

Current Research

Stories about escaped slaves in the swamp have been a part of local lore for centuries. Recent studies in the Great Dismal Swamp, however, have uncovered archaeological evidence to confirm the presence of maroon colonies. The Great Dismal Swamp Landscape Study is a partnership between American University and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service that aims to expand this knowledge. Every summer, professors and students conduct digs on sites deep within the swamp.

News of this research has found a wide audience. In 2004, the Refuge was designated as an important landmark on the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom.

The study's findings were included in an award-winning documentary by WCTV of Chesapeake, VA. At the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, visitors can visit the newly constructed Underground Railroad Education Pavilion, which was built to tell the story of maroons in the swamp. The story of maroon settlements will also be a featured exhibit in the new National Museum of African American History and Culture currently being built on the National Mall.



Dr. Dan Sayers of American University has conducted extensive archaeological research in the swamp. One of his findings is the outline of a maroon cabin, pictured above.

For more information about the Great Dismal Swamp and the Underground Railroad, you can visit the Underground Railroad Education Pavilion in the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. Please check our web site or call the refuge headquarters for current information on auto access into the Railroad Ditch Trail. The refuge office is open Monday-Friday from 8:00 am to 4:00 pm. The pavilion is also accessible by a short hike or bike on Railroad Ditch Road.

A list of resources for further reading is available from the refuge headquarters.

Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge
3100 Desert Road
Suffolk, VA 23434
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www.fws.gov/northeast/greatdismalswamp



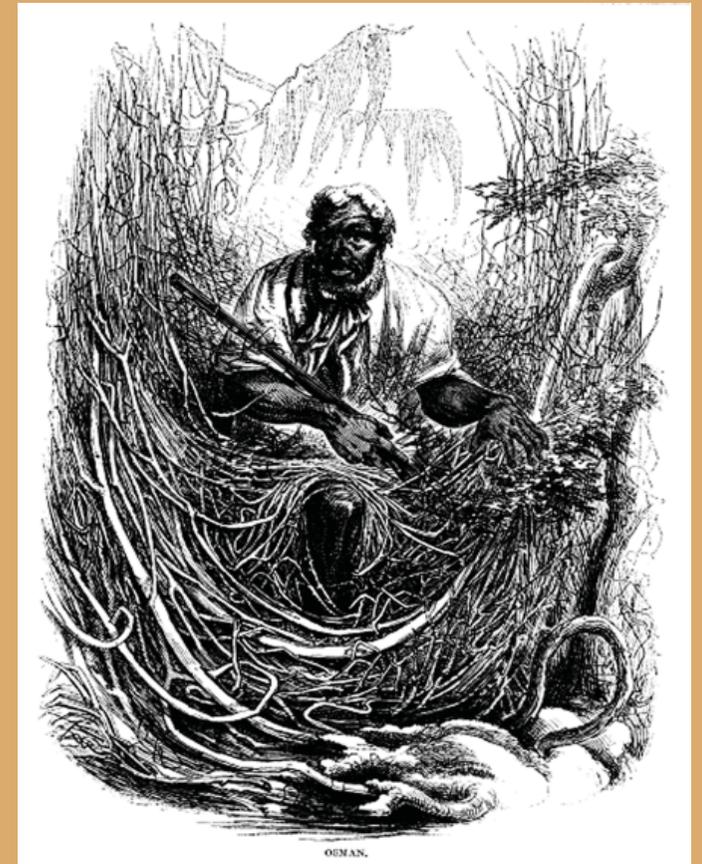
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The Great Dismal Swamp and the Underground Railroad



Great Dismal Swamp
National Wildlife Refuge

The Great Dismal Swamp has long been known for its impenetrability, 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 fugitive African-American slaves.

A Place Apart

From the early days of European exploration, the Great Dismal Swamp was considered a wild and inhospitable place. William Byrd II, who led a surveying party through the swamp in 1732 called it a “vast body of mire and nastiness... very unwholesome for inhabitants.” Nearby residents believed that the fog in the swamp carried diseases, and rumor held that lions lived in the swamp’s depths. As a result, the swamp was largely avoided by settlers.

The swamp’s isolation, however, made it an ideal place for those that didn’t want to be found. For centuries, slaves came to the Dismal Swamp seeking freedom. For many, the sprawl of densely forested wetlands on the Virginia-North Carolina border was 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.” 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 the Great Dismal Swamp home. Recent research suggests, however, that as many as 50,000 maroons may have lived in the swamp.

Life in the Swamp

Maroon colonies settled on areas known as “mesic islands,” areas of slightly higher elevation than the rest of the swamp. On these islands, escaped slaves established communities, built cabins, and may have even farmed small plots of land. They could have hunted deer, wild turkey and other game in the swamp, and foraged for a variety of edible plants.

Although preferable to slavery, life in the Dismal Swamp was very difficult. Dense undergrowth, including thorny greenbrier vines, made it difficult to move through the swamp. In the summer, mosquitoes, biting flies and snakes abounded. The maroons also lived in constant fear of discovery, for slave hunters with bloodhounds sometimes ventured into the swamp. The maroons went to great lengths to keep their communities hidden, even taking different routes back to their islands every day so that no one could trace their path.

As logging operations in the swamp expanded and trade along the Dismal Swamp Canal increased, maroon colonies began to trade with the outside world, especially with the hundreds of enslaved workers who

gathered shingles in the swamp. Maroons would help the shingle-gatherers meet their daily quotas in exchange for food, clothing and other necessities. Archaeologists have found pipes, glass bottles and even European pottery on the mesic islands- things the maroons would not have been able to obtain on their own.

After the Civil War, residents of the swamp no longer had to hide. Many settled in the surrounding area, and found work on the canal, as shingle gatherers, or as farmers.



The 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.” Still, the secretive nature of its inhabitants meant that little was truly known about life in the swamp.

More was known about the lives of the enslaved workers who worked in and around the swamp. The Dismal Swamp Canal, which borders the Swamp, was hand dug by slave labor. 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 working on the canal to buy their freedom.