

Conclusion:

Place of Passages

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Historic Resource Study
Jewel Cave National Monument

For millennium, the Jewel Cave area in the southern Black Hills has been a place of passages. Moving water that dissolved limestone, along joint planes in layers of deposited sandstone, over time, created an unknown hundreds (possibly thousands) of miles of underground passages. Above this labyrinth of subterranean passageways, Native Americans who traveled through the southern Black Hills apparently never knew of the intriguing rock formations in Jewel Cave's underground caverns. Yet Native inhabitants of the region passed over the ground above the cave for thousands of years as they gathered food. The passage of Natives undoubtedly occurred with seasonal regularity. With less regularity, one group of Natives in the Black Hills region replaced another group, and that group replaced another, and so on, until finally the Sioux (Teton/Lakota band) arrived in the early 1800s. The imprint of Indians' presence above Jewel Cave was probably negligible compared with natural cycles of freezing and thawing, falling snow and rain and flooding, and births and deaths had completed their course. Periodic naturally occurring fires that swept across the pine-covered grassy and stony landscape over Jewel Cave about every twenty years left far more visible evidence than did Native American travelers passing by.

The passage of small and widely dispersed European trappers and traders, between the mid-1600s and early 1800s, converged with and overlapped the world of Native Americans in the Great Lakes region and upper Mississippi/Missouri river drainages. Their physical imprints were few and quickly eroded and erased. The arrival of foreign pathogens, however, more than the humans that carried them, altered the numbers, flow, and ultimate degree of use of the landscape in the region around Jewel Cave. Large parties of explorers passing through the country, to learn of its natural exploitable treasures, came on horses heavily laden with tools and supplies. In the 1860s and 1870s, the actual passage of Euro-American explorers and wanderers searching for gold began to leave discernable evidence of their movement across the land. The route of Lieutenant Colonel George Custer's summer 1874 party, consisting of 1000 soldiers riding on horseback and setting up numerous camps throughout the Black Hills, and of the Jenney and Newton scientific entourage accompanied by 400 soldiers in June 1875, both left behind a wide swath of disturbed vegetation and game. Their passage, along with the hundreds of gold-seekers who followed in their footsteps, signaled the further displacement of the Lakota Sioux and, soon, their permanent dispossession from the Black Hills.

Beginning in the mid-1870s, the harvesting and commercialization of Black Hills' gold and other natural resources—marked by the permanent arrival of Euro-American placer prospectors, hard-rock miners, freighters and stage company owners, merchants and millers, and farmers and

Conclusion
Historic Resource Study
Jewel Cave National Monument

ranchers—brought the most rapid and dramatic changes to the Black Hills landscape and surrounding environment. Their arrival was accompanied by a new view of owning and ordering the land that found expression in the creation of mining claims and town plats, the construction of log and wood-frame buildings, the arrangement of town lots comprising an orderly grid-pattern of blocks, the small movement and large excavation of earth at mining sites, the construction of mills along with the subsequent diversion of water and felling of logs, the cultivation of the soil, and the grazing of newly introduced cattle.

The development and continuing improvement of roads into the southern Black Hills contributed to the dynamic emergence of a new cultural landscape. The roads themselves impacted the local landscape by cutting into slopes and making exposed soil more vulnerable to erosion. The concentration of human traffic passing over roads trampled vegetation and covered it with a thick veil of dust in the summer and mud in winter and spring. The passage of people and their vehicles across the landscape through the southern Black Hills and not far from the concealed Jewel Cave altered natural unordered patterns of plants and animals in the late 1800s. It was around this time that the new inroads made by Euro-American settlers into the Hell Canyon area led to the “discovery” of the underground passageways of Jewel Cave by Frank and Albert Michaud.

Decades of using and not replenishing natural resources throughout the eastern United States and even in the Black Hills worried a growing number of Americans who noticed the depletion of wildlife, forests, and soil. The concept of exhaustible nature entered the American public consciousness and federal government policy-making in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Black Hills stood at the forefront of experimental conservation legislation, passed by Congress in the 1890s, which gave birth to the designation of “forest reserves” and the creation of a place known as the Black Hills Forest Reserve in 1897. Added to the concept of conserving resources for continued future use, less than a decade later, was the notion of setting aside certain special scientific and cultural features for perpetual protection from use. The 1906 Antiquities Act provided the basis for creation of a new landscape designation—a “monument”—and the establishment of Jewel Cave National Monument in 1908.

For the next twenty years, those responsible for managing the Jewel Cave landscape and its subterranean passageways discussed and debated the meaning of preserving the curious features in Jewel Cave National Monument that happened to be located inside the boundaries of a national forest whose resources were being conserved for continued future use. No federal money existed to adequately answer these questions, to manage Jewel Cave National Monument more than minimally, or to oversee the irregular passage of those who claimed a right to mine the cave

Conclusion
Historic Resource Study
Jewel Cave National Monument

and to show it to curious visitors. Jewel Cave National Monument remained a 1280-acre island of uncertainty inside a larger landscape being logged, grazed, and mined. Between 1908 and 1928, the passage of people to and through the cave was minimal; a stout door across the entrance usually remained locked, even as tourists in new automobiles flooded to Black Hills natural attractions in growing numbers. Those who ventured inside the cave during this time were kept from making ambitious extensive explorations by deteriorating or non-existent ladders and pathways.

The death of the Michaud patriarch in 1927 and the relinquishment of the Michaud family claim of ownership to the cave after nearly thirty years, the founding of the Jewel Cave Corporation in 1928, and, finally, the transfer of Jewel Cave management from the Forest Service to the National Park Service in 1933-34 changed forever the future of Jewel Cave. All three of these events contributed to a sea change in management policies, uses, and public perceptions of Jewel Cave that enveloped the national monument. Recreational use of Jewel Cave, promoted by the Jewel Cave Corporation and the National Park Service, encouraged the arrival and passage of tourists. In the 1930s, Jewel Cave received, for the first time since the creation of the national monument, federal public relief funding to build a ranger cabin, a public campground, develop water facilities, and complete new and improved trails and steps inside the cave. A new section of the U.S. highway between Custer and Newcastle brought travelers closer to the cave, and a new trail brought visitors right to the entrance of the cave in safety and with ease. The natural landscape above Jewel Cave became overlain with an unfamiliar mantle of cultural artifice.

The anxious weary years during World War II saw few additional physical changes in the monument; the total preoccupation and involvement of the American populace in wartime activities along with gas rationing that restricted travel kept most recreational visitors away from Jewel Cave. With the end of war in 1945, however, a great tide of Americans eager to put thoughts of war behind them and return to a normal life headed for outdoor pleasure grounds in the family car. Visitation at parks around the country and at Jewel Cave exploded in the late 1940s. Jewel Cave and hundreds of other National Park Service units around the country underwent momentous physical change as a NPS new building program, planned for completion by 1966, was launched in the mid-1950s to accommodate and to encourage surging visitation in the parks.

Now, for the first time in Jewel Cave National Monument history, discovery and development of new passageways underground inside the cave equaled in importance the construction of new buildings, parking areas, and trails on the land above the cave. In the early 1960s, Jan and Herb Conn explored and recorded many miles of new passageways in Jewel Cave, enabling the Park Service to develop a new underground pathway for

Conclusion
Historic Resource Study
Jewel Cave National Monument

tourists and move the park headquarters to a new location at the edge of Lithograph Canyon. Human efforts to reshape the landscape now shifted away from the natural opening in Jewel Cave in Hell Canyon about a mile to the east to newly excavated openings in the cave at Lithograph Canyon. Between the late 1960s and 1972, the NPS's Mission 66/Parkscape building program transformed the sloping hillside above Lithograph Canyon as a visitor center, parking area, utility building, other small buildings, and connecting roads were completed in the pine forest. Following the dedication of the new visitor center in May 1972, visitors to the national monument focused their wanderings to new pathways above Lithograph Canyon and passageways inside Jewel Cave. The passage of people to unexplored and unsurveyed realms inside the cave continues to this day.

Conclusion
Historic Resource Study
Jewel Cave National Monument
