



# Teaching Tennessee history

**With a curriculum that's scattered throughout grade levels, parents may want to know: 'What will my child learn about Tennessee this year?'**

*Story and photographs by Bill Carey*

Since I co-founded Tennessee History for Kids in 2005, I have been asked many times, "What will my child learn about Tennessee this year?" Given the complexities of the curriculum, the confusion is understandable.

You see, Tennessee history, civics and geography used to be focused in one grade (seventh grade in most parts of the state). That system was altered several years ago when the social studies curriculum was changed and the subject of Tennessee scattered throughout grades kindergarten through 12.

Contrary to what you might expect, I think this "scattering of Tennessee" throughout the curriculum was a good idea. Why?

Two main reasons: If a student takes a class in Tennessee history in one grade and American history in another, he or she often doesn't make connections between the two — especially since the American history textbooks are written and produced in the North. Perhaps the

best example of this is the way American history textbooks talk about the causes of the American Revolution. They talk about taxation, which was huge in the Northeast, but far less about westward expansion, a bigger reason down South.

The other reason is because, if done properly, Tennessee history, civics and geography now come up in so many grades and with so many teachers that

students have a better chance of remembering it.

In any case, following are the grades where Tennessee-specific subjects do come up (and on which "Tennessee History for Kids" focuses). I've also included some suggestions for "field trips" where students can experience history.

In the **second grade**, students are supposed to learn the "high points" about Tennessee. They learn what Tennessee looks like on a map, what the flag looks like and what city is the state capital. They are supposed to learn name of the governor. And although I am not a big fan of students memorizing the state symbols, second grade is the year they learn that the tulip poplar is the state tree and the raccoon is the state wild animal.

In terms of social studies, however, the most important thing second-graders are supposed to learn is what government does and what it doesn't do. This may seem obvious to adults, but not to kids. Many kids have spent their whole lives being taken along government-built highways to grocery stores and their schools, but most don't realize

**At right, above and top right, re-enactors bring history to life during the Tennessee History Festival held in October at Bicentennial Capitol Mall State Park in Nashville.**

that the government built the public school while a company built the grocery store. They need to know this so they can start thinking like civic-minded Americans.

When I talk to kids of this age, I explain the differences in public and private schools, the sales tax on a candy bar and all the things government does and doesn't do in Tennessee.

**Fourth grade** is the first year in which students really learn about American history. Specifically, they take a class on early American history, from the beginning of recorded history to the eve of the Civil War.

Tennessee history lessons are supposed to be "imbedded" throughout this fourth-grade social studies curriculum. In other words, during this American history class, students are supposed to learn all the things that happened in Tennessee during that historically significant time period — the Colonial era, the American Revolution and westward expansion in the early 19th century. So fourth grade is the year students need to learn about Cherokee culture, the Lost State of Franklin, the Battle of Kings Mountain and Andrew Jackson (considering his significance, the more the better).

If you are planning to take your fourth-grader to a historic site, think about the time period that makes the attraction important historically. These locations correspond with the periods taught in the fourth-grade curriculum:

- Old Stone Fort State Archaeological Park in Coffee County
- Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area in Elizabethton
- Fort Loudoun State Park in Monroe County
- The Cumberland Gap in Claiborne County
- The Hermitage in Nashville
- James K. Polk Ancestral Home in Columbia
- Red Clay State Park in Polk County.

**Fifth grade** picks up where fourth grade left off, starting in 1860 and bringing the students (theoretically) to the present time. Much like in the fourth grade, it's an American history curriculum with

Tennessee lessons imbedded throughout. So this is the year students first learn about the War Between the States, the Reconstruction Era, industrialization, the two world wars, etc.

Fifth grade is, therefore, a great year to take your child to one of Tennessee's many Civil War-related historic sites. I suggest you call ahead before you go to these places and try to schedule your visit around a re-enactment. Battlefields are much more fascinating to a





child when uniformed people are standing on it. Consider visiting:

- Shiloh National Military Park in Hardin County
- Fort Donelson National Battlefield in Stewart County
- Stones River National Battlefield in Murfreesboro
- Andrew Johnson National Historic Site in Greeneville
- Fort Pillow State Historic Park in Lauderdale County
- The Carnton Plantation and Carter House in Franklin
- Parker’s Crossroads in Henderson County

Do remember that the Civil War is only a small part of the fifth-grade curriculum, and there are places in Tennessee to take a fifth-grader other than battlefields, like these local history museums:

- Dunlap Coke Ovens Park in Sequatchie County
- Cumberland Homesteads Historic District in Cumberland County, a New Deal-era experimental community that contains a fascinating museum.
- Sgt. Alvin C. York Historic Park in Fentress County
- Cordell Hull Birthplace State Park in Pickett County
- Norris, a great place to learn about the Tennessee Valley Authority, which is a big part of the fifth grade curriculum.
- American Museum of Science and Energy in Oak Ridge
- The National Civil Rights Museum in Memphis
- Green McAdoo Cultural Center in Clinton


**Seventh grade** is the geography grade. Students learn world geography, American geography and, yes, Tennessee geography, including the six physical regions of Tennessee (we produced a video on this at “Tennessee History for Kids,” and I had a lot of fun doing it).

So what do you do with a seventh-grader? This is a good year to make a paiper-mâché map of Tennessee or plan a visit to any of these sites:

- Mississippi River Museum at Mud Island in Memphis
- Tennessee River Museum in Savannah
- Reelfoot Lake in Lake and Obion counties
- Hike along the Appalachian Trail, which runs through Tennessee near the North Carolina border

**Sycamore Shoals State Historic Area**

The **eighth grade** social studies curriculum in Tennessee covers roughly the same time period and structure as the fourth grade plus the Civil War and Reconstruction. So, just



**Tennessee History for Kids**

*Bill Carey is a Nashville author and executive director of “Tennessee History for Kids,” an online Tennessee history textbook. For more great stories of Tennessee history, go to [www.tnhistoryforkids.org](http://www.tnhistoryforkids.org).*



**Shiloh National Military Park**

like in the fourth grade, eighth-graders take an early American history class with Tennessee lessons “imbedded” throughout the year — theoretically in more detail. And all the places that worked for fourth-graders should also work for eighth-graders. Just remember that eighth-graders should be able to grasp more than fourth-graders but also have more distractions. Keeping it interesting for an eighth-grader is more important, but keeping his or her attention is more of a challenge.

Having taken your student in the fourth grade to all the appropriate places in Tennessee, try taking him or her to a place important to Tennessee but outside of the state’s boundaries. Some ideas:

- Horseshoe Bend in Alabama
- Kings Mountain in North Carolina
- DeSoto National Memorial in Florida
- The Alamo in San Antonio, Texas

The **11th grade** covers roughly the same time period and structure as the fifth grade did. So, in general, all the places that worked for fifth-graders are appropriate for 11th-graders. Among places dating to this time period that might be more appropriate for 11th-graders are:

- Scopes Trial Museum in Dayton (the “Monkey Trial” is covered in 11th grade but not the fifth)
- Memphis Cotton Exchange
- The Farm in Lewis County. There’s a lot of history at The Farm, but I think an 11th grader is more likely to appreciate the history of the hippie movement than a child six years younger (and their parents might feel more comfortable explaining it to them).

In the Tennessee public school curriculum, **12th grade** is the government grade when students learn about American, Tennessee and local government. Some places where you and your student can see government in action:

- A county commission meeting
- The Tennessee General Assembly in Nashville
- A meeting with your U.S. representative

*Note: Students in grades not included in the above summary study world history instead of Tennessee-specific subjects. Want to get a preview of some of the places recommended here? Go to the Tennessee History for Kids Web site, [www.tnhistoryforkids.org](http://www.tnhistoryforkids.org), click on “Virtual Tours” and scroll down. You’ll see them listed on the left side. ☺*



**Pinson Mounds State Archaeological Park**



**Meeting “Andrew Jackson” at the Hermitage.**