
TENNESSEE

RIVER BASIN

The Tennessee River watershed includes the states of Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, Mississippi, and Kentucky (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) As the largest tributary of the Ohio River, the river has a drainage area of 40,910 square miles and flows for 886 miles. The Tennessee River flows from its headwaters east of Knoxville, Tennessee south to Chattanooga, Tennessee before turning west to flow through the northern portion of Alabama. The river then turns north to flow back into Tennessee and then Kentucky where it drains into the Ohio River at the Kentucky, Illinois state line.

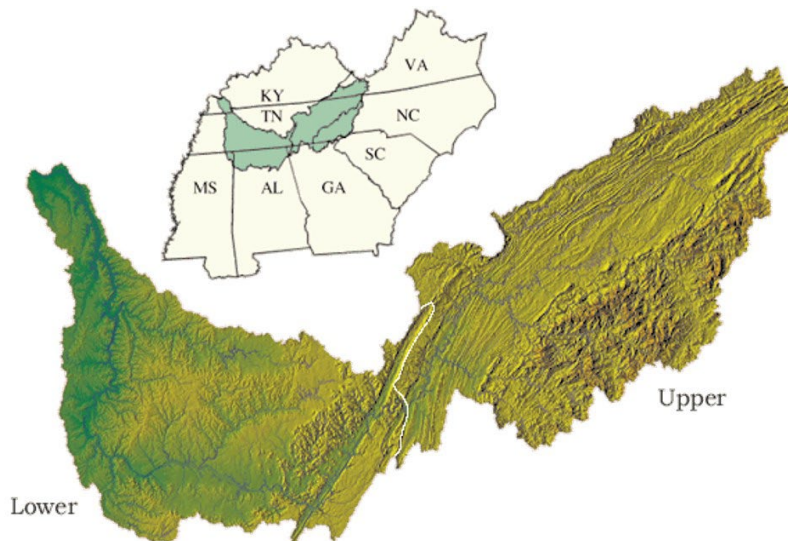


Figure 1. Tennessee River Basin watershed.

The Tennessee River was originally called Cherokee River for the Cherokee tribes that lived along the banks of the river, specifically in Northern Alabama and Eastern Tennessee. The river's current name comes from the Cherokee word "*Tanasi*" which referred to a village located along the Little Tennessee River. The Tennessee River system is the largest to pass through Alabama and one of the only rivers whose course enters and leaves a state at more than one point. The Tennessee River watershed in Alabama contains the cities of Scottsboro, Guntersville, Huntsville, Athens, Hartselle, Decatur, Moulton, Muscle Shoals, and Florence.

The lower portion of the river basin (Figure 1) was important during the Civil War as an invasion route into the western Confederacy. The Confederate Fort Henry was located on the Tennessee River. The Battle of Fort Henry helped the Union, with a force of 15,000 men and seven gunboats, regain western and Middle

Tennessee as well as most of Kentucky. The Confederate forces with only 2,500 soldiers were forced to retreat to the nearby Fort Donelson on the Cumberland River. (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2022)

The Tennessee River in Alabama (Figure 2) has a series of locks and dams that form reservoirs (Guntersville Lake, Wheeler Lake, Wilson Lake, and Pickwick Lake) which provide hydroelectricity, drinking water, recreation, and navigation. All four reservoirs are operated by the Tennessee Valley Authority. The Tennessee-Tombigbee Waterway “Tenn-Tom” connects the Tennessee River with the Tombigbee River. The waterway is 234 miles long and runs from Pickwick Lake in northern Alabama to Demopolis, Alabama. The waterway system provides 10 lakes and 10 locks and dams that offer a shorter route from the interior of the United States to the Gulf of Mexico. The Tennessee River basin drains thirteen percent or 6,800 square miles of Alabama’s total land area.

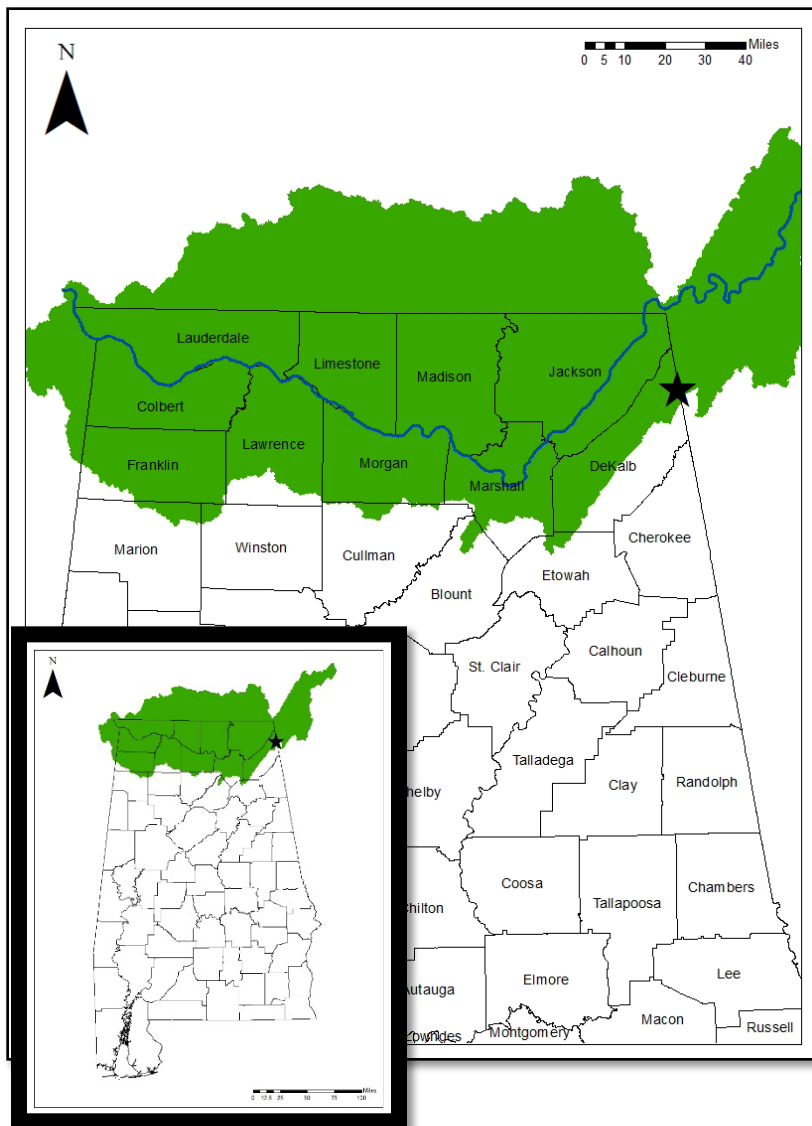


Figure 2. Tennessee River Basin watershed and Tennessee River in Alabama.

The Tennessee River watershed has a vast biodiversity of aquatic life, home to 176 species of fish, 89 species of mussels, and 70 species of snails. Largemouth bass, bream, catfish, yellow bass, white crappie, sauger, striped bass, white bass, palezone shiner, slackwater darter, snail darter, spring pygmy sunfish, freshwater drum, mussels (i.e., Pink Mucket, Cumberland Monkeyface), snails (i.e., Spiny Rocksnail), reptiles (i.e. Mud Snake), birds, and amphibians (i.e. Tennessee Cave Salamander, Northern Map Turtle). The Tennessee River is known for its mussel harvest, providing a large portion of the United States’ annual exports for use in the cultured pearl industry. (Alabama Department of Conservation and Natural Resources, 2023)



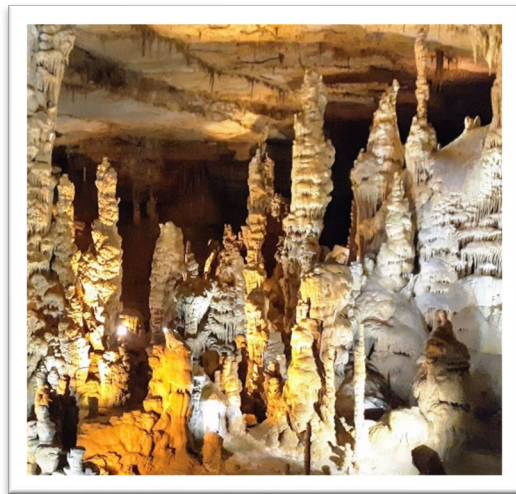
*Figure 3. Lake Guntersville State Park.
Photo Credit: Heather Griffin*

The City of Huntsville boasts numerous tourist attractions such as the Huntsville Botanical Gardens, The Hays Nature Preserve, Huntsville Museum of Art, and the United States Space and Rocket Center. As you travel west from Huntsville, the City of Athens provides the Alabama Veterans Museum, the Swan Creek Greenway Trail, and Joe Wheeler State Park (Figure 5).



*Figure 5. Joe Wheeler State Park
Photo Credit: Jennifer Barker*

Tourism hot spots, fishing, swimming, historical landmarks, and recreational opportunities are available throughout the watershed. Lake Guntersville State Park (Figure 3) provides a championship golf course, zipline, outdoor nature center, horseback riding, swimming, fishing, and hiking. A short drive from Lake Guntersville to Woodville, Alabama will provide you with a breathtaking tour of the Cathedral Caverns State Park (Figure 4).



*Figure 4. Cathedral Caverns State Park.
Photo Credit: Heather Griffin*

South of Athens is the City of Decatur. Point Mallard Park, Cook's Museum of Natural Science, Delano Park Conservancy, Carnegie Visual Art Center, and the Princess Theater are in downtown Decatur. The Princess Theatre began as a livery stable in 1887 before being converted to a vaudeville playhouse in 1919. Today, the 677-seat theater functions as the city's stage for local performers, arts education, music, theater, and dance.

If you are looking for more scenic views, check out Wheeler National Wildlife Refuge. Farther west is the City of Florence, incorporated in 1826 and named for the famous capital of Tuscany, Italy. Florence is home to the Children's Museum of the Shoals, the Alabama Music Hall of Fame, the Kennedy-Douglass Center for the Arts, and the Frank Lloyd Wright Rosenbaum House. Florence also hosts the annual Alabama Renaissance Faire, Trail of Tears Celebration, and Arts Alive. Just south of Florence near the town of Moulton, you can visit the Jesse Owens Museum and the Oakville Indian Mounds.