PATH OF EMPIRE

A volume in the series

The United States in the World

Edited by Mark Philip Bradley and Paul A. Kramer

PATH OF EMPIRE

Panama and the California Gold Rush

Aims McGuinness

Cornell University Press
Ithaca and London

Copyright © 2008 by Cornell University

All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in a review, this book, or parts thereof, must not be reproduced in any form without permission in writing from the publisher. For information, address Cornell University Press, Sage House, 512 East State Street, Ithaca, New York 14850.

First published 2008 by Cornell University Press

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McGuinness, Aims, 1968–
Path of Empire : Panama and the California Gold Rush / Aims McGuinness.
p. cm.—(The United States in the world)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-8014-4521-7 (cloth : alk. paper)
1. United States—Foreign relations—Panama. 2. Panama—Foreign relations—United States. 3. Americans—Panama—History—19th century. 4. Watermelon Riot, Colón, Panama, 1856. 5. Panama—History—19th century. 6. California—History—1846–1850. 7. California—Gold discoveries. I. Title. II. Series.

E183.8.P2M36 2008
327.730728709'034—dc22 2007028868

Cornell University Press strives to use environmentally responsible suppliers and materials to the fullest extent possible in the publishing of its books. Such materials include vegetable-based, low-VOC inks and acid-free papers that are recycled, totally chlorine-free, or partly composed of nonwood fibers. For further information, visit our website at www.cornellpress.cornell.edu.

Cloth printing 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

For my parents
and for Jasmine

Contents

Acknowledgments ix

Prelude: April 15, 1856 1

Introduction: In the Archive of Loose Leaves 4

Chapter 1. California in Panama 16

Chapter 2. The Panama Railroad and the Conquest of the Gold Rush 54

Chapter 3. Sovereignty on the Isthmus 84

Chapter 4. "We Are Not in the United States Here" 123

Chapter 5. U.S. Empire and the Boundaries of Latin America 152

Conclusion: Conversations in the Museum of History 184

Coda: With Dust in Our Eyes 200

Notes 205

Bibliography 231

Index 243

Acknowledgments

This book began at the University of Michigan, where Rebecca J. Scott offered inspiration, direction, countless marginal comments, and many cups of tea. For guidance during my years in Ann Arbor, I am also grateful to Sueann Caulfield, Frederick Cooper, Fernando Coronil, Earl Lewis, Julie Skurski, and J. Mills Thornton. Jane Burbank, Matthew Connelly, Sandra Gunning, Maria Montoya, Martin Pernick, David Scobey, and Julius Scott also provided valuable help as the project evolved. My time at Michigan was enriched by friends including José Amador, Katherine Brophy-Dubois, Adrian Burgos, Laurent Dubois, Frank Guridy, Richard Kim, John McKiernan-González, Kate Masur, April Mayes, Julianne O'Brien-Pedersen, David Pedersen, Lara Putnam, and Kerry Ward. Paul Eiss proved once again to be the ideal roommate and friend.

While at the University of Michigan, I benefited from financial support from the U.S. Department of Education/Jacob Javits Fellowship, the Department of History, Latin American and Caribbean Studies, the Rackham Graduate School, and the Center for Afro-American and African Studies. A Fulbright Scholarship administered by the Council for International Exchange of Scholars enabled my final year of research in Panama and Colombia.

Alfredo Castillero Calvo and Ángeles Ramos Baquero provided sage counsel and warm hospitality throughout my time in Panama City. The wonderful museum they created together, the Museo del Canal Interoceánico, became my classroom for the study of Panama's past, and I treasure the memory of the evenings I spent discussing history on their balcony.

The advice and works of Alfredo Figueroa Navarro influenced this project greatly, and his friendship helped sustain me over the course of many trips to Panama.

Among the others to whom I owe thanks for acts of kindness in Panama are Almyr Alba, José Álvaro, Fernando Aparicio, Celestino Andrés Araúz, Carlos Castro, Rolando Cochez, Jorge Conte Porras, Rémi and Cecilia Carite, Pantaleón García, Joaquín Gil de Real, Nelva Nivia González, Rolando Hernández, Eric Jackson, Stella de Lañas, Marixa Lasso, Sandra Lezcano, Florencio Muñoz, Martín Guillermo Ortiz, Patricia Pizzurno Gelós, Frank Robinson, Peter Sánchez, Fermín Santana, Eduardo Tejeira, and Josefina Zorrita. I also benefited from advice provided by Michael Conniff, John Lindsay-Poland, Thomas Pearcy, Orlando Pérez, Gloria Rudolf, and Peter Szok. I am grateful to Argelia Tello for our informative and enjoyable conversations about Panamanian history over brunch. Belsi Medina proved to be of great assistance to me as she has to many other Fulbrighters in Panama. I offer thanks to Carlos Guevara Mann for his friendship over the years and for sponsoring a talk that I gave as part of the national celebration of Panama's centennial in 2003. Tomás Mendizábal of the Instituto Nacional de Cultura did me the favor of extending an invitation to participate in the official commemoration of the Tajada de Sandía in April 2006.

During my visits to Panama the Torres Moreno family provided me with meals, a place to sleep, and a model of how to treat other human beings. I am deeply indebted to Doña Carmen, Don Alonzo, Cary, Eric, José, and Renán.

In Bogotá I received help from Mauricio Archila, Hayley Froysland, Juan Miguel Gómez, Fernán González, Jaime Jaramillo, Rocio Londoño, Laura Mayorga, Ivan and Marisa Mustain, Juan Camilo Rodríguez Gómez, Maytte Restrepo, Eduardo Sáenz, and Hermés Tovar. The staff of the Fulbright Commission in Bogotá, particularly Consuelo Valdivieso, provided valuable support.

I benefited from advice on matters of Colombian and Latin American history from George Reid Andrews, Charles Bergquist, Ann Farnsworth-Alvear, Michael Jiménez, Catherine Legrand, Michael LaRosa, and Frank

Safford. A lunch over fish tacos with Nancy Appelbaum proved critical for the writing of this book, and I am indebted to her for the support she has offered since I first ventured into the realm of Colombian history. Since James Sanders introduced me to the Archivo General de la Nación in Bogotá, he has been a friend and a constant source of advice—the next *chocolate* is on me.

I am thankful to the many librarians and archivists who offered their help and insights as I worked on this book, including the staffs of the Archivo Nacional de Panamá, the Archivo del Consejo Municipal de Panamá, the Biblioteca Nacional de Panamá, the Biblioteca "Simón Bolívar" of the Universidad de Panamá, the library of the Panama Canal Commission, the Archivo General de la Nación (Bogotá), the Archivo del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores (Bogotá), the Biblioteca Nacional de Colombia, the Biblioteca "Luis Angel Arango" (Bogotá), and the Biblioteca del Congreso (Bogotá). In the United States I received assistance from staff members of the U.S. National Archives, the Library of Congress, the Autry Library, the Bancroft Library, the California Historical Society, the Huntington Library, and the University of Michigan's Clements Library, Bentley Library, and Harlan Hatcher Graduate Library. The people of the American Geographical Society Library and the Interlibrary Loan Department at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee were also immensely helpful and tolerant of my endless requests.

Fellowships provided by the Huntington Library and the W. H. Keck Foundation enabled me to spend a fruitful six months in the Huntington's collections in San Marino, California. Peter Blodgett and Dan Lewis helped me to think better about the book and generously provided advice on manuscripts and secondary sources. While at the Huntington I also learned from conversations with William Deverell, Benjamin Johnson, Susan Lee Johnson, George Sánchez, and Elliott West.

I thank Stephen Aron—director of the Institute for the Study of the American West at the Autry National Center—for his advice on this project and also for the opportunity to present a paper at the Institute's Western History Workshop. I would also like to express my gratitude to Louise Pubols of the Autry for her insights into history and her friendship during my stay in Los Angeles.

I learned from commentators and audiences at presentations of this work at meetings of the American Historical Association, the Organization of American Historians, and the Latin American Studies Association as well as audiences at Carnegie Mellon University, the Latin American History

Workshop of the University of Chicago, the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe, the Facultad de Humanidades of the Universidad de Panamá, and the Universidad Católica Santa María la Antigua in Panama City. I feel fortunate that Julia Greene has joined the select ranks of "Panamanianists" in the United States and I thank her for the opportunity to present my work to the Department of History at the University of Colorado–Boulder. Patricia Limerick of the University of Colorado helped start me down the road of western history many years ago when I met her after playing my bagpipes at the Tattered Cover Bookstore in Denver.

I am grateful to my colleagues in the Department of History at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee for creating a stimulating environment for the study of global history. Those who offered help on the book include Margo Anderson, David Buck, Bruce Fetter, Michael Gordon, Victor Greene, Anne Hansen, Reginald Horsman, Douglas Howland, Will Jones, Joseph Rodriguez, Kristin Ruggiero, John Schroeder, Robert Self, Amanda Seligman, Daniel Sherman, and Merry Wiesner-Hanks. I also appreciate the assistance I received from members of the departmental staff, including Cynthia Barnes, Anita Cathey, and Louise Whitaker. The Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies, the Center for International Education, and the College of Letters and Science supported my research generously. A year-long fellowship at UWM's Center for 21st Century Studies provided me with valuable time and intellectual community. I am grateful to Daniel Sherman, director of the center, the center's staff, and other fellows who joined me in 2003–2004.

In Milwaukee I relied on the support of friends including A. Aneesh, Anne Basting, Erica Bornstein, Christina Ewig, Will Jones, Nan Kim-Paik, Brad Lichtenstein, and Peter Paik. Frank P. Zeidler, Milwaukee's most recent socialist mayor, inspired me through the example he set as a citizen and a historian.

I am most appreciative of the superb editing of Alison Kalett at Cornell University Press. I am also grateful to Kimberley Vivier, who did a splendid job of copyediting the book, and to Cameron Cooper for all of her help. Ange Romeo-Hall guided me expertly through the end of the editing process with forbearance and grace. My thanks also go to Philip Schwartzberg, who went to heroic lengths to make the maps and to Dave Prout, a great indexer. Mark Bradley has been a source of support in ways too many to count.

In its final stages the book benefited immensely from suggestions made by Stephen Aron and an anonymous reader for Cornell University Press.

I also appreciate the advice I received on later versions of the manuscript from Jasmine Alinder, Mark Bradley, Laurent Dubois, Paul Eiss, Paul Kramer, and James Sanders. I am very grateful to Rebecca J. Scott for devoting a long weekend in Ann Arbor to working with me on the manuscript.

My parents, Aims and Susan McGuinness, sustained me from the beginning; as parents and as educators, they are my role models. My brother, Alexander McGuinness, led my way to Latin America, and conversations with him continue to teach me. I am also very grateful to Jim and Mary Alinder and to Scott and Mickey Street for their support over the years. Alice McGuinness, my daughter, provided the combustion I needed to bring this endeavor to a close.

Since we met for the third time, a fire has burned in my heart for Jasmine Alinder. My gratitude to her has no bounds.

Prelude

April 15, 1856

On the evening of April 15, 1856, José Manuel Luna was selling fruit from a small stand located near the railroad station in Panama City when he was approached by a group of three or four drunken men from the United States. One of the men seized a slice of watermelon and asked about the price. Luna answered him in English that the fruit cost a *real*, the equivalent of a dime in U.S. currency. The man bit into the watermelon, tossed the fruit to the ground, and then turned his back to Luna without offering anything in return.

When Luna demanded payment, the drunken man taunted him instead with a vulgarity. Luna repeated his demand, this time with a warning. The drunk responded by pulling a pistol from his belt, and then Luna drew a knife. One of the other drunken men attempted to resolve the problem by offering Luna a coin. But the conflict did not end there. A Peruvian named Miguel Habrahan leaped forward from the small crowd that had gathered around the scene and seized the drunken man's pistol. The two wrestled for a moment before Habrahan freed himself and ran off with the pistol into the nearby neighborhood known as "La Ciénaga," or "the Swamp"—a maze of small houses made of cane and thatched with palm fronds. The drunken men pursued him into the heart of the neighborhood. It was then

that the real trouble began. Or at least this is how José Manuel Luna later remembered the incident to officials in Panama City.[1]

Soon after the argument between Luna and the drunk, the bell of the parish church began to toll and hundreds of men from Panama City's poor suburbs rushed to La Ciénaga. Fights broke out between some of these men and immigrants from the United States who were bound for California, most of whom had arrived in Panama City only a few hours earlier by train. Many of the immigrants took refuge inside the nearby railroad station.

A large crowd of people from the surrounding suburbs soon gathered outside the station along with members of the police. Angry words were exchanged between members of the crowd and people inside the building. Under circumstances that would be hotly debated afterward, shots were fired and members of the police and the crowd rushed into the station to confront the immigrants who were inside. By the morning of the next day at least seventeen people lay dead. Two were from Panama. Most of the others were U.S. citizens who had arrived in Panama City that very day.

The events of April 15, 1856, are known by Panamanians today as El Incidente de la Tajada de Sandía (The Incident of the Slice of Watermelon), or more concisely, La Tajada de Sandía. To readers from the United States, this may seem like a peculiar name for one of the bloodier moments in the history of U.S. westward migration by sea. But in Panama watermelon does not carry the same connotation of racialized humor that the fruit has in the United States. Nor is the Tajada de Sandía a laughing matter. In national histories of Panama today, the event serves to usher in a long chronicle of contention and conflict with the United States that continues into the present. The significance of the event resembles that of the Boston Tea Party—an act of resistance that emblemizes the contributions of everyday people to the national struggle against the tyranny of empire.[2]

My own study of the Tajada de Sandía began soon after the latest U.S. invasion of Panama, which took place in December 1989. By the time I arrived in Panama City, four and a half years later, the bodies of the invasion's victims had all been buried and most of the rubble had been swept away. But scars left by the invasion were not hard to detect, especially in the poor neighborhoods located near the National Archive of Panama.

The National Archive is housed in a neo-classical building that has been grayed by decades of exposure to the exhaust of passing automobiles and buses. On my first visit to the archive, I walked through its grand entrance and found my way to the director's office, where I presented a letter of introduction. After signing my name in the register of researchers, I found a

table in the reading room and set about searching the index to the archive's collection of documents from the nineteenth century.

My goal at the time was to write a history of the United States in nineteenth-century Panama, starting with the California Gold Rush. I had come to Panama City with the goal of including Panamanian voices in the history I hoped to write. As I surveyed the index, however, I felt a sense of disappointment. I found only a few references to documents that related explicitly to conflicts involving the United States.

I filled out a request slip related to one of these documents, one connected to the Tajada de Sandía, and handed it to an archivist. She returned after a half hour and informed me that the document was not where it was supposed to be. Somewhat deflated, I filled out another slip and handed it to the archivist. She went back to the vault and then returned to tell me again that the document I had requested was not there. After this sequence was repeated a few more times, I screwed up my courage to ask if I could at least see where the documents were supposed to be.

Most of the archive's documents from the nineteenth century had been bound into large blue books, or *tomos*. The archivist brought me the book that had once held the first document I had requested. I opened it up. As the archivist had said, the document was not there. When I pressed back the pages, however, I could see the yellowed stubble of the document's remains in the binding of the book. Someone, it seemed, had removed the document with a blade of some kind. I showed the binding to the archivist and she nodded. The National Archive received little support from the government, she explained, and many of its holdings were in poor condition, had been misplaced, or had never been catalogued.

I returned to my rented room that night feeling discouraged. Finding Panamanian voices in the archive was proving more complicated than I had imagined. With a guilty conscience, I reassured myself by recalling that the United States intervened militarily in Panama thirteen times between 1856 and 1903.[3] Surely I could find something in the archive that related explicitly to this history. As it turned out, however, I was wrong. Over the next six weeks I found none of the documents that the index identified as being related to the history of conflicts involving the United States. It seemed as if someone had completed my research before me and had systematically removed the evidence from the archive. But who could have done such a thing, and why? These questions would haunt me until the conclusion of my final research trip to Panama three and a half years later.

Introduction

In the Archive of Loose Leaves

The discovery of gold in California in 1848 kindled hope in many different places. As reports of fabulous riches spread, legions of people abruptly uprooted themselves and set off in search of rosier futures. Hundreds and then thousands of immigrants from seemingly every corner of the world arrived, and a relatively isolated outpost on the Pacific coast was dramatically transformed into a crowded place of frenzied commerce and breathless anticipation.

The sudden convergence in tight quarters of so many people of such different origins produced challenges to hierarchies of class, color, and nationality as well as cherished distinctions between men and women. To some, the rush for riches would bestow unprecedented opportunities for material gain and political power. To others, the rush would bring tragedy and disenfranchisement. Soon enough, however, the excitement engendered by the quest for gold would fade, the crowds would be corralled, and the streets would grow quiet again. A less tumultuous era would follow as an economy that once seemed to offer chances to many came to be dominated by a few. Yet long after the rush had run its course, memories of the golden era of California would live on in stories that continue to be told into the present.

For those who know the history of the California Gold Rush in the United States, the story line just presented may seem all too familiar. But how does the story read differently if we consider that the "outpost" described above could just as easily have been Panama City as San Francisco? The idea that the discovery of gold could contribute to such dramatic changes in a place so far from the goldfields themselves may come as a surprise to readers in the United States. But the gold rush was also an event in the history of Panama. Panamanians refer to the gold rush today as "La Fiebre del Oro" (the gold fever) or more simply as "La California."

How did California, a place now located in the United States, become a period of time in the history of Panama? This book seeks to answer this question using documents found in archives located in Panama, Colombia, and the United States. During the late 1840s and early 1850s, events on the Isthmus of Panama were closely related to developments in California, and they were similar in some respects as well. Yet there were also important differences that may surprise readers more conversant with the history of California during the gold rush. By removing the lens of history from the more familiar territory of California to the isthmus that connects the Americas north and south, we may gain a better understanding of the possibilities that the gold discovery in 1848 helped unleash.

The impact of the gold rush was felt in many places beyond California, but perhaps none was transformed more dramatically than the Isthmus of Panama. Between the end of 1848 and 1856 this slender spit of land was remade into one of the principal conduits for the great maritime migration to the goldfields of California. During those same years Panama saw the building by a U.S. company of the first transcontinental railroad in world history, the final abolition of slavery, the establishment of universal manhood suffrage, the foundation of an autonomous Panamanian state, and the first of what in time would become a long list of military interventions by the United States. A maritime borderland connecting the Atlantic and Pacific worlds, Panama also became a bridge between different regions of the United States—one that was paradoxically subject to the sovereignty of another nation. This other nation was not the Republic of Panama, which became independent from Colombia only in 1903, but rather Colombia's predecessor, the Republic of Nueva Granada, with its capital in Bogotá.

Although most people in the United States today identify Panama with the canal that was completed in 1914, the importance of the isthmus for communication between the east and west coasts of the United States dates back to the late 1840s, more than half a century before. During the gold

rush the fastest way to travel between New York City and San Francisco was not over land but over sea via the "Panama Route"—a network of ships whose linchpin was the Isthmus of Panama. Over the isthmus passed a large portion of the people who traveled between the East Coast and California during the gold rush as well as thousands of tons of mail, gold, and silver. The Panama Route would remain the fastest and most comfortable way for immigrants to travel from one coast of the United States to the other until the opening of the second transcontinental railroad in world history across the United States itself in 1869.[1]

Gold-rush demography is difficult to reconstruct, but the best estimates indicate that maritime migration from New York City to California via Panama was greater than overland migration to California over the California Trail between 1848 and 1860. John Haskell Kemble calculated that a minimum of 218,546 people traveled between New York and San Francisco by way of Panama during this period. During the same era, according to John Unruh, approximately 198,000 people migrated to California through Wyoming's South Pass—the principal portal for overland migration to California and other points west. These same calculations indicate that California-bound migration via the Panama Route exceeded overland migration through the South Pass in 1851 and again from 1854 through the rest of the decade. Panama's importance for immigration between the Atlantic and Pacific more generally was undoubtedly greater than the figure presented above, which omits passengers who crossed Panama with origins other than New York City and destinations other than San Francisco. For return immigration from California to the eastern United States, the Panama Route was by far the most popular route during the gold rush, especially after the completion of a railroad across Panama in 1855. Between 1849 and 1859, most of the roughly one fifth of the people who made it to California and then decided to return to the eastern United States made their voyage home by way of Panama.[2]

Until the establishment of the Pony Express and then the overland telegraph in the United States in 1860–61, the Panama Route was the primary, fastest, and most reliable route for the transmission of news and other information between the eastern United States and California. Until 1869, most of the mail sent between the two coasts of the United States and most of the gold and silver that was sent eastward from California also passed over Panama. Steamship lines including the Pacific Mail Steamship Company, and the United States Mail Steamship Company won contracts from the U.S. government to ship mail. These firms allied with express companies

TABLE 1.
Immigrants from New York City to San Francisco via Panama and Westward Overland Migration through the South Pass, 1848–1860

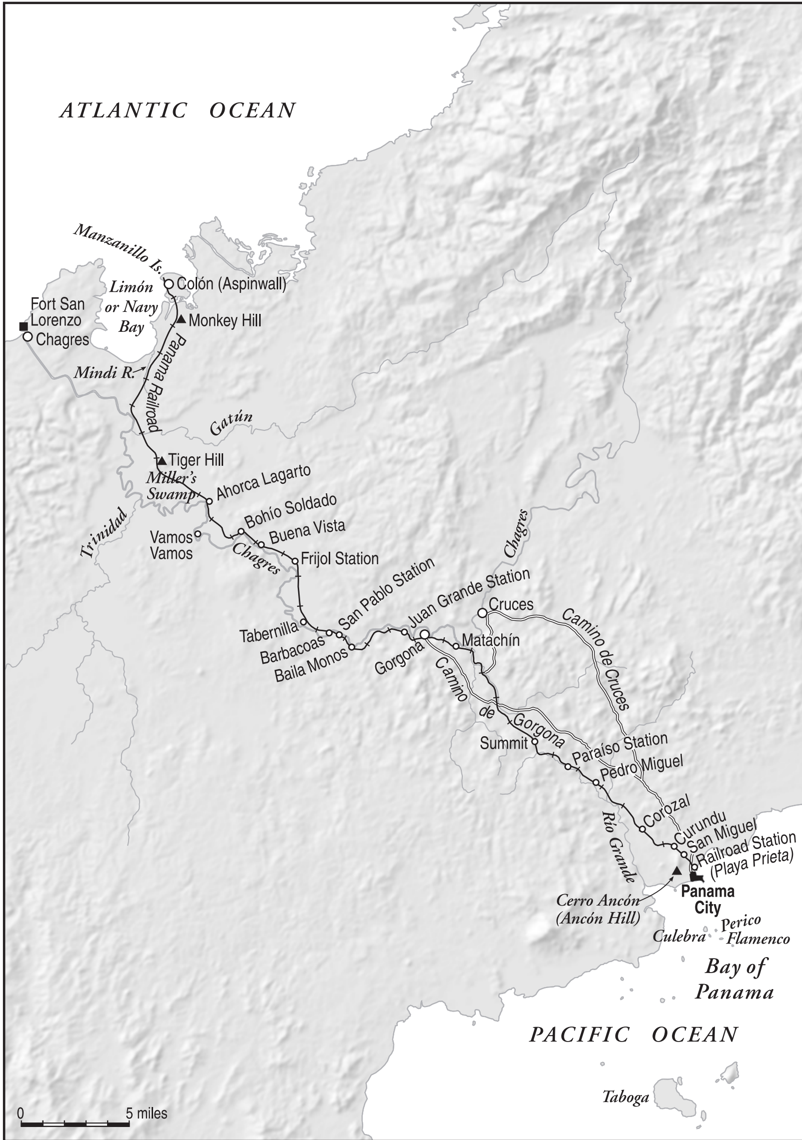
Year	Travelers from New York to San Francisco via Panama[a]	Overland Migration via the South Pass[b]
1848	335	400
1849	6,489	25,000
1850	13,809	44,000
1851	15,464	1,100
1852	24,231	50,000
1853	17,014	20,000
1854	18,445	12,000
1855	15,412	1,500
1856	18,090	8,000
1857	17,637	4,000
1858	24,621	6,000
1859	26,907	17,000
1860	20,092	9,000
Total	218,546	198,000

[a]*Source*: Kemble, *The Panama Route*, 254.
[b]*Source*: Unruh, *The Plains Across*, 119–120.

tied more closely to overland routes, including the Wells Fargo Company, to transport highly valued, time-sensitive commodities across Panama as well, including specie. Kemble estimated the total worth of the treasure sent from California across Panama between 1849 and 1869 to be $710,753,857.62.[3]

There were other ways to reach California by sea from the East Coast in the mid-1800s. During the first year of the rush, when the availability of transportation in Panama and other isthmian crossing points was relatively uncertain, the majority of those who traveled from the eastern United States to California by sea rounded Cape Horn. After 1850, however, the route around the horn was largely abandoned by sea-going passengers destined for California in favor of routes that combined sea travel with overland shortcuts located to the south of the United States. There were other shortcuts of this kind besides Panama, including routes across Mexico, Nicaragua, and other parts of Central America. These competing routes posed challenges to the Panama Route in the early 1850s, particularly the Nicaragua Route. But Panama never lost its dominance to any of these competitors during the gold-rush era, and by 1855, its preeminence among the isthmian routes was virtually uncontested.[4]

In this book I examine two interrelated arenas of struggle that were central to the remaking of Panama into a nexus of the world economy in



Map 1. The transit zone: the route of the Panama Railroad, the Chagres River, and the roads connecting the Chagres to Panama City, circa 1856. By Philip Schwartzberg.

the late 1840s and early 1850s: communication and sovereignty. Communication, or *comunicación*, was a term that Panamanian writers used regularly in the mid-nineteenth century to refer to the circulation of goods, people, and information from one point on the planet to another. I focus in particular on the highly contested transformation of Panama's transit system from a locally controlled network powered primarily by human beings, mules, currents, and the wind to a more centralized and largely U.S.-owned network of ships and locomotives powered by steam. This transformation took place primarily in a place that Panamanian scholars today refer to as "la zona de tránsito" (the transit zone)—a thin corridor of land that encompassed the transit route across the isthmus and the ports located on either side of that route. Sovereignty, or *soberanía*, has also long been a key word for Panamanian political theorists and historians. I use the term to indicate the organization and the enactment of power over territory and flows of people, information, and goods through governmental and extra-governmental means. My analysis of sovereignty ranges from the political writings of members of the Panamanian elite to popular struggles over urban space and projects undertaken by the officials of U.S. companies to enforce their own visions of order in the transit zone. Although struggles over sovereignty in Panama during the gold rush were less conclusive than the battle over Panama's system of interoceanic communication, those struggles produced innovations in the exercise of power that would have important implications for the future political organization of Panama and Nueva Granada/Colombia, the subsequent course of U.S. empire in the Americas, and the shaping of the very idea of "Latin America."[5]

The abrupt onset of U.S. immigration to California at the end of 1848 raised a thorny question in Panama: who would benefit from the huge demand for fast transportation across the isthmus to the goldfields? At first, immigrants, gold, and letters from the United States were transported across Panama by local people using mules, canoes, and their own backs. Almost immediately, however, the people who operated this locally controlled network came into conflict with U.S. transportation companies and U.S. immigrants themselves. Prominent members of Panama's mercantile elite saw the gold-rush migration as an opportunity to recapture the economic glory of the colonial period and to establish greater autonomy and perhaps even independence from the national government in Bogotá. Yet at the beginning, those who gained most directly from the rush were relatively poor people of color who lived along the transit route and took advantage of the demand for their labor and other commodities to earn small

fortunes from travelers desperate to reach California. As white gold seekers from the United States competed among themselves to buy the services offered by working people in Panama, many reacted violently to what they interpreted as inversions of proper racial hierarchy. But immigrants and some U.S. officials in Panama also sharply criticized U.S. steamship companies for extortionate rates and business practices that in their view placed profit above proper concern for their own countrymen. These conflicts between and within nationalities reflected a deeper instability in Panamanian society—no single group of people from any nation controlled either the communication route across the isthmus or the arena of sovereignty.

The terms of the struggle over communication changed dramatically over the early 1850s with the building of the Panama Railroad, which was inaugurated in 1855. The railroad was constructed by the Panama Railroad Company of New York City. From the beginning of the railroad company's operations, company officials sought to undermine the indigenous transit system, which they saw as a barrier to the successful completion of the line. Faced with the challenge of mobilizing and disciplining the labor of thousands of men from many different places including Nueva Granada, Jamaica, the United States, Ireland, and China, the railroad company turned to a variety of strategies that sought to exert company power over territory that officially formed part of Nueva Granada. These strategies included the creation of a private police force in the transit zone and the construction of a new port city on Panama's Atlantic coast where local government officials exerted minimal power. The city of "Colón" (or "Aspinwall," as company officials insisted on calling it) became arguably the first instance of a U.S.-dominated commercial enclave in Latin American history—a place that remained formally within the bounds of Nueva Granada but was effectively ruled by a foreign-owned company.

As in California during the same period, capitalists from the northeastern United States consolidated control over an economy that only a few years earlier had seemed to offer the possibility of fortunes for anyone with desire and a strong back. The railroad that members of the Panamanian elite had envisioned as the key to Panama's prosperity and political future led instead to an economic depression in Panama, as passengers were whisked across the isthmus with barely a pause to refresh themselves before continuing their journeys by sea.

The transformation of Panama into a transportation nexus with special importance to the United States raised troubling questions about the future of sovereignty in Panama. What was the appropriate form of government

for a transit route whose commercial vitality, according to Panamanian boosters, hinged on its immunity to the sovereign claims of any single state? A number of answers were posed to this question in the early 1850s, the most prominent of which was a treatise authored by Justo Arosemena, a Liberal thinker whom Panamanian historians today generally regard as the intellectual progenitor of Panamanian independence. Arosemena proposed the transformation of Panama into an autonomous federal state, one that would remain formally part of Nueva Granada in certain aspects of its governance but independent in others. According to Arosemena's plan, Panama would become the guardian of a transit route that would be fundamentally neutral and open on equal terms to all the world's nations. Arosemena's vision was translated into law in 1855, when the Congress of Nueva Granada voted to establish Panama as the first of what in time would become many federal states within the larger nation.

Other laws passed in Bogotá also had a profound impact on the course of the gold rush in Panama, including the final abolition of slavery in 1852 and the establishment of universal manhood suffrage in 1853. People of color in Panama City and popular groups in rural areas of Panama took advantage of these reforms to claim a larger voice in electoral politics and in the Liberal Party in particular. Popular Liberals organized politically and militarily to defend their interests against not only their adversaries in the opposing Conservative Party but also threats from the United States. The early 1850s saw as well the growing politicization of tensions between people of color and elites in Panama City, including elites in both the Conservative and the Liberal Party. Rumors of caste war or race war suggested the limits to this increase in popular political power, as did conflicts with Anglo-American immigrants in the transit zone. But the most fearsome of the potential threats to black political power and black freedom in Panama was the possibility of invasion by filibusters, the private adventurers who fanned out from the United States in the aftermath of the U.S.-Mexico War with ambitions for further conquest in the hemisphere. The specter of conquest was made more real by the successes of William Walker, the most infamous of the filibusters, who seized control of Nicaragua with a small group of followers and Nicaraguan allies in 1855. Fears of filibuster invasion would play a central role in the violence that took place in Panama City on the night of April 15, 1856—the Tajada de Sandía.

The events of April 15 and the brief U.S. intervention that followed four months later revealed fault lines in Panamanian society that did not fall neatly along national lines. People of color in Panama City faced off against

elite Panamanians even as they prepared to protect their city from invaders from the United States. Those same events exposed the complex relationship among filibusters, U.S. commercial empire, U.S. naval power, and the consolidation of Anglo-American power in California. Rather than separate stages or competing processes, the making of the United States as a transcontinental nation and U.S. expansion overseas in Panama were coincident with one another and intertwined.

One of those who linked events in Panama to other faces of U.S. expansion in the late 1840s and early 1850s was Arosemena. His writings before and immediately after the Tajada de Sandía offer an opportunity to rethink a long-standing debate among historians of Latin America about the origins of "América Latina" as an imagined place and an ongoing political project. Following the violence of April 15, Arosemena wrote an essay that sought to rally the Spanish-speaking republics in the Americas against what he perceived as a coordinated assault by the "raza yankee." One of the earliest literary efforts to evoke a specifically "Latin American" unity in the hemisphere, the essay also evinced anxiety about the political power of men of color in Panama. Arosemena's writings and events on the ground during the U.S. intervention of September 1856 present an opportunity to unearth connections between U.S. imperial projects in Panama, the growing power of popular groups in electoral politics in Panama and Nueva Granada more generally, and the history of "Latin America" as a geopolitical concept.

If the gold rush does not immediately conjure up images of Panama in the United States, it is in part because the history of the gold rush has been told primarily as an event in U.S. history by historians in the United States. Over the past three decades, scholars have transformed our understanding of the rush by writing histories of peoples who were long marginalized in traditional Anglo-American accounts of the event, including Native Americans, *californios*, African Americans, women, Mormons, Jews, and immigrants to California from China, Hawaii, Europe, and different points in the Americas. Historians working in this vein have replaced the hackneyed stereotype of the grizzled Anglo forty-niner with a pick in his hand with a more complex and accurate vision of gold rush society in California. Only recently, however, have scholars begun to give sustained attention to the significance of the gold rush of 1848 beyond the shores of California.[6] Recent works have pointed out the importance of the gold rush for women and families left behind by men who headed to California.[7] Others have pointed to the significance of seaports and transit routes in Latin America, including Panama, as scenes of encounters between local peoples and gold

rush immigrants in ports and along transit routes.[8] These works have contributed to a longer-standing effort by historians to pursue connections and comparisons between the gold rush in California and later gold rushes in Australia, Canada, Alaska and elsewhere.[9]

"California's gold rush truly has many contexts and thus many histories," as Kenneth N. Owens has reminded us.[10] Much remains to be written about those other histories, especially those that unfolded outside or across the borders of the United States. The exclusive identification of the gold rush or any other event with a single place is worth questioning not only because it impoverishes our understanding of the richness of the past but also because such identification has often served to obscure the darker or more disturbing aspects of events. The identification of events such as the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution exclusively with Europe has long masked the importance of European colonial ventures for the history of Europe itself. Yet as scholars of colonialism, slavery, and slave emancipation have reminded us, events beyond imperial centers were often intertwined intimately with events in metropoles themselves.[11] Historians of U.S. empire in recent years have similarly explored connections between what was once regarded strictly as "domestic" history and the history of U.S. imperial projects abroad.[12]

This book is similarly concerned with linkages between events in the United States and Panama. At the same time, I have tried to remain cognizant of a potential problem with such an approach. Although it is laudable to question the strict division between the national history of the United States and the history of U.S. empire overseas, a danger exists when the historical questions that are pursued and the categories of analysis that are employed emerge from the empire alone—even when the aspiration of the historian is explicitly anti-imperialist. Any history that aspires to cross borders must look in multiple directions if it is to be something more than the history of one side of the border writ large.

I do not claim to tell the history of the gold rush "from the Panamanian perspective"—I am from the United States, for one thing, and furthermore, there is no single Panamanian perspective on the past. I have tried, however, to recognize and engage with some of the ways in which Panamanians have told their history: I take seriously the spatial and temporal categories that Panamanian historians have brought to their study of the past, and I attempt to cajole U.S. readers who are not otherwise interested in the history of mid-nineteenth-century Panama to consider how events there were important not just for the United States but for Panamanians in