ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: RECLAIMING HERITAGE: THE ROLE OF LAND MANAGEMENT AGENCIES IN EMPOWERING DESCENDANT COMMUNITIES AT MAMMOTH CAVE NATIONAL PARK

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This thesis examines the relationship between land management agencies, specifically the National Park Service (NPS), and descendant communities in the context of Cultural Resource Management at Mammoth Cave National Park. Focusing on the restoration of a historic cemetery and a volunteer-based relocation outreach event, the study investigates how interactions between the NPS and descendant communities influence these communities' ability to reclaim agency over cultural resources historically denied to them. The central research question guiding this inquiry is: How do interactions between land management agencies and descendant communities influence the ability of these communities to reclaim control over management of their cultural resources in ways that have historically been denied to them? This question addresses broader themes of historical and contemporary land ownership, resource stewardship, and community empowerment.

Prior research has emphasized the challenges of balancing preservation with community involvement, highlighting the exclusion of local knowledge and limited access to culturally significant sites. This research builds upon that foundation by analyzing a specific case in which descendant communities are actively seeking increased involvement in the stewardship of their heritage. It draws on theories of collaborative governance and community-based resource management, which emphasize inclusive, participatory decision-making processes.

Qualitative data are drawn from publicly available sources and existing documentation related to an NPS-organized volunteer event centered on cemetery restoration and relocation. This event provided a unique opportunity for participants to share personal narratives and express perspectives on Cultural Resource Management, offering valuable insights into how community members perceive their roles, rights, and relationships with federal land agencies.

The data reveal complex dynamics between the NPS and descendant communities, highlighting both opportunities for collaboration and ongoing tensions. Preliminary findings suggest that community members express a strong desire for greater autonomy and more meaningful involvement in decision-making processes related to cultural heritage. These findings offer a nuanced understanding of the mechanisms that either facilitate or hinder community participation in resource management.

This research contributes to contemporary Cultural Resource Management (CRM) and archaeological practice by addressing how descendant communities can reclaim stewardship of their heritage within modern CRM frameworks. Ultimately, the study underscores the need for inclusive practices that honor local knowledge and address historical injustices in land access and Cultural Resource Management.

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by

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, whose unwavering love, guidance, and belief in me have been my foundation. Your encouragement through every challenge, and your faith in my abilities even when I doubted myself, have made this journey possible.

To my partner, thank you for your patience, constant support, and tireless assistance in refining my work. Your encouragement, understanding, and belief in my vision have sustained me through the most challenging moments of this process.

Finally, I dedicate this work to all those who generously shared their stories. Your openness, trust, and willingness to let me into your experiences have given life, depth, and meaning to this research. Without your voices, this thesis would not exist.

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Disclaimer

This thesis was initiated prior to recent administrative changes within the National Park Service (NPS) and the broader federal landscape that have influenced how issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion are addressed. As these shifts have affected the ways in which the NPS presents and interprets history, it is important to note that the research and perspectives presented here reflect the context and values in place at the time this work began.

The author acknowledges their former professional affiliation with the NPS; however, the views and interpretations expressed in this thesis are solely those of the author and do not necessarily represent the official policies or positions of the National Park Service or the U.S. Department of the Interior.

Reclaiming the Narrative: An Introduction to Land, Heritage, and Agency

Heritage is not neutral nor are the spaces it occupies. Like many aspects of culture, it is shaped by politics, power, and history. This is especially apparent when addressing the context in which heritage exists in federally owned and managed landscapes. National parks have long since been heralded as icons of conversation for our country's natural resources, in recent decades the need to preserve and protect cultural resources has made its way into the minds and the mission of the National Park system. They historically have also been perpetrators of marginalization, displacing and removing the voices of the original communities that inhabited the land now known as a National Park. This thesis approaches the question, how do the interactions between land management agencies and descendant communities influence the ability of these communities to reclaim control over managing their cultural resources in ways that have been historically denied to them?

This thesis is driven by three interconnected themes. The first of these themes being contesting erasure through memory labor, which explores how descendant communities use storytelling, stewardship, and memory to preserve family histories and challenge exclusion from official park narratives. The second key theme is limits and contradictions of institutional inclusion. This topic addresses how National Park Service efforts to involve these communities are often shaped by bureaucratic constraints that make participation more symbolic than substantive. The third and final theme is volunteerism as grassroots governance, which discusses how community-led initiatives such as cemetery restorations function as informal governance and allows descendants to reclaim cultural authority and power over stewardship. When

examined together, these themes illuminate the broader dynamics of cultural and heritage management at Mammoth Cave National Park.

This thesis aims to address the question at the core of these dynamics: How do the interactions between land management agencies and descendant communities influence the ability of these communities to reclaim management of their cultural resources in ways historically denied to them? Using Mammoth Cave National Park (MACA) as a case study, this research will analyze how descendant communities are working to reassert cultural authority in the face of historical exclusion and how the National Park Service (NPS) has responded to those efforts.

The relevance of this question is in the long and challenging history of how National Parks have been created. The formation of many of the most beloved parks is structurally rooted in the displacement of Indigenous people, African Americans, and rural white communities and in the erasure of these histories and cultural relationships to the land. Mammoth Cave National Park is no stranger to this issue. The land that is now preserved and heralded as a biosphere and geologic wonder once was home to generations of families whose history is deeply entrenched in the soil above and below the surface. Their history can be seen written on the cave walls and amongst the many cemeteries scattered throughout the park. Some of the earliest and notable contributions were from the enslaved guides such as Stephen Bishop and the Bransfords, whose knowledge proved invaluable to the development of early cave tourism throughout the 19th and 20th century. Despite being the true discoverers of the cave, their accomplishments and knowledge went largely uncredited for decades, forgotten deep in the park's archives, or left out entirely from the official park narrative.

When the federal government began acquiring the land for the park, countless families were displaced, many of whom were African American or poor white Appalachian residents. Many folks likely felt powerless as they watched their homes be bought up or condemned, their family land purchased under a “fair” price and their cemeteries go neglected as they were forced to move (Cemeteries 2021). For the African American community, the loss of lands and homes they fought for was immense. The most critical blow came in 1941, when the federal government informed the Black guides their services would no longer be required (National Park Service 2014). Hundreds of years of major contributions to the knowledge of the cave were suddenly done. Many of these men would go on to join the Civilian Conservation Corps to make ends meet after the financial loss of unemployment and the Great Depression (Cultural Landscape 2023). This pattern of removal and displacement is not isolated to MACA, as it mirrors the broad-scale practice of the federal government during land acquisitions. The result of these actions was a deep disconnect between the people who had long since called those lands home and the ways in which those places were remembered and cared for after they became federal lands, an effort the National Park Service fights to correct to this day (Cemeteries 2021; Cultural Landscape 2023).

Today, many descendant communities have started to push back against the long-standing exclusion they have faced. At Mammoth Cave, these communities are advocating for the relocation and rehabilitation of family cemeteries that have fallen into disrepair in the decades since the park's acquisition. They are seeking recognition for their ancestors' contributions and the right to help manage their cultural resources once again. These efforts reflect a larger movement to challenge existing structures of management that have been the traditional pillars of cultural heritage resource management.

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how these interactions unfold in practice, to analyze where and when collaboration occurs, where it breaks down and what it may reveal about the essence of power, historical accountability, and feelings of belonging in spaces of heritage. This thesis draws on a range of theoretical frameworks, including community-based resource management (CBRM), collaborative governance, and cultural heritage and ownership theories, to address the central research question. Collaborative governance emphasizes the critical relationship building that happens between federal and nonfederal stakeholders when they are engaged in shared decision making, especially when it comes to the management of public resources. It offers a valuable insight into ascertaining how the National Park Service interacts with descendant communities, in the ways they encourage participation and engage in meaningful sharing of authority. CBRM further builds on this by stressing the importance of the role of local and traditional knowledge and acknowledging that communities with rich ties to a place are often in the best position to care for it.

The idea of cultural heritage and ownership further reinforces this analysis by establishing heritage as a living, ongoing process shaped by identity negotiation and memory and not as a collection of static sites or objects. Together, these theoretical perspectives can inform the examination of power dynamics and partnership within Cultural Resource Management at Mammoth Cave as a case study for the larger dynamics of park- community relationships as a whole.

To investigate these dynamics, this study uses a qualitative, multi-method approach. Supplemental archival research provides historical context for land acquisition, displacement, and the early narratives shaped by the NPS (Kentucky 2024; Story 2016). Oral histories collected by the author offer contemporary perspectives from descendants, cultural practitioners, and park

staff—highlighting both personal experiences and institutional memory. Photographic analysis offers visual documentation of both historical erasure and recent restoration efforts, particularly in the preservation of family cemeteries. These sources, when viewed together, create a layered understanding of the long relationship between land, community, and federal management at MACA.

Recent efforts at Mammoth Cave National Park have emerged as powerful examples of reclamation and empowerment. Descendant communities in the area have worked to reassert their presence in the park's history through cemetery identification, relocation, and restoration initiatives. Many of these cemeteries had been lost over time, neglected after families were displaced from park lands or obscured due to changes in mapping and documentation. Traditional headstones are rare, as they were often unaffordable for poorer families, particularly African American ones. Instead, natural stones, often indistinguishable from ordinary rock scatter, mark many of the graves. Despite their subtlety, these burial sites are no less significant to the park's cultural history. These cemeteries are more than burial grounds. They are tangible links to place, heritage, and identity. They reflect the deep roots of families who lived, worked, and were buried in the landscape that now falls under the care of the NPS. Community-led efforts to clean, document, and commemorate these spaces represent a form of reclaiming of physical sites, cultural voice, and authority. These actions challenge the NPS to engage more directly and respectfully with the people whose histories were long excluded from park planning.

One meaningful example of the ongoing work by descendant communities is the work done by Jerry Bransford, a fifth-generation guide and descendant of some of the first enslaved guides. Bransford' s efforts not only included the reclamation and preservation of the African American cemetery, but also a special obelisk that honors the legacy of the Bransford and other

enslaved guides (Butler 2023). Jerry goes into detail about the challenges he faced while making an effort to stake his family's claim on the history of Mammoth Cave (Watson and Gayheart 2024). This outreach project is a visible and lasting testament to the acknowledgement of the impact the African American community has on the formation of the park. It underscores the importance of descendant-led initiatives in shaping public memory.

Moving beyond the Bransford site, the community activism extends to other volunteer efforts in the park, also relating to cemetery restoration. The community efforts include the relocation and continuous upkeep of many of the other cemeteries within the park boundaries. Volunteers participate in brush clearing, grave marker identification, stone cleaning and brush removal in partnership with NPS staff. Efforts such as this also demonstrate a positive ongoing commitment to honoring ancestors and reclaiming cultural ties to the land. Descendant community efforts to clean, document, and celebrate these cultural and historic spaces represent a form of reclaiming of cultural voice autonomy. These actions challenge the National Park Service to actively participate in more direct and respectful ways with the people whose histories were long excluded from park planning.

Mammoth Cave is not a unique case, across the country communities are fighting to have a role in managing cultural resources on public lands. Part of what makes MACA so resonant is the richness of its historical record, the engagement of the local community with activism, and the growing responsiveness of the National Park Service. This particular moment in time presents both challenge and opportunity. There is the opportunity to create more inclusive models of heritage management. On the opposite side of the coin are the challenges that lie in authentically confronting the legacies of bureaucracy, systematic inequality that has long shaped the structures of agency-community relations.

The following chapters will expand on this analysis. Moving through theory to history, method to meaning. They are designed to build a cohesive and comprehensive case for why and how descendant community participation must be a key focus of the future of Cultural Resource Management at Mammoth Cave National Park and beyond.

The Theoretical Background chapter will present the frameworks from which analysis is drawn to address the relationship between land management agencies such as the NPS and descendant communities. It will discuss the theories of collaborative governance, community-based management (CBRM), and topics such as cultural heritage and ownership. Together, these frameworks will help explain systematic issues of marginalization of these descendant communities. It will also lay out the framework for how these communities advocate for more inclusive management practices. This chapter will also address the concepts of land ownership and displacement through the complex and nuanced contexts of settler-colonial interactions. When discussed together, a critique of federal agencies' control over cultural resources and the devotion to increased empowerment through authentic participation.

The Historical Background chapter focuses on the long-standing cultural and social histories of Mammoth Cave National Park (MACA) with a focus on the African American guides, most notably during the period of enslavement and immediately following emancipation, as well as later displacement of descendant communities during the period of park formation. It discusses the marginalization of both Black and poor White Appalachians through stories from the park's official history. Additionally, the impacts of long-term exclusion will be discussed. This chapter will also highlight grassroots efforts to reclaim control of historical narratives, such as the efforts made to restore the Bransford family cemetery.

The Methods and Data Collection chapter discusses the collection of information during the research for this thesis. Qualitative methodology was employed through the collection of oral histories, photographic analysis, and supplemental archival sources. Oral histories are performed with members of the local descendant communities and former park staff. The photographic analysis comprises historical and contemporary images that depict heritage sites, family history, and community efforts to reclaim control over their resources. Archival research is limited due to a lack of access to park archives; however, alternative sources were integrated to support a detailed analysis.

The Results chapter presents data from the four interviews with descendants and former staff members, as well as the photographs and supplemental documents. The varied backgrounds of the interviews help to support an inclusive look into the desires and effort put forth by the communities. Their narratives are deeply personal and insightful, relating to generational ties with the land MACA now stands on, feelings on past exclusionary efforts, and community-driven efforts to reclaim a cultural presence in the park. These actions primarily take place through cemetery restoration efforts. Themes of dispossession, memory labor, and collaboration are evident in the interviews.

The Analysis chapter outlines three major themes: contesting erasure through memory labor, limits and contradictions of institutional inclusion, and volunteerism as grassroots governance. The first of these three themes deals with how descendants use storytelling, stewardship, and personal memory to combat systematic erasure from official narratives. The second key theme deals with how land management agencies' efforts of inclusion can be overwhelmingly symbolic rather than authentic, often constrained by the rules of bureaucracy. Lastly, the third theme touches upon how grassroots efforts function as informal governance and

a reclamation of cultural authority. This theme also discussed that although progress has been made in recent decades, systemic challenges persist between management agencies and descendant communities.

This thesis intends to argue that descendant communities are not simply passive beneficiaries of park inclusion efforts. They are active, living agents of cultural and heritage resource management. Their efforts go beyond basic advocacy; it is stewardship in the truest sense of the word. This is done through asserting their histories, restoring family cemeteries, and actively engaging with federal land management agencies. Descendant groups are reshaping what it means for a national park to tell the "whole story".

Frameworks of Power: Theoretical Perspectives on Collaboration and Control

This chapter intends to lay the foundation for theories related to understanding the complex and challenging dynamic between land management agencies such as the National Park Service (NPS) and the descendant communities in the resource management context at Mammoth Cave National Park (MACA).

The thesis engages with various theories, including community-based resource management, collaborative governance, and cultural heritage and ownership theories to address the research question. The chapter aims to examine current frameworks of thought and highlight important concepts that will guide the analysis of relationships between management agencies and the local community. These perspectives provide a comprehensive lens through which collected data can be addressed and offer an intervention for existing scholarship surrounding Cultural Resource Management (CRM) and community empowerment.

Collaborative Governance and Community-Based Resource Management

Collaborative governance is one of the central theoretical frameworks used in this thesis. Collaborative governance brings attention to the importance of cooperation and shared decision making between governmental and non-governmental stakeholders. In the context of federal land management, in national parks such as MACA, collaborative governance can be used as a model where agencies like the NPS work alongside the community groups to manage natural and cultural resources. This framework also suggests that decisions should be transparent and inclusive, allowing stakeholders to have more meaningful input in the management process that deeply affects their lives and cultural heritage (Ansell and Gash 2008). Examples from Ansell

and Gash reinforce these ideas. In the Lower Roanoke River Basin of North Carolina, a rich and complex network of local communities, agencies, and conservation groups has managed wetland ecosystems through adaptive strategies that are rooted in shared decision making and communication. This allows agencies to meet the legal standards required while providing space for local and traditional knowledge. Another case study from Ansell and Gash (2008) that supports these concepts is in Barbados, where the co-management of sea urchin fisheries by local fishers, scientists, and government stakeholders has implemented practices such as participatory research and joint policy development, which has allowed for the empowerment of communities to regain stewardship over vital cultural and economic resources.

This framework of collaborative governance is particularly relevant to this study, as it addresses how historically marginalized groups, such as descendants of enslaved African American guides, may have been pushed out of managing resources in the past. By applying this theory, this thesis can ask whether descendant communities can be active participants in managing their cultural resources, especially for resources under the care of federal agencies such as the NPS. Collaborative governance recognizes the need for communities to be more than passive recipients of agency policies, but rather active participants in decision-making that affects their cultural heritage.

The 1983 General Management Plan for Mammoth Cave National Park largely reflects early efforts by the National Park Service to incorporate public input into park management. Through public meetings and collaboration with local, state, and federal agencies, the Park Service sought to balance a variety of perspectives in shaping the plan (National Park Service 1983). Although the plan does not specifically highlight how descendant communities will be worked with, it does lay the important groundwork for broader engagement by emphasizing

cooperation with educational institutions, conservation groups, and local communities (National Park Service 1983:3-5). Management documents such as this are intended to last years and manage a variety of resources and stakeholder groups. They are a great start and show the park service's effort to balance legal, financial, and social challenges.

Cultural resources, such as historic structures and archeological sites, are recognized in MACA's management plan as critical assets requiring careful protection (National Park Service 1983:5, 36). The management plan commits to enhancing public interpretation of the park's rich history, including the significant contributions made by enslaved African Americans in the cave's early exploration and development stages (National Park Service 1983:20). However, while guidelines for formal power sharing with descendant communities are not specifically outlined, the emphasis on research, environmental education, and preservation collectively signal a meaningful step toward honoring the full story of the park's past, present, and future. The 1983 plan for Mammoth Cave National Park reflects a strong dedication to protecting the park's natural and cultural resources while opening the floor to continued growth in public participation and recognition of historically under-represented voices.

Comparably, community-based resource management (CBRM) is another key theory that informs this research. CBRM highlights the fact that local communities are often the most knowledgeable and invested in management practices that are sustainable over long-term periods. CBRM practices emphasize that communities should have autonomy over how their cultural and natural resources are managed, based on traditional or local knowledge practices. CBRM outlines a critique of a top-down approach to resource management, which historically excludes local or descendant communities from the decision-making process (Berkes 2009).

In his book *Sacred Ecology*, Berkes (2009) discusses the case of the Cree hunters' management system to monitor caribou populations exemplifies collaborative governance through the use of traditional knowledge and sustainable practices. They have created a system to monitor animal health and rotate hunting territories. The community works together to ensure the sustainability of caribou populations for generations to come. This system also emphasizes shared responsibility and collective decision making. Under this system, hunters, elders, and others in the community can proactively contribute to resource management. The Cree's approach shows how local, knowledge-based governance can support sustainability while fostering cooperation within the community.

A final example of collaborative governance is Bali's subak system, which demonstrates this concept through the cooperation of temple priests and local farmers in managing water distribution across the rice terraces (Berkes 2009). This system integrates spiritual beliefs with practical resource management, ensuring equitable access to water and the sustainable cultivation of rice. By working to find the balance between religious practices and technical expertise, the subak system highlights the importance of collective choices in resource management. Both the Cree and subak systems show how collaborative governance can effectively manage shared resources by involving multiple stakeholders in decision making and stewardship.

For this thesis, the principles of CBRM are used to assess how descendant communities at MACA are engaged with resource management practices and whether their inclusion can be made more effective when compared to current practices in place by the NPS. Collaborative governance and CBRM theory are essential to understanding the limitations and potential benefits of greater involvement of descendant communities in the management of cultural resources at Mammoth Cave. These theories provide a lens to analyze how NPS policies and

practices either support or inhibit the communities' ability to be active participants in managing their cultural heritage.

Theories of Cultural Heritage and Ownership

Another key theoretical framework is the theory of cultural heritage and cultural ownership. Cultural heritage refers to practices, sites, traditions, and knowledge that the community values and works to pass on to the next generation. Cultural heritage is not simply a passive preservation of the past, but rather an ongoing living process that is shaped by the contemporary needs and social dynamics of the community, with "scholars [moving] on from the question of what heritage *is* to ask what heritage *does*, how it functions in modern life" (Samuels 2018:2). Relating to the context of MACA, many descendants are seeking increased control over the management of sites that are of deep cultural significance to them, including the restoration of historic cemeteries.

The theory of cultural ownership challenges the controversial view that land management agencies have exclusive rights over the management of cultural heritage and associated resources. The idea of cultural ownership suggests that communities to whom the cultural heritage belongs should have a primary role in managing and protecting those resources for current and future generations to appreciate and experience (Smith 2006). For example, Laurajane Smith argues that heritage is not to be defined as the cultural sites being studied themselves, but what is proceeding within said sites and how they are engaged with; heritage is the "cultural process that engages with acts of remembering that work to create ways to understand and engage with the present" (Smith 2006: 44). This framework is conveyed exceptionally well through Smith's analysis of a research project she and two senior partners were working on within the Boodjamulla National Park in Queensland, Australia. During with

work, the research team was approached by senior Indigenous women from the Waanyi community with hopes to collaborate on a project (The Waanyi Women's History Project) that would bring women's voices to the forefront of resource management that was taking place within Waanyi cultural sites now located within the national park. During this synthesis of ideals and methodology, it became clear to Smith that the cultural knowledge passed down through oral traditions was seen as an equally important aspect to be retained rather than strictly the cultural sites themselves. To the Waanyi women, these sites were "theatres of memory" that could provide deeper context and background to the passage of cultural heritage within their community, but were not directly vital to the culture's retention (Smith 2006: 45-46). Moreover, it should be noted that culture and tradition are not to be exclusively defined by the past, but are the present actions, developments, and displays of a culture's values intertwined with tradition that constitutes its essence. This is emphasized in Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* by analyzing that, "History begins with bodies and artifacts: living brains, fossils, texts, buildings" (2015: 29). In summary, it is of the utmost importance to not view these cultural sites as ruins to be solely analyzed for anthropological analysis, but as extensions of communities who hold deep connections to the lands they once inhabited. It is not a question of ownership, but rather an understanding of a community's connection to the world around them.

Cultural ownership closely aligns with the experiences of many descendant communities who have historically been shut out and excluded from managing their resources due to federal policies, colonization, and the marginalization of local knowledge. Cultural ownership theory calls for a major shift in authority, allowing descendant communities to reclaim their heritage and allow them to play a central and active role in the governance of cultural resources.

At Mammoth Cave, this issue of cultural ownership is particularly important. Many of the descendant communities associated with MACA are African American, and their ancestors were enslaved individuals who played a key role in the development of the cave's history. The descendants of these communities argue that they have both a historical and cultural right to be involved in the management of the park's resources, especially those related to their ancestors' contributions. The struggle for cultural ownership goes beyond simply access to resources; it focuses on empowering communities to define the meaning and value of their heritage and to safeguard it according to their terms.

Historic and Contemporary Context of Land Ownership

Rather than solely relying on a formal theoretical framework, this thesis critically examines the concept of land ownership as a key point of discussion. Ideas of ownership, control, and dispossession have long shaped power dynamics within settler-colonial contexts. In the case of descendant communities, efforts to reclaim access to, or authority over, ancestral lands often clash with dominant legal and administrative systems that have historically excluded them.

In settler-colonial contexts, land is often framed through legalistic and commodified lenses, whereas many Indigenous and descendant communities conceive of land as a living, relational entity. As Simpson (2017:20) remarks, the goal is not assimilation into settler systems of land tenure, but rather a return to relational and community centered ways of being tied to the land. By reconceptualizing the language and assumptions surrounding land ownership, this project highlights how enduring structures of dispossession continue to shape contemporary struggles for Cultural Resource Management and self-determination.

Mammoth Cave National Park has a rich history, much of which is rooted in displacement and dispossession. Long before the park was recognized as the national icon it is today, it was a privately-owned cave system that relied largely on enslaved African Americans to serve as guides for primarily white tourists who flocked to the area to experience the cave's many wonders. Later on, as the government bought up land for what is now considered the park, many of those descendants of the formerly enslaved guides and others of lower socio-economic backgrounds were pushed out or forced to sell the land they had lived on for generations (Eke 2019). Management by the NPS over sites such as this and those across the country has historically lacked input and participation from the descendant and Indigenous communities that surround the park's boundaries. In recent decades, parks have made a concerted effort to be more inclusive in the stories they tell and how they manage resources alongside stakeholders. Land ownership is not merely about legal titles, but also the recognition of cultural connections to the land. Many of the descendant communities at MACA argue that their connection to the land has deep ties to culture and identity.

The issues surrounding land ownership emphasize the importance of recognizing and validating non-material connections to the land, which traditional land management practices have often overlooked. The theoretical approach provides an argument as to why descendant communities should have a more upfront role in the stewardship of cultural resources within lands under federal jurisdiction.

Memory Labor: An Act of Resistance

The idea of memory labor is a concept that often goes hand in hand with managing cultural resources. Memory labor refers to the continuous work of interpreting, transiting, and preserving histories that have historically been marginalized. This labor is largely performed by

members of the community rather than the Federal agencies that have laid claim to management styles. Memory labor sets the critical framework for understanding how these descendant communities resist historical erasure and assert their authority over heritage discourse. It is not simply the act of recalling family stories, but rather an intentional process of asserting their presence in spaces that had otherwise been closed off or challenging to enter. This is especially pertinent to the relationship the NPS has with descendants at Mammoth Cave National Park concerning the African American history of the area. The formerly enslaved guides were pushed out in favor of white guides when the park was formed. Decades of memories and experiences were left out of the park's official history for decades until descendants pushed back.

Taking a look at *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering* by Marita Sturken, the argument can be made that memory is more than a passive process. It is an active struggle to have power over meaning and identity. Memory is often shaped by various institutions, as well as ideologies and social conditions, meaning it can reflect the dominant values of the groups that hold control over the public narrative (Sturken 1997). For many communities, such as those surrounding MACA, it is a form of resistance. Through the act of memory labor, descendants can challenge official narratives and create more accurate and empowering histories based on ancestral knowledge and lived experiences.

For the descendant communities at Mammoth Cave, memory labor takes place both outside and, in more recent decades, inside institutional spaces. These communities perform this action through caring for family cemeteries, sharing oral histories amongst themselves, and working with volunteer events and work with the park unit to correct the prescribed narrative that is shared with the public. Memory labor does not come without cost, especially one of personal significance. Memory takes time, emotional resilience, and continued willingness to

address painful histories. Through the act of memory labor, communities can re-insert meaning into landscapes that have eliminated their histories through federal acquisition, tourism, and marginalization from public interpretation.

This labor challenges traditional boundaries between the political and personal (need more here or would that overcomplicate it). Cultural Resource Management is an inherently political and social process. It is deeply rooted in family stories and local knowledge, as well as the broader battles over cultural authority and legitimacy. The actions undertaken by these descendants are more than reasserting their narratives within the park; it is a way to reclaim their voice and visibility in the present day. Remembrance is a direct challenge to assumptions that cultural heritage should be managed without the input of those whose stories are being told. Additionally, memory labor brings into view the practice through which descendants upkeep their ties to places and their histories despite neglect from institutions. This practice also highlights the various limitations of traditional technocratic models of heritage management that overlook the plethora of emotional, relational, and political dimensions of historical knowledge.

In order to understand memory labor through a theoretical view, a more nuanced analysis of Cultural Resource Management must be undertaken. It is vital to see memory labor through two viewpoints, first as a form of community-led resistance to erasure and secondly as a continuous strategy of empowerment. One that opens more possibilities for descendant communities and federal agencies to collaborate on management practices. It also presents the opportunity to shift the discussion from surface-level inclusion to one of shared authority and increased ethical responsibility for management agencies that have federal control of these heritage spaces. When discussed through this lens, memory labor is not just about preserving the past; it is about history as lived claims and shared in modern park Cultural Resource

Management narratives. It also lays the foundations for a more inclusive and authentic future of heritage management.

Intervention in Theory: Empowerment through Participation

This thesis interposes the theoretical debate by arguing that true empowerment of descendant communities in resource management can be achieved through authentic participation and collaboration with land management agencies. While the existing literature has addressed challenges relating to inclusion and participation, this new research intends to offer a more nuanced understanding of issues that affect the involvement of descendants and local communities in managing their resources. The findings will further contribute to a broader conversation regarding the role of governmental agencies in assisting or preventing the empowerment of these communities and will advocate for more inclusive models of collaborative governance.

The next chapter will discuss the methodology used to investigate these theoretical questions, focusing on how data gathered through the volunteer-based cemetery restoration and relocation project at Mammoth Cave National Park can provide insight into the lived experiences of the descendant communities. The resulting data will be analyzed to assess the extent to which these communities are empowered to remain in control over resource management.

Roots in the Landscape: The Historical Context of Mammoth Cave

Mammoth Cave National Park, located in northern Kentucky, holds deep cultural and historical significance, particularly through the legacy of formerly enslaved African American guides and their descendants where many of whom continue to reside in the region. This legacy remains integral to the park's history and is further preserved through the continued involvement of their descendants as National Park Service guides today.

The area that is now known as Mammoth Cave was occupied long before Saltpeter production and the rise of the Kentucky Cave Wars. For thousands of years, it was home to Indigenous Gypsum miners armed with cane reed torches as they ventured into the depths of the cave in search of resources. Their presence in the area dates to about 4,000- 5,000 years ago during the Late Archaic and Early Woodland periods. Evidence of these people includes burned remains of the cane reed torches they carried, woven sandals, a gourd bowl, along with pictographs and petroglyphs, which attest to sustained Indigenous use as well as ritual or symbolic engagement with the cave environment. Evidence of long-term occupation ended around 2,000 years ago (National Park Service 2023a).

In addition to these findings, there have also been several sets of human remains found within the cave system, which suggest evidence of both accidental death and intentional interment, further emphasizing the cave system's significance to early Indigenous peoples in the area. Much like the later stories of the African American communities and poor white Appalachians, the Indigenous population was ignored or reduced to entertainment for the tourists who flocked to the area to experience the exotic underdark of Kentucky. Many of the Indigenous sets of human remains were once on display as tourists made their way through the cave passages, and were even displayed as part of a traveling carnival show. These remains have since

been reentered in unclosed locations to preserve their final resting places (National Park Service 2025). It goes to show what can happen when the voices of the community are silenced and their lives (and deaths) exploited. As part of park efforts in recent decades to develop more inclusive management plans, Mammoth Cave National Park acknowledges several modern Indigenous tribes as traditionally affiliated with the land, including the Eastern Band of Cherokee Indians, the Shawnee Tribe, the Eastern Shawnee Tribe of Oklahoma, the Absentee Shawnee, and the Chickasaw Nation (National Park Service 2023a).

Mammoth Cave is rich in history, with many of those associated having stories regarding the marginalization of descendant groups and the right to be stewards of their resources. This chapter will provide historical context for the research by analyzing significant events in the park's history and relevant trends that have influenced the relationship between descendant communities, the National Park Service, and the land. Understanding the historical background is vital for acknowledging the nuances of contemporary struggles for community empowerment and resource management in the descendant communities.

Early History of Mammoth Cave, the Role of African American Guides, and Life for White Appalachians

Long before the land that is now known as the Mammoth Cave region was designated as a national park, the area held high cultural significance, particularly for the early African American communities within the area. The allure of natural landscape and cave formations long fascinated white settlers in the area, who quickly realized that the damp, dark caverns were a great source of income initially from the rich sources, mainly saltpeter, which was a vital ingredient in gunpowder during the War of 1812. According to oral recounts of the extraction process, “as many as 70 slaves were leased to work inside Mammoth Cave, producing saltpeter

from the natural cave sediments" (Farmer 2014:11). After the War of 1812, Franklin Gorin purchased much of the known Mammoth Cave system as the demand for large scale saltpeter mining declined. Like many landowners of the time, he sought new ways to profit from his investment and turned to tourism. During this period, Gorin relied on Stephen Bishop, an enslaved African American man, to explore and guide visitors through the cave. He also rented Mat and Nick Bransford, both enslaved men, from Thomas Bransford to assist with guiding. Eventually, having made his profit, Gorin sold the cave and its assets to Dr. John Croghan, who briefly attempted to use the cave as a tuberculosis hospital, an effort that ultimately failed. Today, many of Croghan's former patients are buried in the nearby Old Guide Cemetery, located close to the modern visitor center. This process demonstrates how enslaved African Americans were central to the economic exploitation of Mammoth Cave even before tourism became its primary industry. Once the war ended, these same white colonial businessmen saw a new opportunity for revenue through tourism. The white landowners employed enslaved African Americans to explore the cave passages and locate routes for tourists. The enslavement and exploitation of African Americans are ingrained as part of early Mammoth Cave history. Before it became a national park, Mammoth Cave was already a place of significant cultural importance, particularly for African American communities. The role of enslaved African Americans in the development of Mammoth Cave is critical to understanding the historical context of the park.

In the early days of cave tourism, the enslaved labor force was vital to its formation as they often served as guides to the thousands of white tourists who flocked to the region to get a glimpse of the region's natural wonders. One of the most famous guides, Stephen Bishop, is credited with discovering many of the cave's most famous features and helping to establish Mammoth Cave as a major tourist attraction. According to eyewitness accounts of Stephen's

work and life, he was “a man of great strength and dexterity, and of unusual intelligence and good manners" (Farmer 2014:72). Bishop’s skills and knowledge earned him widespread admiration, but as an enslaved man, he was denied his expertise's financial and social benefits. Many of Bishop’s routes are still used today as part of tours. Evidence of his activities is written on the walls of the cave, as he signed his work with his name- an action that was illegal at the time, but cemented his legacy as a formidable cave guide to this day. However, like much of the early days of National Park history, the contributions of marginalized groups, such as Stephen Bishop and other enslaved guides, were largely overlooked, and their experiences were excluded from the park's narrative.

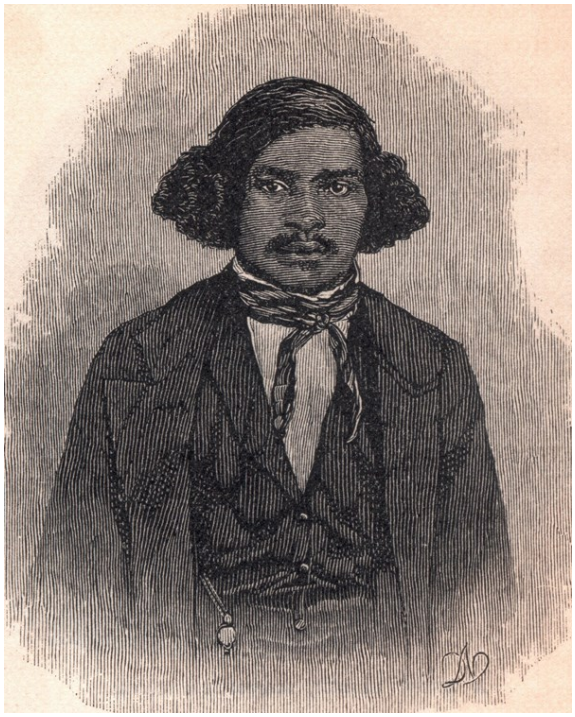


Figure 1: A depiction of enslaved guide Stephen Bishop. Illustration courtesy of the National Park Service.

National Park Service. 2021. Stephen Bishop. https://www.nps.gov/people/stephen-bishop.htm, accessed June 10, 2025.

The use of enslaved labor in the development of cave tourism is a prime example of the historic exploitation and exclusion of African Americans in the park's early days. African American guides made significant contributions to the development of the area's reception and laid the foundations for the park's formation despite not being able to gain recognition or reap the economic benefits of such endeavors.

When examining descendant and oral histories from African American families, it is important to discuss the lives of poor white Appalachians. These folks, while they may have also been semi-isolated, did experience greater social and economic benefits than the African American families, even after emancipation. The 1891–1893 journal of Addie Wells, whose transcription was provided by one of the interviewees, provides an insightful counterpoint that exposes the racialized nature of life in the area that would become Mammoth Cave. The diary has been transcribed and published by another family member, so the names have not been redacted in any quotes used as they are publicly accessible. The descendants who participated in this research will remain anonymous.

Wells's writings depict the relative stability of white settler families who retained access to land and community structures that African American descendants were later denied (although the family mentioned in this journal did eventually lose their land to the park). She writes, "Pappa and Mamma Urias (name may not have been transcribed correctly) and Lucy, Maggie, Uncle and myself constitute the family now" (Wells 1891:4), and also writes heavily on the daily life of homesteaders, "Papa and Elijah went working… Urias is gone after a load of corn" (Wells 1893:50). This entry captures a sense of continuity and belonging tied to property and kinship, this is something many participants in this research expressed as desiring and strengthening for their families. Wells also writes about attending services at Silent Grove and Joppa churches,

“This is Silent Grove meeting day… Jessie and Lucy may have gone but it is raining and I didn't go” (Wells 1892:44) Religion was a life line for many of the early residents of what is now Mammoth Cave and her journal entries reflect the well-established religious and social order available to white residents. When this journal is placed in the broader historical contexts of Mammoth Cave, Wells' viewpoint highlights how white rural families experienced relative security and belonging to the land in ways that weren't entirely possible for the formerly enslaved guides and their families. This is especially pertinent to the future economic landscape that would develop as the role of what would become Mammoth Cave materialized.

Another important backdrop to Mammoth Cave’s transition into a national park was the period known as the “Kentucky Cave Wars.” During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, intense and often violent competition broke out amongst various private cave operators attempting to capitalize on the growing tourist trade. Local landowners and would-be entrepreneurs, many economically struggling farmers, resorted to tactics such as sabotaging roads, misleading tourists, and even engaging in physical altercations to lure visitors away from Mammoth Cave and toward their caves (McGraw 2023). These conflicts were fueled by a broader scramble for control over the cave systems, exemplifying how capitalist interests historically have dictated access to and narratives about the land, often ignoring the cultural significance it held for local communities. George Morrison, a former oilman, even blasted open a new cave entrance in 1921 in an illegal attempt to divert traffic away from the official cave entrance, highlighting the lengths to which developers went to commodify the cave’s resources (McGraw 2023).



Figure 2: Image of Mammoth Cave Tourism sign: This is an example of one of many signs geared towards tourists during the cave wars. Often, these signs depicted false information to trick travelers into avoiding competing attractions. The Kentucky Cave Wars. Appalachian History. Photograph, https://www.appalachianhistory.net/2017/04/kentucky-cave-wars.html, accessed June 8, 2025.

Mammoth Cave was declared a national park in 1941. Before this date, the area had already endured decades of exploitation and contentious land grabs. This set the stage for a federally controlled narrative that readily romanticized local lore while shutting out the marginalized voices of the area. Promotional materials from the 1930s, for example, boasted that guides were "carefully selected from families in the vicinity who, through generations, have passed on from father to son Mammoth Cave lore," without acknowledging the contributions of Black guides or the forced removal of local families (McGraw 2023). This willfully selective and ignorant memory underscores the need for more inclusive storytelling and Cultural Resource Management today.

The Transition to National Park and Displacement of Descendant Communities

Beginning in 1926, the federal government was able to acquire the land to form Mammoth Cave National Park. This acquisition resulted in the displacement of descendant communities through the condemnation of familial land that had been established in the area for generations. Economically disadvantaged groups were the most negatively impacted, with African American communities being the largest affected group. These communities had close ties to the land and were largely responsible for laying the foundations for the park's formation, but again, they were pushed out by the economic developments of settler colonialism. The displacement of these descendant communities has been a focal issue in the ongoing struggle for recognition and participation in the park's Cultural Resource Management.

The federal government's new ownership of the land to create the park led to the displacement of many families, namely the African American families who worked the caves and surrounding lands for generations, and the forceful sale of family lands without due compensation for the cultural or historical value of the lands. The transformation of Mammoth Cave into a national park did not put an end to economic extraction but shifted control away from local African American communities to prioritize “landscape modification and economic development, both inside and immediately adjacent to the park" (Algeo 2004:42).

This widespread level of dispossession is a part of a broad-scale pattern of marginalization faced by African Americans in the early 20th century across National Park units, as land ownership rights and rights of cultural heritage were systematically undermined in the name of preservation. The effects of this displacement are still felt today by the local descendant communities, many of whom have had limited opportunities to reconnect and engage with the land that was once shaped by their ancestors, while additionally losing the ability to inherit the

generational wealth that was lost due to said displacement. The NPS's history of exclusion of local communities and Indigenous groups highlights the need to create more inclusive management practices to empower the voices of descendant communities and strengthen relationships between them and the land management agencies. Rather than segregating resources, environmental conservation, and cultural heritage away from the communities who hold long-standing connections to the land they were systemically forced out of, there should instead be a concerted effort to engage in "multiple partnerships and dialogues across a dispersed and multi-centered world" (Hodder 2010:115).

The National Park Service and Its Relationship with Descendant Communities

The National Park Service, which assumed responsibility for the park in 1926 and formally dedicated it as a national park in 1941, has historically maintained a paternalistic and often exclusionary approach to managing cultural resources, particularly those tied to marginalized communities. The NPS has focused mainly on conservation and scientific management, often prioritizing the preservation of the park's natural and geological features over the cultural heritage of local communities. This approach reflects the greater trends in federal land management that have excluded Indigenous and descendant communities from decision-making processes related to the stewardship of cultural resources. However, in recent decades, the parks have begun to make more inclusive efforts and work more in depth with Indigenous communities through the enactment of NAGPRA.

One of the key issues in this relationship has historically been the lack of recognition the descendants of African American guides have gotten for their role in the park's history. Notwithstanding systemic oppression, these African American communities leveraged their roles to gain a degree of independence despite being historically overlooked, "[finding] a way to give

life meaning, resisting the debilitating effect of slavery, and used their position as cave guides to take advantage of the opportunities it offered" (Farmer 2014:80). The challenge of overcoming this exclusionary approach is a central theme in the ongoing efforts of descendant communities to reclaim control over the cultural resources associated with Mammoth Cave National Park. A recent example of this reclamation is the historic achievement of the Bransford descendants through the restoration and rededication of the Bransford family cemetery, which serves as a deeply symbolic act of honoring a legacy once marginalized and nearly erased.

The Bransfords' connection to Mammoth Cave runs deep. Materson (Mat) and Nicholas (Nick) Bransford, both enslaved in the early days of cave tourism, began their work as cave guides in 1838 when they were teenagers. Leased to the cave's proprietor, Franklin Gorin, they became pioneers of exploration in a largely unknown underground world of Mammoth Cave. Mat and Nick, alongside Stephen Bishop, established a tradition of African American excellence in cave guiding, blending scientific knowledge, sharp wit, and a commanding presence that captivated wealthy visitors from around the world, much to the disdain of their owners. A descendant African American former NPS staff member highlights this while sharing his family's history with the park, a topic of discussion that will be addressed in a later chapter.

Over the next few generations, the Bransfords continued carrying on this legacy. Mat's son Henry, his grandsons Will and Matt Bransford, maintained the family's presence and built a respected reputation. Matt Bransford and his wife Zemmie even ran a hotel for Black visitors, offering accommodations equal to white visitors at a time when racial segregation barred them from staying at the main Mammoth Cave hotel. These achievements occurred despite the many challenges they faced, including the trauma of family separations under slavery and later the devastating loss of their homes and lands to the creation of Mammoth Cave National Park. By

1941, it seemed the Bransfords' success would run out for the time being. When Mammoth Cave was officially designated a national park, none of the Bransfords who had guided visitors for over a century were not included among the new staff of guides, nor were any other black guides asked to continue under federal employment. Their exclusion was shaped by a broader pattern of systemic racism and displacement caused by the federal government's use of eminent domain to acquire the surrounding lands. In the decades following the park's acquisition, their contributions were largely forgotten in the long history surrounding Mammoth Cave. Often, their achievements are mistakenly attributed to others, like Stephen Bishop.

Due to the persistent efforts of descendants such as the African American former NPS staff member, who returned to the cave as a park guide after decades of exclusion, alongside historians such as Joy Lyons, the Bransford family's contributions are receiving recognition. Their story, once buried, is now being unearthed and honored, ensuring that their role in shaping the history of Mammoth Cave will not be forgotten.



Figure 3: Image of the Bransford brothers: (Left to right) Charles, Lewis, John Henry, and Matterson in the 1920s. Lewis and Matterson both worked as guides. Ohlson, Kristin 2006, The Bransfords of Mammoth Cave. *American Legacy* (Spring):22. Photograph.

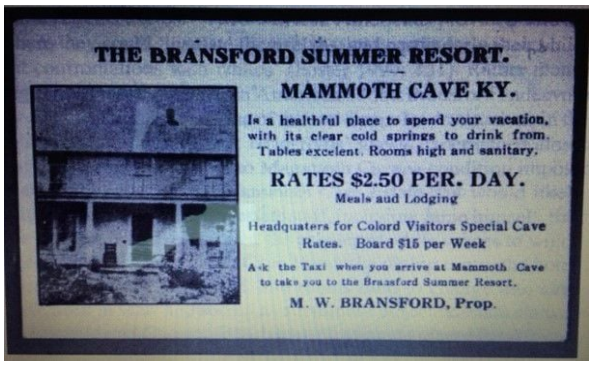


Figure 4: Advertisement for the Bransford Summer Resort. It was the only hotel in the area that catered to African American clientele. Kenan Christiansen 2014 “In Kentucky, a Family at the Center of the Earth.” *New York Times*, March 2. Electronic document, https://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/02/travel/in-kentucky-a-family-at-the-center-of-the-earth.html, accessed June 9, 2025.



Figure 5: Picture of the entrance to the Bransford Summer Resort. The building no longer stands, but remains of the foundation can be seen along the road near its former location. Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service.

National Park Service. 2014. "African American History." *Mammoth Cave National Park.* Electronic document, https://www.nps.gov/maca/learn/historyculture/African American-history.htm, accessed June 9, 2025.

The Role of Cultural Resource Management and Community Empowerment

In recent decades, there has been an ongoing movement within the National Park Service to make a more concerted effort to utilize more inclusive and participatory models of resource management. Community-based resource management is at the forefront of this movement, alongside collaborative governance. These two models highlight the necessity of community involvement in decision-making processes. They also recognize the inherent value of local knowledge regarding the management of natural and cultural resources.

While these efforts are beginning to emerge, they have been largely slow to start, especially regarding making space for marginalized groups who have historically been excluded from the process. Ian Hodder reflects on the past models of resource management in his 2010 article, suggesting that the earlier model failed because it did not centralize multiple partnerships and diverse dialogues. In other words, these models failed because they excluded the communities that had historically lived and worked in those lands for decades, along with any traditional knowledge they had.

The restoration of historic African American cemeteries within the park represents a step toward reclaiming cultural heritage, with " the COBACHREM (Community-Based Cultural Heritage Resources Management) model [providing] a guide to sustainable use of cultural resources by applying conservation measures before destruction of the resource" (Keitumetse 2016:71). More recently, at Mammoth Cave, descendant communities have advocated increased involvement in managing resources located within the park's boundaries, particularly regarding the restoration of historic cemeteries. These issues continue to reflect broader struggles for cultural ownership, as descendant communities seek to reclaim control over their heritage and ensure that it is protected and passed down to future generations. The struggle for cultural ownership is more than simply having access to resources but is also about reclaiming the power

to define and control the meanings and values attached to cultural heritage, empowering these communities.

Mammoth Cave National Park's historical context is bookmarked by a history of exclusion, dispossession, and, more recently, calls for reclamation. Starting with the stories of the formerly enslaved guides to the displacement of local families during the park's formation, the park is intertwined with the struggle of descendant communities to reclaim their control over their cultural resources now under federal management. While recent efforts to include these communities in the management of the park have been met with overwhelming success, the history of exclusion continues to mold the relationship between the National Park Service and local communities. Understanding this aspect of the park's history is vitally important for appreciating the complexities of the current struggles for Cultural Resource Management, as well as the need for more inclusive and collaborative approaches to management that recognize the rights and contributions of descendant communities.

Research Process: Methods, Sources, and Fieldwork Approaches

The theoretical chapter of this research draws largely on collaborative governance, community resource management, and cultural heritage theory. When aligned, these frameworks set up the foundation of more empowered community-led decisions. It also leads to the increased recognition of heritage as a space where historical natives and power are constantly being negotiated. When applied to Mammoth Cave National Park, these theories can reveal how descendant communities, particularly African American and white Appalachians, have been shut out of park management decisions despite cultural and familial ties to the land.

The historical chapter further illustrates these dynamics. In the early days of Mammoth Cave, enslaved African American guides played a vital role in tourism development, most notably through the work of Stephen Bishop, the Bransfords, and other guides. They were largely uncredited for their work for most of the area's early history. Later, the park's formation led to the displacement of dozens of families who had lived on the grounds of the now-recognized Mammoth Cave for generations. This forced removal is part of a larger federal pattern of exclusion of severing communities from ancestral lands, which continues to shape the relationship between the NPS and descendant communities today.

The methodology is rooted in this theoretical and historical understanding, and the research seeks to emphasize these communities' experiences. This chapter will outline a comprehensive approach to documenting how descendant communities are working to reclaim their cultural authority and reshape the narrative and management at MACA by implementing qualitative methods such as supplemental archival research, oral histories, and photographic data.

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative approach integrating archival research, oral histories, and photographic data. Each data type contributes to a comprehensive understanding of the historical and contemporary relationships between the NPS and descendant communities at MACA. The methodology was designed to capture a wide range of experiences, focusing on the community-driven efforts to reclaim cultural authority over the park's resources.

The standards for human research as outlined by the IRB were closely followed during the research phase of this thesis. All participants were provided with a summary of the project and provided with a set of interview questions prior to the interviews taking place. Participants also verbally consented to participation and having their stories recorded for transcription purposes. It is also important to note that due to the sensitive nature of the research the names of the participants were redacted to protect their privacy and follow IRB standards. Any names mentioned in this thesis come from publicly available sources and have not been redacted.

Archival Research

Archival research was initially planned to be a key component of this project, with central focus on documents stored at the Mammoth Cave National Park Museum archives. These included documents containing records on land acquisitions, early park management, and other historical materials. However, the majority of these resources are currently inaccessible, as they are being processed off-site and have not yet been digitized. Also given current location and scheduling constraints, travel to access the physical materials was not feasible.

While this is a notable challenge, it is not entirely unexpected due to the ongoing logistical and operational difficulties faced by the National Park Service. To address this issue,

the research relied primarily on digital archival resources and publicly accessible materials. Digital archival documents hosted by the National Park Service, including records available through the Mammoth Cave National Park website and the NPS Digital Archive eTIC, were used to supplement physical records. Additional sources included secondary academic literature, publicly accessible government documents, community-collected materials, and oral histories, particularly from individuals whose ancestors were marginalized in the park's historical narrative. These sources collectively provided the essential context and supported the reconstruction of historical narratives in the absence of physical archives.

Photographic Data

Photographs, both historical and contemporary, were also analyzed to provide a visual understanding of the park's cultural heritage. Historical photographs of enslaved guides, early tourism activities, and family cemeteries complement the archival materials and help illustrate the role of African Americans, white Appalachian families, and other residents in the park's early development. Edwards argues that photographs act not only as records of history, but as active agents in shaping cultural memory and identity (2001:38–39). The photographs collected in this study reflect the erasure of local communities from the official park narrative, while also documenting the physical and emotional labor involved in maintaining these spaces of memory.

Contemporary photographs of community-led restoration efforts, such as the preservation of African American and white Appalachian cemeteries, highlight the ongoing work of descendants in reclaiming their cultural heritage. Meek notes that cemeteries, especially those of marginalized communities, are vital sites of cultural continuity (2010:306-308). These photographs serve as visual evidence of how descendant communities preserve their heritage and assert their agency in the face of historical neglect. The author took these photographs during

their time leading volunteer cemetery relocation and restoration efforts. The author is deeply appreciative of these experiences as they allowed them to engage with the Cultural Resource Management process and hear from the volunteers, many of whom are descendants themselves about life before the park as well as how they are currently intact with the NPS regarding management of cultural resources. These experiences inspired the topic of this thesis.

The historic photographs were sourced from the Mammoth Cave National Park website, park-related publications, and additional online resources about the cave and its surrounding history. The Contemporary photographs were contributed by the author and by interview participants. Photographs were collected from the Mammoth Cave NPS website, park-based literature and other online sources pertaining to the cave and local history. The contemporary photographs were provided by the author or interview participants with permission.

Oral Histories

Oral histories played a pivotal role in this research, offering a human perspective on the archival and photographic data. Interviews were conducted with descendants of African American, white Appalachian, and Indigenous communities, as well as current NPS staff involved in cultural heritage programming. Shopes asserts that oral histories are vital in constructing shared community identities, particularly when these communities have been marginalized in official historical accounts (2002:590). The interviews conducted for this study provided valuable insight into how local communities have resisted exclusion and worked to preserve their heritage despite historical erasures.

The semi-structured interviews included questions about participants' family histories, their connections to the park, and their perspectives on the NPS's role in managing cultural resources. Participants of this research came from a variety of backgrounds, former staff

members, volunteers and descendants of those who resided in the area of Mammoth Cave long before the area got its name. Names of those interviewed were redacted for privacy reasons under the guidelines set by the IRB. Each of the participants shared stories of land loss, segregation, and the ongoing struggles for recognition and respect. As Brown argues, oral histories allow marginalized groups to resist historical silencing by elevating personal experience as a legitimate form of public memory (2011:262).

This research demonstrates how descendant communities, including African Americans, white Appalachians, can reclaim cultural authority over heritage sites such as Mammoth Cave National Park. By integrating collaborative governance, community-based resource management, and cultural heritage theory, this study provides strong evidence towards how these communities can work alongside the NPS to challenge historical exclusions and reshape the management of cultural resources. The use of archival research, oral histories, and photographic data provides a multifaceted view of the ongoing efforts by these communities to reclaim their heritage, highlighting the importance of recognizing their contributions and experiences within official narratives of the park.

Stories from the Field: Cemetery Restoration, Outreach, and Other Findings

The results chapter presents the data collected through four oral history interviews, which were enhanced by photographic and supplementary archival research relating to Cultural Resource Management and federal agencies. These interviews also serve to document community-agency relationships at Mammoth Cave National Park. The information discussed here is descriptive and lays the foundation for the analytical discussion in the following chapter. The focus of this chapter is the immediate outcomes of the research process, which include the interviews, photographic evidence, and additional documents used. It also opens the dialogue about what themes emerged from the materials without offering interpretive analysis.

Over several weeks, four semi-structured interviews were conducted via phone call with individuals who had ties to Mammoth Cave National Park. The participants included an African American former National Park Service employee with long-standing familial ties to the park, a former NPS employee who now leads volunteer cemetery restoration efforts, a descendant community member whose family lived in the area before creation of the park and who has participated in recent cemetery clean-ups, and another descendant family member who now resides out of state in Texas, yet maintains close ties to the land through volunteering to restore his family cemetery and sharing stories with his children. These individuals were recruited through a combination of referrals using the snowball method and/or through prior community connections, as well as local outreach. Interviews lasted approximately one hour or less.

The African American former staff member provided a detailed account of Black history at MACA, by far the most in-depth of all interviews due to the variety of family history he had to share. Both professional experience and multigenerational, personal connection shaped his interview. Recounting his childhood visits to the park, he recalled:

"Daddy would say, 'Let's go over to Mammoth Cave,' and we would… go up that road… Daddy would say, 'Well, you know, I used to run down this road barefoot'" (Interview with [Name Redacted], phone interview by Grace Evans, April 8, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project). The reality of segregation overshadowed these visits. He recalls the time his father tried to visit the hotel that his family had operated for Black guests after being freed from enslavement, "...you have to go to the back door, you know. And… I remember kind of the dismay on Daddy's face or humiliation… even in your hometown, you had to sit upstairs in the theater, you know" (Interview with [Name Redacted], April 8, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project). This same individual also worked as a tour guide for many years, which he bridged personal memory and public history with during the interview, "...it's such a refreshing experience. Not only hearing about my early-day kinfolk working in that cave, but I had the opportunity to work in the cave as well" (Interview with [Name Redacted], April 8, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project).

He also spoke on the importance of representing a broader sense of Black history at Mammoth Cave, "So I've tried to make it a point to let folks know the story isn't about me, but it's a story about Black men and not all Bransford, there was [much] Hunter Bob Lively, Jonathan Doyle, and these people were also guides in Mammoth Cave. So, I wanted to tell America about what happened, because I met so many people from the area that had no idea that men of color had made such incredible contributions to the success of Mammoth Cave in the early days" (Interview with [Name Redacted], April 8, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project).



Figure 6: Generations of Guides- *Image of: (Left to Right) Mutch Hunter, Bob Lively, Will Bransford, Matt Bransford, and Schuyler Hunt.* Photograph courtesy of the National Park Service. *https://www.nps.gov/maca/learn/historyculture/African American-history.htm*

Finally, he shared a deeply personal story about the community effort around the restoration of his family cemetery: "There are over 80 cemeteries in Mammoth Cave. Joy Lyons [former National Park Service Chief of Program Services at Mammoth Cave 2004-2013], who worked in program services, found my great-grandfather's headstone at the overgrown Bransford cemetery and was moved to tears. Before retiring, she invited me to Mammoth Cave, hoping I would apply for a job there. She took me deep into the woods to the old cemetery, which hadn't been maintained since 1939. I felt strongly about restoring it and, with help from volunteers, we've made great progress over the last 20 years. I also pushed for a memorial stone listing all the Bransford guides. After a long approval process, including state and federal offices, we placed a 6,000-pound obelisk with photos of Nick and Matt Bransford and their names" (Interview with [Name Redacted], April 8, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project).

The former NPS staff member also recounts the challenges of putting a monument to commemorate and acknowledge the vital contribution of the African American guides, “I went to administration, and I didn't realize that it was such a long and tedious road getting permission to have that done. I had to go to the state of Kentucky. It went on to regionals in Nashville, Tennessee, and then Washington, DC, and then the superintendent sped that process up. And I did get permission” (Interview with [Name Redacted], April 8, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project).



Figure 7: Descendant community member next to the completed monument honoring the African American guides located at the Bransford cemetery, 2024. [*https://www.wkyufm.org/arts-culture/2024-02-29/a-true-american-story-how-a-celebrated-bransford-family-legacy-continues-to-impact-mammoth-cave-national-park*](https://www.wkyufm.org/arts-culture/2024-02-29/a-true-american-story-how-a-celebrated-bransford-family-legacy-continues-to-impact-mammoth-cave-national-park)

Additional stories passed down through the generations greatly added to the emotion and historical richness of his family history, including the broomstick wedding of Matt and Parthena Bransford: “The preacher says, Matt, do you love this girl? He says, ‘Yes, sir, I love her so much. When I think of her, I can’t even eat my supper, sir.’ She says, ‘I think about him at night and I can’t even sleep’” (Interview with [Name Redacted], April 8, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project). She also recalled the brutal separation from their children during the Civil War:

"Matt said, 'No, sir, please don't take my children… Would you take me instead?' He says, 'No, Matt… you work in the cave. Make me lots of money'" (Interview with [Name Redacted], April 8, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project). These stories that were graciously shared for the sake of this research project highlight how loss, labor, and heritage are deeply entwined in MACA's cultural history.

The second of the four interviews was conducted with another former staff member, now the cemetery restoration volunteer coordinator. Although she is originally from out of state, she worked at MACA for 19 years and remains engaged as a community steward through her cemetery work. The former staff member emphasized her pride in recent shifts toward recognizing African American heritage, "Mammoth Cave recently has put a lot of emphasis on the African American heritage… and I'm proud of them for doing that… for years, you didn't hear anything about it" (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 1, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project).

She also recalled meaningful past programming, like cemetery workshops and family-centered memorial activities that used to be more common in the park.

"We would learn about cemetery restoration… then we would go to a particular family cemetery, and there would be somebody there who would talk to us about their family. I think that helped with the community buying into Mammoth Cave" (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 1, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project). This point is meant to illustrate that by fostering a sense of personal investment and shared ownership amongst local residents through outreach efforts, it can assist in connecting them with family histories within the park's landscape and show that their heritage and voices were valued.

During the interview she noted tensions between inclusive ideals and administrative limitations: “The emphasis was not, ‘this is what local people wanted’... It was what we all can learn from Mammoth Cave. Which sometimes I felt like the local people got shorted” (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 1, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project).



Figure 8: Volunteers participating in a cemetery restoration project. Evans, Grace ***Cemetery Clean up****. Personal photograph, taken at Mammoth Cave National Park, 2023.*

The former staff member noted that while more inclusive actions have been taken, oftentimes local residents’ histories, priorities, and connections to the park were still undervalued or overlooked. While the park’s programming aimed for broad public appeal, it may still fail to fully honor or acknowledge the people whose families and stories were most deeply connected to the land.

The third interview was conducted with a descendant community member whose family once lived in the area now occupied by the park. She described childhood stories passed down

from her grandmother, who remembered growing up near the cave: “They would leave notes for each other in the cave entrance. I don’t know which entrance it was, but… they grew up in that area” (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 1, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project). The volunteer talked of how her son spent a summer working at the cave and the event she has participated in: “I enjoyed it… probably I wish I could do it more… It makes you feel like you have a connection with your descendants—or even if they’re not related to you… it makes you feel like you’re at home” (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 1, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project). Toward the end of the interview, she discussed cautious optimism about community engagement but also concern about who participates and why: “I think a lot of people… want to be in control. They have an agenda, and it’s not for the good of the people… They just want to build themselves up” (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 1, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project).



Figure 9: Descendant community member and volunteer standing by a family grave site.
Evans, Grace
***Cemetery Clean up**. Personal photograph, taken at Mammoth Cave National Park, 2023.*

The fourth and final interview was conducted with another descendant community member whose grandmother, Grace was born in the early 1900s and grew up on the land that is now Mammoth Cave National Park. Grace' early life was incredibly challenging as both her parents died within the same year. As a result, she and her five siblings were almost separated, until their grandfather snuck the children out and shipped them all to Texas with nothing but a name tag. Today, the interviewee resides in Texas, but no amount of distance can sever his connection to his ancestral lands. His family's story is one like many others, full of displacement, survival, and reconnection.

The Furlong Cemetery is located near what was once the family's homestead. After the children lost ownership over the land due to land acquisition for the park, which the descendant community member recounts as something they were never properly compensated for, the cemetery became nearly forgotten and overgrown. That was until a family member relocated it, desperately asking the park to help restore it. Unfortunately, the park did not have the resources to do so at that time. However, the family did not give up and was determined to restore their family's final resting place. One cousin wrote a letter to the Secretary of the Interior asking for assistance in the matter. This letter that so easily could have been lost in the mailbox under far larger projects received an immediate response, “She wrote a letter straight to the cabinet, the Secretary of the Interior, and immediately… they chose the Furlong cemetery… and made it one of the sites at Mammoth Cave.” (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 3, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project).

The NPS quickly set to work clearing the cemetery and installed an informational wayside honoring the Furlong family's legacy. In the years since the rededication the descendant has brought his children to the site to impart generation knowledge and appreciation, “Every

time I go, I try to take at least one of them to see that so that when I'm gone, someone will know where that is" (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 3, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project).

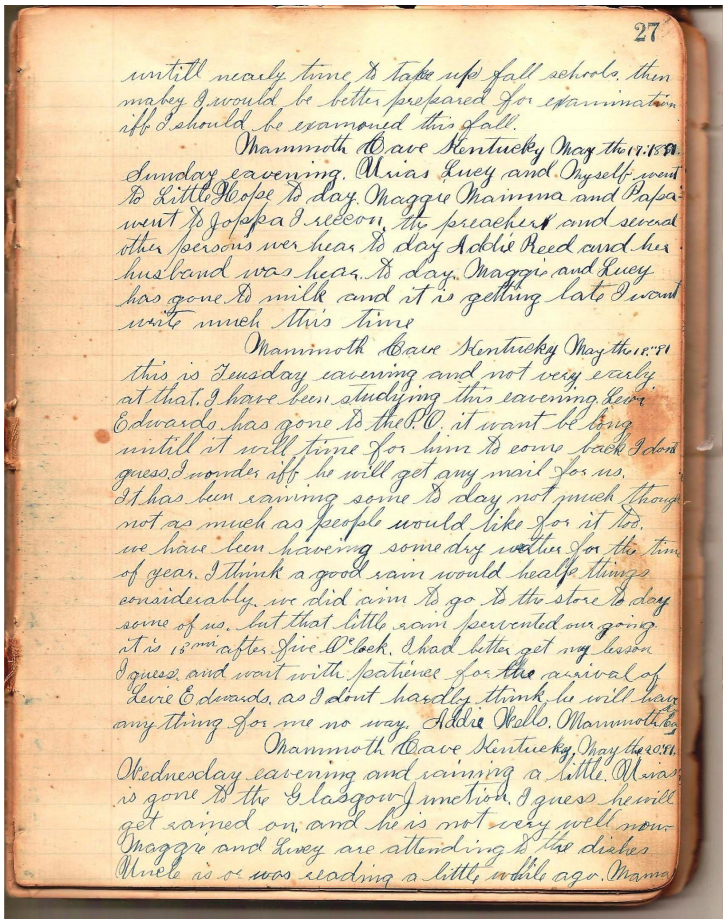


Figure 10: The wayside erected at Furlong Cemetery. The sign shares a bit about the family's history. Graves can be seen in the background of the image. 2023

He talked about how dealing with the cemetery restoration was for him and his family, "It brought many families together who had never known each other… [Redacted] is now my favorite cousin—we talk all the time. Until I was in my 50s, I didn't even know about her" (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 3, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project).

The ability to take charge of his family heritage greatly shaped his understanding of cultural ownership. He sees familial history as something deeply emotional and vitally important to preserve for generations to come. The participant was gracious enough to share several photos and scans of one of his ancestor's diaries, recounting life in the area before Mammoth Cave was

formed: “What has changed in my life is being more connected with my family, being more connected with my history… and more intentional about teaching my children. Telling them the history that, if we didn’t have that diary, we wouldn’t know a thing about that period of time. I think they’ll remember my words and the things I’ve said and organized and leave them” (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 3, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project). Names mentioned above have not been redacted as the diary they are from is a published work and is publicly accessible; the descendant who provided this source will remain anonymous.



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untill nearly time to take up fall schools. then maby I would be better prepared for examination iff I should be examoned this fall.

Mammoth Cave Kentucky May the 17. 1891.

Sunday eavening. Miss Luey and Myself went to Little Hope to day. Maggie Mamma and Papa went to Josepa I reckon. the preacher and several other persons ver hear to day Addie Reed and her husband was hear to day. Maggie and Luey has gone to milk and it is getting late I want write much this time

Mammoth Cave Kentucky May the 18. 91

this is Tuesday eavening and not very early at that. I have been studeying this eavening Levie Edwards has gone to the P.O. it want be long untill it will time for him to come back I dont guess. I wonder iff he will get any mail for us. It has been raining some to day not much though not as much as people would like for it to. we have been having some dry weather for the time of year. I think a good rain would healp things considerably. we did aim to go to the store to day some of us. but that little rain perverted our going. it is 15 min. after five O'clock. I had better get my lesson I guess. and wait with patience for the arrival of Levie Edwards. as I dont hardly think he will have any thing for me no way. Addie Wells. Mammoth Ca

Mammoth Cave Kentucky May the 20. 91.

Wednesday eavening and raining a little. Miss is gone to the Glasgow Junction. I guess he will get rained on. and he is not very well now. Maggie and Luey are attending to the dishes Uncle is or was reading a little while ago. Mamma

Figure 11: Diary entry from May 17, 1891, describing daily life in the area before the formation of the park. Access granted 2025.

The participant also discussed his attempts to maintain the site through informal volunteer work: “Every time I’ve gone, I’ve tried to spruce things up. I’ve stopped on the trail and told people the history and the story… the bikers actually stopped and listened instead of riding on” (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 3, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project). He went on to express his views on the importance of direct community participation and input: “When you’ve been the one to clean that area, it’s just totally different. You feel ownership. I’d want to give money to something I had decision-making power in—not just something the government tells me is important” (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 3, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project).

The descendant finished his interview by advocating for more ways communities can have their voices heard, “If there was an office descendants could contact directly, with priority… I think that’d be great. We know what not to destroy and what to build up” (Interview with [Name Redacted], June 3, 2025, Mammoth Cave Oral History Project).

These four interviews offer a multi-view snapshot of the ways dependent and local communities interact with the land management agencies near them. Each interview adds key context to a much larger story of memory, an effort to reclaim their historical presence in Mammoth Cave, and the resilience to keep pushing for more inclusive management practices.

Interview participants contributed to the documentary aspect of this research project through sharing historical and contemporary photographs, as well as references to community-held documents. The images present throughout the chapters include portraits of enslaved guides, early tourism scenes, maps, and images of homes and cemeteries absorbed into the park landscape. These photographic materials provide key documentation of presence, erasure, and survival despite historic challenges. The commemorative photographs used were either taken by

the researcher or shared by participants. These depict active cemetery restoration and elements of current park interpretation. The two categories of photographs provide contrast and reveal the evolving narratives and changes both within the park and the communities that surround it. They document who is represented and how they are represented within the heritage framework at Mammoth Cave National Park.

As discussed in an earlier chapter, MACA's primary archives were intended to be a component of this research. However, the majority of those records were unavailable due to being restored and a lack of digitized records available for public access. To overcome challenges, additional text was used to discuss the various theories and other relevant ideas, such as MACA's formation, race-based displacement, and heritage representation debates. Additionally, one of the participants agreed to share the family's diary regarding life in Mammoth Cave.

The three key themes mentioned in the introduction emerged from this combined data set, and while this chapter is meant to serve as an analysis for those themes, it is important to note that participants described feelings of marginalization regardless of their cultural or familial background. African American foreign staff members discussed in detail their long family ties to the park at the cost of advocating for more inclusive narratives. The former staff member highlighted the importance of providing opportunities that not only validate the families but also invite the sharing of community knowledge. The first descendant participant talked about her deep emotional ties to the land and her family buried in one of the many cemeteries. She also expressed concern regarding performative or self-serving community involvement.

When examined together, the photographs, supplemental sources, and oral histories pulled for this research project create a complex portrait of community engagement with federal

management agencies such as the NPS. These accounts emphasize collective and personal frameworks for preserving memory and asserting ownership over cultural presence. While rarely acknowledged in the past regarding formal heritage policies, grassroots efforts, such as the ones undergoing at MACA, have more recently begun to be acknowledged in the struggles to achieve visibility, access, and cultural ownership in federally managed spaces.

Negotiating Stewardship: Analyzing Power, Participation, and Partnership

The results depicted in the previous chapter provide a deeper understanding of how local and descendant communities navigate and challenge traditional authorities on the management of cultural resources and heritage. The interviewees in this research study are a prime example of this type of action taking place at Mammoth Cave National Park: a former African American NPS staff member, a former park employee now leading cemetery restoration efforts, and two additional white descendants with family buried within the park. Drawing from their stories and the frameworks of collaborative governance, cultural heritage theory, oral history methodology, and community-based resource management, this chapter will break down and discuss the nuances of the social, institutional, and symbolic dynamics at play in community engagement practices.

The results of the interviews are only understandable if proper analysis is done, so to move beyond describing the stories, the interviews were examined for recurring ideas or themes. The participants' stories were categorized in the following ways: memory labor, institutional barriers, and volunteer stewardship. The concept of cultural authority is also relevant to the interviews. Comparing these themes across the participants revealed many overlapping, divergent experiences. These experiences show how various stakeholders negotiate belonging and power dynamics within the same space. This section examines the oral histories comparatively while contextualizing individual experiences within larger patterns of meaning.

This chapter is intended to interpret how various stakeholders assert cultural authority and agency within federally managed spaces that have a history of marginalizing these groups. Through acts of preservation, oral history, and reclamation of cultural memory, communities can build a resistant framework against historic erasure from park narratives. From the data collected

during this study, three critically centered themes emerged: contesting erasure through memory labor, the limits and contradictions of institutional inclusion, and volunteerism as grassroots governance.

Contesting Erasure Through Memory Labor

One of the most prominent themes throughout the interviews and other relevant documentation is the toll of emotional and physical labor those involved endured to challenge the exclusion descendants have faced in the past from MACA. Participants spoke of the pain that comes from marginalization and of the determination to reclaim power over the generalized narratives of the park. Take, for example, the African American participant, who painted a vivid picture of their personal and familial experience at Mammoth Cave. Their interview reveals the struggle African Americans faced to gain recognition for their countless contributions to the early development of cave exploration and tourism, and long before that, the use of enslaved labor in the saltpeter mines during the War of 1812. Their stories were full of critiques on exclusion and misrepresentation and revealed a persistent struggle to make Black history more visible in the public narrative. They shared examples of tourists and other staff alike being unaware of the true extent of African American history at Mammoth Cave National Park. These personal stories were deeply entangled with family history as they recalled narratives that were passed down to them through the generations regarding life in the region before the park's formation. These stories provided a direct connection to the land that had been inaccessible in the way it had been for decades. The interviewee also recounted his own experiences returning to the park as a staff member and actively participating in the fight to have his family and many of the other African American guides receive the recognition they deserved. Sharing these stories is an act of "memory labor". This is a concept better outlined in the classic work of oral history, *The*

Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History, by Italian oral historian Alessandro Portelli. This frames the concept as a transformation from personal memory to one of collective awareness through the sharing of oral history. This labor often requires deep emotional vulnerability alongside ongoing policy efforts to address the misrepresentation in public narratives (Shopes 2002).

The second interview with the former staff member, now volunteer leader, is also a prime example of memory labor through the physical actions they participate in to preserve the legacy of the family residing in one of the many cemeteries within the boundaries of the park. Their work consists of relocating unmarked cemeteries, cleaning headstones, and clearing brush, as well as advocating for descendants to have access to restore these spaces. Comparing this interview with those of the descendants, these stories discuss the physical labor involved with CRM, intersecting around a shared ethic of care. These stakeholders value repairing not merely the landscape, but also the social memory of the cultural and historical sites. These actions are more than just caricatures; they are deeply symbolic. One of the descendants interviewed describes searching for their family plots only to find them overgrown and lost amongst the towering trees; it was invisible to most park visitors. They went on to describe how another family member wrote to the Secretary of the Interior asking for assistance in restoring the cemetery and giving their ancestors their dignity back.

Grassroots movements such as this can challenge the existing narratives and the dominant powers' structure in place in federally managed spaces. Lynn Meskell further dives into this argument and discusses that heritage management often reflects the wants of the state, which prioritizes aesthetics, tourism, and preservation over the lived experience of the local communities (Meskell 2015a:S77-S86). Community-centered narratives are an alternative

epistemological approach to heritage in contrast to the traditional/standardized narratives in place. They serve as one where history resides not only in documents and monuments but in a living and ongoing relationship between the people and the place they reside.

The Limits and Contradictions of Institutional Efforts

The interviews also revealed contradictions that are innate to institutional efforts to be inclusive. When examining the interviews for thoughts regarding institutions, participants expressed repeated frustrations over bureaucratic challenges while also sharing their appreciation for progress made due to recent recognition efforts. The first interview with the African American former staff member highlighted the need to have exhibits and archives reflect a more accurate and inclusive picture of African American life in the region. He went on to describe how, for decades, archival records and photographs labeled all the African American guides as the same person, erasing their identities and contributions. Mistakes such as these are tokenistic; they "acknowledge" the presence of these individuals without truly seeing them. Exhibits in the visitor center were formulated by a third-party vendor, which is not uncommon in the national park system due to staffing or time constraints. However, this also means displays run the risk of being created without proper consultation with the community and the people they feature. The results exhibit narratives being abstract and decontextualized. Smith's work in their 2006 writings talks about this disconnection that is then reinforced by alienation and further underscored by the difference between representation and participation in heritage narratives (Smith 2006). In this discussion of "authorized heritage discourse", further outlined in *The Palgrave Handbook of Contemporary Heritage Research* by Waterson and Watson, institutions have a history of defining what they deem to be significant while ignoring the knowledge of the local and distant communities.

Through their actions in reclaiming and maintaining resources at MACA, participants recognize that real change is more than a symbolic action on behalf of the park, but through real structural changes in how and when they are recognized in these heritage spaces. The fight for integral roles in defining park identity and historical narrative is an ongoing and evolving process.

The participants also expressed frustration with the seemingly endless bureaucratic blocks in being allowed to care for their family cemeteries. The frustrations rose over delays in permitting, inconsistent communication, and policies favoring aesthetic standards over cultural expression. Their stories reflected a broad-scale example of institutional priorities at odds with community needs. The African American former staff member waited months for approval to erect a monument at the enslaved guide cemetery. The participants' experiences emphasize the many challenges they faced from traditional institutional management practices and those of their grassroots movements.

Volunteerism as Grassroots Governance

The descendants and volunteers' actions constitute a model for grassroots governance, a community-based management plan that can sometimes run into opposition with those of an institution. The term plan is used here in a different context than how it is used when referring to formal management plans drafted by managing agencies such as the NPS. These participants step into roles of documentation, education, advocacy, and conservation, typically without any form of compensation. Their stewardship actions are driven by ties to the land, family, and memory.

When cross analyzing the interviews, the theme of volunteerism revealed a spectrum of care, ranging from the actions taken by institutional insiders to community members operating independently. Despite the many differences in access and power, all those involved expressed

sentiments of stewardship as a moral responsibility rather than a purely professional one. The stories shared emphasize how informal forms of governance often rise to fill the gaps left behind by management agencies.

The work done by these individuals is deeply and politically meaningful. Mammoth Cave National Park's formation involved the displacement of local communities who, by the work of their descendants, work to reclaim cultural autonomy through cemetery restoration that aims to repair this challenging and often complex relationship with the federal agencies that now manage the lands their families once called home. For participants in this study, this cemetery work serves as a way to strengthen ties through grassroots action and the sharing of intergenerational histories.

These descendants, volunteers, and former staff members balance the past, present, and future through their actions of cemetery restoration, sharing forgotten narratives, and other work to regain control over their cultural heritage. Their form of governance is based on reciprocity and recognition, often undertaking actions outside of those utilized by traditional/standardized power structures.

Participant Contributions to Grassroots Governance

Each of the participants interviewed for this thesis demonstrates, in their own ways, how community members participate and contribute to grassroots stewardship. Their efforts reflect the desire for an ongoing relationship with the land and a commitment to preserving individual and community histories.

The African American descendant returned decades after his ancestors served as enslaved guides. His desire to follow in their footsteps shows his dedication to honor their legacy, as well as the legacy of other black guides. Another way he showed his commitment to honor the legacy

of African Americans in the area is through his work restoring the Bradford cemetery, where many of the African American guides reside as their final resting place. During these efforts, he successfully designed and placed an obelisk to commemorate these early guides. This act of remembrance not only acknowledged their work, but also proudly reclaimed visibility for history that had long been marginalized within the park's narrative.

The former park staff member, who's now a devoted cemetery volunteer, conducts research on the burial sites and shares these stories with other project volunteers. Through her work, descendants and the larger community are able to reconnect with family plots and actively participate in the care of ancestral resting places. Her efforts fostered a vital link of collaboration between families, volunteers, and the park. She helps create a bridge between institutional knowledge and lived heritage.

The two additional descents interviewed also take place in cemetery restoration efforts. On numerous occasions, both have participated in clearing overgrown areas and cleaning stones. These actions, although they may happen on a small scale, carry profound significance. Their continuous care and persistence help contribute to the preservation of community memory and provide dignity to those interred there. This is a point he sent from out of state, takes great pride in, he shows this through his actions by sharing stories with his children so that they may also get to participate in this process.

These combined efforts extend beyond the individual and form a living, growing, and ever-changing example of grassroots governance- a form of governance in which descendants, volunteers, and the extended park community can reclaim agency over their heritage. Through acts of research, remembrance, and restoration, each stakeholder ensures that the histories of those who came before remain central to the ongoing story of Mammoth Cave National Park.

Negotiating Cultural Authority

The synthesis of the observations made in this chapter lead to discussions surrounding the negotiation over cultural authority, meaning who defines the history, interprets its significance, and shapes the public memory of the people and events. The interviewees, while coming from a variety of backgrounds, all confronted the boundaries set in place by institutions such as the NPS. The concept of "voice and control" was a constant theme amongst all the interviews. While each of the interviewees' relationship with the park differed, they all expressed concerns over the power imbalances that remain today. Although they all noted that the park had worked to improve its relationship with the community, there were still issues regarding who got to tell the story and how. The former African American staff member recounted stories relating to the fight to receive proper and inclusive acknowledgment of the contributions that the former enslaved guides provided. This greatly illustrates the need to actively seize authority over cultural heritage rather than passively receiving the results of federal management. The volunteers face a different type of challenge regarding receiving proper acknowledgment for their work in preserving cultural resources. Often their actions are done behind the scenes and are not expressed as large events put on by the parks (although many parks host public volunteer events such as Earth Day cleanups). For the most part, volunteer's work is invisible- picture a family member coming to clean up the cemetery gradually on each visit or stopping to share a story about their family's history to a passing visitor. Their work persists due to a deeply-rooted belief in the value of heritage grounded in lived experiences and generational knowledge.

This negotiation over cultural authority occurs every time a descendant or community member partakes in managing resources within MACA's boundaries. Whether this is through the sharing of stories or the restoration of a grave site, each stone and shared story is an impactful

political act of reclamation over the land, their voices, and identities. The formation of the park resulted in the displacement of churches, centuries, and homes. By returning to these spaces, community members are partaking in actions of reclamation and reinhabitation.

History and by extension, heritage narratives are not neutral forces; they are deeply rooted within structures of power that determine who is remembered, what is discussed, and why. In the 20th anniversary edition of his 1995 book, "Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History", Trouillot argues that “history is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots” (Trouillot 2015:26). This argument emphasizes the unnoticed mechanisms that shape public knowledge. He goes on to discuss how these mechanisms operate and silence narratives. These mechanisms affect the creation of sources, how they are placed in archives, and even the retrieval of sources after the fact. They affect how significance is retroactively attributed to people, things, and events.

The framework outlined by Trouillot highlights how marginalized communities are not excluded due to a lack of agency or significant events, but rather because of structural inequities in historical production. It is important to note here that his discussion of historical narratives would likely be considered heritage narrative in today's academic and research discussions. Trouillot uses the Haitian Revolution as a key example of these structural inequities in action. The revolution, which is undoubtedly a significant moment in history, is still underrepresented in the dominant narratives due to the strong hold Eurocentric historiographical frameworks have on the topic (Trouillot 2015:73). In other words, the real-life experiences of those involved in the revolution are ignored because they, as a non-white population, lack the capacity to undertake such action, nor do they have the proper resources to share those stories the way traditionally

white organizations in power do. So, while agencies such as the NPS have made strides in opening narratives to communities, this example, while a bit dated, shows the ongoing need to reevaluate how histories are shared and by whom they are shared. Trouillot's writings show the importance of remaining heritage practitioners that historical interpretation is situated and influenced by present perspectives.

CRM professionals and agencies must engage critically with the silence that persists in today's Cultural Heritage Resource Management field. It is important that those involved learn to recognize which voices are amplified, which are ignored, and why that may be happening. Empowering communities to reclaim authority over historical and cultural narratives involves not only engaging with them out in the field, but in the office as well. Through the careful and thoughtful collection of histories, they can be given the proper consideration when preparing them for archival spaces. This "hidden" side of CRM work should be seen as an ongoing moral and ethical concern, and not simply a step to check off a task list.

Gestures without adequate sharing of power remain just that- empty symbolic gestures, which leave the public narrative incomplete. While exhibits and public acknowledgements are important, true collaboration calls for the redistribution of management authority. This allows for descendants and local communities to be truly heard and reclaim cultural authority over their resources.

The careful examination of the recorded oral histories revealed how different stakeholder experiences and subsequent narratives can redefine what stewardship means in Mammoth Cave National Park. The shared concepts of memory, care, and determination to regain control show strategies of resistance that go beyond individuals to create an inclusive community-based model to reclaim authority over cultural spaces.

When analyzed together, the interviews, photographs, and supporting documents show a complex heritage landscape at Mammoth Cave National Park. Each in their way, the participants in this study engage in acts of memory labor, volunteer stewardship, and reclamation of the park narrative. Their actions at the very core are resistant to erasure and fight to reclaim and maintain control of their cultural spaces.

Through the frameworks of cultural heritage theory, oral history, and collaborative governance, as well as community-based resource management efforts, Mammoth Cave reveals itself as an evolving entity. One that is working to balance federal requirements and repair the historically challenged relationship the National Park Service has with communities. Here, decent have asserted their claim over the park's narrative by advocating for more inclusive management practices.

The analysis chapter highlights the significant and complex nature of heritage as an ongoing dialogue between descendants and local communities and the federal stewards and Mammoth Cave National Park. The dispute over stewardship shows how heritage is not a fixed concept but rather a living one that is continuously shaped through social action. These findings reveal that meaningful inclusion in cultural heritage management requires more than empty symbolic gestures. It calls for the re-shaping of traditional frameworks and more spaces for communities to make their voices heard on a fundamental level.

The concluding chapter will further build upon the discussion above and reflect on the broader implications of community empowerment in heritage practices. It will also share insights into how to better support more inclusive and participatory approaches within federal managed spaces such as Mammoth Cave National Park.

Toward Shared Ground: Conclusions and Pathways for Inclusive Resource Management

This thesis has examined how descendant groups interact with and challenge the existing dominant narrative of heritage at Mammoth Cave National Park. This analysis was performed through an illustrative combination of oral histories, photographic documentation, and supplemental archival sources. This research has highlighted the emotional, political, and often deeply personal aspects of memory work and heritage stewardship in the context of federal agencies such as the National Park Service. The participants of this study, a former African American staff member who also belongs to a key descendant group relating the history of the park, a volunteer whose ancestry rests in one of the many restored cemeteries, and finally another former staff member turned volunteer restoration leader, all offer valuable insights into the multifaceted discussions of cultural autonomy, access, and representation. Their stories and actions represent broad-scale challenges within the field of Cultural Heritage Resource Management, particularly when it comes to who wields the power to define and maintain historical narratives within federally managed spaces.

One of the critical findings of the research performed is the prevailing sense of historical erasure and exclusion experienced by many descendant communities. Participants shared stories of how long-forgotten ancestors were once again heard through their fight to manage their own resources. These people and their history were once purposefully hidden and neglected. This erasure was the product of institutional choices, displacement, and the prioritization of narratives that favor certain histories over the communities studied through this thesis.

The formation of Mammoth Cave was the result of exploitative labor and forced land acquisition, resulting in the removal of long-standing communities and cultures. This process

involved the reconfiguration of the landscape to fit federal preservation goals and the exclusion of African American and white working-class Appalachian histories from official interpretive materials. Against this backdrop, the work of remembering becomes not only emotionally demanding, but politically significant.

The concept of memory labor has shown that it is essential for understanding how participants navigate this erasure, whether this is through oral history testimony or physically taking back control of managing resources through cemetery restoration. The community members in this study are actively engaged in preserving their histories that institutions have long ignored. These actions serve as a resistance movement against dominant narratives and assertions of cultural presence in spaces that have sought to erase these communities. The former African American staff member's account, in particular, highlights the difficulties of working within an institution that symbolically acknowledges diversity while structurally maintaining exclusion. Their story emphasizes the need for institutions, such as the National Park Service, to move past simple representational gestures and towards true engagement with descendant communities.

The many challenges that come alongside institutional inclusion emerged as another crucial point. While in recent decades there has been an increased effort to raise awareness amongst institutions and the public alike, the methods enacted by these heritage stewards often fall short without proper consultation and inclusion of the groups they are meant to protect. The analysis chapter dove deeper into this issue, noting how some of the participants brought up the shortcomings or challenges they faced fighting for acknowledgement within the official park narrative. The desire to "do better" is genuine amongst contemporary park staff, but bureaucratic constraints, aesthetic priorities, and institutional inertia often prevent meaningful change. The

result is a heritage framework that appears inclusive on the surface but continues to marginalize those it claims to represent.

Volunteerism was revealed by the research as a form of grassroots governance. Grassroots movements, such as the ones previously discussed, culminate when there is a lack of formal recognition and support, so descendant communities and volunteers take it upon themselves to care for family cemeteries, document histories, and educate others about the area's past. Mammoth Cave has come a long way since its origins and actively works to engage with these communities; however, the work to make Cultural Heritage Resource Management more inclusive is never done.

These volunteers are not simply filling gaps left by these federal agencies; they are redefining what heritage stewardship looks like. Their actions are deeply rooted in familial obligation, moral responsibility, and commitment to cultural continuity. Their work challenges historic institutional assumptions about expertise, authority, and preservation. By challenging these assumptions, they present a powerful alternative to the traditional top-down heritage management style. They help uphold a system that is participatory, emotionally resonant, and deeply localized.

The dialogue surrounding cultural authority is perhaps the most important thread apparent in this study. There are many things at stake: who gets to be included in historical narratives and who gets to define them. Participants in this research have made it clear that inclusion without power sharing in the decision-making process is insufficient. True partnership requires management agencies to give back partial control and to place greater trust in community knowledge, as well as to allow descendant voices to lead the management process as much as legally possible. While this change is a radical shift from traditional models of heritage

management, it is necessary if public history is to become genuinely representative and inclusive.

Methodologically speaking, this research also demonstrates the invaluable aspects of oral history and community-sourced materials. These topics reveal important lived experiences that shape the way communities interact with heritage landscapes. The voices recorded in this study are not simply data points; they are vital interventions into the world of public history that have historically excluded them from the record. Their stories offer a counternarrative to what had been the official history of Mammoth Cave for decades. These participants also illuminate the struggles and achievements involved in taking back a cultural space. The photographic evidence and other documents help enrich these pictures by offering a scholarly-backed confirmation of the narrative shared in the interviews.

The implications made by this thesis extend beyond the boundaries of Mammoth Cave National Park. As heritage institutions across the US and abroad work to improve relations with the communities they serve, the question of inclusion, representation, and equality are at the forefront of these discussions.

The lessons presented in this study offer an important framework for guidance on these matters. First and foremost, descendant communities need to be seen as active participants and not passive stakeholders of heritage. Inclusion must go beyond symbolic representations of the communities they relate to; they must involve key structural changes in how heritage is managed. Additionally, grassroot efforts put forth by the local community need to be acknowledged and integrated into existing strategies for managing resources. Lastly, steward institutions must confront their past actions, which have often been colonial and exclusionary.

Through this, communities and institutions can work collaboratively to make the management process more equitable.

This thesis serves to affirm that heritage is not a static collection of facts and places, nor is it a neutral phenomenon. It is a living, complex, and deeply human process that is continuously shaped by emotion, power, and memory. The descendant communities at Mammoth Cave are one of many taking part in the process to reclaim spaces they once lost, which is challenging, but wholly necessary for the structure of Cultural Heritage Resource Management. These communities actively challenge federal agencies to rethink what heritage means, how it should be cared for, and who it belongs to. As professionals continue to interact with communities, they must engage with these questions aligned with the voices and actions of all those who are involved. Descendant communities are not simply preserving their histories through these actions; they are creating it.

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