



Key Words: landform, mountain, mountain range, basin, peak, desert, island, peninsula, plateau, plain, relief map, elevation, piedmont, coastal plain, valley

You have probably sung about “purple *mountain* majesties upon the fruited *plain*.” Mountains and plains are two kinds of **landforms**. Landforms are features of the Earth’s surface. Major landforms include:

- **mountain:** the highest type of landform, higher than hills
- **mountain range:** a series of mountains that form a group
- **basin:** all the land drained by a river and by all the streams flowing into the river
- **peak:** a high mountain or the pointed top of a mountain
- **desert:** a dry, often sandy area that gets very little rain
- **island:** land that is completely surrounded by water
- **peninsula:** a body of land that is almost completely surrounded by water
- **plateau:** a large area of high, flat land
- **plain:** a large area of mostly flat land with few trees

The **relief map** on the opposite page shows the major landforms in the United States. A relief map shows the higher and lower parts of an area. To show **elevation**—the height of the land above sea level (the level of the ocean)—relief maps often use different colors and textures. For example, mountains on a relief map might look bumpy, while plains look smooth.

Elevation changes a lot from place to place in the United States. The highest point in the United States, Mount McKinley in Alaska, is 20,320 feet above sea level. The lowest point, Death Valley in California, has an elevation of 282 feet *below* sea level. The map on the next page uses colors to show different elevations in the United States. For example, the darker green areas are between 0 and 650 feet above sea level, while the darker orange areas are over 6,560 feet above sea level.



A mountain peak in the Cascade Range in Washington



A plain in the central United States

United States: Major Landforms and Elevations



1. What is the largest mountain range in the western United States? What is the largest mountain range in the eastern United States? Which mountain range is higher? How can you tell?
2. Find the Ozark Plateau and the Columbia Plateau on the map. Which is closer to sea level?
3. The highest and lowest elevations shown on this map are both in the west. Identify these places and their elevations.
4. Which city is at a higher elevation—Raleigh, North Carolina, or Denver, Colorado?
5. Is the elevation higher in the Great Plains or along the Atlantic Coastal Plain?
6. The Missouri River flows into the Mississippi River. In what mountains does the Missouri River begin?
7. Identify two other rivers that flow into the Mississippi River.
8. Which southeastern state is mostly a large peninsula? What bodies of water surround this peninsula?
9. What type of landform are the Florida Keys?
10. Do most mountain ranges in the United States run north-south or east-west?
11. Which part of the United States has the most deserts—western, central, or eastern?
12. The Great Basin is not as flat as the Great Plains. How is this shown on the map?

On the map on the opposite page, find the city of Alexandria, Virginia, one of the oldest cities in the United States. Before the American Revolution, Alexandria was a busy port. Farmers to the north and west brought their tobacco to Alexandria to load on ships going to England. Look again at the map. You will see that Alexandria is on the Potomac River. Why did ships stop at Alexandria instead of going farther inland up the Potomac?

The answer to that question shows us how landforms affect human activity and history. Locate the Fall Line on the map. Virginia's Coastal Plain and the Piedmont meet at this line of small waterfalls and rapids (places in rivers where the water runs swiftly and roughly). The land to the west of the Fall Line is hard and rocky. The land to the east is softer. As Virginia's rivers flow eastward from the Piedmont to the Coastal Plain, when they cross from the hard rock to the softer land, they create waterfalls. That's why the ships stopped at Alexandria!



A town in the Coastal Plain of Virginia



The Great Falls of the Potomac River

19. Name two cities in Virginia south of Alexandria that are located on rivers where the Coastal Plain and the Piedmont meet. On what rivers are these cities located?



Skill Builder

Review

1. What does a relief map show?
2. Name four major landforms found in the United States.
3. In which landform region would you find more farming—mountains or plains?
4. On which coast is there a larger coastal plain—the Atlantic coast or the Pacific coast?
5. Name two cities at elevations over 3,300 feet.
6. In colonial times, as settlers began to move westward, what large mountain range slowed their progress?

Try It Yourself

What types of landforms can you see near your home? What other types of landforms are found in your state? How far would you have to travel to reach the nearest mountains? To reach sea level?