



Kentucky's War of 1812: Great Saltpeter Cave

The Kentucky Historical Society's historical marker 715 in Rockcastle County commemorates the importance of the Great Saltpeter Cave, a large cave located south of Mt. Vernon. There, organic materials were mined to create gunpowder during the War of 1812.

Sulfur, charcoal and saltpeter create gunpowder, and during the 19th century Kentucky's extensive cave systems, including Mammoth Cave, were important sources of saltpeter. During the War of 1812, Kentucky's caves played an important part in the American war effort.

In many instances, wooden frames were built within the caves and were filled with dirt from the cave floor. Water was filtered through the dirt, which contained calcium nitrates, or saltpeter. The water containing the saltpeter was then filtered and boiled, leaving saltpeter crystals that were transported to factories to make gunpowder.

Pictured: Entrance to "Gothic Avenue" in Mammoth Cave. Wooden pipes dating from the early 19th century that were used to pump water into the cave for saltpeter production can be seen to the right of the staircase.