

CONVALESCENCE AND CALIFORNIA

The Civil War Comes West

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My remarks this evening all spring from a book project currently underway. I was trained as a Civil War historian by the Civil War scholar James M. McPherson. While I was in graduate school, my own scholarly interests migrated westward, and I chose western American history as my major field of interest, research, teaching, and writing. It has been my preoccupation for the last twenty years. But I maintain a kind of nagging attraction to the roots of my scholarly training, the coming of, waging of, and ultimate meanings of, the Civil War. I think that in the back of my mind I've been trying for several decades to figure out a way to amalgamate my interest in the West and the Civil War, to hit upon a research project that brings the two together. This book, and the part of it that makes up the following Whitsett Lecture, is about the post-Civil War American West. What role did the West play in the national drama of Reconstruction? What role did the West play in the healing, or attempts at healing, of the shattered nation and its shattered soldiers in the years and decades following the peace at Appomattox?

When does war end? At peace? At a treaty? At conquest? At a stand-down? At ultimate defeat? Yes, of course, but wars end elsewhere, too. War's end for countries in places and spaces very different than where they might end for individuals caught up in them. Think about the difference between the end of war for a nation and the end of war for a soldier. For a soldier war can end at death. At injury. At sickness. At desertion. At dereliction. At shell shock. At the space between harm's way and convalescence.

When did the Civil War end? I know it ended in 1865. I know it ended on Palm Sunday, when Lee surrendered to Grant, mere days before the Good Friday assassination of Abraham Lincoln, who had only that briefest interval, barely five days, to be freed from his terrible commander-in-chief burdens before John Wilkes Booth martyred him for the ages.

But let me offer two bookends, a nation apart, that might suggest a figurative coda to the Civil War. The Civil War might be said to have ended when the great battlefields of the contest were rendered commemorative sites. This is largely a late, indeed a very end-of-the-nineteenth-century phenomenon, and much credit for this has to be granted to John Page Nicholson, a Civil War veteran so obsessed with the place of the Civil War in national culture that, as a young officer in the midst of the conflagration, he painstakingly began collecting regimental and other histories on his own. Decades later, he would be placed in charge of the commemorative efforts to render the battlefields as virtual or actual national parks. From there, bestowed with statues, plaques, and monuments large and small, they entered national culture as somehow monuments to peace every bit as much as reminders of war, if not more so.²

And they had their baptism, if you will, in this commemorative and commemorating process, none more compelling or poignant than that of the most famous and most important battlefield in all American history. We might suggest that the Civil War ended in 1913, when enfeebled former Confederate soldiers, walking where they once ran, charged somewhat unsteadily up the long rise of Cemetery Ridge at Gettysburg, where they were met, with hugs and tears, by former Union foes. We might say, as many at that time did, that in some ways the Civil War ended there, in that moment of fraternal redemption, a half century removed from Gettysburg's horrific violence and Abraham Lincoln's valiant effort to wring higher meaning from the bloody sacrifice of so many dead, dying, and wounded.³

But maybe that storybook moment on Cemetery Ridge, important as it was, isn't the time and place to end the war. And maybe we'd better come West for a different perspective, a different vantage. For at the same time, and just mere miles from where we are gathered here this afternoon, a group of fairly ragtag theatrical performers were doing their own version of Civil War re-enactment, every bit as dramatic, compelling, and ultimately symbolic as that of the old men at Gettysburg. This was a different marking of the fiftieth anniversary of that hallowed ground of battle. This was in the hills and fields of greater Los Angeles; this was the making of D. W. Griffith's masterpiece, *Birth of a Nation*, a film that raised all sorts of questions about the meaning, legacies, and ultimate purposes of the Civil War, a film blamed for the resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan, and a film that suggested the Civil War was both not over and was, in fact, the recurring problem or sore within the American body politic. Griffith, in the West and from the West, suggested that the Civil War was anything but redemptive.

Whether that was true or not is immaterial; what the film, and particularly reception of the film, made clear was that the nation, and the West, had a long way to go before any racial divides gave way or gave ground to redemption. At virtually the same moment that elderly Gettysburg warriors reunited so symbolically on the eastern battlefield, Griffith and his film fired a cinematic western shot that stirred up the meaning of the war all over again.

Griffith and his film help us begin to think about the West in the aftermath of the war, and his is a troubling vision of the nation at the dawn of the twentieth century. Having come through the conflagration, what did it all mean?

Now, to be sure, there are other ways to draw the West into our thinking about the Civil War and its aftermath, and we shouldn't be surprised about this, despite the usual textbook and scholarly tendencies to neatly and surgically excise the West from the war and its many meanings. All we need to do, really, is look closer at the historical record and historical landscape.

There are other visions, western visions, of the post-Civil War world. For example, consider this story: in the late 1880s, an old man died in Pasadena. Owen Brown, one of John Brown's twenty children, who had been "mentally astray for some time," died in the home of his brother-in-

law Henry Thompson; his last words were, "it is better to be in a place and suffer wrong than to do wrong."⁴

Owen Brown had been, along with a number of his brothers, with his father at the notorious Harper's Ferry Raid in the late 1850s; abolitionist zealot and scripture-quoting John Brown had imagined that a raid upon the federal armory there would lead to a slave insurrection by which the institution of slavery would be at last destroyed. The raid was a murderous farce—the first man killed was the African American night watchman of the armory—and offered up one of the most remarkable ironies of the era; Brown and his ragtag group were vanquished by none other than United States Army Colonel Robert E. Lee. From there Brown was himself soon hanged and, in the process, martyred as a symbol of the North's rising abolitionist, and violent, sentiments at the very dawn of the Civil War. It also seems as if Owen was one of the last of the Harper's Ferry raiders to die, which in and of itself might suggest to us another opportunity to mark yet a different conclusion to the Civil War.

Owen Brown's obituary said that he was one of the few to escape the bloody Harper's Ferry fiasco, "through mountain fastnesses and swamps and forests and sassafras leaves." Some years later, Owen, along with his brother Jason, began homesteading high in the San Gabriel Mountains—clearing some land, working a few acres, and living in a tiny cabin. There, as the obituary put it, lived "two feeble old men," men whose beards flowed nearly to their waists, men who were much visited by tourists and the curious.

Two thousand Southern Californians attended Owen Brown's funeral. The pall bearers were a who's who of old abolitionists who had come west following the war, and they bore the casket from the funeral parlor to the tune and strains of "John Brown's Body," with its chorus of "Glory, glory hallelujah! His soul is marching on."

The reclusive, odd Brown brothers, sons of "old John Brown," who settled not far from where we are gathered this afternoon, did not just fall into Pasadena. They did not choose their mountain hideaway simply because it was so far away from Harper's Ferry, from Bleeding Kansas, from their father's Virginia execution, though I am sure that distance formed part of their reasoning for living out their final days in Southern California. Atop their mountain, they were hermits, peculiar. But they had both seen a lot of death by then and probably had their own versions of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Southern California beckoned because it is far away, but it beckoned, too, because Southern California, or at least parts of it, moved beyond the self-congratulatory language of boosterism and actually got into the healing act, actually tried to build a more egalitarian corner of the world as regards race and redemption.

The Brown brothers were observers of the world for the most part, though seemingly deeply devoted to temperance, cramped into their little cabin atop the San Gabriels. But their sister, Ruth Brown Thompson, was different.

She was married to Henry Thompson—it was their home in which Owen died. Henry Thompson was also with John Brown at Harper's Ferry. His two brothers, Dauphin and William, were killed in that raid. Henry Thompson had been shot through the lungs at the Battle of Black Jack in Kansas in 1856, when pro- and anti-slavery forces fought a pitched three-hour battle not long after John Brown and his followers had hacked five proslavery men to death in the Pottawattomie Massacre. Some consider the Battle of Black Jack to be the first battle of the Civil War.⁵

Southern California was not so far from this world. On the contrary, Southern California was highly responsive to this world. It styled itself as a redemptive place, a place where healing and convalescence could take place, a place far removed, even chastened, by the horrors of the Civil War.

Ruth Brown Thompson and Henry Thompson lived in the Arroyo Seco in Pasadena. It was Ruth Brown Thompson who took the region up on its post-war healing promises: she ran a convalescent hospital there, ministering to the sick and doing so across the racial divides that were rapidly solidifying as the century waned. And when she came down on her luck, to be redeemed by the friends she had made in the African American community, she acknowledged her thanks and debts in a letter published in the local paper:

To the Afro-American League, Pasadena, Cal.

Dear Friends: Please accept our warmest thanks for the gift of fifty-eight dollars and two cents. We feel an especial gratitude for your generosity as coming from those for whom John Brown gave up his life. We shall think of you often with grateful hearts.⁶

Where do these stories come from? And, in terms of what history can tell us, where do these stories go? What can we learn, what do we need to know, about this region and the aftermath of the Civil War?

On the one hand, Southern California came of age in an era of remarkable racial inclusiveness. Much of this emerged out of the cauldron of the Civil War and what it left in its legislative wake. The constitutional hat trick of the 13th, 14th, and 15th amendments, ending slavery, allowing for the black vote, and legislating protection under the due process clause, were revolutionary in their aims. Aims and execution weren't the same thing, of course, and much of the idealism, at least on the national level, was pretty quickly wrecked on the shoals of Southern resistance. But it is important for us to see the ties from the region to the war in just this way, to examine the context surrounding the presence of Owen, Jason, and Ruth Brown, and their racial egalitarianism, here in Southern California.

I think convalescence, as an idea, a faith, and a conviction, has a great deal to do with this—the convalescence of putting the nation back together, the convalescence of putting the wounded back together, the convalescence of repairing, or attempting to repair, the pain of centuries of racial antagonism and racial horrors.

I think the West, especially California, and most especially Southern California, spoke to these dire needs. And if we look closely enough in the historical record, we can find others who thought so, too.

In 1864, as the Civil War waged, and in commemoration of California's admission to the Union fourteen years earlier, the poet and short story writer Bret Harte wrote a poem. It is a poem of contrasts, contrasts between the war in the East and the pastoral tranquility and beauty of California and the far West. At the poem's conclusion, Harte compares California's "full harvest and the [wagon's] advance" to the bloodied battlefields of Civil War: "there the Grim Reaper and ambulance."⁷

Harte may or may not have been a great short story writer, but it is probably fair to say that he was not a great poet. But that's entirely beside the point here, for in this little couplet, he cleverly tied together in just a few words what struck so many Americans in the era of the Civil War and its aftermath—the country had been cleaved in two twice. First between North and South—hence the war; then between the theaters of war in the East, North and South included, and the pacific landscapes of the trans-Rocky Mountain West, California preeminent among them. There war, here peace. There death, here life. There injury and blood, here convalescence and healing.⁸

“Wagon’s advance” and “ambulance” make for a poor rhyme. But Harte was on to something he may not have known at the time. The Union Army’s ambulance corps during the Civil War was something new in medical and military history, at least insofar as United States troops were concerned.

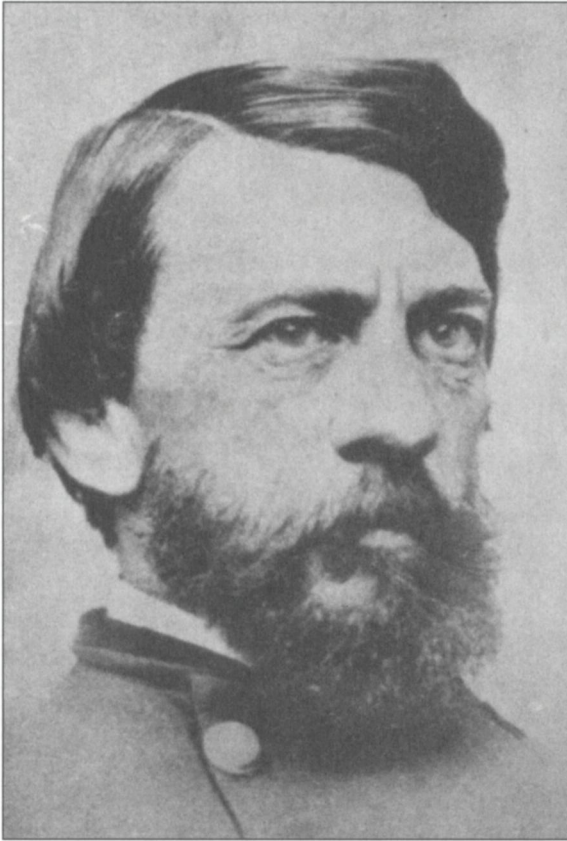
The ambulance corps was the brainchild of a physician named Jonathan Letterman. Slight, short, and thin, Letterman—a doctor with what an acquaintance called the “face of a scholar”—trained as a physician at Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia before the outbreak of the Civil War. Following completion of his medical training, Letterman joined the antebellum medical corps of the United States Army and was assigned to a rotation of installations in the West.

Rising rapidly in his career, he became a prominent surgeon and was made medical director of the Army of the Potomac during the Civil War. He is best known as author of the famed Letterman Plan, a far-reaching reorganization of Union hospitals and healthcare around a set of principles including fresh air, modular tent hospitals, battlefield triage, and the creation and efficient use of an ambulance corps. With ambulances, generally wagons pulled by men or horses, the battlefield wounded could be hastily fetched from where they previously would have lain for hours or even days, put into a triage system of care, and assigned then to their next destination: hospital, home, or back to the battlefield.

Jonathan Letterman knew Bret Harte’s Grim Reaper well. Any surgeon—any soldier—in the Civil War would have. And he was appalled by the carnage of the war, both that wrought by the hostilities and by the surgeons who worked for him. As he wrote following one engagement, “The Surgery of these battle fields has been pronounced butchery.”⁹

In the very year that Bret Harte wrote his California commemoration, 1864, Jonathan Letterman quit the service, and I suspect it had much to do with his revulsion at the human wreckage the war and its surgeons produced. His quitting was not in itself so unusual; we do not know nearly enough about Civil War resignations but we know that they happened.

But what Jonathan Letterman did next is at least slightly odd. He moved all the way across the nation here to Southern California, to what was then called Buena Ventura, what we now call Ventura on the coast north of Los Angeles, which in the mid-1860s was a humble crossroads of mostly nothingness. From this modest base of operations, Letterman pur-



Dr. Jonathan Letterman, medical director of the Army of the Potomac during the Civil War, relocated to Southern California hoping that relocation would allow him to start life anew. *Courtesy of Library of Congress LC-USZ62-117330.*

sued two projects, one a failure and one a success. One, he became an unsuccessful wildcat oil speculator working for a man named James de Barth Shorb, but he and Shorb failed miserably. Shorb would later get rich, build a big house on his ranchland south of Pasadena, go broke, and end up selling his ranch lock, stock, and barrel to Henry Huntington, who then established there his library, art collection, and botanical gardens.

Dr. Letterman had more success with his second project. While in Southern California, he wrote a book entitled *Medical Recollections of the Army of the Potomac*, a first-rate history of the Civil War from the physician's vantage.¹⁰ The book is literally a medical history of the Civil War written in the West. At the same time, the volume offers a metaphorical connection to the medical history of the Civil War written in the lives and

bodies of the thousands of veterans, Union and Confederate alike, who, alongside countless others, came to the West following the war, hoping that relocation would allow them to start life anew, if not life healed.

Jonathan Letterman's story is not a happy one; his far West was all about death, not life. Following his oil-hunting failure, he moved north to San Francisco and became that city's coroner. His young wife, Mary, whom he had married just before resigning his commission, took ill and died. Shattered by her death and prone to reclusiveness, Letterman died in 1872. The recently demolished military hospital at the Presidio Army installation in San Francisco was named for him in the early twentieth century, and if he's known at all today (and mostly he is not), it is for that honor.

John Brown's shell shocked sons. Their healing sister. Bret Harte's California poem, with its ambulance facing westward. Jonathan Letterman's life, his ambulances, and his medical history of the Civil War written at the very edge of the Pacific Ocean. Taken together, these figures and features hint at a different kind of California Dream of the latter nineteenth century that historians and others have unaccountably forgotten or at the least neglected. Their California, and their Southern California—Harte's, Letterman's, the Browns'—and their American West is the place of a certain set of dreams, dreams having everything to do with the Civil War, with convalescence, and with hope of gradual healing of both the body and the body politic.

As is perhaps already clear, I do not understand the decoupling of the Civil War from the experience of the West, a decoupling that occurred in precisely the same period. Think, for instance, about Los Angeles. We usually date the rise of Los Angeles to the mid-1880s, through the boom, the boosters, the railroad rivalries. We know that Los Angeles—it's brash and boisterous. I've written in other contexts about the hangover of the Mexican American War here in the far West and have argued that we would all be collectively better informed of the history of our place if we took that into greater account.

But we also, certainly, forget, and seemingly willfully forget, the presence of the Civil War in the lives of the people out here during the rise of Los Angeles. If you came to Los Angeles, on the make, ready to tackle the challenges and pitfalls of this place, and it was 1885, the Civil War was as close to you as the late 1980s are to us. It was with you.

More importantly, our excision of the Civil War negates and makes a mockery of the Civil War's almost indescribably profound impact upon the lives of all Americans. Historians are very fond of saying that the Civil War is still with us, and I admit that I'm one of them. But what that means, really, is that the momentousness of the event back then was so astonishing that its innumerable wakes and shock waves yet reverberate in our lives today. One could hardly live through the war without knowing someone or being related to someone who was wounded or killed in the war. The dead and wounded from the war amounted to well over a million men, or something in the neighborhood of one out of every thirty-four Americans at the time. The nation, North and South, was awash in the wounded following the war; entire chunks of state budgets, especially in the states of the former Confederacy, became earmarked for the treatment of the wounded. In the years immediately following the war, one fourth of the entire state budget of the state of Mississippi went for the purchase of artificial limbs for Confederate veterans of the war.

Americans, Northerner and Southerner alike, moved West in the postwar era in part because of the Civil War, because they wanted to get away, because they wanted to heal, physically, emotionally, or otherwise. And most of them came on the transcontinental railroad, which was, if anything, a device by which the nation was supposed to be drawn together after the war, a gigantic suture tying together the torn-asunder North and South. If we simply populate Los Angeles with excited mid-westerners railroading out here to remake Iowa, Indiana, or Michigan here in the basin, and forget the very recent Civil War sacrifice of those states and those people, and fail to mention the Virginians, the Georgians, and the Carolinians, we aren't paying very close attention to what the Los Angeles historical record is telling us.

I think that re-coupling the war with the region can be done in two critical ways: one is in regard to the coming of the war, and one is in regard to the ways in which the nation tried to heal the awful wounds of that war.

There's no doubt that the Civil War made the modern American West. Emerging from the catastrophe with a mighty and centralized federal presence, the United States set about incorporating the West into the nation in the aftermath of the war. That process took a generation, aimed at the final conquest of native peoples, tied the region into national net-

works of economy and transportation, and urged western settlement through further rationalization of the public lands.

But so, too, did the American West provoke and, in a very real sense, cause the Civil War. Abstract early nineteenth-century disagreements over territorial expansion and the future of slavery became fighting words by the 1840s and 1850s. The rapid escalation of sectional strife toward disunion can be drawn as an upward curve from one western moment or place to another. From the 1830s sectional turmoil surrounding expansion and warfare in Texas, through the 1846–48 brutal little war against the Republic of Mexico and subsequent Congressional and Constitutional questions over territorial acquisition, on to the Compromise of 1850 and the meaning of California, and thence to the killing plains of Bleeding Kansas by the mid-1850s: each arena of rising conflict had much to do with fundamental disagreements over the meaning of western conquest and the westward expansion of slavery or free-labor ideology. Taken together, they first rehearsed, and then helped to cause, the Civil War.

Historians of antebellum America correctly insist that the far West played a critical role in the eventual capitulation to war. Scholars know well the ways in which questions over the future of western territories, before and especially following the Mexican War, provoked political and other antagonisms on the ground and in Washington. The West helped bring about the war in one shattering moment after another, and western politicians proved incapable of meeting the challenges of sectionalism effectively, or were at the very least in over their heads, naïve and utterly unable to reverse the rush to the precipice that their very own region was initiating. By the time John Brown took what he learned as an abolitionist zealot in Kansas, namely how to slaughter pro-slavery opponents in cold blood, to the East and that federal armory at Harper's Ferry, the war was a *fait accompli*. Lincoln's election and the South's immediate secession were but additional preludes, not causes, of the clash that followed so quickly.

But what of the West after the war? With a few notable exceptions—generally works that trace Reconstruction policies in western settings—historians have too quickly jettisoned the West from their teaching and research devoted to the Civil War and the postwar period. This tendency (encapsulated in the usual textbook recitation of postwar western history through formulations such as “the Conquest of the West” or “the Rise of the West”) is profoundly misleading.

Western historians look for the Civil War in the West in the wrong places. A skirmish here or there, a real battle in northern New Mexico, and that is supposedly the whole story. But it is not so. The war was everywhere—in rhetoric and politics—and thus the impact of the war was also everywhere. If ever there was a case of western or American historians looking for trees while missing the obviousness of the forest, this is it. Yes, there were a few Civil War battles of importance in the West. The dramatic engagement at Glorietta Pass, New Mexico, is the most famous and most important, and it did blunt a Confederate hope to hold a supply and territory line in the far Southwest, stretching north even into pockets of pro-slavery sympathies very strongly expressed right here in Los Angeles. But finding battlefields, digging up spent bullets, or plotting troop movements is not the only, or even most emblematic, way to find the Civil War in the West. The war was fought on battlefields of the East and South, and it was fought there because of the ways in which northern, southern, and western politicians disagreed about the West. As such, the war was everywhere in the West—before, during, and after hostilities.

Now, if difficult and apparently insurmountable questions about the fate of the West in the nation caused the Civil War, because antagonistic sections of the Union could no longer peaceably agree about what the West would look like, and for whom—what did the West do to heal the wounds of that war?

The question was not lost on sharp observers or people who understood, if wishfully, that the West had a special role (if not special obligation) in the postwar aftermath when peace ought to reign. Some understood that soon-to-be veterans would find their way West. In early 1865, for example, the *New York Herald* wrote of the restlessness and independence of soldiers, insisting that postwar work—"the dull routine of regular employments"—would hardly satisfy men accustomed to the nomadic adventurousness of soldiering. "There are plenty of fine, strapping fellows who would laugh at the idea of being bound down to a bench or a spade after having enjoyed the liberty of war." What would become of these men? They would go west. "Colorado, Idaho, Nevada, Montana, and Utah, to say nothing of Mexico, Sonora, Sinaloa, Durango, Chihuahua, Lower California, are yearning for such settlers as those in the armies of the North and the South. . . . They will go there, settle down, populate the country, get rich and double the size of the Union within twenty years."¹¹

It is intriguing that the *Herald* assumed postwar peace between Northerners and Southerners in the West, as if geography alone could overwhelm the antagonisms of the “late unpleasantness.” It is a wishful, if quaint, notion about a region where, as elsewhere, even the veterans’ hospitals like our own in Los Angeles, that would eventually open in Westwood once Senator John P. Jones of Nevada provided the government with the large parcel of land, would be open only to those soldiers who had fought on the side of the Union. The postwar peace made no provision for Confederate veterans in this regard.

But what the *Herald* missed is as interesting as what the paper surmised. What was missing was the convalescent quality of much of that postwar migration westward and the reasons for it. The larger project from which this lecture is derived is one in which I expect to pay attention to westering people, individuals and collective Americans both, and I want to try to understand their journeys in the years after (and because of) the Civil War. This will be, I suspect, a book mostly about them. But it is about how they got to the West; such a perspective invites a closer look at that transcontinental railroad suture. The railroad project spanning the nation was perfectly coincident with, and not at all coincidental to, the Civil War.

Scarcely a week after the Emancipation Proclamation went into effect in early 1863, groundbreaking ceremonies were held in Sacramento for the launch of the Central Pacific Railroad. Designed to be built eastward, to meet the westward-building Union Pacific somewhere—the Central Pacific and its role in the transcontinental project was hailed as something other than ordinary railroad building. This, like the language of Bret Harte’s couplet, was the western answer to the eastern Civil War.

“Hail, then, all hail,” exclaimed an orator at that groundbreaking, “this auspicious hour! Hail this bond of brotherhood and union! Hail this marriage tie between the Atlantic and the Pacific! Hail, all hail, this bow of promise which amid all the clouds of war is seen spanning the continent—the symbol, the harbinger, the pledge of a higher civilization and an ultimate and world-wide peace!”¹²

It would be almost a year before any rails were laid. But the burden was already placed on the railroad project to provide the iron stitches for the wounded nation—on a line east to west, the rail project would heal North and South. Central Pacific and Union Pacific would meet, and not

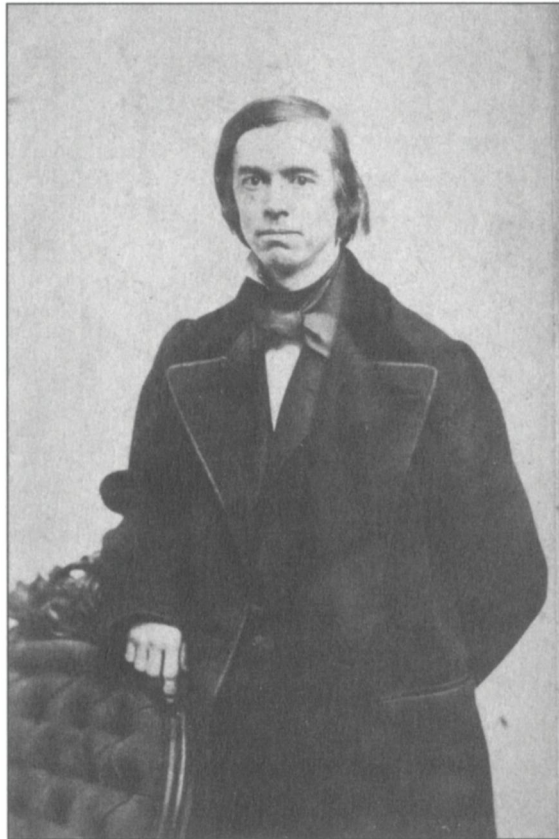
only would the oceans be bridged, but so too would the railroad corporations herald a renewal of the injured nation itself.

The point was hardly lost on preachers; their sermons tied the railroad to the biblical exhortation to “make straight in the desert a highway for our God” and forcefully prophesized great tidings to be brought forth upon the driving of the last spike. Said one, “I think we must all feel that the mission of railroads is somewhere in the general direction of human peace, fraternity, unity. Clearly these iron bonds which bind States ...hint a higher and warmer and purer brotherhood of mankind.”¹³

Another made the point all the more vehemently. With the railroad, “the New Jerusalem is coming down out of Heaven, and will switch off into Oakland.” This unsubtle declaration that the Second Coming was at hand was not so unusual in the 1860s; some believed that the Civil War itself could be found in the Book of Revelation’s prophecies, while others assumed that the railroad itself would provide divine transportation for Jesus Christ’s triumphal return earthward. And, to be sure, that holy arrival was to take place in the West. Linkage of the completion of the transcontinental railroad to the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy is but a single instance of the supposedly redemptive power of the postwar American West.

And lest we think that is mostly or only a moment of northern California celebration, we should remember that the transcontinental railroad arrived in Southern California but eight years later to fanfare, celebration, and claims of prophecies and promises fulfilled nearly as vociferous and joyful.

People of far more ordinary stature than Jesus Christ himself most certainly did come west or wish to come west, driven there by the Civil War, and their journeys heralded redemption of a different cast or power. For example, Surgeon Jonathan Letterman shared San Francisco in common with his contemporary, Thomas Starr King. Known mostly by his middle and last names, Starr King, as a young Unitarian preacher in Boston, had been a favorite of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Barely five feet tall and very slight, King had delicate health. But he was a brilliant orator who captivated his audiences with fiery denunciations of the war and slavery. King moved to northern California in 1860 to take up a pulpit in San Francisco, and he knew well the impact of the Civil War on the nation and its young men, even from the far-off Pacific Coast.



Fiery orator and Unitarian minister Thomas Starr King moved to California in 1860, where he preached peace and healing. *Courtesy of California Faces: Selection from The Bancroft Library Portrait Collection; University of California, Berkeley.*

King's many contemporary admirers, including Abraham Lincoln, argued that he kept California in the Union and out of the Confederacy. This claim is often made here in Southern California, a hotbed of Confederate sympathies.¹⁴ King's words and fire-and-brimstone pronouncements were powerful fodder for Unionists in Los Angeles. Did he keep California in the Union? No. This exaggerates both the state's Confederate leanings and King's influence. Nonetheless, horrified by the war's carnage, he did preach peace and healing and used his California pulpit to great moral advantage. He organized a far-western branch of the United States Sanitary Commission, which raised huge sums for the treatment of wounded Union soldiers. Caught up in the effort well beyond his abilities to withstand the stress, King preached himself to death, dying of diphtheria at thirty-nine in 1864.

King's death can be understood as part of a triptych of Civil War martyrs. John Brown established the first link in this chain by his martyrdom to the cause of anti-slavery when hanged at the end of 1859 for his quixotic and murderous quest to loot the federal armory at Harper's Ferry of its weapons in order to start a domestic insurrection against slavery. His martyrdom was in the name of the redemptive power of warfare, as Brown aimed, as he put it, "to purge the land with blood."

Once John Brown attempted his assault on Harper's Ferry, once the abolitionist North embraced his gallows offer of ferocious martyrdom, the Civil War had all but arrived. Thomas Starr King's western martyrdom was different—like Lincoln's, his death was wrapped in opposition to the war. Brown's death helped inaugurate the war; King and Lincoln died, in effect, as victims of it.

Starr King saw in the far West, and especially in a place like California's Yosemite, which he adored, the hope both for national unification and closeness to God. His death was hailed as a way to unite the nation, East and West, North and South, through honoring his life and vision. His was a life marked as a western beacon of peace, and after his death many seemed to think that this vision and work would continue. As the *Los Angeles Times*, which apotheosized King when it started publication decades after his death, observed, "By his grave it seemed as if strife was for the hour ended."¹⁵

And what of that martyr lofted far above Starr King? Killed on Good Friday, 1865, Abraham Lincoln never made it to California. But he wanted to. Within hours before his death, Lincoln spoke of visiting the far West. Utterly exhausted by the commander-in-chief stresses of leading the Union through four years of war, the congenitally melancholy president yearned for the rejuvenation and convalescence that California seemed to promise.

Schuyler Colfax, Speaker of the House of Representatives, met with Lincoln on the day of the assassination. When he told the president that he was soon to be off to California, Lincoln responded that he wished that he could come along. Later that day, Lincoln went for a carriage ride with his wife. His thoughts again turned to California and the far West. He proposed to Mary Lincoln that they travel to the Rockies and go thence on to California. The trip would be restful and reinvigorating. Lincoln was in an exuberant mood, Mary recalled later, so much so he startled her.

His assassination makes the moment all the more ironic—Lincoln looked west for healing on the very day he was killed. In the end, it wasn't Lincoln that came; it was the widows: Custer's, Garfield's, and Fremont's. Los Angeles became their home or their refuge, and it would make for a fine historical study to try to figure out the connections between place and such examples of elite widowhood in the era of the Civil War.



A search for the cultural power of the healing West can take us to pages of fiction alongside those of biography and memoir. And in this respect, one book stands out above all others. *The Virginian*, a turn-of-the-century best seller now enshrined in the American canon, is all about a Southern boy scarred by the loss of male family members in the war. He lights out for the West. There, he meets and falls in love with New Englander Molly; together they drop their sectional loyalties and penchant for sectional antagonisms, and in the West they remake their own lives and, as the narrator makes clear, in doing so they symbolize a re-made America.

That narrator was author Owen Wister. His own life speaks of the search for health in the West. Suffering, like his mother, from neurasthenia, the grab-bag Gilded Age diagnosis used to describe maladies ranging from, among others, war-induced shell shock and post-traumatic stress disorder, anorexia nervosa, bi-polar disorder, schizophrenia, and simple exhaustion, both Wisters were patients of Dr. Silas Weir Mitchell, a Philadelphia physician famous for his treatment of neurasthenics and for co-authoring a treatise on the diagnosis and treatment of Civil War gunshot wounds. Mitchell ordered Wister's mother, Sarah, to bed. He ordered her son to the West. Owen Wister's westering changed his life, and he paid back a regional debt in his fiction: the West of *The Virginian* is nothing short of the new America, a place shorn of long-standing enmity between North and South and a place where North and South could find redemption in new matrimonial bonds.

I think America suffered from the neurasthenia borne of nationwide postwar stress disorder. The South had chosen to amputate itself from the Union, despite Lincoln's constitutional insistence that secession was not literally possible, that this rash act could only be illegitimate rebellion. So many of our stereotypical associations of the West and true American

character—rugged individualism, the cowboy mystique, the association of American values with particular landscapes—date from the postwar era. The nation was in search of itself. A wounded North mistrusted the South; the shattered South mistrusted the North: the West and all that it could mean about America, beckoned.

Wounded in body and body politic both, the nation and its people looked west and went west. To the Rockies, to the Northwest, to the Southwest, and of course to California. We have long known of Southern California's attraction to those suffering pulmonary distress in the late nineteenth century. Both the well-to-do, suffering from "consumption," and the poor, whose identical maladies were termed "tuberculosis," came west hoping in vain for a cure. We can't really understand late nineteenth-century Southern California without grappling with diseases of this type. But we misread the story, I think, if we see these as somehow uncoupled from the great national trauma of the very recent Civil War. Pulmonary and other distress could be neurasthenic, just as they could be caused by insults less subtle than bacteria: a wartime gunshot wound, for example. The healing landscapes of the post-Civil War West, wishful though they may have been, need to be re-examined by scholars with a close eye on the Civil War and its effects. We need, in other words, to look for the war in the lives of the wounded; we need to see the amputees amidst the orange groves.

Owen Wister went west and it remade him. So, too, with his close friend, and the man to whom his novel is dedicated. Nearly incapacitated by fragile health and near-sightedness until the West bucked him up, Theodore Roosevelt was both healed and remade by the West, and it is that region he chose to embody for the rest of his life as the rough-riding cowboy and president. The same is again true with Charles Fletcher Lummis, who traded Harvard and a midwestern newspaper life for a famous walk across the Southwest in the 1880s. Los Angeles forever changed Lummis. He essentially stayed in Southern California for the rest of his busy life, where he would embody the Southwest (a region whose name he immodestly claimed to have invented) in vigorous displays of masculine vitality and virility, some of it undoubtedly fueled by his customary forty cups of coffee a day. As yet but in the earliest stages of a larger research project focused on these themes, I have been startled by the frequency of encounters with those whose lives echo with the power, presumed or real, of the postwar West to rejuvenate themselves and the nation.

Frederick Law Olmsted came west. From his position as secretary of the United States Sanitary Commission, where he saw firsthand and then wrote about the ravages of the war, Olmsted exchanged carnage for California. In 1864, the year of Bret Harte's poem, Starr King's death, and Jonathan Letterman's retreat to California, Olmsted wrote the first, and arguably the most important, treatise on Yosemite. In some specific Yosemite respects, his report is a kind of Letterman plan for the wounded nation—a prescription for the nation to medicate itself, physiologically and psychologically, by immersion in nature, by going, getting, and staying outdoors.

Starting with Olmsted, where so much seems to originate, might we re-examine the inauguration of the national park movement in light of the Civil War? The movement, aptly encapsulated by federal action regarding Yosemite in 1864 and Yellowstone in 1872, was both a western phenomenon at the outset and perfectly coincident with the rise of the nation's war-induced medical and psychological needs.

To Olmsted, the Yosemite Valley was already a park in the early 1860s. The valley floor was, he quickly surmised, ideally suited for contemplation and its rewards, a bigger and bolder environment in the genre of the New England landscapes of transcendental reverie, or his own Central Park. He oversaw the first Yosemite Commission, a body charged with formulating plans about management of the Yosemite landscape once Congress established protections for it. Olmsted responded with ideas by then very familiar to him about the necessity of melding democracy with nature in order to preserve both. The trauma of the Civil War had heightened the nation's "susceptibility" to contemplation, both aesthetic and therapeutic. As he wrote, "It is a fact of much significance with reference to the temper and spirit which ruled the loyal people of the United States during the war of the great rebellion that a livelier susceptibility to the influence of art was apparent."¹⁶

Olmsted's arguments emphasized the point that Yosemite's arrival into American consciousness, whether by way of famed 1860s photographs, paintings, or floridly descriptive writings, was about national healing and personal convalescence in both physical and psychological terms. "If we analyze the operation of scenes of beauty upon the mind," he wrote, "and consider the intimate relation of the mind upon the nervous system and the whole physical economy, the action and reaction



Frederick Law Olmsted saw Yosemite Valley as ideally suited for contemplation, both aesthetic and therapeutic. *Courtesy of M. Ovnick, May 1987.*

which constantly occur between bodily and mental conditions, the reinvigoration which results from such scenes is readily comprehended. Few persons can see such scenery as that of the Yosemite and not be impressed by it in some slight degree."¹⁷

As had Letterman, Olmsted, Wister, King, and countless others, the shattered nation looked west, beyond the apocalyptic conflagration, to find, as Olmsted championed, environments peaceful and restorative. None were more important than Yosemite.

Olmsted envisioned for the West, and again one sees the impact of the Civil War in this, something different than the meanings attached to natural landmarks in the antebellum period. We must place Olmsted's

contemplative Yosemite alongside its precursor as the most American of natural places—what Yosemite became, Niagara Falls once was. But Niagara, by virtue of what it is and was environmentally, was far less a contemplative site than Yosemite. It fit more into the need to see the sublime power of God at work so that the viewer might be scolded or shocked back into submissiveness in the Almighty's presence.

What remains to be connected are the dots of historical influence and historical personalities between, for instance, Olmsted's vision of the western landscape and Los Angeles' plaintive attempts to get Olmsted to come design landscapes for the growing region as early as the 1890s. Olmsted turned Los Angeles down, and again so did his sons in the early twentieth century, just as Gettysburg's fiftieth anniversary was being marked and *Birth of a Nation* was being made. By the time the Olmsteds agreed to think and design in Los Angeles, in the late 1920s, the Civil War era had at last passed. Lummis was gone; Los Angeles was not really in the Southwest anymore. It was the metropolitan hub on the verge of what the Second World War would bring it—just beyond the hiatus of the Depression—and the needs of the place had changed. When Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., offered up his plan of comprehensive landscape planning and, woven in, convalescent nature, the powers that be decided that they didn't need it, they didn't embrace it, they didn't buy it, and they didn't vote for it, and thus it died. One wonders what its fate might have been had it come about earlier, when its gifts might have been better appreciated by leaders and a population that had been through the Civil War.¹⁸

Yosemite is slightly out of field in a talk ostensibly about post-war Southern California. But there's a point to be made here. All the convalescent talk and faith regarding the Southern California landscape had its connections to the national parks, to Yosemite in particular, and to the fascinating notions about Los Angeles existing within a very special embrace of nature. And while we correctly emphasize northern California's, and especially the Bay Area's, connections to Yosemite, largely through the Sierra Club, we'd do well to remember that Yosemite played a very important role in the lives and imaginations of Southern Californians as well, that Southern California and Southern Californians played important roles in the creation and sustenance of Yosemite, as they do yet.

Should we connect John Muir, the so-called Yosemite hermit, to the far-off Civil War and to journeys of personal and physical redemption in

the West? I think so, just as I think we ought to be much more cognizant of the Southern California episodes in the lives of such people as Muir and, as well, famed photographer Carleton Watkins, Yosemite's first great photographer, whose work so anticipated that of Ansel Adams and whose views of the Southern California landscape were all about pastoral reflection and peaceful growth. Had not so much of Watkins' work burned up in the fires following the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, we'd have a better sense of his "Southern California-ness" and the ways in which he connected landscape, nature, region, and places like Yosemite.

Is it a surprise? John Muir loved Los Angeles, and many of the closest friends of his entire life were here. Raised in Wisconsin, John Muir came of age with the coming of the Civil War. It appalled him, not least because Wisconsin regiments were so much cannon fodder once Ulysses S. Grant figured out that he had far more men to sacrifice than did Robert E. Lee. Wisconsin sent nearly 100,000 men to fight for the Union in the war, and Wisconsin regiments, including the famed Iron Brigade, suffered high casualty rates in battles such as Antietam and Gettysburg.

John Muir dodged the wartime draft by walking to Canada, and thence throughout the continent and eventually on to California and to Yosemite, where he stayed four years or, in some ways, for the rest of his entire life.

To argue that Muir loved the Sierra Nevada landscape would vastly understate his passion. The mountain range was, as he put it so enduringly, "the Range of Light." His was assuredly a religious, redemptive exuberance about the Sierra. To Muir, God's handiwork was inscribed all over Yosemite. Muir's scamperings around the park, which are the stuff of legitimate legend a hundred years later, were inextricably tied to his devotional life. In the Yosemite landscape he saw a conduit to the divine and, increasingly, the divine itself. His searches, high and low and to and fro, are joyous in their abandon, a joy made infectious through his writings. Muir's ecstatic discoveries revealed and replenished his passion. It is not hard to discern the polarities in Muir's worldview. War, and especially the Civil War, was profanity. In Yosemite was divinity.

Muir exemplified Olmsted's lessons about the significance of Yosemite and, by extension, the landscapes of the entire postwar West, even the urban landscapes of an upstart city. But does that inform us that the post-

war West was truly a redemptive place? Could it heal the wounds of disunion, heartache, and death—national and individual insults that it has such a central role in provoking in the first place?

The short answer is that we don't know. But one promising avenue that calls out to be more deeply explored in precisely these terms is the historical experience of African Americans following the Civil War, and in this we come somewhat full circle back to Ruth Brown Thompson, her brothers, and her friends. In their courageous attempts to start life anew following the abolition of slavery, thousands of newly freed people effectively rearranged the heavens. Where the North Star had once shone brightly over places like Frederick Douglass' Rochester and his abolitionist newspaper, freedom's beacon in some ways rotated ninety degrees in the night sky of the postwar. Newly illuminated for black Southerners were places like Kansas, Oklahoma, Colorado, and, especially, California. Following the call of charismatic black leaders and preachers who self-consciously echoed Moses in the desert, freed Exodusters walked and rode west a step ahead of the Ku Klux Klan and the grim violence of what white Southerners claimed was their own postwar redemption of a flawed Dixie. Once West, these pioneers soon discovered that the glow of western freedom perhaps promised more than it delivered—many settled into all-black townships, self-segregated enclaves of self-sufficiency, racial pride, and solidarity at least partially insulated from the often less-than-ideal racial atmosphere of the far West.¹⁹

I think Los Angeles, and hopes tied to Los Angeles, were at the center of this post-Civil War black west. Consider W. E. B. Du Bois, the leading African American intellectual in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Du Bois fell in love with the far West. Hardly a gushing sentimentalist, Du Bois nonetheless nearly outboosted the boosters in his praise of Los Angeles written in the pages of *The Crisis*, the magazine of the new National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the organization he helped to found in the first decade of the twentieth century. "One never forgets Los Angeles and Pasadena," he wrote, "the sensuous beauty of roses and orange blossoms, the air and the sunlight and the hospitality . . . lingers long."²⁰

Du Bois very nearly pronounced Southern California—with its tree-lined boulevards, the fragrance of the flowers, the beaches, and freedom

wafting in the breezes—the promised land, the place where the physical and psychic hurts of slavery might be healed. Du Bois' fervent enthusiasm is all the more poignant because they seem so out of character for the hard-headed scholar who was the bridging figure between Frederick Douglass and Malcolm X. And he was at least partially, if not mostly, wrong, and there's undoubted poignancy in that, too.

For as black Southerners left a South retrenched in apartheid, Jim Crow accompanied them westward. That is not to doubt some of the redemptive qualities of life in the West. Life *was* better in the West. How could it not be when post-Civil War lynchings of blacks, and their white political allies in the party of Lincoln, became brutally routine? Life was better, but it got worse.

One can nearly see a window—call it a redemptive window—opened briefly in the postwar West. But for how long? A generation? The West not only appeared, but was, more racially egalitarian—the pattern holds for barometers attuned to anti-Semitism, anti-Mexican behavior, and anti-African American thought, word, and deed, in the single generation following the Civil War. That this had somehow to do with a redemptive hopefulness regarding region and regional promise would seem at least worthy of greater study, though glaring exceptions to the tendency arise to pose immediate contradiction.

And just to be clear, the postwar West utterly failed Asians and Asian Americans. The supposed racial threat Asians, especially the Chinese, posed to whiteness, was deemed so troubling that they alone were singled out as unacceptable candidates for the privileges of citizenship. Post-Civil War America excluded the Chinese from the nation—a racist diplomatic cudgel codified in 1880s exclusion laws—and such restrictions were of course first forged in the far West.



He might never have come west, but Abraham Lincoln knew all about national redemption. When he dedicated the new cemetery at Gettysburg in late 1863 with a few hundred words, he recast the Constitution by way of a reinterpretation of the Declaration of Independence. By taking the Declaration at its word, and thus radicalizing the document's

claims of equality among all people, Lincoln literally rewrote what the Civil War stood for, even as it continued to rage. That was a redemptive oratorical act, in that it cast greater honor on the Union dead that Lincoln spoke of that day, those from whom, he said, all should take “increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion.”

It seems no surprise that Lincoln’s thoughts turned west as the war closed in the spring of 1865. The Union had been preserved, but the cost had been shatteringly high. Well over a half million men lay dead. Countless others were sorely wounded in spirit and forever broken in body. And so, too, the nation itself. Why wouldn’t Lincoln think to compare destruction and renewal, East and West? Why wouldn’t he look to the West in his mind’s eye as a convalescent landscape for both himself and the nation?

But five days following Robert E. Lee’s surrender at Appomattox, John Wilkes Booth assassinated Lincoln. Had he lived, Lincoln surely would have come west, if not in person then in beautiful language and oratory. He would have exhorted the West to live up to its convalescent promises to a wounded nation—and he would have asked more of the place, too. What we’re left with is Lincoln on our landscape, and he’s not hard to find—in the names of our schools and parks and neighborhoods, as a proxy to any actual visit he might have made in which he could have made his regional expectations of our place clear.

Make no mistake. As North and South looked west in the postwar for new national ideals and national meanings free of the violence borne of sectional conflict, Lincoln would have urged the West to live up to its promise—not of wealth—but of renewal and redemption. Lincoln fell. And we must conclude that the West fell short of its promise. But might we, in stories and the hopes of over a century ago, find the stuff by which to rededicate ourselves and our region to again be a place where, even now in a terrible time of war, the magnetic appeal of peace and redemption emanates and echoes from western places, from western hearts, and from western people? We will again soon see the wounded, the grievously wounded, in our midst. Might we renew a commitment to the belief that war ends when and where national and individual healing together begin?

NOTES

- ¹ The author offers sincere thanks to the Whitsett Committee and Whitsett Endowment at California State University, Northridge, especially professors Josh Sides and Merry Ovnick. Thanks as well to the Office of the Provost at the University of Southern California for research support.
- ² See the John Page Nicholson Collection at the Huntington Library. From 1861 to 1865, Nicholson served as regimental quartermaster with the 28th Pennsylvania Infantry regiment. He began to amass his collection of Civil War material at that time and added to it (prodigiously) following the war. From 1885 until his death in 1922, he served as recorder in chief of the Military Order of the Loyal Legion, and was Secretary of the Board of Commissioners of Gettysburg Monument. A very fine discussion of the culture of post-Civil War reconciliation is Nina Silber's *The Romance of Reunion: Northerners and the South, 1865–1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997).
- ³ As many as 55,000 veterans of the war attended the fiftieth anniversary of Gettysburg.
- ⁴ See *Pasadena Standard*, January 12, 1889 at http://tchester.org/sgm/mssc/brown_funeral_notice.html
- ⁵ The author's thanks to Nick Smith and Gary Cowles for their assistance.
- ⁶ See *Pasadena Daily News*, November 19, 1901; the author thanks Nick Smith for this reference.
- ⁷ "Poem Delivered on the Fourteenth Anniversary of California's Admission into the Union, September 9, 1864," in Bret Harte, *Complete Poetical Works* (New York: F. P. Collier & Son, 1902).
- ⁸ For related and earlier discussion of many of the ideas presented here in this talk and essay, see the author's "Redemptive California: Re-thinking the Post-Civil War," in *Rethinking History* 11, no. 1 (March 2007): 61–78; see also the forthcoming essay "From the Farther West: Mormons, California, and the Civil War," in *The Journal of Mormon History*.
- ⁹ For the text of Letterman's letter, see *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. vol. 1, series 27 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), 106–17.
- ¹⁰ Jonathan Letterman, *Medical Recollections of the Army of the Potomac* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1866).
- ¹¹ *New York Herald*, February 6, 1865.
- ¹² See William Deverell, *Railroad Crossing: Californians and the Railroad, 1850–1910* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 12.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁴ See Louis A. Di Donato, "Charles Myers Jenkins: A Sketch of the Extraordinary Life of an Ordinary Man," *Southern California Quarterly* 88 (Summer 2006): 125–60, about the Union Army experience of one Angeleno.
- ¹⁵ *Los Angeles Times*, August 24, 1887.
- ¹⁶ Quoted in Scott Hering, *Lines on the Land* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2004), 19.
- ¹⁷ Linda W. Greene, *Yosemite: The Park and its Resources*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of the Interior/National Park Service, 1987), 56.
- ¹⁸ See Greg Hise and William Deverell, eds., *Eden by Design: The 1930 Olmsted/Bartholomew Plan for the Los Angeles Region* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).
- ¹⁹ For black America's perspectives on Los Angeles, see Douglas Flamming's fine study, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005).
- ²⁰ See William Deverell and Douglas Flamming, "Race, Rhetoric, and Regional Identity: Boosting Los Angeles, 1880–1930," in Richard White and John Findlay, eds., *Power and Place in the North American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 117–43.