



Expedition: Swampscapes

Archaeological Exploration in the Great Dismal Swamp

Summary: Becca Peixotto, a PhD candidate at American University, spent the summer of 2016 on an archeological expedition in Virginia's Great Dismal Swamp, located in Virginia. Becca and her team are working to uncover the remarkable story of resistance and resilience of African-Americans who fled enslavement and sought refuge in the harsh environment of the swamp between 1680 and 1860.

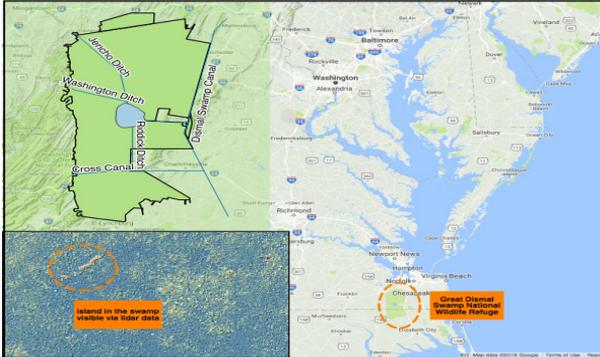
THE EXPEDITION

Home to thousands of marginalized people between 1660-1860, the Great Dismal Swamp today is an expansive morass straddling the boundary between Virginia and North Carolina. Enslaved laborers built canals and harvested timber on company-owned Swamp land. In remote



areas, maroons (people of African descent fleeing the oppressive conditions of slavery), sought a measure of freedom. Through archaeology, we study the hidden Dismal Swamp landscape which grew as a place of resistance to the inhumane control of people and space in the region.

This expedition began with targeted exploration in a 42 square-mile area previously overlooked by archaeologists. We knew from Professor Dan Sayers' work with the Great Dismal Swamp Landscape Study on a sandy island in another part of the Swamp that the rare dry areas were important to maroon communities. Guided by data from an aerial lidar survey and historic documents, we visited spots we thought might be islands. Along the way, we encountered reminders of the Swamp's history like old cedar stumps and a ca. 1915 rail chassis mired in the muck and abandoned in a long gone lumber operation. From what we saw on the ground, we selected a few larger, dry islands to investigate further.



In the second phase, we mapped the islands, studied soil profiles and did test excavations. On one island, we found an upturned tree: the root mass was teeming with artifacts. It was clear people – Native Americans? Maroons? Enslaved Laborers? – had lived in this place. Testing on a different island revealed second possible settlement.

Subsequent excavations have revealed fire pits, a possible cabin footprint and artifacts ranging from small fragments of glass and iron nails to ancient stone tools left by earlier people, sharpened and repurposed by maroons and others. These artifacts tell a tale of isolation from the outside world, of limited resources, and of daily life in the Swamp prior to the U.S. Civil War.

Although this expedition barely scratched the surface of what can be learned about African-American history in this corner of the Great Dismal Swamp, we have shown maroons were present in this area. And we demonstrated the effectiveness of our exploration and testing methods paving the way for future research.

WHO

Becca Peixotto

WHAT

The first archaeological exploration of a former refuge for escaped African-American slaves

WHEN

April 26 – August 1, 2016

WHERE

Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia, United States

WHY

To uncover the remarkable story of resistance and resilience of African-Americans who fled enslavement



EXPEDITION GOALS

The purpose of our work in the Great Dismal Swamp is to help recover the remarkable story of resistance and resilience of African-Americans who fled enslavement and sought refuge in the harsh swamp environment. In the first part of the expedition, our goal was to determine if the research area contained areas of dry land where people might have lived. The goal for the second part of the expedition was to find archaeological evidence of Swamp communities and learn how they made lives for themselves in this place. Those goals are lofty and broad, so the team and I approached the expedition with a list of smaller goals in mind:

- Explore a new area to find islands
- Determine the viability of our method for targeted exploration (it works!)
- Create a new, more detailed map of the research area
- Conduct careful excavations, respectful of the people whose lives we study
- Develop team members' field skills
- Share our process and findings

EXPEDITION FUNDING

The Swampscaapes project is funded by grants from the Explorers Club (Washington Group), the Archaeological Society of Virginia, American University and the AU College of Arts and Sciences.

CHALLENGES FACED

We expected, and faced, environmental challenges working in the Great Dismal Swamp. The undergrowth in the Swamp is thick, and carving a path through the vines and bushes is a slow, strenuous process. The dense tree canopy hampers the signal to our GPS units making it difficult at times to collect location information at the accuracy we need to create new maps. In areas of standing water, the water is not quite deep or open enough for a boat and is the color of strong tea. Each step through the water or wet mud is a mystery: will it be shallow or will there be a hole below? The summer heat, humidity and biting flies strained the team's resolve on occasion. These challenges gave us all a deeper appreciation for the hardships faced every day in the Swamp by the maroons and enslaved laborers whose story we want to help tell.

An unexpected challenge arose when one of the sites proved to be a peat island rather than the sandy island we anticipated. Peat has the potential to preserve organic artifacts that would decompose in the sandy soils of the Swamp. Our expedition did not include the infrastructure for the special excavation and artifact conservation methods we would need to investigate that site properly. Although that island could lead to exciting finds, we will have to revisit it on a future expedition.

EXPEDITION RESULTS

The Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge protects what remains of a once 2,000-square-mile swamp, a mosaic of morass, waterways, and dry islands home to diverse plant and animal communities. It also protects the buried cultural resources that represent thousands of years of human experience in the landscape, only a tiny fraction of which are known. Deep in the Swamp's interior, we located two previously unknown archaeological sites and identified several spots worthy of further investigation. Our finds shed new light on the lives of maroons, enslaved laborers and early 20th century lumbermen. Many more discoveries await in the Dismal.



ABOUT THE FLAG CARRIER

Becca Peixotto (PhD candidate and adjunct instructor, American University) is an archaeologist studying resistance landscapes in the Great Dismal Swamp, ca. 1660-1860. She uses scientific methods like pXRF, remote sensing and GIS to address theoretical, social and historical questions about marginalized people in the past.

Before archaeology, Becca was an Outward Bound instructor, leading wilderness expeditions in mountains and deserts. She is a member of the National Geographic Rising Star/Homo naledi team and the Biggs Ford excavation of pre-contact Native American villages in Maryland.



From left to right: Professor Dan Sayers, Justin Uehlein, Becca Peixotto and Emily Duncan.

EXPEDITION TEAM

Team Leader
Becca Peixotto

Supporting Members:
Ella Beaudoin
Emily Duncan
Emily Shames
Justin Uehlein
Professor Dan Sayers
(Dissertation Supervisor)

CONTACT INFORMATION:

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