Maquoketa Caves State Park

A History of the Caves

From Prehistoric Shelter to Iowa State Park

Introduction

Maquoketa Caves State Park, located about six miles northwest of the town of Maquoketa, Iowa on State Road 428, is one of the most remarkable public recreational areas in the Midwest. With more than 200,000 visitors and around 14,000 campers annually, the park stands apart from other Iowa parks because of its extraordinary geology — a rugged limestone landscape riddled with caves open for exploration, from easy lit walkways to challenging muddy crawlspaces.

The caves are carved from Hopkinton dolomite, a limestone-like rock laid down when Iowa sat beneath a shallow tropical sea some 400 to 500 million years ago. Over countless millennia, mildly acidic rainwater dissolved passages through the rock, and as water tables dropped, the caves gradually filled with air and began to grow their spectacular formations — stalactites, stalagmites, flowstones, and soda straws — at a rate of roughly one inch every hundred years.

The story of these caves spans thousands of years: from prehistoric peoples who sheltered here, to Native American councils, to the dramatic rediscovery by frontier hunters, to the civic campaign that finally won the land a permanent place in the Iowa State Park system.

Prehistoric & Native Peoples

Long before European settlers arrived in eastern Iowa, the Maquoketa Caves were known to the indigenous peoples of the region. The constant interior temperature — hovering around 50°F year-round regardless of the weather outside — made the caves an ideal refuge: refreshingly cool in the scorching Iowa summer and noticeably warm on bitter winter nights.

Evidence of prehistoric habitation is not merely circumstantial. Frank E. Ellis, an early custodian of the park, recorded his findings in the official program for the Dedication of Maquoketa Caves on October 13, 1933:

> *The great underground passages were thousands of years ago the homes of prehistoric people. This fact has been proven by the many discoveries of stone, flint, bone and horn artifacts that have been washed out from time to time by flood waters. These caves are wonderful rooms and passage-ways which made warm shelter in winter and cool havens in summer for these ancient folk who loved them for the homely protection they offered them.*
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> *— Frank E. Ellis, Dedication Program, October 13, 1933*

Amateur and professional archaeologists excavating Dancehall Cave — the largest cave in the park — have unearthed cooking utensils, clothing, day-to-day belongings, and even the skeletal remains of early inhabitants. In later centuries, tribes including the Sac and Fox, Sioux, and Winnebago are believed to have held councils inside Dancehall Cave, according to local legend.

The name "Maquoketa" itself comes from the Sac and Fox language — Makwok-eteg — meaning "there are bears," a fitting name for a wild and wooded limestone landscape teeming with wildlife.

Rediscovery by White Settlers

The Black Hawk Purchase, 1832

The Sac and Fox and other tribes were effectively removed from the Maquoketa area following the "Black Hawk Purchase" — a treaty signed by Major General Winfield Scott and Chief Black Hawk in 1832. With the indigenous peoples displaced, the land was opened to white settlement. One of the first exploration parties to cross Jackson County had appeared even earlier, in 1834, lured by Winnebago tales of lead-rich minerals in the area. Cold weather, heavy snow, and conflict with the Sioux cut that expedition short and no substantial mining ever followed.

Joshua Beer & David Scott, 1837

The dramatic rediscovery of the caves by white settlers belongs to two frontier hunters — Joshua Beer and David Scott — who arrived in the Maquoketa area with their families in 1837. Their account, preserved in the History of Jackson County (Western Historical Co., 1879), is one of the most vivid cave discovery stories on record. Beer told it in his own words:

> *You know that Scott and I, the first year we lived in Iowa, had to depend almost entirely on our rifles for the subsistence of our families. In the hunting season, he would come to my house, or I would go to his, and we would start together for a ten-days' hunt. On the occasion of the discovery of the cave, we started from Scott's for the heavy timber on the forks of the Maquoketa, knowing that the deer would take shelter there from the heavy snow-storm prevailing at the time.*
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> *— Joshua Beer, History of Jackson County, pp. 351–352*

Tracking a herd of deer up a ravine, Beer and Scott watched in astonishment as the animals vanished completely — disappearing into a cave hidden in the bluffs. They made camp at the cave mouth to prevent the deer from escaping. The night took a far more dangerous turn when their dogs cornered an animal in a tree. Beer climbed to shake it out, only for it to rush over him and plunge down into a ferocious fight with the dogs and Scott. The creature proved to be a panther. Scott wrestled it to the ground and, with help from Beer and the dogs, finally killed it. Only his heavy elk-skin hunting shirt and trousers saved him from serious injury.

When daylight came, the hunters discovered a second outlet to the cave — the deer had already escaped. Their dramatic hunt was over, but Dancehall Cave had been rediscovered for the modern era.

Early Recreational Use, 1840s–1910s

Word of the caves spread quickly. By 1844, a minister — the Reverend William Salter — was exploring and documenting them. By the 1860s the caves and surrounding woodland had become a popular destination for picnicking and exploring. A dance pavilion was constructed just north of the Natural Bridge, and by 1868 regular dances were being held in the valley, drawing visitors from across the region. These events would continue well into the 1920s.

During this period the caves were known variously as "Burt's Caves" and "Morehead's Caves," named after early private landowners. Picture postcards from the early 1900s still occasionally surface bearing these older names. The name "Maquoketa Caves" only came into common use around 1921, once a serious campaign to establish a state park was underway.

A vivid account from Judge E. H. Thayer — owner of the Clinton Age newspaper in the 1870s — describes the caves in their unspoiled glory, noting that his party gathered specimens from the formations. That kind of "souvenir collecting" was widespread and would ultimately strip many caves, particularly Wide Mouth Cave, of the extraordinary white speleothems that had rivaled anything at Mammoth Cave or Carlsbad Caverns. Postcards from the 1920s show Wide Mouth

Cave packed with brilliant white stalactites and flowstone; today those same walls stand almost bare.

Becoming a State Park

The Campaign for Preservation, 1919–1921

By the early twentieth century it was clear that the caves needed formal protection. In 1919, the Fine Arts Club of Maquoketa urged the Iowa State Board of Conservation to consider acquiring the land. That same year the Board officially recommended purchase. Local residents rallied quickly. In 1921 the Maquoketa Chapter of the Iowa Federation of Women's Clubs secured an option on a parcel of land, and the state purchased 17 acres — including the Natural Bridge and most of the cave system. Additional land was acquired in 1931, expanding the park to 111 acres. Today the park covers 323 acres.

Official Dedication, October 13, 1933

The official dedication of Maquoketa Caves State Park took place on Friday, October 13, 1933 — a grand occasion attended by some two thousand spectators and a full complement of dignitaries. The Maquoketa Boy Scouts Band kicked things off, followed by a drill from the American Legion Drum and Bugle Corps and an invocation by the Reverend G. F. Barsalou. The park was formally presented to the State of Iowa by Mrs. Henry Frankel, chairman of the Iowa State Board of Conservation, and accepted by Governor Clyde L. Herring. Frank E. Ellis, by then a long-standing champion of the park, served as official greeter.

Special tribute was paid at the ceremony to Mrs. Frances Myatt and Edward Luckiesh, local residents who had worked extensively on the park improvement program, as well as to Oscar Brown, the first paid park manager, and Bruce Davis who held that role at the time of dedication.

The CCC and WPA: Building the Park We See Today

The Great Depression brought financial hardship, but it also delivered an unexpected gift to Maquoketa Caves in the form of two of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal programs: the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) and the Work Progress Administration (WPA).

Two CCC camps operated in the Maquoketa area through the 1930s. Their workers tackled erosion control, cleared the caves of hazards, constructed the first walkways inside Dancehall Cave, and installed the cave's original electrical lighting system. They also built and maintained trails throughout the park. In 1937 — exactly one century after Beer and Scott's famous hunt — the WPA took over, constructing the handsome Old Concession Stand and Enclosed Shelter (which stands today as the stone shelter and modern restroom building) and the elegant stone entrance portals that still greet visitors at the park gate.

The CCC also relocated the course of Raccoon Creek inside Dancehall Cave, moving the stream from the right-hand wall to its current position — a significant engineering project aimed at reducing flood risk and improving visitor safety.

The craftsmanship of the CCC and WPA is visible throughout the park and is rightly celebrated. A particularly fine example is the picnic shelter perched high on the bluff above Balanced Rock, looking down more than 100 feet into the valley. In recognition of this legacy, the entire park was nominated for and accepted into the National Register of Historic Places in 1991.

Floods, Setbacks & Recovery

Raccoon Creek has proven a persistent challenge throughout the park's history. A major flood in 1939 caused serious damage to the caves. A further significant flood struck in 1940. The most severe modern flood hit in 1981, forcing the temporary closure of Dancehall Cave to the public for over a year.

The 1982–83 restoration effort was a notable community undertaking. Residents of the Iowa Men's Reformatory at Anamosa — whose predecessors had helped with the original CCC construction decades earlier — worked alongside Northeast Iowa Park District personnel to clean up flood debris, build new walkways, and repair retaining walls inside the cave. Around the same time, the U.S. Soil Conservation Service partnered with the Iowa DNR to construct a series of retention ponds upstream, designed to slow floodwater and reduce the frequency of future events.

A major park renovation in the 1990s brought modern campground facilities, new roads, updated parking lots, and a new water and sewer system. Another significant flood in 2007 brought AmeriCorps workers to assist with cleanup and repairs. In 2010, the emergence of White-nose Bat Syndrome — a devastating fungal disease affecting cave-dwelling bats across North America — led to temporary closure of the caves to protect the bat populations that hibernate there each winter.

Chronology

Year	Event
Prehistory	Indigenous peoples use the caves for shelter. Stone, flint, bone, and horn artifacts are later found washed out by floodwaters.
Up to 1831	Sac, Fox, Sioux, and Winnebago Indians inhabit the area; Dancehall Cave reportedly used for councils.
1832	The "Black Hawk Purchase" treaty signed; Native Americans are displaced from the Maquoketa region.
1837	Joshua Beer and David Scott rediscover Dancehall Cave while on a winter deer hunt — encountering a panther along the way.
1844	Reverend William Salter explores and documents the caves.
1860s–1920s	The caves become a popular recreation destination. A dance pavilion is built near the Natural Bridge; regular dances begin by 1868.
1919	Iowa State Board of Conservation recommends purchase of the cave lands for a state park.
1921	First 17 acres purchased from private ownership. Name changes from "Burt's Caves" / "Morehead's Caves" to Maquoketa Caves.
1928	Frank E. Ellis appointed honorary custodian. Izaac Walton League raises $2,000 for park improvements.
1931	Additional land purchased; park expands to 111 acres.
October 13, 1933	Official dedication of Maquoketa Caves State Park. Governor Clyde L. Herring accepts the park on behalf of the State of Iowa.
1930s	CCC camps install walkways and electric lighting in Dancehall Cave, build trails, and control erosion. Raccoon Creek diverted inside Dancehall Cave.
1937	WPA constructs the stone shelter, restroom building, and entrance portals.
1939	Major flood damages the caves.
1940	Further flood damage. Park doubles in size.

1960s–1970s	Park doubles in size again through additional land acquisitions.
1981	Major flood; Dancehall Cave closed to the public for over a year.
1982–1983	Restoration of Dancehall Cave by Iowa Men's Reformatory residents and Northeast Iowa Park District. Retention ponds built upstream.
1991	Maquoketa Caves State Park accepted into the National Register of Historic Places.
1993–1994	Major renovation: new campground, modern facilities, roads, parking, water and sewer systems.
2007	Major flood. AmeriCorps workers assist with cleanup and repairs.
2010	White-nose Bat Syndrome leads to temporary cave closures to protect hibernating bats.

The Park Today

Maquoketa Caves State Park is open daily all year from 4:00 a.m. to 10:30 p.m. with no entrance fee. It now encompasses 323 acres of limestone bluffs, forest, caves, stream, campgrounds, picnic areas, native grasslands, and a Visitor Center. The park offers 13 numbered caves plus additional passages — ranging from the electrically lit boardwalk of Dancehall Cave to the demanding 500-foot crawl of Steel Gate Passage.

The caves remain fragile. Speleothems broken or removed by souvenir hunters will never regenerate within a human lifetime. The oils from a single touch can halt the growth of a formation forever. The credo of the National Speleological Society remains as relevant here as anywhere: take nothing but pictures, kill nothing but time, and leave nothing but footprints.

Sources: Maquoketa Caves State Park History Guide; History of Jackson County (Western Historical Co., 1879); Jim Scheffler, Iowa Conservationist, May 1992; Official Dedication Program, October 13, 1933.