

the Inside Story

Ohio's Great Black Swamp

The Great Black Swamp was a vast wetland that dominated the Lake Erie lowland from northwest Ohio into northeastern Indiana. The system of marshy, woody habitat was created by Ice Age glacial advances and retreats. Although Native Americans set up villages on the periphery of the swamp, they ventured only occasionally across its sandy ridges. The swamp was a barrier to most people for centuries, and was studied by almost no one until it was drained in the late 19th century.

In June of 1812, U.S. troops led by General William Hull crossed the swamp in 20 days. It took them eight days to get from Urbana to Fort McArthur, near Kenton. They bogged down 16 miles north of Fort McArthur, erected Fort Necessity, then advanced 14 miles to build Fort Findlay. They made it to the Maumee River on June 30.

The U.S. government took years to build the Maumee-Western Reserve Road, now State Route 20, through the swamp. The job, begun in 1808, was finished in 1820. By 1835, the road had become an impassable quagmire, and people were traveling along the roadway's side ditches instead. Short-lived "corduroy" roads were made from logs hewn from the swamp's massive trees. People who ran inns along the way often made more money pulling people from the mud than for hotel services. Some inn owners were accused of secretly watering holes to make sure guests got stuck and stayed longer.

The first settlers to live under the swamp's vast tree canopy had to combat horseflies, malaria-bearing mosquitoes and cholera. They routinely wore long gloves and veils and burned smudge pots that they carried with them like small smoke screens when tending livestock. They even placed them next to their beds at night.

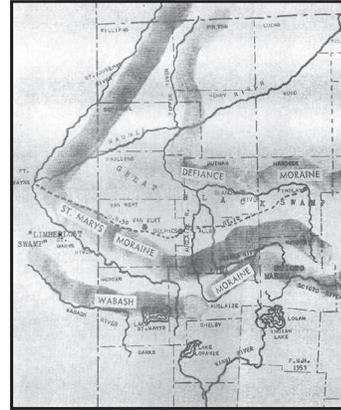
Plank roads were laid in the 1850s. These boardwalk highways worked well at first, but high water levels eventually carried away the planks. In the 1870s, native clay was used to make field tiles for drainage. The implementation of tile drainage was expensive but effective. By the 1900s, the Great Black Swamp was all but gone.

The land that remains is one of the richest agricultural regions in the nation, but draining the swamp destroyed a built-in, natural filter for Lake Erie. The swamp had cleaned mud from the Maumee River, Lake Erie's second-biggest tributary. Today, people are replanting field buffers of native trees and plants, and establishing wetlands and holding ponds, to try to restore some of the best of the Great Black Swamp.

Newspaper Activities:

Look through today's newspaper for news of countries in the world today whose people are suffering from illnesses such as cholera that could be treated if enough resources were available.

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The Great Black Swamp region (photograph courtesy of the Allen County Historical Society and The Lima News)

Words to Know:

- habitat
- cholera
- glacial
- implementation
- periphery
- tributary
- necessity
- buffer

For Discussion:

1. For centuries, no one lived in the Great Black Swamp. What do you suppose made people finally wish to live there?
2. The Great Black Swamp served as a sponge that collected debris and dirt flowing toward Lake Erie. Look at the rivers, streams and other waterways that flow through your community. What color is the water? Are their trees and native plants that protect or buffer the waterways from roads, sidewalks and fields? What can you do to help make waterways more beautiful and cleaner for the things that live there?



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