

### The Fishing Creek Confederacy: A Story of Civil War Draft Resistance

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#### Recommended Citation

Ruehlen, Christopher R. (2014) "The Fishing Creek Confederacy: A Story of Civil War Draft Resistance," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 3 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.16.3.10

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol16/iss3/8>

## Review

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Summer 2014

**Sauers, Richard A. and Tomasak, Peter.** *The Fishing Creek Confederacy: A Story of Civil War Draft Resistance.* University of Missouri Press, \$35.00 ISBN 978-0-8262-1988-6

### Loyalty and Dissent in Pennsylvania

In the fall of 1864 nearly 1,000 Union troops arrived in Columbia County, Pennsylvania. This military expedition expected to uncover the so-called "Fishing Creek Confederacy," an armed fortress containing hundreds of southern sympathizers conspiring to resist the draft. From August through October federal troops arrested approximately 100 individuals, questioned and harassed others, and shipped 45 to a military prison near Philadelphia. Despite this heavy-handed response, little evidence for an organized conspiracy surfaced. Federal troops departed in late 1864, but the expedition and subsequent military trials left the community bitterly divided. Richard A. Sauers and Peter Tomasak's slim volume represents the first book-length study of the Fishing Creek Confederacy. Their detailed account provides some new answers about this interesting episode in Civil War Pennsylvania.

*The Fishing Creek Confederacy* constitutes a narrative history based on extensive research in federal and state archives, and Pennsylvania newspapers. Sauers and Tomasak begin with the early history of the war in Columbia County, noting how the traditionally Democratic region supported the conflict initially, until a combination of military stalemate and controversial measures such as emancipation and conscription precipitated widespread disaffection. The authors detail how opposition to the draft escalated in Columbia County and Pennsylvania in 1863 and 1864. Throughout the state Democratic newspapers railed against the measure, enrollment officers faced threats and personal violence, and the Pennsylvania Supreme Court even ruled federal conscription unconstitutional in November 1863.

Columbia County was largely spared from internal strife until the summer of 1864. A new draft in June calling for 636 men from the county triggered a firestorm of opposition. Rumors swirled about armed groups plotting to resist conscription, but it was the death of a Union veteran, allegedly searching for deserters in the county, which represented the catalyst for military intervention. On July 30, 1864 Lieutenant James Stewart Robinson and several other veterans patrolled the county and confronted a trio of deserters. An exchange of gunfire occurred and mortally wounded Robinson. The incident provoked fears of large-scale resistance in Columbia County, and in response federal officials dispatched a large military contingent to enforce the draft and “overawe” opposition.

In August 1864 close to 1,000 federal troops arrived in the county. Union officials interviewed local residents and compiled a list of names for arrest. On the evening of August 30 federal forces quietly rounded up approximately 100 residents in Columbia County. Over half of the men were released, but 45 were sent to a military prison near Philadelphia to await trial for encouraging resistance to the draft. Loyal residents also informed troops about a large fortress on North Mountain, which supposedly contained 600 or 700 Copperheads conspiring to resist the draft. In early September, a small contingent of Union troops searched North Mountain for the fortress. Combing the mountainous area of north Columbia County, soldiers found no evidence of a fort or large-scale resistance. The “Fishing Creek Confederacy” proved to be greatly exaggerated, but a significant military force remained in the county through October, sometimes harassing civilians, and discouraging some Democrats from voting in Pennsylvania’s state elections.

Sauers and Tomasak provide rich detail of the military trials that followed. Their account provides further confirmation that a disloyal conspiracy did not exist in Columbia County. Only fourteen of the forty-five prisoners went to trial, and just eight received sentences for conspiring to disrupt the draft. Even so, the military commission failed to connect any of the guilty individuals to an organized conspiracy. Most notably, the prosecution alleged that these men were members of a lodge of the Knights of the Golden Circle, a treasonous secret society. From witness testimony it became clear that some secret meetings took place, possibly for the purpose of protecting individuals from the draft, but they were not connected to the Knights of the Golden Circle or any subversive conspiracy. By May 1865, the War Department discharged the remaining prisoners, suggesting that federal officials overreacted to the threat of draft

resistance in the summer of 1864.

*The Fishing Creek Confederacy* stands as an impressive micro-history of one community during the Civil War. The research is exhaustive, especially in the National Archives and Pennsylvania State Archives. Some readers may find the detailed narrative challenging at times, such as the meticulous description of the military trials, but the book is successful in providing some new answers about the episode in Columbia County. Sauers and Tomasak clarify one minor detail in noting that James Stewart Robinson, the veteran whose death sparked the military expedition, did not work as a Provost Marshal as previous histories maintain. Robinson might have desired to capture deserters in exchange for bounty money, but his presence in Columbia County that summer symbolizes something of a mystery. Moreover, this detailed narrative stands in agreement with recent scholarship that portrays dissent in Civil War Pennsylvania as a loyal opposition. Most notably, historian Robert M. Sandow's *Deserter Country* (2009) provides strong evidence that draft resistance in the Pennsylvania Appalachians did not reflect southern sympathies or a large-scale conspiracy. *The Fishing Creek Confederacy* provides ample evidence for these assertions in Columbia County, as the authors state in the conclusion "the Copperheads of the county did not have pro-Southern sympathies." (185)

Nevertheless, Sauers and Tomasak disagree with previous interpretations that frame the military expedition as a purely "political raid." The authors maintain that although reports of an armed fortress with hundreds of individuals proved exaggerated, Republicans and loyal citizens genuinely feared organized opposition. Sauers and Tomasak note that there is indisputable evidence of draft resistance in Pennsylvania and Columbia County, but that citizens and government officials overestimated and misunderstood the nature of this opposition. Partisan newspapers, they maintain, played a major role in blowing the threat out of proportion. Sauers and Tomasak even speculate that a small fort might have existed on North Mountain. In July 2007, Peter Tomasak travelled to the area and discovered the remains of a nineteenth-century structure, near the location of the alleged fort. This hardly stands as overwhelming evidence, but it does suggest a larger point. The Fishing Creek Confederacy, like other reports of secret societies and treasonous activity during the Civil War, represented a complex mix of fact and fiction. It certainly did not represent a lodge of the Knights of the Golden Circle or an organized conspiracy. Nevertheless, rumors and fears about draft resistance in Columbia County might have rested on a modicum of truth. Similar episodes of home front conflict at the local or

community level could likewise benefit from careful scholarly scrutiny.

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