



# Foundation Document Overview

## Cumberland Gap National Historical Park

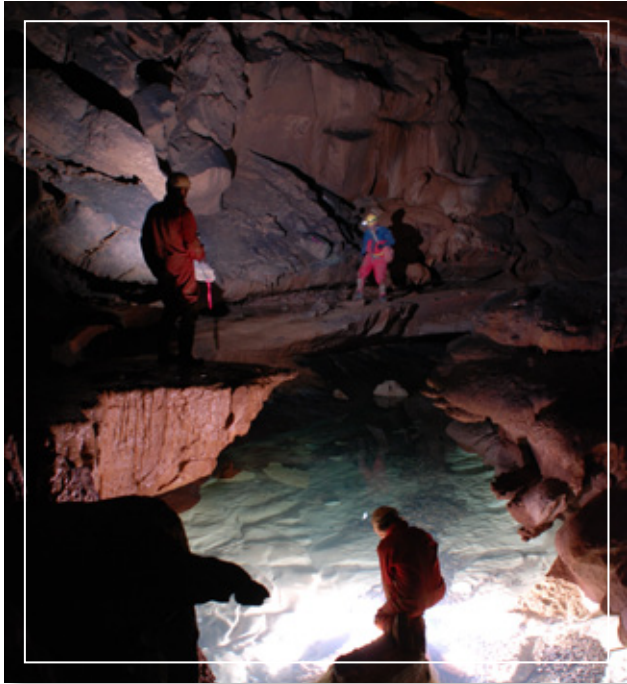
Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia



### Contact Information

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## Purpose



*The purpose of CUMBERLAND GAP NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK is to preserve, protect, and interpret the geologic “doorway to the west”—the Cumberland Gap—through the southern Appalachian Mountains, together with the natural, historic, and cultural features that have made the area integral to and symbolic of centuries of American history.*



## Significance

Significance statements express why Cumberland Gap National Historical Park resources and values are important enough to merit national park unit designation. Statements of significance describe why an area is important within a global, national, regional, and systemwide context. These statements are linked to the purpose of the park unit, and are supported by data, research, and consensus. Significance statements describe the distinctive nature of the park and inform management decisions, focusing efforts on preserving and protecting the most important resources and values of the park unit.

- **Crossing the Great Appalachian Barrier.** The Cumberland Gap represents a turning point in American history as the Gap witnessed nearly 300,000 settlers pushing through the Appalachian barrier during the late 18th to early 19th century. Today some 40 million Americans can trace their history to crossing through the Gap.
- **Geology.** Cumberland Gap National Historical Park protects an extensive array of geologic features formed over the course of hundreds of millions of years in the wake of numerous Appalachian orogenies (mountain-forming periods). The park’s notable concentration of caves and karst formations, cliffs, pinnacles, and other geologic features provide a valuable window into the dynamic nature of the landscape and the impact of geology on human migration and culture.
- **Hensley Settlement.** The Hensley Settlement provides a rare vision of a farming community lifestyle that was declining during a time of dramatic change in Appalachia. During its existence (1903–1951), the settlement witnessed a shift from a largely self-sufficient farming economy to mining and timber resource extraction and the related impacts on the Appalachian economic culture. The settlement maintains its remoteness today as it did during its existence.



## Significance

- **Strategic Civil War Location.** Situated between the neutral state of Kentucky and the Confederate states of Tennessee and Virginia, the Cumberland Gap illustrates a divided nation in conflict, sometimes within a single household, as well as marking a strategic location and narrow transportation route that changed hands several times throughout the Civil War.
- **Transportation Corridor.** For centuries, the Cumberland Gap has served as a critical transportation corridor for people and animals traversing the southern Appalachian Mountains. Bison and other animals first traveled the path of least resistance; their trails were followed by American Indians and early American pioneers. The Gap continued to serve as a transportation artery for the region throughout the 20th century. Today, traffic has been rerouted through the Cumberland Gap Tunnel, allowing visitors and animals to walk the restored Wilderness Road Trail in the footsteps of the thousands who came before them.
- **Wilderness Character.** In 1978, the president recommended that Congress designate more than 60% of Cumberland Gap National Historical Park as wilderness under the Wilderness Act of 1964. The recommended wilderness at Cumberland Gap—the largest protected wildlands in the Cumberland Mountains—offers extensive opportunities for solitude and primitive recreation in one of the most biologically rich and diverse forest ecosystems in the eastern United States.



## Fundamental Resources and Values

Fundamental resources and values are those features, systems, processes, experiences, stories, scenes, sounds, smells, or other attributes determined to merit primary consideration during planning and management processes because they are essential to achieving the purpose of the park and maintaining its significance.

- **The Cumberland Gap and the Wilderness Road**
- **Diverse Ecological Landscape**
- **Geologic Features**
- **Prehistoric and Historic Sites**
- **Trails and Viewsheds**
- **Wilderness Character**

Cumberland Gap National Historical Park contains other resources and values that may not be fundamental to the purpose and significance of the park, but are important to consider in management and planning decisions. These are referred to as other important resources and values.

- **Cumberland Gap Tunnel**
- **Chadwell Gap Coal Company Historic District**
- **Museum and Archival Collections**



# Description

Cumberland Gap National Historical Park encompasses 24,547 acres on the boundaries of Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia. Carved by wind and water, Cumberland Gap forms a prominent break in the formidable Appalachian Mountain chain. The park ranges from 1 to 4 miles in width, and stretches for 20 miles astride the forested Cumberland and Brush Mountains. Approximately 4,000 acres of the Fern Lake watershed is also in the park. East of the Cumberland Gap (the Gap), more than 14,000 acres of roadless lands have been recommended to Congress for wilderness designation.

The park was authorized by Congress on June 11, 1940, to commemorate the story of the first “doorway to the west.” In the late 17th century, the route into the rich hunting lands of “Kaintucke” was known to several American Indian tribes, but only a few Europeans. In 1775, a little known hunter named Daniel Boone was commissioned to blaze a road through the Gap. Boone’s Trace evolved into the Wilderness Road, establishing Boone’s place in history as a frontiersman and pathfinder. The Cumberland Gap subsequently became the first and foremost avenue for the settlement of the nation’s interior, and served as the primary route to the west until 1810.

During the Civil War, the Gap was strategically important to both the Confederate and Union armies. There was no military railroad near the Gap, so defenses were constructed and portions of the Wilderness Road were used to transport supplies, troops, and ordnance.

Another key historic resource in the park is Hensley Settlement, a community of scattered farmsteads on an isolated plateau on Brush Mountain. Originally established by Sherman Hensley around 1903, the settlement consists of more than 40 historic structures, including several log cabin homes, split rail fences, and a one-room log cabin schoolhouse.

The natural resources of Cumberland Gap National Historical Park are rich and diverse, with 90% forest cover and more than 62 miles of streams. The majority of the forest is a mix of second- and third-growth Eastern hardwood and conifers. The park also supports a diversity of flora and fauna, including 970 vascular plant species (90 of which are rare or sensitive), 145 bird species, 40 mammal species, 25 fish species, and 35 reptile and amphibian species. In addition, the park contains more than 30 known cave features, including Gap Cave, which is part of a major cave system.

The park’s forested landscape has been altered by the Civil War, logging, agriculture, mining, and road construction. The chestnut blight in the early 20th century also drastically changed the landscape, eliminating a species that once dominated the park.

Cumberland Gap National Historical Park today receives nearly 900,000 visitors annually. The park contains more than 85 miles of foot and horse trails, and five backcountry camping areas. Popular activities include sightseeing, hiking, horseback riding, photography, camping, and guided tours of Gap Cave and the Hensley Settlement.

