Physiography

North Carolina can be divided into three physiographic provinces, the Coastal Plain, the Piedmont and the Blue Ridge. Each province is characterized by particular types of landforms.

The Coastal Plain is characterized by flat land to gently rolling hills and valleys. Elevations range from sea level near the coast to about 600 feet in the Sand Hills of the southern Inner Coastal Plain.

The Piedmont Province lies between the Coastal Plain and the Blue Ridge Mountains. The Piedmont occupies about 45 percent of the area of the state. Along the border between the Piedmont and the Coastal Plain, elevations range from 300 to 600 feet above sea level. To the west, elevations gradually rise to about 1,500 feet above sea level at the foot of the Blue Ridge. The Piedmont is characterized by gently rolling, well rounded hills and long low ridges with a few hundred feet of elevation difference between the hills and valleys. The Piedmont includes some relatively low mountains including the South Mountains and the Uwharrie Mountains.

The Blue Ridge is a deeply dissected mountainous area of numerous steep mountain ridges, intermontane basins and trench valleys that intersect at all angles and give the area its rugged mountain character. The Blue Ridge contains the highest elevations and the most rugged topography in the Appalachian Mountain system of eastern North America. The North Carolina portion of the Blue Ridge is about 200 hundred miles long and ranges from 15 to 55 miles wide. It contains an area of about 6,000 square miles, or about 10 percent of the area of the state.

Within North Carolina, 43 peaks exceed 6,000 feet in elevation and 82 peaks are between 5,000 and 6,000 feet. On the west, the Great Smoky Mountains is the dominant range with several peaks that reach more than 6000 feet. On the eastern side of the North Carolina Blue Ridge, the highest range is the Black Mountains which extend for some 15 miles and contain a dozen peaks that exceed 6,000 feet in elevation. This group includes Mount Mitchell. At an elevation of 6,684 feet, it is the highest peak of eastern North America. Other prominent ranges from northeast to southwest are the Pisgah Mountains, Newfound Mountains, Balsam Mountains, Cowee Mountains, Nantahala Mountains, Snowbird Mountains and the Valley River Mountains.

Geology

Three major classes of rocks common to North Carolina are igneous, metamorphic and sedimentary. North Carolina has a long and complex geologic history. Although much remains to be learned, detailed geologic studies provide a general understanding of regional geological relationships. The state is best described in terms of geological belts; that is, areas with similar rock types and geologic history.

Blue Ridge Belt: This mountainous region is composed of rocks from over one billion to about one-half billion years old. This complex mixture of igneous, sedimentary and metamorphic rock has repeatedly been squeezed, fractured, faulted and twisted into folds. The Blue Ridge belt is well known for its deposits of feldspar, mica and quartz–basic materials used in the ceramic, paint and electronic industries. Olivine is mined for use as refractory material and foundry molding sand.

Inner Piedmont Belt: The Inner Piedmont belt is the most intensely deformed and metamorphosed segment of the Piedmont. The metamorphic rocks range from 500 to 750 million years in age. They include gneiss and schist that have been intruded by younger granitic rocks. The northeast-trending Brevard fault zone forms much of the boundary between the Blue Ridge and Inner Piedmont belts. Although this zone of strongly deformed rocks is one of the major structural features in the southern Appalachians, its origin is poorly understood. Crushed stone for road aggregate and building construction is the principal commodity produced.

Kings Mountain Belt: The belt consists of moderately deformed and metamorphosed volcanic and sedimentary rocks. The rocks are about 400-500 million yearls old. Lithium deposits here provide raw materials for chemical compounds, ceramics, glass, greases, batteries and TV glass.

Milton Belt: This belt consists of gneiss, schist and metamorphosed intrusive rocks. The principal mineral resource is crushed stone for road aggregate and for building construction.

Charlotte Belt: The belt consists mostly of igneous rocks such as granite, diorite and gabbro. These are 300-500 million years old. The igneous rocks are good sources for crushed and dimension stone for road aggregate and buildings.

Carolina Slate Belt: This belt consists of heated and deformed volcanic and sedimentary rocks. It was the site of a series of oceanic volcanic islands about 550-650 million years ago. This belt is known for its numerous abandoned gold mines and prospects. North Carolina led the nation in gold production before the California Gold Rush of 1849. In recent decades, only minor gold mining has taken place, but mining companies continue to show interest in the area. Mineral production is crushed stone for road aggregate and pyrophyllite for refractories, ceramics, filler, paint and insecticide carriers.

Triassic Basins: The basins are filled with sedimentary rocks that formed about 200-190 million years ago. Streams carried mud, silt, sand and gravel from adjacent highlands into rift valleys similar to those of Africa today. The mudstones are mined and processed to make brick, sewer pipe, structural tile and drain tile.

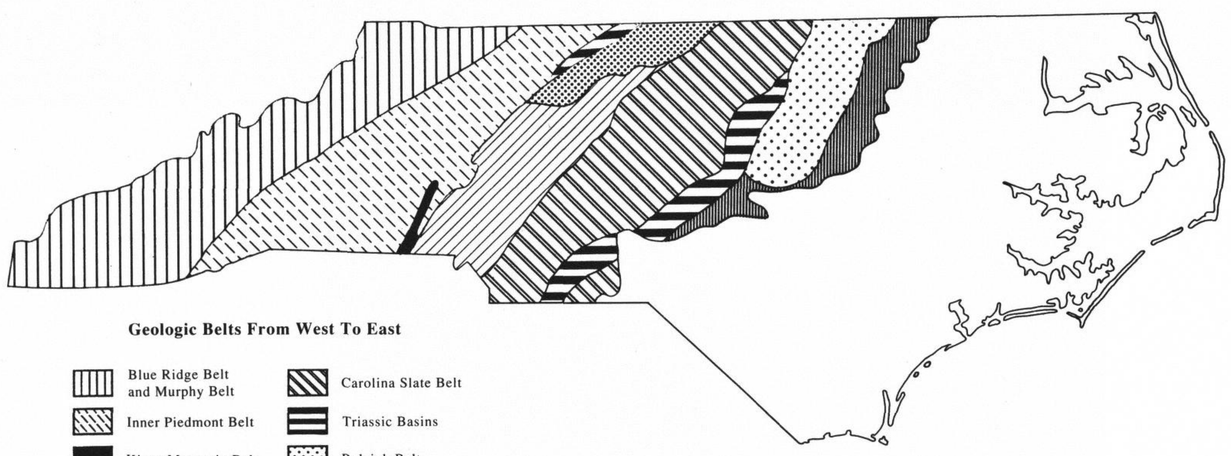
Raleigh Belt: The Raleigh belt contains granite, gneiss and schist. In the 19th century, there were a number of small building stone quarries in this region, but today the main mineral product is crushed stone for construction and road aggregate.

Eastern Slate Belt: This belt contains slightly metamorphosed volcanic and sedimentary rocks similar to those of the Carolina slate belt. The rocks are poorly exposed and partially covered by Coastal Plain sediments. The metamorphic rocks, 500-600 million years old, are intruded by younger, approximately 300 million year old, granitic bodies. Gold was once mined in the belt, and small occurrences of molybdenite, an ore of molybdenum, have been prospected here. Crushed stone, clay, sand and gravel are currently mined in this belt.

Coastal Plain: The Coastal Plain is a wedge of, mostly marine sedimentary rocks that gradually thickens to the east. The Coastal Plain is the largest geologic belt in the state, covering about 45 percent of the land area. The most common sediment types are sand and clay, although a significant amount of limestone occurs in the southern part of the Coastal Plain. In the Coastal Plain, geology is best understood from studying data gathered from well drilling. The state's most important mineral resource in terms of dollar value is phosphate, an important fertilizer component, mined near Aurora, Beaufort County. Industrial sand for making container and flat glass and ferrosilicon and used for filtration and sandblasting is mined in the Sand Hills area.

Mineral Industry

North Carolina has important deposits of many minerals and annually leads the nation in the production of feldspar, lithium minerals, scrap mica, olivine and pyrophyllite. The state ranks second in phosphate rock production and ranks in the top five in clay and crushed granite production. North Carolina does not produce significant quantities of metallic minerals.



Geologic Belts From West To East

- Blue Ridge Belt and Murphy Belt
- Inner Piedmont Belt
- Kings Mountain Belt
- Milton Belt
- Charlotte Belt
- Carolina Slate Belt
- Triassic Basins
- Raleigh Belt
- Eastern Slate Belt
- Coastal Plain

GEOLOGIC TIME SCALE FOR NORTH CAROLINA

EON	ERA	PERIOD	EPOCH	GEOLOGIC EVENTS IN NORTH CAROLINA	AGE*
PHANEROZOIC	CENOZOIC	Quaternary	Recent	Deposition of sediments in Coastal Plain. Erosion of Piedmont and Appalachian Mountains to their present rugged features.	
			Pleistocene		1.7
		Tertiary	Pliocene		5
			Miocene	Phosphate deposited in eastern North Carolina (Beaufort and Pamlico Counties).	24
			Oligocene	Limestone deposited in Coastal Plain. Weathering and erosion continue in Piedmont and Mountains.	
			Eocene		
			Paleocene		66
	MESOZOIC	Cretaceous	Late	Deposition of estuarine and marine sediments in the Coastal Plain. Continued erosion of the Piedmont and Mountains.	
			Early	Sediments deposited in northern half of the Coastal Plain. Cape Fear Arch begins to develop. Piedmont and Mountains eroded.	138
		Jurassic	Late	Marine sediments deposited on outer continental shelf. Piedmont and mountains eroded.	
			Middle	Weathering and erosion of the Blue Ridge and the Piedmont areas. Emplacement of diabase dikes and sheets.	
			Early		205
		Triassic	Late	Faulting and rifting create Deep River, Dan River, and Davie County basins. Basins fill with continental clastic sediments known as "red beds".	
			Middle	Formation of the Atlantic Ocean as North America and Africa drifted apart. Weathering and erosion of Piedmont and Mountains.	
			Early		240
	PALEOZOIC	Permian		Final collision of North America and Africa. Thrust faulting in west; deformation in eastern Piedmont.	290
		Pennsylvanian		Emplacement of igneous intrusions: Time of uplift and erosion.	330
		Mississippian		Time of uplift and erosion.	360
		Devonian		Emplacement of lithium, mica, and feldspar-rich pegmatites, primarily in the Kings Mountain and Spruce Pine districts. Metamorphism of Carolina slate belt. Period of erosion.	410
		Silurian		Period of uplift and erosion.	435
		Ordovician		Continental collision and beginning of mountain building process--faulting, folding, and metamorphism of pre-existing rocks.	500
		Cambrian		Sandstone, shale, and limestone deposited in the mountain area. Continued deposition of Carolina slate belt rocks. Gold deposits of the slate belt form.	570
PROTEROZOIC		Late		Sedimentary and volcanic rocks deposited in the mountains and Piedmont. Local intrusions of igneous rocks.	900
		Middle		Sedimentary, volcanic, and igneous rocks formed in the Blue Ridge and metamorphosed to gneisses and schists.	1600
		Early		Oldest dated rock in North Carolina is 1,800 million years old.	2500

* Estimated age in millions of years.

Oldest known rock in U.S.- 3,600 million years old.
Oldest known rocks in world- 3,850 million years old.
Formation of the Earth- about 4,500 million years ago.

Commercial Gem- and Mineral-Collecting Sites

Garnet, moonstone, ruby and sapphire - Cowee Valley mines; 8 miles north of Franklin, Macon Co., on NC 28. Panners Creek Gem Lines; southwest of Raleigh off Old Apex Road (gems are from western N.C.)

Emerald, aquamarine and amethyst - mines in the Spruce Pine-Little Switzerland area, Mitchell County.

Emerald, hiddenite, rutile and quartz - mines at Hiddenite, Alexander Co., 15 miles northwest of Statesville off NC 90.

Gold - Reed Gold Mine State Historic Site; off NC 200, 6 miles southeast of Concord, Cabarrus County. Cotton Patch Gold Mine; off US 52, 2 miles southeast of New London.

Sapphire - Pressley Mine; off Interstate 40, near Canton, west of Asheville, Haywood Co.

The State Precious Stone - Emerald

The General Assembly of 1973 designated the emerald as the official State precious stone. Emerald is found in North Carolina near Hiddenite in Alexander County and southwest of Spruce Pine in Mitchell County. The largest single emerald crystal found in North America was found at the Rist Mine at Hiddenite in 1969. This crystal weighed 1,438 carats. The *Carolina Emerald*, a 13.14 carat, emerald-cut gem, was also found at the Rist Mine.

The State Rock - Granite

The General Assembly of 1979 designated granite as the official State rock. North Carolina is blessed with an abundance of granite. When granite is crushed, it is used as an aggregate for road and building construction. If granite has the right physical properties, it can be cut into blocks and used for monuments, curb stone and stone for building facings. The largest open-face granite quarry in the world is located at Mount Airy, North Carolina.

STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA
James B. Hunt, Jr., Governor

Department of Environment, Health and Natural Resources
Jonathan B. Howes, Secretary

Division of Land Resources
Charles H. Gardner
Director and State Geologist

North Carolina Geological Survey

Mailing Address:
1612 Mail Service Center
Raleigh, NC 27299-1612

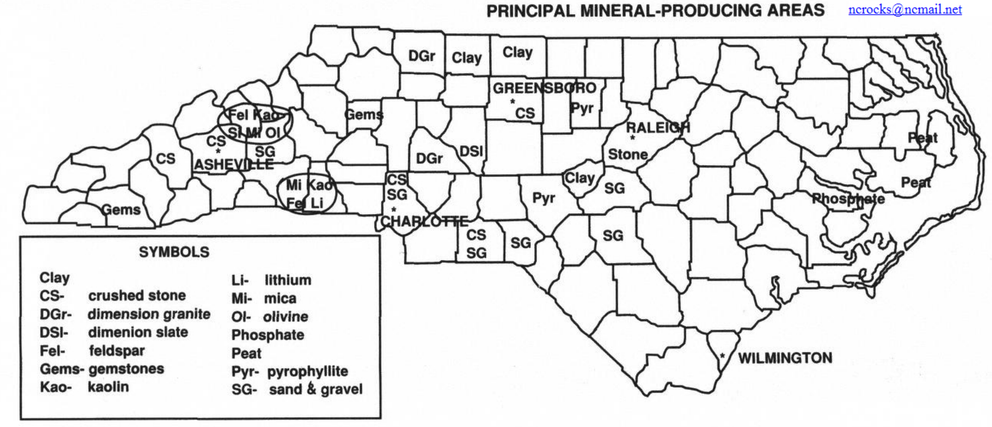
Physical Address:
512 North Salisbury Street
Raleigh, NC 27604

Phone:
919-733-2423

Fax:
919-733-0900

Internet:
www.geology.enr.state.nc.us

Online Store:
http://nc-maps.stores.yahoo.net/

E-mail:
ncrocks@ncmail.net

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