

Description of the Dismal Swamp and a proposal to drain the swamp

DESCRIPTION OF THE DISMAL SWAMP

Heartman's Historical Series No. 38.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DISMAL SWAMP AND A PROPOSAL TO DRAIN THE SWAMP

By William Byrd of Westover

EDITED BY EARL GREGG SWEM Librarian, College of William and Mary

LC

61 Copies Printed for Charles F. Heartman Metuchen, New Jersey Nineteen Hundred
Twenty-two

F232 .D7B9 copy 2

No. of 61 Copies Printed.

Also Five Copies Printed on Japan Paper.

Gift Publisher NOV 11 1922

LC

7

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The author of the "Description of the Dismal" is the well known William Byrd II, who was born March 28, 1674, and died Aug. 26, 1744. The life of William Byrd has been sketched

Library of Congress

so often that no repetition of the facts of his life will be attempted here. In John Spencer Bassett's "Writings of Colonel Byrd, New York, 1901," will be found an account of his life.

The following three editions of his writings have been published:

The Westover Manuscripts; containing the History of the Dividing Line betwixt Virginia and North Carolina; A Journey to the Land of Eden, A. D. 1733; and A Progress to the Mines. Written from 1728 to 1736, and now first published, By William Byrd, of Westover. Petersburg, Printed by Edmund and Julian C. Ruffin, 1841. iv, 143 pages.

History of the Dividing Line and other Tracts from the Papers of W. Byrd...Richmond, Va. 1866. 2 v. (Historical Documents of the Old Dominion, nos. 2, 3). Contents: v. 1. History of the Dividing Line between Virginia and North Carolina...in 1728-29. v. 2. Journey to the Land of Eden, A. D. 1733. A Progress to the Mines...in 1732. An Essay on bulk Tobacco. Miscellaneous Papers.

The Writings of "Colonel William Byrd of Westover in Virginia, Esq." Edited by John Spencer Bassett. Illustrated. New York, Doubleday, Page & Co., 1901. lxxxviii, 461 pages.

It was through the enterprise of Edmund Ruffin that the Westover Manuscripts were first given to the public, as the appendix to volume 9 of the Farmers' Register. This appendix was also issued separately, and is best known in the separate form; it is the first of the three editions listed.

In the History of the Dividing Line is the journal of the survey of the North Carolina boundary through the Dismal Swamp. This was written in 1728. The "Description of the Dismal, with the Proposal to drain it," as reprinted in this present volume, was written sometime between 1728 and 1737. This is determined by the author's suggestion of the Earl of Orkney, who died in 1737, as one who should be invited to encourage subscriptions to shares of the company. The text of this reprint is from the Farmers'

Library of Congress

Register, volume 4, pages 521 to 524. This "Description" 9 has not been printed in any one of the editions of Byrd's Works.

The attempt to drain the Dismal Swamp seems to have been abandoned by William Byrd, the author of this Description. The proposal was revived in 1763, nineteen years after his death. On May 25, 1763, a petition for the Dismal Swamp in Norfolk was read and postponed. (*Journal of the Executive Sessions of the Council, in Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, v. 16, p. 148). At the January, 1764, Session of the General Assembly, "An Act to enable certain Adventurers to drain a large Tract of Marshy Grounds in the Counties of Nansimond and Norfolk" was passed. (*Hening*, v. 8, p. 19). This act did not grant any land to the company of adventurers, but it stipulated that "it shall and may be lawful for the said company of adventurers, or any of them, at any time, to enter upon, and have such a free passage, and make such canals or causeways, through the lands of any person whatsoever adjacent to the said Dismal Swamp, as may be conducive to the more effectual draining thereof, without being subject to the action or suit, of any such persons for the same."

On March 27, 1922, the "Original Manuscript Surveys of Washington's Dismal Swamp Enterprise" 10 was sold at Auction in New York. As I have not seen this manuscript, I give the description printed in the catalog:

The Original Surveys and Descriptions of Washington's Real Estate Adventure in Great Dismal Swamp Lands, as drawn and prepared by Gershom Nimmo, the Surveyor. Occupying eight pages of surveys, descriptions, and drawings, on five folio sheets. Inlaid, and contained in a portfolio.

(Dated) Norfolk, 1763

Sheet 1, p. 1, bears the inscription: "To Coll. Fieldg. Lewis," and is endorsed: "Entries made in the Great Dismal Swamp. 1763."

Library of Congress

Sheet 1, p. 2, is a "Memo. of Entries made in the Great Dismal, viz."—then follows a list of ten land entries made in the Swamp, between Sept. 29, 1760, and Oct. 20, 1763, by John Mercer, Jr.; Chas. Wilkins; Thos Wright; Col. Robert Tucker, and others. Following these records is a statement beginning "Sir," and stating that the above lands (aggregating 5800 acres) have not yet been surveyed. All signed "Yr. Huml. Servt, Gershom Nimmo" (and dated) "Norfolk, Nov. 20th, 1763."

Sheet 2, p. 1, is headed "Coll. Washington & Company," and is a detailed surveyor's description of the property. It commences: "Beginning at a point at the Mouth of Poison Swamp, running thence," and then embraces about 110 closely written surveyor's entries, delimiting the boundaries, and filling the whole page.

Sheet 2, p. 2, contains a blank MS. legal document drawn up by Justice Henry Reddick, and has nothing to do with the land records. The sheet was convenient for the surveyor, and he used the other side of it.

Sheet 3, p. 1, is headed: "A Survey made for the Dismal Swamp Compy. in the Great Dismal Swamp," etc. In 23 lines of narrative MS. it gives numerous details regarding boundaries; the lands of Mills Reddick; of Col. Lemuel Reddick; of Robt. Tucker; the location of Carberry's Mill; the Patented Lands, 11 the Company's Causeway and other allied information regarding a tract "containing 23,696 acres."

Sheet 3, p. 2, contains the MS. description of the boundaries of a tract of 10,449 acres "along the Carolina line," and "along the said Causeway." It is accompanied by a quill-pen drawing showing the tract, Dismal Town, the Dismal Pond, and the Causeway.

Sheet 4, p. 1, is endorsed: "Part of Survey of D. Swamp."

Library of Congress

Sheet 4, p. 2, is occupied by a quill-pen drawing showing “Dismal Town,” the Causeway for 6 miles; “Dismal Pond,” the “Landing” at the Pond, and a Compass. The size of the Pond is given as “2 miles by 1¾.”

Sheet 5, p. 1, is endorsed: “Survey of the Dismal Swamp.”

Sheet 5 (larger than the rest), p. 2, is occupied by a quill-pen surveyor's drawing of the boundaries of the Company's tract, and locating “Rothery's Mill”; “Col. Tucker's Mill”; “Cooper's Mill”; “Col. L. Reddick's Mill”; “Dismal Town”; “Lake”; and “Causeway to Lake.”

Through the courtesy of Dr. Herbert Putnam, Librarian of Congress, I have received a description of the manuscript material in the Library of Congress relating to Washington's connection with the project for draining the Dismal Swamp. This has been prepared by J. C. Fitzpatrick, assistant chief of the Division of Manuscripts.

“The Washington Diary for 1763 contains nine pages of pencil notes about the Dismal Swamp. They are very dim and almost illegible. The diary for 1764 contains nine pages of notes, in ink, which are a duplication of the pencil notes of 1763, but vary in particulars, and the pencil notes have some information not copied out in the ink notes of 1764.

12

Hamilton's Letters to Washington (Colonial Dames Society, Boston, 1901), Volume 3, pages 276 et. seq., groups the ledger entries of expenses connected with the Dismal Swamp, through the years 1763–72. The original manuscript ledger is, of course, here.

Washington's letter to John Jameson, 1795, February 15, authorizes him to guard Washington's interests in the Dismal Swamp Company, and incloses an authority to represent Washington in the matter. Both of these are letter-press copies.” See also in this connection Washington's letter to Patrick Henry, Governor of Virginia, November 30, 1785. (Spark's Writings of Washington, v. 12, p. 277,278).

Library of Congress

We have references to this project in the two following wills. The will of Anthony Bacon, dated May 13, 1785 (Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, v. 15, p. 183) leaves "To my half brother William Bacon £500 and all my estate in the Province of Virginia which I hold in partnership with sundry gentlemen called the Dismal Swamp, containing I suppose 30,000 acres." The will of Mrs. Mary Willing Byrd, who died in 1814, widow of William Byrd III, states "I give and bequeath to all my grandsons the interest I have in the Dismal Swamp to be equally divided between all." 12 13 (Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, v. 6, p. 352). That work was begun in draining soon after the passage of the act is evident from the fact that Speaker John Robinson, who died May 6, 1766, owned one share in the Dismal Swamp, and had some slaves employed in draining the same. (Virginia Magazine of History and Biography, v. 17, p. 319).

In the January number, v. 4, no. 9, of the Farmers' Register, the editor, Edmund Ruffin, published his "Observations made during an Excursion to the Dismal Swamp [in 1836]." The "Observations" by Ruffin precede immediately in the same volume the "Description" by Byrd.

Acknowledgment is made of the generous assistance given by Miss Ethel Nolin, of the Virginia State Library.

E. G. SWEM.

College of William and Mary.

14

PROPOSAL TO DRAIN THE DISMAL SWAMP

By William Byrd of Westover

It was after the preceding article on the Dismal Swamp had been written, and was partly in type, that we received and for the first time saw the manuscript from which

Library of Congress

the following article is printed, and also the full and minute journal of Col. Byrd, of the survey of the line between Virginia and North Carolina, which he superintended as one of the Commissioners of the Colony of Virginia. For the use of this antique paper, we are indebted to the owner, George E. Harrison, Esq., of Brandon, and also for the original journal of his distinguished ancestor. This proposal, was founded on the information obtained by the survey, and recorded more fully in the journal—and upon these grounds and suggestions it is probable that the present Land Company was formed at a subsequent period, and in which Col. Byrd, or his son, was a partner, and his shares are still held by some of his descendants.

The journal, written in 1728, is interesting not only 15 for its antiquity, but for the early views, and then supposed facts, which it presents. In our next No. will probably be inserted the portion of the journal embracing the passage, probably the earliest made by man, of the Dismal Swamp.

The account of Col. Byrd given here, and in his journal, is erroneous as to several particulars which rested then merely on report, and therefore could not be more correctly known by him. For example, as to the supposed pestilential effects of the air—the total absence of animals—and as to the general width of the swamp, which he greatly underrated. It will be also observed, both from this piece and still more from his journal, that there was then no suspicion of the existence of the lake; and yet according to the maps of highest authority, its southern margin is within less than a mile of the State line, which was so long in being traced and marked by the surveying party which Col. Byrd in part directed and superintended.

The manuscript, in our charge, is the original, in the handwriting of the author—and though timeworn, and requiring much care to handle without injury, is perfectly legible. It is here copied literally.¹

1. Here ends the introductory note by Edward Ruffin.

A DESCRIPTION OF THE DISMAL

The Dismal is a very large swamp or bogg, extending from north to south near 30 miles in length, and in breadth, from east to west, at a medium about ten miles. It lyes partly in Virginia, and partly in North Carolina. No less than 5 navigable rivers, besides creeks, rise out of it, whereof 2 run into Virginia, viz. the South Branch of Elizabeth, and the South Branch of Nansimond Rivers—and 3 into North Carolina, namely, North River, North-west River, and Perquimonds. All these hide their heads, properly speaking, in the Dismal, there being no signs of them above ground. For this reason there must be plentiful subterranean stores of water to feed so many rivers or else the soil is so replete with this element, drained from the higher land that surrounds it, that it can abundantly afford these supplies. This is most probable—because the ground of this swamp is a meer quagmire, trembling under the feet of those that walk upon it, and every impression is instantly filled with water. We could run a long stick up to the head without resistance—and wherever a fire was made, so soon as the crust of 18 leaves and trash burnt through, the coals sunk down into a hole, and were extinguisht. The skirts of the Dismal towards the east were overgrown with reeds ten or 12 feet high, interlaced everywhere with strong bamboe-bryers, in which the men's feet were perpetually intangled. Among these, grows here and there a cypress, or a white cedar, which last is commonly mistaken for the juniper. Towards the south end of it, is a very large tract of reeds, without any trees at all growing amongst them, which being constantly green, and waving in the wind, is called the Green Sea. In many parts, especially on the borders, grows an evergreen shrub very plentifully, that goes by the name of a gall-bush. It bears a berry which dyes a black colour, like the gall of an oak, from whence it borrows its name. Near the middle of the Dismal the trees grow much thicker—the cypresses as well as the cedars. These being always green, and loaded with very large tops, are much exposed to the winds, and easily blown down in this boggy place where the soil is soft, and consequently affords but slender hold for the roots, that shoot into it. By these the passage is in most places interrupted, they lying piled

Library of Congress

in heaps, and horsing on one another; nor is this all, for the snags left upon them point every way, and require the utmost caution to clamber over them. 19 'Tis remarkable that, towards the heart of this horrible desert, no beast or bird approaches, nor so much as an insect or a reptile. This must happen, not so much from the moisture of the soil, as from the everlasting shade occasioned by the thick shrubbs and bushes, so that the friendly beams of the sun can never penetrate them to warm the earth. Nor indeed do any birds care to fly over it, any more than they are said to do over the lake Avernus, for fear of the noisome exhalations that rise from this vast body of dirt and nastiness. These noxious vapours infect the air round about, giving agues and other distempers to the neighboring inhabitants. On the western border of the Dismal, is a pine swamp above a mile in breadth, great part of which is covered with water knee-deep; however, the bottom is firm, and though the pines growing upon it are very tall, yet are they not easily blown down by the wind. So that the people waded through part of it, without any other hindrance but what the depth of water gave them, With all these disadvantages the Dismal is in many places pleasant to the eye, though disagreeable to the other senses, because of the perpetual verdure, which makes every season look like the spring, and every month like May. This dreadful swamp was ever judgd impassable, 'til the line divideing Virginia 20 from North Carolina was carryd through it in the year 1728, by the order of his late majesty. Nor would it have been practicable then, but by the benefit of an exceeding dry season, as well as by the invincible vigor and industry of those that undertook it. Some of the neighbors have lost themselves here for some days, but never had either the courage or curiosity to advance very far. Nor can the difficultys of passing this inhospitable place be better conceivd, than by the long time that was spent in doing it, even by men who were not altogether without apprehensions of being starved—they being no less than ten whole days in pushing on the line 15 miles, tho' they proceeded with all possible diligence and resolution, and besides, had no disaster to retard them.

21

ADVANTAGES OF DRAINING THE DISMAL

Library of Congress

The foregoing being a true and faithful account of the present condition of the Dismal, if any way could be found to drain it, the benefits both to his majesty and these colonys, would be very considerable.

1. First, that vast extent of bogg, which is now of no value to the crown, nor ever can be, in the condition it lyes at present, will come in time to pay the same quit-rent that other lands pay in this colony, and employ a great number of people.

2. By draining the Dismal, it will make all the adjacent country much more wholesome, and consequently, preserve the lives of many of the king's subjects; this will happen by correcting and purifying the air, which is now infected by the malignant vapours rising continually from that large tract of mire and filthiness.

3. After the Dismal comes to be drained, it will be the fittest soil in the world for producing of hemp; the propagating of which, is with so much reason desired²² and encouraged in his majesty's plantations. Besides, the hemp made in this place will have the advantage of being nearer to navigation than it can commonly be in this colony.

4. As the Dismal must be drained by the help of canals, to be cut from the northern to the southern rivers, there will be a safe and easy communication, by water, betwixt Virginia and North Carolina, to the manifest advantage of both. Virginia will have the benefit of being the port and public mart, to which the inhabitants of North Carolina must bring their commoditys; and these, again, will have the convenience of shipping the effects of their industry and receiving their returns from Great Britain, in good ships—there being no inlets into the hither part of that province, but what are dangerous even to the small vessels that can enter them.

23

CONDITIONS OF DRAINING THE DISMAL

Library of Congress

The Dismal then being so utterly useless to the crown, and such a nuisance to the neighboring country, and the advantages of draining it being so many, there remains no difficulty but to find out a method of doing it without leading his majesty into an expence, or laying a burthen on the people; and I humbly conceive that neither of these objections can be raised against the following scheme.

It is therefore proposed that his majesty be graciously pleasd to grant the Dismal, and all the land not yet taken up, lying within half a mile of any part of it, to the petitioners hereafter named; and the better to encourage them to undergo the heavy charge of draining it, 'tis farther proposed, that the said petitioners may have such grant, free from rights, and be also exempt from paying any quit-rent for the space of 50 years, except one pound of hemp yearly, on St. George's day.

It is also proposed, that all the persons employed in draining the said Dismal shall be excused from 24 paying any levys for the space of ten years after the date of said grant.

Nor can it fairly be objected, that such exemption from rights and quit-rents will be any loss to the crown, because nobody will ever take up any land in the Dismal, but with intent to drain—it and the expense of that will be too great to undertake it without this encouragement at least. Wherefore, since the king can get nothing for it as it now is, it would be more to his majesty's interest to grant it on the prospect of a future advantage, than to let it lye wast, and continue a nuisance to perpetuity. Nor would the country be a looser by indulging the undertakers of this great work with a freedom from levys, because of the advantages that would happen to it from their industry—and because most of the hands employed therein, will be imported on purpose to carry on this laudable design, and consequently woud never pay any levys without it.

And to remove all suspicion of fraud, it is likewise proposed that a condition be inserted in the royal grant, that in case the petitioners shall not drain the said Dismal in the space of ten years, they shall then be obliged to pay all arrears of quit-rent from the date of the said

Library of Congress

grant, together with a full value of the rights which ought otherwise to have been payed 25 down in the beginning, proportionably to the quantity of land so granted. The petitioners humbly relying on his majesty's goodness, to indulge them a longer time in case unforeseen difficulty should require it. [This paragraph, in the manuscript, is marked across, by a single stroke of the pen.—Ed. of Farmers' Register.]

26

PROPOSALS FOR DRAINING THE DISMAL

If this great undertaking be managed prudently, it may be completed in the forementioned time of ten years, for the summ of four thousand pound sterling, and perhaps for a great deal less.

It is therefore proposed, that this sum be divided into 20 shares, and that they to be subscribed by as few persons as possible. That the Earl of Orkney, Sir Charles Wager, Sir Jacob Acworth, and Col. Bladen be invited to encourage this subscription, being well wishers to these colonys, as well as to the propagateing of hemp in his majesty's plantations, and the rather because their credit may be necessary in obtaining the royal grant. So soon as such grant shall be obtained, the first step ought to be to procure a man that perfectly understands draining of land, at a moderate salary, and while that is transacting in England, the whole tract should be exactly surveyd here, and the level of it tryd. After that, a proper piece of land should be chosen on the skirts of the Dismal, whereon to make the first settlement. Sufficient 27 land may be found out there that may be laid dry by a trench only, and with that improvement done, produce hemp and rice, as well as Indian corn.

The next advance must be to build convenient houses to receive the people necessary to be employd in the beginning, and to provide the proper tools, bedding, cloaths, and provisions for them. When these are all ready, let 10 seasoned negroes be purchased, of

Library of Congress

both sexes, that their breed may supply the loss. Let these be employd in clearing and in trenching the ground, in making of corn and other requisite improvements.

In the mean time, a moderate stock of cattle should be provided, which will winter on the edges of the Dismal with very little dry feeding.

It may be proper to teach two or more of your negro men to saw, make shingles, burn tar, draw clapboards, and set up tight casks, that so all the timber cut down to clear the ground may be turnd to the best advantage. And the money to be raisd from all these improvements will help to defray the expences of the first settlement, and in some measure enable the work to carry on itself; that so the money remaining in bank may be reservd for the purchase of negros, as fast as room can be made for them, and 28 your work shall need a greater number of hands to carry it on with vigour.

When you have thus got a firm footing, a near computation may be made what increase of strength will be wanting the second year—remembering to purchase no more negros than you have made provision for, and there is no doubt in the world, but by the time the whole money is expended, the Dismal will be made as good land as any in the country, with at least 300 negros working upon it, and stockt with an incredible number of cattle. From all which we may safely conclude, that each share will then be worth more than ten times the value of the original subscription, besides the unspeakable benefit it will prove to the publick.

29

AN ESTIMATE OF THE FIRST EXPENSE

To the building a quarter, barn, and house for an overseer, £ 60 00 0

To the purchase of 10 seasond negros, half men, half women, 300 00 0

To cloaths, bedding, tools, and provisions for the first year, 40 00 0

Library of Congress

To 20 cows and calves, 9 steers, one bull, and a horse, 50 00 0

To the wages of an overseer, and his provisions, 25 00 0

To accidents and charges unforeseen, 25 00 0

To soliciting the grant in England, 50 00 0

To surveying the Dismal, and the expence of the patent here, 50 00 0

£600 00 0

To 20 negros the 2d year 400 00 0

To 25 negros the 3d year 500 00 0

To 25 negros the 4th year 500 00 0

To 25 negros the 5th year 500 00 0

30

To 25 negros the 6th year 500 00 0

To 25 negros the 7th year 500 00 0

To 25 negros the 8th year 500 00 0

£4000 00 0

The foregoing account shows only how many negros may be purchased for £4000, being the summ subscribed, to be employd in the Dismal; but besides that mony, there is no question but the profits ariseing from the labour of the negros on the land, which will every year be laid dry, will be very considerable—inso much that it will not only defray all incident

Library of Congress

charges, but also purchase many more people to finish this great work. And for those which happen to dye, 'tis probable that their place will be fully supplyd by their children, if care be taken to buy as many women as men. And because it will be some years before such children grow up to a stature fit to work, it will be prudent to lay out part of the money in boys and girls, which will not only season better than men and women, but will be very soon fit for labour, and supply the mortality that must happen among so great a number. Besides the advantages of propagation, there is another benefit in provideing wives for the men: it will keep them at home, and prevent their rambling 31 abroad anights, from which arise many great inconveniences. By this practice they learn to be dishonest, take cold, and lose their rest, whereby they are less fit to do their work the following days. Besides, when they have wives in other familys, they are frequently poisoned by the jealousy of their rivals, who think they have a much better right to the affections of their fellow servants, than any stranger. By this many lose their lives.

(Copy of Petition annexed.)

To the King's most Excellent Majesty,

The petition of Humbly sheweth:

That whereas there is a large bogg, situated partly in Virginia, and partly in North Carolina, which lyes wast by reason of the mire and water with which it is covered, and corrupts the air of all the neighboring country by the noxious vapours that perpetually ascend from it, to the great annoyance of your majesty's subjects: and whereas, many considerable advantages woud arise, both to your majesty and those colonys, from the effectual draining of it, which cannot be performed without a very great labour and expence—

32 2/E 297430/ C 6465 12

Your petitioners therefore humbly pray, that your majesty will be graciously pleasd to grant to your petitioners the said bogg, and all the land not yet taken up, lying within half a mile of any part of it: and the better to enable them to support the heavy charge of draining it,

Library of Congress

your petitioners further pray, that your majesty will please to grant them the said bogg, free from rights, and also exempt them from paying any quit-rent for the space of 50 years, except one pound of hemp to be paid yearly.

And your petitioners shall ever pray, etc.