

高等院校特色课程英语系列教材

范建华 毛启红 主编

新编英美国家 社会与文化

美国篇



苏州大学出版社

图例(CIP)目录第五卷



高等院校特色课程英语系列教材

中国图书馆分类号(CIP)第143285号

新编英美国国家 社会与文化 美国篇

苏州大学出版
05000000-2100 苏州
苏州大学出版
苏州大学出版社

图书在版编目(CIP)数据

新编英美国国家社会与文化. 美国篇/范建华,毛启红主编. —苏州:苏州大学出版社,2010.8
ISBN 978-7-81137-567-1

I. ①新… II. ①范…②毛… III. ①英语—阅读教学—高等学校—教材②美国—概况 IV. ①H319.4:K

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字(2010)第 163235 号

新编英美国国家社会与文化
美国篇
范建华 毛启红 主编
王娅 责任编辑

新编英美国国家社会与文化
美国篇

范建华 毛启红 主编
责任编辑 王 娅

苏州大学出版社出版发行
(地址:苏州市十梓街1号 邮编:215006)
丹阳市兴华印刷厂印装
(地址:丹阳市胡桥镇 邮编:212313)

开本 787 mm×1 092 mm 1/16 印张 22.25(共两册) 字数 555 千
2010年8月第1版 2010年8月第1次印刷
ISBN 978-7-81137-567-1 定价:48.00 元
(共两册)

苏州大学版图书若有印装错误,本社负责调换
苏州大学出版社营销部 电话:0512-65225020
苏州大学出版社网址 <http://www.sudapress.com>

前 言

“英美国家概况”课程是为高等学校英语专业学生开设的专业知识必修课。按照教育部 21 世纪我国高等学校英语专业人才的培养目标和要求,在打好扎实的英语语言基本功和牢固掌握英语专业知识的前提下,要拓宽学生的人文学科知识,扩大知识面,对西方不同的政治、经济、文化、历史和科技教育等有较全面的了解,其中重点是对英国和美国国情的梳理和掌握。同时,注重培养学生独立思考、分析问题、解决问题的能力 and 创新能力,培养学生跨文化交际意识和能力,提高思想道德素质、文化素养,并对今后从事英美问题的研究打下坚实的基础。

一直以来,在这样一门重要课程的教材选择方面,存在着诸多难点:

1. 由于“英美国家概况”课程的知识覆盖面广,涉及历史、政治、经济、文化等方方面面,所选教材在内容上应做到有详有略,既全面翔实,又重点突出。
2. 英美两国在政治、地域、风俗等方面与中国有很大差异,这种差异会对学生的认知和理解造成一定的困难。教材编写者应充分考虑到这种客观存在的文化差异,并在编排上加以妥善考虑。
3. 英文版的教材中存在大量历史事件、地理位置等专有名词和术语,这对于学生的英文水平是一个很大的挑战。教材的语言在地道通畅外还应做到难易适中。
4. 网络时代,学习方式呈多样化,教材的内容不应显得过于陈旧,应能满足网络时代的学习需求。

为此,我们组织国内诸多高校的一线“英美国家概况”课程教师,从实际授课需求出发,在他们多年教学经验的基础上,编写了《新编英美国家社会与文化》(英文版)一书。本书充分考虑了以上提及的问题,综合考量了教师的教学需要和学生的学习需求,对于应该让中国学生掌握的英美国家社会文化知识作了详尽介绍,而对一些只需要了解的知识简要介绍,使教材在有限的篇幅里较为全面地向中国学生展示“尽可能真实的英国和美国”。本教材既可作为大中专院校相关课程的教材,满足人才培养需求,也可以作为英语爱好者的普及性读物。

希望读者通过本套教材的学习,了解英美国史,以及英美两国的政治、经济、文化发展状况,了解中国与英美两国国际关系演变的基本情况与信息,进一步认识借鉴外国经验对我国经济社会发展的重要意义,从而增强自己的跨文化交际能力,丰富自己的

知识结构,为今后的工作打下良好的文化知识基础。

本书由泰州师范高等专科学校范建华老师和南京人口管理干部学院毛启红老师担任主编。分为英国篇和美国篇两册,共20章。其中英国篇第1章由南京林业大学吴雪峰老师编写,第2章和第3章由南京信息工程大学张厚振老师编写,第4章由南京人口管理干部学院毛启红、刘长城老师编写,第5章由江苏大学张明权老师编写,第6章由广西师范大学陆巧玲、何玲老师编写,第7章由常熟理工学院何充老师编写,第8章由浙江传媒学院陈欣老师编写,第9章由宿迁学院张子通老师编写,第10章由南京医科大学徐畅老师编写。美国篇第1章由淮北师范大学唐永辉老师编写,第2章和第3章由泰州师范高等专科学校范建华、徐小丽和徐佳老师编写,第4章由南京人口管理干部学院毛启红、刘长城老师编写,第5章由江苏大学张明权老师编写,第6章由广西师范大学陆巧玲、何玲老师编写,第7章由常熟理工学院何充老师编写,第8章由海南师范大学关世民老师编写,第9章由桂林电子科技大学邝增乾老师编写,第10章由南京医科大学秦志红老师编写。泰州师范高等专科学校李萍、石莉莉、朱婧、李飒等老师协助收集材料,并审读了全部书稿,提出了许多建设性意见。成书之际,我们衷心感谢苏州大学外国语学院衡仁权博士帮助审校书稿,感谢苏州大学出版社对此书的大力支持,感谢编辑为此书付出的大量辛劳!

由于编者水平有限,书中一定存在不少瑕疵和谬误,敬请读者和同行批评、指正!

编者 2010年8月

2010年8月



目 录

Chapter One General Introduction	(1)
1.1 Topography	(2)
1.2 Rivers, Lakes and Coast	(8)
1.3 Climate	(12)
1.4 Natural Resources	(14)
1.5 Population and Language	(15)
1.6 The American Dream	(17)
1.7 American Family Life	(19)
1.8 Holidays and Festivals	(21)
Chapter Two A Brief History (I)	(25)
2.1 The Discovery of America	(25)
2.2 Overview of Colonial America 1607–1754	(30)
2.3 Mayflower Compact	(33)
2.4 The American War of Independence	(35)
2.5 The American Civil War	(38)
Chapter Three A Brief History (II)	(41)
3.1 World War I	(41)
3.2 Prosperity and Depression	(43)
3.3 The New Deal and World War II	(46)
3.4 The Modern Era	(53)
Chapter Four Political System	(62)
4.1 The Political Culture of America	(63)
4.2 The 1787 Constitution	(64)
4.3 The Federal System	(68)

4.4	The Party System	(74)
Chapter Five	Economy	(79)
5.1	The Economic System	(80)
5.2	A Historical Overview	(81)
5.3	Natural Resources	(83)
5.4	Different Sectors	(85)
Chapter Six	Literature	(91)
6.1	Literature and American Revolution (1746–1815)	(92)
6.2	American Romanticism (1815–1865)	(94)
6.3	American Realism (1865–1914)	(99)
6.4	Modern Period (1914–1945)	(102)
Chapter Seven	Education	(110)
7.1	School Grades	(110)
7.2	Basic Curricular Structure	(114)
7.3	College and University	(116)
Chapter Eight	Foreign Policy	(120)
8.1	The American Heritage in Decision of Foreign Policy	(120)
8.2	The Foreign Policy in and out of the World War Time	(123)
8.3	Three Dimensions of the US Foreign Policy	(127)
Chapter Nine	Religion	(135)
9.1	Protestants	(136)
9.2	Catholics	(137)
9.3	The Orthodox Church	(139)
9.4	Judaism	(140)
9.5	Religion and Politics	(141)
Chapter Ten	News Media	(145)
10.1	Different Forms of News Media	(145)
10.2	Features of News Media	(161)
10.3	New Trends	(163)
Bibliography		(166)

Chapter One

General Introduction

The full name of the United States of America (USA) is sometimes abbreviated to the United States (US), or just to America. Since the establishment of the US, the number of states expanded from 13 to 50. Washington, D. C., the capital city of the US, is in the District of Columbia, not, as many Chinese students might expect, in the State of Washington. The flag of the US (the American flag) consists of thirteen equal horizontal stripes of red (top and bottom) alternating with white, with a blue rectangle in the canton bearing 50 small, white, five-pointed stars arranged in 9 offset horizontal rows of 6 stars (top and bottom) alternating with rows of 5 stars. The 50 stars on the flag represent the 50 US states and the 13 stripes represent the original 13 colonies that rebelled against the British monarchy and became the first states in the Union. Nicknames for the flag include the Stars and Stripes, Old Glory, and the Star-Spangled Banner (also the name of the national anthem).

The US has established a highly developed national economy within a matter of about two hundred years, counting from the time of its independence. Perhaps no other country has left as great an impression on the contemporary world as the US—a big achievement for such a relatively young nation. Lauded as a beacon of freedom, where over the centuries millions of immigrants have come to better their lives, and reviled as an international bully, perhaps never more so than in recent years, it's a place you have to explore in order to understand and appreciate.

The images of the country that named itself after a continent are embedded in the mind of people from all over the world; endless highways cutting through shimmering deserts; forests of skyscrapers towering over urban jungles; acres of beaches dotted with surfboards and suntanned skin; high mountain peaks and green river valleys; magnificent feats of engineering, from the Brooklyn Bridge to the

Hoover Dam. The country's emblems are so familiar that they constitute as much a part of the world's culture as its own—Lady Liberty, the Grand Canyon, the Empire State Building, the US Capitol, the “Hollywood” sign ... the list goes on.

1.1 Topography

1.1.1 Physiographic Divisions

The US is a country in the Western Hemisphere. Bounded on the east by the Atlantic Ocean and on the west by the Pacific Ocean, the US occupies a territory of 95,220,572 km² primarily in the mid-latitude region of the North American continental landmass. The non-contiguous territory comprising the state of Alaska is located in the extreme northwestern part of the continent and is separated from the 48 contiguous states by Canada. The Hawaii islands in the mid-Pacific form the 50th state of the US.

The territory comprised of the 48 contiguous states is bordered by Canada on the north and Mexico on the south. Alaska is bordered by Canada on the east and the Bering Sea on the west, which also separates it from Russia and Asia. The US is the second largest country in North America after Canada and the fourth largest in the world after Russia, Canada and China.

The location of the US in the mid-latitude region of the North American landmass flanked by the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans on either side and its vast territorial extension especially from the west to the east imparts it with a diverse physical environment. The country boasts of a varying range of climatic regions that are as far apart as the Arctic conditions in the far corners of Alaska and the subtropical climatic conditions in the state of Florida. The natural vegetation of the US can also be as varied as tropical rain forests to arid desert scrubland, and its physical landscape can be as diverse as the high and rugged mountain peaks of the Appalachians and the flat expanses of the prairie lowlands.

Despite New York's status as the cultural and economic center of the US, the federal capital is in Washington, D. C., which doesn't even rank among the top twenty cities in terms of population (though officially, it is a district, not a city). The US government is divided into three branches: the executive, headed by the president; the legislative, which comprises the Senate and the House of Representatives; and the judicial, with the Supreme Court as its highest office.

The eastern US has a varied topography. A broad, flat coastal plain lines the Atlantic and Gulf shores from the Texas-Mexico border to New York City, and includes the Florida Peninsula. Areas further inland feature rolling hills and temperate forests. The Appalachian Mountains form a line of low mountains separating the eastern seaboard from the Great Lakes and the Mississippi Basin. The five Great Lakes are located in the north-central portion of the country, four of them forming part of the border with Canada. The southeast US contains subtropical forests and, near the gulf coast, mangrove wetlands, especially in Florida. West of the Appalachians lies the Mississippi River Basin and two large eastern tributaries, the Ohio River and the Tennessee River. The Ohio and Tennessee Valleys and the Midwest consist largely of rolling hills and productive farmland, stretching south to the Gulf Coast.

The Great Plains lie west of the Mississippi River and east of the Rocky Mountains. A large portion of the country's agricultural products are grown in the Great Plains. Before their general conversion to farmland, the Great Plains were noted for their extensive grasslands, from tall-grass prairie in the eastern plains to short-grass steppes in the western High Plains. Elevation rises gradually from less than a few hundred feet near the Mississippi River to more than a mile high in the High Plains. The generally low relief of the plains is broken in several places, most notably in the Ozark and Ouachita Mountains, which form the US Interior Highlands, the only major mountainous region between the Rocky Mountains and the Appalachian Mountains. The Great Plains come to an abrupt end at the Rocky Mountains. The Rocky Mountains form a large portion of the western US, entering from Canada and stretching nearly to Mexico. The Rocky Mountains generally contain fairly mild slopes and low peaks compared to many of the other great mountain ranges, with a few exceptions (such as the Teton Mountains in Wyoming and the Sawatch Range in Colorado). In addition, instead of being one generally continuous and solid mountain range, it is broken up into a number of smaller, intermittent mountain ranges, forming a large series of basins and valleys.

West of the Rocky Mountains lies the Inter-Montana Plateaus (also known as the Intermountain West), a large, arid desert lying between the Rockies and the Cascades and Sierra Nevada Ranges. The large southern portion, known as the Great Basin, consists of salt flats, drainage basins, and many small north-south mountain ranges. The southwest is predominantly a low-lying desert region. A portion known as the Colorado Plateau, centered around the Four Corners Region, is considered to have some of the most spectacular scenery in the world. It is accentuated in such national parks as Grand Canyon, Arches, and Bryce Canyon, among others.

The Inter-Montana Plateaus come to an end at the Cascade Range and the

Sierra Nevada. The Cascades consist of largely intermittent, volcanic mountains rising prominently from the surrounding landscape. The Sierra Nevada, further south, is a high, rugged, and dense mountain range. It contains the highest point in the contiguous 48 states, Mount Whitney (14,505 ft; 4,419.19 m). These areas contain some spectacular scenery as well, as evidenced by such national parks as Yosemite and Mount Rainier. West of the Cascades and Sierra Nevada is a series of valleys, such as the Central Valley in California and the Willamette Valley in Oregon. Along the coast is a series of low mountain ranges known as the Pacific Coast Ranges. Much of the Pacific northwest coast is inhabited by some of the densest vegetation outside of the tropics, and also the tallest trees in the world (the redwoods).

Alaska contains some of the most dramatic and untapped scenery in the country. Tall, prominent mountain ranges rise up sharply from broad, flat tundra plains. On the islands off the south and southwest coast are many volcanoes. Hawaii, far to the south of Alaska in the Pacific Ocean, is a chain of tropical, volcanic islands, popular as a tourist destination for many from East Asia and the mainland US.

The geography of the US varies across its immense area. Within the continental US, eight distinct physiographic divisions exist, though each is composed of several smaller physiographic subdivisions. These major divisions are:

Laurentian Upland—part of the Canadian Shield that extends into the northern US Great Lakes area.

Atlantic Plain—the coastal regions of the eastern and southern parts which include the continental shelf, the Atlantic Coast and the Gulf Coast.

Appalachian Highlands—lying on the eastern side of the US, which includes the Appalachian Mountains, the Watchung Mountains, the Adirondacks and New England Province originally containing the Great Eastern Forest.

Interior Plains—part of the interior continental US, which includes much of what is called the Great Plains.

Interior Highlands—also part of the interior continental US, and this division includes the Ozark Plateau.

Rocky Mountain System—one branch of the Cordilleran system lying far inland in the western states.

Inter-Montana Plateaus—also divided into the Columbia Plateau, the Colorado Plateau and the Basin and Range Province, it is a system of plateaus, basins, ranges and gorges between the Rocky and Pacific Mountain Systems. It is the setting for the Grand Canyon, the Great Basin and Death Valley.

Pacific Mountain System—the coastal mountain ranges and features in the west

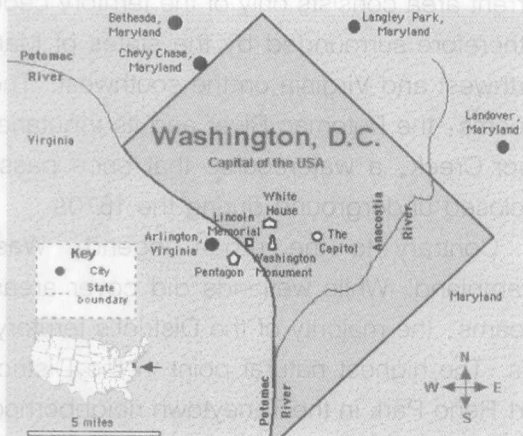
coast of the US.

The Atlantic coast of the US is, with minor exceptions, low. The Appalachian Highland owes its oblique northeast-southwest trend to crustal deformations which in very early geological time gave a beginning to what later came to be the Appalachian mountain system. This system had its climax of deformation so long ago (probably in Permian time) that it has since then been very generally reduced to moderate or low relief. It owes its present day altitude either to renewed elevations along the earlier lines or to the survival of the most resistant rocks as residual mountains. The oblique trend of this coast would be even more pronounced but for a comparatively modern crustal movement, causing a depression in the northeast resulting in an encroachment of the sea upon the land. Additionally, the southeastern section has undergone an elevation resulting in the advance of the land upon the sea.

1.1.2 The Two Major Cities

❁ Washington, D. C.

Washington, D. C., formally the District of Columbia and commonly referred to as Washington, the District, or simply D. C., is the capital of the US, founded on July 16, 1790. The City of Washington was originally a separate municipality within the Territory of Columbia until an act of Congress in 1871 effectively merged the City and the Territory into a single entity called the District of Columbia. It is for this reason that the city, while legally named the District of Columbia, is known as Washington, D. C.



The city is located on the north bank of the Potomac River and is bordered by the states of Virginia on the southwest and Maryland on the other sides. The District has a resident population of 599,657; because of commuters from the surrounding suburbs, its population rises to over one million during the workweek. The Washington Metropolitan Area, of which the District is a part, has a population of 5.3 million, the ninth largest metropolitan area in the country.

Article One of the US Constitution provides for a federal district, distinct from the states, to serve as the permanent national capital. The centers of all three branches of the federal government of the US are located in the District, as are many of the

nation's monuments and museums. Washington, D. C. hosts 174 foreign embassies as well as the headquarters of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the Organization of American States (OAS), the Inter-American Development Bank, and the Pan-American Health Organization (PAHO). The headquarters of other institutions such as trade unions, lobbying groups, and professional associations are also located in the District.

The city is governed by a mayor and a thirteen-member city council. However, the US Congress has supreme authority over Washington, D. C., and may overturn local laws. Residents of the District therefore have less self-governance than residents of the states. The District has a non-voting at-large Congressional delegate, but no senators. D. C. residents could not vote in presidential elections until the ratification of the Twenty-third Amendment to the US Constitution in 1961.

The District has a total area of 68.3 square miles (177 km²), of which 61.4 square miles (159 km²) is land and 6.9 square miles (18 km²) is water. The District is no longer 100 square miles (260 km²) due to the retrocession of the southern portion of the District back to the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1846. The District's current area consists only of the territory ceded by the state of Maryland. Washington is therefore surrounded by the states of Maryland on the southeast, northeast, and northwest and Virginia on the southwest. The District has three major natural flowing streams: the Potomac River and its tributaries, the Anacostia River and Rock Creek. Tiber Creek, a watercourse that once passed through the National Mall, was fully enclosed underground during the 1870s.

Contrary to the urban legend, Washington was not built on reclaimed swampland. While wetlands did cover areas along the two rivers and other natural streams, the majority of the District's territory consisted of farmland and tree-covered hills. The highest natural point in the District of Columbia is Point Reno, located in Fort Reno Park in the Taneytown neighborhood, at 409 feet (125m) above sea level. The lowest point is sea level at the Potomac River.

Approximately 19.4% of Washington, D. C. is parkland, which ties New York City for the largest percentage of parkland among high-density US cities. The US National Park Service manages most of the natural habitat in Washington, D. C., including Rock Creek Park, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park, the National Mall, Theodore Roosevelt Island, the Constitution Gardens, Meridian Hill Park, and Anacostia Park. The only significant area of natural habitat not managed by the National Park Service is the US National Arboretum, which is operated by the US Department of Agriculture. The Great Falls of the Potomac River are located upstream (northwest) of Washington. During the 19th century, the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal, which starts in Georgetown, was used to allow barge traffic to bypass

the falls.

New York City

New York City is located in the northeastern US, in southeastern New York State, approximately halfway between Washington, D. C. and Boston. The location at the mouth of the Hudson River, which feeds into a naturally sheltered harbor and then into the Atlantic Ocean, has helped the city grow in significance as a trading city. Much of New York is built on the three islands of Manhattan, Staten Island, and Long Island, making land scarce and encouraging a high population density.

The Hudson River flows through the Hudson Valley into New York Bay. Between New York City and Troy, New York, the river is an estuary. The Hudson separates the city from New Jersey. The East River, actually a tidal strait, flows from Long Island Sound and separates the Bronx and Manhattan from Long Island. The Harlem River, another tidal strait between the East and Hudson Rivers, separates Manhattan from the Bronx.

The city's land has been altered considerably by human intervention, with substantial land reclamation along the waterfronts since Dutch colonial times. Reclamation is most notable in Lower Manhattan, with developments such as Battery Park City in the 1970s and 1980s. Some of the natural variations in topography have been evened out, particularly in Manhattan.

New York City's total area is 468.9 square miles (1,214km²). 164.1 square miles (425km²) of this is water and 304.8 square miles (789 km²) is land. The highest point in the city is Todt Hill on Staten Island, which at 409.8 feet (124.9m) above sea level. The summit of the ridge is largely covered in woodlands as part of the Staten Island Greenbelt.

New York is the most populous city in the US, and the center of the New York metropolitan area, which is one of the most populous urban areas in the world. A leading global city, New York exerts a powerful influence over worldwide commerce, finance, culture, fashion and entertainment. As host of the United Nations headquarters, it is also an important center for international affairs. The city is often referred to as New York City to differentiate it from the state of New York, of which it is a part.

Many districts and landmarks in the city have become well-known to outsiders. The Statue of Liberty greeted millions of immigrants as they came to America in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Wall Street, in Lower Manhattan, has been a dominant global financial center since World War II and is home to the New York Stock Exchange. The city has been home to several of the tallest buildings in the world, including the Empire State Building and the twin towers of the former World Trade Center.

The City is the birthplace of many cultural movements, including the Harlem Renaissance in literature and visual art; abstract expressionism (also known as the New York School) in painting; hip hop, punk, salsa, disco and Tin Pan Alley in music; and is the home of Broadway theater.

New York is notable among American cities for its high use of mass transit, most of which runs 24 hours per day, and for the overall density and diversity of its population. In 2005, nearly 170 languages were spoken in the city and 36% of its population was born outside the US. Sometimes referred to as “the City That Never Sleeps”, the city has also been nicknamed the Capital of the World, Gotham, and the Big Apple.

New York City has a humid subtropical climate and enjoys an average of 234 days with at least some sunshine annually. It is the northernmost major city in North America that features a humid subtropical climate using the 0°C (American scientist standard) isotherm as criteria.

The building form most closely associated with New York City is the skyscraper, whose introduction and widespread adoption saw New York buildings shift from the low-scale European tradition to the vertical rise of business districts. As of August 2008, New York City has 5,538 high-rise buildings, with 50 completed skyscrapers taller than 656 feet (200 m). This is more than any other city in the US, and second in the world behind Hong Kong.

New York City has over 28,000 acres (110 km²) of municipal parkland and 14 square miles (23 km²) of public beaches. This parkland is augmented by thousands of acres of Gateway National Recreation Area, part of the National Park system, which lies within city boundaries. The Jamaica Bay Wildlife Refuge alone, the only wildlife refuge in the National Park System, is over 9,000 acres (36 km²) of marsh islands and water taking up most of Jamaica Bay.

1.2 Rivers, Lakes and Coast

1.2.1 The Atlantic Seacoast

The Atlantic Seacoast, also known as the Eastern Coastal Plain, is a wide strip of fairly level country between the Atlantic and the Appalachians. It is the country of the first European immigrants and the original 13 states. Broad in the south, about 300 kilometers, the coastal plain narrows towards the north and gives way to rocky

coastlines in New England. The coastal plain is made of low land and the tides from the sea can be seen rushing up the streams for many miles. Therefore, it is also called by some people as the tide-water region. A large part of Georgia and Florida is low-lying swampy land. The Okefenokee Swamp in southern Georgia and the Everglades in southern Florida are huge swamps which have become tourist attractions. But the Atlantic beaches are well-known for their fine sand which has given birth to famous summer playgrounds such as Atlantic City and Miami Beach.

As the Coastal Plain extends westwards, it gives way to a series of hills where rivers and streams suddenly fall to a lower level, resulting in the so-called Fall Line running along the west border of the plain. The abundant water powers supplied by the rapids and falls have led to the rise of some cities along the Fall Line, such as Columbia, Richmond, and Washington.

1.2.2 The Great Mississippi River

The Mississippi River is the largest river system in the US and the largest of North America. About 2,320 miles (3,730 km) long, the river originates at Lake Itasca, Minnesota and flows slowly southwards in sweeping meanders, terminating 95 river miles below New Orleans, Louisiana where it begins to flow to the Gulf of Mexico. Along with its major tributary, the Missouri River, the river drains 31 US states stretching from the Rocky Mountains in the west to the Appalachian Mountains in the east to the Canada-US border on the north, including most of the Great Plains, and is the fourth longest river in the world and the tenth most powerful river in the world.

From its origin at Lake Itasca to St. Louis, Missouri, the flow of the Mississippi River is moderated by 43 dams. Fourteen of these dams are located above Minneapolis in the headwaters region and serve multiple purposes including power generation and recreation. The remaining 29 dams beginning in downtown Minneapolis all contain locks and were constructed to permit commercial navigation of the upper river. Taken as a whole these 43 dams significantly shape the geography and influence the ecology of the upper river. Beginning just below Saint Paul, Minnesota and continuing throughout the upper and lower river, the Mississippi is further controlled by thousands of wing dikes that moderate the river's flow in order to maintain an open navigation channel and prevent the river from eroding its banks.

The Mississippi River runs through 10 states and was used to define portions of these states' borders. The middle of the riverbed at the time when the borders were established was the line to define the borders between states. The river has since shifted, but the state borders of Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Missouri, Kentucky, Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi have not changed; they still follow the former

bed of the Mississippi River as of their establishment. The widest point of the Mississippi River is Lake Winnibigoshish, near Grand Rapids, Minnesota, at over 7 miles (11 km) across. Also of note is Lake Onalaska, near La Crosse, Wisconsin, where the river is over 4 miles (6.4 km) wide (created by Lock and Dam No. 7) and Lake Pepin at more than 2 miles (3.2 km) wide. However, the first two areas are lakes or reservoirs rather than free flowing water. In other areas where the Mississippi is a flowing river (other than Lake Pepin), it exceeds 1 mile (1.6 km) in width in several places in its lower course.

The Missouri River flows from the confluence of the Jefferson, Madison and Gallatin Rivers and is the longest river in the US. Taken together, the Jefferson, the Missouri, and the Mississippi form the longest river system in North America. If measured from the source of the Jefferson at Brower's Spring to the Gulf of Mexico, the length of the Mississippi-Missouri-Jefferson combination is approximately 3,900 miles (6,300 km), making the combination the fourth longest river in the world. The uppermost 207 miles (333 km) of this combined river are called the Jefferson, the lowest 1,352 miles (2,176 km) are part of the Mississippi, and the intervening 2,341 miles (3,767 km) are called the Missouri.

The Arkansas River is the second-longest tributary of the Mississippi River. Measured by water volume, the largest of all Mississippi tributaries is the Ohio River. The Mississippi River is divided into the upper Mississippi, from its source south to the Ohio River, and the lower Mississippi, from the Ohio to its mouth near New Orleans.

The current form of the Mississippi River Basin was largely shaped by the Cordilleran Ice Sheet of the most recent Ice Age. The southernmost extent of the enormous glaciations extended well into the present-day US and Mississippi Basin. When the ice sheet began to recede, hundreds of feet of rich sediment were deposited, creating the flat and fertile landscape of the Mississippi Valley. During the melt, giant glacial rivers found drainage paths into the Mississippi watershed, creating such features as the Minnesota River, James River, and Milk River valleys. When the ice sheet completely retreated, many of these "temporary" rivers found paths to Hudson Bay or the Arctic Ocean, leaving the Mississippi Basin with many features "oversized" for the existing rivers to have carved in the same time period. The Mississippi River Delta has shifted and changed constantly since the formation of the river, but the construction of dams on the river has greatly reduced the flow of sediment to the delta. In recent years, the Mississippi's mouth has shown a steady shift towards the Atchafalaya River channel, but because of flood works at the river's mouth, this change of course—which would be catastrophic for seaports at the river mouth—has been held at bay.