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The Gateway Arch: A Biography (Icons Of America)



Synopsis

Rising to a triumphant height of 630 feet, the Gateway Arch in St Louis is a revered monument to America's western expansion. Here, Campbell dispels long-held myths and casts a provocative new light on the true origins and meaning of the Gateway Arch.

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Customer Reviews

If you drive through St. Louis, Missouri, you cannot help noticing the magnificent stainless steel arch that rises 630 feet over a bank of the Mississippi River. It is a unique and beautiful building (or perhaps a sculpture), and historian Tracy Campbell admires it as much as anyone. This is despite his knowing many grubby and ill-considered moves that led finally to the Gateway Arch's completion in 1965. His history, *The Gateway Arch: A Biography* (Yale University Press, part of their fine "Icons of America" series) shows that there is a great deal to admire esthetically and technologically about the arch, while there is much to disdain about the civic deals that brought it to completion. As a warts-and-all biography, this is entertaining history. St. Louis's was in decline, and the Jefferson National Expansion Memorial was planned to reverse that. What actually happened was that businessmen got to unload their unwanted riverside properties for an inflated value, and they used fraud to do it. Those cynical about how government and business work together will find much confirmation here. The story of the design and building of the arch are more, well, uplifting. A young Finnish-American architect, Eero Saarinen, won the competition for his design, and by 1961 funding to start had been found. Saarinen shortly thereafter died of a brain tumor and so never got to see or

oversee the project. Nothing like the arch had been built before; it didn't have a single straight line in it, and none of the sections put on top of the previous ones had exactly the same shape, so there was a good deal of ad-libbing on site.

T. S. Eliot, who grew up in St. Louis, was thinking of the Mississippi River when he wrote "I think that the river is a strong brown god." Mark Twain, who grew up a hundred miles upstream, was also enthralled by the river. Yet when Twain became a steamboat pilot and was forced to see the river as an artery of commerce and transportation, he lamented that the river had lost its poetry for him. That same experience happened to America as a whole. Rivers were seen as servants of economic activity and national expansion. The great river cities filled riverfronts with wharfs, warehouses, mills, and factories. Even fifty years ago, in most of the great river cities, it was very hard to find the river. The riverfronts were a maze of railroad tracks, alleys, barbed wire fences, No Trespassing signs, rubble, garbage, abandoned warehouses, alcoholics camped in the shadows, and maybe a few working factories pumping out smoke and noise. In the last half century, this has changed a great deal. Now most river cities have riverfront parks. Some parks have historic themes, such as Hannibal's tribute to Mark Twain. Others are mainly for people to enjoy the natural wonder of the river. Omaha built a grand, 3,000-foot-long pedestrian bridge just so people can walk across the river, and it is enormously popular. This change reflects the growth of environmental, cultural, and community values, of Americans deciding that there is more to life than making money. Riverfront parks are often the favorite places for music festivals and other civic events. In St. Louis, the riverfront 4th of July celebration has become one of the most popular 4th of July events in America.

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