

TOMBIGBEE

RIVER BASIN

The Tombigbee River begins in Prentiss and Tishomingo County in Mississippi. The river then flows southeast into Alabama until it joins the Black Warrior River near Demopolis, Alabama. It then flows south to join the Alabama River near Malcolm, Alabama, forming the Mobile River. The watershed extends east into fifteen Alabama counties (Figure 1). Around fifty percent of the Tombigbee River and watershed are in Alabama. A watershed is an area of land through which rainwater drains by flowing across, though, or under the soil surface to a common low point, typically a stream, river, lake, or ocean. (Brantley, Bell, & Dictson, 2019).

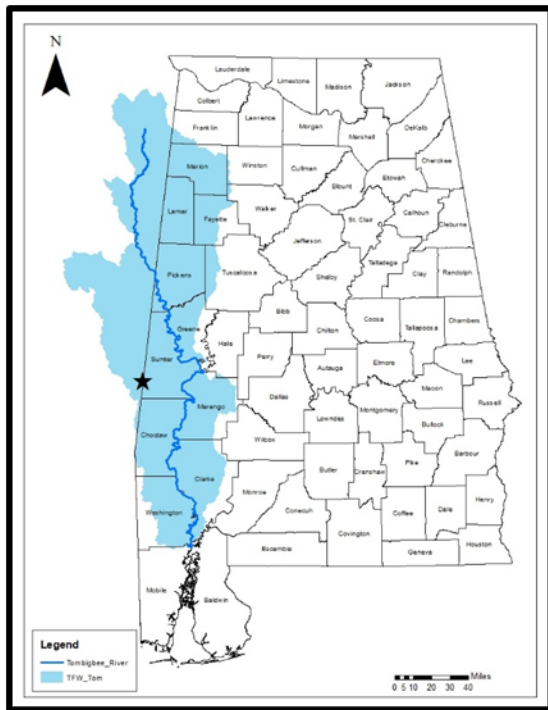


Figure 1. Tombigbee River and watershed.

The Tombigbee River flows for 200 miles through Pickens, Greene, Sumter, Marengo, Choctaw, and Washington counties in Alabama. The river flows through the cities of Gainesville, Demopolis, and Jackson in Alabama. The Tombigbee River is controlled by hydroelectric release and contains the John C. Stennis Lock and Dam, Tom Beville Lock and Dam, Howell Heflin Lock and Dam, Demopolis Lock and Dam (Figure 2), and Coffeerville Lock and Dam.



Figure 2. Demopolis Lock and Dam.
Photo Credit: Jennifer Barker

The Tombigbee River has been used by humans for centuries. Based on archeological evidence, researchers estimate humans have been using the river since the Paleo-Indian Era (10,000 – 6,000 BC). Archaeologists believe the Tombigbee River continued to be occupied by Native Americans until the Indian Removal Act was passed in 1830. Humans utilizing the river for centuries resulted in its name changing several times. The first European to discover the river was Spanish explorer Hernando de Soto in 1540, and the river was named River of the Chicaca (Chickasaw), out of respect for the local Chickasaw tribes found throughout the area.

Additionally, based on historical records, the Choctaw tribe had three names for the river. One being “Ming-oo aye-u-py Ok’Hin-nah,” which translates to King’s Bath River. The Choctaw tribe believed that the river’s flooding was caused by a great spirit taking a bath. The river was also known as the “Itte-ombe-eye ika-abee,” which translates to Wooden Box Making River. The name commemorates the tribes learning how to construct wooden boxes to ship animal pelts. In 1805, a Mississippi judge stated the Choctaw tribe referred to the river as “Elome-gebee,” Box Maker, which the French translated as “Tombecbe.” The name “Tombecbe,” eventually evolved into Tombigbee due to the several different English accents in the area (Ward, 2010).

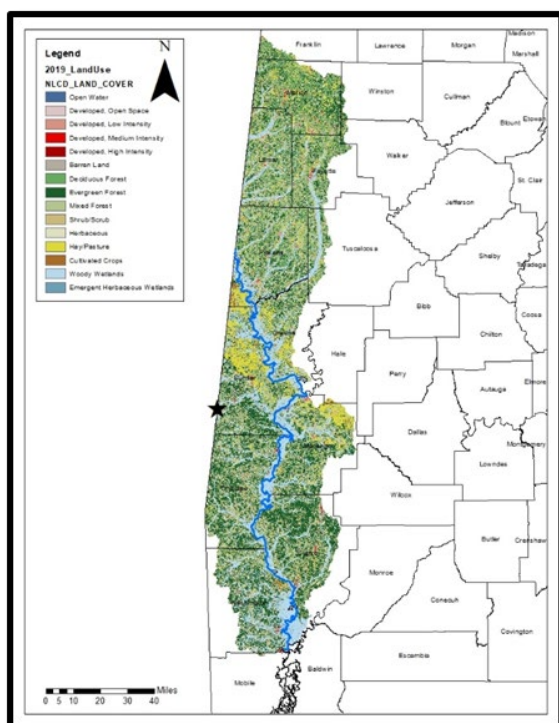


Figure 3. 2019 Tombigbee River watershed land use map.

The Tombigbee River watershed contains mostly forested areas and pastureland with small areas that have been developed for urban use (Figure 3). Visitors have the opportunity to experience wildlife and historical areas throughout the watershed.

Anglers can expect to catch largemouth bass, crappie, bream, and catfish. Hikers throughout the watershed can see whitetail deer, red and grey foxes, and turkeys in forested areas and pastureland.

The Town of Gainesville, Alabama sits along the Tombigbee River. The town provides visitors with historical information about how the town was founded and its reliance on the Tombigbee River for travel, commerce, and daily life. The town was founded in 1832 by Colonel Moses Lewis and was named after Colonel George Strother Gains, due to his role in the [Treaty of Dancing Rabbit Creek](#) in 1830. By 1840, the town had become the third largest town in Alabama, with a population of 4,000. Gainesville also exported 6,000 bales of cotton to Mobile every year via steamboats on the Tombigbee River. Currently, there are a few pre-1830 homes still standing in Gainesville such as the Stein Garth House, Moses Lewis House, and Magnolia House (Figure 4) (Gainesville, 2010).



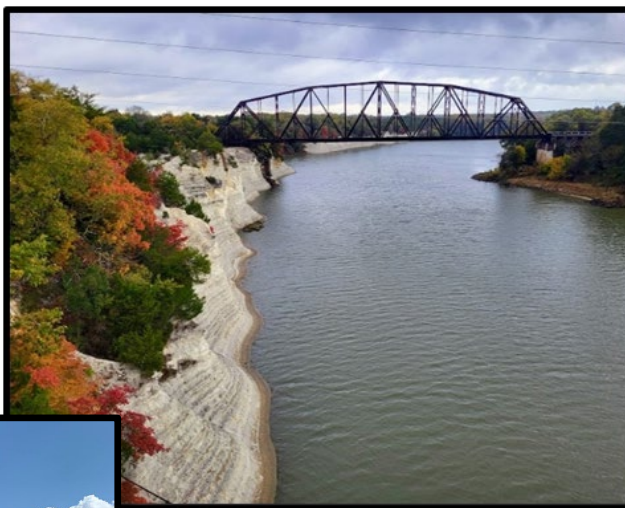
Figure 4. Magnolia House in Gainesville, Alabama.
Photo Credit: Jennifer Barker

If travelers continue south along the Tombigbee River, they will reach the town of Epes, Alabama. The White Cliffs of Epes can be found along the river (Figure 5). The cliffs are on average thirty feet tall on either side of the river and are made of a chalk-like material. The cliffs were formed around 80 million years ago, when Alabama was mostly underwater. The chalk was created by around 10 billion ocean shells that drifted to the area and remained there

undisturbed for millions of years. The White Cliffs of Epes span two miles and offer many places for visitors to explore.

Along the White Cliffs of Epes also sits the archeological site of the 1736 [French Fort Tombecbe](#). The French constructed the fort to inhibit England from gaining land in the Americas and to increase relations and trading with the Choctaw Nation. The French used the fort from 1736 to 1763, when the Treaty of Paris was signed. During that time, the French strengthened their relationship with the Choctaw Nation and used the fort to assist the pro-French Choctaws in the Choctaw Civil War of 1746 – 1750 with arms and rations. At the conclusion of the Choctaw Civil War, both sides had experienced significant losses and by 1763 the fort was abandoned. Today, visitors can visit the area where Fort Tombecbe once stood, get verbal history lessons regarding the fort, and dig for archeological items.

Travelers can also visit the [Choctaw Nation Wildlife Refuge](#) along the banks of the Tombigbee River in Coffeetown, Alabama. The 4,218-acre wildlife refuge was established in 1964 to provide wood duck brood habitat (Figure 6), where wood ducks will lay and hatch offspring. It is estimated that around 2,500 wood ducks are hatched in the refuge each year. The refuge contains around 1,800 acres of waterways, 2,265 acres of bottomland hardwoods, and 151 acres of croplands. Visitors can see wood ducks, bald eagles, whitetail deer, alligators, and beavers (U.S. F&W, 2023).



*Figure 5. White Cliffs of Epes.
Photo Credit: Jennifer Barker*



*Figure 6. Wood duck brooding habitat.
Photo Credit: Jennifer Barker*