



Picturesque America; or, the land we live in

a delineation by pen and pencil of the mountains, rivers, lakes, forests, water-falls, shores, cañons, valleys, cities, and other picturesque features of our country ; with illustrations on steel and wood, by eminent American artists

Bryant, William Cullen

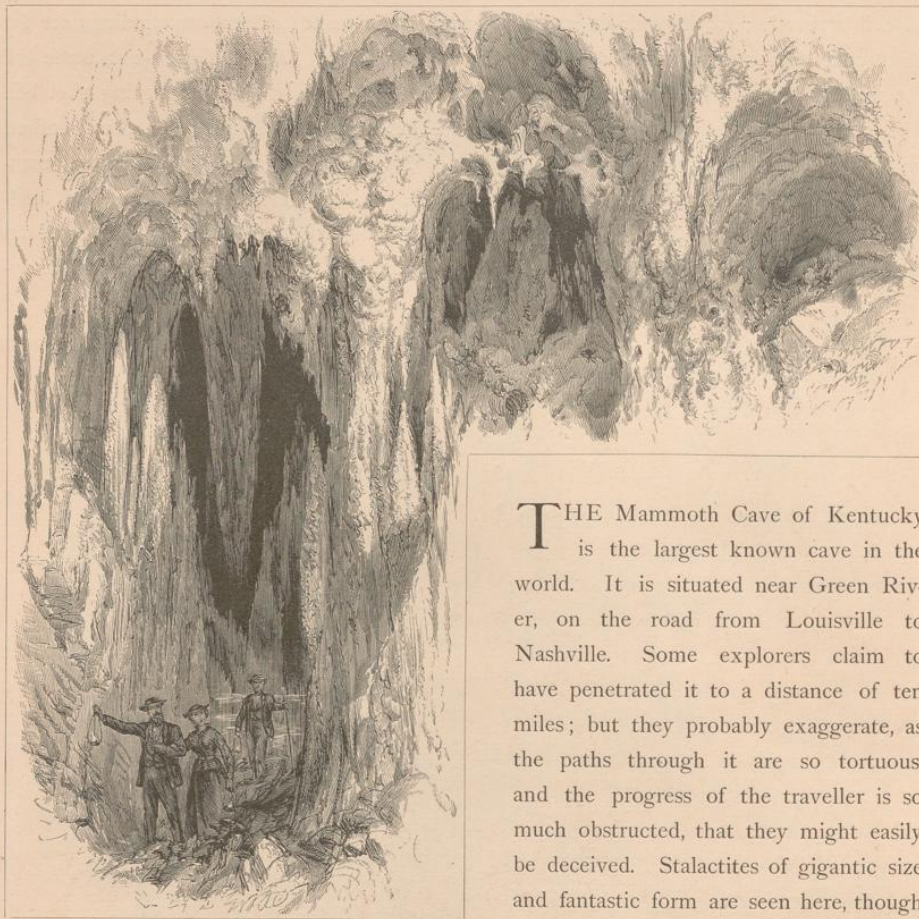
New York, 1874

The Mammoth Cave.

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THE MAMMOTH CAVE.

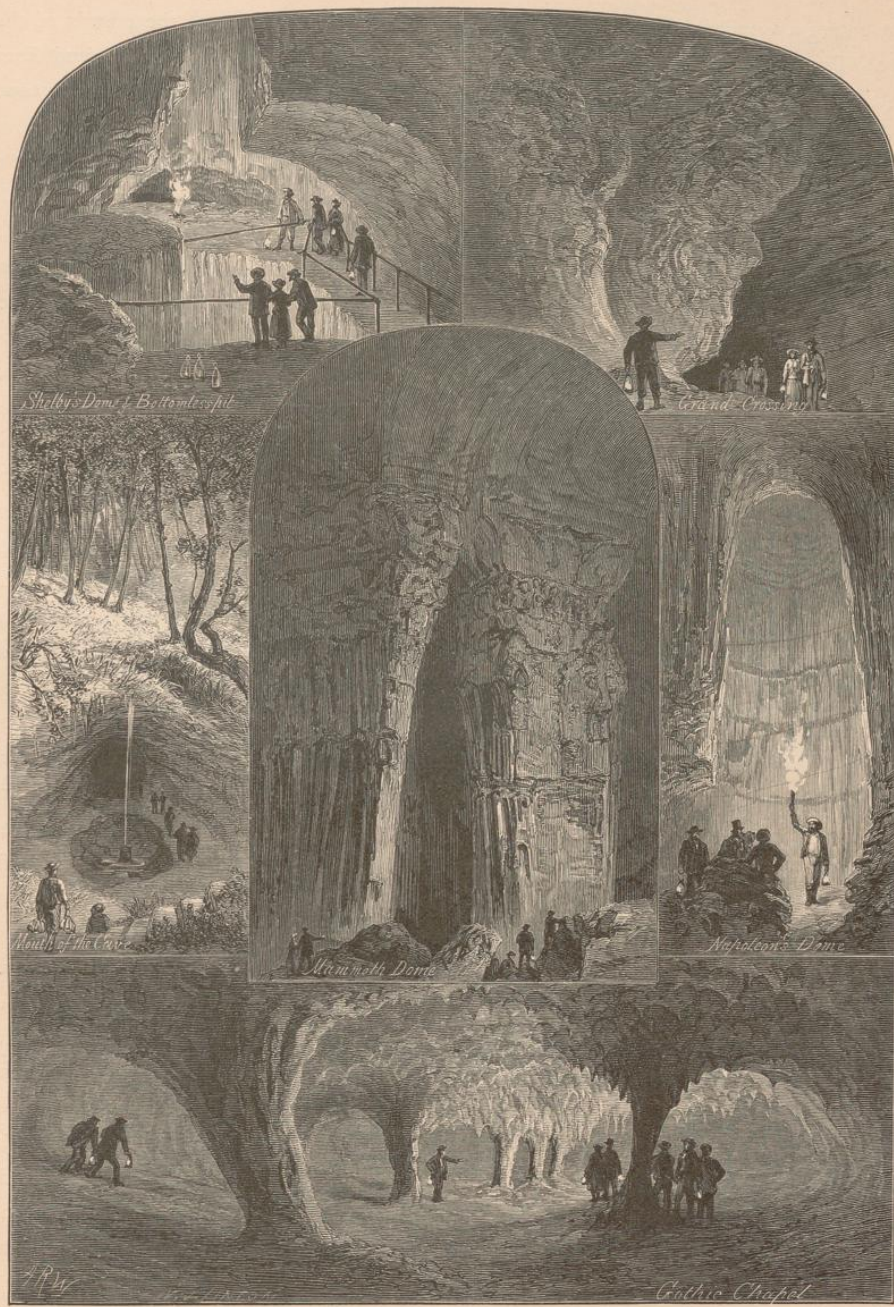
WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY ALFRED R. WAUD.



THE Mammoth Cave of Kentucky is the largest known cave in the world. It is situated near Green River, on the road from Louisville to Nashville. Some explorers claim to have penetrated it to a distance of ten miles; but they probably exaggerate, as the paths through it are so tortuous, and the progress of the traveller is so much obstructed, that they might easily be deceived. Stalactites of gigantic size and fantastic form are seen here, though they are not as brilliant as those that

adorn other and smaller caves elsewhere. But, if the Mammoth Cave is deficient in pretty effects, it is crowded with wild, fantastic, and deeply impressive forms, that almost forbid the intrusion of the curiosity-seeking tourist from the surface of the earth.

The railway deposits you at Cave City, and thence a stage-ride of ten miles brings you to an old-fashioned Kentucky hotel, where guides are procured for the exploration. Each person is provided with a lamp; and then you are led, in military order, by a pompous negro, who shouts "Halt!" and "March!" with comical gravity, down a path



SCENES IN MAMMOTH CAVE.

that enters a wooded ravine, and, slanting aside, terminates suddenly at the portals of the cave. The entrance is abundantly supplied with vegetation. Trailing plants descend from the arch above; grass and moss grow thickly around; and the cool beauty of the scene is enhanced by a slender thread of water, which falls continually into a small pool below. But you have little time to linger here. The conductor lights the lamps, and, in a severe voice, calls "Forward!" A few lichens wander a little way in from the entrance, with the daylight, and then all vegetation abruptly ceases. You are ushered into a primitive chaos of wild limestone forms, moist with the water oozing from above. A strong current of air is behind you, as you think; but it is in reality the "breath" of the cave. In explanation, you are told that the temperature of the cave is fifty-nine degrees Fahrenheit the year round, and the cave exhales or inhales, as the temperature outside is above or below this uniform standard. As you proceed farther, the chill felt near the entrance passes away, and the air is still, dry, and warm.

For nearly half a mile on your way you see, in the dim light, the ruins of the saltpetre works that were built in 1808, by persons in the employ of the United States Government. The huge vats and tools still remain undecayed. The print of an ox's hoof is embedded in the hard floor, and the ruts of cart-wheels are also traceable.

Advancing farther, you enter the Rotunda, which is illuminated for a moment by a sheet of oiled paper lighted by the guide. It is over seventy-five feet high, one hundred and sixty feet across, directly under the dining-room of the hotel, and the beginning of the main cave. These things are imparted to you, in a loud voice, by the guide. The lamps throw a feeble light on the dark, irregular walls, broken in places by the mysterious entrances to several avenues which lead from the main cave, and are said to extend altogether a distance of one hundred miles! What if the lights should go out? The thoughtful guide is provided with matches, and he will proudly tell you that there is scarcely a spot into which a traveller could stray that he is not familiar with. As you tramp onward, your companions ahead are rimmed with light; and, if your imagination is active, you might transform them into gnomes or other inhabitants of the subterranean world, albeit their movements are sedate as those of gnomes doing penance. Anon, too, the supernatural aspect of the scene is heightened by the fluttering of a bat that spins out of a dark crevice for an instant, and disappears again in the all-enveloping darkness. If you have courage to look, you will find nests of his brethren in the walls, and a sly rat will dart away at your approach. One chamber, entered from the Rotunda, bears the unattractive name of the Great Bat-Room; and here thousands of the little creatures are found snarling and curling their delicate lips at all intruders. These and the rats, a few lizards, a strange kind of cricket, and some eyeless fish, constitute the entire animal life of this kingdom of everlasting gloom.

From the Rotunda you pass beneath the beetling Kentucky Cliffs, and enter the Gothic Chapel, a low-roofed chamber of considerable extent. Several twisted pillars



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ascend from the ground into arches formed of jagged rock, and, in the distance, there are two which form an altar of glittering splendor as the light falls on their brilliant stalactites. Near here, too, is the Bridal Chamber, and the guide will tell you how a certain maiden, having promised at the death-bed of her mother that she would not marry any man on the face of the earth, came down to this dark place and was married. He will also tell you that these great stalactites that are so massive take fifty years to grow to the thickness of a sheet of paper. Then, with a sharp word of command, he will lead you on into fresh wonders.

There are rivers and lakes among the mysteries of the Mammoth Cave, and you are floated in a small boat on the dark, stilly, lone waters, among columns and walls, arches and spires, leaden-hued rock and jewelled stalactites, lighted up by a flaring torch in the guide's hand. Memory cannot retain a distinct idea of the thousand weird forms that are constantly flitting before the eye. As you pass one point, a mass of rock assumes a human form, lowering upon you, and the next instant it vanishes from the sight into the darkness.

The next halt is in another wide room, in the middle of which rests an immense rock, in the exact shape of a sarcophagus. This is called the Giant's Coffin, and the guide, leaving you alone for a minute or two, reappears on its lid, his form, shadowed on the wall, imitating all his movements. Above the shadow you will notice the figure of an ant-eater, one of the many shapes with which the ceilings of the caverns are adorned by the oxide of iron. You will then rest a while under the Mammoth Dome, which appears much over a hundred feet high, with its magnificent walls of sheer rock, and at Napoleon's Dome, which is smaller than the former, but hardly less interesting. Afterward the guide will conduct you to the edge of a projecting rock overlooking a hollow, the surface of which is composed of boulder-like masses of rock, ridiculously called the Lover's Leap. In the Star-Chamber the stalactites assume new forms, even more curious and beautiful than the others; and, in Shelby's Dome, you are ushered into a scene of indescribable grandeur. The height seems limitless, and the eye traces on the walls innumerable scrolls, panels, and fanciful projections of the most varied design and beauty. Under the dome is the celebrated Bottomless Pit, which has a depth of one hundred and seventy-five feet, and a wooden Bridge of Sighs, which leads from this chasm to another, called the Side-Saddle Pit. A railing surrounds the principal pit, and, as you stand holding to it, and peering into the depths, the guide illuminates the dome above, affording one the grandest sights in the cave.

At a point called the Acute Angle there is a rude pile of unhewn stone, called McPherson's Monument, which was built by the surviving staff-officers of that general. A stone is occasionally added to the pile by those of McPherson's soldiers or friends who visit the cave.