

Gregory A. Waselkov, *A Conquering Spirit: Fort Mims and the Redstick War of 1813-1814* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2006). 414 pages + Bibliography and Index. ISBN # 978-0817355737. Hardcover \$45.00

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Gregory Waselkov argues that almost every generation witnesses an “event of such palpable violence and manifest injustice that the very mention rallies the nation to a common purpose, a bloody minded determination to destroy this new enemy” (p. 1). His text, *A Conquering Spirit: Fort Mims and the Redstick War of 1813-1814*, examines the assault on Fort Mims within the context of the Creek War of 1813-1814. Waselkov provides a timely and insightful analysis of America’s continued memory of the conflict and how that memory has evolved over time. The scope of the assault can be considered a “turning point in American history” and Waselkov treats it in this manner (p. 2). Waselkov examines the assault and its consequences in unprecedented scope. Using his background as an anthropologist and ethnohistorian, Waselkov successfully conducts field research at Fort Mims, examines genealogical lineages and explores letters concerning the fort in order to expand the depth and breadth of historical knowledge concerning the assault. The actual attack, the preceding events and their consequences are covered in a book that should be well regarded within the history of the Creek War and for the history of the American South.

Waselkov commences the book with a unique and personal history of the Tensaw Valley in which Fort Mims would be built. The first three chapters discuss many of the families within the valley in depth. Waselkov notes that his use of genealogy to track many of the major participants of the Creek War has been methodologically disdained by many historians and can be seen as “indiscriminate fact-gathering an inefficient and inadequate way to plumb the historical essence of a life or an epoch” (p. 35). However, Waselkov counters this criticism by arguing that in the case of the Tensaw, the “genealogy reveals the numerous ties that bound” members of the settlements and

the Creek Nation (p. 35). Consequently, Waslekov ignores historical norms and effectively constructs the family lineage and story concerning dozens of marquee members of the Creek War. Waselkov pays special importance to the Sehay, McGirth and Bailey lineages, all of whom saw family members fight on opposite sides in the conflict. Through this unique method, it becomes apparent that this war, like the American Civil War fifty years later, divided families, neighbors and friends.

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The actual conflict of the Creek War began as an inter-tribal feud between Creek factions. Historians and anthropologists have labeled the two sides differently, and Waselkov directly confronts this problem. He discusses the historically used terms of pro and anti-American factions, the use of economic inequality or the even simpler use of Lower Creeks consisting of pro-Americans and the Upper Creeks constituting the Redstick nativists. In conclusion, none of the usual categories are completely satisfactory for explaining inter-tribal divisions. For example, Waselkov points to William Weatherford's decision to join the Redsticks. Weatherford was a Creek plantation owner who had much more in common economically with the pro-American faction of the Creek Nation. But "Weatherford's lifelong adherence to traditionalist beliefs suggests the [Redsticks] nativist religious doctrine may indeed have attracted him" despite his economic position (pg. 94). Waselkov's methodology may not be innovative, but his utilization of genealogy and personal letters provides a unique insight into many Creeks and their decision making process. Waselkov, through his research, has brought a study of a heretofore macro and generalized decision making process to a more personal, micro level.

The buildup to the Creek War included fighting within and outside of the Creek Nation "in the late summer and early spring of 1813 [and had] neighboring populations [grow] increasingly concerned about the prospects of a broader war between the Redsticks and the United States" (p. 96). The economic division within the Creek Nation widened since the end of the American Revolution, and Waselkov notes that the "economic status of most Creeks fell from comfortable affluence to

poverty and indebtedness, with little prospect for betterment” (p. 75). Instead of focusing on the economic conflict, as Claudio Saunt so eloquently does in *A New Order of Things*, Waselkov incorporates the economic issues that occurred within Creek society into a more expansive explanation of the conflict. Waselkov does not simply tie himself to a purely economic dissection of the coming crisis. This in turn allows Waselkov to examine and explain why some Creeks in the Tensaw, like Weatherford, would choose the Redsticks instead of simply aligning themselves with their economic brethren.

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While the actual attack on Fort Mims has been recounted in almost every book or article detailing the Creek War or even the War of 1812, Waselkov’s account markedly improves on many points. The buildup to the attack includes the personal accounts of numerous soldiers, including militiaman and half Creek Dixon Bailey, and settlers living near the fort. Included within these reports are complaints of supply problems, the construction and maintenance of the fort as well as other forts in the surrounding area, and troop movements and strategies to confront the Redsticks if and when they would arrive. Waselkov uses this information to construct not only the most accurate outlay of the fort to date; it also provides him with an inlet to the fear and emotions carried by many within the Tensaw.

While Waselkov is very detailed in his examination of the assault upon Fort Mims, his analysis of the events before and after the attack provides the most thorough scholarship. Waselkov discusses in detail the actual construction of the fort. The information is derived from “a detailed sketch of the fort drawn by one of General Claiborne’s officers less than a month after the battle” and a “compensation claim filed late in 1815 by Samuel Mim’s son” (p. 75). These two primary documents assisted Waselkov with the actual size, shape and building contained by the fort. Waselkov supplements this with his own anthropological field research of the grounds of the fort. This field research is combined with primary research done in the Alabama Department of Archives and History, in order to discover the actual

constitution of the fort. This research also provides the first accurate death count of the affair. Waselkov's training in anthropological methodology allows for a new set of data to be produced on one of America's most important early conflicts.

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The conflict within the Creek Nation is normally told from the East, meaning that many authors focus on the conflicts after the assault at Fort Mims that either occurred within the Creek Nation or near its Georgian border, all territories east of the Tensaw River. This may have occurred because of the invasion from the north by Andrew Jackson and the east by General Floyd of Georgia. While these invasions occurred at the apex of the war and contributed mightily to the end of the conflict, such a focus generally marginalizes the events after the assault on Fort Mims in the West. To fill this gap in the historical literature, Waselkov focuses on the aftermath of the conflict, dissecting the accusations directed at General Claiborne, the head of the militia for the Tensaw and the actual recovery of the bodies from Mims. Waselkov also analyzes the continued assaults by the Redsticks in the Tensaw. Many of these attacks focused on persons of Creek heritage who embraced an American economic and social lifestyle. In these continued assaults, Waselkov reveals an aspect of the conflict that requires additional research.

The manuscript closes with a discussion of the end of the Creek War and the consequences of the assault at Fort Mims. In many books, the end of the war would signify the end of the manuscript, but Waselkov delves deeper by examining the memory of Fort Mims in the American psyche. Consequently, he strengthens his text by presenting a unique and fascinating review of monographs devoted to Fort Mims since the end of the Creek War. This research is important, because the battle itself has become "ingrained in history texts as an antecedent to (and, implicitly, an excuse and rationale for) the eventual forced removal of Indians from the eastern United States" and is thus included in some of the earliest histories concerning the history of the United States. (p. 179). One of the most important works concerning the history of the early South is Albert Pickett's *History of Alabama and Incidentally of Georgia and*

Mississippi, from the Earliest Period, which is a “romantic historical narrative” but does well to place the history of Fort Mims in a factual context (p. 189). Waselkov points to some of Pickett’s faults, such as failures in identifying types of soil and ramparts; but he also notes that “we probably should not be too hard on Pickett for an honest mistake” (p. 189). Waselkov’s historiography also includes many texts that are now staples in Creek historical reading, including Halbert and Ball’s *The Creek War of 1813-1814* and Owsley’s *Struggle for the Gulf Borderlands*. While the place for such historiography is usually near the introduction, Waselkov comfortably and effectively uses it as a conclusion.

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A Conquering Spirit is a unique and exceptional work to be added to the growing history of the Creeks. The pacing is excellent and Waselkov’s descriptions of surrounding and previous events comfortably situate the context of the book for both lay and academic readership. Waselkov’s unique use of family timelines, anthropologic field research and the examination of multiple primary sources provides incredible depth and breadth in a topic that is still in need of further analysis. Waselkov has produced a marquee book pertaining to a seminal event in early American history and is highly recommended for all interested in the American South or Native American history.