

Gone West Through the Tropics: The Isthmus of Panama and the History of the American West

Go west, young man! That pithy remark, attributed to Horace Greeley, conjures images of young Americans taking up the mantle of “manifest destiny” and traveling west. The nation was growing, and with that came opportunity that whetted the appetite of thousands. For many, their journeys took them to spaces contested between Indigenous nations, white North Americans, and foreign nationals—a destiny hardly manifest. The sheer number of westward and southbound settlers gave legitimacy to the U.S. conquering of the “West,” but the enterprise would surely have failed without the constant support of the state. The state controlled Indigenous resistance, parsed out free land, developed infrastructure, and replenished settlers with fresh stocks of capital.¹ In this mutually constitutive process, the state gave the settlers the tools they needed to be the perfect colonialists. They could improve the land and spread their faith and culture in ways that verified the tropes of civilizational progress emanating from policymakers in Washington. Persistent control over the economic and social fabric of the colonized areas allowed the settlers to build off the groundwork of the missionaries, soldiers, and merchants that opened the gates of colonialism and whittle down any “middle ground” occupied by Indigenous powers.² Likewise, as land-hungry settlers pushed the bounds of empire beyond the state’s intent, they leveraged their connections to the national imperial project to get the state to sustain their efforts with even more force and capital. In these ways, Greeley’s subject, like settler colonialists the world over, became the essence of the “continentalist” vision that swept the United States during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.³

This story, however, runs much deeper. Ordinary citizens were also at the vanguard of empire in spaces beyond our traditional understanding of the American West. Protestant missionaries and U.S. sugar planters in Hawai’i gradually assumed control of the islands’ administrative and political centers in a manner inextricably linked to the state’s goal of Americanizing such a strategic place.⁴ Alaska, also a place historians try to bring into the story of the American West, relied upon the state and outside investors to develop the resources of the territory. Here, too, settlers and

goldseekers violently clashed with Natives with near impunity for the U.S. Army, as a representative of the state, was there chiefly to protect the U.S. citizens whose presence the territory literally depended on.⁵ American colonialism in the Philippine Islands projected the mainland settler experience onto the Pacific archipelago. Even though North Americans did not settle in the Philippines at nearly the same rate as other territories, those civilian and military personnel that did travel there treated Filipinos with much the same violence and prejudice as the Native Americans. The presence and sovereignty of U.S. nationals, therefore, became justified in the name of civilization and uplift.⁶ To this model, historians should add the Isthmus of Panama. The isthmian territory served as both a conduit for continentalist expansion and as a reinvention of the colonialism that occurred in the “American West.” From the gold rushers of the mid-nineteenth century to the Canal Zone authorities of the twentieth, North Americans treated Panama as an instrument of their own ambitions. Panama was where motivated Americans could gain quicker access to the boon of California and spread their nation further south and west. Later, the isthmus served as the proving ground for North American conceptions of grandeur—both in the building of the canal and the “civilization” of the tropics.

What may appear as disconnected sets of events is, in reality, part of one process of imperial expansion designed to enrich the nation and fulfill the desires of the continentalists. Panama, as a strategically vital nexus, became the connective tissue between the exploitation of the American West and the overseas expansion of the United States. Fueled by material gain and strong beliefs in Anglo-Saxon providence, imperial agents spread their bounds southward and westward on the North American continent and then later to destinations in the Caribbean and Pacific worlds. It was crucial, in both of these cases, to take colonial space away from those deemed unworthy of occupying it. Anglo-Saxons approached Latin American land in a similar light to that of Indigenous Americans or Native Hawaiians.⁷ White U.S. nationals were able to levy extraordinary power in Panama without bringing it formally under the rights of the U.S. Constitution and, in so doing, congealed the nationalist, racist, and capitalist ambitions.⁸ Here, ordinary citizens, even settlers in the truest form, pushed the bounds of empire beyond the limits set in Washington. They committed crimes against locals, grabbed land, and spread American culture all while connecting their efforts to the wider aims of “civilization” and “national greatness.” By framing their imperial actions in this light, these U.S. citizens were able to lobby the state to defend their incursions with military force and diplomatic pressure or boost them with more capital. Consequently, U.S. prospectors and settlers not only linked the isthmus to historical developments in the American West, but extrapolated those processes over a space that was part of both the Greater Caribbean and Pacific world. The American enterprise in Panama, therefore, fits into the field of scholarship proving the “West,” a multicultural and multispatial borderland, as a contested space beyond the nineteenth century.

Rather, these spaces given cultural clout as the “West,” gradually fell further under the scope of U.S. empire through a series of processes—some exploitative, some collaborative—that endured well into the twentieth century.⁹

Historians have begun to look at Panama as a manifestation of mainland initiatives. Walter LaFeber and Michael Conniff, in their overviews of U.S.-Panamanian shared history, flesh out the ways in which Americans acted out their imperatives and forced themselves on Panamanians shorn of the means to resist.¹⁰ Further, John Major and Lester Langley paint Panama and the Greater Caribbean as central to U.S. designs on hegemony across the hemisphere as well as the trade that crossed the Pacific and Caribbean.¹¹ These scholars point to the isthmus as an outlet for U.S. domestic fears, especially power projection and commerce vis-a-viz other Great Powers. More recently, historians have examined Panama as a social laboratory for Progressive Era ideals of government, labor management, and efficiency. Alexander Missal, for instance, argues that the isthmus became a model for U.S. Progressivism where Americans, as imperialists, learned how to publicly serve a strong state—something they could then apply at home.¹² Conversely, Julie Greene sees Panama as the place where Progressives tackled the obstacles of nature and labor in their quest for social efficiency and an American way of civilization to display for the world.¹³ The work that best connects Panama to the story of the American West is Aims McGuinness’s *Path of Empire*. In that 2008 book, McGuinness places Panama at the center of the California gold rush, a pivotal moment in global history. The isthmus, and isthmians, took pride in their nation’s blessed geography and found ways to negotiate their place in a space becoming ever more an instrument of U.S. empire. Arrogant Americans saw the sliver of territory as a mere tool to get to the goldfields of the Pacific coast. From undermining the Panamanian economy to imposing their own social order on a foreign people, these U.S. nationals emulated their filibustering peers and brought Panama under the influence of the northern colossus. McGuinness, therefore, uses Panama to contend that there truly was no disconnect between the aggressive U.S. imperialism of the mid-nineteenth century and the overseas expansion at century’s end.¹⁴

Nevertheless, historians have yet to draw explicit parallels between the history of the American West and the U.S. exploitation of Panama. Likewise, the common Americans who carried out the colonial enterprise in Panama have yet to be given serious shrift in studies of the United States on the isthmus. It was these actors, namely Pacific prospectors and U.S. citizen-settlers, who transformed the U.S.-Panamanian relationship and built an empire around two central projects—the Panama Railroad and, later, the Panama Canal. A study of these actors in Panama reveals how they thought and acted similarly to mainland colonialists and, in so doing, pushed the bounds of the nation’s power in ways the state did not even conceive. The “taking” of the West brought Panama into the American fold and Panama reproduced the colonialism of the West on a broader stage.

The Pacific Prospectors

James Wilson Marshall may not have known what he started when he found flakes of gold in the American River in late January of 1848. California, long the desire of Pacific-minded American expansionists, was just now coming under the Stars and Stripes with the signing of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Prospectors knew of the economic potential of California and the other Mexican territories to the west, but most of the buzz surrounded available land and access to Pacific trade. The discovery of gold, and lots of it, set in train a course of events that would bring hundreds of thousands of people from the world over to California in search of nuggets. The Gold Rush, as it became known, enriched plenty of Americans and expedited the process of bringing yet another foreign territory under the flag of the United States.¹⁵

Marshall's discovery, however, had ripple effects well beyond California. Perhaps no people saw more consequential change than those on the Isthmus of Panama. A province of the Republic of Nueva Granada, Panama stood as the narrow waist of Central America. This geographical blessing made Panamanians very proud of their position at a crossroads of the world's trade and travel. The idea of *pro mundi beneficio* ("for the benefit of the world") predated any Great Power designs on an isthmian canal. However, European and U.S. imperialists also saw the isthmus as critical to their dreams of controlling the key hinge between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. London, Paris, and Washington all sought concessions in Panama to build a railroad, a ship canal, or, in the peculiar interests of some Americans, a safety valve for the diluted institution of slavery. By the late 1840s, none of these powers had achieved such concessions, but all remained focused on bringing their immense capital to bear on the isthmus.¹⁶

Naturally, many from the East Coast of the United States and from places further afield saw the isthmian province as the logical nexus of their journey to California. With no transcontinental railroad across the United States and the apparent dangers of travel around Cape Horn, a mere fifty-mile trek across Panama became the preferable link between oceans. Between 1848 and 1860, a total of 218,546 passengers made their way to San Francisco via Panama. Conversely, 198,000 traveled overland, reaching California through Wyoming's South Pass. Many of these travelers were American "gold rushers" looking to strike it rich out west and use the isthmus as a key node in those prospects. During the height of the rush, these migrants sent more than \$710 million worth of gold (more than \$15.7 billion in today's dollars) back through Panama on its way to U.S. and European banks or to the private coffers of corporations and individuals.¹⁷ In these ways, Panama relived its history as the hub of Spanish imperial power in the Americas and the corridor for silver and precious metals mined in the New World on their way to Madrid.¹⁸

The effects upon Panama, moreover, went much further than sheer numbers. North Americans, whether gold rushers, land and mineral prospectors, or those with a penchant for adventure, took to the isthmus with the pride of an expansionist people. They not only saw Panama as a vehicle of their Pacific dreams, but negotiated their place in Panamanian society vis-a-viz their nation's imperial growth. For instance, the mule trains and human porters of Panama's well-established travel industry had to give way to a U.S.-owned railroad. Such a railroad would expedite the forward march of empire and denote the civilizational progress of an American people destined to rule the hemisphere. Further, when Panamanian guides, porters, or hoteliers were forced to charge exorbitant prices to compete with the railroad and other U.S. enterprises chiseling away at their market share, Americans felt a disruption in the fixed racial social order they had grown accustomed to.¹⁹ With their numbers rising and the value of their dollars ever clear, U.S. citizens came to view Panama as an extension of their nation and, consequently, the hegemony spreading over the continent and hemisphere at large. The foundation of that hegemony, thought many Americans, was their racial and cultural superiority and the protection of it. This manifested in the hostile treatment of Panamanian vendors, including theft of services and even acts of violence, by Americans looking to assert themselves in a place increasingly falling under their influence. Further, Pacific prospectors in Panama lobbied both their government and fellow voyagers to Americanize the isthmus's infrastructure in ways that would meet these imperial ends. Beyond the railway itself, these Americans took law and order of the "Yankee strip" as well as some of the services within it away from dark-skinned Panamanians and entrusted them to people they considered to be more capable—white North Americans.²⁰ Consequently, U.S. Pacific prospectors linked the Isthmus of Panama to their conquest of the American West and acted on what one historian has called the American "habits of empire."²¹

North Americans poured into the Panamanian province within weeks of Marshall's discovery. The allure of gold and the charm of the Pacific market transformed the isthmus almost overnight. U.S. nationals were not completely foreign to Panama, however. They were aware of its position astride the Spanish-American economic corridor and almost sent a delegation to Simón Bolívar's Pan-American Congress there in 1826 before the Liberator's abolitionism kept their ship in port.²² Policymakers long held the dream of a U.S.-owned ship canal through Panama and had surveyed it for that purpose. Tropical disease, however, was foremost in the minds of Americans when it came to Panama. Yellow fever and malaria ran rampant throughout the isthmus, claiming the lives of many who deigned to traverse its jungle. This, coupled with the more superficial conceptions of Latin American racial backwardness, led many white North Americans to either hold the isthmus in contempt or wish to dive headlong into fixing it. "If we are ever going to conquer the tropics for our race," wrote Boston columnist Sylvester Baxter, then it was incumbent upon the white man to "enter the

tropics and improve its conditions of health and government.”²³ Baxter’s words did not fall on deaf ears. Many U.S. scholars purported that the tropics, though relatively unsafe, were worth the effort to bring under the influence of the white North American, who would not only improve it with his industry and science, but would also realize its potential for national expansion and the prosperity of the white race.²⁴ For those brave enough to take to Panama to reach the Pacific, they considered their feat to be providentially destined like the settlers pouring over the continent.²⁵ The prospectors could connect to that notion no matter where their imperial ventures took them.

It did not take long for these U.S. prospectors to leave their mark on Panama. Impatient and rowdy, these Americans viewed both the Panamanian environment and people with disdain. The trip across the isthmus was more arduous than many expected. Docking at the coastal town of Chagres, Americans encountered a “novel and unique” town of 500 people who lived in “huts of wattled cane.”²⁶ From there, voyagers typically took a boat down the Chagres River to the village of Gorgona, where they would then link up with a mule train that would lead them to Panama City on the isthmus’s Pacific side.²⁷ The terrain was punishing and rife with disease. Early prospectors contrasted the “trackless jungle” and “infested” nature of Panama with the civilization of their settlements on the mainland.²⁸ Travelers also had the option of moving overland the entire way, recreating the epic treks of the old Cruces Trail, but the extra time and danger of this route rendered it unattractive to most. These realities of isthmian travel during the early years of the Gold Rush made many white U.S. citizens rely upon dark-skinned and Spanish-speaking Panamanians and their knowledge of the land and waters. Local muleteers, boatmen, and porters were essential to guiding goldseekers and prospectors across the province and onto the Pacific shore.²⁹ This flew in the face of the racial and cultural prejudice that most U.S. citizens brought with them to Panama. For enterprising Americans, the dark Panamanians did not fit their picture of modernity, something their mission on the isthmus sought to advance. Further, the Panamanians’ “dirty huts,” language restrictions, and struggles with disease led many prospectors to consider their counterparts to be incapable of managing the trade routes that geography had blessed them with.³⁰ The potential of the isthmus for Western expansion and the national interests of the United States was too great to be left in the hands of a backward and inferior race.³¹

Likewise, the arrival of thousands of avaricious Americans, imbued with a sense of inherent racial superiority, clashed with the growing political consciousness of Black and Latino *panameños* at the time. Nueva Granada had finally phased out slavery and achieved universal suffrage. The Liberal Party elevated dark-skinned Panamanians to positions of leadership, with some even championing a republicanism that could align with that of their ungracious guests. Aggrieved vendors asserted this fact when rowdy and patriotic U.S. nationals ridiculed their racial laws and shouted them down as “tropical peoples” whose climate and race made them lesser.³² Some gold rushers, fresh

off the U.S. seizure of a third of Mexico's territory, thought annexing Panama could bring a more sensible form of government to this wayward place.³³ However, the mainland slavery debate was too wrapped up in questions of territorial aggrandizement to ever bring a space as racially diverse and politically conscious as Panama under the flag.³⁴

Instead, the solution was to undermine *panameños* and Americanize the isthmus's infrastructure as much as possible. That way, North Americans, who felt they were the only people appropriate to modernize the tropics, could bring the undertaking firmly into their own hands. Further, this resolution allowed U.S. citizens to connect more with the wider imperial mission of reaching California gold and the Pacific world. If the isthmus—a key artery to that mission—looked more “American,” then those using it would see first-hand the success espoused in the rhetoric of “taking the West.” The first step was the Panama Railroad. Long the dream of continentalists, surveyors began to study Panama as a possible route for the first rail line connecting the Atlantic and Pacific. The Mallarino-Bidlack Treaty, signed in 1846 between the United States and Nueva Granada, gave the project political viability. That deal gave the United States special transit rights on the isthmus, including the right to a future railway or canal, as well as the responsibility for protecting Bogotá's sovereignty there.³⁵ Colonel G.W. Hughes of the U.S. Topographical Corps arrived in spring 1849 to begin the task of the world's first ocean-to-ocean railway.³⁶ William Aspinwall, a New York shipping magnate, helped bankroll the project along with Wall Street financier Henry Chauncey and diplomat-turned-writer John Stephens. The idea was to construct a railroad to significantly defray the time and costs of isthmian travel, especially as white Americans overcame the region. With locals charging U.S. nationals exorbitant rates to boat and mule them across the jungle, this road figured to be a balm to Americans' pride and pocketbook.³⁷



Figure 1. Portrait of William Henry Aspinwall, co-founder of the Panama Railway Rail and the Pacific Mail Steamship Companies, painted by Daniel Huntington, 1871. In the Public Domain, at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:William_Henry_Aspinwall.jpg

The Panama Railroad, as it came to be known, got off without a hitch. The government of Nueva Granada, still sovereign over the isthmus, granted it license to construct the road but ordered the Pacific terminus to be Panama City. Hughes and the financiers agreed.³⁸ The Pacific city may have seemed like a “decayed city of the Old World” to some Americans in country, but to even the lax observer it was a far cry from the “wild half-civilized state” they saw in the rest of Panama.³⁹ Construction began on the Atlantic side where Hughes selected Limón Bay, just east of Chagres, to be the other terminus of the rail line. Here, Americans began to truly mark their stamp on Panama. U.S. prospectors, who saw in the railroad an opportunity to lay down roots and earn a living in Panama, formed an American settlement across the river from Chagres. They began competing directly with Panamanian vendors, offering hotel, cargo, and passenger services for incoming migrants.⁴⁰ Their plan was to undermine the Panamanian transit economy, which now competed with the railroad project and Americans’ desire to lay claim to a space they saw as the nexus between their own coasts. U.S. nationals even bought up hotels and shops at places further inland, such as the towns of Gorgona and Cruces.⁴¹

Panamanians resisted these threats to their livelihood, resorting to violence on several occasions. In October 1851, one particularly tense confrontation between white U.S. and Black Panamanian boatmen fostered an all-out battle between each settlement that left several men dead.⁴² With U.S. citizens and capital ensconced in Panama, Washington could not let this slide. Pacific prospectors in Panama rallied their government to deploy a contingent of marines, a part of a wider naval mission to the isthmus, to maintain law and order.⁴³ These enterprising Americans, much like their counterparts encroaching on Indigenous and Mexican lands on the continent, invoked their citizenship to get military protection for their own ventures, which evidently surpassed those laid out by U.S. officials. Washington had sanctioned the railroad, but now it was endorsing the activities of its citizens on the isthmus by according them the military protection that enabled them to continue meddling in Panama’s society and economy.

Gradually, white Americans squeezed out the existing transit economy in favor of their own enterprises. Mile for mile, American hotels, grocers, shops, and boatmen prospered while *panameños*, forced to charge more, lost their market share. A U.S.-owned newspaper, *The Panama Star*, operated out of Panama City, spreading word of U.S. achievements on the isthmus.⁴⁴ Even though the railroad itself was making slow progress, the Americanization of the space surrounding it was testament enough to the changing dynamics of the isthmus. In a true twist of provincialism, Americans gave the name Aspinwall to the Atlantic terminal city.⁴⁵ A gut punch to any proud Panamanian, the christening of isthmian locales with American names gave further legitimacy to the

vision of Panama as the key way-station in the continued spread of U.S. industry and ingenuity.⁴⁶

The railway company, however, elected to take things further. George Totten, the chief engineer of the project, wished to sound the death knell of any native competition. Totten and Aspinwall sent the steamer *General Herrán* up the Chagres River to deter the activities of local boatmen still trying to compete with their U.S. counterparts. Not only did the vessel provide a show of force, but those on board implored the *panameño* boatmen to abandon their cause and join the Panama Railroad Company as wage laborers. Engineers dramatically underestimated the task at hand, and the railroad had yet to cut even halfway across the isthmus. Totten wished to trap locals into contracts that would pay them low wages and keep them from taking money out of the hands of intrepid Americans, whose complaints were none too few.⁴⁷ While some caved, most took to overland routes to try to reestablish themselves as muleteers and guides. Nevertheless, the river became the exclusive purview of American boatmen and Totten was able to clear some of the protests of his countrymen.⁴⁸

As locals resisted work for the exploitative company, Totten and the board pivoted to another strategy—the import of foreign workers. The company sought labor from Caribbean islands, namely Jamaica, to carry out the arduous and low-paid work largely refused by Panamanians. The rationale for this policy was twofold. First, it enabled the railway to overcome its labor shortage and construction delays. The sooner they completed the project, the sooner Americans, convinced of their destiny, could populate the Pacific shores of the continent and reap its rewards.⁴⁹ Second, and more consequential to the people on the isthmus, it brought throngs of foreigners into a place unprepared to accommodate them. While North Americans could rely upon the U.S. community in Panama for hospitality and life's necessities, Black West Indians could not. They were largely subject to the racial prejudice of the U.S. domestic racial social order that Americans transposed onto their tropical enterprise. Therefore, these foreign workers were forced into communities that neighbored the rail line and were populated by *panameños*. Soon, West Indians came into conflict with locals over access to food, housing, and other goods as well as for extra employment opportunities beyond the U.S. railroad.⁵⁰ Totten was aware of the effects of imported labor on local society and was unabashed in the company's contribution to Panamanian unease and how the policy undermined their resistance to American incursions.⁵¹ One U.S. observer noted how the railway's use of foreign labor mirrored the use of Asian labor in the mining, agriculture, and manufacturing sectors of the burgeoning American West.⁵²



Figure 2. An illustration of George M. Totten, Chief Engineer of the Panama Railroad, appearing in Harper's New Monthly Magazine v. 18 (May 1859). Source: In the Public domain at <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/njp.32101064075458>.

These developments made the railway an arbiter of power and influence on the isthmus. With minimal observation from Bogotá, the company essentially had a free hand to carry out its prerogative. Likewise, the U.S. prospectors who, in many cases, latched onto the success of the railway in clearing the isthmus of their competition, grew more numerous and prosperous. Americans transported specie to and from California while those safeguarding such travel were increasingly American as well. This created opportunities for aggrieved Panamanians hungry for the chance to fetch some easy gold. In the early 1850s, bandits had their way with travelers. Many were robbed of their gold, while others were beaten or killed. In one instance, native bandits killed six U.S. travelers camping along the Chagres in February 1851.⁵³ Later that summer, outlaws robbed a specie train headed from Panama City to Aspinwall, murdering two guards and severely injuring another. U.S. citizens reacted with outrage. *The Panama Star* called out the “laxity” of the provincial government and demanded a stop to the “rapine, murder, and theft” ravaging the isthmus.⁵⁴ Some even called for the extrajudicial lynchings of perpetrators in the absence of proper law enforcement. At the very least, the protection of white Americans was as essential to Panama as in the Western territories. If the Bogotá government would not provide sufficient law and order, then these Americans thought it best to resort to U.S. modes of criminal justice.⁵⁵ Like in previous bouts of turmoil, U.S. citizens called on government officials to lobby for military protection. U.S. Consul Amos Corwine answered their pleas and obtained such, but marine and navy patrols made a negligible impact on robberies, especially on the overland route between Gorgona and Panama City.⁵⁶ Though some of the incensed Americans did lynch bandits, the issue went mostly unchecked over the next two years.⁵⁷

Then George Totten devised another creative solution. Instead of relying on the provincial government, bereft of treasure and troops since the onset of a coup in Bogotá,

the chief engineer offered to use railroad funds to hire a private police force to bring in criminals along the “Yankee strip.” This posse would be under the command of a U.S. national answerable to the railroad company.⁵⁸ Governor Urrutia Anino consented to this arrangement in the spring of 1854, provided the U.S. lawman did not mete out punishments. That authority had to remain in the hands of the sovereign government.⁵⁹ Totten chose Hiram R. “Ran” Runnels, a former Texas Ranger and veteran of the Mexican war, to head this new Isthmus Guard. Runnels had been in Panama for five years, ferrying travelers up the Chagres before buying hotels along the strip. Long an advocate for law and order on the isthmus, he led the posse that apprehended the killers of the Chagres campers. Runnels, therefore, was a natural fit for the position. He had the support of the American community on the isthmus, who, along with some wealthy Panamanians sympathetic to the cause, filled out the ranks of his Isthmus Guard.⁶⁰ In the interest of the Pacific prospectors, law enforcement was now an American purview in the Panama conduit.

Runnels and his group of vigilantes took their commission seriously. Tasked with “ridding the isthmus of bandits,” the Isthmus Guard patrolled overland and riverine routes throughout the Yankee strip.⁶¹ To blend in with their surroundings, the Guard often disguised themselves as local habitants or weary gold prospectors to lure out and catch thieves.⁶² Their efforts bore fruit rather quickly. Runnels’s posse captured dozens of gold robbers during the summer of 1854, turning them over to the native authorities to dispense justice. His work, according to his benefactors at the railway company, made a discernable impact on Americans being able to cross the isthmus to and from their endeavors in the “West.”⁶³ But not all shared this propitious view of the Guard. Many of the working class in Panama City and people of color from the rural areas despised Runnels. The impoverished people of Arrabal and La Ciénaga, in particular, saw his vigilantes as the manifestation of U.S. encroachment on the isthmus. When the Isthmus Guard came to these villages to serve arrest warrants for murder and theft, locals pelted them with stones. Their authority was not respected here.⁶⁴

Further, some of the more chauvinistic Americans on the isthmus felt Runnels’s authority did not go far enough. Since many of his prisoners either slipped away or faced minimal penalty, some advocated he “abandon a purely judicial course” and mete out punishment himself.⁶⁵ Panama’s importance to the wealth and expansion of the United States was too great for these bandits to be “acquitted for want of sufficient evidence.”⁶⁶ Runnels did liberally inflict punishments such as the whipping, imprisonment, and even shooting of known criminals.⁶⁷ Rumors abounded that his Guard hanged some on the spot.⁶⁸ However fantastic these reports may have been, Runnels, a U.S. citizen, was certainly bringing Panama further under the influence of the United States. His posse replaced local authorities in policing their native territory. They even got the right to patrol Panama City and other spaces off the “Yankee strip.”⁶⁹ For Runnels and his supporters, the ostensible goals were to protect U.S. nationals in their westward quests

and ensure the safety of the railroad. To those ends, they were successful. George Totten drove in the last spike of the Panama Railroad in January 1855 and disbanded Runnels's Guard.⁷⁰ With the railroad in place, U.S. nationals could enjoy a safer journey to the Pacific. Nevertheless, the Isthmus Guard was an instrument of American power on the isthmus that enabled the completion of the railroad and the forward march of empire.

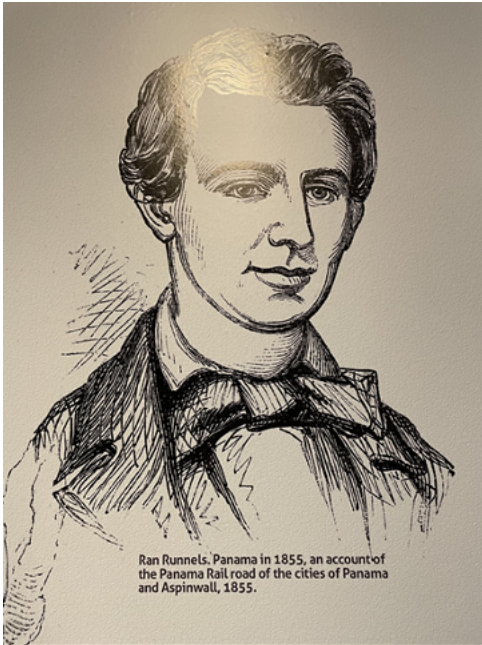


Figure 3. An illustration of Hiram R. "Ran" Runnels, the leader of the Panama Railroad's Isthmus Guard. This image comes from travel writer Robert Tomes's 1855 book *Panama in 1855*, published by Harper & Brothers in 1855. Source: In the public domain at <https://archive.org/details/panamainanaccou01tomegoog/page/n126/mode/2up>.

The Pacific prospectors of the mid-nineteenth century used the Isthmus of Panama as the key conduit for their exploitation of the West. In so doing, they accomplished the twin dreams of invading California's goldfields and subjugating the isthmus to American designs. Though U.S. citizens may have acted "as if they were the rightful owners of the soil" as early as 1849, by 1855 they could boast of "bringing a spark of life into a stagnant country."⁷¹ These U.S. nationals, bent on realizing the economic potential of the American West and the Pacific portal, altered Panama's infrastructure and imposed their own order on the isthmus. Done in the name of the wider imperial mission, it was the ordinary Americans on the ground that drove these changes. Officials in Washington or Panama City often found themselves responding to the demands and actions of the prospectors, who took example from their continentalist counterparts on the mainland. In Panama, as in territories of the American West, enterprising U.S. citizens marginalized the average local who looked to capitalize on the westward rush. Through both individuals and corporations, the imperialist-capitalist interests of the United States relegated the average *panameño* to a status beneath the white North American who saw the isthmus as an extension of his own more capable country.⁷² The legacy of the mid-century prospectors lived on for Panama, like the spaces of Western North America, was forever changed. But Americans were not done

with Panama. They had learned valuable lessons about the role of the isthmus in their personal ambitions as well as that of the nation. Looking back at the gold rushers and Pacific voyagers, another group of U.S. nationals sought to further their country's stamp on the tropics in the early twentieth century. These actors, settlers in a true sense of the word, represent another watershed in the link between the taking of the West and the exploitation of the isthmus.

The Citizen-Settlers of the Canal Era

U.S. settler colonialists had whet appetites for the Gulf Coast and territories further south much the same as lands lying west of the Mississippi River. Often overshadowed by the "conquering of the West," the forays into Louisiana, the Floridas, Texas, the Mississippi Valley, and eventually the Antilles and Central America often occurred in conjunction with, and, at times, superseded, these more famous pursuits. Americans were encouraged to push into these spaces, both by the actions of their government and the desire to seek material gain. The president and cabinet endorsed Andrew Jackson's 1818 raids into Florida and caved to the whims of US citizen-settlers who, empowered by their nation's victories over the British in the south, felt the removal of Spanish power from the continent to be their logical next step. Here, the "law of occupancy" reigned supreme and U.S. citizens used their numerical superiority to pressure local actors and stage rebellions against European colonial rule.⁷³

Further, the concept of preventing a different power from accomplishing the goals of land-hungry U.S. settlers drove much of Washington's endorsement of, or tactical silence toward, these incursions. Policymakers knew that Britain wanted Spain as a colonial buffer in the West Indies and that French or Dutch power could not be ignored for long. If the United States did not absorb these territories, one of these other powers would. That outcome was inconceivable, even to moderates. American observers were especially wary of Britain for it had deep commercial interests throughout Latin America and presented the greatest threat to any U.S. expansion therein.⁷⁴ As the Gulf Coast boundaries of the nation took form, this pattern repeated itself as Stephen Austin's Anglo-Americans took Texas, in part, to block British designs on the Gulf and its threat to slavery's expansion. War with Mexico came about from disputes over frontier land and Indian control, and brought more land under the flag for Americans to settle, improve, and then continue their southward push.⁷⁵ The Central American filibusters undertook a similar ambition, sometimes earning the scorn or approval of Washington as they sought to secure more economic opportunities for Americans who felt increasingly boxed in on the continent. Even William Walker's unendorsed expedition to Nicaragua brought upwards of twelve thousand white U.S. settlers looking to fulfill their continental destinies on a tropical space. Like Austin leading the Texians or Astor and Whitman plunging settlers into Oregon, Walker aimed to Americanize the Central American republic.⁷⁶

By the dawn of the twentieth century, with a mixed record of successes and failures, Americans had spread the eagle's talons over much of the land that extended south and west of their original states. Panama, a place already subject to U.S. encroachment during the railroad era, seemed poised to be the next space enveloped by American covet. Washington had long desired a ship canal through the region. A series of deals with London endowed the United States first with equal, and then exclusive, rights to a transoceanic canal through Central America. With that rival power out of the way, the United States Congress then had to choose which isthmian country to dissect. Many, including influential Alabama senator John Tyler Morgan, wanted Nicaragua, citing its political stability and closeness to U.S. ports. Others, including President Theodore Roosevelt, pushed for a Panama route. A failed French attempt in Panama provided Americans the chance to demonstrate their national-racial potency while benefiting from existing excavations. Further, the Panamanian province of Colombia posed the narrowest point of Central America.⁷⁷ However, Bogotá was not interested in permitting a U.S. canal project through its territory. The calculus changed when Panamanian rebels, long angry over Bogotá's neglect, revived their armed struggle against their Colombian rulers in 1903. President Roosevelt saw an opportunity to secure the canal his country needed. A devastating volcanic eruption in Nicaragua also bode well for the Panama enthusiasts. Soon, even some of the most ardent of the Nicaragua camp moved to support the idea of a Panama Canal. In exchange for material support and recognition, the Panamanian rebels agreed to allow the United States to build a canal in Panama. Once established, the new Republic of Panama sought to treat with the United States over the terms of the project.⁷⁸

The resultant treaty, of which no Panamanian signed, gave the United States the ability to exercise power over the 553-square mile construction zone "as if it were sovereign."⁷⁹ Some of these rights included the ability to intervene in Panamanian affairs or expropriate additional lands deemed necessary to operate and defend the canal. Consequently, the U.S. negotiators upgraded the "Yankee strip" developed by the Panama Railroad and the Pacific prospectors of the mid-nineteenth century to a Canal Zone effectively dissecting the new republic. The United States, for all intents and purposes, had shepherded Panama out of Colombian rule and into its own unfurled imperial arms.

From 1904 to 1914, the United States led a herculean effort to build the Panama Canal. Using tens of thousands of imported West Indian workers, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers oversaw the project to its completion in August 1914.⁸⁰ Yet the canal was not where American penetration of the Republic of Panama ended. The 1912 Panama Canal Act made the young nation a U.S. protectorate, bringing with it more than ten thousand troops and further rights of intervention.⁸¹ U.S. officials, both in Washington and the Canal Zone, grew very interested in preserving the political status quo of Panama. The Army suppressed riots and supervised elections to that end.⁸² Further,

U.S. missionaries fanned out all over Panama to spread their gospel and continue the longstanding effort of converting the tropics to Protestantism. Private corporations, namely the United Fruit Company, purchased large swathes of territory in the Panamanian countryside. Tapping in to the rich agricultural trade, United Fruit exploited local labor and markets to replicate the control they enjoyed across Central America.⁸³

Alongside these vessels of U.S. empire were scores of citizen-settlers who continued to hone the colonialist visions of earlier ventures on the isthmus and on the U.S. mainland. With the presence of the United Fruit Company and the backing of U.S. military power and diplomatic authority in Balboa (the Canal Zone capital), these settlers had “imperial eyes.”⁸⁴ Numbering 592 by 1933, these citizen-settlers purchased or stole land, cultivated the soil, and exploited local markets.⁸⁵ The influx of many U.S.-born agriculturalists, corporate and private, altered the social, economic, and cultural fabric of a space already fraught with tension. Soon, the interests of these settlers, like the Texians and Appalachian border crossers before them, came into conflict with the very locals on whom they relied, and sometimes preyed. They stole property, killed agitators, and asserted their rights as landed yeomen. Washington and Balboa neither sanctioned nor repudiated these trespasses. They did, however, appreciate the role these settlers played in expanding U.S. influence over the Panama protectorate. Alban Snyder, the U.S. consul general in Panama City, even wrote to one concerned citizen that opportunities on the isthmus abounded. “Why worry about the future when for a little money,” wrote Snyder, “you can get a large farm among American settlers in a country backed by Uncle Sam?”⁸⁶ The arable Panamanian interior became, by the mid-1920s, a place where “American and European settlers were well-established.”⁸⁷ Consequently, these citizen-settlers reinvented the settler colonialism of their continentalist forefathers and brought Panama further under U.S. influence. Panama, therefore, as a small country under U.S. influence *and* populated with many Americans, felt the constraints and pressures of a colonized people.

U.S. settlers had a profound influence in one particular region—the borderland between Costa Rica and Panama. Private U.S. citizens took to the Panamanian hinterland to take advantage of the great potential for raising bananas, coffee, cacao, and cattle.⁸⁸ Much of this settlement occurred in the provinces of Veraguas, Bocas del Toro, and Chiriquí near and within the borderland between Panama and Costa Rica. Some benefited from Panamanian President Belisario Porras's land grant program designed to fill the Panamanian interior with competent farmers.⁸⁹ Others elected to abscond from the U.S.-controlled Canal Zone—where nobody could own private property and the ever-expanding interests of the canal administration proved impossible to overcome—to snag most of the available cheap land or to outbid locals for land auctioned away from debtors. Together with U.S. corporations already operating in the area, particularly the United Fruit Company and its subsidiaries, these Americans

represented a surge in U.S. influence in the region that came increasingly under dispute from Panamanians.

These tensions boiled over during the years between 1914 and 1921—a time colored by renewed conflict between Panama and Costa Rica over the borderland where these settlers and corporations dominated. U.S. citizens, namely William Chase and Augustus Schade, each large landowners in the disputed region, had a hand in helping Costa Rica violate Panamanian sovereignty and in encouraging the U.S. government to pressure Panama into accepting defeat. All of this was done in the name of their own private interests as settlers in a disputed region. These U.S. settlers became important power brokers in a contested Panamanian hinterland not just because of the wealth they possessed or the tensions they brewed, but as Americans, who, despite having their own profit-based motives, leveraged their citizenship to get Washington and Balboa to act in their interest. In so doing, these twentieth century adaptations of the “conquerors of the West” made way for the forward march of empire.

The presidential administration of Belisario Porras had an agenda to help Panama reach its agricultural potential. Knowing the U.S. Canal Zone had been pushing for access to more arable lands to feed its population, Porras’s government concocted land development schemes in the interior where local intermediaries could snatch up cheap land and flip it to the United Fruit Company or to private U.S. agriculturalists looking to embark on their own enterprise.⁹⁰ Panama City also wished to curb the flow of West Indians migrating from their former jobs on the Panama Canal to the hinterland either as United Fruit workers or as private cultivators, something that was clearly not meeting the agricultural potential of a nation whose highlands were very fertile.⁹¹ Thus, Porras and his U.S. counterparts welcomed the contained settlement of white U.S. citizens with agricultural experience in Panama’s northwest provinces to serve all of these interests.⁹²

A number of Americans met the call. Two of the most prominent were William G. Chase and Augustus Schade, both former Canal employees with a penchant for ranching and agriculture. Chase acquired several hundred thousand acres in the Chiriquí province near David where he raised beef cattle and grew vegetables.⁹³ He called his ranch San Juan. Schade, a German-American, received a large land concession near Bocas del Toro where he and his legion of workers harvested timber, coffee, and a wide array of fruits. Schade’s “colony” was known as Era Nueva and soon featured prominently among the produce of the region.⁹⁴ It became clear by 1916 that U.S. citizens had taken most of the large tracts of good soil and grazing lands, surpassing the expectations of Porras’s land development scheme. Almost immediately, Chase, Schade, and their American compatriots came into conflict with local Panamanians, who challenged their claims to ranches and plantations in the interior. Some of these conflicts came by way of legal dispute where aggrieved Panamanians appealed to local judges to nullify land titles granted to U.S. nationals. Cases, many of which lasted years,

put liens on U.S.-owned land and even clawed back some of the excessive land grabs done in the name of agricultural colonization. William Chase, himself the object of one of these legal disputes, appealed to the U.S. Consul for intervention. In plain words, Chase looked to his “government, through you [Consul Snyder], for my protection and rights.”⁹⁵

Not all resistance was left to the courtroom. Some Panamanians took matters into their own hands, launching armed standoffs on lands owned by Americans, squatting on their land, and even disrupting harvests. Many rustled cattle away from U.S. cattlemen who grew wealthy off enterprises kept more or less exclusive from most rural Panamanians.⁹⁶ In several cases, in and around Bocas del Toro and David, locals murdered U.S. settlers who refused to abide by the court’s decision to relinquish land or as premeditated acts of resistance to gringo incursions throughout their country. The murders of William Carnott, Charles Oakley, and Penny Smith—all landowners in Chiriquí—sparked widespread unrest in the Panamanian interior between *panameños* who considered their sovereignty compromised and U.S. citizens, who felt not only that their rights were infringed upon, but that all they had done to improve the lowly nation of Panama went unappreciated.⁹⁷

Chase and Schade would not sit idly by while the colonialist-capitalist enterprises of Americans came increasingly under threat. The legal disputes against them and their fellow U.S. citizens, and especially the murders of Carnott, Oakley, and Smith, put these two in a position to act for the interests of American settlers in the hinterland. Chase, for instance, developed his rapport with the U.S. Consul at Panama City, Alban Snyder, into a relationship where he provided vital intelligence pertaining to investigations into crimes committed against U.S. citizens in Chiriquí as well as rumors circulating about potential actions taken against his countrymen from David to Progreso in the west and La Concepción and Boquete in the north.⁹⁸ Likewise, Schade became a confidant to Snyder’s counterpart at Bocas del Toro, Paul Osterhout, sharing information about Panamanian disruptions to banana and coffee cultivation on U.S.-owned plantations and local consternation over United Fruit’s monopoly over transportation infrastructure in the province.⁹⁹ As order in these distant provinces began to break down, Chase and Schade were key advocates of a plan to occupy Chiriquí as well as parts of Bocas del Toro and Veraguas provinces with U.S. soldiers stationed in the Canal Zone. Troops would ensure the safety of Americans resident in the interior and help maintain profits made by private agriculturalists and corporations. Even more apparent were the ways in which the U.S. Army would restore the order considered so necessary to teaching Panama how to be a civilized country.¹⁰⁰ In these ways, the occupation heralded by Chase, Schade, and their compatriots was not dissimilar from the military intervention prompted by white settlers across the American West.

The U.S. military occupation of Northwest Panama lasted for over two years—from the summer of 1918 until the autumn of 1920. During this time, cattle thefts,

standoffs, and general crimes committed against Americans decreased significantly. However, Panamanians continued to press legal challenges to land titles claimed by U.S. landowners and companies. For those on the ground, like Chase and Schade, the presence of the Army was considered essential to the wellbeing of Americans who, by their measure, could not be under the authority of Panamanians.¹⁰¹ Though the military commander in charge of the U.S. occupation forces wished to “stay for one year, ten years, or a longer period of time” until Panamanians could “recognize and obey” legal and constitutional order, the State Department knew that Washington could not risk further injury to U.S. reputation, and thus had the Canal Zone commander recall the troops once local conditions seemed much improved.¹⁰²

Disappointed with the end of Army protection, settlers soon found alternatives to these “abuses” as tensions with neighboring Costa Rica heated up. Though the French Loubet award, and then later the White award handed down by U.S. Chief Justice of the Supreme Court Edward White, granted the disputed borderland territory along the Coto boundary to Costa Rica, Panama City would not cede the land. President Porras, an erstwhile Liberal revolutionary and wed to a Costa Rican wife, did not see cession as an option, even as representatives in San José pushed harder for their internationally backed land rights.¹⁰³ He also felt confident in U.S. support in the event of Costa Rican action in the Coto region, given the very clear terms of the U.S. protectorate over Panama.¹⁰⁴ These very terms permitted U.S. forces to act on Panamanian soil to restore order and ensure the canal’s defense, but, on the obverse, committed the same forces to defend Panama’s sovereignty should it be threatened. Porras’s administration was aware of tensions between U.S. settlers and locals in the disputed territory, but had his representatives walk a fine line between assigning blame to Panamanians who resisted U.S. land domination and calling Americans out for their privileged position and routine violations of Panamanian sovereignty.¹⁰⁵ Panama City expected to hold the disputed frontier and settle tensions with enterprising Americans. For Chase, Schade, and other U.S. citizens vying for their interests in this borderland, the rising inter-American tensions between Costa Rica and Panama presented an opportunity to circumvent Panamanian disputes against their holdings by seeking out assurances of better treatment from Costa Rican officials and relaying them to their own government representatives.

Augustus Schade had contacts at the Panama Division of United Fruit in Almirante who made him aware that the Costa Rican government was offering land at even better prices than could be found on the Panama side of the border. Further, the Costa Rican side of the borderland was a region with existing United Fruit operations that could almost seamlessly integrate larger American enterprises, including those of private citizens, into an agricultural belt that boasted easier access to the port of Limón.¹⁰⁶ Schade wrote not only the consul at Bocas del Toro, but U.S. Minister William Jennings Price about these benefits to U.S. citizens’ interest if the United States opted to

enforce the Loubet and White awards and hold up Costa Rica's claim in the border dispute. William Chase kept Consul Snyder well apprised of rumblings he heard about Americans looking to border hop and escape abuses from Panamanians and be on the right side of a border dispute that seemed to be coming to a head. If the U.S. Army could not stay and assure the rights of U.S. citizens, they could fare better in Costa Rica—a decision that would take their dollars and produce out of a cash-strapped Panama.¹⁰⁷

As the Costa Rican invasion took shape in late February of 1921, U.S. settlers like Schade and Chase became important interlopers in the Coto war that unfolded. Their contacts in the U.S. government, who kept freshly appointed Secretary of State Charles Evans Hughes and his Panamanian counterpart Narciso Garay well-informed of settler interests in the hinterland, followed events on the ground during the brief war and soon became clear advocates for Panamanian cession. This position was equally informed by Washington's belief that Panama was obligated to follow the international arbitral decisions laid down by Loubet and White as well as by the presence of landowners like Schade and Chase and the ever-present United Fruit Company, who all actively worked to undermine Panama's response to the invasion.¹⁰⁸ Long dismayed by Panama's inability to protect their investments and guarantee their safety as citizens of the United States, compatriots of Chase and Schade, along with United Fruit railway operators, transported Costa Rican soldiers in their invasion across the Sixaola River to take Guabito in Bocas del Toro province on March 1. Though these landowners did not directly engage the Panamanian police forces (ironically led by a U.S. national) that arrived to combat the invasion, they enabled the Costa Ricans to hold the town and maneuver out of harm's way as Panamanian forces closed in.¹⁰⁹ All the while, Chase and Schade, representatives of so many of the men on the ground, pushed their government representatives to maintain the position that Panama had to cede the disputed land to Costa Rica.

It would, in part, work. Secretary Hughes, acting for US President Warren G. Harding, pressured the Porras government to cede. Though Panama forced the Costa Rican invaders out of Coto on the Pacific side, they proved unable to prevent routine invasions along the Sixaola—which were enabled by incensed and opportunistic U.S. settlers and United Fruit workers. Hughes did not wish to see a prolonged war between the two Central American nations and authorized a naval contingent with marines ready to land off each coast of Panama in case that did occur.¹¹⁰ Panama City would bend to the pressure of their North American protector, who, despite being treaty-bound to defend Panama's sovereignty, considered Costa Rica's claim to the disputed land to be legitimate. In some measure, officials in Washington wished to entertain the interests of their citizen-settlers who found a potential solution to longstanding U.S.-Panamanian tensions by supporting Costa Rica in its attempt to "regain" territory.¹¹¹ Secretary Hughes would refer to the U.S. citizen-settlers as "unavoidable factors" in the decision to enforce the cession of Coto. Their presence and interests in the region were not small

variables in Washington's approach to the crisis.¹¹² Though Porras's government would drag its feet on surveying the Coto region and moving its population east of the new boundary line, the conflict did end in a Costa Rican victory. Augustus Schade and William Chase, the latter of which finally won his San Juan land dispute in 1923, would both establish new landholdings along the new boundary line, but on the Costa Rican side, taking advantage of cheaper land that came with little to no local unrest.¹¹³

These citizen-settlers, like the prospectors before them, brought their interests to bear on Panama's society. Settlers, like Schade and Chase, were active participants not only in the subjugation of the Republic of Panama to U.S. influence, but also in Panama's surprising loss of sovereign territory to Costa Rica. This episode brought to an ignominious end the decades-long border dispute between the neighboring republics. It, too, shored up the concerns of American landowners who came to see the borderland as more their domain than sovereign territory. Though they never intended to bring the Panamanian interior under the Stars and Stripes, these settlers harbored similar thoughts and employed similar tactics to those U.S. settlers who repeatedly established new domain on the continent. They made decisions based on their own material well-being and leveraged their citizenship to get U.S. officials to conflate their personal goals with those of the state. The Panamanian hinterland, consequently, represented an overseas extrapolation of the processes that colonized the American West.

Conclusion

The Isthmus of Panama was a connective tissue between the conquering of the American West and the overseas expansion of the United States. Mutually constitutive, these processes manifested in the interests of private citizens and the U.S. state. Through the actions of Pacific prospectors and a host of citizen-settlers, Panama became both a conduit for the exploitation of the American West and a reinvention of the colonialism that seized the continent. Americans brought their physical and political capital to bear on the isthmus and, in turn, negotiated a powerful place for their interests in a sovereign land. The Panama Railroad and, later, the Panama Canal provided an impetus for ordinary U.S. citizens to see Panama as an extension of their nation and a testament to their civilization. From these projects sprang a bounty of interests, both private and public, that tethered Panama ever closer to U.S. influence. Pacific prospectors and citizen-settlers became principal, though not the only, players in this process that mirrored much of the development in the American West. By taking a long view of the history of the American West—and the colonial dynamics that define it—scholars can glean a better understanding of how the wider world played into such history and, equally, how developments in the American West wrought change abroad. Panama, much like Alaska, Hawai'i, the Philippines, and other overseas territories, holds an integral place in the history of the American West and that of the nation's long

record of expansion. Only through further scholarly research can we broaden the scope of these all-important links.

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Notes

¹ This ground is well-trod among historians. See: Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest: The Unbroken Past of the American West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1987); Elliot West, *The Contested Plains: Indians, Goldseekers, and the Rush to Colorado* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1998); Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011).

² Historians have long argued for the agency of Indigenous peoples in a West that was more “fluid” and complex than we often consider. This paper, despite focusing on how settler colonialists abroad mirrored the actions of their continental counterparts, appreciates the active role Indigenous peoples played in the history of the American West and American empire, more broadly. For examples, see: Richard White, *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991); James Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1999); Ned Blackhawk, *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Pekka Hamalainen, *The Comanche Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); idem, *Indigenous Continent: The Epic Contest for North America* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2022).

³ The term “continentalist” has been used by historians to describe the peopling of the North American continent with white U.S. citizen-settlers. It captures the essence of “manifest destiny” without using such fraught terminology. See: Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and its World in an Age of Civil Wars, 1830-1910* (New York: Viking Press, 2016), esp. 114-152; Charles Vevier, “American Continentalism: An Idea of Expansion, 1845-1910,” *The American Historical Review* 65, no. 2 (1960): 323-335.

⁴ Arrell Gibson, *Yankees in Paradise: The Pacific Basin Frontier* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1993), 296; Walter Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism: A History* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 148.

⁵ Stephen Haycox, *Alaska: An American Colony* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2002), 162-165; Hixson, 162-163.

⁶ Paul Kramer, *The Blood of Government: Race, Empire, the United States, and the Philippines* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Julian Go and Anne Foster, eds., *The American Colonial State in the Philippines: Global Perspectives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Katherine Bjork, *Prairie Imperialists: The Indian Country Origins of American Empire* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

⁷ See: Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism*; Robert Johanssen, *To the Halls of the Montezumas: The Mexican War in the American Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985); Matthew Karp, *This Vast Southern Empire: Slaveholders at the Helm of American Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); Eric T.L. Love, *Race Over Empire: Racism and U.S. Imperialism, 1865-1900* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

⁸ Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders*, 498-499.

⁹ Samuel Truett, *Fugitive Landscapes: The Forgotten History of the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006); Rachel St. John, *Line in the Sand: A History of the Western U.S.-Mexico Border* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Jessica Kim, *Imperial Metropolis: Los Angeles, Mexico, and the Borderlands of American Empire* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Phoebe S. Kropp, *California Vieja: Culture and Memory in a Modern American Place* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2006); Katherine Benton-Cohen, *Borderline Americans: Racial Divisions and Labor War in the Arizona Borderlands* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Geraldo L. Cadava, *Standing on Common Ground: The Making of a Sunbelt Borderland* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Walter LaFeber, *The Panama Canal: The Crisis in Historical Perspective* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Michael Conniff, *Panama and the United States: The Forced Alliance* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1992).

¹¹ John Major, *Prize Possession: The United States and the Panama Canal, 1903-1979* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Lester Langley, *Struggle for the American Mediterranean: United States-European Rivalry in the Gulf-Caribbean, 1776-1904* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1982); idem, *The United States and the Caribbean in the Twentieth Century* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1989).

¹² Alexander Missal, *Seaway to the Future: American Social Visions and the Construction of the Panama Canal* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).

¹³ Julie Greene, *The Canal Builders: Making America's Empire at the Panama Canal* (New York: Penguin, 2009).

¹⁴ Aims McGuinness, *Path of Empire: Panama and the California Gold Rush* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008).

¹⁵ See: Malcolm Rohrbough, *Days of Gold: The California Gold Rush and the American Nation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997); Brian Roberts, *American Alchemy: The California Gold Rush and Middle-Class Culture* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Kenneth Owens, ed., *Riches for All: The California Gold Rush and the World* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2002).

¹⁶ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 7-18; Robert May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld: Filibustering and Antebellum America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); idem, *Slavery, Race, and Conquest in the Tropics: Lincoln, Douglas, and the Future of Latin America* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2013); Alex Perez-Venero, *Before the Five Frontiers: Panama from 1821 to 1903* (New York: AMS Press, 1978), 52-60.

¹⁷ McGuinness, *Path of Empire*, 6-7; Also see: John Haskell Kemble, *The Panama Route, 1848-1869* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1943), 254; John Unruh, *The Plains Across: The Overland Emigrants and the Trans-Mississippi West, 1840-1860* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1979), 119.

¹⁸ Alfredo Castillero Calvo, "Capítulo III: Reorganización económica y política del espacio: 1519-1597" in *Nueva historia general de Panamá* (Panamá: Alcaldía de Panamá : Editora Novo Art, 2019); idem, "El transporte transistmico y las comunicaciones regionales," in Castillero Calvo, ed., *Historia General de Panamá*, vol. 1, tomo 1, 355-398.

¹⁹ McGuinness, *Path of Empire*, 140-141.

²⁰ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 28.

²¹ Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansionism* (New York: Penguin, 2008), 7.

²² Caitlin Fitz, *Our Sister Republics: The United States in an Age of American Revolutions* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016), 195-196.

²³ Sylvester Baxter, “The Tropical Renaissance,” (1886), included in Michael LaRosa and Germán R. Mejía, eds., *The United States Discovers Panama: The Writings of Soldiers, Scientists, Scholars, and Scoundrels* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 186.

²⁴ See: A. Grenfell Price, *White Settlers in the Tropics* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1939).

²⁵ Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism*, 11.

²⁶ John Harris Forster Field Notes of a Surveyor in Panama, March 2, 1849, University of Michigan Bentley Library, Michigan Historical Collections (Hereafter MHC), Ann Arbor, MI.

²⁷ John Harris Forster Field Notes of a Surveyor in Panama, March 14, 1849, University of Michigan Bentley Library, MHC, Ann Arbor, MI.

²⁸ “The Canal Diggers in Panama, 1904-1928,” *Panama Canal Retirement Association*, January 2, 1928, Digital Library of the Caribbean, University of Florida Digital Collections, 16.

²⁹ McGuinness, 54. Also, see: Marixa Lasso, *Erased: The Untold Story of the Panama Canal* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 55-60.

³⁰ Lady Emmeline Stuart Wortley, *Travels in the United States, etc. during 1849 and 1850*, vol. 2 (1851): 249.

³¹ Lady Wortley, *Travels*, 250.

³² Lasso, *Erased*, 68.

³³ John Lindsay-Poland, *Emperors in the Jungle: The Hidden History of the U.S. in Panama* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 13.

³⁴ *Panama Star and Herald*, May 8, 1854, National Archives of the United States, College Park, Maryland, Records of the Department of State, General Records of the Panama Railroad Company, 1848-1999, Record Group 185 (Hereafter referred to as RG 185).

³⁵ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 19.

³⁶ McGuinness, *Path of Empire*, 57.

³⁷ Castellero Calvo, “El transporte transístmico y las comunicaciones regionales,” in Castellero Calvo, ed., *Historia General de Panamá*, vol. 1, tomo 1, 374.

³⁸ McGuinness, *Path of Empire*, 58.

- ³⁹ John Harris Forster Field Notes of a Surveyor in Panama, March 23, 1849, University of Michigan Bentley Library, MHC, Ann Arbor, MI.
- ⁴⁰ Wortley, *Travels*, 2: 257-258.
- ⁴¹ David C. Humphrey, “The Myth of the Hangman: Ran Runnels, the Isthmus Guard, and the Suppression of Crime in Mid-Nineteenth-Century Panama,” *The Latin Americanist* 59, no. 4 (2015): 4.
- ⁴² Castellero Calvo, “El transporte transístmico y las comunicaciones regionales,” in Castellero Calvo, ed., *Historia General de Panamá*, vol. 1, tomo 1, 378.
- ⁴³ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 35.
- ⁴⁴ John Harris Forster Field Notes of a Surveyor in Panama, May 12, 1849, University of Michigan Bentley Library, MHC, Ann Arbor, MI.
- ⁴⁵ Perez-Venero, *Before the Five Frontiers*, 88. Aspinwall was renamed Colón in 1890.
- ⁴⁶ No title, April 28, 1851, Record of the Joint Land Commission, Land Files of the Panama Railroad Company, RG 185, Box 2, File 1.
- ⁴⁷ George Totten to Thomas Ludlow, February 13, 1850, Totten Letters, RG 185.
- ⁴⁸ George Totten to John L. Stephens, August 25, 1850, Totten Letters, RG 185.
- ⁴⁹ George Totten to John L. Stephens, December 11, 1850, Totten Letters, RG 185.
- ⁵⁰ Lasso, *Erased*, 70.
- ⁵¹ George Totten to Stephens, December 22, 1850, Totten Letters, RG 185.
- ⁵² Wortley, *Travels*, 2: 251.
- ⁵³ Amos B. Corwine to Daniel Webster, with enclosures, Mar. 22, 1851, The United States National Archives, College Park, Maryland, Consular Dispatches from Panama City, Panama, vol. 2, Records of the Department of State, Record Group (Hereafter referred to as RG 59), MP M139, roll 2.
- ⁵⁴ *Panama Star*, July 25, 1851; September 30, 1851; *Panama Herald*, September 22, 1851, RG 59, MP M139, roll 2. *The Panama Star* and *The Panama Herald* were both English-language newspapers started by U.S. citizens in Panama. They merged to form *The Panama Star and Herald* in 1854.
- ⁵⁵ Clippings from the *Panama Echo* and the *Panama Star* enclosed in Amos B. Corwine to Daniel Webster, Nov. 14, 1851, RG 59, MP M139, roll 2.
- ⁵⁶ William A. Graham, Secretary of the Navy, to Daniel Webster, Dec. 5, 1851, RG 59, MP M139, roll 2; Also, see: *Panama Star*, December 23, 1851 and *Panama Herald*, December 22, 1851, idem.

- ⁵⁷ John Easter Minter, *The Chagres: River of Westward Passage* (New York: Rinehart, 1948), 247.
- ⁵⁸ Minutes of Meeting of the Board of Directors, Panama Railroad Co., May 13, 1854, vol. A, RG 185, 151–52.
- ⁵⁹ Humphrey, “The Myth of the Hangman,” 7-8.
- ⁶⁰ *Panama Star and Herald*, July 18, 1854; July 26, 1854; July 27, 1854, General Records of the Panama Railroad Company, 1848-1999, RG 185.
- ⁶¹ Perez-Venero, *Before the Five Frontiers*, 37.
- ⁶² Ernesto J. Castellero Reyes, “Ran Runnels en la Ruta de ‘El Dorado,’” *Loteria* 23 (Oct. 1957): 90.
- ⁶³ Minutes of Meetings of the Board of Directors, Panama Railroad Co., Aug. 16, 1854, vol. a, RG 185, 159.
- ⁶⁴ Humphrey, “The Myth of the Hangman,” 10.
- ⁶⁵ *Panama Star and Herald*, August 12, 1854, General Records of the Panama Railroad Company, 1848-1999, RG 185.
- ⁶⁶ Robert Tomes, *Panama in 1855: An account of the Panama rail-road, of the cities of Panama and Aspinwall, with sketches of life and character on the Isthmus* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1855), 123.
- ⁶⁷ Tomes, *Panama in 1855*, 123-124.
- ⁶⁸ Humphrey, “The Myth of the Hangman,” 12.
- ⁶⁹ *Panama Star and Herald*, December 2, 1854, RG 185.
- ⁷⁰ Humphrey, “The Myth of the Hangman,” 11-12.
- ⁷¹ Refer to: John Harris Forster Field Notes of a Surveyor in Panama, May 12, 1849, University of Michigan Bentley Library, MHC, Ann Arbor, MI; and Robert Tomes, “A Trip on the Panama Railroad,” (1855) in LaRosa and Mejía, eds., *The United States Discovers Panama: The Writings of Soldiers, Scientists, Scholars, and Scoundrels* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 12.
- ⁷² McGuinness, *Path of Empire*, 81.
- ⁷³ See: Hixson, *American Settler Colonialism*; Langley, *Struggle for the American Mediterranean*; Nugent, *Habits of Empire*.
- ⁷⁴ See: Jay Sexton, *The Monroe Doctrine: Empire and Nation in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 2011).

⁷⁵ See: Langley, *Struggle for the American Mediterranean*; May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld*; and Brian DeLay, *War of a Thousand Deserts: Indian Raids and the U.S.-Mexican War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

⁷⁶ See: May, *Manifest Destiny's Underworld*; Gibson, *Yankees in Paradise*; Michel Gobat, "Our Indian Empire: The Transimperial Origins of U.S. Liberal Imperialism," Kristin Hoganson and Jay Sexton, eds., *Crossing Empires: Taking U.S. History into the Transimperial Terrain*, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 69; and idem, *Empire by Invitation: William Walker and Manifest Destiny in Central America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018). Gregg Cantrell, in his 1999 biography *Stephen F. Austin: Empresario of Texas*, portrays Austin as more of an accommodationist figure than a mere leader of Manifest Destiny. His command of the Spanish language and evident respect for Mexican customs allowed him to negotiate space for his Anglo colonists in this borderland. Ultimately, Austin, like many at the vanguard of empire, took to the interests and fears of his colonists and spearheaded a movement to pull away from Mexico and form a separate republic that championed slavery and the property rights of Anglo settlers.

⁷⁷ See: Alfred Thayer Mahan, *Hawaii and Our Future Sea Power* (New York: Forum Publishing Group, 1893); Joseph A. Fry, *John Tyler Morgan and the Search for Southern Autonomy* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1992); Ovidio Diaz Espino, *How Wall Street Created a Nation: J.P. Morgan, Teddy Roosevelt, and the Panama Canal* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 11-12.

⁷⁸ McCain, *The United States and the Republic of Panama*, 8.

⁷⁹ Convention for the Construction of a Ship Canal (Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty), November 18, 1903, Avalon Project, Yale University Law Library Online Collections.

⁸⁰ LaFeber, *The Panama Canal*, 49-50.

⁸¹ *Panama Canal Act: "An Act to provide for the opening, maintenance, protection, and operation of the Panama Canal, and the sanitation and government of the Canal Zone" (Signed by the President August 24, 1912.)*, The Annual Message of the President to Congress, December 3, 1912, *Foreign Relations of the United States (FRUS)*, doc. 661, 477-479.

⁸² Carlos Guestava Mann, *Panamanian Militarism: A Historical Interpretation* (Miami, OH: University of Ohio Press, 1996), 48-49.

⁸³ See: Jason Colby, *The Business of Empire: United Fruit, Race, and U.S. Expansion in Central America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011).

⁸⁴ See: Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁸⁵ Memorandum for Major Covell, "Chiva Chiva Road," December 27, 1933, Politically Sensitive Correspondence, 1924-1964, RG 185, Box 7, Folder 1.

⁸⁶ Alban Snyder, Consul General, to R.C. Bedell, September 6, 1912, National Archives of the United States, College Park, Maryland, Records of the Department of State, Records of Foreign Posts of the United States Record Group 84 (Hereafter referred to as RG 84), Vol. 209, File no. 852.

⁸⁷ “Finds Many Suitable Regions Here for Colonization,” *The Star and Herald*, May 30, 1925, General Records, 1914-1934, RG 185, Box 1317, Folder 80-A-16 (2).

⁸⁸ Lester Langley and Thomas Schoonover, *The Banana Men: American Mercenaries and Entrepreneurs in Central America, 1880-1930* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky), 14.

⁸⁹ McCain, *The United States and the Republic of Panama*, 103.

⁹⁰ Major, *Prize Possession*, 71.

⁹¹ W.C. Bond to Alban Snyder, Consul General, July 29, 1912, RG 84, Vol. 209.

⁹² C.A. McIlvaine to Alban Snyder, July 11, 1913, RG 84, Vol. 214.

⁹³ H.H. Wefel, Mobile, Alabama, to Alban Snyder, July 3, 1918, RG 84, Vol. 241.

⁹⁴ W.M. Beinhart to United States Consul, Colon. February 26, 1913, RG 84, Vol. 19.

⁹⁵ William G. Chase to Alban Snyder, November 3, 1914, RG 84, Vol. 216.

⁹⁶ Alban Snyder to John Bradley, July 15, 1918, RG 84, Vol. 214.

⁹⁷ McCain, *The United States and the Republic of Panama*, 98.

⁹⁸ Alban Snyder to the Secretary of State, July 31, 1916, RG 84, Vol. 225.

⁹⁹ A.E.P. Schade to Paul Osterhout, American Consular Agent, Bocas del Toro, July 18, 1916, RG 84, Vol. 27.

¹⁰⁰ “Crux in Chiriquí Land Squabble is Expected to Have Sensational Sequel,” *Star and Herald*, March 5, 1920, RG 185, Box 1308, Folder 80-A-3 (2).

¹⁰¹ William G. Chase to Alban Snyder, February 13, 1919, RG 84, Vol. 245.

¹⁰² Major Herbert Pace, “To the Public” Leaflet, March 9, 1920, RG 185, Box 1308, Folder 80-A-3 (2).

¹⁰³ Rene de la Pedraja, *Wars of Latin America, 1899-1941* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2006), 99.

¹⁰⁴ Ramon Valdes, “The North American Protectorate,” George Washington Goethals Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (Hereafter referred to as LOC), Folder E-H.

¹⁰⁵ Narciso Garay to William Jennings Price, February 6, 1918, RG 84, Vol. 235.

¹⁰⁶ A.E.P. Schade to American Consular Agent, Bocas del Toro, November 4, 1920, RG 84, Vol. 245.

¹⁰⁷ Conniff, *Panama and the United States*, 85-86.

¹⁰⁸ Woodrow Wilson to W.J. Bryan, March 24, 1915, William Jennings Bryan Papers, Library of Congress, Washington DC., Box 45: Special Correspondence.

¹⁰⁹ Rene de la Pedraja, *Wars*, 100.

¹¹⁰ Rene de la Pedraja, *Wars*, 374-375.

¹¹¹ Memorandum of Interview with Foreign Minister Garay of Panama and the Panama Charge d'Affaires, July 28, 1921, National Archives of the United States, College Park, Maryland, Records of the Department of State, Miscellaneous Records of the Secretary and Undersecretary of State, Memorandums of Conversation of the Secretary of State, 1921-1925, Records Group 59 (Hereafter to as RG 59), Box 2, Folder-Panama.

¹¹² Secretary of State Hughes to William Jennings Price, March 3, 1921, Memorandums of Conversation of the Secretary of State, 1921-1925, RG 59.

¹¹³ Superintendent of Farms to E.C. Adams, May 22, 1928, United Fruit Company Letters, Philippe Bourgois Collection, 215.