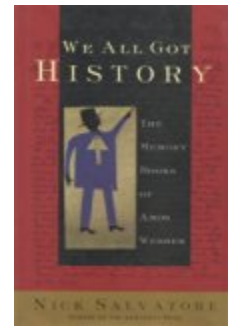


H-Net Reviews

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Nick Salvatore. *We All Got History: The Memory Books of Amos Webber*. New York: Times Books, 1996. xx + 443 pp. \$25.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8129-2681-1.

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Invisible Man

Any plodding researcher could have stumbled upon the “thermometer books” of Amos Webber, a serendipitous find in the archives of the Baker Library at the Harvard Business School. They were accessioned with the surviving records of Washburn and Moen, a major iron and steel firm in late nineteenth century Massachusetts, a part of the larger American Steel and Wire Collection. Only a writer with the imagination of Nick Salvatore, a Bancroft prize winner, would have realized what these faded ledgers represented. They were nothing less than a primary source with which to recover a vanished world, that of a free black who lived in antebellum Philadelphia and Gilded Age Worcester, and who served in the 54th Massachusetts Colored Infantry and the 5th Massachusetts Colored Cavalry. The author’s patience and ingenuity must have been sorely tested, in puzzling out and filling in the gaps in Amos Webber’s volumes. At times the narrative reads like a detective story.

Salvatore has met this challenge by writing a triumph of historical reconstruction. It is greatly to his credit that he has resisted the temptation to “read into” (p. xvii) Webber’s text his own late twentieth century understandings of literary theory. Salvatore believes that “the best historical writing seeks not to confuse one’s present with another’s past, and accepts the central historical challenge to engage the otherness of that past. To use twentieth-century political, literary, or psychological theorists to read into these silences was to risk obliterating the nineteenth-century consciousness that penned the original chronicle” (pp. xvii-xviii).

Instead, Salvatore has written a magnificent and moving portrait of a long forgotten American whose life spanned the last three-quarters of the nineteenth century and who contributed to his country’s history in many small ways. The book is also quite sad, however, frustrating in its carelessness about many historical details, and may ultimately prove unsatisfying to a variety of readers for quite different reasons, not least of which is that there is no known photograph of Amos Webber. For all of Salvatore’s skill and passion, there is much that will forever remain invisible about this extraordinary man.

Amos Webber was born 25 April 1826 in Attleborough, a small community southwest of Trenton in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, that rests within a large curve of the Delaware River. He was the son of Samuel and Fannie (Johnson) Webber, both of whom had been born free in Philadelphia. Webber’s father died a few months before his birth, leaving the widow to raise Amos and his brother Samuel alone. Salvatore was unable to find any other information about the family in Bucks County. Slavery never had much strength in this part of the state, though an elderly white resident remembered in 1845 that as a youth in the 1790s he could “stand on the corner of my father’s farm...and count sixteen farm houses, and in every house were slaves” (p. 9). In 1790 Bucks County ranked sixth in slave population among Pennsylvania’s counties, but had almost six hundred free people of color and only 261 slaves. By 1820 the free black population had grown to more than 1,200 but there were only two slaves, both older women. Despite the small black population, local whites and Pennsylvanians generally

exhibited considerable racial prejudice. Though slavery officially ended in 1827 under the gradual emancipation plan that had been adopted in 1780, ten years later black men in Pennsylvania lost the right to vote in a December 1837 decision by Judge John Fox. He ruled on a contested Bucks County election, where defeated local Democrats used the presence of a handful of black voters to challenge the victory of an anti-Jacksonian coalition composed of former Federalists, Whigs, and anti-Masonic elements:

The key constitutional question...was whether Negroes were legally eligible for inclusion as freemen under the Pennsylvania constitution. Judge Fox concluded they were not. From William Penn's time to the approval of the 1776 state constitution...Pennsylvania had never accorded blacks the rights of freemen. Even the 1780 act to abolish slavery did not bestow those rights, for an act of the state assembly, in itself, could not alter a constitutional provision. As the 1790 constitutional convention made no explicit reference to this issue either, Fox held for the plaintiffs and reversed the election results, citing Chancellor Kent, a leader in new York State's 1821 constitutional convention, who had argued that [t]he African race are essentially a 'degraded caste of inferior rank and condition in society' (p. 15).

Fox's decision was affirmed a month later by the state constitutional convention. It anticipated the Dred Scott case twenty years later, as did, indirectly, the opinion of a Massachusetts native, Associate Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court Joseph Story, in the fugitive slave case of 1842, *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (p. 13). Though not uncritical of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and the racial views of its white residents, A. Leon Higginbotham's appraisal was perhaps more balanced when he wrote that "Pennsylvania's accomplishment in passing the gradual emancipation acts cannot be underestimated. It was a significant changing of the tide toward ultimate freedom for blacks. Its impact went beyond Pennsylvania and helped trigger similar legislation in other northern states."^[1]

Here in the opening pages of the book is an essential part of the context for northern and American racism that Salvatore fails to provide near the end of the volume when quoting Webber's sarcastic comments comparing the late Chief Justice Salmon P. Chase with his predecessor on the high court, Roger B. Taney (204), author of the Dred Scott decision. Taney, a southerner and former slave owner, was racist, but so were northern jurists like Fox, Kent, and Story. It was Taney's misfortune to

write a controversial decision in 1857 when the political climate had changed greatly. (He was also a Catholic, a fact generally overlooked by historians in evaluating the reaction to his decision by a northern public not yet recovered from its Know-Nothing mania.) By 1873, the year of Chase's death, slavery was dead, and most Americans thought the issue of states' rights had been settled also, but as Amos Webber knew all too well, racism was still very much alive.

Antebellum whites in Pennsylvania were often hostile, and frequently prone to violence against blacks, especially if the whites were immigrants or of the working class. The two groups competed for jobs, living space, and social and political status. Slavery was a powerful economic and political force in nearby Maryland and Delaware. And slave catchers frequently preyed on free blacks and fugitive slaves alike all along the eastern seaboard of the Middle Atlantic states. Given this environment, it is not surprising that there was considerable activity by blacks and whites on the Underground Railroad, both in Attleborough and Bucks County, and in the much larger community of Philadelphia. Blacks constituted a semi-independent group within the larger network of activists, and were more radical and more willing to take physical risks than their white comrades. Some of the evidence that Salvatore has found while searching for information about Webber is more convincing than the traditional, and often undocumented, popular accounts of the Liberty Line by authors such as Charles L. Blockson, whose work on Pennsylvania he cites.

How and why Amos Webber moved to Philadelphia, or in what year, is not known. Salvatore sketches the black community in the city, and mentions a few black property owners. Most blacks were without real estate; only four percent owned any. Whether poor or struggling to gain a foothold in the black middle class, they were always vulnerable to white racism, which often manifested itself in riots and assaults in the 1830s and 1840s. In such an environment it was helpful if not essential to find a white patron, much like free blacks in the old South. Webber was fortunate in finding them throughout his long life in the guise of wealthy employers, but then he had many virtues that would have made him a desirable and trusted employee. His first white mentor was Charles S. Wurts, a member of the German Reformed church, who observed the sabbath strictly. He made the young Webber part of his extended family, and seems to have imbued his employee with a work ethic that he kept for the rest of his life, along with a social and economic conservatism that in some ways contradicted Webber's

political and racial views. Wurts worked for a family-owned dry goods firm, and assigned the young black man tasks both in the store and at his own residence. Webber also found a home in the local black community, joining a church and several fraternal groups. He may well have met his wife at a church function. Webber married Lizzie Sterling Douglas, born free in New Jersey, on 24 March 1852. They would be separated only by his death in 1904 on the afternoon of their fifty-second wedding anniversary. Shortly after his marriage, Amos Webber went to work for Hart, Montgomery and Company, one of the few manufacturers and retailers of wallpaper in Philadelphia. The real owner of the firm, Isaac Pugh, had a sister, Sarah, who was an active abolitionist and a friend of the Quaker leader Lucretia Mott. Pugh's political and racial sympathies and those of his family and business partners may have aided Webber, both in getting the job and advancing at the firm. Not long after this change in employment, Webber began making daily entries in the first of his ledgers or "thermometer books" (pp. 33-36) where he recorded twice daily the temperature, wind direction, and occasional comments about personal matters and events in the larger community that interested him. Amos and Lizzie were active members of the Lombard Street Central Presbyterian Church. Salvatore includes much detail on the history of black Methodists and Presbyterians in Philadelphia. One of the striking aspects of his analysis is the inferior position of black women in these congregations. Webber was the organist for his church, and could also play the piano and violin, though it is unclear how he acquired his musical training. Nor does Salvatore explain how a church member in good standing could also be "skeptical of organized religion" (p. 60), a characterization of Webber that he repeats while tracing his life in Worcester, where he wrote nothing in his later years on the subject of the active black religious community in the city (p. 253). It is clear that in both Philadelphia and Worcester, Webber was an energetic member of a variety of black lodges and male organizations, several of which had female auxiliaries for fund-raising and entertainment; and he joined both white and black veterans groups after the war.

Chapter four, "In the Cause of Liberty," is a detailed investigation of the community of black activists in Philadelphia, and several attempts to rescue slaves, and carry them to Canada on the Underground Railroad. Some months after the trial of the fugitive slave Daniel Dangerfield, Webber left the firm of Hart, Montgomery and Company for Canada. He departed in October 1859, and passed through Worcester, returning to Philadelphia

just before John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry. It seems likely, though there is no direct evidence, that Webber's absence was caused by his involvement with fugitives from slavery. He moved to Worcester with his wife in September 1860, a major dislocation that coincided with and may have been caused by the bankruptcy of Hart, Montgomery, and Company. Or perhaps his activities with the local abolitionist network were too well known. A community in New England would have been far safer for a man like Amos Webber. The Webbers left behind their only child, Harry J. Webber, who had died in May 1858. Amos Webber had his remains moved to Worcester in 1875. Webber made no ledger entries between the end of his first volume in October 1860, and the start of the second book a decade later. It is a big gap in this man's life, but one that Salvatore fills with notable success. He begins by describing the much smaller city of Worcester, Massachusetts, which, oddly enough, seems to have harbored some pro-Confederate sentiment. Salvatore describes white church members praying for Jefferson Davis in August 1861, an activity that the city's blacks scorned. There was more predictable racism in organizations like the Sons of Temperance, whose local division refused to admit a black resident, "because it would make trouble to bring a nigger in'" (p. 103).

The author, a careful and conscientious scholar, seldom goes beyond his evidence, but asserts that on his trip to Canada Webber had "undoubtedly met Isaac Mason" (p. 105), a prominent Worcester black who would become a lifelong friend. Though he probably did meet him, there is no evidence to support the claim. A few pages later, Salvatore describes how "Worcester's black community viewed the approaching Civil War" (p. 109), a conflict that had not yet begun, and which did not exist as an historical reality; and was one that few Americans, in the North or South, made accurate predictions about even after Bull Run in July 1861. One of those who did, William T. Sherman, was felt to be unbalanced by many of his contemporaries. Nor does it seem likely that the Confederate flag flew "over captured Union territory for the first time" (p. 110) following the surrender of Fort Sumter. The Stars and Bars was adopted at Montgomery, Alabama, when the Confederacy was created, and a number of Federal facilities had been captured as various states seceded before the firing in Charleston harbor. Salvatore simply does not treat the Civil War as a subject, or Webber's wartime activities, with the same care and respect that he devotes to American labor history, African-American culture, or postwar American politics. That carelessness about the conflict that created

a real nation state is characteristic, unfortunately, not only of Ken Burns but also of many social and labor historians. It is understandable that Webber put the entire blame for the war on the south (p. 110), but a scholar of Salvatore's stature might show a bit more balance. White Union soldiers displayed intense racism, in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and elsewhere, as the author makes clear. Northern leaders like John Murray Forbes of Boston were callous about the recruitment of black soldiers (p. 117). The evidence that northern racism should be taken into account, along with other causative factors for the Civil War, is overwhelming. What seemed like a straddle in my graduate school days now seems like a more balanced explanation of the coming of the Civil War. Shortly after another great war Allan Nevins concluded that "The main root of the conflict (and there were minor ones) was the problem of slavery *with its complementary problem of race-adjustment* [his genteel term for racism, north as well as south]; the main source of the tragedy was the refusal of either section to face these conjoined problems squarely and pay the heavy costs of a peaceful settlement. Had it not been for the difference in race, the slavery issue would have presented no great difficulties." [2]

Unlike many wealthier and better educated white men, Webber chose to put his principles into practice and fight for his country. He enlisted in the Fifty-fourth Massachusetts Colored Infantry, but left the unit for unknown reasons before it departed for South Carolina and immortality at Fort Wagner. Though Salvatore used War Department pension records and Army muster lists, he apparently did not find Webber's service record, which might show under what circumstances he left the Fifty-fourth, probably because of illness or an injury. Later Webber enlisted again, at the age of thirty-eight, in the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry (Colored), and served until the end of the war, after which he was sent to Texas with the all-black XXV Corps. Salvatore accepts without question accounts of black soldiers inflicting a significant defeat on Confederate troops between Richmond and Petersburg in early May 1864. Butler's forces accomplished little on this occasion, according to E. B. Long [3] and other standard sources, but that was usually the case with troops commanded by this political general. Eventually the Fifth Massachusetts was detailed to guard duty at the Confederate prisoner of war camp at Point Lookout, Maryland. During Jubal Early's raid on Washington in the summer of 1864, there was sheer panic among the garrison when Confederate forces were reported to be only four miles away. Relations between the black guards and Confederate prisoners were not good, and as

at Fort Pillow, a number of atrocities allegedly occurred, this time committed by black troops. [4] White officers had difficulty controlling their own men in both armies when they were fighting (or guarding) enemy soldiers of the other race. Many of the black troops preferred John C. Fremont to Lincoln in the 1864 campaign. One of Webber's comrades in the Fifth Cavalry wrote that Lincoln's racial policy "has always been one of a fickle-minded man" and that if the President had used all the power at his disposal he "would have been recognized as the magnanimous regenerator of American institutions, and the benevolent protector of human freedom" (p. 141). Salvatore errs again in describing Texas as the "one Confederate state that had never felt the presence of Federal troops during the long war" (p. 146), when in fact Union forces had occupied the strategic town of Brownsville (which was important because of the adjacent port of Matamoros, through which foreign supplies came for the Rebels) on the Mexican border as early as the fall of 1863, along with Corpus Christi, Indianola, Aransas Pass, and Matagorda Island. By the end of the year Galveston and Sabine Pass were the only Texas ports still controlled by the Confederacy. [5] What the author probably meant was that except for certain naval and amphibious operations along the Texas Gulf Coast, the state largely escaped major military invasion by Union armies, but that is not what he has written in a rather sweeping generalization. Salvatore mentions General Samuel Chapman Armstrong as a commander of black troops, but may be unaware that he later founded Hampton Institute, now Hampton University. And he quotes Major General David S. Stanley on freedmen who thought that plantation land would be subdivided and distributed among them. "I do not know how they got the idea" (p. 148), he told a congressional hearing. Presumably they got it from William Tecumseh Sherman and a few other Union generals who did what they could for the freedmen in the waning days of the war. Salvatore's description of the quick growth of the Grand Army of the Republic (p. 157) is questionable, since the low point of membership for the organization was as late as 1876. That "all partisan political discussions were banned" (p. 158) may have been technically correct, for some posts in heavily Democratic areas, but the GAR became not only a veterans' lobbying group but a highly organized and militant arm of the postwar Republican party with influence until after the turn of the century. Webber joined a Worcester post in 1868, though other black veterans were initially rejected. Yet he and sympathetic whites worked to integrate the organization, which shows that Webber was secure in the community and had enough white friends

that he could risk such activity. Far more applicants were turned down in the early years throughout the GAR; later on men who belonged to less favored groups would not even bother to apply. Nor were black applicants necessarily rejected solely on grounds of race; personality, occupation, and class may have had something to do with such decisions. Surely that was the case when the white veterans voted to admit Webber.[6]

In Worcester, Webber continued the work pattern he had established in Philadelphia, finding employment for the rest of his life at the wire and cable factory of Washburn and Moen. He became the trusted driver and delivery man for plant owner Philip L. Moen, and the companion for his son, “young Master Philly” (p. 305), working for the two men a total of thirty-six years. Webber even went to the resort at Palatka, Florida, probably as a servant accompanying his employer’s family on an extended southern vacation during the winter of 1881-82. Salvatore has found some evidence that whereas white society in general often favored lighter-skinned blacks, in Worcester the situation may have been reversed (p. 255). In Webber’s case his treatment by the Moens and other high status whites probably had more to do with the content of his character than the color of his skin. As a loyal and faithful worker, Webber had little sympathy for strikes by laborers, black or especially white. He shared the critical view of Pennsylvania’s Molly Maguires in the 1870s held by most respectable whites. Webber had a steady job, was a respected member of the community, and was not about to endanger either his income or his social status. As in Philadelphia, he and his wife were one of the few black couples to own their own home. Webber was a staunch, upright figure, and highly moralistic in his judgments, albeit somewhat selective, as in his condemnation of the adulterous James J. Fisk, Jr., shot by his mistress’s other lover in 1872. Yet the Alabama carpetbagger William C. Luke, lynched by the Ku Klux Klan in 1871 and mourned by the angry Webber, had been guilty of the same moral crime as a minister in Canada; and was again accused of it in Alabama.[7] Webber thought that the Modoc Indians who killed General E.R.S. Canby (whose death in 1873 was quietly celebrated by white Richmonders [8] who remembered his role as a Union commanding general during military Reconstruction) should be “exterminate[d],” (pp. 204-05) along with the white men in Louisiana. Presumably he kept such comments to himself, or within the circle of a few trusted friends. Even in the privacy of the pages of his ledgers Webber became quieter and even more conservative as he grew older. The fire that had burned in his heart during

the exciting times of fugitive slave rescues in the 1850s and as a Union soldier died down to a smoldering ember, but clearly he was not filled with Christian forgiveness towards white southerners, but instead a mixture of bitterness, resentment, and scorn, as Reconstruction ended with few tangible benefits achieved for black Americans North or South other than an end to chattel slavery. Webber supported Ben Butler after the war, until the mercurial politician changed his political affiliation once again and returned to the Democrats. His views on Butler are unclear from the scant evidence presented, and perhaps somewhat confused, a matter that Salvatore does little to clarify (pp. 217, 244, 246). Nor does the author do much to explain some of the controversial positions taken by Frederick Douglass after the war, or why Webber disagreed with him (pp. 191, 247). The book has been beautifully produced, virtually without editing errors except for the title of Kenneth M. Stampp’s 1950 work, *And [Then] the War Came* (p. 345, n. 33).

Some will be troubled by the many small mistakes that mar this impressive work of history and biography. To others, they will seem mere “picked nits,” if they even notice factual errors. But I suspect even more readers will be disturbed by the story of a man, admirable and even courageous in many ways, who served the white establishment all his life, and became ever more conservative and restrained, even in private journal entries, as he aged. Though he disagreed at times with Frederick Douglass, the most important African-American of the nineteenth century, Webber seems to have had more in common with the postwar Douglass, and with Booker T. Washington, than with the far more radical David Walker, and fiery black abolitionists of northern origins, some of whom would go to Africa; or with later figures like Marcus Garvey and W.E.B. DuBois. Nick Salvatore has told Amos Webber’s story perhaps as well as anyone could, and far better than less gifted writers. Despite his obvious sympathies, the narrative is remarkably restrained and understated. Ideologues on both sides of the spectrum will find points to criticize in *We All Got History*. Americans who respect serious scholarship will be grateful to Salvatore for making Webber at least partly visible, however much they may differ with certain matters of emphasis, interpretations, or shades of meaning.

Notes

[1]. A. Leon Higginbotham, Jr., *In the Matter of Color: Race and the American Legal Process, The Colonial Period* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 310.

[2]. Allan Nevins, *The Ordeal of the Union: The Emer-*

gence of Lincoln (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 4:468.

[3]. E. B. Long, *The Civil War Day By Day* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1971), 494-495.

[4]. See Edwin W. Beitzell, *Point Lookout Prison Camp for Confederates* (Leonardtown, Md.: St. Mary's County Historical Society, 1983), for many examples of the shooting by black guards of unarmed southern prisoners of war, not in the heat of battle or while trying to surrender as black Union soldiers died at Fort Pillow. For the historiography of this neglected subject see Michael B. Chesson, "Prison Camps and Prisoners of War," in Steven E. Woodworth, ed., *The American Civil War: A Handbook of Literature and Research* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1996), 466-478.

[5]. T. R. Fehrenbach, *Lone Star: A History of Texas and the Texans* (1968; New York: Collier Books, paper ed., 1985), 369-371; Brownson Malsch, *Indianola: The Mother of Western Texas* (1977; Austin: State House Press, 1988), 173-181; Mark Mayo Boatner, *The Civil War Dictionary*, rev. ed. (1959; New York: David McKay Co., 1988), 833.

[6]. See the prize-winning study by Theda Skocpol, *Protecting Soldiers and Mothers: The Political Origins of Social Policy in the United States* (1992; Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995, paper ed.); and Stuart McConnell, *Glorious Contentment: The Grand Army of the Republic, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992), 20, 24-25, 82-83, 111. McConnell found that the organization did not really mature as a major political force until about 1880. The original ideal may have been a "Soldiers Party...above the narrow line of Republicanism and

Democracy'" (970) but the group was Republican in orientation from its very beginnings in Illinois supporting two Republican candidates, and Democratic veterans applying for membership were sometimes blackballed because of their political affiliation. McConnell describes the "national GAR's Republican coloration" (113); and the perception of it as "a Republican political club" (126) by non-members. He calls its "rhetoric...a variant of the ideology of the Republican party, to which so many GAR members belonged" (212). Skocpol's focus is quite different, and her chronological coverage extends well into the twentieth century, but she found the same strong Republican affiliations for the GAR.

[7]. Gene L. Howard, *Death at Cross Plains: An Alabama Reconstruction Tragedy* (1984; Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1994, paper ed.), 30-32, 79. Luke's character flaw unfortunately fit part of the Dunningite stereotype of carpetbaggers so disarmingly described by Richard Nelson Current, *Those Terrible Carpetbaggers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), many of whose characters exhibit the same weakness along with other moral defects.

[8]. Michael B. Chesson, *Richmond After the War, 1865-1890* (Richmond: Virginia State Library, 1981), 226 n. 9. Webber, more than many historians with a kind of "bury my heart at wounded knee" sentimentality toward the Plains Indians, recognized that the same army that had defeated the Confederacy could, and in his view should, destroy Native American culture.

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