

# Cumberland Gap

NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK  
KENTUCKY, VIRGINIA, TENNESSEE

*Through Cumberland Gap passed the Wilderness Road, main artery of the great trans-Allegheny migration which won the Northwest Territory and extended the western boundary of the United States to the Mississippi River.*

Long before explorers came into the region, "Kentucky" was a magic name among the Indians. Its fertile grazing lands teemed with vast herds of bison and deer, and with smaller game. Cherokee hunters from the south often visited Kentucky, vying for its rich prizes with Indians from north of the Ohio River. Bloody clashes among the fierce tribes were frequent. One of the trails much used by war and hunting parties was the "Warriors' Path," which crossed the mountain barrier into southeastern Kentucky at Cumberland Gap.

For nearly 150 years after the first settlement of Virginia, the forbidding Alleghenies kept the English colonists from Kentucky. In 1750, Dr. Thomas Walker discovered Cumberland Gap—a natural passage through this mountain barrier.

Engaged to locate an 800,000-acre grant for the Loyal Land Company, Walker and five companions set out from Albemarle County, Va., on March 6. After crossing the Blue Ridge, the party moved southwestward and, on April 12, camped on Powell's River about 10 miles east of the gap.

Walker's journal entry for April 13 tells of their momentous discovery: "We went four miles to large Creek . . . and from thence six miles to Cave Gap, the land being level." He named the mountain pass for a large cave, with a spring flowing through it, which he found there.

Noting the precipitous face of the Pinnacle, which he called "Steep Ridge," Walker and his companions followed a "plain Indian Road" into Kentucky. Moving northward along this trail, the Warriors' Path, the party on April 17 came to a river, which Walker named the "Cumberland" in honor of the Duke of Cumberland, son of King George II and Queen Caroline of England. (Later, that name was given also to the gap and the mountain range.) Near the river the explorers built a log cabin, the first in Kentucky.

After 2 months of exploring the hills of eastern Kentucky, the party crossed the mountains north of Cumberland Gap, and on July 13 returned to its starting point. Walker had failed to find the storied Bluegrass region of central Kentucky, but had located the mountain pass which was to play such an important part in the settlement of that fertile section.

## DANIEL BOONE AND THE WILDERNESS ROAD

The French and Indian War, 1754-60, and Pontiac's Rebellion, 1763-65, prevented any immediate attempt to follow Walker's lead. When peace returned, however, small parties of hunters began passing through the gap. The most famous person to come through was Daniel Boone.

After an unsuccessful attempt to cross the mountains north of Cumberland Gap in the winter of 1767-68, Boone returned to his home in the Yadkin Valley of North Carolina. There, a year later, he had a surprise visit from John Finley, a fellow campaigner of the French and Indian War. Finley had visited the Bluegrass region several years before, and he convinced Boone that it could be reached through Cumberland Gap.

Boone and Finley, with four companions, set out on May 1, 1769. Passing through the gap, they followed the Warriors' Path northward until they came to a branch of the Kentucky River. Entranced by the richness and beauty of the country, Boone spent nearly 2 years exploring. Completely alone much of the time, he ranged all through the fertile region and finally returned home, in the spring of 1771, knowing more about Kentucky than any other pioneer.

In September 1773, Boone led a party in an attempt to settle in Kentucky. But near the gap an Indian attack killed several persons, including Boone's son James, and the party turned back. An Indian uprising (Lord Dunmore's War) broke out in 1774 while numerous parties of white hunters and surveyors were operating in Kentucky. Boone and a companion, Michael Stoner, passed through Cumberland Gap and covered 800 miles of wilderness in 2 months to warn the white men of danger.

The defeat of the Indians, in October 1774, paved the way for an ambitious scheme to settle Kentucky. At the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals in March 1775, Judge Richard Henderson bought the Cherokee claim to 20 million acres south of the Kentucky River. There he planned to establish a new colony, "Transylvania," engaging Daniel Boone to blaze a trail through the gap.

Starting from Long Island of the Holston (now Kingsport, Tenn.) on March 10, Boone led 30 axmen in cutting the "Wilderness Road" across mountain and through swamp and canebrake. On April 1 the party reached the Kentucky River, 208 miles from its starting point. There they erected a fort, which they named Boonesborough.

## THE WILDERNESS ROAD IN THE REVOLUTION

Soon Judge Henderson arrived with reinforcements for the Boonesborough garrison. The opening of the Wilderness Road drew more pioneers, and other "Kentucky stations" began to appear.

When Judge Henderson tried to assert authority over these settlements, however, the independent backwoodsmen rebelled. In June 1776, George Rogers Clark and John Gabriel Jones made the arduous journey to Williamsburg to ask the Virginia government for support. Six months later, Virginia formally organized Kentucky as its westernmost county. Judge Henderson's plan for a private colony had failed, but his Wilderness Road had guaranteed Kentucky's settlement.

The westward movement slowed to a trickle during the first years of the Revolutionary War. Northern Indians, backed by the British, began to harass the infant settlements in ever-growing numbers. The Cumberland Gap route was frequently closed by the Indian threat; when open, it was used mainly to bring badly needed troops and supplies to the hard-pressed settlements.

The tide turned in 1778-79, however, when a Kentucky and Virginia force under George Rogers Clark crossed the Ohio River and captured the important British posts at Kaskaskia, Cahokia, and Vincennes. Though Indian attacks continued, travel over the Wilderness Road soon became even heavier than before. By the war's end in 1783, some 12,000 settlers had entered Kentucky, most of them through Cumberland Gap.

## FLOOD TIDE OF SETTLEMENT

The mass immigration which followed the Revolution caused John Filson, Kentucky's first historian, to predict in 1784 that the region would soon become "exceedingly populous." He was right, for 8 years later Kentucky entered the Union with a population of 100,000, and by 1800 it was more than 220,000.

For some years, most of this great stream continued to pass through the gap, and in 1796 the Wilderness Road was improved for wagon traffic. The defeat of the Indians and the opening of more direct routes across the mountains, however, eventually diverted most of the travelers. By 1825, a large part of the traffic on the Wilderness Road, which had once echoed with the footsteps of Boone and Clark and the war whoops of the Indian, consisted of livestock en route to eastern markets.

## LATER HISTORY OF THE AREA

When the Civil War began in 1861, Cumberland Gap was important to both sides. Either army, holding the mountain pass, would be in position to invade the other's territory. Held first by Confederates, the gap was captured on June 17, 1862, by Union troops. The Federals evacuated the position 3 months later, and the gap remained in Confederate hands until its final capture by the Union army on September 9, 1863.

One chapter remained in the dramatic story of Cumberland Gap. In 1886, the historic mountain pass figured in a large industrial promotion scheme which gave birth to the city of Middlesboro, Ky. An English syndicate, planning to exploit mineral resources in the area, spent millions of dollars in land purchases and industrial development. In 1893, before development was complete, financial reverses caused the scheme to collapse; but Middlesboro refused to become a ghost town and the plans of the boom were in part realized.

## GEOLOGY

Cumberland Gap is a saddle, or notch, cut into a ridge of resistant rock by former stream activity. Such notches, frequently found in the Appalachians, are known as wind gaps.

This region has been subjected to great earth stresses, producing folded and faulted rocks. Stresses were so great that older rocks from the southeast were thrust for miles over younger rocks to the northwest. Erosion of rocks of varying hardness and different angles of folding have formed the present topography.

The gap is in a zone of fractured rock where the ridge was most easily attacked by erosion. Presumably, a southward-flowing stream crossed what is now the ridge. However, the Middlesboro Basin, to the northwest, was more rapidly and more deeply quarried than the gap area. This resulted in the diversion of the stream northward into the Cumberland River. The ridge became the water divide, and the former stream course became the gap.

## ABOUT YOUR VISIT

The 20,000-acre park is in three States—Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee. The visitor center is near Middlesboro, Ky., and can be reached by either U.S. 25E or U.S. 58. Park gates are open from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m. in summer and from 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. the rest of the year. Campgrounds and picnic areas are open May 1 to October 31.

We invite you to hike the trails; motor vehicles, however, are not permitted on them. Campfires are not allowed at any time without a permit issued by a park ranger.

Hunting, disturbing wildlife, and disturbing or removing any natural or historic object is not allowed.

## ADMINISTRATION

Cumberland Gap National Historical Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. A superintendent, whose address is Box 840, Middlesboro, KY 40965, is in immediate charge.

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National Park Service  
U. S. Department of the Interior



The Wilderness Road in Kentucky, looking north into Yellow Creek Valley.

Courtesy, Inman



Pinnacle Overlook Terrace

Courtesy, Inman

### A VISIT TO CUMBERLAND GAP

The best way to see the park is to follow this tour guide, which is keyed to the map.

1. **Cumberland Gap Visitor Center**, on U.S. 25E near Middlesboro, Ky., has a museum, information desk, and assembly room program to orient and inform visitors.
2. **Fort McCook**, part of a network of small earthen Civil War forts, was built by Union troops early in the war to guard this important passageway through the Cumberland Mountains. The fort was used by both armies. It was named after Brig. Gen. Robert L. McCook, U.S. Volunteers; the Confederates called it Fort Rains, after Brig. Gen. James Edward Rains, C.S.A.
3. **Wilderness Overlook** provides a view of land that still looks much as it did when the pioneers moved west in the 18th and 19th centuries.
4. **The Pinnacle**, high shoulder of Cumberland Gap, rises almost 1,000 feet above the saddle, or low point, of the pass. The 4½-mile Skyland Road winds from the visitor center to a parking area where you will find a panoramic overlook, history exhibits, and a short loop trail.
5. **Tri-State Peak**, where Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia meet, can be reached from the pullout on U.S. 25E near the saddle of the gap. A 4/5-mile trail winds upward to the peak.
6. **Cudjo Cave** (privately operated) lies on U.S. 25E near the saddle of the gap. Fees are charged for a guided tour through the limestone cavern.
7. **Wilderness Road and Iron Furnace**. A 1/4-mile remnant of the trail slashed through the wilderness by Daniel Boone ascends from the Iron Furnace to the saddle of the gap. A small parking area serves visitors who want to see the charcoal Iron Furnace, built about 1815. Self-guiding folders are available.
8. **Wilderness Road Campground**, containing 165 sites, is near U.S. 58 in Virginia. Programs are presented nightly in the amphitheater in summer. A picnic area is near the campground.
9. **Sugar Run Overlook** is on Ky. 988 (Sugar Run Road) and offers a view of the wilderness faced by the pioneers. A picnic area is nearby.
10. **Hensley Settlement**, now abandoned, occupied a 500-acre plateau high on the mountain ridges. Hikers of the Ridge Trail can see this Appalachian mountain community, now undergoing restoration.
11. **Sand Cave**. The entrance arch of this shallow sandstone cave, has a span of 240 feet and rises more than 80 feet above the 1½-acre loose-sand floor. The cave is a short hike off the Ridge Trail.
12. **White Rocks**, 400- to 600-foot vertical cliffs, rises 3,451 feet above sea level. Visible from U.S. 58, it was a landmark to pioneers traveling the Wilderness Road.

Hiking information for Ridge Trail, Sand Cave, and White Rocks is available at the visitor center.

