

Slacks Cave Bicentennial 1790—1990

By Gary A. O'Dell and Lawrence E. Spangler



The largest room in Slack's Cave, formed by a passage meander about 2000 feet downstream from the sinkhole entrance. The cave stream is absent here, being temporarily diverted through a cut-off. This photo appeared on the cover of one of the first issues of the then-fledgling Blue Grass Grotto. Photo by Richard Smithers.

Abstract

The first known description of a cave in the Blue Grass Region of Kentucky was a report in 1790 of a mission to rescue a calf from a large stream cave. From this 18th century account, it has been possible to locate the precise cave system that was visited, identifying it as a previously unknown section of a large cave familiar to modern cave explorers.

When the first explorers of the Kentucky lands ventured across the mountains, the abundance of caverns in the limestone regions figured prominently in their reports. Dr. Thomas Walker reported finding alum salts in 1750, in a cave or rockhouse in the region that is now Rockcastle County. John Filson, another early explorer, wrote in 1784 that "Caves are found in this country amazingly large; in some of which you may travel several miles under a fine limestone rock, supported by curious arches and pillars." Though Filson was most likely describing the caverns of the Cumberland Valley, the Blue Grass region, in the heart of the state, also contained hundreds of caves. Most Blue Grass caves are low, wet crawlways, yet there are also many of large size and extent. Some reach a length of several miles.¹

The settlement of Kentucky had begun in earnest about 1780, and the immigrants swelled from a trickle to a flood. Throughout the fertile Blue Grass region, communities sprang up and farmland was surveyed and cleared, sold and traded and divided as the wilderness was tamed. On many of these tracts was a large spring or even a cave; usually this was by intention, as springs were thought to be the best possible water source for their families and livestock. These landscape features were referred to in passing as deed landmarks, and such land transactions are perhaps the earliest indicators of specific caves or springs. There were, however, few

physical descriptions of Blue Grass caves until the 1832 publication of Constantine S. Rafinesque's short article entitled "The Caves of Kentucky."²

The first record of the exploration of a cave in the Inner Blue Grass Region (and possibly, first in Kentucky) is taken from a short account in *The Kentucky Gazette* in June of 1790:

On the 3d May last, Mr. John Garnet near the mouth of Cain [Cane] Run in Woodford County, lost a calf which was supposed to have gone into a Cave at the head of a spring; the Cave was examined some distance underground, but as they proceeded the passage was obstructed by a large current of water, upon which he had a boat built and proceeded by water up the stream about three quarters of a mile, when they overtook the Calf, which they recovered, and brought down to the mouth again. They saw no evidence of an end to the passage, the aperture as large where they stopped as at any other place. They were provided with candles to see their way.³

This is a remarkable description, as the early *Gazette* is generally rather terse concerning local news; the inhabitants already *knew* the happenings of the Blue Grass—they wanted to read about the rest of the world. Sufficient information is contained in these few sentences to permit a certain identification of the precise cave system so described, though the account did not name it. In addition, the spectacle of a group of unwilling cave explorers by candlelight wrestling a balky calf into a rocking boat provides an interesting subject for contemplation.

* * *

Cave exploration during that period was a rather chancey business at best. All techniques were primitive, with adequate lighting being perhaps the greatest handicap. The calf-rescuers were "provided with candles," a rather feeble illumination. Other preparatory measures taken by cave explorers in the pioneer era might seem rather odd today, but the cave environment was then a complete unknown and ventures underground were usually made with no little trepidation.

The style of the 1790 trip through the cave to rescue the calf can perhaps be evoked by means of a nearly contemporary account of the exploration of another local cave. The Russell Cave, also a large stream cave, is located about ten miles from the cave of the lost calf, and had been well-known from the earliest days of settlement. In October 1820 a letter was published describing a trip to the Russell Cave, and gives a view of cave exploration techniques of the era:

We stripped off our coats, tied handkerchiefs round our heads, girded our waists [while] some of us adopted the oriental



The entrance sink of Slack's Cave showing the opening that leads to the larger, downstream section. Directly across from this opening, out of sight beneath the foreground, is the entrance to the upstream segment of the cave. Photo by Gary A. O'Dell.

custom of paying 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. . . .

Though the explorers of Russell Cave had been a group of affluent townsmen from Lexington, and the Garnet party no doubt consisted of local farmers, in both cases the expeditions were motivated mainly by the spirit of adventure. A lost calf in itself does not appear to be sufficient motivation to conduct such a major enterprise as reported in the *Gazette*; probably it simply served as a pragmatic excuse to go exploring. It seems likely that the calf expedition of 1790 also consisted of a group of slightly tipsy and nervous local adventurers on their first cave trip.⁴

One trip was evidently sufficient to satisfy the curious, for the *Gazette* subsequently reported that a "likely black mare with a late summer colt" had strayed away from John Garnet about a month later, but there was no mention of another sally into the cave. A reward of two dollars was offered for the return of the mare and colt.⁵

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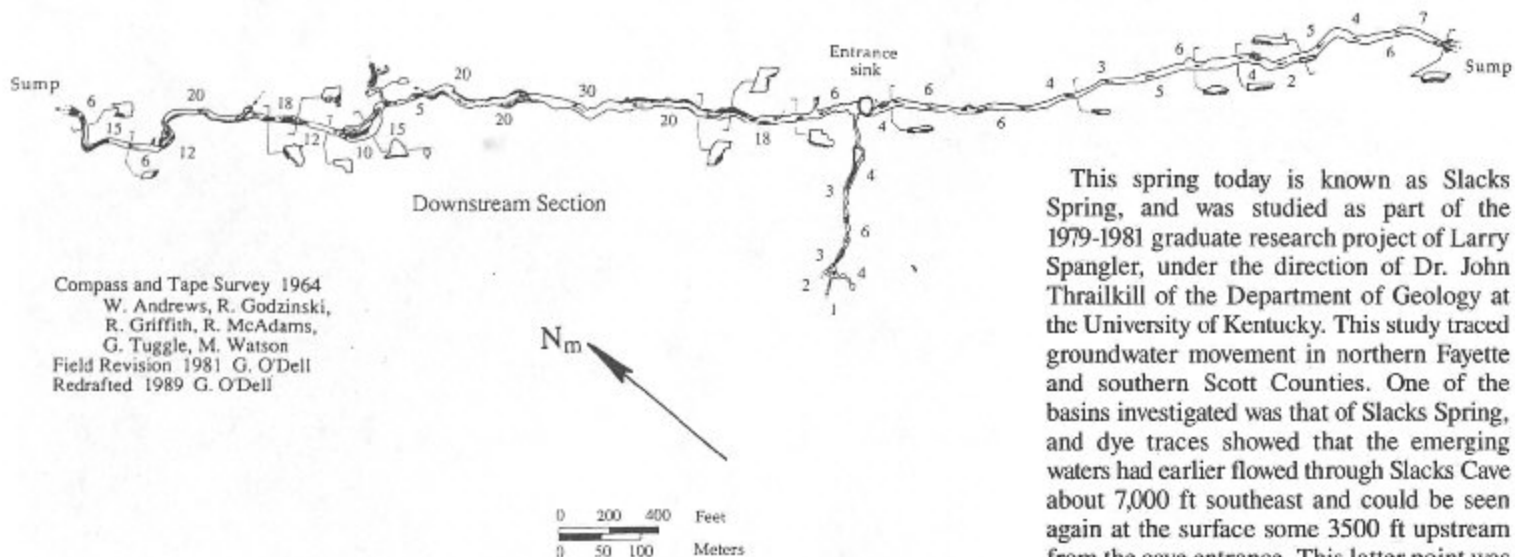
The flow of Cane Run originates in central Fayette County and empties into North Elkhorn Creek three miles west of Georgetown, Kentucky. The mouth of Cane Run lies in present-day Scott County. In 1790, however, Scott County had not yet been created and the area was then part of Woodford County. Woodford at that time was a very large county that extended north all the way to the Ohio River.

When the Blue Grass was settled, a large bison trace led across North Elkhorn at a natural ford a few thousand feet upstream from the mouth of Cane Run. The community of Great Crossing was established here, primarily by the Johnson family. (This bison trail also led to the naming of another Scott County town a few miles north, called Stamping Ground). An equal distance south, or downstream, from the stream junction is a set of springs along the bank of Elkhorn Creek. A tenacious modern tradition holds that there was once also a cave entrance at this location. This is sometimes said to have been commercialized, but no documentation has been found to support this. If there was a commercial cave enterprise here, it must have been very small-scale and highly informal. The writers believe that this locale was most likely the cave explored by John Garnet and his party.⁶

Jim Sharp, lifelong rural resident near Great Crossing, is an avid cave explorer and was a member of the Blue Grass Grotto of Lexington in the 1970s. Without foreknowledge of the Garnet account, he recently related the local belief that the former cave entrance here had been dynamited shut—because cattle had frequently wandered into the cave and become lost!⁷

SLACKS CAVE Scott County, Kentucky

Upstream Section



Compass and Tape Survey 1964
W. Andrews, R. Godzinski,
R. Griffith, R. McAdams,
G. Tuggle, M. Watson
Field Revision 1981 G. O'Dell
Redrafted 1989 G. O'Dell

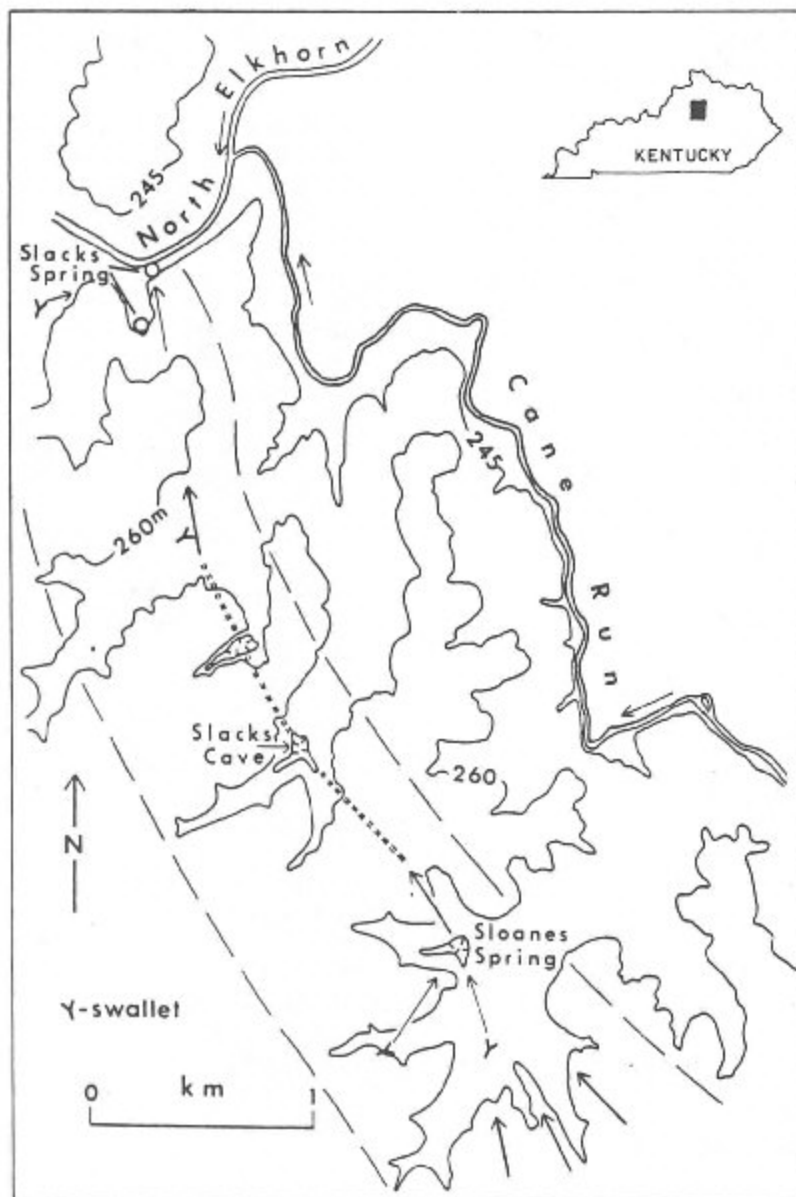
This spring today is known as Slacks Spring, and was studied as part of the 1979-1981 graduate research project of Larry Spangler, under the direction of Dr. John Thrailkill of the Department of Geology at the University of Kentucky. This study traced groundwater movement in northern Fayette and southern Scott Counties. One of the basins investigated was that of Slacks Spring, and dye traces showed that the emerging waters had earlier flowed through Slacks Cave about 7,000 ft southeast and could be seen again at the surface some 3500 ft upstream from the cave entrance. This latter point was called Sloanes Spring in the Spangler study.⁸

Both Sloanes Spring and the Slacks Cave entrance manifest as karst windows, where short segments of the cave stream flow across the bottoms of deep sinkholes. At Sloanes, there is no enterable cave opening, but at the Slacks karst window, large openings exist at both ends of the briefly exposed cave stream. The cave passages were explored by the authors in 1981, and had been previously surveyed by members of the Blue Grass Grotto in 1964.⁹

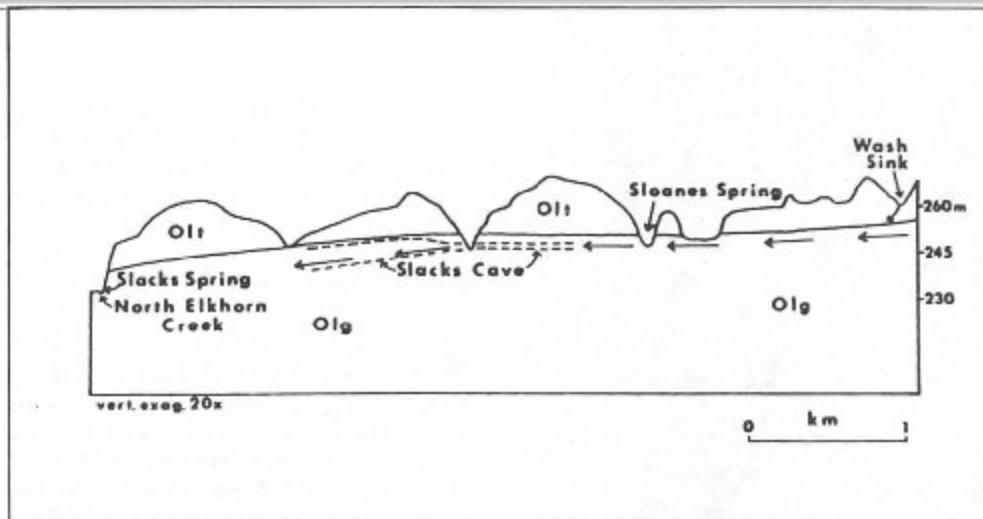
Upstream from Slacks sink the cave passage averages 10 ft high and 20 ft wide, extending about a half-mile toward Sloanes Spring. The cave downstream from the Slacks entrance sink is even more impressive, being a large canyon passage averaging 20 to 30 ft high and 30 ft wide. This thoroughfare continues for well over 3000 ft before being abruptly ended by a sump.

The cave is not decorated with speleothems such as stalactites or stalagmites, being essentially a large water conduit subject to partial inundation, but the sheer passage size, uncommon in Blue Grass country, gives interest to exploration. With few exceptions, though, this cave has been closed to explorers by the owner for the last several decades.

If there was once a cave opening at the Slacks Spring, the entrance could have been in several places, as the spring emerges from multiple outlets at different elevations. Of particular interest is a high-level outlet at the head of a ravine about 1000 ft south of the main spring. Water rises vertically through limestone rubble after heavy rainfall, discharging more water than the lower, main spring. It is at this location that local rumor places a buried entrance. The inference from the *Gazette* account is that the Garnet party had traveled through a relatively dry passage for a short distance before reaching a place where they felt a boat necessary to continue. If this were the case, this upper opening may



Map of downstream portion of Slacks Spring Groundwater Basin, adapted from Spangler, 1982.



Cross-section of groundwater flow in lower portion of Slacks Spring Basin.

have then descended to merge with the cave stream below, at low flow.

The account also relates that the group of rescuers had traveled "by water up the stream three-quarters of a mile," indicating that the water must have been deeply pooled throughout or that the boat was light enough for short portages over rocky places and gravel banks. The passage of Slack's Cave at the downstream sump approaches to within 3300 ft of the high-level Slacks Spring outlet. The quoted extent of exploration, three-quarters of a mile, places the calf interception point overlapping beyond the sump in the downstream or northern extension of Slacks Cave. Though no doubt the distance was exaggerated, the 18th-century explorers must have come to within a very short distance of the sump. In the *Gazette* report, the passage cross-section at this place was as large as elsewhere, with "no evidence of an end." This would resemble closely the large passage found in the downstream part of Slacks, which contains a major stream that is often several feet deep even at normal flow. If this scenario is accurate, then there may only be a single sump separating Slacks Cave, second largest cave in the Blue Grass, from a considerable quantity of huge trunk passage.

Another possibility is that the Garnet party did not enter a cave at the Slacks spring location, but rather descended into the Slacks Cave karst window and followed one or the other stream passages away from the entrance. This seems rather less likely, as the *Gazette* account stated that the cave was at the "head," or outlet, of a spring, which describes the situation in the ravine but not that of the Slack's Cave entrances. There was a well-established pioneer terminology for karst landforms, necessitated by their usage in depositions and land surveys, and the Slack's Cave entrance would have been properly described as a "sinking spring."

Initial arrangements were made by the writers for a series of diving expeditions into Slack's Cave, for the purpose of penetrating the downstream sump and reaching the long-hidden passageways first explored two centuries ago. These dives were to have been conducted by William Dooley of Lexington and his team. Bill is the owner of Fantasy Scuba and a certified NSS cave diver, experienced with the murky underwater conditions of Kentucky caves. Permission for exploration had been gained by the writers in 1981, but unfortunately could not be obtained for this more recent venture. The project remains on hold, awaiting a future change in access policy.

Whether entered near the spring by North Elkhorn, or from the locally well-known karst window in the Slacks pastureland, the cave explored by the intrepid calf-rescuers in

1790 seems certainly to have been the Slacks Cave or its now-hidden extension.

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- 5 *The Kentucky Gazette*, 4 December 1790.
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Mist envelops Tina at the south entrance, barricaded by a fence of ice speleothems. On this frigid day both entrances in this karst window were vigorously blowing. Photo by Gary A. O'Dell.