Historical Background

Tennessee has three very distinct regions that make up the state: east, middle, and west. These are commonly referred to as the “grand divisions” and are represented by three stars on the state flag. The grand divisions of Tennessee are most visible by the different types of geological features across the state. Because of differences in geology and resources, the distribution of industrial and agricultural products varies widely. Furthermore, cultural differences have inspired different forms of folklife, including popular music, from blues in the west, to country in the middle, to bluegrass in the east.

East Tennessee is distinct for several reasons: it is
- Composed of 30-35 counties (differs according to source– Tennessee State Code states that there are 33)
- Situated at the highest elevation in the state, between the border with North Carolina and the Sequatchie Valley
- A part of the Appalachian Mountains, containing the Great Smoky Mountains National Park
- Often independent from the rest of the state, from the proposed State of Franklin in the 18th century to the overwhelming Unionist sympathies during the Civil War
- Home to one of Tennessee’s three presidents: Andrew Johnson, who was Abraham Lincoln’s vice president and successor after Lincoln’s assassination.
- Mostly in the Eastern time zone (with a few exceptions), while the rest of the state is in the Central time zone.
- The location of many of the major operations of the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)
- Also the location of a portion of the Manhattan Project: the Oak Ridge National Laboratories

Suggestions for Teachers & additional online resources

There are many East Tennessee primary sources on the Library of Congress Web site. The majority of them relate to environmental issues, such as the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, and the New Deal activities of the Tennessee Valley Authority.

Have students search for these categories of primary sources in the American Environmental Photographs and Farm Security Administration / Office of War Information Black-and-White Negatives. Use search terms such as “Tennessee,” “Great Smoky Mountains,” “Tennessee Valley Authority,” or the names of specific towns, cities, or TVA dams. Discuss with students the following questions:

How does the landscape change in response to “progress”? How have local and federal efforts both devastated and protected certain environments? What are the long-term impacts of these efforts on the economy and the people of East Tennessee?

Library of Congress resources to examine:
- Primary Sources for Tennessee
- Explore the States: Tennessee
- Local Legacies: Tennessee

More interesting links:
- “Geologic Zones” entry in the Tennessee Encyclopedia of History and Culture
- East Tennessee Historical Society
Great Smoky Mountains National Park Roads & Bridges, Foothills Parkway, From Chilowee to Walland & from Cosby to I-40, Gatlinburg, Sevier County, TN [n.d.; detail]

Andrew Johnson House, 217 South Main Street, Greeneville, Greene County, TN. (above photograph)

Great Smoky Mountains National Park Roads & Bridges, Cades Cove Road & Laurel Creek Road, From Townsend Wye to Cades Cove, Gatlinburg vicinity, Sevier County, TN. [after 1968] (above photograph)

A train bringing copper ore out of the mines, Ducktown, Tenn. Fumes from smelting copper for sulfuric acid have destroyed all vegetation and eroded the land. [1939]

Market Square, Chattanooga, Tenn. [c.1907]

East Tennessee Citizens to Abraham Lincoln, Saturday, April 23, 1864.
Map of Fort Sanders, Knoxville, Tennessee, showing the Confederate assault of Nov. 29, 1863.

Clinton, TN, school integration conflicts. [1956]

Chattanooga, Tenn. Confederate prisoners at railroad depot [1864]


Hiwassee Dam and powerhouse. General view downstream. This dam, about 307 feet high, closes a deep canyon in a scenically outstanding section of the North Carolina Mountains. Keynote of design is extreme simplicity. Highway is carried across top of dam. [between 1933 and 1945]

Maintenance man at the Combustion Engineering Co. working at the largest cold steel hydraulic press in the world, Chattanooga, Tenn. This press can shape steel plates several inches in thickness [1942]
CITATIONS: TENNESSEE'S GRAND DIVISIONS- EAST TENNESSEE

TEACHERS: Providing these primary sources without their titles (at first) may enhance the inquiry experience for students. This list of citations (Chicago Manual of Style) is supplied for reference purposes.


Wolcott, Marion Post. “A train bringing copper ore out of the mines, Ducktown, Tenn. Fumes from smelting copper for sulfuric acid have destroyed all vegetation and eroded the land.” September 1939. From the Library of Congress, America from the Great Depression to World War II: Photographs from the FSA-OWI, 1935-1945. https://www.loc.gov/item/2017877450/.


