

Promoting a New Frontier

Like other elected officials at the turn of the twentieth century, Sen. Orville Platt fielded many inquiries from his constituents about Cuba. U.S. entrepreneurs had been interested in the island dating back to the eighteenth century. With Cuba as an independent state under the watchful eye of the United States, opportunities for commercial prosperity seemed ripe for enterprising Americans. Eager to take advantage of the situation, W. H. Putnam of Bridgeport, Connecticut, wrote his senator to ask for advice about living and investing in Cuba. Platt was familiar with Cuban affairs. As chairman of the Senate Committee on Relations with Cuba, he was the sponsor of the so-called Platt Amendment that had made Cuba a U.S. protectorate. Although Platt favored close commercial ties between the United States and Cuba, he was tepid about middle-class entrepreneurs' prospects for success; he surmised that only financiers with large amounts of cash could prosper. But Platt recognized that U.S. businessmen already engaged there were working to get other Americans to follow their lead. "This new phase of business which is called 'promotion' seems to be the popular one with regard to Cuba just now," he wrote.¹

That "promotion" was especially evident on the Isle of Pines. At the dawn of the twentieth century, U.S.-owned companies advertised throughout the United States to entice Americans to buy land. As with any good sales pitch, these landholding companies accentuated the Isle's attractive features while minimizing, or altogether ignoring, factors that

¹ Platt to Putnam, December 5, 1904, Orville Platt Papers, Box 2, Official Correspondence: 1900–1905 – Various Subjects, Vol. 1, 190, Record Group 69, CSL. Putnam's professional background is not clear from the correspondence.

complicated the picture. Later experiences would bear out that companies often exaggerated physical, political, commercial, and social conditions to enhance the Isle's appeal. These enterprises, however, insisted that their descriptions were not too good to be true. "Mindful of the fact that exaggerations and misleading statements are all too frequent in the average prospectus," the Cleveland-based San Juan Heights Land Company wrote, "it is the purpose here to be conservative." This from a company that referred to the Isle as "A Veritable Garden of Eden."²

Among Cubans, particularly in Havana, the Isle of Pines largely was viewed as a backwater. In the 1890s, it was home to only about 3,000 people, mostly cattle ranchers, wage workers, and subsistence farmers. To American entrepreneurs, however, the Isle seemed something else: an opportunity. Shortly after the War of 1898, U.S. businessmen began buying tens of thousands of acres from Spanish and Cuban landowners. These businessmen then subdivided the land into smaller parcels with the aim of reselling it at modest prices that would appeal to middle-class Americans.

Much of the Isle's promotional literature reflected white Americans' changing attitudes toward the tropics around the turn of the twentieth century. As Catherine Cocks has shown, popular racist beliefs that the tropics were places of disease, sloth, and moral degeneracy gave way to new considerations of these regions as areas of opportunity and rejuvenation.³ Boosters, entrepreneurs, and tourism promoters drove this shift, which was evident in the ways landholding companies portrayed the Isle of Pines. They framed the Isle in four ways. First, they described the Isle as an exotic tropical paradise. This allure included not only the promotion of the year-round warm climate and proximity to beaches, but also its mythology as a colonial-era pirate haven. By implication, the Isle was laden with riches, both figuratively (in the form of its agricultural potential) and literally (buried treasure).

Second, companies depicted the Isle as attainable and tamable by Americans who were willing to work hard. Its relative proximity to the United States gave the comforting impression that something so alien and exotic was actually close to home. Moreover, companies often portrayed *pinneros* as pliable. They described *pinneros* as unsophisticated, yet lauded them for being courteous, welcoming to foreigners, and a source

² San Juan Heights Land Company, "The Isle of Pines: The Garden Spot of the World" (Cleveland, OH, 1914), 7, 1.

³ Catherine Cocks, *Tropical Whites: The Rise of the Tourist South in the Americas* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

of inexpensive labor that could help settlers convert their land into groves and farms.

Third, the Isle offered physical and financial rejuvenation. Companies hailed the mineral springs for their healing powers and cited the warm climate as a place to recuperate from chronic illness. Developers also stressed that the Isle was free from the tropical diseases prevalent in other Caribbean islands, including mainland Cuba. Financially, the Isle promised to be a place where Americans could make their fortune, either through investment in the landholding companies or moving to the Isle to start their own farms or businesses. Advertisements depicted the Isle as “the modern El Dorado,” the mythological city of gold that Spanish explorers had searched for in South America.⁴ Such promises of wealth surely resonated during an era of economic boom and bust.

Finally, the Isle of Pines promised a new frontier for U.S. expansion. The 1890s signaled the so-called closing of the frontier in the U.S. West. The Isle was depicted as a means to revive territorial expansion. Many companies and settlers harkened back to the pioneer spirit of the nineteenth century. For example, one letter-writer to the *New York Times*, who claimed to have lived on the Isle for ten years, asserted that Americans who settled there were akin to those who went west during the Gold Rush and “fought a fight against tremendous odds of distance and nature that will compare most favorably with what our old Forty-niners did in years gone by.”⁵

These elements helped frame U.S. perceptions of the Isle for the next half-century and spurred Americans to settle and invest there. Private companies and individuals, rather than officials and policymakers, drove this phenomenon. Military reports were typically lukewarm about the Isle’s prospects for U.S. interests. While recognizing that the Isle had modest potential for agricultural commodities and tourism, such reports also downplayed its capability to sustain a military base, which curbed U.S. officials’ enthusiasm. The potential for commercial growth, however, lured private U.S. entrepreneurs who communicated that promise through advertisements aimed at middle-class Americans. Their message helped inspire as many as 10,000 Americans to buy property there – some 2,000 of whom may have owned a residence – and ushered in a U.S. presence and influence on the Isle that endured for more than sixty years.

⁴ The Isle of Pines Investment Company, “The Pineland Bulletin” (Cleveland, OH, 1908), 4–5.

⁵ J. Earl Finnigan, “Whose Isle of Pines?” *New York Times*, February 11, 1923.

Entering the American Consciousness

Although U.S. interest in Cuba had existed for years – Benjamin Franklin and Alexander Hamilton had called for increased commercial ties going back to the eighteenth century – the Isle of Pines had not attracted much attention in the United States. That changed during Cuba’s War of Independence, particularly after an uprising in Nueva Gerona on July 26, 1896, in one of the rare instances of combat on the Isle during the conflict.⁶ Seventeen-year-old Evangelina Cossio, whose father had been sent to the Isle for helping Cuban *insurrectos* the year before, led a revolt of other exiled rebels against a Spanish garrison. Their hope was to quell the small Spanish force by capturing the Isle’s governor, Lt. Col. José Bérriez, and secure passage to the main island to rejoin the rebellion. Despite briefly detaining Bérriez by using Cossio as bait (the colonel was said to be infatuated with her), the uprising ultimately failed. Cossio was sent to a women’s prison in Havana, where she remained for the next year. That is, until her story caught the attention of renowned publisher William Randolph Hearst and the U.S. press. Cossio’s tale was widely reported to American audiences, more so after Hearst’s correspondents freed her from jail and whisked her to the United States in October 1897. Her exploits attracted widespread sympathy, in large part because of the powerful gendered dimensions to her story. While often portrayed as brave and patriotic, akin to a modern-day Joan of Arc, her femininity was unquestioned. Described as attractive and delicate – the *New York Times* referred to her as “picturesquely beautiful”⁷ – she also exemplified the perfect damsel-in-distress, rebuffing the unwanted advances of Bérriez and languishing in Spanish captivity. Much of this sympathy also resonated in U.S. support for the cause of *Cuba Libre*, particularly evident in political cartoons of the day that personified Cuba as a threatened female.⁸ Cossio’s notoriety and her story’s setting helped to introduce the Isle to Americans.

⁶ Details taken from the following syntheses: Louis A. Pérez Jr., *Cuba in the American Imagination: Metaphor and the Imperial Ethos* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2008), 77–80; Jane McManus, *Cuba’s Island of Dreams: Voices from the Isle of Pines and Youth* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 6–16; Kristin L. Hoganson, *Fighting for American Manhood: How Gender Politics Provoked the Spanish-American and Philippine-American Wars* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998), 58–61; Wiltse Peña Hijuelos, et al., *Con Todo Derecho: Isla de la Juventud* (La Habana, 1986), 33–5; Antonio Núñez Jiménez, *Isla de Pinos: Piratas, Colonizadores, Rebeldes* (La Habana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1976), 525–38.

⁷ “Senorita Cisnero’s Tale,” *New York Times*, August 25, 1897.

⁸ For examples, see Pérez, *Cuba in the American Imagination*, chapter 2, and John J. Johnson, *Latin America in Caricature* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1980), 72–95.

Once the United States formally entered the conflict against Spain in 1898, the Isle of Pines proved only a minor theater of operations. One colonel suggested using the Isle to hold Spanish prisoners of war because it would require a minimum of resources to guard and maintain them.⁹ Although the U.S. military did not pursue such a policy, the Isle posed a source of some concern as a base for blockade runners. U.S. newspapers noted that the Isle served as a station from which smugglers could evade the U.S. naval perimeter around Cuba because warships were too big to patrol the shallow waters of the Gulf of Batabanó between the Isle and mainland Cuba.¹⁰ This anxiety did not last long, however, as U.S. Marines captured the Isle in August 1898 when Spanish forces on site surrendered after light resistance.¹¹

With control of the Isle – indeed, all of Cuba – secure by the end of summer, the U.S. military began producing on-site reports about conditions there. Although the military informed U.S. officials, such as Secretary of War Elihu Root, that the Isle offered little strategic utility for the United States, these studies also suggested potential commercial benefits. The first of these reports came in November 1898, when a three-man military delegation spent four days on the Isle. Upon arrival, the group reported an emotional reception of “nearly the whole male population of [Nueva Gerona], about 350 people, who were most enthusiastic in their greeting, shouting ‘Viva la Comission Americana,’ ‘Viva Cuba Libre,’ etc., waving their hats, throwing themselves into each other’s arms and fairly going wild with enthusiasm.”¹² The report offered few demographic details

⁹ Col. C. C. Byrne to Surgeon-General, U.S. Army, May 11, 1898, in *Isle of Pines: Papers Relating to the Adjustment of Title to the Ownership of the Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 177–8.

¹⁰ “Havana Fed from Progreso,” *New York Times*, June 21, 1898.

¹¹ “Marines Will Capture the Isle of Pines,” *New York American*, August 11, 1898; “Move Against Havana,” *Tacoma Daily News*, August 12, 1898. The only first-person account of combat came from a published letter that indicated the USS *Maple* had engaged in a firefight against resistance near Siguanea Bay. “Walter Hiatt – Writes an Interesting Letter from Isle of Pines,” *Lexington Morning Herald*, August 16, 1898. Some Cuban historians have noted that the United States secured the Isle by positioning two ships at the mouth of the Río Las Casas to block the main port of Nueva Gerona. Roberto Únger Pérez, et al., *Americanos en la Isla* (Nueva Gerona: Ediciones El Abra, 2004), 11; Peña Hijuelos, et al., *Con Todo Derecho*, 35. One report stated that Gen. Nelson Miles wanted to invade the Isle in July to move against blockade runners. But President William McKinley and Secretary of War Russell Alger rejected the plan, presumably to focus on taking Santiago in eastern Cuba, which proved the decisive conflict in the Cuban theater. “Alger’s Story of the War,” *New York Times*, December 3, 1898.

¹² Maj. William E. Almy, et al., to Brig. Gen. J. W. Clous, November 25, 1898, in *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 179–80.

about the Isle's people but rather focused on resources and military utility. The delegation noted the Isle's limited potential for agriculture – “The soil is not rich, being sandy and arid, the country resembling somewhat the scrub-oak country of the Indian Territory or Wyoming” – but also its abundance of timber, marble quarries, and medicinal springs.¹³ It also suggested that the Isle might be a good way station for U.S. troops to acclimatize them to tropical conditions.

Gen. Fitzhugh Lee, U.S. consul general in Havana before the war and nephew of famed Gen. Robert E. Lee, offered another report in February 1899 after a four-day trip to the Isle. He was more skeptical about the Isle's utility. “The Isle of Pines is disappointing in its appearance, [the] number of its inhabitants, and the fertility of its soil.”¹⁴ Although tobacco and timber might be good export products, sugar – one of the principal export crops in Cuba – did not grow well on the Isle, at least in the abundance it would take to be profitable. Nor were the marble quarries quite as promising as the November 1898 report had indicated. Moreover, Lee questioned the placing of U.S. military personnel on the Isle considering the slow speeds of the shallow-water boats that could travel between the Isle and mainland Cuba.¹⁵

Later that month, Capt. Frederick Foltz made a three-week visit to the Isle. His subsequent report provided the most detailed description of the Isle during the three-and-a-half-year U.S. military occupation of Cuba. Foltz found the Isle disorganized with a poor infrastructure owing to a Spanish-era tax structure in which only about one-fourth of the money collected had been reinvested locally. “As a consequence,” Foltz wrote, “the bridges are in need of repair, the schools are closed, the clerks [are] living from hand to mouth without any remuneration.”¹⁶ Economically, Foltz suggested that the Isle held some promise for its agricultural commodities. He predicted that tobacco had the best chance for export success. But he saw another industry as having even more potential: “The exploitation of the island as a sanitary resort is, however, the enterprise which seems to promise the greatest return to the capitalist, as well as

¹³ *Ibid.*, 180.

¹⁴ Lee to Adna Chafee, February 9, 1899, in *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 185.

¹⁵ Lee's trip to the Isle was reported in U.S. newspapers, suggesting U.S. audiences were aware of activity on the Isle. For example, see “Lee on a Visit,” *Birmingham Age-Herald*, February 7, 1899.

¹⁶ Foltz to Lt. Col. Tasker H. Bliss, February 22, 1899, in *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 192.

the greatest benefit to the island itself.”¹⁷ In the months that followed, U.S. entrepreneurs took up Foltz’s suggestion, indicating that businessmen were closely attuned to these reports.¹⁸

The following year, Capt. H. J. Slocum reported substantial progress on the Isle in terms of civil society and the local economy, but with still more room for improvement. He stated that health and order in Nueva Gerona were “excellent,” with clean streets and neat schools – “much better than any I have seen on the island of Cuba.”¹⁹ Yet infrastructure remained poor, particularly roads and bridges that were still in disrepair. Slocum’s report also hinted at divisions among Cubans on the Isle, particularly officials against the general population. On one hand, he noted “some feeling on the part of the people about the alcalde [mayor] and some of the officials not being the people of the isle, these officials having been sent to the island from Cuba.”²⁰ Yet “the alcalde informed me that the people are very lazy. I learned incidentally that they won’t even raise their own garden truck or catch their own fish.” After noting that the local police in Santa Fe had not made an arrest for more than four months – and even that was for public drunkenness – Slocum stated, “From all appearances the people were too lazy even to get into trouble.”²¹ Slocum concluded his report with a generally positive reflection about the Isle and its economic potential: “From all I saw on the island I am satisfied that it is capable of being quite productive, there being immense mountains of marble and fine timberland, and the warm springs and abundance of excellent cold water make it attractive as a health resort.”²² Such optimism foreshadowed some of the promotional literature that landholding companies developed in the ensuing years.

Spreading the Word

Reports assessing the Isle’s commercial potential coincided with lingering questions about the status of Cuba after the War of 1898 and stoked renewed calls for formal annexation to the United States. Throughout the

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 194.

¹⁸ For example, Foltz’s inspection was reported in “The Isle of Pines,” *Boston Evening Transcript*, March 23, 1901.

¹⁹ Slocum to Adjutant-General, April 20, 1900, in *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 169.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 170.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 171.

²² *Ibid.*, 171–2.

nineteenth century, U.S. policymakers had looked to Cuba as a potential addition to the Union. Thomas Jefferson once wrote, “Cuba’s addition to our confederacy is exactly what is wanting to round our power as a nation to the point of its utmost interest.”²³ During the height of Manifest Destiny, the U.S. government made two bids to purchase Cuba from Spain: the James K. Polk administration offered \$100 million for it in 1848; six years later, the Franklin Pierce administration increased the bid to \$130 million.²⁴ But Spain refused to sell, partly because of Cuba’s profitability, partly out of a sense of national pride as Cuba, the “ever faithful isle,” was one of the last remnants of Spain’s vast empire in the Western Hemisphere. With Spain out of the picture after 1898, the notion of Cuba’s formal incorporation within the United States seemed ripe for reconsideration.

Such ideas continued throughout 1899 despite the passage of the Teller Amendment the year before, as well as the formal signing of the Treaty of Paris ending hostilities between the United States and Spain. The Teller Amendment, attached to the U.S. declaration of war against Spain, stated that the United States would not exercise sovereignty over Cuba but would merely maintain control over it until its “pacification” was secured and it became ready for self-government. Specific benchmarks for what constituted pacification or readiness for self-government, however, were left vague. Likewise, the wording of Article II of the Treaty of Paris led some to question whether the Isle of Pines rightfully belonged to the United States. It stated: “Spain cedes to the United States the island of Porto Rico and other islands now under Spanish sovereignty in the West Indies.” Confusion persisted, both publicly and privately, which led some Americans to address the question directly to U.S. officials.

One of the earliest inquiries about sovereignty and settlement came from a private citizen in Philadelphia, Philip Kern, who requested a land grant in order to found a colony on the Isle. Kern had read that the U.S. government was preparing such grants for U.S. citizens.²⁵ Although reports about impending grants may have been exaggerated, stories about the Isle of Pines had been appearing in newspapers across the country since the summer of 1898. Kern’s hometown newspaper, *The Philadelphia*

²³ Jefferson to James Monroe, June 23, 1823, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, H. A. Washington, ed., Vol. 7 (Washington, DC: Riker, Thorne, 1854), 300.

²⁴ Louis A. Pérez Jr. *The War of 1898: The United States and Cuba in History and Historiography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 5.

²⁵ Philip Kern to Sen. Boies Penrose, February 3, 1899, General Records, General Classified Files: 1898–1945, Box 73, Record 393, Record Group 350, NARA.

Inquirer, published a feature-length piece about sunken pirate ships laden with gold and silver lying off the Isle's coast, reinforcing the "Treasure Island" mythology.²⁶ A widely published travel article that first appeared in the *New Haven Journal* reflected such exotic visions. The uncredited writer described the weather as "near absolute perfection," which helped with chronic illness. Aside from the nuisance of "Fleas, roaches, spiders, a thousand wriggling, crawling, stinging creatures [that] beset you continually," the writer portrayed the Isle as a tropical paradise. He continued by stating that "The natives of Isla de los Pinos [are] a simple, kind-hearted people, whose greatest pleasure seems to be chatting with strangers and listening to their accounts of the outer world... The young children go about entirely naked and the universal innocence, combined with the utmost dignity and punctilious courtesy, is charming to behold."²⁷

These depictions attracted U.S. citizens' attention. Many of them wrote to officials asking for more information about the Isle. Writers often operated from the assumption that the Isle of Pines was U.S. territory acquired from Spain, not a part of the political body of Cuba.²⁸ They asked for reports about the Isle, including details about its native population, topography, climate, and availability of land. Initially, individuals independently wrote these letters. But as more Americans were settling on the Isle, letter-writing campaigns became coordinated efforts, looking less for information about the Isle and more to express arguments on behalf of annexation. For example, in April 1901, Charles Raynard, who

²⁶ "Millions and Millions of Treasure," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 15, 1899. Similar stories continued to emerge a decade later. For example, a travel writer told the story of a "Mr. Johnson of Pennsylvania" who had come to the Isle in the 1880s. He obtained a treasure map from one of the last surviving pirates and found two barrels of gold on the sparsely inhabited South Coast. After evading Spanish authorities, he made his way back to Pennsylvania with his riches. Frederic J. Haskin, "The Real Treasure Island," *The State (Columbia, SC)*, January 20, 1909.

²⁷ "Isle of Pines," *Butte Weekly Miner*, September 15, 1898. Reprinted from *New Haven Journal*. Other contemporary travel articles in popular national magazines portrayed the Isle in a similar light. John Huston Finley, "The Isle of Pines," *Scribner's* 33 (1903): 174–81; "The Isle of Pines," *National Geographic* 17 (1906): 105–8.

²⁸ Newspapers frequently reported that the Isle was or would become U.S. territory, undoubtedly shaping or reinforcing popular perceptions about the issue. For examples, see "Tiny Lands to be Marked 'U.S.,'" *Kansas City Star*, August 30, 1898; "Belongs to the United States," *Grand Rapids Herald*, January 14, 1899; "The Isle of Pines," *Duluth News-Tribune*, February 27, 1899; "An Isle of Pines Colony," *Kansas City Star*, March 13, 1899; "Isle of Pines," *Dallas Morning News*, August 6, 1899; "The Isle of Pines Is Ours," *Kansas City Star*, November 27, 1900; "To Hold the Isle of Pines," (*Oshkosh Daily Northwestern*, November 27, 1900; "Isle of Pines Will Be Retained," *Fort Worth Morning Register*, November 28, 1900.

had bought land on the Isle and later formed the American Club there, wrote to Secretary of War Root lobbying for the United States to maintain possession of the Isle. He noted that he and some friends already had invested \$25,000 there with the understanding it was to be U.S. territory and that others were doing likewise.²⁹ Over the next month, at least four other men submitted letters offering virtually the same points, suggesting a coordinated effort. These letter-writing campaigns began at roughly the same time that American entrepreneurs started pooling their resources to form landholding companies, which quickly were becoming the dominant brokers on the Isle.

Enter the Landholding Companies

The first U.S. citizens to buy land on the Isle of Pines were individuals, acquiring property for themselves by the tens or hundreds of acres. Claims regarding the first U.S. property owner on the Isle are in dispute. Journalist Irene A. Wright, a contemporary of the era, wrote that C. M. Johnson was the first American to buy land on the Isle; he had an option for 17,500 acres in Santa Rosalia in March 1901.³⁰ Another scholar has contended that Johnson was the first U.S. settler after the War of 1898, but that Capt. H. Haemel in 1899 was the first American to receive title to land, in Los Indios.³¹ Neither writer provided sources for their information. The first American on record to have bought land on the Isle was Henry Haener, who purchased 133 acres for \$250 in July 1900.³²

U.S. records indicate that no other Americans bought land on the Isle until after the United States passed the Platt Amendment in March 1901. Best known as the U.S. congressional act that made Cuba a protectorate of the United States and gave the United States the right to a naval base in Cuba, the Platt Amendment also contained a clause regarding the Isle of Pines. Article VI stated that the Isle was to be omitted from the constitutional boundaries of Cuba and that sovereignty would be determined by a future treaty. While Root is often credited as the progenitor of the

²⁹ Raynard to Root, April 21, 1901, General Records, General Classified Files: 1898–1945, Box 72, Record 377, Record Group 350, NARA.

³⁰ Irene A. Wright, *Isle of Pines* (Beverly, MA: Beverly Printing Company, 1910), 44.

³¹ F. A. Carlson, "American Settlement in the Isla de Pinos, Cuba," *Geographical Review* 32 (January 1942): 28.

³² Herbert G. Squiers to John Hay, March 18, 1903, in *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 189. An American-owned, English-language newspaper referred to him as Henry Haemel and claimed he was "the first American to buy land on the Isle of Pines" in Los Indios. "Oldest Oldtimer Returns," *Isle of Pines Post*, August 15, 1930.

Platt Amendment, Sen. Orville Platt, the amendment's titular sponsor, privately took credit for Article VI. Although Platt believed that the Isle was part of Cuba and not among the islands ceded to the United States from Spain, he argued that it held great value as a potential naval base and should be purchased. "I inserted a clause to the effect that the title should be subject of treaty negotiations," he wrote in 1902. "I feel that it is of the utmost importance that it shall be ours. It will give us the most advantageous point from which to defend the entrance of the isthmian canal."³³ To Americans interested in the Isle, Platt's clause seemed a signal that the Isle would one day formally become U.S. territory and spurred further U.S. investment.

This development greatly concerned many *pineros*. Some took their pleas to Havana. Just a month after Cuban independence was established in May 1902, the Isle's *alcalde* and *ayuntamiento* (town council) sent a letter to Cuban President Tomás Estrada Palma. Referring to themselves as "good Cubans," the writers, supported by the signatures of more than 170 *pineros*, argued that leaving the Isle's sovereignty in question undermined Cuba's territorial integrity. Moreover, they argued that if incorporated by the United States, *pineros* risked losing their customs, laws, and even their religion. They implored Estrada Palma not to let that calamity happen.³⁴ When given the opportunity, some *pineros* voiced their opinion directly to U.S. officials. In the spring of 1900, a U.S. officer on routine inspection spoke with local authorities concerned about U.S. designs. According to the report, the officials "expressed a strong preference toward belonging to the island of Cuba if any issue should arise."³⁵

Large landowning Cubans, however, welcomed the prospect of a greater U.S. presence because it created a market for real estate that had been virtually nonexistent during the colonial era. *Hacendados* owned most of the land in estates that had been passed down or divided over generations since the seventeenth century. U.S. entrepreneurs' post-1898 interest in land gave Spanish and Cuban landowners reason to sell.

³³ Platt to J. C. Lenney, November 5, 1902, in *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 285. In an undated handwritten draft of the amendment, one version states that "there shall be secured to the United States the following rights and privileges: One, a recognition of the title of the United States to the Isle of Pines." Record Group 69, Orville Platt Papers, Box 2, Official Correspondence: 1900-1905 - Various Subjects, 11, CSL.

³⁴ Juan M. Sánchez, et al., to Tomás Estrada Palma, June 30, 1902, Secretaria de la Presidencia, 1902-1958, Legajo 75, Expediente 66, ANC.

³⁵ Capt. H. J. Slocum to Adjutant-General, April 20, 1900, *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 170.

Although undeveloped land sold for only about \$2 an acre, *hacendados* earned a tidy sum by selling in large quantities, often by the thousands or tens of thousands of acres.³⁶ José M. Tarafa was one such *hacendado*. Before the U.S. Senate passed the Platt Amendment, Tarafa, who claimed to own up to 40,000 acres on the Isle, wrote to Root to ask him to clear up the ambiguity over the Isle's sovereignty. "You will readily understand how important it is to me, as the largest landowner on the Isle of Pines, to know under what flag that island is going to remain," he wrote. "I hesitate before investing more capital in my estates on the Isle of Pines until I can know how this matter stands."³⁷ Two years later, Tarafa sold an indeterminate number of acres to American buyers for \$38,000.³⁸

Those transactions were just the beginning. According to U.S. Minister to Cuba Herbert G. Squiers, Americans spent more than \$265,000 to acquire property on the Isle between March 1901 and March 1903.³⁹ Landholding companies made a great majority of these purchases. American entrepreneurs in the Northeast and the Midwest formed these businesses and bought land by the tens of thousands of acres, then subdivided the land into smaller parcels, usually ten-, twenty-, or forty-acre plots, for resale at up to \$50 an acre for undeveloped land. These companies became the predominant marketers of real estate on the Isle of Pines during the early twentieth century.

³⁶ Estimates of land prices taken from Academia de Ciencias de Cuba, "Serie Isla de Pinos No. 23: Latifundismo y Especulación," Delfín Rodríguez, et al., eds. (La Habana, 1968), 4.

³⁷ Tarafa to Root, August 10, 1900, General Records, General Classified Files, 1898–1945, Box 72, Record 377, Record Group 350, NARA.

³⁸ *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 198. In September 1902, Tarafa made a \$30,000 transaction with the Almacigos Springs Land Co. He made four additional \$2,000 transactions with individuals, including Robert I. Wall and C. M. Johnson, both of whom were involved with landholding companies. Tarafa's land deals would not be his last transactions with U.S. entrepreneurs. He was one of the leading railroad magnates in Cuba and in the 1920s merged his Cuba Northern Railroad with the U.S.-based Cuba Company that virtually monopolized the country's railways. Juan Carlos Santamarina, "The Cuba Company and the Creation of Informal Business Networks: Historiography and Archival Sources," *Cuban Studies* 35 (2004): 75–6; Robert F. Smith, *The United States and Cuba: Business and Diplomacy, 1917–1960* (New Haven, CT: College and University Press, 1960), 31.

³⁹ Squiers to Hay, March 18, 1903, in *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 189. This amount was just a fraction of what American land buyers purchased in all of Cuba. According to one estimate, some 13,000 Americans spent more than \$50 million to acquire land in Cuba by 1905. Leland Hamilton Jenks, *Our Cuban Colony: A Study in Sugar* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1928), 144.

This activity was not unique to the Isle. Similar transactions among American entrepreneurs were taking place all across Cuba as potential settlers and investors looked to take advantage of depressed property values in the wake of Cuba's devastating War of Independence.⁴⁰ On the Isle, however, much of the activity occurred while sovereignty remained in question. Annexation to the United States appeared a distinct possibility just as zeal for incorporating all Cuba seemed on the wane. Entrepreneurs wanted to take advantage of this ambiguity. Some hoped that a flurry of American activity would compel U.S. officials to annex the Isle; others wanted to buy and sell land before Cuban sovereignty could be formally established. They assumed Americans would lose interest if the Isle was officially declared Cuban territory.

Landholding companies took great pains not to appear as speculators. Such a stigma carried a pejorative association.⁴¹ In promotional literature, company officials claimed their activities on the Isle had higher aims than simply to turn a profit. For example, the Buffalo, New York-based Tropical Development Company stated that its purpose was "to systematize and stimulate the work of colonization and improvement already inaugurated by the numerous **American** population of the Island."⁴² Another enterprise, the Cañada Land & Fruit Company based in Marinette, Wisconsin, claimed that the work of these landholding enterprises benefited average Americans. "American syndicates have purchased large tracts of land, surveyed and platted the same, thereby making it possible for the man of moderate means to buy and own a piece of land commensurate with his means."⁴³ The Cleveland-based Isle of Pines Investment Company justified buying so many acres, ostensibly to avoid the appearance of speculation. According to its prospectus, former Spanish and Cuban landowners "refused to sell part of their lands unless the purchaser was willing and able to take the whole tract; consequently

⁴⁰ Louis A. Pérez Jr., *On Becoming Cuban: Identity, Nationality, and Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 104–25; Carmen Diana Deere, "Here Come the Yankees! The Rise and Decline of United States Colonies in Cuba, 1898–1930," *Hispanic American Historical Review* 78 (November 1998): 738–52.

⁴¹ Robert P. Swierenga, "Land Speculation and Its Impact on American Economic Growth and Welfare: A Historiographical Review," *Western Historical Quarterly* 8 (July 1977): 283–302.

⁴² Tropical Development Company, "McKinley, Isle of Pines: A City of Orange Groves in the American District of Cuba" (Buffalo, 1906), 5. Emphasis in original.

⁴³ Cañada Land & Fruit Company, "Isle of Pines: Land of Fruit and Flowers" (Marinette, WI, 1903), 29.

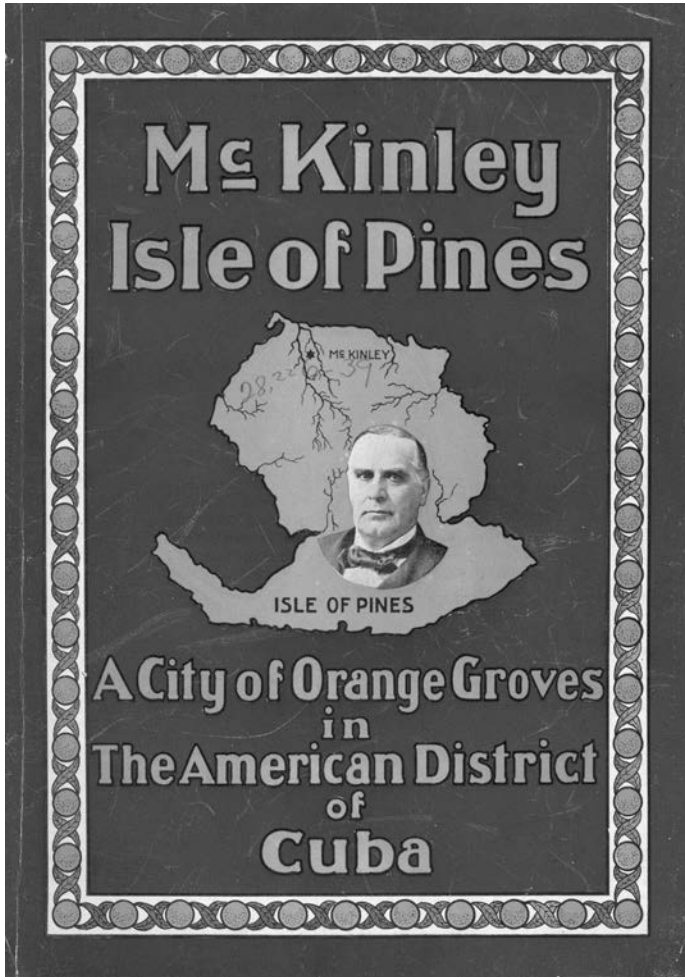


FIGURE 1.1. Cover to the 1906 prospectus of the Buffalo-based Tropical Development Company. The TDC founded the town of McKinley on the northwest side of the Isle in the name of the slain president. The patriotic gesture enabled the company to blunt criticism that it was merely engaged in real estate speculation. Courtesy of the Yates County (NY) Genealogical and Historical Society.

a large capital was required before one could buy land in the Isle of Pines.”⁴⁴

Company executives also denied to U.S. officials that they were profiteers, a charge that some newspapers had suggested. Albert B. Young, one

⁴⁴ Isle of Pines Investment Company, “The Pineland Bulletin,” 1.

of the Tropical Development Company's directors, insisted to Sen. John T. Morgan, who was part of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, that his enterprise was not involved in speculation. "Misled by the false statements given to the press, you may be induced to believe that all Americans interested in the Isle of Pines are operating as real-estate speculators. Let me assure you that this is not the case."⁴⁵ George Hibbard of the El Canal Company told Morgan likewise. "This howl by some of the papers that the island was bought up and *held* by speculators is the worst kind of rot."⁴⁶

Landholding companies also cited the rather undeveloped state of the Isle to justify their activity. They suggested that Spanish misrule during the colonial era had prevented the Isle from reaching its full agricultural and commercial potential. As a result, the Tropical Development Company asserted, "thousands of acres of virgin soil now await the thrifty and energetic American to make it the most productive spot in the world."⁴⁷ Another company stated that "it is doubtful if the indolent Spaniards appreciated [the Isle's] possibilities as a field for citrus culture."⁴⁸ U.S.-based landholding companies implied they would not make that same mistake. Wright argued that these companies were doing the Isle a favor by bringing order and development, a subtle nod to the contemporary idea of the "White Man's Burden" to help civilize non-Anglo-Saxon peoples. "These companies ... rendered the Isle a great service in accurately surveying and in clearing titles to the same," she wrote.⁴⁹

Companies invoked their activities within a larger continuum in U.S. history: pioneering work in the nineteenth century. The timing of this rhetoric was important. By the turn of the century, the notion of a "closed" continental frontier was widely accepted. There was a great deal of anxiety about what the United States would do now that this frontier feature, which had been part of Americana since inception, was apparently no more.⁵⁰ With land in their possession in abundance, landholding

⁴⁵ Young to Morgan, January 20, 1906, in *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 293.

⁴⁶ Hibbard to Morgan, March 1, 1906, in *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 27. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁷ Tropical Development Company, "McKinley, Isle of Pines," 22.

⁴⁸ Isle of Pines Company, "McKinley, Isle of Pines: A City of Orange Groves in the American District of Cuba" (New York, 1911), 3.

⁴⁹ Irene A. Wright, *The Gem of the Caribbean* (Nueva Gerona: Isle of Pines Publicity Company, 1909), 36.

⁵⁰ Walter LaFeber, *The New Empire: An Interpretation of American Expansion, 1860-1898*, 35th ann. ed. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 62-101; David M. Wrobel, *The End of American Exceptionalism: Frontier Anxiety from the Old West to*

companies underscored a closing domestic frontier to steer land-buyers in their direction. “The era of golden opportunities in Southern California, for instance, is a thing of the past,” the Tropical Development Company stated.⁵¹ If the average American was to continue to look to the frontier for farming opportunities, they would have to look beyond U.S. shores to find it. U.S. businessmen argued that the Isle of Pines could supply this extended frontier through its cheap, plentiful land, prospects for growth and wealth, and a pliant native population who would not interfere with American designs.

The extent to which landholding company executives truly believed in the agrarian ethic they were promoting is certainly questionable. Post-1898 American expansion provided established elites with new commercial opportunities, particularly for profitable investment abroad.⁵² The availability of land on the Isle of Pines provided such a potential benefit for U.S. businessmen. But those entrepreneurial ambitions – to reap the financial benefits of investing in foreign real estate – were often masked in the rhetoric of nineteenth-century agrarianism, a language that often featured opposition to urbanism and industrialization.

The largest and longest-lasting of these landholding companies was the Isle of Pines Company, which plainly stated its mission: “Our purpose is to systematize and stimulate the work of colonization and improvement already inaugurated by the numerous American population of the Island, and to engage in the buying, selling, improving, and cultivating of land in the Isle of Pines.”⁵³ Samuel H. Percy was the driving force behind the enterprise. A Confederate army veteran from Tennessee, Percy owned shipping and manufacturing interests in Havana before he turned his attention to the Isle in 1899.⁵⁴ Within two years, Percy and a

the New Deal (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Atheneum, 1992); Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization, 1800–1890* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1985); Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 46–59; William Appleman Williams, “The Frontier Thesis and American Foreign Policy,” *Pacific Historical Review* 24 (November 1955): 379–95.

⁵¹ Tropical Development Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 56. Emphasis in original.

⁵² T.J. Jackson Lears, *Rebirth of a Nation: The Making of Modern America, 1877–1920* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 169.

⁵³ Isle of Pines Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 24.

⁵⁴ One sympathetic account of Samuel and his brother, Josiah, referred to them as the George Washington and Benjamin Franklin of the Isle of Pines. The report also noted that Josiah Percy was one of the original members of the Ku Klux Klan, but that he had “condemned” the group’s radicalism of its later years. Frederic J. Haskin, “Personal Stories,” *Omaha World Herald*, March 19, 1907.

group of New York investors bought more than 106,000 acres from former Spanish landowners for roughly \$174,000. The company's holdings spread across five former Spanish estates, including Santa Barbara, which would eventually have the highest concentration of Americans. The company also bought tracts in small towns as well as in sparsely populated areas on the South Coast, typically paying about \$1.75 to \$2 an acre.⁵⁵ Squiers in 1903 referred to the company as "purely speculative," as it had yet to resell any land but was instead waiting for the prices to increase.⁵⁶ By the end of the decade though, the Isle of Pines Company became the prime seller of Isle real estate to Americans, selling tracts for up to \$50 an acre, and advertising in newspapers all across the United States.⁵⁷ At the same time, Percy emerged as one of the most vocal and visible members of the budding American community, largely in an effort to persuade the U.S. government to annex the Isle. Although Percy died in 1913, his son, Edward, continued to serve as the company's manager on the Isle until he closed the business in 1950.

In an example of cooperation among landholding companies, the Tropical Development Company was born out of the Isle of Pines Company, from which it had purchased 5,200 acres on the north end of the Isle. James A. Hill, a New York-based publisher, served as treasurer of the Isle of Pines Company as well as vice president of the Tropical Development Company. The Tropical Development Company was best known for founding the town of McKinley, named for the slain U.S. president. As described in its company literature, the Tropical Development Company designed the town to help support and sustain the American presence on the Isle. To finance this development, the company sold bonds. It was expected that these bonds would mature in ten years, specifically on "McKinley Day," January 29, 1914. At that point, it planned to sell its 500-acre company citrus grove in five-acre plots to the highest bidder (the company expected to fetch \$1,000 per acre by then), the proceeds of which would then be divided among all bondholders.⁵⁸ Although the town of McKinley endured for many years, no records indicate if the company successfully sold off its groves on "McKinley Day" or how long it stayed in operation.

Landholding company executives came from a variety of industries. The Isle of Pines Company featured publishers and shippers. Among the

⁵⁵ Academia de Ciencias de Cuba, "Serie Isla de Pinos No. 23," 4.

⁵⁶ Squiers to Hay, March 18, 1903, in *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 188.

⁵⁷ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 30, 1909; *Kansas City Star*, February 21, 1910.

⁵⁸ Details from Tropical Development Company, "McKinley, Isle of Pines."

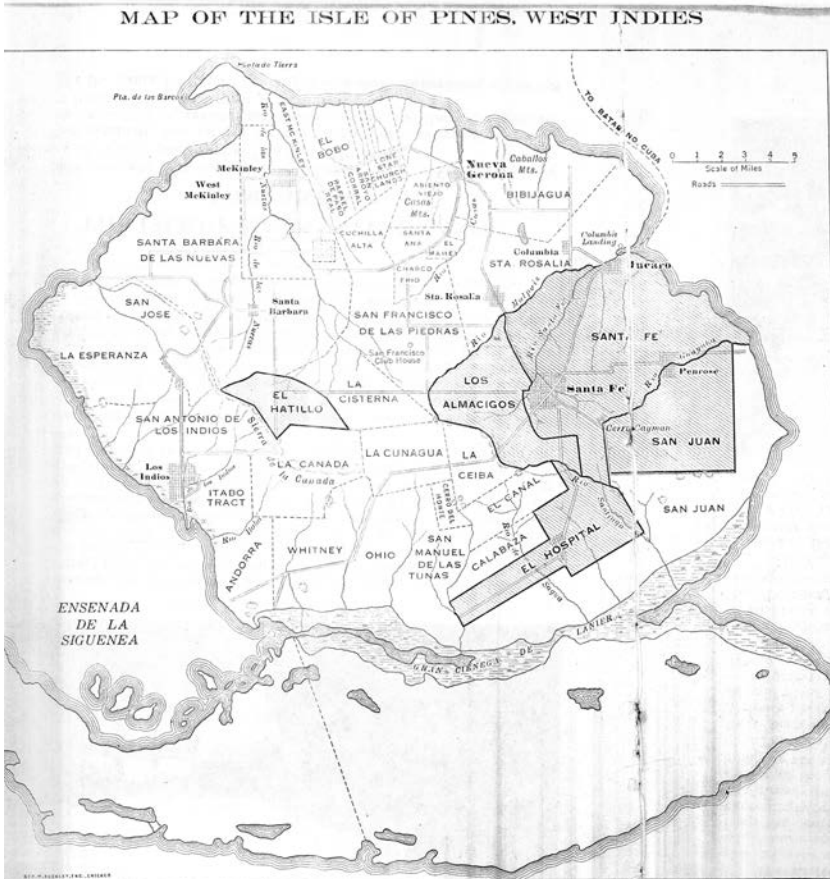


FIGURE 1.2. A 1914 map showing the various tracts on the Isle of Pines, many of which were owned by U.S. landholding companies who had bought them from Cuban or Spanish *hacendados* after the War of 1898. Shaded areas represent tracts owned by the Santa Fe Land Company and the Isle of Pines United Land Companies, which were incorporated in Iowa and Illinois, respectively. *Source:* Santa Fe Land Company and the Isle of Pines United Land Companies, “Marvelous Isle of Pines: That Magnificent Land of Sunshine, Health and Wealth” (1914).

Tropical Development Company’s directors were former Buffalo mayor Erastus Knight and bookseller Frederik A. Fernald, who sold his business to become an investor in the company.⁵⁹ The Isle of Pines Investment Company was mostly a family affair. Real estate mogul Truman Swetland

⁵⁹ Harvard College Class of 1882, *Sixth Report of the Secretary* (Boston: E.O. Cockayne, 1908), 65–6.

started the company in 1908 when he bought nearly 10,000 acres at San Francisco de las Piedras, the largest undivided tract at the time, from the Sarda family for \$55,000. Among the company's directors were three of Swetland's sons, who were integral to the tract's development. Frederick Swetland Jr. noted that "After my grandfather signed the contract, the rest of the family finally dug up the purchase money to bail him out ('after all, how can you go wrong on land at \$5 an acre?')." ⁶⁰ Over the next half-century, the Swetland family engaged in a variety of business enterprises, including land sales, citrus production for export, resort development (the family converted part of its house into an inn for tourists), and cattle raising. The family soon emerged as one of the most prominent on the Isle. They retained their property in San Francisco over four generations up to the Cuban Revolution, and would be one of the last American families to leave.

Selling the Isle

In addition to word of mouth, perhaps the most effective way in which news spread about the Isle of Pines and its available land was through advertisements. Companies produced notices not only in newspapers and magazines, but also through prospectuses that touted the benefits of living on the Isle and the abundance of opportunity. At the turn of the century, advertisements increasingly were becoming a feature of American business. ⁶¹ Landholding companies found them indispensable to operating on the Isle. For example, the Isle of Pines Company produced a glossy, picture-filled, easy-to-read prospectus, a feature that surely reflected the fact that two of its directors, J. C. Tichenor and James A. Hill, were publishers in New York City. In general, companies portrayed the Isle as an untapped commodity, ripe for exploitation by savvy, hard-working Americans who, through ingenuity, industriousness, and know-how, could maximize its latent potential. But companies also often exaggerated, obfuscated, or suggested grandiose development plans that never came to fruition.

⁶⁰ Memorandum of Frederick Swetland Jr., March 7, 1961, 2–3, SFA.

⁶¹ Stuart Ewen, *Captains of Consciousness: Advertising and the Social Roots of the Consumer Culture*, 25th ann. ed. (New York: Basic Books, 2001); Pamela Walker Laird, *Advertising Progress: American Business and the Rise of Consumer Marketing* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); James D. Norris, *Advertising and the Transformation of American Society, 1865–1920* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990); Roland Marchand, *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920–1940* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

Most conspicuously, landholding companies drew interest in the Isle by citing its prospects for wealth. The Cañada Land & Fruit Company, for example, was rather blunt in its assessment. In a section of its prospectus titled “What Could I Do in the Isle of Pines?” the company stated: “Among other things you could get rich.... You do the work properly, and fortune will follow as certainly as day follows night. And no beggarly pittance either, but wealth ample even for these days, and it can be vast wealth, if you have sufficient energy and push.”⁶² The pronouncement tapped into a trope familiar to turn-of-the-century Americans: the Horatio Alger code – the idea that success and upward mobility were possible, but would have to be earned through struggle and hard work. Companies presented the Isle as a place in which to achieve independence and self-sufficiency. The Isle of Pines Company, for example, implored potential settlers to “Stop working for other people. Join us and become an independent citizen of this sturdy American Colony in the Isle of Pines. You can take possession of your property at once and be working for yourself instead of toiling for a mere existence day in and day out.”⁶³ At the same time, companies claimed to be targeting “high class Americans” and “America’s most progressive citizens” as potential customers.⁶⁴ The Tropical Development Company mentioned the names of notable men who invested on the Isle, including prominent politicians, bankers, financiers, and railroad magnates. “**These are the men who are making the adjacent tropics a safe and profitable field for investment.**”⁶⁵ Not only did such an association give the Isle an image of exclusivity, but it also was meant to assure skeptical investors of average means that their money would be in good company.

Landholding companies most often cited the development of citrus fruit as the way to wealth. This fruit included grapefruit, oranges, and pineapples that because of the favorable climate and soil could grow in abundance. Companies claimed that the Isle produced high-quality fruit, better than that from Florida and California. “The Isle of Pines grape fruit has been tested by fruit experts in New York and European markets and has been pronounced absolutely the finest that has ever reached these markets,” one company boasted.⁶⁶ Moreover, citrus fruit production on

⁶² Cañada Land & Fruit Company, “Isle of Pines,” 32.

⁶³ Isle of Pines Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 58.

⁶⁴ San Juan Heights Land Company, “The Isle of Pines,” 18–19.

⁶⁵ Tropical Development Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 96. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ Santa Fe Land Company and the Isle of Pines United Land Companies, “Marvelous Isle of Pines: ‘That Magnificent Land of Sunshine, Health, and Wealth’” (Chicago, 1914), 11.

the Isle had a competitive advantage over rivals in the domestic United States because of the warmer climate. Citrus trees could escape the early-season frosts that occasionally blighted production in Florida. This also meant that Isle producers could get their product to market earlier than Florida growers and thus receive a better price. Fruit from the Isle had another advantage over similar products from California: because Isle growers shipped by steamer rather than by railroad, they could get their produce to eastern markets more quickly and less expensively.⁶⁷

Although citrus fruit was the most heavily promoted export commodity, landholding companies cited other products that promised to bring settlers and investors a handsome profit. Befitting its name, the Isle of Pines boasted a significant timber industry. One estimate suggested the Isle had up to sixty varieties of wood with high export potential, including pine, cedar, and mahogany, constituting “the most valuable tract of timber to be found in the West Indies.”⁶⁸ Saw mills did, in fact, emerge throughout the Isle over the years, mostly to make crates in which to ship citrus. The Isle also featured marble quarries, most of which remained largely untapped during the Spanish colonial era, as well as deposits of gold and silver – or so the claim went.⁶⁹

In mainland Cuba, sugar and tobacco were the two biggest export commodities that long attracted U.S. investment. Landholding companies promoted both products as sustainable industries on the Isle as well. “The Isle of Pines will produce better tobacco than any known section on the globe, except for a few favored localities in Cuba,” the Cañada Land & Fruit Company declared.⁷⁰ The Isle of Pines Company made a bolder claim, suggesting that “the tobacco raised on the Isle of Pines was as good as the Cuban stock.” It also claimed that “Sugar cane ... grows luxuriantly on the Isle of Pines and will be extensively cultivated and constitute a profitable crop.”⁷¹ Despite such assertions, sugar never developed as an export industry. Early settlers quickly found that the conditions on the Isle – particularly the sandy soil, smaller plantations,

⁶⁷ Isle of Pines Company, “The Isle of Pines: Uncle Sam’s Latest Acquisition of Territory” (New York, 1901), 6; Cañada Land & Fruit Company, “Isle of Pines,” 19; Tropical Development Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 61; “No Frost in Isle of Pines,” advertisement in *Duluth News-Tribune*, January 14, 1913.

⁶⁸ Isle of Pines Company, “The Isle of Pines.” The company claimed that the value of timber on land it owned was approximately \$9.05 million.

⁶⁹ Cañada Land & Fruit Company, “Isle of Pines,” 18.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁷¹ Isle of Pines Company, “The Isle of Pines,” 12–13.

and lack of refineries – could not sustain sugarcane on the same scale as on the main island.

Landholding companies also pitched the Isle as a resort location. This discourse suggested that the Isle could be a place for physical and mental rejuvenation. “[The Isle] has been a health resort for more than a century and is one of the oldest known,” the Cañada Land & Fruit Company stated. “The sea air, pure water, the mineral springs and equitable temperature are all conducive of long life.”⁷² Company literature cited the mineral waters, in particular, as having healing properties for a variety of ailments, including stomach and kidney disease, rheumatism, and asthma. Mineral waters from the Isle were so desired in Cuba that it was bottled and shipped to Havana for those who could afford such a luxury. The Tropical Development Company stated that one settler, T. J. Keenan, so highly regarded the healing powers of the mineral springs that he spent \$3,000 to build a private bathhouse around one.⁷³ Company literature also noted that the mineral springs in the interior of the Isle “are constantly visited by many invalids, who find speedy relief.”⁷⁴

Stories about the Isle’s healing prowess were not new to American audiences. Samuel Hazard wrote about the Isle’s mineral springs in an 1871 travelogue. Plagued by a respiratory ailment while in Havana, Hazard was instructed to do one of two things: quit smoking, or go to the Isle and “take the miraculous waters of its mineral baths.” He chose the latter option. Although underwhelmed by the lack of material comforts around the springs at Santa Fe, Hazard nevertheless expressed amazement at being “completely cured” after a ten-day regimen of two baths and four glasses of water per day. He concluded that his trip to the Isle provided “much pleasure and some few discomforts, with lasting benefit in health.”⁷⁵ Three decades later, landholding companies promised the same thing to settlers.

In addition to appeals for self-improvement, landholding companies piqued the imaginations of settlers and investors. Prospectuses portrayed the Isle in exotic terms, as a land significantly more alien and mysterious than any found in the familiar Northeast or Midwest. Images commonly depicted the Isle as precious and pristine. The Isle, the Tropical Development Company stated, “has been compared to ‘a jewel pendant

⁷² Cañada Land & Fruit Company, “Isle of Pines,” 9.

⁷³ Tropical Development Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 39.

⁷⁴ Cañada Land & Fruit Company, “Isle of Pines,” 9.

⁷⁵ Samuel Hazard, *Cuba with Pen and Pencil* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Publishing Company, 1871), 382–97.

from the throat of Cuba, blazing in the tropic sun.’”⁷⁶ A sense of adventure and excitement – even a subtle hint of danger – seemed to pervade the Isle. Prospectuses cited the Isle’s mythical heritage as a pirate hideout during the colonial era as well as its status as a destination for political prisoners during the nineteenth century, including, most famously, José Martí in 1870.⁷⁷

While evoking a sense of mystery, excitement, and derring-do in their depictions of the Isle, companies also sought to reassure potential customers that it was not *too* far away, literally and figuratively. To that end, companies showed that the Isle was, in fact, easily reachable, its potential benefits attainable, and its exotic nature capable of being tamed by the average American. One of the key selling points was the Isle’s relative proximity to the United States. The Isle of Pines Company stated that the Isle was within four days’ travel from any major city in the United States.⁷⁸ The Tropical Development Company put it another way: the Isle of Pines was as far from New York City as St. Paul, Minnesota – although in the distinctly opposite climatic condition.⁷⁹ To get there, of course, one needed sufficient financial means. As of 1911, the round-trip cost of first-class travel from New York to the Isle was \$100.70; an “intermediate”-class ticket cost \$58.60.⁸⁰ To rural and middle-class U.S. settlers, these costs likely prohibited frequent returns to the United States.

Based on the glowing descriptions of the Isle’s climate, however, the trip was worth it for the weather alone. The Isle was warm during the winter, but not too uncomfortably hot in the summer, contrary to most tropical climates. “The Isle of Pines enjoys one continuous summer,” the Isle of Pines Company hyped. “No heavy overcoats or expensive clothing [is necessary].”⁸¹ Considering landholding companies advertised mainly in the Northeast and Midwest, with their cold winters, depictions of the warmer climate on the Isle surely had an appeal. Frederick Swetland Jr. believed that was the case for his grandfather. Envisioning what Truman Swetland thought when he first came to the Isle in 1908, Frederick Swetland Jr. wrote, “How fragrant, warm, clear and quiet it must have seemed to him, straight from the snows and grime and huddled cold of

⁷⁶ Tropical Development Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 30.

⁷⁷ Isle of Pines Company, “The Isle of Pines,” 1.

⁷⁸ San Francisco was listed as the lone exception; travel from there took an unspecified longer amount of time. Isle of Pines Company, “The Isle of Pines,” 4.

⁷⁹ Tropical Development Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 13.

⁸⁰ Isle of Pines Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 31. The trip consisted of a steamship to Havana, railroad to Batabanó, a steamer to the Isle, and included three daily meals.

⁸¹ Isle of Pines Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 41, 46.

Cleveland, with the wind off the crumpled ice floes of the lake. Of course he fell in love with it as all Northerners coming down into winter sun and color must do.”⁸² The Tropical Development Company conspicuously referenced not only the warmer temperatures on the Isle, but also its consistency, in contrast to the fluctuations typical in Buffalo, the company’s headquarters.⁸³ The Isle of Pines Company starkly described the difference between the climate on the Isle and what was typically found in the Northeast and Midwest: “When Snows, sleet and blizzards hold this country in their icy grip, McKinley with its orange blossoms, birds, flowers, sunshine and blue sky is a picture of summer, a paradise for those seeking to escape coughs, colds, bronchitis, pneumonia, catarrh, consumption and rheumatism which are so prevalent here [in the United States].”⁸⁴

There was one important caveat, however, to the Isle’s ideal climate: hurricanes. Every prospectus either ignored or overlooked tropical storms. Some companies claimed that such storms did not affect the Isle despite a 1902 U.S. government report that stated they had occurred periodically over the years.⁸⁵ According to the Cañada Land & Fruit Company, “Hurricanes, cyclones and tornadoes have never visited the island. No crops are ever injured by storms, overflows or frosts.”⁸⁶ The Isle of Pines Investment Company made a similar prevarication. “Natives claim that there has never been a single visit of either a hurricane or cyclone to the Island.... No other place in the West Indies is so free from storms.”⁸⁷ This was certainly not the case during the period of American involvement. Over the next half-century, the Isle experienced devastating hurricanes that significantly damaged crops, property, and infrastructure. The storms of 1917 and 1926 were particularly catastrophic.

⁸² Memorandum of Frederick Swetland Jr., March 7, 1961, SFA.

⁸³ Tropical Development Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 14–15.

⁸⁴ Isle of Pines Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 61.

⁸⁵ The Division of Insular Affairs in the U.S. Department of War reported that although “hurricanes are less frequent [on the Isle] than in Cuba ... damaging hurricanes occurred in 1774, 1844, 1846, 1865, 1870, 1876, 1885, 1894.” “The Isle of Pines (Caribbean Sea): Its Situation, Physical Features, Inhabitants, Resources, and Industries” (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1902), 15.

⁸⁶ Cañada Land & Fruit Company, “Isle of Pines,” 9.

⁸⁷ Isle of Pines Investment Company, “The Pineland Bulletin,” 6. The company made one of the only allusions to hurricanes, citing a “severe wind storm” in 1906 that was the worst there in thirty years, “but the damage to the island was so slight as to be hardly worth mentioning.”

Nevertheless, landholding companies promoted the notion that the Isle of Pines was safe for American settlement – specifically, for white American settlement. The Isle of Pines Investment Company declared that the island “may be regarded as strictly a white man’s country, a condition almost impossible to find in the Southern States and unknown in any other part of the West Indies.”⁸⁸ Landholding companies sought to reassure Americans who considered moving that they would not meet a hostile reception in a foreign land from uncivilized tropical peoples. To that end, prospectuses emphasized *pineros*’ whiteness and sophistication, suggesting that they wholeheartedly welcomed Americans. “The natives are of Spanish descent ... and they are now almost to a man gratified that the island is United States territory,” the Isle of Pines Company stated. “The natives are an intelligent, hospitable people and welcome emigration from the States.”⁸⁹ Likewise, the Cañada Land & Fruit Company claimed: “The native of the Isle of Pines is not lazy. He is very much of a gentleman and prefers not to do much manual labor, but enjoys riding around on horseback to look after his stock, and they are for the most part from their own standards well fixed, having simple tastes easily satisfied.”⁹⁰

This depiction ignored deep divisions within *pinero* society, particularly between the minority *hacendados* and the vast majority who made a living as wage laborers or subsistence farmers. In 1899, the U.S. military government conducted a census that found the Isle had 3,199 residents, a 63 percent increase from the previous Spanish census in 1887. Although still one of the smallest population densities in the country, the increase was exceptional in light of the fact that Cuba’s population declined during the twelve years between censuses mainly because of the toll of war. More than 80 percent of the Isle’s population in 1899 was considered “white,” the precise definition of which presumably referred to people of Spanish descent. Nearly 56 percent of the overall population was male. Economically, *pineros* were not quite as well off as landholding companies suggested. Indicators show that 1,916 people were “without gainful occupation,” including all but thirty-seven of the enumerated women. Of those employed, the most popular occupations were in “domestic or personal service” (647 people) and “agriculture, fisheries, mining” (403 people). In terms of education, only twenty-two *pineros* were considered

⁸⁸ Isle of Pines Investment Company, “The Pineland Bulletin,” 16.

⁸⁹ Isle of Pines Company, “Isle of Pines,” 5.

⁹⁰ Cañada Land & Fruit Company, “Isle of Pines,” 20–1.

to have “superior education,” while less than one-third of the population was said to be literate.⁹¹

Some companies suggested *pineros* would make good employees, eager to work for U.S. landowners. The Tropical Development Company stated that locals were “not remarkably industrious, because they don’t have to work hard, [but] they are not so lazy nor so much given to holiday making as are the people of many Spanish-American countries.... [T]hey learn quickly and prove good farm laborers under proper supervision.”⁹² The Isle of Pines Investment Company echoed that contention, describing *pineros* as “full-blooded Spanish people – hard-working, law abiding, peaceable, hospitable, and honest – who invariably command the respect, after acquaintance, of all Americans.... In fact, the native population on the Isle of Pines is distinctly different in character and disposition from the average native of Cuba.”⁹³ By emphasizing *pineros*’ Spanish, European heritage, landholding companies made a clear distinction that the natives were not Afro-Cuban, as was more common in mainland Cuba. Therefore, settlers would not have to worry about consorting with non-whites, a fear prevalent in the United States that spurred the rise of Jim Crow segregation.

Companies looked to alleviate another concern often associated with tropical regions: disease. This was a long-held concern among Anglo-Americans anxious about traveling to the tropics for fear of contracting ailments such as yellow fever or malaria. During the War of 1898, some U.S. soldiers stationed in Cuba were uneasy about staying on the island longer than necessary. Most notably, Theodore Roosevelt appealed to get his Rough Riders out of Cuba soon after hostilities ended out of fear that his soldiers would contract tropical diseases.⁹⁴ Landholding company executives clearly remained alert to this concern. Citing U.S. government reports, the Isle of Pines Company asserted that the Isle had no record

⁹¹ *Report on the Census of Cuba, 1899* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1900).

⁹² Tropical Development Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 43.

⁹³ Isle of Pines Investment Company, “The Pineland Bulletin,” 16. U.S. newspapers widely echoed these depictions of *pineros* as friendly, cooperative, and simple. For examples, see “Isle of Pines,” *Grand Rapids Herald*, June 19, 1898; “About the Isle of Pines,” *Lexington Herald*, July 20, 1898; “‘Paradise of the Atlantic’: The Isle of Pines,” *Biloxi Herald*, April 6, 1903.

⁹⁴ In August 1898, Roosevelt requested to have the Rough Riders relieved and returned home. In a letter to his friend Sen. Henry Cabot Lodge, Roosevelt feared his troops would contract malaria and “die like rotten sheep.” Quoted in David F. Trask, *The War with Spain in 1898* (New York: Macmillan, 1981), 330.

of yellow fever or cholera.⁹⁵ Indeed, in the years that a U.S. consul was stationed on the Isle (1910–29, 1942–4), health reports indicated no instances of yellow fever or malaria.

Landholding companies also typically obfuscated the sovereignty question. While U.S. and Cuban officials deliberated about such claims, U.S.-based landholding companies and private U.S. investors rarely, if ever, recognized Cuban interests or authority, even though the Cuban government had been administering the Isle since independence in May 1902. Instead, U.S. settlers and investors often referred to the Isle in prospectuses, company stationary, and personal correspondence as “Isle of Pines, W.I.” – West Indies. This designation not only denied Cuban sovereignty but also implied that it was among the islands Spain had ceded to the United States under the Treaty of Paris. Some companies went further by suggesting that the Isle of Pines belonged to the United States unconditionally. The Tropical Development Company referred to the Isle as the “American District of Cuba”; the Isle of Pines Company stated that “The Isle of Pines is the very latest of Uncle Sam’s territorial acquisitions.”⁹⁶ Even after the Hay-Quesada treaty was signed (but before the U.S. Senate formally ratified it), landholding companies continued to suggest that the U.S. government was an active player in the Isle’s affairs and that it would guarantee the physical and financial protection of settlers and entrepreneurs. In 1911, the Isle of Pines Company claimed, “The United States government has absolutely pledged itself to see that an orderly government is maintained and there is to-day in the Isle of Pines as perfect security of life and property as in any part of the United States.”⁹⁷

Such promise of security was critical in light of some companies’ pledge to construct a deep-water port and a railroad.⁹⁸ Although neither project ever came to fruition, the idea of development was an integral part of the landholding companies’ sales pitch. They promised significant returns on investment to the settler who bought land sooner rather than later so they could reap the benefit of the inevitable increase in land values. Or, as the Isle of Pines Investment Company put it: “Buy Land Now, It’s Like Taking Out an Insurance Policy [–] the Longer You Put It Off the More

⁹⁵ Isle of Pines Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 40.

⁹⁶ Tropical Development Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines”; Isle of Pines Company, “The Isle of Pines,” 1.

⁹⁷ Isle of Pines Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 33.

⁹⁸ Isle of Pines Railroad Company Inc., “Isle of Pines Railroad Company Prospectus” (New York, 1910).

Expensive It Gets.”⁹⁹ In the first years of the twentieth century, landholding companies generally sold undeveloped land for up to \$50 an acre. They promised that once developed, the value of land would increase exponentially. The Isle of Pines Company asserted that “Every available acre of tillable land in the Isle of Pines is, in our opinion, worth \$100, uncultivated, to-day. Cultivated (in grapefruit or oranges, for instance) it should be worth \$1,000 in full bearing.”¹⁰⁰ Advertisements attributed this increase in value to the efforts of settlers, whose industry and efficiency made the Isle more productive and valuable than it ever was under Spanish rule. According to the Isle of Pines Company, “the activity of the Yankee settler [brought] an era of prosperity – and of increase in land values vastly greater in five years than in the five centuries preceding.”¹⁰¹

Another tactic of landholding companies was to cite testimony from existing settlers, investors, and experts to support its claims. One of these experts, Dr. William Browning, wrote in November 1910 about the Isle’s prospects as a health resort. Although lukewarm in his assessment – “Cuba hardly equals [the U.S. South], certainly not yet for lack of suitable accommodations” – he nevertheless argued that it was a place physicians should consider for its potential to improve patients’ health.¹⁰² That was sufficient endorsement for the Isle of Pines Company, which quoted his report at length in its 1911 prospectus.¹⁰³ A decade earlier, the company reprinted a letter in full from independent inspectors of its property that reported that its tract was “the best I have found for growing Tropical fruits and winter vegetables” and that “the leaf grown on [the] Isle of Pines is of good quality.”¹⁰⁴ It likewise reprinted letters from settlers who were said to be thriving on the Isle. J. A. Lattin of Farmingdale, New York, wrote the Isle of Pines Company to say that he and his family were enjoying life on their forty-acre farm in West McKinley so much

⁹⁹ Isle of Pines Investment Company, “The Pineland Bulletin,” 14.

¹⁰⁰ Isle of Pines Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 28.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁰² William Browning, “The Isle of Pines as a Hibernaculum,” *Long Island Medical Journal* (November 1910), 10.

¹⁰³ Isle of Pines Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 7–12.

¹⁰⁴ Isle of Pines Company, “Isle of Pines,” 19–20. Similar letters testifying to the Isle’s potential were reproduced by other companies, including: the Tropical Development Company, with a 1904 letter from Squiers, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 8; the Isle of Pines Investment Company, with a note from the president of the Cuban National Horticultural Society, “The Pineland Bulletin,” 22; and the San Juan Heights Land Company, which offered excerpts of five letters from fruit shippers testifying to the quality of Isle citrus, “The Isle of Pines,” 31–2.

that “Mrs. Lattin did not care to come North on a visit, stating that she enjoys the summer climate there as well as the winter. In fact, nothing could induce us to move back to the States. The island undoubtedly has a great future.”¹⁰⁵

Cultural Representations

The landholding companies’ sales pitch evidently caught Americans’ attention. An estimated 10,000 Americans eventually bought land. Another sign was how the Isle of Pines resonated in U.S. popular culture, where its image both reflected and reinforced landholding companies’ portrayals. Descriptions of the Isle as a tropical paradise, a place for rejuvenation, an opportunity for prosperity and social mobility, and an untapped commodity ripe for exploitation all were evident in contemporary books, poetry, and even a play.

Irene A. Wright, who spent nearly a decade in Cuba, became the most notable chronicler of the Isle of Pines in the early twentieth century. A native of Colorado, she served as a writer and an editor for various Havana-based publications before later working for the U.S. National Archives and Department of State.¹⁰⁶ She wrote two books about the Isle, *The Gem of the Caribbean* and a revised and expanded version, *Isle of Pines*. The project began as a report undertaken at the behest of the Provisional Government of Cuba, which the United States administered during a twenty-eight-month reoccupation beginning in September 1906. Both publications were similar in form and style to the landholding company prospectuses published around the same time. In *Gem of the Caribbean*, for example, pictures included panoramas of Nueva Gerona and Santa Fe as well as various farms, beaches, dwellings, and groves in their early stages of development. Such images, particularly of the young groves, left the powerful impression of future growth to come. Like the company prospectuses, Wright’s works read like promotional literature, emphasizing the benefits and attractive features of the Isle. About settlers she wrote, “On one point, however, everybody agrees: that the Isle of Pines is the greatest place on earth. No view to the contrary is tolerated.”¹⁰⁷ This laudatory tone is perhaps not surprising considering

¹⁰⁵ Lattin to J. D. Potts, September 30, 1910, in Isle of Pines Company, “McKinley, Isle of Pines,” 20.

¹⁰⁶ <http://encyclopedia.jrank.org/articles/pages/4812/Wright-Irene-Aloha-1879-1972.html> (accessed July 18, 2015).

¹⁰⁷ Wright, *Isle of Pines*, 92.

Wright had sought editorial and financial help from U.S. businessmen to get *Isle of Pines* published.¹⁰⁸ Nonetheless, whereas company prospectuses touted a particular tract, Wright's works promoted the Isle in its entirety, including attractive descriptions of its climate and topography, its citrus and vegetable potential, as well as its native people, plants, and animals.

While the works by Wright and the landholding companies depicted the Isle of Pines as a new frontier for U.S. settlement, other writers promoted elements of the island as having a place *within* the United States. This idea was offered most notably in Mary Estelle Franklin's *Isle of Pines Cook Book*. Published in 1914 by the Boston-based Isle of Pines Co-Operative Fruit Company, an agent for the United Fruit Company, the cookbook offered a collection of recipes featuring grapefruit, which the company grew on the Isle. Franklin suggested a variety of uses of the fruit, including for beverages, salads, sandwiches, entrees, and desserts, some 250 recipes in all. She portrayed the Isle's citrus fruit as of the highest quality to generate interest among potential investors in the Isle of Pines Co-Operative Fruit Company.¹⁰⁹ Like the landholding company prospectuses, Franklin used third-party testimonials to establish the quality of the Isle's produce. "[T]here is no question as to its flavor being far superior to that of any other grapefruit grown," Franklin quoted one shipper. "We have disposed of a large quantity of Isle of Pines grapefruits at \$6.00 a crate, and have received nothing but the highest praise in regard to it from our customers," she cited another.¹¹⁰ Moreover, Franklin emphasized the U.S. presence and influence on the Isle to show it was not a totally foreign land and to suggest that investments in the fruit company's efforts were a safe bet. To that end, she asserted that 4,500 Americans, including many New Englanders, lived on the Isle, who owned 99 percent of the land.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., foreword.

¹⁰⁹ U.S. growers in Hawai'i also used a cookbook to promote an American-run enterprise, in this case to draw attention to the pineapple industry in the newly annexed territory. Gary Okihiro, *Pineapple Culture: A History of the Tropical and Temperate Zones* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 143–50.

¹¹⁰ Testimonials quoted from C. S. Alden, president of the Cleveland-based Alden Adams Brokerage Co., and Thomas F. Galvin of Boston, respectively. Mary Estelle Franklin, *Isle of Pines Cook Book*, (Boston, MA: Isle of Pines Co-Operative Fruit Company, 1914), 30. Wright also attested to the high quality of the fruit produced on the Isle. "It is not possible to produce anywhere better pineapples than grow on the Isle of Pines." Wright, *Isle of Pines*, 79.

¹¹¹ Franklin, *Isle of Pines Cook Book*, 31.

The quality of the Isle's produce also offered a selling point for grocers in the United States. In May 1913, the Hartford, Connecticut, grocer Newton, Robertson & Company promoted having just received pineapples from the Kopf Nursery Company, one of the prominent U.S.-owned citrus enterprises on the Isle. "No fruit could be more delightful and healthful to eat than these perfectly ripened Isle of Pines Pineapples," the advertisement stated.¹¹² Just two months earlier, however, it was apparent that Newton, Robertson & Company did not have this Isle pineapple. Instead, the company promoted its stock by favorably comparing it to that from the Isle. "Solid, ripe, beautiful eating fruit," the advertisement stated. "Equal to the Isle of Pines fruit at about half the price."¹¹³

The Isle of Pines also inspired poetry from American writers. In 1905, W. H. Merritt wrote "Isle of Pines," an ode to the favorable climate and conditions on the island. Referring to the Isle as the "fairest gem," Merritt's poem contained three themes. The first was the stark contrast between the weather on the Isle and the climate in Merritt's hometown of Bolivar in western New York, a place notorious for its punishing winters and lake-effect snow. On the Isle, Merritt wrote, there are "No withering vines with frost bit leaves ... No chilly winds with icy breath; No winter storm with its shroud of death." The second theme depicted the Isle as a place for relaxation and rejuvenation. "And my heart grows young," he wrote, suggesting the healing powers of the serene surroundings. This was followed closely by "And my soul is filled with peace and rest," which, in addition to crediting the Isle's calm nature, offered a heavenly allusion. That leads to the third theme in the poem, a religious or spiritual quality to the Isle. Merritt compared the Isle to the biblical "promised land" and portrayed the Isle as a "gift from the hand divine." Nowhere did he allude to the competing claims of sovereignty or lobby the U.S. government for annexation. Rather, Merritt referred to the Isle as "home" and "the land for me," suggesting that it was so marvelous a place as to be worth leaving the United States.¹¹⁴

Merritt's work, however, did not achieve the same level of notoriety as the most famous U.S. poet associated with the Isle of Pines, Hart Crane. Best known for his poem, *The Bridge* (1930), the Ohio-born Crane wrote

¹¹² Advertisement in *Hartford Courant*, May 20, 1913. Additional advertisements appeared in the editions of June 5 and 11, 1913. The company was still promoting Isle of Pines produce as of 1941. See *Hartford Courant*, November 18, 1941.

¹¹³ Advertisements in *Hartford Courant*, March 6, 1913; March 8, 1913.

¹¹⁴ W. H. Merritt, "The Isle of Pines" (1905).

much of his renowned opus while living on his family's property on the Isle in 1926. That stint was his second visit to the Isle; his first occurred as an adolescent in the winter of 1915, an experience, one scholar wrote, that "sank plummet-wise into the depths of his being, where it lived and grew secretly, later to put forth in his poetry curious and moving images of tropical seascapes."¹¹⁵ While writing *The Bridge*, he lobbied his mother and grandmother to stay in the house his grandfather had built. Echoing some of the selling points from landholding companies, he wrote that the fresh air and recreation on the Isle – in contrast to that of his home in New York City – would reinvigorate him. Moreover, he did not want the family's property to go to waste. "It's a clean home with beautiful surroundings and sunshine with quiet and tranquility – compared to this metropolitan living with its fret and fever – it's a paradise."¹¹⁶ Crane's mother, Grace, however, refused his repeated requests, suggesting that problems with the property would prevent him from finding the peace and quiet he sought. "I never want you to plan to go to the Island or give it another thought – it is too absurd to consider," she wrote. "If you knew the troubles & complications that are constantly confronting me with that property, you would want to stay as far as possible."¹¹⁷ She eventually relented and he stayed on the Isle with the family's housekeeper for nearly six months, during which he channeled his energies not only into his writing, but also into the daily upkeep of the family property.

Although he had idealized the Isle as a retreat from which he could focus on his writing, his letters suggest that his opinion of the Isle varied in proportion to his productivity. During his most creative burst in late July and August, when he wrote significant portions of *The Bridge* as well as other short poems, he called the Isle "the most ideal place and 'situation' I've ever had for work."¹¹⁸ Just weeks earlier, however, during an ebb in his writing, he complained that the Isle's conditions were stifling him and made it difficult to work: "I have not been able to write one line since I came here – the mind is completely befogged by the heat

¹¹⁵ Philip Horton, *Hart Crane: The Life of an American Poet* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1937), 26. See also, José A. Taboada and Enrique O. González, *Hart Crane: El Poeta Perdido en Isla de Pinos* (Nueva Gerona: Ediciones El Abra, 2001).

¹¹⁶ Hart Crane to Grace Hart Crane, October 20, 1926, *The Letters of Hart Crane, 1916–1932*, Brom Weber, ed. (New York: Hermitage House, 1952), 153.

¹¹⁷ Grace Hart Crane to Hart Crane, April 17, 1924, in *Letters of Hart Crane and His Family*, Thomas S. W. Lewis, ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 304.

¹¹⁸ Crane to Grace Hart Crane, July 30, 1926, *Letters of Hart Crane*, 269. One Crane biographer argued that Crane's creative burst during this period came while he was battling insomnia, brought on by the heat of the Isle's summer months. Horton, *Hart Crane*, 212.

and besides there is a strange challenge and combat in the air – offered by ‘Nature’ so monstrously alive in the tropics which drains the psychic energies.”¹¹⁹ Even after his return to the United States, Crane suggested that his sojourn did not live up to his expectations. “The result has been that there was only about four weeks on the Isle of Pines that I managed to accomplish any work at all; my mother’s unrestrained letters, the terrific heat and bugs, etc., nearly killed me.”¹²⁰

Crane’s work, though, clearly bore an imprint of his time on the Isle. *The Bridge* contains many scenes and allusions to coastline and beachfront. As does the posthumously published *Key West* (1933), which contains some short poems that he wrote during his 1926 stay. In “O Carib Isle!” for example, Crane writes:

To the white sand I may speak a name, fertile
Albeit in a stranger tongue. Tree names, flower names
Deliberate, gainsay death’s brittle crypt. Meanwhile
The wind that knots itself in one great death –
Coils and withdraws. So syllables want breath.¹²¹

In this passage, Crane describes the process of giving words and descriptors to objects and settings, some of which – like the “white sand” or the “wind that knots itself” – he surely encountered while on the Isle. Crane’s experience living through the powerful October 1926 hurricane also is evident in “Eternity,” which he wrote after his return to New York. He describes a scene of utter devastation at his family’s house, where he survived with the housekeeper:

After it was over, though still gusting balefully,
The old woman and I foraged some drier clothes
And left the house, or what was left of it;
Parts of the roof reach Yucatan, I suppose.
She almost – even then – got blown across lots
At the base of the mountain. But the town, the Town!

There, he finds “Wires in the streets and Chinamen up and down With arms in slings ... Everything gone – or strewn in riddled grace – Long tropic roots high in the air, like lace.”¹²² The poem concludes with reference to talking with American sailors who brought relief aid to the island

¹¹⁹ Crane to Unknown, July 1926, *Letters of Hart Crane*, 264. The recipient and exact date of the letter are redacted in this edition.

¹²⁰ Crane to Charlotte Rychtarik, November 1, 1926, *Letters of Hart Crane*, 276.

¹²¹ “O Carib Isle!” in *Key West: An Island Sheaf* in Hart Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters*, Langdon Hammer, ed. (New York: Library of America, 2006), 77.

¹²² “Eternity” in Crane, *Complete Poems and Selected Letters*, 131. See also McManus, *Cuba’s Island of Dreams*, 44–7.

aboard the USS *Milwaukee*. Considering Crane wrote as much as half *The Bridge* as well as shorter works like “O Carib Isle!” and “Eternity” while living on the Isle of Pines, his retreat certainly had its desired effect in spurring him to write.

Most cultural reflections of the Isle of Pines celebrated the virtues of U.S. settlement, but that sentiment was not universal. Nowhere was this more evident than in the two-act play *The Isle of Pines: A Musical Comedy*, written by three playwrights in 1906, which satirized Americans’ drive for land and desires for annexation. One of the main characters, Thad Thompkins, manufactures a phony cablegram from the Roosevelt administration stating the United States was assuming sovereignty over the Isle and sending a governor to take command. This governor, Billy Norcott, is actually a low-level State Department clerk in on Thad’s ruse. Thad’s motivation is to secure 30,000 acres, the title to which was in dispute with Kitty Curtis, an American woman who also claimed ownership of the land through inheritance of an old Spanish deed. Thad’s plan is to have Billy, as governor, install Ben Bingham as a territorial judge who will surely rule the land dispute in Thad’s favor. From there, Thad says, “I will sell the lands on the strength of his decision. We go half on the proceeds, and by the time Uncle Sam gets on to the fake, we can be any old place enjoying the fruits of our honest toil.”¹²³

Although the second act devolves into a farcical romantic comedy (wherein a variety of love triangles enmeshes each of the story’s ten main characters) and the misadventures of mistaken identity, the play nevertheless offers some criticisms about contemporary events on the Isle. The first is powerbrokers’ proclivity for scheming and corruption. This element is most clearly evident in Thad’s plot to bolster his property claim. If Thad is representative of the U.S. landholding companies, his scheme can be read as a critique of the companies’ own land claims, especially since there were few formal titles at the turn of the century. Also, in one scene Ben, Nellie (Thad’s daughter), and Don Pedro (a prominent Spaniard) lobby Billy for preferential benefits in his new government, specifically kickbacks. “We want Graft!” they declare.¹²⁴ In response, a disgusted Billy throws them out of his office. Finally, the play lampoons the habit of powerbrokers to call for rebellions when matters do not go their way.

¹²³ Collin Davis, Max Rosenfeld, and Hilding Anderson, *The Isle of Pines: A Musical Comedy* (1906), Copyright Office, Drama Deposits, 1901–1944, Reel 209, Act I, 16, LOC.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

This tendency is evident in both Thad's scheme, as well as characters' talk of staging a counter-revolution against Billy. Such talk of revolution among these characters reflected many reports at the turn of the century that settlers were on the verge of revolting against Cuban authority to secure U.S. annexation. Amid the talk of counter-revolution against Billy, the play's powerbrokers suggest that manipulating the general populace would be fairly easy. Don Pedro says, "The people are ready to rebel. We have incited them to revolt."¹²⁵ Such views of *pineros* presents another common theme that runs through the play, that the natives are naïve and simplistic, easily manipulated by more sophisticated Americans and Spaniards (as represented by Don Pedro). Indeed, there are only two Cuban characters by name, Lt. Garcia and Lolita, suggesting *pineros* were inconsequential to the Isle's power struggles. Early in the play, Ben refers to the natives as "simple-minded," easily distracted by the pomp and circumstance of welcoming a new governor.¹²⁶ In fact, the only issue of concern to Lt. Garcia is his desire to have the new governor, Billy, change the law to allow him to marry seventeen-year-old Lolita (the law in the play allowed for marriages after eighteen). The suggestion here is that the older, lecherous Lt. Garcia was trying to take advantage of an innocent young girl.

The play opens with a nod to the contested political status of the Isle, particularly the question over sovereignty. In the first scene, *pineros* – described as "Citizens of the Island [in] (Spanish costume)" – gather for the opening song:

We first were subjects of Sunny Spain
 'Till they blew up the Main [*sic*];
 And then we went under Cuba's flag,
 But found it all the same.
 So now we call on the U.S.A.,
 Just over across the way,
 Between them all, it's a game of tag,
 We're waiting to hear them say:

Come, come, into the fold, into the U.S.A.,
 For that's the only country on the face of the globe to-day,
 Come, come give us your hand, we'll send a governor down,
 But you must vote for Teddy when election comes around.

Have you received the cablegram?
 Have you heard from Uncle Sam?

¹²⁵ Ibid., 35.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 3.

We're sick of revolutions,
 Sick of Cuba's flim, flam, flam,
 We can't find among the Spaniards,
 Any man we care to love.
 Send us down some chaps from Broadway,
 We will be their turtle Dove.¹²⁷

The song suggests that *pineros* were looking to the United States to provide political stability and would welcome annexation. Indeed, it ignores any notion that *pineros* may have felt ties to, or identified with, mainland Cuba. Instead, it more aptly reflects the sentiments expressed by annexationists who appealed to the Roosevelt administration to make the Isle U.S. territory. These efforts are referenced later in Act I as Thad explains the backdrop to his annexation ruse saying, "Cabled Uncle Sam to take us under his wing as a territory. Root sent his refusal – expected it. He didn't want the Isle of Pines as a gift."¹²⁸

Like other contemporary literature, reports, and advertisements, *The Isle of Pines: A Musical Comedy* took a condescending tone toward *pineros*, portraying them as ignorant and simple-minded. Yet unlike most other writings of the era, the play also satirized entrepreneurs and investors. It revealed a counter-narrative that slowly emerged after the first few years of the U.S. presence. Some settlers who returned to the United States complained that the notion of the Isle as a tropical paradise was a sham; it was not as picturesque as they had been led to believe, nor could it support the kind of lifestyle they expected to enjoy. They vilified landholding companies as profit-driven speculators who had dishonestly mischaracterized the Isle and duped Americans of modest means into sinking their money into a losing enterprise. The play reflected a growing undercurrent of discontent among those who found that the Isle of Pines was not all it had been portrayed to be.

By 1910, U.S. interests had acquired more than 90 percent of available land on the Isle of Pines. It was a startling figure considering that ten years earlier only one American with a little more than 100 acres was on record as a property owner. Private interests largely facilitated this development, with only modest support from the U.S. government. Indeed, in a January 1904 report Elihu Root flatly stated that "The executive department of the Government does not deem the isle of value to the

¹²⁷ Ibid., 1. The scene description notes that the play takes place in Nueva Jeroma – presumably a misspelling of Nueva Gerona – on the Isle of Pines.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 16.

United States.”¹²⁹ Nevertheless, private U.S. citizens continued to buy and sell land. Landholding companies’ advertising and publicity campaigns greatly spurred this activity. These efforts successfully appealed to Americans of sufficient means who continued to look to the frontier for adventure and opportunity. But U.S. entrepreneurs were not alone in crafting this appealing vision. While they supplied the advertisements and prospectuses that drew Americans’ attention, their depictions of “Treasure Island” were reflected and reinforced in U.S. popular culture, particularly among writers who described the Isle using many of the same themes. They established an image of *pineros* as simple, yet friendly and welcoming, as well as a set of assumptions about the Isle that many settlers carried with them. Depictions of the Isle as an exotic tropical paradise, a place for rejuvenation, and an area ripe for American development not only resonated in the early 1900s, but would continue to be used for the next half-century.

For the first U.S. landowners, however, simply having property was not enough. Their goal was to ensure that the Isle would be U.S. territory, not Cuban. Landholding company executives and investors looking to sell the hundreds of thousands of acres they owned feared that Americans would have little interest in buying land in a foreign country. Moreover, if the Isle was indeed foreign territory – a question that would remain in diplomatic limbo until 1925 – those entrepreneurs looking to sell their goods and produce in U.S. markets would be subject to tariffs and undermine their bottom line. To achieve annexation, then, a distinctly American presence had to be established. So began the proliferation of American settlements and communities across the Isle during the early twentieth century.

¹²⁹ Report of Secretary of War to U.S. Senate, January 14, 1904, *Isle of Pines*, 68th Cong., 2d sess., 1924, S. Doc. 166, 211.