



An American Tour: 95



Leasburg, Missouri's Onondaga Cave

Onondaga Cave is actually in a Missouri state park, Onondaga Cave State Park, located on the Meramec River approximately 5 miles southeast of the village of Leasburg. In 1886, while studying the outlet of the spring that powered a new mill, Charles Christopher discovered that a cave existed behind the spring. With a borrowed boat and two of his friends, Christopher spent an entire day exploring the tunnels within the property. Christopher and a partner acquired the land over the cave and began developing their discovery as the "Mammoth Cave of Missouri".

At the time, "cave onyx" was in demand for architecture, and many caves in the area were being harvested for this purpose. The cave surveyed in 1897 for mining but tours were also given to make the money needed to develop the caverns further. Eventually, the property was purchased by the Bothe group. The cave was opened as a tourist attraction for the upcoming Louisiana Purchase Exposition planned in St. Louis for 1904. The name for the cavern system was chosen in 1904, coming from an Iroquois tribe. The translation of Onondaga is "People of the Mountain."

There were a number of legal problems and property transfers over the years, but in 1932, Missouri Caverns was opened as the first electrically lit cave in the Missouri Ozarks region. Though the entrance is now sealed, the ruins of the buildings over the entrance still exist not far from the current visitor parking area. Onondaga now had competition on two fronts from both Cathedral Cave and from the back portion of itself under the name Missouri Caverns. In 1937, a motel was built at the mouth of the cave, known as the Cool Room, as the building's temperature was regulated by the cavern's consistently cool air.

Onondaga became a state park dedicated to Lester B. Dill. Officially dedicated in 1982, the cave was also designated as National Natural Landmark. In 1986, a large celebration was held in commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the cave's discovery. Under the management of the Missouri Department of Natural Resources' Division of State Parks, Onondaga Cave is now in its second century and secure from further land disputes and vandalism. A new visitor's center and the nature museum were erected in 1990.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Onondaga_Cave_State_Park]

