

SLAVES IN DISMAL SWAMP

In the nineteenth century, the Great Dismal Swamp was a morass of huge trees towering over dense underbrush and delicate ferns, inhabited by black bears, wildcats, wild cattle and hogs, and poisonous snakes. It was to this inhospitable place many slaves came. The foreboding swamp provided a natural refuge for runaways.

Following the American Revolution, there were numerous instances of slave resistance. While some runaways were able to blend in with free blacks, many chose to seek refuge among a colony of runaways (called maroons) in the Great Dismal Swamp. The very nature of the swamp made it possible for a large colony to establish a permanent refuge. It was difficult to capture a slave once they reached the swamp although occasional forays were made into the swamp to recapture runaways with specially trained dogs.

As Robert Arnold remembered in 1888 in his THE DISMAL SWAMP AND LAKE DRUMMOND. EARLY RECOLLECTIONS:

Notice! \$500 Reward. Ran away from the subscriber on the night of June 18th, my Negro man. Simon He may be making his way to the Dismal Swamp.

Colonies were established on high ground in the swamp where slaves built crude huts. Family life evolved, and the abundant animal life provided food and clothing. Some earned money by working for free black shingle makers, who hired the maroons to cut logs, paying them with small amounts of food, money or precious clothing. Frederick Law Olmstead, in his account of A JOURNEY IN THE SEABOARD SLAVE STATES, details this illicit practice.

Sometimes runaways were betrayed by the Negro lumbermen. Renegade fugitives often raided nearby towns or preyed upon travelers along the stage road. Others stole from boats anchored along the canal. These violent rebels were a dreaded menace to the whole swamp community. Slave disturbances in the early 1800's caused much alarm among residents living near the swamp. Tidewater Virginia



residents were greatly concerned about reported unrest among slaves in nearby Camden, Elizabeth City and Currituck County, North Carolina. In the spring of 1823, the situation was so serious a large militia force with dogs was sent to wipe out the colony of slaves in the swamp. Even though some were captured or killed, most of the maroons escaped.

A brutal slave uprising in 1831 resulted in the butchering of 13 men, 18 women, and 24 children in Courtland, Virginia. Following the Southampton County slave rebellion, it was feared many of the insurgents planned to flee to the swamp. The leader of the rebellion was Nat Turner, a powerful Baptist preacher with a large loyal following, who remained at large for several months, causing speculation he was hiding in the swamp. Expeditions searched for him, capturing a number of maroons. Nat Turner was eventually caught.

While returning from a trip to England in 1842, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow composed his poem "*THE SLAVE IN DISMAL SWAMP*", telling of the miserable plight of a Negro in hiding. In 1856, David Strother wrote a description of the swamp's beauty and fearsome natives for Harper's magazine. As an artist, he sketched the legendary Osman, who, according to legend, protected the Negro slave escapees. Harriet Beecher Stowe used this sketch by Strother as the main character in her novel, DRED: A TALE OF THE GREAT DISMAL SWAMP.

These sites received the
National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Designation

Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge
Dismal Swamp Canal
Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center
Dismal Swamp State Park
Elizabeth City State University Dismal Swamp Boardwalk

The Dismal Swamp and The Civil War Battle of South Mills

THE SLAVE IN DISMAL SWAMP

By Henry W. Longfellow

In the dark fens of Dismal Swamp
The hunted Negro lay;
He saw the fire of the midnight camp;
And heard at times a horse's
Tramp, and bloodhounds distant bay.

Where well-o-wisps and glow worms
Shine in bulrush and brake;
Where waving mosses shroud the pine,
And the Cedar grows and the
Poisonous vine, is spotted like the snake.

Where hardly a human foot could pass
Or human heart would dare,
On the quaking turf of the green morass
He crouched in the rank and
Tangled grass like a wild beast
In his lair.

A poor old slave, infirm and lame;
Great scars deformed his face;
On his forehead he bore the brand
Of shame, and the rage that
Hid his Mangled frame were the livery
Of disgrace.

All things above were bright and fair,
All things were glad and free;
Lithe squirrels darted here and there,
And wild birds filled the
Echoing air with songs of liberty.

On him alone was the doom of pain,
From the morning of his birth;
On him alone the curse of Cain
Fell like a flail on the garnered
Grain, and struck him to the earth.



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THE BATTLE OF SOUTH MILLS

The Dismal Swamp Canal, opened to waterway traffic in 1805, became a “prize of war” during the Civil War. In the early months of war, southerners used the canal to transport much-needed supplies. W. F. Lynch, Commander of the C.S.S. *Sea Bird*, a side-wheel steamer, received naval supplies via the canal when he was in charge of a tiny fleet defending Roanoke Island. After Roanoke Island fell into Union hands on February 8, 1862, Lynch decided to take a position at Elizabeth City. However, on February 10, units of Admiral Goldsborough’s fleet captured Elizabeth City and the *SEA BIRD* was rammed and sunk by the U.S.S. *COMMODORE PERRY*. Two other ships fled northward up the Pasquotank River to the Dismal Swamp Canal enroute to Norfolk. While C.S.S. *BEAUFORT* made it safely through the Canal to Norfolk, C.S.S. *APPOMATTOX* was two inches too wide to enter the locks. Rather than let his ship be captured by the enemy, the captain set it on fire.

Union forces did not attempt to capture control of the Dismal Swamp Canal until two months later. According to *THE REBELLION RECORD*, Frank Moore, Editor, it was known that “Rebel entrenchments and batteries to protect the canal had been installed at South Mills. Also, this was the time of the “ironclads”, with the battle between the *MONITOR* and the *MERRIMACK* at Hampton Roads on March 9, 1862. Word reached General Burnside, who had established a position in New Bern, that Confederates were building ironclads in Norfolk and intended to bring them south through the Dismal Swamp and Currituck Canals. Therefore, General Burnside ordered General J. L. Reno to move *troops to South Mills and blow up the locks* there, then proceed to the Currituck Canal and destroy its banks.

General Reno moved his command of 3,000 men from



Roanoke Island on April 17 and transported them by water to Elizabeth City. From there, they marched north to South Mills, accompanied by three wagons loaded with explosive materials to be used on the locks. After marching all night long, Reno’s men encountered the Third Georgia Regiment, commanded by Colonel A. R. Wright, about three miles below the locks at the edge of the woods at the north end of Sawyers Lane. On April 19th for five hours the 750 defenders withstood all Union assaults. Running low on ammunition, Wright withdrew his troops to a new position about a mile away. Unaccustomed to the oppressive heat, the Union forces did not pursue and, in fact, rapidly withdrew back to their boats, leaving their dead and wounded behind and the Canal intact.

Despite claims to the contrary, The Battle of South Mills was a failure for Federal troops because their mission was not accomplished even though the smaller Confederate army retreated.

Soon afterwards, however, Norfolk surrendered on May 10, 1862, and Union troops transported goods on the Canal. In a “Letter from the Secretary of the Treasury in reference to the interests of the Government in the Dismal Swamp Canal”, Leroy G. Edwards, Collector of the Tolls for the Dismal Swamp Canal Company, testified: “In the latter part of the summer of 1862, the U. S. forces took possession of the work. They gave us much trouble...Goods were carried through under military permits. I asked payment of tolls, which were refused”.

During this time, a sizable number of Confederate sympathizers and deserted soldiers were in hiding in the Swamp, making periodic raids on Federal boats. Official Army records document on December 5th, 1863, Brigadier General Edward A. Wild led forces from Norfolk to South Mills and Camden Court House to capture these rebel forces. However, the two small steamers carrying supplies for his forces were by “some unaccountable blunder...sent astray through the wrong canal”, and did not catch up with General Wild until he arrived at Elizabeth City. Rebels eluded this expedition in the vastness of the swamp. All settlements discovered on this march were burned and confiscated, innocent men were hanged and women were taken as hostages. North Carolina Governor Zebulon B. Vance referred to General Wild’s actions as a “disgrace to the manhood of the age. Not being able to capture soldiers, they war upon defenseless women. Great God! What an outrage”. The Union forces returned to Norfolk on December 24th, leaving a trail of destruction behind them.

Following the surrender at Appomattox on April 9, 1865, the Canal was returned to its owners in a deplorable condition.