

NORTHWEST PASSAGES

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Young writer sheds light on obscure slave revolt

By **TEKE WIGGIN**
Current Correspondent

Recent Harvard grad and Georgetown native Daniel Rasmussen took no time in setting out to make a name for himself in his academic field of interest.

The former history major, described as “bold as brass” by his thesis advisor, recently completed the first in-depth account of a largely untold story in American history: its biggest slave revolt.

“American Uprising,” a detailed portrait of the events leading up to and through the 1811 slave revolt that arose in a swath of plantation country outside New Orleans, will be published by Harper early next year.

The book tells the story of the “highly sophisticated, well-organized and incredibly courageous heroes” who participated in the uprising, Rasmussen said, and explores its purportedly profound effect on the cultural architecture of the antebellum South.

“It’s a story about heroic slaves. I think it’s a really inspirational story — a story that I hope a year from now is in every history book in the country,” he said.

Like his reported personality, Rasmussen’s argument is bold and ambitious. It contends that the revolt did nothing less than catalyze the absorption of

Louisiana into the Union; prepare New Orleans militarily to repel the British in the War of 1812; and lay the groundwork for the admission of other slave states to follow — states that 50 years later made up a large portion of the Confederacy.

Rasmussen first developed an interest in the subject when he learned of the revolt from the short asides and footnotes usually reserved for it in history books, he said.

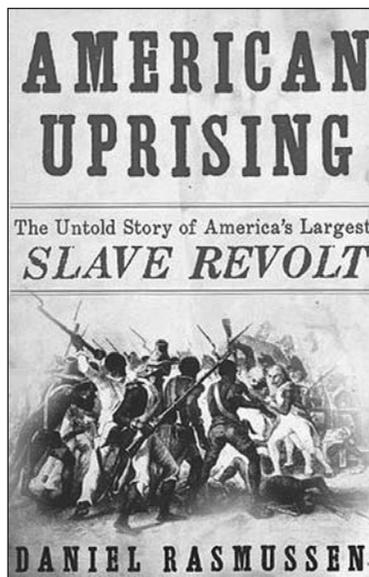
“You’ll typically see three sentences from great historians,” he said. “I kept noticing this pattern. All these historians that I really respected just knew nothing about this event.”

Bothered by the apparent neglect, he decided to find out why it took up such little space in history books compared to smaller-scale slave revolts like the ones led by Nat Turner and John Brown.

“The more I dug,” he said, “the more fascinated I became.”

Soon he began to piece together what he believes was a massive cover-up of the revolt. He then sunk his teeth into the subject, thinking, “This has got to be an opportunity for me, as a young guy, to make a difference,” he said.

That bulldog instinct, he claims, comes partly from his training as a journalist, as an intern at The Current and a



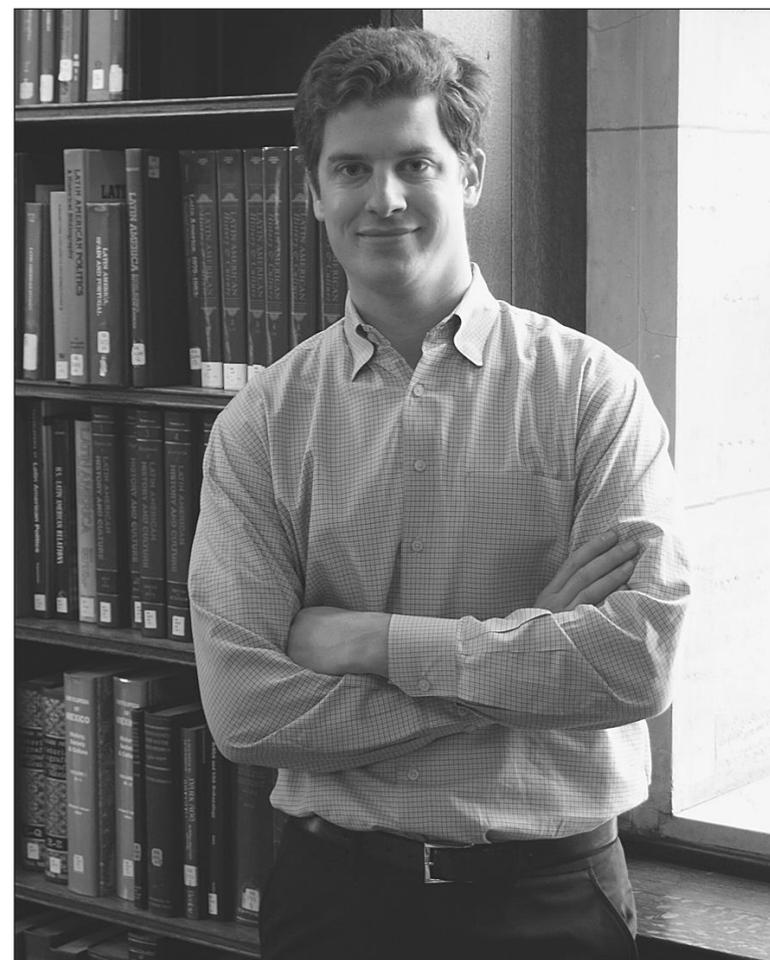
reporter/editor at his high school newspaper. Rasmussen started interning for The Current the summer after his sophomore year at St. Albans. At the paper, he learned how to write in a “short, punchy style,” which was drilled into him by editors who took a chance on a 15-year-old, he said.

Even as an adolescent, Rasmussen relished “challenging older people” and putting them under the gun, he said.

His journalism experience also sparked an interest in “expos[ing] things people didn’t want known.”

So when faced with the neat, dismissive letters composed by the Louisiana territory’s then-governor William Claiborne — which had thus far served as the primary source of the revolt — Rasmussen plunged into alternative sources to seek out the other side of the story.

He researched his thesis by



Courtesy of Daniel Rasmussen

Georgetown native Daniel Rasmussen turned his senior thesis into a book, which Harper is publishing next month.

scouring newspaper accounts (mostly in French), diplomatic correspondences, court records, planters’ records, naval records and other obscure sources. Meticulously cataloguing all this information, he created two giant databases, one on slaves and their origins, and the other on the slaves’ actions.

He worked closely with adviser Susan O’Donovan to groom and comb this data into his thesis. O’Donovan, who specializes in the history of slavery and taught Rasmussen in various classes at Harvard, said Rasmussen always struck her as a particularly committed student, and that, conse-

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quently, she had originally “thought it would not be terribly painful to be his thesis adviser.”

As they met almost every week for more than a year, Rasmussen was relentless in his research and a “tremendously hard worker,” she said.

Soon it became apparent to Rasmussen, he said, that Gov. Claiborne had acted on a “tremendous incentive to cover up this revolt” in the interest of priming the territory for statehood. Claiborne downplayed the uprising’s significance in letters to politicians while simultaneously exploiting the paranoid, post-revolt psyches of planters to persuade them to accept Union integration and protection, Rasmussen said.

“The crushing of this revolt cemented an alliance between American officials and American military and French planters who before had really been resistant to American government,” he said.

After more than a year of burrowing into archives, Rasmussen wrapped up his thesis, earning summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa and other honors when he graduated in 2009. And he soon took a job in private equity in Boston, which takes up close to 12 hours a day, he said.

But true to his track record, he resolved to spend his free time transforming his thesis into a history book to expose the incident to others.

O’Donovan, who wrote “Becoming Free in the Cotton South” and now works at the University of Memphis, explained the lengths to which a historian must go to repackage content for a mass audience. An author must “pitch [the book] differently,”

use “different language,” explain things that “don’t need explaining” for history scholars, and drop the “esoteric stuff of interest to scholars and not necessarily of interest to the general reader,” she said.

The main idea, she said, is to “get away from the abstractions.”

Though Rasmussen said his original drafts were “just terrible” and “really unfortunate,” he plodded on, using feedback from mentors and close friends to hone the book’s style and structure and “really learn how to bring characters to life.”

The narrative in the final version often hovers just above the actions of individual characters, sometimes even venturing into their minds.

Reads one description, just before a revolt leader cuts down the notoriously cruel planter Manuel Andry: “His mind clouded by fear and anger, Andry’s eyes

fixed on Charles’s axe, a plantation tool transmuted into an icon of violent insurrection.”

Rasmussen, “a strong believer that history should speak to people,” said he took some license to speculate on characters’ thoughts and actions in order to help connect readers to his characters. This narrative style makes his account distinct from most history books.

And the work also stands out from your average historical account for another reason: It seems little concerned with withholding judgment and sometimes verges on directly condemning the planter lifestyle. Rasmussen said he’s now aware of that characteristic, and that the actions of the average planters he scrutinized must have partially compromised his effort to remain strictly aloof.

Of the average planter, he said, “It’s hard to not see him as evil.”