

Georgia's Little Grand Canyon

Travelers who visit the forested areas near Lumpkin, Georgia, often think they've made a few wrong turns and have ended up in America's Southwest instead of Georgia's Southwest. That's because of the beautiful sandstone formations found in an area nicknamed Georgia's "Little Grand Canyon."

Old Farming Methods

Providence Canyon, as this area is officially named, is located in southwest Georgia's Coastal Plains region near the Alabama border. Originally, this area was not a canyon at all, but rather a dense forest. However, that all changed when farmers moved into the area in the early 1800s and started growing the time period's most profitable crop, cotton. They moved in, cut down the trees, and started plowing and planting their seeds in long straight lines. Of course, the farmers didn't realize at the time that these traditional farming methods were actually initiating a string of events that would drastically change the landscape. Had the farmers known about land preservation techniques such as rotating the crops in the field every year, growing cover crops to protect the soil, and plowing the soil with the contour method, the landscape would have never been altered. However, these methods weren't fully developed until 100 years later, and so the farmers just used the best knowledge they had at the time.



Etching Into the Soil

Since the soil in this region was very soft and sandy, every time it rained, the plowed soil would be washed away by erosion. Soon, small ditches were etched into the farmland. And with every rainstorm these ditches just kept expanding wider and deeper. The natural cause-and-effect pattern was simple: Rain would fall; then, another inch or two of soil would flow downstream leaving a trench behind. It seemed there was no way to stop it. By the 1850s, many of the cotton fields in Stewart County had three- to five-foot gullies carved across them.

Come One, Come All

By the 1930s, the gullies had eroded into deep cliffs, chasms, plateaus, and pinnacles. Some of the canyons and cliffs jutted more than 150 feet deep into the earth. Even though it was no longer suitable for farming, the area had become quite popular for locals to visit. Families would pack lunches and picnic at spots that overlooked the canyon's colorful cliffs and landforms.

Local government officials saw the economic value in this. If the locals thought this area was beautiful enough to visit, then maybe tourists from other areas might too. And if people came, they might spend money in the surrounding businesses. The officials felt that the best way to get national tourist attention for Providence Canyon was to convince the federal government to turn it into a national park—just like other areas of natural beauty had been preserved in the American Southwest. In 1933, the Atlanta Constitution reported, "It [Providence Canyon] has attracted national attention and is said to be second only to the Grand Canyon in size and scenic beauty." That's actually how Providence Canyon obtained the nickname "Little Grand Canyon."

Yet, despite many pleas from the locals, the federal government did not turn Providence Canyon into a national park. So, nearly forty years later in 1971, the state of Georgia decided to officially name it a state park instead. Governor Jimmy Carter signed this bill into law on June 1 of that year.

Seeing It In Person

Providence Canyon State Park is considered one of the Seven Wonders of Georgia. If you get the opportunity to visit, you'll get to see Georgia's geologic history in the park's 1,108 acres. As you study the canyon's interesting rock formations, take notice of the different colors of sand that are layered on top of each other like pages in a book. Millions of years ago, this area was covered by ocean waters and over time different types of silt and sediment were deposited into deep layers of soil. The sand in Providence Canyon comes in a palette of colors: deep pumpkin orange, mustard ochre yellow, fiery red, sugar-white kaolin, pale pink, dusty lavender, and misty grey. Scientists have counted a grand total of 43 different colors of sand in all.

Visitors can hike around the canyon's rim and check out the scenery from above. Or, they can trek down a trail to the canyon floor and take a look at the region from an entirely different perspective. In July and August, the canyon floor is decorated with the world's largest known colony of the rare plumleaf azalea. This beautiful paprika-red flower is found only in southwestern Georgia and eastern Alabama. Along the trails, you'll also likely see woodpeckers, wild turkeys, warblers, white-tailed deer, armadillos,

raccoons, red foxes, and gray squirrels. The trails are clearly marked; or if you prefer, a park ranger can take you on a guided tour. True adventurers may want to bring an overnight pack and pitch a tent in one of the designated backcountry camping spots.

What You Should Know Before You Go

- The park is located 7 miles west of Lumpkin on GA State Hwy 39c.
- The park has 2 picnic shelters, 2 pioneer camps, and 6 backcountry camps. All must be reserved in advance for a fee: \$40, \$33, and \$9 respectively.
- The park is open daily. From September 15-April 14, the hours are 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. From April 15-September 14, the hours are 7 a.m. to 9 p.m.
- There are 3 miles of hiking trails at the park and 7 miles of backcountry trails.
- Evening visitors and overnight campers particularly enjoy stargazing under the park's canopy of stars.

1. Read this sentence from the article.

As you study the canyon's interesting rock formations, take notice of the different colors of sand that are layered on top of each other "like pages in a book."

Why does the author use the phrase "like pages in a book" in this sentence?

- A) To emphasize the different types of sand
- B) To describe the appearance of the rock formations
- C) To suggest that the rock formations are as thin as paper
- D) To explain how the rock formations were formed over time

2. Which statement **best** reflects the author's point of view?

- A) Water erosion takes millions of years to change the landscape.
- B) Farmers should be allowed to plant crops again in Stewart County.
- C) Tragedy can only result when people fail to utilize land preservation techniques.
- D) People who visit the southwestern region of Georgia will be pleased with its beauty.

Short Constructed Response:

Explain whether the farmers in Stewart County were likely to be unhappy with the erosion that occurred on their property. Use details from the article to support your response.

Long Constructed Response:

Write an argumentative response in support of or against the federal government's decision **not** to make Providence Canyon a national park. Use details from the article to support your argument.