Names 41.1 (March 1993)

In a Tavern, in a *Caverne*: Explicating Missouri Names

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Local folk-etymologists and professional placename scholars have agreed with 19th and early 20th-century travelers on the Missouri and Osage rivers that three separate sets of "Tavern" creeks and caves must have been the sites of actual frontier taverns. Instead, both historical evidence and inspection of the sites indicate that the source of the names was the application, to certain open rock-shelters, of a play on the French words *caverne* and *taverne*.

How does a cave cause a creek to be named "Tavern"? The actual taverns that were built over or within caves beneath St. Louis and a few other Missouri towns in the 19th century are well known. But there also has existed, at each of three widely separated places in onetime French-speaking districts, a cave near the mouth of a Tavern, Big Tavern, or Little Tavern creek. The names all date from the late-18th century, when the creeks were so far from European settlements as to make it virtually impossible that anyone could have kept a *taverne* on their banks. What did exist, near the confluence of each creek with the Missouri or Osage river, was a landmark *caverne*.

In France a hillside *caverne* does not, however, immediately suggest a *taverne*, whose underground wine-cellar is a *cave*. Although in English "cave" and "cavern" are almost interchangeable, "cave" is the more colloquial. In parts of Missouri that have been English-speaking since white settlement began, there are no

"Tavern" caves – or creeks. *Caverne-tavernes* are peculiar to French Missouri.[1]

One pair of creeks – Tavern and Little Tavern – join the Missouri just below the present village of St. Albans in the northeast corner of Franklin County. As late as 1797 the site was still several miles above the last white settlement, less than 30 miles due west of St. Louis (Abel-Henderson 432). Sixty miles on up the Missouri and unknown to any Europeans of that time but explorers and fur traders, two more Tavern creeks, Big and Little, flow into the river in the southeast corner of Callaway County. Still another 20 miles west and 40 more up the winding Osage River, in Miller County, there come in a third Little Tavern Creek and, a mile farther yet, the longest and broadest of the Tavern creeks; this is met, five miles upstream, by yet another Little Tavern.

To the ear of the curious, "tavern" has seemed to echo the conspicuous *caverne* nearby. But why not simply Cavern or Cave Creek? Is there anything but the rhyme that might suggest a tavern? Could any of these caves have contained, indeed, some sort of *auberge*, *taverne*, or *estaminet*? Local folk may tell you they did.

Of the two of the caves that still exist, neither seems very tavernlike, one not at all. The first, Tavern Rock Cave in Franklin County, is the more likely – a rectangular indentation, originally 120 feet broad, 20 high, and 40 deep, in the base of Tavern Rock, the highest bluff along the lower 100 miles of the Missouri River. It was formerly right on the river, though now hidden from it by some 200 yards of cottonwoods. The second extant cave, now a state-protected bat refuge on the Osage River and called Bat Cave, has three fairly large, dry chambers, but the entrance is some 40 feet straight up the bluff; a double overhang below it, however, affords a shallow shelter. At the third site, on the Missouri near the Montgomery-Callaway county line, nothing more cave-like can now be seen than a few high, shallow overhangs; between 1893 and 1986, when a railroad ran along the foot of the bluff, these sometimes did shelter workgangs of as many as 50 men.[2] For a generation after the 1790s the site was known as *Caverne à Monbrun*, presumably for Etienne or Don Esteban Boucher de Monbrun, a retired militia officer from a Canadian

family of minor prominence in the Illinois country (Houck vol. 1: 198, 201).

One of the seven Tavern creeks and one of the three caves (not at the same place) figure on maps near the end of the Spanish era, when the white population of Upper Louisiana was still mainly French-Canadian. Earlier explorers, notably Etienne de Véniard de Bourgmont and Father Dumont de Montigny, who charted the Missouri River between 1714 and 1728, marked no caves among the bluffs, creeks, and islands that their maps and journals quite accurately designate (Villiers 47, 49; Norall 113). In the 1790s, Nicolas de Finiels' map for the first time places the word *Caverne* at Tavern Rock Cave; the adjacent creek, however, it names *R[ivière] au Sable* 'Sand Creek' (Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark*, facing 94; Ekberg et al. 87). *Taverne* first appears on a contemporary map with placenames in both French and English, evidently by John Evans and James Mackay, a Welshman and a Scotsman in the Spanish service who explored the Missouri as far as present-day North Dakota in 1795-1797.[3] Their map translates *Taverne* as "Cave" – it does not show the creeks at all. It is now understood to be the map, probably revised by Finiels, a copy of which President Thomas Jefferson supplied to Meriwether Lewis and William Clark for their more famous expedition of 1804-1806. Lewis and Clark stopped to investigate the cave on May 23, 1804, but camped two miles beyond this so-called "*taverne*" (Abel facing 344; Wood, "Finiels").

In switching back and forth between "cave" and "tavern," Clark and the four enlisted men in the Corps of Discovery who left journals simply followed the map's usage. Clark's field notes, paraphrased in his journal, are as explicit about both cave and creeks as his characteristic orthography was poor. The cave, he wrote, was

> an endented part of a Rock which juted over the water, Called by the french the tavern which is a Cave 40 yards long with the river[,] 4 feet Deep [journal: 40 feet] & about 20 feet high, this is a place the India[ns] & french Pay omage to, many names are wrote up on the rock[,] Mine among others [journal: many different immages are Painted on the Rock], at one mile above this rock comes in a small

> Creek called Tavern Creek, abov one other Small Creek (Moulton vol. 2: 246, 248).[4]

Clark's sketch map of the day's travel labels the place "Tavern Cave" but omits the creeks (Wood, "Clark" 248).

The other journals present minor variations. Sergeant Charles Floyd estimated the cave to be half as deep but twice as high:

> the tavern or Cave a noted place on the South Side of the River 120 feet long 20 feet in Debth 40 feet purpendickler... high Cliftes one mile to a Creek called tavern Creek" (Thwaites, *Travels* vol. 7: 5). Private Joseph Whitehouse agreed with Clark: "A noted [p]lace called cave tavern in a clift of rocks on [the] South Side, which is 120 feet long 20 perpenticular (ibid. 31).[5]

Sergeant John Ordway described it as "the Cave tavern" under "high clifts, 1 mile to Tavern Creek" (1804, microfilm).[6] Private (later Sergeant) Patrick Gass simply recorded "the Tavern Cove [sic?], a noted place among the French traders" (13).[7] None of them sought to explain the name of the cave (nor how the Indian pictographs and French graffiti might represent "homage"). Two years later Zebulon Pike simply marked "Cave" on the map of his Missouri-Osage expedition (Coues vol. 2: 362; 3: map).

Travelers up the Missouri during the next 30 years customarily had the landmark cave pointed out by name as they went by. In 1810 the Englishman John Bradbury described "the Tavern Rocks, so called from a large cave therein, level with the surface of the river," without pausing to conjecture what a cave might have to do with a tavern (41). Over the years the association of words evolved its own explanation. The cave, so Henry M. Brackenridge surmised in 1811, was "a stopping place for voyagers ascending, or returning to their homes after a long absence" (Thwaites, *Travels* vol. 6: 35). The army surgeon John Gale, accompanying another expedition in 1818, reported a "vast cave called the tavern" but did not speculate on the name (Nichols 10).[8]

A proper name for the cave finally appears in 1823, when Duke Paul of Württemberg briefly observed the "*Grande Caverne*, or *Caverne à Tardie*,... perhaps fifty feet deep" (203); nine years later Prince Maximilian of Wied-Neuwied heard it as *Taverne de Montardis*, evidently after Pierre or Don Pedro de Montardy (d. 1809), a French militia officer and merchant of St. Louis who in 1792 was licensed to trade on the Missouri (Thwaites, *Travels* vol. 22: 239; Houck vol. 1: 183, 241; Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark* 162; Collet 80). By 1838 Montardy just as abruptly vanishes from the record, though the "sort of cave" below the height "known to the people thereabout as Tavern Rock" had become, so the Milanese Count Francesco Arese was given to understand, a "refuge for the crews of the flatboats that go up and down the river" (63).[9]

These casual references have excited speculation. Robert Ramsay, the late dean of Missouri placename studies, took over the footnotes of early 20th-century editors, expanding Clark's cryptic reference to "omage" to make the cave "a sacred spot, a sort of shrine, to the Indians, who regarded the place with superstitious awe" (Thwaites, *Travels* vol. 5: 41; Ramsay 26). A recent guidebook adds "early settlers" to those whom it supposes sheltered there (Griffith 75). Another goes further: "Because they called it the 'Taverne' (cafe or restaurant), some form of a rest stop or inn may have existed there to provide for the comforts of river travelers" (Ferris 298). Altogether, so a real-estate reporter concluded in 1990, the cave must have made the site "a thriving center of commerce for native Indians and French fur trappers" long before 1836, when St. Albans was founded nearby (*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 16 February 1990). Would not such a place have had a flourishing tavern?

Sixty miles west, the *Caverne à Monbrun* went through a similar embroidering. No French or Spanish observer left a record of its dimensions, appearance, or possible use. The first explorers commented only on the surrounding bluffs. Bourgmont in 1714 noted the *chaîne de rochers* stretching along the north bank, interrupted by *une petite rivière*, and several islands opposite, one quite long (Villiers 49; Norall 115). Montigny's much more elaborate chart of 1728 indicates the bluffs on the north and an

island to the south but neither cave nor creek, although it quite accurately singles out the nearly 400-foot bluff a few miles downriver as *Rocher le plus haut de la Route* (Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark*, vol. 1: facing 14).[10] As late as 1785 a fairly precise official account of the Missouri found no features of any kind worth listing along this stretch (Nasatir, "Spanish Louisiana" 527-28).

Monbrun's name finally becomes attached to the cave and one of the two creeks in journals and maps of the 1790s. Finiels gives *Rivière à Monbrun* (Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark* vol. 1: facing 94; Foley 88). Mackay's table of distances between points on the Missouri adds *Caverne de Mont brun... dans une chaine de roches, rive du Nord* (Abel-Henderson 433). The map illustrating François Marie Perrin du Lac's journal of travel up the Missouri in 1802, after passing by Tavern Rock Cave and its creeks without notice, here names only *I[le] à la Caverne*, apparently the same island shown by Montigny, but not the cave itself (facing title page). The bilingual Evans-Mackay-Finiels map, in Clark's possession in 1804, duly specifies *Caverne à Montbrun*, literally translated as "Montbrun's Cave" (Abel facing 344).

The first linkage of cave, creek, or island to a tavern appears in Clark's journal for May 30, 1804: "passed a large Island a creek opposit on the St[arboard or north] Side Just abov a *Cave* called *Monbrun Tavern* & River [field notes: Monbrains]." Was he transferring the name from the "tavern" cave he had looked into the week before? The sketch map in his field notes does not; it labels the site simply "Monbruns Cave & R[iver]" (Moulton vol. 2: 264, 265; Wood, "Clark" 250).[11] Sergeant Ordway noted only "a Cave Clifts called Monbrans Tavern" (1804, microfilm)[12] Gass's journal, as published in 1807 (the manuscript is lost), introduces some doubt about the cave; his schoolteacher-editor transcribed the key word as "a *cove* where there were high cliffs on the north side opposite an island, called Mombran's tavern" (14, emphasis added). A map drawn by Private Robert Frazer, for a journal lost and probably never finished, shows only "I[sland] of Tavern" (Moulton vol. 1: map 124). *Island, creek, cave, cove*, or *tavern*: the expedition saw them all only as they passed by up the river.

Later observers who paid any attention to the spot only further garbled the name. Although Brackenridge in 1811 offered the explanation that "Montbrunt's tavern" was "another resting place for voyagers" (Thwaites, *Travels* vol. 6: 43), Gale in 1818 merely noted "Montbourn's Tavern, a cave on the North" (Nichols 12). Others mentioned no cave; the journal of Major Stephen Long's expedition in 1819 described only "hills... extending eight or nine miles on the north side of the river" (Thwaites, *Travels* vol. 14: 137).

The first traveler to leave a circumstantial description of the "great cliff, called the *Caverne à Montbrun*," Duke Paul of Württemberg, in 1823, was also the last to notice it at all:

> Between awesome cliffs a small creek, the *Rivière de la caverne*, plunges into the Missouri. The rock mass, almost three hundred feet high, hangs at least thirty feet over the edge of the stream. The lowest level is most deeply hollowed out, forming a long, commodious chamber [*Halle*], which extends crescent-shaped some hundred feet along the creek and the Missouri. In the space [*Raum*] thus created, several hundred persons could seek shelter from rain and bad weather. ... I found many traces of Indian painting on the walls of the bluff, ... very well preserved.[13]

The nearest that the Duke came to calling this rock-shelter a tavern, however, was to say that *Taverne-Insel*, the narrow, two-mile island on the far side of the river bore "the name of the cave" (216-217).

Württemberg's French boatman from St. Louis, who claimed to have hidden in the cave along with some companions and 30 Osage Indians during warfare with the Fox tribe, recalled Monbrun as "a French Creole from Canada" who had "led a band of Indians ... during one of the wars between the whites and the aborigines" (216-17). That a gentleman who had in fact led a St. Louis militia expedition up the Mississippi in 1783 against the British-allied Sauk Indians could be so identified 40 years later puts etymological peccadilloes into perspective (Houck vol. 1: 201).[14] Thereafter the *caverne* itself, as well as the name, altogether disappears from local record. Evidently such a shelter would

cease to be even a landmark as steamboats displaced the last *coureurs de bois* and the town of Portland was settled (1831) a few miles away. To a Swiss traveler heading upriver for the Far West in 1846 "there was not much to be seen" there or elsewhere across the state (Lienhard 6). An otherwise perceptive Englishman a year later would have agreed (Palliser 78); in 1848 a French artist admired the bluffs for the verdure that concealed them (Girardin 91).[15]

By the end of the 19th century local memory reached no farther back than 1815 and the first Anglo-American settlers (*History of Callaway* 133). Big and Little Tavern creeks still flowed, but if a sizable shelter-cave existed in 1892 no one thought to mention it when blasting for railway construction perhaps obliterated it (Berthoff 30).[16] A highly circumstantial guidebook-writer with lifelong (1903-1970) experience on the Missouri passes the site by unnoticed (Griffith 67), and a retired river pilot identifies the few small overhangs that remain nearby only with his boyhood exploits around Portland (see note 10).

When Robert Ramsay recovered "Mombrun" and "Montbrun's or Mombran's Tavern" from the Lewis and Clark journals, it was to argue that the Tavern creeks at the site confirmed his etymology for Tavern Rock Cave downriver. Were there not, indeed, "*many* parallels in early Missouri history"? One, at any rate: Bat Cave on the Osage, close by its Tavern creeks (26, emphasis added). Unfortunately, no one seems ever to have called Bat Cave, or the shallow overhangs below it, a tavern. The main creek was first mapped, as *Rivière à la Caverne*, by Perrin du Lac, who ascended the Osage in 1802 (facing title page).[17] It becomes "R[iver] Tavern" on Private Frazer's map; he was the only member of the Lewis and Clark expedition (which of course did not explore the Osage) to refer to it (Moulton vol. 1: map 12-4).[18]

Nicholas Hesse, writing in the 1830s from the new German settlements in the area, noted "the so-called Tavern Creek," a phrase suggesting he did not think of the *Höhle* near its mouth – if indeed he saw it – in connection with a tavern (Bek, "Hesse," 33). If Bat Cave was the *belle grotte ouverte* that the French traveler Victor Tixier investigated on his return journey down the

Osage in 1840, his journal gives no hint – except the ladder that he found by it – that it had ever been occupied; he found nothing in it but *oiseaux de nuit* – 'bats' (257). Sixty years later the state geologists sought to explain the name of this Tavern Creek as simply "a corruption of the word "cavern"... on account of the many caves found in the limestone bluffs on either side" (Ball, et al. 16).[19] By 1930 a local inquirer into Miller County placenames still could venture nothing more than that "the Tavern [Creek]... was originally known as 'Caverne' creek... for the large cave at the mouth of the creek" (Shultz 540). Another quarter-century, however, and the etymologist seeking parallels to Tavern Rock Cave flatly asserted that Bat Cave "was known in early days... as 'The Tavern,' having been long used as a stopping place by boatmen in bad weather" (Ramsay 26).

A stopping place, likely enough, but never, either there or at the two other sites, anything resembling a tavern. Tavern Rock Cave could have accommodated a small one but never did. Even less probable is the now lost overhang once called Monbrun's or the shallow one below Bat Cave – certainly not the unapproachable, bat-infested cave itself. Ramsay gratuitously adds *la taverne à Mellier*, a purely fictional "rock house" created by the novelist and linguist Ward Dorrance, who placed it fifty miles upriver from the nearest actual *caverne-taverne* (Ramsay 26; Dorrance 37, 41).

And yet somehow our three shelter-caves were associated with the idea of a tavern. Was the shaky orthography of frontier mapmakers to blame, confusing "C" and "T" in their 18th-century hand? Evidently not: those letters are quite distinct on the early maps. Nor was it a mishearing of *caverne* by incoming English-speakers, the first of whom, James Mackay in the 1790s, was fluent in French and also Spanish (Houck, vol. 2: 180). Later arrivals who were not, notably Clark, found "Tavern" already on the map (Wood, "Finiels" 400).

Was it simply punning, then, that elevated shelter-caves, and the creeks nearby, from *caverne* to *taverne*? Many much more involved word games were played in Upper Louisiana. St. Louis was familiarly *Paincourt* 'short loaf;' Carondelet, *Vide Poche* 'spendthrift;' Ste Geneviève, *Misère* 'hard luck;' Peoria, *Les Piss* 'worse luck[?]' Men mocked each other's peculiarities with

dit-names: Sanschagrin, Sansquartier, Beausoleil, Bijou, Fifi, Belle-pêche, Lachance (Foley 25, 35, 85, 86; McDermott, *Glossary* 68-69; Collot 345, 368-69; Thwaites, "Canadian Archives" 137).20 What besides the sound of the word might make such a wry joke out of *taverne*?

Since none of our three onetime shelter-caves supports the supposition that Missouri caves "*must* have made admirable taverns" (Ramsay 26, emphasis added), at most the very incongruity of such a notion may have amused boatmen camping under a rocky ledge after a hard day's rowing and cordeling a pirogue up the river. Perhaps, too, making gentlemen merchants in the fur trade like Montardy or Boucher de Monbrun nominal keepers of such a miserable mockery of a tavern was more derisory – in the Missouri tradition – than deferential. We seem to be pondering only a crude bit of inside irony.

"Perhaps" and "seem" are, however, too familiar pitfalls of placename etymology. Once-multilingual Missouri excels in airy deduction, anachronism, and suppositious derivations from French, German, Siouan, or Algonquian (see McDermott, "Clark's Struggle"). We can only caution the curious traveler along a backcountry Tavern Road not to expect to find hostelry sites along the Tavern Creek in the bottomland below – or even in the cave around the next bend. The temptation is strong to picture a *lieu où les gens viennent boire pour l'argent* ensconced in a *lieu creux dans les rochers*. Although thrice repeated in Missouri, it is a wilderness mirage.

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NOTES

1. Even the "Cave Creek" located in 1874 in northeastern Missouri is not so called today (Ramsay et al. 71; U.S.G.S. 7.5-minute map, Spencerburg Quadrant). In France, placenames derived from Latin *taberna* (tavern) are not associated with caves or streams (Longnon 572).

2. The author thanks Mr. and Mrs. Marion Aubuchon, Rhineland, Mo., for the railroad information. Letter, March 1990.

3. For Evans and Mackay, see Hafen vol. 3: 99-117; vol. 4: 185-206.

4. The present height and width of the cave have been reduced by debris from the bluff above, across which a railway roadbed was cut in 1887. Jerry D. Vineyard, Deputy State Geologist, to author, 8 November 1991; *Railway Age*, 11 March 1887.

5. The ceiling today varies in height from 15 to 35 feet. Vineyard to author, 8 November 1991.

6. "Corn tavern," an evident misreading of Ordway's manuscript by his 20th-century editor, has provided the only suggestion that food had even been stored in the cave (Quaife, 80).

7. Since Gass's manuscript has not been seen since it was edited in 1807, this reading is unverifiable.

8. Gale's modern editor volunteers that the cave "perhaps was used as a tavern" (Nichols 10).

9. For common usage of "Tavern Creek" by settlers in the 1830s, see Bek, "Duden" 226-28, 437.

10. Professor Shaw Livermore, Jr., kindly confirmed the inscriptions from the copy of the Paris map in the W. L. Clements Library, Ann Arbor. Letter to author, 16 July 1990.

11. If *Ile à Monbrun* was the Portland Island of 1879, near the south bank, it is not the nameless island now below Portland, which was formed, close to the north bank, after the Army Corps of Engineers realigned the channel in the 1930s. (CE map, 1879; U.S.G.S. 7.5-minute map, Morrison quadrant, 1974). The author thanks the island's owner, Capt. Royal Tate, Portland, Mo., for various recollections since the 1920s. Interview, 30 July 1990.

12. Since Ordway's written "a" and "o" are usually indistinguishable, there is no need for his editor's reading of "cave" as "cove" (Quaife 81). See notes 6 and 7, above.

13. The site is evidently the bluff-end east of the mouth of Little Tavern Creek, although all trace of an overhang has been lost through blasting for railroad construction in 1892 and quarrying for the Corps of Engineers in the 1930s.

14. The British commander at Michilimackinac had reported him as "a Mr. Moumbourne Bouché, ... a Canadian ... Commissioned by the Spaniards" (Thwaites 1892, 66). There were in fact no Indian-white wars, as such, at that time and place.

15. The leading authority on the cartography of the Missouri River knows of no later references. W. Raymond Wood to author, 11 September 1991.

16. For local information, the author thanks Mrs. Marjorie Miller and William Auchly, Montgomery County Historical Society; for geological advice, Jerry D. Vineyard, Kurt Hollman, and David Hoffman, Missouri Department of Natural Resources; and Ishmael Kronk, the adjacent landowner.

17. Finiels' list of nearly two dozen tributaries of the Osage skips over this creek, by any name (Ekberg et al. 89).

18. Although Wilson Cave, another 20 miles up this Tavern Creek, was the home of a frontier family in the 1820s, the creek was named earlier (*Missouri Guide* 562).

19. Geologists have located only one other habitable cave conveniently near the Osage River on this Tavern Creek (Fowke 95; Bretz 341; *Missouri Speleology* 22).

20. For advice on the meaning of the placenames the author thanks Professor Peter Moogk, letter 16 June 1992.

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_____. "William Clark's Mapping in Missouri, 1803-1804." *Missouri Historical Review* 76.3 (1982): 241-52.

Württemberg, Paul Wilhelm, Duke of. *Erste Reise nach dem nördlichen Amerika in den Jahren 1822 bis 1824*. Stuttgart and Tübingen: J. G. Cotta, 1825.

Conference on Literary Onomastics

The Nineteenth Annual Conference on Literary Onomastics (COLA) will be held on Saturday, 6 November 1993, at the Holiday Inn in Athens, Georgia. Registration is $20, which includes both admission to the sessions and the annual luncheon.

For further information, contact the conference coordinator, Betty J. Irwin, University of Georgia, Department of English, 254 Park Hall, Athens, Georgia 30602-6205.

American Name Society

The annual meeting of the American Name Society will be held in Toronto, Ontario, 27-30 December, 1993. Lodging is being arranged by Allan Metcalf at the Prestigious Four Seasons Toronto – said to be one of the two or three best hotels in North America. We have been guaranteed double room rates of $95 Canadian (approximately US $70). For reservations, call toll-free (800) 332-3442, ((800) 268-6282 in Canada), ((416)964-0411 direct), and ask for the American Dialect Society meeting rates.

The ANS Banquet will be held on the panoramic 45th floor restaurant of the Four Seasons on 28 December (time, menu and price details will be announced).

Questions or comments concerning the meeting or banquet should be addressed to the Chair of the Local Arrangements Committee, Sheila Embleton, Department of Languages, Literatures and Linguistics, York University, 4700 Keele St, North York, Ontario M3J 1P3.