



The Rockcastle Karst Conservancy Now Owns Kentucky's Great Saltpetre Cave

text by Jennifer Pinkley; photos by Nathan Williams

The Rockcastle Karst Conservancy, a group dedicated to preserving caves and karst in the Rockcastle region of Kentucky, is pleased to announce the acquisition of their first property, the 305-acre Great Saltpetre Preserve. The preserve features the Great Saltpetre Cave, a cave with a long and fascinating history.

The Great Saltpetre Cave in central Kentucky has long lured explorers into its depths, although details of early visits are lost to history. The earliest signature in the cave (Daniel Boone) dates to 1769, but the first written account of the cave comes from a settler named John Baker. In 1798, John discovered a cave entrance next to Crooked Creek and was intrigued. The next day he took his wife and two children to the cave, lit torches, and ventured into the unknown. Unfortunately their torches burned out, leaving them trapped in the dark for two days. The family managed to find their way out, but their story is the first of many documented adventures in the "The Great Cave on Crooked Creek."

Kentucky in the 1800s was an important saltpeter mining region, and the cave quickly became one of the most important saltpeter mines in the country. Small-scale saltpeter mining started in 1801, and by 1805, production had jumped from 1,000 pounds a week to 1,000 pounds a day. During the War of 1812, as many as 70 miners worked at the cave. The cave was so productive that it produced at least 30 percent more saltpeter than Mammoth Cave.

An interesting side-effect of the mining

also occurred. In 1805, miners uncovered two unusual bones that were later identified as the remains of two extinct animals from the Pleistocene epoch. The bones were from an extinct giant ground sloth (*Megalonyx jeffersoni*) and an extinct flat-headed peccary, or pig (*Platygonus compressus*).

The Great Saltpetre Cave history also features an important "first" in cave surveying: it was the first cave in the United States surveyed using modern surveying instruments. The resulting map, surveyed and drafted in 1805, barely missed another first: it is the second oldest known cave map in the United States (Thomas Jefferson drafted the first known cave map in 1782). When you compare the original map from 1805 and the modern map, you can tell that the 1805 version is quite accurate.

After the War of 1812, saltpeter mining was scaled back in the cave and it was never again extensively mined. The cave was little-used until 1939, when the cave was opened to the public for the Renfro Valley Barn Dance. CBS radio broadcast the opening night show (quite an accomplishment in those days!). Barn dances continued for many years, and the cave was opened for commercial tours in 1966. However, in 1985, the cave was sold and closed to the public. Luckily, in 1989 the Felburn Foundation, an organization interested in environmental preservation, purchased the cave and 305 surrounding acres.

The Greater Cincinnati Grotto soon signed a 25-year lease with the Felburn

Foundation, creating the Great Saltpetre Preserve (GSP). To manage the property, several grottos came together to form the Great Saltpetre Preserve committee. The committee consists of members from the Greater Cincinnati Grotto, the Dayton Underground Grotto, and the Blue Grass Grotto. The committee has worked very hard over the years to manage, maintain, and improve the property, serving as excellent stewards of the cave, the facilities, and the entire preserve.

Since the creation of the GSP, the property has become an important "base of operations" for caving in Rockcastle County. The property has camping sites, a picnic shelter, kitchen facilities, and bathhouses. Most weekends, you can find a variety of cavers getting ready for caving trips and enjoying the natural beauty of the preserve. Over the years, the preserve has been the location for many caving functions, most notably the 2001 NSS Convention, when cavers camped on the preserve property and enjoyed a Howdy Party inside the Great Saltpetre Cave. In addition, the preserve hosts the annual Karst-O-Rama every summer. The cave is also open to the public one weekend every May for an "Open House."

In 2003, Ellie Schiller, the executive director of the Felburn Foundation, presented members of the GSP committee with an intriguing proposition. If cavers formed a 501(c)3 non-profit karst conservancy, the Felburn Foundation would donate the preserve to the conservancy. The offer

presented a wonderful opportunity for cavers to make sure the property is preserved for future generations. To take full advantage of this opportunity, plus to address the recognized need to protect other area caves, the Rockcastle Karst Conservancy (RKC) was born. RKC was formed in May 2004 and became operational in March 2005. The new conservancy focuses on protecting and preserving caves and karst in the entire Rockcastle region of Kentucky, as well as educating the public about cave and karst issues. There are currently 120 members

from 12 states and also 6 organizational members. In August 2006, the Felburn Foundation officially transferred the title of the GSP property to the RKC.

RKC is excited about this important acquisition and looks forward to continuing to work with area grottos and the GSP committee to manage and maintain the property. The RKC would also like to thank the Felburn Foundation for their generous donation. All of the members of RKC look forward to continuing to preserve the cave, its rich history, and the 305 acre property

for future generations. If you would like to learn more about the RKC, contact Andy Niekamp at andyniekamp@gmail.com or visit our web site at www.rkci.org/. To learn more about the preserve, visit www.caves.org/conservancy/gsp/.

Note: Angelo George's research is the source of much of the historic information about the Great Saltpetre Cave.

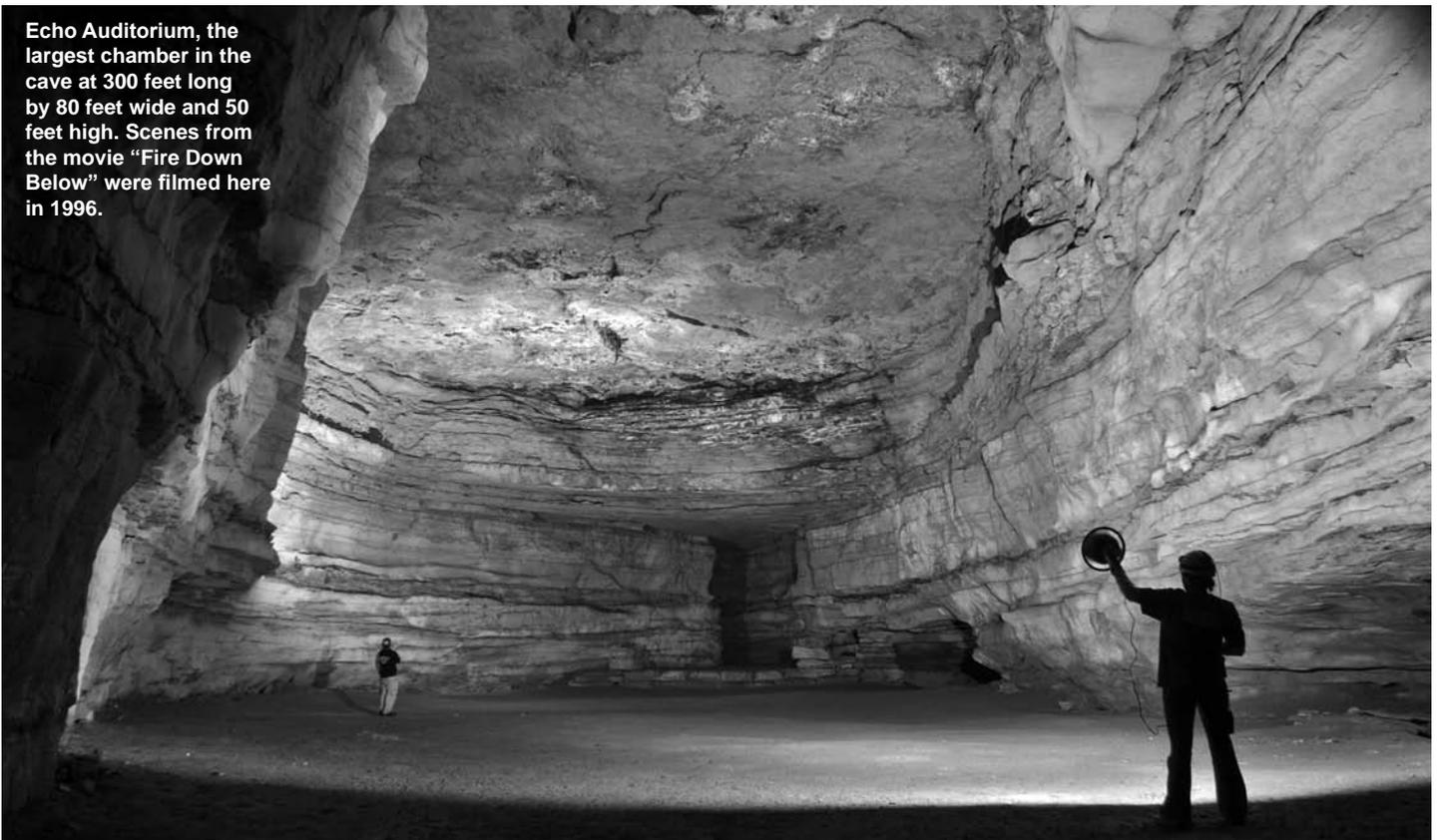


Bunker Hill



The Museum Section, where items are on display showing past activities in the cave

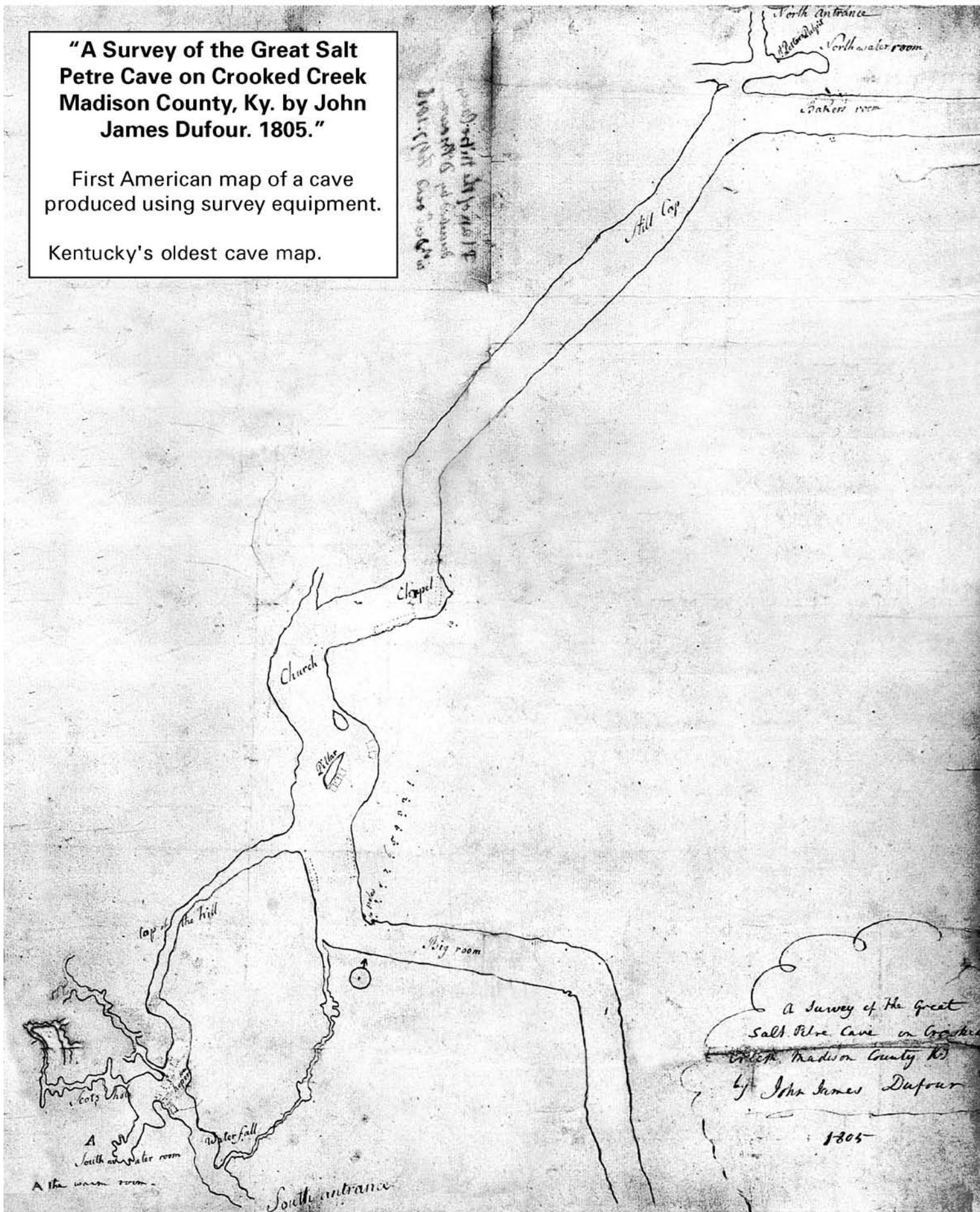
Echo Auditorium, the largest chamber in the cave at 300 feet long by 80 feet wide and 50 feet high. Scenes from the movie "Fire Down Below" were filmed here in 1996.



**"A Survey of the Great Salt
Petre Cave on Crooked Creek
Madison County, Ky. by John
James Dufour. 1805."**

First American map of a cave
produced using survey equipment.

Kentucky's oldest cave map.



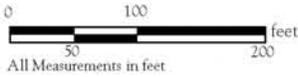
A Survey of the Great
Salt Petre Cave on Crooked
Creek Madison County Ky
by John James Dufour
1805

Great Saltpetre Cave

Rockcastle County, Kentucky

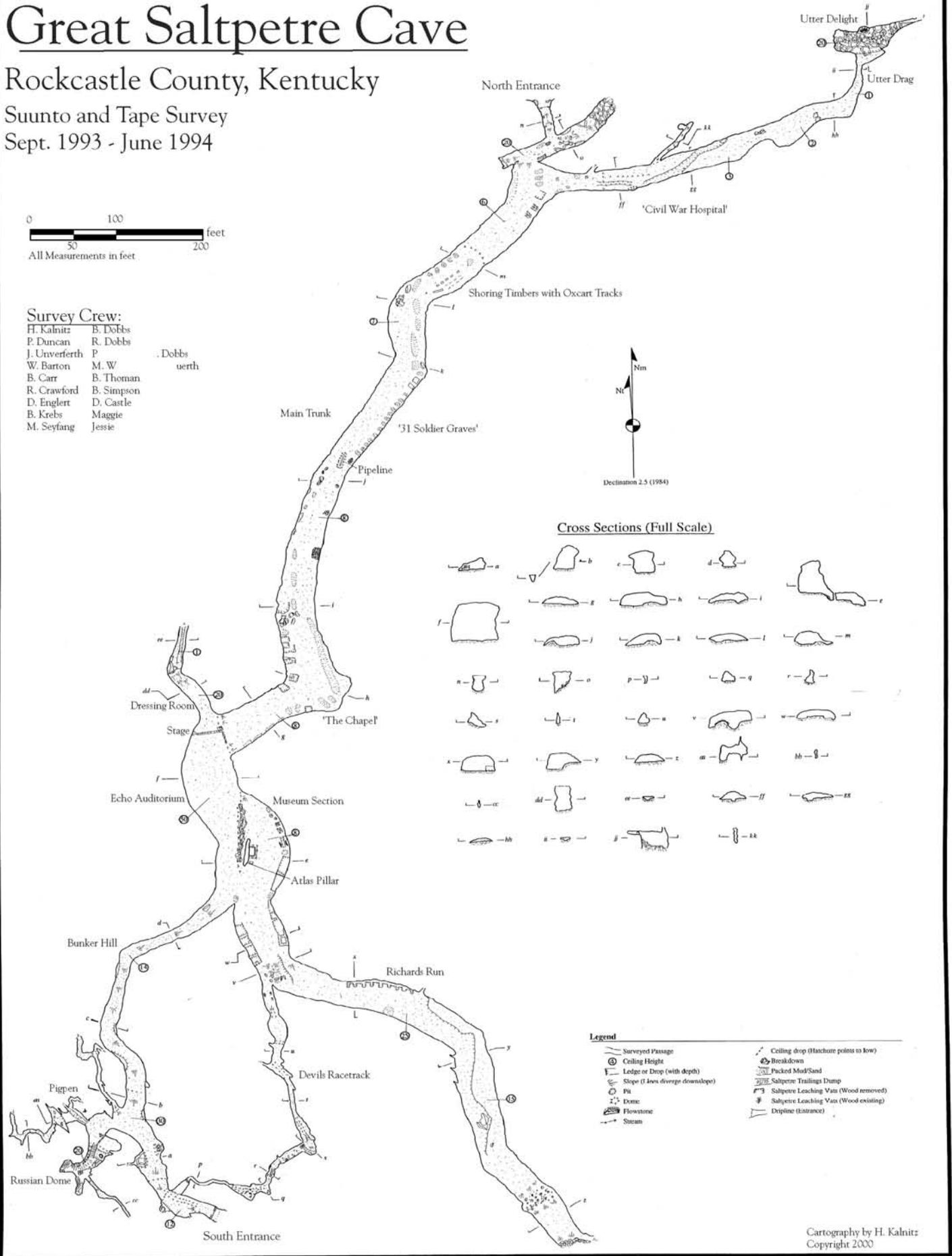
Suunto and Tape Survey

Sept. 1993 - June 1994

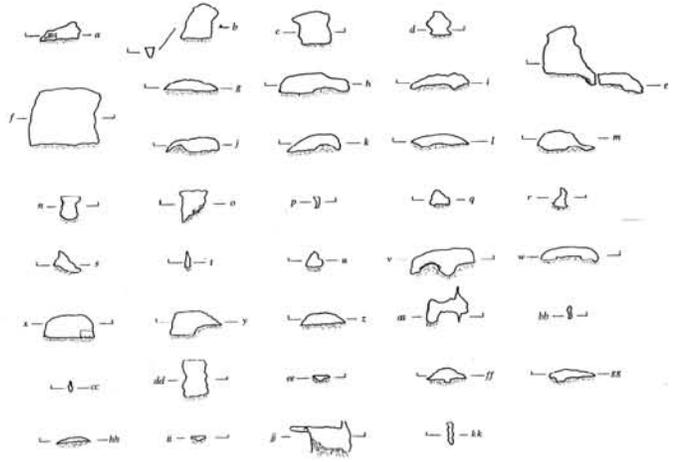


Survey Crew:

H. Kalnitz	B. Dobbs
P. Duncan	R. Dobbs
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W. Barton	M. Wuerth
B. Carr	B. Thoman
R. Crawford	B. Simpson
D. Englert	D. Castle
B. Krebs	Maggie
M. Seyfang	Jessie



Cross Sections (Full Scale)



- Legend**
- Surveyed Passage
 - ⊙ Ceiling Height
 - Ledge or Drop (with depth)
 - ↘ Slope (↓ shows diverge downslope)
 - ⊙ Pit
 - ⊙ Dome
 - ⊙ Flowstone
 - Stream
 - ⊙ Ceiling drop (Hatchstone points to low)
 - ⊙ Breakdown
 - ⊙ Packed Mud/Sand
 - ⊙ Saltpetre Trailings Dump
 - ⊙ Saltpetre Leaching Vats (Wood removed)
 - ⊙ Saltpetre Leaching Vats (Wood existing)
 - ⊙ Driftline (Entrance)

Cartography by H. Kalnitz
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