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# More than Just a Prize: The Civil War and the West

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For example, back in the 1980s and 1990s, regionalists argued frequently about where to locate the eastern boundary of the West, but they tended to accept as fixed the placement of northern, southern, and western borders. This, though, was before studies of “the Pacific world” opened the North American West to its west. It was also before histories of “borderlands” made contingent and fluid the northern and southern boundaries of

the region and nation, and, indeed, made all borders subject to crossing. In fact, over the last decade, borderlands has supplanted frontier as the favorite construct of western historians. But the success of borderlands has made it into something of a catch-all concept, and in its various and vague usages it invites criticism on some of the same grounds that were used by those who wished to banish the frontier.

Space here does not permit a fuller explication of the directions taken by recent scholarship and how these enliven and reframe western history. We can hope that the debates they spark should disturb the peace that has lately prevailed in the pages of the *Western Historical Quarterly*. And by reminding us of what really matters, these fights about western history could restore some peace to the Western History Association.

## More Than Just a Prize: The Civil War and the West

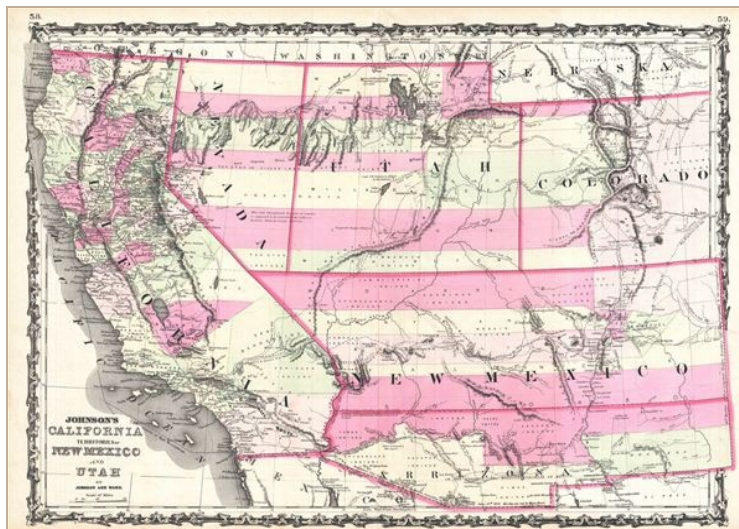
by Adam Arenson

When it comes to the causes, conduct, and consequences of the Civil War, western history gets a little soft in the middle.

The question of slavery’s expansion into the West gets its due, of course. The annexation of Texas, the acquisition of Oregon, and the conquest of northern Mexico that doubled the size of the country between 1845 and 1848, ground any discussion of Manifest Destiny. Even in Civil War courses, the overland trails and the gold rush get a cameo to introduce the unsatisfying Compromise of 1850 and the fighting along the Kansas-Missouri border. Similarly, the age of the cowboys, the completion of the transcontinental railroad lines, and the participation of Civil War veterans, black and white, in the conquest

and containment of the American Indian nations, highlight postwar histories—the best of which, like the work of Elliott West and Heather Cox Richardson, explain how the incorporation of the West was intimately linked with Reconstruction.<sup>1</sup>

Western historians have emphasized the importance of the unfulfilled citizenship promises to Spanish-speaking Americans in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo; the varieties of unfree labor present throughout the West; and the exodus of free African Ameri-



Alvin Jewett Johnson’s 1863 map of California, Nevada, Utah, Colorado, New Mexico and the new Confederate state of “Arrizona.” Courtesy of Geographicus Rare Antique Maps, [www.geographicus.com](http://www.geographicus.com)

<sup>1</sup> Elliott West, “Reconstructing Race.” *Western Historical Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 7–26, and Heather Cox Richardson, *West from Appomattox: The Reconstruction of America after the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).



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cans from San Francisco to Victoria, British Columbia in 1858 to escape the reach of the *Dred Scott* decision. They have linked the granting of suffrage to the women of Wyoming Territory in 1869 with the debate and interpretation of equal rights under the Reconstruction Amendments. And some might remember to say the war did not end at Appomattox, but after the last pitched battle at Palmito Ranch, near the Texas-Mexico border, on May 12 and 13, 1865; after the surrender of the last of the Confederate generals, Cherokee leader Stand Watie on June 23, 1865, and after the flight of many western Confederate officers into Mexico.

But when it comes to offering a western perspective on the events between Fort Sumter and Appomattox, there can be a deafening silence.<sup>2</sup> Some western-history textbooks just skip the war years. Others focus, understandably, on the creation of new federal territories in the West (as discussed elsewhere in this newsletter) that caused the intensification of Army attacks on Native American nations - including new onslaughts against the Shoshone, Snake, Navajo, Apache, and Paiute peoples.

Yet western history has a lot to offer Civil War history. When Civil War historians talk about the war's western theater, they mean the battles in Kentucky, Tennessee,

and Mississippi. Their Trans-Mississippi describes battles in Arkansas, Texas, and the crucial (if often overlooked) Sibley Campaign, where Confederate troops first celebrated in Mesilla - the capital of the newly seceded Confederate Arizona - before they hastily retreated after strategic blunders in battles with Colorado and California Union troops in Glorieta Pass, near Santa Fe. And the extensive set of Civil War fortifications along the Pacific Coast—for example, Drum Barracks which stands along the water in Los Angeles and was the largest U.S. Army installation west of St. Louis—receive a dismissive footnote.

Indeed, the Civil War-western connection may be in our origins. The founding of the Western History Association coincided with the federally sponsored Civil War Centennial - an outpouring of both public enthusiasm for reen-

acting the war's battles and scholarly interest in preserving and exploring the war's history at all levels. One of the organization's old-timers might be able to say if the Centennial provided an impetus to organize out west, with a similar blend of popular enthusiasm and scholarly interest.

In either case, the Civil War sesquicentennial/WHA semi-centennial moment can motivate us to integrate Civil War and western history traditions. To choose only the most prominent example, think how important it is to link the experience of John Chivington's Colorado troops at Glorieta Pass to the Sand Creek massacre: These men had recently returned from seizing Confederate supply trains in order to stave off an enemy invasion when they acted with similar determination against the Cheyenne and Arapaho



**The last extant Civil War Era wooden building at Drum Barracks in Wilmington, California, now holds a Civil War Museum.**

<sup>2</sup> Some exceptions provide the examples mentioned in this essay. See Glenna Matthews, *The Golden State in the Civil War* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012); Ari Kelman, *A Misplaced Massacre: Struggling Over the Memory of Sand Creek* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2012); Clarissa W Confer, *The Cherokee Nation in the Civil War* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007); Rebecca Brooks Edwards, *Angels in the Machinery: Gender in American Party Politics from the Civil War to the Progressive Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); and correspondence with Lorraine McConaghy at the Seattle Museum of History & Industry.

women and children—to horrific effect.

Civil War battles of the West do not compare to the massive military encounters in the East, but there are still plenty of sites important to the war's fight. Ralph Jones of the Oklahoma Historical Society recently used an American Battlefield Protection Program grant from the National Park Service to create a wonderful four-state sesquicentennial touring map to lead enthusiasts through graveyards, battle sites, and history museums in the corners of Arkansas, Kansas, Oklahoma and Missouri, while the Show-Me State has been touting how the state holds the third-largest number of Civil War battle sites, after Virginia and Tennessee.<sup>3</sup>

Small, quirky skirmishes throughout the West reveal how locals integrated the Civil War into their lives. For example, longtime rivals from Montana to Texas to southern California to Oklahoma took the call to secession as an opportunity to align local squabbles with the national divide. In particular, many Spanish-speaking Americans debated and divided over how to use the Civil War to their advantage; and the Cherokee Nation split over the war—a decision that brought both sides to mutual ruin.

Even thousands of miles from the battlefields, the issues at stake were the same. In Montana, Confederate sympathizers named a town after Varina Davis, while women in Washington Territory resisted the Union by baking a Stars and Bars cake. Meanwhile, union-

ists made sure to do what they could to support the Union cause. Oregon's U.S. Senator Edward Baker organized a "California Regiment" in Philadelphia before dying in one of the war's first major engagements; and the Unitarian minister Thomas Starr King died from exhaustion after traveling up and down the Pacific Coast to raise money and collect supplies for the Union's sanitary commissions.

In my book on St. Louis as the center of a three-sided Civil War, I include advocates of the North, South and West equally. I consider Abraham Lincoln, Jefferson Davis and Stephen A. Douglas as westerners, men born on the perceived frontiers of the nation in the early nineteenth century. In the 1850s, their respective strategies for settling

the newly acquired western lands differed—free-labor for Lincoln; slavery's expansion for Davis; and the hope that integrating western territory through the development of the railroad would end the importance of the slavery question for Douglas. But all three understood the fate of slavery (and perhaps the nation) would rest on the solutions found in the West.

So western historians should not think of the Civil War sesquicentennial as something happening back east. Lots of local and regional stories that emphasize the connections between the political, cultural, and military aspects of the Civil War Era and the development of the American West. They deserve to be researched and taught, now more than ever.

**COL. E. D. BAKER'S**  
**CALIFORNIA**  
**REGIMENT.**

**A RENDEZVOUS**  
 For the enrollment of a  
**COMPANY OF PICKED MEN**  
 WILL BE OPENED ON  
**Monday, August 12, 1861,**  
 AT THE HOUSE OF HENRY NEHRING,  
**PASSYUNK ROAD**  
**OPPOSITE QUEEN STREET.**

This Company will leave for the Seat of War in two weeks, or sooner, if full.  
**JOSEPH C. TITTERMARY, Captain.**  
Philadelphia, August 10, 1861.  
W. H. Jones & Co., Printers and Job Printers, No. 24 Second's alley, one door East of the Post Office.

**Senator Edward Baker of Oregon organized a "California Regiment" in Philadelphia and New York in the first months of the war.**

<sup>3</sup> The map will soon be available on the Oklahoma Civil War Sesquicentennial website.