National Parks in the Eastern United States

—The Mammoth Cave Experience—

Bruce J. Noble, Jr.
USNPS Preservation Planning Branch
Washington, D.C.

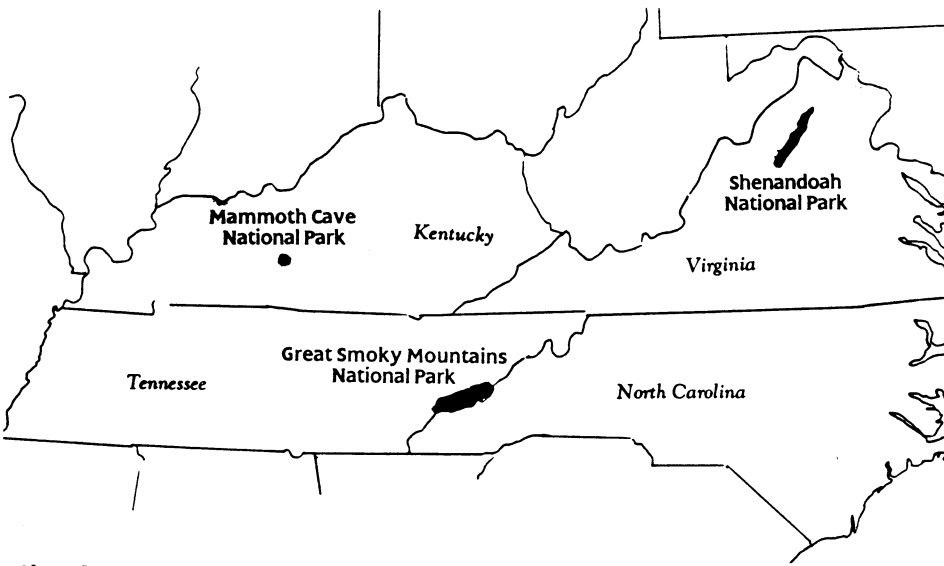
The serene natural setting which prevails in Kentucky's Mammoth Cave National Park today acts to disguise the human history of the park area. The pastoral landscape which typifies the above-ground portions of the park suggests that few humans have ever inhabited this section of the Earth. The U.S. National Park Service constructed most of the limited number of buildings which exist in the park today, and these remain, for the most part, discreetly hidden from public view. Primarily attracted by the underground wonders of the cave, visitors pausing to notice the above-ground world see ample evidence to imply that nature has retained uninterrupted supremacy in the park area since primeval times.

Closer inspection reveals a different story. The park includes three wooden church buildings and dozens of cemeteries as evidence of past human occupation which pre-dates the official establishment of the national park in 1941. Travelers who leave the main park roads might find farm building foundations, weathered fences, and an occasional small orchard as indicators that an agricultural population once inhabited the area. What led to the departure of this populace? Answering this question requires some investigation of the course of events which led to the founding of the national park.

As early as 1886, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad had begun promoting the concept of a national park as a means of increasing tourist travel on their rail line. However, serious efforts to support the idea of a national park in Kentucky did not begin until the 1920s. These efforts

began with the creation of the Southern Appalachian National Park Commission in 1925.

Established in 1916, the USNPS inherited fourteen national parks and 21 national monuments previously designated by Congress and placed under the jurisdiction of the Department of the Interior. All located in the West, these parks and monuments initially constituted the totality of the national park system. Because most of America lived east of the Mississippi in the 1920s, the first director of the USNPS, Stephen Mather, decided it would be politically expedient for the Service to shed its image as a predominantly western organization. Thus, the Southern Appalachian National Park Commission was created in 1925 to explore the possibility of establishing national parks in the East.



Sketch locating the three national parks authorized by Congress in 1926 as recommended by the Southern Appalachian National Park Commission.

After visiting and investigating several potential park areas, in April 1926 the Commission recommended three places for national park status —Mammoth Cave, Great Smoky Mountains, and Shenandoah. The following month, Congress passed legislation authorizing the creation of all three national parks.

The Southern Appalachian National Park Commission left behind a twofold legacy which would profoundly influence the process for establishing each of the three parks. First, each park would be created as a natural area. Second, each park would be established without the expenditure of federal funds. This meant that creative park-building methods were essential.

In the case of Mammoth Cave, the legislation authorizing the new park had designated a maximum area of 70,618 acres within which the park would have to be established. A minimum of 45,310 acres would have to be purchased and donated to the USNPS before official designation of

citizens would have to join together to lobby politicians, raise funds, and purchase land. In Kentucky, a newly formed organization known as the Mammoth Cave National Park Association agreed to coordinate this process.

At first, land acquisition went well. Judge Mills M. Logan, who eventually represented Kentucky in the United States Senate, owned 8,000 acres in the proposed park area which he donated to the Mammoth Cave National Park Association. The Louisville & Nashville Railroad agreed to donate an additional 3,000 acres. These initial successes quickly led to the realization that not everyone wanted to voluntarily sell. Many local residents appeared intent on fighting efforts to acquire their land.

In 1928, the Kentucky legislature adopted measures designed to circumvent local opposition to the establishment of Mammoth Cave National Park. The legislature created a new group called the Kentucky National Park Commission and granted them the power of eminent domain. Now land could be acquired through legal condemnation proceedings.

Although condemnation power provided a formidable tool, certain impediments remained. Perhaps the most significant obstacle proved to be the local court system. The local courts, and more importantly, local juries, tended to sympathize with their fellow citizens whose land had been condemned. This sympathy frequently meant that the courts would award sums of money to the land owners which greatly surpassed the market value of the land. This hardly proved to be a cost-effective way of acquiring land for the new national park.

Problems with the condemnation process and the perception that the federal government had not done enough to support Kentucky's quest for a national park both contributed to some amount of unrest. One spokesman said that Kentucky national park supporters had begun to feel that "the Mammoth Cave National Park is a step-child and isn't quite getting what they expected, in view of the fact that Mammoth Cave is one of the seven wonders of the world, [and] is known in every civilized country that never heard of the Great Smoky Mountains nor the Shenandoah." Perhaps responding to such concerns, in May 1934 federal legislation granted the Secretary of the Interior authority to accept monetary donations to use for land purchases. The legislation provided the USNPS with an opportunity to assume the lead role in the land acquisition process.

With the Depression now in full swing, land acquisition had evolved into a rather volatile process which pitted park supporters against impoverished rural families. Some of the more difficult cases involved farms within the proposed park area that were occupied by tenants. Even in situations where the land had been condemned, court proceedings held, and the land owner paid, tenants sometimes lacked the financial wherewithal to vacate their rented farms.

Recognizing that they would become a permanent presence in the Mammoth Cave area, and thus hoping to avoid undue irritation of the local citizenry at the outset, USNPS officials opted to remain behind the scenes and allow the Kentucky National Park Commission to deal directly with owners and tenants in the park area. In extreme cases

directly with owners and tenants in the park area. In extreme cases involving either steadfast owner opposition or financial inability to vacate, the Kentucky National Park Commission resorted to physical removal. Personal belongings would be removed from the property and placed in storage. Finally, Civilian Conservation Corps laborers would be brought in to tear down houses and barns before they could be reoccupied.

Not surprisingly, this process sometimes led to clashes. In one case, an overly aggressive employee of the Kentucky National Park Commission—who later became a USNPS superintendent—dumped a farmer's plow into a river. The employee ultimately paid a fine for trespassing. In another case, a USNPS ranger received a minor gun shot wound in the shoulder. Although the shooting evidently had no direct connection with land acquisition efforts, the incident provides further evidence of the elevated tension in the area.

Ultimately the hostility diminished and the land acquisition process began operating smoothly. Formal USNPS involvement in land acquisition meant that condemnation proceedings could be conducted in federal—rather than local—courts. The federal court system tended to award property owners a sum of money roughly commensurate with the appraised value of the land. The general efficiency of the federal court system accelerated land acquisition and in 1941 the necessary amount of land had been acquired to allow for formal establishment of the new national park. The onset of World War II delayed the completion of official park dedication ceremonies until September of 1946, twenty years after enactment of the authorizing legislation.

With the exception of a few remaining cemeteries and churches, the present natural appearance of Mammoth Cave National Park would not suggest to contemporary visitors that a sizeable human population once occupied the park area. Although an exact estimate regarding the number of people who once lived within the park is not readily available, the acting superintendent of the park estimated in June of 1937 that 2,500 buildings had already been razed and another 2,500 awaited future demolition. While the USNPS certainly hoped to avoid the appearance of insensitivity when creating the park, present-day observers might want to characterize the destruction of 5,000 buildings as an insensitive act. However, we should resist the temptation to view the establishment of this park strictly in present-day terms.

Concerns about the negative consequences of urbanization and industrialization influenced the actions of the founders of Mammoth Cave National Park. In the early twentieth century, the proliferation of factory jobs attracted more and more citizens to America's urban areas. In response to this trend, the leaders of the park movement in Kentucky believed that the preservation of natural places like Mammoth Cave National Park would provide a sort of "escape-valve" for people in need of a respite from the oppression of city squalor.

In addition, the Dust Bowl had left the American public with vivid images of clouds of topsoil blowing across the Plains states. At least part of the Dust Bowl phenomenon resulted from the extension of agricultural pursuits into regions of the

tive measure, natural parks would serve as bastions of correct conservation practice where the virtues of conserving timber and preventing topsoil erosion could be publicly demonstrated. Given the perceived magnitude of such environmental threats during the 1930s, Mammoth Cave National Park advocates proceeded on the assumption that they were serving the larger interests of society by promoting the conversion of marginal Kentucky farmland into a natural preserve.

It is also important to bear in mind that the establishment of Mammoth Cave National Park falls within the context of initial trial efforts to develop national parks in the eastern United States. Earlier efforts to establish national parks in the West had encountered fewer complexities as Congress simply decided to set aside park lands within certain unsettled areas of the public domain. In some cases, these western parks were created with land that the nineteenth-century public perceived to have no economic value for farmers, ranchers, miners, or lumbermen. In the case of Mammoth Cave—and Shenandoah and Great Smoky Mountains as well—the USNPS first confronted the challenge of creating a park in an area with an existing white population. Lacking tested procedures to follow, the rules simply had to be made up and implemented with hopes for the best possible outcome.

Although contemporary perspectives should not distort our view of the past, the Mammoth Cave National Park story does contain some relevant lessons for today's USNPS. The agency still struggles with its dual mandate to preserve both natural and cultural values in the national parks. Perhaps because of the growing urgency to safeguard the few natural areas that remain, the national park system frequently places greater emphasis on natural values. This can result in unintentional adoption of an institutional philosophy predicated on belief in the ascendancy of nature over culture.

The history behind the founding of Mammoth Cave National Park illustrates how the ambition to emphasize natural values superseded any concerted efforts to preserve the cultural values of the human population which once occupied the park. Particularly in parks established as "natural" areas, the desire to portray a natural appearance to the visiting public can sometimes overshadow recognition of the important roles played by prehistoric peoples, early settlers, and Native Americans who traditionally inhabited national park areas. While the scale still sometimes tips toward the natural side of the equation, the growing popular interest in cultural diversity suggests that park managers, policy-makers, and public interest groups must remain cognizant of the mission to conserve both natural and cultural values within our national parks.

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