Historic Preservation at Hubbards Cave: Inventory and Management of Cultural Resources

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Abstract

Following the destruction of historic material by vandals in 1997, a group of conservation-minded cavers, guided by professionals, undertook to identify, inventory, and suggest management strategies for the cultural resources of Hubbards Cave, Tennessee. With the permission of the Nature Conservancy, owner of the site, the Hubbards Cave History Project team assessed the damage to the cave's historic resources, evaluated the threat to remaining resources, and performed short-term preservation efforts. While previous efforts to protect the historic resources of the site relied upon education, through on site signage, the efficacy of this approach was thrown into doubt. The team recommended passive entrance control, using gates, for the historically important (and unprotected) West and North Passages. These recommendations fit in well with the Nature Conservancy's own plans for biological preservation at the site, which is a critically important bat cave. Over the following two summers gates were erected which protected both resources.

The Hubbards Cave History Project began a detailed inventory of the historic resources on site, with the goal of recording primary information for future researchers. As a supplement, we also created an archive by compiling written information on the cave. Historic structures, such as ladders, steps, bridges, and saltpeter vat remains, were described, sketched, and photographed, as were other artifacts and features. Ambitiously, the team began a long-term effort to document the numerous names, dates, and other wall markings in the cave. During the first year of work, we discovered evidence of Pre-Columbian usage of the cave and turned to Professor Jan Simek and the University of Tennessee Cave Archaeology Research Group. A parallel archaeological study of the prehistory of the site soon commenced. In 1999, a third project began, a re-survey of the cave system by regional cavers, to aid both the history and archaeology projects. These three complementary projects co-exist remarkably well, and this bodes well for the future study of this significant cave.

Hubbards Cave, located on the Cumberland Plateau escarpment in Warren County, Tennessee, is one of the most historically significant caves in the state. The cave contains a wealth of important material culture resources, representing four major themes in the environmental history of caves: pre-Columbian usage before Anglo-American settlement, saltpeter mining in the 19th century, use of the cave environment as a social and recreational space in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the rise of cave conservation in the last 50 years. A large, mostly dry cave, the site has well-preserved artifacts which are unique and irreplaceable. Yet these resources have suffered both gradual and catastrophic damage over the years, resulting in a diminished resource for a site with tremendous research and educational potential.

Early speleologists in Tennessee, such as Tom Barr and Larry Matthews, studied Hubbards Cave, recognized the historical significance of the saltpeter mining artifacts, and published pleas for the conservation of cave

resources, including historic resources, in their writings. Yet damage to the site increased after 1960, as the cave, already well-known locally, became known to a wider public. Matthews, for example, in 1971 noted and photographed a wheelbarrow used by saltpeter miners to transport cave earth, yet the artifact was no longer present in 1977 when I first visited the cave.

Early attempts at on-site historic preservation focused upon education of visitors through signage. Nashville cavers, led by Joel Buckner, placed a conservation sign inside the cave at a unique, lashed, three-sectioned Civil War era ladder in the late 1970s, explaining the importance of the artifact and asking visitors to leave it unused and undisturbed. In the mid-1980s, after the Nature Conservancy bought the cave to protect its critically important bat colony and habitat, additional signs were placed at the cave entrance urging visitors to cooperate in the conservation of the biological and historical resources of the cave. These signs also pointed out that the features of the cave were protected under Tennessee law. At about the same time a new, small, wooden ladder was placed in the cave next to an historic peg and hole ladder so that visitors would not use the 19th century artifact. While the Nature Conservancy erected a large gate to protect endangered bat roosts in the South Passage of the cave, unmonitored access to the historically important West and North Passages continued. Unfortunately, the strategy of preservation through education proved inadequate, at least in this specific situation, for while most visitors to the site understood and respected the importance of the cave, a small number of vandals could and did inflict great harm to the cave's cultural resources.

In the summer of 1997, Nashville caver Thany Mann visited Hubbards Cave and was shocked to find that vandals had destroyed, by burning in place, the three-piece, splint- lashed Civil War era ladder. This unique artifact had been admired by several generations of cave explorers and had considerable research and educational value. On a more basic level, it was part of our common human heritage and a link with the irretrievable past. Though we have suffered similar losses before, we are all poorer from this loss. Thany noted what he thought might be new damage to other cultural resources as well. After exiting the cave, he notified the Nature Conservancy and other interested parties of his discovery.

Spurred on by Thany's report, Gabby Call of the Tennessee Nature Conservancy and Rob Robbins of the National Speleological Society organized a trip on September 13, 1997, to assess the overall situation at the cave and perform a variety of conservation tasks. I talked to Rob beforehand and offered to lead a team to assess the damage to the cave's historical resources while other teams engaged in biological research, removed recent trash, installed new conservation/cave law signs, constructed a second modern bypass ladder, and so on. This trip was the beginnings of the Hubbards Cave History Project, which is now in its third year.

One major problem in analyzing damage to the cultural resources of Hubbards Cave was the lack of an adequate baseline for comparison. In fact, little was known, and less documented, concerning the historical resources of the cave. We knew it contained historic ladders, some evidence of saltpeter mining, and some historic signatures, but that was about it. So on the first work trip into the cave, I decided to thoroughly inventoried the cave's resources while at the same time assessing the recent damage. Little did I know what I was getting into. Luckily for me, from that first trip forward I had the full support and help of a group of historically-minded conservationists and cavers, including Lynn and Brian Roebuck, Rob Robbins, April Hannah, Tim Curtis, and others.

On September 13, 1997, the Hubbards Cave History Project began, first by describing, sketching, and photographing the artifacts and historic wall markings in the entrance room. We then did the same for the short North Passage. We immediately made significant discoveries, ranging from the previously unknown presence at the cave of Shelah Waters, a well-known 19th century Tennessee cave explorer, to evidence of exploration and gypsum mining by pre-Columbian cultures. We took some emergency preservation actions by marking off cane torch fragments in the North Passage while we took two small samples for further study.

Later, we began the inventory of the extensive West Passage, focusing at first on the historic built structures, which included bridges, ladders, paths, shoring timbers, and stone-stair steps. In addition, we assessed the recent damage to some of the resources, which, in addition to the destruction of the three-sectioned ladder, included minor damage to the peg and hole ladder, much spray paint over historic graffiti, and the unearthing of three previously buried saltpeter troughs in the entrance room. We placed signs at each artifact cluster as a short-term measure, but two things were clear: the resource was both larger and more significant than previously suspected and it was still very vulnerable.

In our initial report to the Nature Conservancy, we submitted a preliminary artifact inventory, accompanied by illustrations and photographs and keyed to an existing, though only marginally useful, map of the cave. We also documented the names, dates, and wall markings in the North Passage. Most significantly, we analyzed the nature of the threat to the cave, which was primarily vandalism from unregulated trips, and recommended several management strategies for historic preservation on site. These were, first, that although most of the cave was very conducive to long term preservation due to its stable, low-humidity environment, the three saltpeter troughs recently unearthed at the entrance were threatened by exposure and should be re-interred. Secondly, unsupervised visitation should cease, though educational and research trips should be allowed in the appropriate season. Thirdly, since active enforcement of access limitation was impractical due to the cave's location, passive entrance control, that is a gate, for the West Passage would protect the majority of the currently vulnerable resources. There was some concern that gating the West Passage would divert all the unauthorized traffic into the seldom-visited North Passage. And lastly, removing of the modern ladder into the entrance room and posting additional signs were practical steps that might help protect the cave entrance without damaging its aesthetic value. These ideas for historic preservation fit in well with the Nature Conservancy's own plans for biological conservation at the site and, over the next two years, many of these ideas were implemented.

We began the 1998 work season at the end of April by beginning the inventory of cultural resources in the already protected South Passage. Again, artifacts and historic wall markings were described, illustrated by drawings, and photographed. And again additional historical discoveries were made, including a probable moonshine cooker, which adds another dimension to the history of the cave. The contrast between sections of the cave was great, as the South Passage, gated in 1985, contained none of the graffiti from the last 15 years that so mars the West Passage. Hubbards Cave History Project team member April Hannah prepared a nicely done second report for the Nature Conservancy on the cultural resources in the South Passage.

In June 1998, members of the Hubbards Cave History Project aided the Nature Conservancy in gating the West Passage of the cave. From our point of view the gate was highly desirable for preservation of historic material in the West Passage. There would be no more burning of artifacts or spray painting over historic wall markings. Thanks to the Nature Conservancy, the bleeding had finally stopped. During the gating work, we did also manage to find time to examine one previously un-inspected passage and document a few more historic inscriptions.

On July 11, 1998, we returned to Hubbards Cave for a productive historic inventory and preservation trip. We had previously consulted with Dr Jan Simek, head of the University of Tennessee Cave Archaeology Research Team, about our work at the cave. Based on our conversations, we decided to re-inter the three saltpeter troughs as soon as possible. Brian Roebuck and Marbry Hardin led a team that efficiently and carefully laid the artifacts back into one of the original beds and reburied them. This will stabilize the extremes of temperature and humidity that cause rapid decomposition of wooden artifacts on the entrance floor. Also on July 11 we began the enormous task of recording the names, dates, and wall markings in the extensive West Passage, which will number in the thousands when completely inventoried. Additional trips on September 7, 1998, and August 14, 1999, have continued this major effort, which remains far from complete. The signature record at Hubbards is one of the most extensive in the state, rivaling that of caves such as Big Bone Cave. We systematically and carefully scrutinized the cave walls, trying to untangle the jumble of faint, sometimes superimposed, lines, smudges, and torch marks which, remarkably, contain meaning to the trained eye. Since wall markings contain three types of information, conveyed respectively by content, style, and media, we noted aspects of all three while performing our inventories. For example, the inscription "Absalom Brown 1809" would be recorded on paper and film, which is the content, but we would also indicate the style, an older orthography with ruled lines, and the media, a wall etching. Not willing to hastily or arbitrarily judge which marks were historically important, we decided at the beginning of the Project to record the information *in toto* as a primary document for future researchers. The very large number of historic names in the cave will, when recorded and analyzed, give insights into of the social history of the cave and surrounding communities, as well as provide information on the cave's past as an extractive industrial site. They contain great genealogical and local history value as well.

By 1999, the activities of the Hubbards Cave History Project had clearly broadened. While

short term or emergency historic preservation had been our original goal, along with assessing damage to resources, those tasks were now complete. We had also completed our inventory of built structures in the cave. Now, long-term preservation was foremost in our minds, along with the continuing creation of a primary document to allow scholars to "read" the walls of the cave. We formalized our launch of a Hubbards Cave archive, maintained by Rob Robbins. The archive was created by collecting the many scattered references to the cave in the historical literature and holding them in a central location for research purposes. We also began participating in two other newer projects at Hubbards Cave, which in part stemmed out of our efforts.

In July and August of 1999, the Nature Conservancy built a massive bat-friendly gate on the last remaining unprotected section leading off from the entrance, the North Passage. The Hubbards Cave History Project personnel again assisted. This protection, described by Gabby Call and Roy Powers in a paper elsewhere in this volume, was none too soon. Upon arriving at the site, for instance, Brian Roebuck and I had to replace an artifact of undetermined age in its proper provenance, as unauthorized visitors had carried a primitive cedar tree "ladder" out of the North Passage and used it at the entrance sinkhole. Project personnel, especially Lynn Roebuck, were on site to find, collect, and preserve any cultural materials displaced when the footings of the gate were installed. The new gate on the North Passage, like the 1998 gate on the West Passage, demonstrates the compatibility of biological and historic preservation, for structures built primarily for bat and bat habitat protection also securely protect important cultural resources. While we continued our historic inventory in 1999, we also participated in interdisciplinary trips with two other projects working on site. I had notified Jan Simek about our work and discoveries at Hubbards Cave in the fall of 1997. Jan agreed to date, using C 14 assay, the two cane-torch samples we had collected from the North Passage. The early dates obtained, c. 2730 BP and 2260 BP, led to a joint site visit by the University of Tennessee Cave Archaeology Research Team and the Hubbards Cave History Project, whereupon additional discoveries were made, confirming and extending some of our earlier finds. Soon Dr Simek proposed a major archaeological study of the site, to be conducted by Erin Pritchard, one of his graduate students, under his direction. We have since conducted three additional joint field trips, one in 1998 and two in 1999, between the Hubbards Cave History Project and the University of Tennessee Cave Archaeology Research Team. This cooperation has been beneficial for both groups, as each has learned from the other's expertise. This cooperation has now extended to other caves and other projects as well.

One problem facing both the History Project and the Cave Archaeology Research Team was the lack of a detailed map of the cave. There had been at least three maps made of parts of the cave, the first dating back to the early 1940s, but even the most recent one, by Bill Deane in the mid 1970s, omitted significant passages and showed very little detail for others. After seeking permission from the Nature Conservancy, the two existing projects, History and Archaeology, recommended that a third project be created, whose purpose was to provide an accurate, detailed map of the cave for scholarly work and management planning. Soon, Marbry Hardin, a well-known Tennessee Cave surveyor and project leader, organized a multi-grotto survey effort, which began its work in the 1999 field season. Members of the History Project have participated in every survey trip to ensure close communications between the complementary projects. The 1999 field season ended with three active and cooperative research, survey, and inventory projects in place. All three eagerly await the beginning of next year's fieldwork.

In conclusion, the important historic resources at Hubbards Cave have been protected from the most immediate threat by piggybacking historic preservation onto the biological preservation strategies that the Nature Conservancy has successfully adopted. In this case, there has been no conflict between the different goals of biological protection, historic research, and preservation of cultural resources. Instead, there has been complimentary work, supported by different teams for their own reasons, which protects the diverse and important resources more securely while allowing significant research to continue in the appropriate season.

For the Hubbards Cave History Project, the work at the cave is continuing. While many of the passages have now been inventoried, several others have not. We have over a thousand names, dates, and wall markings recorded already, but many more remain to be documented. We are well on our way toward creating a usable primary document, based on cultural features in the cave, which will be of great value for future scholars. Someday an important history of the cave will be written which will rely heavily on our work at the site and our documents archive. We have a solid,

well-trained team of enthusiastic cavers in place, and team members have already applied their new expertise to the study of other caves across the region, making other significant discoveries in last year or two.

Several years ago, Bill Halliday suggested, with considerable foresight, that the National Speleological Society create a policy for Historic Preservation in caves. While this has been slow in coming, recent field work across the cave regions of the U.S., including our own little project at Hubbards Cave, suggests that, perhaps finally, the idea of preserving the past in American caves has come of age. I do a cringe a little though, when I hear my team members suggest that we "do Big Bone Cave next."

About the Author

Joseph C. Douglas is an American historian, trained at Middle Tennessee State University (B.A. 1986, M.A. 1991) and the University of Houston (currently ABD). His specialization includes both environmental and public history, with an emphasis on the history of caves. He is the recipient of the 1998 Peter Hauer Spelean History Award from the National Speleological Society and is a frequent contributor to The Journal of Spelean History. He is an Instructor of History at Volunteer State Community College in Gallatin, Tennessee.