Curious visitors have come to Mammoth Cave since 1816 to see the subterranean realm. Travelers of those early years often wrote accounts of the cave and their experiences, accounts which were published on both sides of the Atlantic and brought more visitors to discover the cave first-hand with the only people who truly knew this underworld – the guides. And among the greatest of the guides were the Bransfords.

Bransford family members guided visitors in Mammoth Cave from 1838 until 1939. Prior to the Bransfords, two generations of earlier guides had conducted travelers through the cave.

MAT and NICK

A new era began in 1838 when Franklin Gorin, an attorney of Glasgow, Kentucky, purchased the property from Hyman and Simon Gratz. Gorin brought his 17-year-old slave, Stephen, for a guide. He also hired from his Glasgow friend, Thomas Bransford, two slaves, Mat and Nick, brothers about the same age as Stephen.

Guides Joe Shackelford and Archibald Miller, Jr. taught the three younger guides the tourist routes in the cave, as they themselves had been taught by earlier guides. The three were willing learners and became the principle guides during the next two decades.

Not content with the known cave, each of them entered the dark unknown and made new discoveries. Mat was a member of the exploring team that first entered Mammoth Dome and found there a miner’s lantern that had been dropped down Crevice Pit when the cave was worked for saltpetre. He also discovered at the end of Franklin Avenue a beautiful grotto later named Serena’s Arbor.

The cave property changed hands again in 1839 when Dr. Croghan planned a descent of Crevice Pit when the cave was worked for saltpetre. He also discovered at the end of Franklin Avenue a beautiful grotto later named Serena’s Arbor.

Stevenson later described his discoveries on what has since been known as “Steven- son’s Lost River.” When a dam was built on the Green River 43 years later the water level rose in the dome, closing the only known entrance to that river. Remains of the boat could still be seen at the bottom of the dome. Stevenson and Nick spent the next two days exploring the upstream part of the river.

Henry’s Lost River was a discovery made by Dr. Charles W. Wright, in his 1858 guidebook, wrote that “although a great deal has been said and written about Stephen, from the fact that he was the favorite of a former proprietor, he was in no respect supe rior to either Mat or Nicholas, nor was his acquaintance with the cave more thorough or extensive.”

Wright also mentioned that “Mat, as well as Nicholas, saved a party from drowning on the Echo River, by his courage and self-possession.”

Some visitors wanted to explore the new parts of the cave. In 1863 F.J. Stevenson of London, England, spent ten days doing just that. He and Nick descended into the bottom of Gorin’s Dome, and found a pool of water issuing from under a low arch of rock, and passing out by a similar arch on the other side. The following day a small boat was constructed and lowered by guides to the bottom of the dome. Stevenson and Nick spent the next two days exploring the upstream part of the river.

Dr. Croghan died in 1849, and Stephen in 1857. Now Mat and Nick were the most experienced guides. Dr. Charles W. Wright, in his 1858 guidebook, wrote that “although a great deal has been said and written about Stephen, from the fact that he was the favorite of a former proprietor, he was in no respect super iior to either Mat or Nicholas, nor was his acquaintance with the cave more thorough or extensive.”

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Stevenson also wrote that he and Nick explored Roaring River and that he, Nick, and guide Frank Demunbrun each descended the Machstrom, the deep pit at the end of the “Long Route.”
One of Henry’s chores in 1882 was watering and tending the short-lived mushroom farm in Audubon Avenue. During the previous year natural beds of mushrooms were found in River Hall. Since there was a considerable demand for this delicacy in Louisville and Nashville, as well as at the cave hotel dining room, three of the Estate Trustees organized the Mammoth Cave Mushroom Co. One trustee proved untrustworthy, however, absconding with all the cash.

Parades of visitors came with each passing year. Herman Zagel, a German visitor in 1887, described Henry as: “a handsome young negro man built like Hercules, tall and broad-shouldered. On Echo River, he sang with a full melodic voice ... a three-tone sequence of notes ... which came back a splendid chord.”

Mat Bransford died in 1886. Henry died in 1894, leaving two young sons, Louis and Matt, who would later serve as a third generation of Bransford guides. But in the meantime, William Bransford, of the second generation, was becoming a well-known and respected guide at the cave.

William, Mat’s grandson and Henry’s nephew, was born in 1866. He began guiding in 1888, and continued for over 40 years. Tall and dignified, he accompanied the cave exhibits to the Chicago World’s Fair in 1893.

The management had stripped beautiful Charlotte’s Grotto of its gypsum flowers for exhibition at the fair. The original “Mammoth Cave” mummy (“Fawn Hoof”) had been exhibited at the cave since 1815; the role of the “Cave Mummy” was now being played at the cave by another mummy, “Little Alice.” Similar in appearance, few people knew the difference.

William exhibited the mummy and the gypsum flowers in White City at the Chicago fair. Thereafter, the area off Cleaveland Avenue from which the flowers had been taken was known by the guides as Specimen Avenue.

William was an exploring guide. In May 1907 he and guide Edward Hawkins took Benjamin F. Einbiger of New York City through a maze of passages to the left of Boone Avenue. Beyond, they discovered the majestic Cathedral Domes. The following month author Horace C. Hovey was taken to their discovery. It appeared on his 1909 cave map as “Hovey’s Cathedral.” On the same map he remembered the two guides by naming one passage “Hawkins Way” and another “Bransford Avenue.” This is the only feature in the cave named for any of the Bransford Guides.

LOUIS and MATT

A third generation of Bransford guides took up the lantern with Louis and Matt, sons of Henry. Louis began guiding in 1895. Matt began as a lunch carrier in 1897 and became a full guide in 1905. Like the guides before and after them they saw the hundreds of names and dates placed on the cave wall since 1802.

In 1907 a stone plaque was dedicated by Chancellor J.H. Kirkland of Vanderbilt University as a tribute to the students and alumni of the school. The ceremony was held in Sparks Avenue just beyond Bandit Hall. The polished granite plaque includes the quotation from Thomas Carlyle:

“Out of the lowest depths, there is a path to the loftiest heights.”

Thereafter the room with the plaque has been known as Vanderbilt University Hall, and the guides took pride in showing this literary gem on their cave tours.

Occasionally large banqueting groups were served dinner in the cave. Louis and Matt long remembered the time in 1915 when tables were set in Audubon Avenue for two hundred guests. They dined on hotel linens by candlelight, and then were taken on a cave tour.

By 1930 there were eight Bransfords on the guide roster. The fourth generation included Arthur, Clifton, Eddie, Elzie and George, sons and nephews of Louis. William died in 1934. The younger Bransfords left the guide service by 1935, on the eve of the cave becoming the nation’s 29th national park. Matt retired in 1937 and Louis in 1939.

An era had ended. Four generations of the Bransford family had guided their last tour, after leading visitors safely through shadow for over 100 years.

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