

Runaways and slave hunters in the Dismal Swamp

Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States: with Remarks on Their Economy* (New York: Dix & Edwards, 1856), pp. 160–162.

As you read...

FREDERICK LAW OLMSTED

Frederick Law Olmsted (1822–1903) is best remembered today as the landscape architect who designed New York City's Central Park, but he first achieved fame in the 1850s as a travel writer. He began his career in 1852 with an account of his tours of public parks of Europe. Later that same year, he began his travels through the U.S. South, writing dispatches to the *New York Times*. He later published three volumes about his trips, beginning with *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States; With Remarks on Their Economy*, from which this page is excerpted.

In this book, Olmsted wrote about the land, the people, agriculture, industry, and slavery. He was not usually complimentary about what he found; he often commented on poor transportation and accommodations. He was especially critical of slavery, and argued that slavery held the South back from economic and social progress. Unlike many northern abolitionists, though, Olmsted had little interest in individual African-Americans, and his portrayals of them were typically quite racist. Nevertheless, his books influenced many northerners politically, convincing them that slavery must not be allowed to expand into the West.

For more about Olmsted, see the information about this book from Documenting the American South (see <http://docsouth.unc.edu/nc/olmsted/summary.html>).

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How did Olmsted describe Joseph? How might this description have challenged assumptions Olmsted's readers might have had about enslaved people?
2. Olmsted relied heavily on Joseph's account of the people who lived in the Dismal Swamp. Do you think it was significant that he quoted Joseph rather than his master, whom Olmsted said "confirmed" the information? Why might he have chosen to use Joseph as his source?
3. What hardships did fugitive slaves and their descendants endure in the swamp? Where did they live and how did they survive? Why would they have chosen to remain in the swamp even in such conditions? What would they have faced had they come out or been caught?
4. What methods did white people use to recapture slaves? How might these methods have deterred other blacks, such as Joseph, from joining fugitive slaves in the swamps?

5. We know that Olmsted was opposed to slavery — how would his experiences in the Dismal Swamp have reinforced his anti-slavery views? Do you think this account might have changed the minds of a reader who did not oppose slavery?



Figure 1. The swamps of northeastern North Carolina were a difficult place to live — and a difficult place to find someone who didn't want to be found.

While driving in a chaise from Portsmouth to Deep-river,¹ I picked up on the road a jaded looking negro, who proved to be a very intelligent and good-natured fellow. His account of the lumber business, and of the life of the lumbermen in the swamps, in answer to my questions, was clear and precise, and was afterwards verified by information obtained from his master.

He told me that his name was Joseph, that he belonged to a church in one of the inland counties, and that he was hired out² by the trustees of the church to his present master. He expressed entire contentment with his lot, but showed great unwillingness to be sold to go on to a plantation. He liked to “mind himself,” as he did in the swamps. Whether he would still more prefer to be entirely his own master, I did not ask.

The Dismal Swamps are noted places of refuge for runaway negroes. They were formerly peopled in this way much more than at present; a systematic hunting of them with dogs and guns having been made by individuals who took it up as a business about ten years ago. Children were born, bred, lived and died here. Joseph Church told me he had seen skeletons, and had helped to bury bodies recently dead. There were people in the swamps still, he thought, that were the children of runaways, and who had been runaways themselves all their lives. What a life it must be; born outlaws; educated self-stealers; trained from infancy to be constantly in dread of the approach of a white man as a thing more fearful than wild-cats or serpents, or even starvation.

There can be but few, however, if any, of these “natives” left. They cannot obtain the means of supporting life without coming often either to the outskirts to steal from the plantations, or to the neighborhood of the camps of the lumbermen. They depend much upon the charity or the wages given them by the latter. The poorer white men, owning small tracts of the swamps, will sometimes employ them, and the negroes frequently. In the hands of either they are liable to be betrayed to the negrohunters. Joseph said that they had huts in “back places,” hidden by bushes, and difficult of access; he had, apparently, been himself quite intimate with them. When the shingle negroes employed them, he told me, they made them get up logs for them, and would give them enough to eat, and some clothes, and perhaps two dollars a month in money. But some, when they owed them money, would betray them, instead of paying them.

I asked if they were ever shot. “Oh, yes,” he said, “when the hunters saw a runaway, if he tried to get from them, they would call out to him, that if he did not stop they would shoot, and if he did not, they would shoot, and sometimes kill him.

“But some on ‘em would rather be shot than be took, sir,” he added, simply.

A farmer living near the swamp confirmed this account, and said he knew of three or four being shot in one day.

No particular breed of dogs is needed for hunting negroes: and one white man told me how they were trained for it, as if it were a common or notorious practice. They are shut up when puppies, and never allowed to see a negro except while training to catch him. A negro is made to run from them, and they are encouraged to follow him until he gets into a tree,

when meat is given them. Afterwards they learn to follow any particular negro by scent, and then a shoe or a piece of clothing is taken off a negro, and they learn to find by scent who it belongs to, and to tree him, etc. I don't think they are employed in the ordinary driving in the swamp, but only to overtake some particular slave, as soon as possible after it is discovered that he has fled from a plantation. Joseph said that it was easy for the drivers to tell a fugitive from a regularly employed slave in the swamps.

"How do they know them?"

"Oh, dey looks *strange*."

"How do you mean?"

"*Skleared* like, you know, sir, and kind 'o strange, cause dey hasn't much to eat, and ain't decent [not decently clothed], like we is."

When the hunters take a negro who has not a pass, or "free papers," and they don't know whose slave he is, they confine him in jail, and advertise him. If no one claims him within a year he is sold to the highest bidder, at a public sale, and this sale gives title in law against any subsequent claimant.

On the web

Stealing a Little Freedom: Slave Runaways in North Carolina

<http://www.sog.unc.edu/programs/civiced/resources/docs/slaverunaways.pdf>

In this lesson from the North Carolina Civic Education Consortium, students will explore the perspective that in actuality, those enslaved were resilient in many ways, some by making the risky choice to run away. Through the exploration of runaway ads from the 1700s, students will gain an understanding of the individual lives affected by slavery during the 1700s as well as the skills and characteristics possessed by such individuals.

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Visit us on the web at www.learnnc.org to learn more about topics related to this article, including Great Dismal Swamp, North Carolina, antebellum, history, and slavery.

Notes

1. Portsmouth is in the southeastern corner of Virginia, and Deep River is between Greensboro and Winston-Salem, North Carolina. It is about 250 miles between the two locations.
2. Many slave masters hired out, or rented, their slaves to other whites. The temporary master paid a lump sum to the slaves master, and the slave then lived and worked for the temporary master for one year.

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