

The Ghosts of the Great Dismal Swamp

By John Tidwell

Legend has it that in the 17th Century a storm blew a French warship loaded with doubloons off course. It sought shelter up Virginia's Elizabeth River, in a huge, forbidding swamp. Pursued by the British, the Frenchmen hid their treasure somewhere among the swamp's giant juniper and cypress trees. Today locals say on moonless nights you can hear the restless spirits of the Frenchmen searching for their lost gold among the misty fens and thickets of the Great Dismal Swamp.

Vast and ancient, sprawling defiantly across the borders of Virginia and North Carolina, the Great Dismal is one of the largest natural areas on the East Coast. Encompassing some 107,000 acres it is actually the largest of three 'Dismal Swamps' in the Tidewater region, and the northernmost of a family of federally protected wetlands that include the Florida Everglades, the Okefenokee in Georgia, and the Congaree and Four Holes swamps of South Carolina. Like many of America's great wilderness areas, the Dismal Swamp has been exploited, misused and stripped of much of its natural wealth. It's been host to roughnecks, poets, fugitives and warring armies. Yet, as one explores its waterways today, the Great Dismal's serene beauty has remained undimmed by human history.

My canoe moves silently through water the color of espresso. I put into the main canal of the Swamp, launching from a public parking lot-cum-boat-ramp off Virginia's Interstate-17. A few paddle-strokes and the world is transformed: A river otter glides noiselessly across the 50-foot wide canal before sounding in one smooth movement. A wounded blue-green dragonfly with a wingspan as large as my hand flails on the surface and then is yanked below in a splash. An ancient-looking turtle, probably a Carolina slider, pretends to be part of a stump and then plops like a stone into the water as I approach.

The only denizens that aren't shy are small yellow horseflies with rainbow eyes that look like groovy California shades. Festooned with flowers and 85 species of songbirds each spring, the Great Dismal doesn't seem *dismal* in the least. In the 1600s when English settlers first explored the Virginia lowlands, the word *dismal* actually meant *swamp* and the two words were used interchangeably. But its connotation was always something dangerous and foul. Writing in the 1720s Virginia's Col. William Byrd II echoed the attitudes of his day when he described the Great Dismal as "*a horrible desart ...having vapours which infest the air and cause ague and other distempers to the neighboring inhabitants.*"

Some thought the swamp was too poisonous for anything to live there, while others said it harbored things like lions, alligators, demons and ghosts. However, such fantasies didn't stop people from venturing in. Even Byrd himself led a survey team into the Great Dismal in 1728 to settle a political feud between Virginia and North Carolina over the exact location of their mutual border. It was there that he thought of a plan to drain the swamp and turn it into a vast hemp farm. He also wrote about connecting the southern Pasquotank River with its northern cousin, the Elizabeth, through several long canals carved through the heart of the Dismal Swamp. Such ideas were typical of the 18th Century: The best thing to do with a wilderness was tame it into a civilized, profitable business. But it would be another hundred years before anyone turned Byrd's ideas for the swamp into reality.

As I paddle south along this oldest of operating American waterways, a fluid corridor of with leafy walls suddenly opens up to my right, leading off ruler-straight into the distance. The Feeder Ditch, a rather ignominious name for such a lovely route, has a magic of its own, if you are sensitive to it. This is an 18th Century way to travel. Once you put your canoe in the water and head down the canal, the modern world melts away and you are in a realm of trees and water that probably feels very similar to what William Byrd or George Washington would have known. The three-mile Feeder leads directly to the freshwater heart of the swamp, a two by three-mile bowl called Lake Drummond, which lies at the center of the Great Dismal. The lake is named after North Carolina's 17th

Century Governor William Drummond, who, legend says, got lost in the swamp with a group of hunters. All perished but Drummond, who eventually staggered out ragged, hungry and full of descriptions of a vast lake deep in the swamp. In reality, bad luck seemed to follow Drummond. He was ousted from the Governorship by the Carolina Lords Proprietors in 1667, joined firebrand Nathaniel Bacon in his rebellion against the rule of Virginia Governor William Berkeley and was hanged ten years later when the insurgency collapsed. Drummond's lake, however, endured.

Drummond's great-grandson times eight, author Bland Simpson, recommends the swamp in early spring or mid-October when the forest is ablaze with autumnal colors and the biting bugs have gone. Simpson grew up near the North Carolina edge of the swamp, and when he isn't teaching creative writing at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, or playing with the Carolina Bluegrass band *The Red Clay Ramblers*, he can be found deep in the Great Dismal savoring its unique appeal. In his book *The Great Dismal, a Carolinian's Swamp Memoir*, Simpson recounted many adventures while camping at the Feeder Ditch spillway, which is run by the Corps of Engineers. Then as now you could pull your canoe or small boat across to the higher water with the spillway's electric winch, as long as your craft weighed less than a ton. Heading up toward the Lake, the last quarter mile of the Feeder seems wilder. Limbs overhang the Ditch and I must navigate around large fallen logs that lie like alligators in the water. At the end of the Ditch the sky opens up in silent brightness, flanked by majestic gnarled cypress trees and the world once again is transformed.

Lake Drummond feels vast, ancient and dreamlike. In the open water the yellow flies at last depart, and the huge cypresses form Cretaceous-looking forest islands in the black, shallow water. Millions of years ago the Great Dismal Swamp was at the bottom of the ocean, and the high sandy ridge along its western edge, that we call the Suffolk Escarpment, was the coastline. The sea dropped 300 feet during the last Ice Age and a forest grew where waves once crashed. When the glaciers melted again and the sea level rose to its current height, the forest became a wetland, with cold-weather Jack pines and spruce giving way to temperate junipers, gums and cypress. The acidic sap and juices

from these trees prevented fallen vegetation from decaying and for millennia it piled up as peat. Today a layer of peat some 10 feet thick is estimated to cover the swamp. It also turned the water dark brown. Interestingly, European colonists found the tea-colored water stayed fresh longer and sailors used casks of Dismal Swamp water for long sea voyages because it didn't go stale. It's even said that Admiral Matthew Perry had barrels of Swamp water aboard his ships when he made his *Pacific Overtures* trip to Japan in 1853.

Bland Simpson remembers nights out on Lake Drummond drinking rye whisky and watching the full moon rise in ghostly splendor over the dark waters. He says there used to be about two dozen small stilt-legged cabins around the lake in the 1920s and '30s: 'hunt clubs' where locals and their politicians would shoot bear or deer and drink 'swamp cocktails' of juniper water and moonshine. Fishing for crappie and bullhead catfish is still reputed to be excellent. One old swamper named Capt. Bill Crockett used to guide visitors out onto the lake in the '50s and sing from memory the famous *Ballad of the Lake of the Dismal Swamp* that Irish poet Sir Thomas Moore penned in 1803. Based on what Moore said was an old Indian legend, the ballad tells of a young man driven mad by his sweetheart's death, who vainly looks for her ghost on Lake Drummond:

*“ And she's gone to the Lake
Of the Dismal Swamp
where all night long
by a firefly lamp
she paddles her white canoe.”*

Five thousand years ago the swamp and the lake were the rich hunting grounds of native peoples whose trading network reached as far as the Ohio Valley. Dennis Blanton, director of the Center for Archeological Research at the College of William and Mary, has found their hunting bolas, round stones linked by a long tether, all around the swamp and even in Lake Drummond.

Sitting in my canoe among these timeless sunken cypress forests, reflection is easy. A Great Blue Heron steps hesitantly along a fernbank. George Washington slept here. During his survey of the Great Dismal in May 1763, he camped by the shores of this lake and discovered, contrary to popular belief about swamps, that water didn't flow into Drummond's lake – it poured out. The lake itself turned out to be some 20 feet above sealevel. Washington, fresh from leading Virginia's militia in the French & Indian Wars, was turning his energy to enlarging his own lands through speculation. The Great Dismal Swamp must have fired his imagination when he strolled through it some 35 years after Byrd's team had hacked their way across. But where the 1728 'Dismalites' saw a fetid malarial hell, young George the outdoorsman stood among the giant junipers and envisioned a land brimming with possibility, calling it "*a glorious paradise.*"

"Men like Robert "King" Carter and William Byrd had staked out land in the late 17th Century and essentially had given it to themselves through the medium of the government." Explains Charles Royster, professor of History at Louisiana State University, "So Washington's generation thought, 'I want that too. I want to get rich the way they did.'"

If the lake is the beating heart of the swamp, then the scores of canals men dug connecting it to the outside world are its aorta. As I cruise along the north edge of the lake the Washington Ditch silently opens in the foliage like a shimmering pathway into darkness. This shallow canal was the first to cut all the way through the swamp to Lake Drummond and was the start of Washington's grand vision for the swamp. After surveying the Great Dismal, young George wanted to drain the swamp and turn it into a vast plantation. That very year he gathered a group of investors, most of whom were his relatives, and formed two syndicates: *Adventurers for Draining the Great Dismal Swamp* and the less romantic *Dismal Swamp Land Company*. Shortly thereafter the Company bought 40,000 acres of the Northwestern swamp for the equivalent of \$20,000 and began digging the five-mile Washington Ditch, connecting Lake Drummond to the outside world. A small logging settlement was built next to the ditch called Dismal Town, the Company's barracks and headquarters. It was a busy year.

But it wasn't very long before things started going wrong. The swamp was either too wet and drowned everything, or it was too dry and forest fires burned the land black.

Washington tried growing rice in the swamp, but conditions weren't right and it failed. In his comprehensive work, *'The Fabulous History of the Great Dismal Swamp Company'* Charles Royster says that the Adventurers were overly optimistic both about the fertility of the land and how fast they'd turn a profit from it. Royster told me that this kind of risky land speculation was a major force in the American economy of the 1700s. The Ohio River valley, the Piedmont, even the District of Columbia were part of land schemes by the Founding Fathers that often were built more on promises of wealth than actual products.

Faced with failure in the swamp Washington got practical and focused his company on logging the Great Dismal's enormous old-growth thickets of juniper, cedar and cypress. The Dismal Swamp Company went full steam into the lumber business, digging more canals and floating logs out on flat-bottomed barges called 'lighters'. Small towns like the Jericho Mill, which stood beside a 10-mile ditch with the same name, sprang up. One of their best sellers were cedar shingles for roofing. Shingles soon became the 18th Century equivalent of aluminum siding because unlike ordinary wood, cedar didn't rot. By 1795 the Company was cutting well over a million and a half shingles a year, shipping them down the Nansemond River on schooners bound for Philadelphia, Boston and New York. Logging and shingle cutting became the swamp's only crop, selling briskly for well over 150 years.

I beach my canoe at the mouth of Washington Ditch and walk up the wide gravel towpath beside it. Slaves used to push loaded 'lighters' up and down the ditch with long poles, walking along paths like this one. All the canals had them. But today the rice farms, the Jericho mill and old Dismal Town are gone, reclaimed by the swamp. A couple of miles up, the path connects with the Washington Ditch parking lot, where a large metal sign marks the site of Dismal Town. In its place is a boardwalk built by the National Park Service that runs an eighth of a mile into the forest in a semi-circle, letting you enjoy the

swamp's natural beauty without getting muddy feet. Bland Simpson says if you turn off Washington Ditch and follow Lynn Ditch a few miles you will come to a spectacular stand of Junipers, a small reflection of the great shaggy trees Byrd's 'Dismalites' once encountered.

Before the Civil War most of the men who cut timber or shingles for the Company were slaves. They poled slim rafts up the canals or drove two-wheeled mule carts along corduroy '*Gum Roads*' made of gum tree logs sunk in the peat. Many of these men had dug the canals they now worked, and lived in semi-autonomy in shantytowns deep in forest where white men rarely ventured. The Dismal Swamp became their domain.

"There was an understanding between the whites and the blacks." Royster explains, "The blacks would live in the swamp several days a week, and when they provided a certain quota of logs or shingles, the whites were satisfied and left the blacks alone."

But not all blacks who worked in the swamp were slaves. Some saved up and bought their freedom, while others may have been escaped slaves in hiding. According to Tommy Bogger, a historian at Norfolk State University's archives, slaves had been running away to the swamp since the late 1600s. While there is heated debate among scholars as to whether colonies of these runaways were able to survive independently in the swamp, Bogger is convinced that there were small groups that secretly hired themselves out to shingle crews in exchange for food and provisions. No one has any hard evidence either way, but truth or fiction, the idea of escaped slaves living in *maroon* communities in the swamp seized the imagination of Americans. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem in 1842 about *The Slave in the Dismal Swamp*, envisioning a tragic, hunted being living "*like a wild beast in his lair*". Another Northerner inspired by the swamp was Harriet Beecher Stowe. In *Dred: a tale of the Great Dismal Swamp*, her 1856 sequel to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the fictional son of real life insurrectionist Denmark Vessey escapes slavery and takes refuge in the Great Dismal, venting rage and moral righteousness at whites before he is tracked down by slave hunters. Ironically the myths whites created about Dismal Swamp maroons far outlived whatever real ones existed.

The 351-year-old town of Deep Creek, whose lock is the northernmost gateway to the Dismal Swamp Canal, is home to about 2,500 farmers and shipyard workers. Motorcycles, tattoos and NASCAR t-shirts are popular. 150 years ago Deep Creek was a brawny mill town and Saturday night carousing often went into the wee hours with Lumberjacks, riverboatmen and caravan merchants playing card games like 'Sledge' or 'Bluff' for drinks. It was a gritty, vibrant life that was only possible because of the Dismal Swamp Canal. When the idea of a canal connecting the Albemarle Sound with the Chesapeake Bay was first proposed to Washington he was reluctant to plunge into another Dismal Swamp project. But with encouragement from Thomas Jefferson and Patrick Henry he agreed and in 1793, thirty years after his swamp adventures began, the great canal was started. It took 15 years for slaves to dig and when it was finally finished in 1808 the Canal ran 22 miles south from Deep Creek down to South Mills North Carolina. It was little more than a muddy gulch, and to raise the water level the Feeder Ditch was dug in 1812. For 50 years canal traffic gushed up and down the waterway. By the 1830s nearly 200 miles of ditches, towpaths and railroads had been built into the Great Dismal, allowing more people in than ever before. Everything changed after the Civil War. Slate and tin became the roofing material of choice because, unlike cedar, they didn't burn. The Albemarle & Chesapeake, a rival canal to the East, siphoned off shipping commerce. Ignored, the Dismal Swamp Canal fell into disrepair. The swamp's timber industry also declined as old growth stands of juniper and cedar dwindled and in 1899 the Company sold its Great Dismal property to William Nelson Camp for the bargain-basement price of \$76,500. Thirty years later the federal government bought the Canal for \$50,000, nearly seven times what was paid for the swamp.

As I drove along I-17 with my canoe tied to the roof of my car, I came to the intersection of Glencoe Road that locals call Wallacetown. By the water stood the ramshackle remains of the Canal Superintendent's house, the only original Dismal Swamp Company building still in existence. Across the road was a weathered blue house, the plantation home of George and Elizabeth Wallace, one of the oldest and most famous families in the region. In her Civil War diary '*The War Comes to Glencoe*', Mrs. Wallace told how her family

farm became a no-man's land in 1862, occupied by both Union and Confederate armies. Before the War was over the Wallaces would lose both their sons to Federal bullets.

If you stand 515 feet North of the current Virginia-Carolina border, you will be on the original state line before it was moved in 1887. This was also the site of one of the most notorious and colorful places in the swamp. The Lake Drummond Hotel opened by the canal in 1829 straddled the border and advertised itself as catering to “*all purposes of life as eating, drinking, sleeping, marrying and dueling....*” During its 10 years, the 128-foot hotel acquired the name *The Half-Way House* and a wild reputation for duels, trysts and ‘no-questions-asked’ weddings that took advantage of North Carolina’s lenient marriage laws. Evidently, Simpson told me, all you had to do to avoid Virginia law was walk across the hall to North Carolina.

Along these southern roads you often see the remains of 19th Century clapboard farmhouses, overgrown with trees, standing next to the modest tract-homes that are their successors. Small graveyards with weathered headstones sometimes huddle nearby. In 1913 many small towns in Virginia and North Carolina were culturally isolated and people didn’t usually travel to cities like Philadelphia and New York. So when a retired farmer from Michigan decided to build a showboat to ply the backwaters of the lowcountry, it was a sensation. James Adams’ Floating Theatre was a huge, tug-pulled barge that could sit an audience of 500 and boasted its own plays, performers and playwrights. C. Richard Gillespie, a Maryland drama professor who wrote the first biography of the James Adams Floating Theatre, says it was part of the burgeoning Repertoire Theatre movement, playing 6 different melodramas a week with a ribald Vaudeville act after each show. During its 27 year run, people up and down the Dismal Swamp Canal came from miles around to see the spectacle. Adams’ fame grew and in the mid-1920s the popular author Edna Ferber visited the Floating Theatre several times, gathering research and stories for a novel she later called *Showboat*.

“It’s because of that boat that we have the novel and the musical and that wonderful Jerome Kern music.” Says Bland Simpson; “There would be no *Old Man River*

If Edna Ferber hadn't come and ridden on it."

After they bought the swamp, the Camp Company and its later incarnation, Union Camp worked the Great Dismal's timber until it too decided the swamp wasn't worth the effort and the risk of fire. On February 19th, 1973, George Washington's Birthday, Union Camp donated its Great Dismal Swamp holdings to the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service with help from the Nature Conservancy. Now a National Wildlife Refuge, the Great Dismal attracts more than 10,000 visitors each year. Its venerable canal is on the National Register of Historic Places and is a National Civil Engineering Landmark. After surviving 210 years of human exploitation, the ancient swamp can at last reclaim its lands and be what it is. That wild beauty is what people seek there today. Bland Simpson echoed this sentiment when he wrote about Lake Drummond in early springtime, when it probably looks very much the way Washington first saw it:

"The Lake is pink-rimmed in spring, when all the maple in the marge of the morass put forth like cherry and the cypress that still stand in the shallows are the lightest and most feathery green. Fetter-bush hangs abloom at the mouth of Jericho Ditch, bullfrogs ga-unk there where the Lake just slides off into the Swamp and thrushes sing their looping, liquid songs." H

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