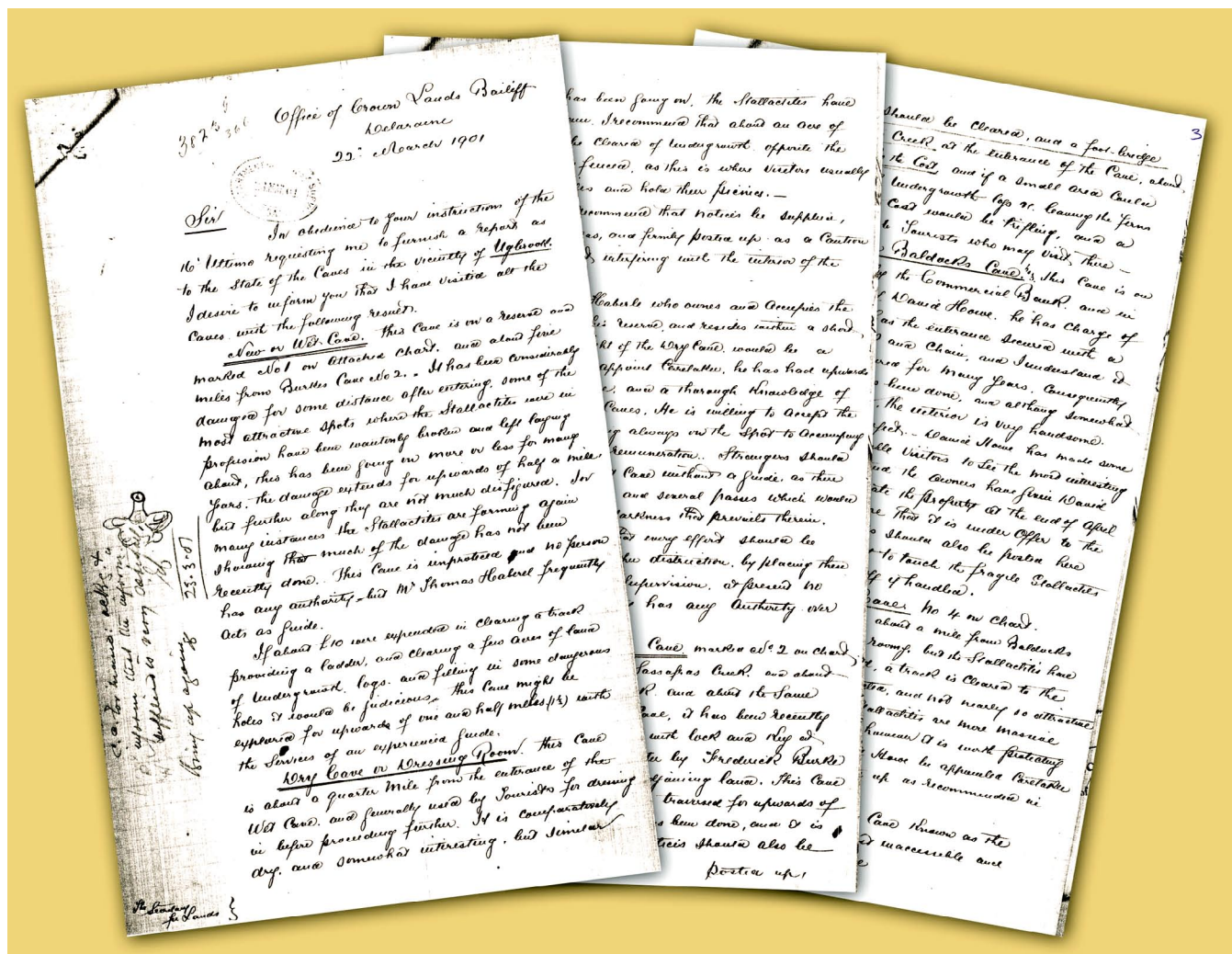


POSTER

“VERY INTERESTING, VERY BEAUTIFUL ... AND FULL OF CURIOSITIES”: SOME HISTORICAL MATERIAL RELATING TO CAVES AT MOLE CREEK

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ABSTRACT

Historical documents, recently come to light, add considerably to our knowledge of the history of caves at Mole Creek since first settlement. In 1879 surveyor Charles Smith wrote to the Minister of Lands and Works describing a richly decorated cave shown to him near Sassafras Creek. Smith contrasted the pristine state of the new cave with the degradation that had occurred at other Mole Creek caves, recommending that the land should be set aside as a cave reserve. This evidently provided the stimulus for one of three cave reserves created at Mole Creek in the 19th century, encompassing a total of 426 acres. However, by the mid 20th century, the largest of the cave reserves (300 acres) had been sold off, except for about 5 acres surrounding the most downstream entrance to Sassafras Cave, leaving most of the cave under private land. In 1901 the Crown Lands Bailiff reported on the condition of the caves, indicating that some of the caves at Sassafras Creek had been secured by gates and were in good condition. Those at Caveside (ie. Wet Cave and Honeycomb Cave) were unsecured and showed considerable damage. Despite early recognition of the need to protect the caves at Mole Creek, some caves suffered much damage within the first few decades of their discovery by Europeans. Where the colonial government did act to create cave reserves, the reserve boundaries rarely encompassed the underground extent of the caves, creating the situation that currently exists at Mole Creek whereby some of the most important caves are located partly in reserves and partly in private land or State forest.

INTRODUCTION

Details concerning early cave discoveries at Mole Creek, and European responses to these, are generally sketchy and sometimes subject to conflicting accounts. Some correspondence recently come to light adds to our knowledge in this regard. The material dates to the period 1879 to 1901 and is held on file at the Department of Primary Industries, Water & Environment in Hobart. At this time caves at Sassafras Creek were referred to as the “New Caves”, whereas those near Caveside (Wet Cave and Honeycomb Cave) had been known since the 1820s and were called the “Old Caves” (Clarke 1999).

Transcript: Smith to O'Reilly 1879

Deloraine 20th August 1879
The Hon. C.O.Reilly
The Minister of Lands & Works

Sir

I have the honor to report that I have completed the Survey of Road from the Mole Creek to The Mersey River at the Site for Bridge in the Township of Liena and have succeeded in marking out a line of Road with easy Gradients through a large area of good Land which this Road will open up to Selectors, I hope to forward the Plan with detailed particulars in a week.

While making this Survey through the new Township of Ugbrook, I was informed by Mr. Willm Ried How, that he in company with his Son while looking for Timber he had discovered another Cave hid in thick Scrub, he had not made it known, fearing it might be despoiled, as the others had been, I went with him next day to see it, the shortest way, but over Rocky Limestone Hills impracticable for a Road.

I found the Cave in a perfect State of Preservation the Stalactites, and Stalagmites undisturbed, pure White and semi transparent, Clear as Alabaster assuming all sorts of fanciful Shapes, very Interesting, and very Beautiful.

The entrance to the Cave through an Aperture in the Face of Limestone Rock about 6ft x 3 ft and descends some 10ft to the bed of a small Stream, which at that time, the fourth of July, was about 6 Inches deep with Water, 9 or 10 feet wide, but Level, and Smoother as a Gravel Walk, The Length at least as far as I could go then, Two to Three Hundred Feet, Height from 8 to 12 feet, and Width 10 to 20 ft and full of Curiosities, on one Side you may fancy a Sideboard covered with a heavy white Cloth and deep Fringe, with various ornaments placed thereon delicately White and Transparent with Hundreds of Stalactites at the Back like Clusters of Small Organ Pipes, also an Large one Suspended from the Top like a large [chased?] vase, or Chinese Lantern, and reaching down to about a foot of the bottom and when touched, Sounds as Sonorous as a Bell.

Considering the Cave in its present perfect state as Specialty Interesting I proceeded next day to find a practicable Road to it from The Township of Ugbrook, and also to ascertain its Locality.

Starting from an Old Ford across the Sassafras Creek and keeping on the Eastern Side I found an easy Level Road may be obtained to both Caves, and also to good Level Crown Land Lightly Timbered to the East, and South East, of the Caves, several Hundred Acres which will be immediately applied for, but may I request you not to approve of any, till the Road and Reserves for caves are finally disposed of, or we shall, as usual meet with opposition, and unnecessary expense in getting the best line for a Road, which will be required to open up this part of the district and connect it with Ugbrook and main line of Road.

I enclose a Chart showing the Localities and Distances.

Providing the new cave is not Reserved by the Govt or the Municipal Council, a few Gentleman here will subscribe to purchase the Cave and Sufficient Land around it, to Keep a Man on the spot, to Secure the Cave from spoilation, and keep it open to the Public in its pristine beauty, of course it requires Closing at once with Strong Doors, as a few Persons could destroy this Cave, as the others have been in a very short time.

If you will oblige me with your views, as early as possible whether you will make a Reserve around this Cave for the Govt, or the Municipal Council, I shall be happy in helping to secure it, as it is, to Public Service by Subscriptions, if it cannot be had without.

Waiting your further commands
I have the Honour to be Sir
Your most Obedt Ser^t
Chas J Smith

NOTES:

1. The principal cave described by Smith is that now known as Cyclops Cave. This is marked “W. How’s New Cave” on a map held on the same file as Smith’s letter (Figure 1). It is unclear whether this map is the chart referred to in Smith’s letter, although it clearly depicts the same caves.
2. The cave marked “1st New Cave” on the map is Sassafras Cave – the principal source of Sassafras Creek except under dry conditions. This cave was discovered prior to 1868 when Sassafras Creek was shown rising from a cave on Walch’s Map of Tasmania (Jones 1988, p. 238).
3. Smith’s suggestion that he could raise a subscription to purchase the newly discovered cave was not taken up. His alternative – a government reserve – evidently stimulated the creation of a 37 acre Cave Reserve which appears on a land title survey of 1887 (Figure 2). Some 99 acres at Wet Cave and 300 acres at Sassafras Cave (adjacent to the 37 acres) had already been identified for reservation, (see Figure 3) although Smith was evidently unaware of this when he wrote the report. In 1894 the two larger cave reserves were gazetted under the *Crown Lands Act 1890* (for some reason the 37 acre reserve was not included).
4. The boundary of the 37 acre reserve was evidently devised with reference to the estimated extent of the cave, which is shown as a dotted line on an 1887 title plan (Figure 2). In fact, the accessible passages in Cyclops Cave extend for a distance of little more than 100 m to the west of the cave entrance, not the 400 m implied by the old plan. No attempt appears to have been made to include all of Wet Cave in the 99 acre reserve at that site – possibly the land had already been granted.
5. Smith’s recommendation that the cave should be protected by “Strong Doors” had been given effect by 1901 (see Berresford letter below). There is now no obvious sign of a gate at this site, which has been left open for many years.

Transcript: Berresford to Counsel 1901

Office of Crown Lands Bailiff
Deloraine
22 March 1901

Sir

In obedience to your instructions of the 16th Ultimo requesting me to furnish a report as to the State of the Caves in the vicinity of Ugbrook I desire to inform you that I have visited all the Caves with the following result.

New or Wet Cave, this Cave is on a reserve and marked No1 on Attached Chart and about five miles from Burkes Cave No.2. It has been considerably damaged for some distance after entering, some of the most attractive spots where the Stallactites were in profusion have been wantonly broken and left laying about, this has been going on more or less for many years, the damage extends for upwards of half a mile, but further along they are not much disfigured. In many instances the Stallactites are forming again showing that much of the damage has not been recently done. This Cave is unprotected and no person has any authority but Mr Thomas Haberle frequently acts as guide.

If about 10 pounds were expended in clearing a track providing a ladder, and clearing a few acres of land of undergrowth, logs, and filling in some dangerous holes it would be judicious. This Cave might be explored for upwards of one and half miles (11/2) under the Services of an experienced guide.

Dry Cave or Dressing Room. This Cave is about a quarter mile from the entrance of the Wet Cave and generally used by Tourists for dressing in before proceeding further. It is comparatively dry and somewhat interesting, but similar destruction has been going on. The Stallactites have not formed again. I recommend that about an acre of land should be cleared of undergrowth opposite the entrance, and fenced as this is where visitors usually keep their vehicles and hold their picnics.

I strongly recommend that notices be supplied, printed on Canvas, and firmly posted up as a Caution to visitors against interfering with the interior of the Caves.

Mr Thomas Haberle who owns and occupies the land adjoining the reserve, and resides within a short distance, and in sight of the Dry Cave, would be a desirable person to appoint Caretaker, he has upwards of 25 years experience, and a thorough knowledge of the interior of these Caves. He is willing to accept the appointment and being always on the spot to accompany visitors, for a small remuneration. Strangers should not venture in the Wet Cave without a guide, as there are dangerous spots, and several passes which would be impossible in the darkness that prevails therein.

I am of opinion that every effort should be made to prevent further destruction, by placing these Caves under further supervision, at present no person in the locality has any authority over them.

Little or Burks Cave, marked as No.2 on chart this is on the Reserve at Sassafras Creek, and about five miles from Mole Creek, and about the same distance from the Wet Cave, it has been recently secured by a strong gate with lock and key at entrance, and looked after by Frederick Burke who is the owner of the adjoining land. This Cave is very pretty and can be traversed for upwards of 300 yards, little damage has been done, and it is in fair preservation. Notices should also be posted up, a track should be cleared, and a foot-bridge put over the creek at the entrance of the Cave, about 2 pounds would be the cost, and if a small area could be cleared of undergrowth logs [?] leaving the ferns and trees, the cost would be trifling, and a convenience to tourists who may visit there.

Bolar or Baldocks Cave, no.3 this cave is on land owned by the Commercial Bank and in the occupation of David Howe. He has charge of this cave, and has the entrance secured with a strong gate, lock and chain, and I understand it has been so secured for many years. Consequently little damage has been done, and although somewhat difficult to traverse, the interior is very handsome. The Stallactites perfect – David Howe has made some improvements to enable visitors to see the most interesting spots. I understand the owners have given David Howe notice to

vacate the property at the end of April next. He informs me that it is under Offer to the Government. Notices should be posted here requesting visitors not to touch the fragile Stallactites many would break off if handled.

Saw Mills Cave, no 4 on chart. This is on a reserve and about a mile from Baldocks Cave it is very large and roomy, but the Stallactites have been more or less destroyed, a track is cleared to the entrance, it is unprotected, and not nearly as attractive as the other Caves. The Stallactites are more massive and not so handsome, however it is worth protecting and I suggest that David Howe be appointed caretaker and guide. Notices posted up as recommended in other Caves.

There is another Small cave known as the Rock Hole. no 5 which is almost inaccessible and not of much importance.

NOTES:

1. This letter lacks a signature block and is evidently incomplete. The chart showing cave locations mentioned in the letter has not been found. Other correspondence on the same file indicates that H. Berresford was the Crown Lands Bailiff at Deloraine at this time. He was writing to Counsel, the Secretary for Lands.
2. Berresford's "New or Wet Cave" matches the description of Wet Cave. However, reference to "New" contradicts evidence that the caves near Caveside were referred to as the "Old Caves" following the discovery of caves at Sassafras Creek (Clarke 1999). Berresford's letter suggests that by 1901 the distinction between old and new caves had become blurred. Alternatively, he may simply have got the names mixed up.
3. Berresford's cave names are mostly no longer in use. "Dry Cave or Dressing Room" matches the description of Honeycomb Cave, while "Little or Burkes Cave", "Bolar or Baldocks Cave" and "Saw Mills Cave" are probably Cyclops Cave, Baldocks Cave and Sassafras Cave respectively. "Rock Hole" could be one of several small caves in the vicinity of Sassafras Cave.
4. In 1901 the Crown purchased a 100 acre block which had been granted prior to the discovery of it of Baldocks Cave. Part of the land was declared a State Reserve in 1939 (see Figure 3).

CONCLUSION

By the late 19th century the colonial government recognised that newly discovered caves at Mole Creek were at risk from damage by visitors. This was accompanied by a level of official interest in protecting the caves, leading to the appointment of caretakers, installation of cave gates and the creation of cave reserves. By the 1890s, the Crown had set aside as cave reserves some 426 acres (~173 ha) of land at Mole Creek, encompassing Cyclops Cave, Sassafras Cave and parts of Wet Cave and Honeycomb Cave. The Crown purchased an additional 100 acres at Baldocks Cave in 1901, although this was not formally reserved until 1939, and then only in part. As in New South Wales (Hamilton-Smith 1998), some of Tasmania's earliest reserves were created to protect caves.

Despite initial interest in protecting the caves at Sassafras Creek, this was not sustained. An important factor in this was the discovery of more spectacular caves at Mayberry and Liena: Marakoopa Cave and King Solomons Cave. They were eventually acquired by the government and became major tourist attractions, as they are today. In a sad parody of the vandalism and neglect that had occurred at the "Old Caves"

near Caveside, the “New Caves” at Sassafras Creek lost out when the cave tourism focus shifted further west again in the early decades of the 20th century.

By 1911 about two thirds of the 300 acre cave reserve at Sassafras Creek was excluded from a new reserve gazetted at this time, (see Figure 3) the balance being sold off to private interests. A miserable 5 acres of the original 300 was proclaimed a State Reserve in 1939, leaving most of Sassafras Cave and several other significant caves without protection (Figure 3). The new reserve was not provided with legal public access, being entirely surrounded by private land. In 1996 the three small State Reserves at Sassafras Creek were incorporated in the Mole Creek Karst National Park – a collection of mostly small pre-existing reserves and Crown land parcels. Although two caves at Sassafras Creek had been secured with gates by 1901, these were not maintained

and much damage undoubtedly occurred after cave tours ceased at Baldocks Cave. In an ironic twist, the Tasmanian Government has recently negotiated to covenant or purchase a number of private land blocks in the Mole Creek area, in order to provide greater security for caves that the Crown had sold off in the 19th and 20th centuries ■.

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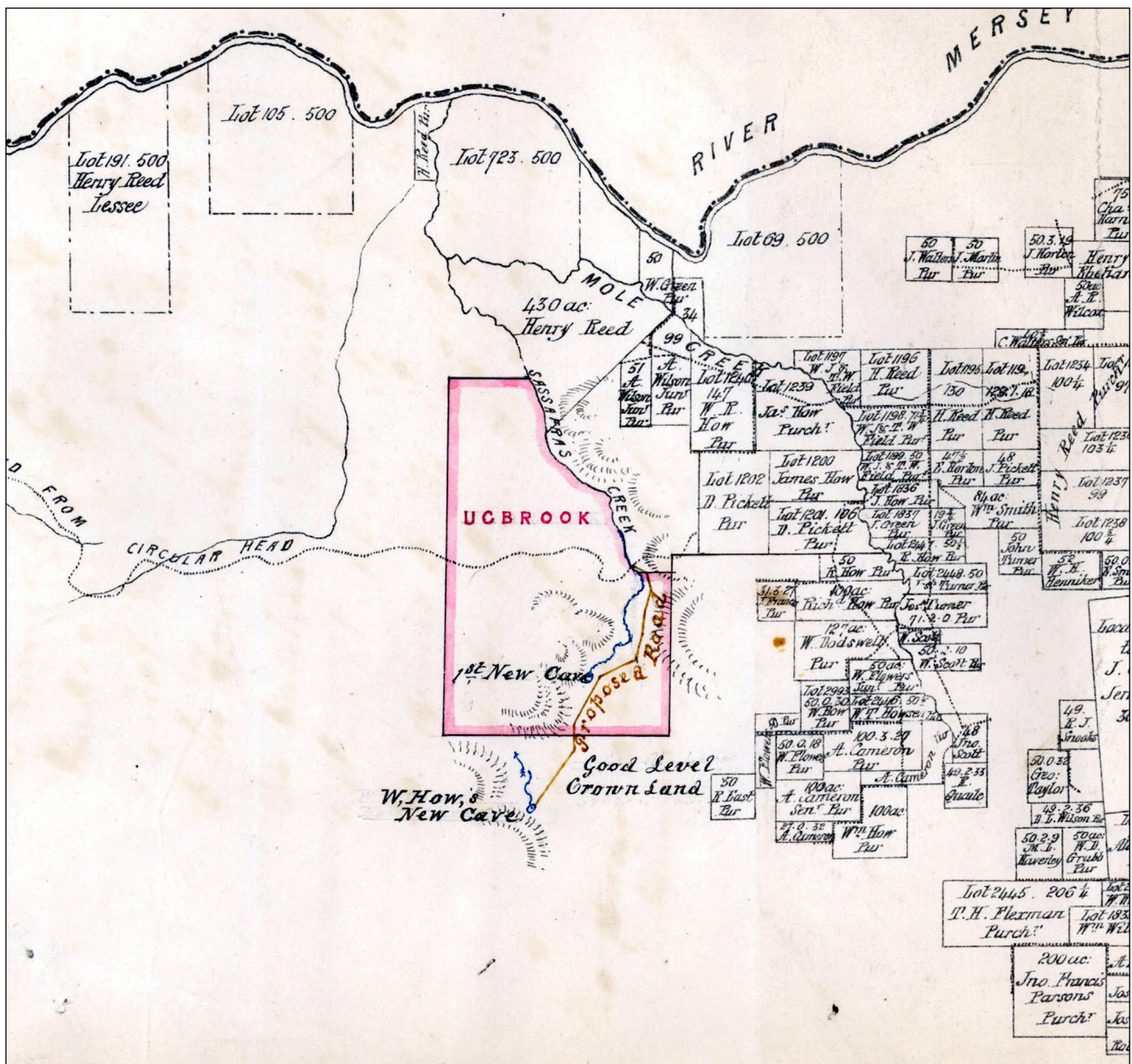


Figure 1: Part of a map showing location of How's New Cave.
This map was found on the same DPIWE file as the 1879 letter from Smith to O'Reilly.

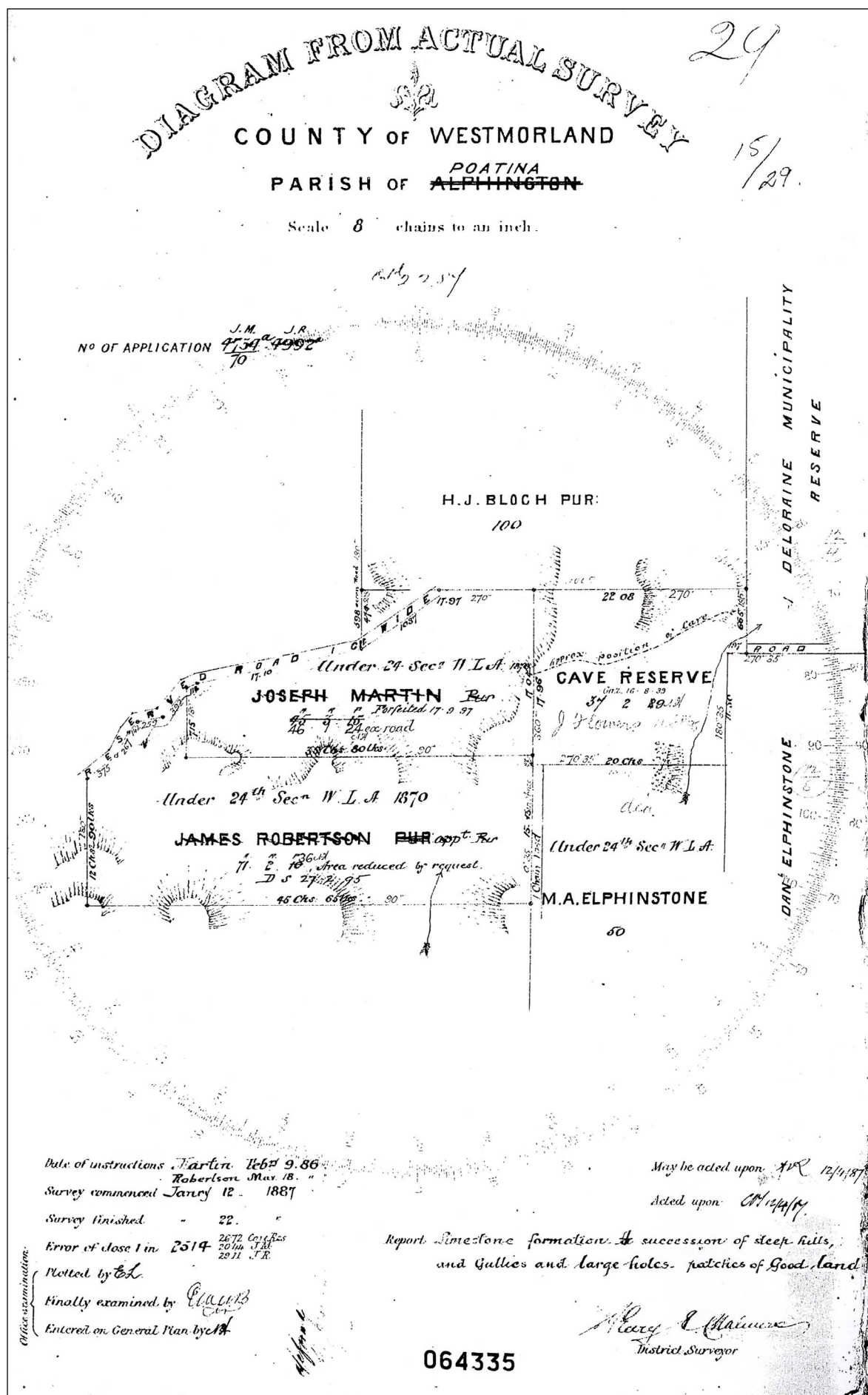


Figure 2: Title plan for the cave reserve at Cyclops Cave ("How's New Cave") dated 1887.

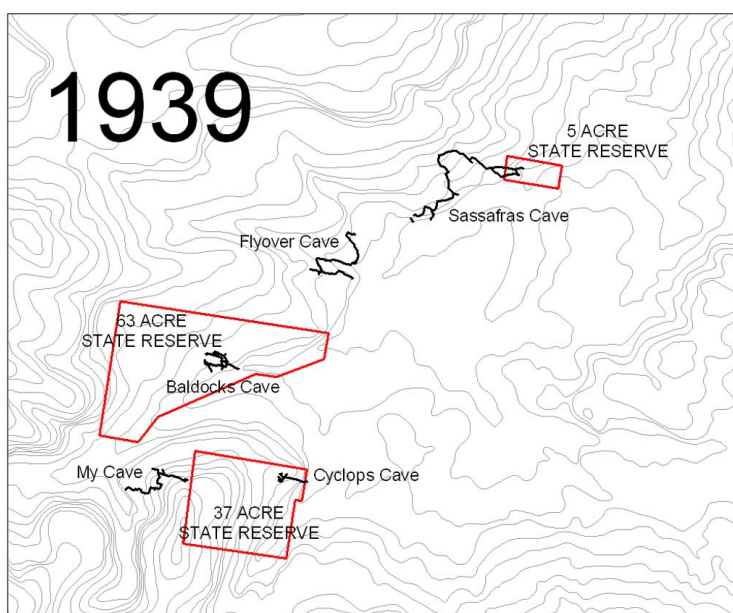
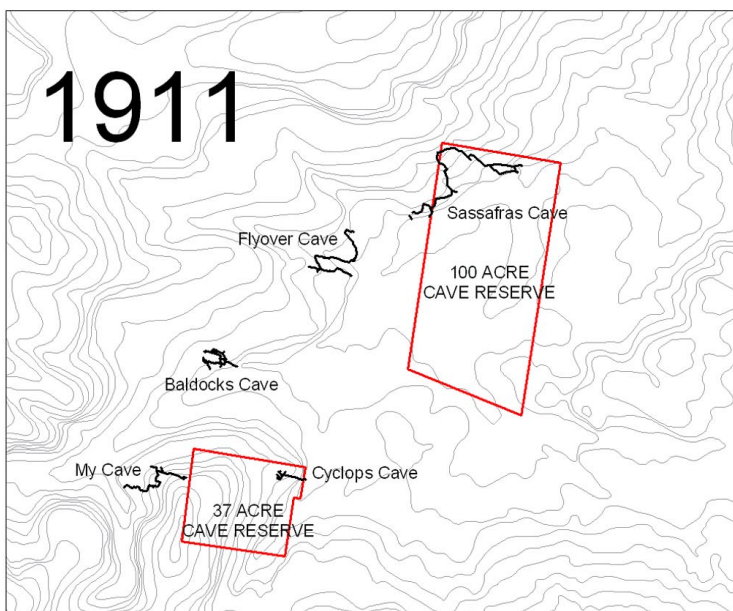
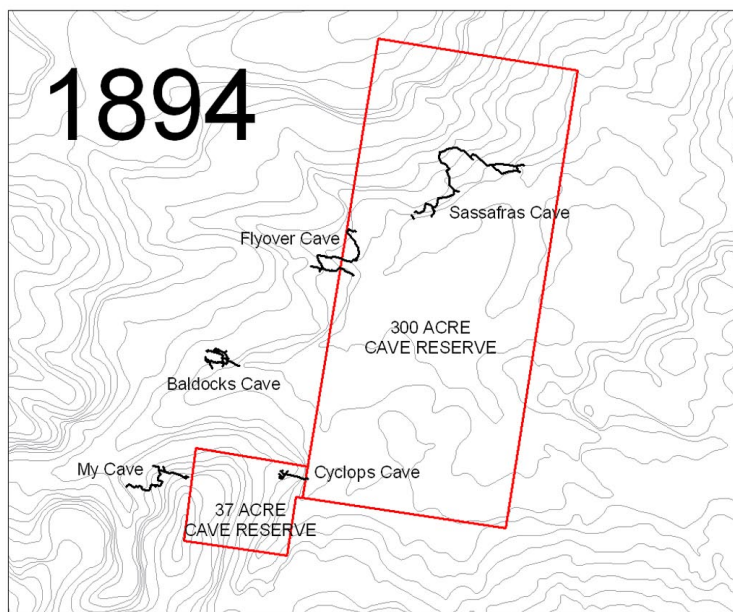


Figure 3: Reserve boundaries at Sassafras Creek from 1894 to 1939.