# Kentucky's Frontier Trails:

## Warrior's Path, Boone's Trace, and Wilderness Road – 1795









# Lay of the Land

## Area Geography and Geology

*When I visited Kentucke, I found it so far to exceed my expectations, although great, that I concluded it was a pity, that the world had not adequate information of it.* -John Filson, 1784

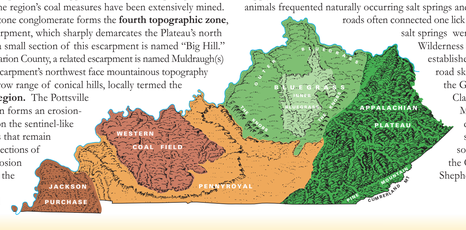
The Wilderness Road and Boone's Trace routes transect six different geographic-geologic regions as they track from Cumberland Gap at Kentucky's southeast-most corner northwest to Danville, Harrodsburg, the Falls of the Ohio at Louisville, and Boonesborough. The Wilderness Road is a western extension of the Great Wagon Road that linked Philadelphia to the North Carolina Piedmont by way of the Shenandoah Valley. The Wilderness Road approached Kentucky through the **first region**, the Ridge and Valley country of southwest Virginia and northeast Tennessee.

Crossing into Kentucky the road traversed a **second region**, the Cumberland Thrust Block. At 125 miles long and up to 25 miles wide the block is a combination of faulted sedimentary rocks that, more than 250 million years before present, pushed northwest like a giant sled up and over younger rocks. Nearly parallel ridges, Pine Mountain on the west and Cumberland Mountain on the east, demarcate the thrust block's leading and trailing edges. The block's trailing edge, the 1,500-foot Cumberland Mountain, presents a steep, east-facing sandstone wall, popularly known as White Rocks, to the adjacent Powell Valley. Ten miles northwest, the block's leading edge, Pine Mountain, rises 1,200 feet above the adjacent valley floor. Cumberland Gap is a 600-foot-deep notch in Cumberland Mountain that offered one of the few passages across the great barrier. North of Cumberland Gap, the Cumberland River crosscut a deep gap through Pine Mountain permitting comparatively easy passage at river level through this otherwise formidable barrier. Though Cumberland Gap is often cited as the primary entry into the Appalachian Mountains for Indian trails such as Warrior's Path and the pioneers' Wilderness Road, Cumberland Gap's role as a focus for important trails would have been negligible without a corresponding gap through Pine Mountain. Without the Pine Mountain passage, pioneers moving north through Cumberland Gap into Kentucky would have encountered a topographic dead end.

**A third region**, the Appalachian Plateau (sometimes termed the Appalachian or Cumberland Mountains), abuts Pine Mountain's west side and extends north and west some 70 miles to the edge of central Kentucky's Knobs and Bluegrass country. The Plateau is underlain by nearly level Pennsylvanian-age sedimentary rocks; sandstones, shales, limestones, and bituminous coals. Concordant ridge tops, visible from atop Pine Mountain, suggest that the area was once a gently rolling plateau. Numerous streams, many of them tributaries of the Big South Fork, Kentucky, and Licking Rivers dissected the plateau into rugged country with steep ridges and narrow valleys. The region's coal measures have been extensively mined.

A stout sandstone conglomerate forms the **fourth topographic zone**, the Pottsville Escarpment, which sharply demarcates the Plateau's north edge. Near Berea a small section of this escarpment is named "Big Hill." In the west, near Marion County, a related escarpment is named Muldraugh(s) Hill. Beyond the escarpment's northwest face mountainous topography gives way to a narrow range of conical hills, locally termed the Knobs, the **fifth region.** The Pottsville conglomerate often forms an erosion-resistant caprock on the sentinel-like knobs. The knobs that remain represent isolated sections of the Plateau that erosion has cut away from the escarpment face. Daniel Boone and other frontier explorers are said to have used Pilot Knob as a lookout point from which they could scout the Bluegrass Region to the north. The Escarpment and Knobs country extends in a great semicircle from Lewis County in the northeast, south to Madison County and west-northwest toward Jefferson County and Louisville.

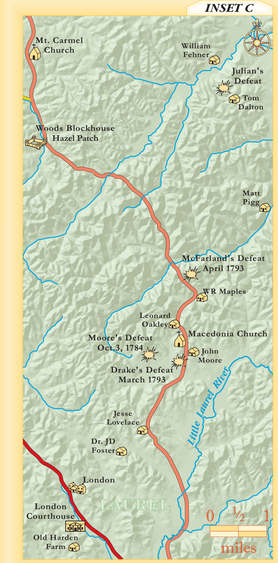
Beyond the Plateau and Knobs, the routes emerge onto the **sixth region**, the great Bluegrass plain, a fertile land that early settlers often termed the "Eden of the West." This lush country of gently rolling topography was the preferred destination for many early pioneer migrants into the state and rigorously defended by Indians for whom the area had long been a prime hunting ground. Radically different from the mountainous topography to the south and east, the Bluegrass country is underlain by limestones which yield productive soils as they weather and erode. The Bluegrass limestones, of Ordovician age and much older than the Pennsylvanian carboniferous rocks of the Plateau, have been up-warped to form a low amplitude arch–termed the Cincinnati Arch–the crest of which has been eroded away by the region's trunk streams; the Kentucky, Elkhorn, Licking, Salt, and Chaplin among them. The truncated arch exhibits **three distinct subregions** that align in roughly symmetrical rings. In the center, the oldest limestones form the **Inner Bluegrass**, an area of high fertility soils. Few streams and rivers cross its surface; instead, thousands of sinkholes drain precipitation runoff into underground caverns. A **second subregion**, the Eden Shale Hills, wraps around the Inner Bluegrass. Part highly erodable shale and part limestone, streams have cut this surface into steep, narrow valleys and ridges that contain low fertility soils. Eighteenth-century pioneers referred to the shale lands as "broken beechey country," which aptly described the topography and acknowledged the prevalence of beech trees which favor the shale's sour soils. Surrounding the shale country a **third subregion**, the Outer Bluegrass, is underlain by limestones that yield gently rolling lands desirable for farming. Many of Kentucky's first settlements developed around forts, fortified houses, or stations built in one Bluegrass subregion or another including Boonesborough and Fort Harrod. Pioneers often chose farm and town settlement sites based on the availability of an all-weather water supply. Salt was a second critical frontier resource. Buffalo and other animals frequented naturally occurring salt springs and licks; their trails or roads often connected one lick with another. Where salt springs were convenient to the Wilderness Road, settlers established salt works. The road skirted one salt works, the Goose Creek area in Clay County, near Manchester, and directly targeted a second, Bullitt's Lick south of the Falls of the Ohio near Shepherdsville.













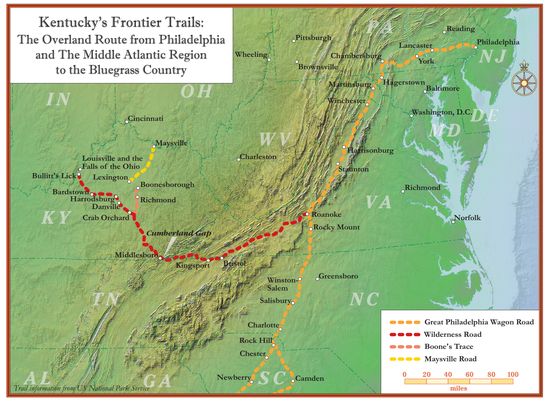
### Historic Frontier Trails

- Wilderness Road
- Warrior's Path/Athawominee
- Boone's Trace
- Other Trails
- Minor Connector Roads

Dashed Trails (▭▭▭) indicate conjectural alignments

### Selected Historic Trail Locations

- Forts & Stations
- Cities & Towns
- Indian Camp
- Houses & Farms
- Church
- Mill
- Courthouse
- Salt Lick
- Spring
- Mountain / Knob
- Gap
- Ambush / Defeat Site
- Furnace
- Pioneer Camp




## Establishing Kentucky's Frontier Trails

Kentucky's Warrior's Path, Boone's Trace, and Wilderness Road were laid out and followed by different people seeking different destinations at different times.

The geographical juxtaposition of Cumberland Mountain's saddle-like gap (N11), the water-level gap cut by the Cumberland River through Pine Mountain (N10), and the adjacent river lowlands limited the overland route into Kentucky to a narrow corridor over the first 20 to 30 miles. Buffalo, deer, and elk created the original track along the trans-gap route. Indians, especially Cherokee and Shawnee, established the Warrior's Path along the same route linking the gaps and Flat Lick (M9) north to the Ohio River. By the 1760s hunters could follow Skaggs Trace, named for brothers Charles, Henry, and Richard Skaggs, from Hazel Patch (P2) northwest to Crab Orchard (J6). Trail extensions led from Crab Orchard to the Falls of the Ohio River (Louisville, A1) by way of Stanford (I5), Danville (H11 and I5), and Harrodsburg (G9 and H4), where the road forked. A west road led toward Bardstown (F4) and then north to Bullitt's salt lick at Shepherdsville (5A and D2); a north road headed toward Jeptha Knob and Shelbyville (G2) before reaching the Falls. Daniel Boone, working for the Transylvania Company, established Boone's Trace from Flat Lick north and west to Boonesborough (K3) on the Kentucky River in 1775.

Twenty-one years later, in 1796, the Kentucky Legislature authorized creation of an improved wagon road from the gaps northwest to Crab Orchard which was, for the first time, officially termed the Wilderness Road. North of Flat Lick, the Wilderness Road and Boone's Trace followed different tracks although they crossed south of London (P4 and L8).

For the next century travelers followed the Wilderness Road route until it was supplemented by the railroad or replaced by constructed macadam roads. For most of their first 130 years in service, the Wilderness Road and Boone's Trace were little more than narrow tracks passable only by packhorses and people on foot or horseback moving in single file. Travelers found the road a dangerous and exhausting gauntlet threading a complicated maze of narrow-ridged mountains and steep-sided valleys. Hazards encountered by those traveling the road were legion and legend. The road across Cumberland Gap was so steep and treacherous people called it "The Devil's Stairway." Once beyond the Gap, travelers had to ford dozens of rivers and creeks. The routes often followed creeks to their headwaters, crossed or followed a high ridge for a distance before descending into another drainage basin. Other sections alternated between alluvial valley bottoms and narrow ridges. Thick stands of giant cane (*Arundinaria gigantean*) often choked fertile bottom land and although draft animals favored cane as fodder, travelers had to clear paths through it to permit passage. Dense trees, a thick understory of laurel and rhododendron, and rugged rock outcroppings also appeared along slopes and ridge tops. Minor improvements by organized work crews–logs laid corduroy-fashion across bogs, for example, in the 1830s and during the Civil War–soon yielded to the pounding of horses' hooves and the washing action of heavy rains and reverted to "natural conditions."

The Wilderness Road linked to the Middle Atlantic ports of Philadelphia and Baltimore by way of Great Wagon Road and the Shenandoah Valley. The route's total length from Philadelphia to the Falls of the Ohio, including the Virginia and Tennessee sections, was over 700 miles. The route's distance and poor condition, together with the Kentucky section's reputation for extreme danger, conspired to discourage wealthy travelers. They could follow a northerly route to western Pennsylvania where they could reach Kentucky by way of Ohio River flatboats and a downstream passage to Limestone (Maysville), Cincinnati-Covington, or Louisville. Those who could not afford the expedience of riverboat travel found the southern route into Kentucky via the gaps, the Trace, or the Wilderness Road, their only alternative.

## Buffalo Track–Indian Trail

The Warrior's Path or Athawominee was one trail in a network of Indian trade trails that crisscrossed Kentucky and linked the Cherokee towns along the Tennessee River in the south with the Shawnee towns in central Kentucky and on the Ohio River and its northern tributaries. The Path ran generally north from the Cumberland and Pine Mountain gaps to Flat Lick. From there the Path likely followed Stinking Creek (N9) north to War and Paint Gaps where they linked to Station Camp Creek (M6) in Jackson County, the southernmost Shawnee agricultural village at Eskippakithiki in eastern Clark County (L3), and Upper Blue Licks (M1) on the Licking River. This Path section terminated at the Shawnee village of Lower Town on the Ohio River near Portsmouth. Literate explorers and surveyors made frequent mention in their reports and diaries of the cultivated fields and villages that lay on or near the great Warrior's Path.


The Ohio River's south bank near Limestone (Maysville), Kentucky, provides the backdrop for artist Steve White's depiction of Shawnee warrior Tecumseh on horseback wearing his red British brigadier general's coat.

## Hunter's, Explorer's, and Surveyor's Trail

Many Anglo hunters, explorers, traders, and surveyors made their way through the Cumberland and Pine Mountain gaps before the mid-eighteenth century, including Gabriel Arthur in 1674, but none documented their trips in records or diaries. The first to do so was Dr. Thomas Walker whose foray into Kentucky began in the spring of 1750.

Thomas Walker was born in King and Queen County, Virginia, in 1715. He practiced medicine and surgery in Fredericksburg, and was a resident of Charlottesville, Virginia, in the 1740s when he became interested in the expansion of settlement into Virginia's western country. He became a surveyor and a principal of the Loyal Land Company which held 800,000 acres of land in western Virginia. On April 13, 1750, Walker and five other explorers moved southwest along the Ridge and Valley country to Cumberland Mountain where they followed an Indian trail through what he initially termed Cave Gap. Walker's group then moved north following Clear Creek to a large stream that previous explorers had named Shawnee River. Walker renamed the stream the Cumberland River (N10) after the English Duke of Cumberland. Other hunters subsequently applied the name to the gap and Cumberland Mountain. Walker passed through Pine Mountain Gap, called Wasioto Gap at the time, following the Indian trail and the river, and several miles downstream found an expansive bottomland. He directed three of his men to build a log cabin and plant corn thereby establishing a legal land claim (M9). Walker's party traveled north and east across the rugged mountains of what later became eastern Kentucky and West Virginia before returning to his Virginia home in July, four months after he departed. Though the places and route information that Walker recorded lacked geographical precision, cartographers and others nevertheless made extensive use of his descriptions.

John Finley, a Lancaster, Pennsylvania, resident and a licensed Indian trader, established in 1752 a trading camp at the Shawnee village Eskippakithiki (east of present day Winchester) on the Warrior's Path. Finley returned to Pennsylvania to participate in the frontier war with the French and Indians where he served with Daniel Boone. With a small company of North Carolina hunters Finley and Boone returned to Kentucky in 1769 by way of Cumberland Gap and followed the Warrior's Path north to Roundstone Creek (K6) in present day Rockcastle County. On this trip Boone is thought to have first seen the Bluegrass plain from atop Pilot Knob (M3). Finley, Boone, and the rest of their hunting party established a permanent camp on Lulbegrud Creek (L4) in Clark County, a short distance from Finley's original trading cabin at Eskippakithiki.

North Carolina Judge Richard Henderson organized the Transylvania Company in January of 1775 with intent to purchase from the Cherokee sufficient land to start a proprietary colony in central and western Kentucky and north central Tennessee. Henderson commissioned Daniel Boone to negotiate the purchase which was consummated by the Treaty of Sycamore Shoals. Boone then organized a company of some 30 woodcutters, slaves among them, to make a road through the wilderness of western Virginia to the Kentucky River where Henderson wished to establish a colonial headquarters. Boone's Trace followed the long established Warrior's Path from Cumberland Gap north to Flat Lick. From there Boone's men cut a track north-northwest to the Laurel River, Hazel Patch, the Rockcastle River (K7), and Roundstone Creek just south of present day Berea (K5). Boone's Trace crossed present day Madison County east of the future site of Richmond (K4) and dropped into the Kentucky River bottoms by way of Otter Creek (K3). Near the mouth of Otter Creek Boone established a fort site on a floodplain meadow along the Kentucky River. Boone's Trace was a steep, rocky, miry track suitable only for pack horses and people on foot. Virginia and North Carolina reasserted their respective claims to the Kentucky and Tennessee lands that Henderson sought thereby depriving him of his Transylvania colony. Nevertheless, Boonesborough (K3) established a presence, together with Benjamin Logan's St. Asaph (Stanford) and James Harrod's Fort Harrod (Harrodsburg) on the Wilderness Road, in the midst of the Bluegrass plain.

## Pioneer Road

John Filson's book *The Discovery, Settlement, and Present State of Kentucky,* published in 1784 and widely circulated among Atlantic coast residents, portrayed Kentucky in glowing terms: a land of great promise, metaphorically flowing with milk and honey. Accepting the romanticized vision as reality, a steady stream of pioneer migrants of all backgrounds and ethnicities moved into Kentucky over Boone's Trace and the Wilderness Road in the three decades from 1770 to 1800, contributing to a state population of 220,955 by 1800. Importantly, the popular perception of Kentucky as a grassy idyll related to the Bluegrass plain, not the mountainous country through which migrants had to travel to get there. Even after statehood in 1792 travelers often conceived of the mountains as a place apart, a region whose edge or boundary they often precisely delimited, and whose descriptor they often capitalized–Wilderness! The term "wilderness" had several connotations. It was both a type of place and a concept. Some used the term to describe a place beyond a settled region, a hinterland. Others no doubt associated the term with a biblical wilderness, a place of desolation, deprivation, a dangerous abode of bandits. Early travelers therefore did not acknowledge their arrival in Kentucky via the Cumberland-Pine Mountain Gap route until they cleared the wilderness and reached the Bluegrass settlements, a region already regarded as Eden.

The trek over the mountains and through the wilderness was a formidable undertaking. Even those of means who were well prepared and outfitted found the passage arduous. A decade before John Filson published his perspective on Kentucky, William Calk, a member of the party that platted and settled Boonesborough in 1775, moved through Cumberland Gap to engage Daniel Boone's newly cut trail to the Bluegrass settlements. As a "natural" or unconstructed road, the track posed exceptional difficulties for Calk and his contemporaries. The route through the dense mountain forest was often so vague or braided together with other trails that travelers lost their way. Mountain streams flowed in V-shaped valleys necessitating repeated crossings. Some river flood plains, while broad enough to permit direct passage, were choked with rank cane breaks. Crossing the Cumberland and other large streams may have required swimming horses, pack animals, and cattle across swift water.

Compounding the physical obstructions was the ongoing threat of ambush by Indians or Anglo pirates who might scatter a migrant party and steal their goods and livestock, or slay as many as could be run to ground. Travelers found some safety and solace in numbers and so frequently joined other migrant parties at Cumberland Gap before entering the wilderness. Although the threat of Indian raids continued, once travelers reached the Knobs and the edge of the Bluegrass the physical demands of travel eased considerably. Moving across the Bluegrass plain travelers encountered stations and taverns with frequency; creeks and rivers were comparatively shallow and easily crossed unless in flood. Despite the hardships of travel, large numbers of poor, landless people from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia, and the Carolinas moved along the trail seeking fertile lands and a new life. But what could be more distressing, one traveler wrote, "than to see women and Children in the Month of December Travelling a Wilderness Through Ice and Snow passing large rivers and Creeks without Shoe or Stocking, and barely as maney rags as covers their Nakedness, with out money or provisions except what the Wilderness affords…." Sadly, the great Bluegrass meadow that they aspired to reach had, by the time of their arrival, been claimed by war veterans, surveyors, and wealthy plantation owners from the east.

## Wagon and Turnpike Road

In 1792, Governor Isaac Shelby, recognizing that the state treasury held no funds for internal improvements, collected donations from individuals to establish a modest road fund to improve the Wilderness Road from Crab Orchard to Cumberland Gap, a distance of some 90 miles. For 22 days work crews cut trees and brush along the old track, yet the road remained in such poor condition that U.S. Postal Service, began in 1792, had to be discontinued. When it was reinstituted in 1795, the post remained sporadic with mail sometimes delivered only twice a year. Though road use by migrants, packhorses, drovers, and post riders did not abate, the road required significant improvement that could only



be accomplished by well-funded and skillfully managed construction. In late 1795, the state legislature approved substantive road improvements and realignments from Crab Orchard to Cumberland Gap to create a road 30 feet wide and capable of small wagon traffic. By the autumn of 1796 modest road improvements had been completed and the new track was officially designated as the Wilderness Road although travelers had called it by that name for many years. A few weeks later Virginian Moses Austin, traveled the Wilderness Road to Danville. Though on horseback, and with a personal assistant and a pack mule, he found long sections of the road in very poor condition and travel very unpleasant. Overnight accommodations, be they in private farm homes or roadside taverns, while more numerous than a few years before, were often abominable.

In March of 1797, about three months after the first concerted efforts to improve the road, the legislature approved additional expenditures to turn the road into a turnpike or toll road. Lawmakers naively surmised that tolls would pay for road maintenance and future improvements. The road's commissioners built the first toll gate at Cumberland Ford (Pineville) and added others in subsequent years, although the tolls proved insufficient to keep the road in acceptable condition. By 1820, Bluegrass farms were producing a surplus of cattle, sheep, hogs, mules, and horses which drovers herded by the thousands along the road to eastern markets. Thus, two-way traffic developed on the Wilderness Road, now Wilderness Turnpike, as the route became the primary outlet for the state's early exports. But heavy use degraded the road faster than it could be repaired.

By 1850, Kentucky possessed over 700 miles of stone-surfaced macadam roads, perhaps the best road system in the South and equal to any in the United States. Most constructed roads were turnpikes that connected Bluegrass county seats into a loose network that focussed upon Lexington and linked to the Ohio River towns of Louisville, Cincinnati, and Maysville. Along the Wilderness Road the only macadam segment was the Crab Orchard section. The difficult mountain sections remained largely unimproved. New steamboats capable of navigating both down and upstream plied the Ohio River and offered competition to overland roads. The Louisville & Nashville Railroad completed trackage into the state's southeastern hill country by the 1870s.

## Civil War Supply Route

To Civil War strategists, the Wilderness Road corridor seemed a direct route for a potential invasion of enemy territory whether their perspective was from the Union or Confederate side of Cumberland Mountain. Generals for both armies assigned to the mountain theater had two primary concerns: first, gain control of Cumberland Gap and fortify it to turn back incursions; second, improve the Wilderness Road to permit troops and supply wagons to move readily along its length. Confederates occupied the Gap in 1861 and established seven fortified positions on Cumberland Mountain's north shoulder. In the summer of 1862, Confederate troops withdrew from the Gap ceding their control to the Union Army. In defense of their vantage point Union troops built nine cannon battery sites on the mountain's south slope. Both armies drew their supplies along roads within the territory they controlled. While the Union's heavy supply wagons readily negotiated macadamized Bluegrass roads they foundered on the Wilderness Road's rugged mountain section.

Union troops expended considerable effort to widen the trail, fill holes, and lay corduroy logs across perennially wet sections. Without systematic construction and repairs made according to the best engineering practices of the day, however, the road remained a horrific obstacle course and its margins collected the corpses of dead mules and broken wagons.

By traveling across the mountains, Confederate troops bypassed the Gap and moved into Kentucky to cut the Wilderness Road thereby choking off the Union Army's supply line. Seeking an escape route to the north, Union troops relinquished the Gap and the road and retreated toward Ohio following the general route of the Warrior's Path. The Confederates in the meantime, were stymied at Perryville and retreated from Kentucky along the Wilderness Road, the only direct route toward the south available to them. In October 1862, a Confederate wagon train loaded with supplies captured from Bluegrass farms and Union depots headed for Cumberland Gap. Contending with the same rocks, holes, stumps, and steep slopes as had the Union troops, the Rebels left in their wake hundreds of dead draft animals and broken wagons. The Confederates controlled the Gap until they were dislodged by Union troops in September 1863. A Union garrison held the Gap until the war's end in 1864. During the War, the Gap saw skirmishes and sieges but the two armies fought no major battles there. Although the Gap was a strategic gateway, the connecting road to central Kentucky imperiled those that tried to use it for military-scale movements; the road humbled military strategists and broke armies trying to pass along its length.

After the Civil War the Wilderness Road receded from public consciousness, though it continued to function largely as a drover's road. In the mid-1880s, a group of English investors began buying land in and around the great basin on the north side of Cumberland Gap with the intent of mining coal and iron ore. They created an industrial city that they named Middlesboro (N11). Laborers completed a tunnel under Cumberland Mountain in 1889 to accommodate a railroad coming to Middlesboro from Knoxville, Tennessee; shortly thereafter the Louisville & Nashville Railroad tracks arrived from the north.

The old road remained in very poor condition, barely passable by stagecoaches or wagons. Although industrialization, especially coal mining, brought new people onto the mountains and traffic on the old road increased, the state offered no funding to support road repair or construction so improvements were relegated to the counties. In 1909, funded by the federal Office of Public Roads, engineers rebuilt across the Gap a short two-mile road section in stone-covered macadam as part of a larger federal project to build "object-lesson" demonstration roads at selected sites across the nation. The new road matched its intended effect. Bell County successfully sold bonds to finance completion of a stone-surfaced macadam road from Middlesboro to Pineville, and other counties along the route soon followed the example. Elsewhere across the nation promoters started a national Good Roads Movement that advocated governmental support for large scale road building projects.

Middle West business people backed the idea of a cross-country highway that would connect Detroit, Michigan to Miami, Florida. They named the road the Dixie Highway–most roads were still named for their destinations. A Dixie Highway branch would cross Kentucky along a corridor that included an extended section of the Wilderness Road. Growing public support for government-funded roads led to the 1916 passage of the Federal Post Roads Act which resulted in Kentucky receiving more than $1 million in federal road construction funds, some of which was allocated to improve the Wilderness Road section of the Dixie Highway.

## State and Federal Highway

The Dixie Highway's Wilderness Road sections in Kentucky were not constructed to federal standards and paved until 1926. Also in 1926, a joint committee of state and federal highway engineers approved merging some 96,000 miles of primary state roads into a nationwide federal road network. The new policy required replacing road names with a federal numbering system and standardizing highway signs. Sections of the Dixie Highway became US 25.

Contemporary travelers can intersect parts of the Warrior's Path, Boone's Trace and the Wilderness Road in other places. One can approximate the routes by way of numbered county, state, or federal highways. In Virginia, from Gate City to Cumberland Gap, sections of US 23, US 421, and US 58 approximate the old road and are designated the Daniel Boone Heritage Highway. In Kentucky, US 25E roughly coincides with the three overlapping routes between Middlesboro, Pineville, and Flat Lick. North of Barbourville, KY 229 parallels the route to London and Hazel Patch. South of Berea US 25 tracks along Boone's Trace from near Roundstone to Boone Gap. North of Richmond, KY 388 parallels or follows the Trace at Otter Creek. From Mt. Vernon to Brodhead and on to Crab Orchard, Stanford, and Danville, US 150 approximates the Wilderness Road. From Danville to Harrodsburg, US 127 closely parallels the old track.

The largest federal expenditures on road improvement along these historic road corridors were at Cumberland Gap where the twin tube, 4,600-foot Cumberland Gap Tunnel, built at a cost of $280 million, opened in 1996. To accommodate the anticipated increase in traffic that the tunnel encouraged, engineers widened US 25E to four lanes from Middlesboro to Barbourville. On the south side, US 58 is four lanes most of the distance from the Gap to Duffield, Virginia, where the road links to US 23 and Kingsport, Tennessee on the Holston River.

## The Modern Era–Corridor of Memory

Today, commemoratives of explorers' adventures and migrants' trials align Boone's Trace and the Wilderness Road routeways. Roadside historic plaques mark some notable sites; parks encompassing hundreds of acres incorporate others. One enters the route through the first of these commemoratives, Cumberland Gap National Park. President Franklin Roosevelt signed an authorization to create a National Historical Park at Cumberland Gap in 1940. There followed combined efforts by Kentucky, Tennessee, and Virginia to acquire land for the park from private owners. The park was officially dedicated in 1959, and ultimately encompassed over 20,000 acres draped across 17 miles of the Cumberland Mountain crest. The Gap, by this time, had become a metaphor for the frontier's westward movement. The park's purpose was to reconstruct or preserve the cultural and topographic environments at the Gap and surrounding lands as they existed during the three frontier decades from 1780 to 1810; a gateway which marked a route of passage that became a rite of passage in the human experience of frontier making. Achieving this goal required resetting the landscape clock by removing structures and utilities accumulated over some 150 years, including US 25E, and reconstructing in their place the old Wilderness Road.




Along the Wilderness Road, Fort Harrod State Park commemorates the establishment of the first permanent historic settlement in Kentucky. A party of settlers led by James Harrod reached the area that later became Mercer County in 1774. They established a temporary camp where the fort was subsequently built and conducted extensive land surveys. The following year, they built a stockaded fort to house and protect the families from Indian attacks. As the population increased, residents built a second, larger fort to accommodate more people. The town of Harrodsburg grew adjacent to the early fort site. In 1927, a reconstruction of the fort was built and Pioneer Memorial State Park, later renamed Old Fort Harrod State Park, was established. The reconstruction is one-third smaller than the original structure and is positioned just south of the primary site.







Also in 1931, the state received some 300 acres of land to establish Levi Jackson State Park. Boone's Trace and Wilderness Road segments lay within the park's boundaries as did the site where, in October 1786, an Indian ambush killed 24 members of the McNitt party near the Wilderness Road. Although hundreds of people lost their lives crossing Kentucky's wilderness by way of these routes this was the most notable incident. The ambush site and burial ground quickly became regarded as "hallowed ground" by local activists. A further land bequest in 1938 added significant additional acreage to the park. Since the park's establishment, it has accrued additional memorials including a reproduction dam and log grist mill on the north bank of Little Laurel River near the point of intersection with Boone's Trace (L8).

At the head of Boone's Trace in Madison County, Fort Boonesborough State Park opened in 1963 to commemorate the site where the Transylvania Land Company headed by Richard Henderson and his partners built a fort in 1775. The Revolutionary War dashed the proprietors' plans and Boonesborough never developed beyond a small settlement, although the valley of Lower Howard's Creek (K3) across the Kentucky River to the north became one of the state's first major industrial-scale milling sites. The fort played a critical role as a place of sanctuary and as a marshalling point for hundreds of settlers during Kentucky's early settlement period. In 1974, a local citizens' association and the state underwrote a reconstruction of the fort atop a hill overlooking the old riverside site. The new fort today serves as a tourist destination.

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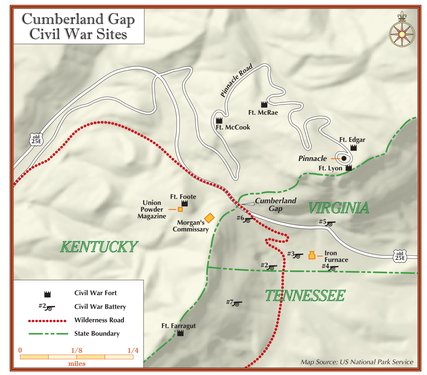
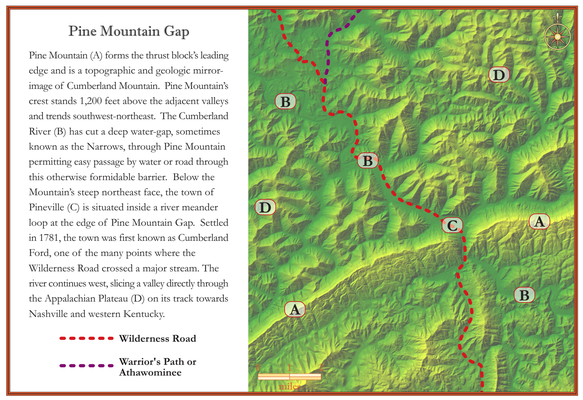


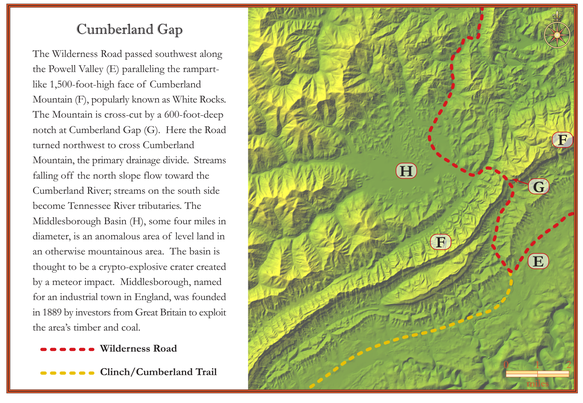






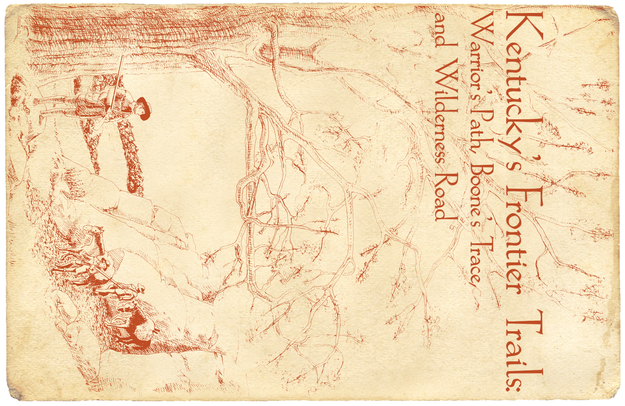

### Pine Mountain Gap

Pine Mountain (A) forms the thrust block's leading edge and is a topographic and geologic mirror-image of Cumberland Mountain. Pine Mountain's crest stands 1,200 feet above the adjacent valleys and trends southwest-northeast. The Cumberland River (B) has cut a deep water-gap, sometimes known as the Narrows, through Pine Mountain permitting easy passage by water or road through this otherwise formidable barrier. Below the Mountain's steep northeast face, the town of Pineville (C) is situated inside a river meander loop at the edge of Pine Mountain Gap. Settled in 1781, the town was first known as Cumberland Ford, one of the many points where the Wilderness Road crossed a major stream. The river continues west, slicing a valley directly through the Appalachian Plateau (D) on its track towards Nashville and western Kentucky.




### Cumberland Gap

The Wilderness Road passed southwest along the Powell Valley (E) paralleling the rampart-like 1,500-foot-high face of Cumberland Mountain (F), popularly known as White Rocks. The Mountain is cross-cut by a 600-foot-deep notch at Cumberland Gap (G). Here the Road turned northwest to cross Cumberland Mountain, the primary drainage divide. Streams falling off the north slope flow toward the Cumberland River; streams on the south side become Tennessee River tributaries. The Middlesborough Basin (H), some four miles in diameter, is an anomalous area of level land in an otherwise mountainous area. The basin is thought to be a crypto-explosive crater created by a meteor impact. Middlesborough, named for an industrial town in England, was founded in 1889 by investors from Great Britain to exploit the area's timber and coal.

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GIS Data Sources:
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Interactive map available at:
http://kygeonet.ky.gov/metadataexplorer
keyword: *frontier trails*

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