



ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL

312 Madison Street ■ Clarksville, TN 37040  
(931) 647-2331 ■ Fax: (931) 645-1574  
[www.clarksville.tn.us](http://www.clarksville.tn.us)

# News Release

**Media Contact:**

Michelle Dickerson  
VP of Communications  
931-551-4313, ext. 227  
[cmcedc@clarksville.tn.us](mailto:cmcedc@clarksville.tn.us)

## Cave Reflects Natural & Cultural History of Clarksville

**Clarksville, TN** – Dunbar Cave State Natural Area is a 110-acre park that is one of Clarksville’s most scenic areas at all four seasons. In the 1930s and 40s, the cave entrance served as a naturally air-conditioned venue to Big Band performers. Later owned by country music legend Roy Acuff, the venue hosted some of Nashville’s biggest entertainers. The State Natural Area celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2003.

### **HISTORY**

#### **1790-1840**

In 1790, Isaac Rowe Peterson traveled to the Clarksville area to seek his fortune. He came across the cave, and staked a claim on it. While he returned to North Carolina to gather his family, another man – Thomas Dunbar – found the cave, staked a claim, and built a home. Peterson returned with his family in 1791 to take possession of his claim, but found the Dunbar family already living there.

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After a bitter dispute, the matter was settled in court. Peterson received the title to the land, but had to pay Dunbar a sum of one hundred pounds for the house.

### **1900-1945**

In 1931 a group of Clarksville civic and business leaders formed the Dunbar Cave and Idaho Springs Corporation. The purpose of the group was to develop the cave tract into a resort. Their first act was to build a dam across the valley to form a 15-acre lake, fed by the cave stream. The Idaho Springs Hotel was then built and a swimming pool, tennis courts, lighted parking lots, and other improvements were added.

A pavilion with a bandstand and a concessions building were also added to the cave entrance. The improvements were made in native stone to harmonize with the surroundings. Finally, an electrical lighting system was built into the cave.

The pavilion became the site of dances, and the music was provided by the big bands of the era. Clarksville was in the path of a major route between Louisville and Nashville, and bands traveling the route would stop at Dunbar Cave and play, allowing the residents to dance to the music of some of the most famous musicians of the time.

### **1945-1973**

The corporation dissolved in 1945 and the 400-acre resort was sold to the mayor of Clarksville, William Kleeman, and then to country music star Roy Acuff.

Acuff had an arena built on the northeast side of the lake and built an 18-hole golf course adjacent to the east side of the lake. While under Acuff's ownership, some of the most successful rising country music stars played on the pavilion.

Acuff sold the cave to McKay King, a local contractor, in 1963, but King's attempts to revive the resort failed. He closed the swimming pool in 1967 and tried to sell the property to the State of Tennessee in 1970.

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At this point, all that remained of the resort were the cave and the lake. King died in 1971 and his wife closed the cave for good. The City of Clarksville purchased the golf course from the estate in 1972, leaving only 110-acres.

### **1973-PRESENT**

In 1973, the State of Tennessee purchased the remainder of the estate. Between King's death and the state purchase, local vandals nearly demolished the property.

Joe McCraw and Paul Huff, the Natural Area's first staff, secured the area and recruited local volunteers to begin a major cave cleaning. By 1978, most of the trash and had been removed and the grounds were beginning to take the shape of the Natural Area that can be seen today.

Dunbar Cave State Natural Area is located at 401 Old Dunbar Cave Road, Clarksville, Tenn. and is open every day from 8 a.m. until dark. Occasional programs are conducted by the park staff, along with guided tours of the cave and slide shows. The park also offers picnic tables, hiking trails, and fishing. Call 931-648-5526 for pricing and schedules.

*Information from "Historical Sketch of Dunbar Cave" by R.P. Geer.*

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