

Cumberland Gap

Throughout the ages, poets, songwriters, novelists, journal writers, historians and artists have captured the grandeur of the Cumberland Gap. James Smith, in his journal of 1792, penned what is perhaps one of the most poignant descriptions of this national and historically significant landmark: "We started just as the sun began to gild the tops of the high mountains. We ascended Cumberland Mountain, from the top of which the bright luminary of day appeared to our view in all his rising glory; the mists dispersed and the floating clouds hasted away at his appearing. This is the famous Cumberland Gap..." Thanks to the vision of Congress, who in 1940 authorized Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, visitors today can still bask in its beauty and immerse themselves in its rich history.

The story of the first doorway to the west is commemorated at the national park, located where the borders of Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia meet. Carved by wind and water, Cumberland Gap forms a major break in the formidable Appalachian Mountain chain. First used by large game animals in their migratory journeys, followed by Native Americans, the Cumberland Gap was the first and best avenue for the settlement of the interior of this nation. From 1775 to 1810, the Gap's heyday, between 200,000 and 300,000 men, women, and children from all walks of life, crossed the Gap into "Kentuckee."

The Path of Buffalo and Warriors

During the 17th century, the American bison, after a 1,100 year hiatus, resumed a migratory pattern into the southeast portions of North America. Besides foraging for grazing areas, these large path-makers sought the numerous salt licks that dotted present Kentucky and Virginia, and in doing so beat out a well-defined trace. During the next two centuries travelers could follow such traces on roads extending from near Roanoke, Virginia to central Illinois. Just as this network of traces served as a corridor for native peoples, so it served the European frontiersmen and settlers who followed. Foremost among Indian routes in the eastern United States was the Warrior's Path, which looped southward through the Cumberland Gap, connecting the Ohio valley and that of the Shenandoah and the Potomac. Branches of the road also continued southeast to the Cherokee and Creek settlements. In short, the path laid down by animals and native peoples was ready to be adapted by opportunists from the colonies on the Atlantic seaboard.

Early travelers included Gabriel Arthur and [Dr. Thomas Walker](#) in the 17th and 18th centuries, respectively. Walker's account in 1750 gives the first Anglo eyewitness description of Cumberland Gap, the entrance of the present Cudjo Caverns, the spring emanating from it, and the Indian road Walker followed. During the French and Indian War (1754-1763), exploration and travel temporarily halted. But in 1763 a group of "long hunters" led by Elisha Walden (Wallen) crossed into Kentucky through Cumberland Gap. Success of the hunt brought others to Kentucky, including [Daniel Boone](#), the individual most identified with the Gap, who traversed it in 1769.

Daniel Boone, working for Judge Richard Henderson, explored Kentucky in 1775 and marked a well-defined trail to productive lands, which returned profits for investors. Four years later the first of a still-continuing series of road improvements began; Virginia passed a law for building a "good waggon [sic] road through the great mountains." In 1780 the builders requested payment for the road over Cumberland Gap in a petition that stated that wagons had passed over it to the convenience of travelers. From then on, Virginia, followed by Kentucky, passed laws to improve the road over Cumberland Mountain. Immigration through the Gap 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 1790s traffic on the Wilderness Road increased. By 1800 almost 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 1820s and 1830s 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 seen the opening of the first American West.

Waiting for the Battle That Never Came

The old Wilderness Road cutting through the Gap was a natural invasion route. For the Confederacy, it led to the rich Kentucky bluegrass country to the north. For the Union, it led to the Northern sympathizers of East Tennessee, and to an opportunity to cut rebel supply lines. In late summer of 1861, the Confederacy seized the Gap and made it the eastern anchor of a defense line extending to the Mississippi River. Brigadier General William Churchwell was placed in command, and fortified the garrison during the fall of 1861. He built seven forts on the north facing slope, and cleared the mountains of all trees within one mile of each fort. Needed more elsewhere, the Confederates abandoned the Gap in June 1862.

Union Brigadier General George W. Morgan soon arrived to take possession of the Gap. The 20,000 men under his command began building nine south-facing batteries to repel an invasion. But none came. The Confederates under Lt. Gen. Kirby Smith by-passed the Gap with 12,000 men and moved into Kentucky, severing Morgan's supply line. Without food and still fearing an attack, General Morgan boldly led his men north through enemy territory to safety.

The Confederates returned to the Gap, cleared up the mess Morgan and his men left behind, and strengthened the forts. Many skirmishes took place, as Unionists from Tennessee raided the garrison. In September 1863 a Union force under Maj. Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside moved toward the Gap. On September 7, the Yankees destroyed provisions stored at the Iron Furnace. Burnside also deceived the Confederate commander, Brig. Gen. John W. Frazer, into believing that his force was stronger than it actually was. Believing his Confederates to be outmanned, and short of provisions necessary for a long siege, Frazer surrendered his garrison on September 9.

Lining up along the Harlan Road, the Confederates were amazed to see the small force to which they had surrendered. The Gap remained in Union hands until the end of the war. Except for a garrison inspected by Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant in January 1864, when he labeled the Cumberland Gap the "Gibraltar of America," there was little excitement. Meanwhile, the war fought to its end in the South and East.

By the end of the war the Gap had changed hands four times, yet no major confrontation took place here.

Situated on an isolated plateau astride Brush Mountain, Hensley Settlement flourished for nearly five decades as a community of 12 scattered Appalachian 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 1940s and early 1950s the settlement was abandoned. The buildings deteriorated quickly. Since 1965 the National Park Service has restored three of the farmsteads with their houses, barns, fences, and fields, as well as the schoolhouse and cemetery.

Cumberland Gap Visitor Center Open All Year

Memorial Day through Labor Day 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Labor Day to Memorial Day 8 a.m. to 5 p.m

The park's Visitor Center complex includes a museum, auditorium, sales areas and restrooms. All are accessible, allowing for wheelchair use. Designated parking allows easy access to the building.

At an elevation of 2,440 feet, the Pinnacle Overlook is perhaps the most visited area in the park. A level 1/4-mile paved trail provides access to this overlook, from which visitors have a spectacular view into Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. Accessible restrooms are located near the overlook.

Accessible drive-in campsites are available at the park's Wilderness Road Campground. Surfaces within these sites have been hardened, the height of fire grates has been increased, and picnic tables have been modified. A short, paved trail guides visitors to the campground's amphitheatre, where park rangers present programs on the cultural and natural history of the park.

<http://www.ajlambert.com>



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