

## LEGENDS AND LORE OF SOUTHERN ILLINOIS

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### AN ABANDONED MAUSOLEUM

The ruins of a fifty-six vault mausoleum that stands at a lonely and seldom-visited spot on the brink of Eagle Cliff - near the place where Dug Hollow leads downward from the hill to the fertile flood plain of the Mississippi in Monroe County - illustrate the truth of the poet Burn's assertion that the best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley. This mausoleum is about eight miles north of Valmeyer, at the place where Stephen W. Miles opened a farm and established an estate of feudal proportions.

Miles was no ordinary individual. Born in 1795, in Cazenovia, New York he had received a liberal education. He also was a student of music and an accomplished performer on the violin. Though not of great wealth when he came to Illinois, his resources were far beyond those of most persons here at the time. Legend began to gather about the man almost from the time of his arrival.

The large group he led came down the Ohio on flatboats and landed near Cave-in-Rock. They brought along much livestock, many teams, and wagons carrying farm equipment and household goods. Trails leading from their landing place on the Ohio to Eagle Cliff were vague, indirect, and difficult to follow. Miles carefully selected the better portions of the old trail, linked them with new sections of road, and clearly marked the route that is often referred to in old records as Miles's Trace. It is among the traditional roadways of the region and once was designated as the boundary line between counties.

Miles prospered and soon came to own several thousand acres of fertile farmland in the region where he had settled. It is reported that he would stand at the high point where the mausoleum is now located and, extending his arm toward the valley, say, "For miles and miles it is all Miles'."

It apparently was Miles's hope to establish an extensive landed estate, a kind of feudal empire. He bought much land at the government land office in Kaskaskia. Other land came from his purchase of the claims of those who had entered land and made improvement. Tradition has it that strangers, apparently co-operating with him, would come into the region and file on land they claimed for military service. These men would disappear, sometimes mysteriously, shortly after transferring their claims to Miles. Only the mausoleum now remains to remind us of Miles. An inscription on the large marble panel at the right of the walled-up doorway states that it was built by Stephen W. miles, Esquire, son of the elder Miles, in 1858, as a memorial to the S. W. Miles family and descendants. It also says that the eldest son of each generation was to care for it and to hold it "through this succession in trust for the above family." The bankruptcy of Miles's son, the builder of the mausoleum, disrupted the plan.

A similar panel on the left of the doorway is entitled "To the Visitor." Much of the inscription here is weathered away and illegible. The legible portions are mostly scriptural citations. The name of Stephen W. miles appears in large letters above the

door.

The front of shaped stone, the high arched doorway, the column and the frieze lend a certain architectural distinction. Earth over the top, however, makes the mausoleum practically unnoticeable except from the small level spot between it and the brow of the bluff. Remnants of a somewhat massive iron fence lie all about among sections of fallen wall and misplaced headstones.

If the visitor clambers to the arched opening at the top of the doorway and peers within, a strange sight greets him. There are fifty-six vaults, twenty-four on each side and eight at the farther end. All are open except one in the top tier at the left. This one evidently contains no burial since the marble slab in its opening shows no signs that it has ever been sealed.

The floor is littered with pieces of broken marble slabs, rotting bits of wood from walnut coffins, and some of the decorations from them. There are numerous bones with shreds of dried flesh still clinging to them, cloths that may be the remains of shrouds, bits of glass that once sealed the coffins, and other assorted debris. A musty smell pervades all. Ghouls and vandals certainly have done a thorough job.

Enough pieces of the marble slabs remain to enable one to piece together some of the records once engraved on them. The slabs that sealed the wall of Miles and of his two wives, Lucretia and Sarah, are in pieces large enough to rearrange and read. Another slab of interest carried the following legend:

ANNY,  
A PIOUS, HONEST AND UPRIGHT COLORED SERVANT OF  
S. W. MILES, SENIOR  
DIED OCTOBER 18, 1847  
AGED ABOUT SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS

Dates on the broken slabs indicate that some of the bodies had been buried elsewhere and later moved to the mausoleum. As the visitor peers about the dismal ruins and listens to the stories that tradition relates, he catches glimpses of an interesting character and wishes to know more about the one who said, "For miles and miles it is all Miles'."