

The Great Dismal Swamp

Genealogy Tips by Jeannette Holland Austin



Great Dismal SwampThe Great Dismal Swamp. In 1728, Colonel William Byrd II was a member of a commission which was sent to survey the North Carolina-Virginia State line running through the Swamp. But it was not until May of 1763 that George Washington made his first visit there with the idea of draining it and digging a north-south canal to connect the waters of the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia with the Albemarle Sound in North Carolina. For this purpose the Dismal Swamp Land Company and the Adventurers for Draining the Great Dismal Swamp were sent to do the job.

They hoped to drain the Swamp and harvest the trees, then use the land for farming. Therefore, 40,000 acres were purchased in 1763 for some \$20,000. It was George Washington who directed the surveying and digging of the 5-mile long ditch from the western edge of the Swamp to Lake

Drummond (Washington Ditch) but it was not until the late 16th century that the Riddick Ditch was completed. These ditches provided the avenue for transporting logs out of the Swamp and drained it as well.

However the Adventurers soon realized that the task of draining the Swamp was enormous and gave up that part of the plan. Many of the ancient cypress trees were cut for shipbuilding and also the cedars for the purpose of making shingles and other products.

Ultimately, Washington was disappointed in the management of the Dismal Swamp lumber business and in 1796 contracted to sell his 1/12th share to "Lighthorse" Harry Lee. But Lee was unable to come up with the purchase price. Therefore, when George Washington died, his share passed on to his heirs.