

## **Cumberlands Corridor Heritage Tourism**

The heritage of the Cumberlands Corridor is written on the land where early settlers once carved out lives. In the late 1700s and early 1800s when the discovery of the Cumberland Gap opened up the territory, pioneers created homesteads, towns and communities from the great wilderness. They put down roots and crafted a rich heritage as a magnificent legacy for coming generations. That history is celebrated today in museums, attractions, festivals and tales of the past. While keeping an eye on the future and enjoying the present, residents in the Cumberlands Corridor make sure to honor their heritage and use it as a guidepost for whatever tomorrow might bring.

A good example of the area's dedication to the past is the "Raccoon" John Smith cabin in Wayne County. Built around 1814 by the pioneer preacher, the cabin is now located adjacent to the First Christian Church in downtown Monticello. The cabin originally had been constructed on a farm 16 miles away in an area called Horse Hollow. Smith was a famous Baptist preacher who helped organize the First Christian Church in 1831. When Smith casually made reference to his having lived among the coons on the Cumberland, he unwittingly became known as "Raccoon" John Smith. He became a living legend in Kentucky and is regarded by many as the greatest preacher of his day. His cabin was lovingly moved log by log to the site where it is now open to the public with tours available by appointment.

Monticello is home to the William Crenshaw Kenney Jr. Memorial Museum, which showcases the history of Wayne County. It includes a miniature building display, a complete post office, stagecoach exhibit and much more. Founded by the Wayne County Historical Society in 2003, the museum is located in the historic Hotel Breeding. Also at this location is a fully restored one-room schoolhouse.

Historic homes, such as the Raintree Inn in Bronston, recall the charms of yesteryear. Nestled above Colson's Cove on Lake Cumberland, the 1872 home was used in the movie *Raintree County* starring Elizabeth Taylor. Now a bed and breakfast, the inn even has its own legendary "Raintree," a huge sycamore tree with a circumference of nearly 20 feet.

The Farm House Inn is set in the middle of Good Spring Farm and is surrounded by the natural beauty of the Daniel Boone National Forest. Opportunities abound to walk through a diverse woodland to waterfalls, cliffs, wildlife areas, fishing ponds or to watch farm life and wildlife from the Inn's porch.

The Civil War left its mark on the state and several sites memorialize local episodes of the War Between the States. General Burnside Island State Park, eight miles south of Somerset, covers 430 acres and is Kentucky's only island park. During the Civil War, General Ambrose Burnside and his troops patrolled the Cumberland River in the vicinity of this island to keep watch for Confederate soldiers.

The Battle of Mill Springs, which occurred January 19, 1862, is interpreted by a nine-mile driving tour that begins at Zollicoffer Park, 10 miles west of Somerset, near the small community of Nancy. The first stop is the National Cemetery at Nancy containing the graves of Union soldiers. At the second stop another monument commemorates the Confederate soldiers killed in the battle and buried in mass graves. The "Zollie" Tree here marks the spot where Confederate General Felix Zollicoffer died as a result of wounds received during the battle. Other stops mark significant points in the action.

The battle was the first significant Union victory in the Civil War and a key loss to the Confederacy. Union victories here and in western Kentucky early in 1862 destroyed the South's first line of defenses against northern invasion and opened the way to Shiloh and Vicksburg.

An audiovisual display at the Mill Springs Mill, north of Monticello, offers an overview of the area's Civil War history. The mill, built in 1840 and powered by one of the world's largest overshot waterwheels (40 feet in diameter), was restored in the 1970s and provides cornmeal-grinding demonstrations on weekends throughout the summer.

Coal played an important part in the heritage of the Cumberland Corridor. Coal mining in Appalachia began almost 200 years ago and visitors can see the tremendous mark it left on Kentucky. After the Civil War, coal mining began in earnest and became a major industry. In 1902, Justis Stearns of Michigan bought 30,000 acres of virgin timberland in southern Kentucky. He discovered coal soon afterwards and built a huge empire. The Stearns Coal and Lumber Company built the town of Stearns to serve as the hub of a logging and mining empire. In its heyday, the company controlled over 200 square miles of land, built the Kentucky and Tennessee Railway as well as the world's first all-electric sawmill and employed over 2,200 people living and working in at least 18 coal camps. The restored downtown area in Stearns is designated as a National Historic District.

Located in the 1907 Stearns Coal and Lumber Company office building, the McCreary County Museum is one of the area's most popular repositories of the past. The museum highlights local history from the Indian and pioneer era through the "boom" times of the coal and lumber industries. The sandstone tree stump in front of the museum has an interesting story. The stump was unearthed in a strip mine just below the Tennessee line. Apparently the two-ton stump is not petrified wood but a sandstone cast of a tree, possibly an oak, that died about 315 million years ago. When the tree rotted or dissolved, the space was filled with sandstone silt, which then hardened.

The Big South Fork Scenic Railway takes visitors on a three-hour trip through the Stearns Coal and Lumber Company's former logging and mining empire, now mostly second growth woods. The land that was once occupied by loggers and miners is now covered by lush vegetation and abundant with wildlife. The train hugs cliffhills and follows roaring mountain streams, passes through a tunnel and over a bridge as it descends over 600 feet in five miles to the floor of the Big South Fork River Valley.

The first stop on the scenic railway is Barthell Coal Mining Camp. Barthell was the first of 18 mines belonging to the Stearns Coal and Lumber Company. To preserve the history and culture of coal mining, the Koger family reconstructed Barthell as it looked around 1910. Visitors to the camp can see the old-time doctor's office, barber shop, bath house with original shower room, coal mine opening, machine shop, period house, company store, motor house and schoolhouse/church. Guests can even lodge in one of the cabins, although furnishings have improved over the days when miners slept here. Each cabin includes two bedrooms with queen-sized beds and kitchens with microwaves.

Farther down the railway line is an abandoned coal mining camp called Blue Heron or Mine 18. The site is administered by the National Park Service as part of the Big South Fork National River and Recreation Area. This isolated company town was built in 1937 and nearly abandoned by the early 1960s. The original buildings were ingeniously rebuilt as "ghost structures" in 1989. Life-sized photographs of miners and their families occupy the skeletal structures and corrugated steel spaces. Recorded history depicts life in the camp through the words of those who once lived here. Pushing a button at one of the audiotape stations, it is eerily impressive to hear the voice of a long-ago resident reminiscing about the hardships and joys of life at Blue Heron.

A walk across the coal tipple bridge at Blue Heron is breathtaking. Considered state-of-the-art when completed in the late 1930s, the dynamic structure and bridge were the heart of the Blue Heron operation. Here, raw coal was dropped into the 120-ton hopper and sorted and separated into marketable sizes. The separated coal was then transferred by chutes into waiting coal cars underneath the tipple, railed to Stearns, transferred to the main Southern Railroad line and delivered to various coal markets such as Cincinnati and Chattanooga. It is hard to imagine the intense noise and bustle of the coal tipple in those bygone years. Today the operation is silent except for the whistle of the wind, the faint ripple of the Big South Fork of the Cumberland River and the song of birds in nearby trees.

## **DESTINATIONS:**

McCreary County Museum, Stearns: 606/376-5730.  
General Burnside State Park, Burnside: 606/561-4104.  
Mill Springs National Cemetery, Nancy: 859/885-5727

Mill Springs Battlefield, Somerset: 606/679-1859  
Battle of Mill Springs, Mill Springs: 606/348-8189.  
"Raccoon" John Smith Cabin, Monticello: 606/348-3064.  
Big South Fork Scenic Railway, Stearns: 800/462-5664  
Barthell Coal Mining Camp, Barthell: 888/550-5748.  
Blue Heron Coal Mining Camp, Blue Heron: 606/376-5073.  
William Crenshaw Kenney Jr. Memorial Museum, Monticello: 606/340-2300.  
Mill Springs Mill and Park, Monticello: 606/348-3064

## **FESTIVALS AND EVENTS:**

- \* Stearns Golf Course, Stearns, June: Since 1926, the second oldest golf course in Kentucky has hosted the longest continuous golf tournament in the Southeast. 606/376-2666.
- \* Mill Springs Civil War Heritage Trail, Somerset, July: Expertly guided tours and living history programs. 606/679-1859.
- \* Old-Fashion Days, Monticello, first weekend in September: Enjoy crafts, contests for longest hair and best dressed, corn-on-the-cob eating competition. 606/348-3064.
- \* Pansy Festival, Russell Springs, last weekend in September: Wagon rides, vendors, food, activities, plus plenty of pansies and mums. 270/866-4769.
- \* Railroad Days, Somerset, September: Honors the role the railroad has played in Pulaski County, featuring the world's largest model train exhibit. 800/642-6287.
- \* Big South Fork Scenic Railway Christmas Train, Stearns, first three Saturdays in December: Special three-hour train ride with Santa and carolers in heated enclosed train cars. 606/376-5330.
- \* Christmas Island, General Burnside Island State Park, beginning in mid-November and continuing through the end of December: The park invites visitors to experience a 3.5-mile drive through more than 300 displays illuminated by one million twinkling bulbs. 800/642-6287.
- \* McCreary Heritage and Homecoming at Stearns, July. 800/462-5664
- \* Cumberland Heritage Days at Blue Heron, Saturdays in October. 800/462-5664