

Groundless: Rumors, Legends, and Hoaxes on the Early American Frontier

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Imagine the surprise of Henry Rowe Schoolcraft when, on a humid July day in 1846, he picked up a copy of the *Albany Argus*, a New York state Democratic Party newspaper, only to learn that he had been murdered. The paper carried an obituary which reported that Schoolcraft had been shot in Sault Ste. Marie, Michigan by a 'half breed' named John Tanner. Reports of Schoolcraft's death had, indeed, been greatly exaggerated: but for Gregory Evans Dowd, the falseness of the report illuminates the significance, power, and function of rumor in early American culture. Dowd is especially interested in what rumor can tell us about the interactions and relationships between white settler colonists and Indians in the history of early America. In the case of the report of Schoolcraft's assassination, the allegation that the murderer was half Indian - though false - fueled polemical arguments in the press justifying Jacksonian-era Indian removal. In *Groundless: Rumors, Legends, and Hoaxes on the Early American Frontier*, Dowd explores the significance of rumors such as those surrounding the Schoolcraft murder in over the long arc of early American history, especially as these rumors impinged upon the relationship between colonists and natives in frontier regions. Well known for his magisterial histories of native peoples in early America, Dowd here reveals – in both illuminating and sobering terms – the deeply significance of rumor to the making of early America and to the meanings we have made of its history.

Dowd argues that rumor lay at the heart of the European colonization of the Americas. As they conquered and colonized in the Americas beginning in the 16th century, the Spanish were driven by rumors about the presence of riches; in turn, the English were propelled in their incursions by rumors about the brutality of the Spanish (the 'black legend') and the presence of gold. The devastation wreaked on the native populations by these Europeans in turn spawned rumors that have shaped the writing of the history of empire in the Americas. In chapter two, Dowd examines one of the most potent of these rumors – that the Upper Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Valley Native Americans contracted smallpox when they attacked the British at Fort William Henry in 1757 as 'divine retribution' for their actions. As Dowd shows, the truth is more complex: there is no definitive evidence proving that it was the attack which caused the spread of smallpox among the Indians. But the circulation of this rumor has contributed to the development of a 'broader American smallpox-blanket legend' that figured the contraction of the disease as just punishment for the Indians' aggression (p. 62).

In subsequent chapters, Dowd turns to examining a variety rumors that captivated the minds of colonial and early Americans. These expertly crafted and deeply researched microhistories encompass case studies of the recurring panic among Indian tribes in from the late 17th century through the Seven Years' War about the designs of colonists to enslave them; competing rumors circulating between the Cherokee and Carolina Indians in 1751 about the other tribe's impending attack; the 'Winchester alarm' of 1757 alleging an impending mass attack by French and Indian forces on Fort Loudoun; and rumors circulated by British propagandists during the American War of Independence of Indians and colonial insurgents allying to engage in the scalping of imperial troops. A common conclusion about the function of rumors emerges from Dowd's illuminating discussions: they developed as ideologically infused explanations that different groups in early America generated about the intentions and actions of their enemies in order to understand, compete with, and demonize them. In turn, rumors revealed the cluster of assumptions, fears, beliefs, and ideologies that lay behind the efforts of natives and colonizers to attain power.

For all of Dowd's considerable achievement, *Groundless* raises several questions that remain unresolved at the book's conclusion. The first concerns the vectors through which rumors spread in early America: what forms of media were central to the spread of rumors, and what impact did they have upon the content of the information circulated and its plausibility to audiences? The rumors Dowd examines circulated in a variety of genres, both written and oral - personal letters, bureaucratic memoranda, printed newspapers, and testimony, to name just a few examples. Each of these genres commanded varying forms of credibility and authority from early American audiences, which surely shaped the extent to which rumors were found to be plausible. Nor did media technology and communications infrastructure remain static in the years over which *Groundless* ranges: the spread of rumors via messengers, letters, and newspapers in backcountry Carolina in the 1750s must have been very different from the considerably different communications environment of America in the 1840s. Yet, the forms or infrastructure through which they circulated themselves never seem central to Dowd; and thus the possible effect of these different forms and the mechanisms of their transmission on either the nature of the content or the plausibility of the information to audiences is unclear from Dowd's discussion: were rumors more believable when they were printed, or when circulated in handwriting? Did different actors invest rumors articulated in certain forms with more authority? Did the accelerating speed of communication over the period examined shape the way rumor spread? On the single occasion when Dowd does delve into a discussion of the material forms in which rumors were articulated, it seems clear that early Americans could make deliberate calculations in choosing forms and genres in which to circulate rumors: discussing Benjamin Franklin's creation of a fake 'Supplement' to the real Boston *Independent Chronicle* in 1782 which circulated a fabricated story about British participation in Indian scalping of Americans, Dowd points to the ways in which Franklin expertly mimicked the typography, layout, and numbering of the actual newspaper in order to render the rumor plausible. Unfortunately, however, Dowd does not accord a similar degree of attention to the forms in which other rumors circulated, leaving open the question of how medium shaped the plausibility of message to early American audiences. Engagement with scholarship on print, epistolary, and media practices in this period, which Dowd sidesteps, would have helped clarify this question.

Dowd's book also raises an even knottier problem: that of agency. At times, Dowd seems to treat the rumors themselves as historical actors - in fact, he concludes the book by stating that 'we rightly invest rumors and legends with ... strong agency ...' (p. 293). For example, he writes that 'legends' about gold not only 'reveal patterns of early American thought'; according to Dowd, these legends actually 'propelled' the European 'incursions that decimated populations and encouraged colonization' (9). But without the willingness of *people* to believe false information and act on it, the rumors themselves lack precisely that significance which justifies the attention of historians - they would simply be insignificant speech acts in search of believers. If people - not rumors - have agency, then the relevant question is not the possible causal power of rumors, but rather the ways and reasons why different groups, acting in particular contexts, believe them to be true; and the actions which they subsequently take on the basis of those beliefs. By placing 'rumor' at the heart of his inquiry - rather than the more precise question of the changing ways in which rumor fit into the social and political ideologies of different actors in early America - , Dowd unsatisfactorily deflects this core issue.

Finally, a paradox seems to lie at the heart of *Groundless*: the more Dowd discusses rumors in early America, the less 'groundlessness' - by which he seems to mean 'without foundation' (p. 9) - convinces as an organizing framework for making sense of rumoring. Many of the rumors Dowd discusses many not have been true, but that does not mean they lacked foundation. The attack on Fort William Henry by Upper Great Lakes and St. Lawrence Valley Indians in August 1757, which Dowd tackles in chapter two, did not clearly cause these Indians to contract smallpox, as longstanding rumor has it. But there is no doubt that the British at Fort Pitt in 1763 sought to infect the Delaware Indians with smallpox - which in turn formed the 'ground' upon which the story about the Fort William Henry massacre developed. The Fort William Henry story may be false, but it has a foundation. Indians in the Susquehanna, Detroit, and Ohio Valleys rumored in the 1760s that British colonists planned to enslave them. But while there was no large-scale revival of Indian slavery at that time, these rumors were entirely grounded: as Dowd shows in chapter three, there *was* a long history of

enslaving Indians in North America, and even though it had declined by that point, memory of the experience remained alive within indigenous cultural traditions, providing a perfectly understandable 'ground' for Indian fear (pp. 64–5). Rather than being 'groundless,' people in early America created rumors by applying the very real 'ground' of actual, lived experience to the work of making sense (albeit incorrect sense) to phenomena that, in their minds, seemed similar. In this way, perhaps rumors reflected the efforts of different early American groups to come to terms with past traumas and make meaning out of highly uncertain environments. That a social group's collective explanation for phenomena is untrue does not necessarily mean that it is 'groundless'; rather, the divergence between memory and truth seems to point to the complex ways in which people come to understand both their past and their present.

These criticisms do not detract from what Dowd has accomplished in *Groundless*. By placing rumor at the center of his account of the history of the early American frontier, Dowd innovatively reorients the narrative of colonization and conquest in early North America, opening up new paths for scholarship on information and empire.

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