

# Dismal Freedom: A History of the Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp

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## Review

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**Morris, J. Brent.** *Dismal Freedom: A History of the Maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp*. The University of North Carolina Press, 2022. HARDCOVER. \$29.95 ISBN 9781469668253 pp. 256

J. Brent Morris's *Dismal Freedom* is a welcome addition to the history of enslavement, self-emancipation, and maroons in the United States. Morris excavates the lives and communities of the people who inhabited the Dismal Swamp from European settlement through the Civil War. The Great Dismal Swamp stretched for over 2,000 acres across Virginia and North Carolina and presented a great impediment to English settlers' desires to tame the land. At the same time, this seemingly impregnable morass became a refuge for marginalized people, including poor white indentured servants, Indigenous people, and enslaved people. As slavery became firmly entrenched in the South, the Dismal Swamp beckoned to enslaved people as a beacon of freedom. *Dismal Freedom* makes two major interventions. Drawing on new archaeological evidence, Morris demonstrates that maroon communities in the swamp were far larger and in existence for much longer than historians previously thought. The raiding activities, attempted rebellions, and mere existence of these maroons assisted in ultimately bringing about the demise of slavery.

Historians have defined *marronage* in a variety of ways, as its form varied over time, space, and location. According to Morris, the diversity of experiences of the maroons of the Dismal Swamp do not easily fit into the categories historians have used to analyze maroons. To conceptualize the experiences of Dismal Swamp maroons, Morris defines a maroon as "someone who has self-extricated from enslavement, or is born to maroon parents, and lives in defiance of the laws of the enslavers that would limit their freedom" (5). This broad definition and emphasis on the *act* of marooning allows Morris to capture the "expansiveness of maroon life" from those who fled from slave labor camps temporarily, to those who spent the entirety of their lives within the Dismal Swamp (5).

*Dismal Freedom* is organized into five chronological chapters spanning the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries. Chapters 1 and 2 trace the settlement of Virginia and North Carolina around the Dismal Swamp. The swamp served as a refuge for indentured servants, Indigenous people fleeing from the Tuscarora War, and enslaved people. Chapter 2 also details early efforts to tame the swamp by figures such as William Byrd II and George Washington and the Dismal Swamp Company. Chapter 3 examines the raids Dismal Swamp maroons launched during the Revolutionary era. North America did not witness maroon wars akin to those waged in the Caribbean and Central and South America, but Morris argues that “in the aggregate, the chronic maroon skirmishes emanating from the Dismal, often coordinated with wider rebellion plots of enslaved people or military contests in the region, resulted in greater property loss and human casualties than all other North American rebellions of enslaved people in the half century following the American Revolution” (67). The next chapter uses new archaeological evidence along with primary sources to reconstruct the communities maroons cultivated. In the final chapter, Morris traces the role that maroons played in the demise of slavery. The violent suppression of Nat Turner’s rebellion and subsequent passage of stricter laws regarding slavery inhibited the number of people who were able to self-emancipate in the swamp. Nevertheless, the communities established in the swamp persisted. With the arrival of Union troops to the area early in the Civil War, maroons harnessed the skills they had used to survive in the swamp to serve as guides, spies, and soldiers, and deal a death blow to slavery.

Morris draws on an impressive array of primary sources to tell this story, including contemporary newspapers, industrial swamp records, census data, judicial proceedings, letters, slave labor camp records, and colonial and state laws. What is most exciting about the book, however, is the way Morris weaves these documents together with new findings from the Great Dismal Swamp Landscape Study (GDSLS) for which Morris has served as the project historian since 2009. The GDSLS collects archaeological information about the pre-Civil War communities of the Dismal Swamp. The GDSLS has barely scratched the surface of the swamp, surveying less than 1 percent of the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, but what the study has found provides tantalizing information on how “Deep Swamp Maroons” lived. These maroons lived in the furthest recesses of the swamp, cut off from the outside world to safeguard their freedom. At the most thoroughly excavated site, the GDSLS has uncovered ten “significant structures and cultural landscape features” along with a fort and ammunition depot (95). Using

this research from the GDSLS, Morris argues that the maroon population of the swamp likely numbered in the hundreds or potentially thousands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Pairing the findings from the GDSLS with primary sources allows Morris to craft a vivid portrayal of swamp communities, including their trade and communication networks, and their political and religious lives.

Reconstructing the lives and communities of people who were adept at disappearing and hoped to never be found is no small feat, but Morris makes it look easy. He skillfully uncovers the experiences of individuals in the swamp, demonstrates how their self-emancipation weakened the institution of slavery, and reveals how their presence vexed enslavers as it contradicted enslavers' supposed natural superiority by exposing their powerlessness to control enslaved people. *Dismal Freedom* deserves high praise. Morris has written a readable and engaging account of the Dismal Swamp maroons and their contributions to ending slavery.

*Ashley Towle is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Southern Maine and author of African Americans, Death, and the New Birth of Freedom: Dying Free during the Civil War and Reconstruction (2022).*