



Harper's Magazine, 1856

## African American Heritage in Camden County

The first Africans were introduced to the colony that would later become North Carolina in the sixteenth century. By the 1680s planters were directly importing enslaved Africans, who performed essential labor on farms and plantations in northeastern N.C. These individuals were the property of their masters, who often attempted to make them completely dependent on them for all of their needs. Living conditions, housing, nutrition and clothing would be a reflection of the owner's control and temperament. They were prohibited from learning to read and write, with restrictions in their behavior and movement. Families were often separated, as trade or payment for services with no regard for relationships. The enslaved who worked in the home or skilled artisans, who may have more freedom or privilege, were deemed superior to field hands, laboring in poor conditions. This created a hierarchy among the enslaved, adding to the challenges of their community. African Americans yearned for freedom and the Dismal Swamp, a natural refuge due to the morass of huge trees towering over dense underbrush, played a significant role.

*"In dark fens of the Dismal Swamp..."*

The Dismal Swamp Canal, Dismal Swamp State Park, Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, and the Dismal Swamp Canal Welcome Center share recognition as designated sites and members of the National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom Program. This Program commemorates and preserves the historical significance of the Underground Railroad in the eradication of slavery and the evolution of our national civil rights movement. Free Network to Freedom Passports and cancellation stamps are available at these designated locations.



Artwork credits: *Underground Railroad Mural* by Trigg Community School Students and Tunde Afolayan Famous. *Canal #1* is part of the *Underground Railroad Series: PASSAGE: Echoes of the Great Dismal Swamp*.



Camden County  
Heritage Museum  
117 NC 343 N.  
Camden, NC 27921  
camdenmuseum1777@gmail.com



Camden County Tourism  
Development Authority  
252-771-8333  
www.VisitCamdenCountyNC.com  
www.NCBlackHeritageTour.com  
dscwelcome@camdencountync.gov



Dismal Swamp State Park  
2294 US 17 North  
South Mills, NC 27976  
www.ncparks.gov/dismal-swamp-state-park



For additional information  
about this program:  
[www.nps.gov/ugr](http://www.nps.gov/ugr)

*"All things above were bright and fair..."*

# African American Heritage

CAMDEN COUNTY, NORTH CAROLINA



*"Freedom will teach anyman to be glad when he gets freedom..." - Moses Grandy*

*"I was always dreaming of flying over woods and rivers." - Moses Grandy*

## The Dismal Swamp & Dismal Swamp Canal

The Dismal Swamp was a known route and destination for freedom seekers. This route was the most rugged and treacherous route where insects, snakes, and wild animals were abundant. It was to this inhospitable place many runaways came.

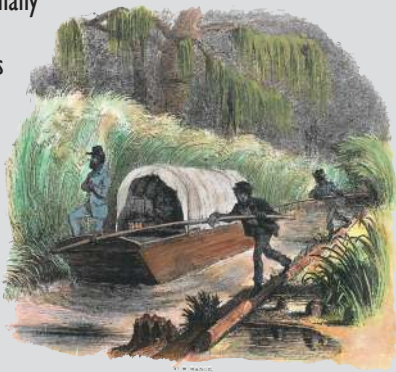
While some runaways were able to blend in with free blacks, many chose to seek refuge among a colony of runaways (called maroons) in the Great Dismal Swamp. The nature of the swamp made it possible for large colonies to establish permanent refuge. It was difficult to capture a freedom seeker

once they reached the swamp, although occasional trips were made to recapture runaways with specially trained dogs. Colonies were established on high ground in the swamp, where crude huts were constructed. Abundant animal life provided food and clothing. Some earned money by working for free black shingle makers, who hired maroons to cut logs.

The Dismal Swamp Canal, hand dug by hired enslaved labor, opened to navigation in 1805 after twelve years of backbreaking work under highly unfavorable conditions. This 22 mile long canal allowed trade between the Chesapeake Bay in Virginia and the Albemarle Sound in North Carolina. African Americans made up thirty percent of the waterman in Camden County in the 1790s and were common sights on local waterways.

## The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad was not underground nor was it a system of tracks, but an informal network of secret routes and safe houses used by enslaved Africans in the U.S. to escape to freedom. The network was known as a "railroad" by way of the use of rail terminology in the code. It consisted of meeting points, secret routes, transportation, safe houses, and assistance provided by sympathizers. Due to the risk of discovery, information was usually passed along by word of mouth. The route consisted of resting areas ("stations" or "depots") that were held by station masters. The "conductors",



*Harper's Magazine, 1856*

coming from various backgrounds to include free-born blacks, whites, formerly enslaved persons, and Native Americans, moved the runaways from station to station. Freedom seekers would steadily move along the route toward their safe destination. Interpretive panels are located on the east bank of the Dismal Swamp Canal and Visitor Center at the Dismal Swamp State Park.

## Moses Grandy

Moses Grandy was born into slavery in Camden County in 1786 and as a youth became interested in maritime occupations. As a result of his skills as a river ferryman, canal boatman, schooner deck man, and lighter captain, he became known as Captain Grandy. William Grandy, a prominent slave owner in Camden County was Moses's first slave master. Moses was hired out to Enoch Sawyer and George Furley to tend ferry along the Pasquotank River and haul lumber in the Dismal Swamp.

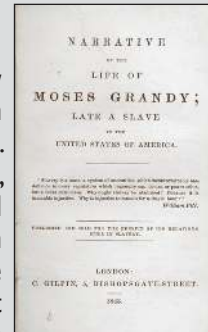
A successful waterman, Moses attempted to purchase his freedom three times, but twice was cheated out of his earnings and release. Finally in 1827, Captain Edward Minner, purchased Moses and allowed him to live as a free man. Grandy repaid Captain Minner and eventually settled in Boston, where he did a variety of jobs, but was soon at sea again.

In 1842 Moses sailed to London and met with abolitionist George Thompson, who penned Grandy's life story. Proceeds from Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy; Late a Slave in the United States were used to help liberate Grandy's enslaved relatives. Grandy's story and other slave narratives were used by anti-slavery movements in the United States and Britain to demonstrate the cruelty of slavery. Grandy recounted his story throughout his travels and addressed the World's Anti-Slavery Convention in London on June 17, 1843.

*An interpretive panel is located at the Camden County Heritage Museum.*

## Literature

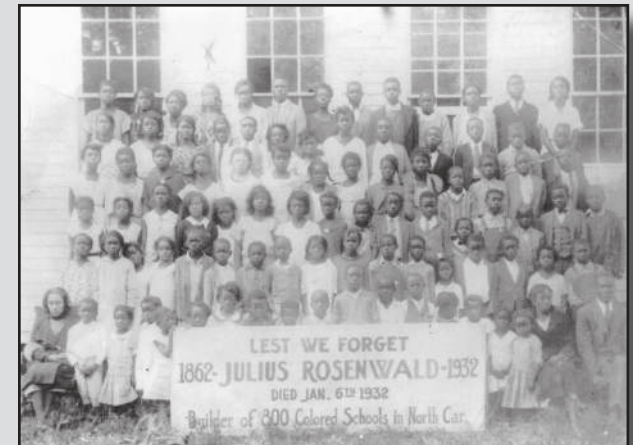
Many authors and historians have written about the swamp's role as a hiding place for freedom seekers and fugitives. It has been used as a backdrop in Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel, Dred: A Tale of the Great Dismal Swamp, and Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's poem, "The Slave in the Dismal Swamp".



## An excerpt from "The Slave in the Dismal Swamp"

*Where hardly a human foot could pass,  
Or a human heart would dare,  
On the quaking turf of the green morass  
He crouched in the rank and tangled grass,  
Like a wild beast in his lair.*

*A poor old slave, infirm and lame;  
Great scars deformed his face;  
On his forehead he bore the brand of shame,  
And the rags, that hid his mangled frame,  
Were the livery of disgrace.*



## Rosenwald Schools & Marian Anderson High School

Julius Rosenwald, a Chicago philanthropist and president of Sears, Roebuck and Co., became aware of the sad state of education among African Americans in the rural South in the early 20th century. He established funding for the construction of more than 800 schools in N.C., and Camden County was home to two Rosenwald Schools. The Rosenwald School in South Mills continued to operate until the opening of Sawyer's Creek High School. In 1952, Camden County schools consolidated from multiple schools throughout the county to collective county seat schools. Schools remained segregated until 1969. With integration, Camden County High School became home to all high school students and Marian Anderson, the former Sawyer's Creek High School, became the county's middle school.

*"Where hardly a human foot could pass, Or a human heart would dare..."*