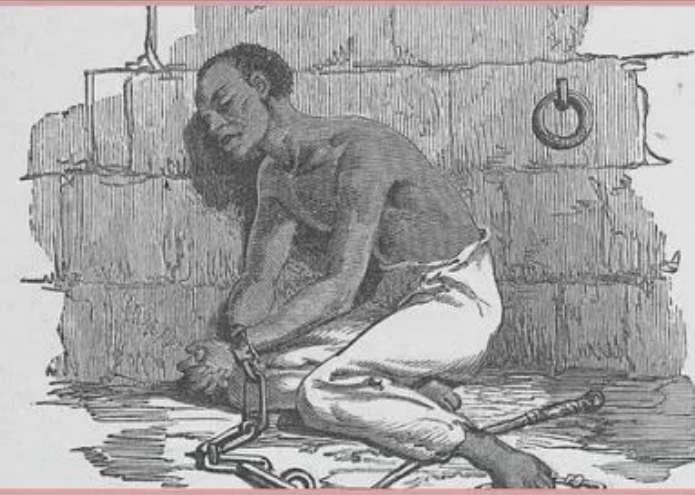


Past and Present: Marronage in the Great Dismal Swamp and Suriname

By Max Zinman

Introduction: The Story of Moses Grandy

Narrative of the Life of Moses Grandy :



Formerly a Slave in the
United States of America

Moses Grandy

Moses Grandy (1786 - 1843)

Moses Grandy was an enslaved person in North Carolina during the early years of the United States who eventually bought his freedom.¹ Both during and after his enslavement, Moses worked and sometimes lived in the Great Dismal Swamp, a dense swampland that was located in northern North Carolina and southern Virginia.² Grandy secured his freedom in 1827 with financial help from one Edward Minor, and went on to publish a firsthand account of the realities of enslavement in 1843.³ His was quite possibly the first widely circulated narrative of a formerly enslaved person.

Moses' Petit Marronage

One of the periods during which Moses lived in the Dismal was after purchasing his freedom from one of his enslavers, he found out the enslaver had secretly used him as collateral for a loan, nullifying the deal.⁵ In response, Moses escaped from his enslaver's plantation into the Great Dismal Swamp, and marooned himself there for an unknown period of time until his enslaver agreed to honor the deal.⁶ Though this too turned out to be a lie, the fact remains that Moses only left the swamp when he chose to; his enslaver was unable to successfully pursue him in the Dismal.⁷ After later obtaining his freedom, Moses would again maroon himself Dismal for around 3 years while he paid off his debt to Minor, his benefactor, though this was once again his choice; he was paying off a debt at this point, no longer enslaved.⁸

One of Many

The Great Dismal Swamp was a site of petit marronage for a great number of enslaved people in the 1700s and 1800s. Its terrain and density of trees made it highly unsuitable for colonial forces to traverse or transport to cross, and even the construction of the Dismal Swamp Canal beginning in 1794, which made the swamp more traversable by boat, it still remained an invaluable refuge for escaped enslaved people; after all, Moses' first epoch of marronage was sometime after 1809, well into the canal's construction.⁹ Thanks to the narrative that Moses published, he serves as a spectacular historical example of how marronage was appealing to enslaved people, how they went about it, and does so from an enslaved person's voice; not the records of a colonial government or company overseer.

Defiance of Commodification

Marronage was a way to escape not only the brutalities of enslavement but the its system of commodification as a whole. Moses turned to marronage after twice paying for his freedom and not receiving it; he went to the Dismal to get away from that system. He determined that his “soul value,” the intrinsic, unquantifiable value he felt for himself, was valuable enough to pay for twice; he then determined that it seemed like the ability to live his own life was worth more than any price he could pay his enslavers, and seized his soul value for himself by escaping to the Great Dismal Swamp. In this way too, Moses Grandy is an illuminating example of the realities and crossroads of enslavement and marronage.

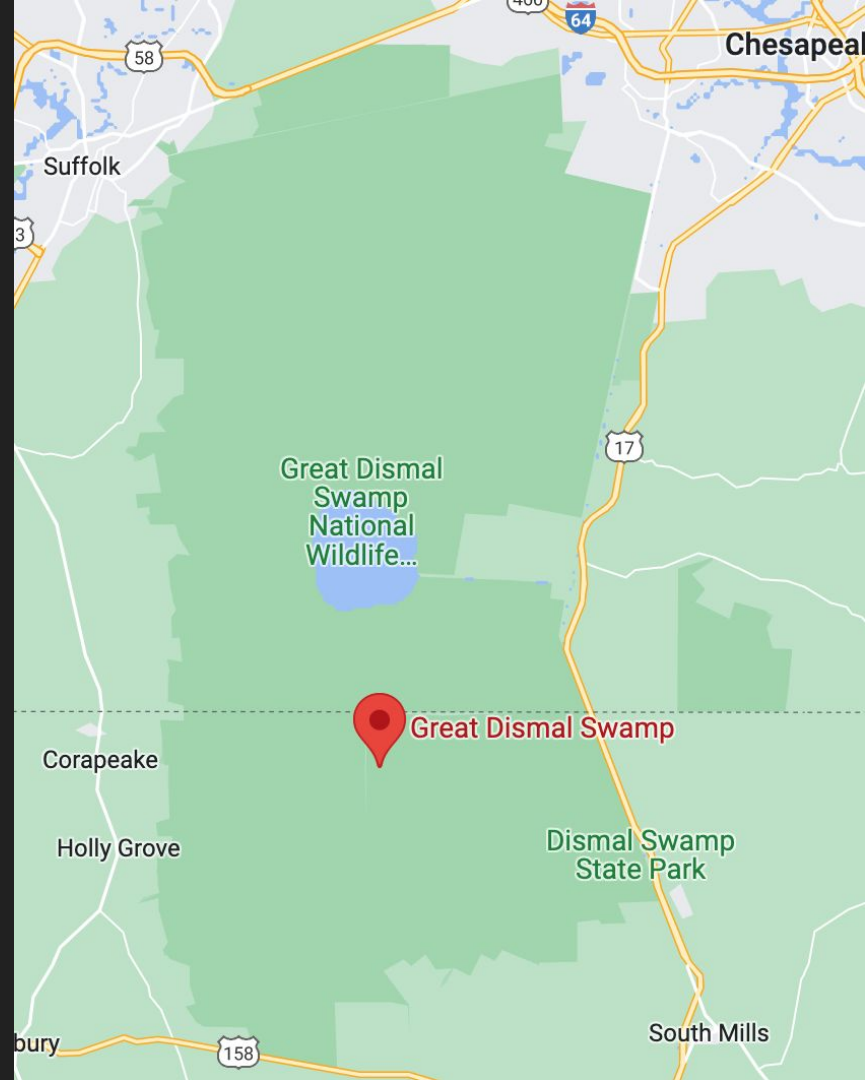
To the Present Day

In the past, maroons were people like Moses Grandy: people who escaped enslavement and formed lives or even whole communities in harsher environments than colonial forces could easily police, building lives and societies that stood in direct opposition to the systems of commodification they had escaped from. In the modern day, despite how globalized our world has become, there are still some communities of maroons living apart from western capitalist society, particularly in Suriname, where they have been receiving an increasing amount of official recognition in recent years. This project will explore how the practice of marronage has changed from the time of Moses Grandy in the years of the early United States to the relationship that is currently developing between maroons and the Surinamese government.

Marronage in the Past: Great Dismal Swamp

The Great Dismal Swamp

The Great Dismal Swamp is, as the name suggests, a very large swamp that straddles the state border between Virginia and North Carolina. Lake Drummond is located roughly in the center of the swamp's marshy terrain, and today the Dismal is a wildlife preserve and protected land. When construction began on the Dismal Swamp Canal and other projects to open up the swamp, no barriers were in place to protect the swampland — that there still remains no significant transportation route through the swamp is a testament to how hostile its terrain is to imperial forms of construction.



Made For Marronage

When finding a place to live away from enslavers and imperial authorities, maroons opted for hard to reach locations in the wilderness. The flooded, densely wooded, swampy terrain of the Dismal was perhaps ideal for maroons to hide in. Large groups of soldiers couldn't traverse it easily, no land transport could get through, and it took a decades-long construction project to establish a workable route for boats through the swamp. For all intents and purposes, the Dismal was impenetrable to the imperial system. Moses Grandy was one of a great many maroons who used the swamp as a refuge.



What Moses Grandy Escaped From: American Slavery

Life for enslaved people in the United States was the height of dehumanization. The system of enslavement commodified enslaved people from birth to death and even beyond, incorporating everything from the more commonly understood tragedies of lifelong unpaid labor, ruthless physical abuse (including rape), and hereditary enslavement status, to the lesser known tragedies of forced reproduction, life insurance, and corpse trade in the pursuit of enslavers' enrichment from their slaves.¹⁰ Slaves were essentially investments for enslavers, and they would do anything imaginable to maximize their returns.¹¹ The life Moses Grandy and so many other enslaved people sought to escape was truly horrific; the daily discomforts of life in the Dismal could not compare to the physical and psychological torture enslavement is understood to have been from the records we have. It could have only been worse to *actually* live through it.

Contemporary Events in the Great Dismal Swamp

In the early 1800s, when Moses first marooned himself in the Great Dismal Swamp, it had already served as a refuge for refugees of enslavement for many years. More recent was the establishment of corporations trying to extract value from the Dismal in the form of shingles and agriculture.¹² The drama and chaos of these companies' operations is well documented in Nevius' *City of Refuge*, but the important points are the following. These companies, unsurprisingly, used enslaved laborers for all the manual labor, establishing slave camps around the periphery of the swamp.¹³ However, because of the previously mentioned obstacles posed to incursion by the Dismal, it was functionally impossible for these companies to exercise the same degree of control as plantation enslavers could, so enslaved people around the Dismal possessed a comparatively high degree of freedom, often being entrusted with boating across the swamp unmonitored to do their labor or carry messages.¹⁴ Sometimes enslaved people were sent to work in the Swamp from other enslavers; Moses Grandy was, prior to his marronage, one such case.

What Moses Grandy Escaped to: Informal Economies of Maroons

There was not infrequent contact made between the slave camps around the swamp and the maroons living within it, and their interactions operated based on an exchange economy.¹⁵ Maroons might trade food they'd grown in the Dismal for supplies that the enslaved people in the camps had — a needs based economy, not one of commodification. The companies, such as the Dismal Swamp Company, certainly knew about the maroons and their contact with the laborer camps, but the logistical difficulties and management dysfunctions were so severe that despite white American society viewing marronage as a somewhat existential threat to their enslavement economy, these companies were somewhat forced to tolerate the maroons because they were often unable to get supplies to the enslaved laborers on their own.¹⁶

Commodification and Market Values

During the time he was enslaved, Moses purchased his freedom at least two different enslavers at the price of \$600 (roughly worth \$14700 in 2023), and was twice betrayed after he paid the money and was given to a different enslaver.¹⁷ Clearly, enslaved people were highly valuable “assets” for enslavers. In addition to the market values Moses was having to compete with buy his freedom, enslaved people could “hire their own time” out, but had to pay high rates to their enslavers to do so. Moses was hired out by his first enslavers, the Grandys, to a man named Furley for around \$90 (~\$2200 today) per year for his labor.¹⁸ Furley in turn allowed Moses to hire out his own time, but charged Moses \$30 (~\$730) per year just for the ability to do so, on top of additionally having Moses cover the costs Furley incurred by hiring him from the Grandys; with those costs, Moses could not have been making very much hiring himself out¹⁹. Both the Grandys and Furley tried to squeeze every last ounce of profit out of Moses, emblematic of how all enslaved people were treated. It is only because Moses eventually got his freedom that we do not have to discuss how much an enslaver made from an insurance policy when Moses died, or how much his corpse was sold for.

Actualization and Soul Values

A key concept of Berry's writing is that of soul value, an intrinsic and individually determined value that every person, especially enslaved people possess that defies monetary valuation. Many acts of resistance by enslaved people can be seen as the expression or preservation of their soul values. For Moses, the comparison is quite simple. After Moses paid the first \$600 for his freedom and was betrayed, he decided his soul value was worth more than that and was willing to pay it again. After the second betrayal, Moses determined that his soul value was worth more than any money he seemed able to pay or any risks incurred by living in the Dismal, so he escaped from his second enslaver and marooned himself, taking part in the informal barter economy that existed between enslaved laborers and maroons. The act of choosing a new way to live his life and leave behind the system of enslavement, even though his first time doing so was temporary, was a strong expression of his Moses' soul value exceeding and defying any kind of valuation American enslavers could assign his body or labor. In short, marronage allowed Moses to live for his soul value instead of his market value.

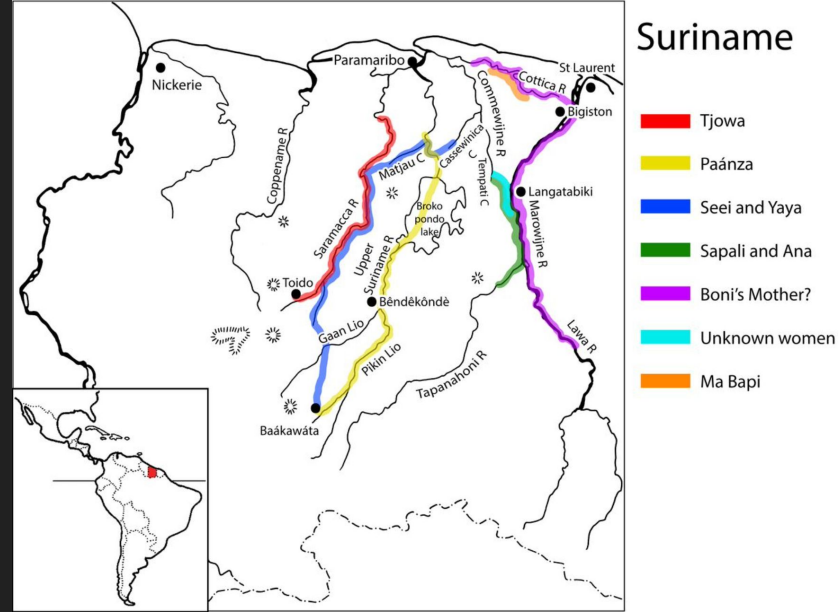
Salvation of Marronage

It is no great revelation that enslavement in the United States and the rest of the Americas was one of the most horrific, deplorable practices throughout history, and that escape was ever on the minds of the enslaved. Marronage in places like the Great Dismal Swamp offered a physical, psychological, and spiritual escape from that existence, whether permanent or temporary. However, the study of marronage does something in a similar vein. It shifts the focus away from only discussing the tragedies of slavery and the deplorable actions of enslavers, and gives agency and life to the stories of the enslaved. Marronage let enslaved people escape from commodification and follow their soul values, and its study keeps those soul values alive rather than suppressing them beneath stories of commodification; the horrors and the heroes are equally worthy of historical recognition.

Marronage in the Present: Suriname

Origins of Surinamese Maroons

Maroons in Suriname are the descendents of enslaved Africans who were taken to the colony at least as early as 1650, first by the British and then, for a much longer period starting in 1667, by the Dutch.²⁰ On the right is a map of routes used by early maroon women, most of them starting roughly out of Paramaribo, the only major port in the colony of Suriname. Scholarship is more scarce regarding slavery in Suriname compared to the United States, but it's reasonable to infer the conditions in Suriname were at least as bad as in they were for Moses Grandy and his contemporaries.



Shockingly Early Recognition

In the 1760s, after over fifty years of guerilla fighting against colonial Dutch forces in Suriname, a peace treaty was signed between the maroons and the Dutch that included formal recognition of the maroons' independence, and allowed them to live in large portions of Suriname's interior, which is where modern Surinamese maroons still live today.²¹ This treaty was signed a full century before slavery was abolished in Suriname in 1863, giving the maroons plenty of time to grow into some of the most prosperous and well established maroon communities in the Americas.

²² If the Great Dismal Swamp was the quintessential example of petit marronage, then Suriname is second only to Haiti in how it exemplifies the long term viability of grand marronage and the establishment of entire maroon societies.

Modern Maroons

Today maroons in Suriname are divided among six groups: the Saamaka and Ndjuka (~50000 people each); the Matawai, Paamaka, and Aluku (6000 people each); and the Kwinti (500 people).²³ All together that makes well over 100,000 maroons living in the densely forested interior of modern Suriname, descendents of the original maroons who escaped there over three centuries ago. They still use a barter system, the agricultural practices of their ancestors, and have their own rich cultures, distinct for each of the six groups. The maroons are still formally recognized by the modern government of Suriname, though that is not to say that there aren't still problems to be overcome.

Modern Maroon Society

Modern Surinamese maroons are generally led by one village master, while other elders called “kapiteins” are responsible for memorizing the entirety of the village’s history, and in the case of the Saamaka village Dan often represent the prominent families in the village.²⁴ This history is passed down through generations, and constitutes the core of the maroons’ oral history tradition.²⁵ Decisions are made in village councils led by the village master and the kapiteins, and there is a secretary called a basja who keeps the minutes of the council meetings, in their head rather than on paper, in keeping with their oral tradition.²⁶ Furthermore, most Surinamese maroon communities are matrilineal, and the village masters can be men or women.²⁷ Each of the maroons has their own language; one of the larger groups, the Saamaka, speaks a creole dialect that is a hybrid of Dutch and English, reflecting the colonial history of Suriname, though they also sometimes use the country’s official Dutch language.²⁸

Maroon Tourism

A recent development for modern maroons is the industry of eco-tourism, starting roughly 30 years ago. The communities either build tourism lodges of their own or lease the land so that a different group can run it.²⁹ In many cases tourism can be destructive or endanger a people's culture, and the maroons are very conscious of this. But they have proven very able to manage tourism on their own terms, and the funds it brings in support health care, elderly care, and kindergarten for children.³⁰ The maroons make sure the tourism stays small scale and sustainable; visitors are almost always accompanied by a guide, and they say that as long as visitors don't break the rules of the village then their way of life will not be impacted negatively.³¹



“In the beginning, when tourism came, there was one answer for it, it was yes. And we still say yes.”³¹

-Captain Maloni, Dan maroon village

Government Recognition

Starting with the Dutch treaty centuries ago, maroons in Suriname have benefitted from much greater formal recognition by outside nations than most those elsewhere in the hemisphere, and that trend has continued to this day.

Recognition is still an ongoing process, however, and there have been fights for land rights throughout the country's history. Progress is nonetheless being made, however, and for the past several decades the government has issued ten-year forestry permits to maroon and indigenous communities alike, allowing them to establish community forests in the dense Surinamese jungles.³² These forests, like the eco-tourism, allow the communities to have a higher degree of economic autonomy on their own terms.³³ The permits stop short of granting full land rights, though, so there is still work being done to clear that last hurdle on this issue.

New Times, Same Struggles

Following Suriname's independence in 1975, a military man named Desi Bouterse came into power in Suriname, and stayed in that position at least into the late 1980s.³⁴ One of Bouterse's top personnel was a maroon named Ronnie Brunswijk, who was fired in 1986.³⁵ Brunswijk took some munitions other resources back to his village of Mungo-tapu, and in response Bouterse sent the full might of his military to destroy the village, and went on to wage a full-scale war against Surinamese maroons until 1992.³⁶ The war destroyed dozens of maroon villages and left survivors to rebuild with little to no aid, saddled with poverty, destruction, and diseases. Evidently, conditions improved between the 1990s and the forestry and eco-tourism policies of the 2010s and 2020s, but the fact remains that maroon communities are always vulnerable to the governments they live alongside. The 1986 war was the boiling over of already existing tensions between the Surinamese state and the maroons, and it is certainly possible for such a thing to happen again under the wrong conditions.³⁷

Conclusions: Past vs. Present

Cultural Role Change?

Maroon communities still exist in Suriname today as distinct and rich communities with their own cultures. The institutions of slavery that led to the establishment of these maroon communities no longer exist, so they are not quite the same beacons for soul values that they were during the time of Moses Grandy and the Great Dismal Swamp's heyday. Nevertheless, maroon communities are still cherish their self determination and independence from modern states, and even as they "modernize" through the more formal establishment of tourism, they retain the historic spirit of marronage as a separation from commodification by keeping the mechanisms of tourism tightly operating on the maroons' terms.

Modern Viability of Maroon Communities

Maroon communities are certainly viable today. Though they may be relatively few and far between, that is the fault of the past efforts to root them out, not present unfitness; absent the war of the 1980s, maroons in Suriname would be doing just as well for themselves as any other communities. And looking at the progress that has been made since then, they can clearly adapt to changing times and realities, recovering surprisingly well from the horrors of Bouterse's war. That is not to say things are perfect; they are not. There is still work to be done. But that there are still so many maroon people willing and ready to do that work is a testament to the resilience and independence of marrons and marronage as a whole.

Opposing Oppression

One thing that has remained the same from Moses Grandy to Ronnie Bunswijk is marronage serving as a symbol of opposition to oppression. Marronage began as an act of defiance against enslavement and colonial commodification, and the communities in Suriname still existing today are clearly still proudly defiant against autocratic governments seeking to expand or consolidate their power. Bouterse was not an enslaver, but his war had all the spiteful anger of colonial wars against maroons from Virginia to Jamaica to Brazil.

Further Questions

Are there any other modern maroons?

It's certainly not impossible, but it is unlikely. Suriname was a unique case where the colonial forces proved unable to uproot maroon communities, and so they were formally recognized and left to their own lives for several centuries. Practically everywhere else in the Americas, military efforts to destroy maroon spaces were successful; the US almost certainly has no modern maroons with how thorough the expansion of its infrastructure and institutions has been over the course of its history. The only place I could imagine more maroons existing undetected in the Americas is deeper into the jungles of the region around Suriname and the Amazon rainforest, since that is where they would be able to live without the rest of the world knowing. And even if this is the case, knowing that as recently as the 1980s wars were waged to destroy maroon peoples, would it be for the better to uncover these hidden communities?

What can we learn from maroon communities' living practices?

The most important thing we can learn is that modern industrial capitalism is not the only way to live. The Surinamese maroons use the same informal economies and sustainable living practices employed by Moses Grandy and the other maroons of the Great Dismal Swamp back in the 1800s. A common argument to major reforms to modern systems is that there are no other possibilities. The long-term success and resilience of Surinamese maroons is ironclad evidence that there are other ways to live, and to thrive.

Final Thoughts

The study of marronage is important both because it gives voice and agency to those deprived of both and more in the past, and gives different perspectives for how to navigate the present. I don't know if I'd rather live in a maroon community than a dense urban city; I'm used to one, and conditioned against many aspects of the other such as being in the wilderness — even suburbs make me anxious. But many aspects of maroon life, such as a deemphazation of wealth and profit in favor of needs-based community structures that seek to take care of everyone living within them is certainly a model worth pursuing in modern societies. Learning about the past is always valuable, but we should never underestimate the power of alternatives that life alongside us in the present.

Documentation

Footnotes

- 1: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 68.
- 2: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 67.
- 3: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 68.
- 4: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 66.
- 5: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 67.
- 6: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 67.
- 7: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 67.
- 8: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 68.
- 9: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 55, 67.
- 10: Berry, *The Price For Their Pound of Flesh*.
- 11: Berry, *The Price For Their Pound of Flesh*, p. 19.
- 12: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 25 - 28.
- 13: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 25 - 26.
- 14: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 54 - 55.
- 15: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 58, 60, 68.
- 16: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 59 - 60.
- 17: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 67.
- 18: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 67.
- 19: Nevius, *City of Refuge*, p. 67.
- 20: Montenegro, "Saamaka Maroon Communities."
- 21: Franszoon, "Suriname Maroon Crisis."
- 22: Montenegro, "Saamaka Maroon Communities."
- 23: Montenegro, "Saamaka Maroon Communities."
- 24: Plater, "Captains of the Rainforest."
- 25: Plater, "Captains of the Rainforest."
- 26: Plater, "Captains of the Rainforest."
- 27: Plater, "Captains of the Rainforest."
- 28: Plater, "Captains of the Rainforest."
- 29: Kusters, "The Future of Community Forests in Suriname."
- 30: Kusters, "The Future of Community Forests in Suriname."
- 31: Kusters, "The Future of Community Forests in Suriname."
- 32: Kusters, "The Future of Community Forests in Suriname."
- 33: Kusters, "The Future of Community Forests in Suriname."
- 34: Franszoon, "Suriname Maroon Crisis."
- 35: Franszoon, "Suriname Maroon Crisis."
- 36: Franszoon, "Suriname Maroon Crisis."
- 37: Franszoon, "Suriname Maroon Crisis."

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Inflation calculations performed using: <https://www.officialdata.org/us/inflation/1809?amount=30>

Image Sources

Slide 3 [Moses Grandy (1786 - 1843)]:

<https://www.barnesandnoble.com/w/narrative-of-the-life-of-moses-grandy-joe-henry-mitchell/1134493477>

Slide 9 [The Great Dismal Swamp]:

<https://www.google.com/maps/place/Great+Dismal+Swamp/@36.5486587,-76.666954,10.06z/data=!4m6!3m5!1s0x89b0000f4cc112f7:0x90085ae45d1165ca!8m2!3d36.5334855!4d-76.4621685!16zL20vMDRqNHRr>

Slide 10 [Made for Marronage]:

<https://tryl2012.blogspot.com/2016/09/the-great-dismal-swamp-was-once.html>

Slide 18 [Origins of Surinamese Maroons]: <https://www.researchsquare.com/article/rs-2266777/v1>

Slide 22 [Maroon Tourism]:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/06/12/travel/getting-to-the-heart-of-suriname.html>