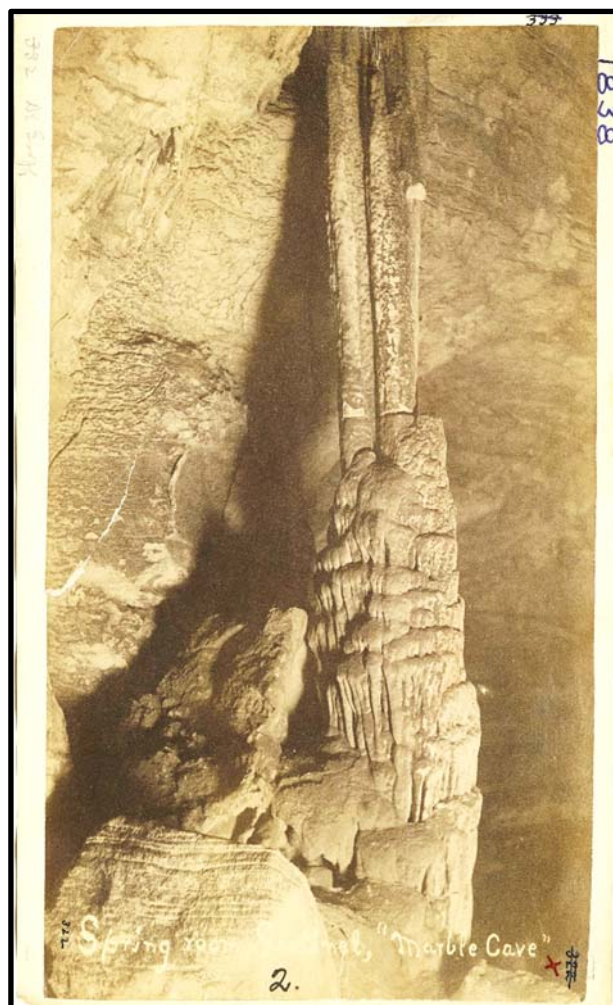


**No. 3. Entrance to Grand Amphitheatre, Marble Cave**

I went to Marionville and traveled by stage to Galena then hired a man to drive me to the cave. I took a picture in the cave; the first ever made of the interior of Marvel Cave, and afterwards, made other trips there.

*The Crane Chronicle*, Crane, Mo. (Nov. 22, 1928).

In the fall of 1892, the Powell family hosted DeGroff and two other men representing the Missouri World's Fair Commission. DeGroff's photos of Marble Cave were used in Missouri's exhibit at the first World's Fair in Chicago in 1893. They were also published in the weekly journal *Scientific American* in 1893.



**No. 4. Spring Room Sentinel, Marble Cave**

Before the initial opening of Marble Cave on October 18, 1894, by its owner, William Henry Lynch, DeGroff made a set of 15 stereographs showing "the head of the waterfall on Lost River and a number of other cave scenes." He had explored past "Blonde's Throne" and taken "flashlight" views of that remote place.

In March 1896, the geologist Luella Agnes Owens ordered a full set of views of the cave from Stone and DeGroff for her soon to be published book, the *Cave Regions of the Ozarks and Black Hills* which was released in 1898. She mentions that the illustrations in the book were by both Stone & DeGroff, even though only DeGroff's name is on the reverse side of the stereographs.

Between 1892 and 1902, DeGroff traveled frequently from his photography studio in Warrensburg to his Stone County ranch retreat near Marvel Cave. In 1899, DeGroff, as a field photographer, went with Missouri state geologist, John A. Gallaher, to Southern Missouri for three months in the fall to take photographs of various rocks and minerals.

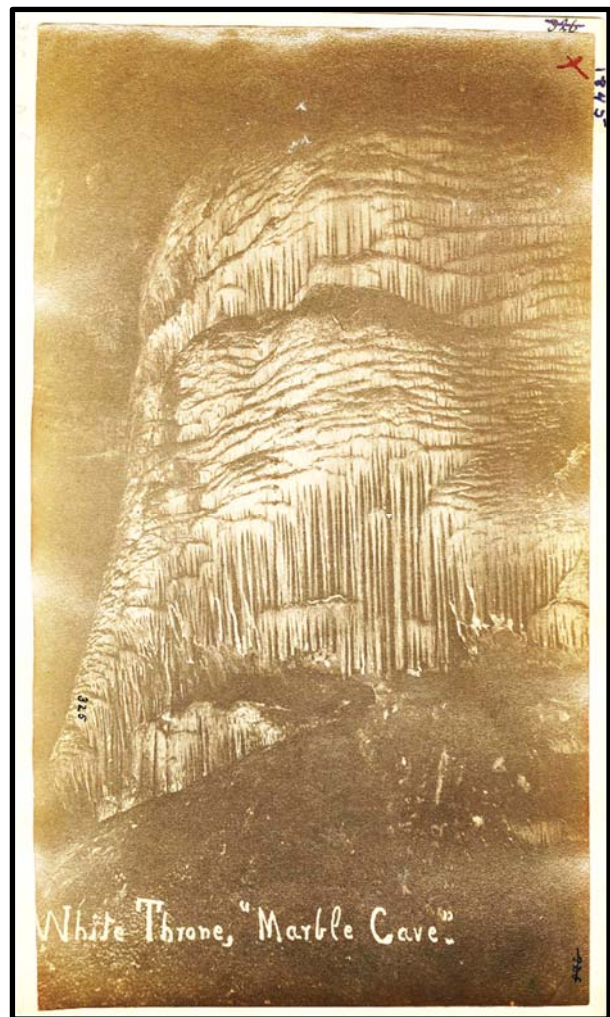
In 1903, DeGroff gave up traveling; sold his Warrensburg photography business, moved permanently to his Stone County ranch, and raised Angora goats. His ranch was sold in 1929 and he then moved to St. Cloud, Florida, to grow “giant” pecans. He occasionally came back to the Ozarks to renewed old acquaintances including visiting the Lynch sisters at the Marvel Cave cabin.

### Sources

Marble Cave images courtesy of the Missouri State Archives, RG110 DNR Geology and Mines Photograph Collection. More images from this collection can be viewed at: <https://cdm16795.contentdmoclc.org/digital/collection/p16795coll29/search/searchterm/marble%20cave>

*The Crane Chronicle*, Crane, Mo. (Nov. 22, 1928).

*The Crane Chronicle*, Crane, Mo. (May 24, 1934).



**No. 8. White Throne, Marble Cave**

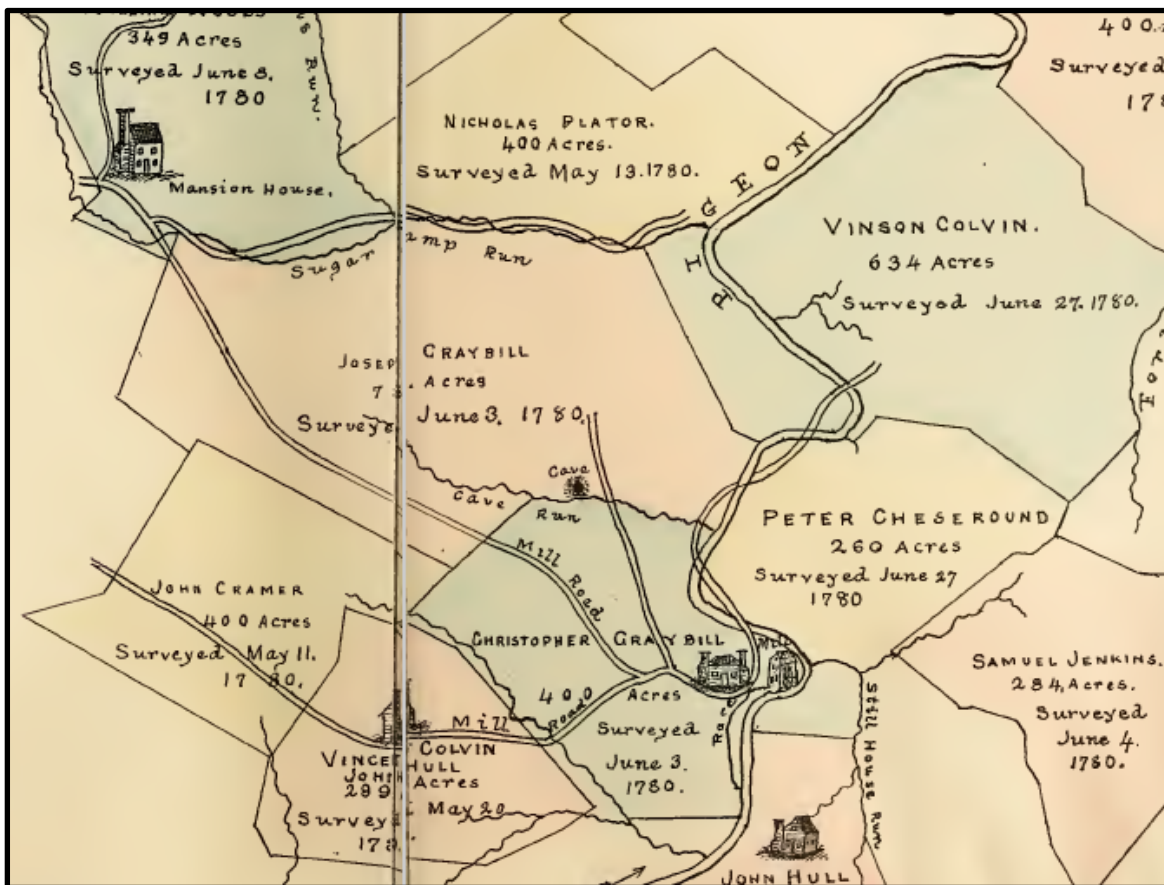
# Searching for Two Historical Caves in Washington County, Pennsylvania

© by Bert Ashbrook and Tom Metzgar

Washington County in southwestern Pennsylvania extends from the Pittsburgh suburbs to West Virginia's northern panhandle in the west and to the banks of the Monongahela River to the east. This is coal country, not cave country. The county has mostly thinly bedded limestones within in the coal series, but nothing in Washington County can properly be considered karst. Nevertheless, there are two historic limestone caves in the county. This is their story.

Washington County Cave is located on an unnamed tributary of Pigeon Creek about

half a mile southwest of the present-day coal patch town of Van Voorhees in Fallowfield Township. It was documented at least as early as 1780, when present-day Washington County, Pennsylvania, was part of Yohogania County, Virginia (although at the time Pennsylvania claimed the area as part of Westmoreland County). Several surveys of the area were made by Col. William Crawford, county surveyor for Yohogania County, in 1780. The survey of the lands of Joseph Graybill, made on June 3, 1780, depicts the cave on the north side of the tributary. This and surrounding surveys were connected and



Washington County Cave as shown in Crawford's 1780 surveys, from Crumrine's *History of Washington County*



**Washington County Cave as shown on the Barker Map**

drawn into a single map by John G. Ruple and published in Boyd Crumrine's history of Washington County in 1882. Although the cave was unnamed on Crawford's survey, the tributary of Pigeon Creek was known as "Cave Run" and is shown as such in the survey. Crumrine speculates that the tributary was named for the cave.<sup>1</sup>

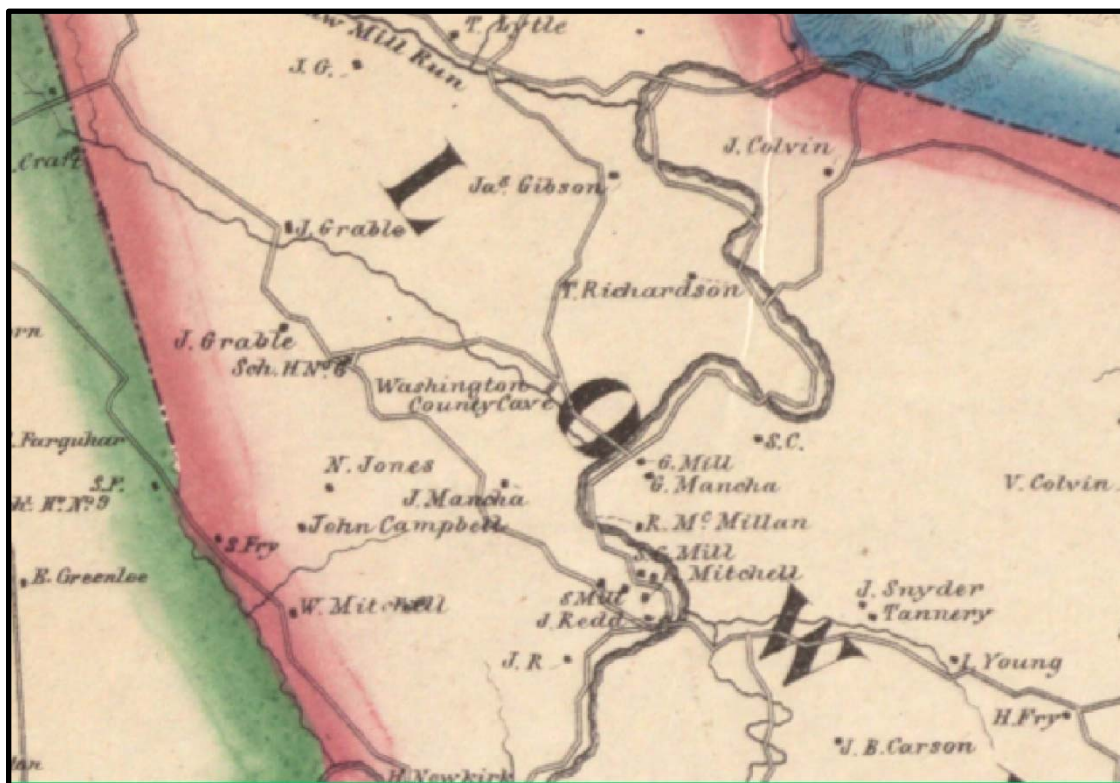
A second transcript of the original 1780 survey also shows "Cave Run" and the cave in the same location. This transcript was made by the Pennsylvania Department of Internal Affairs and is available from the Pennsylvania

Archives.<sup>2</sup> The original 1780 surveys have not been seen by the authors, but they may be extant in the records of Yohogania County's successor, now Augusta County, Virginia.

This cave is also shown on two nineteenth century maps. In 1856, William J. Barker published a large hand-colored map of the county (37-1/2 inches by 40 inches) that indicates that it was made from actual surveys. The Barker map has the word "Cave" written by the tributary at the same location in Fallowfield Township. The tributary is unnamed on the Barker map, but a road is

<sup>1</sup> Crumrine, Boyd, ed., *History of Washington County, Pennsylvania*, Philadelphia: L.H. Everts & Co., at plate bound between pp. 192-93, p. 790 (1882). Crumrine's account appears to have been copied by Joseph McFarland, *20th Century History of the City of Washington and Washington County Pennsylvania and Representative Citizens*, Chicago: Richmond-Arnold Publishing Co., p. 317 (1910).

<sup>2</sup> Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, Pennsylvania State Archives, Record Group 017-114 (Land Office, Copied Surveys, 1681-1912), Book C75, pp. 38, 78. The survey is also available on-line from the PHMC website.



### Washington County Cave as shown on the Pomeroy Map

shown following the tributary upstream (west) from its confluence with Pigeon Creek along the tributary's north bank. The road is shown forking just upstream of the cave, with one fork continuing upstream along the north bank of the tributary, and a second fork continuing northwest and diverging from the stream.<sup>3</sup>

In 1861, an even larger hand-colored map of the county (58 inches by 60 inches) was published by A. Pomeroy and S.W. Treat. The Pomeroy map is at a 1:42,240 scale (1.5 inches = 1 mile) and also indicates it was made from actual surveys. It gives this cave its name: "Washington County Cave." The Pomeroy map shows the same unnamed tributary and roads as the Barker Map, but it places the cave between the road and the tributary, just upstream of the fork.<sup>4</sup>

The authors visited the area looking for Washington County Cave on March 27, 2021. We met the landowner, Eric Fisher, and his son, Mike Fisher. Neither knew of the cave nor of the name "Cave Run," nor did any of the other area residents whom we met. Nevertheless, Mike Fisher took us on an all-terrain vehicle tour along the tributary, using the remains of the roads shown on the Barker and Pomeroy maps. These former roads are now ATV trails through the woods. The Fishers referred to the road along the tributary as "Spring Road" and said it was used by a strip mine further upstream of the fork in circa 1969-70. The Fallowfield Township zoning map (revised July 15, 2009) shows the portion of the road along the tributary west of the fork as a private road. It shows both the portion of road along the tributary east of the fork, and fork that diverges northwest from the tributary, together

<sup>3</sup> James M. Sherman & A.R. Day, *Barker's Map of Washington County Pennsylvania*, New York: William J. Barker (1856). The copy shown is from the Library of Congress, call no. G3823.W3 1856 .S4.

<sup>4</sup> S.N. & F.W. Beers, engineers, *Map of Washington County, Pennsylvania*, Philadelphia: published by A. Pomeroy & S.W. Treat (1861). Reproduction is courtesy of the Norman B. Levanthal Map Center Collection at the Boston Public Library.



**Tom Metzgar and Mike Fisher before the entrance to Washington County Cave. The entrance is dammed up to form the piped spring in the background.**

as Rosena Road. Fallowfield Township records (ordinance no. 209) confirm what Eric Fisher told us: that this section of Rosena Road was vacated by Fallowfield Township on July 31, 2013, because “this portion of the roadway is almost like a cow path which goes down through the woods and there are places where there is no road; where it is washed out.”

Outcroppings of limestone, evidently part of the Sewickley Member of the Upper Pennsylvanian Pittsburgh Formation, are visible along the ATV trail following the tributary, particularly upstream of the fork. Perhaps 200 feet upstream from the fork, about 40 feet north of the ATV trail, the authors found Washington County Cave. It is a natural opening, perhaps three feet high and wide, from which a piped spring flows. The opening has been nearly closed by a dam of stone and brick, presumably to provide for the piping of the spring. The dam is covered with tufa and moss. One can look through a narrow slot above the dam and see that the ceiling descends

to meet the dammed-up water level only a couple feet inside. Further access to Washington County Cave would require removing the dam followed by a wet crawl.

\* \* \*

The second historical limestone cave in Washington County is called Panthers’ Den. The cave appears to have been located just inside present-day Centerville Borough, Washington County, along Barneys Run near where it empties into the Monongahela River. The earliest description of the cave known to the authors is the 1806 (fifth) edition of Zadok Cramer’s *The Navigator*, a well-known early guide for boatsmen on the Monongahela, Allegheny, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers. Cramer did not mention the cave in his previous 1804 (fourth) edition. The authors think it is likely that Cramer copied his description of the cave from some newspaper or other presently-unknown source that was

published between 1804 and 1806. Cramer writes:

About one mile below [downstream on the Monongahela River, i.e., north of] this town [Fredericktown], on the same side of the river, is a large and curious cave, called the “Panthers’ Den.” It enters the hill about half way up from its base. As you enter, the passage is low and descending; you have to slide down, or shove yourself half upright, for about fifteen yards with candles, and a cord as a director; here you enter a spacious room forty feet in diameter, not sufficiently high to stand upright in; wandering about for a while, you will discover to the left a fracture in the rock large enough to squeeze yourself through; here you creep up five feet into another considerable room, but so very low that you either have to crawl on your belly or roll over to make any progress; hunting about you will discover another small fracture to the right through which a middle sized man may force himself down a perpendicular of five feet, thence ten feet of a slope, and here you enter a room three times larger than either of the former; this room is divided by a petrified partition formed by the drippings of the roof, or rock above; in this room you can nearly walk upright. Our candles burning well we felt no danger from the air; we found abundance of bats hanging in a torpid state to the roof of the rooms; some of these we brought out, and it being in the spring of the year, they soon revived. Finding that our cord was almost out, which was about sixty yards long, and being much fatigued and very warm, occasioned by our exertions, we returned to its mouth again, satisfied that we had all got out in safety. This cavern appeared to me to have

been formed by a general rent of the hill, for we could in some places see for ten feet in the openings of the rock, which were filled with stones evidently called off in the general fracture of the mountain. It is evident this cavern has been the refuge of wild beasts, from the number of bones it contains.<sup>5</sup>

Panthers’ Den next appears in a September 27, 1809, journal entry by Joshua Gilpin (1765-1841).<sup>6</sup> In 1775, Gilpin’s father, Thomas Gilpin (1727/28-1778), had surveyed 700 acres of land near the present-day coal patch village of Vestaburg present-day East Bethlehem Township and Centerville Borough, and in 1787 the family patented the land. In the fall of 1809, Gilpin set out on a trip with his wife and eight-year-old son to visit western Pennsylvania, including inspecting the family land in Washington County. His journal was published in the *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* in installments from 1926 to 1928. He writes,

Barneys run forms a deep glen almost immediately from the river, the sides being little more than tremendous cliffs of freestone, coal & limestone—it is covered with wood & as gloomy & wild as possible—some distance up the run & on our tract, is a cavern one of the greatest curiosities of this country—it is called the Panthers Den & is similar to Pooles hole in Derbyshire.

We were deterred by many circumstances from entering this place—I had not time without neglecting all objects of business—we

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<sup>5</sup> Zadok Cramer, *The Navigator: or the Traders’ Useful Guide in Navigating the Monongahela, Allegheny, Ohio, and Mississippi Rivers*, Pittsburgh: from the Press of Zadok Cramer, p. 21 (1806). A paraphrase of this description appears in Alfred Creigh, *History of Washington County from its First Settlement to the Present Time*, Washington, Pa.: Alfred Creigh (1871) p. 97 and in a subsequent edition published the next year.

<sup>6</sup> Three generations of Gilpins have connections to caves. First, Joshua Gilpin’s father Thomas Gilpin was a prominent Quaker pacifist who along with a score of fellow Quakers was exiled from Pennsylvania in 1777 for their refusal to support the Revolutionary War. While being escorted under armed guard from Philadelphia to Virginia, the group stopped to visit Indian Echo Caverns on September 22, 1777. See Bert Ashbrook, “The Strangest Cave Trip in History? The Quaker Exiles and Their 1777 Visit to Indian Echo Caverns, Penna.,” *Journal of Spelean History* vol. 55 no. 2 #160 (Sept. 2021) pp. 3–10. Second, Joshua Gilpin himself wrote in his journal that the family passed by Indian Echo Caverns and another Pennsylvania cave, Baker Caverns, although the journal is unclear about whether they entered these caves. This is the earliest reference to Baker Caverns known to the authors. Finally, Joshua’s son, Henry Dilworth Gilpin (1801-1860), who was eight years old when he accompanied his parents to Washington County, visited Weyer’s Cave (now Grand Caverns), Madison’s Cave, and the Natural Bridge during a trip to Virginia in September, 1827. See Ralph D. Gray, ed., “A Tour of Virginia in 1827, Letters of Henry D. Gilpin to his Father,” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 76, no. 4 (Oct. 1968) pp. 444-71. Henry Gilpin would go on to become attorney general of the United States in 184041.

were all extremely warm, & I feared the effect of going into so cold & damp a place at this critical season of the year—we were wholly unprepared with ropes, straw, candles or in fact any thing else, & in so very rugged a place, I did not wish to risque [sic] the copper heads a species of snake very abundant among these crags & if possible more fatal than the Rattle snake—I shall however give an account of the cave which has been published.

“About a mile below Frederickstown [sic] is a curious cave called the Panthers den it enters the hill about half way from its base by a small fracture or rent in the rock—after going a few yards thro a narrow & descending passage, you enter a wide but low room in which you can walk nearly upright—to the roof of this room we found bats hanging in a stupid kind of sleep—the next room we got into by clambering up another fracture in the rock—this room we had to roll ourselves thro & entered a third by a passage narrow & descending occasioned by another rent in the rock this room was extensive & high enough to walk in upright and was nicely divided by a partition of petrifications formed by the drippings of the water from the roof the formation of the petrifications had a singular appearance something similar in shape to two haystacks with their conical points put one on the other.”

“We had gone crouching [sic], pushing & rolling ourselves thro this fractured hill about 40 yards—feeling tired we returned with candles & cord to the mouth in safety. The first room had sufficient marks of animals bones in it to entitle it to the name it bears.” I must remark, that tho I had heard of & ascertained the place of Panthers Dens, I had not seen the above relation till since I returned from it—of course we had not the same interest to see it when there as we might now have—as for Panthers which are the American Tyger [sic], they are long since gone from this neighborhood.”<sup>7</sup>

Gilpin’s description of the cave in the last two paragraphs—which he says was previously published—is similar enough to Cramer’s to indicate that they two were derived from the same original source. But each adds details that the other does not; for example, Gilpin says the flowstone was shaped like haystacks, while Cramer says the bats were taken outside the cave. It would appear that there was an original, longer description of the cave that Cramer and Gilpin both excerpted. The authors have not yet found it.

“Panthers Cave” is shown on an 1876 map of East Bethlehem Township, part of an atlas published by John A. Caldwell in Ohio. (The Caldwell map was created before Centerville Borough was created in 1895). It shows the cave at the fork of Barney’s Run and a smaller tributary that joins Barney’s Run from the east, shortly above (north) of where Barney’s Run flows into the Monongahela River.<sup>8</sup>

Panthers’ Den has been the subject of cavers’ explorations for more than thirty years. On December 31, 1989, one of the authors joined three other cavers on an unsuccessful search for the cave. In December 1990 and February 10, 1991, cavers looking for Panther’s Den found a new cave in the area that they dubbed “Can Cave.” However, Can Cave does not fit the Cramer and Gilpin descriptions of Panthers’ Den, nor does its location match the location on the Caldwell map. One caver returned that spring and found only a coal mine. Finally, cavers returned in 1993, identified an outcropping of Fishpot Limestone, and determined that the entrance to Panthers’ Den was in this limestone but buried beneath coal mine spoils. The authors do not believe that

<sup>7</sup> Joshua Gilpin, “Journal of a Tour from Philadelphia Thro the Western Counties of Pennsylvania in the Months of September and October, 1809,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, vol. 51, no. 2 (1927) pp. 362–64; see also Joseph E. Walker, ed., *Pleasure and Business in Western Pennsylvania, The Journal of Joshua Gilpin, 1809*, Harrisburg: Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission (1975); Tom Metzgar, ed., “The Panther’s Den in 1809,” *Loyalhanna Troglodyte*, Loyalhanna Grotto of the National Speleological Society, vol. 4, no. 4 (Summer 1991) pp. 138-39.

<sup>8</sup> J[oseph] A. Caldwell, *Caldwell’s illustrated Historical Centennial Atlas of Washington Co. Pennsylvania*, Condit, Ohio: J.A. Caldwell (1876) p. 157. This map was described in Tom Metzgar, “The Panthers Den of Washington County,” *Loyalhanna Troglodyte*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Winter 1989–90) pp. 17, 19-21.

the cave lies in the Fishpot Limestone, because the Fishpot Limestone is above the Pittsburgh Coal, much higher up in the glen. That area would not match the historical evidence of the cave's location.<sup>9</sup>

The authors visited the area to search for Panthers' Den on March 28, 2021, keeping in mind these historical clues to the cave's location:



**“Panthers Cave” is located just above the “G” in “Monongahela” on the Caldwell Map of East Bethlehem Township**

<sup>9</sup> Tom Metzgar, “The Panthers Den of Washington County,” *Netherworld News*, Pittsburgh Grotto of the National Speleological Society, vol. 39, no. 3 (May-June 1990) pp. 27–29; Keith Christenson, “Is Panther’s Den Finally Found?,” *Loyalhanna Troglodyte*, Loyalhanna Grotto of the National Speleological Society, vol. 4, no. 3 (Spring 1991) p. 113; John Chenger, “April 29; Barney’s Run, Washington County,” *Loyalhanna Troglodyte*, Loyalhanna Grotto of the National Speleological Society, vol. 4, no. 4 (Summer 1991) p. 149; John Chenger, “The Panther Is Dead!,” *Loyalhanna Troglodyte*, Loyalhanna Grotto of the National Speleological Society, vol. 7, no. 2 (Winter 1993-94) p. 34.

- It is probably in limestone, from the descriptions of the cave. Cramer (1806), Gilpin (1809)
- It is “some distance up [Barney’s] run.” Gilpin (1809)
- “It enters the hill about half way up from its base.” Cramer (1806), Gilpin (1809)
- It is on the Gilpin tract. Gilpin (1809)
- It is located near where Barney’s Run and its tributary meet. Caldwell (1876)

Joshua Gilpin’s journal elsewhere says that the Gilpin plot is roughly bordered by Fishpot Run to the south and Barney’s Run to the north, although its location along an oxbow in the river means that those directions are closer to west and east, respectively. However, we know Gilpin’s description of the tract’s boundaries is not quite right; warrantee surveys of the original tract show that the Gilpin land extended well beyond Fishpot Run to the west and slightly beyond Barney’s Run to the east. Therefore, we assumed that “some distance up” Barney’s Run could be on either side of the stream.

Gilpin’s description of Barney’s Run (it “forms a deep glen almost immediately from the river, the sides being little more than tremendous cliffs of freestone, coal & limestone—it is covered with wood & as gloomy & wild as possible”) is true to this day, except that today one can follow Barney’s Run Road up the glen along the Run. That road is shown along the west bank of the Run on the 1876 Caldwell map. It was evidently relocated before the publication of the Brownsville U.S.G.S. quadrangle map in 1902, which shows the modern course of the road along the east bank of the Run for several hundred feet from the bottom of the glen before crossing a bridge to continue up the glen on the Run’s

west bank. A large set of aerial utility lines running east-west crosses both the road and the Run near this spot.

From the bridge where Barney’s Run Road crosses Barney’s Run, the west bank of the Run is largely covered with coal mine spoils lying below the coal patch town of Vestaburg. Now and again, mine portals in the Pittsburgh Coal are visible on this steep hillside.<sup>10</sup> The corresponding strata on the east bank are marked as “unchecked sandstone caves” on a portion of the California U.S.G.S. 7.5-minute quadrangle map reprinted with Chenger (Spring 1991); however, the authors inspected the area and identified them as hand-dug coal mine adits, not cave entrances.

From the power line, the authors walked upstream along the tributary that enters Barney’s Run to inspect rock exposures. About 250 feet northeast from the road, a series of two waterfalls 25 feet apart, each about six feet high, cascade over thin sandstone ledges. Seven hundred feet further upstream, and about 40 feet higher in elevation, a ten-foot waterfall plunges over another sandstone ledge into a four-foot-deep, trash-filled pool. To the right of this uppermost waterfall, someone hand-mined the 40-inch-thick coal seam that is exposed at the level of the pool. This tiny coal mine is about 16 feet wide and 12 feet deep. The amount of coal removed was probably limited by difficulty of transporting the coal downstream to the road over the jumble of rugged rocks.

The only limestone the authors saw exposed in this glen was near the bridge over Barney’s Run, on the east side of the Run, beneath a set of poles supporting the aerial utility line previously mentioned. This is below the Pittsburgh Coal, unlike the Fishpot Limestone which lies above the Pittsburgh Coal. Therefore, we believe this limestone to be within the upper Castleman Formation. The

<sup>10</sup> All our geological identification comes from the geologic map in S.P. Schweinfurth, J.B. Roen, and B.H. Kent, *Geology and Land Use in Eastern Washington County, Pennsylvania; California and Monongahela 7-1/2-Minute Quadrangles*, Penna. Topographic and Geologic Survey General Geology Report 56A (1971).

location of this limestone outcrop, near where the road crosses Barney's Run, matches all the information we have about the location of this historical cave—it is “some distance up [Barney's] run,” it is “about half way up from [the hill's] base,” it is on the former Gilpin tract, and it is near where Barney's Run and its tributary meet. We believe the entrance of Panthers' Den was most likely here, now buried by construction of the road or of the base for the utility poles, or at a corresponding outcrop on the west side of Barney's Run, now buried with mine spoils.

\* \* \*

It is remarkable that two of Pennsylvania's earlier-known caves are in a cave-poor area such as Washington County. But these caves shared a feature that is common among the earliest known caves in the Commonwealth, like Christopher Gist's Cave, Indian Echo Caverns, Durham Cave, Conodoguinet Cave, Arch Spring and Tytoona Cave: they had natural (not quarried) entrances in hillsides along streams or rivers.<sup>11</sup> That feature of their location made relocating them much easier more than two hundred years later.



**Panther's Den may be located in a limestone outcrop just east of Barney's Run, between the vehicle and the utility poles in the background. A detached block of limestone is below the outcrop, beside the vehicle.**

<sup>11</sup> Bert Ashbrook, *Caves of Pennsylvania in the Eighteenth Century*, Bloomington: Greyhound Press (2013).

# Bert Ashbrook Is the 2021 Peter M. Hauer Award Recipient

*Editor's note:* The recipient of the Peter M. Hauer Award is normally announced at the National Speleological Society annual convention. Because this year's NSS convention was held on-line, we are recognizing the recipient in these pages. The award presentation can be viewed at the NSS's YouTube channel.

The Peter M. Hauer Award is presented annually to a member of the National Speleological Society who has made a significant contribution to Spelean History. The 2020 Peter M. Hauer Award recipient is Bert Ashbrook, NSS 25104 CL FE PH.

Bert is a long-time member of the NSS and is active in documenting the history and exploration of caves, especially those in Pennsylvania. He is the author of the book, *Caves of Pennsylvania in the Eighteenth Century* and has also been investigating the history of caves in the Mammoth Cave region of Kentucky. He has presented many papers at the American Spelean History Association sessions at NSS conventions, and has published numerous articles in *The Journal of Spelean History*.



**Bert Ashbrook**