

THE JOURNAL OF  
**Spelean History**

OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE AMERICAN SPELEAN HISTORY ASSOCIATION



The entrance to Russell Cave, Kentucky, as it appeared in the nineteenth century. By permission of Archives, University of Kentucky Libraries.

A HISTORY AND DESCRIPTION OF THE  
RUSSELL CAVE, FAYETTE COUNTY, KENTUCKY

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It was a hot August afternoon in 1843 at Russell Cave, an attractive and popular location a few miles north of Lexington, Kentucky. Robert Wickliffe, of Lexington, was speaking to a gathering on the lawn above the cave spring, charging dishonesty on the part of the Whig party in the recent congressional district revision. Cassius Marcellus Clay, a fiery abolitionist and supporter of the Whig candidate, interrupted to present a refutation. Standing near Clay in the crowd was Samuel Brown, a former Lexington attorney who has been described as a "noted fighter with a quick temper." Turning to Clay, Brown shouted, "Sir, it is not true!" The impetuous Clay responded quickly by calling Brown a liar, whereupon Brown heatedly accused Clay of being a "damned liar!" In a moment the fight was on, and proved vastly more entertaining to the spectators than the oratory it had interrupted.<sup>1</sup>

Accounts of the battle vary greatly as to the succeeding course of events, but all agree that it was brief and bloody. It is unclear who struck the first blow of the exchange. In an interview half a century after the event, Clay maintained that Brown had rushed upon him and began striking him with an umbrella. Brown and his supporters insisted that the first blows were delivered by Cassius Clay with a leaded horsewhip. This charge was denied vigorously by Clay, who insisted that he had no whip in his possession at the time.<sup>2</sup>

The conflict escalated rapidly from this first exchange. Clay drew the enormous Bowie knife he often carried and rushed upon Brown with the formidable weapon. A friend of Brown's in the crowd thrust a pistol into the hands of Brown, who fired point-blank into Clay's chest. Undaunted by the ball, the enraged Clay began to slash and hack at the upper body of the now defenseless Brown. Before the bystanders could separate the two, Brown had lost his right eye and left ear, and blood poured down his face where his nose had been cleaved in two. Clay brought the razor edge of the huge knife down in a tremendous blow on the top of his adversary's skull, gouging down through bone nearly into the brain and removing a large piece of the scalp. The violent encounter came to an end when the mutilated body of Samuel Brown was thrown over a low wall that guarded the cliff by the Russell Cave entrance. However, it is not certain who sent Brown on the terrible fall into the cave spring. Some accounts hold that Brown was tossed over the wall by his own friends as being a lesser evil than continued punishment from the hands of Cassius M. Clay, which version Clay himself supported. In another published account, it is held that Clay, prevented from inflicting further damage with the knife, picked Brown up from the ground and tossed him over the bluff into the stream. While the friends of Samuel Brown rescued him from the water, the victorious Clay retired to the nearby farmhouse to examine his own wounds, having received a pistol ball from only arm's length: "I thought I had killed him [Brown], but I felt no remorse as I thought he had also killed me." Clay proved to be uninjured, for in a miraculous stroke of luck, the ball had struck the silver knife scabbard that he wore beneath his coat, leaving only a red spot over his heart.<sup>3</sup>

Cassius Clay was indicted by the Fayette County Circuit Court in an attempt to verify the circumstances of the incident. For his defense, Clay retained the services of his famous cousin, Henry Clay, possibly the most brilliant and



Clay as a young man, a few years after the affair at Russell Cave. From and by permission of Archives, University of Kentucky Libraries.

successful attorney of the day. One of the foremost questions was that of the pistol that Brown had fired at Clay; the latter asserting that the entire affair had been premeditated and deliberately provoked by Brown. In an impassioned and eloquent defense, Henry Clay sought to prove that his client had acted in his own self-defense and was therefore innocent of any crime. He played masterfully upon the sympathies of the jury: "with the fatal pistol of conspired murderers pointed at his heart, would you have him meanly and cowardly fly? . . . he would not be worthy of the name which he bears!" Cassius Clay was acquitted, and his renowned kinsman maintained his spotless record of having not lost a single case during the last forty years of his legal practice.<sup>4</sup>

Less fortunate was Samuel Brown, who after a partial and painful recovery was killed a year later in a boiler explosion aboard the steamboat Lucy Walker. Mason Brown later wrote that his grandfather had "fully intended as soon as his



health would permit to meet Clay, and fight it out by Clay's method of fighting." On the day of the trial, Cassius Clay sent Samuel Brown a letter in which he apologized for his behavior, his suspicions of a murder plot, and for the injuries he had inflicted. Brown initially responded favorably to this overture and called Clay's gesture "magnanimous," but reconsidered after a few weeks and sent a letter to Clay, saying in part, "it requires a much stronger effort than any you have yet made, before you will be held to be 'magnanimous' by me, or even to inspire me with sufficient confidence to throw me off my guard when in your presence."<sup>5</sup>

There are few caves in Kentucky that can boast a more interesting and colorful history than the Russell Cave in Fayette County, located just north of the intersection of Huffman Mill and Russell Cave roads. The tract that included the cave was a land grant given to Colonel Henry Russell for services in the French and Indian War. This military grant of two thousand acres of choice Bluegrass land was given posthumously and passed to Colonel Russell's brother William. William Russell's son, William, Jr., settled on the land near the cave, giving up the greater portion of the acreage to his brother Robert in order to possess the cave and its fine spring of water. William Russell, Jr., chose the name of Mount Brilliant for his newly settled lands, thus honoring one of the estates of a noted family friend--Patrick Henry. The first house was built on the tract in 1783, followed in 1792 by a two story brick residence that formed the base of the elegant mansion that occupies the grounds today. The building site adjacent to the cavern was chosen for several reasons, not only for the beautiful setting but also for tactical advantage in those troubled times of Indian raids. The house is located on high ground, above and on the same side as the water source, and there was a natural ford of Elkhorn Creek near the cave. Additionally, the cavern mouth provided refrigeration and a never-failing supply of cold, clear water.<sup>6</sup>

The first description of the cave was published in 1820 by Constantine S. Rafinesque, then instructor of natural history at Lexington's Transylvania University:

The cave is crooked, narrow, and rather shallow, and the stream often fills it from side to side, so that one to explore it must wade, and even swim, in some places. Fishes are often found in it, such as Suckers and Catfishes. At the mouth the stream is usually one foot deep, and discharges itself into the Elkhorn, about one hundred steps below. The mouth of the cave is below a chain of rocky limestone cliffs, where some organic fossils are embedded. A large and spacious room lies next to it in the rocks, forming another cave which is filled by rubbish at a short distance, but communicates by narrow chasms with the other cave.<sup>7</sup>

In the same year a letter was published anonymously in the same publication, the Western Review, which in view of circumstantial evidence very likely was actually also written by Rafinesque. The letter described a comical afternoon excursion to the cave that probably was typical of the state of cave exploration in that day:

I have had an hour's experience to day, much to the annoyance of my bones and muscles, in traversing Russell's Cave in the vicinity of Lexington. The exterior of the mansion is so imposing

that I was tempted to explore the wonders within. The party consisted of Mr. A., Mr. F., Mr. Y., and Mr. L. Mr. A., having as much judgement as curiosity, and choosing the more discreet and comfortable course of relying upon our testimony in regard to the discoveries we should make, calmly seated himself in the vestibule of the cavern with [a] novel . . . in his hand, while [we] prepared to pay our respects to Pluto in this, one of his remoter dominions. . . . We stripped off our coats, tied handkerchiefs round our heads, girded our waists . . . [while] some of us adopted the oriental custom of paying our homage barefooted, and left our shoes behind. As it was a very warm day, and the water, through which we were obliged to pass, was as cold as that of a well, our outset in this chilling element, notwithstanding the copious draughts which we had made from a bottle of madeira, was more agitating than agreeable. Bare feet furnish by no means the most comfortable soles, with which to meet sharp and rugged stones; nor is the power to guard against falling aided by being compelled to hold a greasy candle in one's hand, whose light is to be most cautiously preserved under the certain alternative of our being bewildered and lost. . . . After going about two hundred yards in a circuitous and changing direction, climbing over rude fragments of rock, and squeezing our bodies through narrow straits, we reached a wide portion of the cave with an immense flat surface of limestone above us, and a shallow lake under our feet with a bottom of mud varying from the depth of the knee to that of the whole leg or limb. Walking with our bodies bent double, our heads and backs striking the jagged and dripping roof, our noses nearly in contact with the water and occasionally ploughing its surface, our legs drawn out of the mud at every step with great difficulty, our candles in danger of a ducking which would not much increase their usefulness, the possibility that we might meet with some deep hole in the way and suddenly plunge entirely under water at the hazard [of] drowning, and being at the same time told that we had only SIXTY YARDS to traverse in this position . . . we could not consider as perfectly delightful. . . . Mr. A. hailed our return with the joy of one receiving his friends from the grave.<sup>8</sup>

The area about the Russell Cave came to be quite popular with the inhabitants of the region and the nearby town of Lexington. In an era when radio, television and other forms of mass entertainment were nonexistent, it is difficult to imagine a more pleasant manner in which to spend a summer afternoon than a short horseback or buggy ride to the cave and a leisurely picnic beneath the trees in the enchanting locale. It was a favored gathering spot and site of many social affairs such as dances, barbecues, political rallies, and debates. It was one such occasion that sparked the violent confrontation between Samuel Brown and Cassius M. Clay.

After the death of William Russell, Jr., and of his widow five years later, the estate was sold in 1832 to Hamilton Atchison, Jr., and given in 1846 by his widow to her daughter Isabella as a wedding gift. Isabella and her new husband, James N. West, changed the name of Mount Brilliant to "Bellevue" and made it their home. West died in 1875 and his widow's heirs sold the property in 1889 to Henrietta Barkley. Mrs. Barkley gave it to her daughter, Henrietta B. DeLong,

and the estate was again sold in 1905 upon the death of her husband, A. A. DeLong. The new owner was James Ben Ali Haggin. The farm was given by Haggin to his grandson, Louis Lee Haggin, and his new bride, who restored to it the name of Mount Brilliant. The estate has remained in the possession of the Haggin descendants to the present day.<sup>9</sup>

The newspaper account of the 1905 purchase reported that James B. Haggin, who owned the adjacent Elmendorf Farm had obtained the Mount Brilliant acreage primarily for the abundant water supplied from the cave spring. Haggin soon set about to transform the spring into an efficient water system. Concrete retaining walls replaced the stream banks before the cave entrance and a concrete dam was built to impound the waters. A stone pump house was constructed containing a steam-driven pump with aerator and chlorinator, assuring the fitness of the spring water for human consumption. The pump house was converted to electricity in 1918, and rebuilt in 1940 with a filtration system added. Water was supplied from the cave to Mount Brilliant and to Haggin's palatial main residence at Green Hills, three miles distant, until the latter mansion was torn down in 1929. The entire system showed careful planning:

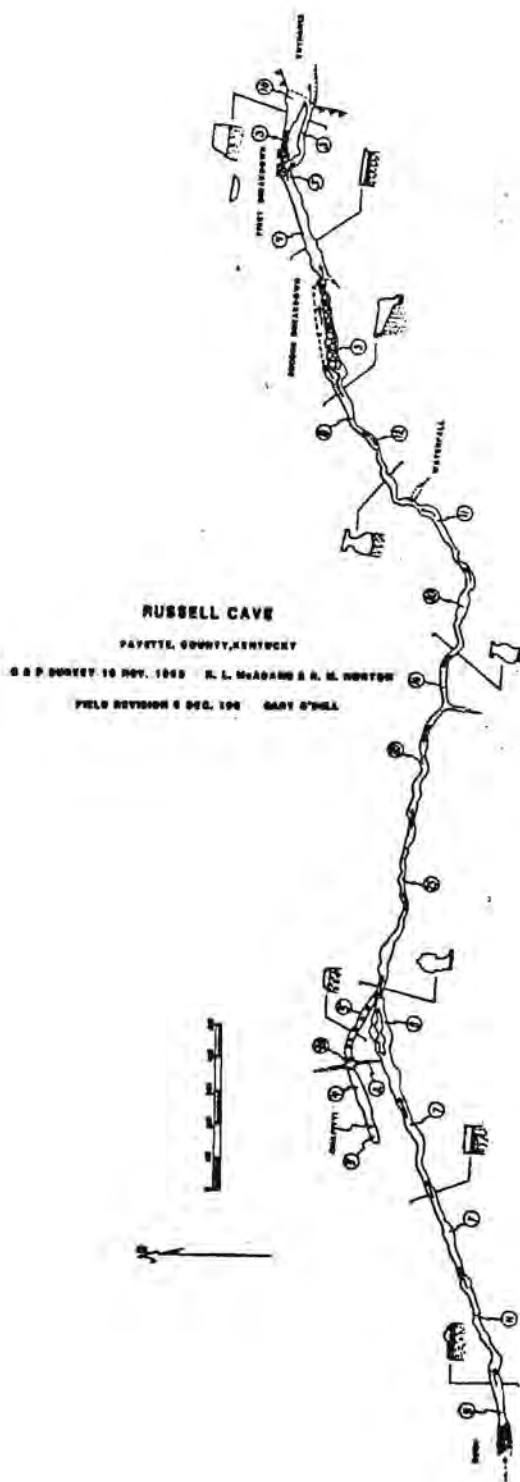
Water entered the pump house through an iron gate located on the inside of the retaining wall and down at the level of the bottom of the channel. This water entered a storage area after passing through the gate, which served as a settling tank to allow dirt to settle to the bottom. Water then entered the pump house where it purified and cleansed. After this, it passed on to a set of water rams, which functioned to pass the water up to the main house.<sup>10</sup>

City water was made available to the farm during the 1940's and domestic use of water from the cave was discontinued, although the swimming pool at the house was for many years afterward still filled from the cave. This pool, one of the very first built in Fayette County and excavated entirely by hand and animal labor, used water from the cave until the mid-1960's. At the present time there is no domestic use of water from the Russell Cave.<sup>11</sup>

Casual exploration of Russell Cave continued up to the time of World War II, when an incident occurred which forced the property owners to prohibit further entry into the cave. On September 5, 1944, four local youths entered Russell Cave after school in the afternoon on what was intended to be merely a short but exciting adventure of cave exploration, which no doubt they had before undertaken many times in the past. The boys had completed their explorations and were near the entrance on their way out when Grover S. Hughes, thirteen, noticed that he had lost a shoe some steps further back. He shouted to one of those behind to retrieve it and evidently the sound waves, magnified in the confined space, dislodged a large slab of rock from the ceiling which fell upon Hughes and a companion. John Mathews, twelve, was standing beside Hughes at the time of the rockfall and was grazed by the four-foot slab. Hughes was standing directly beneath the rock, which fell twelve feet, and he suffered a crushed skull and back. Their companions, the Tyson brothers, Chester, sixteen, and Neal, fourteen, moved the rock and dragged the two injured boys to the entrance, going to the nearby Haggin house for help. Mrs. Douglas Parrish, younger daughter of Mrs. Louis Lee Haggin, drove them to St. Joseph's Hospital in Lexington. Grover Hughes died enroute, but the Mathews boy was treated and released. It was this unfortunate accident that resulted in the closing of Russell Cave to future cave explorers.<sup>12</sup>



Russell Cave is the largest cave in Fayette County and with nearly a mile of surveyed passage is also one of the largest in the Bluegrass. As is common in any area containing a large and well-known cave, stories and anecdotes abound. The story of Colonel Frank Waters is only one of many similar tales. It was related that Colonel Waters, while out duck hunting one day in the late nineteenth century, shot a duck on a pond near the Lunatic Asylum (present-day Eastern State Hospital). The duck disappeared with the flow of the water down a sinkhole before it could be retrieved and was given up for lost. The colonel then moved on to the North Elkhorn, a distance of several miles, to continue his hunting and while admiring the scenic beauty of the Russell Cave entrance, spotted his duck as it drifted out of the dark cavern mouth, "by what means he recognised it as the same duck, deponent saith not!" Another story told of the cave is that of an early exploring party that was able to hear the ring of Squire John Kearney's anvil as they passed Beneath his blacksmith shop on the Ironworks Pike. As a plot of the cave shows it approaching within a thousand feet of this road at a depth of forty feet, it is entirely possible that the sound of Kearney's hammer was conducted by the limestone to the ears of the startled cave explorers. So well-known was the Russell Cave that nearly every other cavern and sinkhole in the region was thought to have some connection to its passages. In 1925 it was recorded that "one of its passages is said to extend to the Big Spring at Georgetown, Kentucky. A small cavern once opening near the Jefferson Street viaduct was also believed to have been a branch of Russell Cave." Such claims have been numerous despite the fact that previous explorations of the cave claimed a penetration of only three-quarters of a mile, and that apparently a survey of the cave had been made as early as 1820: "The general course of the cave is southeast [actually one travels southwest, beginning at the entrance and proceeding deeper into the cave], and has been followed, and accurately surveyed, for three-quarters of a mile . . . we were shown above ground, where we had been, the trees, fences, eminences, and rocks under which we had passed." Although a mod-



ern survey indicates a length of somewhat over five thousand feet total for the cave, the straight-line distance from the entrance to furthest known point is, indeed, three-quarters of a mile.<sup>13</sup>

The potential for additional passage certainly exists. It was reported that James N. West, one of the former owners of the Mount Brilliant property, before his death in 1875 had traversed the known passage and then explored an additional two and one-half miles of difficult.<sup>14</sup> The actual end of the surveyed passage is blocked by water, the roof of the cavern nearly meeting the broad expanse of deep water that occupies the passage; even during periods of drought the stream remains deeply pooled in this area and during wet weather the major portion of the cave is totally inaccessible. However, this does not preclude the possibility that, past the point of blockage, the ceiling may be higher and the passage again traversable. If the feat of James West was more than just another story, it must have occurred during an extraordinary period of drought. It is unlikely that the miles of new passage that he allegedly discovered could have been anywhere else in the cave, for there is very little air movement in any of the minor branches to indicate any considerable lengths of undiscovered passage. The water barrier at the known end of the cave would form an effective seal against air movement from deeper within.

There are several small caves in sinkholes adjacent to the furthest surveyed extent of Russell Cave, on the opposite side of Huffman Mill Road. Collins reports in his history of Kentucky that "articles thrown into the sinks west of Russell Cave have come out at the spring." These may have been some of the sinks to which he referred. There is a line of filled sinks that extends along the course of Russell Cave and west toward Newtown Pike. Mr. James Haggin Molloy, present owner of the Mount Brilliant farm, reported that some of these sinks on the property had subsided as much as twenty feet in recent years. One such collapsed sink left a visible opening which was soon recovered by soil.<sup>15</sup>

In recent years with the increased interest in locating and accurately surveying caves, and in particular the groundwater tracing studies in the Bluegrass directed by Dr. John Thraikill of the University of Kentucky, a great deal more is now known about the actual underground extent of the Russell Cave system. The Russell Cave groundwater basin is second only in size in Fayette County to that of the Royal Spring (the "Big Spring" of Georgetown) and comprises a drainage area of at least six square miles. The longest dye trace in this basin was of nearly four and one-half miles. It now appears that some of the old tales of the extent of Russell Cave may actually have had some factual basis.

Although Russell Cave had been closed by the owners for nearly four decades as a result of the Hughes fatality, permission was obtained for a single trip to be undertaken in December of 1980. This trip was arranged through the diplomatic efforts of Larry Spangler, who during the course of the groundwater studies in the Russell Cave area had earned the trust of the landowner. Members of the expedition were limited to experienced cave explorers who were required to sign a legal form releasing the property owners from liability for any injuries that might occur during the exploration. The main party consisted of Larry Spangler, Lance Barron, and the author. Also present for a portion of the trip were Dr. John Thraikill and Phil Byrd.



The flow levels of surface streams in the area were minimal at the time due to a recent period of drought; little water was issuing from the lower cave entrance. The upper, larger entrance is flooding only during times of heavy flow when levels may reach a depth of several feet. The upper entrance was the route taken and is floored by mud for a hundred feet, followed by an extensive area of collapse through the section where the stream entrance merges with the higher entrance. It apparently was in this area that Grover Hughes was killed by rockfall.

To continue further into the cave, one must here climb down from the level of the main entrance into the cave stream. After descending, the first portion of the cave is filled from wall to wall by the stream which in this section is pooled rather deeply. Even a slight amount of flooding in the cave would completely seal this passage, preventing entry from outside and trapping any who might be within. This is one of the aspects of Russell Cave that renders it potentially dangerous. After traversing several hundred feet of water, two to four feet deep, in the stooped position so humorously described in the 1820 account, another area of extensive collapse is encountered. One must climb out of the stream onto the large slabs, stacked horizontally and covered with layers of mud, and crawl for several hundred additional feet before rejoining the cave stream, which has followed a course beneath and to the side of the breakdown. Past this second breakdown area, the stream flows unhindered for the remainder of the cavern.

It is evident that much of the cave floods deeply during periods of heavy precipitation, as the walls are coated with a layer of thick, gummy mud. There are thick banks of sediment along the walls and the cave floor is covered by mud to an unknown depth. It is very difficult to progress through the mud, as each footstep sinks from six inches to two feet into the sediment.

In several locations along the stream course are small inlet channels, generally too small to enter, which contribute slightly to the main flow. About fifteen hundred feet into the cave an intersecting stream passage near the ceiling forms a small waterfall, and an equal distance further upstream is the only significant side passage.

This side passage contains a thick sediment fill, forming a steep bank where it has been cut across by the main stream passage. Midway through this side passage are two sinkholes in the fill which actively take in small amounts of water. The second of the two is the larger and has a small channel at the bottom that probably leads the flow to the stream in the adjacent main passage. Past these two pits in the side passage is one of the very few dry areas of the cave and the only location where signatures and dates are preserved, as the frequent flooding in the rest of the cave eradicates any markings. The termination of the side passage has been marked by a large cairn of stones and by dozens of inscriptions on the ceiling above. At least four of the dates observed were from the nineteenth century, with the oldest being 1858.

The long section of passage between the collapse areas and the side passage is the most spacious of the cave, with widths of ten to thirty feet and passage heights of up to twenty-five feet. It is generally of a canyon cross-section, wide at the top, narrower in the middle, and again widening near the bottom. There are a few unremarkable flowstone depositions on the walls through this area, though otherwise Russell Cave is barren of speleothems.

Beyond the side passage, the main channel of the cave changes character and again resembles the section near the entrance for the remainder of its length-- low ceiling, soft, muddy floor, deeply pooled water spreading across the entire width of the passage, with occasional mud banks along the walls. It is an unpleasant and tiring region to travel through; one must remain in a stooped position to the end of the cave and the knee-deep mud and waist-deep water make every step a struggle.

As previously described, the terminus of the cave is not the abrupt, well-defined ending by collapse or fill as occurs in some caves, but rather is a gradually decreasing air space above the surface of the stream. At the furthest point explored in 1980, just beyond could be seen the roof of the cave descending to nearly meet the water, leaving scarcely an inch of breathing space. It may be possible that this sump continues for only a few feet and that, during periods of low flow, it would be possible to negotiate the barrier and emerge in a continuation of the passage.

Russell Cave can be potentially dangerous to its tendency to flood and remain flooded for long periods of time. There are numerous places in the cave where a rise in the stream level of less than two feet would completely seal the cave and trap any persons inside for days or even weeks. In addition, the unsure footing, the deep mud and cold water quickly strip away human bodily resources, so that even a group of experience and well-prepared explorers such as participated in the 1980 reconnaissance were numbed by cold and utterly exhausted after a round trip of only five hours. It is for these reasons that the author recommended to the owner that Russell Cave should remain closed to the general public. One life has been lost in the cave and the circumstances are such that such an incident could occur again.

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>David L. Smiley, Lion of White Hall (Madison, Wisconsin, 1962), pp. 60-63.

<sup>2</sup>Cassius M. Clay, "Gen. Clay and Brown," and Mason Brown, "A Grandson of Sam Brown Says Cash Clay is a Liar and Coward," Lexington Morning Transcript, December 8, 1894, pp. 2, 8.

<sup>3</sup>Smiley, Lion of White Hall, pp. 60-63; "Cash Clay's Views," Lexington Morning Transcript, December 16, 1894, p. 6; Joe Jordan, "Affair at Russell's Cave," Louisville Courier-Journal, August 5, 1956, pp. 22-25.

<sup>4</sup>Clay, "Lexington Morning Transcript, December 8, 1894, p. 2; Smiley, Lion of White Hall, pp. 60-63.

<sup>5</sup>Brown, Lexington Morning Transcript, December 8, 1894, p. 8; Samuel M. Brown to Cassius M. Clay, October 20, 1843.

<sup>6</sup>Bettye L. Mastin, "Beloved Mount Brilliant," Lexington Sunday Herald-Leader, February 28, 1971, p. 54; Roger Michael, "Mt. Brilliant Continues to Radiate Colonial Charm," Lexington Sunday Herald-Leader, June 1, 1980, p. G-1; Personal communication from James H. Molloy, Lexington, Kentucky, 1977.

<sup>7</sup>Constantine S. Rafinesque, Western Review and Miscellaneous Magazine, III (August, 1820), pp. 55-56.

<sup>8</sup>"A Letter, Touching Russell's Cave, from a tourist in Kentucky to his friend in Philadelphia," Ibid., (October, 1820), 160-64.

<sup>9</sup>Mastin, Lexington Sunday Herald-Leader, February 28, 1971, p. 54.

<sup>10</sup>"Haggin Buys Another Farm," Lexington Herald, October 8, 1905, p. 8; Personal communication, James H. Molloy to Lawrence Spangler, Lexington, Kentucky, 1979.

<sup>11</sup>Molloy, 1977.