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THREE KENTUCKY SPRINGS

Gary A. O'Dell

ROYAL SPRING, SCOTT COUNTY

In the summer of 1774 a party of eight men were surveying land along the North Elkhorn, marking off tracts to be granted to American veterans of the French and Indian wars. On the 7th of July two of the party, John Floyd and William Nash, split off temporarily in a speculative attempt to locate a good spring. Less than a mile up a sizable side branch of the Elkhorn they found exactly what they had sought. A thousand acres of land about the spring were surveyed for Floyd on July 20. Floyd's Spring, as they then called it, was found to "have a fall of thirteen feet and seven inches" and was "the largest . . . ever seen in the country, and forms a creek of itself."[1]

In the fall of 1775 Robert Patterson, who three years later would help establish the settlement of Lexington beside a different spring to the south, went with the McClelland family and six other men to the spring claim that had been arranged for Floyd. They called it then by the name of Royal Spring, so impressive was its flow and setting. There they built a cabin and thus spent the winter at McClelland's Station. In the early summer of 1776 John Floyd learned that John McClelland had settled on his claim "at the Big Spring." He then "went determined to drive him off, but on seeing his wife and those small children who must have been distressed, I sold it for 300 pounds."[2]

In that same summer the increasing threat of Indian attack led to the decision to fortify McClelland's Station. Among those helping to raise the blockhouse on the bluff above the spring were Robert Patterson, John Todd, and Simon Kenton. This was a strategic location, being then the only fort north of the Kentucky River.[3]

Supplies were desperately low in that summer of 1776, particularly powder and shot. In September, Patterson and six others set off to Pennsylvania to bring back the needed items, but were attacked by Indians. Patterson was badly wounded

and two others of his party were killed. George Rogers Clark and Gabriel Jones, who earlier had set out from Harrodsburg on a similar mission, were more successful, although they also were attacked. They managed to hide the powder and make their way to the fort at Royal Spring in December; not finding enough men there to retrieve the powder, Clark traveled on to Harrodsburg. After his departure the men at McClelland's Station decided to go after the powder themselves, but were attacked by Indians on Christmas day. With two killed and two captured, they retreated in defeat back to McClelland's. The next attack came on the 29th of December, and was made against the fort itself by a group of forty or fifty Indians led by Chief Pluggy. John McClelland and Charles White were wounded, and both died within a few days. With these disheartening events the year 1776 closed, and on the 30th of January the fort at Royal Spring was abandoned.[4]

It was not until 1786 that the land by the spring was again settled, this time by a party led by Elijah Craig, who three years officially purchased the tract containing the spring and the stream that flowed from it to the North Elkhorn. A town began to grow about the spring, which kept the inhabitants well-supplied with water and also provided power to operate industry. Turned by the flow from Royal Spring were the first paper mill in the region and a fulling mill. Water from the spring also supplied a distillery operated by the Reverend Craig that has sometimes been credited with producing the first bourbon whiskey in Kentucky.[5]

Water was carried daily from the "Big Spring," as it came to be called by the inhabitants; those bringing water up brought three buckets, one for each hand and one to balance atop the head. The half-mile stream from the spring was dammed in several locations, and a bridge, still standing, of rock and earth was erected to span the watercourse. The scenic locale in the midst of the small community became popular for recreation and social events such as baptisms.[6]

William H. Perrin wrote in 1882 that "Some of the cavernous spaces in the limestones near Lexington are supposed to have subterranean inter-communication with [Georgetown] . . . since it is believed by some that substances thrown in at Lexington have made their appearance in the springs at Georgetown." The studies made in recent years under the direction of Dr. John Thrailkill of the University of Kentucky's Department of Geology have shown that this is indeed so. The course of Cane Run in northern Fayette County is normally dry for much of its initial length; dye traces have shown that the flow is diverted underground through numerous inlets to the spring at Georgetown.[7]

A municipal waterworks was constructed at Georgetown in 1889, using the spring as its source of supply. Today, the community is still faithfully served by the same spring that has played such a prominent part in its history.[8]

McCONNELL'S SPRING, FAYETTE COUNTY

Tradition has long held that the city of Lexington received its name several years before any settlement was made. In April, 1775, a party under the leadership of William McConnell (who had been in Kentucky the previous year) came to the Kentucky interior for the purpose of land selection and "improvement" to qualify for land grants from the Virginia colony. They traveled by canoe from the Ohio River down the Kentucky River and had reached the forks of Elkhorn by May. The company traveled up the North Fork of the Elkhorn, camping at McCracken's Run, and built several cabins on various branches of the stream. They then went southward to the Middle Fork, later known as the Town Branch, and established a camp at a sinking spring. This spring was to be included in William McConnell's claim and to be called McConnell's Spring. During the time that the company remained at that location, news came to them of the opening battle of the Revolution fought at Lexington, Massachusetts. To commemorate this American victory, the name "Lexington" was chosen to designate that place in the Kentucky wilderness.

Four years later, in April, 1779, the blockhouse of Lexington was raised at a spring on the waters of Town Branch.

Uncertainty shrouds the identity of the exact spring at which the news of the momentous battle was received. The Bluegrass region abounds with hundreds of springs which scarcely can be distinguished from one another without some additional referent. In the few square miles adjacent to the Lexington fort were several springs of copious flow in addition to the spring at the site of the blockhouse. The accounts seem to agree that the camp was not at this latter spring, but rather one located some distance away.

Adding to the confusion has been the similarity of names of several of the first settlers. The encampment at which the naming took place was on land that was claimed by William McConnell. However, in the company were no less than three related McConnells, all of whom made improvements in the area. The site came to be called simply "McConnell's camp" or "McConnell's Station," but there were actually two McConnell's Stations.

For over a century the famed spring was generally designated to be near the former McConnell's Station on the original improvement of Francis McConnell; this later became known as the Royle or Royal Spring (not to be confused with the Royal Spring at Georgetown!). Generations of historians perpetuated this belief with embellished retellings of the episode. This location was apparently first seriously questioned by George W. Ranck in 1879, one of those who had appeared previously in print supporting the Royle Spring site. While investigating a second spring on land that had been settled by William McConnell, he was struck and killed by a train.

The strong circumstantial evidence pointing to (William) McConnell's Spring as the more likely location was first published in 1975 in a slim volume by Carolyn M. Wooley, The Founding of Lexington: 1775-1776. Favoring this spring is its location on the claim of William McConnell as opposed to Francis' and that the historic location matches far more closely in terms of stated distance from the Lexington fort. There is additional substantiation, enough so that this writer is in agreement.[9]

Even though McConnell's Spring was not considered to be the historic site, the abundant flow of its underground waters assured it a solid place in Lexington history. It is reported that the stream issuing from this spring powered a large powder mill during the period of the 1812 war. The Reverend Spencer Cooper did manufacture gunpowder at this location in the early 19th century, but as he did not come into possession of the property until 1818 there may have been an earlier powdermaker on the site. In 1879 the remains of this mill were reported to still be visible.[10]

In 1858 the firm of Headley and Farra built a distillery on the Old Frankfort Pike and piped water from the spring through a five-inch pipe. This distillery operated until about 1873, when it was destroyed by fire and replaced by the Gilbert Company's Blue Grass Pork House. The spring at this time was owned by John N. Wilson and had come to be generally known as "Wilson's Spring."[11]

As well-known as the Wilson Spring had become, it was to rise to even greater prominence in the storm of controversy that preceded the building of the city waterworks in 1884. Many possible water sources had been suggested to supply the city, with the greatest attention given to the numerous large springs that lay within or near the city limits. "Wilson's Spring" was the site most often suggested. An investigation was to be made of this spring and other possible sources by experts. As often occurs when proposed large expenditures are involved, politics dominated the situation and the citizens of that century proved that people of any era can be equally narrow-minded and self-serving.

So it was in that summer of 1879 when the two leading newspapers of the city squared off on opposing sides of the issue, each bringing forth article after article laced with heavy sarcasm and dripping with venomous innuendo, so heated had the

waterworks controversy become. The Lexington Daily Transcript supported the construction of a modern waterworks, while the editors of the venerable Kentucky Gazette were strongly opposed to any change or expenditure of public funds, holding that "Waterworks are a luxury for towns more wealthy than Lexington."[12]

The editorial dispute warmed markedly in July. On the 15th of that month an engineer from the Holley Water Works of New York visited the Wilson's Spring to make an estimate of its potential. On the day of the inspection, the Transcript noted that Wilson's Spring was

> a basin of water about one hundred feet in depth, and containing a great quantity of water, while a continual stream wells up. Sometimes hundreds of large and beautiful fish may been seen on it, and then they disappear again for weeks. The water is pure and clear, and just such as the citizens of Lexington would delight to have in their homes, and places of business. It is as cold as ice. The center of the spring has been sounded for hundreds of feet, and no bottom ever reached. . . . All who have seen this wonderful spring agree that it is the outlet of a subterranean lake or river, and that an inexhaustible supply of water may be obtained from it.

The next day the paper reported that the engineer had ascertained that Wilson's would indeed be suitable and provided his estimate of the cost of a city waterworks using this source.[13]

The rival Gazette had a markedly differing opinion of the spring and expressed it on July 19th in a biting rebuttal:

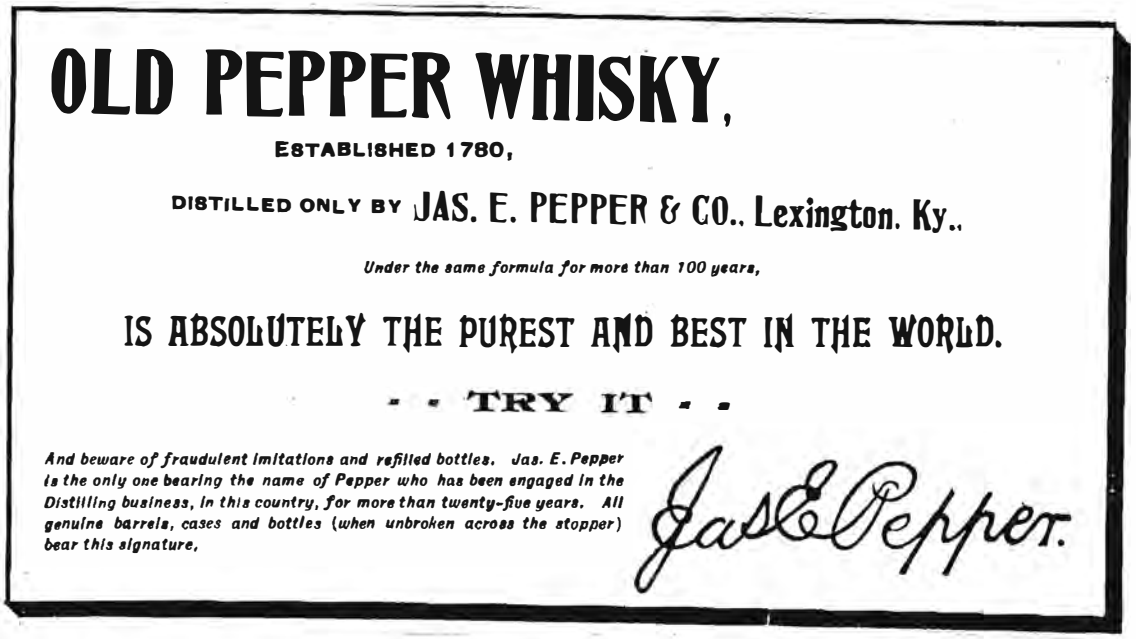
> A good many cock and bull stories have been told about [Wilson's] spring. . . . One person asserted that he had sounded it to the depth of 700 feet and failed to reach bottom, and it was not impossible to find a man who believed that it was the deepest hole in Kentucky. . . . Two friends of ours, of practical turn of mind, visited Wilson's spring on Thursday afternoon July 18 and sounded its mysterious depths, and will it be believed, they did not even find 70 feet of water. With pole, and reel, and lead, and one hundred fifty feet of line, they approached its margin and sounded every square foot of the pool, and all the depth they could find . . . scarcely twelve feet, and from the pool issued a little rill scarcely sufficient to cleanse the filth out of the gutters on Broadway.[14]

The Gazette, not yet satisfied, took another dig at Wilson's Spring on the 23rd, reporting that a Barney Shiddell had also plumbed the spring, more than fifty years earlier, and had found only fifteen feet of depth in his soundings.[15]

Despite the diligent efforts of the Gazette to the contrary, Lexington did ultimately construct a waterworks. The source selected, however, was not Wilson's or any other spring, but rather a man-made reservoir and later, the Kentucky River.

The belief that John Wilson's spring was virtually bottomless was common in the nineteenth century; it is a fairly large spring, welling up in a broad pool. The owner had himself reported having "sunk a fishtrap sixty feet," and a surveying party from the Louisville, Cincinnati and Lexington Railroad were said to have lost long poles into the deep pool in an attempt to probe its depths. And, for one Mr. A. J. Oots, a flatiron with 400 feet of line attached proved, as reported, insufficient to reach the bottom. An attempt by this writer in 1980 to equal the feat of Mr. Oots with a weighted line, instead, like those gentlemen "of a practical turn of mind" could find no more than twelve feet of depth.[16]

In that same year of 1879 James E. Pepper and Company purchased the Gilbert establishment and began making whiskey. The Henry Clay Distillery, as it was known, used the water from the spring, supplied at a rate of up to 700 gallons per minute by two pumps. This distillery continued to operate for nearly a century, and was finally destroyed in a 1978 fire.[17]



Water from the McConnell's Spring was used in the manufacture of the James E. Pepper company's whiskey.

McConnell's Spring, today on the property of the Central Rock Company, forms a segment of a rather extensive groundwater network which in recent years has been partially traced. Downstream from the spring the water follows the surface for about a hundred feet, sinking beneath a low ledge. The stream then follows an underground route for 200 feet, visible briefly as a pool in a small but deep sink atop a rise, and resurges near the base of a limestone bluff on the opposite side. In this second appearance the spring boils out of the ground so vigorously that even under normal weather conditions the upflow creates a turbulent swell above the surface of the pool. In wet weather it nearly geysers. The stream from this point flows another 300 feet and again vanishes with a rush through an impenetrable tangle of trash, wire, and old truck tires in a deep sink. The waters of McConnell's Spring are next seen on the surface a half-mile distant, issuing from the mouth of Preston's Spring Cave. They continue uneventfully from here to mingle with Wolf Run to the west.

The origin of the McConnell's Spring flow has long been a mystery. Many of the early inhabitants of Lexington believed that the city was underlain by a vast underground lake that gave rise to the numerous springs. Others, more observant, noted that "It has an underground connection with the sink at Headley & Peck's Distillery, and when the distillery is running the water to the spring becomes so foul that neither man nor beast . . . could drink it." More recent and less odious water tracing studies have shown that at least a portion of the flow comes from the waters sinking at the Big Elm Golf Course, well over a mile south; this is the site of the former Peck distillery.[18]

MAXWELL SPRINGS, FAYETTE COUNTY

There is now no surface trace of the old Maxwell Springs, but for more than a century they were one of the landmarks of Kentucky's Bluegrass region. Today thousands of students at the University of Kentucky daily tread over their buried locations, unaware of the important role played by these springs in the everyday life of the early inhabitants of Lexington.

John Maxwell, for whom the springs are named, was one of the original founders of the city of Lexington. Born in Scotland, Maxwell came to the Kentucky wilderness

in 1774, before any settlements had yet been established. In 1776 he assisted Robert Patterson and others in building two rough cabins in the Lexington area. In a trading arrangement with Patterson, Maxwell obtained an excellent tract adjacent to the future townsite and containing several fine springs.[19]

There were originally at least three springs feeding an attractive west-flowing stream. The initial spring was located near present Rose Street, down the slope from the residence of the university president; another was two hundred yards west, near Euclid Avenue; and the largest was on the north side of Euclid to the rear of Patterson Hall, almost directly opposite the second spring. In the frontier days of Lexington the major spring was called the Sinking Spring, which "gushing from a hillside, runs a distance of two hundred yards or so,never going dry, to disappear in a natural well in the ground. In the course of several hundred yards it reappears in a group of gently bubbling springs, a stone's throw from one to the other." The area about the springs was a wilderness of trees, cane, and ferns, and even as late as 1812 was described as a place where pawpaw and grapevine thickly grew, with deer plentiful in the woods. The springs were evidently a favored campground for Indians, for it was reported that artifacts were still abundant at the locale a century after the town was settled.[20]

Maxwell and his wife Sarah were the first to be married at the blockhouse in Lexington, and built their cabin near the largest spring. Here he also constructed a stone springhouse, directing the flow of the spring into a rock basin for easier access. Maxwell's original holding at the springs had encompassed a thousand acres, but before his death in 1819 the greater part of this land had passed into other hands. Fourteen acres around the easternmost spring, called Maxwell Place, had been given to his son James, but only a year after his father's death the younger Maxwell sold that parcel to satisfy a debt of one hundred fifty dollars. The Maxwell's daughter Sarah inherited from her parents the remaining portion that included the other springs. During Sarah's ownership a bottling works was established and bottled water from the springs achieved widespread fame.[21]

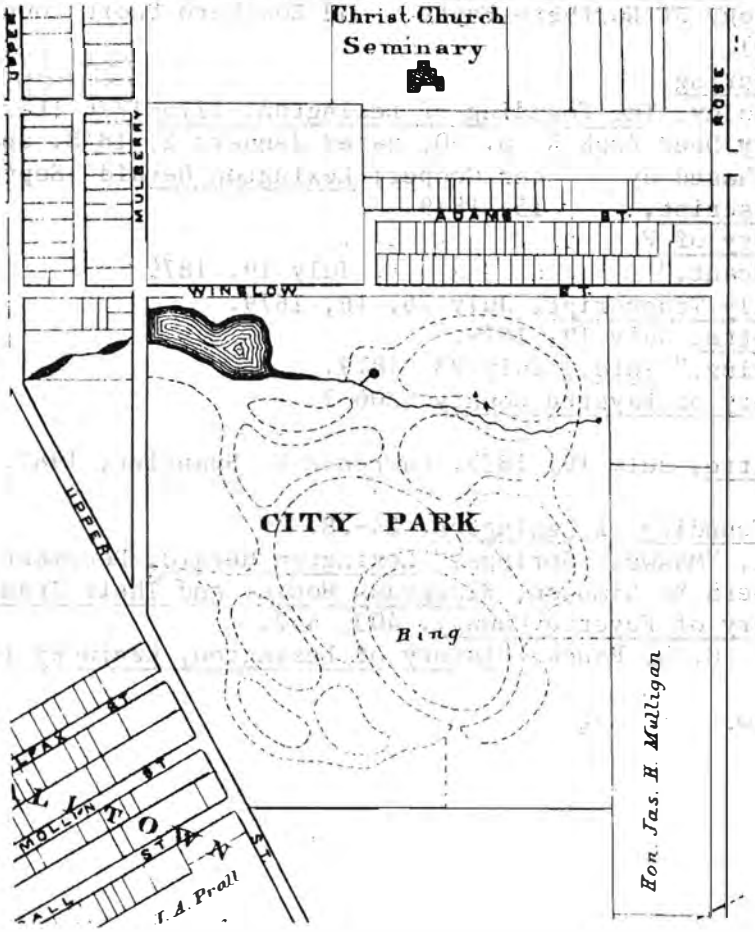
From the earliest days the Maxwell Springs, as they became known, were a popular gathering place for the local inhabitants due to the cold, clean, plentiful water and the aesthetic appeal of the locale. Picnics, parades, political rallies; nearly any occasion was sufficient for the citizens to celebrate at Maxwell Springs. The Lexington Light Infantry was organized in 1789 and used the area by the springs as their parade ground for many years. When news came of the annexation of the Louisiana territory in 1804, a grand celebration was held on the tract with a barbeque; salutes were fired by four military companies, and endless toasts were drunk, each more imaginative than the preceeding as progressive inebriation stimualted flowery oration. The most time-honored tradition at Maxwell Springs was the annual Fourth of July celebration. Many of the most renown figures in Kentucky on one occasion or another came to speak to a gathering at these springs.[22]

The Kentucky Racing Association, one of the first organized horse racing efforts, used the Maxwell Springs property for many of their racing meets until about 1840, when that association was disbanded. In 1850 a more stable organization was formed with the intent to purchase or otherwise acquire property upon which a meet could be held in the following autumn. The committee charged with acquisition recommended the Maxwell Spring tract to the Board of Directors; a parcel totaling twenty-four and a half acres could be obtained from Sarah Winslow for the sum of $5,000. The organization thus created was called the Maxwell Spring Company and held meets on the beautiful acreage for many years. Shortly after its formation, an agreement was made with the Kentucky Agricultural and Mechanical Association to allow provisional use of the Maxwell Springs property for annual exhibitions. Many improvements were subsequently made, including the erection of a large amphitheatre and other buildings, and the property was landscaped with plantings of trees and shrubs. A series of fairs were held and greatly enjoyed until the advent of the Civil War.[23]

In the fall of 1861 the buildings and grounds were occupied by Federal troops, with thousands of pieces of armament there in storage preparatory to campaigns in

Kentucky and Tennessee. As the season grew colder and the absence of firewood became critical, when a request to the quartermaster for fuel was declined, the commanding officer gave the order for all the trees in the woodlands of Maxwell Springs to be felled. By the next day the forest had vanished. In December the amphitheatre was gutted by fire, and soon all other buildings save the commandant's residence had been torn down. This latter building was used as a hospital.[24]

After the war, a lien and mortage were enforced against the heavily indebted Association. The property was sold in 1870 to the city as the site for a city park in order to preserve the historic grounds from development. Willows, maples, and evergreens were planted, but with insufficient funds to make further improvements, a high fence was erected and the property remained idle. When a location was sought for the Agricultural and Mechanical College, recently separated from the Kentucky University, the park acreage was offered by the city of Lexington. Thus the Maxwell Springs came to form the core of the present University of Kentucky.[25]



The City Park in 1877, showing the two southernmost Maxwell Springs and the small lake fed by them. Note that on this map, Mulberry and Winslow streets are now Limestone Street and Euclid Avenue.

The spring-fed watercourse winding peacefully beneath the trees to a small lake was apleasant area for relaxation and activities for the students. During the summer months swimming was popular, replaced by ice-skating in the colder months. For a number of years, students cut and sold ice from the lake.[26]

As the landscape was developed and rearranged, the springs eventually disappeared. The large spring north of Euclid, over which had been built a stone dairy house with crocks of milk and cream cooled by the springwaters, was filled in near the beginning of the twentieth century. In 1929 the springs on campus still poured forth into the placid stream, but by the middle of the next decade the continued building on the University grounds had buried the historic springs.[27]

No surface trace remains of the site of which Henry Clay reportedly said, "No man can call himself a true Kentuckian who has not watered his horse at Maxwell Springs."28

FOOTNOTES

1. Ann Bolton Bevins, The Royal Spring of Georgetown, Kentucky (Georgetown, Ky.: Scott County Historical Society, 1970), 7-10.
2. Charlotte R. Conover, Concerning the Forefathers (New York, 1902), 141; Bevins, Royal Spring, 14; Draper Manuscripts 16J44.
3. Lewis Collins, Historical Sketches of Kentucky (Cincinnati, 1847), 237-38, 509; Bevins, Royal Spring, 18-22.
4. Ibid.
5. Bevins, Royal Spring, 25-31.
6. Ann Bolton Bevins, The Big Spring of Georgetown, Kentucky.
7. W. H. Perrin, History of Fayette County, Kentucky (1882), 32; Lawrence E. Spangler, Karst Hydrogeology of Northern Fayette and Southern Scott Counties, Kentucky (MS thesis, U. Ky., 1980).
8. Bevins, Big Spring.
9. Carolyn M. Wooley, The Founding of Lexington: 1775-1776 (Lexington, 1975).
10. Fayette County Deed Book R, p. 50, dated January 2, 1818, and recording boundaries of tract purchased by Spencer Cooper; Lexington Herald, September 15, 1901; Lexington Daily Transcript, July 15, 1879.
11. Perrin, History of Fayette County, 206.
12. "Mark-Twain-Scant," Kentucky Gazette, July 19, 1879.
13. Lexington Daily Transcript, July 15, 16, 1879.
14. Kentucky Gazette, July 19, 1879.
15. "Wilson's Spring," Ibid., July 23, 1879.
16. Perrin, History of Fayette County, 206-7.
17. Ibid., 207.
18. Kentucky Gazette, July 19, 1879; Lawrence E. Spangler, 1987, personal communication.
19. Wooley, The Founding of Lexington, 24-28.
20. M. A. Scovell, "Maxwell Springs," Lexington Herald, December 19, 1915.
21. Ibid.; Elizabeth M. Simpson, Bluegrass Houses and Their Traditions (1932), 46-47.
22. Perrin, History of Fayette County, 403, 442.
23. Ibid., 120-21; G. W. Ranck, History of Lexington, Kentucky (Cincinnati, 1872), 277.
24. Scovell, "Maxwell Springs."
25. Ibid.
26. The Kentuckian (1938 yearbook, University of Kentucky).
27. Scovell, "Maxwell Springs"; "Buildings and Grounds: University of Kentucky" (campus maps 1920, 1929, 1934, 1937).
28. Scovell, "Maxwell Springs."

JOHANN GEORG KOHL ON MAMMOTH CAVE, 1857

James Hedges

"When one makes up his mind to travel to America, when he wants to see what America really has to offer, there are two places which must be seen: One is Niagara Falls, and the other is Mammoth Cave." So begins Johann Georg Kohl's chapter on Mammoth Cave in his 1857 travelogue, Reisen im Nordwesten der Vereinigten Staaten (New York, Appleton, 534 pages). Kohl also visited and described Fountain and Carver's caves in Minnesota.