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Mammoth Cave, Slavery, and Kentucky: Overcoming the Chains that Bind

Susan Farmer

Mammoth Cave National Park is a world-renowned park and the longest cave in the world, but it is much more than just a cave and a park. Mammoth Cave has a long and interesting history that has as many twists and turns as the cave itself. The history of Mammoth Cave fits squarely into the history of Kentucky and the United States; just as Kentucky was being settled and explored, so too was Mammoth Cave. The settlement of this cave and its land follows the patterns of the nation because just as this nation was built on the back of hard working African American slaves, so too was Mammoth Cave. This paper seeks to examine the way that the slavery at Mammoth Cave followed and diverted from the norm of slavery within Kentucky. While slavery at Mammoth Cave started almost as soon as it was discovered by the early settlers, this paper focuses on the lives of the slave guides and their work in the cave. How were their lives like other slaves in Kentucky? How did their lives differ because of their situation as cave guides? What opportunities were they presented with that were different from other slaves?

Before understanding the lives of the remarkable men that were enslaved at Mammoth Cave, it is important to understand what slavery was like in Kentucky. Kentucky was part of the South and was a slave holding state until the Civil War ended. This is well known, and it has often been said that Kentuckians treated their slaves better than other states did. However, one must question if a person could really treat a person better even though they are still held bondage. Does this mean that Kentuckians did not beat their slaves? Did they not have to work as hard or face being split apart from their families? Were their living conditions better than in a deep South state, or did they have better opportunities to escape bondage? In fact, historian Marion Lucas discusses why this idea has been accepted over time. He says that this was because Kentucky masters owned fewer slaves than in other places, typically worked side-by-

side with their slaves, and made their interactions more personal than in the larger gang system in the deep south.

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the system of slavery in Kentucky might have been smaller and more personal, but did not mean that the slaves in Kentucky did not suffer or face the same dangers that the slaves in other places faced.

The history of slavery started when the first white settlers came to explore and start new settlements. Slaves came to the state as early as 1751 when a man named Christopher Gist explored the area around the Ohio River.<sup>2</sup> African Americans and whites continued to enter and explore the state together, “In 1773, when Daniel and Squire Boone attempted to settle several families in the Bluegrass region, they brought an unknown number of slaves.”<sup>3</sup> From the beginning, Kentucky had slaves, and the lives of those slaves were controlled by men and women working to make Kentucky their home by choice. Slaves, however, had no choice and often dreaded hearing that they were to be moving to the new frontier. Moving often meant that families would be torn apart and may never see each other again. For Francis Frederick, who was 12 when his owner moved from Virginia to Kentucky, this meant the family had to “bid a tearful farewell to their friends, and several wagons loaded with 'sobbing women' followed by 'stony' faced men began the journey through the forests with their owners.”<sup>4</sup> Surviving off meal cakes and salt herring, the group made it through the mountains, down the Ohio River, until they came to their new home in Mason County.<sup>5</sup> Starting a new life and continuing the traditions of

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<sup>1</sup> Marion B. Lucas, *A History of Blacks in Kentucky: Volume 1 From Slavery to Segregation, 1760-1891* (Frankfort: The Kentucky Historical Society, 1992), 42.

<sup>2</sup> Lucas, xi.

<sup>3</sup> James A. Ramage and Andrea S. Watkins, *Kentucky Rising: Democracy, Slavery, and Culture from the Early Republic to the Civil War* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky and The Kentucky Historical Society, 2011), 237.

<sup>4</sup> Lucas, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Lucas, 1.

slavery from Virginia, Kentucky often followed Virginia law when it came to the laws concerning slaves.

Under Kentucky and Virginia law, slaves were viewed as chattel property, and therefore were seen as items to be bought and sold. At times, Judges would step in making laws to try to soften the harsh conditions that these people faced. One such judge was Warren County Judge J. Ewing; in 1838 he ruled in a case, “that slaves were property and had to be treated as such, 'but they were human beings, with like passions, sympathies and affections with ourselves.’”<sup>6</sup> This ruling, however, did little to change the status of slaves in Kentucky or the troubles that they faced. As early as 1798, slave codes were adopted that attempted to regulate how slaves were to be treated, the activities of slaves with their masters, as well as the community at large.<sup>7</sup> Under these laws, slavery was a protected institution in the new state, and its growth contributed to Kentucky as Kentucky worked to find its place in the nation.

While Kentucky was not the largest slave holding state and held a relatively small number of slaves and slave owners, it was still a large number of people that were held in bondage. At the turn of the nineteenth century, Kentucky was home to 40,343 slaves, or 18.3 percent of the total population of 220,955.<sup>8</sup> By 1860, the number of slaves living in Kentucky was 225,438.<sup>9</sup> This is a distinct part of the population who were living under the control of others and had no choice in the decisions made about their lives. For the most part, the people who owned slaves in Kentucky were different from other Southern states. An 1850 census shows 139,920 white families living in the state; of that number 28 percent, or 38,385, owned

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<sup>6</sup> Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 169.

<sup>7</sup> Harrison and Klotter, 169. Ramage and Watkins, 237.

<sup>8</sup> Ramage and Watkins, 237.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

slaves. While this number appears high, only five held more than one hundred, 88 percent had fewer than twenty, and 24 percent owned only one, ranking Kentucky thirteenth of the fifteen slave holding states.<sup>10</sup> While there were slaveholders throughout the state, most of the slavery was concentrated in the Bluegrass region, “with large numbers in the south-central region and in Henderson and Oldham counties on the Ohio River...the lower percentages of slaves were in the eastern mountains and the northern and west-central portions of the state.”<sup>11</sup>

Since slavery in Kentucky was such a personal relationship between master and slave, Kentucky masters tended to follow the ideas of paternalism in justifying their role in slavery. The typical slave and master relationship in Kentucky was that they lived and worked together on a small farm. Often this meant that they worked side by side, slept under the same roof, and lived together for many years.<sup>12</sup> The idea behind paternalism is that the white masters were placed in their role to protect and care for slaves that they owned. This idea spread throughout the South as the end of the foreign slave trade came, and it helped gain credence through the spread of evangelical Christianity in the South and the Second Great Awakening took place.<sup>13</sup> Historian Lacy K. Ford argues that it was out of these evangelical efforts “emerged a coherent portrait of slavery as an institution that could be rendered consistent with Christian teachings if characterized by domesticity and paternalism.”<sup>14</sup> This idea also helped to transform slavery from a labor situation to a domestic situation. Therefore, domesticity was the core of the South's self-justification of owning slaves, and paternalism worked to explain why slavery was just and humane. “Thus paternalist ideology not only empowered the white male slaveholder, making

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ramage and Watkins, 238.

<sup>12</sup> Ramage and Watkins, 238-9.

<sup>13</sup> Lacy K. Ford, *Deliver Us from Evil: The Slavery Question in the Old South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 150.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

him master of exterior worlds large or small...but more emphatically master of his own household, where white dependents...looked to the master, the head of the household, both protection and comfort in return for loyalty and obedience.”<sup>15</sup> The idea of paternalism was wide spread and crossed class lines. Poor farmers believed these ideas, as well as Kentucky senators. In the Missouri debates of 1820-1, one Kentucky senator, Richard Johnson asserted during the debate that “every master stood as the 'guardian' of his or her slaves.”<sup>16</sup> Therefore, this cemented the idea that Kentucky slaveholders were placed in their positions of power as a way to care for the people that they held in bondage.

Whether the slave owner justified owning another person for domestic or labor issues, at the heart of the situation, the Kentucky economy benefited from slave labor. However, to benefit, the Kentuckian had to have money, because slaves were expensive. The people in Kentucky who did not own slaves might not have taken part in the system because they objected to owning other humans. However, many of the white Kentuckians did not own slaves did because they could not afford them. Many factors played into how much a slave cost; prices varied depending on age, gender, health, location, skills and economic conditions. “During the first third of the nineteenth century, a male slave in the prime working years of eighteen to thirty-five might cost \$400-700 in Kentucky; a female in the same age group would cost about \$350-450.”<sup>17</sup> For many Kentuckians, one slave could cost more than what they would earn in two years, and as prices rose in the late 1840s and early 1850s, the idea of being a slaveholder was not a reality.<sup>18</sup>

However, for those that could, the labor of the slave benefited them greatly. Slaves

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<sup>15</sup> Ford, 151-2.

<sup>16</sup> Ford, 152.

<sup>17</sup> Harrison and Klotter, 168.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

worked in all parts of the Kentucky economy; however the industry that pushed slavery the most in the state was the hemp industry. Working in the hemp fields was the hardest job that a slave could have in Kentucky. Since the traditional crops of the deep south such as rice, cotton, and sugar were not profitable in Kentucky, hemp was the industry that made the most money. The production of hemp was tied to the the crops and the lives of slaves in the deep south, however. “Most of the crop was sent south in the form of rope, raw bagging used to wrap cotton bales, and rough cloth for slave clothing.”<sup>19</sup> Hemp production was a year-round task, and slavery was used for all its production, from sewing the seeds in the spring, all the way to the factories where it was produced for shipping. “By the middle of the nineteenth century, there were 159 hemp factories in Kentucky, one-third the national total, that employed close to three thousand African Americans.”<sup>20</sup> While hemp production was mainly a male-oriented job, it did allow for some African Americans a chance of advancement. If the worker met his daily quota in the field, he was allowed to work over and would be paid for his work. “When it was time to break stalks, each man was to break 100 pounds of hemp each day. For each pound over 100, a slave would be paid one cent...most men could break 125-160 pounds in a day. The fibers would be weighed carefully by the white master at the end of each day, and overage pay was handed out at the end of the week.”<sup>21</sup> This practice was carried over into the factories also. If slaves were given a task to perform and worked over, they were paid two to three dollars for any overwork.<sup>22</sup>

Slaves in Kentucky were not regulated to just hemp production; instead, slaves worked in almost every part of Kentucky's economy. Other industries included ironworks, saltworks, and iron and lead mines. However, the most common jobs that they would have held were as field

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<sup>19</sup> Ramage and Watkins, 239.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ramage and Watkins, 240.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

hands, carriage drivers, house servants, seamstresses, stable boys, and dairymaids.<sup>23</sup> In Urban areas, slaves worked in all parts of the service industries, and were often hired out. According to Marion Lucas, there were three methods of slave hiring. First, “many small farmers rented slaves from neighbors on an informal basis. They were usually looking for slaves with particular skills to accomplish specific tasks.”<sup>24</sup> The second way was more formal, where slaveholders leased to neighbors or regional farmers with a written contract. The third way that hiring out was performed was when owners would place their bondsmen with commission agents and traders, which took place mostly in the larger cities.<sup>25</sup> Being hired out gave the slave some opportunities that they might not have had otherwise. This is because “working as 'free' laborers usually provided hired slaves a measure of independence and opportunities for self-improvement. As a result, the practice of slave hiring elevated the status of bondsmen in Kentucky society and became for some a step toward freedom.”<sup>26</sup> Often the slaves would have unsupervised time after their work had been completed, and would allow some slaves to earn extra money. “In the factory, many supervisors used the task system with quotas of work to encourage production. After finishing a task, a slave might be paid a bonus for any additional work performed, allowing a slave to earn up to two or three dollars a week.”<sup>27</sup> There were laws that stipulated that it was illegal for “owners to allow bondsmen to hire their own time and 'trade as free' people. Nevertheless, many owners disregarded the law by permitting slaves, including entire families, to engage in whatever business they desired, provided they paid them a specified weekly or monthly sum.”<sup>28</sup> Here slaves worked under a contract that was negotiated between the owner

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Lucas, 101.

<sup>25</sup> Lucas, 102.

<sup>26</sup> Lucas, 101.

<sup>27</sup> Ramage and Watkins, 242.

<sup>28</sup> Lucas, 105.

and the employer. These contracts were usually a year long, and the rates charged for hiring out varied depending on the basis of skills and the needs of the market.<sup>29</sup> Typically, a one-year contract would cost the employer \$75.00 to \$150.00 plus the cost of boarding.<sup>30</sup> In these contracts, it was often stipulated that the owners would be responsible for the property taxes that were to be paid on the individual, but the employers had to provide boarding, clothing, and proper treatment for the hiring term.<sup>31</sup> Under these conditions, slaves entered into occupations that they may not have had access to otherwise.

One occupation that was opened to slaves because of this system was the role as tour guide. “Blacks also served as guides at two of Kentucky's famous tourist attractions. In Louisville, visitors from around the world listened to a slave guide who described at length an artesian well which brought water to the surface from over two thousand feet below.”<sup>32</sup> In Mammoth Cave, African American slaves worked to explore the cave and take visitors from around the world through the cave. Mammoth Cave is located in a relatively rural part of Kentucky in Edmonson county. Edmonson county was founded in 1825, and by 1830 had a population of 2,642.<sup>33</sup> Of that population, 2,305 were white, 278 slaves, and 59 “freed colored.”<sup>34</sup> This small population soon discovered that they had a valuable tourist attraction that would help to bring money and fame to the area. However, for Mammoth Cave to become the valued commodity that it is today, they had to work to get past the rural conditions that surrounded the area. Transportation was limited with very few roads and even fewer railroad lines. The Louisville & Nashville railroad did run through the county, but only on the southeast

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<sup>29</sup> Ramage and Watkins, 241.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Lucas, 9.

<sup>33</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Ninth Census, 1870: Statistics of Population (Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 1872), 32.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

corner boundary.<sup>35</sup> Steamboats were the other main way that citizens of the county were able to travel and receive supplies. Two weekly steamboats brought groceries, hardware, and necessities to the county seat of Brownsville from Bowling Green on the Barren River and Evansville on the Ohio River.<sup>36</sup> Under these conditions, the tourism of the cave moved slowly, but it helped to change the lives of the slaves that worked there.

The earliest modern history of the cave began just as the American Revolution was ending. As the new nation was giving its war veterans land grants in the West, it also was making other plots of land available for purchase. It was under these conditions that the first owners of the cave came to discover what they had. In 1799, one of these land grants was rewarded to a man named Valentine Simons. His land grant was for 200 acres along the south side of the Green River and included two saltpetre caves.<sup>37</sup> Saltpeter was important to these early settlers because it provided them with an important material used in making gunpowder. Gunpowder was very important to these early settlers because they were at least 400 miles from established settlements and retail sources in Virginia.<sup>38</sup> Mammoth Cave provided an unlimited supply of saltpeter, and its earliest use by these settlers was to mine it out of the cave. The earliest owners of the cave did not take full advantage of this possibility though. The ownership of the cave changed several times in the early years. Simons sold the cave to John Flatt shortly after gaining it for a sum of \$116.67<sup>39</sup> Flatt held onto the cave for a few years, but then sold it to the McLean brothers—George, Leonard, and John, of Hart county Kentucky, for \$400. These

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<sup>35</sup> W.H. Perrin, J.H. Battle, and G.C. Kniffin, Kentucky: A History of the State (Louisville: F.A. Battery and Co., 1886), 664.

<sup>36</sup> Works Project Administration in Kentucky, Series 2, Box 50, Kentucky Department of Libraries and Archives, Frankfort, Ky.

<sup>37</sup> Joy Medley Lyons, *Making Their Mark: The Signature of Slavery at Mammoth Cave* (Fort Washington: Eastern National, 2006), 9.

<sup>38</sup> Lyons, 10.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

brothers held onto the cave and most likely used the saltpeter for their own personal use. It was not until they sold the cave to Fleming Gatewood of Louisville and Charles Wilkins of Lexington that saltpeter extraction became a major production.<sup>40</sup> It was these men that applied the idea of hiring out African American slaves and brought the first recorded use of slave labor to Mammoth Cave.

According to Joy Medley Lyons, author of *Making Their Mark: The Signature of Slavery at Mammoth Cave*, “Oral tradition has long maintained that as many as 70 slaves were leased to work inside Mammoth Cave, producing saltpeter from the natural cave sediments.”<sup>41</sup> While Lyons notes that this number has never been validated, it is known that one-room log cabins were constructed to house these slaves and that these cabins were later put under one roof to form a row of rooms for the first hotel at Mammoth Cave.<sup>42</sup> The production of saltpeter continued at the cave until the owners could no longer make it valuable, and it is most likely that the mining ended around 1812, when a series of earthquakes occurred and damaged the wooden vats, pipelines and pump tower inside the cave; these earthquakes also made it hard for work to continue because the underground workers and overseers were not willing to return to the cave.<sup>43</sup> After the production of saltpeter lost its worth, the cave again changed hands. In 1812, Gatewood sold his share of the cave to Hyman Gratz of Pennsylvania, and moved to Warren County. An Irish immigrant named Archibald Miller and his family began to take care of the cave. For the next two decades, Miller and his family worked as tour guides, guiding people through the cave. All the earliest guides were white. It was not until 1838 that the guide force

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Lyons, 11.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

changed, when the cave was bought by Glasgow attorney, Franklin Gorin.<sup>44</sup> Gorin hoped to turn Mammoth Cave into a major tourist attraction, and he immediately began making improvements to the land, expanding the hotel accommodations with hopes of expanding the known passageways. It was under Gorin that the most famous guides at Mammoth Cave came to the cave and the history of African American slave guides began.

When Gorin came to Mammoth Cave, he already owned a young slave named Stephen Bishop, who would spend the rest of his life at the cave. Gorin also hired out two other slaves to work at the cave, Materson “Mat” Bransford and Nicholas Bransford from Thomas Bransford, a wealthy farmer from Glasgow, Kentucky.<sup>45</sup> The actions of Gorin follow the typical role of a slave owner in Kentucky at the time. By bringing his slave, Stephen, to the cave to help him expand his business and his cave, he was following the same path as many other Kentucky business owners. It is also most likely that Gorin rented the Bransfords because he could not afford another slave, or was, as many others in Kentucky, looking for the cheapest form of labor and decided to enter into a contract with another slaveholder as a more economical avenue. Either way, Gorin's actions changed Mammoth Cave and its history forever.

Gorin worked to make Mammoth Cave profitable, but only a year after purchasing the cave, he sold it to a young doctor from Louisville named John Croghan. Croghan paid \$10,000 for the cave, the land, the young Stephan Bishop, and renewed the lease on Mat and Nick.<sup>46</sup> Under Croghan, the tourism of the cave was boosted, and the lives and roles that the early guides played changed. These young slaves were in charge of exploring the cave, adding known mileage, and escorting visitors through for a whole new kind of experience.

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<sup>44</sup> Lyons, 14.

<sup>45</sup> Lyons, 15.

<sup>46</sup> Lyons, 18.

Before exploring how guiding at Mammoth Cave changed the path of these men's lives, it is important to understand the background that they came from. How did their backgrounds play into the role that they would play at Mammoth Cave and within the larger African American community in Kentucky? Stephen Bishop was a young man when he was brought to Mammoth Cave, but what was known about his past plays into the role that he had and the opportunities that he was able to take advantage of. Early visitors to the cave would often write about their experiences at Mammoth Cave and their guides. In these descriptions, they always mention that Stephen was a mulatto. One visitor in his diary stated, "Stephen, the guide was a remarkable and picturesque person...He was a slave, part mulatto and part Indian, but looking more like a Spaniard, with black hair and long mustache. Athletic in type, with broad shoulders, full chest, narrow hips and legs slightly bowed. A man of great strength and dexterity, and of unusual intelligence and good manners."<sup>47</sup> However, Lyons asserts that Stephen was biracial but only white and black. She states that, "No one knows who Stephen's father was, but he was most certainly a white man. In fact, if Stephen's mother was also mulatto, Stephen's biological heritage was more Caucasian than African."<sup>48</sup> Mat Bransford also has a similar biracial history, that may have helped him to achieve his place as a guide at the cave. Mat belonged to Thomas Bransford and was later purchased by Thomas L. Bransford when the elder passed away. However what is important to remember here is that Mat may have been sent to Mammoth Cave because of the fact that Thomas Bransford Sr., was his father. "Descendants of Thomas Bransford admit to the biracial kinship to this day."<sup>49</sup> Therefore, Mat was never taken away from Mammoth Cave. Lyons suspects that this is because his white family members may have felt it

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<sup>47</sup> Thomas Kite, Diary, June, 1847, (unprocessed), Western Kentucky University Library, Bowling Green Kentucky, 9.

<sup>48</sup> Lyons, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Lyons, 49.

was the best place for him. “Or maybe, despite the fact that at least two of Mat's relatives acknowledge his kinship privately, they were not quite ready to do so in Glasgow or Nashville” where they lived with their families.<sup>50</sup> This could also be the case since Thomas L. Bransford was the president of the Nashville and Cincinnati Railroad Company and the Whig candidate for Congress in Tennessee in 1843.<sup>51</sup> Therefore, the position that these two men held at Mammoth Cave might have played into the fact that they were lighter skinned than others. Miscegenation was always present in the South.

Visitors often had to remind themselves that their guides were slaves. One woman who visited the cave in 1853, found it hard to believe that Stephen was a slave. She wrote, “He seems more like the high priest and expounder of its mysteries, than a hired guide, much less a slave.”<sup>52</sup> Descriptions of Mat mirror that these men made whites question their preconceived notions of what a slave was. An 1855 visitor stated that Mat 's presentation displayed that there was “nothing slavish in his learning, dress or language.”<sup>53</sup>

These guides personal lives as slaves, however, mimicked the lives of other slaves in Kentucky. Marriage was one of the biggest celebrations for African American slaves, but it could also cause pain and suffering. Marriage represented these two opposite ends of the spectrum because of the uncertainty that slaves lived under. This is because slave families could be ripped apart at the will of the master, Kentucky law did not recognize marriage between slaves, and the couple could only be together if the owners consented.<sup>54</sup> Marriage between slaves was not an easy task. If they lived on separate farms, then owners of the two slaves had to

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<sup>50</sup> Lyons, 51.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Marianne Finch, *An Englishwoman's Experience in America* (London, 1853), 350-1.

<sup>53</sup> Anonymous, “My Groupings Nine Miles Under Ground,” *The National Magazine* 7(1855): 58.

<sup>54</sup> Ramage and Watkins, 237.

reach a settlement where often one master would than become owner of both slaves.<sup>55</sup> Other times, if they stayed with their separate owners, depending on the distance, “this usually meant visits by the husband one or two nights and weekends, but many slaves only enjoyed family life on Saturdays and Sundays.”<sup>56</sup> For the tour guides at Mammoth Cave, their lives most likely followed these lines. Each of the men were married under slavery and would have had to work in their personal relationships away from the cave. Stephen was married to a woman named Charlotte, and unfortunately, history has all but forgotten the female slaves of this country. Not much is known about Charlotte; she is mentioned rarely in visitor accounts. Lyons explains that according to oral tradition, Stephen and Charlotte met during a visit to Locust Grove in Louisville in 1842. She explains that Charlotte was also a mulatto and that she and Stephen had one son, Thomas, in 1843.<sup>57</sup> Their feeling for each other could be seen through Stephen's actions; one visitor recalled that Stephen named a passage for Charlotte. He wrote, “This our guide informed us was 'Charlotte's Grotto,' named in honor of his wife--'You might be sure' he replied to some exclamation 'I would not call anything but the prettiest after my old lady.’”<sup>58</sup> Mat was also married, to a woman named Parthena. She was also a slave and lived on a farm located two miles from Mammoth Cave. According to Lyons, Parthena's owner let them live together on his land where Mat was able to eventually build a small home for himself, his wife, and at least four children.<sup>59</sup> Their relationship shows how even as world-renowned guides at the Mammoth Cave, they were still forced to live within the confines of a society that regulated every movement of their lives.

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<sup>55</sup> Lucas, 18.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Lyons, 19.

<sup>58</sup> Kite, 25.

<sup>59</sup> Lyons, 51.

Having children under slavery caused even more heartache for these men and their families. Stephen never had to deal with losing a member of his immediate family being sold to another owner, but it was something that he might have thought of daily. This is because under slavery, children were property of the master not of the mother or father, and therefore, the owner could do as he or she pleased with the children of slaves. Mat knew all too well how it felt to have his children ripped away from him. While Parthena's master allowed them to live together, that did not stop him from selling three of their children away from them during the slavery years. One mis-informed visitor assumed that the loss of children did not really effect slaves, and he said to Mat, "I don't suppose you missed these children much? You colored people never do, they say."<sup>60</sup> If Mat were allowed to speak his mind, one can be sure that he corrected the man and his ideas of African American family life and relationships.

Education was another area where these men followed the path of the African American community around them. While the cave put them into contact with highly educated visitors, not all the guides were able to procure an education. Many southern states created laws that made it illegal for slaves to learn how to read and write; however, Kentucky never passed that law. A few of the slaveholders actually educated their bondsmen, but "state laws were supplemented by codes passed in various communities to confront the issues and fears of a white population as time passed."<sup>61</sup> Many of the visitors were surprised by the intelligence that Stephen showed, and many commented on their surprise at his education. Thomas Kite, a visitor who had Stephen as a guide, said this of Stephen's education,

He is a slave...and is unusually intelligent for one in his situation...He

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<sup>60</sup> F. Rusling, "A Trip to Mammoth Cave of Kentucky," 7 in Joy Medley Lyons, *Making Their Mark: The Signature of Slavery at Mammoth Cave* (Fort Washington: Eastern National, 2006), 51.

<sup>61</sup> Ramage and Watkins, 237.

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. His memory is retentive, and from the information gathered from many scientific individuals, whom he has guided through his domains, he was able to tell us the geological formations, point out and name the encrinetes and fossils.<sup>62</sup>

One must question if Stephen ever tried to teach the other slaves how to read and write. Did he help his son learn? While Stephen did know how to read and write and about the science of the cave, Joy Medly Lyons asserts that this form of education did not spread to all the guides. She states that, “Oral tradition conveys that early slave guides learned to read and write while watching visitors carve or smoke their names on cave walls and ceilings. If this is the case, the lessons did not work for Nick or Mat, since legal documents filed in Edmonson County following their manumission bear their 'mark' and not a signature.”<sup>63</sup> Why did Mat and Nick not learn how to read and write? Did their lives make it so they did not have time to learn? Was education not important to them? Evidence shows this is not true because at the end of Nick's life, he donated his land so that it could be used for the Mammoth Cave school where his grandchildren would learn to read and write.<sup>64</sup>

Many aspects of these guides personal lives followed the patterns of other Kentucky slaves, but their work as guides also allowed them to escape from caste system and leave

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<sup>62</sup> Kite, 11.

<sup>63</sup> Lyons, 44.

<sup>64</sup> Lyons, 47.

traditional slave roles. The fact that they were guiding visitors through a cave that could be deadly worked as one factor that allowed them to leave their slave positions, even if it were only while they were underground. Numerous records show that the guides were to have complete authority over the white visitors while exploring the passageways. One visitor commented that, “the guide exercises the strictest authority in order to guard against accidents...the services of a guide cannot be safely dispensed with, and guest should respect his authority.”<sup>65</sup> Others noted that the tone that the guides would take with the visitors was not disrespect but instead out of safety. Charles Wright, a visitor, cautioned others that, “the abrupt manner in which it is necessary for the guides to address visitors in dangerous places must not be confused with insolence, as it is absolutely essential at many points.”<sup>66</sup> The guides even had the authority to end the tour if the visitors were not respecting their authority. Nick did so according to one visitor account. When the tourist repeatedly took foolish risks and made dangerous demands, Nick simply refused to serve as his guide any longer.<sup>67</sup> When one thinks of the situations that these men lived in having every aspect of their lives regulated by others, one hopes that they received some sort of joy in the authority that they held in the cave.

Their role as leader often allowed them to break other social etiquette that was taboo on the surface. The guides would carry with them in the cave meals for the visitors since the tours would last for hours. When it was time to eat, visitors often commented on how they felt wrong making the guides separate themselves during meals. Nathaniel Willis, a visitor, recalled, “Our guide modestly remembered that he was a slave, and after repast under the weight of which he

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<sup>65</sup> H.C. Hovey, “One Hundred Miles in Mammoth Cave,” Scribner's Monthly 20 (May 1880): 920, 924.

<sup>66</sup> Charles Wright, The Mammoth Cave, Kentucky (Vincennes, Indiana: Harvey Mason and Company Printers, 1858), 6.

<sup>67</sup> F.J. Stevenson, “Adventures Underground: The Mammoth Cave of Kentucky in 1863,” Blackwoods Magazine 831 (June 1932): 756.

had toiled so far, he seated himself at a distance; but, remembering his merits and all the geology and history he had given us on the way, we voted him to the first table by an immediate and general remonstrance.”<sup>68</sup> Eating together which signified equality would often take place in the depths of the cave between the two races. How did the guides feel about eating with the guests? Did they enjoy it, or could the fact that it was taboo make them feel resentment? Did they wonder if this would ever be possible on the surface?

Another taboo that they were allowed to break in the cave was physical contact with white women. On the surface, having physical contact with a white woman could be enough for severe punishment if not death. However, the cave seemed to once again change the rules. Many whites who were visitors commented on having help from the guides, and even being carried or picked up. Thomas Kite commented, “As we were congratulating ourselves on having passed over all danger one of the girls slipped and falling with violence hurt her side, arm and limbs against the rocks. Our stout guide soon raised her up and assisted her to a place of safety.”<sup>69</sup> Others noted how Stephen would use his personality to bring people at ease in the cave. One such visitor wrote, “He is extremely attentive and polite, particularly to the ladies, especially if they be any ways good looking, and runs over what he has to say with such ease and readiness, and mingles his statement of facts with so loft language to which his race are so inclined, that all classes, male and female, listen with respect, and involuntarily smile at his remark.”<sup>70</sup> Stephen's actions would not have been tolerated on the surface, and all would have known the rules. Did Stephen know the risks he was taking, or did the shadows of the cave hide all the taboos of the surface?

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<sup>68</sup> Nathaniel Willis, *Health Trip to the Tropics*, Charles Scribner, New York, 1853.

<sup>69</sup> Kite, 23.

<sup>70</sup> Anonymous, *A Description of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky*, (Boson: J.M. Hewes and Co., 1850), 34.

Being guides in the cave, allowed whites to give respect to these men and their jobs, but that did not stop the power of slavery from controlling their lives. Even though these men met world wide reputations, they were still not free. Freedom did not come to them just because of their role as guide. Instead, the cave did give them the opportunity to work towards freedom or a nice distraction until freedom came to them. Stephen did not receive his freedom until John Croghan died and left it in his will to emancipate his slaves. His will stated that each of his slaves would be free after seven years, and during those years they were to prepare for freedom by working and earning wages.<sup>71</sup> Even with this opportunity, Stephen and his family were listed on Croghan's inventory as to how much they were worth, Stephen at the age of 28 was worth \$600, Charlotte age 26, \$450, and their six year old son Thomas was listed as \$100.00.<sup>72</sup> Mat and Nick were not included in this will setting the slaves free because they were still owned by Thomas L. Bransford. Nick, however, was able to earn his freedom. When Thomas Bransford died, Nick was listed as valued at \$800, and eventually Nick bought his freedom prior to 1863 according to the reports of visitor, F.J. Stevenson. According to this, Nick was able to buy his freedom from the tips that he received from the visitors and by capturing and selling the eyeless cave fish to the visitors for three dollars a fish.<sup>73</sup> As for Mat, there is no evidence that he was freed before the end of the Civil War. However, what is important is that he lived to experience freedom and live a life that he controlled.

Kentucky likes to tout how good it was to its slaves, but the truth is that it was a state that held people, involuntarily forcing them into submission. Mammoth Cave used slave labor to become a world-renowned destination. However, through will power and hard work, these

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<sup>71</sup> Will of John Croghan, January 10, 1849, Book 4, page 181, Jefferson County Court Clerk, Louisville, Kentucky.

<sup>72</sup> Lyons, 20.

<sup>73</sup> Lyons, 46.

African Americans found a way to give life meaning, resisting the debilitating effect of slavery, and used their position as cave guides to take advantage of the opportunities it offered. Being a cave guide allowed them to have some authority, a chance to learn from the visitors, less secluded from life than other slaves, and a chance at freedom. Yet, it was a struggle to survive and find self-respect under the binds that held them.

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