

Creating a Legacy: Cumberland Gap National Historical Park

July 4, 2009 marked the 50th anniversary of the dedication of Cumberland Gap National Historical Park, located at the junction of Tennessee, Virginia and Kentucky. The idea of creating a park around Cumberland Gap was talked about as early as the 1920s by the Middlesboro Kiwanis Club. Motives behind the creation of the park included saving the mountains from the continued effects of coal mining and providing additional revenue for the area.



Although the creation of the park was authorized in 1940, the visitor center in Middlesboro did not open until 1955 due to World War II. When the park was officially dedicated on July 4, 1959, Vice President Richard Nixon, Secretary of the Interior Fred Seaton and Director of the National Park Service Conrad L. Wirth were among the dignitaries at the dedication.

While the establishment of a national park in their community excited the residents of Middlesboro, families who lived in the rural areas of the three states felt it forever changed their traditional ways of life. Recollections of people who used to call the park lands their home sharply contrast with the stories of those who were passionate about the park's creation.

Oral history interviews with former residents and people involved with the creation of the park can be found at <http://passtheword.ky.gov>. (Photo courtesy of Cumberland Gap National Historical Park)

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