

MATTHEWS CAVE: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

In the book *Tales of Huntsville Caves* written by William W. Varnedoe, Jr. and Charles A. Lundquist (2005) in commemoration of the Huntsville, Alabama bicentennial (1805-2005) and the 50th anniversary of the Huntsville Grotto, National Speleological Society, the authors state that James Manning obtained the land where Matthews Cave is located on February 2, 1818. They state that in that transaction, the property was referred to as “Cave Plantation,” so it was “clear that the cave was a significant feature of the property” (p. 42). They suggest that the stream running through the cave may have been a convenient water supply, and the cave may have been used for cool storage of food items. It seems that in the early years, there were three entrance holes from which one could drop into the cave.

Varnedoe and Lundquist (2005) explain that when Dr. Walter B. Jones recorded the cave, as number 23 in the Catalogue of Alabama Caves and Caverns, the property was no longer owned by the Matthews family, but Jones noted that the cave “was on the old Matthews place” hence the name Matthews Cave.

The entrance of the cave was a short distance from where the plantation house was built and a short distance south of the road. Bernice Chaney said “the new road” was built over the cave. She said she remembers the cave from the 1920’s and 1930’s, but she was not allowed to go into it.

Varnedoe and Lundquist make additional comments about Matthews Cave through the years:

Matthews Cave is near the north boundary in an area now used for field training of troops. For some reason the army dug out the approach to one of the entrances so that one could almost walk in. Therefore, many opportunities occurred for casual visits by army and other personnel.

In 1993, the arsenal authorities decided to clean the cave. Over the years, a large collection of junk had been thrown into it and its walls were vandalized by extensive spray painting. The Huntsville Grotto bid on a contract to perform the clean up and was selected for the task. The walls were scrubbed clean, except for an historic inscription discovered in the process. (Varnedoe and Lundquist 2005:43)

The inscription photographed by the Huntsville Grotto of the National Speleological Society:



Historic inscription found in Matthews Cave. It reads: J.C. ‘A’ T. Co A 69 RGT NY Source: Varnedoe and Lundquist 2005:43.

Elizabeth Humes Chapman (in her book *Changing Huntsville-1890-1899*) discusses the encampment of several units of Spanish American War soldiers in Huntsville following the hostilities in Cuba—Company A of the 69 Regiment of Infantry, New York Volunteers was one of several units encamped in western Huntsville during the last half of 1898. After examining a roster of Company A of the 69th RGT in the National Archives, she found three soldiers with initials “J.C.” They were James C. Callahan, Joseph Clark, and James Coleman. The meaning of the “A.T.” was not discerned, but it is suggested they could have identified a “subunit”.