Cumberland River Navigation

STATE/PROVINCE: Tennessee, Kentucky

COUNTIES:

LOCATION: Above Carthage TN to mouth on the Ohio River; plus section to Burnside KY

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE:

There have been two lock-and-dam systems on the CUMBERLAND RIVER, one replacing the other. The first, constructed between 1888 and 1914, had a 6-ft. channel and 15 locks and dams called A through F and 1 through 8, with another far up the river in Kentucky called Lock 21. These are now referred to as the "Old Locks." Until 1910 the locks were of cut stone; the last 7 were of concrete, all for steamboats and 52 x 280' in the chamber. Beginning in 1934 this system was replaced by four high dams with locks, the first two 110 x 800 feet, the rest 84 x 400', and a 9-foot channel, with the same head of navigation as before, over 300 miles from the Ohio. The old dams were removed, and because of the narrowness of the river the river-side walls of the old locks were removed, except for Old Locks 1, 3, 4, 5 and 8, which are all under 20 or more feet of water so were left with the operating machinery intact and the gates closed. Industrial archaeologists of the future will have a field day with these navigation time capsules!

Today there are public access areas or parks at the new locks and at most of the old sites. These are marked on recreation maps of Barkley, Obear, Old Hickory and Cordell Hull Lakes available free from the Nashville District. Especially useful is the Nashville District Centennial History, ENGINEERING ON THE TWN RIVERS (1976) by Dr. Leland Johnson, available from the district at $10 ppd. Also very useful is a bound book of navigation charts of the Cumberland, showing the old lock locations, available from them at $4. See also STRANGWAYS' ON THE CUMBERLAND by Byrd Douglas (Tennessee Book Co., Nashville, 1961).

From THE AMERICAN CANAL GUIDE Part 3, p.17 (1979)

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY:

Engineering on the Twin Rivers by Dr. Leland Johnson

For more details see THE AMERICAN CANAL GUIDE Part 3, pp.17-19.

UNPUBLISHED RECORDS, PHOTOS, DRAWINGS (CEHR, HABS, HAAI, Local or Regional Historical Societies, Libraries, etc.):

Field work for ACS by Minnie B. Morton

EXISTING OR RECOMMENDED LANDMARK STATUS (CEHR, National Register, etc.):

Old Lock C should become a canal park; also Old Lock 1, the oldest still visible. Old Lock 2 is a park and should have an exhibit. Old Lock 7 is a good park maintained by Smith County and would also be a good place for an exhibit.