
CAHABA

RIVER BASIN

The Cahaba River begins north of Birmingham, Alabama and flows south to Selma, Alabama where it joins the Alabama River. The Cahaba River is the longest stretch of free-flowing river in Alabama, and its watershed encompasses eight counties within central Alabama (Figure 1). A watershed is an area of land through which rainwater drains by flowing across, through, or under the soil surface to a common low point, typically a stream, river, lake, or ocean (Brantley, Bell, & Dictson, 2019). The Cahaba River is 194 miles long and its watershed is 1,870 square miles. The word “Cahaba” originates from two Choctaw Nation words “oka” and “aba,” which can be translated as “water above.”

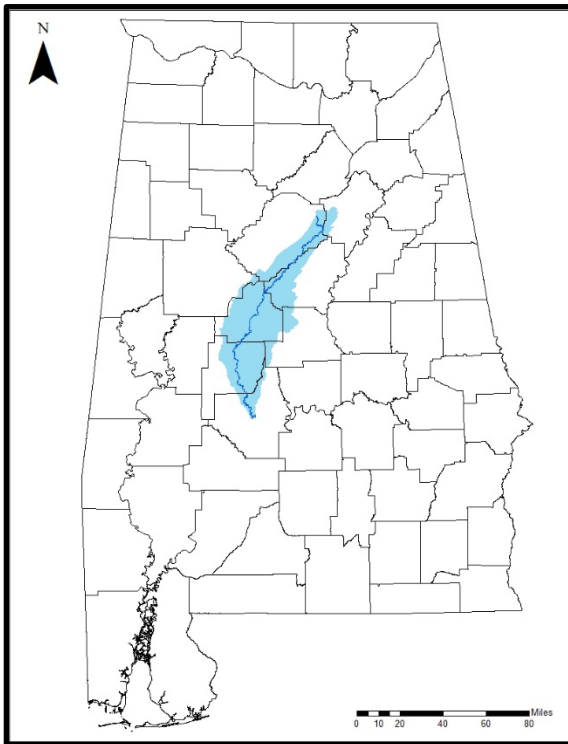


Figure 1. Cahaba River and watershed.

The Cahaba River is nationally known for its biodiversity and its abundance of fish species. The river is home to more species of fish (135) than any other river its size in North America, and eighteen of those species are only found in the Cahaba River. For instance, the Cahaba shiner is only found in 76 miles of the Cahaba River. The river is also home to thirty-two species of snails, forty-eight species of mussels, and several species of turtles and crayfish.



*Figure 2. Cahaba Lilies in Cahaba River.
Photo Credit: Jennifer Barker*

The Cahaba River also contains one of the largest populations of Cahaba lilies (Figure 2) in the world. The Cahaba lily can be found in Alabama, Georgia, and South Carolina. It is mostly found in swift water flowing over rocks in direct sunlight. Between Mid-May and June, travelers flock to the river in hope to see the lilies blooming. The Cahaba lily produces a single bloom per stalk, that lasts for around 24 hours (Cahaba River Society).

The Cahaba River basin has forested and urban areas throughout the watershed (Figure 3), providing a unique experience for any traveler. The basin contains parts of Birmingham, Pelham, Alabaster, Hoover, Helena, and Montevallo in Alabama. The first settlers of Birmingham, Alabama chose the area due to its unique composition of minerals in the area. Birmingham is the only place in the world where the resources needed to make pig iron and steel (iron ore, coal, and limestone) can be mined within a 50-mile radius. Iron and steel manufacturers in Birmingham relied on the Cahaba River as a source of water for transportation of materials and manufacturing of products. Travelers can visit the Vulcan Park and Museum, Sloss Furnaces National Historic Landmark, and Red Mountain State Park to get a more in depth understanding of how the iron and steel industry influenced Birmingham and its metropolitan area.

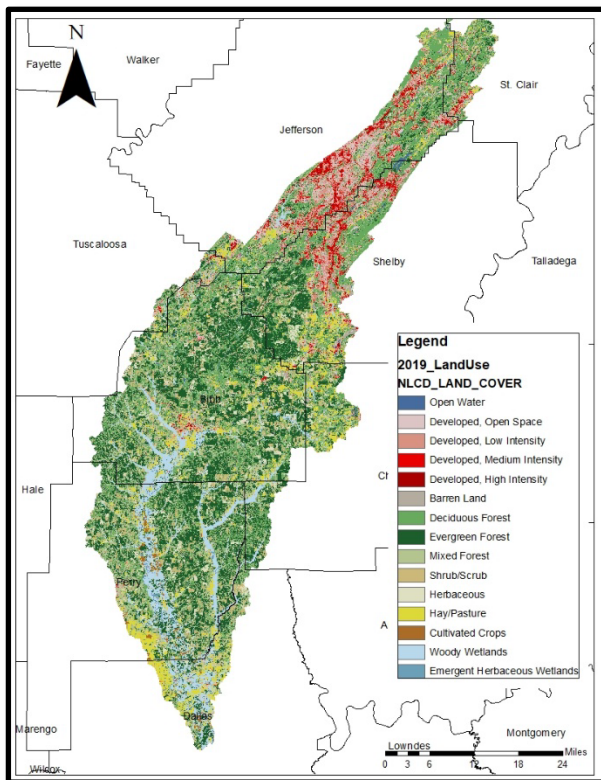


Figure 3. 2019 Land use map of Cahaba River watershed.

Hoover, Alabama contains the Moss Rock Preserve and the Aldridge Gardens for travelers looking to explore nature. Moss Rock Preserve encompasses 349 acres of forest, large rock outcroppings, streams, and waterfalls. The preserve also has a unique sandstone glade that has only been seen in 35 other places in the world. The preserve offers almost 12 miles of trails for walking and hiking and several spots for rock climbing enthusiasts to scale parts of the Boulder Field.

Montevallo, Alabama also holds unique attractions. Orr Park is a 40-acre park that sits along Shoal Creek. The park offers several biking, walking, and hiking trails, athletics fields, and meeting areas. However, the park's main attraction is its "forest of faces" (Figure 4) that was designed by Tim Tingle in the early 1990s. In 1993, a storm damaged several cedar trees in the park that would have led to their removal. Instead, Tingle began carving faces, animals, and other characters into the trees. Tingle has carved over 30 characters throughout Orr Park (McCormick).



Figure 4. Orr Park in Montevallo, Alabama.
Photo Credit: Jennifer Barker

The cities of Alabaster and Helena share a similar history with their use of Buck Creek, a tributary of the Cahaba River. In the mid-19th century, cotton mills were built along Buck Creek to process crops. A notable cotton mill, the Siluria Cotton Mill, was built in Alabaster, Alabama by Thomas Carlyle Thompson in 1896. Thompson used a portion of the profits from the mill to assist in funding the first established educational building in the area (Seales, 2000). Currently, the ruins of the Siluria Cotton Mill, Alabaster jail, and water tower (Figure 5) are used to educate the citizens about the history of Alabaster and its dependence on natural resources.



*Figure 5. Buck Creek Jail and Water Tower.
Photo Credit Jennifer Barker*

Helena, Alabama was originally occupied by the Muscogee people of the Creek Nation. After the War of 1812, Andrew Jackson's army chose to settle in modern day Helena. When the American Civil War broke out in 1861, Helena began increasing its manufacturing production and created new industries to support the war. During the Civil War the Louisville and Nashville Railroad was built to transport supplies to the front lines. Around 1864, a rolling mill and dam (Figure 6) was built along Buck Creek to assist with shaping the steel that was being transported from Selma, Alabama. However, the rolling mill was destroyed by Union armies, led by James Harrison Wilson, in 1865. Almost 7 years after the war, the rolling mill and other structures were rebuilt and continued to process steel being transported from Selma. The rolling mill was purchased by R.W. Cobb, B.B. Lewis, and Richard Fell, who used the mill to make Cobb's patented "Alabama Loop Cotton Tie", which is still used in today's agricultural practices (Helena, 2023). Today, travelers can see the historic dam and ruins of the rolling mill in Helena.



Figure 6. Buck Creek dam in Helena, Alabama. Photo Credit: Jennifer Barker