

The Slave Guide Legacy at Mammoth Cave

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Abstract

Serving as guides and explorers at Mammoth Cave partially rescued four men from the obscurity of enslavement. Stephen Bishop, Materson Bransford, Nicholas Bransford and a young man named Alfred all had their very existence documented in the written journals and diaries of various nineteenth century Mammoth Cave visitors. They were physically described, their personalities contemplated, their intelligence gauged, their dialects imitated. At least one abolitionist characterized Stephen Bishop as a charismatic natural leader who could govern the citizenry of freed men in Liberia, should he choose to relocate there.

Modern cavers and researchers have monitored the cave explorations of these men for years. Their signatures or names and dates are found in numerous areas of the cave, often documenting discovery dates and exploration parties. With the exception of Mat Bransford, who has known descendants, the personal and professional lives of the other enslaved guides are shrouded in mystery. About the year 1887, Ed Bishop came to Mammoth Cave as a guide and explorer. He claimed to be the grand nephew of Stephen Bishop. What was that familial connection? Who parented Stephen Bishop? Who are the descendants of Nick Bransford? What took Ed Bishop away from Mammoth Cave and where did he go? What physical reminders are found on the cultural and geographic landscape today that lend better understanding to these early guides and their enslavement – to the lives of Black cave guides during the years of Reconstruction in Kentucky?

Continuing painstaking research by current Mammoth Cave guides and scholars brings to light previously unknown information about our enslaved predecessors and their descendants. Government records, oral tradition and other primary sources are helping us better understand the men – and women -- behind the cave signatures.