

THE GREAT CRAIGHEAD CAVE



Mining a Strategic Material



Saltpeter, or niter, is a key ingredient of gunpowder found in many limestone caves in East Tennessee. In June 1861, Randolph Ross, Jr., and J. Marshall McCue contracted with the Confederate Ordnance Bureau to produce niter here at the “Milk Sick Knobs,” a place where the white snakeroot thrived. Beneath the sandy shale that nurtured this deadly herb was the Great Craighead Cave, which contained significant deposits of saltpeter.

The war effort required immense quantities of saltpeter and the Confederate government soon advanced \$2,000 to the partnership to increase the capacity of the facility. By the following January, McCue, now in business by himself, had contracted to deliver 250,000 pounds of the vital substance to the Confederate powder works in Augusta, Georgia, during 1862. Although production here never came close to that amount, the facility shipped several hundred pounds of niter every two weeks.

Abraham Stakely oversaw the saltpeter operations at Craighead Cave and conscripted men such as Charles W. Hicks to mine the mineral and heat it in large iron kettles. Almost 60 years later, attorney Hicks recalled in his Civil War Veterans Questionnaire that he and ten others “camped there and worked faithfully two years and a half until Federal soldiers came to Sweetwater, four miles distant in Sept. 1863, when we tore down our works and scattered to our homes to prevent capture.”



Tennessee Saltpetre Cave, *Harper's Weekly*, Feb. 6, 1864

“Enough Saltpetre can be obtained to supply the demand of the State for making powder, even if Old Abe False Pretence and his Northern successors shall continue a wicked war against the South for forty years.”
— John Grant, *Athens Post*, June 21, 1861

Great Craighead Cave interior – Courtesy *The Lost Sea*

