

# Claiborne County

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*Established 1801 County Seat: Tazewell*

## **Early History**

The geography of Claiborne County has played an important role in the county's history. The Cumberland Gap and the Clinch and Powell rivers lie within its boundaries. The Cumberland Gap, a natural gap between the mountains, was first used by Native Americans who referred to the trail through the gap as "the Warrior's Path." In 1750, Dr. Thomas Walker traveled through the region and named the gap in honor of William Augustus, Duke of Cumberland and son of King George II. Daniel Boone led thirty men through the gap in 1775 and opened the way for settlement west of the Appalachians. Claiborne County was created from part of Grainger and Hawkins counties in 1801. In the north, Claiborne County borders both Kentucky and Virginia. The county took its name from William Charles Claiborne, a prominent politician in early Tennessee. Claiborne served as Tennessee's first representative to Congress and as a Superior Court judge. The county seat, Tazewell, was named for an important Virginia family.

## **Civil War and Reconstruction**

During the Civil War, both the Union and Confederacy considered the Cumberland Gap valuable. Its location on the border made it an ideal route for Tennessee Unionists who wanted to join the Union army in Kentucky. The Union also viewed the gap as a path to invade the Confederacy and disrupt lines of supply and communication. As a result, the Confederates viewed the gap as a vital defensive position. Several skirmishes were fought in the region, and the gap changed hands four times before the end of the war. Following the Confederate retreat from Tazewell in November of 1862, a large fire swept through the town and destroyed many of the buildings, including the courthouse. Following the Civil War, mining became the most important industry in Claiborne County.

## **Twentieth Century**

The creation of Cumberland Gap National Park in 1940 created new opportunities for tourism in the area. In 1996, the Cumberland Gap Tunnel was completed, allowing traffic to be rerouted under the park. The former Highway 25E roadbed was restored to a wagon path in keeping with the historic nature of the site. Coal mining remains an important industry in Claiborne County, though the transition to surface or strip mining has led to controversy and radical changes to the geography of the county.

## **Lincoln Memorial University**

President Abraham Lincoln felt a deep affinity for the loyal Unionists of East Tennessee during the Civil War. In 1863, Lincoln expressed this sentiment during a meeting with General Oliver Howard. Lincoln said, "*General if you come out of this horror and misery alive, and I pray to God that you may, I want you to do something for those mountain people.*" Following the war, Howard served as head of the

Freedmen's Bureau. One of his many accomplishments was the founding of Howard University in Washington D.C. In 1897, Howard fulfilled President Lincoln's desire when he, along with Reverend Arthur A. Myers, founded Lincoln Memorial University in Harrogate. The charter from the State of Tennessee was signed on February 12, 1897, Lincoln's birthday.

Originally, a hotel had been planned for the site of the university. However, a financial crisis caused the hotel project to be abandoned despite the fact that roads and several buildings had already been completed. Students in the tristate area who could not afford to pay tuition were able to pay their way by working on the university's farm.

Today, Lincoln Memorial University's Abraham Lincoln Museum contains the United States largest Lincoln and Civil War collection. The collection began with donations from General Howard. Lincoln Memorial University now operates a number of satellite locations throughout the East Tennessee region.

***For more information, see***

**[Lincoln Memorial University](#)**

**[Rootsweb: Claiborne County , Tennessee](#)**

**[Cumberland Gap National Park](#)**

***Harrogate and Cumberland Gap by Natalie Sweet***

***Lincoln Memorial University and the Shaping of Appalachia by Earl J. Hess***