



Seventh-graders know the physical regions. Why not you?

If you want to get a rise out of a seventh-grade teacher, ask about the six physical regions of Tennessee.

You see, under the current social studies curriculum, seventh grade is the geography grade. In the seventh grade, students in Tennessee's schools are supposed to learn world geography, American geography and Tennessee geography. If you have a seventh-grader at home, you should already know this by now since they bring home assignments about things such as latitude and longitude, the mountain ranges of Asia and flooding along the Mississippi River.

When it comes to Tennessee, seventh-graders are supposed to learn (among other things) the six physical regions of Tennessee. But teaching this isn't easy. After all, most adults don't know them. It's not easy to find a map that shows them. And, even among well-educated people, there is some dispute about whether there are, in fact, six physical regions of Tennessee (a map created by the University of Tennessee geography department shows eight).

In any case, here are the six as recognized by the Tennessee Department of Education. For everyone keeping score, they do appear on the standardized test (also known as the TCAP).

The entire western third of Tennessee is considered **Gulf Coastal Plain**. This is where the elevation of the state is lowest and the land is flattest. Among the cities you will find in the Gulf Coastal Plain are Memphis (which has an elevation of about 250 feet above sea level), in the southwest corner of Tennessee, and Jackson, in the heart of West Tennessee.

If you live in hilly or mountainous parts of Tennessee, the Gulf Coastal Plain takes some getting used to. The first time I drove through the heart of Dyer County, I stopped my car just to stare at an empty field. It had been a long time since I'd seen terrain so flat, and I usually associate such qualities with states like Kansas and Nebraska. And although I have no way of proving this, I suspect that the topography of Madison County had something to do with why Woodland Indians decided to build mounds so big. After all, Saul's Mound at Pinson Mounds is 72 feet from base to top. That's a mountain by West Tennessee standards!

Middle Tennessee is divided into two physical regions. The outer ring of Middle Tennessee is known as the **Highland Rim**. (As has been noted before, it is shaped like a donut, an analogy that has an odd appeal in Tennessee.) Among the

towns in Tennessee's Highland Rim are McMinnville, Manchester and Dickson.

The main thing to remember about the Highland Rim section of Tennessee is that it is dominated by small hills and valleys. There are also some great waterfalls in the Highland Rim such as Burgess Falls (White County), Stillhouse Falls (Maury County) and the Walls of Jericho (Franklin County).

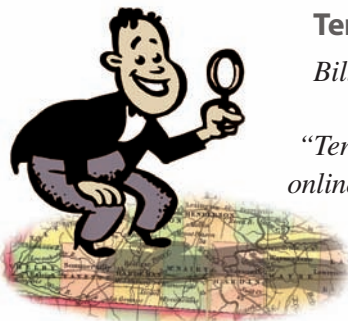
The **Central Basin** is slightly lower than and completely surrounded by the Highland Rim. In this era of the interstate superhighway, it can be hard to distinguish between the Central Basin and the Highland Rim. But if you look for it, you'll notice the boundary. For example: The next time you head southeast on Interstate 24 (from Nashville to Chattanooga), notice how flat it is in Rutherford County. But when you get to Coffee County you ascend for a few miles. That, you see, is where the Central Basin becomes the Highland Rim.

The biggest city in the Central Basin is Nashville (although parts of west Nashville are on the border between the Highland Rim and Central Basin). Other communities located in the Central Basin include Murfreesboro, Franklin, and Lebanon. In the heart of the Central Basin, in Rutherford and Wilson counties, it's as flat as it is in West Tennessee.

The people who live in the Central Basin may not be able to name the six physical regions, but they are affected by the fact that they live in a valley. Whenever there is a heat wave in Tennessee, the Central Basin is slightly warmer than the Highland Rim. And because Middle Tennessee sits in a "bowl" of sorts, it is also known to be one of the worst places in the United States for human allergies.

As you ride from west to east through Tennessee, you suddenly climb WAY up, elevation-wise, at the **Cumberland Plateau**, which goes all the way through Tennessee north to south. If you are heading east on Interstate 40 from Nashville to Knoxville, you move upward onto the Cumberland Plateau right after you pass Cookeville. If you head east on Interstate 24, you ascend onto the Cumberland Plateau right before you get to Monteagle.

The Cumberland Plateau contains many scenic cliffs, gorges and natural bridges. One of the best ways to sample these natural wonders is to explore part of the Justin P. Wilson Trail (which used to be known as the Cumberland Trail but was renamed by former Gov. Don Sundquist). Still a work in progress but



Tennessee History for Kids

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about half completed, the Wilson Trail will eventually traverse the Cumberland Plateau in Tennessee.

There are lots of coal deposits in the Cumberland Plateau, which is why parts of the region are associated historically with mining.

By the way, a remarkable valley cuts through the middle of the Cumberland Plateau. It is called the Sequatchie Valley, and it runs through the heart of Marion, Sequatchie and Bledsoe counties.

Next on the list of physical regions is the **Valley and Ridge**, also known as the Great Valley of Tennessee. A series of valleys divided by ridges and low hills, it runs through most of East Tennessee, and for the most part these ridges run in a southwest-to-northeast direction. (The best example of this is Clinch Mountain, which towers over Grainger and Hawkins counties.) The Tennessee River is formed in the Valley and Ridge where the Holston and French Broad rivers

come together near the city of Knoxville. Other cities located in the Valley and Ridge area are Chattanooga, Maryville, Bristol and Cleveland.

Finally, the **Unaka Mountains** run along Tennessee's border with North Carolina. With rugged terrain, rushing streams and heavily forested slopes, it's a great place to visit. But early settlers found it to be a rough place to go through and an extremely difficult place to farm.

Just to be clear, the Great Smoky Mountains is not the same as the Unaka Mountains but more like a "subset" of the Unaka Mountains. Within Tennessee, the Great Smoky Mountains only refers to the parts of the Unaka Mountains within Blount, Sevier and the southern tip of Cocke counties.

Want to SEE a video on the six physical regions? Go to <http://www.tnhistoryforkids.org/videos> or <http://www.youtube.com/tnhistoryforkids> and find the video called "Trek Across Tennessee." ☺