

Collection Essay

Unearthing Mammoth Cave Collections at the Filson

Mammoth Cave, the world's largest known cave system, consists of more than four hundred miles of underground passageways. This marvelous subterranean palace in Edmonson County, Kentucky, is about ninety miles south of Louisville. Today, Mammoth Cave is a national park, and tourists from around the world flock to its caverns. But how did it become an international tourist destination? When was the cave discovered, and how was it used prior to tourism? By exploring the Filson Historical Society's rich cave collections, we learn more about the history of Mammoth Cave through the eras. Spanning from the early nineteenth through the twenty-first century, its materials include rare guidebooks and maps, early cave photographs, manuscripts of past cave owners, books and pamphlets about Mammoth Cave, and a bottle of Mammoth Cave Bourbon. The Filson's Mammoth Cave collections have materials to entice the tourist and the scholar.

It is unclear when the cave was first discovered by white settlers, though historians estimate it was the later part of the eighteenth century. According to legend, in about 1797, a hunter named Houchin rediscovered the cave while pursuing a wounded bear that had taken refuge in it. As depicted in Carolus Brenner's *Natural Entrance to Mammoth Cave* (circa 1890), at that time the cave did not have the grand entrance it does today. The first written record of the cave property dates from 1798, when a land certificate for two hundred acres along the Green River was issued to Valentine Simons, the cave's first owner. A year later, the metes and bounds of the tract were recorded in a Warren County Clerk's surveyor's book; it concludes with the words "to the beginning including two saltpeter caves," called Dixon's Cave. Simons owned the cave until July 1812, when he sold it to John Flatt of Barren County, Kentucky, who sold it to brothers George and John McClean in December 1812. The next year, the McLean brothers sold a portion of the cave to Charles S. Morton of Fayette County, Kentucky, and a portion to Williamson Gatewood of Warren County, Kentucky. Morton sold his portion to Hyman Gratz of Philadelphia and Charles Wilkins of Fayette County. Wilkins also purchased Gatewood's tracts of land and established a saltpeter leaching company with Hyman Gratz. Wilkins and Gratz made great fortunes on the saltpeter found in the cave, which was essential in the production of gunpowder. It is within these land transactions that the cave is first referred to as "Mammoth Cave." Remnants of the old saltpeter vats were later documented by early cave photographers such as W. F. Sesser, who did so in 1866.¹



Natural Entrance to Mammoth Cave by Carolus Brenner (c. 1890).

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1812 Saltpetre vats photograph, taken by W. F. Sesser (c. 1866).

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By the end of the War of 1812, the cave was no longer needed for gunpowder. Hyman Gratz purchased Wilkins's tracts of land at the time of his death in 1828, thus becoming the sole owner of Mammoth Cave and lands around it. In 1839, the cave was sold to John Croghan (1790–1849). Croghan, a physician and entrepreneur, was the son of Maj. William Croghan (1752–1822) and Lucy Clark (1765–1834), a sister of Gen. George Rogers Clark. Historians believed Croghan had previous ties to Edmonson County. However, the 1901 *Courier-Journal* article “The Owners of Mammoth Cave: And Some New Facts about the Discovery of the Famous Cave” states that Croghan, “a resident of Jefferson County, Ky., went to Europe and while there he heard so much about the wonders

of Mammoth Cave that he concluded to investigate it upon his return...and his investigation resulted in the purchase of the cave from Mr. Gorin for \$10,000.”

Croghan had ideas about how to use and explore the cavern. He considered the steady climate potentially beneficial in the treatment of tuberculosis and built houses in the cave to treat patients. Unfortunately, his plan proved unsuccessful, particularly because of the accumulation of smoke from oil-burning lamps, cooking, and heating fires within the cavern. A letter from a lung patient, Oliver Anderson, to Henry Wingate explains why he ultimately had to leave the cave after spending five months there to help cure lung problems: “I left the cave yesterday under an impression that I would be better out than in as my lungs were constantly irritated with smoke and my nose offended by a disagreeable effluvia, the necessary consequence of its being so tenanted without ventilation. The thermometer stood at 40 degrees in the shade when I came out and I cannot tell how delightful the upper world was to all my senses.” The deaths of several patients ultimately made Croghan shut down the hospital project. While using the cave as a treatment center failed, Croghan saw opportunities to profit from it in the form of tourism.²

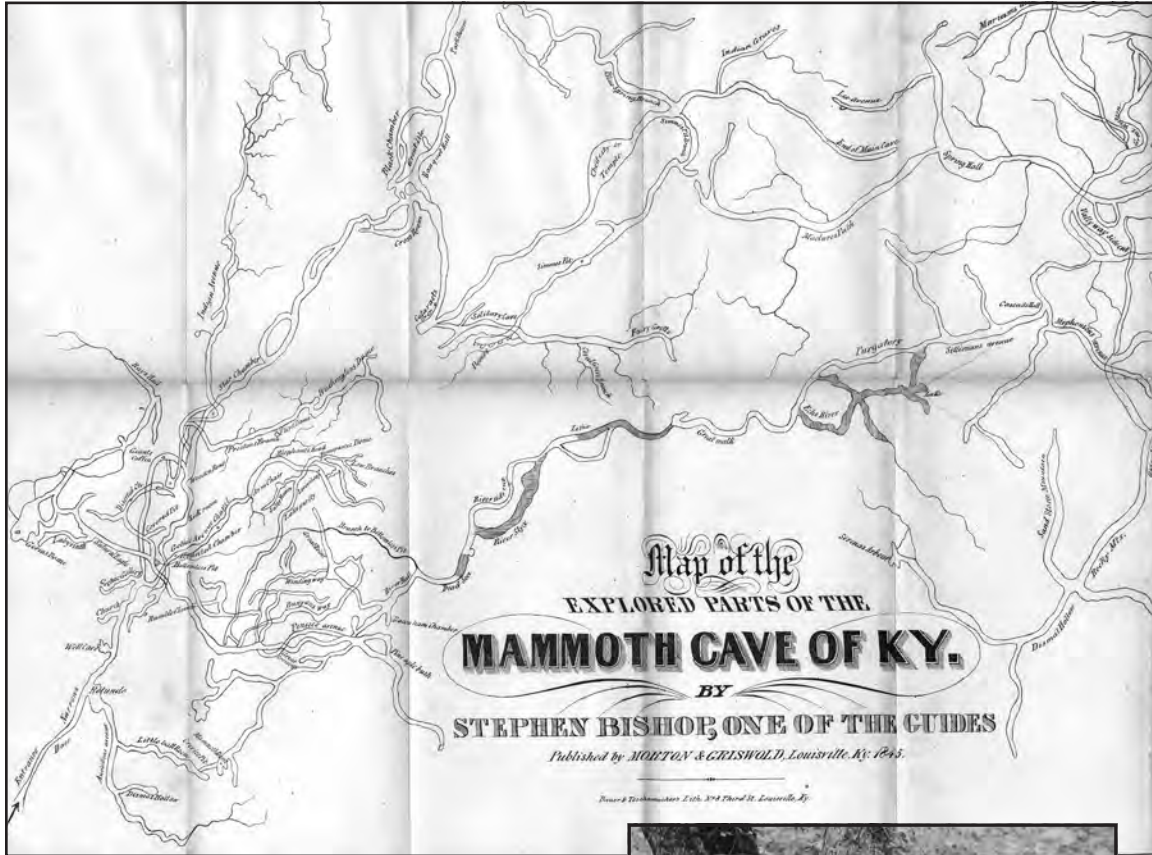


Margaret Schafer at the first consumptive house in the Mammoth Cave (1932).

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Cave exploration quickly expanded, and agents and guides mapped out new passageways and caverns. Many of the early guides were enslaved African Americans; among the greatest of these was Stephen Bishop, one of the cave’s first explorers, who drew the first map of it in 1842. His map was later published in *Rambles in Mammoth Cave, during the year 1844*, for which Bishop was given full credit. Materson “Mat” Bransford, another early explorer, was a member of the

team that first entered Mammoth Dome and found there a miner's lantern that had been dropped down Crevice Pit when the cave was worked for saltpeter. He also discovered Franklin Avenue, a beautiful grotto later named Serena's Arbor. Bransford was also an early tour guide.

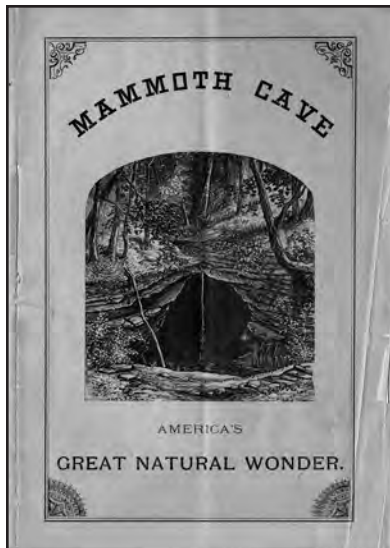


Stephen Bishop's map of Mammoth Cave (1842).
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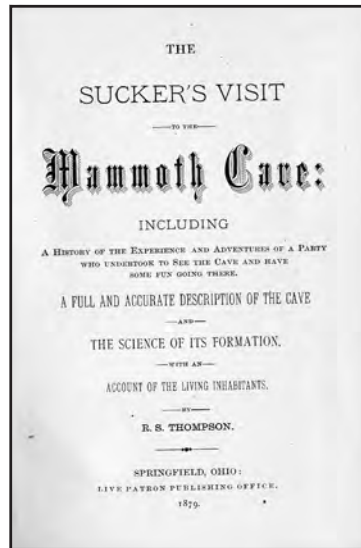
Early exploration led to the publication of a variety of pamphlets and books that enticed early travelers. These early guidebooks often included the history of the cave, tips on traveling, maps of the cavern's vast passageways, and scientific descriptions. The Filson's library collection houses a variety of these travelogues, which date back to the early 1840s, including *Rambles in Mammoth Cave* (1845), *A Tour in the Dark* (1867), *The Sucker's Visit to Mammoth Cave* (1879), *Pictorial Guide to the Mammoth Cave, Kentucky* (1888), and *Mammoth Cave of Kentucky: An Illustrated Manual* (1897).



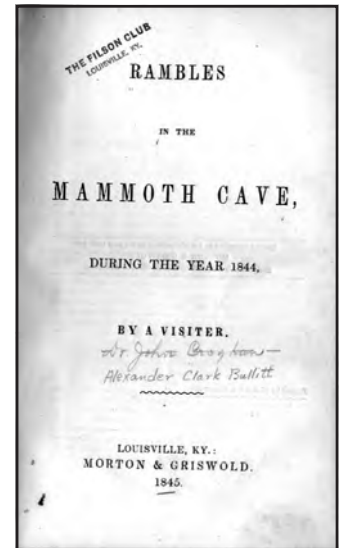
Agents and Guides to Mammoth Cave (1896).
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Mammoth Cave
America's Great Natural Wonder.
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The Sucker's Visit to Mammoth Cave: a history of the experience and adventures of a party who undertook to see the cave and have some fun going there (1879).
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Rambles in Mammoth Cave, during the year 1844.
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Visitors to the cave also wrote about their accounts and experiences, many of which were later published on both sides of the Atlantic, sparking international interest. In a letter dated Thursday, June 10, 1852, an anonymous writer describes a recent visit to Mammoth Cave: “After a ride of four or five hours we arrived at the Dripping Springs, where we stopped to refresh ourselves and rest the mules. We then left the pike, and took the dirt road leading to the cave. The distance from there is about eight miles and the road the most hilly and rocky I ever travelled...The air upon entering the cave is most delightfully cool, and is so pure and bracing that a person may walk a considerable distance without feeling the least fatigued.”

The letter describes different parts of the cavern: “The next large room that we enter is called the church. Here the rocks form a large platform in the shape of a pulpit, and other small ones, have been arranged around as seats for an audience. Here fourteen years ago service was held regularly once a month, but the practice has of later years been discontinued.”³

In 1849, Croghan, a bachelor, died of tuberculosis, leaving a remarkable will probated in Jefferson County, Kentucky, a copy of which can also found in the Filson’s manuscript collection along with his family’s papers. In the will, he deeded all the cave properties (embracing over sixteen hundred acres of land) to trustees to be held for nine nephews and nieces, who continued managing the cave property. By the 1860s and 1870s, cave marketing increased—with new ways to entice visitors, such as a broadside describing a special event featuring

new views of Mammoth Cave, “Emerson’s New and Magnificent Panorama of the Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, a rich treat for the scholar, Christian and lover of the beautiful.” Not only would visitors to the event view over forty miles of never-seen views produced by the finest painter, but they would also see the mysterious eyeless fish found in the cave. Slick marketing ploys continued to entice tourists, including Mammoth Cave Bourbon Whiskey, which was sold by the Number One Distillery Company until prohibition in 1920.

AT **HALL,**

ON **Eve.,** **1860.**

EMERSON'S
NEW AND
MAGNIFICENT PANORAMA
—OF THE—
MAMMOTH CAVE,
IN KENTUCKY.

A RICH TREAT FOR THE SCHOLAR, CHRISTIAN AND LOVER OF THE BEAUTIFUL.

These scenes are painted on many thousand feet of canvass, upon the most gigantic scale, without regard to cost, exhibiting scenes for over FORTY MILES, never before shown, producing one of the finest paintings extant—yea, far superior to all others in extent and beauty ever exhibited upon this

GREAT GEOLOGICAL WONDER OF THE WORLD.

The paintings are entirely new, having been sketched by the proprietor, and painted by one of the first artists in the country. The proprietor having personally explored the Cave from beginning to end, is able to give a lively and graphic description of the grand, the beautiful, and the awful scenery of these subterranean streets and cascades, descending to unknown depths and spacious halls, glistening most gorgeously from resplendant emeralds, now reflecting light from myriads of crystals upon the spell-bound and admiring spectator, exhibiting *Stupendous Arches, Spacious Halls, Gorgeous Fairy Scenes, Beautiful Grottos, Waterfalls, Rivers, Seas, Arch Bridges, Magnificent Temples, Splendid Domes, Gloomy Caverns &c., &c.*

In connection will be exhibited the remarkable curiosities found there by the speaker, some of which are the following:—

THE CELEBRATED EYELESS FISH!

Found nowhere else in the world, besides Crawfishes and Crickets peculiar to that cave,
Also the curious kind of rocks formed from water, viz:—

Stalactites, Stalagmites, Snow-Balls, Grape Formations, Celery, Cream Cand^r Portions of Roses, Selenite Incrustations, Crystals, Mineral Rocks from the Rivers and Seas, Cave Rock, Water from the River Jordan, where the celebrated Eyeless Fish are found, &c.

PROGRAMME.

Costume, manner of entering the Cave, Cascade at the mouth, Air, Great Vestibule, Bat Room, Kentucky Cliffs, Giant's Coffin, Gothic Cathedral, Gothic Avenue, Stone Houses, Mummies, Registry Room, Brewer's Studio, Devil's Arm-Chair, Elephant's Head, Lover's Leap, City of the Tombs, Crown of Victory, Richardson's Spring, Bottomless Pit, Bridge of Leith, Winding way or Fat Man's Misery, Buchanan's Way, Bacon Chamber, Napoleon's Fortress, Crystal Pillar, River Styx, Snow Clouds, Echo River, Pass of El Chior, Silliman's Avenue, Gorin's Dome, Mammoth Dome, Cascade Hall, Ocean Steamer, Ball Room, Pass of Orpheus, Pompey's Pillar, Black Hole of Calcutta or Tartarus, Island of the blessed, Bottomless Well, Flower Valley, Martha's Vineyard, Mount Olympus, Holy Sepulchre, Cleveland's Cabinet, Snow-Ball Room, Paradise or Fairy Grotto, Dead Sea, Star Chamber, Dandit's Hall, the Hospital or Sanitarium Room, Elysian Grotto, Bacchus's Glory, Crogans Hall, the Maelstrom, &c.

COME EARLY; IF A GOOD SEAT IS DESIRED! [TURN OVER

Broadside promoting “Emerson’s New and Magnificent Panorama of the Mammoth Cave in Kentucky” (1860).

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From the time of Croghan's death in 1849 to the 1920s, Mammoth Cave was owned and operated by his nieces and nephews. In July 1924, the then-living beneficiaries under Croghan's will filed a petition in Edmonson Circuit Court seeking the appointment of three trustees to assist with managing the property in conjunction with the two existing trustees. The judge, possibly with the sense of a public interest in the Mammoth Cave estate, granted the prior of the petition but ignored the request to appoint trustees and instead chose three citizens of Edmonson County. Soon the Mammoth Cave National Park Committee was formed, and pamphlets were being created to promote the formation of a new national park. In 1926, Congress authorized the formation of a national park in the Mammoth Cave area to protect the caves, hilly country, and scenic river valleys typical of south-central Kentucky. The park was officially established on July 1, 1941.

More than two hundred years since the cave was first documented in a deed book of Warren County, Kentucky, Mammoth Cave National Park now receives more than 2 million visitors per year. Over the decades, new guidebooks have been written, many of which can be found in the Filson's collections. Examining early records and sources allows us to better understand how this hidden place has made an international name for itself.

Heather Potter
Curator of Photographs and Prints



Mammoth Cave Whiskey, c. 1920.
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- 1 Samuel W. Thomas, Eugene H. Conner, and Harold Meloy, "A History of Mammoth Cave, Emphasizing Tourist Development and Medical Experimentation under Dr. John Croghan," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 68 (1970): 322; Valentine Simons, Sept. 3, 1799, Warren County, Kentucky, Surveyors Book A: 268; 330 old Book A, and Valentine Simons and his wife Ann Simmons of Hardin County & John Flat of Barren County, July 9, 1812, Williamson Gatewood of Warren County & Charles Wilkins of Lexington, Jan. 29, 1814, and Charles S. Morton and his wife Hannah of Fayette County & Hyman Gratz of Philadelphia and Charles Wilkins of Fayette County, Apr. 20, 1813, Warren County, Kentucky Deed Book 6: 48-49, 323, 324-25, Warren County Clerk's Office, City of Bowling Green, Kentucky.
 - 2 Oliver Anderson to Henry Wingate, 1843. Mss. C/A Oliver Hazard Anderson letter, Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky (hereafter FHS).
 - 3 To father, June 10, 1852, Mss. C/M Mammoth Cave, and Last will and testament of Dr. John Croghan, 1849, Mss. A/C941, fld. 2, Croghan (William) Family Papers, FHS.