

H-Net Reviews

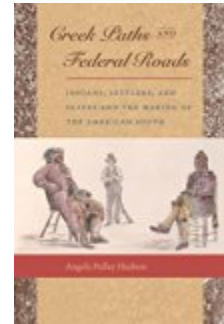
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Angela Pulley Hudson. *Creek Paths and Federal Roads: Indians, Settlers, and Slaves and the Making of the American South*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010. 272 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-3393-3; \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-7121-8.

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How Creek Paths became Roads of Expansion in the Early American Republic

As this year marks the beginning of the 200th anniversary of the Creek War (1813-14), it is fitting that we take time to consider this as part of the larger War of 1812. Recent scholarship has rightfully characterized the conflict as one that began as a civil war between dissenting Creek factions but ended with the intervention of Americans and other Native peoples, such as the Cherokees. As many ethnohistorians, historians, and anthropologists have contributed to the growing scholarship on this event and the groups that fought in it, Angela Pulley Hudson's contribution helps to fill a noticeable void of events leading to Indian removal in the 1830s. This study painstakingly explores the connection between "internal improvement, the expansion of slavery, and Indian dispossession" (p. 8) through the examination of Creek paths as symbolic sites of cultural interaction, competition, and conflict.

Hudson's carefully constructed study leads the reader over old paths that ultimately change into new paths to serve the United States economically, socially, and politically. In six well-organized chapters, the author reveals just how scholars have taken for granted access and mobility over these worn paths as U.S. expansion became inevitable after the defeat of the British at New Orleans in 1815. The process, she clearly notes, is one that took decades of persistence by state and federal government officials and white citizens, and even a certain amount of Creek agency, to make happen.

One of the most striking features of Hudson's book is her discussion of paths as symbolic, as well as utilitarian, within the Creek worldview. White and straight paths signified peaceful, profitable, and productive activities that led to the Creek towns or *talwas* after a successful hunt or diplomatic or trading journey. Red or crooked paths reflected conflict, dishevelment, betrayal, and/or the shedding of blood—all negative forces acting against the stable maintenance of good tribal relations with other groups.

Paths and waterways served as the traditional routes of communication between Creek *talwas* and the outside world. After the American Revolution, Hudson posits that the young U.S. republic quickly sought to gain access into Indian country. It became federal policy to establish treaties specifically to define the limits between the United States and its Indian neighbors. Along with this, Hudson argues, land cessions were encouraged as a way to settle debts owed by Native peoples. One of the biggest coups gained by treaty negotiation, however, was the agreement to allow the establishment of federal postal roads through the Indian nations. As surveyors blazed trees delineating the boundaries, the new Federal Road became a reality, leading from the interior to the Gulf straight through the heart of Creek country.

This road, and others like it, was not merely a passage through Creek territory; the Federal Road became a wedge in the separation between the Creeks and their

American neighbors. Over time, the Indian agent and state officials granted more and more passports for those wanting to travel through. The trickle, beginning with traders, drovers, and postal riders, became a flood as cotton became the new American means to prosperity in the southeast. As white heads of households caught "Alabama fever," they brought their enslaved property with them, soon followed by entire families.

Buoyed by her impeccable examination of the evidence, Hudson successfully contends that the Creek paths, now federal roads, became places of negotiation, contention, and the cultural exchange of ideas and values, along with economic opportunities for both those who lived near or traveled over them. While some of the younger Creeks saw travelers as prime targets for the taking, others sought to position themselves to benefit from the operation of ferries and inns, as well as the collection of toll fees. This only served to agitate hostilities between Creeks who supported the federal Indian civilization plan and those who opposed any intervention into their affairs or lifestyle. This split ultimately widened as some Creeks sought to enrich their own position by embracing the American market economy at the expense of traditional communal obligations and values. Many received special consideration from the government for their roles in supporting American access through Creek land; these headmen received patronage through cash payments or through the permits to collect travel fees.

As could be expected, the War of 1812 placed the Creek Nation in a precarious position. As violence erupted in the north between the United States and the British and their Indian allies, including the Shawnee Tecumseh, the passion for war against white expansion westward spread. The tension between Creek factions erupted in civil war in 1813. The dispute elevated into regional war with the intervention of American militia forces from the Mississippi Territory, Georgia, and Tennessee, who saw this as a plot sanctioned by the British to expose the Americans in the backcountry to invasion and defeat with the help of Indian allies. The Red Stick Creeks, named for their red war clubs, found themselves fighting not only other Creeks who supported the United States, but also American troops and other tribes, such as the Cherokees and Choctaws. The Federal Road and other paths into the Creek territory became military roads or "war paths," places of battles and ambushes (p. 14). The waterways served in this capacity also.

Shortly after the defeat of the Red Sticks at the Battle

of Horseshoe Bend on March 27, 1814, the commander of the Tennessee, Cherokee, and 39th United States Infantry regiments, Andrew Jackson, proclaimed the right to "establish military posts and trading houses, and to open roads within the territory ... and a right to the free navigation" (p. 117) within the Creek Nation. In addition, the peace treaty stipulated the cession of approximately twenty million acres of Creek land to offset the cost of the war. The United States soon had no cause to fear any foreign invasion with Jackson's defeat of British forces at the Battle of New Orleans in early 1815.

Postwar activities brought changes to the shrinking Creek country. Now that peace reigned, the pressure of increased emigration to new cotton lands brought the necessary improvements to the old Creek paths. The Federal Road became passable by wagon, and forts along the way protected travelers. Hudson stresses that this is reflective of the internal improvement movement that swept the country during the Jacksonian era. She even explains the process for improving roadbeds that derived from scientific advances. While discussing this national movement toward improving the transportation system, the author never loses focus on what that meant for the Creeks. Along with the increased traffic came the constant white demand for more Creek land, especially from Georgians.

In the last chapter of this study, Hudson considers the marketing of land as a prime factor in the quest to remove the Creeks. As speculators garnered followings of those hoping to gain access to cheap Indian land, editorials and other promotional literature touted the legitimacy of reclaiming the "misused" land for the progressive landscape of farms, plantations, towns, and fields, as if the land itself needed rescuing from an inappropriate Indian presence. As such, the Creeks became the very symbol of the obstruction of progress. As the states of Alabama and Georgia resolved their contiguous boundary dispute, the consideration that most of this area fell in the middle of Creek lands they deemed incidental. Georgia continued to push the federal government to expel all Indians from within its borders as promised in a compact signed in 1802. From notched trees to macadamized roadbeds, the roads marked through Creek country became only one more type of line on the maps showing boundaries and byways in an expanding nation that kept demanding more economic and spatial growth.

As the expulsion of Indians living east of the Mississippi River drew near, Hudson asserts, an African American population was destined to replace a Native one.

Georgia's wish came true through the Treaty of the Creek Indian Agency in 1827, when Creeks forfeited all claims to their land within its boundaries. They, however, did not merely leave; instead, many destroyed their own property, such as fencing, orchards, or stands of corn, so that the new residents could not reap the profits. Did this hurt the Creeks, though? Interestingly, Hudson contends that this demonstration of resistance in some cases might have actually increased profitability when the diminished supply of corn, for example, led to higher prices reaped by Creek farmers elsewhere. To stress the complexity of the conditions, the author also counters that reported Creek thefts of foodstuffs increased, perhaps revealing acts of need rather than defiance. Nevertheless, Hudson reports that many Creeks continued to pursue an amiable economic relationship with their white neighbors through trade and by offering amenities along the roadways.

The early 1830s saw the paths become bloody again throughout the Creek Nation. As President Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act as a remedy to the "Indian problem," the unscrupulous seized the opportunity to begin the dispossession process immediately. Nevertheless, by 1836, the Creek removal to the west was mostly complete. White settlers with black slaves came by the droves to finish claiming Creek land for the opportunity to raise cotton—white gold. The Creek trek west ended with the

re-establishment of *talwas* and grounds for their sacred fires that they brought along with them. Their identity and very existence remained intact over the trail to their home. As this happened to the Creek people, so did it to the other southeastern tribes. The use of Indian paths by Americans, seeking the opportunity for land and wealth, did not end there, though. Hudson reminds us that the later gold and land rushes of the nineteenth century led politicians and citizens alike to declare Native peoples as obstacles to development and the progress of the nation. Indian paths that began in the east and became federal roads would eventually span the entire continent. As this was repeating, over and over again, with the movement of Americans west, so too was the resistance of Native peoples who had long lived and moved along those paths.

Hudson's *Creek Paths and Federal Roads: Indians, Settlers, and Slaves and the Making of the American South* provides an insightful perspective into a complex topic that authors often only skim. This book puts Creek history squarely in the midst of southern and American history where it rightfully belongs. By using an ethnographic perspective, Hudson allows readers to follow the different threads that intricately bound the three groups together in a particular space at a particular time. Hudson's study should become a standard in southern history classrooms, as well as for anyone wanting to understand the convoluted relationships that forged this nation.

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