

MARK TWAIN CAVE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

Press announcement will take place at Mark Twain Cave, 300 Cave Hollow Rd, Hannibal, MO on September 24, 2019, 12:00 noon central time. All press invited.

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Mark Twain Cave in Hannibal, Missouri announces discovery of long-sought Clemens signature

During his boyhood years in Hannibal, Sam Clemens, better known as Mark Twain, autographed the cave he immortalized in his literature.

Hannibal, Missouri (Sept. 24, 2019) – The Mark Twain Cave in Hannibal, Missouri was so named to honor the man who immortalized it. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, whose pen name was Mark Twain, lived in Hannibal from 1839 to 1853 (ages 4 to 17). When he published *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in 1876, the cave achieved nearly the same celebrity status as the author. Now Mark Twain has again put the spotlight on the cave 166 years after leaving Hannibal with the discovery of a long-sought “Clemens” signature found in an unlit passageway. Scholars have verified its authenticity.

“We have been looking for a Clemens signature for decades,” said Linda Coleberd, whose family has owned the cave since 1923, “but with three miles of passageways, that means there are six miles of walls to examine. And with 250,000 signatures on the walls, looking for ‘Clemens’ has been like the proverbial needle in the haystack.” Prior to 1979, visitors to the cave frequently added their names using candle smoke, pencil, paint, or berry juice. Upon becoming a National Natural Registered Landmark, signing the cave was no longer allowed.

The Clemens signature was discovered during a special tour in July, but Coleberd wanted to wait on announcing the news until scholars had the opportunity to compare the found signature to Sam Clemens’s boyhood signature and those of his siblings. Unfortunately, only “Clemens” was

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scrawled on the cave wall in pencil, although higher resolution photos revealed the name “Sam” had first been carved in the location.

The discovery occurred during the third quadrennial Clemens Conference, a scholarly symposium held by the Mark Twain Boyhood Home & Museum. Scholars toured the cave on July 26th. Coleberd joined the last group with plans to veer off the tour with her friend and fellow signature-seeker, Cindy Lovell, who spotted the signature. The two frequently roam the cave with flashlights searching for “Clemens” and “Blankenship.” Tom Blankenship was the Hannibal boy who became the model for Twain’s famous character Huckleberry Finn.

“Linda and I have been looking for so long, it still seems unbelievable,” said Lovell. “My single hope has been that someone would find it during my lifetime. Sam knew the cave so well and described it in exact detail. We just knew it had to be in here somewhere.” Lovell, who is the director of education at Epic Flight Academy in New Smyrna Beach, Florida, is best known in Hannibal as the former director of the Twain museum there as well as the former director of the Mark Twain House in Hartford, Connecticut. “I have been a ‘Twainiac’ since I first read *Tom Sawyer* in the fourth grade,” she said, “and I have been looking for his signature in the cave since my first visit to Hannibal in 1996.”

Lovell immediately shared photos of the signature with Twain scholars Dr. Alan Gribben and Kevin Mac Donnell who had also attended the Clemens Conference. Gribben thought it was most likely Sam Clemens’s signature, with Orion and Henry (Sam’s brothers) far lesser probabilities. The two scholars then undertook the task of researching signatures from the period Sam lived in Hannibal.

Gribben, a professor at Auburn University-Montgomery who has spent 50 years studying Twain’s library and reading, said, “I am going to go on record as believing this to be Sam Clemens's handwriting. There are other considerations that would support this theory. Clemens would repeatedly refer to this cave in his mature writings, so we know he was often there and that it was an important landmark to him. Moreover, his temperament was...far more

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egotistically assertive than those of either of his brothers, Orion and Henry, which makes it more likely that of the three he would be inclined to inscribe his signature on this site.”

Mac Donnell, a rare books dealer in Austin, Texas who owns the world’s largest private collection of Twain first edition books, autograph letters, photographs, and artifacts, scrutinized signatures provided by the Mark Twain Papers & Project at The Bancroft Library, UC-Berkeley. Siblings Henry and Pamela along with cousin Jeremiah were quickly eliminated.

“That leaves us with Sam and Orion,” said Mac Donnell. “Both write their ‘l’ loop a bit shorter than their ‘C.’ While their letter formation and connecting strokes and baselines are similar, there are differences. In 1853 Sam is rounding the humps in his ‘m’ and sharpening them in his ‘n.’ He puts a very short tail on his ‘s.’ You could almost lay a ruler at a downward slant over the tops of his ‘C,’ ‘l,’ and first ‘e.’ His ‘s’ is the same height as his ‘n.’ Orion’s signature displays none of these things, and the signature in the cave shares all of these traits with Sam’s Oct. 1853 signature. The cave signature is very likely of an earlier date, possibly by several years, since Sam left Hannibal earlier that same year.”

“Without Sam Clemens writing down the exact location or signing with his full name and dating the signature, we are left to make an authentic assessment of this signature with the help of scholars,” said Coleberd. “Kevin Mac Donnell suggested using a UV light to try to date it, so that is something we are looking into as well. Years ago, we authenticated Jesse James’s signature, which was dated Sept. 22, 1879. In 2012, during one of our signature searches, Cindy Lovell found ‘N. Rockwell’ written on a wall about 30 feet from where Norman Rockwell sketched inside the cave in the 1930s. It would be interesting to examine all of these signatures with the UV light to see what else we can learn.”

“Hannibal became a tourist destination 143 years ago when Twain published *Tom Sawyer*,” said Gail Bryant, Director of Tourism. “This year, not only is Hannibal celebrating its bicentennial year, the Mark Twain Cave is also celebrating its 200th anniversary of discovery. We are thrilled that at long last Sam Clemens’s signature has been found in the cave that was named for him.”

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The cave is open for tours year-round, but Coleberd is still trying to decide how to include the Clemens signature on the tour. Although electric lights were added in 1938, they are placed along the 5/8 mile footpath tour guides follow. The Clemens signature remained unseen because it is in a completely darkened area. So, figuring out how to share this new discovery will be the next order of business.

“I’m jealous of the owners of the cave,” added Mac Donnell. “I have signed books, letters, photos, legal documents, checks, autograph albums, and even an opera fan, but no signed cave--not sure where I’d put it if I did have one.”

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Mark Twain Cave has been open to the public for 200 years. Mark Twain Cave is open daily except Thanksgiving and Christmas Day. The cave contains 260 passageways spanning three miles. It is Missouri’s oldest show cave. The temperature inside remains a steady 52 degrees year-round. More information at <http://www.marktwaincave.com>

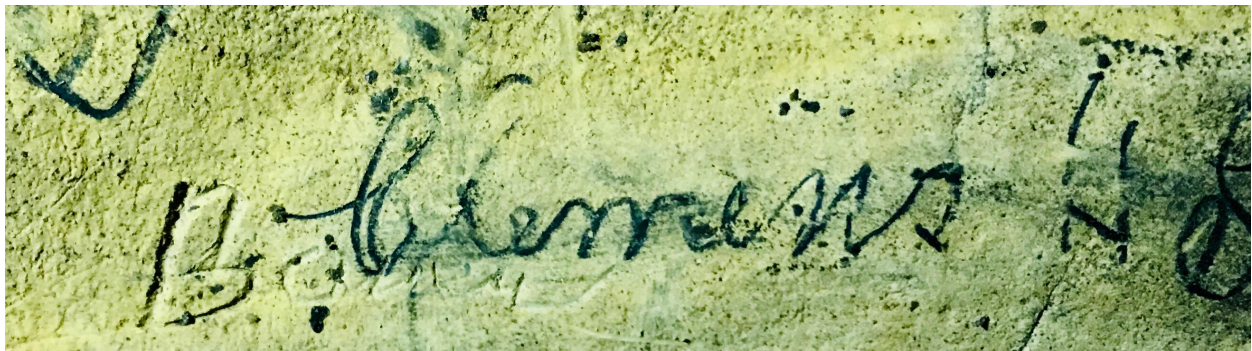


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