



Great Dismal Swamp in Literature

Many authors and historians have written about the swamp's role as a hiding place. Abolitionist Harriett Beecher Stowe's 1856 novel *Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* captured the imagination of thousands of readers, as did Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem "The Slave in the Dismal Swamp." Even so, the secretive nature of its inhabitants meant that little was truly known about life in the swamp.

More was known about the lives of enslaved workers who worked in and around the swamp. The Dismal Swamp Canal, which borders the swamp, was hand dug by slave labor, as well as the Washington, Jericho, and Portsmouth Ditches in the swamp. Moses Grandy, an enslaved waterman who worked in the swamp and on the canal, told of his experiences in *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy*. Grandy and others managed to earn enough money through working on the Dismal Swamp Canal to buy freedom for themselves and their families.

For more information about Great Dismal Swamp Maroons and the Underground Railroad, you can visit the Underground Railroad Education Pavilion in Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. The outdoor pavilion is located on the Lake Drummond Wildlife Drive.

The Lake Drummond Wildlife Drive is a self-guided tour route to Lake Drummond. Entrance to the drive is through the Railroad Ditch entrance of the refuge, at 3120 Desert Road, Suffolk, VA. The access gate is open daily with seasonal hours. A self-serve pass and required fee envelope are found at the entrance permit station. Fee is \$5 a day for private vehicles. Fee exemptions are posted at the permit station. The pavilion is also accessible by a short hike or bike on Railroad Ditch Road. There is no fee or permit required for hiking or biking on any of the refuge's roads and trails.

For more information contact the refuge office, open Monday-Friday from 8:00am to 4:00pm. The office is closed on weekends and Federal holidays but all trails remain open.

Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge
3100 Desert Road, Suffolk, VA 23434
(757) 986-3705
www.fws.gov/refuge/Great_Dismal_Swamp

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Great Dismal Swamp has long been known as a place where travelers could easily lose their way. Yet in the early centuries of American history, many of the people who vanished into the swamp were lost by their own choice. The swamp was a sanctuary for hundreds, maybe thousands, of freedom-seeking slaves.

A Place Apart

In the early days of colonial expansion, Great Dismal Swamp was considered a wild and inhospitable place. William Byrd II led a surveying party through the swamp in 1732. In his journal he wrote it was a "vast body of mire and nastiness... very unwholesome for its inhabitants." Nearby residents believed just breathing the fog from the swamp could make one ill. Rumor also held that lions lived deep in its midst. As a result, the swamp was largely avoided by early settlers.

This isolation made the swamp an ideal place for those not wanting to be found. For centuries escaped slaves came to Great Dismal Swamp seeking freedom. For some, the sprawl of the densely forested wetlands on the Virginia-North Carolina border was only a stopping point on their journey northward. For others, the swamp became a permanent home where they established hidden, largely self-sufficient settlements.

They were called maroons, a word that comes from the French word *marronage*, meaning "to flee," or "to be removed." Maroon communities developed throughout the American South, especially in inaccessible swampy areas. Because the maroons lived in secrecy, it is impossible to know exactly how many people called Great Dismal Swamp home. Recent research suggests that as many as 50,000 maroons may have lived here over the period of years between the mid 1600's and the Civil War.

Life in the Swamp

Maroon communities were settled on small rises of land in the swamp known as "mesic islands." On these islands, escaped slaves established some form of shelter or built small cabins, and may have farmed small plots of land. They would have hunted deer, Wild Turkey and other game in the swamp, and foraged for edible plants. New evidence suggests these survival skills were learned from retreating Native Americans whom had also taken shelter on the mesic islands during the colonial expansion.

Although preferable to slavery, life in Great Dismal Swamp was very difficult. Dense undergrowth, including thorny greenbrier vines, made it difficult to move through the swamp. In summer, mosquitoes, biting flies, and snakes were plentiful. Despite the hardships, the maroons went to great lengths to keep their communities hidden, often taking different routes back to their islands so no one could trace their path. None the less, occasional advertisements would appear in local papers giving notice of rewards for the return of runaways hiding in and around the swamp. Maroons lived in constant fear of the slave hunters and their bloodhounds.

The danger of discovery increased as logging operations in the swamp expanded and trade along the Dismal Swamp Canal flourished. Even so, some maroons began to trade with the outside world, especially with other slaves who had been sent into the swamp to dig ditches or gather shingles. Evidence supports the idea that maroons would help the shingle-gatherers meet their daily quotas in exchange for tools, clothing, and other necessities. Archaeologists have found bits of pipes, glass bottles, and small pieces of European pottery on the mesic islands nearest to the canals and ditches—things the maroons would not have been able to obtain on their own.

After the Civil War, the maroons no longer had to hide. They slowly moved out of the deep swamp and settled in the surrounding area. In their new freedom some found work as shingle-gatherers, as farmers, or as mates on canal barges. There remain today pockets of local residents that can recall family histories of living in the swamp.

Current Research

Stories about the freedom-seekers living in the swamp have been a part of local lore for centuries. In 2004, the Refuge was designated as an important landmark on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom. The designation was granted due to the abundance of news articles, journeys, and family histories giving report of the secret society.

Recent work in the National Wildlife Refuge has confirmed archaeological evidence of the maroon colonies. Research sites are deep within the swamp, in the most difficult of locations. These sites are fitting for generations of communities not wanting to be discovered.



Painting: Carolyn Arcabascio