

Fountain Cave: St. Paul's Birthplace by the River



While noteworthy as a natural phenomenon that contained a “crystal” stream, Fountain Cave derives historical significance from its role as a starting place for a great city.

Beginning of a City

During the past 10,000 years Native Americans often inhabited sites in the area of present-day St. Paul. However, Fountain Cave, located on the “east bank” (north side) of the Mississippi River between today’s Drake and Randolph Streets, may be considered the birthplace of modern St. Paul, since it was this site that attracted the first collection of immigrant settlers to the present-day city. The site’s first structure was a log cabin erected by Pierre “Pig’s Eye” Parrant in June, 1838. Several squatters evicted from the Fort Snelling military reservation soon joined Parrant around Fountain Cave, including Abraham Perry, a Swiss watchmaker, and Benjamin and Pierre Gervais, French Canadian fur traders.

The Cave

Estimated to have been 1,150 feet in length in the 1880s, Fountain Cave is presumed to have been Minnesota’s longest natural sandstone cave. The cave formed as water from a rare sinking stream drained through it toward the river, eroding the soft sandstone. Inside the arched entrance-way was a large winding hall measuring about 150 feet in length, 15 feet in width, and from 8 to 16 feet in height. A narrow passage led from the entrance hall to a beautiful circular room measuring about 50 feet in diameter.

“The entrance to the cave is at the bottom of a circular bluff... Descending into this basin we suddenly find ourselves in a spacious room...arched overhead... The floor is a horizontal plane of sandstone. About its center glides a pretty rivulet of transparent water from which the cave takes its name, and which is heard flowing through the next room in gentle ripples; and far in the interior, out of sight, is heard the sound of a rumbling cascade. The whole interior of this cave is composed of pure white sandstone, resembling loaf sugar, which readily yields to the knife, and is constantly crumbling off.”
(E. S. Seymour, “Sketches of Minnesota,” 1850)

Photo at right: Mouth of Fountain Cave, c. 1870. The stream flowing from the cave gave Fountain Cave its name.
Photo: J. Carbutt, Chicago, IL., Minnesota Historical Society.

Below: Location of Fountain Cave near Mississippi River

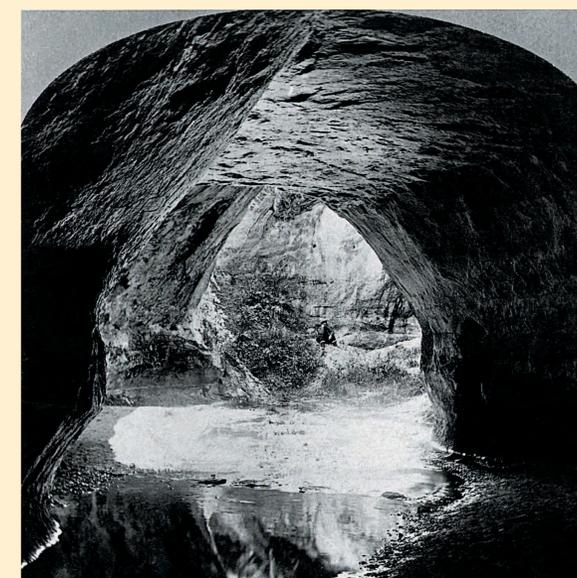
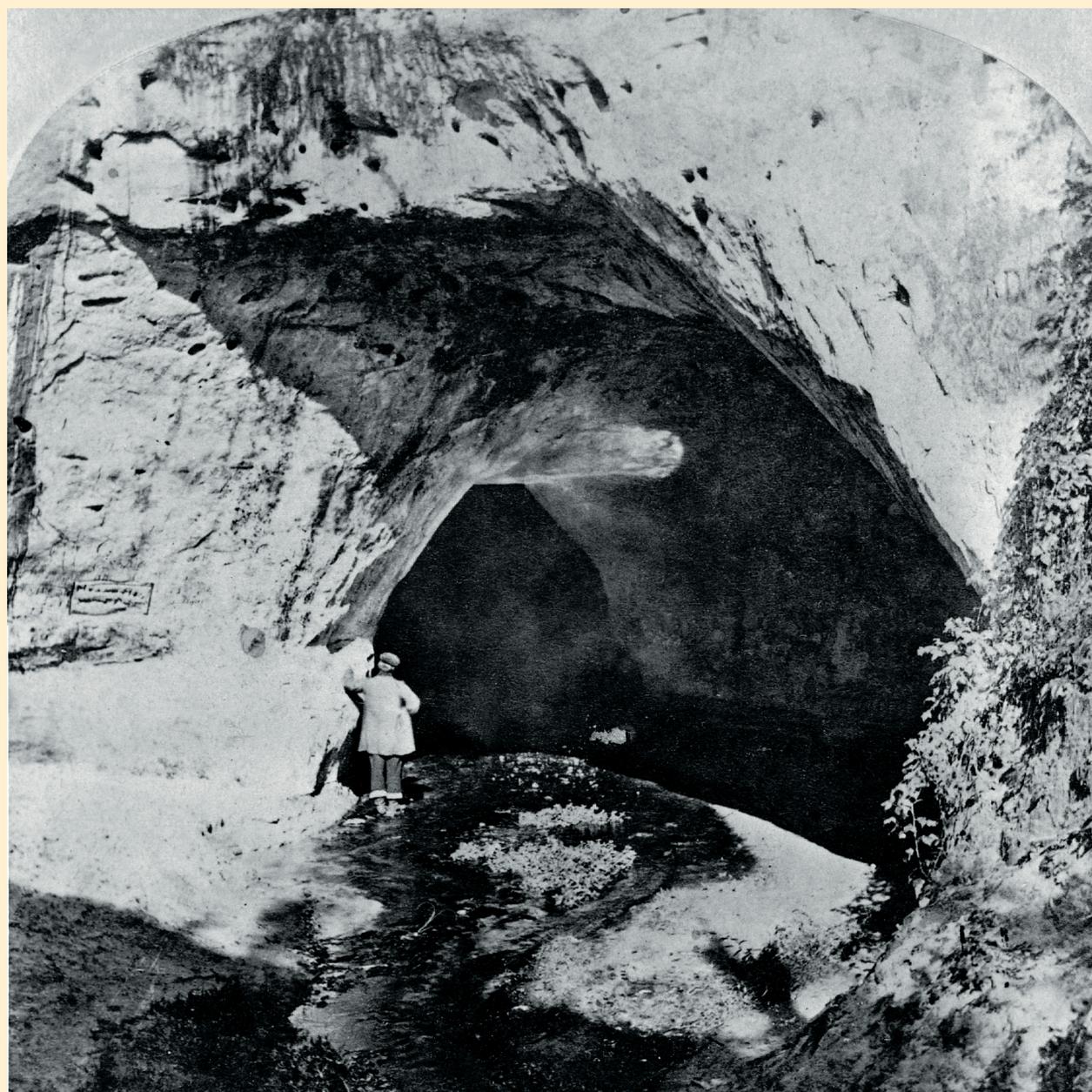
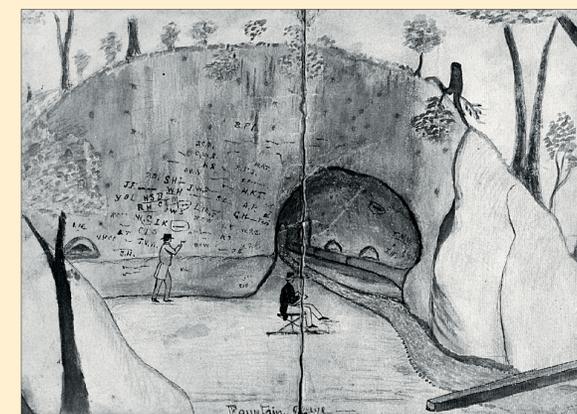


Photo above: Looking out of Fountain Cave, c. 1867. This image is from a stereoscopic post card that advertised the cave as a tourist destination.
Photo: Minnesota Historical Society.

Illustration below: Pencil and watercolor illustration of Fountain Cave, created by an unknown artist around 1850. It is the oldest known graphic representation of a Minnesota cave. Markings can be seen etched into the soft white sandstone cliffs around the cave’s entrance.
Source: Minnesota Historical Society.



“Marble Temple”

A popular tourist destination from 1850 to 1880, Fountain Cave was compared to a “marble temple” and its clear stream to a “shower of diamonds.” German geographer Johann Kohl proclaimed the cave a “painter’s dream.” It was fashionable for St. Paul residents to visit the cave for its cool air and cold water. In 1852 a pavilion opened near the cave’s entrance, offering ice cream and lights for exploration, and making Fountain Cave the earliest known commercial cave in the Midwest.

In 1879 Fountain Cave was featured in the “Tourists’ Guide to the Health and Pleasure Resorts of the Golden Northwest” with a picture showing elegantly dressed visitors with top hats and walking sticks. Another travel guide depicted boats inside the cave, though Fountain Creek was not navigable.

What Became of the Cave?

A variety of human activities led to the deterioration of Fountain Cave. In 1880 a nearby railroad facility began discharging its sewage and storm water through Fountain Cave. The flow of sewage impacted the cave’s value as a tourist attraction. By the late 1800’s, development above the cave, notably the filling of wetlands for residential development and the plugging of the sinkhole at which the creek entered the cave, severely reduced the flow of Fountain Creek. Subsequently, the creek became too sluggish to flush debris, which then accumulated at the entrance to the cave. In 1960 the cave’s entrance was buried during construction of Shepard Road, however the remainder of the cave presumably still exists.

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