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TOP STORY

Mammoth Cave guide works to fund memorial for ancestors

By JACKSON FRENCH jfrench@bgdailynews.com 22 hrs ago



Jerry Bransford kneels between the graves of his great grandfather Henry Bransford, and great grandmother Alice Bransford on Wednesday, February 14, 2018, in Mammoth Cave National Park. Bransford is attempting to have a monument installed to commemorate his family's history and contribution to the cave. (Anthony)

A seasonal tour guide at Mammoth Cave National Park is working to have a memorial built for his ancestors who explored Mammoth Cave as slaves.

Jerry Bransford's family history is tied to the cave. His great-great-grandfather Mat Bransford and Nick Bransford were born into slavery and leased to Franklin Gorin, who owned Mammoth Cave in 1838, for \$100 a year so they could work as cave explorers and guides.

Mat and Nick Bransford were not biologically related, but used the last name as their owner, Thomas B. Bransford. They were the first of many black Bransford men to work as guides at Mammoth Cave.

To commemorate his great-great-grandfather's contributions to Mammoth Cave, Jerry Bransford wants to see a granite monument 15 to 17 feet tall erected in a small cemetery in Mammoth Cave National Park where Mat Bransford is buried.

"There's an old cemetery where ancestors of mine are buried, and I'd like to see a memorial for them placed there," he said.

The cemetery contains numerous graves both marked and unmarked, Jerry Bransford said.

"I want to clean it up," he said. "I want it to be something to admire rather than something that makes you sad."

In his efforts to raise the \$10,000 needed to have the marker constructed and placed, Jerry Bransford is working with Imagewest, a student-run advertising and public relations agency at Western Kentucky University.

Imagewest manager Kara Williams Glenn said she and her student interns are working on Jerry Bransford's campaign pro bono.

“This is something we feel is a story that has to be told,” she said.

Williams Glenn and the students she works with met Jerry Bransford in November and heard the story of his ancestors and quickly decided they wanted to help him pay tribute to his ancestors.

“It was the first business meeting I’ve had where I cried,” she said. “We couldn’t fathom not working on that project.”

Williams Glenn said Imagewest has put together a gofundme page, a Facebook page, several videos and a fundraising campaign website bransfordmemorial.com, that lays out the Bransford family history and the family’s connection to the cave.

The gofundme page, which as of Thursday morning had garnered \$1,050, can be found at gofundme.com/bransfordfamilymemorial.

MCNP spokeswoman Vickie Carson said Jerry Bransford had to get approval from the National Park Service to have the memorial built.

“This is considered a marker for the family and that was considered appropriate by the National Park Service,” she said.

Because the National Park Service, which oversees the park, is a part of the federal government, the park cannot officially support Jerry Bransford’s campaign or similar fundraising efforts, Carson said.

Carson said Mat and Nick Bransford, along with Stephen Bishop, another slave who explored and gave tours in the cave, are important parts of the cave’s history and there is an exhibit about them in the park’s Visitors Center.

“The Bransfords are part of the history of the park,” she said. “Our guides speak about the Bransfords every day on their tours.”

Jerry Bransford said if he can’t get the \$10,000 he needs within a year, he will refund the money he’s collected.



“I have several pledges now, though I’ll need many, many more than what I have,” he said.

Several members of the Bransford family served as cave guides, both before and after Emancipation, he said.

“Because you were emancipated, you didn’t know what was over the hill, but you were comfortable in the cave,” he said.

The Bransford line of cave guides came to an end in 1939, when Louis Bransford’s employment was terminated, Jerry Bransford said.

“The Bransford men, because they were men of color, were no longer qualified to do the job they’d been doing for generations,” Jerry Bransford said.

Jerry Bransford became a cave guide in 2004 after an encounter with Joy Lyons, who, at the time, was the chief of programs at MCNP and had been studying the Bransford family’s connection to the cave.

Though he already knew most of his family’s history, he did not previously know about Mat Bransford and the meeting inspired him to become the first cave guide in his family in 65 years, he said.

“I feel very fortunate and blessed to carry the torch again,” he said. “I feel very strongly about walking in their footsteps.”

Jerry Bransford said he wants to see a memorial constructed at his ancestors’ cemetery to honor their hard work and the contributions they made to the cave.

“It’s not for me or my story. It’s for my kinsfolk,” he said. “This memorial is for black men who gave so much.”

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