

The Wilderness Road

~ Traffic ~

At first the *Wilderness Road* was only a crude trail; only pack teams could cross the mountains. Pioneers coming from Pennsylvania, Maryland, Virginia and the Carolinas before 1796 found it necessary to unload their Conestoga Wagons at Sapling Grove and pack their belongings on horses in order to cross the mountains.

The early pioneers lashed huge baskets and bundles of clothing, bed furnishings and household articles upon packhorses. Children perched on top, or rode in front and behind their mothers and relatives. The older boys and men who did not have mounts had to trudge along on foot.

A caravan of pack horses and people on foot sometimes stretched out as far as three miles along the trail.

Indian raids were common at various points on the *Wilderness Road*.

Professional packhorse men made it a business to hire out to settlers or merchants for transporting supplies through the wilderness. They objected to road improvements, saying it would drive them out of business.

After 1796 when the trail was widened, Conestoga Wagons could cross over the mountains. A Scots-Irish family could travel from the end of their sea voyage at Alexandria, Virginia, all the way to the middle of Kentucky in the same wagon.

When Kentucky and Tennessee became occupied, the *Wilderness Road* provided the means to send surplus produce back to the eastern seaboard.

Droves of cattle, horses, mules, and hogs went by this route to the cotton plantations of South Carolina and Georgia.

Conestoga wagons were constructed of oak, with eight-inch-wide hickory-spoked wheels, five feet high. They were pulled by six draft horses. The high-riding canvas top was supported by eight hoops, rising six feet above the wagon panels. The body was sixteen feet long--large enough to accommodate most of the personal belongings pioneer families wanted to take with them.



Conestoga Wagon

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~Features~

The Cumberland Gap through the Allegheny Mountains was first used by hunting and war parties of rival Indian tribes north of the Ohio River and south of the mountains.

Part of the road was known first as *Boone's Trace*. The Transylvania Company sent Daniel Boone with 30 men to hack a trail into the lush valleys beyond the mountains. In less than three weeks, Boone's men blazed a trail of 208 miles from Long Island on the Holston River through the Cumberland Gap and on into Fincastle County, which is now Kentucky.

The road was created largely by the wear of constant travel. At first it was no more than a pack trail. Only after Kentucky had become a state was it widened for wagons.

The first settlements were at Boonesborough and Harrodsburg. Other sites followed, mainly on or near the Kentucky River. Despite numerous Indian raids, they prospered and still more families came.

Early roads were made by chopping out underbrush and small trees in a swath only ten to thirty feet wide and cutting off the larger timber eighteen inches from the ground. The axemen had to leave the largest trees standing, even in the middle of the road. They bridged small streams with logs, and crossed rivers by fords or ferries. Even under the best of conditions such roads were unsatisfactory, and during wet weather they were impassible. Nevertheless, they connected the East to the West, and that was enough!

Of Kentucky's 75,000 population in 1790, about 90% had arrived by way of the *Wilderness Road*.

The Cumberland Gap is about 510 highway miles from Washington D.C.

Located at the Virginia-Tennessee border, the little village of Cumberland Gap, TN, is about 25 miles farther west than the meridian of Detroit, Michigan.

Today, Cumberland Gap National Historical Park commemorates Daniel Boone and the surge of people who traveled westward after the Revolution.

~ Timeline ~ The Wilderness Road

- 1750 Dr. Thomas Walker discovers Cave Gap, which he later calls Cumberland Gap. And during that same year, Christopher Gist crosses the whole of Kentucky to the Miami River.
- 1752 John Finley sees the falls of the Ohio River, where Louisville now stands.
- 1769 Daniel Boone reaches the Cumberland Gap and passes into the Blue Grass region, a hunting ground of both southern and northern Indian tribes.
- 1775 Land speculator Thomas Henderson "buys" twenty million acres from the Cherokees.
- 1775 The Transylvania Company sends Daniel Boone and about 30 woodsmen with rifles and axes to mark out a road through the Cumberland Gap.
- 1775 Boone's men complete the blazing of the first trail through the Cumberland Mountains. They establish Boonesborough on the Kentucky River.
- 1781 Captain John Kinkead headed a crew of woodcutters employed by Virginia to clear the road to Kentucky, following Boone's original path. He made the trail a little wider, removed obstructions and trimmed out overhanging limbs, but it remained a pack-horse trail.
- 1783 At the Treaty of Paris, Britain cedes to the United States the area from the Appalachian Mountains to the Mississippi River. Thousands of American settlers are already living in Kentucky.
- 1792 Kentucky becomes a state. It is estimated that 70,000 settlers have poured into the area through the Cumberland Gap.



- 1796 The road is widened and sometimes relocated by James Knox and Colonel Joseph Crockett, allowing Conestoga Wagons to travel on it. Now it is officially the *Wilderness Road*.

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Route of the Wilderness Road

Some suggest that the origin of the *Wilderness Road* was at Fort Chiswell (Ft. Chissel) on the *Great Valley Road* where roads converged from Philadelphia and Richmond.

Others claim the *Wilderness Road* actually began at Sapling Grove (now Bristol, VA) which lay at the extreme southern end of the *Great Valley Road* because it was at that point that the road narrowed, forcing travelers to abandon their wagons.

It moved through the Allegheny Mountains at Cumberland Gap, at what is now the junction of the State boundaries of Kentucky, Tennessee and Virginia.

Heading northwest, it splits at Hazel Patch--with one route creating Boonesborough, the other Frankfort.

Today one can follow the main route from Bristol, VA to Middlesboro, KY, then to Pineville, Mt. Vernon, and on towards Lexington on Interstate 75.