Cave Spring Farm
Karst Springs and the Settlement of Kentucky

(A shorter version of this article was presented at the 1989 NSS Convention.)

Boggs Cave entrance today. Very little has changed in the passage of more than a century.

By Gary A. O'Dell

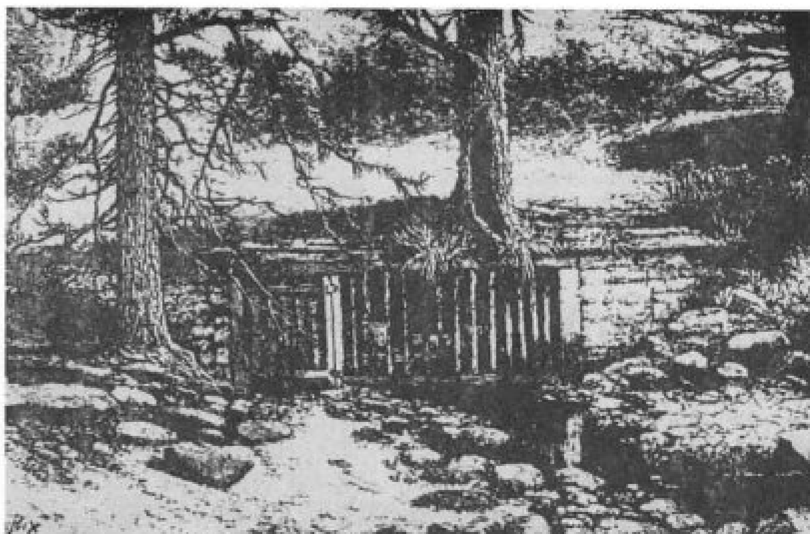
Claiming Land in Pioneer Kentucky

It was late in the morning, early in May 1775. The skies were gray, a blanket of clouds hanging down low over the treetops. All through the night and the morning, the rain had come intermittently—brief, light showers that slowly trickled through the leaves and branches to the ground. A roughly-dressed group of eight men huddled under a crude shelter of branches and deer-skins on the north bank of Elkhorn, among the dripping trees that leaned across the narrow span of the creek to entwine with those of the opposite bank. A small fire, expertly built from dry wood, burned hot and smokeless, hissing from the occasional large drops that coalesced and fell from the trees above. The smell of roasting meat tickled the nostrils of the hungry men. They licked their lips unconsciously. The remains of a deer carcass lay just outside the circle.

A large man with a full beard, sitting on a log near the fire, rose to his feet, fed a few more sticks into the fire, and gave the roasting haunch another quarter-turn. Another man was also seated on the log, bare toes squishing in the mud, warming his toes and holding a wet boot over the fire on the end of a stick. A cured deerskin was draped over his head and shoulders against the rain. The other men sat under the leafy shelter, staring out at the gloomy morning. They would remain in camp this day, to continue their explorations when the weather cleared. They were a party of "improvers" who had come into the wilderness west of the Appalachian mountains, exploring and claiming lands from Virginia's frontier.

Eighteen years later, this land would be part of the newly created state of Kentucky. The settlement of Kentucky proceeded in stages. During the first half of the 18th century, the land west of the mountains was known only by rumor, tales from a handful of explorers and from former captives of the Indians. A more determined effort began about 1774, an effort not just to explore but to acquire the land. Along with the explorers came men with compass and chain, rifle and axe, to survey and claim large tracts for themselves and others. Many of the surveyors measured land for men back east who would never themselves lay eyes upon it, but they also surveyed land for themselves and the men who accompanied them.

Virginia law at the time was rather vague as to the methods by which land might be claimed in the Kentucky frontier. There were various existing claims upon the government, for military or other services, that were filled by grants of land. In addition to these, land claims were made by two primary methods: selection and survey without occupancy. An unsurveyed claim based upon occupancy must be "proved,"



An illustration from James Lane Allen's *The Bluegrass Region of Kentucky* (1892) shows the cave entrance. Note vertical wooden bars and gate. Milk and produce were set upon flat rocks inside to cool in the natural refrigerator.

meaning that definite improvements must be made to the land to establish ownership against other possible claimants. Improvement of the land might consist of clearing a half-acre of trees to plant a corn crop, building fences or a crude cabin. The improver would usually remain on his intended claim, clearing the land and building the structures that would assure him of ownership. Legal depositions subsequently made by the claimant and his supporters could secure that tract under the law.

Legal surveys were made by the rather ambiguous metes and bounds method. The measurements were imprecise and other errors such as number transposition crept in, leading to surveys that overlapped other claims. Metes and bounds surveys used natural landmarks as reference points, such as a prominent boulder, a clump of ash trees, or a watercourse. Markers of this sort were sometimes subject to change or removal, leading to confusion. Finally in 1779, the Virginia legislature passed a land law which sent a commission into the region to set standards and judge cases. The commission settled over 3000 cases, issuing certificates such as this typical example from a Boonesborough session in December of 1779:

> Simon Canton [Kenton] this day claimed a settlement and preemption to a tract of land lying on Elkhorn joining Colo. Preston's Survey at the Cave Spring on the south west side by improving the same and residing in the Country ever since the year 1775 satisfactory proof being made to the court. . . (Certificate Book, 64)

Despite the efforts of the commission, land suits tied up Kentucky courts for decades.

This particular party of men had met at Drennon's Lick (Henry County) near the Kentucky River in April and traveled to Elkhorn Creek (Franklin County) where they were joined by others. Traveling along the Elkhorn, they came to the forks and went north to the vicinity of the large spring that had been surveyed in the previous year by John Floyd (Royal Spring, site of Georgetown). From Floyd's spring they headed south, into the heart of the choice lands of the Bluegrass region. On this day in early May they were camped along the middle fork of Elkhorn (adjacent to Lexington). By this time all the men but one had chosen the land they would improve and claim.

As they sat in their temporary camp in the morning drizzle, engaged in solitary meditations or swapping stories with their companions, a tall man came ambling through the trees from downstream. His name was Patrick Jordan. Possessed of sufficient energy and curiosity, he explored a little further ahead while the others had been content to loaf under shelter. He propped his long rifle, the mechanism loosely wrapped in oilskin against the wet, next to a tree trunk and came over to the log to sit beside the barefoot man. He took off his hat, wrung the water out of it, and donned it again. The others looked at him expectantly.

"This sure is some pretty country through here," he said, and inhaled deeply of the roasting meat. "Plenty trees, tall grass, game everywhere. A man could live real well."

Another man spoke up, from the shelter. "What we've come through here this last week or so is the best land I've ever laid eyes on."

Jordan ran his fingers briefly through the long hair on his neck, combing the water out and flinging it to the ground. "This is what we come here for, what we was told about. That's why I couldn't set still this morning. I went about, maybe, a mile or so up the crick here. Not too far off there is a real good spring, a big one."

The barefoot man, Joseph Lindsay, swiveled his head around. "Show me," he said.

"That meat smells mighty good," said Jordan, "And I'm wet clear through."

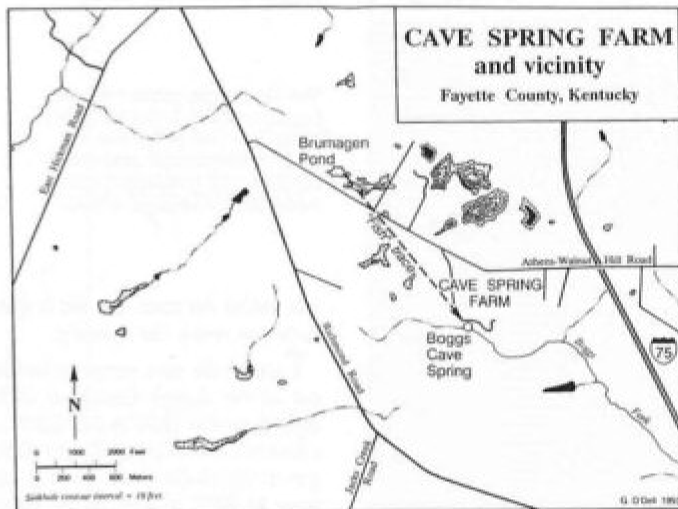
"Show me," Lindsay insisted. "By God, I'll give you two guineas to show me that spring, right now. I'm the only man of this comp'ny without a claim, and this land looks good to me!"

Jordan looked sidelong at him. "Well then, Joseph, let me just put a slab of that meat in my belly and we'll be gone. Git your axe." Lindsay pulled his boots back on and soon the two men, with rifle and axe in hand and alert, set off down the meandering creek. When they reached the spring a short time later, Lindsay looked at the water rushing down to the Elkhorn, looked around him in a circle, and said, "I'll have this land, I will! Pat, you done me a good turn today. This here will be my claim." Lindsay carved his initials, "J. L." boldly into a tree beside the spring. The two men cut poles and built a cabin, three or four logs high and about 10 ft square, stripped the bark off a few trees, and piled up brush.

When the camp broke on the next day, several of the men went to the settlement at Harrodsburg, while Lindsay and the others went back for their supplies at the forks of the Elkhorn, where they left their canoes. In a few days they were back, each man ready to work on improving his own claim with assistance from the others.

Importance of Springs

The conversational exchanges above are imagined, but the incident occurred much as here depicted, based on depositions from Patrick Jordan and others taken at Harrodsburg in 1797 and reported in Collins (1874, 177). A few more anecdotes from the pioneer history of Kentucky are illustrative of the importance in which springs were held. Russell Cave Spring, located in Fayette County about six miles northeast from Lindsay's spring, is a very large and scenic spring that feeds a very short tributary of North Elkhorn Creek. A 2000 acre tract that included the cave was granted posthumously to Colonel Henry Russell for service in the French and Indian war, and



Eastern Fayette County, along Athens-Walnut Hill Road, including Cave Spring Farm. Significant karst features are indicated.

fell to Henry's brother William. William Russell had two sons, Robert and William Junior. Young William Russell so desired to have the cave spring that he gave up the greater portion of the land to his brother Robert in order to possess it. In 1783 he built a house on the gentle slope that overlooked the cave spring (O'Dell, 1985).

Royal Spring (Scott County) was discovered by John Floyd and William Nash in 1774, who had temporarily split off from their surveying party in a deliberate effort to find a good spring. They were amply rewarded for their effort, for Royal Spring is the largest in the Inner Bluegrass region. Floyd later described it as "the largest I have ever seen in the country, and [it] forms a creek of itself." He called it the Big Spring. The two men surveyed a thousand acres around the spring for Floyd. Two years later, in the early summer of 1776, Floyd learned that John McClelland settled at his spring: "[I] went determined to drive him off, but on seeing his wife and those small children who must have been distressed, I solt it for 300 pounds" (O'Dell, 1987).

Before white incursions into Kentucky lands, the numerous springs of the region had been equally important to various cultures of Native Americans. Large springs had been favored as campsites, and water from mineral springs had been boiled down to produce valuable salt. The early white explorers and settlers utilized the wilderness springs in exactly the same manner. In addition, in an almost featureless expanse of backwoods, prominent springs became important landmarks for travellers.

The settlement phase began in 1774 with the establishment of Harrodsburg, although such settlements were initially precarious as the Indians resisted the white intrusion. Following the Battle of Blue Licks in 1782, settlers came into the country in ever-increasing numbers.

The settlement of Kentucky, as has been true for human civilization throughout the history of the world, was strongly influenced by the location of exploitable water supplies. Rivers, lakes, and seacoasts are traditionally favored locations for the establishment and development of communities.

In Kentucky, like certain other regions of the world, such features are absent or of limited flow due to the karstic nature of the terrain. Much of the state is underlain by soluble limestones at or near the surface, and the landscape is largely characterized by underground flow. As a consequence of the lack of substantial surface streams, early white settlers located homesteads and towns adjacent to one or more of the numerous large regional springs. Not only were springs plentiful, they were also favored as water supplies due to a universal perception that spring water was superior in quality to that from any other source. Many of the present-day communities of Kentucky owe their location to the existence of a good spring during the pioneer era. Versailles, Georgetown, Stamping Ground, and Lexington are among the many communities in the Bluegrass karst region that were founded in this manner, but numerous other settlements throughout the limestone country also owe their location to the presence of a large spring.

Cave Spring Farm

The account of the settlement of the Cave Spring Farm homestead in the Bluegrass may be regarded as a case study typical of the region, in which a major spring formed the basis of land selection and was an important focus of social activity for the homestead.

In the eastern part of Fayette County, Kentucky, along the Athens-Walnut Hill Road, Boggs Fork of Boone Creek flows from the mouth of a small cavern. The scenic locale of this karst valley has remained virtually unchanged since the Bluegrass region was first settled, and is still a well-maintained farm today. The cave spring is surrounded by the immaculately-kept buildings erected two centuries ago, and is a perennial spring of moderate flow. The reliability of this spring led to its use as a watering place long before the first exploring parties reached the Bluegrass region, as it was reported to have been a favorite camping spot of the Indians and many artifacts have been found near the cave. Boggs Cave is named for the original settler of the surrounding land, Robert Boggs, a captain in the Revolutionary Army.

Robert Boggs first came to Kentucky in 1775 as a chainman on John Floyd's surveying party; his payment was to be 400 acres of the best land. In that year he aided in the building of the fort at Boonesborough and explored the surrounding countryside. On one such trip Boggs discovered the cave spring, and was so impressed with the locale that he surveyed 1000 acres of surrounding land. Soon afterward he returned to Virginia (the Greenbrier region of West Virginia) to serve in various campaigns of the Revolutionary War, including the long winter at Valley Forge (Perrin, 1882, 490).

In 1779 he returned to Kentucky and the land on which he laid his claim. Robert was granted 400 acres surrounding the cave spring in 1782, but conflicting claims deprived him of the greater part of his survey (Staples, 1932, 348-356). The best portion was still to be his. In 1784, two years after the Land Commission heard his case at Harrod's Station, Boggs brought his wife Sarah and infant daughter Nancy to the site of their future home. At first, the family lived in a tent of poles and buffalo skins while building a cabin on the creek below the cave mouth, which later was improved to a substantial two-story log house (Lyle Papers). The site was selected for the good supply of spring water for family and livestock, and for the aesthetic appeal of the setting (Cassidy, 1985, 422-427). The log house, moved twice and restored to perfect condition, today stands high on the slope of the valley overlooking the spring.

The Brumagen pond collapse (summer 1978), just after failure occurred. The pond has not been reestablished and today is filled with brush and small trees. Photo by Gary O'Dell.

The cave spring with its never-failing waters had been the prime reason Robert Boggs selected this particular tract of land, and the settlement was centered about the cave. The various buildings were constructed, most before 1800, on the gently rising ground north of the cave, as the land south is far too steep for building. Only the log house is presently on the south side, and it was bodily transported there with some difficulty in 1974. The main stone residence, completed in 1792, and all the major outbuildings were located near the cave spring. These included a smokehouse and hemp house on the high ground north of the spring, an ice house a few yards above the mouth, and a small brick house that lies directly atop the course of the cave. About 1000 ft downstream of the cave entrance are traces of foundations of what are believed to have been log cabins for the slaves once employed on the farm (Cassidy, 1976).

The three-room brick house just above the cave mouth was erected before 1800 and was used as a residence for the household servants, being divided into two sections for cook and house maid and their families. This arrangement continued on a more amenable basis after the Civil War, until about 1917 (Cassidy, 1985, 595-614; 626-627).

During the Civil War, soldiers of both sides used the cave area as a bivouac, attracted by the fine cold water of the spring. The story is told that a troop of Federals were encamped on the grounds at the time when the peaches in the orchard were ripe, and they discarded hardtack rations to make room for as many peaches as they could carry. The ground was so littered by the discarded hardtack that it had the appearance of a light snowfall (*Ibid.* 609-611).

From the very first days of the Boggs settlement, the cave spring was a part of everyday life. Water was carried up the hill to the stone house; a large tank mounted on a wagon and pulled by a team of mules was filled by hand dipping from the pool before the cave mouth. The family wash was done in good weather below the cave mouth, with water heated in large cast-iron kettles on tripods over open fires (Cassidy, 1970).

When electricity became available in the district about 1925, a hole was drilled into the cave and an electric pump installed in a pumphouse directly over the cave passage. Just prior to this time, the property was sold by the Boggs descendants after over 140 years of residence, purchased by Porter Land in 1917. Water lines were run from the pump-house to both the stone house and the brick house, though the water from the cave was used by the Land family for washing only. Drinking water was supplied by a cistern. The use of the cave's water for any domestic purposes was discontinued in 1964 when "city" water became available to the farm (Cassidy, 1985, 615-616). Still visible today, a section of pipe protrudes from the ceiling borehole a short distance within the cave.

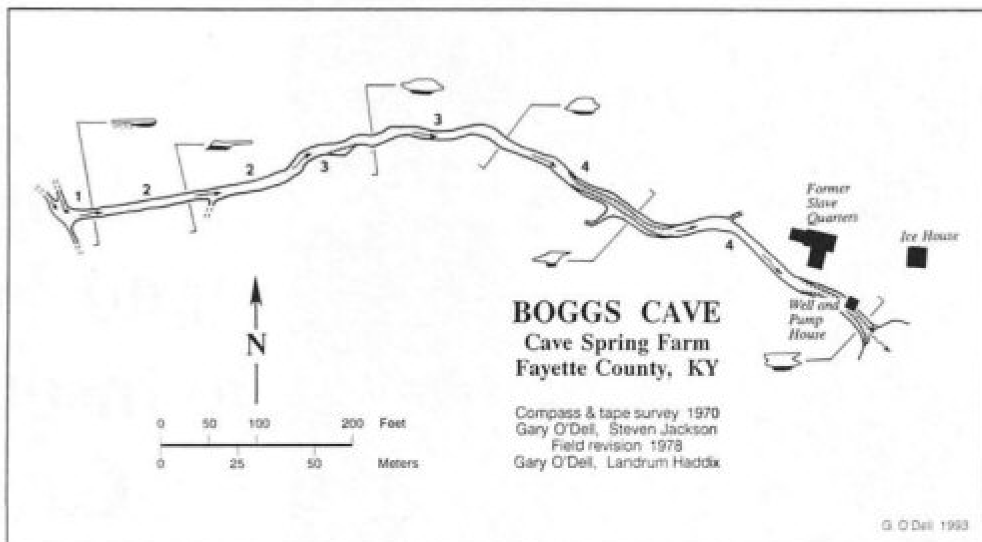
Before mechanical refrigeration, the mouth of the cave was used for cooling milk and produce. No springhouse had ever been built, for the steep terrain directly above the cave mouth would make such a project extremely difficult. The cave spring is framed neatly by square walls and roof ledge and is kept cleansed by the flow. The stream is dammed, several hundred feet below the cave, but the impoundment does not reach the opening.

Though the cave property had been sold out of the Boggs family in 1917, it was repurchased in 1964 by Samuel M. Cassidy, a descendant of Robert Boggs. Cassidy had grown up on the farm, having been born there in 1902, and set about restoring the homeplace to mint condition. His presence there in 1992 marked 170 years of residence of Boggs' descendants there, interrupted by the near-half-century occupation by the Land family: a total of 214 years since Robert Boggs first saw the land that he would settle.

Since the 1964 reacquisition, a new wing was added to the stone house and the various historic outbuildings have been renovated, though not with their original functions. The log house, which had been moved in 1872 to what later became the Wallace farm, was returned to Boggs land in 1974 at its present location. It and the smoke house serve as guest houses, with discretely added modern comforts of indoor plumbing and climate control.

At present the extent of the Boggs Cave groundwater basin is not completely known since little hydrological research has been done in the area. However, in June, 1978, a pond on the property of Mr. Ed Brumagen collapsed into an underground cavity and emptied completely. At this time Cassidy observed that the water flow from Boggs Cave, more than a mile distant from the pond, had greatly increased although there had been no rain in the district for many days. He described a great outpouring of muddy water and large, bewildered fish (personal communication, 1978). The connection has not been confirmed by dye tracing, but the "fish trace" is convincing and the cave passage trends directly toward the Brumagen property. This was shown by a survey made in February, 1970, by Gary O'Dell and Stephen Jackson.

Throughout its history, the cave has been a popular excursion for visitors to the farm, particularly the children, despite the cold and wet conditions within. Boggs Cave consists primarily of a single passage about four feet high and eight feet wide, gradually decreasing in height through the extent of the cave until no longer passable. There are



only a few side passages in the form of low, muddy crawls. The stream which issues from the mouth is present through the entire cave length.

A return trip was made to the cave by Gary with Landrum Haddix in June, 1978, pushing about 200 ft farther than the original survey of 800 ft, to the explorable end of the passage. This last section, constantly decreases in height. From the entrance to the end, the ceiling remains constant while the floor rises with the gradient of the stream. The most spacious part of the cave, near the entrance, requires a tiring half-stoop to travel the passage, undoubtedly the reason why the cave has been more popular with children than with adult explorers. Successively, the explorer is forced to his knees and then to a belly crawl in the cold cave stream. The torture is finally ended when the physical thickness of the human body prevents further progress, one then being tightly wedged between ceiling and floor.

Boggs Cave, though of small size and simple plan, is nonetheless significant for a number of reasons. At nearly 1000 ft, it ranks as the fifth-longest of the nearly 50 known caves in Fayette County. Boggs Cave and the surrounding lands are perhaps classic examples of the cavern-forming processes of the Inner Bluegrass region. The enterable portion of the cave is a solution conduit at its simplest, with a typical bedding-plane cross-section of width greater than height and an essentially straight passage showing little sign of influence by vertical jointing.

North of the cave, however, the situation is completely different. Large, deep, and steep-sided, grassy sinks are aligned along an area of faulting roughly parallel with the Boggs Cave passage. No cave is presently known in this fault zone, but the surface solution development has been considerable and presumably there is a significant underground conduit underlying these sinks. The relationship of this postulated drainage system to that of Boggs Cave is unknown. About a mile northwest of the cave is the Brumagen Sink, which vividly demonstrated the principal of sinkhole pond failure and is one clue to the extent of the Boggs Cave hydrological network. In the larger view, the entire area surrounding the Cave Spring Farm is rather highly developed karst, with numerous sinks, springs, and small sinking streams present on the landscape.

It is for its history that the cave is most significant. Robert Boggs was so entranced by the cave mouth and locale in 1775 that, of all the land in Kentucky he saw and helped survey, this was the place he chose to settle and raise his family. It was a wise decision, for they prospered greatly and Robert Boggs became a wealthy man. The cave was a center of activity for the farm, with the large, dependable stream of cold water issuing from its mouth, and gained a place in the affection and memories of the family and descendants.

The setting of Cave Spring Farm is nearly unique, for it has been preserved for two centuries with little alteration, presenting much the same face today as it did when it was first settled. The buildings on the property show the rapid pioneer transition from log to stone to brick structures all on one farm. For this and other reasons Cave Spring Farm has been included in the National Register of Historic Places. The well-documented account of Robert Boggs' settlement here clearly illustrates the high regard of the pioneers for springs. This high regard for the Boggs Cave spring has fortunately led to its preservation through two centuries. Today the locale of the cave mouth provides a tranquil setting for any visitor.

Further Reading

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