

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

OFFICE OF THE SECRETARY

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INTERIOR TO ACCEPT CONTROL OF GREAT DISMAL SWAMP SEGMENT FEBRUARY 22

A major share of the Great Dismal Swamp in southeast Virginia -- rich in history, legend, and living things -- will be deeded to the United States for use as a national wildlife refuge on February 22 by the Union Camp Corporation and the Nature Conservancy.

Union Camp will deed over a 40 percent interest in its nearly 50,000 Dismal Swamp acres at a ceremony in the office of Secretary of the Interior Rogers C. B. Morton. Next year and in several subsequent years it will sign over similar documents with complete Federal ownership expected to become a reality in 1975.

The board chairman of Union Camp, a New Jersey-based forest products company, Alexander Calder, Jr., will sign documents to commence the formal transfer of title.

Everett M. Woodman, president of the Nature Conservancy, will sign for his nonprofit organization, which acquires natural areas for preservation in the public interest, and which served as unpaid middleman in this transaction, the biggest in its history.

The largest parcel of land ever given to the United States Government for wildlife preservation, Union Camp's acreage has an appraised value of \$12.6 million. It constitutes about half of the swamp in Virginia; adjoining North Carolina has even more of the overall swamp than its sister State, most of it in private ownership.

Secretary Morton said George Washington's birthday, February 22, was chosen for the ceremony because the first President was among the first large land owners of the Great Dismal Swamp -- in fact, his original holdings represent the bulk of the area being donated by Union Camp. Washington described it in 1763 as a "glorious paradise" for wildlife, despite the gloomy name given it by earlier settlers.

Unlike many Eighteenth-Century Americans, Washington thought the swamp had possibilities. Along with Patrick Henry and other investors, he financed some farming experiments that ultimately proved disappointing. Washington also inspired the idea of a canal to connect the Chesapeake Bay with Albemarle Sound to the south; five miles were dug, and christened "Washington's Ditch."

The swamp is considered significant by scientists working in several disciplines. Heavily forested, it serves as home or resting place for a remarkable variety of animals and plants. Conservationists for years have expressed concern that it might lose its character or even disappear in the name of progress, but the Interior Department's management will be designed to preserve its special flavor.

Other famous Americans down to Robert Frost have figured in the Great Dismal Swamp story, and legends are abundant. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote about it, and it was a hideout for runaway slaves before the Civil War.

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