

The Dismal Swamp Today...



George Washington would probably be amazed at the progress made since his first ventures in taming the swamp. Today, the paths made by loggers and developers are being used to provide a glimpse of the Dismal's valuable secrets.

Nature can be experienced and enjoyed on the old logging trails throughout the Dismal Swamp State Park's 14,000 acres. Biking, Birding, Hiking, Photography, Picnicking and Exploring are all possibilities at this "last wild place". The State Park offers a Visitor Center with interactive exhibits, examples of the diverse animals and birds which call the swamp home, half-mile boardwalk, 20 miles of trails and numerous Ranger led programs. Canoe/Kayak and mountain bike rentals are available for a nominal fee.

The historic Dismal Swamp Canal provides a glimpse of the past to nearly 2,000 recreational boats each year. The 22 mile Canal is managed by the US Army Corps of Engineers as an alternate route on the Intracoastal Waterway. Locks at South Mills, NC and Deep Creek, VA operate four times daily on the same schedule of 8:30 & 11 am and 1:30 & 3:30 pm.

Note: Locking times vary in times of drought.



The Welcome Center is located on US Highway 17 just three miles from the NC/VA state line and at mile marker 28 on the Dismal Swamp Canal. Welcome Center grounds feature an open-faced 150 foot dock, 24-hour restroom facilities, vending machines, picnic tables, grills and a quarter-mile nature trail. Adjacent to the Welcome Center is the Dismal Swamp Canal State Park and the Dismal Swamp Trail, a three mile paved trail extending south from the State Park's parking lot.

The Dismal Swamp Welcome Center provides a friendly face and tourism information to the traveling public. Whether by water or by land, the staff at this lovely complex aims to please and assist with a variety of services.

- Entered in the National Register of Historic Places
- Designated a National Historic Civil Engineering Landmark
- Part of North Carolina and Virginia Civil War Trail
- Recognized as a part of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program

Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center

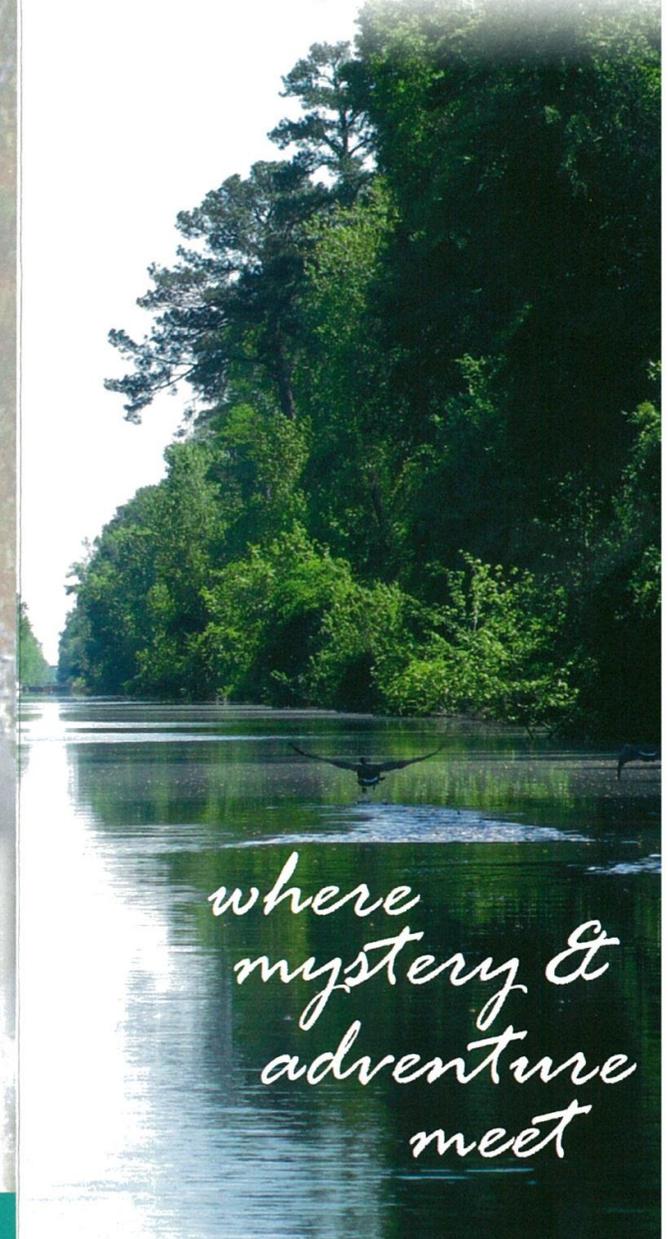
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www.dismalswampwelcomecenter.com



*where
mystery &
adventure
meet*

History of the Dismal Swamp



Just who discovered the Great Dismal and when is unknown. Colonel William Byrd II was a member of the commission that surveyed the state line through the Swamp in 1728 and provided the first extensive description. In May 1763, George Washington made his first visit to the Swamp and suggested draining it and digging a north-south canal to connect the waters of the Chesapeake Bay and Albemarle Sound. Joining with several other prominent Virginians and North Carolinians, he formed two syndicates known as the [Dismal Swamp Land Company](#) and the [Adventurers for Draining The Great Dismal Swamp](#). They hoped to drain the Swamp, harvest the trees, and use the land for farming.

The company purchased 40,000 acres of Swamp land for \$20,000 in 1763. Washington directed the surveying and digging of the 5-mile long ditch from the western edge of the Swamp to Lake Drummond, the first site to bear his name. In the late 1700's, Riddick Ditch was completed. Together these ditches provided a way to transport logs out of the Swamp and drain it as well. The Adventurers soon realized, however, the task of draining the Swamp was enormous and gave up that part of their plan to concentrate on lumbering. Countless virgin cypress trees were cut for use in shipbuilding, cedars for shingles and other products.

By 1796, Washington had become disappointed in the management of the Dismal Swamp lumber business and contracted to sell his 1/12th share to "Lighthorse" Harry Lee, father of Robert E. Lee, who was unable to come up with the purchase price. Washington's share passed on to his heirs upon his death in 1799.

Camp Mfg. Company, a predecessor of Union Camp, acquired all the Dismal Swamp Land Company's property in 1909. Lumbering continued in the Swamp and by the 1950's acres of virgin timber had been removed. In 1973, Union Camp donated its Virginia swamp holdings to the Nature Conservancy which, in turn, deeded it to the Department of the Interior for creation of the Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, headquartered near Suffolk, VA.



THE DISMAL IS NAMED

As one of the first to visit the Swamp and record his experiences, Colonel Byrd led a band of surveyors into the Swamp in 1728 to run a dividing line between the disputing colonies of Virginia and North Carolina. They were almost devoured by yellow flies, chiggers and ticks. Byrd's description was that it was a "Horrible Desert" and he called it "Dismal." We also know Europeans referred to areas where water stood for long periods of time as "Dismals". We prefer the latter description as the likely source for the unique name.

LAKE DRUMMOND

Lake Drummond is an amber jewel, a lovely circular lake covering approximately 3,000 acres in the heart of the Swamp. William Drummond, the first Governor of North Carolina (1663-1667), discovered the oval lake which bears his name today. The average depth is between three and four feet and its unusually pure water is essential to the Swamp's survival. This lake supplies water for the Dismal Swamp Canal through the Feeder Ditch.



JUNIPER WATER

Why is the water in the Swamp black? Actually, it's amber-colored and unusually pure, preserved by the tannic acids from the bark of the juniper, gum and cypress trees. These conditions make it difficult for bacteria to grow. Before the days of refrigeration, water from the Swamp was a highly prized commodity on sailing ships. Considered chemically pure, it was stored in kegs and maintained its potability. People spoke of the magical qualities of the tea-colored water and how, if it were regularly drunk, it prevented illness and promoted long life.

A LAND OF LORE AND LEGEND

The oldest and best known of the Dismal Swamp legends is that of the Lady of the Lake, a myth the Irish poet Thomas Moore canonized in 1803 in his poem, "The Lake of the Dismal Swamp." The poem is based on local lore about an Indian maid who died just before her wedding and who is periodically seen paddling her ghostly white canoe across the waters of Lake Drummond. Moore's poem tells how the bereaved lover came to believe his lost love had departed her grave and taken to the Swamp. He followed her and never returned, but was reunited with his Lady of the Lake in death.

*But Oft, from the Indian hunter's camp
This Lover and Maid so true
Are seen in the hour of midnight damp
To cross the Lake by a fire-fly lamp,
And paddle their white canoe.*

Most good legends are rooted in reality. Eerie lights in the middle of the night are not uncommon and have been attributed to ghosts, pirates, madmen, or flying saucers. Foxfire is the source of these strange lights, (a luminescence given off by the decaying of wood by certain fungi, burning methane escaping from decomposing vegetation, or smoldering peat.)

A GEOLOGICAL WONDER

The Dismal is higher than the surrounding countryside ~ on a hillside at least 20' above sea level. It is one of the few places on the North American Continent where peat is being formed. A varied assortment of insects, frogs, mammals, and plants combine to form a unique community. Black bear, white-tailed deer, bobcat, and otter inhabit the Swamp, and 203 species of birds have been reported.

Originally, the Swamp spread over approximately a half million acres; however, thousands of acres have been cleared and drained for cultivation, reducing the Swamp to its present size. Federal and State agencies now protect 126,000 acres in southeastern Virginia and northeastern North Carolina.



DISMAL SWAMP CANAL WELCOME CENTER