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## Interview

### CWBR AUTHOR INTERVIEW: THE GREAT HEART OF THE REPUBLIC: ST. LOUIS AND THE CULTURAL CIVIL WAR

Arenson, Adam

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Interview with Adam Arenson, Professor of History at the University of Texas at El Paso

Interviewed by Nathan Buman

*Civil War Book Review (CWBR)*: Today, *Civil War Book Review* is proud to speak with Adam Arenson, Professor of History at University of Texas at El Paso about his recent work, *The Great Heart of the Republic: St. Louis and the Cultural Civil War*. Professor Arenson, I appreciate you taking the time to speak with us.

**Adam Arenson (AA)**: It's my pleasure

**CWBR**: I was struck by your timeline. How did you decide to begin your narrative in the 1840s and conclude with the St. Louis World's Fair and Olympic Games in 1904?

**AA**: I found that they actually match very well with these national events that we often think of as the beginning and ending of the Civil War era: the end of the U.S. war with Mexico in 1848 and the Tilden-Hayes Election that is over with the semi-compromise of 1877. It was fascinating to see how these local and national events were in conversation, for example, the fire in 1849. That's a random event; in May 1849 there is a spark that catches from one steamboat to another and burns down a lot of downtown in St. Louis. But that turns out to be a great thing for the merchants of St. Louis because they are able to change their trade patterns from being about a North-South trade to New Orleans and old French patterns into a new East-West trade that takes advantage of their new position as a gateway to the West. Similarly, with Forest Park, the fact that

Governor Tilden of New York is in St. Louis in 1876 to be named the Democratic national nominee at the National Convention, that fact that they take a break from that convention to go out and dedicate Forest Park, I think it tied together these two moments where the national conversation is shifting very dramatically and the fact that both the Tilden-Hayes Election and the election to split the city and county of St. Louis end up very contested. There is a lot of discussion of fraud and they are basically both decided by extra-electoral decision making, that was another thing that helped me to see that these events could be tied together and help close the story.

**CWBR:** You discussed how insurance policies helped businessmen and women rebuild St. Louis after the great fire of 1849, describing the fire as their opportunity to start anew. How common were insurance policies during the period and how significantly did the decision to purchase insurance on one's business and inventory play into the rebuilding of St. Louis?

**AA:** What I found was that, right at the top or northern part of the waterfront, what you have is a number of the city's most wealthy individuals. They're French fur-trading families and they have a lot of investments in various places and I think, because they were well-connected to other trading centers, to the uncertainties of the steamboat trade, and to the fur trade rendezvous, they seemed to be better connected to the insurance markets. My analysis shows that, on the southern part of the fire, that was the area where it was more working-class, in modern terms. And those individuals, not only were they not able to save their belongings, because the whole city had rushed to save the northern part of the city, but they also were not people who were insured. And that area is emptied out, not because they're able to rebuild with insurance money, but because they have to go live with relatives or other people. So, there's two sets of change happening along the river: the northern part that is able to capitalize on the fact of the fire and the southern part who are really victims of it. And so it was interesting to see these two effects of the fire right in two different neighborhoods along the riverfront.

**CWBR:** It seemed to me that Thomas Hart Benton had a pretty firm grasp on the future and he understood the consequences of politics and the future of slavery? How was this insight possible and what did it mean for his career?

**AA:** Benton was born in North Carolina but at an early age he had moved west and he saw a rise of the West as the thing that would raise his fortunes in the

country. He was instrumental in the statehood debate and the Missouri Compromise that allowed Missouri to join as a state and then, from 1821, he was in the U.S. Senate representing Missouri and what he understood was the interest of the greater West. The introduction of the book talks about the three sides of the Civil War and this effort to see North, South, and West, not just North and South. That is something that Benton really exemplifies along with a lot of other figures who we often think of as being on opposite sides: people like Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis, and Henry Clay. Some of them ended up in different political parties but there is kind of a western agenda that all of them are pushing, thinking that the railroad, if it reaches out, first if they gain the continent, as they do in 1848 and then, once they can reach the Pacific, once they build that railroad, the politics, economics, and culture of the country will change pretty dramatically because of the differences in the West. They're not so worried about slavery; they're not so worried about tariffs and some of these eastern concerns because they think, once the mining riches of the West and the natural riches of the West, and certain other interests out on the Pacific become the center of national attention, then the West will really rise and these eastern concerns will matter a lot less. I think Benton is probably the person in American history who embodies that in one of the most powerful ways, especially for a politician rather than someone who is an adventurer, someone like Kit Carson.

**CWBR:** How did city leaders reconcile their desire that St. Louis be a beacon for growth, progress, and the American ideal in the future with the fact that immigrants from Europe were flooding the city and fueling this growth in the first place? Was St. Louis another "city on a hill?"

**AA:** This is another area where the unusual demographics of St. Louis play in. It's a city that has a large northern population and also a growing German population who are often free labor, free soil advocates, yet it's a large city on the border of slavery and freedom in a slave state, in this exceptional geographic location of Missouri after the Missouri Compromise. And so you have individuals from all of the different communities investing in the railroad; you have French fur-trading families who often held slaves investing in the railroad. You have the Germans; you have those from the Northeast. And part of what they thought is, like we can see later with Stephen Douglas and the Kansas-Nebraska Act, is that they saw the building of the railroad as linked to something that would dramatically change the way that slavery would function. And so I see some of their support for popular sovereignty-the idea that, as you move into the territory, the people of the territory themselves will determine if

slavery is necessary or not-I think that they see that, as railroads are this transformative technology, they're going to change the reality of living in these communities and only then will we know if slavery needs to continue or not. Looking back, we know that's a little optimistic, that slavery was a little more entrenched than they seemed to believe, but I think that really motivated their policy; they really thought the railroad would solve all.

**CWBR:** How were the slavery debates problematic for the supporters of the Transcontinental Railroad in St. Louis? Was this an indication that some semblance of unity is necessary to achieve national goals?

**AA:** There's definitely language that puts forth St. Louis as this great national city, this place that the whole country should look to. The most prominent moment where that happens is the founding of Washington University as this national, non-sectarian, non-political driven place that would be a beacon to education in the country. They talk of themselves as being the Harvard or Yale of the West, two years after they're founded, before they even have a building. Later, during Reconstruction, there's also an effort to move the national capital to St. Louis and they think that's, among other things, a nice gesture of sectional reconciliation. It will be in a place that is North, South, and West and not in Washington which they see as peripheral to the newly continental nation. So there are definitely ways in which St. Louis is trying to put forward itself as a global city. One of the pamphlets that's written for the Capital Removal Campaign, is called "St. Louis: The Future Great City of the World" and so they are very much embracing the German immigrants, the Irish immigrants, and others as coming to a city that's on the rise, that they're willing to take the best of the world and make it into what they see as the promise of the United States for the whole continent and then trade with the world as well.

**CWBR:** On Page 138 you make the statement that "Missouri's condition was so stable that the principles for postwar government could already be considered in June 1862." What, if anything, did President Lincoln and his administration learn from their experiences in St. Louis?

**AA:** What you see in St. Louis is, in May 1861 there is a skirmish at Camp Jackson as the Confederate-leaning state militia gather and then Union troops, along with a number of German volunteers, surround them and get them to surrender. That's really the only kind of battle in St. Louis. What you see after that is the building of gunboats, the training of troops, including lots of U.S.

Colored Troops, the caring for wounded and refugees from both sides, as well as new schools for African Americans, and a pretty strong presence for the Provost Marshall to keep the Confederate sympathizers at bay, but also not to expel them, not to remove them from the economy. So I think that balancing act, that effort to make sure the city is still a place of North, South, and West is what makes it an interesting model for thinking about wartime reconstruction. What does Lincoln gain from it, on the other hand? I think a lot of the examples are in the negative. General Fremont puts forward a proclamation in his efforts to deal with the Confederates in the western Missouri, where he is going to start emancipating slaves in 1861. Lincoln immediately shuts that down; Fremont is eventually removed. There are other examples where St. Louis gets ahead of what Lincoln thinks is prudent for the whole country and so he wants to be a little more cautious of it. On the other hand, Fremont works with William Greenleaf Eliot to create the Western Sanitary Commission and its as active as the U.S. Sanitary Commission out of Philadelphia in being the relief organization for the sick and wounded and refugees. And so that's an important part of the picture and the Sanitary Fair that they hold in 1864 gathers signatures and mementoes from heroes and notables all through, not only the West, but the country as a whole. Nelly Grant, General Grant's daughter is instrumental in selling a number of raffle tickets for important items too. So that's an interesting moment that thinks about how the home front notables, in ways, were connected to the military leaders as well.

**CWBR:** What were some of the challenges that St. Louisans faced that made their Reconstruction experience unique to the rest of the country?

**AA:** They had been a Union city in a border state, sort of nervously held for the Union so they're dealing with the aftermath of a slave society as much as the South is, but the city is not destroyed. They hadn't been a place of battles in a way that Richmond and other places were so you have some of the political issues that faced the former Confederacy but the economic possibility that the North and South are experiencing during Reconstruction. You have the mix of things going on and so I highlight both the success of people linked to St. Louis in creating Lincoln University, which is the school for African Americans founded by ex-U.S. Colored Troops, really a unique case in that way and also the first permanent memorial to Abraham Lincoln anywhere in the country. On the other hand, this capital removal effort, though it looks like something that is trying to bring everyone together and bring the national attention to St. Louis, as it falls apart, very quickly it becomes clear that these are individuals who are

willing to leave African-American civil rights question behind as they think about ways to reintegrate ex-Confederates and they sort of reinvigorate the Democratic Party through people like Frank Blair and Benjamin Gratz Brown, Missourians become very active in what ends up stalling, and eventually reversing, the advances of Reconstruction.

**CWBR:** You close your book with the quote, describing St. Louis as "impossible or visionary, unfortunate or impractical," and suggest that this might be a broad model for the general cultural civil war at the center of U.S. history. What can we take from your analysis of St. Louis that we can apply to our broader understanding of American history?

**AA:** Well, the period, I would say following, even the War of 1812 forward to the firing on Fort Sumter, that period is a period of really vast dreams for the United States. You have people like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Walt Whitman making poetic or artistic goals but you also have people like Thomas Hart Benton or the filibusterer, William Walker, making territorial goals, thinking about this is what we're going to do when we integrate the West, this is what we are going to do when we integrate Nicaragua, Cuba, or other places that the United States doesn't take in this period. So, there are so many wild dreams and, the fact that many of them succeed, we often don't think of how impossible some of these goals were. When the question over slavery becomes paramount and the war begins, you begin to see a recalculation of how people think about the role of these broad ideas in their own lives. In a book like Louis Menand's *The Metaphysical Club* you see the effect of the fighting on some of the deepest thinkers in the country. What I'm trying to do is bring the political story and the cultural story together in that way. You see the success of some wild dreams in St. Louis-their work on the railroad, the success of Washington University-but you also see their failure of something like the moving of the national capital and the way in which they set up a large urban park that doesn't really allow them to recapture the national imagination quite as they hoped. And I think that those contradictions between really broad claims and the realities of the society that is dealing with the end of slavery is really something that shapes much of nineteenth-century U.S. history in places far beyond St. Louis.

**CWBR:** That concludes our interview for this issue. Professor Arenson, thank you for joining us today and discussing *The Great Heart of the Republic: St. Louis and the Cultural Civil War*.

**AA:** Thank you; I've enjoyed it.