

Exploring Rural Kentucky Through Documentary Art: Unit 1 - Rural Economy in the Early 20th Century - For the Student -

BACKGROUND READING

Today, Creelsboro, Kentucky is a quiet, nearly deserted community near the Cumberland River in southcentral Kentucky. Upriver from the town is Lake Cumberland, created by Wolf Creek Dam in 1952.

Before the dam, Creelsboro was a bustling river town and its river landing was a major stop for steamboats on their way to Nashville, Tennessee and then eventually to New Orleans.

The first Euro-American visitors to the Creelsboro Valley were long hunters – groups of men who came to hunt the abundant game for valuable pelts. After the Revolutionary War, a handful of Continental soldiers came to settle on lands granted to them in compensation for their wartime service.

They found a richness of natural resources – timber, limestone, fertile soil, plentiful game, and a river full of fish and mussels. While some settlers arrived on horseback, others came down the river on flat boats.

The rich bottom lands produced not only enough crops for local needs, but also a surplus of goods – mainly

tobacco – that was loaded on makeshift barges and floated downriver to New Orleans. There, the tobacco and barges were traded for horses that the men rode back home. The river also provided a convenient way to get timber to market. Logs were tied together into rafts for the trip.

The invention of the steamboat in the early 1800s transformed communities along inland waterways like Creelsboro. Now, goods, livestock, and passengers could be transported upriver as well as downriver. Creelsboro was ideally situated to become a trading center. The community boomed.



Creelsboro in October 2015. Incorporated in 1836, the town is located on the north bank of the Cumberland River.



Cumberland Memories by Fred Thrasher (1981).

In most places by 1915, railroads were replacing steamboats for transportation, but this did not immediately impact the Creelsboro Valley. Steep escarpments along the river kept railroads and paved roads at bay until the 1950s.

When President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Flood Control Act of 1938, planning began for the construction of dams

on the Cumberland River. The dams would not only curtail flooding but generate electricity.

When construction on Wolf Creek Dam began in 1950 upriver from Creelsboro, life in the valley was once again transformed. There were good paying jobs working on the dam. Soon after construction was completed, Lake Cumberland became a popular destination for boaters and tourists. The jobs and the lake gave a boost to the regional economy.

But the dams also limited transportation up and down the Cumberland River. The steamboat era drew to a close and with it, the days of Creelsboro as a center for commerce and trade. However, residents still take pride in their rich local history.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

After reading the BACKGROUND READING, consider these questions:

1. How did geography determine the history, culture, and economy of the Creelsboro Valley? What natural resources were available? Were there geographic factors that limited development?
2. How did human interaction change the environment?
3. How did the invention of the steamboat influence life in the Creelsboro Valley? What do you know about the steamboat era in other areas of the U.S.?
4. How did the construction of dams change life in the Creelsboro Valley? What do you know about the construction of dams in the area where you live? In other areas of the U.S.?

After watching **Rural Economy**, consider this question:

What did Mr. Reeder mean when he said, “The river gave a lot, but it took a lot, too”?