



Joshua Piker. *Okfuskee: A Creek Indian Town in Colonial America*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004. xi + 270 pp. \$45.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-01335-3.

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## Community Studies Come to Indian Country

“Without the town ... Creek society would not have existed.” Joshua Piker makes this arresting claim in his recent study of the town of Okfuskee. He challenges the primacy of the clan in Creek social organization, asserting that “the people of Okfuskee, like their neighbors throughout Creek country, were first and foremost members of a particular town” (p. 10). Piker’s *Okfuskee: A Creek Indian Town in Colonial America* takes the novel approach of combining the tradition of community studies with ethnohistory to produce a history of a single Creek town in the eighteenth century. The first study of its kind for native communities in colonial North America, *Okfuskee* seeks to capture the local level of native life. As Piker points out, while previous scholars have acknowledged that, for most Native Americans in the colonial period, the “tribe” or “confederacy” played only a peripheral role in daily life, most studies continue to evaluate native societies at that level. *Okfuskee*, therefore, offers a fresh perspective on Creek life during the era of British colonization.

The town (*talwa*), Piker explains, “consisted of people who shared a square ground and a fire” (p. 9). Okfuskee itself incorporated the main town center as well as several villages (*talofa*) affiliated with it. As the center of this extended community, Okfuskee “contained the full Creek complement of civil, military and religious specialists; it controlled the productive resources necessary for its own reproduction and that of its people; and it was linked to the other-than-human beings on which all life depended” (p. 9). The town served an important unifying function as well in Creek society. “At the town level, the factions

and centripetal forces unleashed by individual and clan interests were harnessed to whatever degree possible.... [T]owns became ... the loci of discussion, mediation and reconciliation which made interclan relations, and thus Creek life, possible” (p. 10).

Piker’s sweeping claims that links to the town took precedence over those to the clan are attention-grabbing and will provoke significant discussion and debate within the field, a development that is to be welcomed. In this reviewer’s opinion, however, Piker’s assertions go too far and de-emphasize the crucial role that clan membership and kinship played in day-to-day Creek life, providing a sense of belonging that both transcended and undergirded local interests. In focusing on the town, Piker understates the significant degree of mobility that persisted in Creek society (particularly during the unsettled times of the eighteenth century), as well as the frequency with which townsmen married women from other towns and took up residency elsewhere. The town therefore appears to be a more static, homogeneous entity that it often was. However, by making the town the focus of his study, Piker restores the importance of local residency and governance to our understanding of Creek history. His emphasis on local rather than “tribal” ties is a well-needed correction in the field.

Piker also structures his study in a comparative framework, drawing parallels between Okfuskee and the better-known Euro-American communities it encountered and competed with. “Colonial-era communities,” he argues, “Euro-American and Native American alike,

are broadly comparable and ... each people's experiences have relevance for our understanding of the other" (p. 4). This approach helps put into perspective the dramatic changes Okfuskee experienced during the period of Piker's study and the extraordinary pressures the town faced. At the end of the later chapters, Piker compares the transformations he has traced in Okfuskee with those going on in the English colonies at the same time, demonstrating that both dealt with the problems of increasing integration into a market economy and the centralizing pressure of an imperial government, as well as changes in gender and familial relations. He is also able to demonstrate, however, why these pressures were greater for the Creeks, who were operating with different cultural structures and intellectual traditions, and facing the growing racism and exclusionary nature of expanding British colonial society.

The town of Okfuskee was neither typical nor atypical as a Creek town. Piker has chosen this town for study largely because of the availability of source material. The documentary record itself determines that *Okfuskee* cannot be a traditional community study, at least not in the same vein as those conducted for Euro-American communities in the Chesapeake or New England. Piker did not have access to church records of births, deaths, marriages or baptisms, nor court records like deeds, estate inventories, wills, or lawsuits that have formed the foundation of most community studies to date. He was forced to rely on records produced by outsiders, mostly British colonial records including travel accounts, governors' papers, and legislative journals. There are no available archaeological studies for Okfuskee itself, although some studies of its satellite villages exist. The study, therefore, focuses very strongly on the relationship that residents of Okfuskee had with Europeans, and the diplomatic ties between the town and the British at Savannah and (especially) Charles Town. Readers expecting a detailed picture of everyday life in Okfuskee will be disappointed. What Piker does offer, however, is a largely convincing analysis of the impact of colonization on the townspeople, as well as the logic of the town's diplomatic position vis-à-vis the British.

Because of Piker's focus on Okfuskee's relations with the British, the book begins with external relations, then moves inward. In fact, more than half the volume is dedicated to diplomatic relations with the English, while the rest deals with the impact of European traders and goods on local life. It is in the chapters on diplomacy that Piker is most convincing and makes the greatest contributions to our understanding of the town's place in the greater

Southeast. Piker argues persuasively that, as a "white town," Okfuskee often served in the position of mediator in Creek/English relations. The Okfuskees believed that they had a special relationship with the British in Charles Town, based in Creek understandings of fictive kinship relations. When Thomas Nairne offered an English commission to the Okfuskee headman Cossitee in 1708, the Okfuskee responded by holding a ceremony designating Cossitee as Fanni Mico. (The Fanni Mico, in Muskogee societies, served as a fictive uncle to an outside group, and represented the interests of that outside group to his own community. He integrated the outsiders into the Creek kinship system, and served as an important intermediary.) Piker then traces the repeated reappearance of headmen serving in the position (and taking the title) of Fanni Mico (later called Red Coat King) in meetings between Okfuskee and the English. The Okfuskees often represented themselves as being of one fire with the English, a metaphor that designated them as members of the same town. The Okfuskees, he asserts, claimed a special place in the Creek/British alliance because of the creation of these kinship ties. The town worked to maintain that privileged position in several ways, including allowing the establishment of a trading factory and later a fort, and also by lobbying for the English within the nation. The Okfuskees hoped to use their special relationship to represent the concerns of neighboring towns to the British. Because of the close ties the town developed early on with Charles Town, it continued to orient its diplomacy to that capital, even after the foundation of Georgia and the shift of much of Creek/English diplomacy to Savannah. Okfuskee also suffered disproportionately for its peacemaking efforts, often targeted by hostile Cherokee factions, for example, during the years of its support of a Creek/Cherokee peace.

Okfuskee's claim to a special place in the relationship with the English suffered several setbacks as the eighteenth century progressed, although Piker suggests that the town continued to try to maintain its position. After the French and Indian War, diplomacy increasingly shifted to Savannah, decreasing the influence Okfuskee was able to assert in meetings. The trade also reoriented to the Gulf Coast ports and away from the paths linking Okfuskee to Charles Town. Pressures on wild game populations drove Okfuskee hunters further east just at the time that British settlers were flooding the backcountry, causing conflict and resulting in violent encounters. While the backcountry before the 1750s had offered a "frontier exchange economy," opportunities for peaceful co-existence became less common as British settlers and

Indians clashed more and more often.

In part 2, Piker turns to the internal life of the town. There is not much that is new here, but the shift of the focus to the experience of one town, rather than generalizations about Creek societies overall, allows him to demonstrate the local particularities of the situation. For example, while Okfuskees themselves did not adopt cattle- or pig-raising before the Revolution, some of the neighboring towns did or local traders brought livestock with them, putting pressure on the Okfuskees to find a way to protect their crops. Once some members did decide to adopt animal husbandry, town settlement patterns changed dramatically, as families scattered to more dispersed plantations. The presence of traders, while offering opportunities for commercial interaction, also created tensions and internal strife, which in turn led to the 1760 killing of several of the town's leading traders. The pressures of debt and increasing dependency on the trade led first to an expansion of the trade and, then, in the 1760s, to a shift from the trade in processed skins to the production of a significant number of raw skins. Okfuskee seems to have produced a slightly greater proportion of raw skins than many other Creek towns, although

Piker does not explain fully why Okfuskee was more vulnerable to this phenomenon than other towns. Piker also investigates the impact of the trade and European colonization on gender relations, as well as the increasingly complicated relationship between peace chiefs and head warriors, and between head warriors and young men.

The book concludes with the destruction of two satellite villages of Okfuskee, the largely accommodationist Nuyaka and the nativist stronghold of Tohopeka. While taking a different approach to relations with the United States, the two towns shared a number of common features (including a common history, an overlapping leadership, kinship ties, and an inability to disentangle themselves from the encroaching white society) and in the end a common fate.

*Okfuskee* is engagingly written and clearly argued. While perhaps too narrowly focused for the undergraduate classroom, the book should provoke serious discussion at the graduate level. In addition, the concept of approaching native history at the community level raises some intriguing possibilities for the future of Native American Studies and deserves attention from all those interested in the field.

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