

Falls of the Ohio River

Falls of the Ohio is a world-class fossil reef outcrop along the banks of the Ohio River. Located between Louisville, Kentucky, on the south, and Clarksville, Indiana, on the north, the falls are the only bedrock passage across the Ohio River. Native Americans and animals (mainly bison) used this natural ford to cross the river. Falls of the Ohio is named for a series of rapids within a fall of 26 feet over a distance of about 2 miles, making it the only navigational hazard on the Ohio.

Many historical figures visited this early “Gateway to the West.” Robert LaSalle, a French explorer, may have visited the falls in 1669. George Rogers Clark and his militia were the first documented visitors of European ancestry during the Revolutionary War. Clark established the first settlement at the falls on Corn Island in 1778, which has since been entirely removed by erosion. Later in the 1800s, travel up or down the Ohio River was impeded by low water, but large barges and steamboats could shoot the rapids during high-water stage. The first steamboat navigated the falls in

1811, and the Shippingsport Canal was constructed on the Louisville side of the river in 1830. The first dam was constructed in 1881–1885.

Geologists have long studied the Devonian- and Silurian-aged strata that are exposed at the falls. Containing an abundance of fossils, the outcrops along the river provide an excellent view of corals of the Devonian age. The first paper on the corals was published in 1820. About 75 papers describing more than 600 species of various types of fossils, about two-thirds of which were type specimens, have been published, fostering the claim that more new fossil specimens have been named from the Falls of the Ohio River than any other locality on earth. In 1990, the state of Indiana established a park on the river’s edge above the falls. Access to the fossil beds at the falls is limited to low-flow periods on the Ohio River, which commonly occur during late summer or autumn. Fossil collecting is not allowed by state and federal regulations and laws.

