

Fire, Pestilence, and Death: St. Louis, 1849

Jeffrey S. Adler
University of Florida

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2019 State Historical Society of Iowa. This article is posted here for personal use, not for redistribution.

Recommended Citation

Adler, Jeffrey S.. "Fire, Pestilence, and Death: St. Louis, 1849." *The Annals of Iowa* 78 (2019), 398-399.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol78/iss4/8>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

important tools for thinking about maps in complex ways. He carefully draws attention to the multifaceted processes and power involved in their construction, which, in turn, opens up many avenues for understanding how and why U.S. expansion developed as it did. By showing that maps were “syncretic creations” (199), Bernstein also shows how the nation that was being mapped was one as well.

Fire, Pestilence, and Death: St. Louis, 1849, by Christopher Alan Gordon. St. Louis: Missouri History Museum Press, 2018. 280 pp. Map, illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$19.95 paperback.

Reviewer Jeffrey S. Adler is professor of history at the University of Florida. He is the author of *Yankee Merchants and the Making of the Urban West: The Rise and Fall of Antebellum St. Louis* (1991) and *First in Violence, Deepest in Dirt: Homicide in Chicago, 1875–1920* (2006).

A dizzying, jarring series of crises shaped daily life in St. Louis during 1849. Perhaps faster than any other urban center in the United States in that era, the city’s economy boomed and population soared. Thousands of ambitious easterners and European immigrants settled in St. Louis, while tens of thousands of trans-Mississippi migrants and California-bound gold prospectors passed through the city in 1849. But St. Louis also endured horrific natural disasters during that fateful year, including a cholera outbreak that claimed at least 10 percent of the local population and a huge fire that consumed part of the levee and downtown area. In an engaging and accessible book, one lavishly illustrated with mid-century photographs and lithographs, Christopher Alan Gordon describes these scourges and depicts life in St. Louis in 1849.

The director of library and collections for the Missouri Historical Society, Gordon pitches his narrative to informed general readers rather than to professional historians. He is more interested in recounting the flavor of mid-century St. Louis and the vigor of its residents than in engaging scholarly debates about the city or the region. “Although demographic breakdowns and statistics provide perspectives on the seriousness of St. Louis’s cholera,” Gordon explains, “individuals’ personal stories give us the truest insight into this tragedy” (41). Nor does his examination of the city’s massive 1849 fire compare the local disaster with comparable conflagrations in Pittsburgh in 1845 or in other cities.

After offering interesting snapshots of St. Louisans’ challenges from pestilence and fire, Gordon moves beyond themes relating to death and destruction to include chapters on race relations, law enforcement, and crime, all of which provide fascinating, informative perspectives on the fabric of daily life in the city in 1849. Gordon does not calculate crime

rates or chart institutional changes in St. Louis policing. But the book presents colorful portraits of a high-profile embezzlement scandal and a double murder involving visiting French noblemen.

Much like the newspapers of the era, which sought both to report local events and to promote the city, Gordon's narrative strikes a celebratory, triumphalist tone, emphasizing the "determination and resilience" of St. Louisans, even in the face of devastating crises (251). His examinations of the epidemic and the fire depict residents at their best, focusing on the heroism of prominent citizens, their unshakable faith in the future of the city, and their zeal to restore stability and rebuild St. Louis. With a keen eye for finding riveting details and selecting evocative quotations, Gordon draws skillfully from the diaries and personal papers of these residents and, in doing so, makes effective use of the rich holdings of the Missouri Historical Society. Similarly, his chapters on crime underscore the resourcefulness of local lawbreakers and the integrity of St. Louis attorneys.

In sum, *Fire, Pestilence, and Death: St. Louis, 1849* reconstructs the thrall of urban life during an unimaginably tumultuous year. Gordon's emphasis on the grit and optimism of St. Louisans is difficult to evaluate. Were residents of the Mound City more valiant and heroic than New Orleanians confronting the yellow fever epidemic of 1853 or Chicagoans dealing with the Great Fire of 1871? Other city dwellers, after all, also did not abandon major urban centers after any of these disasters. That issue aside, Gordon has skillfully captured the chaos and spirit of St. Louis during perhaps the most challenging year in its long history.

The Life of Mark Twain: The Early Years, 1835–1871, by Gary Scharnhorst. Mark Twain and His Circle. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2018. xxxi, 686 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, index. \$36.95 hardcover.

Reviewer C. Elizabeth Raymond is Grace A. Griffen Professor of History at the University of Nevada, Reno. She is the author of "Creating the Heartland: The Midwest Emerges in American Culture" in *The Midwestern Moment*, edited by Jon K. Lauck (2017).

In the first of a projected three volumes, Gary Scharnhorst offers an extremely detailed biography of the writer Samuel Clemens. This stately account assiduously follows its subject through childhood and early adventures, focusing intently on the process of literary professionalization that eventually led to the emergence in 1863 of the humorist and writer Mark Twain. The book will be of genuine interest to Twain scholars, but the very comprehensiveness that makes it valuable to academics will limit its appeal to general readers.