

Cape Fear River ^[1]

Cape Fear River

by Jay Mazzocchi, 2006

Cape Fear River is formed in central North Carolina at the [Chatham](#) ^[4]-[Lee](#) ^[5] County line by the convergence of the Deep and Haw Rivers, flowing southeast and touching parts of [Harnett](#) ^[6], [Cumberland](#) ^[7], [Bladen](#) ^[8], [Columbus](#) ^[9], [Pender](#) ^[10], [Brunswick](#) ^[11], and [New Hanover](#) ^[12] Counties before emptying into the Atlantic Ocean at Cape Fear (part of [Bald Head](#) ^[13] Island) south of [Wilmington](#) ^[14]. The river also receives the Black and Northeast Cape Fear Rivers near Wilmington. Its 202-mile length makes the Cape Fear the longest river to run entirely within the state's boundaries.

The Cape Fear River has been one of North Carolina's most important natural resources since it was first dubbed "Rio Jordan" by Spanish explorers in 1526. Its subsequent names included the Charles River and the Clarendon River; it appears to have been commonly known as the Cape Fear River by at least 1733. The Cape Fear was the site of many initial European settlements and served as a key transportation route for colonial pioneers traveling into the North Carolina [backcountry](#) ^[15]. The Cape Fear and Deep River Navigation Company, operating in the nineteenth century, was financed by state and private funds to improve the river's navigability. Control of the Cape Fear River during the [Civil War](#) ^[16] became a coveted prize for both Confederate and Union forces.

The Cape Fear River system is the largest in North Carolina, encompassing a 9,000-square-mile basin that includes streams flowing within 29 of the state's 100 counties. With about 27 percent of the state's population and dozens of municipalities situated within its boundaries—including [Greensboro](#) ^[17], Burlington, Chapel Hill, Sanford, [Fayetteville](#) ^[18], Dunn, Clinton, Warsaw, Burgaw, and [Wilmington](#) ^[14]—the [Cape Fear River Basin](#) ^[19] is one of the most industrialized regions in North Carolina. These and other cities and towns rely on the river and its tributaries for freshwater, transportation, recreation, natural habitats for abundant wildlife species, and other uses. The Cape Fear Estuary—a 35-mile section of the river between Wilmington and the Atlantic Ocean—features saline waters that are important habitats and breeding grounds for many saltwater animals, including fish, crabs, and shrimp. The estuary is also part of the Atlantic Intracoastal Waterway.

Reference:

Philip Gerard, "Cape Fear: Historic Gateway to the Atlantic," *Wildlife in North Carolina* 63 (November 1999).

Additional Resources:

"The Muscle of the Cape Fear," *Our State*, September 2012. <https://digital.ncdcr.gov/Documents/Detail/our-state/950242>

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Subjects:

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From:

[Encyclopedia of North Carolina, University of North Carolina Press.](#) ^[32]

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