



## HNRC Testimony: In Support of The Great Dismal Swamp National Heritage Area Feasibility Study

June 15, 2021

Hello,

My name is Dr. Alexandra Sutton Lawrence, and I am speaking to you today on behalf of the Great Dismal Swamp Stakeholder Collaborative. The Collaborative comprises representatives of more than 35 local and national organizations and communities, among them the Nansemond Indian Nation; the Association for the Study of African-American Life & History (ASALH), Hampton Roads chapter; the City of Suffolk Parks & Recreation; the Izaak Walton League local chapter, Preservation Virginia, and the US Fish & Wildlife Service. The mission of the Collaborative is to strengthen the relationship between cultural, tribal, environmental, and governmental organizations in order to advance activities that protect and respect the Swamp.

I am speaking to you today in support of the proposed Feasibility Study to create a Great Dismal Swamp National Heritage Area. National Heritage Areas are grassroots, community-driven, public-private partnerships designated by Congress for the protection and preservation of resources and stories that are both regionally unique and nationally important. Nothing fits this description better than the Great Dismal Swamp, with its culturally and ecologically significant landscape, its vibrant modern-day communities, and its irreplaceable history.

Among the diverse members of the Collaborative, we all agree that the Great Dismal Swamp is one of the most unique and valuable historical, cultural, and ecological landscapes in the United States. Sitting along the border of southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina, this magnificent place contains some of the last remains of a vast, swampy forest which once spanned more than 1,000,000 acres<sup>1</sup>. Now reduced to a tenth of its original size, its 110,000 acres still work generously to provide space for education, recreation, and enjoyment — as well as health benefits such as clean air, clean water, fire protection, hunting & fishing opportunities, and rich soil for agriculture to the more than 1 million people in the Hampton Roads region.

Designated a national wildlife refuge in 1974, the core of the Great Dismal Swamp contains incredible, unbroken stretches of cypress and cedar forest that house sensitive wildlife populations, including at least 47 different species of mammal like black bears and bobcats. Over 200 species of bird spend at least part of their annual migratory cycle in the Great Dismal Swamp, and nearly 100 species breed on the refuge<sup>2</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> "About the Refuge." US Fish & Wildlife Service. [https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Great\\_Dismal\\_Swamp/about.html](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Great_Dismal_Swamp/about.html)

<sup>2</sup> "Great Dismal Swamp: Wildlife & Habitat." US Fish & Wildlife Service. [https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Great\\_Dismal\\_Swamp/wildlife\\_and\\_habitat/index.html](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Great_Dismal_Swamp/wildlife_and_habitat/index.html)

But the natural bounty of the Great Dismal Swamp isn't its only value – the Swamp has been the backdrop to some of the most profound moments in United States' early history, and has hosted some of our most fascinating and outstanding citizen heroes — many of whose lives are recorded in exceptional narratives, autobiographies, and histories: George Washington (*first President of the United States*), Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*<sup>3</sup>), Moses Grandy (*Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy; Late a Slave in the United States of America*<sup>4</sup>), Elizabeth Bass (*the ancestral mother of the Nansemond Indian Nation, who first met the European settlers on the shores of the Swamp*) and Mary Smith Peake (*mother of education at Hampton University*<sup>5</sup>).

The Swamp is also home to an incredibly rich number of cultural and historical sites, including:

- 1) the ancestral lands and buried artifacts and ancestors of the Nansemond Indian Nation<sup>6 7</sup>;
- 2) the largest known collection of archaeological artifacts from Mid-Atlantic *maroon colonies* – generational communities of people who escaped a slaving society by living hidden in the swamp<sup>8 9</sup>;
- 3) one of the only known water-based stops on the Underground Railroad to Freedom;
- 4) the Dismal Swamp Canal, the oldest still-operating canal in the United States, and one of a young George Washington's first investments in the country<sup>10</sup>. It was dug by hand by enslaved African and African American laborers<sup>11</sup>; their efforts connected the Chesapeake Bay to the Albermarle Sound, and in doing so, laid the foundation for the United States' economic prosperity on the East Coast<sup>12</sup>;
- 5) and last but not least, it is home to an incomparable collection of Early Colonial artifacts, towns, and churches built by Free People of Color whose families navigated an increasingly precarious position in society by retreating toward the Swamp<sup>13</sup>.

---

<sup>3</sup> Jacobs, Harriet, and Julie R. Adams. *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. ProQuest LLC, 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Grandy, Moses. *Narrative of the life of Moses Grandy, late a slave in the United States of America*. Univ of North Carolina Press, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Taylor, Kay Ann. "Mary S. Peake and Charlotte L. Forten: Black teachers during the Civil War and Reconstruction." *The Journal of Negro Education* (2005): 124-137.

<sup>6</sup> Sayers, Daniel O. *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp*. University Press of Florida, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> "The Nansemond of the Great Dismal." Descendants of the Great Dismal.

<https://descendantsofthegreatdismal.com/2016/08/03/the-nansemond-of-the-great-dismal/>

<sup>8</sup> Sayers, Daniel O., P. Brendan Burke, and Aaron M. Henry. "The political economy of exile in the Great Dismal Swamp." *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* 11.1 (2007): 60-97.

<sup>9</sup> Maris-Wolf, Ted. "Hidden in plain sight: Maroon life and labor in Virginia's Dismal Swamp." *Slavery & Abolition* 34.3 (2013): 446-464.

<sup>10</sup> "Dismal Swamp Company." George Washington's Mount Vernon.

<https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/digital-encyclopedia/article/dismal-swamp-company/>

<sup>11</sup> Nevius, Marcus P. *City of Refuge: Slavery and Petit Marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp, 1763-1856*. Vol. 35. University of Georgia Press, 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Royster, Charles. *The fabulous history of the Dismal Swamp Company: A story of George Washington's times*. Knopf, 1999.

<sup>13</sup> Milteer, Warren E. "Life in a Great Dismal Swamp Community: Free People of Color in Pre-Civil War Gates County, North Carolina." *The North Carolina Historical Review* 91.2 (2014): 144-170.

In total, the Swamp has innumerable stories to tell, about the power and resilience of our most virtuous and most widely shared American values: love of family, commitment to community, drive for freedom, desire for education, and fearlessness in the face of oppression. Bringing these stories together in a unified Heritage Area would allow us to direct attention and resources to these places, these heroes, and to these core American values.

In 2013, a report on the economic impact of National Heritage Areas estimated “the economic benefit of all 49 NHA sites on the nation’s economy at \$12.9 billion annually.” This included 148,000 jobs and \$1.2 billion annually in Federal taxes. The 21 NHAs in the Northeast Region of the United States alone had an annual economic impact of \$5.4 billion, supporting more than 66,880 jobs and generating \$602.7 million in local and state taxes.<sup>14</sup>

We are thrilled to explore what the Dismal Swamp NHA designation could mean for us, for our communities, for the Great Dismal Swamp, and for the states of Virginia and North Carolina. The Swamp is a place that holds, in the liminal folds of its misty innards, curious relics, innovations of economy, feats of engineering, tragedies of human horror, victories of liberation, and stories of the passionate love for family, freedom, and happiness that remind us, again, that some of greatest American heroes are unsung and unknown; that their achievements have laid the foundation for all our current prosperity, and that their sacrifices have given us all our current freedoms and powers. The *least* we can do is thank them, and protecting this irreplaceable piece of the United States is one way to do it.

---

<sup>14</sup> Tripp Umbach Consultants, The Economic Impact of National Heritage Areas (Feb. 2013)