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HON 101

Dr. Friedman

9 October 2022

Beneath the Surface

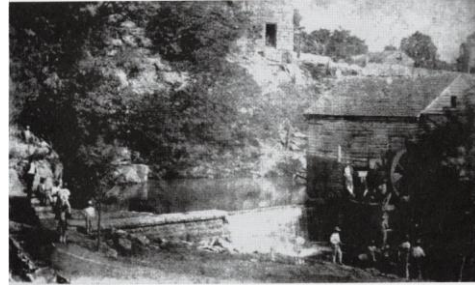
Lying dormant and unexplored for decades, rests a little-known cave underneath the streets of Huntsville. Big Spring Cave is a phrase not even most locals have heard before. This unassuming cave plays an important role in not only the founding, but the creation of Huntsville itself. It is important to know about this cave because it is so relevant to Huntsville's history through its founding, its contributions towards different innovations, its configuration, and the legacy it has left today.

Huntsville's very origin can be tied back to Big Spring Cave. John Hunt—the man of whom Huntsville was named after—decided to lodge his cabin close to the cave system as it proved itself to be a sustainable water source (Varnedoe and Lundquist). His lodging was the foundation of Huntsville. From this little cabin emerged one of the fastest-growing cities in America, and it is all thanks to the water that Big Spring Cave produced.

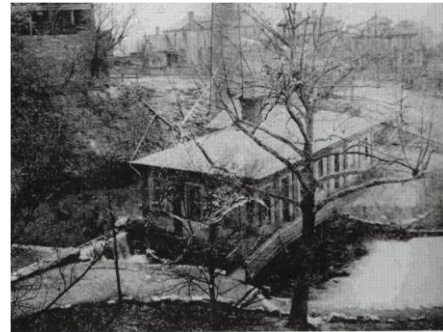
With Big Spring producing the city's main water supply at the time, a water mill was built for the use of pumping water into the reservoir located on the Madison County Courthouse square and then to Echols Hill (Varnedoe and Lundquist 13). Later on, this water wheel was replaced with a steam driven pump and pump house (Varnedoe and Lundquist 13). The steam pump was used to create electricity within the city as well. Along with these things, the water produced from the cave would often be used by churches to conduct public baptisms within the community.



Baptisms taking place at Big Spring

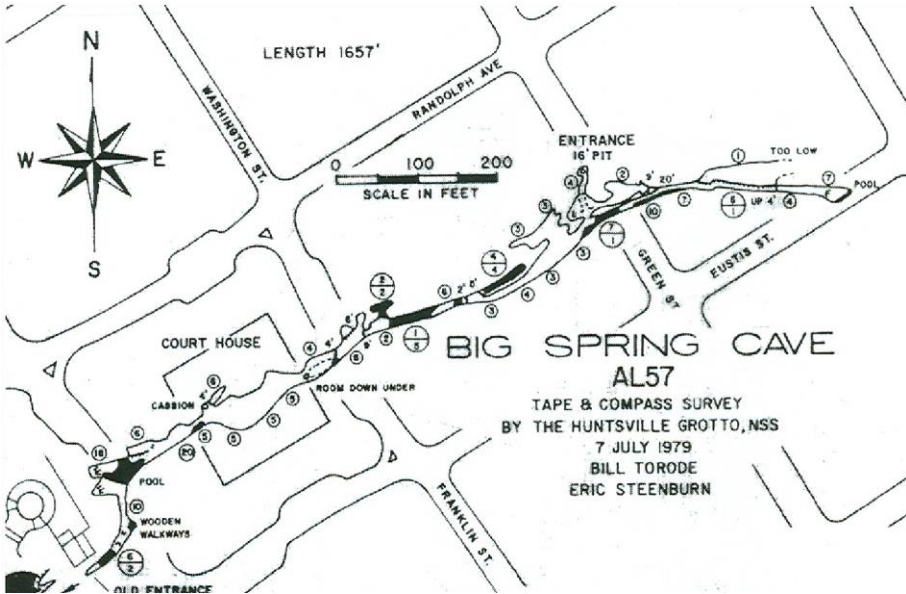


Early Waterwheel Water Works at Big Spring



Steam Water Works at Big Spring

Throughout Huntsville's history, there have been many times where people have entered the cave. The first recorded instance of entering the cave was in 1916. The water that flowed from inside the cave was still the city's main source of water, and an expedition took place to check the water quality. To access the more remote parts of the cave, "a wooden catwalk was built" and left inside the cave (Varnedoe and Lundquist 16). Later during the Cuban Missile Crisis in the 1960's, the Huntsville Grotto, a part of the National Speleological Society, was authorized to survey and map Big Spring Cave. This was led because the city wanted to know if the cave would be a suitable fallout shelter. It is known today that caves are not good as shelters because of their air and water circulation that would easily let in radiation. The most important survey of the cave, and the one that produced the most documents, was in 1962 to see if the cave was structurally sound enough to have the Madison



County Courthouse built atop it. Out of this survey came the most accurate topographical maps and measurement and test results. The map shown in Fig.X is one of the documents that resulted from this specific study. The cave is only 0.2 miles, or a little over 1,050 feet,

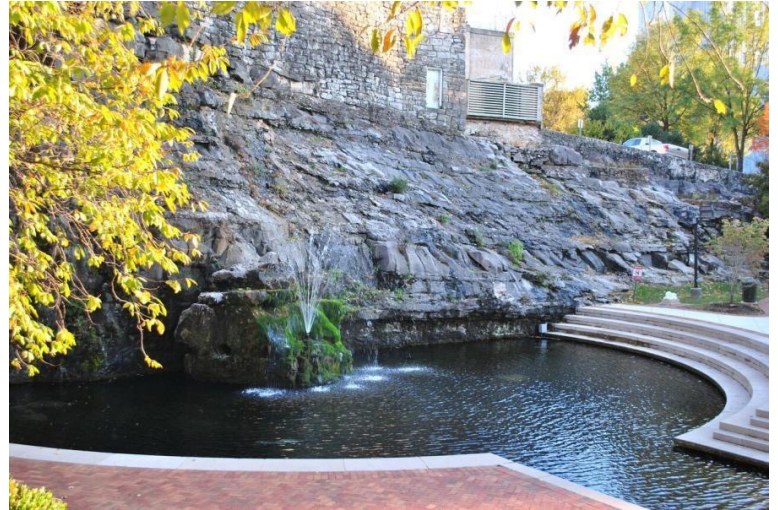
long and is more so just a fissure rather than an expansive cave (Report on the Foundation Studies County Courthouse Square Madison County). The water inside the cave gets deep. There are not any concrete measurements, but the men that conducted the inspection would not just have to tread waters, but swim through parts of the cave where the waters reached up to their necks. It was deemed structurally sound, and the building of the courthouse commenced. It is still standing mighty atop Big Spring Cave.



Big Spring Cave was officially recognized as a cave of Alabama on October 6, 1939, when brothers Dr. Walter B. Jones and Carl T. Jones visited and named it as

“number 57 in the Catalog of Alabama Caves and Caverns” (Varnedoe and Lundquist 16). In modern day, the cave is sealed up to keep unwanted critters and curious teenagers out. The manhole in the street is sealed, and the entrance is blocked off. If the need to go back into the cave arises, it can still be accessed by tearing down the seal or barricade. Even though the actual cave cannot be entered, the cave’s legacy lives on through one of

Huntsville’s national parks: Big Spring Park. Big Spring Park is a beautiful area filled with greenery, scenic pathways, contemporary art, and of course a beautiful pond courtesy of Big Spring Cave. It is a popular space for tourists and citizens



of Huntsville alike to visit. Through time, it has still produced the water that birthed the lifeforce of the city and welcomed its inhabitants. What lies beneath the very surface of Huntsville’s streets has been a staple of the city since its founding and has proven time and time again its importance to the city and its people.

Works Cited

Map of Big Spring Cave Huntsville AL, 1962-11-10 Box 1, Folder 1. MC-152 Big Spring Cave Collection. UAH Archives and Special Collections, M. Louis Salmon Library, Huntsville, AL. 28 September 2022.

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