
The story of Fort Laurens, long available only in fragments, has now been presented in complete form for the first time. Composed of seven short chapters, five of which concern the fort during the war years of 1778-79, the book is an attempt to synthesize a vast number of historical events, movements, and trends into a concise panorama of the American Revolution in the west. However, the book fails to do this despite its lively and readable writing style.

The narrative is a brief overview of an extensive topic, but it provides little insight into the history and culture of the area and does not present the more sophisticated interpretation this period demands.

The book details the heroic attempts of a patriot army to capture Detroit from the British during the winter of 1778-79. Failing to march across several hundred miles of forested wilderness, the colonials stopped halfway and built a stockaded enclosure near present-day Bolivar, Ohio, named Fort Laurens. The overall importance of this outpost remains debatable to this day, but the need for a scholarly examination of this subject remains.

Fort Laurens, while delightful to read, has several important flaws. In viewing the frontier as part of the Revolutionary movement, the authors have not sought out the newer interpretations that have long since forced old views and myths aside. The view of the west as presented by the authors is very traditional and staid. Some of this may in part be due to their use of several sources of questionable accuracy written long before modern research uncovered new facts and developed new interpretations. Relying in part on C. H. Mitchner's Ohio Annals and an 1884 history of Tuscarawas County, Ohio, for their source material, the authors' tone and level of research is questionable. The 1884 history is so massively inaccurate that it places the fort on the wrong side of the Tuscarawas River. Mitchner's book is without doubt the most fanciful collection of tales ever written on the period, and is one of the worst sources available. The unqualified use of such works is a major shortcoming of the book.

For the serious reader, the book lacks footnotes — an obvious concession to the publisher. Furthermore, the book fails to compensate the reader for the omission with an adequate bibliography. The notes
on sources are vague and serve as only the most general introduction to the period.

A number of interesting illustrations give the book's graphic artist high marks. However, the maps are especially disappointing, as they seem to have been added as an afterthought; they appear hurried and placed, not as part of the text, but as an element in the graphic design. The map on page 11 shows, for example, the regional situation of Fort Laurens and contains spurious information on the Indian tribes of Ohio. The Tuscarora Indians are mapped in the region of the fort, while no authentic original documents from the period place the Tuscaroras in Ohio. This particular myth is one of the most common circulating on Ohio's Indian tribes, and it would seem about time there was some sound research to settle the question.

Perhaps the most serious flaw of the entire book is the drawing of the fort on page 85. This rendering shows the design of the bastions at about 115 degrees in angle to the curtain walls. If the fort had been built with such an angle on the bastions, they would have been of no use in defense. Anything greater than 100 degrees for the bastions is too much out of range with the curtain walls to allow an enfilading fire upon the ditch. The ideal angle for the bastions is 90 degrees, with a 10-degree swing in either direction. It is obvious that the fort was not built as the drawing shows and that the drawing is wrong.

Students of the Revolution in the west will find this volume most useful for its narrative of the short life of Fort Laurens, but they will gain little insight into the more complex events of the Revolutionary frontier. Useful because it helps to give some order to the complex events of a confused period, the book does not raise the questions that must be asked to solve the many riddles of Ohio's early history.

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