

ONESQUETHAW CAVE PRESERVE MANAGEMENT PLAN

INTRODUCTION

The Onesquethaw Cave System (Onesquethaw Cave and Jordan Cave) is about 5500 feet long making it the second longest known cave in Albany County, NY and the 12th longest in New York. The Northeastern Cave Conservancy (NCC) owns and manages access to the Onesquethaw Cave part of the system. Onesquethaw Cave is a sinking stream cave system and it has a history of flooding.

The property containing the entrance of Onesquethaw Cave is about 1.35 acres. It is roughly trapezoidal in shape with 153 feet of road frontage. The back line is 154 feet. The west side is 354 feet long and the east is 407 feet long. The entrance to the cave is located in the back third of the property. A broad, shallow sink is developing about half way between the cave and the road. This shallow sink has a number of small holes about 6" to a foot in diameter that descend about 3 to 5 feet.

PURPOSE OF A MANAGEMENT PLAN

The purpose of a management plan is to describe what is on a property and how it should be managed. It is an operating manual for the preserve. A plan is not a static document that once written is placed on the shelf and forgotten. It is a document that is to be used and referenced on a regular basis. The property manager must follow the plan unless there is a compelling and overriding reason for doing otherwise.

HISTORY OF THE PROPERTY

The cave is named for the nearby creek. Onesquethaw is Amerindian for "corn field."

The cave is not mentioned in some of the older references on the area which do record nearby caves such as Clarksville Cave and caves at the base of Copeland Hill. The first mention of it comes from 1897. After that, there is no known mention of it until the 1950s when it was known as Tri-County Cave (presumably named after the Tri-County Grotto of the NSS which existed in the area at the time). It has also been known as Dewey Cave.

The cave entrance was, for many years, on the property of Helderlaan, the nearby farm originally settled in 1751. In the late 1950s the property was owned by the Dewey family. (The farm is now owned by the Mattenson family.) In 1960 the owner, Corinne Dewey, put the farm up for sale. Jack Child persuaded her to subdivide the land and sell him the portion with the cave. Ron Sloan bought the land from Child though the deed was apparently never filed. Due to high taxes and the difficulty of developing this property, Sloan decided to let the parcel go for taxes. In March 1990, Albany County foreclosed on the property and became owners of the cave.

In December 1990, a county road crew working where County Route 106 crosses the outlet from Lawson Lake, breached a beaver dam. The increase flow flooded the cave while a group from Syracuse University Outing Club was in the cave. The resulting rescue led the county to give the cave to the then Albany County Land Conservancy. Now known as the Mohawk-Hudson Land Conservancy, they transferred the property back to Albany County which then transferred it to the NCC in 2011.

UNDERGROUND RESOURCES

Biological - One species of cave-adapted amphipod, *Stygobromus alleghensis*, exists in Onesquethaw Cave. No special precautions are in place to protect the amphipod as normal caving activities do not seem to have an adverse impact on its population. A small population of cave crickets, *Ceuthophilus maculatus* has also been noted in the cave.

Because Onesquethaw is a sinking stream system there are a number of accidentals found in it. Over the years there have been reports of catfish, eels, and frogs. These either get flushed through the system or die in the cave. Either way, they do not constitute a significant or important biological resource except as a food source.

Due to seasonal flooding a bat population has never been established in Onesquethaw Cave.

Geological & Hydrological - The cave was the subject of an extensive study by A.N. Palmer which was published in the *NSS Bulletin* in 1972. A less technical version was published in *The Northeastern Caver* in 1971 and the following quote is from that article.

The cave is developed in the Onondaga Limestone of Middle Devonian age at the eastern edge of the Helderberg Plateau, where the essentially flat-lying rocks of the plateau have been deformed by gentle folds and minor faults during the crustal disturbance that produced the folded structure of the Appalachian Mountains. The zone of cave development in the Onondaga Limestone that includes Onesquethaw, Ward-Gregory [Clarksville], Leonard Caves, and the Slingerland Hellhole [Chatter-Stone-Hole] system, is bounded on the west by hills of the overlying amilton shales and sandstones and on the east by an escarpment formed by the exposed edge of the Onondaga and the underlying Esopus Siltstone. The limestone forms a rather flat bench sparsely dotted with small hills of glacial drift.

The origin and development of the cave is the result of progressive headward diversion of a tributary to Onesquethaw Creek. At present the cave-forming stream sinks roughly 1000 feet northwest of the Onesquethaw entrance, passes through the lowest levels of Onesquethaw Cave, and resurges at Jordan Cave to the northeast. The main passages of Onesquethaw Cave receive direct recharge from the sinking stream only during periods of flooding.

The cave is formed on a thrust fault. The "bedding plane" at the ceiling of the entrance passage marks the fault. Between the end of the first crawl and the beginning of the Broken Room, the fault cuts down across the beds. Slickensides can be seen in the ceiling at the beginning of the Barnyard. The dip of the fault flattens here. In the Broken Room are several calcite boulders. These represent infilling on the fault surface.

Outside the cave, the fault can be traced north. It is the same thrust seen in Clarksville Cave and as far north as John Boyd Thacher State Park.

M.V. Palmer did an extensive study of the hydrology of the cave. She determined that the cave can flood to the ceiling throughout its entire length.

Paleontological - The Onondaga Limestone is a reef limestone. As such several places in the cave (most notably near the beginning of the Barnyard) have excellent exposures of the Devonian age fossils. Due to the manner in which the cave floods, no paleontological resources of younger age have been found in the cave.

Archeological - No resources are known to exist in the cave.

Historical - No resources are known to exist in the cave.

SURFACE RESOURCES

Biological - The property contains no unique or unusual flora or fauna. The front 2/3 of the property is regularly farmed. Only the area around that cave entrance has been allowed to go back to natural vegetation. The primary early successional plants include gray dogwood, Cornus

sp., and staghorn sumac, *Rhus typhina*. The most common tree on the property is the sugar maple, *Acer saccharum*. A few black cherry, ash, and American elm are also present. The wild grape, *Vitis* sp., is also common.

Geological & Hydrological - A sinkhole is forming in the cornfield about half way between the entrance and the road. This sink is associated with the upper level passage that intersects the cave in the 2nd room and is east of the junction near the upstream end of this upper level passage. Additionally, as a result of Tropical Storm Irene, another hole has formed that is about 18" in diameter and 6 feet deep. This is located just east of the old apple tree. It seems that during the storm, the entire main sinkhole flooded and there was standing water out into the field. This water piped through the soil. This hole may be associated with the upstream end of the left-hand passage at the end of this upper level passage.

Paleontological - No resources are known to exist on the property.

Archeological - No resources are known to exist on the property.

Historical - No resources are known to exist on the property.

ACCESS POLICY

Groups wishing to visit Onesquethaw Cave will be required to get a permit. To obtain a permit visitors should e-mail a list of the people on the trip and the date. A permit will be sent back via e-mail. The preserve manager may be reached at onesquethaw@necaveconservancy.org. Visitors wishing to obtain permission other than by e-mail, may contact the manager to make other arrangements.

Regarding the small sink that is forming between the cave and the road and the six-foot deep hole near the apple tree, in the event that an entrance does form at one of these location (and processes should be allowed to proceed naturally) a gate should be installed somewhere in the upper level passage as the descent into the main passage from this upper level can be rather dangerous for individuals without proper experience. This gate should be designed so that it can be opened without a key from the inside.

USE CONFLICTS

Normally, use conflicts in cave management are caused by conflicts between recreational caving and preservation of an in-cave resource such as hibernating bats. Onesquethaw Cave is a sinking stream that drains about 1.4 sq. mi. including Lawson Lake (about 40 acres in size). Due to high water problems at the lake it is, on occasion, necessary of lower the water level. Such a step would likely cause the cave to flood. Events of December 1, 1990, clearly indicate that if lowering of water levels were to occur when cavers are in Onesquethaw Cave, the results could be disastrous.

To remedy this problem, it will be necessary to coordinate cave access and water releases; not permitting access when releases are planned and not making releases when people are in the cave. Individuals lowering the water level must check with the cave manager(s) first to make sure nobody is in the cave. In an ideal situation, a schedule of lake lowerings could be worked out in advance for a given period. To minimize use conflicts, lake lowerings should be scheduled for weekdays only - preferably Tuesdays, Wednesdays, or Thursdays. The use of a specially-designed culvert invert has greatly reduced the affects beavers have on the culvert.

EXPLORATION RULES

While Onesquethaw Cave has pretty much been explored from end to end, new passage

does on occasion, turn up. However, because some potential does exist the following simple rules to govern exploration are recommended:

1. The exploration party should be explicit in indicating what part of the cave will be explored when they ask for permission to enter the cave.
2. Any digging projects will have to be approved by the preserve manager. Persons proposing a dig project shall submit a plan to the manager detailing where they plan to dig, how long they plan to dig, and where they plan to dispose of the spoils. Plans should also include how the diggers plan to remediate the dig should it be abandoned. Projects that include potential passage modification require specific approval from the preserve manager. Any dig that is not worked on for more than one (1) year shall be considered abandoned and any subsequent work in the same area will require manager approval.

PUBLICITY POLICY

The cave is not publicized in magazines or newspapers of general circulation. Caver's publications like *The Northeastern Caver* and the *NSS News* may contain information on the latest discoveries. Some grotto publications may also have information, but again these have limited circulation and usually do not give locations.

SURFACE MANAGEMENT

Much of the 1.35 acres is leased for farming. Normally, the northern two-thirds of the preserve is planted in either corn or alfalfa. The farmer uses a no-till method of planting. The western edge of the property is mowed by the western neighbors. In return, they use the property to access the back of their property. Over the years, the width of the mowed area has been gradually enlarged. The width of the mowed area should be reduced so as to be no more than 20 feet from the western property line.

No camping is allowed on the preserve.

Parking is allowed only within 20 feet of County Route 301.

It was recently discovered that snowmobile trail S75 went across the property. In 2007 Albany County delisted these trails, but the trails are still shown on some maps. Contact should be made with the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) to assure the trail is removed from subsequent editions of their snowmobile trail map. The trail also appears in *All Outdoors Atlas & Field Guide – Eastern New York* put out by Sportsmen Connection. They also should be contacted to assure the trails are removed from subsequent editions of their atlas.

A changing area has been constructed to the left of the trail into the sinkhole. Some sort of a floor needs to be placed in it. This might be as simple as a couple of wood pallets. Additionally, the location of this area has resulted in cavers accessing the cave via the steep mud bank adjacent to it. A fence should be placed to direct cavers back to the main trail into the sink.

A kiosk should be constructed where the main trail meets the spur to the changing area.

As noted the northern two-thirds of the property is primarily in either corn or alfalfa. Roughly in the center of this is a newly developing sinkhole. This sink, while it has “rabbit holes” off the bottom appears to be stable and at the last corn harvest vehicles drove over it without any apparent impact. The newer opening near the old apple tree has been marked to prevent vehicles from driving into it.

MONITORING

To know whether a plan is working, requires monitoring. This may be as simple as driving by the preserve on a routine basis or more complicated strategies involving data-loggers and more.

At Onesquethaw Cave one of the concerns is the status of newer openings that have formed in or near the corn field. These should be observed on a regular basis to ascertain what is

happening with them.

Additionally, it is recommended that a light monitoring data-logger be placed in the cave. Location can be determined later, but just before the 1st room or in the 2nd room would seem to be logical locations.

RESCUE CONSIDERATIONS

There has been only one known rescue at Onesquethaw Cave. Primary dangers in the cave result from flooding and from the climbs into the upper level passages in the first and second rooms.

In the event of a fall and the need for a rescue, it appears that a sked-type stretcher could be taken out through the winding entrance passage without too much difficulty. The only problematic area might be at the downstream end of the entrance passage where it enters the first room. In fact, despite the large amount of crawling in the cave, moving a stretcher through most of its length would not appear to be too difficult. The most difficult area to negotiate would probably be the Duck-Under, the fissure and wet crawl between the Barnyard and the Otter Slide.

Flooding is another problem. As noted above, M.V. Palmer determined that the cave can flood to the ceiling along its entire length — the cave quite literally filling like a bottle. If someone is trapped in the cave, all they can do is move to the highest ground and hope the water recedes before it gets there. This is what happened in the December 1, 1990 rescue. No attempts should be made at rescue until the water levels drop and it is safe to enter the cave.

One of the problems with the cave is that the first place in the cave to flood is the first crawl off the second room. This crawl, beyond which the majority of the cave lies, acts like the elbow in a drainpipe. At one time, the inward end of this crawl was quite a large room (by northeast standards). In less than 20 years, this room was filled to within a foot of the ceiling. It has since been re-excavated and a 6-foot climb is now present. In all events, the size of this room and the climb vary from season to season and from year to year. Cavers caught beyond this crawl have as their only viable option to climb the fissure at the end of this crawl. With some passage enlargement, this might permit a caver to reach the first room via the upper level, though it is unclear how they would then get down.

The Barnyard and the Duck-under can also act as water traps. The only feasible way around these are the two extremely tight crawls that lead from the top of the Otter Slide to the upstream end of the Barnyard. Some study of these should be made to see if they could be enlarged.

FUTURE PLANS

1. The top of the slope by the changing area should be fenced to discourage visitors from accessing the cave from there.
2. Some sort of a floor should be placed in the changing area.
3. A small kiosk should be constructed just west of the changing area, on the trail into the sinkhole.
4. Place stakes to redefine the size of the mowed area.
5. Contact the Albany County Department of Public Works to assure they remember to contact the NCC before work is done on County Route 109 at the outlet of Lawson Lake.
6. Regarding former snowmobile trail S75, contact should be made with the NYS Office of Parks, Recreation, and Historic Preservation (OPRHP) to assure the trail is removed from subsequent editions of their snowmobile trail map. The trail also appears in *All Outdoors Atlas & Field Guide – Eastern New York* put out by Sportsmen Connection. They also need to be contacted to assure the trails are removed from subsequent editions of their atlas.