

*A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp*

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In *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp*, Daniel O. Sayers delivers an important and timely study of the people of African descent who lived and worked in the Great Dismal Swamp during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. This volume represents both a culmination and continuation of Sayers's archaeological work in the swamp. The work is important as a study of the lives of those who fled slavery to form communities in the swamp, but it is equally salient as a rich example of capitalism's reach and the various contours of its critique in the archaeological record.

Sayers demonstrates why doing an archaeology of maroon communities is so imperative and why much more work needs to be done. The Great Dismal Swamp covers 2,000 sq. mi. of Virginia and North Carolina and, as Sayers explains, was also one of the largest concentrations of maroon communities in the United States. Because of the swamp's sheer size and the paucity of both historical and archaeological data on the subject, Sayers started out with

some basic questions about the types of evidence that might be found at maroon sites. Armed with these questions and a predictive model, Sayers and his crews located numerous archaeological sites, including two maroon communities that provide the primary material for the book: the Cross Canal site (31GA119) and the Nameless site (31GA120).

Chapters 2 and 3 explain the foundational theory and concepts used to interpret the archaeological remnants of maroon communities in the swamp. Sayers uses an explicit and complex understanding of Marxist theory to frame his subject. Central to the arguments presented in the book are the discussion of capitalist modes of production, alienation, and exile. Sayers clearly articulates the parameters of the wage-labor-based capitalist mode of production. Most important is the distinction made between forms of production based on wage, versus slave labor. Sayers departs from traditional Marxist studies in defining slavery as a distinct mode of capitalist production in the Mid-Atlantic and southern colonies. By envisioning a capitalistic enslavement mode of production, Sayers is able to more clearly articulate the material critiques of capitalism that existed within maroon communities.

Alienation and exile are also central concepts used throughout the book. Within capitalist modes of production, people are alienated from the products of their labor. For Sayers, during much of the 18th century, the Great Dismal Swamp was a place apart from the alienating conditions

of modern capitalist production. Exile is another concept Sayers uses effectively in his analysis of communities within the swamp. The concept of exile, rather than simply diaspora, is used to define the conditions under which maroon communities lived beyond both their homeland and the capitalistic enslavement mode of production.

Chapter 4 of the book proceeds to describe the general history and changes that occurred in the swamp from the early 17th through the mid-19th centuries. In particular, Sayers is interested in the swamp as a refuge from slavery and how maroon communities formed and changed through time, especially with the development of the canal system toward the end of the 18th century. African Americans lived within one of three types of communities, or “modes of communitization,” that were defined by historical conditions. It is within these modes of communitization that the author solidifies his analysis of the maroon communities living in the Great Dismal Swamp and explains their material critique of the system within which they had been enslaved. One mode is defined as semi-independent and perimetrical whereby people formed communities around the edge of the swamp during the 17th and early 18th centuries prior to the development of logging interests in the area. The second type of communitization was the interior scission mode that consisted of settlements on fast land within the deep recesses of the swamp and firmly beyond the practical reach of chattel slavery and its material representations. This mode was a prevalent form of African American maroon settlement from the mid-17th through the late 18th centuries. Finally, the canal labor exploitation mode of communitization occurred in mature form after 1800 with

the dominance of the canal system. These communities were located near the canals and were organized around labor associated with resource exploitation by the canal companies. These last two settlement types, their expectant material signatures, and the frameworks and theories detailed in chapters 2 and 3, guide the archaeological analysis that is summarized in chapter 5.

In chapter 5, Sayers provides a detailed analysis and interpretation of the archaeology conducted at the Nameless and Cross Canal sites between 2003 and 2012. At least five distinct loci were identified at the Nameless site, and each of the intensively excavated areas was interpreted. One of the more striking patterns at the Nameless site was the small number of mass-produced objects recovered by archaeologists. Optically stimulated luminescence was used to help date features and layers where the presence of temporally diagnostic historical artifacts was rare. The features and soil deposits that dated to the period before 1800 were interpreted as representing the scission mode of communitization. Sayers’s argument follows that the maroon community that lived at the Nameless site during this period used materials primarily found in the swamp and not procured through an outside exchange network. Sayers points to artifacts such as reworked stone projectiles and prehistoric pottery sherds as examples. Gunflints and bottle glass were also repurposed as tools.

Sayers argues that artifacts and their distribution at the Nameless site support the scission mode of communitization whereby objects were produced for their use value as needed. Evenly distributed artifacts across the site and the reliance on available swamp materials are cited as evidence of a “community-subsistence ethos and praxis” (p. 169)

that was very different from the exchange-value-based and fetishized material conditions of communitization within the capitalistic enslavement mode of production. Although the archaeological evidence is thin at times, the author makes a compelling case that the maroon community at the Nameless site structured their everyday lives in a more egalitarian manner in opposition to the alienating nature of capitalist production.

Archaeological evidence at the Cross Canal site (ca. 1820–1860) is analyzed as a contrast to the Nameless site. The Cross Canal site represents evidence of communities of workers, including enslaved African Americans, who excavated and worked on the canal for the canal companies. A greater quantity of mass-produced goods were recovered from the Cross Canal site, and Sayers claims this as one piece of evidence that workers were fully immersed in the canal labor exploitation mode of communitization. Sayers summarizes this condition as follows: “[a]s fetishized commodities, the material culture of the canal company laborer settlements

represented alienated labor and was alienating for the people of the swamp” (p. 194).

Sayers’s analysis of marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp is a fascinating study in historical archaeology and the edges of capitalism. The most powerful insights in *A Desolate Place for a Defiant People* come from the connections Sayers makes between the archaeological record and the various modes of labor used to construct communities within the swamp. If it is true that “the Diasporic world of the swamp was an unrecognized system from without, largely ignored by outsiders and positioned at the far edges of the social consciousness of the world beyond it” (p. 207), and little archaeological work has focused on the subject, then Sayers has made a substantive contribution toward understanding the lived conditions within the swamp and the expanding field of diaspora scholarship.

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