

**HISTORY OF  
LAKE CUMBERLAND**  
KENTUCKY LEADERSHIP CENTER  
September 14, 2006



Presented By:  
**Harlan Ogle**



**HISTORY OF  
LAKE CUMBERLAND  
KENTUCKY LEADERSHIP CENTER  
September 14, 2006**

**This morning my goal is to provide you with a brief and informal history of Lake Cumberland. I hope to be able to do that in a way that will increase your desire to take advantage of the abundance of material that is available to give you a detailed history of this beautiful and useful resource.**

**It would be good to remember that before there was ever a Lake Cumberland, there was the Cumberland River.**

**Let's talk about the Cumberland River for just a moment.**

**The Cumberland River is one of the most important waterways in the southern United States.**

**It is 687 miles long.**

**It starts in Letcher County in eastern Kentucky on the Cumberland Plateau, flows through southeastern Kentucky before crossing into northern Tennessee, and then curves back up into western Kentucky before draining into the Ohio River at Smithland, Kentucky.**

**One of the native American name for the Cumberland River was the War-ri-to and was the source of food for them.**

**It also provided a means of transportation as they would travel from place to place in their canoes and small boats.**

**The Cumberland River was probably known by the earliest European explorers who visited the region but it was in 1748, that Dr. Thomas Walker led a party of hunters across the Appalachian Mountains from Virginia into what would later become Kentucky.**

**Walker was an explorer and surveyor of renown.**

**When crossing the mountains through the newly discovered Cumberland Gap, he gave the name "Cumberland" to that lofty range of mountains he and his party had successfully crossed.**

**The name he selected was in honor of Prince William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland.**

Walker kept a journal of his travels and his journal entry for April 17, 1750, reads in part: "I went down the creek a-hunting, and found that it went into a river about a mile below our camp. This, which is Flat Creek and some other join'd, I called Cumberland River."

The Cumberland River is called a wild river above Burnside because it is shallow, filled with huge boulders, and flows through rugged terrain.

Included in this section of the river is the Cumberland Falls, a 68-foot waterfall. It is one of the largest waterfalls in the eastern United States, and the only place in the Western Hemisphere where a moonbow can be seen.

Most of the river below Lake Cumberland's Wolf Creek Dam is navigable because of a number of locks and dams.

Dams at various locations of the Cumberland River have created large lakes.

These lakes on the Cumberland include:

Lake Barkley in western Kentucky  
Cordell Hull just east of Nashville, Tennessee  
Old Hickory Lake also east of Nashville  
Cheatham Lake west of Nashville  
Laurel Lake in southern Kentucky  
Dale Hollow Lake in northeast middle Tennessee  
Percy Priest Lake in Nashville  
Lake Cumberland here in southern Kentucky

Lake Cumberland is located in Wayne, Russell, Pulaski, Clinton, McCreary, Laurel, and Whitley counties in Southeastern Kentucky on the Cumberland River.

The site of the dam that created Lake Cumberland is in Russell County about 10 miles southwest of Jamestown, Kentucky.

The Wolf Creek Project was authorized by the Flood Control Act of 1938 and the Rivers and Harbor Act of 1946.

The motive for construction of the dam was primarily flood control and hydroelectric power production.

Recreational activities and water supply were secondary considerations.

**On July 21, 1941 the contract for construction of the dam was awarded to the S.A. Healy Company of White Plains, New York, whose bid was the lowest, just under \$16 million. Projected estimates including the addition of costs for land and hydroelectric power equipment were approximately \$55 million. Actual cost would exceed that figure.**

**Nearly 10,000 people attended the ground breaking ceremonies which were held on Labor Day, September 1, 1941.**

**Construction was just underway before the United States entered World War II and with less than 10% of construction completed, the War Production Board suspended all activity in August of 1943.**

**Work on the project would not resume until August 1946 after the war's end.**

**The dam was completed for flood control operation in 1950. Three of the six hydroelectric generating units were placed in operation in 1951 and the remaining three in 1952.**

**The final cost of the project was approximately \$80.4 million.**

**Lake Cumberland's shoreline measures 1,255 miles and the lake is spread over 50,250 acres.**

**The Lake is approximately 101 miles long.**

**Wolf Creek Dam ranks 22nd in the One Hundred Largest Dams in the U.S. and required 11,568,900 cubic yards of concrete and earth in construction.**

**It is over a mile long at 5,736 feet. It is 258 feet high at its tallest point.**

**The average depth of Lake Cumberland is 90 feet with its deepest depth being 200 feet.**

**The reservoir ranks 9th in the U.S. in size with a capacity of 6,089,000 acre-feet, enough water to cover the entire Commonwealth of Kentucky to a depth of 3 inches.**

**That's roughly 1.9 trillion gallons.**

**More than 4.7 million visitors spent 73,252,200 hours in pursuit of recreation and added more than \$152,395,044.00 to the local economy in 1999.**

**The number of visitor hours ranks Lake Cumberland 4th in the nation among 383 Corps Lakes.**

**Since it was impounded, Wolf Creek Dam has prevented more than \$500,000,000 in flood damages for cities and communities downstream.**

**The six turbines at Lake Cumberland are capable of producing 270 megawatts of electricity, enough to supply the needs of an average city with a population of 375,000.**

**The base under the Wolf Creek Dam consists of limestone and this has caused problems as the water has found paths in the limestone under the dam and created “leaks” in the dam.**

**The first of these “leaks” were detected in 1967 and repaired in 1977 at a cost of \$96.4 million.**

**Just recently another “leak” has been found in the Wolf Creek Dam and the Corps of Engineers has already embarked upon a plan to repair this “leak” that will reach into 2012.**

**Estimated cost of these repairs is \$300 million!**

**The corps also outlined an emergency plan if the dam were to unexpectedly break.**

**I want you to know that the story of Lake Cumberland does not consist just of dates, statistics, concrete, and construction equipment.**

**To understand the story of Lake Cumberland, you have to understand the cost the construction of the lake as it relates to the thousands of people who lived in the vast farmland that existed along the river.**

**In 1775, when the first battles of the American Revolutionary War were fought at Lexington and Concord, Daniel Boone built the fort at Boonesborough.**

**There would be battles fought to establish freedom for the American settlers in the East and battles fought to establish a frontier in the Kentucky wilderness.**

**After the Revolutionary War ended in 1783, the news of the settlement of the land Boone called Kain-tuck had gained the attention of the new American government.**

The government was not able to pay the soldiers who fought in the Revolution and they decided to use a large part of South Central Kentucky to award land grants to many of the soldiers.

These men moved their families from Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and other of the original states to the fertile lands of Kentucky where they could build their houses, plant their crops, and begin a new life.

The Cumberland River and other rivers, creeks, and branches made Kentucky a land of promise.

So, they came by the thousands and cleared the forests and built their log cabins in the flat river bottoms of the Cumberland, and defended themselves against any enemy that opposed them.

In time these brave Revolutionary soldiers died out but their descendants continued to live on the land of their forefathers.

They were proud of the sacrifices their ancestors made for America.

They possessed land that had been purchased with the blood and sweat of America's first freedom fighters.

In time their way of life was threatened when the government decided that it was in the best interests of the nation to build a dam, flood their ancestral homes, and relocate the thousands of proud Kentuckians who had become one with their land.

The advantages of building the dam on the Cumberland was touted as a major step in the progress of Wayne and surrounding counties. Those predictions, have certainly come true but not without tremendous cost in human upheaval and misery.

Wayne County historian, Garnett Walker hints at that cost in these words:

“This lake will inundate many acres of fertile land in Wayne County. Many communities have been evacuated to make way for it. Because of this evacuation the Mill Springs mill and a portion of the land surrounding it is being converted into a State Park. The Fall Creek Mill has been demolished. The Slate Gap, Backbone, Eads Bottom, Ganns Bottom, Rankin, and Cumberland Schools have been discontinued; and the Beaver Creek Church has been forced to disband. Along with this exodus from the Cumberland River Bottoms has come a general redistribution of Wayne County's population.”

People of compassion realize the cost of the dam and its effect in the lives of people cannot be measured in dollars alone. There were more tears shed, more anger expressed, and more personal turmoil than most people could ever imagine. People, good people, had to leave the places where generations of ancestors had been buried. Schools were closed. Churches, made precious in the minds of worshippers for decades, existed one Sunday and were gone the next Sunday. Old grandmothers and grandfathers were uprooted from the homes that were their birthplaces. Farms that had been cleared and worked by Wayne County pioneers would be no more.

The records of the Corps of Engineers indicate that the building of Lake Cumberland resulted in 123 cemeteries and the bodies of approximately 2,800 persons were relocated.

Some family members were said to have “hid the headstones of their relatives to prevent their graves from being disturbed.”

In 1999, a local author, Norma Cole, wrote a novel entitled **THE FINAL TIDE**.

In it she tells the story of the Haw family who lived on the banks of the Cumberland River in 1948.

One of the characters in the book is Granny Haw and she is determined that she is not going to leave her home even if they have built a dam and the flood waters are fast reaching her old home where she said the Haws had lived “since Daniel Boone showed them the way.”

It seems that Granny Haw had made a promise to her departed husband to be buried beside him in the old family cemetery and that she was not going to allow his remains to be moved nor leave her beloved home place.

The book then gives this description of what happened in the building of Wolf Creek Dam and the impact it had on families:

“In late August crews of men with saws, big log trucks, gasoline to set fires, and steam-driven earth-moving machines swarmed over the mountains that circled their river bottom. They cut every tree that might be in the future lake bed. They hauled off the big logs, piled up the brush, and burned piles of it night and day. The air was smoky and hazy from the fires, and the barren hillsides looked naked and ugly.

“Little by little the farm and house were stripped and hauled off. The house was almost bare, but they were reluctant to make the final break.

**“In November men came and took down Bart and Ina’s house. It had been sold and the new owners prepare it to be moved.**

**“‘Is someone going to take our house, too?’ Geneva asked.**

**“Dade shook his head. ‘No. I’ll take it down. Part of this house was built when Daniel Boone first come through here, and’ if it can’t be a Haw’s house, it ain’t gonna be nobody’ house.’**

**“Geneva watched the destruction of the woods and forests she loved so dearly. Men and saws went higher and higher up the rise of mountains. They went beyond the baby’s burying ground, past the woodlot, above the high pasture Geneva had taken the cows to before the tide of last spring. Castle Rock was left exposed to the wind and rain. Across the river the setting sun no longer danced on Tillet’s Mountain but burned red through the haze.**

**“Rain came and created gullies in the thin soil. Jagged rock fell off exposed cliff faces. The gold of the long fall weather turned to the dusty, smoky gray of fires, spoiled land, destroyed lives.**

**“The government men made repeated trips to Granny’s. They took down the church house and took the trees from the woodlot behind the burying ground, but they left Granny...shotgun in hand, standing on her porch.**

**“...the men of the community took down the walls [of the school house], carried away the windows, gave away the desks, left nothing but the stones of the foundation and the two steps.”**

**The building of Wolf Creek Dam and the impounding of Lake Cumberland has been an undeniable success in the history of South Central Kentucky.**

**I have not attempted to deny that fact in any way this morning.**

**I have, however, tried to get you to see beyond the lake, the dam, and the great recreational and financial opportunities it presents and see that the history of Lake Cumberland is a story of a noble and proud people who were able to accommodate the progress the Dam brought and to realize that people of lesser character and strength would have been destroyed and defeated.**

**But not them.**

**That pioneer spirit and determination continues to live in the hearts and minds of the great people whose ancestors moved into this land, carved out a civilization, and provided for their descendants a proud and honorable legacy.**

**Harlan Ogle  
Monticello, Kentucky**



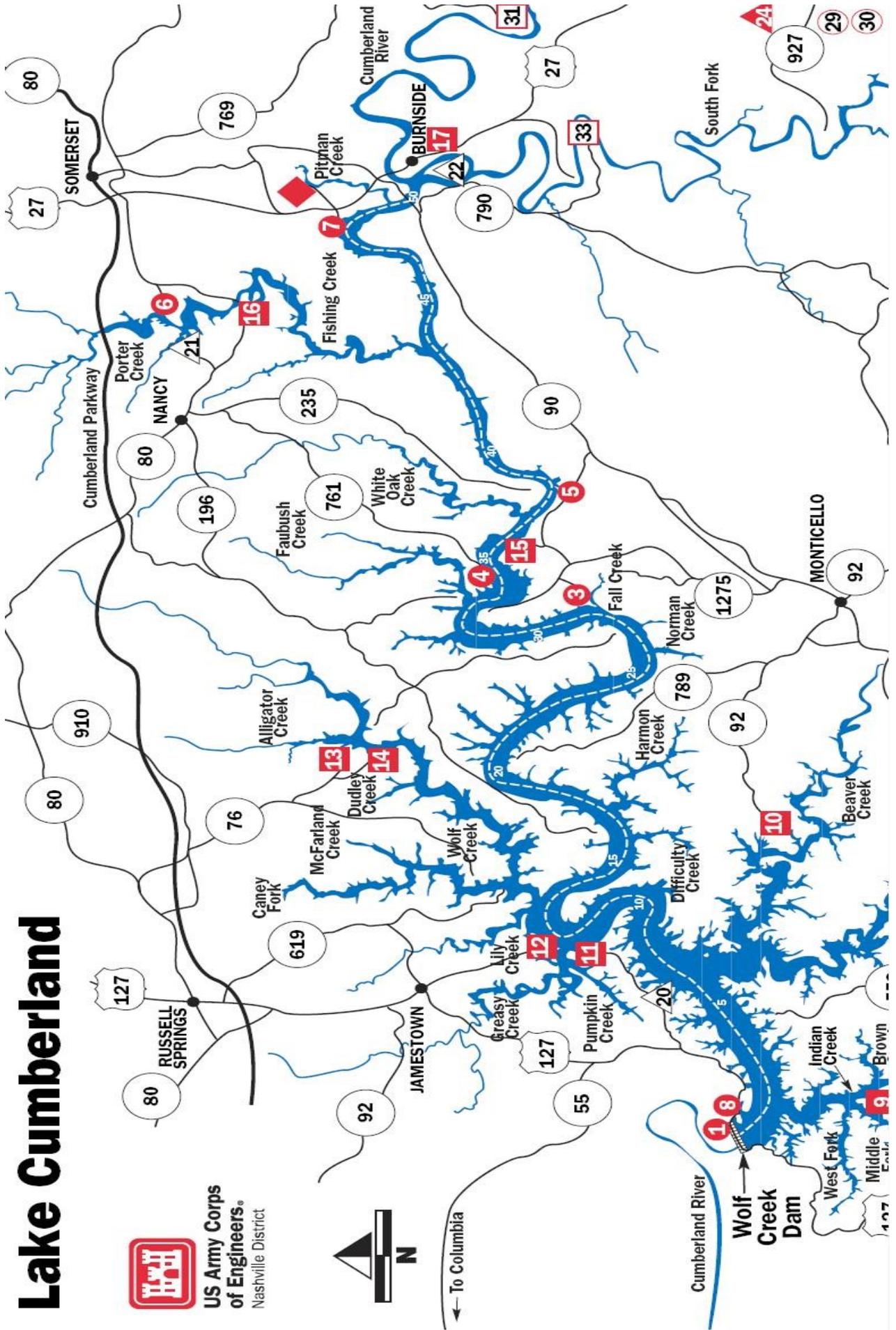
# Lake Cumberland



**US Army Corps  
of Engineers**  
Nashville District



← To Columbia



**LAKE CUMBERLAND****Wolf Creek Dam Statistical Information****DAM**

Type Concrete-gravity and earthfill

**Quantities:**

Concrete, cubic yards 1,380,000  
Earthfill, cubic yards 10,016,500

**Dimensions:**

Maximum height, feet 258  
Length, feet (concrete, 1796; earth, 3940) 5,736

**Elevations (above mean sea level):**

Top of dam 773  
Top of gates 760  
Spillway crest 723

**Spillway crest gates:**

Number and type 10, Radial  
Size (width and height), feet 50 X 37  
Discharge capacity, c.f.s. 553,000

**Sluices**

Number of conduits 6  
Size (width and height), feet 4 X 6  
Total discharge capacity, c.f.s. 9,800

**HYDROPOWER**

Installation 270,000 kw in 6 units  
Rating, each generator, kilowatts 45,000  
Estimated energy output, average yearly, kilowatt-hours 800,000,000

**RESERVOIR**

Drainage area, square miles: 5,789  
Length of pool at Elev. 760, river miles: 101  
Length of shoreline, pool at Elev. 760, miles: 1,255

**Area, acres:**

Top of flood-control pool (Elev. 760) 63,530  
Maximum power pool (Elev. 723) 50,250  
Minimum power pool (Elev. 673) 35,820

**Storage capacities, acre-feet:**

Flood control (Elev. 760 - 723) 2,094,000  
Power drawdown (Elev. 723 - 673) 2,142,000  
Dead (below Elev. 673) 1,853,000  
Total (below Elev. 760) 6,089,000







