

# Daniel Boone

When you are on a road trip with your parents, do you ever wonder how they know exactly how to get to where they want to go? Do they use the GPS in your car to show them which roads to take or how far away the destination is? Do you help them navigate with a map on the cell phone and tell them when to turn?

Now, imagine that you didn't have a GPS, or a map on a cell phone, or a car that takes you places. You may be familiar with the area surrounding your school, and where you live, but when you get outside of your city or town, it probably becomes less familiar. Picture how difficult it would be to find your way to a new, unknown place without the comfort of a car, the convenience of a cell phone, or the help of a GPS. You might use the main, paved roads as clues but what if there were none – just dirt, plants, wildlife, and wilderness? Then what would you do?

Such was the experience of the famed frontiersman, Daniel Boone. Let's see what he did.

Daniel Boone was born in Pennsylvania in 1734. His dad, Squire Boone, was a weaver and a blacksmith who came to America from England to freely practice his Quaker faith. He married fellow Quaker Sarah Morgan, and the two had 11 children (Daniel was the sixth).<sup>1</sup>

As a young boy, Daniel spent much of his time that he wasn't helping look after his family's cattle, wandering in the forest by himself, where he learned many skills that would be useful later on. When he was 12 years old, he got his first rifle and learned how to be a very good hunter. Though Daniel didn't have any formal schooling, he did learn to read and write and would take materials to read with him as he ventured through the woods.<sup>2</sup>

After the family was disowned from the Quaker community [Editor's note: two of the Boone children married non-Quaker "worldlings"], Squire Boone and his family left Pennsylvania for North Carolina when Daniel was 15 years old.<sup>3</sup>

Daniel earned money by living as a long hunter, which was someone who spent months or years away from home in the wilderness and sold the skins of the animals they had hunted.<sup>4</sup> While in his 20s, Daniel served in the North Carolina militia as a wagoner during the French and Indian War. There, he met a man named John Finley. [Editor's note: some sources spell it as "Findley."]



John told Daniel about an amazing and beautiful place in the west called Kentucky. The land had bountiful wide open spaces, natural beauty, and was filled with deer, buffalo, and elk – which could yield a lot of profit for a long hunter like Daniel.

After the war, Daniel got married to Rebecca Bryan in 1756, and over the course of their marriage, the two had ten children together. Daniel continued to support his family by hunting and trapping. He would have to leave for multiple months throughout the fall and winter, but he would come back in the spring to sell his furs to traders.<sup>5</sup>

In 1769, John Finley visited the Boone home and sparked his interest in “a big gap [Cumberland Gap] in the mountains that the Indians use.”<sup>6</sup>

At the time, many American Indian tribes lived in Kentucky and, following the French and Indian war, England proclaimed that Kentucky was Indian Territory.<sup>7</sup> Following trails forged by buffalos, tribes including the Shawnee and the Cherokee had traveled along a path network, which was translated to and known as The Great Warrior’s Path, and crossed through the Cumberland Gap, the Kane Gap, and the Moccasin Gap in the Appalachians.<sup>8,9</sup>

Cumberland Gap was known by previous explorers who had passed through it, but the challenge that Boone and Finley faced was finding the most efficient and direct route to get over the Appalachians and into Kentucky. Think of how a GPS will give you multiple routes to get to the same place, and some are much faster, have less traffic, or are easier to navigate. When the long hunters of the 18th century got lost, they couldn’t pull over at the next rest stop for a meal and a room to rest. Any day that was lost to travel in the wilderness had a cost and a risk; travelers could get sick or hurt, run out of supplies or food, and take away valuable time from hunting which was the source of their livelihood. They needed to find the best combination of all the known trails to get to their destination.<sup>10</sup>

Boone had many skills. He had a photographic memory, a great sense of direction, and he was brave.<sup>11</sup> Daniel knew how to get through the first two gaps in Southwest Virginia – Moccasin Gap and Kane Gap – and the best route to take to then reach Cumberland Gap.

In 1769, Boone and Finley, along with four others, made the journey to Kentucky. Daniel spent the next two years there hunting and trapping until he returned home in March 1771. From this trek, Boone learned a lot about eastern Kentucky and had found the best way to get there.<sup>12</sup>

This knowledge would become important because a few years later, the Transylvania Company bought 20 million acres from the Cherokee tribes, but needed a path for settlers to follow so they wouldn’t get lost as they moved to Eastern Kentucky and Middle Tennessee. Boone was hired for the job.

On March 19, 1775, Boone led a team of 30 axemen along a part of The Great Warrior's Path to the Cumberland Gap and into Kentucky.<sup>13</sup> This route became known as Boone Trace and was nothing more than a dirt walking path.<sup>14</sup> It was a dangerous journey (they were attacked on the way by the Shawnee tribe), but Boone and the group pressed onward until they arrived in present-day Madison County, Kentucky, in April.<sup>15</sup>

With more American colonists excited about the opportunities that were to the west, new branches expanded from the primary route and in the 1790s, the path was widened to allow for wagon travel. This remodeled route has had many names but is commonly called the Wilderness Road. The Kentucky Gazette referred to the path by this name on October 15, 1796: "The Wilderness Road from Cumberland Gap to the settlements in Kentucky is now completed. Waggons loaded with a ton of weight, may pass with ease, with four good horses." [sic]

By 1810, some 300,000 people made the journey to Kentucky along the Wilderness Road to start new lives in the West.<sup>16</sup> And it was because of Daniel Boone's courage to forge a path that showed them that the scary, dangerous, and seemingly impossible journey west was possible!

The next time you go to a new place and feel a bit nervous, remember the bravery and adventurous spirit of Daniel Boone.

## Footnotes

1. <https://www.history.com/news/8-things-you-might-not-know-about-daniel-boone>
2. <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/daniel-boone>
3. <https://www.history.com/news/8-things-you-might-not-know-about-daniel-boone>
4. <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/daniel-boone>
5. <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/daniel-boone>
6. <https://danielboonetrail.com/history/>
7. <https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/kentucky#the-first-people-in-kentucky>
8. <https://www.nps.gov/cuga/learn/historyculture/warriors-path.htm>
9. <https://danielboonetrail.com/history/>
10. <https://www.boonetrace1775.com/History/Historical-Significance/historical-significance.html>
11. <https://www.boonetrace1775.com/History/Historical-Significance/historical-significance.html>
12. <https://danielboonetrail.com/history/>
13. <https://danielboonetrail.com/history/>
14. <https://explorekyhistory.ky.gov/items/show/580#:~:text=Originally%2C%20Boone%20Trace%20was%20little,was%20called%20by%20various%20names>.
15. <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/wilderness-road>
16. <https://danielboonetrail.com/history/>

## Additional Resources

- <https://www.history.com/news/8-things-you-might-not-know-about-daniel-boone>
- <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/daniel-boone>
- <https://www.battlefields.org/learn/biographies/daniel-boone>
- <https://danielboonetrail.com/history/>
- <https://www.history.com/topics/us-states/kentucky#the-first-people-in-kentucky>
- <https://www.nps.gov/cuga/learn/historyculture/warriors-path.htm>
- <https://www.boonetrace1775.com/History/Historical-Significance/historical-significance.html>
- <https://explorekyhistory.ky.gov/items/show/580#:~:text=Originally%2C%20Boone%20Trace%20was%20little,was%20called%20by%20various%20names>
- <https://www.history.com/topics/19th-century/wilderness-road>