Cumberland Gap

National Historical Park
Ky/Va/Tenn

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Detail from George Caleb Bingham's *Daniel Boone Escorting Settlers thru the Cumberland Gap.* Courtesy The Washington University Gallery of Art, St. Louis.

Warrior's Path, Wilderness Road

"Stand at Cumberland Gap and watch the procession of civilization, marching single file—the buffalo following the trail to the salt springs, the Indian, the fur-trader and hunter, the cattle-raiser, the pioneer farmer—and the frontier has passed by."

Frederick Jackson Turner, 1893

From Maine to Georgia the Appalachian Mountains rose up like a giant wall, protecting the American colonies from their enemies: the French in Canada and Indians to the west. Land transportation was primitive, and the nearly trackless mountains that offered security to the colonists also kept the growing population entrapped along the eastern seaboard. In the South, however, Cumberland Gap had long been used to cross the Appalachians. Indians learned of it by following the buffalo, and it became a major route to the hunting grounds of Kentucky. The gap was also an important feature on the Warrior's Path that led south from the Potomac River, across the gap, and north to the Ohio. A trail used by generations of raiding parties, the path was said to be marked by the bleached bones of slain enemies.

In 1750 the first white men came upon the gap. Thomas Walker had been hired to stake out an 800,000-acre grant beyond the Blue Ridge Mountains. After two months of searching, Walker and his companions returned to Virginia. They had not found the Kentucky Bluegrass, but they did find the door that would lead settlers to the region. Colonists could not immediately take advantage of the trail through the mountains. Wars with the French and Indians kept the western frontier closed.

When peace returned hunters began crossing the mountains. Daniel Boone spent two years exploring alone, then returned to Virginia. In 1775, after the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals ending the Indian troubles, Boone and 30 men marked out the Wilderness Trail from Cumberland Gap into Kentucky. Immigration began immediately, and by the end of the Revolutionary War some 12,000 persons had crossed into the new territory. By 1792 the population was over 100,000, and Kentucky was admitted to the Union.

During the 1790's traffic on the Wilderness Road increased. By 1800 over 300,000 people had crossed the gap going west. And each year as many head of livestock were driven east. As it had always been, the gap was an important route of commerce and transportation.

Then in the 1820's and 1830's man overcame the mountain wall. The west could be reached easily over the Erie, the Pennsylvania Main Line, or the Chesapeake and Ohio Canals, or on steamboats up the Mississippi. Cumberland Gap declined in importance. But it had overseen the opening of the first American West.

Daniel Boone No name is more associated with Cumberland Gap and the opening of the west than Daniel Boone's. He was not the first explorer to see the gap, to discover Kentucky, or even to settle there. But this does not reduce his greatness, for his personal characteristics were those admired by people on the frontier: courage, strength, agility, and honesty.

Daniel Boone was born near Reading, Pennsylvania, in 1734. He had little schooling, but had a native intelligence that complemented his physical attributes. When he was 12, his father gave him a rifle, and Daniel soon became noted as a hunter. A few years later he participated in the disastrous Braddock campaign that led to the French and Indian Wars. It was on this campaign that Boone first heard of the fabulous Kentucky country. In 1767 he set out to explore the West. Eight years later, with his wife and children, he settled in Boonesborough where he was appointed to several government offices.

He had continual problems with land claims, and by 1788 all his lands in Kentucky had been lost in legal battles. He moved to what is now West Virginia in 1788 and 10 years later moved again to Missouri, where he died in 1820.

Early History

Long before man came to Cumberland Gap, migratory animals—buffalo and deer—trampled a path through this natural doorway across the mountains in their yearly search for food.

For the Indians who followed the animal trails, the gap was an important pass across the mountains to the rich hunting grounds of Kentucky. It was also the key pass on the great Warrior's Path, the trail of trade and war that led from the Ohio to the Potomac.

Cunne Shote, a Cherokee chief about the time of the American Revolution.

Courtesy, The Thomas Gilcrease Institute of American History and Art, Tulsa, OK

1775

Daniel Boone was not the first white man to discover Cumberland Gap, but he was the first to mark the trail that became the Wilderness Road through the gap to Kentucky.

Painting by Chester Harding, Courtesy The J.B. Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY

1792

Boone carved on his rifle that it was his "bESt FREN."

Boone's powder horn.

Courtesy, Kentucky Military History Museum, Frankfort, KY

Kentucky soon had a population of over 100,000 persons and in 1792 was admitted to the Union as the 15th State, the first west of the Allegheny Mountains. That same year the State legislature adopted a seal, two men shaking hands and the motto "United We Stand, Divided We Fall."

1800

The Wilderness Road through Cumberland Gap became an important thoroughfare. Thousands of people travelled the road going west, seeking new homes and new lives. But the route eastward was equally important. Thousands of cattle, sheep, pigs, and turkeys, the produce of the western farms, travelled the road to the markets of the seaboard.

Visitor Information

Location and Hours Cumberland Gap contains over 20,000 acres in the States of Kentucky, Virginia, and Tennessee. It can be reached by taking U.S. 25E from Kentucky and Tennessee or U.S. 58 from Virginia. Park gates are open from 8 a.m. until dusk year round. A visitor center, open 8 a.m. until 5 p.m. daily except Christmas, is located on U.S. 25E at Middlesboro, Kentucky.

Camping and Picnicking A 160-site campground is located on U.S. 58 in Virginia. Each site has a paved pull-in (some adequate for large trailers and RV's), picnic table, and grill. Running water and restrooms with flush toilets and electric lights are available. There are no RV hookups at the sites. An amphitheater, nature trails, and a picnic area are located near the campground.

Four campgrounds on the Ridge Trail are accessible by foot only. They are primitive and permits are required. Contact the park superintendent at the address below.

In the back country it is advisable to have an alternate fuel source. Fires may be restricted or prohibited depending on fuel supply and weather.

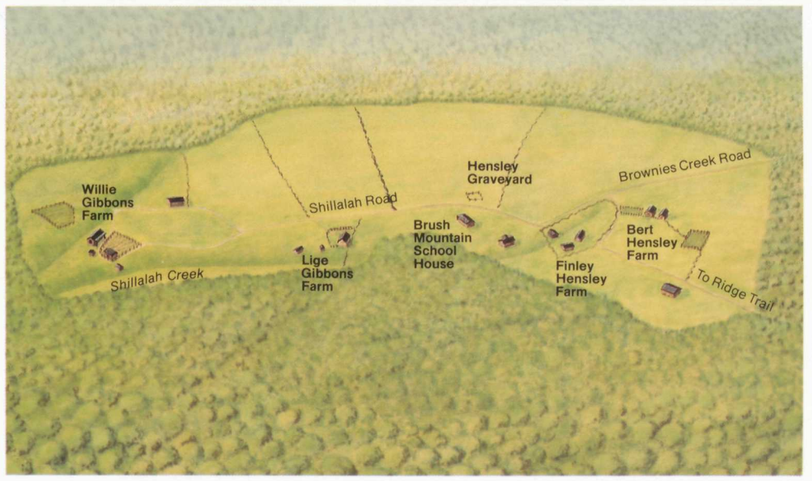
Hiking There are about 50 miles of hiking trails in the park. They range from short self-guided nature trails to longer overnight trails. Some park features, like Sand Cave and White Rocks, are accessible only by trail. Trail guides and information are available at the visitor center. Overnight use requires a permit.

Interpretive Programs Campfire programs, hikes, walks, music and craft demonstrations, and other interpretive activities are scheduled daily from mid-June to Labor Day and on weekends during the spring and fall. Park visitors are invited to participate in the park's programs. Special programs may be arranged for groups visiting the park at other times by writing the superintendent.

Accommodations There are motels located in Middlesboro, Kentucky, and Cumberland Gap, Tennessee. Restaurants, grocery stores, and medical facilities are also available within a five-mile drive of the park.

Caution Cumberland Gap National Historical Park is a wild area. For your safety never hike alone. Avoid snakes and three-leaved plants. Drive alertly.

Administration Cumberland Gap National Historical Park is administered by the National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior. Inquiries about the park or its administration should be addressed to: Superintendent, Cumberland Gap NHP, Box 1848, Middlesboro, KY 40965.



Hensley Settlement Situated on an isolated plateau astride Brush Mountain, Hensley Settlement flourished for nearly five decades as a community of 12 scattered farmsteads. It was established about 1904 by Sherman Hensley. He and his family constructed the buildings, mostly of hewn chestnut logs with shake roofs. They split rails for fences. In the decade after 1925, the settlement reached a peak population of about 100 people. When they had to obtain necessities they could not produce, they walked or rode horseback out and back over steep, narrow mountain trails. During the late 1940's and early 1950's the settlement was abandoned. The buildings deteriorated quickly. Since 1965 the Park Service has restored three of the farmsteads with their houses, barns, fences, and fields, as well as the schoolhouse and cemetery. Two farmer-demonstrators maintain the restored buildings and fields, using many of the techniques of the Hensleys themselves.

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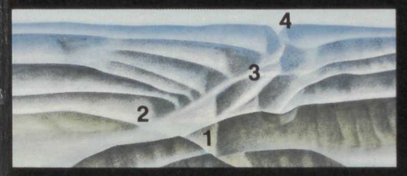
Nature's Doorway

At Cumberland Gap four natural features combine to open the way through the Appalachian Mountain range. At one time this land was flat and Yellow Creek flowed south into Powell River. Then the earth began to push up, and as Cumberland Mountain rose the creek cut in it a notch, or gap **1.** The mountain rose faster than the creek could enlarge the gap, and the creek was diverted northward into Cumberland River. North of the gap is Middlesboro Basin **2,** a large flat area perhaps formed by the impact of a meteor or the collapse of a huge underground cavern. Yellow Creek Valley **3** leads to "the Narrows" **4,** a gap that crosses Pine Mountain and opens into the Bluegrass region of Kentucky. These four features are a natural door through the mountains, allowing travel in either direction and joining the eastern seaboard with the Mississippi west.



Pineville
PINE MOUNTAIN STATE RESORT PARK
PINE MOUNTAIN LAKE
To Corbin
Varilla
Alva
Cumberland River
119
25E
Flag Top
700
2295
1534
Ferndale
Cannon Creek
649
2130
ROCKY FACE
Yellow Creek
Williams Branch
Hances Creek
1344
HANCES RIDGE
987
Cubbage School
Cubbage
LITTLE BLACK MOUNTAIN
HARLAN COUNTY
BELL COUNTY
72
Brownies Creek
Primitive Road
217
BRUSH MOUNTAIN
CANNON CREEK LAKE
Wilderness Road
Meldrum
188
Hensley Cemetery
Hensley Settlement
Marlins Fork
Chadwell Gap
Sand Cave
White Rocks
BAILES MEADOWS
1071
3513
WHITE ROCKS
KENTUCKY
VIRGINIA
CUMBERLAND MOUNTAIN
Sugarlands Trail
Chadwell Gap Trail
Ewing Trail
988
Hutch
DARK RIDGE
Nashville and Louisville Railroad
Sugar Run
Laurel Branch
DEVILS GARDEN
BUTCHERS GAP
Civitan Park
POOR VALLEY
POOR VALLEY RIDGE
To Bristol
724
Ewing
690
Caylor
58
Gibson Gap
CUMBERLAND MOUNTAIN
KENTUCKY
VIRGINIA
Quarry
Elydale School
Wheeler
691
Indian Creek
Pinnacle Road closed to trailers and vehicles over 20 feet long.
Skylight Cave
Gibson Gap Trail
Station Camp Creek
POOR VALLEY RIDGE
MIDDLESBORO
Fort McCook
Fort Lyon
Cumberland Avenue
74
Wilderness Road Trail
744
The Pinnacle 2440
Pinnacle Overlook
Cudjo (Soldiers) Cave
Cumberland Gap
Tri-State Trail
Wilderness Road
Gibson Station
Nashville and Louisville Railroad
BARNES HOLLOW
KECK HOLLOW
Visitor Center
Park Headquarters
Tri-State Peak
6071
1990
Iron Furnace
LEE COUNTY
CLAIRBORNE COUNTY
VIRGINIA
TENNESSEE
Little Yellow Creek
Fern Lake Trail
CUMBERLAND GAP
SHAWANEE
BIG SPRING HOLLOW
HANCOCK COUNTY
CLAIBORNE COUNTY
BELL COUNTY
CLAIBORNE COUNTY
KENTUCKY
TENNESSEE
Tiprell
Lincoln Memorial University
HARROGATE
POOR VALLEY
SIMMONS RIDGE
FORGE RIDGE
POWELL MOUNTAIN
POWELL VALLEY
Indian Creek
Powell River
Arthur
To LaFollette
To Knoxville and Great Smokies
63
25E

North

0 1 Kilometer 2

0 *1 Mile* 2

Parkland

Trail

Unpaved road

P Parking

Picnic area

Campground

Primitive campsite

1071 Elevations are given in meters
3513 with feet in italic.