On September 19, 1946, a collection of high-profile Kentucky officials and average citizens gathered to dedicate the twenty-sixth national park, Mammoth Cave. The dedication ceremony capped a fifteen-year battle to create the park that began in 1926 and ended with the federal government’s official acceptance of the park lands on July 1, 1941. The dedication, however, was seen as less an end, but rather as a beginning. Congressman Earle C. Clements predicted the start of a new stream of tourist dollars that would flow into Kentucky “when on these grounds will be found hotel, cottage, and cabin accommodations to care for our ever-increasing stream of visitors…and also adequate recreational facilities to entertain, to amuse, and encourage return visits.” The celebratory remarks from each official, including Senator Alben Barkley and the Secretary of the Interior, hailed a turning point in Kentucky’s economic and natural future.

Indeed, the new national park would inaugurate a boom in postwar travel as returning veterans and their growing families packed national and state parks. As American families flooded the highways and vacation spots, questions of resource protection emerged from conservation groups new and old, such as the Wilderness Society, the Sierra Club, and the National Speleological Society (NSS). What were parks supposed to protect: visitor experiences, or the natural and cultural resources? And how were they to balance these concerns?

1 The Secretary of the Interior officially accepted the land that made up Mammoth Cave National Park in 1941, and park officials began planning dedication ceremonies for later that year; after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States’s entry into World War II, officials delayed dedication ceremonies.
2 Earle C. Clements, “Dedication of Mammoth Cave National Park,” September 18, 1946; Sound Recordings Related to Memorial and Dedication Ceremonies, National Archives-College Park (NACP).
The Park Service adopted a plan to protect the visitor experience by upgrading and updating park infrastructures and facilities, such as new roads, visitor centers, and restrooms. At Mammoth Cave, this meant the construction of a new entrance road, a new hotel facility, a new $600,000 visitor center, a new 400-car parking lot, new campsites, hiking trails, and the possibility of new cave tours through newly-acquired caves, former competitors Great Onyx Cave and Crystal Cave.³

Preservation of a resource ultimately rests upon knowledge of that resource. Such was the philosophy of a research organization dedicated to the systematic exploration and protection of the Flint Ridge Cave System adjoining Mammoth Cave National Park. The Cave Research Foundation, organized in 1957, was rooted in a 1954 expedition through Crystal Cave. The goal was like that of the legendary former owner of Crystal Cave, Floyd Collins: to find a connection between the Flint Ridge Cave System and the Mammoth Cave System. While they did not find a connection in time to raise the purchase price by 1961, the CRF succeeded in arranging an agreement with the Park Service to continue exploration and mapping of the Flint Ridge System and share that knowledge with the park officials to make best management decisions.⁴

The CRF also shared their opinion as to what to do with the newly-acquired caves to ensure their protection. In a May 1961 report, foundation president Philip M. Smith suggested the National Park Service had a “unique opportunity” with the new caves of Flint Ridge, as “the

surface and subterranean features of Flint Ridge have special value as a wilderness.” The suggestion of preserving land as wilderness was an effort gaining steam in Washington as Howard Zahniser struggled to persuade Congress to create a special designation for wild lands “untrammeled by man.” Underground wilderness, however, seemed to be an entirely new concept. Smith and the CRF did not specify how to preserve the wilderness of Flint Ridge’s subsurface labyrinth, except that they should not be opened to accommodate the growing numbers of visitors to relieve pressure from Mammoth Cave. Smith offered a suggestion, however that “the surface…must be treated as part of the wilderness environment.” Park officials at Mammoth Cave did not open the caves for tours, but neither did they implement any special wilderness preservation, either. In the coming years, however, Flint Ridge became a battleground for wilderness designation.

In 1964, Congress passed two key pieces of legislation which led to disputes over Mammoth Cave’s preservation. The Wilderness Act, the dream of Howard Zahniser and the Wilderness Society, forced all national parks to begin studying the lands under their protection as potential sites for Wilderness Areas, and to report any recommendations within ten years.

Recalling the halcyon days of the Civilian Conservation Corps, the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 created the Job Corps. The Job Corps debuted as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, with conservation camps located in many national parks and forests.

In 1965, The Great Onyx Job Corps Conservation Camp took up residence on the former site of a CCC camp near Great Onyx Cave on Flint Ridge within the boundaries of the park. The

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camp housed and trained more than 200 young men in about a dozen buildings. Those structures and a sewage lagoon sat right above the Flint Ridge Cave system.

The Wilderness Act’s order for park examinations of suitable wilderness prompted Mammoth Cave officials to revise its Master Plan, the document to guide park planning and management efforts for the foreseeable future. Although the Master Plan, the Wilderness Act provisions, and the Job Corps camp were three separate considerations, they blended together into a nearly ten-year fight over how to best preserve the longest cave system—the Flint Ridge Cave system—and the Mammoth Cave itself.

In 1966, trouble first emerged below the surface when in just over a year of use, the lagoon began to leak effluents into the longest cave system in the world. Park officials downplayed the discovery, claiming to have sent water samples to the University of Kentucky for e. coli testing. The CRF did their own testing and found e. coli numbers “off the charts,” as Roger Brucker recalled. When the cavers pressed the National Park Service, however, the park managers seemed to have ignored them.

Instead, the CRF, National Speleological Society, and the Park Service both began working on planning for the future management. In 1967, Richard Watson, the new president of the Cave Research Foundation, organized a symposium relating to the application of the Wilderness Act at Mammoth Cave National Park. There he advocated for underground wilderness for “the knowledge which can be gained through research in such an area of

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9 Personal interview with Roger Brucker, June 6, 2015.
unquestionable intrinsic value.”\textsuperscript{10} That same year, the National Speleological Society produced its own suggestion for a wilderness area at Mammoth Cave National Park. The NSS suggested setting aside over 49,000 acres (out of approximately 51,000 acres of the entire park) as either surface or underground wilderness.\textsuperscript{11} Mammoth Cave National Park officials were busy preparing for the future management of the park through the revised Master Plan, which would have to address the wilderness issue. As a public agency rather than a private organization, the Park Service was legally required to get public input on any significant plans.

On April 24, 1968, the National Park Service announced a public hearing related to the drafted Master Plan. In a press release, the NPS suggested possible comments might relate to various planning issues, such as what tours and cave routes should be open for visitation, and what role private businesses might play as concessionaires in the park. The strongest feedback, however, ultimately concerned whether or not to designate any part of the park as wilderness. Congressman William H. Natcher wasted little time preparing remarks to the planning team. Calling any wilderness proposal a “serious mistake,” Natcher argued that since Kentuckians had footed the bill for paying for a national park, they should be able to recreate in it as they wished, within the bounds of the preservation rules already in place.\textsuperscript{12} Had they known their abilities to enjoy the park as they saw fit would be hindered by Wilderness declarations, they would not have made such sacrifices to set aside park lands and build tourist infrastructure at taxpayer


\textsuperscript{12} Statement of Representative William H. Natcher, Second District of Kentucky, before a 6-Man Study Team Appointed by the National Park Service to Draw Up a New Park Master Plan and to Consider Wilderness Proposals, May 25, 1968. Records of the Mammoth Cave National Park Association, Manuscripts and Folklife Collection, Western Kentucky University.
expense. Furthermore, Natcher pointed out that Kentucky already had wilderness areas both in the western part of the state at the Land Between the Lakes and in parts of Eastern Kentucky “which cannot be developed.”

Congressman Natcher seemed to win the first round with the Park Service, but entering the 1970s conservation organizations were not willing to back down. Richard Watson and Philip Smith of the Cave Research Foundation co-wrote an article in the *International Journal of Environmental Studies* introducing the concept of underground wilderness to a wider, non-caver audience. In it, they challenged the definition of “wilderness” in the Wilderness Act, noting the “explicit contradiction” in “untrammeled” land “where man himself is a visitor who does not remain.” Watson and Smith argued that in a strict sense “there is no such pure wilderness on earth today,” but that caves can “give every appearance of being absolutely unaffected by man,” even if the trained observer could find “the imprint of man’s work.” Caves could give a wilderness experience, which they argued to be the true essence of “wilderness,” for underground, a caver may be separated by only a few hundred feet from visitors and automobiles, but feel “as far from civilization and the works of man as we have felt on our expeditions in the heart of the Antarctic and in the remotest mountains of Persia.” To Watson and Smith and most of the CRF and National Speleological Society, underground wilderness was

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13 Ibid.
16 Ibid., 219.
within the scope of the Wilderness Act, and the Flint Ridge Cave System should be designated as such.\textsuperscript{17}

In 1972, Mammoth Cave National Park announced official hearings for the master plan and wilderness recommendation for June 22 and 23, respectively. The master plan and wilderness recommendation were still considered separate, but related, issues. Shortly before the hearing, however, the park superintendent canceled the event “when it was suddenly discovered that the Environmental impact Statement was not adequate.”\textsuperscript{18} While the National Park Service regrouped, the Cave Research Foundation’s advocacy and explorations continued.

Over the summer of 1972, CRF expeditions were showing great promise for possibly connecting Flint Ridge Cave System to Mammoth Cave, but the work was getting increasingly dangerous. In addition to risks of slips, trips, or falls, the cavers risked hypothermia from staying at the lowest cave levels going through fifty-four degree Fahrenheit water. On September 9, 1972, an expedition team explored farther than any other team had gotten yet, when the ceiling of the river passage they were wading in chest-deep seemed to drop down to the surface of the water. Continuing on could put them in mortal danger—the most common cause of death in caving was drowning. One member of the team pressed on just to see if it might lead anywhere, but promised to turn back if it was a dead end. The ceiling started to rise back up, and a strange horizontal formation greeted them on the other side: a handrail from a Mammoth Cave tourist trail. Overnight, the connection made Mammoth Cave the longest cave in the world, at over 144

\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 220.
miles; the discovery was kept confidential until December, when the Park Service had to confirm the rumors.¹⁹

For its part, the National Park Service and the local community began to take the management plans more seriously than ever, and guiding development became of increasing importance. News of the discovery helped push park visitation to its highest levels in 1973, with over a million visitors to the park. The 400-car parking lot of Mission 66 was not enough to contain vehicular traffic. Park planners began to conceive of a traffic and pollution solution in their master plan: a staging area at the outer boundaries of the park, closer to the recently completed interstate 65, that would take visitors wishing to go on a cave tour via bus to the appropriate entrance. The park would also support the development of a new sewage treatment center for the surrounding communities in the Mammoth Cave watershed, and the removal of the Job Corps camps from Flint Ridge to a more suitable location on the north side of the park, away from the extensive network of caves on the south side.²⁰ In regard to wilderness designation, however, the park remained silent until after a public hearing, and the clock was ticking towards a September 1974 deadline.

On May 29, 1974, forty-six individuals representing themselves or an organization, attended the public wilderness hearing at Bowling Green, Kentucky. In addition to the 265 written responses from around the country, plus the 366 written responses to the announcement of the original 1972 hearing, the park received almost 650 responses. Around seventy percent of those spoke in favor of either surface wilderness or underground wilderness. Most of the anti-

²⁰ 1974 Draft Master Plan, Mammoth Cave National Park; Mammoth Cave National Park Archives.
wilderness responses came from local community groups, such as the Cave City Chamber of Commerce, who echoed Representative Natcher’s arguments about wilderness being a misuse of the park. Despite the public response in favor of wilderness, the Park Service concluded in August that “no areas within the national park are suitable at the present time for wilderness designation.” This was due mostly to the land use and abuse before the park’s existence; building foundations, wagon roads, fence rows, and erosion gullies indicated “the imprint of man’s work,” and cancelling out the other qualifications for wilderness that cave lands met.

Cave advocates were livid in their critiques of the non-recommendation of neither surface nor underground wilderness. Robert Stitt, conservation chairman for the National Speleological Society, drafted a legal brief to force the issue of underground wilderness as a separate legal entity under the Wilderness Act. Stitt based his arguments on many cases that involved caves that were once privately owned in cave country, but now belonged to the American people at Mammoth Cave National Park. First, Stitt dismantled any ideas that the Wilderness Act excluded caves simply because caves were not explicitly mentioned in the text. Second, Stitt argued that underground management did not have to coincide with surface management; cave rights were distinct from surface rights, and each could be managed separately. Since the Park had the duty to protect the cave, and the Wilderness Act required evaluation of all federal lands, including the subsurface by legal definition of “land,” and because “substantial” portions of the cave met the definition of wilderness under the Wilderness Act, the Park should review its non-recommendation and adjust it accordingly.  

21 Mammoth Cave National Park Wilderness Recommendation, August 1974, 10; Mammoth Cave National Park Archives.
22 Robert R. Stitt, “Law and Sound Policy Require the National Park Service and the Secretary of the Interior to Review the Underground Portions of Mammoth Cave National Park as to their
The Park’s recommendation to the President came just two weeks after Richard Nixon resigned and Gerald Ford took over the office. In his December recommendations to Congress as to suitability of wilderness lands, Mammoth Cave was not included; however, President Ford left open the possibility of a wilderness area should the surface land at some point lose the “imprint of man.”

While the majority of local people disagreed with several items in the park’s proposed master plan, on the wilderness issue they agreed with the park. Wilderness advocates lost every attempt at creating underground wilderness as a separate category of protection under the Wilderness Act, except in places where caves are discovered under previously designated wilderness, and only when all entrances to the cave are under the surface wilderness. No part of Mammoth Cave National Park has been designated as wilderness under the 1964 Wilderness Act. Cave Research Foundation and National Speleological Society members won a victory against pollution in the cave, however. In the early 1980s, the National Park Service and the Department of Labor moved the Great Onyx Job Corps Conservation Camp from Flint Ridge to the north side of the park, away from sensitive cave ecosystems. A sewage treatment center took longer to realize, but in 2006 Mammoth Cave National Park completed a new system with the Caveland Environment Authority, connecting the park and five surrounding communities to a wastewater treatment center.

Suitability for Wilderness under the Wilderness Act of 1964,” June 25, 1974; Mammoth Cave National Park Archives.
23 Gerald Ford, Presidential Wilderness Message, December 4, 1974; Mammoth Cave National Park Archives.
25 Mammoth Cave National Park Chronology; Mammoth Cave National Park Vertical Files.