

Coffin Cave Survey

by Alex Fischer

Coffin Cave is a small cave formed in the Stockbridge marble, in the Hollow Brook karst area in the Pittsfield State Forest in Lanesborough, Massachusetts. It has several small entrances in a rock outcropping on the banks of the northwest fork of Hollow Brook. From the entrance, one slides down a somewhat tight coffin-shaped passage, after which the cave is named. “The Coffin” gets one to a nice standing room with pretty blue marble that is typical of the Stockbridge formation. Several small phreatic tubes branch off from there.

On January 3rd, 2023, Amelia Fatykhova, Rachel Aalto, and I surveyed Coffin Cave. It was Rachel’s first time surveying, although she quickly got the hang of it as she used my new BRIC4. It was also my first time drafting a map, which I did using Therion.

It was raining hard that day and the stream adjacent to the cave was flowing with plenty of water. Usually, that stream is dry by the time it reaches Coffin Cave, as the stream slowly sinks into the ground between Coffin Cave and the contact with the Nassau Phyllite 500ft upstream of the cave. Thankfully, Coffin Cave never seems to take water—which is strange considering it is immediately adjacent to a stream and quickly descends to a depth of 45ft below it. Nearby Coon Hollow Cave and Dolo Cave, also adjacent to other branches of Hollow Brook, do take water and are inaccessible in wet conditions.



Caver at the entrance of Coffin Cave in high water - J. Dunham photo

[Editor’s note: the stream channel outside Coffin Cave has become more entrenched since sometime before 1995; reports from visitors in prior decades indicate that water did sometimes spill over into the cave during high flow, but it hasn’t been seen to since that time]

When we got to the cave, we saw a large brown raccoon spot us and run away into the cave. This was somewhat concerning, as we didn’t want to accidentally corner a large raccoon. I entered the cave first, cautiously, going feet first and prodding with a long stick ahead of me. I got into the main room of the cave without encountering a raccoon, so I pronounced the cave safe and we started surveying. When we got to the dig at bottom of the cave, I accidentally cornered the raccoon in the small passage, but thankfully it was more fearful of me than I was of it, and it turned around and burrowed itself in the dig. While we were surveying one of the

other passages, we saw the raccoon casually scurry out of the cave behind us, so we returned to get the last few shots to the end of the dig.

The dig at the bottom of the cave is the only real lead in the cave, although there is a much less promising dig in the room in the southern (downstream) part of the cave. Although it did not seem to be moving air that day, we did notice that it got noticeably warmer as soon as one stepped into that low passage—a good sign, perhaps. We left a permanent station at the dig in case anyone returns to work on it.

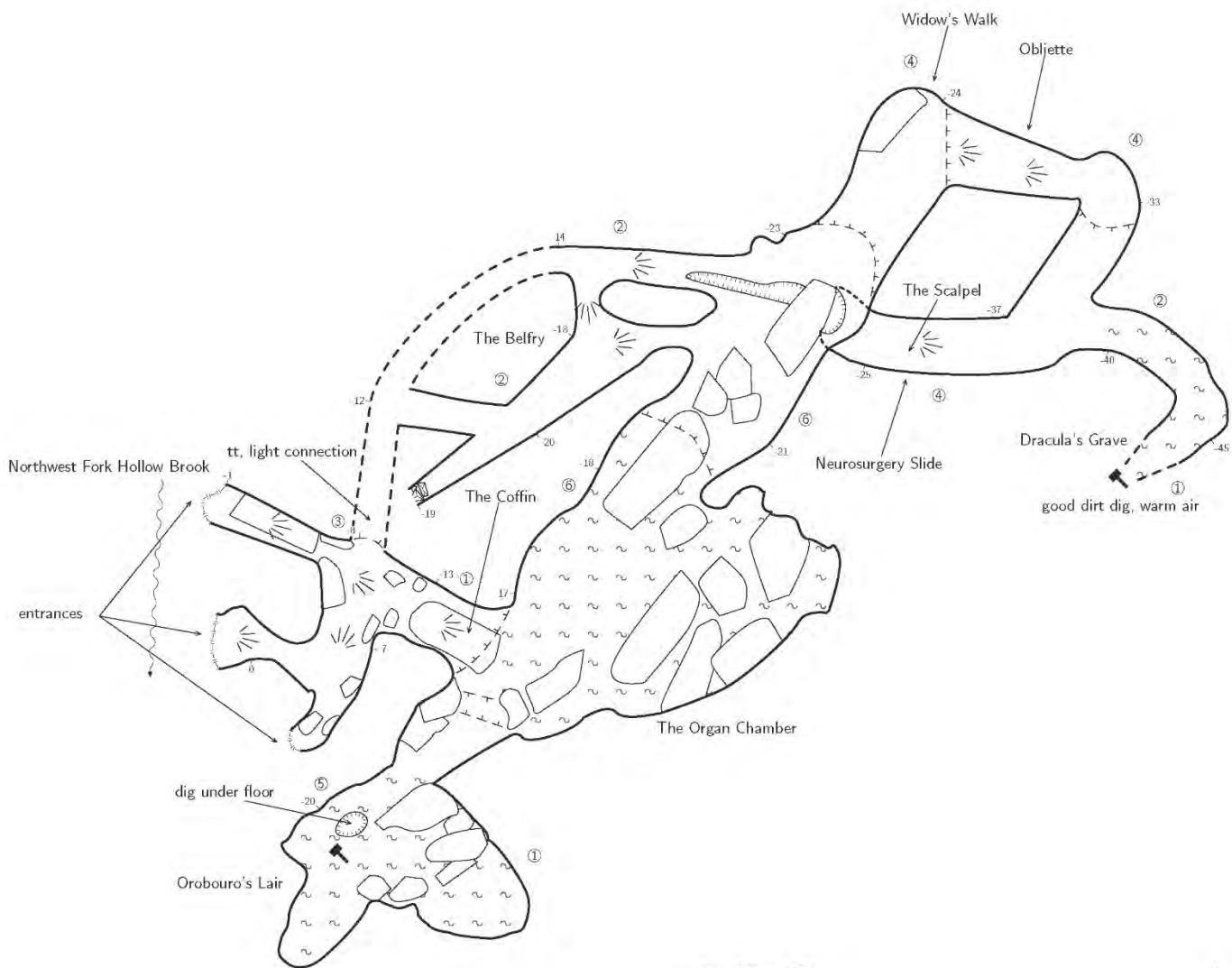
After surveying, we reconned nearby Quarantine Cave, which had been dug open back in 2020 (see the September 2020 issue of the Northeast Caver). We found that the entrance to Quarantine Cave had collapsed shut—dirt from the dug open entrance pit had slumped and filled it shut. This is unfortunately not surprising, since the entrance had several feet of unsupported vertical to overhanging dirt walls.



A caver negotiates the eponymous coffin (fallen block by the entrance) - J. Dunham photo



Morgan Ingalls and the Scalpel in the Neurosurgery Slide - J. Dunham photo



Coffin Cave

25 ft

Lanesborough, Massachusetts. BRIC4 survey. Drafted by Alex Fischer using Therion.

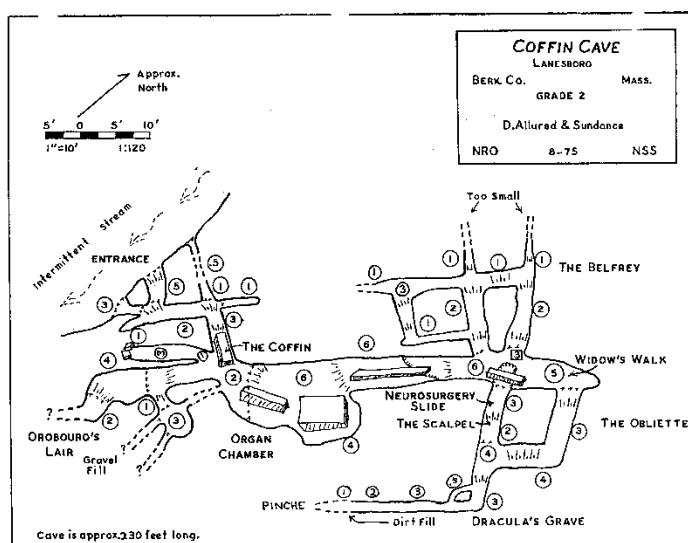
Length: 256 ft

Depth: 45 ft

Surveyed by: Rachel Aalto, Amelia Fatykhova, Alex Fischer 2023

Legend

| | | | |
|--|-----------------|--|-------------------|
| | wall | | passage gradient |
| | underlying wall | | rock border |
| | presumed wall | | rock edges |
| | altitude | | blocks, breakdown |
| | passage height | | mud/dirt |
| | dig | | bedrock |
| | pit | | water flow |
| | ceiling step | | dripline |



Inset: 1975 Alan Plante sketch map of Coffin Cave