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# The Mammoth Eagle: The CCC Era at Mammoth Cave

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## Abstract

Today's visitors to Mammoth Cave National Park sleep in cabins, drive over roads, and hike on miles of surface and cave trail constructed by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and others during the 1930s and 40s to create Mammoth Cave National Park. While this was without question a difficult transition for the residents and region, the work completed during this time is nothing short of monumental. Compiling information from archives, oral histories, and camp newspapers, as well as field observations, this presentation will shed light on several forgotten or misunderstood stories from this period in Mammoth Cave history. The creation of Mammoth Cave National Park also serves as an interesting case study regarding the rapid expansion of the National Park Service during this era and the competing interests between wilderness conservation and public access to recreation.

From 1933 through 1942 four CCC camps operated within the proposed national park. Kentucky NP-1 was not only the first CCC camp in Mammoth Cave, it was the first CCC camp in Kentucky – a point of pride mentioned by the superintendents whenever this camp was threatened with closure. Camp 1 housed Company 510, an African American Camp, on the Flint Ridge using property that was once a country club and later would be used as the Job Corps site. Camp 2 housed Company 543, with enrollees largely from Kentucky, on the Mammoth Cave Ridge near the New Entrance Motel. Camp 3 housed Company 582, men predominately from northern Ohio, on Joppa Ridge not far from Joppa Church. Lastly, Camp 4 housed Company 516, mostly from Indiana, north of the Green River where the Maple Springs group campground currently exists. There are some complications to this story as various companies were disbanded and camps closed or had other companies move to a new camp, however, these camp and company associations are largely true for the majority of this period. Initially, all four camps contributed to “Cave Man” a professional style newspaper with information relevant to the entire area.

Later, this newspaper was separated into four, more amateur, newsletters. Camp 1 produced “The Mammoth Eagle,” Camp 2 claimed the name “Cave Man” (over protests from Camp 3 who felt they had a more legitimate claim to the original paper), Camp 3 produced “Axe and Sledge,” and Camp 4 had “Camp Cade Courier” (not to be confused with “Cades Cove Courier” from Great Smoky Mountains National Park!). These newsletters include information about social and sporting events (Camp 3 often referred to their teams as the “Buckeye-Colonels,” paying homage to both their home and work states), important work updates, editorials by enrollees and supervisors, and – perhaps most enjoyably – gossip and humor pages. The combination of oral histories compiled by various researchers in the 1980s and 90s and the camp newsletters provide a great deal of insight into the life and characters of CCC camps and enrollees.

For a brief time, Camp 1 was a desegregated camp, though with segregated barracks. When Camp 2 became available, Camp 1 housed the entirely African American Company 510 and the other three camps were white camps. The contributions of

Company 510 cannot be ignored. Not only was it the longest operating camp in Mammoth Cave, some of the hardest trail (above and below ground) as well as challenging utility work was completed by this camp. This work even involved becoming archaeological assistants, as 510 was the group involved in the discovery of and archaeology work surrounding “Lost John.” During work in the “New Discovery” area, men from the 510 were tasked with digging the connection to Fairy Grotto and while doing so made several discoveries of significant new rooms and passages in this area. It has been noted that a greater degree of responsibility was given to African American enrollees at Mammoth Cave than to African Americans at sites in the deep south (Mammoth Cave existed in the fifth district of the CCC, also including Ohio, Indiana, etc.). For example, the 510 company at Mammoth Cave was an integral part of the forest fire prevention effort, whereas this was not the case for African American companies elsewhere. However, this does not mean that disparity did not exist between Camp 1 and the other camps. There is no indication in the narrative reports of assigning differing duties to the African American camp versus the white camps. The photo archive provides a slightly different story. While the photos indicate that every camp was involved in many common tasks, including trail and road creation, it is clear that each camp also tended to specialize in other tasks. With the exception of the “Lost John” archaeological work, there is not a single photo of African American enrollees engaged in more technical or skill-based assignments. While enrollees in Camps 2, 3, and 4 are seen building houses and cabins, assisting with masonry and carpentry, learning to become tree surgeons and using modern road engineering equipment, Camp 1 enrollees are shown digging ditches for utility pipes and building cement water reservoirs, as well as working the more labor-intensive cave trail projects.

Camp newsletters reveal rivalries between camps and tales of broken hearts of or by local women, but the available oral histories show very little evidence for meaningful friction between the camps or any bad feelings between locals and the CCC enrollees. Company 510 did face other challenges, however. Camp 1 repurposed older structures and was the first camp built, so its facilities lacked in comparison to the other camps. There was also the rumor that, because of its proximity to Salts Cave and its collapsed Pike Chapman entrance, the area was haunted. Initial poor management in Camp 1 contributed to particularly poor camp spirit. Later, under new leadership, Company 510 became one of the most highly rated companies in the entire fifth district. In 1938 Camp 3 was set to be closed and its company disbanded. At the same time, the Army wished to close the aging Camp 1 and provide 510 with nicer facilities. Mammoth Cave requested that Company 510 transfer from Camp 1 to the abandoned Camp 3 on Joppa Ridge. The local residents, protested this move so strongly that the company was briefly transferred to Fort Knox until the issue could be resolved. After a month of uncertainty the company moved back to Camp 1 on the Flint Ridge and the newer Camp 3 was disassembled and used for spare parts. Late during CCC efforts, the Company 510 was moved to Camp 2, but this move was well after the area was entirely owned by the park.

The creation of Mammoth Cave National Park serves as an interesting case study regarding the growth of the National Park Service during this era. In *Preserving Nature in the National Parks*, Sellars describes the evolution of thought concerning nature in parklands. The competing interests of wilderness conservation and public access and recreation were debated nationally as the Park Service added not only eastern National Parks, but also historic sites,

battlefields, and recreation areas to their previously existing western “crown jewels.”

At Mammoth Cave these opposing forces created differing choices above and below ground. Sellars describes the desire to return parklands to the state of first European discovery. National parks could not be expected to erase Native American history and return nature to a condition before any human contact. However, plant and animal life should be restored and traces of Euro-American history erased to create the best approximation of the land as seen by the first European explorer or settler. At Mammoth Cave, this guideline was followed on the surface above the cave. Above ground nearly all evidence of Euro-American history was erased in favor of soil, forest, and wildlife restoration. Considerable effort was placed in planting over a million trees and building thousands of erosion control check dams. Forestry technicians closely monitored the progress from farmland to restored forest and regularly reported and mapped the results. Existing houses and structures were dismantled and removed (see below). The park service succeeded in preventing the Army Corps of Engineers from building a dam on the Green River that would affect the rivers and river life above and below the ground. Years were spent on the effort to reintroduce deer, turkeys, and beavers into the park. It is hard to think of driving through Mammoth Cave National Park today and not seeing numerous turkeys, but there was a time when great “hunts” took place to locate and track individual turkeys released in the park. One naturalist report details a weeklong trek through the forest to find traces and rumors of turkeys.

Tradition holds that families could see their houses burning as they drove down the road after relinquishing their property. The camp newsletters, CCC oral histories and the park narrative reports contain no evidence of house burning. All of these sources report that properties were

dismantled and materials were salvaged for re-use. In two cases involving land owners who overstayed their allowed residency after sale and had ignored all efforts to evict, when it was learned they would be “in town” for the day park officials moved quickly to seize the property. In even these most contested and time dependent property seizures, the CCC workers dismantled and did not burn the houses and barns. Late in this period, salvaged materials were even sold at public auction. Earlier, however, these materials were used in park construction. Many of the chimneys of farmhouses were rebuilt as foundations in the residential and utility area. Wood was used in the construction of concrete structures and foundations, particularly for utility work. A fireplace mantle believed to pre-date the Civil War was saved for a number of years before finding a re-use in the Maple Springs ranger residence. (Photo 1 shows the Maples Springs ranger residence today. Originally, the “office room,” on the right side of this photo, was a porch.)

As nature in much of the proposed Mammoth Cave National Park was rebuilt to match the image of a pre-European Kentucky, key routes and public services were rebuilt, rerouted and improved to provide travelers with easy access to



significant areas. A residential village was constructed for park employees, including a rather monumental Superintendent's house. Nearby a utility area was built to include several workshops, garages, etc. One water reservoir after another, with accompanying pump houses and pipes, were built to accommodate the growing need for water in the park. Sewage systems were installed in the area of the hotel and in the residential area. New phone lines and exchanges were built. Roads determined necessary were straightened, flattened, and blacktopped, as were the ever-growing parking lots. Drainage control v-shaped stone culverts were built along many of the roads in the park (Photo 2). An artificial beach was installed on the Green River not far from the cave entrance. Visitor cabins, tennis and shuffleboard courts, a picnic area, and a new campground were built. A succession of new ferries were built and launched and the road and landing for the Mammoth Cave ferry near the Styx River was demolished in favor of a new road and landing for the ferry near the Echo River. In this case all four CCC camps contributed to the effort and there was a competition to see which camp would finish their section first. Shortly after construction of the new ferry landing at Echo River, storms and floods caused small landslides along the road cuts. This necessitated



further re-sculpting of the hillsides and the construction of slide control walls (Photo 3) on either side of the river. These erosion control structures work are still visible by everyone using the ferry to cross the river today. The Maple Spring Ranger station with residence and a fire station with ranger office comprised one of the last major structures built by the CCC in Mammoth Cave National Park. Many of the buildings constructed by the CCC in the park are now listed on the National Register of Historic Places.



Given the drive at this time to return nature to a pre-European state one is struck with the realization that no such work took place underground in the cave. One must conclude that to the Park Service, the cave was not viewed as "nature" but rather a source of recreation. Entrances and cave trails were built and greatly improved, additional lighting was added, and the experience was heavily promoted as a recreational experience through numerous media opportunities. During this time the Park Service also took custody of several historic sites and battlefields around the country and historic preservation becomes a new theme in parks. In the early 1940s, the first mention of a historic preservation initiative at Mammoth Cave is mentioned in the narrative reports regarding the need to preserve the remains of the saltpeter mining operations during the War of 1812.

Photos of this time are largely promotional in nature, often showing school groups, boy scouts, minor celebrities, veterans, and handicapped visitors and attractive women enjoying cave tours, lunch in the underground Snowball Dining Room, and beauty of the Frozen Niagara formation. Several radio broadcasts on Louisville, Nashville, and Cincinnati stations were made from within the cave to promote tourism.

Finally, competition from nearby show cave businesses not only led to legal action to curtail questionable tourism business practices, but also triggered renewed exploration of Mammoth Cave leading to the most significant discovery in nearly a century: Hanson and Hunt's "New Discovery." The discovery route was difficult, wet, and prone to flooding and so was not an option for tourism. Park Service geologist, Donald Hazellett, urged no development in New Discovery, but others felt that it would prove a public relations and tourism boom to the new National Park. A plan was developed to include three efforts in New Discovery: a new and modern artificial entrance was needed, cave trails would be constructed, and attempt would be made to drill through from one end of New Discovery to the nearby older tourist trail in the Fairy Grotto area. Work began immediately with much excitement. Care was taken to work carefully to prevent damage to the formations. Observers were posted to watch for signs of damage during blasting and the entrance was built to feature a double door air lock to prevent temperature and humidity changes that would rapidly destroy gypsum. But as World War II began and the CCC labor dwindled to only two smaller camps (Company 510, now at Camp 2, and Company 516), work in New Discovery slowed. The entrance and over a mile of trail was completed, but the connection to Fairy Grotto was never completed. In the spring of 1942 other more pressing projects on the surface drew workers away. April 29,

1942 marks the final day of work in New Discovery. Tools were left in place in the hopes that they would return next winter to complete the job; but by the next winter all of the CCC camps in Mammoth Cave were closed. For the past seventy years, New Discovery has been one of the rarest areas of Mammoth Cave to be seen, and has never been shown to tourists. In the end, Hazellett the geologist had his wish.

Now, though, CCC tools and work sites in New Discovery help us understand the process cave trail construction in other areas seen daily by tourists. For example, tool markings in the Fairy Grotto/Fossil Avenue dig areas look remarkably similar to tool markings in the sediment filled passage off Blackall Avenue near the route of the current Violet City Lantern tour. (Photo 4 shows CCC tool markings in sediment near Blackall Avenue.) Also in New Discovery is an example of a sediment chute (Photo 5) used to quickly transport sediment from a higher passage to the trail construction site. It is not hard, therefore, to imagine a similar chute used to help move sediment from Blackall to Main Cave for use in CCC trail construction past Chief City.

It is my hope that this work will begin a newfound appreciation of this period in the history of the Mammoth Cave region. It is a difficult period in Mammoth's history,





*I drink to the days we've journeyed,  
Afar on the wide green fields,  
And I give my toast to the old camp's  
soul  
And all it's meant to me.*

*I drink to the nights on the watch  
In the glow of a yellow moon,  
Where the cedar trees bow  
With the hoot of an owl  
In the breath of a summer breeze.*

*I lift a cup to the woods,  
As one who has felt its call  
And I pledge me deep,  
To the faith I keep  
In the love that I bear it all.*

*– excerpt from "Toast to Co. 516"  
by Charles Clifton, appearing  
in "Axe and Sledge," Volume 1,  
Number 1, August 1935.*

but the results have had an amazing and far-reaching positive influence. It is correct for historians and others to turn a skeptical eye to the issues of eminent domain, big city versus local politics, and the dismissal of the legendary Black Guides from the guide force. There is, however, another story of this period: a story of building roads, essential buildings and services, hiking and caving trails, and reforestation and erosion control. Hundreds of people from hotel employees to National Park Rangers to engineers to CCC enrollees and local laborers spent many thousands of hours in a very noble endeavor. These men and women accomplished something that is nearly unthinkable today. They *made* a national park.