

The Legend of the Quapaw Cave, Reexamined

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The legend of the Quapaw Cave purportedly based on the tale of a man named Nathan Dale who claimed to have been born in 1833 on the site of the present Quapaw Bathhouse. It is probable that Dale is only a mythical figure. The name does not appear in any of the local federal censuses, including the earliest one taken in 1840. If Dale had existed, he would have been seven years old at that time and unlikely to be anywhere but at home when the census takers came through. The name never occurs in the sworn testimony on pioneer land use taken from early Hot Springs settlers in 1830s and 1840s, or in the 1884 Congressional hearings on the creek arch that included testimony on area history. The name is absent from the long lists of land claimants in 1875 and 1877. It is also missing from the extant city directories in the 1870s and 1880s.

Even if Dale were an actual historic figure, his description of the site is grounded in myth, not fact. It was in fact an early bathhouse site. The Magnesia spring (renamed the Quapaw spring) pouring from the side of the creek had a stronger flow than most of the other springs, and even in 1833 it would have supported some sort of bathing facility. This is also the site where John C. Hale erected his bathhouse in 1854. It is thought to be the first real bathhouse on Hot Springs Creek.

Mr. Dale described an area where Indians took thermal water and mud baths and a long passage winding back into the mountainside that had streams of hot water gushing from the walls. The Quapaw Indians have a tradition of bathing in the springs going back to the late 18th century, but the rest of the statement is not accurate. By 1833 the hot springs were by no means a secluded spot; a great deal of exploration and even settlement had taken place in the area. In fact the thermal springs had been carefully documented in 1804 by Hunter and Dunbar, who measured spring temperatures and described the tufa domes surrounding the thermal springs but made no mention of any cave. No subsequent letters or scientific reports written during the 1800s mention a subterranean passage or cave with a spring issuing from it, either.

The observations attributed to Dale were probably old stories based on local memories of the Magnesia Spring. This spring flowed from the bank just above the surface of Hot Springs Creek at the south end of the Quapaw Bathhouse site. This was a popular bathhouse site at least as early as 1850s. After the 1878 fire destroyed all the bathhouses on the south end of Bathhouse Row, the spring was the subject of several stereographs before the construction of the creek arch in 1884 destroyed its natural outlet above Hot Springs Creek. In fact, the Quapaw Bathhouse site (formerly the site of the Magnesia Bathhouse and others) was popular with bathhouse owners chiefly because of its proximity to the high-volume Magnesia Spring, which was reputed to have superior therapeutic effects. The Mud Hole site, a few dozen feet northeast of the Magnesia Spring, was also considered to be an efficacious bathing site; it was used by indigent bathers in the 1860s and possibly earlier. Dale may well have seen American Indians from other tribes as well as from the Quapaw tribe bathing at the Magnesia spring. The Cherokee, the Choctaw, and the Osage were in and out of the area throughout the years that relocation was forced upon American Indians, but their activities would not have represented Native American life as it existed before European settlement.

Stereographs made after the fire of 1878 show Magnesia Spring and the surrounding tufa bank, which is full of crevices. In the Congressional hearings of 1884 on the creek arch and other matters, a sworn statement appears that describes the soil matrix around the Magnesia Spring and Mud Hole as porous and honeycombed with natural tufa chambers. Not long after the fire of 1878, VERY strong blasting was carried out at Magnesia Spring under the orders of George Smith, who then controlled the property, to increase the flow of thermal water. The 1884 hearings also include sworn testimony to the effect that the blasting was drastic enough to cause most of the springs feeding the Mud Hole (also a former Government Free Bathhouse site) to stop flowing. That the flow there was diminished was reaffirmed several times during the course of the hearings. Similarly, blasting at the Big Iron Spring to remove the large tufa dome there caused several of the higher springs to disappear forever. The construction of the creek arch itself completed the destruction of Magnesia Spring's original termination point (and possibly that of surrounding springs). Thermal water formerly flowing from it was subsequently captured by the spring collection system.

To summarize what has been established so far,

- Hot springs in their natural state (as they would have been during prehistoric times) found their way to the surface through the fissured tufa rocks and flowed from tufa domes built up over the centuries from deposits of calcium carbonate and other minerals dissolved in the thermal water.
- The tufa soil matrix is porous and honeycombed with cavities, some fairly large.
- The spring "channels" through the tufa can be affected by blasting.
- Blasting was carried out at the Magnesia Spring site in the late 1870s and early 1880s, as well as in 1921.
- Except for Nathan Dale, an obscure historical character at best, no early residents, scientists, or travelers in the hot springs area ever reported a cave with springs flowing from its walls.
- No cave is visible in any of the photographs taken of the Quapaw Bathhouse site in the 1860s and 1870s.

From this, I conclude that the area's geological structure would probably not have produced an extensive cave with springs flowing from its walls. It is still more unlikely that if such a cave had existed, it would have passed unnoticed by the many visitors and residents in the area until Mr. Dale observed it sometime after 1833. Even if Dale had been the first to call attention to it, the cave should still have been in existence during the thirty or forty years before the blasting carried out in the late 1870s and early 1880s destroyed it. However, the photographs taken of the site prior to the blasting do not show any cave. Therefore the cave as described by Mr. Dale could only have existed in his imagination.

When further blasting carried out during excavation for the Quapaw Bathhouse caused what was apparently a new spring to start flowing in February 1921, everyone concerned was quite naturally excited and curious. However, excavation in 1914 had also uncovered a "new" spring at Fordyce Bathhouse, which again suggests that blasting tended to divert established spring water flows and bring old springs to the surface by new routes. Old maps show several springs formerly in the vicinity of the Quapaw site; the spring captured by the blasting could have been any of these, or it could have been the Magnesia Spring itself.

In late February of 1921, Hot Springs Reservation Superintendent Parks examined the “cave” and described it to NPS Director Mather as being a pocket in the tufa rock similar to another discovered near the Arlington Hotel some years earlier. He reports that “these pockets are quite common in this particular rock.” This statement is corroborated by the earlier sworn testimony in the 1884 Congressional hearings. The NPS chief civil engineer also expressed disappointment in the cave’s size and appearance. Up to this point, no mention was made of any artifacts at all having been found in connection with the cave.

Early newspaper reports of the cave, along with an excerpt from Zella Gaither’s early 1920s book on Garland County, identify artifacts found there as a few tufa-encrusted projectile points and turtle shells. None of the accounts mention the discovery of the Quapaw “gods of the Bath” featured in later brochures. The explanation of this omission is simple: the figures were not there.

In fact, the Quapaw Bath House Company actually purchased the “gods” from Tom Pavatea , a Navaho Indian trader of Polacca, Arizona, in April 1922. The figures were called Nampayos Rain Gods and sold for \$2 each; the postage and insurance brought the total cost to \$10.28 as stated on the invoice from Mr. Pavatea. George A. Callahan, Sr. (original president of the Quapaw Bath House Company) sent payment with a letter stating that it was in payment “for the figureenes [sic] that you so kindly shipped us. They are indeed very interesting, and have caused considerable attention at the QUAPAW BATHS.” Even though the figures later served as material evidence for the folk tales told about the Quapaw cave and printed in the bathhouse’s promotional material, Mr. Callahan’s letter clearly indicates that they were not commissioned copies of artifacts found in the Quapaw cave but rather were original works of art purchased for display at the bathhouse.

All of the early bathhouse owners were entrepreneurs alert to any circumstance that could distinguish their bathhouses from all the others. This probably explains why Mr. Callahan purchased the little Hopi gods and wove an interesting tale connecting them with the newly discovered “cave” and some of the popular area legends about Indian use of the hot springs. It basically seems to have been a creative but workable marketing idea that took advantage of the contemporary fascination with Indian artifacts and fanciful Indian lore. The Maurice and Fordyce Bathhouses displayed Indian artifacts for the same reason. For years afterward, subsequent Quapaw Bathhouse managers featured the stories and the gods in brochures and advertisements, and the story was eventually accepted as historic fact.

In a 1983 letter to the park, Southwest Regional Curator David Brugge identified Nampayo as a Hopi potter who began a revival of ceramic crafts among her people early in the century. She is well known in the Southwest, and her pieces were commanding high prices there in the 1980s. Because the four figures that the Callahans own are documented as original Nampayo pieces, they may be quite valuable and should be stored in a safe, climate controlled area.