

= Great Dismal Swamp maroons =

The Great Dismal Swamp maroons were freed and escaped slaves who inhabited the marshlands of the Great Dismal Swamp in Virginia and North Carolina . Although conditions were harsh , research suggests that thousands lived there between about 1700 and the 1860s . Harriett Beecher Stowe told the maroon people 's story in her 1856 novel *Dred : A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp* . The most significant research on the settlements began in 2002 with a project by Dan Sayers of American University .

= = Location = =

The Great Dismal Swamp spans an area of southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina between the James River near Norfolk , Virginia , and the Albemarle Sound near Edenton , North Carolina . The swamp is estimated to have originally been over 1 million acres (4 @, @ 000 km²) , but human encroachment has destroyed up to 90 % of the swampland . Today , the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge is just over 112 thousand acres (450 km²) .

= = History = =

The first African slaves brought to the British colonies in Virginia in 1619 came on a Dutch ship . At the time , slaves were treated similarly to indentured servants , becoming free with the passage of a certain period of time . Others gained freedom by converting to Christianity , since the English of that time did not typically enslave Christians . Slave labor was used in many efforts to drain and log the Great Dismal Swamp during the 18th and 19th centuries . Escaped slaves living in freedom came to be known as maroons or outlyers . The origin of the term " maroon " is uncertain , with competing theories linking it to Spanish , Arawak or Taino root words . Maroonage , runaway slaves in isolated or hidden settlements , existed in all the Southern states , and swamp @-@ based maroon communities existed in the Deep South , in Alabama , Florida , Georgia , Louisiana , and South Carolina . Maroonage in the Upper South was largely limited to Virginia and the Great Dismal Swamp .

At the beginning of the 18th century , maroons came to live in the Great Dismal Swamp . Most settled on mesic islands , the high and dry parts of the swamp . Inhabitants included slaves who had purchased their freedom as well as escaped slaves . Other escaped slaves used the swamp as a route on the Underground Railroad as they made their way further north . Some slaves lived there in semi @-@ free conditions , but how much independence slaves actually enjoyed there has been a topic of much debate . Nearby whites often left enslaved maroons alone so long as they paid a quota in logs or shingles , and businesses may have ignored the fugitive nature of escaped slaves who provided work in exchange for trade goods .

Herbert Aptheker stated already in 1939 , in " Maroons Within the Present Limits of the United States " , that likely " about two thousand Negroes , fugitives , or the descendants of fugitives " lived in the Great Dismal Swamp , trading with white people outside the swamp . Results of a study published in 2007 , " The Political Economy of Exile in the Great Dismal Swamp " , say that thousands of people lived in the swamp between 1630 and 1865 , Native Americans , maroons and enslaved laborers on the canal . A 2011 study speculated that thousands may have lived in the swamp between the 1600s and 1860 . While the precise number of maroons who lived in the swamp at that time is unknown , it is believed to have been one of the largest maroon colonies in the United States . It is established that " several thousand " were living there by the 19th century . However , fear of slave unrest and fugitive slaves living among maroon population caused concern amongst local whites . A militia with dogs went into the swamp in 1823 in an attempt to remove the maroons and destroy their community , but most people escaped . In 1847 , North Carolina passed a law specifically aimed at apprehending the maroons in the swamp . However , unlike other maroon communities , where local militias often captured the residents and destroyed their homes , those in the Great Dismal Swamp mostly avoided capture or the discovery of their homes .

Little is known of Native American activity in the area prior to 1600 , though the presence of hunting bolas indicates that the area may have served as a hunting ground as far back as 5 @,@ 000 years ago . Native American communities were already in existence in the swamp when the maroons began to settle there . Because leaving the area could inevitably lead to recapture , the inhabitants often used what was readily available in the swamp , even recycling tool remnants left by Native Americans . Since the maroons had few possessions , the few small artifacts that have been recovered have given historians little insight into their day @-@ to @-@ day lives . To date , excavation has yet to find any human remains . According to Sayers , historical archaeologist at American University who has led research on the maroons of the swamp , it is possible that the acidity of the water disintegrated any bones which may have been left behind .

Some maroons were born to escaped slaves and lived in the swamp for their entire lives despite the hardships of swamp life : dense underbrush , insects , poisonous snakes , and bears . The difficult conditions also made the swamp an ideal hiding place , not just for escaped slaves but also for free blacks , slaves who worked on the swamp 's canals , Native Americans , and outcast whites such as criminals . Maroons are known to have often interacted with slaves and poor whites to obtain work , food , clothes , and money . Some fugitive slaves plundered nearby farms and plantations , stole from anchored boats , and robbed travelers on nearby roads ; those caught were tried for murder or theft . Some maroon communities were set up near the Dismal Swamp Canal , built between 1793 ? 1805 and still in operation . These maroons interacted more with the outside world than those who lived in the swamp 's interior , and had more contact with outsiders once canal construction began . Some took jobs on the canal , and with increased contact with the outside world , some people living in the swamp eventually moved away . During the American Civil War , the United States Colored Troops entered the swamp to liberate the people there , many of whom then joined the Union Army . Most of the maroons who remained in the swamp left after the Civil War .

= = Research = =

The Great Dismal Swamp Landscape Study began in 2002 and was led by Dan Sayers , a historical archaeologist at American University 's Department of Anthropology . In 2003 , he conducted the first excavation in the swamp , and in 2009 , in partnership with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (which manages the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge) and American University , initiated the annual research program titled the Great Dismal Swamp Archaeology Field School . This effort continues the work of the landscape study . It examines the impact of colonialism , slavery , and development on the swamp , especially on the self @-@ sustaining maroon settlements in the swamp 's interior . It also studies native lifestyles before European contact . Prior to Sayers ' efforts , no field research had been done on the Great Dismal Swamp maroons . Even today , the swamp is impenetrable in places ; a research group gave up in 2003 because it lost its way so many times . Sites deep in the swamp 's interior are still so remote that a guide is needed to find them . The National Endowment for the Humanities gave the " We The People Award " of \$ 200 @,@ 000 to the project in 2010 .

In fall 2011 , a permanent exhibit was opened by the National Park Service to commemorate those who lived in the swamp during pre @-@ Civil War times . Sayers summarizes : " These groups are very inspirational . As details unfold , we are increasingly able to show how people have the ability , as individuals and communities , to take control of their lives , even under oppressive conditions . "