

Will Broussard- Author Bio



Will Broussard is a higher education administrator, professor, and essayist. He recently moved to Elizabeth City from *Acadiana* (a heavily Black creole and French-influenced region of south Louisiana). How is the graft taking? He's still flummoxed by the local grocer's lack of Abita and his cupboard is full of Tony Chachere's, Zatarain's, Tabasco, Mello Joy, and filé, y'all.

His essays, op-eds, and reflections on college writing, HBCU leadership, college athletics, and Louisiana politics have appeared in peer-reviewed journals, magazines, newspapers, and least-interestingly (but much more snarkily) on his Twitter feed (@DeadLecturer).

When not on the road raising money for ECSU (or in the classroom) you may see him at the YMCA, scouring Ollie's or Farm Fresh for organic/vegetarian fare and local wares, or sitting on the porch with a scotch, bourbon, beer, or a double maduro. Feel free to stop by. Bring your own cigar, please.

Sans Cartes: The Museum of the Albemarle

“Stop looking at the walls. Look out the window.” –actor/producer Karl Pilkington

It’s little thought of by most folks that the words “museum” and “muse” share the same Greek etymology. But the original museums (at least as we think of them, originating in 4th century BC Athens, and later in Alexandrian Egypt under Ptolemy I) weren’t designed to merely curate and catalog cultural, historical, anthropological, and artistic works and materials for the purposes of education, but also to inspire future generations. Of course, purists, semi-professional docents, and young, aspiring curmudgeons like me decry and lament the ways in which the museum experience has (d)evolved. The actual inspiration once derived from observing art and catalogued history and learning the stories of its tortured and passionate creators and explorers has been all-too-oft replaced by a mediated proof of purchase that said inspiration has occurred (e.g. [a selfie in front of said piece of art, or a Facebook Live video, Instagram check-in](#)). But as the contrarian epigraph notes, museums should be a window to the world we live in—a fresh motivation to recapture what was best about our past or to act boldly in the creation of a better future. The effect of a great museum experience is that its inspiration begins within its walls, and carries forward once you leave them.

By that measure, the [Museum of the Albemarle](#) (MoA) is an archetypal museum and one that should inspire not only its nearest neighbors in Elizabeth City, but folks across the Northeastern North Carolina region that shares its namesake (as well as travelers passing through). For starters, the museum is beautifully designed and optimally located on Water Street, near the downtown waterfront. While many museums contain works of art which belie their sometimes unimpressive exteriors, MoA’s gorgeous architecture is in itself stunning, with [its iconic Kelly green roof and large and numerous windows](#) through which visitors can observe the Pasquotank River waterfront between installations. MoA serves as the northeastern regional branch of the NC Museum of History, and is part of the NC Department of Cultural Resources, committed to preserving the state’s historic sites. For that reason, the exhibits, paintings, and installations tell the complex, troubling, and inspirationally resilient stories of colonists, indigenous peoples, and enslaved Africans and how the Albemarle region was shaped by their conflicts, and eventually, collaboration.

Each piece and exhibit tells a riveting story, including the enormous and exquisitely detailed mural near the entrance which dramatically captures King Charles II’s establishment of the region’s namesake, upon awarding a tract of land to George Monck, Duke of Albemarle, one of the Lord’s Proprietors. Next, one approaches the meticulously preserved 1904 [“North Carolina Shad Boat”](#) which is suspended delicately in mid-air above the entrance between the twin ascending staircases. Then, to the brilliant and intricately researched [“Our Story”](#) exhibit which features the 350 year-old story of how the Albemarle region has evolved from homeland to many indigenous tribes, through colonial times as an important port central to shipping cargo across the colonies, all the way through its modern contributions to the American military (and current home of America’s largest Coast Guard base) and North Carolina’s tourism economy. MoA also features seasonal installations, like its [“Tarheels in the Trenches”](#) exhibit which carefully documents the region’s contributions and service in WWI, through

pictures, well-preserved displays of uniforms and materiel, and the moving stories of those who paid the ultimate price to preserve America's freedoms.

The MoA is a remarkable attraction and is open 9 am-5 pm Monday-Saturday, with free admission to the public and a well-stocked gift shop for those hoping to commemorate the experience. It is also located near several restaurants, coffee houses, and shops for those hoping to may a day trip out of the excursion. Finally, the MoA often hosts receptions, festivals, and events as a beautiful backdrop to community gatherings, and is [available for rent to interested parties](#). Those from the region will be inspired freshly by their home, its people, and its rich history. Those passing through or visiting for a spell will be motivated to learn more about this region and its people, and perhaps lament waiting so long to come to know the region's story. Regardless, the MoA is a deep-dive into the Albemarle region's past, and for those who heed its lessons, a window into its future.

Sans Cartes: Dismal Swamp State Park

“If you hear the dogs, keep going. If you see the torches in the woods, keep going. If there's shouting after you, keep going. Don't ever stop. Keep going. If you want a taste of freedom, keep going.” —Harriet Tubman, architect of the Underground Railroad

As someone who is on a daily diet of antihistamines and grew up around (and swimming in) my share of bayous and swamps in spite of that fact, I was intrigued to find a swamp-centered state park in the region within a 20-minute drive from my new home. I was certain I'd hear no zydeco music on my approach nor see outstretched tables covered with freshly boiled shrimp and crawfish, as I've grown used to, and I admit that I've become biased to the natural beauty of Louisiana's swamps and bayous, sprawling moss-covered cypress, and pelicans and bullfrogs crouching on the tree stumps. However, I freely admit how awestruck I was by the natural beauty and history of the Dismal Swamp upon my first visit, and I'm convinced others will share my opinion.

Lovers of beautiful, lush natural scenery and an escape from the bustle of the daily grind, professional and amateur ecologists alike, and admirers of history's heroes that helped others escape the horrors of chattel slavery will be enthralled when visiting the [Dismal Swamp State Park](#) just off of Highway 17 in South Mills, North Carolina. As someone who has visited several state parks and museum sites along the [National Underground Railroad Network to Freedom](#), Dismal Swamp State Park is a unique combination in which the combined resources of the National Park Service and the North Carolina Division of Parks and Recreation provides an experience that is refreshing and enriching whether one seeks historical, ecological, and geographical knowledge, breathtaking natural trails full of local flora for walks, jogs, and boating, or both.

The initial reaction one will feel upon arrival is a sense of wonder at the impressive construction of the Dismal Swamp Canal, which must be crossed via drawbridge to enter the park. Long, narrow, and perfectly straight for as far as the eye can see, the still waters are likely to be occasionally interrupted by kayakers navigating its nearly 20-mile long path (and not just on the annual [“Paddle for the Border”](#)) or recreational boaters enjoying the pristine landscape. Extensive networks of trails criss-cross throughout the park, including paved jogging/biking trails adjacent to the park and a walking trail that is also guided by a wagon tour. Along this trail you'll see a remarkably preserved moonshine still discovered in the nearby woods. A much longer and beautifully constructed boarded trail extends into the swamp with informational kiosks that describe the native flora, fauna, and is perfect for inquisitive children and visitors curious about the region's native plants, trees, and animals (particularly those interested in birdwatching). Those interested in fishing can also take advantage of the opportunity to snag yellow perch and catfish in the quiet and peaceful surrounds.

After an exploratory walk along the gorgeous trails, one should spend an equal amount of time exploring the Dismal Swamp Visitors Center, which tells the story of how the [Dismal Swamp Canal](#), primarily constructed by slaves from 1793-1805 with backbreaking (and often fatal) consequences. The man-made canal, which connected the Elizabeth River to the Pasquotank River, opened up commerce between North Carolina and Virginia to shipping and is largely responsible for transforming the region's

economy. The canal also dramatically transformed the region's ecology, flooding land to the west making it more fertile for farmland while drying up the land to the east, and the visitors center explains (and in one particularly interesting exhibit, demonstrates) how the peaty soil maintains the swamp's conditions to this day. A separate room extensively documents the area's wildlife with a series of animals displayed by skilled taxidermists who have accurately captured their beauty, fearsomeness, and relative size.

Perhaps most interestingly related to the region's historical topography is its importance to the [Underground Railroad](#), a network of paths and trails engineered by abolitionist Harriet Tubman, and used by slaves to escape to the North and to freedom. Thought perhaps to be haunted by many nearby residents, and extremely difficult to navigate and track escaped slaves due to the thick brush, peaty soil, snakes, bears, and insects, between the turn of the 18th century and the beginning of the Civil War, "maroon" communities made their way to and through the Swamp on the way to freedom. Many freed and ex-slaves formed communities there, hiding from enslavers and trading with local businessmen or paying bribes to locals in order to secure their secrecy, and assisting other slaves passing through on their way north to freedom. The resilience of their inspirational story adds an element of wonder and admiration to the incredible peacefulness and serenity afforded by the surroundings.

Dismal Swamp State Park is open daily from 8am-6pm March-October and 8am-5pm November-February, and the Visitor Center is open weekdays from 8am-4:30pm and Saturday-Sunday 9:30am-4:30pm. All of the park's trails close 30 minutes before park closing time. I spent approximately three hours driving to and from nearby Elizabeth City to the park and exploring its walking trails, the visitor center, and watching a few boats sail through the canal, and can imagine spending even more time on my next trip, provided that they'll rent me a [pirogue](#) rather than a kayak.