

THE SABLE GUIDES OF MAMMOTH CAVE

JEANNE C. SCHMITZER

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries white persons generally held low opinions of most blacks. The majority of whites no doubt believed that servility was the most acceptable role for blacks who were not, therefore, considered worthy of positions of authority. This essay is an examination of black guides (slave and free) at Mammoth Cave in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It discusses some of the more prominent guides, analyzing their status in the eyes of white visitors, their roles, and their authority which was wielded at a time when authority was routinely denied blacks.

Mammoth Cave, a popular national park near Cave City, Kentucky, is an immense underground maze. Hundreds of avenues and offshoots create a confusing labyrinth of approximately three hundred miles and five underground levels. Before it became a national park in the mid twentieth century, the cave was under private ownership and management. Because of their love and enthusiasm for Mammoth Cave, some black Kentuckians played an important role as cave explorers and guides. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries many of these men made significant but often overlooked contributions in cave exploration and development.

Mammoth Cave was purchased in 1838 by Frank Gorin, a Glasgow attorney. He brought with him his slave, Stephen Bishop, and two other slaves, Nick and Mat Bransford, brothers whom he leased from Thomas Bransford of Glasgow.¹ Stephen,

JEANNE C. SCHMITZER, BA, is a graduate student in history at the University of Central Florida.

¹ Oliver Shackelford, "An Account of the History of Mammoth Cave During the Middle Nineteenth Century" (unpublished manuscript ca. 1917-1920, original owned by Young Hunt, copy located in Mammoth Cave Files, Mammoth Cave, Kentucky), unpaginated.

Nick, and Mat were all teenagers when they began their unique careers as three of the most famous early cave guides and explorers.² The three young men were taught the cave routes by J. C. Shackelford and Archibald Miller who were two of the earliest guides at Mammoth Cave. At that time only a minimal distance of twenty miles had been explored.

In 1839 Gorin sold the property to Dr. John Croghan. Croghan also purchased Stephen Bishop and continued to lease Nick and Mat Bransford. Croghan made many improvements on the property, including a hotel for visitors and public-access roads. It was during Croghan's ownership that Mammoth Cave became more widely known and visitors more numerous. It was also at this time that attention was focused on the slave guides.

Slaves were ideal to train and use as guides. Not only would the owner profit from the public showing of the cave, but there would be no wages to pay and no threat of a slave gaining control of business operations. After slavery, blacks remained a wise choice as guides. There would be virtually no opportunity for a black to gain an advantage over the white-owned cave establishment.

Not confined to Mammoth Cave, guides explored and shepherded visitors through other nearby caves such as Dixon Cave and White Cave. In later years, when Great Onyx Cave was opened to tourists under separate, private ownership, the black guides remained at Mammoth Cave.

Those who toured Mammoth Cave in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were mostly of wealthy, educated society. Professors, scholars, writers, scientists, and world travelers often toured the cave under the tutelage of unassuming black guides. In 1853 S. L. Gard noted, "The guides are four in number, all men of color. . . ."³ In 1888 Adam Binkerd

2 *Ibid.*

3 S. L. Gard to his brother, 1853, in the Mammoth Cave Files, Mammoth Cave, Kentucky.

observed that, "There are several trustworthy and competent white guides who occasionally do duty in the busy season, but none have achieved the notoriety of the colored guides."⁴

Distinguished visitors entrusted the guides with their lives and were willingly obedient to them in the enormous underground wilderness. Beneath the earth the guides were in complete charge, for they alone were the lifeline back to the surface. As one visitor stated, "Every tourist will do well to put himself unreservedly under the care of his guide. . . ."⁵ Another visitor, upon following the guide into the underworld, remarked, "One does what he [the guide] does and if he plunges head over heels into some dark chasm, then one imitates him cheerfully and believes confidently that he has a special point of interest up his sleeve."⁶

This position of authority is a circumstance that deserves consideration, for it put these black men into a unique situation. Especially in the South, at a time of marked class distinction and social hierarchy, this particular group of black men, while servants, were yet commanders in a position of authority. This was an especially unusual situation for antebellum black guides who were still slaves.

Obedience to a slave in some cases could mean the difference between life and death. One visitor stated that:

In most regions of the cave it is hazardous to lose sight of the guide. If you think you walk straight ahead, even for a few rods, and then turn around and return to him, you will find it next to impossible. So many paths come in at acute angles; they look so much alike, and the light of a lamp reveals them so imperfectly, that none but the practiced eye of a guide can disentangle their windings.⁷

4 Adam D. Binkerd, *Pictorial Guide to the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky* (Cincinnati, 1888), 16.

5 Binkerd, *The Mammoth Cave and Its Dentizens* (Cincinnati, 1869), 94.

6 Herman Zagel, "An Excursion to Mammoth Cave in Kentucky," *Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 71 (1973): 282. This account was written in 1883.

7 Maria Child, "Mammoth Cave," *Bentley's Miscellany* 14 (1843): 417.

Another visitor observed that, "The services of a guide cannot be safely dispensed with, and guests should respect his authority; for the law holds him responsible for the safe return of those put under his care."⁸

A journalist advised:

One thing I will warn any of my readers who may ever visit the cave: keep near the guide; don't attempt to straggle off in a little exploring party by yourself; but should you get separated from the guide don't attempt to hunt him up, but sit down and wait till he hunts you up.⁹

This advice was not readily followed on one occasion when four men strayed from their party. Guide Ed Bishop, after working an entire day in the cave, searched from seven o'clock at night till one o'clock in the morning before he found them all "well scared" with only one light remaining.¹⁰ Charles Wright credited Mat and Nick Bransford for saving a party from drowning on the Echo River by their "courage and self possession."¹¹ An anonymous correspondent to the *Eclectic Magazine* reported, "No casualty... has yet occurred in the cave under the auspices of the guides, nor is it likely to do so, as long as their instructions are followed."¹²

Records reveal that Mammoth Cave's black guides handled their unique situation without presumption, always remembering their social role dictated by the time and place. One visitor recalled the action of Stephen Bishop and the response of her party as they stopped to eat the noon meal:

8 H. C. Hovey, "One Hundred Miles in Mammoth Cave," *Scribner's Monthly* 20 (1880): 924.

9 R. S. Thompson, *The Sucker's Visit to the Mammoth Cave* (Springfield, Ohio, 1879), 91.

10 LeRoy Jeffers, "The Mammoth and Great Onyx Caves," *Scientific American*, 24 August 1918, p. 155.

11 Charles W. Wright, *A Guide Manual to Mammoth Cave* (Louisville, 1897), 7.

12 Anonymous, *The Eclectic Magazine*, May-August, 1861, p. 52.

Our guide modestly remembered that he was a slave, and after the repast under the weight of which he 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.¹³

It is rare to find an account where a slave was invited to dine in white company!

It is clearly evident that a guide position was not a typical slave role. Some even found it difficult to think of their guide as a slave. Marianne Finch, who visited Mammoth Cave in 1853, wrote of Stephen Bishop, "He seems more like the high priest and expounder of its mysteries, than a hired guide, much less a slave."¹⁴ Another visitor in 1855 observed the young slave guide Mat Bransford and commented that there was "nothing slavish in his learning, dress or language."¹⁵

Black cave guides were unique in another way as well. Prior to academic opportunities for blacks, these men acquired considerable education from the scientific visitors to the cave. This was especially true of Stephen Bishop, a guide from 1838 to 1857. Maria Child noted:

His vocation has brought him into contact with many intellectual 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 recollect everybody that ever visited the cave, and all the terms of geology and mineralogy are at his tongue's end.¹⁶

One scientist remarked that Stephen was very conversant with the many scientific terms for the formations and

13 Parker N. Willis, *Health Trip to the Tropics* (New York, 1853), 178.

14 Marianne Finch, *An Englishwoman's Experience in America* (London, 1853), 350-51.

15 Anonymous, "My Gropings Nine Miles Under Ground," *The National Magazine* 7 (1855): 58.

16 Child, "Mammoth Cave," 419.

asked difficult questions.¹⁷ Another visitor went into more detail:

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 [Benjamin] 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 a repository of a great variety of opinions and comparisons, which he has sagacity enough to collate and arrange, and he rarely misplaces or confuses 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.¹⁸

Frank Gorin, Stephen's former owner, wrote that his talents were of the "first order." Gorin considered him trustworthy, reliable, and companionable:

He was a hero and could be a clown. He knew a gentleman or a lady as if by instinct. He learned whatever he wished without trouble or labor.¹⁹

Marianne Finch wrote in her journal, "He is certainly the very prince of guides."²⁰ Thomas Kite noted that, "Every famous visitor to the cave in those days expressed their appreciation of this unique character in their published journals."²¹

Bayard Taylor recognized Stephen's investigative efforts when he wrote that he "had a share in all the principle explora-

17 [?] Barnwell, "The Mammoth Cave of Kentucky," *Knickerbocker* 33 (1849): 304.

18 Bayard Taylor, *At Home and Abroad* (New York, 1889), 205.

19 Stump W. Forwood, *An Historical and Descriptive Narrative of the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky* (Philadelphia, 1870), 26.

20 Finch, *An Englishwoman's Experience in America*, 351.

21 Thomas Kite, "Journal of a Trip Through Kentucky and Visit to Mammoth Cave" (May and June 1847) introduction by William H. Kite and notes by Mary T. Moore; McGregor Collection Manuscript, Kentucky Library Special Collections, Western Kentucky University.

tions and discoveries and is almost as well known as the cave."²² Prior to Stephen's arrival, explorations had gone no further than the Bottomless Pit, twenty miles from the entrance. In 1838 Stephen was the first to cross the chasm opening up more of the cave to new explorations and discoveries of which he was notably active until his death.²³ None of the rivers had been crossed until 1840 when great efforts were made to discover their courses. Marie Child asserted that, "Though the courageous 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, yet they still remain as much a mystery as ever."²⁴

In 1849, through the continued explorations of Stephen and other guides, the cave was known to have eight rivers; three had been explored.²⁵ In 1842, Colonel George Croghan, brother of John Croghan, had Stephen draw a map of the explored areas. The map was published with credit to Stephen and included in *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844 by a Visitor*.²⁶

Stephen had an appreciation of the cave, and it is clear he was dedicated to his vocation. In 1851 one visitor described Stephen's "zeal unimpaired by daily visits for twelve years." He wrote further that Stephen "girds on his canteen of oil, provides from his stores a flaring lamp for each person, and plunges boldly down into the darkness."²⁷ Bayard Taylor, after spending a full day at Mammoth Cave, remembered that Stephen,

22 Taylor, *At Home and Abroad*, 205.

23 Forwood, *Narrative of the Mammoth Cave*, 25.

24 Child, "Mammoth Cave," 415.

25 Eliza Cook, "The Great Mammoth Cave of Kentucky," *Eliza Cook's Journal*, 8 December 1849, p. 87. The journal is in Kentucky Library Special Collections, Western Kentucky University.

26 Alexander Clark Bullitt, *Rambles in the Mammoth Cave During the Year 1844, by a Visitor* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1973), unpaginated.

27 An Officer of the Royal Artillery, "A Visit to the Mammoth Cave of Kentucky," *Littell's Living Age* 28 (1851): 127.

"Notwithstanding his labors, and the prospect of their repetition the same day, was up in readiness to accompany me to White's Cave."²⁸

Mammoth Cave was a world wonder in the nineteenth century, and visitors often picked up or broke off crystals as souvenirs of their trip. Parker Willis remembered that Stephen eloquently protested against such profanation. However, he was reminded that he was a slave, and in Willis's words, "a slave's remonstrance would not be much, with the kind of white man that would thus immortalize his own bad taste."²⁹ Yet Stephen invariably dealt with this situation by using good judgment. As visitors looked for specimens, Stephen pointed to those out of reach and shrewdly quoted exorbitant prices that even the wealthiest visitor would decline.³⁰

In 1855 Stephen had one year of servitude left before he was to be freed.³¹ He had planned to take his wife Charlotte and son Thomas to Liberia under the plan of the American Colonization Society.³² Stephen and other slaves were receiving wages in order to begin their freedom with a little capital.³³ Bayard Taylor noted that Stephen planned to practice law in Liberia and had commenced a study of Blackstone.³⁴ However, Taylor predicted from personal observations that Stephen's tastes and curiosity of Liberian geography would lead him to become one of its explorers. Taylor further commented, "And if I desired to undertake an exploration of those regions, I know of few aids whom I would sooner choose."³⁵ Willis believed that Stephen Bishop might some day be the president of Liberia or an

28 Taylor, *At Home and Abroad*, 222.

29 Willis, *Health Trip to the Tropics*, 182.

30 Barnwell, "The Mammoth Cave of Kentucky," 305.

31 Taylor, *At Home and Abroad*, 206; also see, Amelia M. Murray, *Letters From the United States, Cuba and Canada* (New York, 1856), 321.

32 Kite, *Visit to Mammoth Cave*, 9.

33 Taylor, *At Home and Abroad*, 206.

34 *Ibid.*

35 *Ibid.*

ambassador from St. Domingo.³⁶ However, one wonders if Stephen would ever have left his Mammoth Cave home. C. G. Rosenberg commented that Stephen had spent his last fifteen years about the cave "until he himself has begun to fancy it would be impossible to quit it."³⁷

Documented evidence of Stephen's manumission has not yet been found. Since land records indicate that he and his wife Charlotte owned and sold a piece of property on 13 July 1857, it is reasonable to believe that he was free at the time.³⁸ Unfortunately, Stephen died a young man around age thirty-seven, and neither the cause of death nor the exact date have been established. In 1858 Charles D. Wright asserted, however, that Stephen had died in 1856.³⁹ These pieces of evidence appear to place his death somewhere between 13 July 1857 and 31 December 1857. While much of Stephen's life remains as much a mystery as his death, his years of service at Mammoth Cave are recognized and documented. As Thomas Kite stated, "Indeed he showed himself a trusty guide, at all times placing himself between us and danger and by his skill eliciting our heartfelt commendation."⁴⁰

Stephen Bishop's reputation as a guide was well known, and he was one of the most popular of the early guides. However, Mat and Nick Bransford were also well known and equally curious and appreciative of the cave. Since they lived longer than Stephen and spent most of their lives at Mammoth Cave, they were involved in further explorations and discoveries.

Materson Bransford spent most of his life as a Mammoth Cave guide and explorer from 1838 until his death in

36 Willis, *Health Trip to the Tropics*, 152.

37 C. G. Rosenberg, *Jenny Lind in America* (New York, 1851), 194.

38 Deed, Edmonson County, Kentucky, 13 July 1857, Edmonson County Courthouse, Brownsville, Kentucky.

39 Wright, *Guide Manual*, 6.

40 Kite, *Visit to Mammoth Cave*, 23.

1888. By the age of thirty-seven it was estimated that he had travelled a distance of not less than fifty thousand miles back and forth through the underground passages.⁴¹ His enthusiasm for his work and his appreciation of the cave is detailed in many visitors' accounts.⁴² During his years underground he was quick to learn from visiting scientists and achieved a "considerable degree of culture . . . by contact with scholars and professors of every science especially of geology and mineralogy." Indeed, Mat possessed a vocabulary of scientific terms that, in the words of a visiting scientist, "would do credit to a man of letters."⁴³ Mat was extremely active in cave explorations as was attested by H.C. Hovey who wrote in 1891 that:

Each guide has his own mark to leave on the walls in order to be certain of the way if ever in doubt. Many a time they have congratulated themselves on a new discovery only to be chagrined by finding Stephen's or Mat's sign on the wall, showing a previous visit.⁴⁴

Mat was a take-charge type who maintained control in the cave. The guide manual cautioned visitors of the potential dangers, warning that:

The abrupt manner in which it is necessary for the guides to address visitors in dangerous places must not be confounded with insolence, as it is absolutely essential at many points.⁴⁵

This statement was vividly proved by Mat whose quick orders prevented one party from possible disaster. One visitor recalled that when their party rushed to peer over the edge of the Maelstrom Pit, Mat "shouted at us - so earnestly we could not but heed - 'Keep back! keep back! don't go near that edge; come

41 Wright, *Guide Manual*, 7

42 Binkerd, *Mammoth Cave*, 62.

43 *Ibid.*, 61.

44 Hovey, *Guide Manual* (Cincinnati, 1891), unpaginated.

45 Wright, *Guide Manual*, 8.



Mat Bransford, 1875

The Filson Club

around this way!" He proceeded to place them at a safe viewing point and lit up the pit with a Bengal light. The visitors could then see that Mat had prevented them from rushing out on a two-to three-inch shelf suspended over the Maelstrom Pit nearly two hundred feet deep. Clearly, as Hovey stated in reference to the guides, "Their prompt alacrity has saved more than one valuable life when suddenly endangered."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Hovey, *Guide Manual* (Cincinnati, 1895), 8.



Mat Bransford, 1875

The Filson Club

around this way!" He proceeded to place them at a safe viewing point and lit up the pit with a Bengal light. The visitors could then see that Mat had prevented them from rushing out on a two-to three-inch shelf suspended over the Maelstrom Pit nearly two hundred feet deep. Clearly, as Hovey stated in reference to the guides, "Their prompt alacrity has saved more than one valuable life when suddenly endangered."⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Hovey, *Guide Manual* (Cincinnati, 1895), 8.

In 1884 Mat and Nick were still faithful in the guide service after forty-five years.⁴⁷ By 1888, Mat had died, but Nick, old and "almost superannuated," remained around the cave as one of its fixtures, occasionally still providing guide service. In 1867, an unknown tourist wrote of him in the *Atlantic Monthly*:

In the evening, as I sat before the blazing pile of logs in the fireplace, someone knocked at my door and a negro servant looked in. Would I like to see the guide? "Certainly. What is his name?" "Nicholas, sah, Nicholas! But we all calls him Ole Nick." On presentation his Majesty proved to be an interesting black man, considerably past middle age; wrinkled, as none but a genuine negro ever becomes; a short, broad strong man, with a grizzled beard and moustache, quiet but steady eyes, grave in his demeanor, and concise in his conversation. He tells me of two routes by which I can make a tour through his domains.⁴⁸

Little has been written about Nick Bransford. The few accounts that exist provide glimpses of what appears to be a profound and enigmatic personality. Though Nick lived longer than Mat or Stephen, he seems to have eluded even the census records between 1860 and 1910, appearing only in 1880.

The personality of Nick was elaborated upon by an 1867 visitor who disliked "overofficial guides" and the "wordy wonder of gabbling tourists." He was therefore happy to be guided by Nick. He observed that Nick "seemed thoroughly imbued with the spirit of the place in which he had spent the greater portion of his time for seventeen years. He was as grave and taciturn as some cave-keeping anchorite. During our inward progress, he had carefully pointed out every place and object of interest." The visitor further recorded that while hiking out of the cave, Nick "stalked silently and abstractedly before, though he seemed to listen to every step of my feet; for if I

47 Hovey, *Guide Manual* (Cincinnati, 1884), 8.

48 Anonymous, "A Tour in the Dark," *Atlantic Monthly*, December, 1867, p. 670.

paused or made a misstep, he instantly looked around."⁴⁹

Guides usually gave visitors the opportunity to experience the darkness and solitude of the cave by putting out the lamplight for a short while. Nick's tourist described his experience:

At last he turned, and looking me curiously in the face, asked whether I thought I should be afraid if left in the dark there a little while. Some people could not bear it he said. . . I was disposed, moreover, to "try the dark" from curiosity. But I must acknowledge that, when the guide, with that doubting look, repeated his inquiry, I hesitated, asking, "Is there any danger? and from what?" "Nobody knows, massa," said he seriously; "only some people's nerve can't stan' it, dats all." At that, he had Nick take all the lamps and retreat into the darkness. Soon the visitor grew tremendously fearful. "Where was he now, my dark-faced guide? What if he should not be able to find me again in the midst of this hundred miles of tunnels that look so much alike? What if he should not intend to come? What if - But thank Heaven! There he is at last! Blessed be his black face!" How foolish seem all those dreadful fancies now, so terribly real then!⁵⁰

The English explorer F. J. Stevenson, another lone visitor under Nick's guidance, was especially awed by his illumination of Gorin's Dome:

The light of my lamps was swallowed up in darkness and I could not make out neither roof, floor nor sides until Nick made a sudden appearance at the other window, high up to the right. I was horrified to see him climb out into the dark space and make his way to a bunch of stalagmites, on which he placed two or three blazing Bengal lights. Wishing to get a view from both points, I desired Nick to come back and conduct me to the upper window. . . I became so giddy that I was obliged to crouch down and hold on to the stalagmites. No one but the guide ever goes out to that place.⁵¹

Nick reluctantly became part of Stevenson's exploring expedition two hundred feet to the bottom of the Maelstrom Pit.

49 *Ibid.*, 677.

50 *Ibid.*, 678.

51 *Ibid.*, 732.

Stevenson's curiosity compelled him to reach the bottom of the pit which he achieved by being lowered by rope. Nick and white guide Frank Demunbrund were also lowered to the bottom. Though Nick would have preferred to not be involved, it was a daring expedition for all three men. He easily could have impressed later visitors with the feat, but it appears he rarely, if ever, told about it. Accounts of his services record that he simply pointed out the Maelstrom Pit without any elaboration of his own descent into it.

Nick, obviously comfortable in accessible areas of the cave, consistently avoided cave dangers. Disapproving of foolhardy exploration, he became agitated when Stevenson's obsession to explore led to a disregard of safety precautions. When their boat was overloaded with two passengers, Stevenson required Nick to wait on a mudbank in the river. Nick, knowing it would be impossible to leave without the boat, objected in vain. Several hours later Stevenson returned to a distraught Nick:

He had made up his mind that I had met with an accident and that he would be left alone to die in the darkness. . . . he swore he would go no more with me on voyages of discovery for love or money.⁵²

Stevenson later informed the proprietors of Mammoth Cave that Nick was "excusably angry with me for leaving him so long alone on that dismal mud bank, but if he is still alive, I hope he has long since forgiven me for having treated him so badly."⁵³

Nick had a high regard for his freedom. However, as far as can be concluded, he had no plans to leave his Mammoth Cave home for Liberia as did Stephen Bishop. Prior to 1863, Nick had saved enough money to purchase his freedom.⁵⁴ He

⁵² *Ibid.*, 756.

⁵³ F. J. Stevenson to the proprietors of Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, 24 May 1912. Kentucky Historical Society, Frankfort, Kentucky.

⁵⁴ F. J. Stevenson, "Adventures Underground: the Mammoth Cave of

fished in solitude for the white, eyeless, cave fish in a home-made boat on the Roaring River.⁵⁵ Quite rare, and thus a novelty, the fish were easily sold to visitors. He managed to purchase his freedom from the proceeds of his sales. In 1895 Nick was retired from the guide service because of ill health.⁵⁶ He died after serving over forty years as a Mammoth Cave guide.

Nick's brother Mat had a son who also served as a guide at Mammoth Cave. Henry Bransford, already active in the guide service, had plodded in his father's footsteps for many years.⁵⁷ Born in 1849, Henry participated in the second generation of Bransford guides in Mammoth Cave. Henry and other later guides were involved in several significant cave expeditions and therefore learned more of the cave than did Stephen Bishop or the earlier Bransfords. Henry also came in contact with many scientists and scholars and had the added benefit of learning from his father and uncle.

Adam Binkerd referred to him as "the inimitable Henry" and described him as the walking "Thesaurus of the Cave." He also had "an ample supply of witty sayings and irresistible drollery, coupled with the dry humor of his father."⁵⁸ Herman Zagel described Henry as "world famous," a "handsome young negro man built like Hercules, who has hiked the cave every day for twenty one years."⁵⁹

Zagel, guided by Henry in 1888, related an experience while visiting Mammoth Cave with two friends. When some of their party became tired, Henry stopped for a short rest. Zagel wrote that for himself and his two friends:

Kentucky in 1863," *Blackwoods Magazine*, June 1932, pp. 722-23.

55 *Ibid.*, 749

56 Hovey, *Guide Manual* (1895), 8.

57 Binkerd, *Pictorial Guide*, 13.

58 *Ibid.*

59 Zagel, "An Excursion to Mammoth Cave," 277.

The stop lasted too long and we started out without the guide to find the exit on our own hook. We came to a place, indeed, where even the pass separated into three smaller passages. Which one of these should we choose? The one leading so steeply upward in front of us was out of the question, since no one could get up it. But which of the other two was the right one? One wanted to go left, the other right. Since we could not agree, we remained sitting in front of the three openings and lit our cigars. Minute after minute passed, the guide did not come. Ten, twelve minutes we sat, but no Henry appeared. The situation became terrifying. What if the colored man had chosen a completely different way to the daylight? Hadn't he said that in such a case we would have to wait ten hours for his return? We called, we whistled. Our calls and whistles echoed along the rocks but no answer followed. Finally, finally a ray of light shot through the darkness, and gasping, we saw the large figure of the colored man loom up in the distance. And which way did he choose? Neither the right nor the left, but the steep one which we had explained was impassable.⁶⁰

Henry died a young man at forty-five years of age. His cause of death remains a mystery. Because his will was written seven months before his death, some have speculated on the possibility of illness. His will reveals extensive property ownership for a black man of the late nineteenth century.⁶¹ Two of his sons, Matt and Louis, continued to carry the Bransford name in the Mammoth Cave guide service.

Henry's son Matt participated in the third generation of Bransford guides and worked in the cave for thirty-two years. Though Matt and his wife Zemmie had no children, they owned a large home which they used to accommodate black visitors and the black servants of wealthy white visitors to Mammoth Cave in the early twentieth century. Postcards were available for those who stayed at the Bransford home with a picture of Matt carrying his guide equipment at the entrance to the cave. The caption on the postcard read, "Mr. M. W. BRANSFORD GUIDE

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 292.

⁶¹ Henry Bransford, will, 28 May 1894, Edmonson County Courthouse, Brownsville, Kentucky. Will Book 2, p. 92.

OF THE 3rd GENERATION Prop. of Bransford's Resort
MAMMOTH CAVE, KY.⁶²

Based on an average of ten miles a day, Matt estimated he had walked in the cave enough to have hiked round the world four and a half times by the time he retired.⁶³ Especially well known for his flare-throwing ability, fellow guides reported that, "He could walk down the steps at the Ruins of Karnak, throw a flare into a hole in the wall 80 feet away and under a waterfall, and never stop walking."⁶⁴ When Matt retired from his service in 1937, his brother Louis remained as a Mammoth Cave guide. The Bransford family then continued their guide service into the fourth generation with Arthur and Clifton. Both began guiding around 1918, and in the 1930s worked in the black Civilian Conservation Corps camp at Mammoth Cave.⁶⁵ The family continued to provide cave guides with Eddie, Elzie, and George Bransford. All in all, Bransford fathers and sons served as guides from 1838, when Mat arrived as a young slave, until the 1930s when seven Bransford names graced the guide roster. The Bishop name was carried on by only one, Ed Bishop, descendent of Stephen. Black guides such as Will Garvin, Louis Brown, Bob Lively, Mutch Hunter, and numerous others also worked and explored in Mammoth Cave into the 1930s.

What happened after this time is unclear. As no written documentation has yet been found, personal interviews and the historical consideration of white social attitudes is thus far the basis of determining the fate of Mammoth Cave's black guides. Former guide Clifton Bransford, interviewed in 1991, expressed

62 In possession of Matt's nephew, Reverend James Bransford, Bowling Green, Kentucky.

63 Marion Porter, "Members of One Family Serve as Cave Guides for 100 Years," *Louisville Courier-Journal*, 21 December 1937.

64 *Ibid.*

65 "Guide Supplement," unpublished guide roster in the Mammoth Cave Files.



*Mammoth Cave Guides — Ed Bishop, front on left, Mat Bransford, second on left, Bob Livey, first on right.
The Filson Club*



*Mammoth Cave Guides — Ed Bishop, front on left, Mat Bransford, second on left, Bob Lively, first on right.
The Filson Club*

his conviction that prejudice was the most significant factor that led to the elimination of blacks from the guide service during the 1930s.⁶⁶

Especially at a time of economic depression, blacks were the first to be relieved of service. With jobs scarce, many blacks in the area migrated to northern cities in hopes of better job opportunities. Among those who left were the younger generation of black guides. Older guides, pressured economically, and with their children gone, resorted to selling their property to the Kentucky National Park Commission and moving to nearby towns.⁶⁷ Under new ownership and management as a national park, no black guides were rehired. Considering social attitudes at the time, this is not surprising.

No longer a part of the Mammoth Cave guide service, the names and deeds of the black guides were largely forgotten, especially as new discoveries in the later twentieth century claimed public attention. However, through the hidden history of their service, a rich black heritage is deeply rooted in the recesses of Mammoth Cave; their legacy still haunts the depths of this underground Kentucky marvel.

66 Interview of Clifton Bransford by Jeanne C. Schmitzer, May 1991, Indianapolis, Indiana. Taped interview in possession of the writer.

67 Minutes of the Kentucky National Park Commission throughout the 1930s record purchases of properties owned by former black guides or their families. These records are kept in the Mammoth Cave Files, Mammoth Cave National Park.