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Between Slavery and Freedom: African Americans in the Great Dismal Swamp 1763-1863

Edward Downing Maris-Wolf
College of William & Mary - Arts & Sciences

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BETWEEN SLAVERY AND FREEDOM:
AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP 1763-1863

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of Anthropology
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
Edward D. Wolf
2002
This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Approved, May, 2002

Kathleen J. Bragdon, Chair

Norman F. Barka

Yvone Edwards Ingram
DEDICATION

To Rachel, the love of my life.
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Of course, all errors and omissions are my responsibility.
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ABSTRACT

The study of maroon (escaped slave) communities in North America has long been overlooked in favor of investigations of larger maroon societies in the Caribbean and South America. This essay attempts to illuminate the nature of North American maroon communities by presenting the evidence for marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp and, further, by proposing a means of examining maroon lifeways in the Dismal Swamp that may differ from those of contemporaneous maroon societies further south.

While maroon societies in Suriname, Haiti, Brazil, and Jamaica were often sizable, sustainable, and isolated enough to serve as destinations for runaway slaves, those in North America such as those in the Great Dismal Swamp were amorphous and less populous and therefore may have served more as intermediate, liminal spaces where slaves worked and subsisted—between slavery and freedom—before attempting to reach safer, more sustainable communities elsewhere. In other words, maroon communities in North America may have been means to ends in the North or Canada, whereas societies in South America and the Caribbean, once established, were largely intended as ends in themselves.

Through a contextual rendering of available environmental, archaeological, and historical evidence, this essay offers an approach to locating and analyzing maroon sites in the Great Dismal Swamp aimed at offering greater insight into the nature of maroon communities in North America.
BETWEEN SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP 1763-1863
The Great Dismal Swamp, straddling the eastern border of Virginia and North Carolina, is an ecological and cultural artifact of early African-American life in the New World. From 1763 to 1861, diverse groups of African-American individuals harvested timber, cut shingles, dug canals, dredged ditches, piloted flatboats, and cultivated crops for European Americans eager to exploit them and the natural resources of an otherwise “thick, boggy, impenetrable wilderness” (Schoepf 1911:99). At various times, in various places, slaves, laborers, and European-American workers interacted in the swamp, exchanging information and goods necessary for survival. While it is unclear exactly how many maroons inhabited the Dismal Swamp during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, runaway slave advertisements, travel accounts, published personal narratives, and contemporary newspaper and magazine articles all suggest that individual runaways consistently sought freedom in the Great Dismal beginning in the latter portion of the eighteenth century until the Civil War.

Although recent scholarly interest in the Dismal Swamp focuses on the commercial enterprises it once engendered, the history of the swamp’s main occupants and workers—African Americans—remains relatively unexplored. Even less known are the identities and everyday lives of maroons who worked and lived in the swamp alongside free and slave laborers. Indeed, despite Herbert Aptheker’s insistence, long ago, that dozens of maroon communities once existed within the
present limits of the United States, next to nothing is known about the nature, composition, or even location of most of these communities, including those in the Dismal Swamp (Aptheker 1939; Weik 1997). Much more is known about maroons further south, where oral histories and written documents provide the framework for reconstructing the collective pasts of sizeable maroon societies such as those in eighteenth-century Suriname and Jamaica (Price 1990; Price 1996; Campbell 1990). Cultural anthropologists and historians, led by Richard Price, pioneered the study of maroon societies by examining maroon cultures in South America and the Caribbean.

Only in the last two decades have archaeologists in the Caribbean and South America begun to investigate maroon sites, hoping to add to the substantial scholarship on maroon societies begun twenty-five years ago by cultural anthropologists and historians (Weik 1997:83; Price 1996:xi-xxvii). While much maroon archaeology conducted in the Caribbean and South America has centered on simply locating maroon sites and little more, its ultimate purpose is to “branch out and address the diversity of historical settings in which Africans lived” (Agorsah 1994:165; Weik 1997:83; Armstrong 1999:186). Indeed, perhaps the greatest achievement of nascent archaeology in the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and Suriname has been to ask new questions about maroon life and the manner in which it is studied (Arrom and Arevalo 1986; Agorsah 1994:176-180; Agorsah 1997:3-11). While some may argue that historical archaeology is simply “an expensive way of finding out what we already know” about well-documented communities (and they may be largely correct), there can be little doubt that archaeology is an invaluable resource for gathering information on those who lived undocumented lives or who
were actively marginalized in the historic record, such as maroons (Deetz 1993:159; McKee 1995:38-41). For reclaiming the pasts of North American maroons largely hidden from history, such as those in the Great Dismal Swamp, the potential for archaeology, in conjunction with history and anthropology, is vast and undeniable (Learning 1995).

For researchers interested in investigating North American maroons, archaeology provides an additional text or record of the past that can corroborate, challenge, or complete existing histories and ethnographies. More generally, maroon archaeology examines the moral nature of documenting, representing, and using the past; this is particularly true in the case of the Great Dismal Swamp, where prevailing histories and texts commonly omit the perspectives, indeed the presence, of maroons and African-Americans from “the record.” As Rhys Isaac writes in The Transformation of Virginia, one constantly confronts the moral nature of documenting the past. Isaac writes, “I consider histories to be not just packages of factual knowledge but primarily moral acts that must help present and future generations by advancing the ethical understandings of the world into which they are published” (Isaac 1998:xxxi). Viewing the representation and use of the past as an inherently moral act, insofar as it represents a process through which information is judged then actively included or actively dismissed at every stage, allows archaeologists to conduct research into the African-American past with a heightened awareness of obstacles (see Trouillot 1995). Isaac’s conception of history—its purpose, its function—becomes readily apparent in attempting to view African-American life through the prisms of European-American writers and historians. In
short, modern researchers interested in African-American pasts must recognize the
moral nature of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century histories which they employ
and the fact that archaeological investigation, also a series of moral acts, can supply
essential information as yet uncovered.

A great deal is known about European Americans in the Great Dismal during
the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, while less is documented about the activities
of the swamp’s African-American residents. Although detailed financial, property,
personal, and even marriage records exist for the swamp’s many European-American
residents, little in the way of official records exists for African Americans, not to
mention maroons in the Dismal. The abundance of published accounts recording
European-American value judgements and views on myriad topics (ranging from the
quality of a harvest to the religious education of slaves to the eulogizing of fellow
citizens) appears to have been recorded often at the expense of African-American
perspectives on the same topics. Take, for example, the well-recorded life of Willie
(pronounced Wylie) McPherson, who, for a number of years until his death in 1835
was one of the wealthiest residents of the Great Dismal Swamp and served as a
Justice of the Peace (Pugh 1964: 18,90). McPherson’s obituary, published in the
Norfolk and Portsmouth Herald, December 21, 1835, reflects, in the words of one
twentieth-century historian, “his status as a worthy citizen” (Pugh 1964:91):

“At the Eagle Hotel in this Borough, on Saturday night last, Willie McPherson, Esq., of Camden County (N.C.) died in his 60th year of his age. On Thursday last he came to town on business, in the enjoyment of his usual good health of which, from his regular habits and temperate course of life, he has been blessed with an uncommon share....The death of this worthy citizen is a public loss. For the persevering industry and prudent enterprise by which
he realized a very large estate he exerted in promoting the public interest, and the welfare of his neighbors. He was correct and upright in all his dealings; plain and unassuming in his deportment, and kind and benevolent in his social intercourse” (Pugh 1964:91).

Indeed, much has been written about European Americans inhabiting or visiting the Great Dismal for sport, leisure, or business. Charles Royster’s recent work entitled *The Fabulous History of the Great Dismal Swamp Land Company* is an example of the kind of scholarship possible when well-documented lives (those of celebrities) are the subject (Royster 1999). The task is more difficult for investigating African Americans living in the Great Dismal Swamp and even more difficult to approach the question, “What were the various African-American views of Mr. McPherson?” While histories have been written, obituaries printed, genealogies chronicled for European Americans, the everyday lives and views of the swamp’s diverse African-American residents have been actively silenced.

In the rare instances where the voices of African Americans have survived in the record, their accounts often differ fundamentally from those of European Americans describing the same person or thing. For example, in his autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America*, former slave Moses Grandy offers a competing obituary for Willie McPherson, “the very worst man as an overseer over the persons employed in digging the [Dismal Swamp] canal.” Grandy writes,

“M’Pherson gave the same task to each slave; of course, the weak ones often failed to do it. I have often seen him tie up persons and flog them in the morning, only because they were unable to get the previous day’s task done; after they were flogged, pork or beef brine was put on their bleeding backs to
increase the pain; he sitting by, resting himself, and seeing it done....I have
seen him flog them with his own hands till their entrails were visible; and I
have seen the sufferers dead when they were taken down. He never was called
to account in any way for it” (Grandy 1968:23).

Grandy’s elegy and that of the Herald, above, differ tremendously; this difference,
however, must be seen in moral, not factual terms, as Grandy’s elegy even appears to
corroborate that published in the Herald. The Herald’s McPherson is a “worthy
citizen” who exhibited “persevering industry and prudent enterprise” through his
“very large estate.” His death was indeed “a public loss.” Factually similar but
morally opposite, Grandy’s McPherson is a man who makes deadlines for canal
construction by flogging slaves under his charge, all the while maintaining his
composure, “sitting by, resting himself, and seeing it done.” Grandy’s account
exemplifies what it was to be a worthy European-American citizen whose “regular
habits and temperate course of life” were worthy of praise and admiration from other
European Americans subscribing to the Herald. It is only after seeing Grandy’s
McPherson together with the Herald’s McPherson that a larger truth can be arrived
upon; that Grandy and those at the Herald (and, most likely, the newspaper’s
audience) represent fundamentally different worldviews. For Herald subscribers
interested in subjugating African Americans and profiting from their labor,
McPherson’s obituary, in Isaac’s words, helped McPherson’s generation advance the
ethical understandings of the world into which it was published—McPherson, a brutal
slave overseer, wealthy landowner, and respectable Justice of the Peace was to be
revered. Conversely, Grandy’s account, published nine years later in Boston,
encouraged its readers to judge the world in Grandy’s moral terms and to see McPherson, and slavery, as brutal affronts to humanity. By comparing the two texts, the cognitive landscapes of two segments of the Euro- and African-American cultures present in the mid-nineteenth century are represented. By contextualizing and comparing relevant data, researchers can arrive at common truths that are morally opposed.

African-American archaeology, while necessarily a moral historical and anthropological endeavor, aims to do more than further a moral mission. Archaeologists today seek to expand the study of African Americans and, more specifically, maroons to include a more general study of ethnicity, illuminating the “process of group identity” in spaces where identities were negotiated between slavery and freedom (Singleton 1999:2). In addition, archaeologists investigating maroon sites must operate publicly and inclusively, offering transparency in their data collection and interpretation methods, as well as diversity among their excavation and interpretive teams. Maroon archaeology in the Great Dismal Swamp, for example, might follow a public course that combines the efforts of professional researchers with volunteers consisting of interested local residents, teachers, and students. The public interpretation of maroon sites enables visitors and volunteers to become, in a tangible way, “actively engaged in some activity that allows them to feel connected to the past” (Horton 2000:10). In addition, emphasizing the public nature of such projects underlines the need for African Americans to play a critical role in conducting and interpreting maroon archaeology, since “white perspectives and those of blacks will not necessarily be the same” (Singleton 1997:149).
The following essay, it is hoped, might serve as a small beginning to a new representation of the Great Dismal Swamp’s human past; one that explores the ecological, historical, and cultural contributions of maroons and African-American laborers to swamp life from 1763 to the Civil War.
CHAPTER I
PRESENT PASTS IN AFRICAN-AMERICAN ARCHAEOLOGY

Archaeological investigations of maroon societies are expanding the study of slavery beyond the plantation in an effort to better understand the tremendous variation in African-American environmental adaptation, land use, living conditions, and cultural contact with Europeans throughout the Americas (Sanford 1996:98; Singleton 1999:15-16; Weik 1997:83). Investigations into North American maroon communities are beginning to form an American tributary to a larger current in global maroon studies and, more generally, African-American history. In the last decade, the aims of maroon archaeology have paralleled those of African-American archaeology in shifting from an emphasis on the basic identification and remembering of forgotten peoples to “the study of the formation and transformation of the black Atlantic world” (Singleton 1999:1). Although still in primary stages, archaeologists in Brazil, Jamaica, Suriname, and the Dominican Republic, are beginning to uncover evidence of the daily lives of slaves, maroons, and Europeans that alters, supplements, or questions previous historical and anthropological assumptions (Orser 1994; Agorsah 1994; Harrington 1997:3). Seen as a part of the modern multidisciplinary approach to the study of slavery and resistance, maroon archaeology offers another perspective on the African-American experience in the New World by investigating the relationship
of identity formation to material culture in contexts of differing power relations
(Singleton 1999:12-19).

Recent studies in African-American archaeology illustrate the potential for
maroon archaeology to contribute to current research into African-American identity
formation and transformation in the Atlantic world (Singleton 1999). While Theresa
Singleton’s “I, Too, Am America:” Archaeological Studies of African-American Life
offers an overview of African-American archaeology, as well as a collection of recent
investigations into identity formation and ethnicity, the variety of research topics
presented represents the diverse and variegated nature of African-American
archaeology today and how much it has diversified from its primary emphasis on
moral mission and social action several decades ago (Singleton 1999).

Jay Haviser’s African Sites Archaeology in the Caribbean is an equally
valuable collection of articles that embodies the current trend in scholarship
emphasizing material, symbolic, and cultural transformations in African-American
traditions in the New World (Haviser 1999). Perhaps no recent publication better
exemplifies the current direction of African-American archaeology than Maria
Franklin and Garrett Fesler’s Historical Archaeology, Identity Formation, and the
Interpretation of Ethnicity, which explores the discourse between ethnicity and the
historical archaeological record.

Maroon archaeology, particularly in the Great Dismal Swamp, has the
potential to contribute new data and perspectives on a wide range of current research
themes in African-American archaeology. The investigation of maroon sites, for
example, allows researchers to explore maroons’ cultural identities as expressed
through such material remains as tools, handcrafted ceramics, beads, and food remains. In addition, maroon housing and settlement, including possible spaces for gardening, burying the dead, and disposing of refuse, suggest ways in which escaped slaves created a sustainable and meaningful existence within the Great Dismal. Barbara Heath’s examination of the slave population at Poplar Forest and her search for markers of identity and “cultural choices” is particularly relevant to maroon archaeology in the swamp. Did, as Heath asks of the Poplar Forest slaves, African-American maroons “share a sense of ‘us’” while laboring in the Dismal Swamp, and was this identity shared by African-American slaves and free laborers (Heath 1999a:47)? What are the material reflections of stolen freedom, legalized bondage, and free labor in the swamp and how does the archaeological record differentiate between legal status or occupation, ethnicity, and cultural identity at specific times and in specific places within the swamp? Maroon archaeology confronts and attempts to formulate answers to such questions, and, in doing so, seeks to re-examine the discourse concerning ethnic “markers” or “Africanisms” on African-American sites, as it relates to identity formation and cultural choices (Singleton 1999:1,6-7; Perry and Paynter 1999: 300; Heath 1999a:47).

Archaeological investigation of maroon sites in the Great Dismal will likely inform the current debates over ethnic markers and archaeology’s ability to determine the legal or professional status of African Americans through the material residue of their lives and activities (DeCorse 1999:147; Perry and Paynter 1999:302; Weik 1997:85; Funari 2000:7; Kern 1999:33; Steen 1999:94; Singleton 1999:6-12). Domestic sites of laborers, slaves, and maroons within the swamp should contain the
material records of inhabitants’ accessibility to markets and clandestine trade networks within and beyond the Dismal. In addition, assemblages should reveal the extent to which maroons worked, traded, and otherwise interacted with lumber company employees and slaves occupying various portions of the swamp at different times during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Excavations of maroon sites will increasingly produce artifacts that are among those most debated by scholars as to origin and use. For example, assemblages from maroon sites in the Dismal might include Colonoware sherds, stem or bowl fragments from locally-made clay pipes, or beads or buttons resembling those excavated from surrounding sites in South Carolina or Virginia. The presence (or absence) of such artifacts on an established maroon site in the swamp would further scholars’ understandings of African-American identity formation and transformation, as well as consumerism, and either help to corroborate or negate claims that such artifacts are tangible markers of cultural identity. Maroon assemblages may underscore Heath’s concept of “cultural choices” and begin to show that maroons, too, actively created sustainable, if temporary, living arrangements that placed them not only physically between slavery and freedom, but economically and socially, as well. The quantity of Colonoware sherds and Chesapeake pipe fragments, in particular, would offer new data that might contribute to the current debate over whether such goods were made and/or used primarily by African Americans (Deetz 1999:42-44; Emerson 1999:47-82; Mouer et. Al. 1999:83-115; Ferguson 1999:116-131). Maroon assemblages will increasingly offer new portraits of African-American material life that can be compared to those from a growing number of collections

Faunal remains recovered from maroon sites will likely add a dimension to scholars’ current understanding of African-American foodways in freedom, slavery, and between. What did Dismal Swamp maroons eat when hungry? Did they have access to firearms? What items were they able to trade or purchase through clandestine networks connecting local farms and towns? Analyses of maroon subsistence and foodways will contribute data that can be compared to assemblages from sites at Poplar Forest (Heath 1999b:58-61), Carter’s Grove (Walsh 1997:200); Gracia Real de Santa Teresa de Mose (Reitz 1994), Flowerdew Hundred, Monticello, Kingsmill (McKee 1999:228-231), and numerous others (see Singleton 1995:124-126). Faunal remains, interpreted in conjunction with results from flotation, phytolith and pollen analyses, might clarify the degree to which maroons cultivated, hunted, or purchased their food. Such contextual evidence may help to illuminate differences between the subsistence, survival, and resistance strategies between maroons and slaves, which might further explain the nature of everyday maroon life as it differed from that under slavery.

Maroon archaeology aims to expand upon studies of African-American plantation life by exploring the extent to which slaves and masters negotiated their identities in ways that the monolithic language of “slavery” and “freedom” cannot capture (Walsh 1997:171-203; Heath 1999b:27-64; Sobel 1987; Fesler 2000:20-21). Future archaeology, beginning in the Great Dismal Swamp, will add a vital perspective to the recent scholarship on maroon communities in the Caribbean and
South America, which continues to challenge the traditional conception of slavery as a rigid “institution” by emphasizing the agency, resiliency, and creativity of African Americans in the face of European power. Scholars such as Richard Price, Philip Morgan, and Mavis Campbell have stressed the importance of the diversity of relationships forged between masters, slaves, and runaways in the New World (Campbell 1990; Price 1990; Price 1996; Morgan 1998:449-451). Increasingly, it is clear that slaves and masters exerted power in various ways in order to improve their respective standings within existing social parameters (Sobel 1987:165-168). Nowhere is this more true than in the Great Dismal Swamp, where the line between freedom and slavery was continually redrawn by individuals navigating lives between slavery and freedom.

Maroon Archaeology and the Great Dismal Swamp

While a number of cultural resource management surveys have been conducted in various parts of the Dismal Swamp (largely along the Dismal Swamp Canal, parallel to Route 17 in Virginia and North Carolina), a systematic survey has yet to be undertaken (McDonald and Barber 2000; McFaden and Hudlow 1992; Jones, Gray, Hudlow 1992). Of the several dozen registered archaeological sites resulting from informal surface collection and pot-hunting within the current bounds of the swamp in Virginia, the overwhelming majority is prehistoric (Lichtenberger,
Groveman, and Gray 1994; Underwood and Blanton 1999). Only a handful of registered sites include historic components associated with canal activity, logging, or other instances of African-American occupation in the swamp (Lichtenberger, Groveman, and Gray 1994; Underwood and Blanton 1999; McDonald and Barber 2000; McFaden and Hudlow 1992; Jones, Gray, and Hudlow 1992).

Although features such as the Washington Ditch and Jericho Ditch received official site designations as long ago as 1981 (44SK78 and 44SK79, respectively) only one formal archaeological investigation has ever been conducted in an area of the swamp which appeared to be associated with maroons. In 1987, Elaine Nichols, then a graduate student at The University of South Carolina, briefly surveyed a tract of farmland near the eastern border between Virginia and North Carolina in the swamp. According to Nichols, she and her crew produced the first material evidence of a hidden North American maroon community; the legendary “black Robin Hoods” of the Dismal Swamp had been found (Nichols 1988:118,133; Aptheker 1939:167). Nichols’s excavation demonstrated the feasibility of maroon archaeology in North America and promoted the study of swamp maroons by uncovering key documentary evidence for the presence of runaways in the Dismal (Ferguson 1992:58; Weik 1997:84-85,87). Nichols’s excavation, designed to simply locate and identify a maroon site, provides the basis for future maroon archaeology in the swamp, which will center more on the formation and transformation of African-American culture and material culture in the Great Dismal.

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1 On pot-hunters, see Site Survey Forms for City of Suffolk and City of Chesapeake on file in the Virginia Department of Historic Resources in Richmond, Virginia.
In order to build upon the foundation that Nichols established as the initiator of maroon archaeology in North America, a rigorous analysis of her theory and methods is critical to finding a new starting point for historical archaeology in the Great Dismal. Although Nichols pioneered the modern study of American maroons by setting her archaeological sights upon the swamp, her sources, assumptions, and conclusions outlined in her thesis illustrate the need for a more disciplined reflexivity between historical documents and archaeological data, a reflexivity that is more common in African-American archaeology since her fieldwork in the late 1980s.

Today, an interpretive, contextual approach that recognizes the significance of archaeological evidence within the larger sphere of historical realities allows artifacts and written words to speak to one another and allows archaeologists to ask more—and better—questions.

In her 1988 thesis, *No Easy Run to Freedom: Maroons in the Great Dismal Swamp of North Carolina and Virginia 1677-1850*, Nichols attempted to show how a maroon community on Culpeper Island, within the Dismal Swamp, could be identified and dated archaeologically. While pioneering the idea that archaeology might illuminate the hidden pasts of maroons, Nichols ultimately failed to convincingly prove her thesis for reasons that are instructive to future archaeologists interested in locating maroon sites in the Dismal and elsewhere in the Americas. First, and perhaps most important, her historical research was incomplete and flawed, resulting in false assumptions that skewed her research design. In short, she relied too much on unsubstantiated evidence and fictional accounts in formulating her research questions and placing her excavation site where she did. Second, Nichols’s
conception of the swamp was monolithic and static. Her swamp was a single, bounded space that changed little, if at all, through time; there were no competing lumber companies, no criss-crossing canal channels, no commercial developments. Finally, Nichols refused to abandon her assumptions even when the archaeological evidence—scant as it was—failed to offer any credible support for her thesis; there was little reflexivity between the artifacts and the documents she collected.

For four days in 1987, Nichols and her crew attempted to locate a maroon site on a farm about one mile south of the Virginia state line in Camden County, North Carolina. Her site, “Culpeper Island,” sits off Sawyers Road, roughly 3,000 feet east of NC Highway 17 (Nichols 1988:110). On the most basic level, however, Nichols was digging in the wrong place. Although there may have been a Culpeper island or “Culpepper Island” or “Culpeper’s Island” in the Dismal Swamp that once harbored runaways, Nichols’s excavation area, as it turned out, was not it. Nichols based the selection of her site on a brief description of the legendary island in the prologue of John Hamilton Howard’s 1906 novel entitled *In the Shadow of the Pines, A Tale of Tidewater Virginia* (Nichols 1988:102-104). In his novel Howard explained that

> “Culpepper Island, a high tract of three hundred acres, difficult of access, under the management of one Stephen Crane, was a favorite rendezvous for deserting slaves and white criminals. This refuge was maintained for many years, and was a prosperous place of its kind, until a posse of slaveholders made their way into the swamp, and routed the proprietor and destroyed his profitable business. Since the raid, Culpepper Island has been deserted as a residence, though dwellers in the swamp make their way to it in search of game” (Howard 1906:iii).

While Nichols accepted Howard’s depiction of Culpeper Island as fact, she rejected Howard’s placement of the island near Wallaceton, Virginia, more than three
MAP SHOWING "CULPEPPER ISLAND" IN JOHN HAMILTON HOWARD'S 1906 NOVEL, *IN THE SHADOW OF THE PINES*. 
LOCATION OF ELAINE NICHOLS’S EXCAVATION SITE ON “CULPEPER ISLAND” (FROM SIMPSON, THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP).
miles north of the North Carolina border. Although two other scholars agreed with Howard’s hypothesis placing the island north of Wallacton, Nichols insisted the island’s true location was in Camden County, North Carolina, where a Culpeper Island is labeled on modern maps (Nichols 1988:104). Nichols argued that not only was the island marked on today’s maps “a hideout for runaway slaves,” but also the hideout for John Culpeper, who may have led a 1677 uprising in North Carolina that became known as “Culpeper’s Rebellion” (Nichols 1988:103-104). Unable to find any historical references to a Culpeper Island in Virginia, Nichols concluded,

“Given the lack of evidence that there was a Culpeper Island in Virginia, the proximity of Culpeper’s rebellion to the site of Culpeper’s Island, approximately 2 miles,...I am convinced that it is highly probable that Culpeper Island in North Carolina is associated with the famous or infamous John Culpeper” (Nichols 1988:105).

To corroborate her theoretical leap from Wallacton, Virginia, to Camden County, North Carolina, Nichols turned to David Hunter Strother’s 1856 visit to the swamp for *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* (described in subsequent chapters).

After describing Strother’s itinerary she argued,

“It is impossible to pinpoint an exact location for where [Strother] was when he saw the maroon. But it can be inferred that he was probably in the general vicinity of Culpeper island. His camp was a horse camp 100 paces from the Dismal Swamp Canal. It is highly probably [sic] that [Strother’s] camp was close to the Virginia/North Carolina border which would have placed him near the Island” (Nichols 1988:26).

Nichols placed Strother and the maroon Osman, whom he spotted, near her dig site in North Carolina. As is shown in the following chapters, however, Strother traveled down the Jericho Canal, belonging to the Dismal Swamp Land Company in the Land Company’s northwest section of the swamp, not the Dismal Swamp Canal,
five miles to the east that belonged to the Dismal Swamp Canal Company. In attempting to legitimatize the location and purpose of her excavation, Nichols rearranged the historical record to suit her archaeological needs.

In addition, Nichols’s research design rested on her assertion that numerous general references to runaway slaves in historical newspaper advertisements and articles referred specifically to maroons inhabiting Culpeper Island. She did not allow for the possibility that there might have been various bands of maroons living in separate areas of the swamp or, more likely, individual maroons, or small groups, working as “shingle-getters” for large lumber businesses. Furthermore, the only definitive date Nichols gave for the Culpepper Island maroons was the date of the Culpeper Rebellion of 1677. She asserted that “this community of rebels contained runaway slaves, which I believe were a part of the maroon community of Culpeper’s Island…” (Nichols 1988:81-82). If Nichols was correct, the artifacts from her site on Culpeper Island should have dated to 1677 or before. Nichols’s excavations, however, uncovered artifacts with *termini post quem* much later than her 1677 date for the supposed maroon community (see Table 1).

Nichols’s model for excavating maroon sites in the swamp was clearly removed from the reality of the historical record. The theory and methods guiding her excavations rested on a set of assumptions that were in direct contrast to available documents. First, while she assumed that the swamp, itself, bound all maroons together in a cultural, social, and economic “common space,” Nichols ignored the fact that, beginning in the eighteenth century, the swamp became divided into separate, large blocks of land used for different commercial purposes (Nichols 1988:8). As
TABLE 1

DISTRIBUTION OF CERAMICS BY AREA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ceramics</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CREAMWARE (65)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plain</td>
<td>3(1798)</td>
<td>10(1798)</td>
<td>2(1798)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>light yellow</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>50(1798)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PEARLWARE (13)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>transfer printed</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1(1818)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plain</td>
<td>1(1805)</td>
<td>10(1805)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blue edged</td>
<td>1(1805)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHITEWARE (12)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>green edged</td>
<td>1(1860)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blue edged</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2(1860)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>polychrome painted</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3(1860)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>plain</td>
<td>2(1860)</td>
<td>3(1860)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>annular ware-mocha</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>finger painted</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STONEWARE (4)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>brown salt</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1(1733)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glazed</td>
<td>2(1733)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>blue/grey salt</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1(1735)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>glazed</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>1(1735)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TOTAL 94

NOTE: Total of 95 sherds found. One blue edged sherd was excluded because it was badly burned and no typology could be assigned to it.

DATABLE CERAMICS FROM NICHOLS'S EXCAVATION (FROM NICHOLS 1988).
shown in the following chapters, available documents allow researchers to view swamp maroons in more specific terms, rooted in particular places at particular times. For example, a runaway who worked in the Land Company’s swamp might have led a very different existence, under different material conditions, than one who sought refuge along the Dismal Swamp Canal, or those who attempted to exist by plundering surrounding farms in the eighteenth century. For those working for lumber companies as shingle-getters or laborers in the nineteenth century, it was unlikely that “to survive, [they] selected isolated, inaccessible and inhospitable places for settlement” (Nichols 1988:14). Rather, such maroons did the opposite, seeking out employment in accessible, hospitable areas of commercial activity within the swamp. Equally questionable is Nicholas’s assertion that maroon societies in the swamp consisted of Native Americans, European indentured servants, and a few African Americans. Not until 1850, she argued, were the swamp’s maroon communities primarily African-American (Nichols 1988:71-72,88). Neither the historical nor archaeological records support this assertion, since the last Native American presence in the swamp is documented to be much earlier (Blanton 2000).

Nichols’s model of maroon life in the swamp, based upon an incomplete and inaccurate reading of the historical record, predicted a set of material remains she expected to find on the Dismal Swamp maroon site. Her model hypothesized a maroon material culture that included such “Africanisms” as fetishes, charms, Colonoware, wattle and daub housing structures, and ceremonial containers of animal bones, teeth, and feathers. Nichols expected the site’s material culture to reflect an African and Native American presence more than a Euro-American presence and to
have an ethnic distinctiveness different from the material remains of small, isolated, rural, European-American farms of the same period (Nichols 1988:106). In reality, however, it is likely that the material culture of swamp maroons differed in more subtle ways from that of the slaves and hired laborers they worked with in the swamp. This, it seems, will present the greatest challenge to archaeologists, who must devise a way of recognizing patterns that will help distinguish between maroon and slave sites within the swamp.

An analysis of Nichols’s results demonstrates the ease with which archaeological data can be manipulated to support false assumptions. More than 95 percent of the site’s artifacts came from unprovenienced, plowzone surface collection (Nichols 1988:120). No subsurface features were identified. From the artifact assemblage, Nichols concluded that her excavations had “revealed a late eighteenth/early nineteenth century component most likely the remains of maroons, a late nineteenth/early twentieth century settlement of poor whites, and some limited evidence of logging activities in the nineteenth and twentieth century” (Nichols 1988:120). The fact that her few artifacts dated the site to the “late eighteenth/early nineteenth century” was in direct opposition to her thesis, that Culpeper Island was a maroon site dating to Culpepper’s legendary rebellion of 1677. Not one artifact excavated or collected dated her site to the seventeenth century, let alone 1677. Nonetheless, Nichols retained her site’s early date and asserted that the later artifacts simply proved that the site was continuously occupied by maroons until 1870. She wrote,
“Ceramic patterns support the identification of this site as a maroon encampment from the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century. The period from 1677-1870 has been considered by references already cited, as a time of continuous occupation of the Island by runaways” (Nichols 1988:120).

Moreover, Nichols attempted to explain away the lack of early artifacts recovered from the site. For example, she wrote that earlier maroons “would have been small in number and were unlikely to have started their settlement in the Swamp with many goods or established networks. The lack of material evidence for an earlier component may be a result of their material impoverishment” (Nichols 1988:120-121). Nichols continued,

“The overall quantity and quality of ceramics and other artifacts found on Culpeper island seem indicative of a group of people with very limited resources. The evidence confirms the historical data that maroon groups in the Swamp prior to the mid-nineteenth century were faced with serious threats to survival because of limited resources” (Nichols 1988:131).

Nichols attempted, unsuccessfully, to draw compelling conclusions from negative evidence gleaned from only a meager assemblage of artifacts.

Nichols appropriately concluded her thesis by acknowledging that her site was “different and unique” because of its “similarity to an industrial rather than a residential site, based on the lack of variation in the ceramic artifactual pattern” (Nichols 1988:131). But instead of asking new questions of her documents and initiating a discourse between her archaeological and historical data, she simply excluded the archaeological evidence from the equation (Nichols 1988:131). In fact, there is little doubt that Nichols succeeded in excavating a nineteenth-century commercial lumbering site, rather than a 1677 maroon encampment or a later maroon community. Indeed, by the late eighteenth century, Culpeper Island became prime
TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF PREHISTORIC AND HISTORIC ARTIFACTS BY AREA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREHISTORIC</th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>C</th>
<th>Tot.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lithics</td>
<td>11/46%</td>
<td>11/46%</td>
<td>2/8%</td>
<td>24/16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HISTORIC</th>
<th>Hist.</th>
<th>Tot.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ceramics</td>
<td>11/8%</td>
<td>80/62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glass</td>
<td>7/5%</td>
<td>16/12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Metal</td>
<td>1/77%</td>
<td>3/2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bricks</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>8/6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>29/23%</td>
<td>107/83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subtotal</td>
<td>129/98%</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>151</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

AGGREGATE ARTIFACTS FROM NICHOLS'S EXCAVATION (FROM NICHOLS 1988).
commercial real estate bordering the Dismal Swamp Canal. Later, the site was once home to a number of small, temporary tramways (railroads) built to transport lumber through the swamp (Nichols 1988:127-128; Trout 1998:46-47).

In her effort to initiate archaeology as a tool for locating American maroon sites, Nichols allowed a meager artifact assemblage and fictional narratives to drive her archaeological methodologies and conclusions. Martin Hall’s lamentation is particularly relevant to the problems in Nichols’s thesis. Hall writes, “One of the most prevalent shortcomings in historical archaeology as a discipline has been the failure to marry words and things” (Hall 2000:16). It is with this goal in mind—to align and allow discourse between the historical and material records—that a new approach to maroon archaeology in the swamp is presented in the following chapters.

Nichols’s work was crucial in expanding the discipline of African-American archaeology to include the investigation of potential maroon sites in North America. A thorough analysis of her research design, methods, and conclusions should lay the groundwork for future archaeological investigation and not to diminish the influence of her work. Indeed, much of the structure and content of this essay is designed to overcome the difficulties and limitations of past research, in light of current data produced by scholars investigating African-American sites in the region. Only by revisiting Nichols’s conclusions, is it possible to begin anew, in the right place.
CHAPTER II
ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

Before draining, development, and cultivation accelerated in the nineteenth century, ecologists estimate that the Great Dismal Swamp encompassed nearly 1,235,500 acres. Today, the remaining swamp stretches across a tract roughly one-third its original size, a large portion of which rests in the Great Dismal National Wildlife Refuge (Whitehead 1972: 301-302; Trout 1998:30). Past visitors to the swamp, however, rarely agreed upon where, exactly, the Great Dismal began and lesser, surrounding “dismals” ended. Descriptions of the swamp—its length, width, topography, flora, fauna, and human inhabitants—vary as greatly as the historical and literary circumstances that produced them.

Beginning in the eighteenth century, surveyors, travelers, and soldiers depicted the Dismal Swamp alternately as a natural wonder, loathsome jungle, or strategic battlefield of differing sizes and shapes. It is often difficult to know, exactly, what or where writers were referring to when they described “the Great Dismal Swamp.” Cartographers interpreted the swamp’s limits differently, as well. For William Byrd, who skirted the dismal while surveying the border between Virginia and North Carolina in 1728, the swamp was an interminable morass. While Byrd hypothesized that “it may be Computed at a Medium to be about 30 Miles long and 10 Miles wide;” in reality he was as uncertain of the swamp’s dimensions as were its bordering
inhabitants, who "knew no more of the Matter than Star-gazers know of the distance of the Fixt Stars" (Byrd 1929: 84, 60).

In 1777, the inspector of the Continental postal route between Philadelphia and Savannah distinguished between the Dismal, which stretched only "about 50 miles in Length, & 15 Miles in breadth, [480,000 acres]" and the numerous smaller swamps to the west (Hazard 1959:361). Several years later, however, Captain Johann Ewald, a Hessian Mercenary hired by the British in the Revolutionary War, was no more certain of the swamp’s size than Byrd had been nearly fifty years before. Ewald viewed the Dismal as unchartered territory, its extent known only to those who lived within it and the Patriots who secretly met there (Ewald 1979:277). A German traveler, Johann David Schoepf, also saw the swamp as wilderness, but one that was firmly bounded by civilization. In 1784 Schoepf wrote,

“This swamp is between Norfolk and Suffolk, Edenton (which is 60 miles from Suffolk), and the sea-coast, and is a thick, boggy, impenetrable wilderness, in length 40-50 miles from north to south, and 20-25 miles wide [more than 500,000 acres]. In it are found...bears, wolves, opposums, raccoons, foxes, squirrels...for few people venture in, and fewer still know anything of what is there except by hearsay. ... While the British garrisons were at Norfolk and Portsmouth, the Americans cut a foot-path through a part of this swamp, to make a more secluded road for spies” (Schoepf 1911:99-101).

A decade later, Isaac Weld reduced the greatness of the Dismal by subtracting 350,000 acres from Schoepf’s estimation. For Weld, the “great tract” of swampland spanned just 150,000 acres.

\(^2\) "Dismal" is old French for swamp. (Berkeley and Berkeley 1976:141)
The extent to which the dimensions of the Great Dismal Swamp were unknown or largely not agreed upon is illustrated by descriptions in two North Carolina school textbooks printed in 1815. In the first, written by Jedidiah Morse, the Dismal “covers 140,00 acres, and has a lake in the middle about 7 miles long, called Drummond’s Pond” (Coon 1926:42). By contrast, William Guthrie’s geography more than doubled the swamp’s size, claiming that it covered nearly 320,000 acres and contained several small lakes (Coon 1926:44).

In several instances, it appears that those who found the swamp threatening or overwhelming exaggerated the physical greatness of the Dismal. For example, in 1817 Samuel Huntington Perkins, a young New England tutor traveling through the swamp, estimated the Dismal’s size to be over a million acres (McLean 1970:56). In his journal, Perkins wrote with relief,

“My road lay through the centre of dismal swamp. And there was no probability of arriving at a stopping place before evening. Travelling here without pistols is considered very dangerous owing to the great number of runaway negroes. They conceal themselves in the woods & swamps by day and frequently plunder by night. However, as my means would not admit delay, concluded to proceed, and have now arrived without molestation” (McLean 1970:55-56).

Similarly, for many nervous whites who lived in Southampton County, Virginia, during the Nat Turner rebellion of 1831, the Great Dismal Swamp seemed to loom over them in a way the remote marshland never had before. Fear magnified the Great Dismal’s size. No longer did the swamp stop in Suffolk; it appeared to lurk just below their Southampton verandas. One Richmond newspaper reported that the
Turner “insurrection in Southampton is little more than the irruption of 150 or 200 runaway slaves from the Dismal Swamp, incited by a spirit of plunder and rapine” (Tragle 1971:36). Another account, published in *The Richmond Enquirer* showed how whites came to see all surrounding Southampton swamps as insidious extensions of the Great Dismal. The *Enquirer* reported that the rebellion began when “about 250 negroes from a Camp Meeting about the Dismal Swamp, set out on a marauding excursion, and have, for the sake of plunder, murdered about 60 persons, some of them families much known” (Tragle 1971:46) It continued, “most, if not all, the blacks were runaways, who had broken out of the swamps, to rob and do mischief” (Tragle 1971:47). While Nat Turner was at large, the Great Dismal swamp seemed to swell, encompassing all “the swamps” in southeast Virginia.

After Nat Turner was captured and executed, however, the Dismal apparently contracted to its normal size. By 1836, according to farmer/editor Edmund Ruffin, the swamp was, in Virginia:

“about 25 miles from east to west, and about 20 from north to south—that is from near Suffolk to the Carolina line [500,000 acres]. The swamp stretches perhaps 20 miles more southward within North Carolina, but with much contracted width, and limits not well defined on maps, or by report” (Ruffin 1837:513)

Although historians and biologists today point to farming and timbering in the mid-nineteenth century that considerably reduced the Dismal’s size and altered its ecosystem, contemporary reports depicted an amorphous swamp sometimes larger than that described more than a century earlier by Byrd, sometimes smaller. For

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3 Perkins’s description appears exaggerated because it supercedes contemporary estimates of the swamp’s size by several hundred thousand acres. For example, see Arthur Middleton’s estimate of
example, in 1852, the French traveler Charles Olliffe wrote that “the famous Dismal Swamp” included 640,000 acres of marshland

“filled from one end to the other, save for an occasional open spot, with a thousand kinds of plant remains: fragments of rotting wood…or tangles of dead tree roots of colossal size. Herbaceous plants, most of which resemble moss, although some grow 4 or 5 feet tall, cover the ground which is really a kind of blackish mud” (Olliffe 1964:53-54).

But the next year, Frederick Law Olmsted, on assignment for The New York Times reported that the “vast quaking morass” encompassed only 150,000 acres, while the “little Dismal, Alligator, Catfish, Green and other smaller swamps, on the shores of the Albemarle and Pamlico contain over 2,000,000 acres” (Olmsted 1853a). Clearly, even as late as the mid-nineteenth century there was little consensus where or what the Great Dismal Swamp was, exactly. Indeed, David Hunter Strother (alias Porte Crayon) of Harper’s Monthly acknowledged the confusion over the swamp’s geography when he confessed in 1856:

“It would be difficult to define accurately the limits of the Great Dismal Swamp. On the Virginia side it occupies considerable portions of Nansemond and Princess Anne counties, and in North Carolina, portions of Gates, Pasquotank, Camden, and Currituck. Its area has been estimated at from six hundred to a thousand square miles [384,000 acres to 640,000 acres]” (Strother 1856:449).

Just as the size and location of the Great Dismal Swamp have varied through time, according to contemporary historical and literary pressures, so have descriptions of the swamp, itself. Since the eighteenth century, various writers depicted the swamp in language that suited their motivations for traveling there. Where some conjured “Gloomy Images” portending evil, others saw virgin beauty akin to Eden

150,000 acres in Wakefield 1819:62-64.
William Byrd described the “Dirty Place” in terms that would forever fix the Great Dismal in the minds of many Americans as an unhealthy morass, an oozing wound on an otherwise pristine landscape. Byrd mused, “neither Bird nor Beast, Insect nor Reptile came in view. Doubtless, the Eternal Shade that broods over this mighty Bog, and hinders the sun-beams from blessing the Ground, makes it uncomfortable habitation for any thing that has life.” He added solemnly, “Not even a Turkey Buzzard will venture to fly over it” (Byrd 1929:70). David Hunter Strother (Alias Porte Crayon) traveled to the Dismal in a similar frame of mind while on assignment for Harper’s Monthly magazine in 1856. He wrote, “Lofty trees threw their arching limbs over the canal, clothed to their tops with a gauze-like drapery of tangled vines; walls of matted reeds closed up the view on either side, while thickets of myrtle, green briar, bay, and juniper, hung over the black, narrow canal.” He concluded, “The sky was obscured with leaden colored clouds, and all nature was silent, monotonous, death-like” (Strother 1856:443).

Perhaps influenced by the poems of Thomas Moore and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (who both wrote poems celebrating the swamp’s dreariness) Alexander Mackay described his dismal journey to the swamp in the mid-nineteenth century. He wrote,

“its name well indicates its character. From the soft spongy ground springs a dense and tangled underwood, overtopped by a heavy and luxuriant growth of juniper, cypress, cedar, and sometimes oak and sycamore, which stand at angles, and are frequently seen propping each other up, so precarious is their hold of the marshy soil. During the day-time the air is moist and relaxing; at night it is laden with pestilential vapours, which war with every form of animal life but that of the venomous reptile and the bull-frog, whose

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4 For discussion of Strother’s journey to the swamp, as well as an analysis of swamp imagery and representation during the nineteenth century see Miller 1989:23-46.
discordant croak ceases not night or day. In passing through, one cannot fail to be struck with the quantity of decaying timber which he constantly sees around him; some prostrate, and melting, as it were, into the semi-liquid earth...At night this timber emits a pale phosphorescent light, which, with the fitful and cold lustre of the firefly, only serves to deepen the pervading gloom...It is desolation in the lap of luxuriance—it is solitude in a funeral garb” (Mackay 1850:170-171).

By comparison, Edmund Ruffin, in 1836, saw the densely-wooded Dismal swampland as a cathedral, muted by brush, lit softly by small patches of sunlight. He exclaimed, “The trees are beautiful, and especially when they stand thick, forming a high roof of their evergreen tops, supported by numerous columns formed by their long and straight stems.” Traveling the same canal that Strother would twenty years later, Ruffin saw life, not death in the quagmire that surrounded him. He wrote, “The canal, when perfectly straight for a long course, with the trees on each side almost joining their branches across, presents a beautiful vista and perspective view—and with our singular boat and its equipage would have furnished a fine subject for a painter” (Ruffin 1836:517). Indeed, in 1796, Benjamin Henry Latrobe looked to the swamp with wonder and awe, recording his impressions in water color and words. On the subject of his painting, Latrobe described in his diary the jungle-like “brake” that “formed a most beautiful semi-circular Arch over our heads in many places” (Carter 1977:234).

In spite of the alternating gloom and euphoria encountered in such descriptions of the Great Dismal Swamp, a number of geographical, ecological, and biological constants surface in historical depictions of the swamp to corroborate scholars’ views of the swamp’s natural and human pasts. In the eighteenth century,
there is little doubt that the Great Dismal Swamp was, as one French traveler recorded, mostly “a Considerable tract of land buried under water” (AHR 1921:739). While timber companies and local residents constructed several log roads through the swamp, the Dismal was largely a waterlogged bog. According to one German visitor, “whoever slipped his footing, sank up to the neck in water and deep, fat mire” (Schoepf 1911: 99-101). Before nineteenth-century logging denuded the oldest and largest stands in the swamp, the Great Dismal was “entirely covered with trees,” Weld wrote. “These trees grow to a most enormous size, and between them the brushwood springs up so thick that the swamp in many parts is absolutely impervious” (Weld 1799:102). Indeed, so dense was the brush within the swamp that it was often impossible to see further than ten yards away or hear even the report of firearms from a few hundred yards (Smyth 1784:235-236; Carter 1977:234). According to British travel writer J.F.D. Smyth, “The only way of hearing any sound, for the least distance, is by laying one’s ear close to the ground, by which means one can hear six times as far as any other way” (Smyth 1784:236).

But the Dismal was never entirely under water. There were ridges that ran through the swamp, high enough to maintain dry ground even in the rainiest of seasons (Smyth 1784:236). Diverse plants and animals abounded on the swamp’s high ground. Weld explained that “juniper and cypress trees grow where there is most moisture, and on dry parts, white and red oaks and a variety of pines” (Weld 1799:102). Smyth reported, “On these ridges are astonishing numbers of bears, wolves, panthers, wild cats, opossums, raccoons, snakes, some deer, and every kind of

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5 On log roads in swamp see also Strother 1856:451; Thomas Place Scrapbook; Ewald 1979:277;
wild beasts; between them are vast numbers of otters, musk rats, beavers, and all kinds of amphibious animals” (Smyth 1784:236-237; Schoepf 1911:99-101; Weld 1799:103). As well as home to wild animals, the swamp’s dry spaces were commonly used as feeding places for surrounding residents’ cattle and hogs (Byrd 1929:74; Smyth 1784:238; Schoepf 1911:99-101; Wertenbaker 1962:30; Royster 1999:249).

Lake Drummond, the second largest lake in Virginia, rested deep in the northwest quadrant of the Dismal Swamp and abounded with fish (Smyth 1784:234). Its water, slightly acidic from decomposing plant matter, proved as healthy as it was brown. Its dramatic setting and size greatly impressed visitors, who saw it as a body of water “so much like belonging to [a] fairy land” (Ruffin 1836:515). Latrobe once wrote that

“upon opening upon Drummond lake, one simple idea, one immense object, uncompounded of heterogeneous parts, fills the eye, at once and satisfies it. A vast circular surface of Water which appears perfectly circular, bounded by a margin of the most gigantic trees in the world (so gigantic that on entering the lake, the barkless stems of trees that have died, appear on the opposite side at the distance of 8 Miles, as objects of very large size) at one view opens to the eye. It absorbs or expels every other idea, and creates a quiet solemn pleasure, that I never felt from any similar circumstance” (Carter 1977:235).

Although the size and depth of Lake Drummond today is much as it was in the eighteenth century, environmental changes brought about by burgeoning timber, canal and agricultural industries altered the surrounding swampland considerably in the nineteenth century. Timber companies felled and collected the swamp’s oldest and largest trees, leaving behind open spaces, where smaller, more dense brush began to
grow. By 1836, leaders of one of the swamp’s largest lumber companies, the Great Dismal Swamp Land Company, complained of a lumber shortage. Joseph Holladay, the company’s agent lamented, “It is unnecessary any longer to conceal the fact that the timber for the best quality of shingle is exhausted” (Reid 1948:102). Olmsted reported several years later that

“Nearly all the valuable trees have now been cut off from the swamp. The whole ground has been frequently gone over, the best timber selected and removed at each time, of course leaving the remainder standing thinly, so that the wind has more effect upon it, and much of it, from the yielding of the soft soil, is uprooted or broken off” (Olmsted 1853b).

Perhaps more than any direct exploitation of the natural resources, nothing changed the swamp more than an inadvertent, but direct effect—fire. Edmund Ruffin described his journey through the swamp’s “burnt woods,” where large stands of trees were once consumed by fire, as in the great fire of 1806. “The parts more easy to walk through,” Ruffin wrote, “are where the original gigantic forest growth has not been destroyed or hurt by fire, or where the reeds, forming a thick growth, have all died, and thus permit one, with some effort, to break his way through such a brittle though close barricade.” Although even then, according to Ruffin, these parts “are scarcely passable” (Ruffin 1836:517). Olmsted described similar conditions during his visit to the swamp. Despite the fact that fires were frequent and destructive occurrences in the mid-nineteenth century, Olmsted observed that “the swamp is scarcely passable in many parts, owing not only to the softness of the sponge, but to the obstruction caused by innumerable shrubs, vines, creepers and briars which often take entire possession, forming a dense brake or jungle” (Olmsted 1853a). Strother,
too, encountered areas of the swamp diminished by man and nature. On entering a burnt woods, he wrote:

“The overarching gums had given place to a thick grove of pointed juniper trunks, deadened by a recent fire. This region bore some resemblance to the crowded docks of a maritime town. The horizontally projecting limbs were the booms and the yards, while the hanging vines served as cordage. Then the gums and cypresses reappeared, the same bed of reeds, evergreens, and briars, in endless perspective” (Strother 1856:444).

While enterprising farmers dug ditches to drain vast tracts on the swamp’s southern and eastern peripheries, much of the Great Dismal remained boggy and wet. One observer wrote in 1845 that the swampy soil “trembles under the feet, and filling immediately the impression of every step with water” (Howe 1845:401; see also Tragle 1971:297). Other than during times of occasional drought, the swamp provided an efficient breeding ground for mosquitoes, flies, and other pests (DSLC 1852b; Reid 1948:106; Ruffin 1861:205). Insects were so savage, according to Strother, that they were said “to worry the life out of a mule” (Strother 1856:450). Indeed, mosquitoes and yellow-flies attacked swamp visitors and laborers alike; they drove patrons from a short-lived summer resort on Lake Drummond and swarmed hungrily to the beef brine rubbed deep into the bleeding backs of beaten slaves (Strother 1856:450; Freund 1949:45-451; Grandy 1968:22-23; Starobin 1970:63; Southern Literary Messenger 1838:25). It was generally agreed that the swamp’s water was potable, if not medicinal. Some went further and insisted, “The water is the colour of wine & the most pleasant that I ever drank” (McLean 1970:55-58). Ruffin argued that the Great Dismal’s water was “preferred for drinking by all the laborers and others most accustomed to its peculiar, and at first, disagreeable flavor,
FIGURE 6

ENTRANCE TO LAKE DRUMMOND FROM WASHINGTON DITCH, 2000 (PHOTO BY AUTHOR).
"ENTRANCE TO LAKE DRUMMOND FROM WASHINGTON DITCH, DISMAL SWAMP, 9 JUNE 1797." WATERCOLOR BY BENJAMIN HENRY LATROBE (FROM CARTER 1977).
to nay other water whatever” (Ruffin 1836:518). Likewise, Strother remarked that the water was “fresh, healthful, pleasant to the taste, and, it is said, will keep pure for an unlimited time.” He added that its slightly acidic quality appealed to captains of vessels who required drinking water on long voyages (Strother 1856:450).

Reviews of the swamp’s air quality, though mixed, were generally less flattering. One visitor, Daniel French, wrote to his wife in Connecticut, “these swamps in hot and dry weather send forth a deadly and poisonous vapour, which produces various sickness and death, and give a great part of the people a yellow, pale, and death like countenance, which makes one shudder with horror.” Reassuringly, he quickly added, “but the thunder storms which are almost every day, coll and purify the air” so that “now and then a fresh and rosy cheek is to be seen” (French 1938:157). Samuel Warner was less balanced, writing in 1831 that “the noisome exhalations” of the swamp “infect the air round about, giving agues and other distempers to the neighboring inhabitants” (Tragle 1971:297-298). While it is difficult to accept Warner’s picture of the swamp’s atmosphere as purely toxic, it is equally difficult to embrace Ruffin’s assertion that

“The laborers are remarkably healthy, and almost entirely free from the autumnal fevers that so severely scourge all the surrounding country. It is said that no case has yet occurred of a shingle-getter dying of disease in the swamp—nor did my informants know that any one had been so sick as to require to be brought out” (Ruffin 1836:518).

It is likely that Ruffin’s sources lacked the knowledge or the inclination to accurately relate health conditions of African Americans working in the swamp. Just two years later, for example, the Dismal Swamp Land Company’s business agent
reported to the firm’s president, “I regret to inform you that One of the Co. Negroes died last week with inflammation & obstruction of the bowels” (Starobin 1970:63; DSLC 1838a; DSLC 1838b). In addition, doctors regularly visited slaves working in the swamp, administering medicine for such diseases as cholera (Reid 1948:118). Moreover, by 1853, work in the swamp was so dangerous or unhealthy that the Dismal Swamp Land Company was one of the few companies in the nation to regularly secure life insurance policies on its hired slaves (Savitt 1977:583, 591).6

In the second half of the eighteenth century, African Americans were compelled to alter the geography of the Great Dismal through clearing, planting, and canal building. European Americans, beginning with William Byrd II, dreamed of taming and draining the Dismal through mass slave labor. Such dreams would irrevocably alter the Great Dismal Swamp’s human and natural history.

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6 The Dismal Swamp Land Company paid $160 plus insurance annually [about $16 extra per $1000] to masters for slave hires. Only three percent of all industrial slaves employed during any year in the 1850s were covered by life insurance; see Savitt 1977:585.
Although considerable evidence supports the presence of maroons in the Great Dismal Swamp in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the nature of the evidence differs greatly from one century to the other. Eighteenth-century references depict maroons only in general terms, which prevent modern archaeologists from associating such accounts with specific spaces within the swamp. By contrast, several nineteenth-century documents locate contemporary maroon sites within particular areas of the swamp, allowing archaeologists to approximate their locations to within an area of a few miles. In addition to locating maroon sites on the map, it is necessary to situate them in time. Thus, the historical and cultural contexts of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century maroons serve as a departure for further exploration of everyday life in the swamp and act as the basis for a model of maroon life—between slavery and freedom.

**Eighteenth Century**

Since the early eighteenth century, the area surrounding the Great Dismal Swamp, especially in North Carolina, had a reputation as a “Rogue’s harbor” and haven for fugitive slaves and idle debtors (Leaming 1995:83-105; Crow 1980:92; Byrd 1929:58; Erickson 1994:G2). For years, tension brewed among Virginia’s officials over the fact that the government of North Carolina, in sheltering maroons and criminals, “has encourag’d this unneighbourly Policy in order to increase their
People” (Byrd 1929:58). While Virginia’s claims might have been true, little evidence exists of maroons in the Dismal Swamp before the 1760s. Instead, it is clear that many middle and lower-class Virginians and North Carolinians who bordered the swamp saw it as their livelihood. Small landowners and squatters harvested massive stands of white cedar on the swamp’s periphery, delivering cut shingles and other lumber to merchants in Norfolk for markets in the north (Erickson 1994:G2). Poor farmers also used the swamp as a free feeding ground for their livestock (Wertenbaker 1962:30). It was not until Virginia/North Carolina relations soured further in 1728, when William Byrd II helped survey the swamp in search of an accurate borderline between the states, that wealthy European Americans came to see the Great Dismal Swamp as something to be exploited, rather than simply avoided.

William Byrd’s legacies to the Great Dismal Swamp were considerable and far-reaching. First, in his *History of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina*, Byrd offered his readers a detailed, play-by-play account of the ill-fated survey that, finally, determined the width of the swamp. Byrd described the Dismal as a place worthy of its name where “the Eternal Shade that broods over this mighty Bog, and hinders the sun-beams from blessing the Ground, makes it an uncomfortable habitation for any thing that has life.” He scorned the smell of the swamp’s air as so corrupt that “Not even a Turkey-Buzzard will venture to fly over it” (Byrd 1929:84,70). While he no doubt valued literary notoriety over scientific accuracy,

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1 Byrd described “a family of Mulattoes, that call’d themselves free” that he met 6 ¼ miles east of the swamp during his survey (Byrd 1929:56,58).
Byrd’s description of the swamp nonetheless fired the imaginations of many would-be adventurers.

Byrd’s second legacy was his utopian “Proposal to Drain the Dismal Swamp,” which outlined his scheme to make the spongy swamp muck “the fittest soil in the world for producing hemp” (Ruffin 1837:522). In a plan that was adopted thirty-five years later by a group of hopeful entrepreneurs (including George Washington), Byrd explained how the Great Dismal could be attacked through timbering and conquered through agriculture within the space of ten years. With the enthusiasm of a motivational speaker, Byrd highlighted his eight-step plan to success:

1) Sell twenty shares to investors.
2) Obtain a Royal grant with an exemption from paying levies for ten years.
3) Survey the land.
4) Select a plantation site on “the skirts of the Dismal.”
5) Obtain all necessary supplies; tools, clothes, etc.
6) Purchase ten seasoned “negros.”
7) Teach slaves how to saw, make shingles, draw clap-boards, etc.
8) Use profits “for the purchase of negros, as fast as room can be made for them” (Ruffin 1837:523).

Byrd’s proposal, which set forth the beginnings of large-scale, commercial exploitation of African Americans in the swamp, was nothing less than a celebration of slavery. Byrd advised that females as well as male slaves be bought, so “that their breed may supply the loss.” Indeed, children would also make sound investments, since they “not only season better than men and women, but will be very soon fit for labour, and supply the mortality that must happen among so great a number.” Byrd
assured his readers, however, that in spite of any losses through slave deaths, once the goal of three hundred slaves was obtained, there would be considerable “profits arising from the labour of negros on the land,” not to mention “the unspeakable benefit it will prove to the publick” (Byrd 1929:524, 523).

Thirty-five years later, a group of twelve men self-styled as the “Adventurers for Draining the Great Dismal Swamp” filed a petition for land in the Great Dismal Swamp in the hopes of realizing William Byrd’s dream (Brown 1967:24; Stewart 1979:59; Royster 1999:82). George Washington, Thomas Nelson, Robert Burwell, and the nine other prominent businessmen who comprised the shareholders of the new Dismal Swamp Company (hereafter referred to by its later name, Dismal Swamp Land Company) began to follow religiously Byrd’s recommendations toward financial success; within two years, they hired a surveyor who mapped their 40,000-acre property; they rented a 402-acre farm, “Dismal Plantation,” on the western skirts of the swamp, obtained necessary supplies, and anted several slaves each (totaling forty-three men, nine women, a boy, and a girl) (Reid 1948:17; Royster 1999:97). Each day, a portion of slaves remained at Dismal Plantation to farm, while others either cleared land by cutting shingles or dug what would become known as the Washington Ditch into the swamp. Until the Jericho Ditch was finished in 1812 and extended a waterway through the company’s land to Suffolk, Virginia, the Washington Ditch remained the company’s main artery for transporting shingles out of the swamp.

Norfolk, just north of the Dismal and the destination for the company’s shingles was, in the eyes of a French visitor “the most Considerable town for trade
and shipping in Virginia. From Norfolk, the shingles and surplus corn or rice the company’s slaves grew were shipped to New England and the West Indies (AHR 1921:739). John Washington, George Washington’s younger brother, managed the company’s daily business from Dismal Plantation and attempted to keep the company’s slaves under his control. In 1768, however, John Washington ran the following advertisement in the Virginia Gazette:

“Nansemond, June 20, 1768. RUN away from the subscriber some time in April 1767, a new Negro man named TOM, belonging to the proprietors of the Dismal Swamp. He is about 5 feet 6 inches high, has his country marks (that is, four on each of his cheeks.) Any person that apprehends the said fellow, so that I may get him, shall have three pounds reward, paid by JOHN WASHINGTON” (Virginia Gazette 1768).

Tom was the first documented runaway to be associated with the Dismal Swamp. (While he may have spent time in the swamp itself, Tom was located in 1781 at a neighbor’s house nearby.) Several years later, another advertisement further illustrated John Washington’s difficulty of controlling slaves so close to the swamp:

“WARRASQUEAK Bay, November 18, 1771. RUN away from the Subscriber, in Isle of Wight, a Negro named JACK, about five and thirty Years of Age, five Feet ten Inches high, a slim, clean made, talkative, artful, and very saucy Fellow. Also a Negro Woman named VENUS, thirty two years old, five Feet four Inches high, stout made, very smooth tongued, and has been five Years accustomed to the House. They worked in the Dismal Swamp about two Years, under Mr. John Washington, and carried with them several different Kinds of Apparel….Nathaniel Burwell” (Virginia Gazette 1771).

About the same time, John Mayo of Cumberland ran a similar advertisement for “a young Negro man name TOM, about 6 feet high, [who] has a roguish look, and has lost part of one of his ears.” Mayo reported that “He has been seen in Nansemond
RUN away from the subscriber some time in April '76, a new Negro man named T. O. M., belonging to the proprietors of the Dismissal Swamp. He is about 5 feet 6 inches high, has his country marks (that is, four on each of his cheeks.) Any person that apprehends the said fellow, so that I may get him, shall have three pounds reward, paid by JOHN WASHINGTON.

ADVERTISEMENT PRINTED IN THE VIRGINIA GAZETTE JUNE 23, 1768.
RAN away from the subscriber, in April 1769, a likely young Negro man named Tom, he is near 6 feet high, and has lost part of one of his ears. It is thought he is about the Nizmaul Swamp, a low down in North-Carolina. Whoever brings the said Negro to me shall have TEN POUNDS reward.

JOHN MAYO.
and Norfolk counties, and is supposed to be about the Dismal Swamp” (Virginia Gazette 1768b; Virginia Gazette 1769).

Although advertisements such as these offered few specifics, they suggested that the Dismal Swamp had entered the minds of surrounding planters and businessmen as a place where their slaves might abscond. Such general references to the “Dismal Swamp,” however, are broad and offer little meaningful information beyond that of a general indication of the eastern Virginia/North Carolina border. It is impossible to say from three advertisements whether or not Tom, Tom, Jack, and Venus intended to escape to maroon communities somewhere in the swamp. Slaves often engaged in the practice of petit marronage, where they left their masters for several days or weeks until they were able to successfully negotiate a safe return (Watson 1978:322). For example, Moses Grandy, who grew up near the swamp in Camden County, North Carolina, recalled:

“I remember well my mother often hid us all [four sisters and four brothers] in the woods, to prevent master selling us. When we wanted water, she sought for it in any hole or puddle formed by falling trees or otherwise. It was often full of tadpoles and insects. She strained it, and gave it round to each of us in the hollow of her hand. For food, she gathered berries in the woods, got potatoes, raw corn, &c. After a time, the master would send word to her to come in, promising he would not sell us” (Grandy 1968:5).

Such petit marronage was commonly accepted by many slave owners as part of the slave system. Here existed considerable room for negotiation and compromise in the master/slave relationship. Slaves often ran off with temporary goals in mind, such as visiting a relative or lover on a neighboring plantation (Price 1996:3). Before
returning to their master, using another slave as mediator, runaways often negotiated an acceptable punishment with their masters, one that discouraged their future disappearance but was not so harsh as to discourage them from ever returning home.

Unlike *petit marronage*, however, “It was marronage on the grand scale, with individual fugitives banding together to create independent communities of their own that struck directly at the foundations of the plantation system,” according to Richard Price (Price 1996:3-4). While only slim evidence for *petit marronage* in the Dismal Swamp exists for the period before the revolutionary war in runaway advertisements, several travel accounts from the 1770s suggest that such *marronage* “on a grand scale” may have, in fact, existed.

In 1775, J.F.D. Smyth, a well-known British travel writer, offered a brief history of the Great Dismal Swamp, which he traveled through on his way to Norfolk while fleeing patriot pursuers who suspected him a spy. After being “alarmed by a Negro, and soon afterwards by a white man,” Smyth hired the Negro to guide him through the swamp to Norfolk. It was clear that Smyth traveled through a portion of the swamp that “belongs to a company of proprietors,” but *which* company’s land and where, exactly, he was in the swamp is unclear. Smyth described the scene that enveloped him: “This is a safe harbour and place of perfect security for all kinds of wild beasts, as well as stray horses, cattle, hogs, and runaway Negroes many of whom live here to be old without the least danger of being discovered” (Smyth 1784:239). He continued, more generally,

“Run-away Negroes have resided in these places for twelve, twenty, or thirty years and upwards, subsisting themselves in the swamp upon corn, hogs, and fowls, that they raised on some of the spots not perpetually under water, nor
subject to be flooded, as forty-nine parts out of fifty of it are; and on such spots they have erected habitations, and cleared small fields around them; yet these have always been perfectly impenetrable to any of the inhabitants of the country around, even to those nearest to and best acquainted with the swamps” (Smyth 1784:102).2

If Smyth is to be believed, maroons inhabited the Great Dismal and surrounding swamps as early as the mid-eighteenth century, carving out homesteads and gardens in the swamp’s high ground. One of the most significant pieces of information in Smyth’s narrative centers on the fact that an African-American man warned him of approaching peril, before any European American man knew of the danger. From early on, it seems that vast communication networks existed between African Americans in distant places that allowed them to send urgent messages and to keep abreast of the latest news, such as the condition of loved ones or who might be sold and when.

Johann David Schoepf offered a strikingly similar history of maroons in a description of his travels through the Dismal Swamp on his way to North Carolina in 1784. While it is possible that Schoepf’s published description was influenced by Smyth’s earlier account, Schoepf’s is important nonetheless in showing the degree to which the Great Dismal had become a popular symbol of slave resistance. Schoepf wrote,

“small spots are to be found here and there which are always dry, and these have often been used as places of safety by runaway slaves, who have lived for many years in the swamp, despite all the snares set for them by their masters, even if planters living near-by, for they are chary of going in. So these negro fugitives lived in security and plenty, building themselves cabins, planting

2 It is important to note that here Smyth was relating what he had heard about maroons in the Great Dismal as well as the nearby Great Alligator Swamp.
corn, raising hogs and fowls which they stole from their neighbors, and naturally the hunting was free where they were” (Smyth 1784:99-100).

Like Smyth before him, Schoepf attested to the existence of maroon “habitations” or “cabins,” as well as small fields or plots surrounding them where maroons could plant corn or raise stolen animals. His portrait of maroon life in the swamp is one of a settled existence and a seemingly permanent community.

Other evidence for maroons in the Great Dismal Swamp surfaces in accounts dating to the revolutionary war. In 1777, Elkanah Watson rode from Suffolk to Edenton, North Carolina, on the western edge of the swamp. He remembered that “We travelled near the North border of the great Dismal swamp, which, at this time, was infested by concealed royalists, and runaway negroes, who could not be approached with safety. They often attacked travelers, and had recently murdered a Mr. Williams” (Watson 1856:36-37). It is unclear whether or not Watson saw the existence of maroons in the swamp as a direct result of the presence of royalists hiding in the swamp or the war. What is clear is that the legend of the Dismal Swamp maroons gained a big boost by the chaotic situation following the British occupations of Suffolk and Norfolk and other wartime activities in and around the swamp. For example, during the war, Simeon Deane, a patriot fleeing the British, hid in a portion of the Dismal near the road to Suffolk. He lay “in the thick Swamp” with a blanket for shelter, having food brought to him. He stayed more than a week, “continually in the Swamp & almost ready to perish by such Millions of Insects” (Royster 1999:255). Deane’s petit marronage in the swamp demonstrates the exact kind of activity that had concerned Watson on his trip to Edenton—strange soldiers secreted behind
bushes. At a time of lawlessness and mass confusion, various European Americans who would not otherwise have cause to flee sought refuge in the Dismal Swamp.

African Americans, too, capitalized on the chaos of the war. Many of the Land Company slaves saw wartime confusion as an opportunity to run, as did 50,000 other slaves from across the South (Crow 1980:88-89; Watson 1978:317). Six of the company’s slaves fled to the British (Berkeley and Berkeley 1976:151). Many more ran away only to be captured and held as war prizes by neighboring slave owners (Reid 1948:21; Berkeley and Berkeley 1976:151). Others simply disappeared (Schoepf 1911:100). In the immediate aftermath of the war, it must have been difficult to tell who was and who was not a runaway in the area surrounding the swamp.

Hessian mercenary Johann Ewald documented the war’s effect on the swamp’s geography and land use in his war diary. Near Great Bridge, Virginia, Ewald wrote, “Indeed, the inhabitants have made a passageway through this wilderness, with the help of fallen trees (called logs), for single travellers on foot. One can cross here with the aid of a compass, but if the year is not very dry, it is impossible” (Ewald 1979:277; Schoepf 1911:99). Again showing how the war had reached the Great Dismal, Ewald boasted, “Through the prisoners I collected the information that their rendezvous was in the great Dismal Swamp” (Ewald 1979:285). The accounts of Deane and Ewald indicate that wartime marronage in the swamp may have been something entirely different from that before and after. It is probable that wartime accounts of swamp maroons might have reflected only war-related activities in the swamp, rather than those of pre-existing maroons.
Following the revolutionary war, there were large-scale economic forces present in the swamp other than that of the Dismal Swamp Land Company. The Lebanon Company, led by Hugh Williamson, claimed 40,000-50,000 acres of land below the Land Company’s grant (Stewart 1979:61; Berkeley and Berkeley 1976:153). Laborers for the Lebanon Company proceeded in much the same way as those in the Dismal Swamp Land Company did, by felling cedar trees for shingles and then cultivating cleared land. Just as Byrd and Washington had believed before him, Williamson dreamed that “After the Timber is removed, such land cannot be exhausted by agriculture” (Royster 1999:293). There are but few records detailing the operations of the Lebanon Company; it is not clear to what extent it employed slave labor. It is often forgotten that the Lebanon Company owned more land than the Dismal Swamp Land Company and, most likely, employed at least the number of laborers that its better known competitor did in Virginia.

In addition to competition from work on the larger Lebanon Company tract to the south, smaller enterprises constantly nipped at the Dismal Swamp Land Company’s heels, encroaching on its land, and often stealing its shingles (Royster 1999:312). Lumber companies of all sizes sprouted throughout the Virginia and North Carolina counties bordering the swamp. It was the age of wood, and cedar from the Great Dismal decorated houses across the eastern United States and Caribbean.

Contemporaries assumed, as historians have since, that any references to the “Dismal Swamp” or, in the following case, the Great Swamp, were specific enough for meaningful interpretation. By the late eighteenth century, however, such terms
were too general and failed to account for the division of and separate areas within the
swamp. Nonetheless, Dennis Dawley of Princess Ann, Virginia, advertised the
following in the *State Gazette of North-Carolina* in 1789:

> “Thirty (Silver) Dollars Reward. RUN-AWAY on the 3d inst. from the
> subscriber, a Negro man, named TONEY, about five feet eight or nine inches
> high, his breast a good deal projected, a very likely active fellow, about 25
> years of age; has been whipped (before I had him) consequently his back much
> marked; he is as black as most negroes, drinks hard. By information he was
> seen at the Great Swamp, passing as a freeman, having procured from some
> villain a free pass to protect him, and said he intended to ship himself on
> board the first vessel going out of the country” (Windley 1983:456).

Dawley’s advertisement underscored the fact that many forces were at work in
the swamp. In this case, a free African-American laborer for one of the lumber
companies likely offered Toney a free pass so that he might travel to Norfolk to
“catch” employment on an international vessel. Not only was communication and
exchange occurring between slave and free, but communication on a grander scale,
regarding ships and trade in surrounding towns, must have also occurred. Several
years later, Virginia legislators acted to end all collaboration between free blacks and
slaves. Free blacks who harbored slaves were to be fined $10 or lashed up to thirty-nine times. It also became a felony for free blacks to hand their free papers to slaves
(Bogger 1982:29).

A new chapter in African-American history in the swamp began in 1790,
when the legislatures of Virginia and North Carolina brought another of Byrd’s
dreams to fruition by authorizing the creation of the Dismal Swamp Canal Company
(Royster 1999:36). Located in the eastern half of the swamp, the company’s canal
would eventually extend nearly twenty-three miles from Deep Creek, Virginia, to
Joyce’s Creek in North Carolina, thus linking the Elizabeth River to the Pasquotank (Brown 1967:32). The canal also served as a final bisection of a previously wild area of the swamp. In 1793, hired slaves, starting on both ends, slowly began digging the canal with saws, axes, and picks (Royster 1999:342; Wertenbaker 1962:159; Brown 1967:32; Berkeley and Berkeley 1976:155). Additionally, slave owners contracted their slaves at times of the year when they were not farming (Hinshaw 1948:21).

Several years later, an advertisement placed in a Norfolk newspaper by the Canal Company stated that it wanted “a number of well disposed, able Negroes and Laborers such as Ditchers, Sawyers and Shingle Getherers” for the ensuing year (Brown 1967:34). Thus, in addition to constructing its canal, the Dismal Swamp Land Company sought shingle-getters to cut cedar on its property.

Increasingly, correspondence between Dismal Swamp Land Company officials reflected the growing competition in the swamp and anxiety over fiscal matters. Not only were the Lebanon and Dismal Swamp Canal companies producing vast quantities of shingles, as were dozens of smaller companies, but trespassers continued to steal Land Company trees and shingles. Land Company supervisor Thomas Sheperd complained that trespassers passed “boldly over the line...cutting and Slaying the Timber in a most horrid manner.” He continued, hopelessly, “Every persons, Owners of the lower swamps is Opposed to the Dismal Swamp Company I believe they hate me upon earth” (Royster 1999:395). Perhaps he was right. Even the Dismal Swamp Canal Company bought stolen shingles from trespassers on the Land Company’s property (Royster 1999:397). In the following decades, Land Company records became increasingly rife with dividend and investor angst; lowering expenses
and obtaining less expensive labor became chief concerns in company correspondence (Reid 1948:89,109). Perhaps it was the growing desire to slash production costs that provided the motive for illegally hiring maroons in the nineteenth century.

**Nineteenth Century**

By 1800, although it could still be described as “a vast oval, thirty miles in breadth, and fifty in length, with a lake, nearly in the center, seven miles diameter,” the Great Dismal was not seen as a single, 1500 square-mile entity by those who worked and inhabited it (Smyth 1784:234). The swamp was divided and largely conquered. No longer could one refer accurately to “the depths of the Dismal Swamp,” since there were but few depths to speak of. Three large commercial interests, which constructed roads and canals that allowed easy passage to and from the swamp’s depths, divided much of the Dismal. The Dismal Swamp Land Company owned more than 40,000 acres in the swamp’s northwest corner; the Dismal Swamp Canal Company managed several thousand acres surrounding its 22.5-mile canal right-of-way in the east; and the Lebanon companies (there were two now) harvested cedar and white pine trees on more than 50,000 acres of the swamp across the Virginia border in North Carolina (Stewart 1979:61; Royster 1999:293; DSLCR 1837:D10). In addition, small businessmen and farmers had long ago parceled the swamp’s periphery into individual lots, which they subsequently cleared and cultivated. African Americans, primarily, hired or bought by entrepreneurs—large and small—created new lumber companies, drained and sowed fields, graded decent
roads, carved new canals, and, by 1836, constructed railroads in the swamp. Thus, by the nineteenth century, human (economic) forces divided the swamp’s vast physical space into smaller workable units where different, often competing, systems of labor were underway.

No longer could the Great Dismal be imagined as a single, bounded entity isolated by its desolation from surrounding commerce and community. In fact, maroons inhabiting the swamp in the nineteenth century relied specifically upon the commerce and community that permeated the physical and legal boundary lines of the Dismal. Unlike their eighteenth-century counterparts, who fled slave society to an impenetrable and unchartered wilderness such as that described by Byrd, Dismal Swamp maroons of the nineteenth century sought refuge and freedom within a space planned, managed, and controlled, largely, by various slave-owning commercial businesses. Divisions in ownership and activity within the Dismal shaped how the swamp’s various inhabitants—slave shingle getters, free and slave lumbermen, ditch diggers, canal workers, cart boys, and maroons—lived and to what degree these “swampers” were documented for posterity. The historical evidence for nineteenth-century maroon life in the swamp (more specific, substantial, and reliable than that of the eighteenth century) suggests that runaways were inextricably involved in the commerce and community of those who worked and lived in and near the swamp.

Therefore, a close reading of documents that depicted life in and about the swamp—the larger context—is necessary to understand the personal and commercial forces that formed the framework for maroon life in the Great Dismal.
The Dismal Swamp Canal, wedding North Carolina and Virginia maritime interests in a 22.5-mile interstate waterway, shaped the swamp’s use and development perhaps more than any other commercial undertaking in the nineteenth century. The canal served regional and national interests by linking Virginia ports with North Carolina markets and provided a safe, inland passageway for supplies in the event of a national naval crisis (Newton et. al. 1825:6-7). In 1805, after twelve years of sawing, chopping, and picking by the Canal Company’s slaves, the corridor was “navigable to admit shingle flats to pass the whole distance river to river” (Brown 1967:39). The following table of tolls from 1807 illustrates the impact that the new waterway had on swamp life:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Toll per 1000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>18&quot; &amp; 22” shingles</td>
<td>$.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24” shingles</td>
<td>$.33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36” shingles</td>
<td>$.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barrel staves</td>
<td>$.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hogshead staves</td>
<td>$.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carts passing the road</td>
<td>$.25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wagons</td>
<td>$.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Horse and man</td>
<td>$.12 1/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head of cattle</td>
<td>$.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hogs and sheep</td>
<td>$.02</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Brown 1967:40)

Shingles, staves, and other products floated through the Dismal on the new canal. More importantly for swamp life, however, was the presence of foot, horse, and wagon traffic alongside the waterway (Royster 1999:414). In addition to its commercial benefits, the canal opened the Dismal Swamp to a new wave of human occupation that transformed the swamp’s dismal reputation into one centered on its
FIGURE 10

ORIGINAL PLAN FOR THE DISMAL SWAMP CANAL (ROCKEFELLER LIBRARY SPECIAL COLLECTIONS, WILLIAMSBURG).
exotic geography and attractive, medicinal drinking water. A road “that McAdam himself could not improve” built parallel to the canal proved “a very good road equal to many Turnpike roads” for those interested in crossing or visiting the swamp (Berkeley 1976:158; Tunis 1829). Revised toll tables, such as that of 1810, acknowledged the additional presence of “foot travelers” on the new road (Sherman 1878:68-69). Opportunists such as William Farange anticipated the presence of travelers on the canal by opening a “house of entertainment” along the road, catering to the needs of weary businessmen and tourists (Brown 1967:37). The increased presence of tourists and their desire to see the canal and visit Lake Drummond created new challenges to those who would keep slaves and laborers silently sequestered in the swamp. Tourists such as the Irish poet Thomas Moore in 1803 required knowledgeable guides who, piloting small boats, could travel more or less freely throughout the swamp. Merchant, tourist, and hired guide could traverse and explore the Great Dismal Swamp with a previously unimaginable ease. As a result, published accounts of swamp life became more and more common in the nineteenth century. When taken together, literary and documentary snapshots depicting swamp still-lifes combine to project a moving picture of African-American life that is anything but static.

Experiences of African-American laborers in the Dismal Swamp were largely shaped by the nature of their duties, rather than their status as free or slave. For those constructing or dredging channels on the Dismal Swamp Canal, everyday life proved harsh and exhausting, especially when large numbers of workers posed management problems for company overseers. Depending on the weather, season, and current
project, Canal Company records show anywhere from 150 to 300 free or slave African Americans employed in canal construction or repair (Whele 1819; Berkeley 1976:158-160). Moses Grandy, a slave who operated a boat on the Dismal Swamp Canal in the 1820s, witnessed as many as 700 fellow African Americans at work on the canal as he slipped by each day. He remembered, “The labor there is very severe. The ground is often boggy; the negroes are up to the middle, or much deeper, in mud and water, cutting away roots and baling out mud; if they can keep their heads above water, they work on” (Grandy 1968:22-23). Continuing, Grandy described life along the canal banks in the disinterested language so characteristic of his narrative. At the end of each day, he wrote, the canal workers

“lodge in huts, or, as they are called, camps, made of shingles or boards. They lie down in the mud which has adhered to them, making a great fire to dry themselves, and keep off the cold. No bedding whatever is allowed them; it is only by work done over his task that any of them can get a blanket. They are paid nothing, except for this overwork. Their masters come once a month to receive money for their labor; then, perhaps, some few very good masters will give them $2 each, some others $1, some a pound of tobacco, and some nothing at all. the food is more abundant than that of field slaves: indeed, it is the best allowance in America—it consists of a peck of meal and six pounds of pork per week; the pork is commonly not good; it is damaged, and is bought, as cheap as possible, at auctions” (Grandy 1968:22-23).

Violence was a part of African-American life along the canals. Overseers flogged workers for not keeping pace or, in one case, catching small game to supplement the company’s meager rations (Grandy 1968:22-23; Hodges 1982:40-42). Other times, laborers were whipped so severely that their “entrails were visible” and “the yellow flies and musquitoes in great numbers would settle on the bleeding and smarting back[s]” (Grandy 1968:22-23). Augustus Hodges, a free African-American
man who traveled to the swamp to secure work, resolved, at one point, to take
revenge on an overseer who had beaten an old slave (named Hubbard) until he was
“more dead than alive” (Hodges 1982:40-42). Hodges resisted, however, because
“The masons were all poor whites who would be glad to help kill us for the simple
sake of a few smiles from the rich whites” (Hodges 1982:40-42). Controlling
hundreds of hired hands, slave and free, African- and European-American, often
proved challenging for Canal Company managers. For example, in a letter written
from Portsmouth, Virginia, to Samuel Proctor at the swamp, Dismal Swamp Canal
Company president Richard Blow inquired about a slave, Jim Pennock, who had
escaped a month before. Blow admonished,

“I wish you to give the Negroes strict-orders, at what time they are to be at
their places of work every monday morning & not suffer them to be indulged
an hour after the time...without a reasonable and good excuse. I am told Jim
Pennock, has not been up since christmas, & that he is now lurking about
Norfolk, if so let me know it, that I may have him taken up & sent to you, by a
constable” (Blow 1806).

In the same letter, Blow expressed his desire for ever-more efficient labor on
the canal when he suggested that a new system of incentives, perhaps, might reduce
overseers’ violence and the resulting impulse of laborers to flee. Blow wrote,

“I have sent up some Spirits last week & have directed Mr. Spratt to send you
some for the purpose of giving the hands a dram in the morning, this is
contrary to former usage, but I wish them encouraged if they behave well, a
Gill[?] a day in the winter is not too much provided they behave well, but all
delinquents in Duty should be [denied?] of their allowance” (Blow 1806).

At the same time that Blow attempted to tighten company control over its
labor force and increase his workers’ motivation, it appears that he thought nothing of
allowing enslaved African Americans travel to and from the swamp alone. In fact, it appears that Blow’s was common practice, as it was not uncommon for single African-American slaves to travel, unescorted, in and around the swamp with impunity. Blow explained to Proctor, “This [letter] is handed you by a young fellow name Henry, which I have hired from Mr. Green of Norfolk…his Master wishes him to be taught how to work, you will see if he will answer our purpose….if not discharge him, and let him return home with a letter to me” (Blow 1806). Earlier that day, Blow had sent Henry home to Norfolk so that his master might furnish him with a blanket for work.

Indeed, the complexity and quantity of commerce in the swamp in the nineteenth century may have created a feeling among African Americans that minor disappearances or transgressions would go unnoticed or overlooked by masters ultimately unable to control every aspect of swamp life. For example, one day Grandy, still a slave, struck out alone into the swamp in search for a cure to his rheumatism. He explained, “I therefore had myself carried in a lighter up a cross canal in the Dismal Swamp, and to the other side of Drummond’s Lake. I was left on the shore, and there built myself a little hut, and had provisions brought to me as opportunity served” (Grandy 1844:24). Here, under trees owned by the Dismal Swamp Land Company, he lived for a time in a “camp” similar to “those commonly set up for negroes” (Grandy 1844:24). Slaves such as Grandy often traveled about the swamp alone. Frederick Law Olmsted, while traveling the swamp in search of a story in 1853, encountered a slave named Joseph who, like Grandy, was walking in the Dismal unescorted. Olmsted explained that he “picked up on the road a jaded-
Looking Negro” who “belonged (as property) to a church in one of the inland counties” (Olmsted 1971:46).

Slaves in the Dismal Swamp were a mobile community. Canal boat hands cruised the waterways, exchanging news and greetings as well as goods. Lightermen piloted their shingles throughout the swamp, likely trading information along with lumber. Even gangs maintaining or expanding the Dismal Swamp Canal covered great distances during their work alongside hundreds of others traveling the canal and road. Other slaves, such as those charged to assist in toll collecting or canal maintenance, must have acted as social synapses, collecting and dispensing information to vast quantities of people throughout the day.

In a broader sense, transience and mobility characterized many slaves’ lives in the Dismal Swamp as a result of commercial hiring practices. A number of slaves spent much of their lives moving and adjusting to new jobs and masters. Slaves often moved back and forth between hired masters, responding to the labor needs of new development projects. The construction of smaller, auxiliary canals, often funded by neighboring lumber companies employed large numbers of African Americans in the swamp. While the numbers might have been smaller for the cutting of the White Oak Spring or Riddick canals in North Carolina, creating the North West Canal employed, according to one traveler, 240 laborers (Berkeley 1976:158).

The construction of railroads in the Dismal also employed free and slave African-American labor. At one point between 1833 and 1836, as many as three hundred men worked on the Portsmouth and Roanoke Railroad, carving a five-mile passageway through the northern edge of the swamp (Berkeley 1976:162). Later, the
FIGURE 11

A SKETCH MAP
OF THE
DISMAL SWAMP DISTRICT
OF
VIRGINIA AND NORTH CAROLINA

Inundated Lands
The white areas within the swamps are drained lands.
SCALE OF MILES

THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP AND ENVIRONS, 1925 (FROM STANSBURY,
THE LAKE OF THE GREAT DISMAL).
construction of the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad leveled a 100-foot wide swath, ten miles long through the swamp (Wertenbaker 1962:183; Berkeley 1976:163). It is likely that both African- and European-American laborers were employed in its construction (Strother 1856:455).

Although less is known about the African Americans employed in canal building, shingle-getting, or other activities in the North Carolina portion of the swamp, several sources recorded fleeting glimpses of their everyday lives and the transience it involved. In his articles for the New York Times, Olmsted described a group of slaves who were preparing to be sent “in a schooner more than sixty miles” to harvest lumber in another swamp, as they had in the Great Dismal. The very nature of the slaves’ work schedules, their resilience, and their makeshift houses were emblematic their lives, which were ever on the move. Olmsted wrote that the slaves “are mostly hired by their employers at a rent, perhaps, of one hundred dollars a year for each, paid to their owners. They spend one or two months of the Winter—when it is too wet to work in the swamp—at the residence of their master, where their families usually have ‘quarters.’ At this period little or no work is required of them; their time is their own, and if they can get any employment, they will generally keep for themselves what they can get for it. When it is sufficiently dry—usually early in February—they go into the swamp in gangs, each with an overseer” (Olmsted 1853b).

Swamp architecture, the design of slaves’ shelters while in the swamp, was a replicable, easily transportable style of housing that demonstrated slaves’ ability to adapt to ever-changing housing conditions. The “camp,” as it was called could be constructed almost anywhere a shingle getter needed to rest. Olmsted wrote, “Arrived at their place of destination, a rude “camp” is made, huts of shingles, plank logs and boughs, built upon the driest spot that can be found—usually
upon some place where shingles have been shaved before, and the shavings have accumulated into little hillocks” (Olmsted 1853b).

It is unclear where, or in which state, Olmsted encountered these slaves he described. But while his descriptions of slave life were generalizing and broad, his brief description of swamp architecture bears a striking resemblance to later descriptions of slave and maroon housing in the Dismal Swamp Land Company’s tract of the swamp in Virginia. As will be discussed further in the following section, an architecture similar to that described above became the dominant, portable style of African-American shingle-getting communities within the swamp, at large.

Ironically, it is the products of institutional racism that today provide the clearest pictures of those—free and slave—who labored on North Carolina’s side of the Dismal Swamp. In an attempt to control (or at the very least monitor) those working or living in the Dismal Swamp (Kent 1991:III-V) the North Carolina General Assembly enacted a law in 1847 declaring

“That no free person of color shall work...in the said swamp without having gone before the clerk of the proper court and caused a description of himself...and keeping and having ready to produce the copy of such description certified by the clerk [of the county court] ...and any free person of color found employed...in the said swamp without such copy, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, may be arrested and committed, or bound over to the next court of the county...and on conviction may be punished by fine, imprisonment and whipping, all or any of them at the discretion of the court” (Franklin 1943:74).

Not only were free African Americans registered at local court houses, but many slaves who were hired to work in the swamp were entered into the court books as well. As a result, hundreds of fastidiously recorded descriptions display the
outward appearances of free and slave who, most likely, worked together to cut the Orapeake Canal and harvest lumber in the Dismal Swamp before the Civil War.

Olmsted might have been referring to the 1847 statute when he described the process by which the slaves he encountered were inspected. He explained,

“Before leaving, they are all examined and registered at the Court-house, and passes, good for a year, are given them, in which their features and the marks upon their persons are minutely described. Each man is then furnished with provisions and clothing, of which, as well as of all that he afterwards ‘draws’ from the stock in the hands of the overseer, an exact account is kept and charged against him” (Olmsted 1853b).

The registration entries, recently re-discovered in the North Carolina State Archives provide sketches, drawn by those in power, of the effects of nineteenth-century slave life on the bodies of African Americans. For example, a Gates County, North Carolina, recorder observed that Sawyer, a slave owned by James Goodman of Nansemond County, Virginia,

“is about Thirty five years old of Dark brown Complexion, has a wild look full eyes, but thin beard around the mouth small mouth with a small scar in the Center of the forehead and a small scar in front of the right ear and one on the back of the Cheek bone behind the left eye and a not on each nuckle bone of the Great toe and a large Scar on the right leg half way from the foot to the Knee stands five feet five & ahalf inch, and weghs one hundred and fifty pounds” (Fouts 1995:3).

Other registrations offer clues into slaves’ personal histories, such as Armstead’s recorded in 1854. It stated:

“Armstead is about sixteen years of age of a very dark copper color has a slight scar on the right side of his face & fore head which was caused by a burn when small, has a scar under his right eye & a small scar on each one of his knees and stands without shoes Four feet & Eleven inches high” (Fouts 1995:100).
FIGURE 12

STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA.

PASQUOTANK COUNTY.

This is to certify that John Northcutt Bass, Resident of
Cumberland County, State of N. Carolina,
has employed in the Dismal Swamp a negro man by name of
James Williams,

of the following description: 5' 7" inches high, of black complex-
ion, aged about 35 years, with a scar on the left side of the face.

Given under my hand and seal of Office, at Elizabeth City, on the 30 day of

[Signature]

[Seal]

Courthouse, Pasquotank County, March 1847.

This is to certify that the negro named
James Williams is now in my employ.

[Signature]

[Seal]

February 25, 1847.

COURT REGISTRATION FOR AN AFRICAN AMERICAN WORKING IN THE
DISMAL SWAMP, 1847 (FROM KENT 1991).
In many cases, the recorders’ worldviews were documented more clearly than the objects of their descriptions. Gates County Clerk H.L. Eurecc wrote, “William is about Thirteen years old Black but not very black good pleasant countenance clear of scars” (Fouts 1995:99). In other cases, registrations may help to draw distinctions between the everyday lives of slaves and free African Americans working in the swamp. For example, Siah Pearce, “a free boy of Color” was described as follows: “Siah is about sixteen years of age of a copper Color has large features, a scar over his left Eye, one on his left arm caused from vaxinating and stands without shoes five feet one and a half inches high” (Fouts 1995:108). When subjected to more systematic analysis, such descriptions may provide valuable information on ante-bellum African-American nutrition, health, and family structure. It is also important to note that most of those in the North Carolina registers, and their employers or owners, were residents of Nansemond County, Virginia (Fouts 1995:i). The fact that, in their lifetimes, laborers might have worked in several areas of the swamp, under different employers, for various companies, illustrates the permeable nature of the swamp’s strict commercial boundaries and the transience inherent in swamp life. African Americans, free and slave, migrated throughout the swamp, following the jobs that accompanied canal construction and maintenance, lumber harvesting, and dozens of other tasks that came and went with the seasons (Thorne 1991:v-x). Unfortunately, little more is currently known about African-American life in the North Carolina portion of the swamp.

By contrast, many details of the everyday life of workers in what was once the Dismal Swamp Land Company’s holdings in Virginia are retrievable. Much of the
land currently preserved within the Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge encompasses the former property of the Dismal Swamp Land Company, which operated and documented its lumber business there from 1763-1902. Many of the Land Company’s receipt books, annual reports, and correspondence survived, preserving details of the company’s lengthy history. In its records, officials interested in satisfying shareholders and demands from faraway markets documented names of employees, supplies ordered to clothe slaves, locations of work areas, and descriptions of the small “ditches,” or canals, that slaves dug in order to transport shingles cut within the swamp to markets near Suffolk, Virginia. While intending to record only basic financial and operational information for the company, bookkeepers inadvertently scribbled onto ledger lines fragments of everyday African-American life that today allow the researcher to recreate, to a certain extent, the everyday lives of free and slave in the swamp. Such documents provide a backdrop and context for accounts of maroon life in the Great Dismal written by contemporary travelers and journalists.

Based in the northwest corner of the Dismal, the Dismal Swamp Land Company controlled more than 40,000 acres of forested swampland. In the nineteenth century, the Land Company’s holdings and operations were organized according to a single commercial goal—to deliver as many shingles and other lumber products to waiting ships and mills on Shingle Creek, near Suffolk, Virginia (Trout 1998:21). To this end, Company managers physically redesigned their portion of the swamp as much as possible. Company slaves constructed a complex system of canals and roads
of varying lengths and sizes that allowed a centralized inspector to monitor laborers’ output throughout the company’s tract (Reid 1948:127-128).

Waterways were the lifeblood of the Land Company’s economy. A number of small ditches, like capillaries, allowed “lighters,” or lean, flat bottomed barges, to transport lumber through the swamp to larger arteries, which in turn, carried produce to market in Suffolk. The Washington and Jericho Canals, the Company’s most vital waterways, radiated outward from Lake Drummond; the Washington to the west, the Jericho to the north. It was the Jericho, twelve feet wide, four deep, and ten miles long, that served as entryway and exit for most workers and visitors to the “company swamp” (Ruffin 1837:517; Strother 1856:451).

Company waterways, swelled with rain or desiccated by drought, structured and regulated “swamp time” by setting the pace at which the transport of goods and people flowed (Genovese 1976:291-292). Edmund Ruffin entered the swamp, and swamp time, through the Jericho Canal while researching an article for The Farmer’s Register in 1836. He rode aboard a boat that

“was flat bottomed, long and spacious, belonging to the land Company, and designed solely for conveying passengers in trips to the lake, for pleasure or business. It was well suited for the purpose, and was well manned and provided for this occasion. The mode of propelling the boat is the same as is always used for shingle boats. A strong pole is fastened across the square head, and another in like manner at the stern, at right angles to the boat, the other ends extending across the tow-path on the margin of the canal. By these poles the men push the boat along in a rapid walk, and at the same time lean on them so as very much to lighten their labor. Four experienced hands accompanied our boat, who relieved each other from time to time” (Ruffin 1837: 516-517).
FIGURE 13

DISMAL SWAMP LAND COMPANY TRACT, CIRCA 1812 (BOARD OF PUBLIC WORKS INVENTORY, LIBRARY OF VIRGINIA, RICHMOND).
Ruffin’s journey down the Jericho from Shingle Creek to Lake Drummond probably took several hours, at most, five (Arnold 1888:13). On Land Company canals, lighters moved and time passed only as quickly as the African-American boatmen decided to walk (Reid 1948:87).

By contrast, mules, driven by slave and free African Americans, hauled much of the lumber from many areas of the swamp to Land Company canals along a vast network of wooden or “corduroy” roads which could extend five or six miles into the dense cane-brake (Reid 1948:87,89; Ruffin 1837:517). Ruffin described such roads as he peered from his canal boat:

“Double lines of poles are laid in the direction of the road, about the distance apart of the cart wheels. Across these are laid split pieces, merely long enough for a single track of a cart, of 4 to 6 inches in diameter, and as angular and irregular as may be supposed, from mauling. These lie close to each other across the sleepers, and present a very rough and unstable surface for the wheels, and still worse for the feet of the mules” (Ruffin 1837:517).

Those who walked the company’s log causeways and muddy tow-paths were primarily African Americans. On any given day during the nineteenth century, anywhere from forty to a hundred slaves and free laborers collected and transported lumber within the Land Company’s tract (DSLCR 1837; Reid 1948:92,118). Land Company managers divided laborers into five general groups. Shingle-getters collected lumber and cut shingles; cart headmen likely drove carts down company roads; cart boys loaded carts and assisted cart headmen in hauling lumber; road hands repaired and constructed roads; and lightermen piloted lighters through the Land Company’s canals (Reid 1948:88; Grandy1968:8; Strother 1856:451). When the need
THE JERICHO CANAL, AS DEPICTED BY DAVID HUNTER STROther IN HIS 1856 ARTICLE FOR HARPER’S NEW MONTHLY MAGAZINE (STROther 1856).
FIGURE 15

THE JERICHO CANAL IN 1964; LOOKING NORTH FROM ITS JUNCTION WITH THE WASHINGTON DITCH (FROM TROUT 1998).
FIGURE 16

THE JERICHO CANAL IN 2000; LOOKING NORTH FROM ITS JUNCTION WITH THE WASHINGTON DITCH (PHOTO BY AUTHOR).
arose, the Land Company also employed African Americans from the surrounding area in the “clearing and deepening” of its canals (DSLCR 1852; Almasy 1988:51). In addition, it is important to note that many of the Company’s canals were dug by outside contractors, who drew their labor from other parts of the swamp (DSLCR 1852a:2; DSLCR 1832).

Land Company laborers worked by “tasks,” whereby “the employers have nothing to do except to pay for the labor executed” (Ruffin 1837:518). For those owned or hired by the Land Company, it appears that Olmsted was more or less correct in writing that

“The slave is not in the meantime driven at all; no force is used to make him ‘work smart.’ He lives as a free man; having the liberty of the swamp; hunts ‘coons, fishes, eats, drinks, smokes, sleeps and works according to his own will. It is only asked of him that he shall have made at the end of a half-year so many shingles as shall, at a certain price, refund to his master he hire paid for him and the value of the clothing and provisions he has drawn.” (Olmsted 1853b).

After visiting the Land Company and interviewing a number of its workers, Strother wrote, more specifically, that

“The Company owns a number of slaves, and hires others, who are employed in getting out the lumber in the shape of shingles, staves, etc. These hands are tasked, furnished with provisions at a fixed rate, and paid for all work exceeding the required amount. Thus an expert and industrious workman may gain a considerable sum for himself in the course of the year” (Strother 1856:451).

Edmund Ruffin wrote that such a task system allowed enslaved African Americans considerable freedom in the form of leisure and mobility. While those he described might have disagreed, Ruffin asserted that Land Company slaves
“live plentifully, and are pleased with their employment—and the main objection to it with their masters, (they being generally slaves,) and the community, is that the laborers have too much leisure time, and of course spend it improperly. Their heavy labors for the week are generally finished in five, and often four days—and then the remainder of the week is spent out of the swamp, and given to idleness, and by many to drunkenness” (Ruffin 1837:518).

Ruffin’s account of Land Company slave life was rife with racist assumptions and judgements. Nonetheless, it is useful to researchers because it helps corroborate the existence of the notion of “free time,” in a double sense, among enslaved and laboring African Americans in the Great Dismal. As long as slaves, laborers, or maroons (as will be shown) completed their tasks on time and without problems, Land Company officials to a large degree let them be. The facts of leisure and widespread mobility among Land Company slaves and laborers in the nineteenth century is critical to the understanding of how workers and company managers created a system of slavery in the swamp based on compulsion and power and social negotiation and partial emancipation. Much like the slaves that Philip Morgan described in South Carolina’s Lowcountry, laborers in the Land Company’s swamp negotiated and helped create a task system that provided (within limits) time and freedom to, among other things, hunt and travel (Morgan 1998:138). It is the limits, the social and cognitive parameters that shaped such notions that future archaeological research might help to further elucidate.

Slaves hired from surrounding plantations completed many of the Land Company’s tasks during the nineteenth century (Reid 1948:118). Every January, the Company actively solicited nearby masters, offering them an average of forty dollars
FIGURE 17

Dismal Swamp Land Company
To William C. Whitley
November 26, 1837

Received 23 n. 20 Negroes & Blankets $10, 25. 60

2 n. 20 do. do. 15. 00

1 n. 1 Small House & Blankets $1. 00

16 acres more West half 15. 00

$43. 00

March 13th, Recorded by A. Hargrave

Dismal Swamp Land Company Receipt Dated November and December 1837 (DSLCR, Duke University).
On or before the first day of January next I promise to pay unto Thomas Harris the sum of fifty dollars for the hire of Boy John the present year for the use of the firm of J. S. J. & Co. And also to pay each Boy good customary allowance as at 1851 and 1852. As interest on said money due the 1st day of January 1852.

South Holston agent

for a grown man’s labor in the swamp for a year (Reid 1948:89). The transfer of John was typical of the contract made between the Land Company and slave owners:

“On or before the first Day of January next I promise to Pay unto Francis Harris the sum of Fifty Dollars for the hire of Boy John the present year for the use of the Disl S. L. Co.—And also to give said Boy food customary Clothing a Hat and Blanket—As witness my hand & seal this 3rd day of January 1851. Joseph Holladay Agent” (DSLCR 1851)

Did the terms of such agreements between the Land Company and local masters largely determine hired slaves’ basic material lives for the following year? According to the contracts, food, rudimentary clothing, a hat, and a blanket were provided each slave. Nothing more. Further documentation shows that the Land Company indeed fulfilled its limited contractual obligations by regularly ordering the bare minimum for its workers. Corn, meal, and “mess pork” were bought every couple months (DSLCR 1852; Reid 1948 94, 118); clothing, in the form of socks, shoes, trousers, shirts, and other “negro clothes” was also provided (DSLCR 1814; DSLCR 1832b; DSLCR 1832c); and hats and blankets were furnished the slaves, as well (DSLCR 1832c; DSLCR 1837).

A broader reading of non-company records shows how slaves and laborers must have supplemented their meager rations through hunting, trapping, and fishing when they were not working. Deer, otter, raccoons, possums, pheasants, partridges, wild ducks, perch, wild cattle presented swampers with prospects of hearty meals (Strother 1856: 448). Strother’s description of the living area in the main company settlement of the swamp, however, suggested that African Americans went well
FIGURE 19

beyond hunting and fishing to find a better meal. Scanning the site, Strother recalled, “There was bacon, salt fish, meal, molasses, whisky, and sweet potatoes, besides plenty of fodder for the mules” (Strother 1856:451). How slaves obtained molasses, whisky, and sweet potatoes or how common such items were in the makeshift cupboards of swamp workers remains unclear.

Descriptions of swampers’ domestic sites, as well as their settlement patterns exist in both written and pictorial form. Edmund Ruffin offered the most detailed written account of workers’ home sites from his boat on the Jericho canal when he observed,

“The only sign of life was seen at intervals in a ‘camp’ of a pair of shingle-getters. Their houses, or shanties, are barely wide enough for five or six men to lie in, closely packed side by side—their heads to the back wall, and their feet stretched to the open front, close by a fire kept up through the night. The roof is sloping, to shed the rain, and where highest, not above four feet from the floor. Of the shavings made in smoothing the shingles, the thinnest make a bed for the laborers, and the balance form the only dry and solid foundation of their house, and their homestead, or working yard” (Ruffin 1837:518).

Ruffin’s portrait of Land Company camps is significant for many reasons. First, Ruffin’s structures are strikingly similar to those described by Olmsted and Grandy in other areas of the Great Dismal Swamp. Houses in the camp, it seemed, were more than improvised, lean-to shelters; rather, they were the result of a cultural tradition singularly adapted to surviving everyday life on the highest (driest) ground of the Dismal Swamp. It could be argued that camp structures represented a distinct architectural style incorporating the values, worldviews, and necessities of their occupants into their very design.
A "CAMP" ON LAKE DRUMMOND (FROM STROTHE 1856).
"HORSE CAMP" IN 1856 (FROM STROTHER 1856).
Second, the scattered buildings that Ruffin saw only “at intervals” along the canal characterized the settlement patterns and lifeways of Land Company laborers. Shingle-getters likely worked and camped in pairs or small groups. The task system did not require slaves or laborers to return to a central location each night; instead, the system allowed workers to remain in various parts of the company swamp, together, for several days at a time.

Finally, Ruffin’s account suggested that shingle-getters’ quarters, “not above four feet from the floor,” were too small to support significant indoor life. Shingle-getters must have spent most of their time outside, retreating inside only to sleep or escape the weather. A clearing in the form of a “homestead, or working yard” commonly surrounded laborers’ houses, according to Ruffin. Depending on the condition of the soil around the house, the yard may have included a small plot for farming or an area where other personal activities were conducted. It is unclear from the documents where, exactly, shingle-getters built such camps and how long they were occupied.

Strother also saw and documented structures within the Land Company’s swamp. Unlike Ruffin, however, Strother described and sketched a single settlement, located beside the Jericho Canal. He remembered

“a rude wharf, piled high with fresh-made shingles. From the landing a road…leads back into the Swamp. A hundred paces brings us to Horse Camp, the head-quarters of the shingle-makers in this district. A group of picturesque sheds afford accommodation for a number of men and mules….Although of the rudest character, there seemed to be every material for physical comfort in abundance” (Strother 1856:451).
Besides Ruffin’s brief descriptions and Strother’s small sketches, there are few details of workers’ everyday lives in the Land Company swamp.

Maroons and The Dismal Swamp Land Company in the Nineteenth Century

There is little agreement on how many maroons inhabited the Great Dismal Swamp at any given point during the nineteenth century. Herbert Aptheker argued that as many as two thousand “Negroes, fugitives, or the descendents of fugitives” inhabited communities in the swamp (Aptheker 1939:168). By comparison, Gerald Levy asserted that because of the swamp’s difficult terrain, only a few hundred maroons could have inhabited the Dismal at any given time (Erickson 1994:G2). Whatever the true number might have been, sufficient evidence exists to prove the existence of runaway slaves in the swamp during the nineteenth century. Numerous reports, popular and academic, written since the 1830s attest to the fact of these maroons (Tragle 1971:297-299; Arnold 1888:7; O’Reilly 1890:18; Catlin 1905:341-342; Taylor 1928:23-25; Preston 1933:167; Aptheker 1939:168; Eppse 1943:158-159; Genovese 1979:68-69; Learning 1994; Kay 1995:101; Parramore 2000:131).

Fictional accounts of swamp maroons also contributed to the popular perception of the swamp as a hideaway for fugitive slaves (Stowe 1856; Howard 1905).

The sources for many of the historical and fictional descriptions of swamp maroons were a small collection of travelers’ accounts, contemporary reports of the Nat Turner rebellion, and runaway slave advertisements referring to the Dismal as a refuge for fugitive slaves. For example, in 1817, Samuel Perkins rode alongside the Dismal Swamp Canal. He wrote that the swamp “is inhabited almost exclusively by
run away negroes” who were often seen “fleeing to the woods & swamps and
subsisting for years on food there found or conveyed to them by their former fellow
sufferers” (McLean 1970: 55-62). A number of newspaper reports published during
and immediately after the Nat Turner insurrection in 1831 described the Dismal as a
haven for runaways, where “two or three thousand fugitives were preparing to join the
insurgents” (Tragle 1971:336).

Scattered throughout the nineteenth century, advertisements also portrayed the
swamp as the probable destination for a number of runaways from surrounding areas.
For example, in 1850, one Pasquotank County, North Carolina, master sought three
runaway slaves who likely “have secreted themselves in the Dismal Swamp.” The
next year, a man in Isle of Wight County, Virginia, advertised for his slave who “is
lurking about the Dismal Swamp” (Bogger 1982:2). The problem with most
contemporary accounts of swamp maroons is their generality and overwhelming
reliance on hearsay. Although scholars often consider such accounts to be primary
sources, they are, in fact, often secondary, and serve only to contextualize the more
specific available evidence.

Documentary evidence of maroon life in the Land Company swamp during the
nineteenth century is slight, but informative. Only two sources—the narrative of an
escaped slave named Charlie and Strother’s article—suggest how shingle getters and
supervisors may have incorporated maroons into the Land Company’s operations. In
addition, Olmsted’s more general account of swamp maroons, although unclear as to
which shingle company he described, appears to corroborate Charlie’s and Strother’s
accounts and offers a more complete picture of interaction and exchange between maroons, slaves, and laborers in the Land Company swamp.

Olmsted intertwined personal observation with hearsay to paint a popular portrait of swamp maroons. “There are people in the swamps now,” he wrote, “that are the children of fugitives and fugitives themselves all their lives.” Of particular interest to Olmsted was the nature of interaction between maroons and slave shingle getters working in the swamp. Olmsted wrote, for example, that maroons “cannot obtain the means of supporting life without coming often either to the outskirts to steal from the plantations, or to the neighborhood of the camps of the lumbermen. They live mainly upon the charity or wages given them by the latter. The poorer white men owning small tracts of the swamps will sometimes employ them, and the negroes frequently” (Olmsted 1853b).

According to Olmsted, it was common for African-American laborers employed by the lumber companies to hire maroons in the swamp. When the shingle getters employed maroons, “they made them get up logs for them, and would give them enough to eat and some clothes, and perhaps two dollars a month in money.” Eager to observe a Dismal Swamp maroon for himself, Olmsted asked his guide (a slave hired to work in the swamp) how to spot one, as opposed to a regular shingle getter. “‘Oh dey looks strange,’” his guide replied, “‘Skeared like, you know Sir, and kind o’ strange, cause they’s not got much to eat and ain’t decent’—(not decently clothed.) ’like’s we is’” (Olmsted 1853b).

Olmsted’s information is consistent with that in Strother’s article published in 1856. In describing the interaction between slave and free employees and maroons in the Land Company’s area Strother explained,
These [maroons] live by woodcraft, external depredation, and more frequently, it is probable, by working for the task shingle-makers at reduced wages. These employees often return greater quantities of work than could by any possibility have been produced by their own labor, and draw for two or three times the amount of provisions necessary for their own subsistence. But the provisions are furnished, the work paid for, and no questions are asked, so that the matter always remains involved in mystery” (Strother 1856:451).

Strother’s description is more useful than Olmsted’s because it explains how runaways managed to subsist once they reached a specific portion of the swamp—that controlled by the Dismal Swamp Land Company. Rather than fleeing slave society completely, maroons sought refuge within the swamp and continued to work for a slave-owning business venture that benefited from their inexpensive labor. It was a symbiotic relationship that allowed maroons to negotiate a greater freedom, or a step toward freedom, in exchange for their labor. Hired slaves benefited from a similar relationship with their temporary masters, as well (Eaton 1960:671). Both hired slaves and maroons, to some extent, were able to negotiate degrees of freedom from their Land Company supervisors (Bogger 1982:84; Starobin 1968:115).

About the same time Strother visited the swamp for his assignment, a slave named Charlie (or Charley) escaped to the Dismal after hearing that he might be sold and separated from his wife (Cowan 1998). Charlie fled to the house of a friend who secured him work in the swamp, where he worked for several months as a shingle-getter before escaping to Canada. Charlie related that upon entering the Dismal,

“I boarded wit a man what giv me two dollars a month for de first one: arter dat I made shingles for myse’f. Dar are heaps ob folks in dar to work. Most on ‘em are fugitives, or else hirin’ dar time. Dreadful ‘commodatin’ in dare to one anudder. De each like de ‘vantage ob de odder one’s ‘tection. Ye see dey’s united togedder in’ividually wit same interest to stake. Never hearn one speak disinspectively to ‘nut’er one: all ‘gree as if dey had only one head and
one heart, with hunder legs and hunder hands. Dey’s more ‘commodatin’ dan any folks I’s ever seed afore or since. Da lend me dar saws, so I might be ‘pared to split my shingles; and den dey turn right ‘bout and ‘commodate demsels. Ye ax me inscribe de swamp? Well: de great Dismal Swamp (dey call it Juniper Swamp) ‘stends whar it begins in Norfolk, old Virginnny, to de upper part ob Carolina. Dat’s what I’s told. It stands itse’f more’n fifty mile north and souf. I worked ‘bout four mile ‘bove Drummond Lake, which be ten mile wide. De boys used to make canoes out ob bark, and had a nice time fishin’ in de lake” (Redpath 1859:288-295).

Charlie stated exactly where he worked as a shingle-getter in the swamp—about four miles above Lake Drummond. It is likely that he worked on a site not far from the banks of the Jericho Canal that resembled those described by Ruffin and Strother. Charlie was a salaried employee, but never made it into company books. It was probably a common shingle-getter who supervised Charlie and reaped greater earnings from the shingles Charlie cut. In return for his labor, Charlie gained two dollars a month and temporary freedom. In addition to Charlie’s descriptions of the economic workings of the Land Company, it is important to note the nature of his relationship to the other Company shingle-getters and their generous relationship to one another. As a newcomer, Charlie saw the veteran shingle-getters and Land Company slaves around him as a vibrant community of people, bonded by their labor or their common purpose for being there.

Although available references indicate that all Land Company slaves and laborers were male, Charlie referred to families—women and children maroons—who inhabited the swamp, as well. While his more general account of maroon families is similar to Schoepf’s and Smyth’s of many years before (and might have suffered from revision after Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Dred was published in 1856) Charlie’s carries
the weight that only primary documents do, relating the strength of first-hand experience. He recalled, “Dar is families growed up in dat ar Dismal Swamp dat never seed a white man, an’ would be skeered most to def to see one. Some runaways went dere wid dar wives, an’ dar childers are raised dar” (Redpath 1859:293). Again, Charlie framed life in the Dismal Swamp as a community experience.

Charlie went on to describe everyday swamp life in greater detail:

“Dismal Swamp is divided into tree or four parts. Whar I worked da called it Company Swamp. When we wanted fresh pork we goed to Gum Swamp, ‘bout sun-down, run a wild hog down from de cane-brakes into Juniper Swamp, whar dar feet can’t touch hard ground, knock dem over, and dat’s de way we kill dem. De same way we ketch wild cows. We troed dar bones, arter we eated all de meat off on ‘em up, to one side de fire. Many’s de time we waked up and seed de bars skulking round our feet for de bones” (Redpath 1859:288-295).

Charlie confirmed that he worked in “Company Swamp,” (the Dismal Swamp Land Company’s portion of the Swamp) the precise area of the swamp that Strother and Ruffin visited and described so explicitly. In addition to showing that maroons relied on wild hogs and cattle living in the swamp to supplement any food provisioned them by the Land Company, Charlie’s account supports the idea that maroons, as well as slaves laboring in the Dismal, enjoyed a degree of mobility during their free time. It might have been this mobility that allowed for the existence of communication networks between maroons in the swamp and slaves on plantations considerably further away. For example, in describing the predicament of his wife, whom he had left behind, Charlie lamented, “Den I heem dat old mass’r made her live wid anudder man, coz I left her. Dis ‘formation nearly killed me….Well, arter I heern dat she was livin’ wid ‘nudder man, dat ar made me to come to Canada” (Redpath
Clearly, the morass and mire that made up the swamp failed to hinder the communication of important long-distance information between maroons and plantation slaves.

Indeed, slaves and even maroons traveled with relative freedom within the Land Company’s swamp. For example, from their camps, Charlie and other maroons and slaves often journeyed several miles south to Lake Drummond to attend religious services. Charlie explained that

“Ole man Fisher was us boys’ preacher. He runned away and used to pray, like he’s ‘n earnest. I camped wid him. Many’s been de ‘zortation I have ‘perienced, dat desounded t’rough de trees, an’ we almos’ ‘spect de judgment day was comin’, dar would be such loud nibrations, as de preacher called dem; ‘specially down by de lake” (Redpath 1859:293).

It appears that the Land Company’s community of African-American men regularly congregated together to listen to their own preacher on the shores of Lake Drummond, one of the most accessible (and therefore public) places in the entire swamp. How was it possible for hired and fugitive slaves to freely travel and meet in the swamp’s busiest area and not be detected? Or, if their meetings were known and condoned by company officials and other European-Americans in the swamp, what does this say about the nature of race and labor relations in the Dismal? Perhaps a clue lies in Charlie’s brief description of his preacher, Fisher. It is likely that Charlie’s “Ole man Fisher” was the same “old Toby Fisher” described by Ruffin during his trip down the Company’s Jericho Canal to Lake Drummond in 1836. Ruffin, eager to learn about the swamp’s history was referred to Toby Fisher by the African-American boatmen he had hired. According to Ruffin, Toby Fisher was an
authority on all that had occurred in the swamp, since he “was then [in 1806], as he still is, and has continued to be, a shingle-getter in the swamp” (Ruffin 1837:519-520). It is conceivable that Ruffin, a prominent European-American visitor, was led by his boatmen to a Dismal swamp maroon for a history lesson. Conversely, it is significant that shingle-getters such as Toby Fisher (whether he was or was not the preacher) had easy access to traffic through the swamp and to visitors of the Land Company’s operation.

Similarly, Strother’s account supports the view that traditional lines of race, class, and status may have been blurred to some degree in the Land Company’s territory in the nineteenth century. During his visit to Lake Drummond, Strother ate, played cards, lounged, and slept next to a motley crew of Land Company employees—his two African-American boatmen/guides Jim Pierce and Ely Reed, the company shingle-counter Joe Skeeter, and an unnamed assistant to Skeeter (likely a slave). Strother remarked, “I spent a night of sweet repose, awaking two or three times to turn over and be again soothed to sleep by the snoring quartette performed by my companions” (Strother 1856:448). Reified racial barriers common in everyday life outside the swamp apparently held little sway within the Land Company’s territory. It should be noted that Pierce and Reed, as well as Skeeter, appeared in the Nansemond County, Virginia, census records of 1850 (Almasy 1988:51,55,39). Strother’s descriptions of those he met in the swamp, like many of his narrative’s details, were remarkably accurate (Kirby 1995:151-161).

Strother’s writings and illustrations present the only reliable first-hand portrait of a Dismal Swamp maroon and help the reader to imagine what Charlie might have
FIGURE 22

DISMAL SWAMP MAROON "OSMAN" (FROM STROTHER 1856).
FIGURE 23

LOG ROAD IN THE DISMAL SWAMP (FROM STROTHE 1856).
looked like while working in the swamp. While wandering off a wooden track made for transporting shingles by cart, Strother penned the only lasting description and portrait of a Dismal Swamp maroon, whom he called Osman. He reported,

“At length my attention was arrested by the crackling sound of other footsteps than my own. I paused, held my breath, and sunk quietly down among the reeds. About thirty paces from me I saw a gigantic negro, with a tattered blanket wrapped about his shoulders, and a gun in his hand. His head was bare, and he had little other clothing than a pair of ragged breeches and boots. His hair and beard were tipped with gray, and his purely African features were cast in a mould betokening, in the highest degree, strength and energy. the expression of the face was of mingled fear and ferocity, and every movement betrayed a life of habitual caution and watchfulness….He did not discover me, but presently turned and disappeared” (Strother 1856:453).

While Strother’s account confirmed the existence of maroons in the Dismal Swamp Land Company tract in 1856, the records of the Dismal Swamp Land Company remained silent on the illegal practice of hiring maroons (Trouillot 1995). Was Charlie’s employment sanctioned by Land Company managers? Or was such “hiring” secretly undertaken by slave laborers? Several sources suggest the former. During the nineteenth century, Land Company officials increasingly complained of high labor costs (Reid 1948:102,109). In several cases, the Land Company’s agent was urged to keep labor costs to a minimum (Reid 1948: 116-117). Might the necessity of cheap labor have driven the Company to illegally hire runaway slaves? In addition, there were several instances where company officials documented expenses under curious headings, such as “Extra lightering & other work done by hands this month” (DSLCR 1860a; DSLCR 1860b). It is possible that the Company agent cloaked all expenses associated with maroon labor as “other work.”
Unlike many maroons in Brazil or Suriname, slaves who fled into the Land Company’s sector of the Dismal Swamp sought refuge in a highly organized commercial entity based on slave labor and the exploitation of African Americans. It would have been difficult for runaways to hide in the Lumber Company swamp or one of the other areas managed by a large commercial operation; instead, maroons were likely detected and either welcomed or returned. If accepted into the lumber enterprise as workers, maroons were employed by European-American managers or African-American de facto supervisors operating in the swamp. Once living in the swamp, it is clear from the accounts of Olmsted, Strother, and Charlie that maroons fit easily into an established task system based on individual production and incentives. For Land Company officials, there was apparently little distinction not only between maroons and slave laborers, but slave laborers and free African-American laborers, as well (Bogger 1982:84).

Unfortunately, the documentary evidence for maroon life in the Great Dismal Swamp raises far more questions than it answers. Where were maroons living and in what proximity to other Land Company workers? How many runaways such as Charlie fled to the swamp in the nineteenth century? Were maroons mostly temporary residents in the swamp, or did they settle, raise children, and die there? What was the basis of their diet—Company rations, or nearby flora and fauna? How much contact did maroons have with those in Suffolk, Norfolk, or Elizabeth City? What relationships did maroons maintain with African Americans enslaved on surrounding plantations and lumber company tracts? Did swamp maroons constitute a socially-bonded “community,” or were their bonds strictly economic?
Employing documentary evidence as a basis for a model of maroon subsistence, archaeology offers a hope of illuminating the cultural and material formation and transformation processes undergone by African Americans between slavery and freedom in the Great Dismal Swamp.
CHAPTER IV
FORWARD AND BACK

One of the most promising projects involving maroon archaeology involves the search for the material remains of quilombos (runaway slave communities) in Palmares, in northeastern Brazil. The comparative, multidisciplinary approach employed by those investigating Palmares is one that might be adopted by archaeologists working on a large number of maroon sites throughout the Americas, as well as by future researchers of communities within the Great Dismal Swamp (Orser and Funari 1999:7; Harrington 1997:4). Archaeologists Charles Orser, Pedro Funari, and Scott Allen discovered that the material remains of maroon sites include a number of objects manufactured outside Palmares. For example, in addition to native pottery and locally-made, glazed ceramics the major presence of European ceramics in artifact assemblages “suggests that the people of Palmares maintained constant links with some segments of the local Portuguese population” (Orser 1994:14).

The maroons of Palmares, like those in Suriname and other locations, could not live in isolation; they situated themselves in an ever-shifting spatial equilibrium that allowed positive exchange with neighbors on the one hand, and, on the other, prevented unwanted contact with European slavers (Price 1990:25; Orser and Funari 1999:6). Orser writes that the fluidity, negotiation, and constant exchange that existed between maroons and their neighbors in Palmares makes traditional archaeology or the construction of a standard ethnography of quilombos impossible.
without adopting a wide perspective that extends well beyond the communities (Orser 1994:5). It is likely that quilombos were societies as open as they were closed—they were economically tied to the larger European world from which they physically (and culturally) severed themselves. Thus, in order to study Palmares, Orser and Funari argue, various related communities and social forces on its periphery—and beyond—must be explored, as well. A comprehensive archaeology of Palmares is therefore only as complete as concomitant investigations of surrounding colonial Portuguese sugar plantations, Native American sites, Dutch colonial sites, and historic Angolan communities (where many newly-arrived slaves originated). Orser and Funari advocate a global, as well as a local approach to slave and maroon archaeology (Orser 1994:5,17; Orser and Funari 1999:6).

In a recent survey of maroon archaeology, Terry Weik also emphasized the need for adopting a broad view while excavating and interpreting maroon sites in the Americas. He advised that

“A comparative perspective on maroon, plantation slaves, free blacks, and urban slaves is required. The extent of contact and exchange between maroons and plantation slaves is an issue which could provide insights into the permeability of the boundaries of slave societies, as well as the (in)dependence of maroons in terms of culture identity and economics” (Weik 1997:86).

Archaeologists investigating maroons in the Dismal Swamp should accept Weik’s challenge by adopting an approach similar to that of Orser and Funari—think globally, dig locally. While one goal is to ultimately place swamp maroons within the context of the larger currents of the African Diaspora in the Americas, archaeologists must first focus on locating sites and distinctive activity areas within the swamp
A new reading of the historical record (presented in chapter four) emphasizes the diversity of people at work in the Dismal at any given time during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By anchoring evidence for maroons to specific times and spaces within the swamp, archaeologists can now begin to evaluate maroon, slave, and laborer sites in the swamp as they changed through time, in relation to ever-evolving communities surrounding the Great Dismal. New archaeological research undertaken in the Dismal can be conducted within the larger context of what Theresa Singleton has called the “study of the formation and transformation of the black Atlantic world” (Singleton 1999:1). A multidisciplinary, comparative approach similar to that undertaken at Palmares will work in the Dismal Swamp.

The Dismal Swamp

Employing many of the same theoretical underpinnings as research at Palmares, maroon archaeology in the Great Dismal Swamp must be conducted with an eye towards more than simply locating and identifying sites, although this is the first step. Dismal Swamp maroon archaeology is designed to determine the duration, material diversity, and process of community formation present at those North American sites where African-Americans lived between slavery and freedom. Identifying African-American sites (especially maroon and slave sites) in the swamp today benefits from a number of studies of African-American material culture not yet available to Elaine Nichols, who pioneered North American maroon archaeology in the 1980s. Such studies include Lorena Walsh’s comprehensive examination of
material culture at Carter’s Grove plantation (Walsh 1997:171-203), Barbara Heath’s exploration into the daily lives of slaves at Poplar Forest (Heath 1999b:47-64), and recent discourse on free African-American communities, such as Fort Mose and Elmwood, Michigan (Deagan and Landers 1999:261-282; Bastian 1999:283-298). Recent scholarship detailing the material remains of slave sites throughout the east may allow archaeologists working in the swamp to identify inter- and intra-site patterns based upon recovered buttons, beads, ceramics, and faunal remains that will determine distinct occupation areas of maroons, slaves, and free laborers.

Clearly, the place to begin archaeological testing in the swamp is the Dismal Swamp Land Company’s old tract now under the protection of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as the Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge. Using historical records as a guide, a project area encompassing a section of the Jericho Canal, midway between Lake Drummond and Suffolk, would allow archaeologists to begin subsurface testing in the approximate area where Strother spotted Osman and where Charlie, the maroon, once lived.

The first phase of testing would aim to locate all sites within the project area contemporaneous with Land Company operations. The survey might consist of shovel test holes occurring at measured intervals, systematic subsurface testing of the area’s high ground, or aircraft-mounted imaging similar to that done at Fort Mose in Florida (Deagan and Landers 1999:270; Carter 1979). In order to locate and identify maroon sites accurately, a large sample of other sites must first be obtained as a standard for comparison. To this end, as many contemporary maroon and non-maroon sites within the Wildlife Refuge should be located as possible.
More extensive testing, followed by complete excavations of various sites would hopefully offer archaeologists a lens into the everyday operations of the Land Company in the area. By following the trail of clues strewn throughout the available documents (historical, anthropological, and archaeological) archaeologists could then begin to identify artifacts and features that mark the locations of past roads, camps, and canals of the company. Clothing, tools, and other supplies detailed in receipts and letterbooks should form the framework for a recognizable artifact pattern indicating the past presence of shingle-getters and Land Company laborers. For example, Edmund Ruffin’s description of the homes of shingle getters is useful as a starting point for archaeological investigation and interpretation:

“Theyir houses, or shanties, are barely wide enough for five or six men to lie in, closely packed side by side—their heades to the backe wall, and theire feet stretched to the open front, close by a fire kept up through the night. The roof is sloping, to shed the rain, and where highest, not above four feet from the floor. Of the shavings made in smoothing the shingles, the thinnest make a bed for the laborers, and the balance form the only dry and solid foundation of their house, and their homestead, or working yard” (Ruffin 1837:518).

Except for the areas where logging railroads and later commercial activities disturbed landforms (as shown in Mallory Hope Ferrell’s composite map) much of the nineteenth-century high ground in the Wildlife Refuge, where shingle-getters constructed their homesteads, should still be intact and dry today (Trout 1998:46-47). Ironically, commercial drainage and development that has been progressively drying the swamp for years might be responsible for the preservation of any subsurface features, since decomposition rates are faster for litter submerged in the acidic swamp water than that in drier soil (Day 1982:670). Therefore, the footprints of shingle-
PROPOSED PROJECT AREA LOCATED ON THE FORMER PROPERTY OF THE DISMAL SWAMP LAND COMPANY, PRESENTLY WITHIN THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE (FROM SIMPSON, *THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP*).
getters’ distinctive homes might still be visible in areas where posts were driven through the peat into the shallow clay subsoil for support. Some kind of midden, or scatter of domestic refuse, in the form of animal bone and containers for all the goods that Strother spotted in Horse Camp—salt fish, molasses, whisky—should serve as markers of camps and working yards, as well.

The following phase must be a rigorous analysis of all accumulated data designed to prompt new questions of the documentary evidence. Will all excavated camps and homesteads fit a similar pattern, or might there be enough variation in the number of manufactured goods, for example, or items listed on Land Company documents to distinguish slave from maroon sites? Archaeologists in search of neatly bounded maroon sites in the Land Company tract must recognize the challenge of distinguishing maroon sites from slave and free laborer sites within the company swamp. Will “Africanisms” or other ethnic markers separate maroons from Land Company slaves or African-American sites from European-American sites on the artifact inventory list (Howson 1990)? Or will settlement patterns showing relative isolation or inaccessibility mark a rogue camp of runaways? Only through practical methodologies that allow for an active reflexivity between the material and historical fragments of slave and maroon life will archaeologists truly see the people of the swamp through the things they left behind (Yentsch 1994:xxii, 188-195, 311).

By first focusing on nineteenth-century sites within the Land Company’s documented space archaeologists can work backwards through the swamp’s development from the 1850s, when Charlie inhabited the swamp, to the eighteenth century, when the Land Company’s slaves began draining the Dismal. As work
begins and new questions arise from recovered archaeological data, documents will lend themselves to alternate readings, which will, in turn, spark new ways of seeing and organizing the archaeological data, and so on. A reflexivity between written, material, and perhaps oral sources will promote a contextual, interpretive approach ripe for local and global comparative analysis (Hodder 1986:121-155; Hodder 1999:80-104; Hall 2000:24).

By stressing the importance of the historical record in assembling an archaeological research design for excavations in the Dismal Swamp, it is hoped that written and material evidence may be viewed, in Martin Hall’s terminology, as transcripts. Hall writes,

“I see the transcript as a web of relations that entwine both objects and words. Transcripts are the basic building blocks of my historical archaeology, because they are the means of connecting material assemblages (the key subject matter of archaeology) with texts (the key sources with which historians work)” (Hall 2000:16).

Transcripts “play against one another,” engaging in discourse that constantly opens otherwise static artifact assemblages and documents to reinterpretation (Hall 2000:17). In order to initiate discourse in a meaningful way, archaeologists must investigate the geographical, historical, and cultural contexts of maroon sites and communities in and outside the swamp. Without grounding the study of maroons within contexts—within particular spaces in the swamp (such as the Land Company tract) and within particular time periods (such as 1850s)—transcripts depicting everyday life or material goods become meaningless (Wilkie 1995:137-138). As
archaeologists, Matthew Johnson writes, “context is the central and defining feature of our discipline” (Johnson 1999:107).

Like the quilombos of Palmares, maroon sites within the Land Company’s area are ideal case studies in the permeability of the boundaries of slave society, as well as maroon (in)dependence (Weik 1997). More broadly, marronage in the Dismal can be viewed not only as a form of resistance to surrounding slave society, “but also as a phenomenon which intersects and engages these societies in economic and cultural dimensions” (Weik 1997:89). In this way, The Land Company’s operation can be seen physically and symbolically as a space of intersection, overlap, and exchange between diverse peoples inside and outside the slave system (Orser 1994:5; Orser 1996:189-201). For example, an approach similar to that taken by Mark Hauser and Douglas Armstrong in their analysis of African-American ceramics may be appropriate in the Dismal Swamp. Hauser and Douglas write,

> “Exchange provides a link between communities previously believed separated by legal and social structures. Exchange mediates relationships between enslaved persons from different plantations; between enslaved persons and free persons; and between the European population and the African population” (Hauser and Armstrong 1999:78).

In viewing exchange and interaction between slaves and maroons or maroons and free laborers in the Land Company’s tract, archaeologists must attempt to identify geographical, social, or cultural limits of marronage. Archaeologists must ask, as Orser did in Palmares, “How could the boundaries of this community be established? Who would be considered to be its members? When is one inside or outside Palmares” (Orser 1994:10)? The question is even more difficult for those attempting
to locate Dismal Swamp maroons than *quilombos*. Unlike Palmares, it appears that
the traditional maroon community—a physically isolated entity of runaways existing
on the margins of the dominant slave society, such as those in Suriname and Brazil—
does not appear to have existed in the Dismal Swamp in the nineteenth century.
Instead, maroons in the Dismal Swamp formed communities within communities,
whose members may have been set apart from others not by space but by the legal
status they renounced and the fugitive status they embraced.
CONCLUSION

Maroon archaeology in the Great Dismal Swamp has the potential to clarify and challenge traditional conceptions of how slaves and maroons negotiated meaningful lives within a society dependent upon slavery and shaped by European-American power. Data collected from African-American sites in the swamp will contribute to the current study of African-American material life in slavery and freedom. Investigations into the size, duration, and settlement of maroon communities in the Dismal will serve as a basis for future anthropological scholarship on maroon societies in North America. Is the role of the maroon community in Charlie’s case—as an intermediary between slavery and freedom—the exception or the rule?

In addition, future research in the swamp will further broaden the scope of African-American archaeology beyond that of plantation archaeology, to include a window into a commercial world dominated by African Americans of diverse backgrounds. Archaeology in the swamp will provide a new host of answers—and questions—about the meaning of race, ethnicity, freedom, slavery, and other social constructions that may not be apparent in the existing written record.

A key component to any future archaeology in the Wildlife Refuge will be its commitment to public participation, where the public is actively informed and involved in developing research questions, conducting oral history interviews, and,
possibly, excavating potential maroon sites. Indeed, adding public archaeology to the
mission of the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in conjunction with a
public history program focused on human-caused alterations to the swamp’s
environment would only strengthen the goals of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.
In addition, a public, interdisciplinary approach combining the efforts of historians,
anthropologists, archaeologists, and local residents would succeed in resuscitating
American interest in an area of study where scholars of the Caribbean and South
America are far ahead.
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