

The majestic Cathedral Domes. At right: Mat and Nick Bransford sit at the entrance to Mammoth Cave around 1865.



A CENTURY AND A HALF AGO A KENTUCKY FAMILY BEGAN OFFERING TOURS OF AN UNDERGROUND EMPIRE THAT WOULD BECOME FAMOUS THROUGHOUT THE WORLD. TODAY A GREAT-GREAT-GRANDSON CARRIES ON THE TRADITION.

BY KRISTIN OHLSON

THERE ARE TWO BRANSFORD AVENUES south of the Mason-Dixon line, just a short distance from where I-65 dips and turns through the hills in Kentucky and Tennessee. One is in Nashville; it is named for a grandson of Thomas Bransford, an Englishman who became a wealthy Kentucky farmer in the mid-1800s.

Less than two hours to the north, the other Bransford Avenue lies hundreds of feet underground, in one of the deepest passageways of Kentucky's Mammoth Cave. While Nashville's Bransford Avenue bristles with lights and cars, its twin is dark and silent; evidence of any human presence is hard to find. None but the doughtiest cavers venture down it, and when they do, they lie on their bellies as they inch past cruel shards of crystalline rock and carefully navigate around the 20-foot pit at its center.

The two Bransford Avenues are linked by more

THE BRANSFORDS OF MAMMOTH CAVE

than coincidence. The one in the cave memorializes William Bransford, who was part of the group that discovered Mammoth's magnificent Cathedral Domes in 1907 and was rewarded by having his name attached to this nearby passageway. He was a member of a family of slaves who had started exploring and guiding tourists through Mammoth Cave in 1838, a role the family's men maintained until just before the area was opened as a national park, in 1941. William, or Will, was a great-grandson of the wealthy farmer Thomas Bransford. The farmer had had a son by a slave woman. He was Will's uncle, Materson Bransford. When Mat was a teenager his father leased him and another slave, named Nicholas Bransford (they shared their owner's surname), to the proprietor of the cave.

LOCATED JUST SOUTH OF LOUISVILLE, Mammoth Cave is the largest cave system in the world, the geologic legacy of water's eating its way through dirt and rock for millions of years. Even though more than 350 miles of passageways have been explored, scientists estimate that another 600 miles of cave are yet to be discovered. This is a site of great beauty and great terror, a repository of secrets and stories. That makes the cave an apt metaphor for the history of the African-American branch of the Bransford family, who were known around the world in their heyday for their cave guiding and explorations. However, within a few decades of their last descent, after they'd given up their own land in the 1930s to make way for the park, they were all but forgotten.

It's likely that the Bransford legacy would still be largely forgotten were it not for Joy Lyons, the chief of program services at Mammoth Cave National Park and the author of the forthcoming book *Making Their Mark: The Signature of Slavery at Mammoth Cave*. On a lark, Lyons took a seasonal job at the park in 1979 and soon fell in love with the place, especially drawn by its rich cultural history. As a cave guide, she became concerned about the accuracy of the stories she and others passed on to visitors, stories that had been handed down from one generation of guides to another. Among the things that perplexed her was that there were so many stories about Stephen Bishop, Mammoth Cave's most famous black guide (see "Pathfinders: The Cave Master," in the Summer 2002 issue). Bishop's arrival at the cave, in 1838, predated Mat and Nick Bransford's by only a few months. Lyons had an inkling that the stories of several black men had been folded into the legend of Stephen Bishop.



Mat Bransford, first-generation cave guide and explorer, at the height of his career.

"I went over to the curatorial room one day to look at photographs," she recalls from her office in the Mammoth Cave visitor center. On the wall behind her a photograph of her daughter and one of Mat Bransford share equal space on a bulletin board. "I noticed that a number of black guides were identified as being Stephen Bishop, even though they were obviously different people. One of the photographs had a car in it, but Bishop had died in 1857. I thought, What is the deal—was every African-American man here called Stephen Bishop, no matter what the date? So I started looking for family descendants and reading historical accounts and newspapers, anything I could get my hands on."

Over the years, Lyons put the story of the Bransfords together in bits and pieces. She tracked down Bransford descendants for information; she even persuaded one of them to

AT THE TIME BISHOP AND THE BRANSFORDS BEGAN EXPLORING, MODERN MAN HAD BRAVED ONLY THE CAVE'S FIRST FEW MILES.

become a seasonal guide in the cave, adding his own family memories to the saga. Jerry Bransford, recently retired from Dow Corning, is the great-great-grandson of Mat Bransford and the first Bransford in 66 years to take tourists into the cave. From childhood Jerry had visited Mammoth many times as a tourist, but without knowing how deeply his family's history was tied to it. "I started doing my own research in 1977," he says. "My daddy didn't know past his daddy and uncles who were guides, but I had a driving ambition to know more. I was sure there was a story. And there was—there was a hundred years of story."

The first owner of Mammoth Cave to employ slaves as guides was an attorney, Franklin Gorin, who bought the property in 1838. He was not the first to think of taking visitors on guided tours; those had begun more than two years earlier, led by a white caretaker of the cave and his son. Neither was Gorin the first to think of putting slaves to work here: In earlier decades, Mammoth's owners had as many as 70 slaves working in an underground saltpeter mining operation (the remnants of which are still perfectly preserved). But Gorin had grand ideas for the property. He spruced up and expanded a nearby estate house so that it could accommodate more overnight guests and then focused on extending the underground routes. He turned this part of his improvement campaign over to the three teenage slave boys: Stephen Bishop, whom he had recently purchased from a business associate, and the two young Bransfords, leased from Thomas Bransford.

Visitors to today's Mammoth Cave are sometimes a little nervous about entering it. First, they encounter the cave's "breath," a cool, steady wind that dries the summer sweat off their faces as they troop down the hill to the main entrance. Beyond an unlocked door, they head down a rocky passage and into a vast room, both carved out by ancient waters. When the guides turn off the muted electric lighting for a moment, the visitors realize just how thoroughly the light from the back end of the tunnel is swallowed in total darkness.

At the time when Bishop and the Bransfords began exploring, modern man had braved only the cave's first few miles. Equipped with oil-burning lanterns and candles, the three teens went much farther than their immediate caving forebears—slipping through cracks in the rock to look for new pas-

sages, wriggling through narrow tubes, dangling from ropes into chasms, searching for ways to cross or descend treacherous pits. Chuck DeCroix, a senior guide at Mammoth, believes that the three and some of their descendants shared the spirit of today's extreme cavers. By way of example, he points to the cave's historic graffiti. Many of the walls are covered with names and dates written in pencil, etched with a knife, or scorched with soot from oil lanterns held aloft on sticks. The names of early guides are everywhere, even in the most harrowing, inaccessible places. "These were men who enjoyed the dangers and the thrill that goes with exploring, as well as the glory," says DeCroix.

Of course, they also were under orders from the cave owners—first Gorin and then, beginning in 1839, John Croghan—to search out unusual new underground sites that would lure more paying guests. And given the reality of life for African-American slaves above ground, the young men were probably even more eager to succeed at the unlikely job of caving.

Still, their far-flung inscriptions show a kind of enthusiasm for the work that exceeds obligation. The cave's sheltering darkness offered freedom from the class and racial divisions on the surface, if only for a few hours. The

cave was their workplace, but it was also their castle, their playground, their place to rendezvous when the masters and the weary tourists went to bed. One of Joy Lyons's favorite bits of cave graffiti is a heart carved on the side of a rock. Inside the heart are the names of Stephen Bishop, his future wife, Charlotte, and Mat Bransford, along with those of several other girls.

Stephen Bishop died in 1857, but Mat and Nick and their descendants flourished. According to an 1860 guidebook on Mammoth Cave, Mat had walked an aggregate 50,000 miles underground by the time he was 37. Stephen Bishop, Mat, and Nick had become more than just guides; they were part of the



William Bransford, far right, with a tour group from New York, 1908.



Visiting Mammoth Cave in 1857. The man in the boat's prow is thought to be Nick Bransford.

cave's mystique. Like Bishop, the Bransfords showed that they were smart and keen on learning, that they absorbed scientific knowledge, the news of the day, and literary banter from the wealthy tourists they squired through the cave. They had a commanding presence, and to visitors taken aback by that the guidebook explained, "The abrupt manner in which it is necessary for the guides to address visitors in dangerous places must not be confounded with insolence, as it is absolutely necessary at many points."

WHEN TRAVELERS LATER WROTE ABOUT THE CAVE, they often penned more than a few words about its most famous guides. Mention of Mat, Nick, and Mat's descendants turns up in personal diaries and published articles. Tours then lasted all day long, and visitors often stayed for nearly a week in order to make several excursions. Those who could afford to do so came from all over the globe and were among the wealthiest and best educated people of their day. Often their preconceived notions about slaves were dashed when they spent a week with the Bransfords, who, like Stephen Bishop, had gained a fine education from the parade of worldly guests.

According to one account, Mat had acquired "a considerable degree of culture . . . by contact with scholars and professors of every science, especially of geology and mineralogy." Although not a free man, Mat was allowed to visit Louisville in 1863, and his presence sparked a glowing article in the local paper, which referred to him as the "colored guide . . . who is familiar with the geological and chemical formations peculiar to the cave, and discourses of all its wonders with an apparent knowledge of his subjects that would do credit to Professor Silliman," a renowned Yale scientist. The paper then reported that Mat would be staying at the Louisville Hotel and would sit for his portrait at Brown's "Daguerrean Salon."

This would not be the only likeness of Mat. The Danish painter Joachim Ferdinand Richardt sketched him and Nick in 1857, and when the Cincinnati photographer Charles Waldack first took photographs in Mammoth Cave, in 1866, he included a dignified portrait of Mat among his 42 stereoscopic views.

Despite Mat's knowledge of geology and his impressive vocabulary, he was still a slave; he was bitterly reminded of that status when his wife's owner sold two of their younger children. The family grieved, and Nick, the more reserved of the first two Bransford guides, began working on a quiet plan to buy his way out of slavery. The men routinely received gratuities from visitors, but Nick began

to augment his income—which was substantial both for the time and for a slave—by harvesting one of the cave's oddest crops. In its depths are streams that harbor eyeless fish and crawdads, and Nick would slip down there at night, scoop some up in his hat, and sell them to tourists the next morning. By 1863 he had raised enough money to buy his freedom. Even then he didn't leave the cave. He continued on, putting in a total of 50 years. His modest prosperity continued, too, and in the late 1870s he donated the land for the Mammoth Cave school, where many of the Bransford children and those of other black cave guides learned to read and write.

The second and third generations of Bransfords, all descended from Mat, also made their marks, although none seemed to achieve the celebrity of their elders. Mat's son Henry, who began his guiding career in 1872 and died in 1894, received

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more than a few write-ups in travelers' accounts. A German tourist considered him "world famous," and another dubbed him the "walking thesaurus of the cave." Mat's grandson Will worked as a guide for more than 40 years, and his name was still listed on the cave's roster in 1931. He was chosen to represent Mammoth at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, carrying with him what would today be considered nearly sacrilegious pillage—gypsum "flowers," as the sparkling white mineral



From left to right, the Bransford brothers Charles, Lewis, John Henry, and Matterson in the 1920s. Both Lewis and Matterson worked as guides.

formations snapped from the walls of one of the cave's grottoes were known. Will's job was to boost tourism by giving World's Fair visitors the ornamental samples in paper bags, stamped with the name of the cave. Attendance was lagging in those years, as tourists had already begun to roam farther, taking

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railroads west to Yosemite and Yellowstone Parks. Travelers also expected to find grand hotels, not the now rundown accommodations at Mammoth Cave.

Guide work was seasonal. When possible, cave guides supplemented their income with farming, often plowing at night by lantern light. Among the third generation of Bransford guides was a man who distinguished himself both in the cave and by his off-hours pursuits. Matt Bransford, another grand-

son of the original Mat, guided tours in the cave for 32 years, estimating upon his retirement that he had walked an aggregate distance equivalent to four and a half times Earth's circumference. But he and his wife, Zemmie, also owned a hotel for black visitors, who were barred from the Mammoth Cave hotel and its dining rooms. The couple even had postcards made up, which they passed out on their own travels. "Matt would hand out those postcards to colored people at Niagara Falls and tell them to come down to Kentucky—that he had a resort at Mammoth Cave that's as nice as anything," Jerry Bransford says.

While there had been only the occasional white guide since the 1850s, a few whites joined the corps in the 1890s and stayed. By then, the guiding profession was steeped in romance, with its nearly 75-year history and widely known luminaries. Around 1904 business at Mammoth Cave started to pick up again as visitors began to arrive in automobiles. New interest in the cave arose in other quarters too. A group of Kentucky citizens had launched a movement to designate it as protected federal land, and by 1926 they had persuaded Congress to authorize the establishment of Mammoth Cave National Park. When the last heir to Mammoth Cave died, in 1929, the Kentucky National Park Commission bought the estate. In the following decade the commission also began to secure, through eminent domain,

other properties nearby. So went Will's farm; so went Matt and Zemmie's hotel; so went the houses, churches, schools, and properties of other citizens, black and white.

By 1931 there were 20 Mammoth Cave guides: 11 black men, including 8 Bransfords—Will, Matt, Louis, Clifton, Arthur, Eddie, Elzie, and George—and 9 white men. Ten years later, when Mammoth Cave National Park was officially opened, none of the Bransfords were among the 18 guides. In fact, there were no black guides on the new roster. At least 5 of the white men from the 1931 group continued as guides with the National Park Service.

What happened to the black guides? What sundered the Bransfords from their century-long, storied tradition in Mammoth Cave?

PERHAPS THEY WERE EXCLUDED FOR WHAT MIGHT seem the most obvious reason. It's true that none of the Bransfords were still actually working as guides by 1941, when Mammoth Cave opened as a national park; the last Bransford, Louis, had turned in his key to the cave entrance and retired in 1939. But according to the historian Jeanne Schmitzer, Clifton Bransford told her in a 1991 interview that prejudice was to blame for the dwindling numbers of black guides. And Jerry Bransford says he has the story that reveals the cogs and wheels of that prejudice. According to his now deceased father, David, who was 24 years old when Louis retired, at some point in the 1930s the black guides were called one by one into a manager's office and told that they would lose their jobs when the National Park Service took over. According to Jerry, this unidentified person told them, "Boys, this thing is coming out of my hands. I can't keep you on when the park comes in, so you need to be looking around for what you're going to do."

There are no known records to document this exchange, but Jerry's account sounds plausible to individuals who have long histories of working with the park service. "My sense is that it would have been very doubtful that the park service would hire them in technical or semiprofessional positions such as park guides," says Robert Stanton, the former director of the National Park Service under President Clinton and the first black man to serve in that position. "African-Americans might have been hired for maintenance, but the National Park Service,

WHAT HAPPENED TO THE BLACK GUIDES? WHAT SUNDERED THE BRANSFORDS FROM THEIR TRADITION IN MAMMOTH CAVE?

and most civilian agencies, moved very slowly on improving their employment practices until major civil rights and equal-employment laws were passed in the 1950s and '60s."

The black guides might have resisted being ousted, but times were tough on them. They had lost their land and their communities when they were bought out by the commission, and they had more difficulties buying new land and resettling than the whites did. Once again, tourism at the cave was down, this time because of the Depression. Some of the younger Bransfords left to join the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) in the 1930s, which had sent four segregated units—one all-black—to prepare for the cave's transition into a national park. Some eventually left the CCC to seek factory jobs in Northern cities. Perhaps the hills of Kentucky seemed dull compared with the cities up North. Or maybe it was because they didn't want to stay in the area anymore. Their family had helped make the park great. How could they bear to hang around as others used their stories, their jokes, and their lore to entertain cave visitors?

Joy Lyons and her colleagues at Mammoth Cave—including Jerry, the fifth-generation Bransford—are still committed to telling their story. And, unbidden, references to them are still turning up. Not long ago a fat envelope

arrived. Enclosed were copies of a woman's journal and this note: "In looking through an old trunk, we came across the following account of a trip to Mammoth Cave, taken in 1857 by Mrs. Nancy Williams Gordon and her friend Mrs. Francis Wedgwood. . . . The feeling that she had indeed done something remarkable led Mrs. Gordon to write of it."

And on the first page, this sentence: "We wished Mat as our guide." 🍌

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Jerry Bransford, a fifth-generation guide, at the cave entrance.