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# From swamps to swamping: The usage and perceptions of swamps by African-Americans in Antebellum and Postbellum Arkansas and Louisiana

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From Swamps to Swamping:  
The Usage and Perceptions of Swamps by African-Americans in Antebellum and  
Postbellum Arkansas and Louisiana  
Tessa Annette Neblett Evans

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

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May 2014

## **DEDICATION**

*To my family*

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This project was greatly aided by the members of my committee, including the director, Dr. Andrew Witmer, who helped me throughout the entire process of researching and writing this thesis. He helped me to narrow my focus and gave me advice regarding historical frameworks that would help to clarify and organize this project. I also wish to thank Dr. Lanier, because she introduced me to cultural geography and landscape studies, and her advice and book suggestions helped me to organize and think about this project in many different ways. Dr. Dillard also offered valuable feedback regarding this project and how to integrate this project into the wider historiography of Southern history. The courses that I have taken at James Madison University and the books I have read the past two years really helped me to begin this project and view it in different ways. The faculty and graduate students at James Madison have given me the tools to conduct better history, and I am very grateful for their patience and guidance.

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## ABSTRACT

This project is a landscape study that examines how different members of the antebellum and postbellum community in Arkansas and Louisiana perceived and used the swamplands, and how this changed over time. This project suggests that the swamps played an absolutely crucial role for individual slaves and free blacks both before and after the Civil War. Unlike Europeans and the white community who viewed the swamps as static, physical spaces on the plantation without value, African-Americans viewed them as fluid places filled with value. Religious practices were often performed near swamps, and even so-called aberrant religions practices, like voodoo, happened in the swamps. Slaves and free African-Americans contributed to a small slave-based economy by trading and selling items from the swamps, such as moss, hides, and nuts. After the Civil War, freed African-Americans garnered more economic stability by buying swamplands and exploiting their rich, fertile nature and planting crops. The swamps offered slaves spaces to perform small, everyday acts of resistance, which did not completely undermine planter control, but helped to did help to contribute to an African American culture and enabled them to enrich their everyday lives, despite their status as enslaved.

## INTRODUCTION

“Even in the heart of that dismal swamp, God had provided a refuge and a dwelling place for millions of living things.”<sup>1</sup> Famous fugitive slave Solomon Northup described the inherent paradoxical nature in the vast swamplands when recording his journey from slavery to freedom in antebellum Louisiana. At one point the swamp was described as “dismal,” yet in the next line it was described as a God-given “refuge” for runaway slaves. Dissecting this quote illuminates a larger issue of how different groups of people in the antebellum and postbellum South, including enslaved African-Americans, free blacks, Europeans, and European Americans, perceived and used this ubiquitous, vast, and mysterious portion of the southern environment. For the majority of Europeans and European Americans, the swamps represented an unhealthy, dismal portion of the southern landscape. They found little usage in these swamps, and endeavored to drain them when possible, especially since the swamps perpetuated deadly diseases. The African-American community, however, both enslaved and free, found a plethora of uses and opportunities in these swamps that affected their everyday lives, including the practice of religion, the decision to stay or run away, and their economic and business endeavors. By exploring in depth the swamps of Arkansas and Louisiana, and how they were described and used by different people at different times, we can more fully understand the paradoxical and complex relationship between people and the environment, and how the various perceptions of the environment influenced people’s lives and their decisions.

Cultural geographers and historians in the past few decades have begun to analyze the “perceptual” landscape, or how the early colonists, settlers, and inhabitants perceived

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 105.



the landscape and their personal relationship with the environment, without modern constructs that might tend to confuse their perceptions. Historians then see how these perceptions changed over time in one geographic space. For example, H. Roy Merrens and George Terry discuss the relationship between the perceptual landscape and disease in colonial South Carolina.<sup>2</sup> Addressing the actions of early South Carolina colonists, these authors write, “The colonists’ perceptions of the environment, and their behavior in response to those perceptions, rather than the environment *per se*, played a crucial role.”<sup>3</sup> The authors analyze pamphlets created by travelers and land agents that were sent back to England in order to entice more settlers to inhabit the new colony. In these pamphlets and journals, they discover that the early inhabitants of South Carolina focus on the physical landscape, and the beauty and potential of this virgin, fertile land. Over time, however, the colonists’ perceived attitude toward the environment changed dramatically, and later letters and documents suggest that their enchantment with the South Carolina environment disappeared, especially because of the summer and what it brought: mosquitoes, stagnant water, humidity and high temperatures.<sup>4</sup> Although the physical landscape did not change over time, and, in fact, remained relatively constant for the lives of the colonists, their perceptions of the environment changed dramatically, thus their descriptions of the physical landscape changed to reflect their newly felt sentiments.

This method can be applied to any space: a city, town, or plantation. Historians can gauge the importance of various areas within the plantation and overall southern landscape to determine several things: how different people described the same physical

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<sup>2</sup> H. Roy Merrens and George Terry. “Dying in Paradise: Malaria, Mortality, and the Perceptual Environment in Colonial South Carolina.” *The Journal of Southern History*. Vol. 50, No. 4, Nov. 1984, 533-550.

<sup>3</sup> “Dying in Paradise: Malaria, Mortality, and the Perceptual Environment in Colonial South Carolina,” 534.

<sup>4</sup> “Dying in Paradise: Malaria, Mortality, and the Perceptual Environment in Colonial South Carolina,” 543.

landscape, how their perceptions of the same physical landscape varied when looked at by different groups of people, and how people's attitudes towards certain spaces either changed over time or stayed constant. In this study, the focus of the perceptual landscape will be swamps. Simply speaking, the perception of the swamps differed greatly between Europeans and African Americans based on the usage of the swamps by enslaved and free blacks. Swamps were typically dismissed by Europeans and planter elite in Arkansas and Louisiana, yet were described as important to other groups, particularly the enslaved and free black populations sharing the same physical landscape.

Historiographically, Arkansas and Louisiana remain relatively understudied territories when looking at colonial and antebellum Southern history and race relations, particularly among the enslaved African Americans and European Americans. Few historians address the social, cultural, political, and economic factors that led to the creation of antebellum societies in Arkansas and Louisiana, and those who do approach these issues tend to analyze these territories in a bifurcated, fragmented manner, without connecting the colonial period with the antebellum period. Historians Gwendolyn Hall and Daniel Usner contribute the most to the discussion of the economic, social, and racial histories of the Louisiana territories in their respective monographs. They study extensively the interactions among the European, African, and Native American cultures in the territories west of the Mississippi River. Their monographs end in the early 1800s, however, and these authors do not discuss the social ramifications in the beginning of the antebellum period, and end their studies at the end of the colonial period, avoiding the nineteenth century altogether. They write in their conclusions that structures created during the colonial period continue into the nineteenth century South, but give no specific

details or patterns. Moving away from Arkansas and Louisiana, other historians of the antebellum South add to the historiography of race, space, and agency, and discuss how the enslaved and free blacks viewed and shaped their perceptual environments, which is the framework for this study on swamps and other marginal landscapes on the plantation. The frameworks created by Stephanie Camp and Anthony Kaye give the most useful tools for conducting this study analyzing the perceptual landscapes of the enslaved and white populations, particularly when teasing out information on how the enslaved viewed, shaped, and changed the spaces on the plantations over time. By examining the rhetoric, usages, and perceptions of specific portions of the plantation landscape, these findings illuminate nuances regarding racial spheres of interaction, race relations, and slave resistance and the creation of an African-American culture in the southern portion of the United States that offer a unique environment to study.

Hall writes extensively about the power secured by both free and enslaved African-Americans in colonial Louisiana, and cites the environment of Louisiana as an important facet. Hall recognizes the role of the environment of southeast Louisiana that gave the enslaved and free blacks a physical space to assert control. The abundant cypress swamps in Louisiana contributed to the French planters' inability to control the movement of their enslaved, and consequently, empowered the enslaved, free blacks, and Native Americans, thus creating anxiety for French planters. She writes about the plantation landscape, "The slave owners' lands stretched back from the waterways indeterminate distances, trailing off into cypress swamps and woodlands." Continuing to describe the physical qualities of the swamps, "Back from the waterfront, within and beyond the property lines of the French settlers, were the

cypress swamps—*la ciprière*—often the most reliable source of wealth. The lands on and behind the estates afforded excellent, nearby refuge to runaway slaves.”<sup>5</sup> She writes that free blacks and fugitive slaves used the cypress swamps to create temporary homes, to hunt, and to store weapons. In the eighteenth century, many created small farms for subsistence, and remained relatively isolated from French authority. They also were armed, and posed a direct threat to French authority, especially when they raided plantations for weapons, cattle, and supplies. She writes, “The danger they posed to the colony was more profound. They surrounded the plantations. Slaves remaining with their masters were in constant contact with them.”<sup>6</sup> The environment enabled manumitted slaves, free blacks, and runaway slaves to congregate together and create fortifications that constantly plagued the French colony.

European control of the landscape, particularly the swamps, changed after a failed slave conspiracy. Hall writes that the power created in *la ciprière* culminated in the failed conspiracy in 1795 in Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana, when Louisiana was a Spanish colony. 57 slaves were tried, along with three whites, who testified to trying to abolish slavery by burning down a plantation, stealing weapons, and killing the white families in the area. Hall creates controversy by connecting this event to the Jacobin movement in France and Haiti. Many historians disagree with the extent to which international events influenced this failed conspiracy in Louisiana, citing that many of the enslaved did not have prior knowledge of world events at this time.<sup>7</sup> She

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<sup>5</sup> Gwendolyn M. Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, 202.

<sup>6</sup> Gwendolyn Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 203.

<sup>7</sup> Gilbert Din criticizes Hall’s treatment of Spanish sources, and believes she overly-simplifies the influence of international events in this conspiracy along with the support of poor whites and Native Americans. See his of *Africans in Colonial Louisiana* in *The Florida Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 72, No. 1, Jul. 1993, 91-93.

argues that “It was not a movement of blacks against whites. It was part of a multiracial abolitionist movement supported by a large segment of the dispossessed of all races in Louisiana and throughout the Caribbean: a manifestation of the most radical phase of the French Revolution, which had spilled over from Europe to the Americas.”<sup>8</sup> Regardless of its transnational aspects, the conspiracy failed when the Spaniards found out about the plot. The three whites involved were deported, whereas twenty-three slaves were hung and “their heads cut off and nailed on the posts at several places along the Mississippi River from New Orleans to Point Coupee.”<sup>9</sup> This created a turning point in race relations and racial legislation, according to Hall, since after this event, the Spanish tried to control the Spanish colonies more closely, until they “abandoned” Louisiana in 1800.<sup>10</sup> Spanish planters petitioned their governors to allow them to punish their slaves more harshly, yet few changes were implemented to quell racial violence or civil unrest in the colonies. In response to these numerous petitions, the Spanish crown issued a statement that said they would not condone racial violence, even after this conspiracy was exposed. The governor wrote:

The petition is asking that the slaves not be heard when they complain of the cruelties inflicted upon them by their masters, that the masters be authorized to oppress and inflict injury on the blacks at their own whims, and even to shoot and kill them if they attempt to run away and fail to halt, as was done in the past; that this be also applicable to the free black people, and that those persons be tolerated who inflict ill-treatment and trample under foot those black people without any investigation or justification of the trust of their disrespect, because they are white. The Spanish government is far from lending its assistance to this

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<sup>8</sup> Gwendolyn M. Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 345.

<sup>9</sup> Gwendolyn M. Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 344.

<sup>10</sup> Gwendolyn Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 378.

chicanery, for it is diametrically opposed by the Sovereign.<sup>11</sup>

Hall continues to argue that the lack of punishment after this conspiracy did create more tangible anxiety for the Spanish planters, encouraging the planters themselves to administer punishments despite Spanish legislation. Planters strictly limited the mobility of the enslaved, yet the Africans, African-Americans, poor whites, and Native Americans continued to fraternize and cause unrest of the Europeans.<sup>12</sup> After the Spanish ceded Louisiana to the French, and the French consequently sold Louisiana to the United States, slaves witnessed more punishments and violent laws to keep them within their proper plantation boundaries, especially with the advent of the Code Noir in the early nineteenth century. Hall ends her monograph in 1795, with the advent of the failed conspiracy at Point Coupee.

However, the environmental factors that influenced early African-American behavior, both of the enslaved and free black communities, continued well into the nineteenth century, as this study regarding the relationship between the environment and slavery shows. The use and perceptions of the environment manifested differently when looking at the space of the movement of the enslaved, in response to the advent of stringent laws, such as the Code Noir, and the implementation of the patrolling of the enslaved. After the acquisition of these territories in 1803, European American and American planters began to watch their slaves more closely, and laws outlawed the practice of interracial relationships or miscegenation, replete with fines and penalties. Unlike in the early colonization of the Louisiana territory, enslaved and free blacks could

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Gwendolyn M. Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana: The Development of Afro-Creole Culture in the Eighteenth Century*, 378.

<sup>12</sup> Gwendolyn Hall, *Africans in Colonial Louisiana*, 379.

not move as easily through the cypress swamps in Louisiana to create temporary communities that relied on violence and pillaging for subsistence. Rather, free black communities were few and far between, mostly in the Western Florida territory. Within the boundaries of the strict plantation, however, the enslaved continued to utilize the physical environment of the South for their own benefit, similar to Hall's discussion of the refugee slaves congregating in *la ciprière*. Swamps did not disappear from the plantation landscape, and were perceived as useful and clandestine spaces for various activities and practices during nineteenth century slavery. In Arkansas and Louisiana, the enslaved and free blacks continued to use the environment in the South for their own pragmatic, religious, or economic benefits, but without leaving the plantation itself. Planters appeared unaware of the exploitation of the swamps by the enslaved and free blacks, and only documented their distaste of the swamps when writing about the nuisance animals, mosquitoes, or disease that these spaces perpetuated.

Walter Johnson also discusses the importance of the environment and how planters used the "carceral" landscape found in the Lower Mississippi Valley to further their control of the enslaved and to make slavery a viable form of capitalism, as the slaves were both the capital and modes of production. Johnson writes about the "carceral" landscape of the Lower Mississippi River Valley and how planters recognized the prison-like aspects of the deep Southern environment, using the physical landscape to exert control, perpetuate anxiety, and pare mobility. He fails to some extent to mention the ways the enslaved used this "carceral" landscape to their own advantage. This research shows how many whites and European settlers, surveyors, and visitors perceived the southern landscape as a malicious, ominous, and unpleasant place. Some African-

Americans, however, especially slaves in Arkansas and Louisiana, did not have the same sentiments regarding the landscape, and these divergent opinions will be studied more closely in this project. In the Lower Mississippi River Valley, slave masters, according to Johnson, utilized the landscape to keep control and limit the mobility of the enslaved, often manifesting in devious and prison-like control. Although he concedes that slaves sometimes used the “off the grid”<sup>13</sup> landscape for their own reasons, he does not go into enough depth regarding the quotidian actions of slaves using the landscape, particularly the swamps, to somewhat ameliorate their condition and express cultural agency. By discussing the various measures plantation owners and slave masters took to control the mobility of the slaves and to use the natural southern environment to their own advantage, Johnson overlooks an important aspect of how the enslaved themselves perceived the same landscape, and furthermore, how they used it against planters when carrying out cultural practices, creating identities, and pushing the boundaries of mobility. Looking at the particular actions of the enslaved in these spaces will add to the historiography of space, race, and everyday resistance, and answer the larger historiographical questions regarding agency and identity formation of the enslaved.

Though not writing about Louisiana or Arkansas specifically, Stephanie Camp’s monograph *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* adds an important level of spatial and geographic analysis to slavery that is integral to this study of the swamps and enslaved. Camp writes that “at the heart of the process of enslavement was a spatial impulse: to locate bondpeople in plantation

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<sup>13</sup> Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 229.



space and to control, indeed to determine, their movements and activities.”<sup>14</sup> Enslaved men and women, however, avoided complete control by creating “rival geographies” that they created, especially women in Camp’s analysis, to bypass these prescribed spaces and to carve out their own space within the white-dominated plantation. She calls the plantations “geographies of containment,” and cites the various laws and ordinances that forced the enslaved to stay within their prescribed spaces. The rival geography presents “alternative ways of knowing and using plantation and southern space that conflicted with planters’ ideals and demands.”<sup>15</sup> Camp does not treat the swamps as separate spaces of influence. She focuses more on how enslaved women in particular shaped their work spaces and personal homes on the plantation for political reasons that in turn empowered them as woman and individuals, not solely property, creating body politics. According to the theory of the body politic, Camp writes that slavery was based on the “domination largely through the body in the form of captivity, commodification, exploitation, and physical punishment... However, brutality did not constitute the whole of slaves’ bodily experience. For those who encounter oppression through the body, the body becomes an important site not only of suffering but also (and therefore) of enjoyment and resistance.”<sup>16</sup>

Steven Hahn’s monograph also discusses the importance of body politics in slavery and after emancipation. In *A Nation Under our Feet Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration*, Hahn details how emancipated

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<sup>14</sup> Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004,) 12.

<sup>15</sup> Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, 62.

slaves after the Civil War drew upon certain practices and familiar tools that they created during slavery to apply to contemporary political movements. He writes, “In countless ways, freedpeople built and drew on relations, institutions, infrastructures, and aspirations that they and their ancestors had struggled for and constructed as slaves.”<sup>17</sup> Because this project relies on free African-American experiences and the narratives of successful businessmen and planters after the Civil War in Arkansas and Louisiana, Hahn’s framework for analyzing how rural African-Americans created political structures and used familiar structures, such as kinship networks and the church, to garner political power after the Civil War provides a useful framework for this study.

Camp concedes that the rival geographies created by the enslaved did not completely threaten planter hegemony, since these spaces were typically located within the plantation boundaries. Rather, the enslaved utilized these common plantation spaces for unorthodox or personal reasons, culminating in every day acts of resistance that slowly chipped away at complete planter hegemony and challenged the laws regarding the mobility of slaves over time. Camp warns that studying these rival geographies can be difficult, however. Because these spaces, like the fields, swamps, woods, or slave quarters doubled as a rival geography along with a prescribed space as dignified by the planters or overseers, historians must scrutinize these sources to read more in between the lines to see how these same spaces had political meanings. She writes, “Studying the rival geography requires a leap of imagination, for it was space chartered by movements that were, by design, hidden, and as a result, little documented.”<sup>18</sup> The slave narratives from

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<sup>17</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet: Black Political Struggles in the Rural South from Slavery to the Great Migration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, 7.

Arkansas and Louisiana, however, do give evidence that the swamps certainly fit the definition of a rival geography, since the usage of these spaces and the perception of these spaces changed depending on who was viewing or using them, and changed under different circumstances.

By utilizing the swamps for economic betterment, the creation of female or male identities, practicing religion, or simply ameliorating the quotidian aspects of slavery, the enslaved certainly created a rival geography in the swamps, sloughs, and bayous in Arkansas and Louisiana. Camp's analysis covers the attitudes and actions of enslaved women throughout the South, without focusing her study to one portion to one geographic place in the antebellum South, as this study will be grounded in one geographic framework. Furthermore, Camp looks at the variety of spaces that the enslaved utilized and created as rival geographies, instead of focusing on one portion of the plantation landscape—the swamps—as this study seeks to do. This study also endeavors to place the swamps in a cultural study, by addressing how different players in the colonial and antebellum South, including the Europeans and African-Americans, perceived and used one specific portion of the plantation landscape, for various reasons that changed over time, and why these spaces meant more to one group of people over another.

Adding to the historiography of race, space, and agency, Anthony Kaye's monograph *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* seeks to flesh out how the enslaved viewed and created communal neighborhoods and spaces, employed for both social and political functions. These functions included courting, running away, and after Emancipation, they created a politically vibrant and powerful African-American

community. Similar to this study of the swamps, Kaye analyses the vocabulary of the enslaved, and examines the different meanings attributed to different words, such as a joining place, network, or neighborhood, and their inherent political connotations before, during, and after the Civil War. Kaye focuses on the Natchez region of Mississippi, and focuses on how these definitions of spaces, created by the enslaved themselves, were entities that changed over time, under varying circumstances, and even from plantation to plantation. Kaye writes about this fluid process of neighborhoods, saying, “Slave neighborhoods were in a constant state of making, remaking, and becoming.”<sup>19</sup> In further describing the plantation landscape and the process by which the enslaved shaped these spaces, Kaye writes, “Amid the fields of corn along with the cotton, the countryside was criss-cut with rivers, bayous, creeks; dense with woods; and broken by swamps and hollows, among other wild places. Different places had different uses and hence different meanings.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the swamps were specific spaces continuously changed, shaped, and redefined by the enslaved, and their function certainly changed depending upon the time period and function of the space, as illustrated by the ex-slaves and fugitive slave narratives who discussed these spaces. Instead of looking solely at the vocabulary of the enslaved, and teasing out which spaces had varying meanings depending upon the circumstances or situations, this study looks specifically at the swamps, sloughs, and bayous, to see what definitions, meanings, and uses that these specific spaces in Arkansas and Louisiana offered to the enslaved, and how the enslaved changed and shaped these spaces over time.

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<sup>19</sup> Anthony Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 5.

<sup>20</sup> Anthony Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South*, 5.

These historians all discuss the measures that slave owners and planters took to curtail the mobility of the enslaved in the South. Planters in Arkansas and Louisiana were no different, and as they endeavored to control the mobility of the enslaved, the laws in colonial and antebellum Arkansas and Louisiana reflected this aspect of bondage. Until 1803, both Louisiana and Arkansas territories followed the Code Noir, passed in 1724. This extensive document listed the responsibilities of both slaves and their masters, and the conditions that were acceptable for plantation owners, many of which required brutal punishments for runaways or insurrections. For example, the law outlawed miscegenation, though Usner and Hall argued that this continued well into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries because the French and Spanish overseers were unable to enforce this law. This law also allowed slaves to carry weapons if they hunted, yet this part of the law was revoked in the later 1800s.<sup>21</sup>

In 1825, Arkansas passed a law that created a slave patrol as part of keeping the mobility of the enslaved hindered, with an agreement that the white community would work together to keep interracial fraternizing illegal and to keep the enslaved within the plantations. Numerous slave narratives and interviews discussed the role of “patrollers” in their plantations and neighborhoods, the punishments for being caught, and the ways about which the enslaved dodged the patrollers. In 1838, Arkansas, as a state, published its revised laws regarding slavery in its *Revised Statutes of the State of Arkansas*. Stated within the lengthy law, slaves were forbidden from owning weapons, even for hunting purposes, and all members of the white community had the same responsibility of

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<sup>21</sup> *Le Code Noir*. “Liberty, Equality and Fraternity: Exploring the French Revolution.” George Mason University. <http://chnm.gmu.edu/revolution/d/335/> (Accessed 3 March 2014).

regulating and enforcing laws surrounding the socializing and fraternizing among the slaves. Section 28 of the Arkansas Statute stated:

Every justice of the peace, upon his own knowledge of any unlawful meeting of slaves, white men, free negroes and mulattoes, or of any riot, rout, or unlawful assembly of slaves, shall suppress the same, and without warrant take the offenders before some justice of the peace of the county, to be dealt with according to law.<sup>22</sup>

Section 29 further states:

Sheriffs, coroners and constables, upon a knowledge or on information of any unlawful meeting of slaves, white men, free negroes or mulattoes, or of any riot, rout, or unlawful assembly of slaves, shall suppress the same, and without warrant take the offenders before some justice of the peace of the country, to be dealt with according to law.<sup>23</sup>

These laws reflected the new emphasis of a communal effort to keep the enslaved within the boundaries of the plantation, and to keep them from gathering or meeting without white supervision. These laws in Arkansas and Louisiana certainly suppressed the mobility of the slaves, and gave legal recourse to slave owners whose slaves left the specific plantation boundaries. Despite these laws and the enforcement of these laws in Arkansas and Louisiana, the enslaved no longer had as much opportunity to leave the plantations, as seen in the colonial and pre-antebellum time period about which Hall and Usner discuss at length. Rather, with the advent of a stronger and more centralized government in these states, the enslaved now had fewer opportunities to leave the plantations, yet they began to utilize and discover places within the plantation, such as the

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<sup>22</sup> Section 28, *1838 Revised Statutes of the State of Arkansas*. Available in Orville W. Taylor's *Negro Slavery in Arkansas* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000.)

<sup>23</sup> Section 29, *1838 Statutes of the State of Arkansas*.

swamps, sloughs, and bayous, which they used for the same reasons as seen in the colonial period, such as gathering to practice religion, participate in a modified frontier exchange economy, and even escape from slavery. Notably, slaves began to recognize the mobility offered through bodies of water, especially bayous that led to rivers, and runaway slave advertisements noted that many of these fugitive slaves became familiar with the bayous and tributaries of navigable rivers to then use them to flee the South. Although the spaces of interaction and expression of cultural traits changed during the creation of the antebellum time period from the colonial, the actions remained relatively similar, and spaces within the plantation boundaries became exceedingly important for the enslaved and free blacks. Using the frameworks of body politics, as presented by Camp and Hahn, it is important to analyze where the enslaved and free blacks chose to congregate for various reasons, and why they chose the spaces that they did. In the case for many of the free and enslaved African-Americans in Arkansas and Louisiana, choosing the swamps as spaces to express cultural expression, to flee from bondage, or to simply hide temporarily, the swamps became a political space that continued to be important well into the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, when looking at the activities and instances of African-Americans choosing the swamps as spaces for various interactions.

An important aspect of this study seeks to find agency of the enslaved and free African-Americans in Arkansas and Louisiana by focusing on the way they used and interacted with the swamps. Agency refers to an individual's control over his or her own life, and a historiographical debate has arisen regarding the agency of slaves. Kaye offers a response to this debate in regards to the enslaved and their actions, by creating an

“abstract spectrum of actions” ranging from accommodation to resistance, and he applies this method to three dimensional, physical spaces—in this case, the slave neighborhoods.<sup>24</sup> On this spectrum, complete subservience and complacency is on one end; outright rebellion and revolts are on the other end. In the middle of this spectrum are acts of “everyday resistance,” which include actions that may or may not have had political motivations, yet were actions that highlighted individual decisions on behalf of the slaves to better their own lives. This study suggests that the actions of free African-Americans and slaves with the swamps fall somewhere in the middle of this spectrum, since they used the swamps as spaces to assert their own power, either by practicing religion freely, making money, or using the swamps to create economic and political power. Kaye assigns actions that he finds in slave narratives, interviews, and records to this spectrum, to see whether or not these actions were inherently or obviously political. Other historians show concern about the propensity of historians to give too generously agency or power to the enslaved, thereby maintaining that they were also able to take power away from their masters or the white community overall. Therefore, this spectrum devised by Kaye, in which certain actions can reflect outright rebellion to quotidian actions that ameliorated or bettered their conditions, will be applied to the enslaved whose interviews and narratives are employed for this study. Finally, perceptions lead to significant change in the development of certain crucial aspects of life, including religion, the economy, and politics. It is this analysis of perception and usage that this paper seeks to show.

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<sup>24</sup> Anthony Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South*, 8-9.



## CHAPTER ONE

### *Lowlands, or High Expectations?*

Perceptions are created based on the descriptions left by those who interacted and endeavored to change the environment. This chapter will compare and contrast the European, European American and African-American descriptions of the physical landscape, and describe the differences in perceived descriptions of the landscape. Sources written by surveyors and planters in the early nineteenth century, during which time Arkansas became more settled and tamed, provide somewhat straightforward descriptions of the swamps, especially in comparison to other parts of the American colonies. An English traveler and early pioneer of the Western United States territory, Timothy Flint, described the early courthouse and settlement at Arkansas Post. He described the physical layout of the young town and its precarious position within the several sources:

The Post of Arkansas is situated on a level tract of land, which has a slight elevation above the adjacent bottom. It lies between two *Bayous*, that are gullied very deep, on the bend of the river...So perfectly level is the country, that there is not a hill or a stone in forty miles distance. The highest point of land in all this extent is scarcely ten feet above the highest inundations of the river. The court-house is situation within three hundred yards of the river in front, and about the same distance in the rear from a swamp into which, in high water, White River flows, which is distant thirty miles.<sup>1</sup>

Another traveler in Arkansas, Zadok Cramer, wrote of the communities near the first European settlements in the Arkansas and Louisiana territories in 1821. He said, “There

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy and James Flint, *Recollections of the Last Ten Years', Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi, from Pittsburg and the Missouri to the Gulf of Mexico, and from Florida to the Spanish Frontier; In A Series of Letters to the Rev. James Flint, of Salem, Massachusetts* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard and Company, 1826), 264.

are several houses with small cleared inclosures just below the mouth of the Arkansas, where settlements have been attempted, but are now vacated, and probably totally abandoned, owing to the overflowings of the Mississippi.”<sup>2</sup> Surveyor Thomas Nuttall went to Arkansas Post in 1819 and again in 1820. He provided rich descriptions of the plants, trees, and animals found in the bottomlands near the confluence among the Mississippi River, White River, and the Arkansas River. He wrote of the trading post: “After leaving the small circumscribed and elevated portion of the settled lands already noticed...I entered upon an oak swamp, which, by the water on the trees, appeared to be usually inundated, in the course of the summer, four to six feet by the back water of the river.”<sup>3</sup> He described the scientific names of the trees and plants in the swamp, including the willow oak, Spanish oak, and swamp oak, and continued to describe the flood-prone landscape. “After crossing this horrid morass, a delightful tract of high ground again occurs, over which the floods had never yet prevailed; here the fields of the French settlers were already of a vivid green, and the birds were singing from every bush.”<sup>4</sup> He contrasted the high lands versus the lowlands, using colorful language and images to describe the highlands, and dark, negative language to describe the floodplains. He finished his description of the swamp, and wrote “After emerging out of the swamp, in

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<sup>2</sup> Zadok Cramer, *The Navigator: Containing Directions for Navigating the Monongahela, Allegany, Ohio and Mississippi Rivers: with an ample account of these much admired waters, from the head of the former to the mouth of the latter; and a concise description of their towns, villages, harbors, settlements, etc., with maps of the Ohio and Mississippi to which is added an appendix, containing an account of Louisiana and of the Missouri and Columbia Rivers, as discovered by the voyage under capt. Lewis and Clark.* (Pittsburg: Cramer & Spear, 1821), 177.

<sup>3</sup> “Thomas Nuttall’s Description of Arkansas Post. January 22-February 26, 1819.” *An Inquiry into the Locations and Characteristics of Jacob Bright’s Trading House and William Montgomery’s Tavern.* (Patrick E. Martin, ed. Fayetteville, Arkansas: Arkansas Archeological Survey, 1977), 89.

<sup>4</sup> “Thomas Nuttall’s Description of Arkansas Post. January 22-February 26, 1819.” *An Inquiry into the Locations and Characteristics of Jacob Bright’s Trading House and William Montgomery’s Tavern,* 89.

which I found it necessary to wade about ankle deep, a prairie came in view.”<sup>5</sup>

Describing the overall Delta, he wrote:

No change, that I can remark, yet exists in the vegetation, and the scenery is almost destitute of every thing which is agreeable to human nature; nothing yet appears but one vast trackless wilderness of trees, a dead solemnity, where the human voice is never heard to echo, where not even ruins of the humblest kind recall its history to mind, or prove the past dominion of man.<sup>6</sup>

The large amounts of water and flooded plains he described will be a main issue for the early colonists who wanted to inhabit the land. The earliest French and Spanish settlers at Arkansas Post endeavored to create a settlement above sea level, though it constituted a difficult feat since the land found between the two large navigable rivers was low-lying and flood-prone, as indicated by Nuttall’s description of the amount of water through which he traversed to find the Post. Colonists had to employ complex levee systems because of the amount of water. Spanish and French colonists alike employed the natural levees, created by silt and dirt from the rivers that created a barrier between the river and its bank.<sup>7</sup> Backswamps were inadvertently created by these natural levees, and contained dense growth of cypress trees and tupelo trees, through which European settlers and explorers had to walk or float to reach the natural levee that was slightly above sea level.<sup>8</sup> De Soto’s early explorations of Arkansas territory noted the backswamps, and one member of his party noted “They rejoiced greatly on reaching dry land because it appeared to them that they would ravel about, lost, all night.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> “Thomas Nuttall’s Description of Arkansas Post. January 22-February 26, 1819.” *An Inquiry into the Locations and Characteristics of Jacob Bright’s Trading House and William Montgomery’s Tavern*. 89.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas Nuttall, *Nuttall’s Journal*, 101.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Foti. “River Country.” *The Arkansas Delta: A Landscape of Change*. (Helena, Arkansas: The Delta Cultural Center, 1990), 20.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Foti. “River Country.” *The Arkansas Delta: A Landscape of Change*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from Thomas Foti, “River Country,” 20.

Although early travelers and colonists to the Arkansas and Louisiana territories detailed the diverse environment at the beginning of the nineteenth century, their journals also listed the inherent physical difficulties required of the settlers to inhabit these tracts of land. They began to view the environment, and swamps (including levees and backswamps) in particular, as obstacles to permanent settlement. They began to document a dislike and repugnance of the swamps by the white community, and found the condition of these early posts, such as Arkansas Post, almost pitiable because of their lack of development. Although these travelers and surveyors recognized the potential for wealth in this portion of the South because of its vast tracts of fertile land, they realized that earlier endeavors had failed, and it would not be easy to turn the land into capital. Environmental difficulties these settlers faced hindered any substantial economic developments west of the Mississippi.

Surveyors and planters, even after the initial settlement, had to control or at least manage the significant natural obstacles in Arkansas and Louisiana, the most difficult of which proved to be the Mississippi River, its tributaries, and the swamps its flooding produced. Surveyors sent by the United States government found it difficult to cut through the thick overgrowth and submerged land acquired from the Louisiana Purchase in 1803.<sup>10</sup> The earliest permanent settlements were often destroyed by flooding and the capricious whims of the Mississippi, Arkansas, and St. Francis Rivers. However, planters, surveyors, and land speculators certainly recognized the economic potential in this land if the swamps were drained. They endeavored to settle and populate these states after Arkansas and Louisiana came under United States dominion to create wealth and

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<sup>10</sup> Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 36.

profits by spreading large-scale agriculture West of the Mississippi River. Nuttall indicated that the settlement and cultivation of the land on the Arkansas and Mississippi Rivers proved slow, especially after the United States bought this land from France in 1803. He noted that much of the land remained undrained and uncultivated, and the cotton produced in this area was far “inferior to that of Red River.”<sup>11</sup> Swamplands that were not drained were problematic to surveyors and planters trying to claim the land. One traveler to Arkansas, John Palmer, wrote of the flood plains that “Between the bayous of the St. Francis and the Louisiana boundary line...annually overflow considerable tracts, which in many places produces irreclaimable swamps.”<sup>12</sup> Another visitor wrote of a tract of land, “But the major part of this tract offers insurmountable obstacles to cultivation, and is even uninhabitable, on account of the vast swamps which with it is interested, and the physical impossibility to drain tem, and purge a soil like that of Lower Louisiana.”<sup>13</sup>

African slave labor was essential to creating an environment conducive to planting, and ex-slaves spoke at length about their role in shaping the environment. Slaves were certainly cognizant of the work that went into preparing virgin land for cultivation. An ex-slave from Brinkley, Arkansas, told an interviewer that she “farmed, cleared land and mama and me washed and ironed and sewed all our lives.”<sup>14</sup> One ex-slave from Arkansas discussed the difficult work that clearing land entailed. He said, “Us old darkies what come up with de country, an’ was de fust one here, us cleared up de land when there wasn’t nothin’ here much, an’ built de log houses, an’ had to git ‘long on just

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<sup>11</sup> “Thomas Nuttall’s Description of Arkansas Post. January 22-February 26, 1819,” 89.

<sup>12</sup> John Palmer. *Journal of Travels in the United States of North America and in Lower Canada* (London: Paternoster-Row, 1818), 421.

<sup>13</sup> John Palmer, *Journal of Travels in the United States of North America and in Lower Canada* (London: Paternoster-Row, 1818), 421.

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Josephine Scott Lynch, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 3 &4, 310.

what us could raise on de land an' so on."<sup>15</sup> Settlers in the early stages of Arkansas and Louisiana's colonization had to drain and turn the wild, untamed swamps and sloughs in Arkansas and Louisiana into workable fields to begin planting and cultivating cash crops, such as sugar, cotton, and rice. Enslaved laborers had to drain the majority of the swamp before planting could begin. The process of draining swamps required creating a series of connected ditches, constructing dikes, and either utilizing natural levees or building them.<sup>16</sup> John Wells recalled that his master "owned four or five thousand acres of land. It was bottoms and not cleared. They had floods then, rode around in boats sometimes."<sup>17</sup> Hattie Thompson, from Widener, Arkansas, said about her time as a slave in Arkansas "It was a new country and it was being cleared out."<sup>18</sup> James Gill moved to Phillips County, Arkansas, and recalled that during slavery he spent most of his time clearing land. He said, "de han's was put right to work clearin' lan' and buildin' cabins. It was sure right lan' den, boss, and dey jus' slashed de cane and deaden de timber and when cotton plantin' time come de cane was layin' dere on de groun' crisp and dry and dey sot fire to it and burned it off clean and den planted de crops."<sup>19</sup> Charley Williams recalled during his time as a slave in Louisiana, "Lots of the plantations had been whacked right out of de new ground and was full of stumps."<sup>20</sup>

Draining swamps was one impediment to cultivating this land, but the lack of congressional actions slowed this process, as well. Nuttall further described this lack of economic growth and attributed the lack of infrastructure and American wealth in this

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<sup>15</sup> Interview with Jeff Davis, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 1 & 2, 117.

<sup>16</sup> David Whitten, *Andrew Durnford: A Black Sugar Planter in Louisiana* (Natchitoches, LA: Northwestern State University Press, 1981), 21.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with John Wells, *Arkansas Narratives*, Part 7, 87.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Hattie Thompson, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 5 & 6, 316.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with James Gill, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 3 & 4, 20.

<sup>20</sup> *Dem Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember*, 105.

territory to the European influences and Congress's inability to reallocate the lands. He

wrote:

The improvement and settlement of this place proceeded slowly, owing, in some measure, and I am informed, to the uncertain titles of the neighboring lands. Several enormous Spanish grants remained still undecided; that of Messrs. Winters, of Natchez, called for no less than one million of acres, but the congress of the United States, inclined to put in force a kind of agrarian law against such monopolizers, had laid them, as I was told, under the stipulation of settling upon this immense tract a certain number of families.<sup>21</sup>

European outlooks on swamplands in Arkansas and Louisiana did not change, even after the Swamp Land Act of 1850 that encouraged planters to drain swamps. Timothy Flint, exploring the Mississippi Valley, called Bayou St. John in Louisiana “a creepithy marshy stream...the dead swamp around it, and the blasted trees, covered with long moss, have a most disheartening aspect of desolation.”<sup>22</sup> Even when Flint complimented the city of Alexandria as “handsomely situated,” he added that the land around it eventually became swampy and unwholesome. He wrote, “But the land, as is common on all these waters, soon descends to the cypress swamp, the everlasting abode of alligators, snakes, and noxious animals.”<sup>23</sup> Flint conceded that Arkansas and Louisiana's rich delta provided land for good cotton and sugar cultivation, though only a small portion of the land that could be cultivated was actually used. While in Louisiana, he said in astonishment, “I have seen in no part of the United States such a rich and

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<sup>21</sup> “Thomas Nuttall's Description of Arkansas Post. January 22-February 26, 1819,” 89.

<sup>22</sup> Timothy Flint, *Reflections of the Last Yen Years, Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, and Company, 1826), 315.

<sup>23</sup> Timothy Flint, *Reflections of the Last Yen Years, Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi*, 322-323.

highly cultivated tract of the same extent.”<sup>24</sup> The rest of Louisiana did not live up to the same expectations he found in New Orleans. He wrote of it: “Cultivation becomes more unfrequent. The country begins to exhibit the somber aspect of swamp and inundation, beyond the reach of the eye...it soon becomes dreary to the eye, from its sad monotony, and from mental associations with it, of fever and ague, and mosquitoes, and consignment to perpetual destitution of human habitations.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the vast landscape of Louisiana repulsed this traveler, and he believed the state had not yet reached its full economic potential.

In addition to natural obstacles found West of the Mississippi River, the United States Congress also muddied the water when trying to tame this part of Arkansas and Louisiana territories. Congress did not know how to properly divide the land from French and Spanish land grants that were given out in the late eighteenth century by the French and Spanish crowns. Congress and Americans in general disliked the large land-holding Spanish and French residents who continued to dominate the cotton and sugar production in Arkansas and Louisiana well after American acquisition of such lands. Congress spent the first part of the nineteenth century deciding how to reallocate Spanish and French land grants, and how to recognize the American settlers who also decided to move to the Arkansas and Louisiana territory to farm. In 1805, Congress passed an act that would recognize French and Spanish landholders if they received proper grants from Spain and France before 1800; any land grant received after 1800 was considered null and void. Furthermore, in order to spread the republican ideal of an agrarian republic, those

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<sup>24</sup> Timothy Flint, *Reflections of the Last Ten Years, Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi*, 300.

<sup>25</sup> Timothy Flint, *Reflections of the Last Ten Years, Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi*, 84.



squatters who cultivated the land and were proper heads of household could also apply to legally own their tracts of land bought formally by the United States government through a permit.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, this unprecedented issue of dividing former European-held lands kept Arkansas and the Louisiana territories from proper settlement and creation of infrastructure until the mid-nineteenth century.

Even after Congressional endeavors to drain and allocate swamplands, Nuttall wrote that Arkansas Post, despite years of settlement, remained “an insignificant village” and “scarcely deserved geographic notice.”<sup>27</sup> Settlers, surveyors, and visitors alike realized the potential found in the rich soil of the Deltas in Arkansas and Louisiana, yet realized that its potential, even in the mid-nineteenth century, had not yet been met. The first American governor of the lower Arkansas territory, General Miller, had the words “I’ll Try” painted onto his pirogue, which he used to travel up and down the Arkansas River.<sup>28</sup> This motto reflected the frustration felt by settlers. Indeed, all settlers endeavoring to drain, cultivate, and endure the harsh Arkansas and Louisiana conditions needed to have this motto in mind.

Nuttall’s writings showed optimism regarding the possibilities of planting because of the rich soil in southeast Arkansas. His optimism worked to encourage planters and land speculators to take a chance in Arkansas and plant. He wrote, “Nature has here done so much, and man so little, that we are yet totally unable to appreciate the value and resources of the soil.”<sup>29</sup> Nuttall wrote to encourage other planters, especially American-born planters, to bring money and resources to this portion of Arkansas to begin planting

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<sup>26</sup> “Spanish Land Grants.” *Arkansas Commissioners of State Lands*. COSL.org. Accessed 3 January 2014.

<sup>27</sup> “Thomas Nuttall’s Description of Arkansas Post. January 22-February 26, 1819,” 90.

<sup>28</sup> “Thomas Nuttall’s Description of Arkansas Post. January 22-February 26, 1819,” 91.

<sup>29</sup> “Thomas Nuttall’s Description of Arkansas Post. January 22-February 26, 1819,” 89.

and profiting from the land. Nuttall also remarked that slave labor was absolutely necessary for Arkansas to reach its potential.<sup>30</sup> He said of those willing to take a chance in Arkansas, “wealth will ere long flow, no doubt, to the banks of the Arkansa.”<sup>31</sup> Few people decided to take this risk, however, and large swathes of Arkansas and Louisiana remained relatively untouched by the mid-nineteenth century. Perceptions of the landscape kept settlers from creating permanent settlements in Arkansas and Louisiana.

The natural obstacles were not the only problem facing settlers in Arkansas and Louisiana territories; disease proved to be a rampant problem in the swamplands. White settlers and planters often referred to illness from the swamps as “miasmas,” though they could not establish causality for illness from the swamps. In the early nineteenth century, Europeans and Americans attributed these swamp fevers to noxious fumes, and actually encouraged the draining of swamps and still-waters. It was not until much later in the nineteenth century that scientists connected the fevers and maladies with the diseases carried by mosquitoes that lived and bred in the swamps.

Early doctors and travelers wrote extensively on swamp fevers and their negative effects on the white population. A historian of Arkansas, writing about eighteenth century Arkansans and their lack of education regarding mosquitoes and swamps, said: “This association of sickness with swamps and stale air was a commonplace of eighteenth-century medicine. It is tragically ironic that swamps did in fact increase the incidence of fevers, but for a reason that colonial doctors could not guess, namely the disease-bearing mosquitoes which infested them.”<sup>32</sup> They associated these lands with illness, maladies, and death. Some travelers later in nineteenth century realized the connection between the

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<sup>30</sup> “Thomas Nuttall’s Description of Arkansas Post. January 22-February 26, 1819,” 91.

<sup>31</sup> “Thomas Nuttall’s Description of Arkansas Post. January 22-February 26, 1819,” 90.

<sup>32</sup> Morris S. Arnold, *Colonial Arkansas 1686-1804*, (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991), 86.

diseases and maladies found in the swamps, making these areas of the landscape undesirable. Cuming described a community in Louisiana that suffered annually from fevers. He noted, “I think the lake and swamp behind Palmyra must render it unhealthy, and the pale sallow countenances of the settlers, with their confession that they are annually subjected to fevers and agues, when the river begins to subside, confirms me in my opinion.” He continued to blame the swamps, and said “Indeed this remark may be applied to the banks of the Mississippi in the whole of its long course, between the conflux of the Ohio and the Gulph of Mexico.”<sup>33</sup> Henry Stanley lived in southeastern Arkansas in 1861, and wrote that the swamp-fever he contracted in Arkansas was much worse than the maladies he contracted in Africa. He called the village where he lived, Cypress Bend, a “pestilential place” and described his illnesses: “suddenly, a fit nausea would seized me, and again the violent malady overpowered me. Such was my experience of the agues of the Arkansas swamp-land; and, during the few months I remained at Cypress Bend, I suffered from them three times a month.”<sup>34</sup>

Timothy Flint stated tersely, yet accurately, “The valley of the Arkansas, with very little exception, is sickly.”<sup>35</sup> Given there was no treatment or cure, Flint expressed surprise that any settlers were able to survive the fevers and chills from the swamps during the sick season, including the Creoles, and those more adapt to this environment.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Fortesque Cuming, *Tour to the Western Country*, 307.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Morton Stanley, *The Autobiography of Sir Henry Morton Stanley* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1909), 156.

<sup>35</sup> Timothy Flint, *Reflections of the Last Yen Years, Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi* (Boston: Cummings, Hilliard, and Company, 1826), 265-6.

<sup>36</sup> Timothy Flint, *Reflections of the Last Yen Years, Passed in Occasional Residences and Journeyings in the Valley of the Mississippi*, 266.

Because of these miasmas, fevers, and mosquitoes that wreaked havoc on settlers, many planters, surveyors, and visitors adapted a negative perception of the vast swamps in Arkansas and Louisiana.

Finally, as if natural obstacles and disease were not bad enough, indigenous wildlife posed a different threat to settlers. Though not at first associated with disease but considered the worst nuisance, the mosquito plagued travelers and inhabitants in the deep South. According to John Davis, an early traveler to Louisiana, the worse inhabitant of Louisiana was the “mosquito.” Acknowledging the other nuisance wildlife, he conceded: “The greatest tormenter in Louisiana is the musqueto. You can avoid the crocodile, the rattle-snake, and toad, by staying at home, or leaving these reptiles masters of the field of battle. But the musqueto is not to be eluded.”<sup>37</sup> Thomas Nuttall, like other early Arkansas travelers, found that snakes and alligators inhabited the “enswamped forests” but were “by no means numerous.”<sup>38</sup> A traveler to lower Louisiana Fortesque Cuming described the difficulties that white planters had with hunting in the swamps below Baton Rouge. He wrote:

The woods about with bear and deer, which are sometimes killed and sold by the Indian and white hunters. Wild turkeys on the hills, and water fowl of every description in the swamps are abundant, besides smaller game both four footed and feathered of various descriptions. But the chase, either with dogs or the gun is so laborious an occupation, from the difficulty of getting through the cane brakes and underwood, that one seldom meets with game at the tables of the planters.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> John Davis, *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas, in the Year 1802, Giving A Correct Picture of Those Countries*, (New York: I. Riley & Co., 1806), 124.

<sup>38</sup> “Thomas Nuttall’s Description of Arkansas Post. January 22-February 26, 1819,” 90.

<sup>39</sup> Fortesque Cuming, *Tour to the Western Country*. (Pittsburgh: Cramer, Spear & Bechbum, 1810), 353.

An early explorer to Louisiana wrote that “the rattle snake is common here; but a more dreadful animal is the congar viper. They are both found in the swamps, woods, and sometimes the houses.” He even described the urban area of New Orleans more harshly, and found that New Orleans was built in precarious position within the state. He wrote of the Crescent City and jewel of Louisiana:

It is no wonder that the air of New Orleans should be generally so unhealthy, and in autumn quite pestilential, for the town is built in a complete swamp, and required to be protected by a dam from being submerged by the river. It certainly was never intended by nature for the abode of man; at most it is fitted for alligators, frogs, and mosquitoes. It is the churchyard of the United States.<sup>40</sup>

It is not surprising that visitors in Arkansas and Louisiana wrote about their distaste for the swamps and sloughs that dominated the southern landscape, given all of the above: the natural obstacles, disease, and threats from wildlife. Writing about Baton Rouge, Cuming seems to sum up the perceptions of Europeans when he writes that: “covered with the usual variety of forest trees, and a thick cane brake underneath, while on my left, a gloomy and malignant swamp extended to the Mississippi, some miles distant.”<sup>41</sup> Cuming’s use of words, such as “gloomy” and “malignant,” highlight his disdain for the swamps, and attributes these portions of the southern landscape as dangerous and foreboding, both of which certainly remained true for white settlers and planters.

In contrast to European descriptions, some ex-slaves remarked on the beauty of the water and wilderness found in Arkansas and Louisiana. This perhaps suggests the close relationship that slaves had with the land, and their ability to manage and control

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<sup>40</sup> Friedrich Gerstaecker, *Wild Sports*, 116.

<sup>41</sup> Fortesque Cuming, *Tour to the Western Country*, 346.

this portion of the landscape, unlike the Europeans, for whom the swamps and sloughs remained tenuous spaces of control. Ex-slave Molly Finley lived near Arkansas Post, and told an interviewer “We lived close to the Post...It was a pretty lake of water. We fished and waded and washed.”<sup>42</sup> Another ex-slave, Jane Oliver, lived near the Arkansas River near the Arkansas Post, as well. She said of the plantation on which she grew up, “Colonel Ed Hampton’s plantation joined the Raws plantation on the Arkansas River were it overflowed the land. I loved that better than any place I ever seed in my life.”<sup>43</sup> In Louisiana, Ellen Betts from Bayou Teche said “Marse William have de pretties’ place up and down dat bayou, with a fine house and fine trees and sech.”<sup>44</sup> Black planter and businessman from Arkansas, Scott Bond, wrote in his autobiography about his home in Eastern Arkansas, “In the summer time wife and I often sit on the front porch and view the lovely landscape, stretched out before us to the east with the beautiful St. Francis river flowing like a silver ribbon for miles through the valley...”<sup>45</sup> For many slaves and ex-slaves, bayous, swamps, and other bodies of water represented beautiful spaces, compared to the sinister descriptions of the planters and European visitors. Perhaps owing to immunity to disease, many ex-slaves had different perceptions of the same physical landscape about which the white population wrote about and criticized greatly. Some slaves found swamps beautiful or alluring because of the economic opportunities found there, and their immunity to debilitating disease, such as yellow fever, would certainly influence their outlook. Adam Hall, an ex-slave who worked on a plantation in Louisiana, helped a professional surveyor survey the plantation after his owners moved.

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<sup>42</sup> Interview with Molly Finley, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 1 & 2, 292.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with Jane Oliver, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 5 & 6, 229.

<sup>44</sup> *Dem Bullwhip Days: The Slaves Remember* (New York: The Grove Press, 1988), 380-1.

<sup>45</sup> *From Slavery to Wealth: The Life of Scott Bond* (Fayetteville, AR: Phoenix International, 2008), 68.

He recalled of his experiences, “Many a day I went wid dem in de swamps clearing ways and runnin’ lines. Why, a man could live in dem days.”<sup>46</sup>

Slaves and manumitted slaves realized the economic opportunity found in the fertile swamplands of Arkansas and Louisiana, without dwelling on the natural obstacles that the landscape presented. Many ex-slaves suggested that land in older states, such as Mississippi and Georgia, began to wear out over time. Doc Flowers, from Lincoln County, Arkansas, said that “we had a 100 acres or better all along the banks of de river and good valley land where we raised corn, potatoes, wheat, oats, an ‘bacco.”<sup>47</sup> After the Civil War, D. Davis, from Marvell, Arkansas, remarked that he was born in Mississippi, but heard about the rich Arkansas land.<sup>48</sup> Wade Dudley remarked that “The land was better here than in Mississippi.”<sup>49</sup> This fondness for the swamps continued after the Civil War, a time during which many freed African-Americans went to Arkansas to try and farm because of the fertile farm land. Callie Donalson said that “Agents jess kept comin after us to get us to come in this rich country. They say: hogs jess walkin round with knife and forks stickin in der backs beggin somebody to eat em over in Arkansas.”<sup>50</sup> Ishe Webb told a WPA interviewer that sharecropping paid more in Arkansas than Georgia. She recalled, “They said, ‘Cotton grows as high as a man in Arkansas. They they paid a man two dollars fifty cents for picking cotton here in Arkansas while they just paid about forty cents in Georgia.”<sup>51</sup> Cal Woods recalled that a man told him the cotton “grow like

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<sup>46</sup> Interview with Adam Hall, *Mother Wit: The Ex-Slave Narratives of the Louisiana Writers’ Project* (Ronnie W. Clayton, ed. New York: Peter Lang, 1990), 93.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Doc Flowers, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 1 & 2, 315.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with D. Davis, Interview with Henry Blake, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 1 & 2, 101.

<sup>49</sup> Interview with Wade Dudley, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 1 & 2, 213.

<sup>50</sup> Interview with Callie Donalson, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 1 & 2, 167.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Ishe Webb, *Arkansas Narratives*, Part 7, 79.

trees out here.”<sup>52</sup> Gip Minton grew up as a slave in Des Arc, Arkansas, and said of the geography of Arkansas, “The ground was new and rich and the seasons hit just fine.”<sup>53</sup> African American newspapers, such as the *Freeman*, published advertisements for newly emancipated slaves to move to areas dominated by swamps and sloughs.<sup>54</sup> One advertisement wanted African Americans to move to a city called Southland, “nine miles northwest of Helena.” The writer said that “The climate is very healthful and surrounding country very fertile. This is a desirable place and the people are very intelligent. Many Negroes own their own homes and others are purchasing.”<sup>55</sup>

A substantial reason why African-Americans perceived the swamplands more positively than Europeans was because of their relative immunity to some disease. Ex-slaves in Arkansas recalled the frequent yellow fever outbreaks, though mentioned that the disease rarely affected them. Many ex-slaves discuss their role in helping the white community during yellow fever outbreaks, and one historian of Memphis writes about social and political power procured by African-Americans, both free and enslaved, during critical times of the yellow fever outbreaks.<sup>56</sup> Arkansas ex-slave John Wells said of the yellow fever outbreak in the 1850s, “Me and my brother waited on white folks all through that yellow fever plague. Very few colored folks had it. None of ’em I heered tell of died with it. White folks died in piles.”<sup>57</sup> Even a traveler to Arkansas recalled that “African slaves performed well in the territories of Louisiana and Arkansas” because

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<sup>52</sup> Interview with Cal Woods, *Arkansas Narratives*, Part 7, 231.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with Gip Minton, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 5 & 6, 102.

<sup>54</sup> *The Freeman*. August 14, 1897. “*Arkansas Negroes in the 1890s: Documents.*” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 33, No. 4, 1974. 324.

<sup>55</sup> *The Freeman*. August 14, 1897. “*Arkansas Negroes in the 1890s: Documents.*” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 33, No. 4, 1974. 324.

<sup>56</sup> See Jeannie Whayne’s lecture, “Crises in Cotton’s Metropolis: Race, Ethnicity, and Yellow Fever in Late Nineteenth-Century Memphis, Tennessee.”

<sup>57</sup> Interview with John Wells, *Bearing Witness: Memories of Arkansas Slavery Narratives from the 1930s WPA Collection* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2003), 70.



“Only Negroes could survive the hot, wet fields and the miasma of the swamps.”<sup>58</sup>

Because fewer African-Americans were affected by the diseases from swamps, their perceptions varied greatly from that of the white community.

From the preceding remarks, it is clear the white community perceived the swamplands very differently from the African-American community, and the actions of the planters reflected their disdain for the swamplands because of disease, wildlife, and natural barriers. Even after planters in Arkansas and Louisiana began to exploit the rich, fertile land in eastern Arkansas and Louisiana, a large portion of the landscapes remained unusable swamps and sloughs that they wrote about with disdain, utilizing negative language. Planters in general left the swamps, sloughs, and other marginalized land alone since draining the swamps resulted in a labor-intensive and an expensive venture. In addition to draining swamps, planters needed to better control and predict the water levels and navigability of the large rivers, such as the Mississippi, White, and Arkansas Rivers. The enslaved helped to tame this landscape, by constructing canals, levees, and creating infrastructure near the bayous for boats. Indeed, manual labor to control and create a working landscape for cultivation took years to create, though the white settlers in Arkansas and Louisiana left much of the landscape in its natural, unpredictable and usable state because of the vast acreage of Arkansas and Louisiana that remained underwater or flood-prone for years, even after the Civil War.<sup>59</sup> Draining swamps took time and enslaved laborers away from planting and cultivating cash crops, and draining these parts of the landscape often proved dangerous and time consuming. These observations show that the planters and African-Americans perceived the land differently

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<sup>58</sup> Edwin Rogers Embree. *Brown American: the story of a new race* (The Viking Press, 1931), 139.

<sup>59</sup> Jeannie Whayne and William Gatewood, *The Arkansas Delta: A Land of Paradox* (Helena, Arkansas: The Delta Cultural Center, 1993).

when describing the physical landscape of Arkansas and Louisiana. The following chapters will reinforce the idea that perception creates significant differences not only in describing the physical landscape, but in the development of religion, a slave economy, the daily life of the enslaved, and the decision to stay or leave the plantation.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *A Place of Grace: Swamps and Religion*

Religion, referred to by one historian as the “invisible institution”<sup>1</sup> on plantations, constituted an important facet of slave life, and the enslaved in Arkansas and Louisiana were no exception. Many planters outlawed the practice of Christianity on their plantations, either covertly or overtly, yet this fact did not always deter their slaves from practicing religion. Slaves living on plantations in Arkansas and Louisiana still practiced religion, by holding meetings, performing baptisms, and even engaging in aberrant religious practices, such as voodoo or hoodoo, near swamps and other marginalized portions of the landscape like sloughs and bayous. Many ex-slave narratives contain evidence that slaves tended to congregate near bodies of water either to practice Christianity with others, or to pray in solitary. Slaves even referred to finding their religion near swamps and bayous, especially in Arkansas and Louisiana, and communal baptisms for African-Americans occurred in bayous and ponds. According to West African religious beliefs, spirits lived in the water, especially rivers, and fishermen and those “who lived near rivers and sea” worshipped these particular spirits.<sup>2</sup> The religious practices and actions of African-Americans suggest a continuation of West African religious beliefs, which became syncretized with Christian beliefs over time in the plantation South. An anthropologist of African-American culture, Melville Herskovits, suggests the importance of water and baptism “by immersion” was a practice of the enslaved directly linked to African religious practices, particularly those from Nigeria

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<sup>1</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Parrinder, *West African Religion: A Study of the Beliefs and Practices of Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Ibo, and Kindred Peoples* (London: Epworth Press, 1949).

and Dahomey.<sup>3</sup> Although historian Raboteau disagrees with this assertion and debates the extent to which African religious practices infiltrated and carried over to African-American slave religion on plantations, he concedes that syncretism of Christian and African pagan elements certainly existed. He writes about the hybridization of religion more broadly, noting that: “The acculturative process was broader and more complex than simple retention or destruction of Africanism.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the debate concerning the continuation of Africanisms in African-American culture in the South includes religion and many other aspects of slave life.<sup>5</sup>

The role of the Catholic Church certainly influenced the religious scene, for both the white and the enslaved, in antebellum Louisiana because of French and Spanish influences and infrastructures created during colonization. The Code Noir, Louisiana’s first black code issued in 1724, made it a law for slave masters to expose their slaves to Catholicism, though Catholic slaves constituted a small minority of the population.<sup>6</sup> Raboteau writes that “Relatively few slaves, mainly concentrated in southern Louisiana and Maryland, were Roman Catholic.”<sup>7</sup> However, a manumitted slave from Donaldsonville, Louisiana, wrote about his religious experience as a Catholic. He wrote: “My early religious training was in the Roman Catholic Church at Donaldsonville. I was prepared for first communion in a large class of both white and colored youths.”<sup>8</sup> Some

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<sup>3</sup> Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution*, 57.

<sup>4</sup> Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution*, 58.

<sup>5</sup> See John Vlach’s work for a discussion of Africanisms in America, “Rooted in Africa, Raised in America: The Traditional Arts and Crafts of African-Americans Across Five Centuries.” Freedom’s Story, TeacherServe©. National Humanities Center. Accessed 3 April 2014.  
<<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/freedom/1609-1865/essays/africa.htm>>

<sup>6</sup> Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution*, 113.

<sup>7</sup> Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution*, 271.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Charles Barthelemy Rousseve, *The Negro in Louisiana* (USA: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1937), 39.

Catholic churches dotted the religious landscape in Arkansas and Louisiana, but the majority of Arkansans, both black and white, were part of the Protestant denominations.

The majority of the enslaved in Arkansas exposed to Protestant Christianity were Baptists or Methodists. The Methodist Church encouraged slave owners to introduce their slaves to Christianity to save both of their souls. One historian estimated that fourteen percent of Methodist preachers in Arkansas in 1850 were black, a higher number than Baptist preachers.<sup>9</sup> Raboteau's research found that at least four black Methodist churches were erected in New Orleans before 1860, with "a combined membership of 1,700."<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, slaves practiced religion differently than the European populations. One early Louisiana historian noted that "On the sugar plantation of Don Juan Estaban de Bore, all slaves gathered at daybreak before the master's home, where some members of the family---each had his turn---led in offering morning prayers."<sup>11</sup>

As enumerated in the slave patrol in 1825, patrollers began to search for slaves engaging in religious activities in groups with an African American majority. One plantation owner sued a patroller in 1854 after a group of patrollers brutally beat a group of slaves returning from a white service on Sunday. In the Arkansas Supreme Court case *Hervy v. Armstrong*, Armstrong lost his claim that his slaves could not be punished by patrollers on his plantation because it was outside their jurisdiction. The court concluded "The elevation of the white race, and the happiness of the slave, vitally depend upon maintaining the ascendancy of one and the submission of the other."<sup>12</sup> According to this case, the religious instruction of slaves did not give planters the ability to allow their

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<sup>9</sup> S. Charles Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800-1860: Remote and Restless* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 135.

<sup>10</sup> Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution*, 205.

<sup>11</sup> Charles Barthelemy Rousseve, *The Negro in Louisiana* (USA: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1937), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Charles Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800-1860: Remote and Restless*, 136.

slaves to move freely within the county or state to attend a church service, even if it were a white service. This case illuminates the complexity of the religious landscape in the slave South, highlighting the fact that the enslaved ultimately faced limited mobility legally, despite the claims or orders of the individual master. After the Code Noir was changed due to American domination of Louisiana, planters in central Louisiana and Arkansas decided whether the enslaved could practice religion, and many of these planters forbade the practice of religion for pragmatic reasons. For the planters in Louisiana, religion posed a risk to white hegemony, especially after the successful Haitian Revolution that gained power through aberrant religious practices, particularly voodoo.<sup>13</sup> Other slave masters allowed their slaves to practice Christianity, but only at the white churches that preached subservience.

Where worship was allowed, space played a dominant role in the practicing of religion. If masters allowed their slaves to practice Christianity or attend church, the enslaved typically accompanied their masters to the white church. Others were forced to stay on the plantation, and the white preacher visited the quarters for religious instruction. An ex-slave from Chicot County, Arkansas recalled to an interviewer, “The niggers didn’t go to the church building; the preacher came and preached to them in their quarters. He’d just say, ‘Serve your masters...Do whatsoever your master tells you to do.’ Same old thing all the time.”<sup>14</sup> Because of the limitations of mobility and space regarding religion, the landscape of the plantation became a space of religious development and creativity for the enslaved who continued to practice religion despite the rules of their masters.

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<sup>13</sup> Ina J. Fandrich, “Yoruba Influences on Haitian Vodou and New Orleans Voodoo,” *Journal of Black Studies*, Vol. 37, No. 5, 2007, 775-791.

<sup>14</sup> *Bearing Witness*, 413.

Slaves' continued practice of religion, however, led them to find clandestine places to pray, hold meetings, or have baptisms within the plantation, without the knowledge of their masters or patrollers. Arkansas and Louisiana ex-slaves recalled that they found religion or spirituality in the swamps and bayous. These were typically hidden places away from white surveillance where slaves could pray, hold ceremonies, or meetings somewhat freely without calling attention to themselves. A black minister and ex-slave from Virginia even noted that the enslaved often fled to the swamps to practice Christianity. He wrote:

Not being allowed to hold meetings on the plantation, the slaves assemble in the swamp, out of reach of the patrols. They have an understanding among themselves as to the time and place of getting together. This is often done by the first one arriving breaking boughs from the trees, and bending them in the direction of the selected spot.<sup>15</sup>

Similar stories abound in Arkansas and Louisiana narratives. Enslaved blacks in Arkansas and Louisiana also tended to congregate near the swamps, away from white patrollers or planters, to practice religion freely.

Slaves recognized the infringement upon their religious freedom and mobility, and knew that they had to find places to worship. Carlyle Stewart, an ex-slave from Jeanerette, Louisiana, told an interviewer, "Oh, yes, they had straps and a whip, and they'd better not catch you praying to God. When you prayed, you had to hide in the woods."<sup>16</sup> Another ex-slave from Little Rock, Arkansas, described how the enslaved practiced religion. He said, "'Uncle Anderson said that old man Fields didn't allow them

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<sup>15</sup> Peter Randolph, *From Slave Cabin to Pulpit* (New York: Anza Publishing, 2004), 112.

<sup>16</sup> *Mother Wit*, 206.

to sing and pray and hold meetings, and they had to slip off and slip aside and hide around to pray...People used to stick their heads under washpots to sing and pray. Some of them went out into the brush arbors where they could pray and shout without being disturbed.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the terminology ascribed to the landscape for religious purposes tended to include the words woods or brush arbors, yet plats and surveyor’s notes by European and white planters only included the words swamps or bayous to describe the same landscape.<sup>18</sup> African-American slaves, therefore, had different words to describe different portions of the plantation landscape for religious exploration.

As previously noted, slaves in Louisiana and Arkansas tended to have religious ceremonies, particularly baptisms, near or in water. Historian Raboteau illustrates the transnational aspects of baptisms, and endeavored to connect African-American religious practices with African practices. He wrote: “In Africa, Dutch Guina, and Haiti, possession by water spirits drives the possessed devotee to hurl himself bodily into a stream, pond or river.”<sup>19</sup> According to interviews with ex-slaves about their religious practices, this importance of water certainly resonated with many slaves on rural plantations in the Arkansas and Louisiana. Harrison Camille, from Baratavia, Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, said “I been a Christian fifty years, a Baptist...I was baptized in the lake.”<sup>20</sup> Elizabeth Ross Hite, who grew up on Trinity Plantation in Louisiana remarked, “Yea, we had those good baptisms in a pond where dey drew water for the sugar house...it was a deep pond where day would get baptize[d] too.”<sup>21</sup> For this case of the enslaved on Trinity Plantation, the preacher decided to utilize the body of water intended

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<sup>17</sup> *Arkansas Slave Narratives* Vol. 11, 40.

<sup>18</sup> See figures in Appendix for examples of surveyor’s maps and plats.

<sup>19</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution*, 57.

<sup>20</sup> *Mother Wit*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> *Mother Wit*, 104.



for sugar cultivation and processing for religious purposes. Using the sugar lake for religious purposes highlights an act of resistance regarding a space for prescribed work and capital, at the same time as a place for spiritual growth, all within the plantation boundaries. Louisa Braxton described her own conversion experience and her relationship with the environment. Braxton felt disenchanted with organized religion, and endeavored to find spirituality and religion on her own. She chose to go pray near the canal in order to find this spiritual awakening. Her description read:

About when I got 'ligion? Well,  
I first started going to the spiritual  
meetings down in Algiers. One night  
they had what dey called the 'Holy  
Roll.' Dey put a man and women in a  
sheet and rolled them over and over, with  
all the lights out. How did dem people  
now what they were doing in there? I said,  
'My God! If this is 'ligion, I don't want none.'

She continued to tell her story:

I soon found out different.  
A friend of mine told me to go down  
in the wilderness And pray, so I went way  
back on the Canal. I just knew that was  
the place to go, so I prayed and prayed.  
The next night I went to the Baptist church....  
When I got home dat night, got in the back yard  
and prayed and prayed, so I seened the spirit.<sup>22</sup>

Lillie Johnson also described religious enlightenment after a baptism in the water in a river on the plantation. She remarked of the baptism, "We used to be babtized in de riber dat we used to call 'Jackass River.' De old people on de plantation used to say anybody

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<sup>22</sup> *Mother Wit*, 30-31.

who would try to swim in dat river was a jackass. I'm here to tell you dat dere was many drowned in dat river."<sup>23</sup> Johnson described the danger associated with a baptism in the water, and the risk many of the enslaved were willing to take in order to find religion and be confirmed in the church. She continued to describe the experience and its power over the newly baptized slaves and the relationship with the environment, saying "Once you has been baptized and gets under dat black water and feel your sins bein' washed away, and when you gets up and you looks at dat blue sky, you just feels de Lawd around you."<sup>24</sup> Johnson's description of the baptism reaffirms a close relationship between religion, spirituality, and the land, even within the plantation boundaries. Even after the Civil War, the environment of the former plantations influenced the religious experiences of the former slaves. One ex-slave from Louisiana said, "After surrender I used to cut cane in the field, and I was converted..."<sup>25</sup>

Another ex-slave from Louisiana discussed utilizing the woods as a space to gain religious clarity. Henry Reed from Opelousas, Louisiana said, "De preacher asked me if I wanted 'ligion; I told him yes. I went down in the woods and got down on my knees...I just kept on praying—got to where I could not eat or sleep..."<sup>26</sup> Johnson also included a story about an experience in which a fellow slave got religion on water. She said, "One woman got excited and stepped off into de water, but her feet didn't go under. No, she was walkin' right on top a dat water cryin' out and sayin', "Look at Jesus!"<sup>27</sup> The importance of water, combining West African and Christian influences, resonated with the enslaved in Arkansas and Louisiana.

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<sup>23</sup> *Mother Wit*, 130.

<sup>24</sup> *Mother Wit*, 133.

<sup>25</sup> *Mother Wit*, 188.

<sup>26</sup> *Mother Wit*, 186.

<sup>27</sup> *Mother Wit*, 139.

For the few enslaved who could have churches, these buildings often were located near bodies of water. An ex-slave from Barataria, Louisiana recalled that “Den we had our own church, and [the] church was our whole living. We could go dere all de time....De church was on one side de bayou, de plantation [was] on de other. Dere was a bridge to go across.”<sup>28</sup> The enslaved utilized the bayou as a physical barrier to separate the plantation and the white sphere of influence with the black landscape, where the enslaved practiced religion openly. A free African American from Mississippi, Joseph Willis, moved to Louisiana in 1812 and founded a Baptist church for African Americans at Bayou Chicot.<sup>29</sup>

Swamps and other bodies of water on a plantation, such as canals and rivers, became early examples of transnational spaces of religious practice and conversion. The swamps became a physical manifestation of a transnational phenomenon in which West African and European Christian beliefs syncretized to become a purely African-American religion. Ex-slaves in Arkansas and Louisiana told many stories of ghosts and the practice of voodoo that took place near swamps or other bodies of water. Encounters with ghosts, spirits, and the supernatural tended to occur near bodies of water, such as canals, rivers, and swamps, which resonates with West African beliefs that spirits often inhabited places with water. A Lecompte, Louisiana ex-slave, Peter Hill told an interviewer, “Sho knows about ghosts. One day me and my wife was on de bridge, and she pulled me right quick. I ax her what was de matter, and she told me she just pulled me outen de way of de spirits. She said dey come by, and some had bodies and no heads.”<sup>30</sup> Water, in West African beliefs, tended to house spirits and spiritual activity. Wilkinson Jones, from Jefferson

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<sup>28</sup> *Mother Wit*, 150.

<sup>29</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 134.

<sup>30</sup> *Mother Wit*, 97.

Parish, Louisiana, told an interviewer that he saw ghosts and spirits frequently, and usually in the swamps. He said, “De spirit comes around me all time now...Some I see sure do look natural. I seen one jump on my dog one day in the swamp and kilt him dead. I knows dat was a spirit for it sure did scream.”<sup>31</sup> In this instance, a malevolent spirit killed his dog in the swamp. In another instance, he discussed a haunted house near a canal. He said, “I know about a haunted house too—back on the canal—where nobody could ever stay in it.” These tales of ghosts and encounters with the supernatural reinforces the notion that West African beliefs continued to infiltrate the minds and actions of the enslaved well into the nineteenth century, suggesting that more Africanisms in religion existed in the plantation South after the close of the Atlantic slave trade in 1808.

Cemeteries in Louisiana were described by many white and black residents as both swamplike and haunted, especially since the coffins tended to reappear during flood seasons, creating an eerie scene for many visitors. Historian of Louisiana Lyle Saxon recalled in the early twentieth century that many “French settlers referred to it as *floissant*—floating land.”<sup>32</sup> Saxon also cited an example from a Louisiana newspaper in which a traveler reported on the horrid conditions of an African-American cemetery. He wrote, “This graveyard is all on a dead-level and on rainy days inundated with water. It is a morass, a swamp partly rescued from its wilderness.”<sup>33</sup> He continued to describe the cemetery, in which half-open caskets floated into the mud, “the very earth gave way under my feet. The vegetation was that of a swamp. The rank weeds flourished roughly

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<sup>31</sup> *Mother Wit*, 142.

<sup>32</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Gumbo YaYa: A Collection of Louisiana Folk Tales*, (Cambridge, MA: The Riverside Press, 1945), 321.

<sup>33</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Gumbo YaYa*, 337.

over many a dead body.”<sup>34</sup> It is perhaps little surprise that many of the enslaved and free blacks in Louisiana associated spirits and haunts living in the swamps and sloughs, especially if cemeteries in Louisiana turned into swamps frequently.

So-called aberrant religious practices, such as voodoo and hoodoo, also tended to occur in the swamps and sloughs since planters outlawed this type of religion, and both enslaved and free African-Americans had to find clandestine spaces where these beliefs could manifest. Swamps were certainly the most hidden and their eerie qualities and still waters gave free blacks and the enslaved spaces to engage in aberrant religious practices. Marie Laveau, the Voodoo Queen of New Orleans, held voodoo celebrations and rituals at Bayou Saint John, a swamp that formed from the overflow of Lake Pontchartrain.<sup>35</sup> Laveau and other perpetrators of voodoo utilized snakes, lizard, and other animals that inhabited the swamps in southern Louisiana to create voodoo charms, potions, and practice rituals. West African beliefs perpetuated the importance of snakes, and some cults of West African religions worshipped snakes.<sup>36</sup> Laveau supposedly owned several pythons for rituals. Odel Jackson, an ex-slave from Algiers, Louisiana, told an interviewer that a woman whom she disliked in the slave community “voodooed” her with a snake because of adultery. She said, “His woman come in and hoodooed me... You know, miss, dat woman put a snake in my leg. I’s cripple yet...Dat snake would just crawl and knot up in my leg, so’s finally he got it kilt.”<sup>37</sup> Snakes also played a role in healing and religious ceremonies. Hopley said of Laveau, “She worked with charms and

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<sup>34</sup>Lyle Saxon, *Gumbo YaYa*, 337.

<sup>35</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 79.

<sup>36</sup> Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 79.

<sup>37</sup> *Mother Wit*, 126.

herbs and incense and snakes and skeletons, and invoked spirits.”<sup>38</sup> Hopley also told interviewers that she used snakes in her public dances and voodoo practices, which he often attended. He said, “This is like a snake. Everything like this, she used as symbols.”<sup>39</sup> Snakes constituted important symbols in the practice of voodoo, and could be used to hurt others in voodoo curses. Even in rural Louisiana, ex-slaves recalled old adages that highlighted the power of snakes. Some of these sayings stated said that “If you kill the first snake you meet in the New Year, you have got rid of an enemy.”<sup>40</sup> Dead snakes gave more pragmatic uses in addition to spirituality. A maxim said, “To hang a dead snake up in a tree makes it rain.”<sup>41</sup>

Though not as common, some voodoo practices called for lizards, which perhaps acted as a substitute for snakes. A Louisiana superstition from the enslaved said that “Snakes, frogs, snails, buzzards, blue jays are in league with the spirits of darkness.”<sup>42</sup> This adaptation might reflect an African-American addition to the practice of voodoo, since lizards were readily available in Louisiana, and lizards did not appear in West African or Haitian ceremonies. One ex-slave recalled making a potion out of a lizard and basil. He said, “I take sweet basil and put it in a can with a lizard. . . . After you say certain prayers and make passes, you seal it tight then bury it under a foot of earth and make a circle around it.”<sup>43</sup> After several days, the ashes of the lizard and basil could be used for potions.

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<sup>38</sup> *Mother Wit*, 113.

<sup>39</sup> *Mother Wit*, 114.

<sup>40</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Old Louisiana*, (New York: The Century Company, 1929), 348.

<sup>41</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Old Louisiana*, 350.

<sup>42</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Old Louisiana*, 351.

<sup>43</sup> *Mother Wit*, 115.

Water could also undo the power of witches and conjurers to possess people. Emma Jackson, an ex-slave from Algiers, Louisiana, recalled a witch, or a woman who practiced voodoo for evil, who stole both of her husbands. According to Jackson and her knowledge of voodoo, the only way to keep a witch from stealing your husband is to undo her spell, which can only be done over a river. She said, “Once they do, you can’t keeps them away from dem. If dey use the red flannel, and the hair from one another, you can’t get them apart but one way; that is to be over a running stream, and throw it over your left shoulder. As the flannel drifts on down the river, they will drift apart.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the enslaved and free African-Americans practiced voodoo near bodies of water, though water also constituted an important facet of undoing malevolent spells and encounters with witches. In a popular Louisiana tale, a mulatto slave haunted the swamps after running away from a mean master and being shot by hunters. A Louisiana folklorist described his story and wrote, “he had vanished into the near-by cypress swamps, where, it is said, he gathered a band of renegade slaves and led them in nocturnal raids on the plantations in the neighborhood.”<sup>45</sup>

A lack of mobility and freedom regarding religion encouraged enslaved persons to find creative and hidden spaces for their continued practice of Christianity. Looking within the boundaries of the plantation, and trying to find safe, hidden spots from white surveillance, the slaves tended to find the swamps the perfect spaces to practice religious freedom. The slaves not only perceived the swamps differently from the white population, but their perceptions of the landscape made for a very different manifestation of religious practices, including their usage of ponds and swamps for total submersion in

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<sup>44</sup> Interview with Emma Jackson, *Mother Wit*, 124.

<sup>45</sup> Lyle Saxon, *Old Louisiana*, 253.

baptisms, secret spaces to gain religious clarity, or prescribed spaces on the plantation that were conducive to spiritual activity. White planters and even lower classes of whites practiced religion freely in public spaces, such as churches or parishes, and had hierarchical, planned religious meetings. Baptisms for younger children typically occurred within the place of worship, without complete submersion in the water, as seen in African-American religious ceremonies, and African and Haitian hybridization of religious cults, like voodoo, were not apparent in the white religious scene. Slaves perceived and used the swamps as places for religious worship, and therefore attributed more importance to these spaces than the white and planter elite did, making the swamps a space for religious transformation



## CHAPTER THREE

### *A Place of Peace: Swamps, Running Away, and Temporary Respite*

Nowhere is landscape perception more important than in a person's decision to stay enslaved or to leave a place for a chance at freedom. For the planter elite, including men and women, the swamplands were almost prison-like, due to the dangerous animals, reptiles, disease, and insects that lived in these spaces and wreaked havoc on the health and sanitation of the plantations. Even though the purpose of the Swamp Lands Act of 1850 was to rid the southern landscape of these dangerous swamps, millions of acres of lowland swamps continued to dot the landscape in Arkansas and Louisiana, to the dismay of the planters.

For African-American slaves, however, the designation of swamps as good or bad is harder to pin down, and is based mostly on context. Surely, at times, the swamps were perceived by the enslaved and free blacks as carceral, complete with descriptions of snakes, alligators, mosquitoes, dogs, and stagnant water that certainly influenced their negative perceptions of the swamps. The swamps were not hospitable places for runaways. Alligators, mosquitoes, snakes, and thick overgrowth continually challenged those who ran away. Runaway slaves had to make calculated choices to avoid the challenges posed by this "carceral" landscape, an idea expressed by historian Walter Johnson. He created this term to describe the confining and prison-like conditions of the deep South, a land shaped and created by agricultural reform and practices that left little room for African-American slaves to hide or find their own space to assert control.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 215.

However, at other times and in other contexts, the swamps were perceived as paradise-like, especially for long term and short-term fugitive slaves.

A deeper analysis of the usage of the swamps shows how these plantation spaces affected their decisions to run away. According to ex-slave interviews and narratives, the enslaved in Arkansas and Louisiana still managed to carve out specific places and attributed different meanings to spaces within the plantation. Fugitive and ex-slaves successfully avoided white eyes by fleeing to the swamps because of the swamp's natural qualities that gave places to hide. Furthermore, the exploitation of the swamps by the enslaved for the purposes of running away highlights the fact that the enslaved were already familiar with this portion of the plantation landscape before they escaped, and knew that the white patrollers and planters were inept at tracking them through the swamps. While in bondage, these skills of understanding and becoming familiar with the landscape were cultivated and perfected, then applied to running away. Because they were familiar with the swamps and sloughs while on the plantation, slaves were prepared to combat these conditions before making their decision to run away. The enslaved developed an intimacy and familiarity with the swamps, sloughs, and other marginal portions of the plantation and overall southern landscape, eluding white eyes, which some used for the ultimate goal of running away.

Language informs perception, and the European and American plats of the Arkansas and Louisiana territory highlighted a superficial relationship with the land.<sup>2</sup> Historian Anthony Kaye writes extensively on the creation and perception of spaces on plantations and joining plantations in his monograph. He studies the vocabulary that the

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<sup>2</sup> See figures of Land Plats from Arkansas in Appendix.

enslaved used to attribute to different places.<sup>3</sup> The language that the enslaved used to describe the same spaces reflected a fluid, intimate knowledge and bond with the natural environment.<sup>4</sup> Interviews of slaves and ex-slaves tend to show that the woods symbolized places for the enslaved to rest temporarily, or to get away for a day or night. The woods were located directly next to the fields, whereas the swamps were located further away from the fields and agricultural spaces. Unlike the woods, the swamps represented a space in which the enslaved lived for a few weeks, months, or even years, to avoid the confines of slavery and to seek freedom. Swamps most likely offered more forms of spaces to hide, sleep, and even provisions to eat, such as small game, wild berries, and nuts. The woods, as gathered from slave interviews and narratives, tended to represent smaller spaces that were more open and cleared compared to the dense, overgrown swamps. Additionally, slaves mention other agricultural-related spaces, such as canebrakes, sloughs, floodplains, ditches, and levees to describe their home and work spaces, and canebrakes typically offered a place to hide from patrollers. Levees were open spaces on raised ground that offered protection against flooding. Sloughs and ditches typically backed up to agricultural spaces, and ditches collected overflowed water from cultivation practices. Often in slave interviews and narratives, however the literal

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony Kaye, *Joining Places: Slave Neighborhoods in the Old South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Modern geographers of the Arkansas and Louisiana Deltas have modern terms to classify the diverse environmental landscape found in the alluvial plain created by the Mississippi and other large rivers. Natural levees, on which early settlements in Arkansas and Louisiana were placed, are spaces slightly above the rivers created by silt and sand. Backswamps are overflowed spaces that run from these natural levees to lower ground. Bottomlands constitute the lowest areas of floodplains, in which cypress and tupelo trees grow to huge sizes, and the bottomlands flood seasonally or can become dry during droughts. A slough, noted by some enslaved, is a narrow channel created by bayous and oxbow lakes.<sup>4</sup> Even educated botanists and surveyors did not use these words to describe the rich environment in Arkansas and Louisiana, and used only a few words, such as swamps, pond, or overflowed land.

definition of these spaces is unclear, and therefore a modern scientific definition of these spaces, denoted by maps today, is irrelevant.

Walter Johnson wrote that the physical layout of the plantation, in addition to agricultural reforms, created a form of “spatial discipline” or “incarceration.”<sup>5</sup> Most Arkansas and Louisiana plantations utilized natural levees on navigable rivers, and therefore their plantations often had backswamps, sloughs, and bayous surrounding the plantations, certainly creating a prison-like feel for the enslaved trapped within these boundaries. French planters in these territories organized their land by gridding their property up straight from the river to higher land. All French plantations had backswamps, therefore, since all of their plantations backed straight up to the river. Slave masters and overseers had to work diligently and creatively to keep slaves from running away, thus using the “carceral” landscape to their advantage. Slaves certainly were cognizant of these practices and discussed the measures slave masters took to keep them within the prescribed plantation parameters.

Adding to the extent of the carceral landscape, planters utilized animals, such as dogs and horses, in addition to objects to keep their slaves from running away. Ex-slave, Anna Woods, described a yoke that her master put around the necks of those who ran off. She said of the tool her master created, “From it there run up a sort of piece and there was a bell on the top of that. It was so high the folks who wore it couldn’t reach the bell. But if they run it would tinkle and folks could find them.”<sup>6</sup> Johnson also argued that slaves endeavoring to run away were often thwarted by the usage of horses and dogs by the planters, which were used both pragmatically and symbolically to create fear and instill

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<sup>5</sup> Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 218.

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Anna Woods, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Part 7, 226.

power for the planters. A plethora of examples exist in interviews and narratives of dogs chasing ex-slaves, and overseers and planters riding horses to catch runaways. Planters employed horses and dogs to catch runaway slaves, though the enslaved were cognizant of this practice and tried to outsmart it. Ex-slave Henry Waldon had plenty of frightening stories to tell about his master's dogs chasing him and other slaves on the plantation. He said, "They had bloodhounds too; they'd run you away in the woods...Five or six or seven hounds bitin' you on every side and a man settin' on a horse holding a doubled shotgun on you."<sup>7</sup> Some slaves endeavored to outsmart the horses or dogs. George Benson, who lived near Pine Bluff, noted that his master employed dogs to find runaway slaves. He said, "Had to go up a tree to keep em from bitin' you."<sup>8</sup> Henry Green lived near Helena, Arkansas, and witnessed a more unorthodox way to keep the dogs from finding runaways. He turned to conjuration to outsmart the dogs, and described his method:

Fust, he kin put er liddle tuppentine  
 on he feet er in he shoe, en er lot er times  
 dat will frow de hounds off de track...iffen  
 he kin git er hold er some fresh dirt whar er  
 grabe aint been long dug, en rub dat on he feet,  
 den dat is er good conjure...den dat is a she conjure  
 ter mek dem hounds lose de track, en dat nigger kin  
 dodge de paddyrollers.<sup>9</sup>

Planters employed the help of dogs to track the runaway slaves, but also for their own protection when travelling alone through the swamps and sloughs. Lizzie Johnson's father said to her that "some of the slaves would go in the woods and the masters would

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Henry Waldon, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts Part 7, 16.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with George Benson, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 153.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Henry Green, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 95.

be afraid to go hunt them out without dogs. They made bows and arrows in the woods.”<sup>10</sup>

The planters wanted dogs to first locate the slaves, and then for personal protection against runaway slaves who might be armed. An Arkansas slave said of his uncle that he “learnt him how to trick the dogs and tap trees like a coon. At the end of the trail the dogs would turn on the huntsmen.”<sup>11</sup> Albert Patterson recalled slaves hiding in the woods near the back of his plantation in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana. He, too, knew of ways to confuse the slave dogs so that men on adjoining plantations could visit their families without worrying about dogs catching them. He said:

He had a great big woods in de back where de  
niggers would hide when they run away..  
If a nigger hide in de woods, he’d  
come in at night to get [a] meal. They bore a little  
hole in the floor, and they break into de meat house too.  
De dogs couldn’t catch dem nohow ‘cause they put bay  
leaves on de bottom of their feet and shoes. Then they go  
and walk in fresh manure, and a dog can’t track them..  
That way a man could come and see his family.<sup>12</sup>

Slaves discussed the lack of mobility on plantations, and expressed a sense of confinement, contributing to the carceral landscape theory. Slaves who made the decision to run away were almost always punished, and some were sold as the ultimate punishment. Charlie McClendon remarked “He had one man named Miles Johnson just stayed in the woods so he put him on the block and sold him.”<sup>13</sup> Reflecting upon his time in slavery, Robert Barr said that “They didn’t have much freedom. They couldn’t go and

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Lizzie Johnson, *The American Slave, Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 102.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Avalena McConico, *The American Slave, Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. 10, Parts 5 & 6, 10.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Albert Patterson, *MotherWit*, 179.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Charlie McClendon, *The American Slave, Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. 10, Parts 5 & 6, 2.

come as they pleased. You had to have a script to go and come.”<sup>14</sup> Restrictions of mobility certainly changed the ways about which the enslaved viewed and used their own landscape within the confines of the plantation or perceived slave neighborhoods. Maria Clemments discussed how slaves had to receive passes from their masters to “visit round on Saturday evening or on Sunday.”<sup>15</sup> Despite this hurdle, the enslaved were still able to use the land to travel to the “other farms round”<sup>16</sup> in these slave-constructed neighborhoods and limited spaces. Clara Walker discussed some of his friends and family members living on a “joinin’ plantation.”<sup>17</sup>

Not surprisingly, the most well-known usage of the swamps by the enslaved was a place to hide. As previously stated, the white population perceived the swamplands as disease-producing, inhospitable and repugnant. The enslaved sometimes refuted this belief and used the swamplands as places of relative peace and paradise. Solomon Northup, a fugitive slave and abolitionist writer, wrote extensively about runaway slaves in Louisiana who hid in the swamps to avoid punishment, and described the swamps as an excellent placed to hide. He said of a fellow slave “During the day he remained secreted, sometimes in the branches of a tree, and at night pressed forward through the swamps,”<sup>18</sup> thus associating the swamps as places of refuge. According to Northup, the environment of Louisiana, especially Bayou Boeuf, where the plantation was located, helped runaways trying to avoid patrollers and overseers.

Men, more frequently than women, used the woods surrounding the plantations for temporary respite. Slave narratives often show that slaves went to the woods while

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<sup>14</sup> Interview with Robert Barr, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 124.

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Maria Clemments, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 18.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Maria Clemments, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 18.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with Clara Walker, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts Part 7,20.

<sup>18</sup> Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968), 182.

working in the fields to get away from punishments, whippings, or tedious work. Nancy Anderson said that “some of the slaves that had hard masters run off and stay in the woods.”<sup>19</sup> Mag Johnson’s father recalled that “They’d take to them woods and canebrakes...to git a little rest.”<sup>20</sup> S.S. Taylor, an ex-slave from Arkansas, recalled a male slave on his plantation who ran away for three years and lived in the bayou.<sup>21</sup> Joe Clinton described an incidence in which a fellow slave “runned off and hid in de canebrake ‘long de bayou all of de nex’ day.”<sup>22</sup> Mattie Fennen recalled that the enslaved helped the runaways who temporally hid in the woods. She said that “Some of them would run off to the woods and stay a week or a month. The other niggers would feed them at night to keep them from starving.”<sup>23</sup> Ex-slave Ida Fluker told an interviewer that her father ran to the woods after his master threatened to sell him. She said, “He say the overseer so mean he run off in the woods and eat blackberries for a week.”<sup>24</sup> Columbus Williams knew of a slave who ran away from his plantation in Union County, Arkansas, and “stayed twelve months once.”<sup>25</sup> Kittie Stanford’s father ran off because their overseer whipped them frequently. She recalled, “Old Henry run away and hide in the swamp and say he goin’ stay till his bones turn white. But he come back when he get hungry and then he run away again.”<sup>26</sup> Other slaves stayed longer, but without proper food they could not stay away from the plantations long. Roberta Shaver said that her grandfather “run off to the woods for weeks and come back starved.”<sup>27</sup> After this failed endeavor, he stopped running away.

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<sup>19</sup> Interview with Nancy Anderson. *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 50.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Mag Johnson, *The American Slave, Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 108.

<sup>21</sup> Interview with S.S. Taylor, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 255.

<sup>22</sup> Interview with Joe Clinton, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 31.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with Mattie Fennen, , *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 265.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Ida Fluker, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 323.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with Columbus Williams, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Part 7, 155.

<sup>26</sup> Interview with Kittie Stanford, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. 10, Parts 5 & 6, 214.

<sup>27</sup> Interview with Roberta Shaver, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. 10, Parts 5 & 6, 140.



Jerry Sims' father stayed in the cane brakes, or the overgrowth with dense weeds and trees near bodies of water, though he admitted that "mighty few cane brakes to be found now."<sup>28</sup>

Women employed the swamps as bypasses to get from one plantation to the next, if their children lived on a different plantation. Manumitted at an early age, Scott Bond recalled in his autobiography that his mother walked through the sloughs and swamps of eastern Arkansas to visit him at night when they lived on adjoining plantations. Israel Jackson's mother, similar to enslaved men, hunted in the swamps to feed her children. He said that his mother "would go huntin' at night and get a 'possum to feed us...sometimes she'd bury a 'possum till she had a chance to cook it" despite the consequences she received if her master caught her.<sup>29</sup> Women took to the swamps and woods for temporary respites, called *truancy* according to Stephanie Camp. Sarah Wells' mother often ran away for temporary spells, sometimes taking enough food with her to last a few weeks, though sometimes she did not take anything. Her daughter said, "She would go in the woods...she would go in the woods and hide somewhere. She'd take somethin' to eat with her. I couldn't find her myself...Sometimes she would stay in the woods two months, sometimes three months."<sup>30</sup> Wells added that her mother never took her with her when she fled, adding to the idea that her mother needed to get away completely from the responsibilities and duties that slavery entailed, including reproductive control.<sup>31</sup> Julia Grace's parents both hid in the woods to avoid punishments in Arkansas. She said, "In slavery days mama said she and my father stayed in the woods most of the time. That's

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<sup>28</sup> Interview with Jerry Sims, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. 10, Parts 5 & 6, 160.

<sup>29</sup> Interview with Israel Jackson, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 6.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Sarah Wells, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Part 7, 90.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams*, 195.

when they was whippin' 'em."<sup>32</sup> Abram Harris's father also ran off to live in the woods for several days because of a malicious master. He said of his father, "he used ter run off en hide in de cane thickets fer days en days kase he marster so mean en beat him up so bad, en dat he git so huntry dat he slip bak close ter de house in de night, en dat sum de wimmins slip him sum meat en bread."<sup>33</sup> John Hunter's father had a mean master, and said that "he would run away in the woods and stay a week or two before he'd come back."<sup>34</sup> Ida Hutchinson's father took similar actions. He ran off temporarily to swamps whenever he became angry with his master, and after being gone for "three or four days" his master "sent word for him to come on back and he wouldn't do nothing to him."<sup>35</sup>

Rebecca Gordon, an ex-slave from Louisiana, remembered a story about her father running away and living in the swamps after his mistress upbraided him. She said, "So he run off one day [and] stayed in de woods for about six weeks before he came out. He said he sho did have fun dat day. He had been killing snakes and drying their hides and heads. When he come back, he had 'em strung around his neck, his wrist, and waist, so when he walked up, they were afraid of him." She continued to tell his story, "So he got some meat and meal and went back to the swamps, and stayed there until peace [was] declared. He said if dey had caught him, dey would have kilt him."<sup>36</sup> Gordon's father lived outside of the plantation boundaries as a fugitive slave for a few years, and used the swamps and its residents, in this case, snakes, to better his condition as a fugitive slave and to exercise some agency over his future. After this incident, and his blatant usage of materials found in the swamps, he effectively garnered more respect

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<sup>32</sup> Interview with Julia Grace, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 65.

<sup>33</sup> Interview with Abram Harris, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 172.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with John Hunter, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 362.

<sup>35</sup> Ida Hutchinson, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 372.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with Rebecca Gordon, *Mother Wit*, 88.

from his masters.<sup>37</sup> Robert Farmer used the swamps to get from one plantation to another at night to avoid overseers and patrollers when they had organized dances and meetings. He said, “We cut the pigeon wing, waltzed, and quadrille. We danced all night until we burned up all the wood. Then we went down into the swamp and brought back each one as long a log as he could carry. We chopped this up and piled it in the room. Then we went on ‘cross the swamp to another plantation and danced there.”<sup>38</sup>

Rarely did entire families in Arkansas and Louisiana run away together, reflecting difficult decisions slave families had to make. Ex-slaves often said that their parents ran away separately. Felix Street attributed this fact to a pragmatic reason. He said, “Niggers were just beginning to wake up then, and know how to slip away and run off. We had whole families there that had run off one by one. The man would run away and leave his children, and as they got old enough, they would follow him one by one.”<sup>39</sup> Male slaves in Arkansas went to the woods and swamps during the Civil War to join the Union Army. They used the paths and trails with which they were already familiar to find the Union lines and recruiting stations, including Delta communities Pine Bluff and Helena with large black populations, quickly and usually without being caught. Boston Blackwell wanted to join the Union Army in 1863 and went to Pine Bluff “to get to the Yankees.” He maneuvered from one plantation to another, but when a white overseer saw him, he “hide in the dark woods.”<sup>40</sup> He stayed in the woods several days before making it to Pine Bluff, and then declared that when he “gets to the Yankee camp and all our troubles was

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<sup>37</sup> Interview with Rebecca Gordon, *Mother Wit*, 88.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Robert Farmer, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 275.

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Felix Street, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. 10, Parts 5 & 6, 250.

<sup>40</sup> Interview with Boston Blackwell, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 169.

over.”<sup>41</sup> Blackwell said that more runaways, “hundreds, I reckon” escaped from bondage to join the Union army by using the same techniques. John Youn<sup>42</sup>g and several of his companions ran from Drew County, Arkansas, to Pine Bluff to join the Union, a fairly short distance yet thick with swamps, sloughs, and dense overgrowth of weeds and plants.<sup>43</sup>

Consequently, the slaves who remained on plantations during the Civil War often noted that the Union army could not maneuver through the complex, dangerous southern landscape easily because of their unfamiliarity with the different environment. John Wesley said of the Union soldiers, “We hid in the woods. The Yankees couldn’t make much out in the woods and canebrakes,”<sup>44</sup> alluding to the notion that the African-American slaves could live in the woods and canebrakes, unlike the white soldiers. Some ex-slaves avoided the war and sectional conflicts completely by hiding in the woods and swamps. Wesley Graves said of his father, “He didn’t go to the War; he went to the woods.”<sup>45</sup> Graves said that his father stayed in the woods for three years in order to avoid going with his master and joining the Confederacy.<sup>46</sup> Another ex-slave from Arkansas told an interviewer that the Civil War did not affect him, since “We lived back in the woods and swamps.”<sup>47</sup> A Confederate soldier, according to Mary Johnson, took his furlough near Pine Bluff. He “just hid out in the cane brake” to avoid going back to the service. Upon being found, other soldiers “took him out in the bayou and shot him.”<sup>48</sup>

Both white and blacks used the swamps, canebrakes, and woods to avoid duties and

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<sup>41</sup> Interview with Boston Blackwell, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 169.

<sup>42</sup> Interview with Boston Blackwell, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 169.

<sup>43</sup> Interview with John Young, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Part 7, 257.

<sup>44</sup> Interview with John Wesley, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Part 7, 96.

<sup>45</sup> Interview with Wesley Graves, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 73.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Wesley Graves, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 74.

<sup>47</sup> Interview with Willie Buck Charleston, Jr. *Bearing Witness*, 307.

<sup>48</sup> Interview with Mandy Johnson, *The American Slave, Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 111.

responsibilities, and to take a temporary respite. Henry Bibb wrote in his autobiography about the importance of swamps when taking his family to find freedom in the North. He wrote:

What would induce me to take my family and go into the Red River swamps of Louisiana among the snakes and alligators, with all the liabilities of being destroyed by them, hunted down with blood hounds, or lay myself liable to be show down like the wild beasts of the forest? Nothing I say, nothing but the strongest love of liberty, humanity, and justice to myself and family, would induce me to run such a risk again.<sup>49</sup>

Despite the perils found in the swamps of Louisiana, Bibb realized that the best way to evade patrollers and white planters was to utilize the portion of the southern landscape that many deemed dangerous and unpleasant, though for him was a means to justify the ends.

Another fugitive slave, Charles Ball, felt similarly in the swamps and also found peace in this southern environment. Although Ball, like other runaway slaves, faced the risk of being caught and punished, the swamps offered temporary relief and tranquility for slaves seeking either a momentary break from toiling the land, or a place to stay while running away to the North. He ran away from his plantation in Louisiana, and said about the swamps, “When in the swamp, I felt pretty secure.”<sup>50</sup>

Advertisements for fugitive and runaway slaves in Arkansas and Louisiana show the propensity of the enslaved to utilize waterways, such as swamps, and bayous, to run away. Furthermore, many of these fugitive slaves escaped on plantations located near

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<sup>49</sup> Henry Bibb, *Puttin On Ole Massa: The Slave Narratives of Henry Bibb, William Wells Brown, and Solomon Northup* (Gilbert Osofsky, ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 126.

<sup>50</sup> Charles Ball, *Slavery In the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man* (Pennsylvania: John W. Shugert, 1837), 433.

large swamps and bayous. Planters and slave masters certainly were cognizant that their slaves utilized the swamps and woods to hide and avoid bondage, as evident by the advertisements for fugitive and runaway slaves. Furthermore, the enslaved realized that these bayous typically ran into larger rivers, most of which were navigable, and they realized this fact because many helped to load cotton or other crops onto boats on these bayous to ship to Memphis or New Orleans. The familiarity with this mobility presented by the rivers and bayous to ship crops ultimately undercut some of the power of the planters. An ex-slave from Ashley County, Arkansas, recalled that his masters travelled on “de boats on de rivers and de bayou’s...den dey shipped by Cypress Bayou, an across Lake Caddo ter de Red River an from dar up North or maybe down ter New Orleans.”<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the enslaved realized the importance and promise of rivers and bayous, and men frequently utilized these bayous and swamps to the fullest extent.

A Batesville, Arkansas newspaper in 1840 had an advertisement that shows the importance of swamps and bayous for hiding. It read:

Ran away from the subscriber living at Greenville Missouri, about the first of October last two Negro slaves one a fellow names HENRY about 35 years of age, six feet high, and of a dark yellow complexion, and MARIA his wife, about 25 years of age, small sized and very black. Said slaves are supposed to be in Black or Current river swamps. The above reward will be paid for their confinement so I can get them.<sup>52</sup>

In 1831, the *Arkansas Gazette* included a lengthy description of several runaway slaves near Arkansas Post who were armed and considered dangerous. It read:

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<sup>51</sup> *Bearing Witness*, 41.

<sup>52</sup> Batesville News (30 January 1840).

Were committed to the care of me, the undersigned, sheriff of St. Francis County, Arkansas Territory, on the 18<sup>th</sup> inst., Five Runaway Slaves, to wit: BEN, a stout black man, about 35 years old, a large beard, and slight impediment in his speech. BILL, a stout likely young fellow, 23 or 24 years old, black, 5 feet 9 inches high, stout built....The said Negroes say they belong to JULIUS BETTIS, living on Bayou Fidelle, Thirty-five miles above the Grand Gulph, on the Mississippi, and that they ran away about the middle of December last, and took with them, a rifle and shot gun, and ten dollars in money, belonging to their master....stolen from different persons on their route by way of the Post of Arkansas, White River, and on the United States's roud...They say there was another Negro man in company, when they left home, along belonging to Mr. Bettis, who left their company about 45 miles below the post of Arkansas.<sup>53</sup>

Some of these aforementioned slaves lived near bayous, and they utilized the location of Arkansas Post to run away, since the Arkansas, White, and Mississippi river were all navigable. Advertisements tended to mention bayous, which gives evidence that the enslaved utilized navigable bayous to either disappear into the swamps or to escape to a navigable river and flee north. In 1833, the *Arkansas Gazette* published a short advertisement for a slave “living on Lake Washington, Mississippi in May last, a Negro MAN and WOMAN...The man was last seen on the Boggy bayou.”<sup>54</sup> Another advertisement from the *Arkansas Gazette* ran an advertisement for two runaways that “They say they both belong to a man by the name of JOSEPH WILLIAMSON, on the Bayou Bartholomew, La.”<sup>55</sup> Bayou Bartholomew is the largest freshwater bayou in North America, beginning in Arkansas and meandering into Louisiana. A slave going into this bayou could either disappear into the wilderness for several months, or follow the bayou

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<sup>53</sup> *Arkansas Gazette* (22 June 1831).

<sup>54</sup> *Arkansas Gazette* (17 July 1833).

<sup>55</sup> *Arkansas Gazette* (23 June 1834).

to a navigable river, such as the Arkansas, Cache, or White, all of which are located near this bayou. In 1836, the *Helena Constitutional Journal* included an advertisement for a fugitive slave that said “He says he belong to a Mr. MURKESON, who lives about 10 miles back of bayou Sarah, LA, and that he ranaway from his master about 3 months ago.”<sup>56</sup> This slave was apparently able to live on his own in the swamps and sloughs near bayou Sarah in Louisiana, effectively avoiding patrollers or plantation masters for three months. The *Arkansas Advocate* in 1837 advertised several runaway slaves found. It read, “They say they belong to NATHANIEL BARNETT, living in Union County Arkansas on the Bayou Saline that they have been out 4 weeks on Friday and came up the Saline in a canoe,”<sup>57</sup> and probably trying to reach the Red River, which flows into the Saline Bayou, and escape to Texas or western territories. A jailer’s notice read:

Was committed to the jail of Pulaski county, on the 18<sup>th</sup> day of November...a Negro boy, who says his name is BILL, and that he belongs to Dr. Holson, living on the Mississippi, near Boggy Bayou, and that he got on board of the steamer, Arkansas...at the plantation of Milford Garner, Esp, of Chicot county.<sup>58</sup>

In this situation, a slave utilized the Mississippi river and its promise of mobility to leave his plantation that was located near the river. In 1841, the *Arkansas Gazette* ran an advertisement stating “a negro Man, as a runaway slave...that he belongs to WILLIAM NEVILLE, of Walnut bayou, Louisiana.”<sup>59</sup> Another advertisement in 1843 advertised a runaway slave who lived on a plantation near a bayou. It read: “Notice Ran away from

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<sup>56</sup> *Helena Constitutional Journal* (24 November 1836).

<sup>57</sup> *The Arkansas Advocate* (14 August 1837).

<sup>58</sup> *The Arkansas Advocate* “Jailer’s Notice” (28 November 1840).

<sup>59</sup> *The Arkansas Gazette* (10 January 1841).



the subscriber about the Blue Bayou, Sevier County Arkansas.”<sup>60</sup> In 1855, the *Democratic Star* ran an advertisement for “Ranoff...the said boy will try to get on a boat for Bayou sara LA.”<sup>61</sup> In 1859, the *Arkansas Gazette* published an advertisement stating ““a Negro boy, who calls his name HORACE, and says he belong to MIRTH McCOY...who owns a plantation on Plum Bayou, Jefferson County, Arkansas.”<sup>62</sup>

These advertisements and statements of runaway or fugitive slaves indicate that the enslaved realized the power of mobility possible from using the bayous, swamps, and navigable rivers in Arkansas and Louisiana to find freedom. Even plantations located further inland from the Delta that contained bayous or sloughs were susceptible to slaves running away by using this ubiquitous portion of the plantation landscape that planters tended to leave alone. Planters realized the opportunity of mobility presented by bayous and rivers, and in Louisiana in 1857, a revised law made emancipation illegal, in addition to barring any slave from becoming a boat captain on any “rivers, bayous, or lakes,”<sup>63</sup> reflecting the new notion that white residents and lawmakers in Louisiana began to recognize the relationship between running away and the swamplands, and how slaves perceived the landscapes much differently than the white community.

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<sup>60</sup> *The Arkansas Gazette* (27 June 1843).

<sup>61</sup> *The Democratic Star* (31 May 1855).

<sup>62</sup> *The Arkansas Gazette* (5 March 1859).

<sup>63</sup> “Free People of Color.” *KNOW-LA, Louisiana Encyclopedia*.

## CHAPTER THREE

### *Swampin’:*

#### *Everyday Resistance, Economic, and Political Power from Swamps*

Mille Evans told an interviewer that she “gathered broom sage fo’ our winter brooms jus’ like we gathered our other winter stuff.”<sup>1</sup> Like Evans, other slaves, including men, women, and children, exploited the swamps in Arkansas and Louisiana for pragmatic reasons. Some of these uses extended to improve their everyday lives, while others helped to create unique identities without the knowledge of the white planters. Economic uses of the swamps appear in slave narratives and WPA interviews alike. Ex-slaves mention the plethora of natural resources found in the swamps, including cypress trees, herbs, plants, barks, animals, and nuts, which men, women, and children collected to either vary their diet, sell in a small market economy, or for medical purposes. All of these uses lead to the creation of an African-American culture that relied heavily on the natural world, particularly the swamps, for creative and unorthodox reasons, which enriched their everyday lives and culminated in small acts of resistance, and could certainly be placed in the middle of the spectrum of resistance created by Anthony Kaye.

An ex-slave from Arkansas, Mittie Freeman, disclosed to an interviewer that “I got the reumatiz a-making the garden. . . I knowed a potion. It made of poke berry juice and whiskey.”<sup>2</sup> The poke berry, a weed found in the swamps, mixed with the whiskey cured her rheumatism. Female slaves collected sassafras to make tea and blood purifiers

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Mille Evans, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 242.

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Mittie Freeman, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 351.

during the spring.<sup>3</sup> To help ease the pain of babies teething, many slaves relied on folk remedies available from the swamps and woods. One author of Louisiana folklore wrote, “Swamp lilies were dried and strung around a baby’s neck for teething.”<sup>4</sup> Sally Snowden from Louisiana recalled that “Dese old yellow top weeds is mighty fine for de fever.”<sup>5</sup> She also disclosed that they collected “Poke salad, wild lettuce and sassafrass tea” from the swamps to eat.<sup>6</sup> Pate Newton, an early settler of Arkansas, said that poke weed from the swamps had a variety of uses. He said, “Poke was used in the following manner— young shoots as a food; berries as a dye and in a wine for rheumatism. Roots in liniment.”<sup>7</sup> Ex-slave from Louisiana, Verice Brown, told an interviewer of a folk remedy he often used that came from the plants he encountered in the swamps, so that he did not have to rely on white doctors to treat maladies. He said, “Jackvine tea is the best blood purify you can get. I have a piece dried. We always made tea out of it and eat with our bread when us would be in de swamps.”<sup>8</sup>

Women used the swamps to both help their families and also to better their own individual status. Millie Evans said that “the way we got our perfume we took rose leaves, cape jasmines an sweet bazil an laid dem wid our clo’es an let ‘em stay three or fo’ days then we had good smellin’ clo’es that would las’ too.”<sup>9</sup> Lidia Jones recalled that she and other female slaves found indigo in the woods to dye their clothes.<sup>10</sup> Slave women collected plants, leaves, and barks from the swamps to create dyes for clothing.

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<sup>3</sup> Interview with Charlie Vaden, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Part 7, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Rebecca Gorden, *Mother Wit*, 88.

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Sally Snowden, *Mother Wit*, 194.

<sup>6</sup> Early Settlers’ Personal History Questionnaire, WPA  
Interviewed by Virgil C. Erwin Washington County, Ark. January 27, 1941

<sup>7</sup> Andrea Cantrell. “WPA Early Settler’s Personal History Questionnaire for Pate Newton.” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly* (Vol. 63, No. 1, 2004), 58.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Verice Brown, *Mother Wit*, 37.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Mille Evans, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 245.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with Lidia Jones, *The American Slave, Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 151.

Emma Tidwell said that “Er little beech bark dyes slate color set wid copper. Hickory bark an bay leaves deyes yellow wid chamber lye; barboo dyes turkey red, set color wid copper. Pine straw an sweetgum dyes purple, set color wid chamber lye.”<sup>11</sup> Adeline Barkley told an interviewer that for clothes “The dye was made from bark and different herbs.”<sup>12</sup> Slave women made the swamps a gendered sphere which enriched their status as women, since they knew where to find these plants and which plants to use to dye or deodorize clothes. Stephanie Camp writes about the importance of clothing for enslaved women:

They grew and processed the cotton, cultivated and gathered the roots and berries for the dye, wove the cloth, and sewed textiles into garments. Women, whose bodies were subject to sexual exploitation, dangerous and potentially heartbreaking reproductive labor, and physically demanding agriculture labor, worked hard to bring personal expression and delight into their lives.<sup>13</sup>

Camp’s argument regarding femininity and body politics for slave women resonates strongly when analyzing the actions of slave women in Arkansas and Louisiana, and the swamps become the rival geography in which these women are able to make these decisions regarding the clothes that they wore.

Cypress trees, an abundant natural resource in Arkansas and Louisiana, had many uses. Men made furniture, cutlery, and shingles out of cypress trees from the abundant cypress swamps. Frederick Law Olmsted noticed that many of the homes, both of the

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<sup>11</sup> Interview with Emma Tidwell, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. 10, Parts 5 & 6, 331.

<sup>12</sup> Early Settlers’ Personal History Questionnaire, WPA  
Interviewed by Virgil C. Erwin Washington County, Ark. January 27, 1941.

<sup>13</sup> Stephanie Camp, *Closer to Freedom: Enslaved Women and Everyday Resistance in the Plantation South*, 81.

enslaved and whites, had cypress shingles.<sup>14</sup> A traveler to Louisiana in 1802 commented that “The wood of the cypress is used in building houses, pettiaguers and canoes; it is, in fact, the only wood that could be applied with facility to these purposes below Upper Louisiana.”<sup>15</sup> One ex-slave from Louisiana recalled that they made tobacco pipes out of cypress trees.<sup>16</sup> Both African-Americans and Europeans employed cypress logs to build homes, bridges, and buildings, since the trees were numerous and repelled insects such as termites. George Green said of cypress plates he used growing up, “When them pans fell they didn’t break...they would take a cypress tree and dig it out and them scoundrels lasted too.”<sup>17</sup>

Henry Walker recalled that as a child in Arkansas, he “hunted chenquips down in the swamps. There was lots of walnut trees in the woods.”<sup>18</sup> He mentioned many items that he, his siblings, and other enslaved children collected in the woods and swamps. He said, “The woods were full of nut trees and we had a few maple and sweet gum trees. We picked up chips to simmer the sweet maple sap down. Used elder tree wood to make faucets for syrup barrels.”<sup>19</sup> His mother sold these for extra money. Fanny Johnson’s master in Louisiana allowed her and the other children on the plantation to collect pecans and “sell them to the river boats what come along.” She said with this extra money, they could trade and buy gloves and hats off the boats.<sup>20</sup> Ike May said that “For many years there was a large grove of paw-paw bushes on the river above the Dardanelle Rock.

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<sup>14</sup> Frederick Law Olmsted, *Journey in the Sea Board Slave States with Remarks on their Economy* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1861), 151.

<sup>15</sup> *Travels in Louisiana and the Floridas, in the year 1802*, 125.

<sup>16</sup> *Mother Wit*, 189.

<sup>17</sup> Interview with George Green, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 107.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Henry Walker. *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 7, 29.

<sup>19</sup> Interview with Henry Walker, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Part 7, 33.

<sup>20</sup> Interview with Fanny Johnson, *The American Slave, Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 87.

Looking and tasting much like bananas, they were free to all who could pick them.”<sup>21</sup> His emphasis on them being free shows his knowledge that other crops slaves cultivated were for selling, yet these wild plants belonged to no one. Charles Ball wrote that he made extra money by trapping raccoons, possums, and other animals from the swamps. He wrote, “I understood various methods of entrapping rackoons, and other wild animals that abounded in the large swamps of this country...”<sup>22</sup> Hunting game in the swamps provided extra income or a supplementation of diets for slaves, and a diverse amount of game could be caught, such as alligator or beaver, to sell or eat.

O.C. Hardy in El Dorado, Arkansas, used the swamps to hunt and fish to vary his diet. He said, “Our sport was huntin’, fishin’, and bird thrasin’ and trap settin’. To catch fish easy we baited snuff and tobacco to the hook.”<sup>23</sup> Arkansas gave plenty of hunting and fishing opportunities for slaves who were allowed to hunt. William Harrison said about Arkansas, “Game was the nicest thing the country afforded.”<sup>24</sup> Men and children also enjoyed hunting and spending time in the swamps. James Gill grew up near Helena, Arkansas, and said of his childhood before he began working, “Us just run wild playin’ and iffen it was in de summer time we was in de bayou swimmin’ er fishin’.”<sup>25</sup> Some ex-slaves referred to “group hunts” in which several men stalked wild animals in Arkansas, such as bear, panther, and fox.<sup>26</sup> Swamps became so crucial to African-American life that Wilkinson Jones, an ex-slave from Jefferson Parish, Louisiana, even used the word

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<sup>21</sup> Ike May “Early Settlers’ Personal History Questionnaire,” WPA

Interview by Sarah R. Scott. Yell County, Ark. September 16, 1940.

<sup>22</sup> Charles Ball, *Slavery in the United States: A Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Charles Ball, A Black Man* (New York: John S. Taylor, 183), 195-196.

<sup>23</sup> Interview with O.C. Hardy, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 162.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with William Harrison, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 188.

<sup>25</sup> Interview with James Gill, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 9, Parts 3 & 4, 21.

<sup>26</sup> “WPA Early Settler’s Personal History Questionnaire for Pate Newton.” *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, 60.

“swamp” as a verb when describing his life. He said, “I’s swamped and trapped and hunted game for a living all my life.”<sup>27</sup> Jones’ usage of the verb “to swamp” clearly illustrates how influential the swamplands were for African-American slaves, and this pattern carried through into the creation of the New South after the Civil War.

Isolated swamplands in Arkansas also offered spaces for free black communities to flourish without pressure from the white community. Few free blacks lived in Arkansas before the Civil War, yet the state had a relatively high population compared to other states that produced cotton and other cash crops. In addition to the individual manumitted blacks, including Scott Bond and Abraham Miller, a small community of free blacks existed in Arkansas’s antebellum period, and they made their village close to a swamp that the white population avoided because of diseases and maladies. Peter Caulder, a slave born in South Carolina, served in the War of 1812 and received his freedom. After leaving the army, he and fellow African-American soldiers created a small village of free blacks in Marion County, Arkansas, along the sloughs and swamps near the White River. Along with another free African-American, David Hall, Caulder and Hall’s families, along with other free families, created a small community based on subsistence farming in the fertile, rich land along the Arkansas River.<sup>28</sup> Marion County had more free African-Americans than slaves, which was certainly an anomaly in Arkansas, especially in a county near to the Delta where slaves were highly concentrated. These free blacks relied on planting corn and selling goods that they procured or hunted in the swamps, such as skins and meat, in a frontier exchange economy. This community of free blacks was successful, and records trace these families as land-owning and tax-

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<sup>27</sup> Interview with Wilkinson Jones, *Mother Wit*, 142.

<sup>28</sup> Billy Higgins. *A Stranger and a Sojourner: Peter Caulder, Free Black Frontiersman in Antebellum Arkansas* ( Fayetteville: University of Arkansas, 2004).

paying in the state of Arkansas. However, this community, which near its height included around 130 free blacks, fell apart in the early 1850s because of heightening racial tensions and pressures, and many of these free blacks left the state.

After the Civil War, the newly freed slaves took advantage of the abundant swamplands in Arkansas and Louisiana to buy and farm independently. Talitha Lewis moved to Pine Bluff in 1889. To justify her decision, she said “They sure said they had fritter trees and molasses pond. They said to just shake the tree and the fritters would fall in the pond...Course there was times when you could make good money here.”<sup>29</sup> In St. Francis County, Wylie Nealy bought a farm and “eight acres to be cleared down in the bottoms.” He remarked that his family helped him clear the land, and he resold it a few years later to make a profit.<sup>30</sup> One ex-slave went to Madison, Arkansas, after the Civil War. He remarked that “It was a thriving little river town surrounded on all sides by wilderness...there was nothing but wooded hills where Forrest City now stands.”<sup>31</sup> Henry Pettus farmed in Marianna, Arkansas after emancipation. He said about his farm on reclaimed swamplands, “We made fine crops.”<sup>32</sup> A free black woman, Abby Guy, sued for her freedom in Ashley County, Arkansas, in 1855. Before suing for her freedom for a claim of being wrongfully enslaved, she and her four children lived together on Bayou Bartholomew farming, where they apparently passed as Caucasian until James Condra, a white planter, tried to enslave Abby.<sup>33</sup> For Guy and her children, however, living on Bayou Bartholomew and farming offered her a comfortable life, and she was

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Talitha Lewis, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 3 & 4, 253.

<sup>30</sup> Interview with Wylie Nealy, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 5 & 6, 191.

<sup>31</sup> Interview with William Harrison, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 3 & 4, 187.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Henry Pettus, *Arkansas Narratives*, Parts 5 & 6, 341.

<sup>33</sup> Charles Bolton, *Arkansas, 1800-1860 Remote and Restless* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1998), 142.



able to interact with the white class fairly easily despite the fact that her mother was enslaved, and the Supreme Court of Arkansas had to determine what biologically constituted a “mulatto” and what constituted a free person of color.

Even after the Civil War, the pattern of economic empowerment from the swamps continued for free blacks. John Barnett told a WPA interviewer that even in his old age that in addition to a pension, he “sells sassafras and little things along to help out.”<sup>34</sup>

Another ex-slave in Arkansas said that blacks often could hunt and “ship the skins and get some money when you couldn’t be farming. Could get all the wood you would cut and then clear out land and farm.”<sup>35</sup> One ex-slave from Louisiana told an interviewer that

“When I came out here as a squatter in 1867, it was a swamp full of snakes and alligators. We killed the alligators and sold their hides and ate their tails.”<sup>36</sup> Even after

Emancipation and during the creation of the New South, African-Americans used the same spaces and tools constructed during slavery to garner some economic freedom.

Mandy Thomas continued to collect herbs and plants to make extra money. She told an interviewer, “I was out pickin’ huckleberries tryin’ to get some money to buy baby clothes when my first girl was born.”<sup>37</sup> Hattie Thompson immigrated to Arkansas after

the Civil War because she heard there were more farming opportunities. Additionally, she found that “In the spring we could get wild polk greens to cook”<sup>38</sup> from the swamps.

Slaves picked Spanish moss from the trees in southern Arkansas and Louisiana to make softer mattresses. Travelers to the South noted that planters often stuffed mattresses with moss, since moss was softer than down feathers and repelled pests, such as lice and

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<sup>34</sup> Interview with John Barnett, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 108.

<sup>35</sup> Name unknown. *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*. Vol. 8, Parts 1 & 2, 224.

<sup>36</sup> Interview with James St. Ann, *Mother Wit*, 189.

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Mandy Thomas, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. 10, Parts 5 & 6, 296.

<sup>38</sup> Interview with Hattie Thompson, *The American Slave. Arkansas Narratives*, Vol. 10, Parts 5 & 6, 316.

fleas. Freed African-Americans continued to pick moss from the swamps to sell to moss gins, many of which were located in southern Louisiana. Newspapers in Louisiana advertised moss mattresses and the growing business of moss ginning along with its growing economic role in Louisiana after the Civil War. In 1896, a newspaper described the new business in Louisiana. It read:

During the last few years the moss business has assumed quite large proportions. It is very profitable and at the same time not as tiresome as field work. We were informed the other day by a young man, that in one day he picked 200 pounds. Now as this moss sells for from 3 to 4 cents per pound, it can easily be seen why so many laborers seek the swamps and woods instead of doing field work.<sup>39</sup>

The writer of this article observed a paucity of field labor and attributed this observation to more African-Americans picking moss instead. He wrote his opinion on the matter:

This is one of the chief causes of the scarcity of labor and it is easily seen that owners of swamp lands could prevent it. Very few persons outside of negroes make a business of picking moss and if the men who own these lands would club together and forbid anyone picking moss on their lands, the trouble of securing labor would be done away with. It seems to us that owners of swamps lands have really a fortune ‘in the woods’ but for some reason they let it stay there, or allow it to be taken away by others.<sup>40</sup>

Perhaps heeding this advice, many newspaper articles printed a warning to moss pickers as illegal trespassers. Louisiana newspapers printed the same “notice to trespassers” that “hereafter fishing, hunting, berrying, promenading, riding, sporting, sparking, chip

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<sup>39</sup> *The Meridional*. (Abbeville, La.), 11 July 1891. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064005/1891-07-11/ed-1/seq-1/>>

<sup>40</sup> *The Meridional*. (Abbeville, La.), 11 July 1891. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064005/1891-07-11/ed-1/seq-1/>>

gathering, moss picking, driving and travelling and all kinds of trespassing and entrance upon the lands late belonging...is prohibited and forbidden by the undersigned who will prosecute violators of this prohibition to the extremity of the law.”<sup>41</sup> In 1881, a newspaper reported that a white French man who owned land in Louisiana “discovered a party of five colored men engaged in picking moss on his lands. In addition to the trespass serious loss was entailed upon him by this depredation, as moss represents a rather important pecuniary value in that section.”<sup>42</sup>

New Orleans had several ginning factories, though the practice of picking, ginning and, baling moss presented dangers. *The Daily Picayune* reported a story that a one-story moss building in downtown New Orleans burned, along with two hundred bales of moss and all of the machinery.<sup>43</sup> In a Donaldsonville newspaper, “A small shanty on one of the cross streets near the railroad...was destroyed by fire...with its contents, consisting of a quantity of moss valued, we hear, at about \$400.”<sup>44</sup> In 1877, a young man, whose race was unidentified, fell from a tree in “while picking moss in the swamps of Chacahoula.”<sup>45</sup> As late as 1913, a newspaper reported that “Alcee Joseph, a negro boy about 16 years old, was killed and Walter Johnson, of the same age, was badly burned when lightening struck a tree under which they had taken refuge during an

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<sup>41</sup> *The Meridional*. (Abbeville, La.), 18 Aug. 1894. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064005/1894-08-18/ed-1/seq-1/>>

<sup>42</sup> *Louisiana capitolian*. (Baton Rouge, La.), 24 May 1881. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064592/1881-05-24/ed-1/seq-2/>>

<sup>43</sup> “Misdeeds and Mishaps Moss Factory Burned” (News)  
*The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA) Friday, June 15, 1888; 3.

<sup>44</sup> *The Donaldsonville chief*. (Donaldsonville, La.), 08 Dec. 1877. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85034248/1877-12-08/ed-1/seq-3/>>

<sup>45</sup> *The Donaldsonville chief*. (Donaldsonville, La.), 12 May 1877. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85034248/1877-05-12/ed-1/seq-1/>>

electrical storm Wednesday. The accident occurred in the woods back of St. Emma plantation, where the boys were picking moss.”<sup>46</sup>

Moss picking and ginning constituted a profitable business for farmers and African-Americans in Louisiana during uncertain times for agriculture and an unpredictable market for staple crops. When crops failed or lost market value, planters, poor whites, and African-Americans turned to moss to pick, gin, and sell. A citizen of Donaldsonville wrote to the editor about a solution for a bad year for crops. He wrote to the editor, “In the seventh ward the crops are young, but promise to turn out well, only a very few farmers being able to plant; I have heard of no suffering, as any one can readily make from \$1 to \$ 2.50 per day picking moss.”<sup>47</sup> 1895, a newspaper article reported that lumber workers could pick additional moss off of trees to harvest.<sup>48</sup> In 1875, a newspaper reported that “this long moss is the salvation of the swamp residents,” and although the races of these residents were unknown, the author probably was referring to whites of the lower socio-economic status, such as Cajuns, who lived on the swamps to hunt and fish for a living.<sup>49</sup> Europeans demanded American-ginned moss, according to newspapers in Louisiana, and the moss-mattress factories outnumbered the hair-mattress factories in New Orleans.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> *The Rice belt journal*. (Welsh, Calcasieu Parish, La.), 16 May 1913. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn88064402/1913-05-16/ed-1/seq-2/>>

<sup>47</sup> *The Donaldsonville chief*. (Donaldsonville, La.), 05 Aug. 1882. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85034248/1882-08-05/ed-1/seq-3/>>

<sup>48</sup> “A Moss Invention Which Will Aid Another Louisiana Industry” (News) *The Daily Picayune* (New Orleans, LA) Tuesday, September 10, 1895; pg. 6; Issue 229; pg. 6

<sup>49</sup> *Le Meschacébé*. ([Lucy] La.), 09 Oct. 1875. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86079080/1875-10-09/ed-2/seq-1/>>

<sup>50</sup> *The morning star and Catholic messenger*. (New Orleans [La.]), 16 Aug. 1874. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress. <<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn86086284/1874-08-16/ed-1/seq-4/>>

In addition to providing some sense of independence, tranquility, or quotidian solutions for everyday ailments and illnesses, free and emancipated African-Americans used the swamps as an economic tool to gain status for free or emancipated African-Americans, seen especially in Arkansas. In 1850, Congress passed the Federal Swamp Land Act to transfer federally owned swamplands to private farmers, so that they could drain, farm the land, and accrue more money for the state.<sup>51</sup> This legislation represented a turning point in the environmental history of Arkansas, even though many of the swamps remained undrained well into the twentieth century. The Swamp Land Act targeted states with large amounts of wetlands, including Florida, Louisiana, and Arkansas. Arkansas farmers took advantage of this legislation, and more than 7.6 million acres of swamp lands were drained and farmed because of this incentive.<sup>52</sup> White Arkansas farmers, particularly in the eastern and southeastern portion of the state, including the land around Little Rock, Pine Bluff, and Helena, bought these lands from 1850 to the early twentieth century to drain and plant cotton. Some free African-Americans bought this land, as well, as did freed slaves after the end of the Civil War in the 1870s. Abraham Miller, a manumitted slave in St. Francis County, Arkansas, applied for a swamp land patent in 1856.<sup>53</sup>

Hahn discusses the importance of structures created during slavery that gave a framework for political involvement for freed slaves after the Civil War. He discusses the role of the church, kinship networks, and a slave-based economy that culminated in political power after emancipation. He writes, “slaves had become familiar with and could appropriate a powerful, if contested, national political discourse that exalted

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<sup>51</sup> “Swamp Lands” (1850). *Arkansas Commissioner of State Lands*. COSL.org. Accessed 5 January 2014.

<sup>52</sup> “Swamp Lands” (1850). *Arkansas Commissioner of State Lands*. COSL.org. Accessed 5 January 2014.

<sup>53</sup> “Land Records.” *Arkansas History Commission*. ARK-ives.com Accessed 5 January 2014.

manual labor and associate freedom with economic independence.”<sup>54</sup> Clear examples of ex-slave and manumitted slaves in Arkansas, especially, demonstrate the influence of economic security and political power. Close to fifty African-American legislators represented Arkansas from 1868-1893, many of whom came from the Delta region of the state where African-Americans outnumbered whites.<sup>55</sup> Out of the fifty legislators representing blacks in postbellum Arkansas, some were born free blacks in Arkansas, and others were emancipated slaves. Additionally, the majority of black Arkansas legislators were not mulatto, as seen in political scenes in other southern states. A historian of Arkansas politics wrote that “at least forty-one of the eighty-four legislators farmed at some point during their lifetimes, and another two were termed ‘planters.’”<sup>56</sup>

Furthermore, data from Arkansas land grant archives suggest that African-American political leaders from the Delta region of the state applied for permits with the Swamp Land Act beginning in 1850, and continued to do so after the Civil War and into the late 1800s. Free blacks in Arkansas, such as Scott Bond and Abraham Miller, certainly used the Swamp Land Act to buy cheaper, marginalized land, and then to plant crops and start agrarian businesses, gaining economic security and power. These swamp land permits after the Civil War even affected the political scene of Reconstruction politics in Arkansas. Indeed, by investing in swamp lands at cheap prices, many of these future African-American political leaders began their start as farmers, planters, and businessmen, who invested in swamplands to drain and begin planting crops to accrue money and status, especially in the counties in the Arkansas Delta where land was fertile

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<sup>54</sup> Steven Hahn, *A Nation Under our Feet*, 135.

<sup>55</sup> Blake Wintory, “African-American Legislators in the Arkansas General Assembly, 1868-1893,” *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* (Vol. 65, No. 4, 2006), 386.

<sup>56</sup> Blake Wintory, “African-American Legislators in the Arkansas General Assembly, 1868-1893,” 390.

once the swamps were drained. These African-American leaders demonstrated their knowledge of the value of these swamplands, and acted accordingly. By investing in these often cheap and marginalized federal lands, these future black leaders of Arkansas were able to effectively shape their futures and play a role in Arkansas politics, even if the status of these newly freed or free black residents of Arkansas would diminish with the close of Reconstruction.<sup>57</sup>

Scott Bond's story epitomizes the culmination of African-Americans' tendency to use the swamps for their own personal betterment. Bond, an ex-slave from Forrest City, Arkansas, stands out in the history of Arkansas because of his business endeavors and economic success, which he attributed to the vast resources and fertile land found in his adopted hometown of the Arkansas Delta. Bond, born a slave in Mississippi to a black mother and a white father, lived through the Civil War as a child in Arkansas. After emancipation, he remained in Forrest City and became a businessman, planter, and role model for many rural African-Americans in eastern Arkansas. He and his sons wrote his autobiography in 1917, which they published for their family to have and as inspiration for other poor African-Americans in Arkansas and the rural South. Bond outwardly

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<sup>57</sup> Name searching in the Arkansas Land records database suggest that free African-Americans applied for swampland permits, reflecting the knowledge that African-Americans had regarding the prosperity found in swamps. For example, James Mason, a representative of Delta counties Ashley, Chicot, Drew, and Desha, applied for a swamp land application in 1856. George W. Bell, a former slave, represented Delta counties Chicot and Desha in the Senate. He applied for two permits, the first in 1856 for 40 acres, and another in 1857 for 40 acres. William Hines Furbush, from Monroe and Phillips counties, applied for 160 acres with the Swamp Land application with preemption in 1873. William Murphy, a representative from Bradley, Grant, Jefferson and Lincoln counties applied in 1860 for swamp lands. Charles Brown, a former slave and farmer, applied for a permit in 1858. Henry Johnson, a planter, applied for a Swamp Permit in 1859. William A. Marshall, a farmer from Hempstead County, applied for a Swamp Permit in 1873, and a Swamp Land Patent in 1873. James Mason, a free mulatto planter from Chicot County, applied for a permit for Swamp Lands in 1856, and his land was assessed for 12,000 dollars in the 1870 census. Abraham Miller, born a slave in St. Francis County, applied for several swamp applications in 1856. John Willis Williams applied for a Swamp Land Permit in 1872 for 137 acres. This information is all available from land records collected by the *Arkansas History Commission*. These data are available at [http://www.ark-ives.com/documenting/land\\_records.aspx](http://www.ark-ives.com/documenting/land_records.aspx). (Accessed 14 April 2014).

attributed his success to the fertile, agriculturally rich lands in Arkansas, and he discussed this land at length in his autobiography. Bond began his career as a farmer by buying swamplands and bottomlands near Crowleys Ridge, Arkansas, all of which were prone to flooding, at a cheap price from the state of Arkansas. The lands needed draining before he could cultivate any crops, such as corn and cotton, which was a difficult, but not impossible task. Bond planted cotton, harvested cypress timber, owned a saw mill, a general store, raised hogs and sheep, and became a well-known and wealthy planter throughout the country.<sup>58</sup>

In addition to securing economic success for himself, his wife and children, Bond wrote his autobiography to influence and help the African-Americans who had few skills other than farming after the Civil War. Bond's outlook on the future of African-Americans varied greatly with some of the contemporary black leaders during his time. Similar to Booker T. Washington, with whom Bond had a friendship, Bond espoused the belief that farming, and the fertile land in eastern Arkansas, was the key to success for all African-Americans. Bond wrote that his story was not exemplary, and any laborer in Arkansas, Mississippi, or other parts of the South who knew how to farm and cultivate the land could create economic success and social prominence, even in the South. Bond praised the state of Arkansas in his autobiography, especially for African-Americans. He wrote:

The resources of Arkansas are hardly scratched. There are still standing in different parts of the state vast tracts of virgin timber, awaiting the woodman's ax, coal, kaolin, bauxite, oil, gas, diamonds, and other minerals are to be found in abundance. The streams and lakes are teeming with fish. Rich pearls are found in great numbers in the rivers. The soil is unsurpassed in fertility, and fortunes

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<sup>58</sup> Scott Bond, *From Slavery to Wealth: The Life of Scott Bond*.



await the energy and thrift of the husbandman. The south and especially Arkansas is the best place in the world for the poor man. Hence as the Negro is the poorest man in the world, it is the best place for him.<sup>59</sup>

He and his family undertook the large endeavor of draining the swamps, and he and his sons invested in better equipment to drain the vast swamplands he purchased efficiently and effectively. To drain these swamplands quickly and with less physical labor, he purchased a stump remover in 1915 that pulled the stumps out of the dense vegetation with less man power.<sup>60</sup> Because of his prominence in the farming society that dominated eastern Arkansas, Bond often worked with white men. During one year Bond bought land that had flooded at an auction. Before even seeing the land himself, a white man, Captain Stearns, made a deal with Bond to cut timber from his cane brake and pay Bond. He wrote: "He offered me \$1.00 per 1,000 feet stumpage. I agreed to this. He put three men in the brake while the overflow was on when the timber was cut and floated out, and the water had fallen, Capt. Stearns paid me \$225 for the stumpage. I had as yet never seen the land."<sup>61</sup> He also found the swamps profitable in very unorthodox ways. Bond wanted to buy swamplands to drain and turn into chicken coops. After viewing the swamps filled with bull frogs, however, he made a pragmatic business decision. He wrote:

While clearing a piece of land on one of my farms last spring I found a low place some 15 acres in extent, the greater part of it covered with water. I could easily have drained it into a nearby bayou or slough, but thought I would try another way to make it profitable. I had often read and heard of bull frogs as a delight for the table, so I came to the conclusion to investigate this line of activity. It was not long before I found out that frogs were more valuable than

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<sup>59</sup> Scott Bond, *From Slavery to Wealth: The Life of Scott Bond*, 87.

<sup>60</sup> Scott Bond, *From Slavery to Wealth: The Life of Scott Bond*, xvii.

<sup>61</sup> Scott Bond, *From Slavery to Wealth: The Life of Scott Bond*, 82.

chickens and cost infinitely less to feed. Without going into detail I have the frog industry under way and unless I am very much mistaken I shall make it return a handsome profit.<sup>62</sup>

In addition to harvesting frogs from eastern Arkansas swamps, Bond also cut cypress timber from the swamps and bought a sawmill to process the lumber himself.<sup>63</sup> He bought tracts of swamplands from a white man, and said of the land “That there was over 2,000,000 feet of the finest cypress I ever saw in that brake.”<sup>64</sup> Similarly, a free African-American in Louisiana, Andrew Durnford, created a plantation and amassed wealth after buying marginal swampland. He struggled to keep his sugarcane from flooding, and constantly had his slaves building ditches, constructing levees, and draining swamps to continue planting more sugar.<sup>65</sup>

Swamps were a major obstacle during the time of early American settlement, yet slaves and free African-Americans felt more at ease with working and living near the swamps. They became proficient at draining the swamps and maneuvering through them, which in turn had a huge impact on their economic status and personal lives as slaves, which in turn led to political gain during Reconstruction. The swamps also offered major economic gain for some African-Americans during the beginning of the early twentieth century, since the skills needed for utilizing and exploiting the swamps during slavery carried through into the creation of the New South. Slaves created and perpetuated an affinity and comfort with the swamps that in turn enabled them to create economic and political advantages during slavery and continued after the Civil War. Even during slavery, slaves were able to use the swamps to better their everyday lives, which placed

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<sup>62</sup> Scott Bond, *From Slavery to Wealth: The Life of Scott Bond*, 220.

<sup>63</sup> Scott Bond, *From Slavery to Wealth: The Life of Scott Bond*, 123-4.

<sup>64</sup> Scott Bond, *From Slavery to Wealth: The Life of Scott Bond*, 117.

<sup>65</sup> David Whitten, *Andrew Durnford: A Black Sugar Planter in Antebellum Louisiana* (Natchitoches, LA: Northwestern State University Press, 1981), 22.

these actions on in the middle of the spectrum of agency, because they did not outright become complacent with their status, yet did not rebel, either. The swamps offered a space to exert some control and agency, and culminated with the actions of free blacks, such as Scott Bond, after the Civil War.

## CONCLUSION

A lonelier spot, or one more disagreeable than the centre of the “Big Cane Brake,” it would be difficult to conceive; yet to me it was a paradise, in comparison with any other place... I labored hard, and oft-times was weary and fatigued, yet I could lie down at night in peace, and arise in the morning without fear.<sup>1</sup>

Summarizing the sentiments of many fugitive and runaway slaves, Solomon Northup remarked in his autobiography about the peace he found in the swamps. By finding a place outside of the strict plantation landscapes, Northup could achieve a sense of peace and security not offered in any other part of the environment in the quiet, dark, and fragrant swamps of Louisiana. Calling these watery spaces a “paradise” sheds light on how the enslaved viewed the cultivated fields, where they toiled endlessly tending to cotton, sugar, and other crops, year round. Gleaning for Northup’s opinions on the wild, untamed, and peaceful swamps, perhaps the swamps offered a sense of peace and tranquility because they were so far removed, physically and figuratively, from the dry and highly-organized sugar and cotton fields in which many slaves spent their whole lives, without ever experiencing the vast part of the south that offered a diversity of stimulation for the senses, which is why ex-slaves described the fragrances, animals, and plants of the swamps.

The swamps played a crucial role in the everyday lives on the slaves in Arkansas and Louisiana, especially in regard to religious, economic, and everyday life for the enslaved. The literature left by European and other white settlers in the South give no indication that members of the white community felt any sense of peace or belonging in

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<sup>1</sup> Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, 155.

the swamps. For modern readers comparing the accounts and perceptions of the swamps and sloughs, it almost seems inconceivable that the enslaved and white members of society were describing the same tracts of land. Indeed, the planters and visitors to Arkansas and Louisiana felt physically repulsed by the swamps, and only focused on the dangerous creatures, such as snakes, alligators, insects, and disease. They never indicated a sense of peace, tranquility, of freedom in this environment, perhaps suggesting the tenuous control over this ubiquitous portion of the southern landscape that gave them anxiety and uneasiness, especially if they noted the familiarity and ease with which the enslaved and free black populations felt with the same part of the environment.

During slavery, swamps became a space within the plantation boundaries that slaves utilized and exploited to better their everyday lives, practice religion in creative ways, and even create a degree of economic security. For some slaves, the swamps were the perfect spaces far enough away from planter control and oversight where they could temporarily get away from daunting agricultural tasks. For others, who needed to flee completely from the restrictions of life in bondage, the swamps were the perfect location to live and hide for longer periods of time, and eventually meander to the North and freedom. Slaves recognized the mobility presented by swamps and bayous, and were cognizant that freedom was tangible if the swamps and bayous were used. For the many slaves in Arkansas and Louisiana who did not run away, however, the swamps gave them a space to carve out individual and communal space to practice religion, gather herbs and plants, hunt, fish, and temporarily escape the issues presented with slavery.

Free black communities before the Civil War congregated in Arkansas near swamp, spaces that European and European Americans dismissed and deemed dangerous.

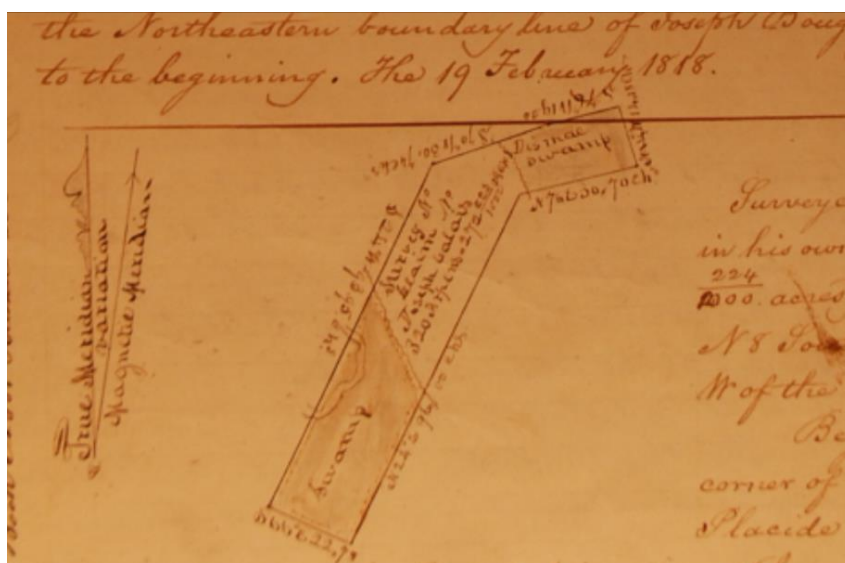
For these communities and individuals, however, the swamps gave them a place to call their own and a source of income and livelihood, since they could fish, hunt, trade and sell various items collected in the swamps. Even black planters, such as Abraham Miller from Arkansas and Andrew Durnford from Louisiana recognized the intrinsic value and possibilities found in the rich soil below swamps, and knew how to exploit and use the swamplands for their own economic advancement.

Overtime, the swamps became utilized to a greater extent, particularly after the Civil War, during which time free African-Americans recognized the monetary value and potential of swamps. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Scott Bond, who dedicated his life as an African-American planter, businessman, and entrepreneur in the Arkansas, and wrote about the value and success brimming in the soil beneath the vast swamps in eastern Arkansas. As a slave child growing up in the rural Delta, Bond cultivated an intimacy with the landscape of the bayous, swamps, and sloughs that are so omnipresent in the Delta. Bond learned early on that the land gave economic opportunity and freedom if treated correctly, and believed wholeheartedly that African-Americans were more adept at bringing these lands to full fruition because of the years they spent cultivating and working with the land as slaves. Bond, and other freed blacks in Arkansas and Louisiana, represent the transformation and progression of viewing the swamps as important places on the plantation to places of tangible opportunity. For some of these African Americans, the swamps became a physical manifestation of freedom and opportunity. Their stories, along with the stories of the slaves, highlight the progression of slaves who viewed these spaces as “swamps” to those who changed their lives and began to “swamp.”

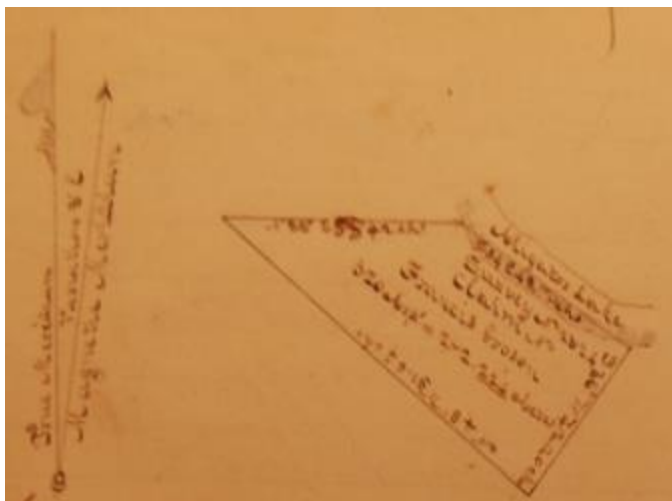
## APPENDIX OF IMAGES



**FIGURE 1:** A typical plat from the Spanish Land Grant surveys conducted in 1805 until the mid-nineteenth century. This plat shows the White River, overflowed bottoms, and swamp.



**FIGURE 2:** An elaborate plat showing an oxbow bayou, a swamp, and a “dismal swamp.”



**FIGURE 3:** A Spanish Land Grant plat with the label “alligator lake” for an estuary near the Arkansas Post.

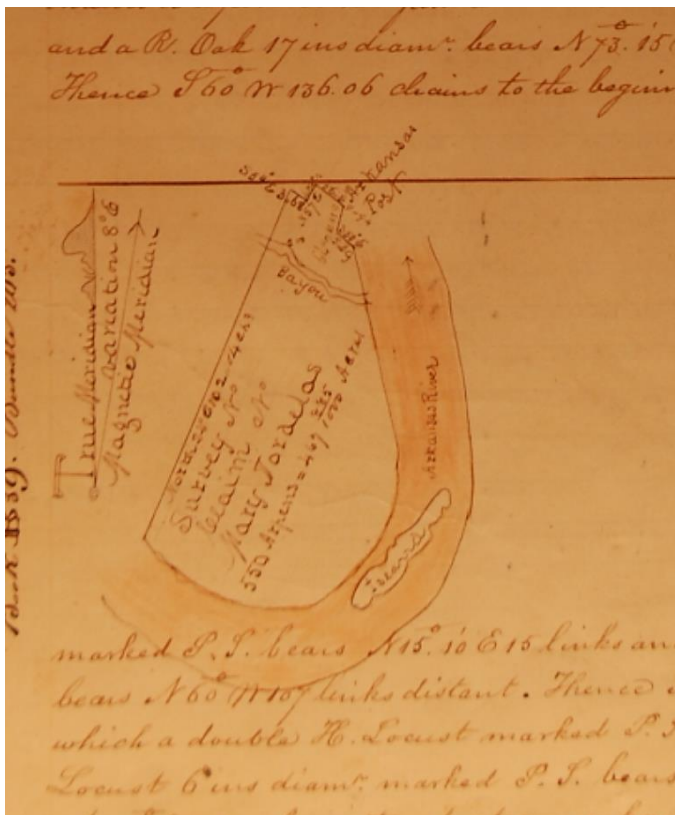


**FIGURE 4:** A Spanish Land Grant labeling the Mississippi River and a bayou parallel to the river.





**FIGURE 5:** A more elaborate grant containing the names of the property owners and labeling of a “cypress” swamp.



**FIGURE 6:** Spanish Land Grant plat showing the Arkansas Post and its relation to the Mississippi River.

All images available from “Spanish Land Grants.” *Historical Documents, Maps and More*. Arkansas Commissioner of State Lands. [www.COSL.org](http://www.COSL.org)

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