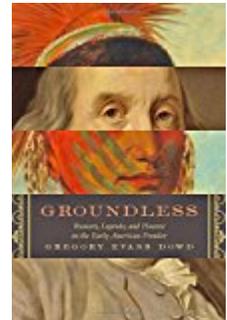


Gregory Evans Dowd. *Groundless: Rumors, Legends, and Hoaxes on the Early American Frontier.* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016. 408 S. \$34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4214-1865-0.



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Rumors abounded in early America. Today it is difficult to comprehend how people communicated across the immensity of the American expanse hundreds of years ago. Travel was arduous, slow, and fraught with danger. Moving over mountain ranges, navigating vaguely marked trails, or crossing into territory ignorant to the disposition of the local inhabitants were all bewildering experiences. Verifying information was extremely difficult. Gregory Evans Dowd takes readers on a journey into the minds of early Americans as they struggled to separate fact from fiction across the great distances of the North American frontier. In *Groundless*, rumors take on lives of their own, misleading colonists, Indians, and even professional historians in telling ways.

Groundless is ambitious in scope. Dowd bookends his pursuit of “bad evidence” in the purported gold fields of the North American Southeast (p. 14), opening with sixteenth-century Spaniards and concluding some three centuries later in Jacksonian America. Facts bear out that neither conquistadors nor Americans found much gold in

the region. However, both events illustrate an important point: what people believed in their head often mattered more than what existed on the ground. Spanish rumors of gold gleaned from Indians spurred colonization efforts in the Southeast which produced the very real consequences of “invasion, sickness, and enslavement” for Native peoples (p. 37). Despite repeated failures to add substance to legend, mutterings of gold endured into 1830s, precipitating the state of Georgia’s infamous destruction and removal of the Cherokee nation.

Dowd chases false whispers up the Appalachian Mountain range to the Carolinas, eastern Pennsylvania, Canada, and westward to upper Michigan, all the while recording echoes reverberating far from the frontier in London, New York, and Philadelphia. Chapters are divided into two forms of the bogus: “longitudinal stories and singular episodes” (p. 278). Longitudinal stories are legends that persist through time, such as gold in the Georgia upcountry or blankets infested with smallpox. Both legends were based in kernels of

truth but long outlived those original events and were consistently embellished over time. In contrast, singular episodes occur in highly local, time-specific moments, such as seeking out the identity of a murderer or determining whether frontier neighbors were about to attack. Although *Groundless* progresses thematically and chronologically, it darts across the North American continent covering events of varying historical and regional contexts. Such structure eludes a clear narrative arc and may prove baffling for those unfamiliar with early American historiography.

That being said, *Groundless* bears tremendous insight on the “widely shared beliefs and understandings” of early Americans (p. 14). Dowd rightly points out that professional historians usually dismiss unreliable information in pursuit of what actually happened. Such an approach overlooks the context in which people lived, where rumor “commanded as much attention in early America as did crops, weather, and shipping news” (p. 2). Grounding his analysis in twentieth-century sociological scholarship, Dowd frames the act of rumor mongering as an attempt to seek out the truth or to make sense of the world. Focusing on rumors instead of dismissing them offers a glimpse into the hopes, fears, and prejudices of early Americans, providing important cultural context for their actions. It is this ingenious methodological approach that future historians should heed.

In the process of mining bad information, Dowd uncovers some surprising revelations about colonial North America. The persistence of particular rumors collapses chronologies many scholars are familiar with. For example, Cherokees and Creeks still feared the prospect of enslavement and deportation well past the Seven Years’ War, fifty years after the Indian slave trade ended in the Southeast. Whispers among Cherokees in 1751 of impending betrayal by their South Carolina allies, although unfounded, reveals that memory of the slave trade weighed heavily on their minds

and contributed to a legacy of diplomatic tension throughout the eighteenth century. On the other side of the frontier, patterns of rumor surrounding war show that colonists feared or suspected the intervention of rival imperial powers more than Indian attack or slave rebellion. Dowd then identifies historians who have assumed that Indians and slaves shared some “ideological solidarity” against colonists in the eighteenth century (p. 151). Such an alliance between Indians and slaves cannot be found in the sources or the rumors of otherwise anxious colonists. That contemporary historians would conclude that Indians and slaves posed a great threat “says more about our world” today “than it does about theirs” (p. 163). In this and other instances, Dowd skillfully demonstrates that by listening to rumor, historians can gain valuable perspective into the worldviews of historical subjects, and in the process, they can check twenty-first-century assumptions when they attempt to recreate those worlds.

Dowd casts a wide net in his survey of three centuries of North American rumor. Consequently, it is often difficult for the reader to discern a consistent narrative angle in *Groundless*. Additionally, little attention is paid to the varied and contested communication networks of early America, which Matt Cohen, Katherine Grandjean, and recently Alejandra Dubcovsky have shown to be so important. More attention to the geography, routes, and messengers through which faulty news passed would undoubtedly have provided valuable context for many of the rumors traced in this volume. Regardless, Dowd’s work has much methodological import for historians of early America and beyond who will certainly benefit from the approach he presents. *Groundless* shows that paying attention to falsities can uncover important cultural truths.

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