

Great Dismal Swamp

Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge/New Jersey/Virginia

In the 18th and early 19th centuries, enslaved African Americans worked as excavation crews on several substantial (but unsuccessful) efforts to drain the swamp; they also served on logging crews for a booming forest products industry. Some of them were able to purchase their freedom through such work, while many others escaped into the swamp and established “maroon” settlements of fugitive slaves or used the swamp as a temporary refuge before heading northward.

Through current archaeological investigations, the Service is attempting to identify the locations of work camps and maroon villages. On February 13, 2004, Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge was recognized as part of the National Park Service’s Underground Railroad Network to Freedom, underscoring the significance of the swamp in the struggle to eradicate slavery (Figure 11). The refuge is the first U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service facility, and the first natural landscape, added to this network.

This project encourages heritage tourism, as well as preservation and education efforts that integrate local historical places, museums, and interpretive programs associated with the Underground Railroad into a mosaic of community, regional, and national stories. The swamp has motivated support from other Federal partners, including the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and the National Park Service.



Figure 11. Great Dismal Swamp Historic Marker