State Parks in Western Kentucky
History and Interesting Facts

Resort Parks

Barren River Lake State Resort Park
Established January 1, 1965

Vast forests did not cover all of Kentucky. In the south-central portion of the state an area of open grasslands known as the “Barrens” made a stark contrast to the heavily forested terrain surrounding it. Native Americans had repeatedly burned the forests that once covered the region as a means to stampede and kill big game. These fires created an open savannah that drew all types of wild game to feed off its lush grasses. Buffalo herds migrated eastward across the Mississippi to Illinois, and then to Kentucky. These herds came to the Barrens and multiplied, providing food and clothing for the Indians.

The open lands of the Barrens also drew settlers who found the treeless areas easy to cultivate. Originally the pioneers thought the treeless grasslands infertile because of the lack of forestation. They soon found the soil to be some of the best that they had encountered. Farms and communities soon began to cover the area.

By 1960, construction of a 146 foot-high dam began on the Barren River. When completed the dam had created Barren River Lake. A movement by the people of Barren County to establish a park next to the lake became a reality on January 1, 1965. The state purchased adjoining farms to extend the park site and the Louisville Corps of Engineers donated acreage to round out the park’s boundaries.

Kenlake State Resort Park
Established March 13, 1948

Gordon R. Clapp, general manager of the TVA, realized the potential of Kentucky Lake as a future recreational resource. As early as 1944, Clapp wrote, “Although exact predictions cannot be made as to future demands for public use of the recreational resources to be provided on Kentucky Lake, the opportunities for post-war recreational development and use would seem to be unparalleled in the general region.”

The Kentucky Dam impounded the waters of the Tennessee River covering a huge area. Kentucky Lake covers 160,000 acres of which 48,000 are in Kentucky. It is the largest of the
Tennessee Valley chain of lakes. Kentucky Lake has a larger area than any other manmade lake in the United States.

In 1946 the Commonwealth of Kentucky began negotiations with the TVA to lease the Aurora Landing site for a state park dedicated to recreational purposes. After the transfer of land, Aurora Landing received a new name. The park became Kenlake State Park.

Kenlake had a unique feature — a separate park for black citizens. During the closing years of legal segregation, the state set aside an area named Cherokee Park, adjacent to Kenlake. The facilities in this park met the same standards as other state parks. Cherokee Park operated separately for a number of years, until the early 1960s, when it became part of Kenlake.

**Kentucky Dam Village State Resort Park**

Established May 19, 1949

The site of Kentucky Dam Village State Resort Park had once been one of the most isolated and poverty stricken in the state. The Tennessee River frequently flooded and some places could not be safely navigated for commercial traffic. After the creation of the TVA, it recommended a dam be built near the town of Gilbertsville. Two Kentucky towns vanished when their sites had to be cleared for the dam’s construction. When actual construction on the project began, accommodations for workmen had to be built. The community that had housed the workmen was abandoned with the project’s completion in 1945. The new dam had originally been called the Gilbertsville Dam, but the TVA renamed it Kentucky Dam.

In 1949 Kentucky Dam State Resort Park consisted of 1,119-acres in addition to several areas designated for state use, an auditorium, personnel building, a central heating plant, a community building, complete water, sewage, and electrical systems, 39 houses, and a hospital. Although the park began with a major group of buildings, the need for recreational facilities to make the park a major resort demanded a large infusion of money.

The region around Kentucky Dam Village at one time belonged to the Chickasaw Indians. This portion of western Kentucky was acquired by the United States as part of the Jackson Purchase. This famous land transaction added 8,000 square miles to the states of Kentucky and Tennessee. Former Kentucky Governor Isaac Shelby and General Andrew Jackson of Tennessee negotiated the purchase with the leaders of the Chickasaw nation.

**Lake Barkley State Resort Park**

Established December 1, 1964

The Secretary of the Army had approved the leasing of 1,800 acres of land along the shores of Lake Barkley for a public park and recreation facility in 1964. The state purchased 1,400 acres of surrounding land for a total of 3,200 acres. Presently the park has 3,600 acres. The U.S. Corps of Engineers constructed the earth and concrete dam, completing it in July 1966. The dam and reservoir are part of a comprehensive plan for flood control and the development of water resources along the Cumberland River.
Named for United States congressman, senator and vice president, Alben Barkley (1877-1956), Lake Barkley and Kentucky Lake make up the largest man-made body of water in the world. Park amenities are plentiful.

**Pennyrrile Forest State Resort Park**

Established July 9, 1954

Pennyrrile Forest State Resort Park, located near Dawson Springs, has some of the most beautiful forested land in the Commonwealth. Pennyrrile Forest is a showcase for Kentucky’s magnificent hardwood trees. The area had been under the supervision of the United States Department of Agriculture and other governmental agencies since the 1920s. The government wanted to restore the forests and the exhausted lands in the area. In the 1930s the National Parks Service and the Works Progress Administration developed a 300-acre tract for recreational purposes. The WPA continued its work in the area until 1937 when the Kentucky Division of State Parks took responsibility for the land on an annual agreement basis. On July 9, 1954, Pennyrrile Forest State Resort Park became a part of the Kentucky State Parks system. The area that contains Pennyrrile Forest State Resort Park had two state parks in the 1930s and 1940s, Pennyrrile State Park and Dawson Springs State Park. The Dawson Springs facility had 457 acres was acquired by The University of Kentucky in the 1950s and made a 4-H Club Camp.

**Rough River Dam State Resort Park**

Established August 18, 1961

In 1938 Congress approved an act that authorized the building of a dam on Rough River to help control flooding in the Ohio River Valley. Construction of the dam did not begin until November 1955. The Kentucky Department of Parks approved the acceptance of the Rough River property on January 18, 1961. However, the state did not officially make Rough River a part of the parks system until August 18, 1961. In 1962 the Kentucky Department of Parks leased 637 acres and built the Rough River Dam State Resort Park.

**Historic Sites**

**Jefferson Davis State Historic Site**

Established June 7, 1924

The Jefferson Davis State Historic Site is the tallest poured-in-place concrete obelisk in the world and the fourth tallest monument in the United States. The monument is to Jefferson Davis (1808-1889), the first and only president of the Confederacy. The desire to memorialize the leaders and generals of the Civil War began as soon as the guns fell silent. As time passed and many of the major participants of the conflict died, monuments to their memory proliferated. After the death of Davis in 1889, groups and
individuals throughout the South began plans to erect a fitting memorial to the Confederacy’s only president.

At a 1907 reunion in Glasgow, Ky. of the famous Confederate Orphans Brigade, former Confederate general Simon Bolivar Buckner proposed a plan for a Jefferson Davis monument to be erected at his birthplace in Fairview. A group started the Jefferson Davis Home Association and raised money for the monument. By April 1909, the Association paid $7,052 for seven tracts of land containing twenty acres. Within the next eight years $150,000 had been accumulated for a suitable monument. In 1917 work began on the world’s tallest concrete obelisk.

America’s entry into World War I halted work on the obelisk for several years. By the time construction began again, costs had risen dramatically and the project faced an uncertain future. The United Daughters of the Confederacy raised an additional $20,000 toward completion of the monument and the Kentucky General Assembly appropriated $15,000 to install an elevator (originally run by steam) in the 351-foot structure. On June 7, 1924, dedication of the Jefferson Davis State Historic Site took place and it became a part of the Kentucky State Parks system.

Wickliffe Mounds State Historic Site

Established 2004

Wickliffe Mounds is the site of a Native American village of the Mississippian mound building culture, located in Ballard County. This archaeological site was first occupied by the Mississippian Native Americans from A.D. 1100 to 1350. Around 900 years ago, Mississippian people moved to this bluff which overlooks the Mississippi River and built a village with earthen mounds and permanent style houses and buildings all surrounding a central plaza. Mississippian were farmers and they grew corn, squash and other crops; they made pottery from clay with elaborate designs and decorations; they participated in a vast trade network up and down the rivers; they had stone, shell and bone tools; and they had a complex chiefdom level society. Sometime in the 1300s, they abandoned the village for unknown reasons, but researchers are working on this question.

From 1895 to 1932, the site was owned by the Wisconsin Chair Company and was used for harvesting timber. In 1932, road crews building Highway 51 cut through the southern edge of the prehistoric site and turned up pottery and other artifacts. Colonel Fain W. King, a Paducah lumber magnate and relic collector, purchased the site and began excavating the mounds and developing a tourist attraction. Fain King, later joined by his wife, Blanche Busey King, opened the site to public visitation, calling the site at first the “King Mounds” and eventually naming it the “Ancient Buried City.” King directed excavations from 1932 until 1939. Some of their excavations followed proper archaeological techniques, but their field notes and other records have disappeared. In 1946, the site was donated to Western Baptist Hospital in Paducah.
In recognition of the scientific importance and the educational potential of the mounds, Western Baptist Hospital donated the site to Murray State University in 1983. Murray State University reorganized the site, calling it the Wickliffe Mounds Research Center and set out to accurately understand, interpret and preserve the site with archaeologists and museum personnel in charge.

In 2004, Murray State University transferred the Wickliffe Mounds archaeological site and its collections to the Commonwealth of Kentucky, Commerce Cabinet. Designated as the Wickliffe Mounds State Historic Site, the mounds are operated by the Kentucky Department of Parks. The site remains open to the public as a state historic site, a tourist attraction, an archaeological museum, and an educational resource. Wickliffe Mounds is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and is designated as a Kentucky Archaeological Landmark.

Recreation Parks

Columbus-Belmont State Park

Established February 10, 1934

The area around the Columbus-Belmont Battlefield State Park has many historic connections. In the 1670s Frenchmen Marquette and Joliet explored the area where Columbus now stands.

As one of the states that bordered both the Union and the Confederacy, Kentucky seemed destined to be a battleground. The role that the Columbus-Belmont area played in that conflict had a long lasting effect on the outcome of the war. Columbus became the center of national attention in the opening months of the Civil War. The town had the distinction of being the opening phase of the Federal campaign to secure the West. On September 1, 1861, General Ulysses S. Grant, commander of the Union District of Southeast Missouri, secured Cairo, Ill. and Paducah. His forces then moved on to take the high ground around Columbus. However the Confederate forces took the property at Columbus first. During the autumn and winter of 1861, the South had 19,000 men laboring on the fortifications around Columbus. Confederate forces installed 140 siege guns along the heights and extended a huge chain across the Mississippi to stop Union gunboats and other vessels from navigating the river. By the time the Confederates finished their work, Columbus had become the most heavily fortified place in North America. It earned the sobriquet, the “Gibraltar of the West.”

Grant upon hearing that General Polk intended to bring more Confederate troops into the area decided that an attack on Belmont had to take place. Union forces landed on the Missouri shore and attacked the Confederate camp forcing them to retreat. Grant’s men turned Belmont’s guns on Columbus and began to fire on the Confederate defenses. The Southern
artillery fire from the opposing heights became so deadly that Grant had to retreat to Union gunboats. The Confederate superiors ordered Columbus to be evacuated. On March 3, 1862, Union troops occupied the Confederate fortifications at Columbus. This victory gave Grant and the Union their first success in securing the Mississippi and thus cutting the Confederacy in two.

In 1927 the greatest flood in the history of the river destroyed most of Columbus. Although their community had been devastated, a piece of history had been uncovered. The huge chain that had once spanned the Mississippi had been nearly forgotten. The floodwaters uncovered it and now the community wanted to preserve this relic of the past.

To prevent future disasters such as the 1927 flood, the town of Columbus was moved to higher ground. One of the people who came to help the stricken community did more than just provide aid. F. Marion Rust of the Red Cross also studied the extremely well preserved Civil War era fortifications. He studied the area and began to formulate plans to make a memorial park on the site.

As early as 1931, efforts to acquire the site had proven unsuccessful. The executive secretary of the parks commission reported that he had made “many trips to Columbus and other towns at which mass meetings and special drives have been made to buy the 110 acres of land which was a part of the old battlefield and trenches at this site.”

On July 4, 1931, Governor Flem D. Sampson, along with a number of prominent Kentuckians, attended a celebration to raise private funds for acquisition of the necessary land for the proposed park. The money raised at the celebration bought 90 acres. After another round of visits to the surrounding towns of Clinton, Columbus, Mayfield and Paducah, it seemed sufficient monies had been raised to purchase the remaining acreage. However, due to unclear titles, infant heirs, and other difficulties pertaining to the Great Depression, the project was again postponed. With this setback, the Columbus-Belmont Battlefield Park Association was formed under the oversight of the Kentucky Legislature and local citizens. The Association continued raising funds until they could purchase enough land to surround the historic battlefield.

In March 1934, the federal government agreed to accept the area as a state park project and assisted by placing a Civilian Conservation Corp Camp at the site. The Department of the Interior established the camp on July 17, 1934, with Rust as project superintendent. The park at Columbus-Belmont has on display part of the chain and a huge anchor used during the Civil War to bar the Mississippi. There is also an antebellum home built in 1850 that once served as a Confederate hospital. The home now houses a museum. The historic fortifications are still recognizable and serve as a reminder of the days of the American Civil War.

**John James Audubon State Park**

Established October 3, 1934

On October 3, 1934, the Commonwealth of Kentucky dedicated the John James Audubon State Park. Some of the most jubilant members of the crowd attending the dedication included members of the Henderson Audubon Society. Founded in 1898 to preserve the legacy of the great American artist and naturalist, John James Audubon, the Society had worked for over three decades to establish a fitting memorial.
In 1930, the Henderson Audubon Society requested $100,000 from the Federal government to help construct an Audubon Museum. The Society had a large and growing collection of Audubon artifacts that needed proper housing. National interest in the works of Audubon had increased through the years and now seemed the right time to involve the government in helping preserve and promote the Audubon collection. A bill introduced in Congress to appropriate money for the Audubon project failed to pass. Undeterred, local citizens continued to raise funds for the proposed museum. By 1934, 275 acres had been acquired through donations and purchase. The goal of establishing a state park seemed possible.

The Civil Conservation Corps constructed cabins, gardens, shelter houses, picnic areas, a lake, trails and a museum. The Audubon Memorial Museum is an impressive structure designed as a replica of a Norman-French inn to honor Audubon’s French heritage. The structure has a round tower that has nesting places for birds. A cobbled courtyard with a French garden graces the immediate grounds of the museum.

The Audubon Memorial Museum contains many of the artist’s oils and watercolors, along with personal belongings and furniture belonging to the Audubon family. The museum also houses the magnificent double-elephant folio (27 by 40 inches) of the Birds of North America.

**Lake Malone State Park**

Established 1962

Lake Malone is considered one of the most beautiful lakes in the Commonwealth. The striking views of sandstone cliffs such as Bear Bluff and Chalk Bluff rising above the water and thick wooded 26-mile shoreline are impressive. The park also has a natural rock bridge. Efforts to create a state park at Lake Malone began in 1959. Previously, the Todd County Game and Fish Club made a proposal to have a lake developed from impounding the waters of Rocky Creek. Interested individuals formed an organization to promote a recreational lake in cooperation with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife. At a December 22, 1955 meeting, representatives of the lake promoters, Department of Fish and Wildlife, and the Federal Soil Conservation Service agreed to work together in planning a dam on Rocky Creek. The resulting lake and surrounding area would be used for recreation. In 1961, with the completion of the dam, the waters of Rocky Creek formed an 826-acre lake. As early as 1959, several citizens wanted a state park in the area. W.C. Malone, a wealthy, retired lumberman and sawmill operator of Greenville, in Muhlenberg County, and his wife donated a large amount of land for the development of the lake and park. The lake and subsequent park were named in his honor.

**Mineral Mound State Park**

Established November 1991

Located on the shores of Lake Barkley, Mineral Mound State Park is one of western Kentucky’s most idyllic parks. Peaceful and inviting, the 541-acre park has a fishing pier, a boat ramp to access Lake Barkley, a lakeside picnic area, and an 18-hole championship golf course. Mineral Mound State Park was established in 1991, and has an interesting literary connection. The park property once belonged to the farm of Willis B. Machen, grandfather of

Nolin Lake State Park

Established May 2001

Nolin Lake was created from the impoundment of the Nolin River. Nolin Lake State Park is an excellent place to camp and fish. The park has 32 campsites with hookups for water and electricity along with 20 primitive campsites. There is a beach, shower and laundry facilities, playgrounds, and the lake has an abundance of bass, catfish, crappie and walleye for great fishing.

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