

The conundrum of graffiti

Tim Moore

The following article has been taken from the newsletter of the National Caves Association of America. It concerns the discovery of a graffiti signature by Samuel Clemens, on a cave wall—he being better known to us as Mark Twain. There is also following that an article by John Brush about graffiti cleaning in Cotter Cave.

In the September issue of this Journal note was made of (photographed) the signature a notorious Hunter Valley (New South Wales) bushranger, Frederick Ward, known as Captain Thunderbolt. He must have marked his name on the wall of main cave at Timor during the 1860s.

These three articles caused me to reflect on a conversation that I had had in the late 1980s standing within the circle of sarsen stones at Stonehenge.

In my then life as Minister for the Environment in New South Wales, I had been given a short fellowship by the United Kingdom Government to undertake inspections of sewerage treatment plants and other waste disposal facilities. I was asked, during the arranging stages for the visit, if there was anywhere in particular that I would like to see during my weekend off in the middle of my fortnight program.

I indicated that I would like to visit Stonehenge. This, I was advised, was easily arranged and, if I drove myself to this ancient monument, the officials at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London (who were arranging my visit) would ensure that a qualified guide would meet me and show me around. I was to be permitted to walk through the monument, a privilege not generally available because of the risk of damage by the very high visitor levels. Visiting members of the general public were (and remain) confined to a perimeter path.

On the designated day, I drove to the appointed meeting place and discovered that my guide was an eminent university professor who held the official appointment of Her Majesty's Curator of Ancient Monuments, an honorary title of some importance.



Photo: British Heritage

During the two or three hours I had with him (not only in the bounds of the ancient monument itself, but also looking over some of the now known to be associated

pathways leading to the famous circle of stones), my guide and I engaged in a discussion of the problem of graffiti. I had enquired as to what, if anything, was to be done about the many, many names and dates that had been scratched into the sarsen stones.

First, he took me to one of the stones and picked a random name. I can no longer remember it. But, for the purposes of this discussion, let us assume that it was "Jay Carruthers, Liverpool, 1980".

During this discussion, he next took me to another of the sarsen stones and pointed to a name on it. The name inscribed, he said, was "+ Wren". My guide observed that this had been identified as having been graffiti by Sir Christopher Wren, the architect of St Paul's Cathedral in London. He said to me that this was graffiti when it was done but "Is it still graffiti or does it have significance and validity of its own?"



Photo: British Heritage

Having caused me to ponder the question of when, during the passage of time, Sir Christopher's name might have been transmuted from vandalising graffiti to having historic heritage and cultural value itself, I was invited to another of the sarsen stones to inspect a further inscription. This inscription, as I remember it, contained no date but said something like Quintus Fabius Maximus. My guide advised me that he was believed to have been a centurion in the Roman legions, the legions which had conquered Britain commencing with the Claudian invasion of 43 AD.

I confess that the latter of these latter two inscriptions was not able to be made out clearly by me but I took the word of the Curator as to the accuracy of what he had described. But then, I asked myself: *"How long did it take for the scratchings of young Quintus to become transmuted from ancient vandalism to an item of cultural heritage in itself?"*

Whilst I was pondering this conundrum, my guide took me back to the scratching of "Carruthers from Liverpool" and said to me, *"Let us assume that, in 25 years or so, Mr Carruthers discovers a cure for cancer. What does that do to his scratching upon this ancient monument, scratching which, in the context of you and I standing here now looking at it, is undoubtedly an act of vandalism?"*

Whilst, undoubtedly, whether in caves or elsewhere, graffiti is to be deplored and cleaning measures such as those reported upon, at Timor, in the September Journal reflect appropriate and desirable approaches by those who are community-minded enough to do something about it, I am still unable to resolve, in my own mind, what I might describe as the "Carruthers conundrum"!

Clemens Signature Found in Mark Twain Cave

166 years after Mark Twain left Hannibal [Editor - in the US state of Missouri], his childhood signature is found in an unlit passageway in the very cave named after the renowned author. Scholars have verified the signature's authenticity. Samuel Langhorne Clemens, whose pen name was Mark Twain, lived in Hannibal from 1839 to 1853 (ages 4 to 17).

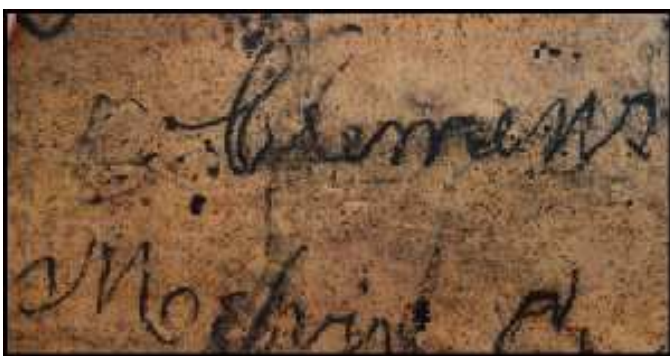
When he published *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* in 1876, the cave achieved nearly the same celebrity status as the author. Now Mark Twain has again put the spotlight on the cave with the discovery of a long-sought "Clemens" signature found in an unlit passageway.

"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 Historic 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 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.



Mark Twain (Samuel Clemens) signature found in Mark Twain Cave.

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 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."

MacDonnell, 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 MacDonnell. "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 MacDonnell 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.”

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.



A young Samuel Clemens whose signature was found in Mark Twain Cave.

“I’m jealous of the owners of the cave,” added MacDonnell. “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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Ken Grimes Award—ACKMA 2020 Conference

Grant funding is available to support attendance at the May 2020 Conference at Jenolan.

The Honorary Life Members Fund will support one to two attendees with their conference costs. The fund is open to members and non-members. Students and researchers are welcome to apply, as well as others (such as leaders in guiding and interpretation) and attendees from neighbouring countries. There is no set format for application. Applicant must describe:

- **how attendance will benefit them (eg professional development),**
- **how their attendance will benefit ACKMA (eg a paper), and**
- **detail of the funding level sought.**

For more information, please contact Dave Smith (dave.smith.nz@gmail.com).

Applications will close 31 January 2020.

Applications are to be sent to the above email address.

ACKMA members are asked to circulate this information to students and researchers working at their local cave or karst site.