

An unexpected component of the assemblage were fragments of worked and unworked freshwater mussels, and a mussel shell pendant. (During the renovations of the present house, a shell crucifix was recovered). The fragments may represent stages in the manufacture of items for visitors to Crystal Cave. There is no historical documentation of this activity, but it would be a logical one for the Collins family. Freshwater mussels could be easily obtained from the Green River and made into saleable items.

Owing to the thin vertical distribution of the remains, I strongly suggest that no surface-altering activities be carried out near the present Collins house, the site of the first Collins house or the ticket office. More data needs to be recovered, and the eligibility of the site for the National Register of Historic Places should be determined.

## **The Obliteration of Clifton Cave**

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A few miles west of Versailles, Kentucky, the highway leaves the lush Bluegrass pasturelands and winds its way down a deep gorge to the Kentucky River and the community of Clifton. Nearby is a locale once known as Woodford Landing, where a ferry plied its way monotonously back and forth across a narrow river hemmed by tall hills and limestone cliffs. Clifton is a quiet place today, a sleepy hamlet shrouded by the morning mist that rises from the river. There was a time when Clifton was a busier, livelier town.

In 1780, Thomas Railey moved from Chesterfield County, Virginia to Kentucky, and settled in Woodford County on a sinkhole-pitted highland overlooking the Kentucky River. He gave his farm the name "Clifton" and so, too, became known the village that later sprang up in the valley below. The Railey name was to become well-known in the county. Though Thomas died in 1822, his grandson, George Railey Berryman, a Confederate veteran of the Civil War, remained in possession of the property until his death in 1882. <sup>1</sup>

Clifton began in 1841 as 14 acres laid off for a town to house the employees of a nearby hemp factory. This factory was replaced by a large stone flouring mill shortly before the Civil War, which by 1869 had become a distillery. The distillery did not stand long, for within a few years it burned completely and left only a tall stone smokestack. There were two other distilleries that operated at Clifton, and by 1880 the town had perhaps 150 inhabitants, two stores, and a sawmill. <sup>2</sup>

Woodford Landing predated the founding of Clifton, and was a port of call for the steamboat traffic that began on the Kentucky River in the early nineteenth century. As the Kentucky had shallow waters, light draft steamboats evolved that became the "river packets", constructed to draw only two to two and a half feet of water. These packet boats, side or stern-wheelers, generally were of two decks, with cabins for overnight passengers as well as space for freight, mail, and merchandise. Navigation of the Kentucky River was, in the beginning of the boom, controlled by the state of the river; waters were highest in late fall, winter, and early

spring, and then allowed the farthest reach upriver. Reflecting this, a 17 February, 1836, advertisement placed in the Frankfort Commonwealth read:

### THE STEAM BOAT ARGO

Will ascend the Kentucky River, as far as it will be safe for her to go, about the first of March, or as soon after that time as the state of the water will allow. Those who may have freight for any point above (Frankfort), will be afforded a cheap conveyance; and holders of produce on the river desiring to ship, are requested to have it ready at the call of the boat. Swigert, Moffert & Co., Ag'ts<sup>3</sup>

The steamboat era on the Kentucky River coincided with that arising along the Ohio River, and was greatly facilitated by a series of five locks that, when completed in 1842, added 95 miles of slack water to the navigable portion of the Kentucky River. The 1840s were the steamboat heyday, and regular service was established between Frankfort and the Ohio River cities of Louisville and Cincinnati. Shaker Landing, about eight miles from Harrodsburg, was about as far upstream as the river packets could penetrate. Between Shaker Landing and Frankfort were numerous small river ports that handled the trade of the Bluegrass. Woodford Landing, though not large, was one of these ports that handled upriver commerce, along with others in Woodford County such as Oregon and Munday's Landing (site of Munday's Landing Cave, largest in Bluegrass at 14,000+ feet). By this time, the town of Clifton had been established, and thrived with the riparian commerce. A steamboat was named for the community, and the "Clifton" was a hardy boat that, having been sunk once, was raised and continued to ply the river.<sup>4</sup>

New Orleans could be reached by steamboat from Frankfort in ten days or less, with two extra days added for the return trip against the currents of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers. As the Civil War approached and Kentucky carried on a brisk slave trade, some steamboats calling at the Kentucky River ports hauled, in increasing numbers, coffles of slaves bound for plantations in the Deep South. Conversely, other boats discharged at Kentucky River numbers of wealthy, aristocratic families who had traveled to Kentucky from New Orleans, Natchez and St. Louis. These moneyed Southerners were attracted for the social season to the favored watering places of the Bluegrass, such resorts as Drennon's Springs in Henry County or Graham Springs at Harrodsburg.<sup>5</sup>

During the Civil War the slack-water navigation system on the Kentucky deteriorated, so that by 1870 the locks were virtually abandoned and river commerce nearly halted above Frankfort. The locks had been mostly restored by 1900, and again the river was busy with commercial boats. Captain Billy Bryant's showboat "Princess", one of the last boats to travel the river, gave one-night shows while traveling up and down river. The "Princess", a sternwheeler, was a gambling ship, and to provide this diversion for its patrons among counties with strict anti-gambling laws, steamed up and down river while the play was carried on. Thus, no laws were broken that were written to be enforced "on the soil of Kentucky." Woodford Landing, as the closest approach by water to Lexington, the major city of the Bluegrass, was one of the favored ports of call. By 1930, however, the era of the steamboat on the Kentucky River had ended.<sup>6</sup>

The streams that empty into the Kentucky River in this region are incised in deep gorges and ravines, with fast flowing waters tumbling down from the uplands. The Clifton Road clings

precipitously to the steep valley wall of one such streamcourse, called in an earlier day Rough's Run and simplified over time to Rowe's. During most of the later 19th century, the James W. Brookie Distillery operated at its mouth, and the stream valley was reported to be "the abiding place of the largest and prettiest ferns in the county and was often visited in the spring by parties of ladies, who collect such plants." <sup>7</sup>

Half a mile up Rowe's Run from Clifton, just on the inside of the Clifton Road and at the very edge of the roadway, a small shaft dropped ten feet into a cavern. It was a well-known feature of the local landscape, and frequently explored by those with a taste for adventure. Perhaps the ladies, collecting ferns and wildflowers, stopped here at the head of the gorge to cool themselves in the air from the cave mouth. The vertical drop doubtless discouraged many from making a closer inspection, though the passages, once gained, were level and easily explored. As the Clifton Road, bringing travelers from and to Lexington and Versailles, was fairly well-traveled, it is not difficult to picture a group of such travelers, while resting their horses at the top of the grade, being tempted to scramble down the easily-climbed shaft. Viewed with improvised torches, or candles, and in later days with lanterns and flashlights, the Clifton Cave must have witnessed the tramp of countless feet over two centuries. It is highly likely that, during the height of the Kentucky saltpeter trade, roughly 1808-1814, this cave must have been scouted for its production potential. It is not known whether, in fact, actual mining operations were conducted. Any traces had since been long-obliterated by pedestrian traffic through the cave.

About 22 years ago, as a teenager and fairly new member of the Blue Grass Grotto (the Lexington chapter of the NSS), I was taken to the gorge by a few of the older cavers and there shown Clifton Cave. In 1968 the Blue Grass Grotto was engaged in a project well in keeping with its name - the exploration and survey of caves in the Blue Grass region. The potential of Rockcastle and Jackson counties were then virtually unknown, and though the Sloan's Valley project in Pulaski County was beginning to divert BGG cavers to the Mississippian limestones of southern Kentucky, the focus of the grotto since its inception in 1962 had been the Ordovician karst oasis surrounding Lexington.

This particular trip was typical, an excursion to a known cave coupled with rambling by auto through the countryside. There was careful scrutiny of topographic maps, accompanied by much shuffling and folding, hoping to unlock the mysteries of the terrain. The Blue Grass is a mildly karstified uplands, with the major surface stream, the Kentucky River, meandering within its steepwalled gorge three hundred feet below the land surface; the result of an ancient geological uplift. The clues to cave locations were on the map; all we need do was interpret them correctly.

Sinking streams so marked received top priority, followed by sinkholes and interesting jogs and zigs of the contour lines that might or might not be something of significance. Bold pencil marks encircled leads that had looked encouraging from the vantage point of the kitchen table or living room floor. Beside some were written the names of caves or comments such as "looks good from road", while beside others were only question marks. Kentucky cavers have been fortunate in reaping the harvest of a farsighted state geological survey that undertook topographic mapping at an early date.

There were thousands of sinkholes and sinking streams and interesting contour jogs on the hundred or so 7 1/2 minute topographic quadrangles of the Blue Grass region of Kentucky.

Nearly every trip yielded new findings. As important as the maps, though, were the contacts with the local inhabitants. A two hour social session by the potbelly stove in the congenial atmosphere of a Kentucky country store usually led to the unfolding of maps and bending of heads in consultation, the farmers delighted by the detail of the maps and orienting quickly. "Now, there's a cave on the bank of the crick I bet you boys don't know 'bout," they would say, and trace the roads and the red dashes of fencelines with gnarled fingers. "An' over here next to the road, behin' the barn they is a hole...."

At the margin of the road that led down the gorge to Clifton, no more than ten feet from the tires that hissed by on the winding descent, a dark hole gaped invitingly. The cave entrance was clearly visible from the roadway. It was about twelve feet long and five wide, and as I stood with three other cavers at the rim, I could see that the fern-shrouded shaft had, by its proximity, amassed a collection of beer and soda cans at the bottom. Above the opening, the valley sloped upward sharply, the top lost in the ranks of trees that marched uphill. Across the asphalt, the hill slanted sharply down a hundred feet to the stream bed of Rowe's Run and then rose again to form the valley wall opposite. It was a wild-looking place, with this narrow, twisty roadbed gouged from the hillside the only sign of civilization. Across the valley of the other side, at about the same elevation, was pointed out to me the location of Little Clifton Cave. It was, they said, very small and short, less than a hundred feet long. I could not see the opening.

We scrambled down into the roadside hole. It was a typical Blue Grass cave, exhaling moist air in our faces, of walking height with floor and walls coated with damp sticky clay. The cave had been located and surveyed a year or so previously, so this was a pleasure trip, simply wandering through the passage forks and turnings to see where it would go next. It was not a long cave, less than a quarter-mile, but it was enjoyable and allowed the group to go caving even should the day's other reconnaissances prove fruitless.

Two years later I drove out the Clifton Road by myself, intending a nostalgic return to the cave before some further surface scouting of my own. My first warning was the sign at the beginning of the descent into the gorge that cautioned "Road Work Ahead." This did not prepare me for what I saw next.

The Clifton Road was being widened, a major engineering project considering the steep nature of the terrain. It was a Sunday and no one was about. The pavement vanished and turned to crushed stone, packed by the wheels of heavy equipment. I reached the place where I thought Clifton Cave should be, and pulled off onto a broad expanse of scarred and muddy limestone bedrock, freshly exposed. I got out of the car and walked around. The hillside had been carved up chunk by chunk with drill and explosive, and the boulders shoved over the hillside as fill. The road shoulder was now composed of hundreds and thousands of tons of broken rock, the older roadway now cut much wider and deeper into the limestone. I looked down to the crushed stone under my feet, bent over and picked up a rock fragment. It was a section of stalactite, eight inches long and a half-inch in diameter. As my eyes wandered the ground I could see dozens more, perhaps hundreds, of such pieces scattered about, mixed in with broken limestone fragments whose internal crystals sparkled in the noonday sun. I put the section in my pocket absently.

Clifton Cave was gone. It was not closed by some annoyed landowner, through refusal of permission or by means of concrete or a thin veneer of rock and soil, a closure thus fleeting on a geological time scale. Much of it was gone as completely as if it had never existed. It had been

dismantled piece by piece, with explosives and great yellow clanking machines, and shoved bodily over the edge to tumble noisily down to the stream. A large part of Clifton Cave had been reduced to boulders and rocks, gravel, dust and calcine mud, spread and compacted with the fragments of speleothems to make the base for a ribbon of asphalt. What had not been carved away had been choked and sealed. I was about six months too late to see Clifton Cave again. It didn't exist anymore.

The hill that had sloped up from the entrance shaft was now a series of limestone terraces that formed a sheer cliff perhaps 50 feet high. Down the roadbed a few hundred feet from the former Clifton Cave entrance, about 20 feet up in the cliffwall, were two small dark openings that had not been evident before the making of the cut. I climbed the rock ledges and crawled inside with my carbide lamp lit. Both caves were less than 100 feet long and never higher than about four feet, but what caught my attention were the hundreds of small stalactites and soda-straws that sprouted from the ceiling. It must have been an impressive sight at one time, but in the scene before me the stalactites littered the floor en masse, sheared off by the blasting outside.

They had both obviously been virgin caves, perhaps passageways in some cavern complex cut off from the Clifton Cave system by earlier fill or collapse. Nothing like the speleothem spectacular of these two remnants had been known from long-stripped Clifton Cave. The Clifton Cave may have been decorated once like this, more than a century before. Although these newly-revealed passageways had survived the excavations, their onetime beauty had been shattered.

Two decades passed. I came back to Clifton again, in 1990. The village was unchanged, a sleepy place of summer homes and a handful of permanent residents. The river seemed perpetual as I sat on the bank of the Kentucky to watch the sun rise, burning away the river mist; it took a long time, for the valley is narrow here. On the winding highway up Rowe's Run, a low cave mouth beckoned from the ledges above the asphalt. Only one opening could be seen, for I could no longer locate the other. Inside, the remembered litter of broken soda-straws had vanished, leaving only a muddy crawlway.

The highway looks well-worn now, no longer brand-new. At the site where once the shaft entrance of Clifton opened, there is now a tiny crawlway, too jammed with broken rock to enter more than a body length. Somewhere behind the jam is the remaining passage of Clifton Cave, greatly shortened. Soil washes into it from the hillside above, and is carried through the rubble.

Slowly, Clifton Cave re-creates an entrance.

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#### NOTES

1. William E. Railey, "The Raileys, Randolphs, Mayos, &c," Register of the Kentucky Historical Society 9 (1911): 80 William E. Railey, History of Woodford County, Kentucky (1938), 258-260.
2. Railey, History of Woodford County, 260; Versailles Woodford Sun, 27 May 1870.

3. J. Winston Coleman, Jr., "Kentucky River Steamboats," Register KHS 63 (1965): 299-322; Frankfort Commonwealth, 17 February 1836; Ella Hutchinson Ellwanger, "Famous Steamboats on Western and Southern Waters," Register KHS, 17 (May 1919): 17-39; Ella Hutchinson Ellwanger, "Famous Steamboats and Their Captains on Western and Southern Waters," Register KHS, 18 (January 1920): 21-32, (May 1920): 33-45
4. Coleman, op cit; Cincinnati Daily Atlas, 1 May 1845; Atlas of Bourbon, Clark, Fayette, Jessamine, and Woodford Counties, Kentucky (1877); Ellwanger, "Famous Steamboats," (May 1920): 41
5. Coleman, "Kentucky River Steamboats," 313-315.
6. Coleman, "Kentucky River Steamboats," 316-321.
7. Atlas, 1877; "Old Times in Woodford," Versailles Woodford Sun, 12 September 1976.

