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NAVIGATING FREEDOM, CREATING SUSTAINABILITY: MARRONAGE IN THE DISMAL SWAMP OF VIRGINIA AND NORTH CAROLINA (CA 1800 – 1850)

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Abstract¹

The phenomenon of fugitive slave communities, or marronage, is immediately associated with Jamaica, Suriname, Brazil, and parts of South America, as well as Florida and Louisiana in the United States.² A lesser-known history is that of the Dismal Swamp Maroons in an ecosystem abutting the southeastern border of Virginia and the northeastern border of North Carolina. To this geography, self-emancipated African slaves, members of indigenous communities, and whites fleeing cruel indentures escaped to create a safe haven in the midst of the Tidewater slavocracy. The inhabitants of the swamp were feared by slaveholders as rebels and threats to their authority, yet to the women, men and children who chose this harsh environment instead of bondage, the Dismal Swamp³ became a landscape of freedom.

This environmental study explores the history of the Dismal Swamp Maroons and suggests that the thinking, resource imperatives and social interactions linking freedom and green might hold insights for those seeking solutions to environmental problems that can help improve the contemporary lives of society's most marginalized communities in ways that are both sustainable and just.

Keywords: Dismal Swamp Maroons, maroon traditional ecological knowledge, indigenous environmental knowledge, environmental stewardship, community operational research

¹ This paper is an expanded version of the author's presentation for the European Working Group for Operational Research and Development (EWG-ORD) held at *Facultad de Ciencias Matemáticas de la Universidad Complutense de Madrid* in July of 2018.

² The focus of this study is marronage in the Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina (circa 1800-1850). The author acknowledges the existence of similar communities throughout the upper and lower southern United States and along its eastern seaboard. Further investigation will expand this topic regionally, nationally and globally.

³ The terms *Dismal Swamp* and *Great Dismal Swamp* are used throughout this study interchangeably as found in geography, history and literature about this region.



Fig 1 Lake Drummond at Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge in Virginia.

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[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Photo_of_the_Week_-_Great_Dismal_Swamp_National_Wildlife_Refuge_\(VA\)_4578425529.jpg#metadata](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Photo_of_the_Week_-_Great_Dismal_Swamp_National_Wildlife_Refuge_(VA)_4578425529.jpg#metadata) (accessed 10/28/19)

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Dismal Swamp Maroons crosses boundaries of political freedom and environmental stewardship, linking freedom and green. This environmental study does not argue that Dismal Swamp Maroons saw themselves as environmental stewards or proponents of environmental justice within the realm we know today. It does argue that by virtue of their response to the challenges of their environment to successfully remain free, Dismal Swamp Maroons created a new position and a new way of understanding environmental stewardship.

The study of Dismal Swamp marronage offers a broad-based understanding of heroic human adaptability to ecosystems thought uninhabitable. How was this accomplished? Maroons achieved and maintained their autonomy by reliance on strong societal and familial ties, and the practice of traditional ecological knowledge systems (TEK).⁴

This environmental study originated as a presentation to the European Working Group for Operational Research Development.⁵ It proposed a new perspective on marronage in the Dismal Swamp as a river culture. This study has implications for thinking through OR models designed for marginalized communities today. Those populations are overwhelmingly people of color, in similar riparian habitats. The working group explored global concerns for sustainable

⁴ Traditional Ecological Knowledge (TEK); or Indigenous Knowledge (IK); Indigenous Technical Knowledge (ITK); and Traditional Knowledge (TK) refer to: "A body of knowledge maintained by a native people, often over a number of centuries in response to specific environmental and social stimuli" (Mirovitskaya and Ascher 2001). Additionally, traditional knowledge (TK) (or other coterminous terms such as indigenous knowledge and local knowledge) generally refer to the long-standing information, wisdom, traditions and practices of certain indigenous peoples or local communities (Kothari 2007). Dismal Swamp Maroons were local self-identifying communities.

⁵ Operations research (OR) is a discipline that uses advanced analytical methods (largely mathematical) in problem solving. It has been termed a management science (quality management, knowledge management, data analytics, etc.) that relies heavily on technical applications to problem solving.



development.⁶ The mathematical methodologies associated with traditional OR practices have been challenged for not considering the social components necessary in solving environmental challenges. Additionally, recent studies towards *new thinking*⁷ in bridging OR and sustainable environmental research promote the practice of meaningful community engagement (Community OR) to better understand challenges faced by marginalized communities. This participatory methodology seeks to deter communities' further marginalization by well-intended practitioners (Midgley and Reynolds 2004).

This study sheds light on an aspect of United States and global environmental history seldom discussed: the environmental history, practice and values of the enslaved. Consider the worst conditions, in which enslaved peoples' survival strategies created adaptable behaviors that in turn positioned them as environmental stewards.



Fig 2 Aerial view of Lake Drummond at the center of the Dismal Swamp Virginia USA
Wikimedia Commons

https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lake_drummond_virginia_usa.png

(accessed 10//28/19)

⁶ The term *sustainable development* (SD) first came to vogue in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*. It was here defined as development that "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Kothari 2007).

⁷ *New thinking* in OR refers to the added component of "meaningful engagement of communities, whatever form that may take" (Midgley et al 2017). Community OR expands the technical methodologies of OR to include social considerations for a better outcome in the decision making that concerns that community.



WHO WERE THE DISMAL SWAMP MAROONS?

History and geography

It is necessary to define the terms *wetland*, *marsh* and *swamp* within their historical and present-day contexts as key to this environmental study. Each denotes low-lying land, partially or at some time inundated with water. In the popular vernacular, the terms *wetland* and *marsh* do not carry the negative political connotations of the term *swamp*. The Dismal Swamp, for example, was historically considered the undesirable landscape of fugitive slaves, renegade whites and violent remnants of Tidewater indigenous nations.

It was to this beautiful and foreboding place that many slaves came. The inhospitable nature of the swamp and the widespread belief that blacks' constitutions were more suited for its conditions led to a larger number of blacks than whites living and working in the swamp. (Blogger 1982)

The Dismal Swamp, an area once estimated to have exceeded a million acres, forms a natural border between southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina (Leaming 1995). The Dismal Swamp Maroons were a diverse community of women, men and children bound by a common determination to live free within the Tidewater slavocracy. White colonists' inability to survive the challenges of the swamp's ecosystem, did not mean it was uninhabitable. Tuscarora, Nanticoke, Powhatan and Croatoan are a few of the indigenous nations that inhabited the Dismal Swamp thousands of years before the first white Tidewater colonists arrived in the mid-seventeenth century (Sayers 2014).

Historically, Tidewater indigenous nations had long hunted and fished in the swamp. The ecosystem supported a large number of wildlife: snakes, bears, wildcats, raccoons, opossums, rabbits, squirrels, quail and turkeys. The small islands within its recesses on higher ground could sustain small crop farming. Additionally, domesticated cattle and hogs often wandered into the swamp from nearby farms. These also contributed to the food supply. Species of black gum, red maple and sweet gum trees were in abundance. The cyprus and juniper trees formed the bulk of the swamp's commercial timber and logging businesses (Blogger 1982). Contrary to popular historical beliefs, freedom seekers did not run off into nothingness.

In 1728 William Byrd II, a wealthy Virginia slaveholder, surveyed the Dismal Swamp for potential profit from its vast timber resources. The more important goal of Byrd's expedition was the establishment of a political border between North Carolina and Virginia. Until that time none existed between the two colonies (Leaming 1995). During the expedition his description of "a miserable morass where nothing can inhabit [...]" is perhaps Byrd's most quoted comment on the landscape. Throughout *The History* he refers to the swampland as "The Dismal," which became its colloquial name, the Dismal Swamp (Byrd 1728). Byrd proposed using slave labor to dig a canal to transport the swamp's rich timber resources.

In 1763, The Dismal Swamp Land Company, with George Washington as a key investor, built a series of ditches to facilitate exploitation of its natural resources (Sayers 2014). The company's larger scheme of draining the wetland for farming failed and was abandoned. It took twelve years to complete the main canal, which was originally six feet wide, four feet deep and twenty-two miles long. The Dismal Swamp Canal remains the oldest operating man-made canal in the United States.

In 2004, an archeological dig was begun (and is still ongoing) that unearthed the remnants of permanent Maroon settlements in the Dismal Swamp. Very little archeological work had been done prior to that time. This has greatly impacted the Dismal Swamp Maroons' historical record (Sayers 2014).

Borderland, hinterland and the plantation landscape

A look at the landscape of slavery offers a window into how freedom seekers understood their natural environment as a liberating space. Consider the plantation grounds: a great house, generally on raised land with carefully manicured lawns; gardens in the forefront and surround areas; the slave shacks in the background, sometimes miles away (Smith 2007). Slaveholders, obsessed with imprinting their authority on every aspect of their chattels' lives, used the land and its architecture to reinforce hierarchy of place. Their disdain for the disruptive ugliness of slave labor on this idyllic landscape often placed slave cabins on the underdeveloped borders of the plantation. Tidewater slaveholders



underestimated enslaved peoples' relationship to their environment. Their aspirations for freedom knew no tangible boundaries. Enslaved women and men crossed the plantation borders and hinterlands. They formed complex relationships between those remaining in bondage and those who fled. Witnessing the selling of children; separation of spouses; indiscriminate and cruel abuse of men, women and children in a systematic attempt to turn human beings into expendable commodities, forced many to intervene and take back their lives. Women and men faced hard decisions in choosing freedom while sustaining familial ties with those still in bondage and all the risks therein. Yet, these ties existed in strength and number.

The maroon communities represented one of the gravest threats to the planters [...]. these communities undermined the master's authority and emboldened other slaves to join them. (Blassingame 1972)

This constant back and forth movement was largely ignored by planters as long as it did not interfere with economic productivity. Was this hubris on the part of slaveholders to so grossly underestimate the intelligence and determination of women and men who sought freedom?

Moreover, Virginia's and North Carolina's intricate intercostal tributaries, coupled with the impenetrability of the woods and wetlands, gave opportunity to Tidewater freedom seekers. Maroons created and sustained communities in the midst of the Tidewater slavocracy:

Inside the Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina there were settlements of escaped slaves, not merely guerrilla bands but true settlements in that they were permanent, and included women and children. Over a span of more than two generations before the Civil War this was alleged by many American and foreign visitors to the region around the Swamp and by other authors. Characteristically these statements were to the effect that some two thousand escaped slaves and their children had long lived within the Dismal Swamp. Further details were rarely given. (Leaming 1995)

Slaveholders' lack of acknowledgement of Maroons' successful autonomy did little to diminish their power as unchallenged beacons of freedom to those still in bondage.



Fig 3 *Osman*, a escaped slave in the North Carolina part of the Great Dismal Swamp, by David Hunter Strother, originally published in *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, 1856

Wikimedia Commons

<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:GreatDismalSwampMaroon1856.jpg>

(accessed 10/29/19)



Popular perceptions

The fear of bands of *negroes lurking and lying out*⁸ roaming the borderland and hinterland was fueled by popular fiction of the period. *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, printed *Osman, a Great Dismal Swamp Maroon* (1856) by David Hunter Strother. *Osman*, was depicted as an armed, half-clothed, wild man coming out of the tangled vines of the swamp. That same year Harriet Beecher Stowe, published *Dred; A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*. Dred is a maroon who advocates slave rebellion. The character, though heroic, is doomed because to preach freedom is treason. *Dred* was loosely based on the lives of freedom fighters Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner.⁹

These popular, yet false representations of Maroons as violent subhumans were seen as a direct result of their lives in the hidden recesses of the Dismal Swamp. The images saturated the white population's imagination and heightened their fears of *lurking negroes* under cover of the swamp's menacing and impenetrable vegetation. They fueled already festering hostilities. Under the pretext of ridding the swamp of fugitives, renegades and criminals, Tidewater slaveholders and their less wealthy cohorts armed themselves and with the help of regional militias (Aptheker 1939) and attempted to *clean out the swamp*. Maroon women, men and children were murdered and their settlements destroyed. Maroons fought back.

LABOR AS A LIBERATING PRACTICE

I am glad to say also that numbers of my colored brethren now escape from slavery; some by purchasing their freedom, others by quitting [...] (Grandy 1844)

The Dismal Swamp offered an alternative to human bondage in several ways: a safe haven for those who chose to live free within the Tidewater; a pathway for those fleeing the area through the underground railroad; and a means of labor to buy one's freedom if so desired. Captain Moses Grandy (ca 1790 – ca 1850), an enslaved man from Edenton, North Carolina, chose labor.

Captain Grandy navigated the waterways of the Dismal Swamp as a shingle and timber barge captain. His labor bought his freedom and that of several members of his family. Captain Grandy's autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy, Late a Slave in the United States of America*, is a unique primary source. He details the harsh conditions of slave labor, the small opportunities for refuge and his self-sufficiency in working the swamp's waterways.

The labor is very severe. The ground is often very 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 1844)

Many maroon and enslaved men and women died in the process of building the canals and ditches in the swamp. Captain Grandy's autobiography gives us access to the geography, challenges, labor and determination of one who knew the landscape intimately.

The swamp offered a safe haven from punishment and frustration. The swamp's dark brown sulfuric waters were believed to have healing properties (Leaming 1995). Captain Grandy describes absenting himself in a lighter¹⁰ to the other side of Drummond's Lake to recover from an illness:

⁸ The terms *negro*, *negros* and *negroes* are used in their period context from both popular and historical reference. Additionally the phrase *lurking and lying out* is within this same context: "And whereas, many times, slaves run away and lie out, hid or lurking in swamps, woods, and other obscure places" cited in "An Act Concerning Servants and Slaves 1705," *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia from the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619*.

⁹ David Hunter Strother, aka Porte Crayon, was a popular illustrator and author of travelogues. Harriet Beecher Stowe, the author of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, penned the novel *Dred* in response to criticism from African Americans and abolitionists that the character Uncle Tom supported the image of the docile, illiterate slave. Through art and fiction, both authors influenced popular notions of what maroons were like.

¹⁰ A lighter is a type of flat-bottomed barge used to transport goods and passengers.



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 I built myself a little hut, and had provisions brought to me as opportunity served. (Grandy 1844)

The system of hiring out skilled slaves was widely practiced in the Tidewater region. Slaveholders could increase their wealth, and slaves might manage to keep a small amount of their earnings for themselves. Occupations included ironsmiths, draymen, nailers and tinsmiths. Skilled boat pilots, like Captain Grandy, were in high demand (Sayers 2014). He, in turn, hired men to help him ship the shingle barges out of the Dismal Swamp. These men would have been maroons. It was often remarked that the enslaved men who worked as shingle getters produced more material than possible for one man, often with the help of a shadow force of maroon laborers (Aptheker 1939; Blogger 1982; Sayers 2014).

Canal camp overseers turned a blind eye to those working for them, interested only in the end result of profit. Poor landless whites,¹¹ low on the economic totem contributed to this workforce, finding commonality with Maroons as social outlyers. The Dismal Swamp offered a liberating space for them also.

Like Captain Grandy, many enslaved and free men worked the docks and navigated the waterways of Tidewater as sailors, ferryman, longshoremen, draymen and in related occupations. Their close contact with a transient, multi-ethnic population leads to speculation about their communication and knowledge of events beyond the region. We can assume that many languages other than English, including those from their African origins, were spoken among women and men, both slave and free.

The Negroes have a wonderful art of communicating intelligence among themselves; it will run several hundreds of miles in a week or a fortnight[...] (Aptheker 1943)

In the period of 1800-1831, a series of pivotal, well-planned slave revolts crossed the borders between North Carolina and Virginia: Gabriel's Rebellion (1800), Sancho's Rebellion or The Easter Plot (1802), Denmark Vesey's Revolt (1822) and Nat Turner's Revolt (1831) (Aptheker 1943). Each rebellion had connections to the Dismal Swamp and vicinity for strategy, refuge or battleground.¹²

Captain Moses Grandy's autobiography remains the definitive primary source cited by historians and researchers of the nineteenth century Dismal Swamp. Moreover, it is the only known autobiography to date from the perspective of a formerly enslaved man who labored on the swamp's waterways and knew its ecosystem intimately.

MAROON ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP AS LIBERATING PRACTICE

The history of Dismal Swamp Maroons illuminates a co-dependency on nature born out of their determination to remain free. That freedom depended solely on their successful adaptation to the swamp's ecosystem. In creating and sustaining this relationship, Dismal Swamp Maroons created a new position of environmental stewardship linking free and green.

The Maroon settlements of the Dismal Swamp no longer exist. Their communities disbanded with the ending of United States slavery in 1865. Yet their survival for hundreds of years can offer a broad understanding of human capability to adapt to ecosystems thought uninhabitable. Dismal Swamp Maroons relied on the same survival strategies, reciprocities and strong familial and societal ties practiced by indigenous communities today.

Maroons would have developed flexible and responsible environmental strategies based on indigenous and traditional ecological knowledge practices: herbal medicines, biological pest control and natural systems of intercropping and irrigation as practiced by indigenous communities today (Mirovitskaya and Ascher 2001). Additionally, Dismal Swamp Maroons sustained themselves through hunting, gardening and aquatic-based occupations such as crabbing, shrimping, fishing and oystering native to coastal Tidewater (Blogger 1982).

¹¹ Note: this population historically was overwhelmingly of Irish descent (Leaming 1995) and will be a topic of expanded research.

¹² The author acknowledges the upheaval associated with slave revolts throughout the Atlantic World during this period, however, the specific scope of this study is the direct relationship of the Dismal Swamp's ecosystem as cover for the genius of rebellion in the Tidewater. This is an ongoing investigation and will continue to broaden its focus.



Fig 4 Maroons of Eastern Jamaica (c1900) New York Public Library Digital Collections. <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47df-8d42-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99> (accessed 10/29/19)

Jamaican Windward Maroons as a parallel community

We can look at the present-day Jamaican Windward Maroons as a surviving indigenous community. Both the Jamaican Windward Maroons and the Dismal Swamp Maroons are river cultures. The Nature Conservancy of Jamaica asked the Maroons to share their knowledge as partners in a study of their traditional systems of water resource management:

The Jamaican Windward Maroons are a continuous link with pre-colonial Jamaica and have a more than 300-year legacy of intimacy with forest and aquatic ecosystems and communal ownership of these resources [...] The main premise is that the Maroon's history of autonomy, semi-isolation and dependence on local natural resources would have fostered home-grown natural resource management knowledge, systems and traditions. The study started with the prospect of uncovering an indigenous Maroon freshwater conservation ethic and values that can inform and guide the management of habitats in the national park and the rest of the island. (Kimberly 2007)

Further investigation connecting Maroon environmental history and present-day conditions in the remaining Dismal Swamp Nature Refuge will raise questions regarding gaps in conservation, aggressive deforestation, fires and the loss of acreage to industrial development.

LINKING HISTORY, COMMUNITY AND GREEN

In thinking through a model that might represent this environmental study, I submit the following design that allows adaptation to many circumstances:



Fig 5 Model linking history, community and green

History: The environmental history of the Dismal Swamp dates thousands of years starting with its first Native American inhabitants and later Maroon settlements documented from the seventeenth century. Maroon sustainable practices developed over long periods of time and mirror those of communities today in similar riparian habitats. Traditional ecological knowledge practices have historically been responses to specific environmental and societal stimuli (Mirovitskaya and Ascher 2001). In the case of the Dismal Swamp Maroons, that stimulus was freedom.

Community Knowledge: Maroon's hard-won independence was achieved through survival strategies based on the indigenous knowledge of Tidewater Native Americans, the endogenous knowledge enslaved Africans brought with them to the region and the blended knowledge systems practiced by enslaved African Americans in response to their environment and their contact with Europeans. The successful longevity of Dismal Swamp Maroon communities was grounded in TEK survival strategies practiced globally today.

Environmental Challenges: The most critical and ongoing environmental challenge faced by Dismal Swamp Maroons was freedom versus slavery. Maroons mastered their inhospitable environment as a requisite for freedom. Their history reflects the absolute worst human conditions. Yet freedom seekers' determination created adaptable behaviors that in turn positioned them as environmental stewards. This history suggests a way of looking at environmental challenges faced by marginalized communities today, overwhelmingly populations of people of color, in similar riparian habitats.

Community Operational Research: Centering community knowledge as the focal point between history and green offers a holistic approach to finding solutions to environmental challenges. Community Operational Research is a participatory practice based on meaningful engagement with communities (Midgley et al 2017). The goal is to seek collaborative solutions to those problems that impact the contemporary lives of society's most marginalized communities in ways that are respectful, sustainable and just.

What are the Environmental Lessons Learned?

The UN Declaration on Indigenous Peoples, endorsed by the UN Human Rights Council in June 2006 with a recommendation for the UN General Assembly to adopt it recognizes "that respect for indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices contributes to sustainable and equitable development and proper management of the environment." (Kothari 2007)



Let us consider:

- 1) The history of the Dismal Swamp Maroons offers an incredible example of the human will to successfully adapt to environmental challenges as a solution to eliminating one of the worst imaginable conditions – human bondage.
- 2) How did Dismal Swamp Maroons accomplish this? The successful autonomy achieved by these freedom takers was grounded in a combination of blended traditional ecological and indigenous knowledges.
- 3) Today much of the Dismal Swamp has been lost to aggressive deforestation, fires and neglect of the canals' infrastructures. How much of this can we contribute to an unconscious and lingering lack of respect for its original inhabitants? How might this have affected the ecosystem's conservation?
- 4) TEK is not static. It allows for innovative and flexible use of its knowledges for problem solving and adaptable environmental practices that can continually benefit indigenous communities and the larger external communities when respectfully coupled with scientific methodologies. Within the scope of this initial study, we viewed Dismal Swamp Maroons as an extinct community and the Jamaican Windward Maroons as an extant community.
- 5) Perhaps the basic underlying lesson of this study points to having respect for the traditional and indigenous knowledges of maroon communities past and present



Fig 6 Great Dismal Swamp, National Wildlife Refuge, North Carolina and Virginia
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Great_Dismal_Swamp/about.html

(accessed 10/30//2019)

This environmental study proposes a first step in opening a discussion of the history of marronage in the Dismal Swamp as an environmental history. Further investigation will build on this initial study and broaden its scope to include a larger environmental and historical context.

CONCLUSION

This environmental study proposes an alternative view of the history of Dismal Swamp marronage. Historically branded as outlyers, violent fugitives and subhuman criminals, Dismal Swamp Maroons stand as a testament to the human will. Their autonomy was grounded in a deep understanding of their environment. This study does not promote the idea that Maroons of antebellum Tidewater saw themselves as environmental stewards as we use the term today. Yet their survival strategies and co-dependency on the swamp's ecosystem, shaped a particular kind of environmental stewardship. That relationship coupled green and free. It is estimated that over hundreds of years the settlements of



the Dismal Swamp Maroons numbered in the thousands. Nevertheless, this remains a largely fragmented and under-documented history.¹³ Perhaps we can best remember these freedom takers as early proponents of environmental justice. Their ecological footprint, though faint, is a tribute to their adaptation to the natural world to hide in plain sight.

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¹³ This study acknowledges that in the last ten years there has been increased interest in the history of this community brought about through the ongoing archeological studies of Professor Daniel Sayers started in 2004.