

# Stephen Bishop: The Celebrated Guide of Mammoth Cave

By Angelo I. George and Gary A. O'Dell

## **An Extraordinary Man**

It was a pleasant afternoon in Kentucky in the spring of 1844.<sup>1</sup> A few guests lounged on the veranda of the Mammoth Cave Hotel, some strolled about the grounds admiring the verdant scenery and clusters of wildflowers, while others consulted with their host about the evening menu or their plans for underground adventures. They were completely unaware that, deep in the earth below this tranquil setting, a life-and-death struggle was taking place. Here, where the Jordan River ran deep and cold through Mammoth Cave, a tiny group of terrified souls huddled together in neck-deep water in an

<sup>1</sup> The authors would like to thank Philip J. DiBlasi, archaeologist, Gordon L. Smith, Marion O. Smith, and Dr. Stanley Sides, M.D. for sharing information on the history of Mammoth Cave. Mammoth Cave historian Norman Warnell critically read an early draft and one anonymous reviewer offered suggestions for the improvement of the manuscript. Over decades the Mammoth Cave National Park Service gave the senior author access to the cave to study the history of the place. Special thanks to Diana E. George for scanning and preparing the antique illustrations for publication. We are very appreciative of the patience and support provided by our wives, Diana Emerson George and Carol O'Dell, during the course of this investigation.

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absolute and fearful darkness. Torches extinguished by the sudden plunge into the chilly waters, they were unable to discern the features of the nearest person. What began as a thrilling honeymoon adventure for two newlyweds and a pair of their closest friends had turned into a fight for survival when their boat capsized while traversing the subterranean river. They clung to each other and grasped at projections on the mud-slick walls of the passage, convinced of impending death.<sup>2</sup>

Earlier that day, the wedding party of four from Bowling Green entered the cave, led by African American guide Stephen Bishop. Subsequent events suggest that some in the party became quite inebriated after a rest break in a location near the termination of Cleveland's Avenue, also called the Dining Table or Cornelia's Table. As part of the caving experience, the guides would take a basket full of food and alcoholic beverages to be served at this location. Numerous published accounts record that after the meal, visitors often became tipsy from "choice old sherry." The wedding party may have been celebrating with alcoholic refreshment even prior to this point. Bishop led his charges into the lowest level of the cave where the Jordan River had to be traversed by boat for nearly a mile, filling the passage from wall to wall and nine feet deep in places. After disembarking at a side avenue and exploring, they came back to the river and boarded the boat for a return to the surface. According to one account, "some of the party, who were in high glee, got into a romp, and overturned the boat. Their lights were extinguished, their matches wet, the boat filled with water and sank immediately . . . [they were] up to their chins in water."<sup>3</sup>

Despite the harrowing circumstances, Bishop maintained composure and calmed the frightened tourists struggling in the cold water.

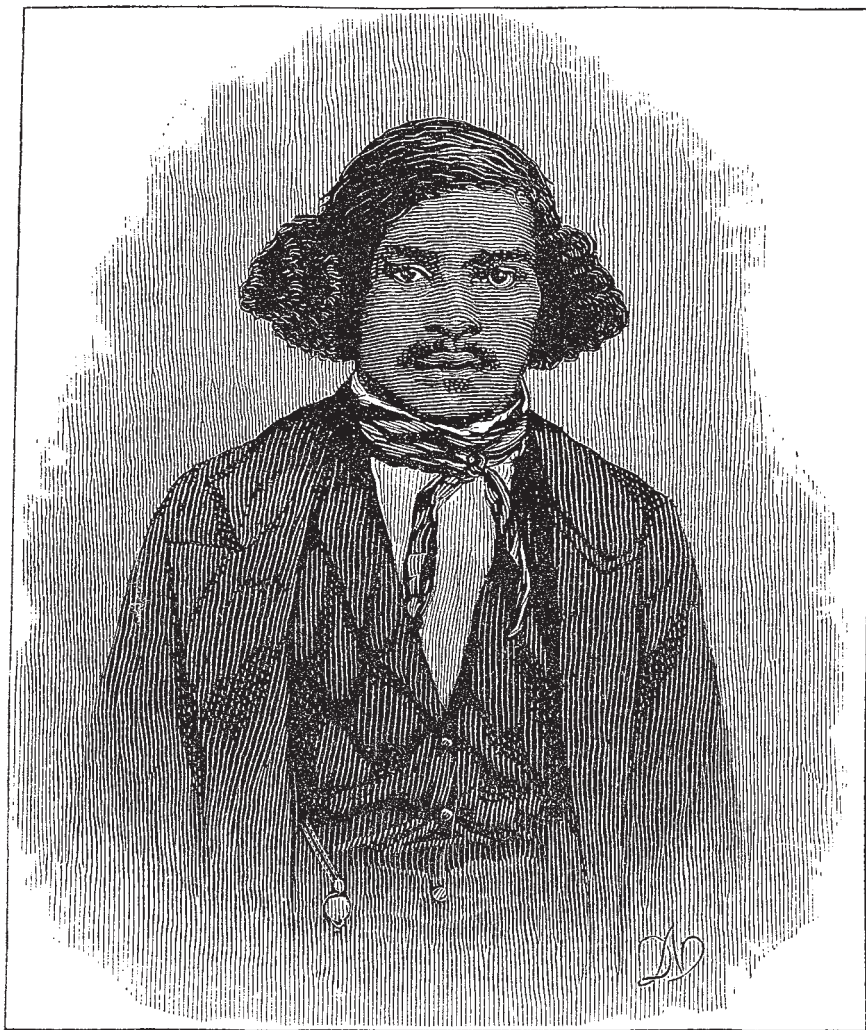
<sup>2</sup> The Jordan River was soon renamed Echo River, by which it is known today.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander C. Bullitt, *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844 by a Visitor* (Louisville, Ky., 1845), 98 (first quotation); "The Mammoth Cave of Kentucky," *Boston Weekly Messenger*, September 18, 1844 (second quotation); "An Awful Situation." *Worcester (Mass.) Palladium*, July 31, 1844.

During his independent explorations of the cave, he had on many occasions been forced to traverse passages while neck-deep in water. He knew the present situation was potentially quite perilous and that the visitors could drown if allowed to panic. He cautioned them to “remain perfectly still, for if they moved a single step they might get out of their depth in water, and swimming would not avail them, for they could not see where to swim to.” Moving about could plunge them unexpectedly into water over their heads. When the wedding party failed to return to the surface at the designated time, a search and rescue team from the hotel was dispatched. Mat Bransford, another Black guide, led the rescue party and located the missing tourists when he heard Stephen “cheering them, and directing his movements while swimming, by the sound of their voices, which were raised, one and all, in prayer and supplication for deliverance.” Everyone was returned safely.<sup>4</sup>

Stephen L. Bishop (1820–1857) was the foremost guide at Mammoth Cave during the antebellum period whose daring exploits, personal magnetism, and knowledgeable discourses on the science of caves brought him international celebrity. Newspaper accounts and guidebooks of the period heralded Bishop as the “Columbus of the Cave;” his enslaver, Franklin Gorin, described him as a “fine genius;” English journalist Thomas Gunn referred to him as the “Cave Lion;” and newspaperman Bayard Taylor reported that Bishop was the “ruler of his realm.” One tourist praised “Stephen the illustrious . . . guide

<sup>4</sup> “The Mammoth Cave of Kentucky,” *Boston Weekly Messenger*, September 18, 1844 (quotations). There are variations on this story but that which is presented here is most consistent with contemporary accounts. Even before Bishop’s death in 1857, revisionist history is apparent in Thomas Gunn’s conversation with manager William Scott Miller, Jr., where Nicholas is elevated to savior of the wedding party and Bishop relegated to the rescue team. See Thomas Butler Gunn, *Gunn Diaries*, vol. 6, p. 144, available online via [https://digitalcollections.lib.lehigh.edu/islandora/object/digitalcollections%3Agunn\\_1128?solr\\_nav%5Bid%5D=e661378dbc42d6afc77e&solr\\_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr\\_nav%5Boffset%5D=12#page/10/mode/1up](https://digitalcollections.lib.lehigh.edu/islandora/object/digitalcollections%3Agunn_1128?solr_nav%5Bid%5D=e661378dbc42d6afc77e&solr_nav%5Bpage%5D=0&solr_nav%5Boffset%5D=12#page/10/mode/1up) (accessed December 24, 2018). A year after Stephen died, in 1858 Charles Wright completely rewrote the scenario, depicting Mat and Nick saving “a party from drowning on Echo River by his [their] courage and self-possession.” Charles W. Wright, *The Mammoth Cave, Kentucky*, (Vincennes, Ind., 1858), 6.



STEPHEN BISHOP, THE GUIDE.

Stephen Bishop, Mammoth Cave guide. Illustration by J. Barton for Horace C. Hovey, "One Hundred Miles in Mammoth Cave," *Scribner's Monthly* 20 (October 1880), 922. There are no known likenesses of Bishop drawn from life. When this portrait was made, Bishop had been dead for twenty-three years. The artist may have copied from a sketch or photograph, no longer in existence, or based his depiction upon recollections by those who knew Bishop.

of thousands and a teacher of the great men of earth in matters pertaining to his vocation.” Many modern explorers consider him to be the greatest cave explorer and spelean cartographer of nineteenth-century America.<sup>5</sup>

The most difficult aspect in understanding Bishop as a historical character is to separate the real person from the persona he invented. Virtually everything known about Stephen during his lifetime and thereafter was written by white people. Rarely did he reveal anything in public about his personal life, growing up near Glasgow, Kentucky, or how he was treated at Mammoth Cave. Although the actual man is rarely revealed, glimpses of his character can be gleaned from the chaff of hype and hyperbole, in which Bishop became famous through his own initiative and accomplishments. To know Bishop as a person we need first to understand how his character was shaped by the environment in which he was embedded in his youth, born into slavery, and raised and educated within a dysfunctional and highly contentious household. Brought to Mammoth Cave, he explored this unknown realm, and his exploits were the beginning point in developing a public persona.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *Boston Weekly Messenger*, September 18, 1844 (first quotation); Franklin Gorin to W. Stump Forwood, February 9, 1868, in W. Stump Forwood, *An Historical and Descriptive Narrative of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, (Philadelphia, 1870), 26 (second quotation); Gunn, Gunn Diaries, vol. 6, p. 144, (third quotation); “The Mammoth Cave—A Day’s Journey Under Ground,” *New York Weekly*, June 30, 1855 (fourth quotation); “The Mammoth Cave,” *New York Tribune*, July 31, 1844 (fifth quotation); Bayard Taylor, *At Home and Abroad: A Sketch-Book of Life, Scenery, and Men* (New York, 1860), 191, 205.

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Bishop has been the subject of a large body of historical research dating back more than a century, and his life continues to engage modern historians. The best biographical sketch during the nineteenth century was made by Horace C. Hovey, included in his *Celebrated American Caverns* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1882). In the modern era, Harold Meloy was the authority on the history of Mammoth Cave and produced several works specifically on Stephen Bishop. A lengthy account of Bishop was featured in Roger W. Brucker and Richard A. Watson, *The Longest Cave* (New York, 1976), which detailed the history of Mammoth Cave explorations. Among recent works of academic significance is Joy M. Lyons, *Making Their Mark: The Signature of Slavery at Mammoth Cave* (Fort Washington, Pa., 2006).

## A Self-Educated Prodigy

Bishop came to Mammoth Cave in 1838, enslaved by Gorin, a Glasgow attorney who had recently purchased the cave to operate as a tourist attraction. Much of Stephen's early life has long been a mystery; even his parentage was uncertain. Until recently, the only such information was an often-quoted 1868 letter to W. Stump Forwood, in which Gorin recalled, "I knew his reputed father, who was a white man. I owned Stephen's mother and brother, but not until both the children were born." In 2006, researcher Joy M. Lyons surmised that Stephen was originally the property of Lowry Bishop of Glasgow, Kentucky. Although Lyons did not provide supporting evidence, subsequent investigation by the authors confirms the validity of her assertion. The necessary link to the evidence trail is found in a statement by English journalist Thomas Gunn, who visited Mammoth Cave in 1853 and noted that Stephen's "former owner was his father," information provided him in a conversation with William Scott Miller, Jr., who was the manager of the cave. Documentation for Bishop's parentage as well as insight into the conditions in which he lived as a youth is provided by the Barren County Circuit Court records of a hotly disputed divorce proceeding filed by Catherine Bishop in 1836 against her husband, Lowry Bishop.<sup>7</sup>

Lowry Bishop was a wealthy plantation owner near the town of Glasgow in Barren County, Kentucky. The plantation consisted of 1,834 acres of farmland suitable for crops and grazing. He enslaved twenty-three persons and made his living farming and raising and

<sup>7</sup> Forwood, *An Historical and Descriptive Narrative of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, 26 (first quotation); Gunn, *Gunn Diaries*, vol. 6, p. 144 (second quotation); Lyons, *Making Their Mark*, 14; *Bishop v. Bishop*, Barren County Circuit Court case #849, July 12, 1836, Kentucky Department for Libraries and Archives (hereinafter KDLA), Frankfort, Kentucky. Lyons cites an unspecified Barren County court record dated May 15, 1837; investigation reveals this is a power of attorney from Lowry Bishop to Franklin Gorin and makes no mention of any enslaved individuals, let alone Stephen Bishop. See Barren County Deed Book O, Power of Attorney from Lowry Bishop to F. Gorin and B. B. Crump, May 15, 1837, 371. William Scott Miller, Jr. (1815–1899) was manager of the hotel and cave from 1850 to 1856, and then from 1875 to 1881. He was the grandson of Archibald Miller, one of the saltpeter makers at the cave during the War of 1812.

selling livestock, along with the distillation of whiskey and brandy. In 1810, Bishop married the recently widowed twenty-one-year-old Catherine “Kitty” Stockton Hayden, daughter of the Reverend Robert Stockton Sr. She brought an element of wealth from her prior marriage, a handful of enslaved people, and her young son Benjamin R. Hayden into the household. At first the marriage seemed to be working out well, but her husband proved to be an unrepentant philanthropist. Because of an undefined medical condition and periods of bedridden ill health, she was infertile in her second marriage. To compensate, she accepted the responsibility to raise two biracial boys in her household fathered by Lowry from one of the two enslaved women whom Catherine had brought with her into the marriage. Catherine also took into her home two infant daughters of her younger sister Prudence, after her sister declined to raise them for unspecified reasons, and later a week-old baby boy after her sister died in childbirth.<sup>8</sup>

After Lowry Bishop’s death in late February 1838, it was Franklin Gorin’s responsibility as Bishop’s attorney to settle the estate. At the time of the divorce petition, the biracial children living in the Bishop house were specified as being, respectively, nine and seventeen years old, the latter corresponding to the approximate age of Stephen Bishop. The court records refer by name to the two enslaved women acquired by Lowry Bishop at the time of his 1810 marriage to Catherine and include their children borne to them since that time. The names of the enslaved women were Luvenia and Marietta, and the other enslaved individuals listed as Catherine’s included a male named Stephen. In November 1837, Bishop informed the court that he had sold several enslaved people to raise money to settle judgements against him, including five to Franklin Gorin. He listed these individuals, which included “Luvenia & her child Mary” along with

<sup>8</sup> *Bishop v. Bishop*, Barren County Circuit Court case #849, July 12, 1836, KDLA. Catherine’s son Benjamin R. Hayden died in 1829, leaving her childless and no doubt providing additional motivation to take her sister’s infant children into her home. The three children were named Catherine, Prudence, and Lowry.



Stephen and William, the fifth being unnamed. The Stephen in this transaction would become Stephen the famed guide at Mammoth Cave, usually described as a “mulatto.” Since Gorin claimed ownership of Stephen’s mother and brother, we can conclude from the evidence that Lowry Bishop was Stephen’s father, his mother was Luvenia and his brother either William or the unnamed slave.<sup>9</sup>

With the addition of Prudence’s three children into the household, along with the two biracial children resulting from Lowry’s sexual abuse of his wife’s enslaved women, Catherine now had a house full of children. Regardless as to her personal feelings about the origin of the children, they were born into slavery and retained this status. Although many southern states passed laws that forbade the education of enslaved people, fearing that literacy could undermine the foundations of the institution, Kentucky enacted no such legislation.<sup>10</sup> Regardless, public sentiment often made impossible what the law did not prohibit. Henry Bibb, an enslaved man in Shelby County, Kentucky, noted in his autobiography that “Slaves were not allowed books, pen, ink, nor paper, to improve their minds,” and recalled that when a “Sabbath School” was opened in his neighborhood to teach enslaved individuals to read, it created an uproar in the community and was quickly broken up. In private homes, however, education of the enslaved was a matter of the enslaver’s discretion.<sup>11</sup>

Stephen’s education was likely garnered by exposure in the Bishop home, where Christian values, etiquette, and music would have been stressed along with a modicum of education. Reading aloud to one another was one of the main forms of entertainment during the

<sup>9</sup> *Bishop v. Bishop*, Barren County Circuit Court case #849, July 12, 1836, KDLA (quotation); Forwood, *An Historical and Descriptive Narrative of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, 26.

<sup>10</sup> Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky from Slavery to Segregation, 1760–1891*, 2nd ed. (Frankfort, Ky., 2003), 140.

<sup>11</sup> Henry Bibb, *Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave* (New York, 1849), 29 (first quotation), 35 (second quotation); Carter G. Woodson, *The Education of the Negro Prior to 1861*, 2nd ed. (Washington, D.C., 1919), 169. See also Heather A. Williams, *Self-Taught: African American Education in Slavery and Freedom* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2009), 7; Ben Schiller, “Learning Their Letters: Critical Literacy, Epistolary Culture, and Slavery in the Antebellum South,” *Southern Quarterly* 45 (April 2008): 13.



period, along with music. Bishop's initial knowledge of Greek mythology, so prominent during his guided excursions in Mammoth Cave, along with his knowledge of literary classics, was likely absorbed in the Bishop household of his youth. Popular works by Walter Scott, John Bunyan, Virgil, and Homer, certainly would be read aloud along with a smattering of quoted passages in Latin and Greek. Although some thought Bishop's Mammoth Cave guide patter represented "grandiloquent language," this was all part of the carefully orchestrated performance in exhibiting the cave, in which he, in effect, played the role of a circus ringmaster announcing the next act.<sup>12</sup>

After Bishop became a seasoned and knowledgeable guide at Mammoth Cave, questions posed by tourists often centered on his ability to read and write. Thomas Kite, during his 1847 visit to Mammoth Cave, inscribed the following in his diary while at the Cave House.

Mosher our landlord said he [Bishop] knew how to read and write and received his education in the cave. On noticing our looks of surprise, he explained by saying that he learned the alphabet by seeing visitors writing their names on the smooth ceiling of the cave, with the smoke of their lamps.

British abolitionist Russell Carpenter provided a variant on this story, reporting that Bishop "taught himself to read by watching persons write their names, so that he could read manuscript before he could read printing. The first difficulties surmounted he obtained aid." Of all he interviewed, Carpenter considered Bishop to be "the most intelligent slave that I ever met." Carpenter does not, however, state that Bishop acquired this skill in the cave or to what aid he had recourse. Since Bishop was purchased by Gorin in late 1837 and as his signatures in Mammoth date to the following year, it seems

<sup>12</sup> L. Maria Child, "Mammoth Cave," *Letters from New York*, 2d ser., (New York, 1845), 95.

likely that Bishop learned to write his name prior to coming to the cave.<sup>13</sup>

There are interesting parallels between Bishop's mastery of reading and writing with the experiences of Frederick Douglass, one of the most prominent African Americans of the era. Like Bishop, Douglass was born into slavery in Maryland, the biracial child of an enslaved woman and most likely fathered by her white enslaver. Separated from his mother in infancy, as an adolescent Douglass was sent to live in Hugh Auld's household in Baltimore. Auld's wife, Sophia, initially took an interest in the enslaved child and taught him the alphabet, well enough to spell and read simple words, but her husband disapproved and soon forced her to cease. Douglass continued to learn in secret, seeking out "little white boys" on street corners and with spelling book or novel in hand, he would trade bread from home and give to the hungry "urchins, who, in return would give me that more valuable bread of knowledge." After escaping from slavery in 1838, he settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, and, as a gifted orator, writer, and statesman, became one of the foremost leaders of the abolitionist movement.<sup>14</sup>

Freeing the mind from the bondage of slavery was one thing, but the life of the enslaved was rooted in a brutal physical reality. Regardless of his intellectual potential, Bishop was first and foremost an enslaved man with little control over his own life and he faced the frightening possibility that he could be sold at any moment. Although his enslavers would have made their expectations clear, Stephen would

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Kite, "Journal of a Trip Through Kentucky and Visit to Mammoth Cave May and June 1847, McGregor Collection Manuscript, Kentucky Library Special Collection, Western Kentucky University, typescript, 10 (first quotation); Carpenter, *Observations of American Slavery*, 46 (second and third quotations); Oliver Shackelford, "An account of the history of Mammoth Cave during the middle nineteenth century by Oliver Shackelford, one of the guides," Mammoth Cave Office Library, (n.p., n.d.), 4; "Six Explorers find Onyx Room off Mammoth Cave," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 3, 1926. Kite's account is one of the earliest references to Stephen's literacy.

<sup>14</sup> David W. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York, 2018), xiv, 13–16, 35–47; Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston, 1845), 32–34, 36–44, 102–11.

have learned his most important lessons on survival from other enslaved individuals in the Bishop household and plantation.<sup>15</sup>

### A Discordant Home

As Stephen grew up in the Bishop household, he would have observed that all was not well between Catherine and Lowry. In her 1836 divorce petition to the Barren Circuit Court, Catherine wrote “This respondent once loved the Deft [Defendant], when she thought that his love was reciprocal, but his beastly habits of cruel treatment changed her feelings.” For many years Catherine was reluctantly tolerant of Lowry’s infidelities, including raising his biracial children in her own home, but finally he crossed a line. Lowry made a habit of frequenting local prostitutes, and around 1829, he became enamored with one, Catherine “Katy” Crawley. During the next seven years he visited her often, sometimes remaining at her house for weeks at a time and fathered two children by her. With no pretense at secrecy, he boasted that Katy was his second wife and one he far preferred to the original. He would often return from his trysts with Katy in a drunken and argumentative mood. Although he did not physically abuse his wife, he subjected her to severe verbal and emotional trauma, assaulting her with the foulest possible language, accusing her of infidelity, and threatening to whip her with a “cowhide,” all with the aim to drive her from his home.<sup>16</sup>

The circuit court records for *Bishop v. Bishop*, which contained lengthy depositions by white witnesses who had resided in the Bishop home, note that Catherine regularly withstood her husband’s abuses stoically, but at times the attacks were so virulent that she burst into tears. In the final year, Catherine fought back as best she might, at one

<sup>15</sup> According to historian John Boles, “fully aware of their situation, they learned, socialized, and passed on to their children a wide range of behavior . . . that combined equal portions of insubordination and minor rebellion to produce a constant undercurrent of resistance to psychological bondage.” John B. Boles, *Black Southerners 1619–1869* (Lexington, Ky., 1984), 175. See also Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky*, 93–97.

<sup>16</sup> *Bishop v. Bishop* Barren County Circuit Court case #849, July 12, 1836, KDLA. A cowhide is a braided leather whip.

point threatening Lowry with an unloaded pistol, and on another occasion flourishing a fireplace poker. Outraged by her treatment, her friends resorted to extreme measures to check his behavior, once dragging Lowry from his bed in the middle of the night and taking him, blindfolded and gagged, into the woods where he was severely beaten, and on another occasion burning down Katy Crawley's house. Nevertheless, the abuse continued to escalate until, finally, on July 10, 1836, she fled from her home, filing for divorce two days later.<sup>17</sup>

Glasgow attorney Franklin Gorin was retained to handle Lowry's side of the divorce, and was authorized on May 15, 1837, to sell as much of Lowry's estate as needed to settle debts. The lawsuit dragged on for months. Although conventional wisdom has held that divorce was extremely rare and difficult to obtain during the antebellum period in the South, where marriage was viewed as the essential foundation of an agricultural society, modern research has shown that this was not the case and that, in fact, the number of divorces granted increased considerably during the period. Furthermore, judges became more inclined to accept verbal, not just physical abuse, as grounds for dissolution. Given the compelling testimony by numerous witnesses as to Lowry Bishop's many outrages against his wife, the Barren Circuit Court could have granted Catherine's petition for divorce, had not the case been vacated by the death of Lowry Bishop early in 1838.<sup>18</sup>

Bishop, who was sixteen years old in 1836, and others in the household would have been affected by the constant emotional turmoil and fearful as enslaved people were sold to pay Lowry's debts. Indeed, Gorin purchased Bishop and moved him to Mammoth Cave. Frederick Douglass observed that "going to Baltimore laid the foundation, and opened the gateway, to all my subsequent prosperity." Mammoth Cave became Bishop's Baltimore.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Barren County Deed Book O, Power of Attorney from Lowry Bishop to F. Gorin and B. B. Crump, May 15, 1837, 371; Loren Schweningen, *Families in Crisis in the Old South: Divorce, Slavery, and the Law* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2012), 1–16, 32–57.

<sup>19</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 31.

## Mammoth Cave and the Arrival of Stephen Bishop

During the War of 1812, Mammoth Cave was one of the main suppliers of saltpeter, the primary ingredient used in the manufacture of gunpowder.<sup>20</sup> Afterward, the cave began to be shown on a limited basis to a few visitors. Mammoth Cave became a popular destination for the leisure class during the antebellum era. The construction of turnpikes and improved stagecoach service, navigation of inland waterways by steamboats, building of canals, and construction of railroads made formerly remote locations accessible. These advancements, as historian John F. Sears observed, “spurred the development of the country’s urban, commercial, and industrial centers, encouraging the growth of a prosperous middle class and thus creating a potential body of tourists.” As an advanced transportation system came into being, taverns, inns, and hotels sprang up along the roadsides and around destinations that assured travelers of relative safety and comfort away from home.<sup>21</sup>

Improved transportation was insufficient to spur American tourism without compelling destinations to draw visitors. Popular attractions are essentially cultural artifacts that have been created by the work of artists and writers through acts of painting them and describing them, and by the building of accommodations for visitors in their vicinity. During the antebellum era, the two most popular tourist attractions were Niagara Falls and Mammoth Cave. Visitors arriving at Mammoth Cave found comfortable accommodations at the hotel, commonly called the “Cave House” and capable of hosting 150 guests

<sup>20</sup> Slavery was the primary form of labor in saltpeter mining and extraction. See Horton H. Hobbs III, et al., eds., *Mammoth Cave: A Human and Natural History* (Cham, Switz., 2017); Katie Algeo, “Mammoth Cave and the Making of Place,” *Southeastern Geographer* 44 (May 2004): 31; Angelo I. George, *The Saltpeter Empires of Great Saltpetre Cave and Mammoth Cave* (Louisville, Ky., 2001); Duane De Paepe, *Gunpowder from Mammoth Cave: The Saga of Saltpetre Mining Before and During the War of 1812* (Hays, Kans., 1985).

<sup>21</sup> John F. Sears, *Sacred Places: American Tourist Attractions in the Nineteenth Century* (Amherst, Mass., 1998), 3, 4 (quotation); Richard H. Gassan, *The Birth of American Tourism: New York, the Hudson Valley, and American Culture, 1790–1830* (Amherst, Mass., 2008), 4–6. See also Alyssa D. Warrick, “‘Deep’ South: Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, and Environmental Knowledge, 1800–1974” (PhD diss., Mississippi State University, 2017).

at a time. Hundreds of accounts of the cave were written by visitors and published in journals, newspapers, and lavishly illustrated books, all of which served to stimulate public interest.<sup>22</sup>

Mammoth Cave is the longest surveyed cave in the world, with over 426 miles accurately charted, the result of careful surveys made by generations of cave explorers. The vast labyrinthian scope of the cave was scarcely comprehended at the time Bishop was brought to the cave, although many considered it to be limitless. The first accurate survey of the cave was made in 1835 by Edmund Francis Lee, a civil engineer from Cincinnati, Ohio, using a surveyor's transit, rod, and chain. The commissioned survey and map indicated about eight miles of passage.<sup>23</sup>

Gorin and Alexander A. Harvey purchased Mammoth Cave for \$5,000 on March 7, 1838, to operate as a commercial attraction. Gorin brought an enslaved teen-aged Stephen to initially work in the hotel and then as an apprentice to learn the trails and lore of Mammoth Cave under the tutelage of cave manager Archibald Miller, Jr. and guides Joseph C. and Robinson Shackelford. Over the next nineteen years Bishop became the most celebrated guide, and his fame was assured when he orchestrated the first crossing of the Bottomless Pit on October 20, 1838—his bold explorations more than tripled the known length of the cave in just three years.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Sears, *Sacred Places*, 4–11; Gassan, *Birth of American Tourism*, 5; Horace C. Hovey, *Guide Book to the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1884), 15. In 2021, Mammoth Cave National Park received 516,000 visitors. “Mammoth Cave National Park receives \$6.5 million in funding to rehabilitate popular cave trail,” National Park Service, available online via <https://www.nps.gov/macal/learn/news/mammoth-cave-national-park-receives-6-5-million-in-funding-to-rehabilitate-popular-cave-trail.htm> (accessed January 19, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> Limaris Soto & Dale L. Pate, *Cave and Karst Resources Summary: Mammoth Cave National Park, Kentucky* (Washington, D.C., 2016), 1; Edmund F. Lee, *Notes on the Mammoth Cave, to Accompany a Map* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1835), 28; Bullitt, *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844, by a Visitor*, xii.

<sup>24</sup> Forwood, *An Historical and Descriptive Narrative of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, 22–23; Harold Meloy, “Introduction to the Reprint Edition,” in Alexander C. Bullitt, *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844 by a Visitor*, (Louisville, Ky., 1845; repr., New York, 1973), xii. The original deed for Gorin's purchase cannot be located, but the conveyance is referred to in Edmonson County Deed Book F, 415.

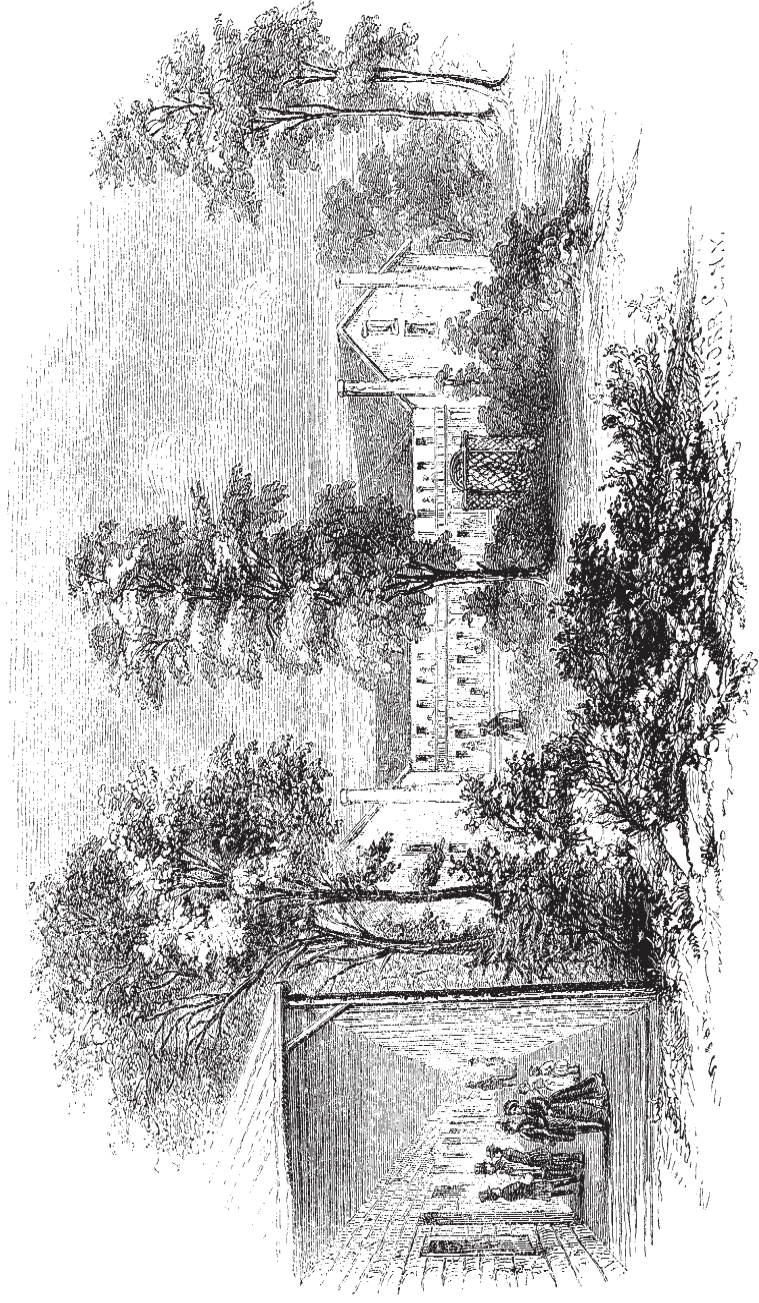
In 1839, Gorin and Harvey expanded their guide pool by leasing enslaved teenagers Mat Bransford and Nick Bransford for \$100 each per year. Although often referred to as brothers in travel accounts, the new guides were not related but shared their enslaver's surname. They were enslaved by Glasgow attorney Thomas Bransford and were later purchased from the Bransford estate by his son, Thomas L. Bransford, in 1853. Both Mat Bransford and Stephen Bishop were very dynamic and outgoing and charmed the crowds at Mammoth Cave.<sup>25</sup>

On October 8, 1839, Dr. John Croghan, of Louisville, Kentucky, purchased Mammoth Cave and 1,610 surrounding acres from Gorin for \$10,000. Croghan ushered in a new age of tourism in Mammoth Cave, and the property remained part of his estate and managed by his heirs until the National Park Service bought the cave in 1941. During Croghan's first years as operator, the old Mammoth Cave Hotel, built circa 1811, was renovated and expanded to accommodate more tourists. The purchase of Bishop was included in the Gorin-Croghan land transaction and Croghan also assumed the lease of Mat and Nick Bransford. Croghan's enslaved man, Alfred Croghan, was assigned to the guide pool and quickly learned to navigate through the labyrinth of cave passages. He was one year younger than Bishop and remained part of the Mammoth Cave "property" in future land transactions. Although Alfred was frequently mentioned in various accounts over a period of decades, we know little about the man and his exploits.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Meloy, "Introduction to the Reprint Edition," *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844 by a Visiter*, xii; Lyons, *Making Their Mark*, 44, 49.

<sup>26</sup> Gorin to Croghan, Edmonson County Deed Book D, 47; Harold Meloy, "Outline of Mammoth Cave History," *Journal of Spelean History* 13 (January–June 1979): 28. John Croghan (1790–1849) was born into wealth and increased his fortune in the salt brine industry. His uncle was George Rogers Clark, founder of Louisville. He never married, and when he died in 1849, Mammoth Cave was willed to his nieces and nephews. For a time, he conducted experiments inside Mammoth Cave trying to find a cure for tuberculosis, based upon his belief that the air in the cave had curative properties. The experiment was a failure. In 1852, Gorin was the proprietor of an inn in Nashville, Tennessee. See Russell L. Carpenter, *Observations of American Slavery* (London, U.K., 1852), 46.





CAVE HOUSE

The Cave House, which later became known as the Mammoth Cave Hotel. Illustration by John W. Orr for Horace Martin, *Pictorial Guide to the Mammoth Cave, Kentucky* (New York, 1851), frontispiece.

From various travel accounts it would appear Bishop had a self-taught classical education, including an understanding of Greek and Latin. While shepherding tourists through the cave, he would quote from the ancient classics with facility, in the appropriate context for the wonders being described. Thomas Gunn was among a minority of visitors in thinking he merely parroted the phrases without comprehension. Condescending remarks from German symphonic conductor Julius Benedict characterized Bishop as lacking true knowledge, noting “of course, uneducated, he is essentially a clever man, and has contrived to pick up a vast amount of information from associating with every description of persons.” Most, however, accepted Bishop’s expertise.<sup>27</sup>

Writing to Maryland physician W. Stump Forwood on February 9, 1868, Gorin observed that “Stephen was self-educated; he had a fine genius” and “learned whatever he wished without trouble or labor.” Bishop possessed a working knowledge of basic geology and continued to build upon this through reading books on natural science and conversations with scientists and scholars on his guided trips through the cave. In 1843, Lydia Maria Child, an ardent abolitionist, lauded Bishop’s expertise on Mammoth Cave and many other subjects.

His vocation has brought him into contact with many intellectuals and scientific men, and as he has great quickness of perception and a prodigious memory, he has profited much by intercourse with superior minds. He can recall everybody that ever visited the cave, and all the terms of geology and mineralogy are at his tongue’s end.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup> Gunn, *Gunn Diaries*, vol. 6, p. 136; Julius Benedict, “Jenny Lind’s Visit to the Mammoth Cave,” in Horace Martin, *Pictorial Guide to the Mammoth Cave, Kentucky*, (New York, 1851), 10 (quotation). Benedict (1804–1885), a German classical operatic composer and orchestral conductor, was part of the entourage accompanying opera singer Jenny Lind on her American tour which included a visit to Mammoth Cave.

<sup>28</sup> Gorin to Forwood, February 9, 1868, *A Historical and Descriptive Narrative of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, 26 (first quotation); Child, “Mammoth Cave,” *Letters from New York*, 95 (second quotation).

## **Mammoth Cave and the Development of Bishop's Persona**

Bishop often signed his name on the walls and ceiling of the caves he explored, using the soot of a candle flame. His early signatures in the Labyrinth area and Salts Cave are generally written as Stephen Gorin. Gorin, was usually present during Bishop's first ventures below ground, and such renditions were possibly intended to please his enslaver. After John Croghan purchased the cave in 1839, Bishop occasionally inscribed his name as "Stephen Croghan," along with a date, but more frequently began identifying himself as "Stephen Bishop" and, after reaching star status as a guide, added a middle initial to become "Stephen L. Bishop," the "L" possibly referring to Lowry Bishop. His contemporary, Frederick Douglass, changed his surname five times, but, like Stephen, never his first name, to "preserve a sense of my identity." For Stephen, writing his name in the cave in multiple locations was a way of affirming, "I was here, I am a person, I have an identity."<sup>29</sup>

Immersed in the unique sociocultural environment of a Mammoth Cave guide, carrying out daring solo explorations into the unknown and leading tourists to view the marvels of the cave, Bishop's public persona soon evolved to that of a showman and authority on the nature of the underground world. When Gorin and Harvey purchased Mammoth Cave, Bishop was initially employed in the hotel and cave. An early visitor, John Wood, described his tour of the cave as being accompanied by "Mr. Miller, two guides, and a servant boy, Stephen." We do not know under what circumstances he was subsequently selected to apprentice as guide under the direction of cave manager Archibald Miller, Jr., and the other experienced guides. As an enslaved man, he may have been tasked to carry supplies and provisions into the cave for the guides and tourists, such as lamp oil, candles, matches, pyrotechnics, and food. In the process he was able to memorize the labyrinth of passageways through which he traveled and, from listening to guide patter, acquired knowledge of the cave's history and

<sup>29</sup> Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 111, 112 (quotations).



Unidentified Black guide leading tourists in Mammoth Cave. Illustrated by Hammatt Billings for "State of Kentucky," *Ballou's Pictorial Drawing-Room Companion* 11 (November 29, 1856), 337.



attractions.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, it was his education that proved to be of most value, an education that he continued to build throughout his life as he met scholars and scientists in the tour groups.

Bishop was a dynamic orator who entertained and enlightened his charges during excursions with a continuous exposition extolling of the beauties and lore of Mammoth Cave.<sup>31</sup> Bishop engaged tourists between exhibit stations in the cave, asking their opinion on the latest local and national news, international events, and recently published novels. As one English visitor observed:

His voice, his manner, his bearing was as free and fearless, slave though he was, as if he felt, in that dark and solitary place, with no eye to watch us but that of the Almighty, we were brother men. He pursued his calling, the necessary pointing out of the various branches and avenues, more like a companion who had been often there than a paid functionary. His questions and remarks were all those of a fine, intelligent mind. He opened upon me with eager enquiries about the war with China, and, during the whole time we were together, there was hardly a pause in our conversation [seven and a half hours]. Did it cease during the difficult portions of the way, the ascending or descending of ladders, or the pausing to admire in silence, the question was not forgotten, but was invariably repeated. He was much interested in Toussaint L'Ouverture, with whose life and character I had been interested in Miss Martineau's noble romance, then just published. If any that read these lines should go over the same ground, let him ask for "Stephen," the lad's name, and he will be as much charmed as I was.<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> John S. Wood, "Mammoth Cave of Kentucky," *American Magazine and Repository of Useful Literature* 1 (September 1841), 88 (quotation).

<sup>31</sup> Guides singing and striking cave formations and large boulders to elicit musical notes was an integral part of the Mammoth Cave tourist experience. See Joseph C. Douglas, "Music in the Mammoth Cave: An Important Aspect of 19th Century Cave Tourism," *Journal of Speleology* 32 (July–September 1998), 47–59.

<sup>32</sup> "Reminiscences of a trip to the United States," *The Albion* (Liverpool, U.K.), March 21, 1842 (quotation). The war in China refers to the first Opium War (1839–1842). François-

Very early in Bishop's life at the cave he was involved in a search and rescue mission for Charles F. Harvey, a nephew of Gorin who became lost. This led to Bishop's discovery of the vast cave that lay beyond the Bottomless Pit. Harvey came to Mammoth Cave in the fall of 1838 on a wedding trip with his new bride, Martha, and while on tour within the cave, was allowed by the guides to go back alone to look for his misplaced silk hat. While so engaged, his light was extinguished and, having no other sensible option, he sat in the darkness for thirty-nine hours waiting to be rescued. When Harvey did not emerge from the entrance, a rescue effort was immediately mounted, but the rescuers faced an immense challenge: Harvey could physically be anywhere in this eight-mile-long cave. Bishop had not yet been promoted to guide status but he diligently searched through every passage along with the guides and other volunteers. Through a low crawlway, Bishop discovered a dome-pit complex which became the largest then-known void in the cave. Sharing news of the discovery, Franklin Gorin named it Gorin's Dome after himself. This became one of the headline attractions in the cave.<sup>33</sup>

Bishop continued to search for Harvey and, at the Bottomless Pit Branch (present-day Black Snake Avenue), was stopped by the deep abyss spanning the entire width of the passage. The pit was known prior to the War of 1812, when Mammoth Cave was mined for saltpeter, and had halted further exploration beyond this point. During the winter of 1834–1835, civil engineer Edmund F. Lee plumbed its depth to 173 feet, an overestimate (as it was later determined), and by dropping rocks down the hole, decided that it might be “perhaps another hundred feet lower.” The shaft was even thought to penetrate deeper than the bed of Green River, although this also

Dominique Toussaint Louverture was the leader of the Haitian revolution and figured in the novel *The Hour of the Man* by Harriet Martineau in 1840.

<sup>33</sup> Meloy, “Introduction to the Reprint Edition,” *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844 by a Visiter*, xi; Gorin to Forwood, February 9, 1868, *A Historical and Descriptive Narrative of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, 24–25; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 30, 1912; Shackelford, “An Account of the History of Mammoth Cave,” 4; Willis, *Health Trip to the Tropics*, 164.



LE GORIN'S DOME DANS MAMMOTH CAVE (KENTUCKY) (d'après nature).

Gorin's Dome in Mammoth Cave. Illustration by French landscape artist and early aeronaut balloonist Albert Tissandier, in *Six Mois aux États-Unis* (Paris, France, 1886), 54.



was later shown to be incorrect. The actual depth is about 100 feet below the level of the footbridge that spans the pit today. Returning to the Main Cave, Stephen proceeded to the Great Bend (today, Acute Angle) where a side passage (formerly the Sick Room) branched off to the right. Here Bishop found the hapless newlywed huddling in a corridor that became known afterward as Harvey's Avenue.<sup>34</sup>

Guides related stories from the cave's history that were intended not only to entertain and educate, but also to make their own jobs easier. Among notable events in the cave's history that were described with relish by guides were the harrowing ordeal of Harvey and the death of Alexander Wright in Long Cave in 1814. These stories were cautionary tales that served the purpose of crowd control, helping to keep the tour group together mindful of their instructions to not wander off, lest one end up like the unfortunate Wright or Harvey.<sup>35</sup>

After the Harvey rescue, Gorin was "determined to have further explorations made" with particular focus on reaching the long inaccessible passage on the other side of Bottomless Pit. The great void of Gorin's Dome was an exciting find, and further discoveries, suitably publicized, could only help boost attendance and revenues. Some of the guests who arrived at Mammoth Cave wanted more than a tame ramble along well-trodden tourist trails. They wanted to experience the high adventure of discovering new places. Having soon devised

<sup>34</sup> Lee, *Notes on the Map of Mammoth Cave*, 5 (quotation); Meloy, "Introduction to the Reprint Edition," *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844 by a Visitor*, xi; *Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 30, 1912; Shackelford, "An Account of the History of Mammoth Cave," 4; Arthur N. Palmer, *A Geological Guide to Mammoth Cave Park* (Teaneck, N.J., 1981), 158.

<sup>35</sup> Robert M. Bird, "The Mammoth Cave," *Peter the Pilgrim*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia, 1838), 95–100; Gorin to Forwood, February 9, 1868, *A Historical and Descriptive Narrative of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, 24. Long Cave is located about four miles south of Mammoth Cave. Mined for saltpeter prior to the War of 1812, the cave was visited in 1814 by Alexander Wright, a saltpeter speculator who died while exploring the cave. For a long time thereafter, the cave was called Wright's Cave or the Cave of Death. The cave was developed as a commercial attraction called Grand Avenue Cave during the late nineteenth century. The actual length of Long Cave is about three and a half miles. Alexander Wright is identified as the Long Cave fatality in John Boyle, *Boyle Genealogy: John Boyle of Virginia and Kentucky* (St., Louis, Mo., 1909), 134.

a way to cross the forbidding chasm, Bishop was easily able to recruit a small group of thrill-seeking visitors for the attempt.<sup>36</sup>

On October 20, 1838, Bishop escorted Hiram C. Stevenson from Georgetown, Kentucky, and several others on an adventure of a lifetime. The explorers crossed the Bottomless Pit on a wooden ladder shoved across the width of the pit, laying the groundwork to triple the known length of Mammoth Cave. Bishop led the explorers onward where they “found themselves in a cave of considerable size . . . which after exploring to the distance of two miles, brought them, to their utter astonishment and delight, to the celebrated river of the cave.” The new discovery beyond the pit was, briefly, called Fingal’s Cave.<sup>37</sup>

To help promote the cave, exciting new discoveries required appropriately dramatic place names. Beyond the pit, the first large passage on the right was named Pensico Avenue, possibly a misspelling of the Italian neoclassical sculptor Luigi Persico, who, in 1835 to great public fanfare, had just installed two large white marble statues (War and Peace) in the nation’s capital. The large dry passage, believed at the time to be several miles in length, was adorned with a variety of stalactites, stalagmites, and gypsum incrustations and contained two prominent formations known respectively as the Devil’s Pulpit and the Pineapple Bush. Writing in late 1838, Leo Tymann described the beauty of the passage when first discovered, the floor was “covered with an incrustation of dark on top but white and glistening underneath: it is not sufficiently thick (not exceeding one-fourth of an inch) to bear a person’s weight in walking. You are reminded of walking

<sup>36</sup> Gorin to Forwood, February 9, 1868, *A Historical and Descriptive Narrative of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, 24 (quotation). During the period, the section known as Main Cave stretched from the Historic Entrance to the end in Symme’s Pit, a distance of more than 2.25 miles.

<sup>37</sup> Meloy, “Introduction to the Reprint Edition,” *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844 by a Visiter*, xii; John Croghan letter to Ebenezer Meriam, quoted in “The Mammoth Cave,” *Charlotte Journal* (Charlotte, N.C.), November 4, 1841, 2. There is enough context in the article to identify Croghan as the author of the letter. John S. Wood, who visited the cave in 1838 shortly after the crossing of Bottomless Pit, states that it was Bishop who made the first traverse. See Wood, “Mammoth Cave of Kentucky,” *American Magazine* 1 (December 1841), 188.

over frozen snow.” Another passage was christened Bunyan Way after the cleric John Bunyan, whose *Pilgrim’s Progress* provided several place names.<sup>38</sup>

Near the end of Fingal’s Cave is the Winding Way (today, Fat Man’s Misery), which connects into River Hall, Bandit’s Hall, and four successive bodies of water (Dead Sea, River Styx, Lake Lethe, and The River). The Dead Sea, named for the Middle Eastern body of water, could be circumvented by visitors. The River Styx is named for the river in Greek mythology that marks the boundary between Earth and the Underworld. Lake Lethe derives its name from Lethe, in Greek mythology one of the five rivers that flow to Hades. This mythological river flowed through the Cave of Hypnos and through the Underworld, where all who drank from its waters experienced complete loss of memory. Initially halted by the River Styx, Bishop must have pushed into the water, feeling his way for footing in water over five feet deep. Writing in 1845, Lydia Maria Child gave a graphic description of what it was like for him to explore these subterranean streams: “Stephen has floated for hours up to his chin and forced his way through the narrowest apertures under the dark waves, so as to leave merely his head a breathing space.” The River, later called Jordan and then Echo River, was wide and too deep to wade, requiring a boat to proceed further. Tourists, of course, would need a boat to traverse these water bodies.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> L. T. [Tymann], 1838, “Mammoth Cave, Nov. 3d, 1838,” *Frankfort (Ky.) Commonwealth*, November 21, 1838 (quotation); Walter Scott and Joseph M. W. Turner, *Poetical Works of Sir Walter Scott*, Bart, vol. 10, ed. J. G. Lockhart (Edinburgh, Scotland, 1833). An interior view of Fingal’s Cave by Turner was used as a frontispiece to illustrate Scott’s narrative romantic poem, *The Lord of the Isles*. Tymann was an educator who operated Leo Tymann’s Public Seminary in Frankfort, Kentucky. Bishop made a number of spelling errors in addition to Pensico Avenue. John Croghan rejected the initial proof copy of Bishop’s Mammoth Cave map in January 1845 for this reason; several corrections were made for the final print run. See John Croghan to Morton & Griswold, Printers [Louisville], January 27, 1845, Huntington Library (San Marino, Calif.) microfilm R-1. At the start of the 1856 spring tourist season, Pensico Avenue was renamed to Pensacola Avenue.

<sup>39</sup> Child, “Mammoth Cave,” 88 (quotation); K, “Mammoth Cave—No. 2,” *The Cincinnati Miscellany or Antiquities of the West*, 2 (1846), 45; Tymann, “Mammoth Cave.” Mammoth Cave no longer offers boat tours.



THE RIVER STYX

The River Styx in Mammoth Cave. Illustration by John Andrew for Horace Martin, *Pictorial Guide to the Mammoth Cave, Kentucky* (New York, 1851), 61.

The earliest reference to the crossing of the Bottomless Pit and into Fingal's Cave was published in an account by Leo Tymann to the *Frankfort Commonwealth* in November 1838, only a few weeks after the pit had been conquered. Eager to capitalize on the new discoveries, Gorin quickly constructed a narrow bridge over the pit to allow tourist access, which was completed by the time of Tymann's visit on November 3. Miles of new passageways were discovered and a route found to the bottom of Gorin's Dome. Soon after the discovery of The River, a crude map was made, probably by a visitor, showing distances and compass bearings from the cave entrance across the Bottomless Pit to The River and other places in the old historic part of the cave.<sup>40</sup>

### **Wood's 1838 Survey of Mammoth Cave**

With the Bottomless Pit finally surmounted, the 1835 map of the cave by civil engineer Edmund F. Lee became obsolete. A new map was needed to depict recent discoveries. Ever since Lee made his survey with an engineer's transit, chain, and rod, the resulting map had been disputed by the managers and guides since it showed little more than eight miles of passages. Those familiar with the cave were certain the length calculated by Lee was far short of the actual span of the cave, even though his survey was made with precision instruments.<sup>41</sup>

Dr. John S. Wood visited Mammoth Cave about six weeks after the crossing, and inscribed his name and date of visit, "Dr. J. S. Wood, Albany, Dec. 5, 1838," on the cave wall along with other signatures in Pensico Avenue, Bottomless Pit Branch, and Fox Avenue. Wood was determined to make a better survey of Mammoth Cave. "We went provided with every necessary apparatus—compass and time-piece,

<sup>40</sup> Tymann, "Mammoth Cave"; Unpublished anonymous handwritten compass and pace survey notes and partial sketch map of "Fingal's Cave," n.d., Filson Historical Society, Louisville, Kentucky. Approximate date of creation is derived from place name usage on the map.

<sup>41</sup> Lee, *Notes on the Mammoth Cave to Accompany a Map*. Thomas Law to E. I. du Pont, June 11, 1811, trans. Bessie G. du Pont, in *Life of Eleuthère Irénée du Pont from Contemporary Correspondence*, vol. 8 (Newark, Del., 1925), 306.

level and measuring line, candles and flambeau-lamps, pencil and paper . . . accompanied by Mr. Miller, two guides and a servant boy, Stephen.” “Biscuit and claret” in Bishop’s basket would do much to ease the surveyors’ work.<sup>42</sup>

Three years later, in 1841, Wood published a description of Mammoth Cave accompanied by his map, based upon his own notes, quoting extensively from several of Ebenezer Meriam’s articles on Mammoth Cave published in the *New York Journal of Commerce* during the same year. Unlike most of the early Mammoth Cave maps, this one included a north arrow and bar scale showing distance in miles. Wood’s measurements of passage lengths were, however, dramatically inflated from those more accurately surveyed by Lee in 1835 through what is now known as the historic section of Mammoth Cave. The finished map shows twenty-four miles of passage, of which two miles of Fingal’s Cave extend beyond the Bottomless Pit to The River. As more discoveries were made, even Wood’s map fell far short of all the passages known to Bishop.<sup>43</sup>

Wood’s article provides a revealing assessment of eighteen-year-old Stephen Bishop. While visiting the Haunted Chamber (present-day Gothic Avenue) at the First Echo, Bishop demonstrated the acoustical qualities and sonic reverberations of the room. As Wood observed,

the eyes of the guides glisten with delight to witness our astonishment; “aint this a roarer?” cries Stephen, bounding and skipping about, jumping upon the floor as if he would break through

<sup>42</sup> Harold Meloy to Norman W. Salisbury, *Park Naturalist*, Mammoth Cave, December 12, 1966, quoted in Meloy, “Notes by Harold Meloy: Old Names and Dates, First Crossing of Bottomless Pit, J. N. McDowell & the Lead-Alcohol Coffins,” unpublished manuscript, Mammoth Cave Office Library (first quotation); Wood, “Mammoth Cave of Kentucky,” *American Magazine* 1 (September 1841), 88 (second quotation); Mammoth Cave Signature Project, manuscript, Mammoth Cave Office Library. Consumption of alcoholic beverages was part of the tourist experience in the early days of exhibiting the cave to the public.

<sup>43</sup> Wood, “Mammoth Cave of Kentucky,” *American Magazine* 1 (September 1841), 86–90, (November 1841), 130–33, (December 1841), 184–90. The Historic Section in Mammoth Cave entails all the cave passages known before the Bottomless Pit was crossed in 1838.



the sounding rocks for our amusement, and making the welkin ring with song of exultation.”

His physical antics and singing were a crowd-pleaser, his voice described by Carlton H. Rogers as “rich and musical.” Singing by guides was an integral part of the tourist experience, especially during the boat ride along The River a few years after Wood’s visit. During the survey through Main Cave, they came to a location known as the Black Chambers, a vast and foreboding place filled with dark soot-covered boulders, where Bishop noticed an obscure passage just beyond the Black Chambers on the left side of Main Cave. Without encouragement or direction, he darted away and was gone for some time, exploring for more than a thousand feet until the passage became too narrow to continue. Returning to the party, he explained, “it isn’t bigger than a fox hole,” and christened it “Fox Alley.”<sup>44</sup>

By the time Wood carried his survey into the Bottomless Pit area, he had acquired a new appreciation for Bishop, describing him in very complimentary terms that helped to propel him into star status for visitors to the cave. He portrayed Bishop’s crossing of the Bottomless Pit as a quest of dogged determination to push into the cave as far as humanly possible.

The undertaking was truly a bold one, yet he succeeded to his master’s utmost wish, who promised Stephen that whatever caves he discovers should bear his name. Thus fired, his ambition was blown into a flame, and for twenty-four hours, without food,

<sup>44</sup> Wood, “Mammoth Cave of Kentucky,” *American Magazine* 1(December 1841), 185 (first quotation), (November 1841), 131 (third quotation); Carlton H. Rogers, *Incidents of Travel in the Southern States and Cuba* (New York, 1862), 306–07 (second quotation). Gothic Avenue is a high-level passage studded with cave formations, reminiscent of Gothic architecture in Europe. The passage was also called the Haunted Chamber, a designation dating back to the saltpeter mining era. Miners had to traverse this passage to reach a lower level that was rich in saltpeter deposits. Fox Alley should not be confused with Fox Avenue, a cut around opposite present-day Wright’s Rotunda. Wood signed his name on the wall in Fox Avenue. See Mammoth Cave Signature Project, a record kept in the Mammoth Cave Park office.



he continued to make discoveries, not even returning, lest some modern Americus Vespucci should “rob him of his glory.” No sooner had he made the way known to others than they strove to call it Fingall’s Cave; but it bears the name of Stephen still.

The discovery of Fingal’s Cave opened the portal to many miles of new passages and led the way down to a large river complex which held the key to even greater discoveries. Numerous individual passages, chambers, and features in the new discovery were endowed with an assortment of colorful designations, many evoking classical mythologies. Bishop’s fame as a guide was sealed: there are no reports as to passages that may have been discovered by the other guides, Mat, Nick, and Alfred, although they were surely involved in the explorations of the new sections.<sup>45</sup>

### Follow the Water

Exploration of The River passage was done in stages, delayed by the deep water and the potential for explorers to be trapped or drowned by rising floodwaters. A boat would be needed to continue investigation of the river level. Gorin described such explorations in a letter dated July 25, 1839, writing, “In another cave a large stream of water was discovered, filling up the whole cave, by means of a small boat it was explored several hundred yards.”<sup>46</sup> The boat was probably a small canoe, because Robert Davidson reported one being used on The River in October 1839. Owner John Croghan referred to river explorations in a letter dated November 15, 1839, to his brother-in-law Thomas S. Jesup, quartermaster general of the United States Army.

<sup>45</sup> Wood, “Mammoth Cave of Kentucky,” *American Magazine* 1(December 1841) 188 (quotation). Amerigo Vespucci was a New World explorer who determined that the landmass discovered by Columbus extended greatly to the south and was not connected to Asia. Wood’s new map and description of Mammoth Cave applied both the name of Fingal’s Cave and Stephen’s Cave to the new discovery but neither designation persisted as a place name. Cave guides Mat, Nick, and Alfred did not distinguish themselves as explorers until after Bishop died in 1857; there is only one event reported in which Mat accompanied Bishop in the exploration of the Mammoth Dome.

<sup>46</sup> “Mammoth Cave,” *Republican Compiler* (Gettysburg, Penn.) December 21, 1839.

Mr. Gorin writes me Oct. 20th that “some visitors & himself had spent several days in the Cave & had found 4 large branches, one of which they explored a mile or two and came to a river 50 feet wide & 3 deep. They caught some fish which were perfectly white & upon coming out of the Cave they ascertained with a microscope that the fish had no eyes.”

Two years later, an anonymous letter writer, added more substance.

The lake in the cave has never been explored—some few have attempted it, but they have become alarmed and abandoned the enterprise. Stevenson of Georgetown has ventured further on it than any other person. He passed, while on it, I am told, the mouth of four rivers or caves filled with water. It is of great depth and is supposed of great width. This however, I conceive doubtful, as I cannot conceive of the existence of an arch of sufficient extension to admit a lake of dimension. In descending the river to the lake, the mouth of a great many caves were seen, all of which are to be explored.

Croghan’s statement suggests that Hiram Stevenson, who participated in the first crossing of the Bottomless Pit, returned to the cave and continued exploration along the river, once again possibly guided by Bishop. They launched their boat on The River and paddled to a large lake at the supposed end of the river.<sup>47</sup>

<sup>47</sup> “Mammoth Cave,” *Republican Compiler*, December 21, 1839 (first quotation); John Croghan to Major General Thomas S. Jesup, Washington, D.C., November 15, 1839, Library of Congress microfilm (R-2) (second quotation); “Mammoth Cave,” *North Carolina (Raleigh) Statesman*, September 8, 1841 (third quotation); Robert Davidson, *An Excursion to the Mammoth Cave, and the Barrens of Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky., 1840), 54–55. Much later, the Roaring River was discovered beyond the terminal lake by guide Nick Bransford. See F. J. Stevenson, “Adventures Underground. The Mammoth Cave of Kentucky in 1863,” *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 231 (June 1932): 739.

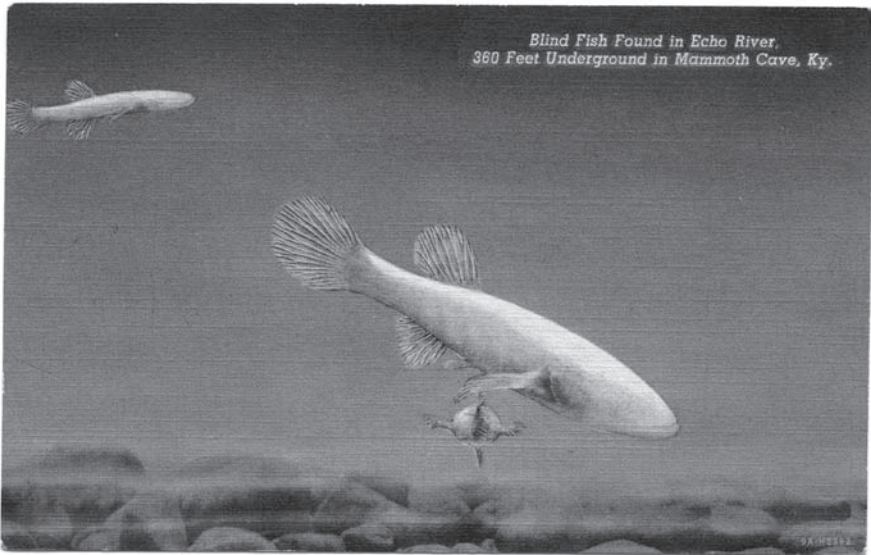
Later explorations showed that the lake was only a continuation of the river. There are several places along the river where the ceiling dips to within a few feet of the water level. This deterred exploration until Bishop and Stevenson pushed beneath the obstacles, opening the way to even more miles of passage. By following the water into side passages draining into the river, one can climb up into dry passages of great extent at higher elevations. Bishop employed this practice to great effect in finding new passages and domes, some seventeen miles by late 1841. A traverse of the entire river was achieved in 1840, at about which time Bishop renamed the stream as the River Jordan.<sup>48</sup>

The sighting of blind albino fish, never seen before, was an epic discovery. Co-discoverers of the fish are believed to be Bishop, Gorin, and Stevenson, and the discovery was probably made in early October 1839. Not much larger than one's finger, the fish are prevalent throughout the lowest stream level in Mammoth and easy to see in clear water. They became a sought-after attraction during tourist boating trips. The first public report of the blind fish is found in Davidson's 1840 Mammoth Cave guidebook, who, from context, visited the cave in October 1839. The fish were discovered some time before his arrival.<sup>49</sup>

In November 1840, Bishop and an unidentified German individual explored a passage off River Hall by climbing up a steep slope into a higher-level passage. After about a mile, the passage ended in a crawlway and after edging though, they found themselves perched on a ledge with a sharp drop into a great black void. The cavity was so large that their feeble lights barely penetrated the darkness. The pyrotechnic brilliance of Bengal lights would have showed the true magnitude of the cavity, but they had none with them in this explora-

<sup>48</sup> Bullitt, *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844 by a Visitor*, 85.

<sup>49</sup> Davidson, *Excursion to the Mammoth Cave*, 1840, 54. Davidson does not report who made the first sighting of blind fish. Within a year, biologists were studying the fish. Cave guides collected fish for sale to tourists as curiosities. In 1842, James E. DeKay provided the first scientific description of the blind fish, *Amblyopsis spelaea*, from Mammoth Cave, in his *Zoology of New York, Part IV, Fishes* (Albany, N.Y., 1842), 187.



Blind fish found in Echo River, 360 feet underground in Mammoth Cave. Image courtesy of the Ronald Morgan Postcard Collection, Graphic 5, Kentucky Historical Society.

tion. They were able to ascertain that they were situated part way up an enormous dome with no easy way to reach the floor, except by rope. During the following month, Bishop and Mat brought four or five tourists and a quantity of rope to the drop-off point. The tourist assistants played out thirty feet of rope and lowered Bishop, then Mat to the floor of the dome. The ceiling was estimated to be four hundred feet high, although the actual height is about 192 feet. Bishop named the feature Mammoth Dome, the largest and highest void in Mammoth Cave today.<sup>50</sup> This was not the first time Bishop used rope work to get to the bottom of deep pits. Shortly after crossing the Bottomless

<sup>50</sup> "Mammoth Cave of Kentucky," *Boston Weekly Magazine* 3 (September 4, 1841), 402; Hovey, *Celebrated American Caverns*, 109; Meloy, "Introduction to the Reprint Edition," *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844 by a Visitor*, xviii; Bullitt, *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave*, 74; Palmer, *Geological Guide to Mammoth Cave*, 161. Hovey identified Mat as being Bishop's partner in the exploration of Mammoth Dome.

Pit in October 1838, he explored a side passage known today as Vanderbilt University Hall. Near the left wall is a deep pit. He was lowered down on a rope eighty feet to the bottom and chiseled his name into the wall, "Stephen Bishop 1838."<sup>51</sup>

Following a side passage off the River Jordan, Cleaveland's Cabinet was discovered in July 1841 by Bishop, Bryce McLellan Patten of Louisville, and John Craig of Philadelphia. The passage was named for Parker Cleaveland, the noted Bowdoin College chemist and mineralogist. Cleaveland's Cabinet is a long trunk cave passage festooned with gypsum incrustations in multitudes of shapes and forms. When first discovered, the place resembled a winter wonderland.<sup>52</sup>

Word of exciting new discoveries made by Bishop brought more tourists to Mammoth. The cave guides incorporated stories of exploration breakthroughs into their expositions, enthusiastically recalling for tourists how Bishop crossed the forbidding Bottomless Pit and discovered many miles of new passageways.<sup>53</sup>

Crossing a pit on a ladder, descending deep shafts on a rope, wading underground rivers in cold, neck-deep water, exploring alone for hours through passages no one had ever seen before, such accounts could tell us about Stephen's mental perspective. One tourist was surprised to find "the prince of guides . . . seems more like the high-priest and expounder of its mysteries, than a hired guide, much less a slave." For Bishop, Mammoth Cave was an environment that loos-

<sup>51</sup> "Six Explorers Find Onyx Room off Mammoth Cave," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, May 3, 1926.

<sup>52</sup> Bullitt, *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave*, 91–94; Horace C. Hovey, *Guide Book to the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, 59, 65–66. Bryce Patten graduated from Bowdoin College (Maine) in 1837, where he likely studied chemistry with Cleaveland and would have been familiar with the outstanding mineral collection at that institution. In 1842, he founded the Kentucky Institution for the Education of the Blind in Louisville. Gypsum cave formations in the shape of curved flower petals were first described scientifically by John Locke in a letter dated October 26, 1841. See John Locke, "Alabaster in the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky," *American Journal of Science and Arts* 42 (April 1842): 206–07.

<sup>53</sup> Gorin to Forwood, February 9, 1868, 26; L. Child, "Mammoth Cave," *Letters from New York*, 95; Hovey, *Celebrated American Caverns*, 58; Harold Meloy, "Historic Maps of Mammoth Cave," *Journal of Spelean History* 8 (July–December 1975), 28.

ened the bonds of slavery in a way like that observed by Frederick Douglass of northern cities, who wrote, “a city slave is almost a free-man, compared with a slave on the plantation.”<sup>54</sup>

Aside from the sense of opportunity Bishop gained from exploring Mammoth Cave, there is little difficulty in attributing his motivations for embracing the challenges. From prehistory to the present day, humans have been lured into the underground world by a fascination with exploring the unknown. Noted archaeologists Patty Jo Watson and Mary C. Kennedy observed that prehistoric peoples of the Late Archaic period (prior to 1000 BCE) were mainly exploring caves of the Mammoth Cave region for sport, and today there are tens of thousands worldwide engaged in the activity for recreational or scientific purposes. In 1923, George Mallory was asked why he wanted to climb Mount Everest. According to reports, he answered, “Because it’s there!” Pressed for further explanation, Mallory observed, “Why do we travel to remote locations? To prove our adventurous spirit or to tell stories about incredible things? We do it to be alone amongst friends and to find ourselves in a land without man.” This one statement may well encapsulate Bishop’s drive to push the limits of the unknown.<sup>55</sup>

### **Stephen Bishop, Cartographer, and Savant**

During the winter of 1841–1842, Croghan’s brother George and Bishop traveled to Locust Grove, the family home in Louisville, Kentucky, to produce a new map of Mammoth Cave, incorporating any recent discoveries. Bishop possessed a clear comprehension

<sup>54</sup> Marianne Finch, *An Englishwoman’s Experience in America* (London, U.K., 1853), 351 (first quotation); Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 34 (second quotation); Wood, “Mammoth Cave of Kentucky,” *American Magazine* 1 (December 1841), 188.

<sup>55</sup> “Climbing Mount Everest is Work for Supermen,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1923 (first quotation); Peter Gillman and Leni Gillman, *The Wildest Dream: The Biography of George Mallory* (Seattle, Wash., 2001), 53 (second quotation); Mary C. Kennedy and Patty Jo Watson, “The Chronology of Early Agriculture and Intensive Mineral Mining in the Salts Cave and Mammoth Cave Region, Mammoth Cave National Park,” *Journal of Cave and Karst Studies* 59 (April 1997), 5.

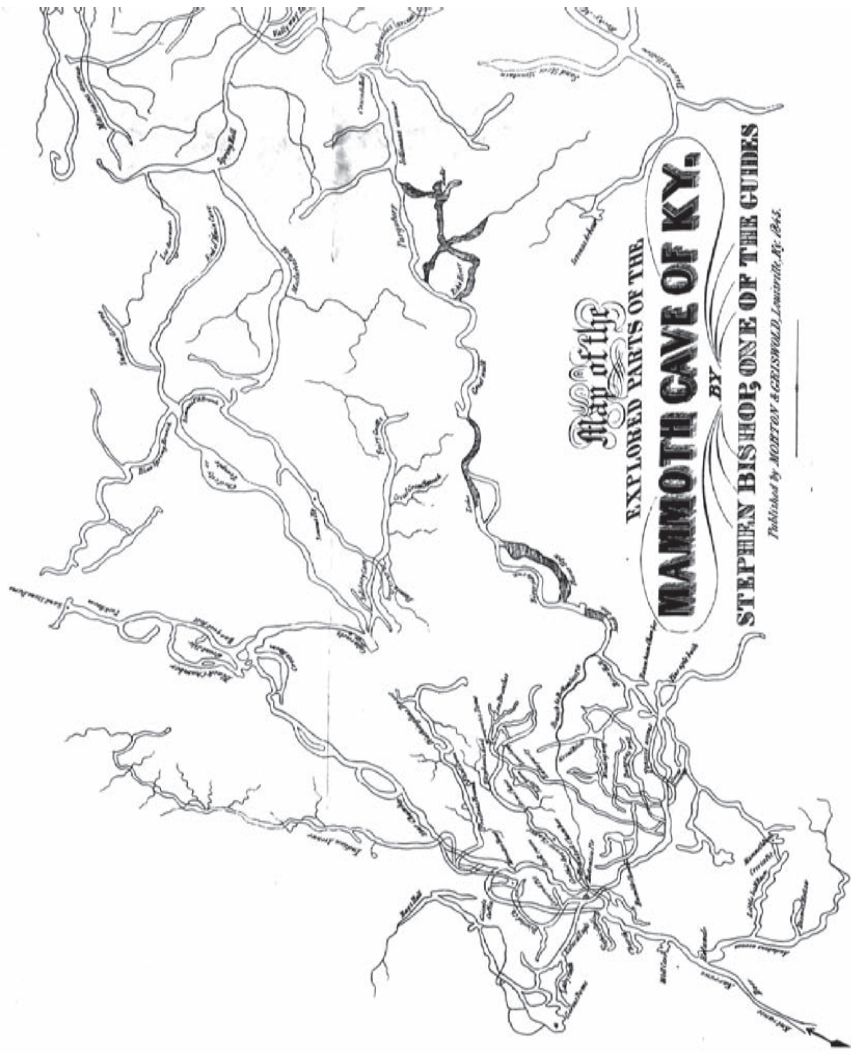


of the cave as a three-dimensional labyrinth, able to visualize the interconnecting passages and how they were related to other paths. He used Croghan's copy of the 1835 Lee map as a base to provide true compass directions and distances for the initial part, then added new passages drawn from memory. By January 18, 1842, he inked the original pencil drawing. Several hand-traced copies were made from the original, although none are known to have survived to the present day. Lithograph copies were produced separately for use at the cave, but not until early 1845, and the map was later used as an illustration in Alexander Bullitt's 1845 guidebook, *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave*.<sup>56</sup> Richly detailed with place names and features, and showing numerous overlapping passages, the map's network of passages calls to mind a plate of spaghetti. Comparing his map to modern surveys, Bishop explored over twenty-five miles of the cave, seventeen of which were his own discoveries. He was given full cartographic credit, with the published version labeled, "By Stephen Bishop, One of the Guides."<sup>57</sup>

As the new cave map was being produced, several place names were changed, of which the most significant was the alteration of the Jordan River to a more descriptive designation, Echo River. One possible rationale for the change was the association of the Jordan River with abolitionist sentiments. The first published reference to the use of the name Echo River appeared in the *New York Journal of Commerce* in June 1842. The Jordan River designation was still being used in published Mammoth Cave notices well into the spring of

<sup>56</sup> For more information on Bishop's role in the book, see Meloy, "Introduction to the Reprint Edition," *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844 by a Visiter*, xxii-xxiii; Horace C. Hovey, *Celebrated American Caverns* (Cincinnati, Ohio, 1882), 61; Samuel W. Thomas, Eugene H. Conner, and Harold Meloy, "A History of Mammoth Cave Emphasizing Tourist Development and Experimentation Under Dr. John Croghan," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 68 (October 1970): 336-37. Kentucky-born Alexander Bullitt was active in state and national politics, worked for the *Louisville Journal*, and was later editor of the *Picayune* (New Orleans).

<sup>57</sup> Meloy, "Introduction to the Reprint Edition," *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844 by a Visiter*, xxii; Croghan to Morton & Griswold, January 27, 1845; Meloy, "Historic Maps of Mammoth Cave," 20.



Section of *Map of the Explored Parts of the Mammoth Cave of Ky.* By Stephen Bishop, *One of the Guides*. The map was used as an insert in Alexander Bullitt's *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave* (Louisville, Ky., 1845).

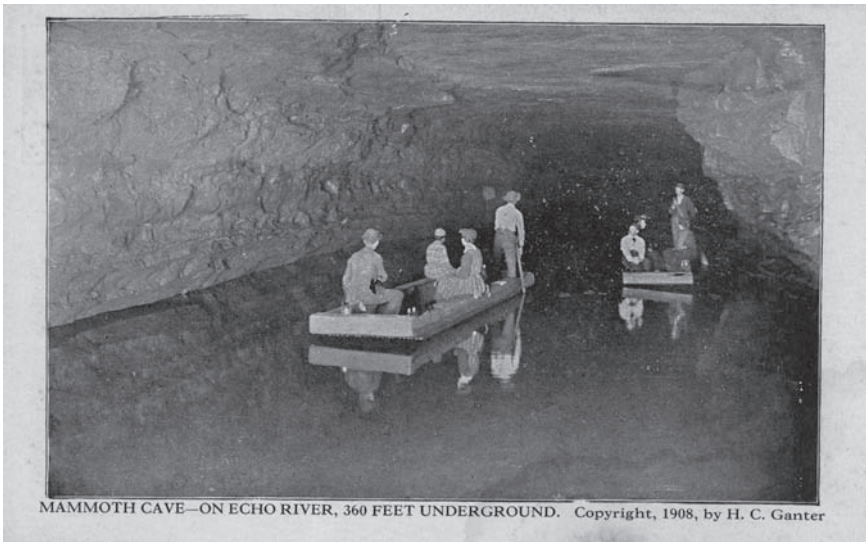
1845, but eventually faded after the publication of *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave*, Bishop's map, and revised guide commentary. A boat ride on Echo River was quite a treat for visitors, the reverberating acoustics dramatically enhancing the singing of the guides. The sound effects were so enchanting that visitors brought musical instruments and fired off pistol shots, and on one occasion the subterranean silence was broken by the performance of a full band.<sup>58</sup>

The map finished, Bishop returned to Mammoth Cave along with an enslaved woman, Charlotte Croghan, and in time they were married. Charlotte sometimes accompanied her husband on his adventures underground. Although no handwritten paper documents are known to have been produced by Bishop, he did leave some lengthy messages in the cave. The Turtle Rock inscription in Pensico Avenue is revealing: "Stephen Bishop, Guide of the Mammoth Cave, Mrs. Charlotte Bishop, the Flower of the Mammoth Cave." The text illustrates a high level of pride and accomplishment, and even greater feelings of warmth—a love letter to his wife, written on stone.<sup>59</sup>

Bishop's curiosity led him to develop an interest in geology and other sciences that would aid him in understanding the cave, a fascination encouraged by his enslaver. Croghan loaned him several books on the subject, particularly Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* and possibly *Elements of Geology*, along with William Buckland's *Reliquiae Diluvianae*. The works of Lyell and Buckland were standard texts in natural history for the next half-century. Visiting scientists such as Benjamin Silliman, Jr., of Louisville, Kentucky, were impressed by Bishop's grasp of scientific principles and how they applied specifically to Mammoth Cave. At this time, speleological science was in its infancy and the processes by which caves originate poorly understood. The best geologic treatment of Mammoth Cave geology

<sup>58</sup> "Mammoth Cave," *New York Journal of Commerce*, June 21, 1842; Peter West, "Trying the Dark: Mammoth Cave and the Racial Imagination, 1839–1869," *Southern Spaces*, February 9, 2010, available online via <https://southernspaces.org/2010/trying-dark-mammoth-cave-and-racial-imagination-1839-1869/>, accessed on December 14, 2018; Nancy A. Clark "Jordan (River, Land)," in Anand Prahlad, ed., *African-American Folklore: An Encyclopedia for the Student* (Santa Barbara, Calif., 2016), 181–82; Martin, *Pictorial Guide to the Mammoth Cave*, 62.

<sup>59</sup> Lyons, *Making their Mark*, 65.



Group of tourists on a boat ride on Echo River in Mammoth Cave, 1908. Image courtesy of Postcards of Kentucky, Graphic 26, Kentucky Historical Society.

in Bishop's era, from a modern perspective, was the work done by Edmund F. Lee in 1835. For a time, there was a copy of Lee's *Notes on the Mammoth Cave* at the cave hotel for tourists to read if they were inclined, and Croghan had a personal copy, yet the management did not favor Lee's geological and hydrological interpretations as to the role of groundwater flow in cavern development and so this information was sparingly used by Bishop. To further Bishop's knowledge of underground environments and to profit from the tours, Croghan also sent him to visit other caves, although he was careful to confine these excursions to slave states only.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>60</sup> Carpenter, *Observations on American Slavery*, 46; Benjamin B. Silliman, Jr., "On the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky," *American Journal of Science and Arts*, 2nd Series 11 (May 1851), 334; Lee, *Notes on the Mammoth Cave, to Accompany a Map*. Lyell, however, did correctly identify acidic dissolution as the mechanism that develops caves in carbonate rocks: "It rarely happens, except in limestone rocks, that the carbonic acid can dissolve all the constituent parts of the mass; and for this reason, probably, calcareous rocks are almost the only ones in which great caverns and long winding passages are found." Charles Lyell, *Principles of Geology* (London, U.K., 1832), I: 249.

Bishop's fame was cemented, nationally and internationally, with the publication of *Rambles*. Scientists, regardless of their specialty, found Bishop a walking encyclopedia of cave information. If a scientist wanted to study some aspect of the cave's geology or biology, it was considered essential to have Bishop as an escort. Visitor Thomas Kite was impressed by Bishop's wide-ranging knowledge.

From the information gathered from many scientific individuals, who he guided through his domains, he was able to tell us the geological formations, point out and name the encrinites and fossils, explain the chemical composition of many of the different mineral substances we met with, and give the classical derivations of such terms as Botryoidal, Dendroidal, he applied to the shapes assumed by the stalactites.

Visiting scientists found in Bishop someone with whom they could converse and be understood from a technical standpoint, a common ground that crossed social boundaries.<sup>61</sup>

The Bishop map would be the standard reference and management tool for the next sixty-six years, until 1908 when German engineer Max Kaemper came to Mammoth Cave as a tourist and remained for eight months. He conducted a compass and pace survey of all the known passages, a total of about thirty-five miles, and produced a map considered to be nearly as accurate as modern maps made with surveying instruments. Kaemper's field guide and survey assistant was Edward Bishop, an African American whose genealogical relationship with Stephen Bishop has not been resolved.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Kite, "Journal of a Trip Through Kentucky," 10–11. Kite operated an iron foundry in Cincinnati.

<sup>62</sup> Horace C. Hovey, *Mammoth Cave of Kentucky* (Louisville, Ky., 1912), 68; Lyon, *Making Their Mark the Signature of Slavery at Mammoth Cave*, 57; Roger W. Brucker, "Mapping of Mammoth Cave: How Cartography Fueled Discoveries, with Emphasis on Max Kaemper's 1908 Map" Mammoth Cave Research Symposia, 2008, available online via [https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/mc\\_research\\_symp/9th\\_Research\\_Symposium\\_2008/Day\\_one/4](https://digitalcommons.wku.edu/mc_research_symp/9th_Research_Symposium_2008/Day_one/4) (accessed December 31, 2018). The Kaemper map remained in the files at Mammoth Cave and unknown to the outside public until 1963.

## Freedom

At Mammoth Cave, primary responsibility for guiding the public through the cave was in the hands of the enslaved. Since it was in the enslaver's interest to assure that paying customers enjoyed their visit, the enslaved guides received a variety of incentives to give visitors a memorable experience. Such incentive payments, widespread through the South, were not wages but a means of control and were entirely a prerogative of the individual enslaver. The primary inducement was the independence allowed to the guides, but visitors often gave gratuities to the guides for their efforts, which they were allowed to retain. In the years prior to the Civil War, monetary incentives became far more significant, ostensibly to allow the enslaved guides to buy their freedom. Nick Bransford was able to purchase his freedom by conducting a brisk side business selling bottled blind fish to tourists for three dollars each. The eyeless albino fish became a major attraction every visitor wanted to see and some desired as souvenirs. Toward the end of the period, guides began to receive actual wages.<sup>63</sup>

As the fame of Mammoth Cave and Bishop continued to grow, underground parties became larger, and gratuities increased. Exploration became more difficult as the length of Mammoth Cave continued to increase from new discoveries, greatly tasking physical capabilities just to reach the frontiers of the cave. By 1856, Stephen was in his mid-thirties and continued to push the boundaries of exploration, often with willing tourists and sometimes with his wife Charlotte. In that year he discovered several more miles of passage. Mat, Nick, and

<sup>63</sup> Allen J. Share, *Cities in the Commonwealth: Two Centuries of Urban Life in Kentucky* (Lexington, Ky., 2009), 89–90; David Goldfield, *Region, Race, and Cities: Interpreting the Urban South* (Baton Rouge, La., 1997), 209–13; Lawrence H. Larsen, *The Urban South: A History* (Lexington, Ky., 1990), 28–35; Robert S. Starobin, *Industrial Slavery in the Old South* (New York, 1970), 98–104; Stevenson, “Adventures Underground,” 722–23; Bayard Taylor, “The Mammoth Cave—A Day’s Journey Under Ground,” *New York Weekly*, June 30, 1855. J. F. Rusling complained about the expense of visiting Mammoth, “You have to pay three dollars a head for the privilege of entering it, and then have to fee the old guide besides.” J. F. Rusling, *A Trip to the Mammoth Cave, Ky.* (Nashville, Tenn., 1864), 39.



Alfred stood ready to lead tours, but were “snubbed into comparative insignificance, all visitors being eager for Stephen’s guidance.” The national and international tour of Brewer’s Panorama of Mammoth Cave displayed a painting of Bishop’s likeness and narrated accomplishments for all to see and hear. Thomas Gunn observed “the constant newspaper glorification of Stephen . . . have made him a Cave lion.”<sup>64</sup>

Perhaps more than any other, newspaperman Bayard Taylor helped build the romanticized image of Bishop that captivated his contemporaries. Writing in 1855, Taylor portrayed Bishop as

the model of a guid—quick, daring, enthusiastic, persevering, with a lively appreciation of the wonders he shows, and a degree of intelligence unusual in one of his class. He has a smattering of Greek mythology, a good idea of geography, history and a limited range of literature, and a familiarity with geological technology which astonished me. He will discourse upon the various formations in the Cave as fluently as Professor Silliman himself. His memory is wonderfully retentive, and he never hears a telling expression without treasuring it up for later use. In this way his mind has become the repository of a great variety of opinions and comparisons which he has sagacity enough to collate and arrange, and he rarely confuses or misplaces his material. I think no one can travel under his guidance without being interested in the man and associating him in memory with the realm over which he is chief ruler.

The Brewers in their traveling Panorama of Mammoth Cave asserted only Bishop “knows it so well; and it has become to be a fixed fact that seven-eighths of the discoveries made have been the result of his courage, intelligence, and untiring zeal.” Charles J. Peterson, publisher of

<sup>64</sup> E[benezer] Meriam, “Mammoth Cave,” *New York Journal of Commerce*, August 7, 1856; Gunn, *Gunn Diaries*, vol. 6, p. 144 (first and second quotations); John Brewer and George Brewer, *A Description of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky, the Niagara River and Falls . . . to Illustrate Brewer’s Panorama* (1850), 33. The portrait of Bishop featured in the Panorama made his image recognizable to the larger public.

*Peterson's Magazine* for women, believed Bishop was “as great a wonder almost as the Cave . . . his geological knowledge quite astonishes his unscientific visitors.” N. Parker Willis, author, poet, and the highest-paid magazine correspondent of his era, showered praise upon Bishop, writing that “the first glance told me that Stephen was better worth looking at than most celebrities.” Willis believed Bishop had such great potential that “he is so likely to be head of, some day, as President of Liberia or Ambassador from St. Domingo, that his portraiture cannot be wisely slighted.”<sup>65</sup>

When John Croghan died on January 11, 1849, the terms of his will directed that Bishop and his family, which by this time included a wife, Charlotte, and six-year-old son Thomas, were to be emancipated in seven years' time, or in 1856. The executors of the Croghan estate were required to provide the Bishop family with transportation to Liberia on the west coast of Africa, if they so desired. To make the transition of immigrating to Liberia, Stephen was studying Blackstone late in life in order to practice law once there. Bishop and his family were finally freed on February 4, 1856, but instead of removing to Liberia, he purchased two tracts of land, more than a hundred acres, near Mammoth Cave from money he had saved. Alfred was emancipated at the same time as Bishop. Mat and Nick Bransford were not included in Croghan's will, because they still belonged to Thomas L. Bransford. Nick purchased his freedom prior to 1863, largely from his sales of blind fish to tourists, but no information is available as to when Mat was emancipated. After gaining freedom, all stayed on at the cave as guides.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Taylor, “A Days Journey Under Ground” (first quotation); Brewer and Brewer, *A Description of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, 33 (second quotation); Charles J. Peterson, “Two Days in the Mammoth Cave,” *Peterson's Magazine* 4 (October 1852), 157 (third quotation); Willis, *Health Trip to the Tropics*, 151 (fourth quotation), 153 (fifth quotation).

<sup>66</sup> Will of John Croghan, Jefferson County Will Book 4, 121, January 10, 1849; Jefferson County Court Orders Minutes vol. 21, 393-394, February 4, 1856; Alan E. Yarema, *American Colonization Society: An Avenue to Freedom?* (Lanham, Md., 2006); Taylor, “A Days Journey Under Ground”; J. Blaine Hudson, “In Pursuit of Freedom: Slave Law and Emancipation in Antebellum Louisville and Jefferson County, Kentucky,” *Filson History Quarterly* 76 (Summer 2002): 306. Alfred was emancipated at the same time as Stephen.

After only a brief period of freedom, Bishop fell ill in the spring of 1857 and by May 11, he was no longer able to guide parties underground. In July, he passed away (from an unknown cause) at the age of thirty-seven, having had little time to enjoy his freedom, and was laid to rest in a grave about two hundred yards from the cave entrance with only a pile of rocks and a cedar tree to mark the location. In November 1878, James R. Mellon, president of the City Deposit Bank in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, visited the cave. He was fascinated by the stories of Bishop and met Charlotte who was managing the hotel's dining room. Charlotte took Mellon to visit Bishop's gravesite, and he promised her that he would have a headstone carved and erected. Three years later, he made good on his promise.<sup>67</sup>

With Bishop's death, Nick and Mat Bransford were now propelled into the forefront as explorers and guides, although neither reached the same level of celebrity as Bishop. As part of a management strategy to disconnect Bishop and the legacy of slavery from the cave, his name was seldom mentioned after the Civil War and gradually faded from public memory. It took the publication of Forwood's Mammoth Cave guidebook in 1870 to first rekindle interest in the accomplishments of Bishop. The headstone placed by Mellon near the cave entrance in 1878 with Bishop's name prominently displayed was visible to tourists. The publication of magazine articles and, in 1882, Hovey's *Celebrated American Caverns* firmly reestablished Stephen's role in Mammoth Cave history and exploration.<sup>68</sup>

Mammoth Cave became a popular tourist destination in antebellum America by virtue of its unique nature and the carefully orchestrated efforts of white enslavers to capitalize on the knowledge of

<sup>67</sup> Maria Mitchell, *Maria Mitchell: Life, Letters, and Journals*, comp. Phebe Mitchell Kendall (Boston, 1896), 81; Wright, *The Mammoth Cave*, 6; William L. Mellon, *Judge Mellon's Sons* (Pittsburgh, Penn., 1948), 84; James R. Mellon to Helen F. Randolph, July 28, 1933, Mammoth Cave Office library; Harold Meloy, "Stephen Bishop: The Man and the Legend" in Bruce Sloan, ed., *Caves, Cavers, and Caving* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1977), 290–291. The headstone correctly records the date of death as June 15, 1859, rather than July 1857.

<sup>68</sup> Meloy, "Stephen Bishop," 288.

enslaved guides. To pass from the sunlight into the gloomy depths of the cave was to enter another world, timeless and surreal, that evoked a sense of grandeur and awe. Visitors were shepherded through this mystical realm and placed their hopes of safe return into the hands of an enslaved man. For nearly two centuries, hundreds of letters, articles, and books have described Stephen Bishop as the celebrated guide of Mammoth Cave. Few, however, have attempted to examine exactly what life and work at Mammoth Cave meant to Bishop, an enslaved man.