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Matthew J. Clavin, *The Battle of Negro Fort: The Rise and Fall of a Fugitive Slave Community* (New York: New York University Press, 2019). 272 pp. \$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4798-3733-5.

David Stefan Doddington, Cardiff University

In July 1816, American troops and their Creek allies launched a combined naval and ground force attack on “Negro Fort,” a heavily armed citadel which stood atop a steep bluff overlooking the Apalachicola River in Spanish Florida. The fort had been built by the British during the War of 1812 as part of their Southern strategy, but it was under new management. “Negro Fort,” as the site was described by Creek Indian Agent and “ruthless slave trader” Benjamin Hawkins (p. 27), was now a home for hundreds of free black people who had either taken up arms with the British or who had fled from Spanish and American enslavers with hopes of reaching this beacon of freedom. In *The Battle of Negro Fort*, Matthew J. Clavin tells the compelling history of the origins, organization, and eventual destruction of “the largest fugitive slave settlement in the history of the present-day United States” (p.76).

Beyond the clear and engaging narrative history of the fort and its occupants’ interactions with both friend and foe, Clavin asserts that the destruction of the fort should be understood as “an important milestone in the history of the early American republic” (p.2). The “rise and fall” of this fugitive community, Clavin argues, must be integrated into wider historical debates surrounding race, slavery, and expansion in the early United States; the causes of, and support for, military intervention here reflected a broader proslavery position as being embedded in domestic and foreign policy in the early republic. Clavin argues that the extreme force applied and the co-operation – both tacit and overt – between local, state, and federal officials of the United States in orchestrating an invasion of foreign territory to destroy “this symbol of slave resistance and revolt” reveals a commitment to the protection and promotion of slavery from the early decades of the republic (p. 76). As Clavin states, the co-ordinated destruction of the fort “provided early evidence of what came to be known as the Slave Power – that is, a political alliance of southern slaveowners and their northern allies who used the federal government to promote and protect slavery” (p. 12). Clavin thus positions the destruction of “Negro Fort” as a moment in US History that symbolized “the nation’s growing commitment to slavery while illuminating the extent to which ambivalence over the institution had disappeared since the nation’s founding (p.13-14).”

In the opening chapters Clavin explores the origins of the fort as part of the British strategy during the War of 1812 and reveals the complex and shifting alliances, negotiations, and conflict between European colonial powers, white and Native Americans, and enslaved and free black people during and after the conflict. Much of the narrative here would be familiar to historians of the period but the emphasis on seeing the fort as a real and metaphorical site of slave resistance, and a signifier for wider social, cultural, and political tensions surrounding race and power in the early republic serves to offer a significant analytical framework. The title of the book might suggest sustained attention to the “community” that resided within the fort, but only one chapter deals with the organization of, and life within, the fort. Access to appropriate material, of course, mitigates against detailed commentary of maroon sites and Clavin uses the limited sources available to good effect. Some of the conclusions drawn about the system of “martial law,” however, and the lack of detail about what it meant to be in a “typical maroon colony” leave some of the arguments slightly undeveloped (p. 80-86). This is particularly true when set against the more sustained attention to the arrangement and internal dynamics of the fort in Nathaniel Millett’s *Maroons*

of *Prospect Bluff* (2013), which Clavin frequently positions himself against. Clavin's argument that the fort's occupants and its organization was shaped by the concern for survival, as opposed to Millett's focus on political autonomy is certainly plausible, and chimes with much recent work in slave studies, but the evidence remains fairly speculative.

In some respects, however, the internal dynamics of the fort are less of a concern to the argument raised. Clavin's emphasis throughout is on the symbolic power of this real and imagined site of slave resistance on the "frontier," and how the anger and anxiety that drove US efforts to destroy the fort speaks to the broader expansionist aims of white Americans, north and south. Those who sought to justify military intervention – both before and after the fact – spoke of a coordinated and combined threat from all non-white people in the area, with Clavin describing how "Negro Fort" was understood as providing "not only sanctuary for fugitive slaves from the United States" but also acting as "a base for their Indian allies to commit violent depredations across the southern frontier" (p.104). The successful destruction of the fort thus spoke to a political and ideological commitment to racial expansionism and slavery among white Americans. This commitment had dire repercussions for Native Americans in the south and southwest, and for the enslaved people who would be forcibly moved into this region during the antebellum era. Well-written, engaging, and clear in argument and analysis, Clavin's work is an important addition to the literature on slavery and racial expansion in the early republic and would appeal to both specialist and wider audiences.