

town, I knew in the 1920's.

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## GREAT SALTPETRE CAVE

In 1798, John Baker discovered a large cave opening from the hillside along Crooked Creek, in what was then still part of Madison County. The next day, he brought his wife and two children back to the cave to explore its depths by the aid of torches. What began as a lark became a terrifying experience when the torches burned out and left them stranded in the lightless depths of the earth for two days. Baker and his family finally reached safety, but the long and colorful history of Great Saltpetre Cave was just beginning.

James Kincaid of Madison County had purchased property in Rockcastle County in 1796; five years later, in 1801, he mortgaged 9,500 acres including "Kincaid's Cave" to the Lexington firm of Trotter and Scott. Meanwhile, the Madison County court issued a certificate to George Montgomery for "two hundred acres of land lying and being in the County of Madison on Crooked Creek emptying into round stone." This land also included the same cave. During the winter of that year, the mining of saltpeter began in the cave on a small scale. Within two more years, Montgomery had sold his interest in the cave to Kincaid. Large-scale mining would soon begin.

Kincaid's early operation employed about twenty workmen (slave labor) in the cave, with furnaces and vats at both of the cave entrances. About 1,000 pounds of saltpeter were produced each week. Kincaid foresaw the potential for greatly increased production, and began to seek partners who might have the wealth to expand his operation. Among those who expressed an interest in such a partnership was Dr. Samuel Brown of Lexington.

The odds were against James Kincaid, however. Long on vision but short on cash, he remortgaged the property again to Trotter and Scott in March, 1804. Unable to meet his payments to that firm, a large piece of his property, including the cave, was sold at a sheriff's auction in Lexington in May of that year. Alexander Scott, co-holder of the mortgages, purchased the cave and property for \$400. Later that year, acting on a motion from Scott, the Madison Court issued an order to build a road from the State Road to the Great Saltpetre Cave.

Dr. Brown had not forgotten about the cave. He formed a partnership called Brown, Hart & Company and purchased the cave property, about 1,000 acres, from Scott in November, 1804. At about this time, Brown ran an advertisement in the Lexington Kentucky Gazette, stating that his company wished to hire:

### 15 or 20 NEGRO MEN

To be employed at their Salt Petre Works in Madison County. For each of whom they will give 80 dollars, and they will in addition to the above, give to each negro 20 dollars at the end of the year, provided he conducts himself with propriety.

Brown intended to turn the saltpeter works into a major operation.

He promptly hired John James DuFour of Jessamine County as an engineer to construct a greatly improved and expanded operation. Over a period of a few months, DuFour made many improvements and innovations. The saltpeter mining operation later built at Mammoth Cave by Charles Wilkins of Lexington was copied from the DuFour designs.

In 1805, Brown wrote a paper on the manufacture of saltpeter and gunpowder and sent a copy to President Thomas Jefferson. This paper describes Great Saltpetre Cave and the method of production, and mentions several other saltpetre caves in the region. His paper

was read before the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia in 1806, and described the cave:

The general level of the cave is about 80 feet above the creek. The average height of the arch is ten feet, though in many places it rises to fifty or sixty. The breadth of the passage is generally about forty feet, in some parts it is seventy or eighty feet. The floor has the appearance of a large public road, which has been much frequented. The ceiling is in most places smooth, with but few incrustations or stalactites. In some of the chambers however there are appearances of Gothic rudeness and irregularity which are truly sublime. When these vast chambers are sufficiently illuminated by the torches and lamps of the workmen, they present scenes so uncommon and romantic, that the most stupid beholder cannot contemplate them without expressions of the greatest astonishment.

Production at the cave went from 1,000 pounds per week to over 1,000 pounds per day.

Unfortunately, Brown was caught up in scandal; his family had been involved in Aaron Burr's plot to overthrow the United States government. Brown was forced to leave Kentucky and abandon his several enterprises, including the cave. In other hands, the cave produced saltpeter during the War of 1812, with as many as 60 or 70 workers employed in the operation. With the end of the war in January, 1815, the bottom dropped out of the saltpeter market and Great Saltpetre Cave was never again mined on large scale. During the Mexican War and later the Civil War, only small-scale mining was conducted in the cave.

About 1860, according to traditions of the Mullins family, the cave property was purchased by Calloway Mullins for \$50 and a rifle. For a long time following the Civil War, little use was made of the cave except for occasional picnics and dances. About 1939 John Lair and Dr. Walker Owens purchased the South entrance tract. The Renfro Valley Barn Dance was begun, with an opening night broadcast made from the cave on CBS radio. The two men attempted to open the cave for commercial tours, and built a lodge for guests. Only two days after it was finished, though, the lodge was burned to ground by persons unknown. The cave was closed to the public.

Lair again opened the cave for public tours in 1966. In 1970, Richard Mullins became the resident caretaker on the property (Richard still owns the north entrance). The remote location of the cave, however, was its downfall as a commercial enterprise. By 1976, tours of the cave were self-guided. In 1985, the cave property was auctioned off to Stanley and Jeanette Rein of Pine Hill, and the cave closed to the public. In that same year, John Lair passed away at the age of 91 years and Richard Mullins moved off the property. During the next year, the cave property was again put on the market.

Great Saltpetre Cave was purchased in 1989 by a private historical foundation, who subsequently turned the management of the cave over to two regional chapters of the National Speleological Society, those of Cincinnati and Lexington. The goals of the present cave management are to preserve and protect the cave and the land about it. Every year, an open house is held at the cave to allow the residents of Rockcastle County to visit and learn about an important part of their heritage. Other than this, there are no regularly scheduled tours of the cave, but interested groups may arrange for special tours by contacting the cave management.

The preceding account is based in large part upon extensive research by Angelo I. George of Louisville. Submitted by: Gary A. O'Dell