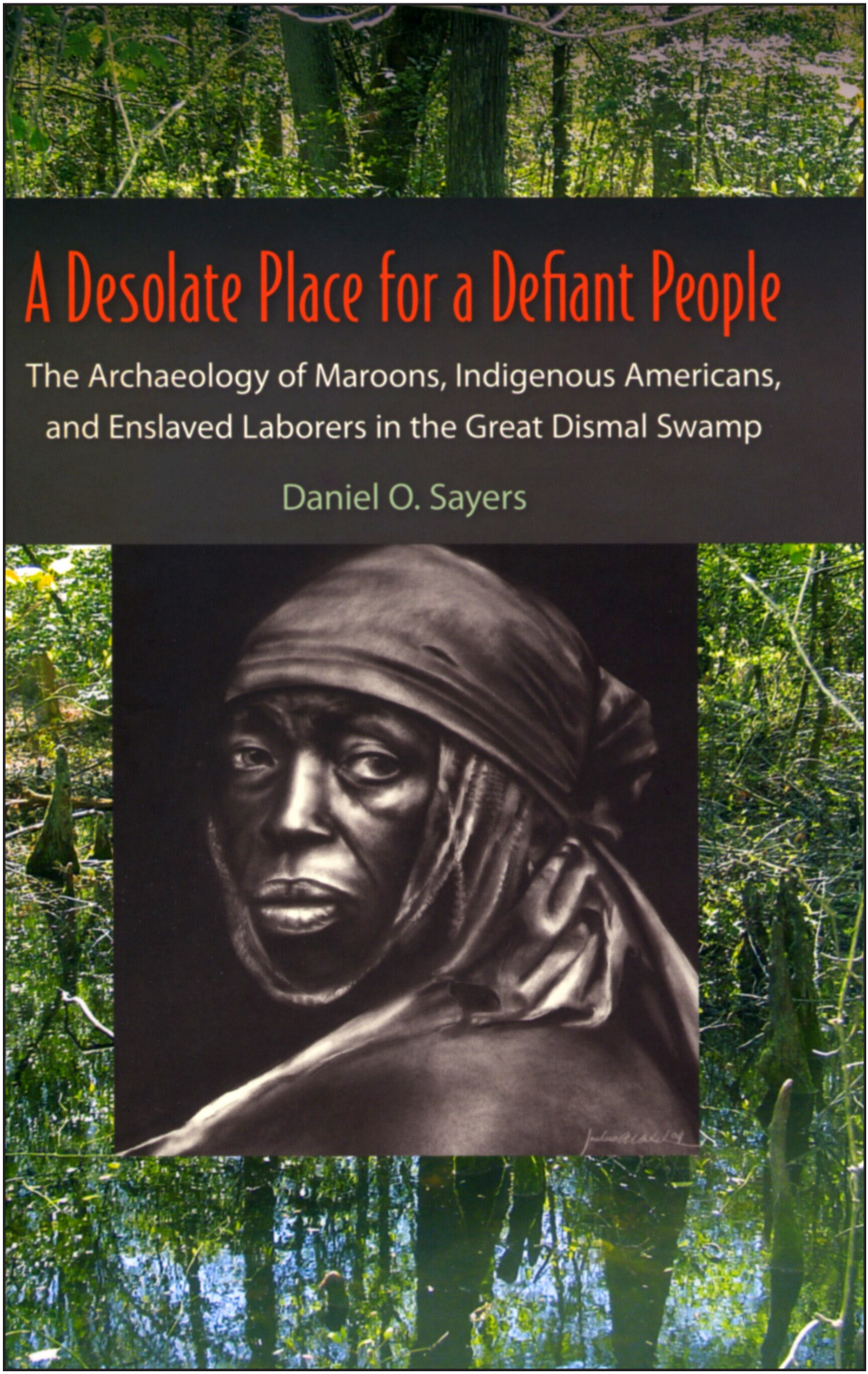

ARCHAEOLOGY/HISTORY

"Shows how colonialism and slavery created sustained critiques of American capitalism and created the conditions for chronic resistance. These communities represent a largely unrecognized, alternative declaration of independence. They are a part of world history that is truly revolutionary."

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"Sayers uses archaeology to tell a compelling story of how alienated people found refuge in the alien landscape of the Great Dismal Swamp. Here they created their own way of life, free of the exploitation and alienation that they escaped. His work helps us to better understand the history of defiance in the antebellum South and raises important theoretical issues for all archaeologists studying diasporic communities."

—**RANDALL H. MCGUIRE,** author of *Archaeology as Political Action*

IN THE 250 YEARS BEFORE THE CIVIL WAR, the Great Dismal Swamp of Virginia and North Carolina was a brutal landscape—2,000 square miles of undeveloped and unforgiving wetlands, peat bogs, impenetrable foliage, and dangerous creatures. It was also a protective refuge for marginalized individuals, including Native Americans, African American maroons, free African Americans, and outcast Europeans.

In the first thorough archaeological examination of this unique region, Daniel Sayers exposes and unravels the complex social and economic systems developed by these defiant communities that thrived on the periphery. He develops an analytical framework based on the complex interplay between alienation, diasporic exile, uneven geographical development, and modes of production to argue that colonialism and slavery inevitably created sustained critiques of American capitalism.

DANIEL O. SAYERS is associate professor of anthropology at American University.

Published in cooperation with the Society for Historical Archaeology

Front: Cedar tree knees growing out of swamp waters, Great Dismal Swamp National Wildlife Refuge (GDSLS Photo Collection, 2005). *Inset*: Original charcoal drawing inspired by Great Dismal Swamp maroons, Joshua Walsh, 2004. Courtesy of the author.

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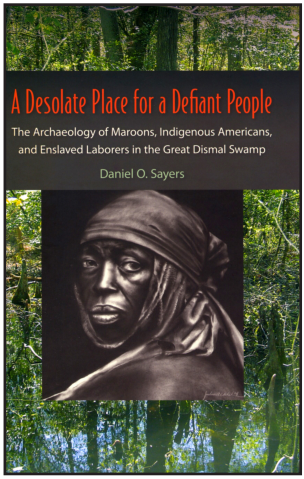

A Desolate Place for a Defiant People: The Archaeology of Maroons, Indigenous Americans, and Enslaved Laborers in the Great Dismal Swamp

Daniel O. Sayers. 2014. University Press of Florida, Gainesville, Florida. 288 pp., 30 figures, 4 tables. $24.95 (paper), $79.95 (cloth).

Reviewed by Noeleen McIlvenna, Department of History, Wright State University, Dayton OH.

Dan Sayers sets his fascinating study of North Carolina's hidden communities in a Marxist theoretical framework, asking us to consider not ethnicity or religion but how differing modes of production reveal a group's collective sense of self. In so doing, we are challenged to examine how present-day consumerism colors our view of the past. For the maroons of the Dismal Swamp, luxury came in control of their own labor and work rhythms and in defying the powerful planter class of Virginia, not in any fetishized commodity. *A Desolate Place* offers much beyond description; Sayers and the maroons he studies force us to ask questions about the definition of liberty.

The book focuses primarily on the settlements in the Great Dismal Swamp in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Sayers's almost decade-long archaeology project found evidence of groups persistently making homes on islands miles into the thick dark vegetation. Sayers painstakingly excavated on these interior sites over the course of several years, in a natural environment most archaeologists thought would be devoid of human occupation. His careful work documents the daily lives of multiple generations of inhabitants. These interior 'scission' communities, probably composed at times of Indians, African Americans, and European indentured servants, created a praxis of production serving themselves. Reworking the stone tools of previous Indian occupants, the runaways fashioned their own lives in what Sayers calls '*autoexusia*': agency within the limits of the possible. Sayers uncovered the remains of entire structures, and revealed details such as the refashioning of broken fragments of ancient Indian pottery into post supports. These structural remains, with raised floors and wattle-and-daub walls, support his claims that people intended to spend their lives here, not merely to seek a temporary refuge. He argues that their tools—tiny reworked pieces of chert and glass—are "a defining feature of the scission community signature" (p. 136).

Marx's concept of alienation occupies the central place of Sayers's analysis and he contends that in growing, gathering, and building the materials to meet their needs, swamp dwellers came close to a "true consciousness." Most will draw pause here; power relationships within any community can exploit and alienate the labor of others. Sayers does not seek to disguise his admiration for his subjects and reveres the courage and resilience they showed in making their homes in the last spot on the eastern seaboard untouched by capitalism.

Dunmore's 1775 Proclamation may have drained the swamp of such communities. And with the new USA encouraging expansionism, canal companies moved into the Dismal, carrying capitalist modes of production into the wilderness. The enslaved men worked on the task system with financial bonuses as incentives and occasionally employed the maroons to cut shingles. For a short time, each group enriched the others' lives, but gradually, perhaps inevitably given the avariciousness of a capitalist system, the maroons became "immersed in that exchange-value market economy" (p. 205).

In combining his archaeology with careful historical work in the archives, Sayer builds a convincing case. American historians may be initially turned off by the dense theoretical language used to explain that people need to eat, but work is hard. But both historians and anthropologists should persevere, for Sayers's perspectives are fresh and brilliant.