



“A Great Thoroughfare for All Mankind”: Asian Trade and the Antebellum Business Case for Building a Transcontinental Railroad

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Returning from China after the Opium War had forcibly opened new ports to Western traders, and just as hostilities with Mexico were promising to secure the Pacific Coast for the United States, Asa Whitney conceived of a bold plan to exploit these vast new fields for American business—and in the process unite the growing American empire. The former merchant’s plan was simple: use federal land granted to him personally to finance a railroad across the North American continent. In one stroke, he promised that the United States would become the “great thoroughfare for all mankind”—and profit from it, too. A widespread consensus on the importance and legitimacy of encouraging American trade with Asia earned Whitney’s proposal an enthusiastic hearing in the press and among legislators. By placing Whitney’s plan in a longer context of ideas about Asian commerce, I argue that his plan was more than another flight of “manifest destiny”-style nationalist fantasy. Instead, it illustrates just how deeply rooted ideas about the revolutionary potential of Asian trade were in the political culture of the United States. Understanding the context in which Whitney’s plan was developed and debated grants us a new perspective on how an attachment to global commerce shaped Americans’ public-private collaborations.

Twice widowed, his import business and real estate investments ruined by the Panic of 1837, and with his remaining family gone West, Asa Whitney

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I would like to acknowledge the support of the Program in Early American Economy and Society, The Library Company of Philadelphia; the McNeil Center for Early American Studies, University of Pennsylvania; and the American Studies Program, Princeton University.

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URL: <http://www.thebhc.org/publications/BEHonline/2012/norwood.pdf>

of New York sailed to China in 1840 to seek a new fortune—and something more.¹ “It certainly is a great tryal at my time of life . . . ,” he confided to his diary; “I hope above all things that I may yet be enabled to do some good to mankind.”² A pious man, but by no means unassuming—his physical resemblance to Napoleon was noted—during fifteen months trading in China amidst the Opium War, Whitney conceived of a plan whose scope and “vast importance” rivaled the deeds of his doppelgänger.³ His providential project? The construction of railroad running from Lake Michigan to the Pacific Ocean—a highway he touted as “a great thoroughfare for all mankind.”⁴

Whitney returned to the United States in the late summer of 1844 and devoted himself to his railroad plan.⁵ He first presented it to the world on January 28, 1845, in a brief memorial to Congress.⁶ Thus began a seven-year odyssey that saw Whitney’s ideas debated at the highest levels of government, and discussed—seemingly incessantly—across the country. During this period Whitney led a surveying expedition to substantiate his proposed route, and then, having satisfied himself as to its “practicability,” barnstormed the country as a lecturer, barraging Congress and the press with letters, reports, and petitions while explaining his plan to audiences

¹ Margaret Louise Brown, “Asa Whitney: Projector of the Pacific Railroad” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1931), 1–18. Though Whitney is mentioned in many books on American railroads, particularly of the transcontinental variety (for reasons that will become clear), good works on his life are rare. The best accounts remain those written by Margaret Brown in the early twentieth century: Brown, “Asa Whitney”; “Asa Whitney and His Pacific Railroad Publicity Campaign,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 20 (Sept. 1933): 209–24; “Whitney, Asa,” *Dictionary of American Biography*, ed. Dumas Malone (New York, 1928). That said, David H. Bain’s more recent popular history of the first transcontinental railroad, which depends on Brown for most of its details on Whitney (updating her work in a few minor places), has the advantage of being more accessible, as it is written with an eye more attentive to drama and narrative tension. David Haward Bain, *Empire Express: Building the First Transcontinental Railroad* (New York, 1999), 1–47, and passim.

² Diary of Asa Whitney [transcript], 4, in Asa Whitney Papers, University of Michigan Library, Special Collections, as quoted in Bain, *Empire Express*, 3.

³ On Whitney’s appearance see: J. S., “Whitney’s Railroad Meeting,” *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, 22 Dec. 1846, and Brown, “Whitney, Asa,” 157. For quote, see Asa Whitney, *A Project for a Railroad to the Pacific* (New York, 1849), iii.

⁴ Whitney, *A Project for a Railroad to the Pacific*, iii.

⁵ Bain, *Empire Express*, 7–10.

⁶ “Railroad from Lake Michigan to the Pacific. Memorial of Asa Whitney, of New York City, relative to the construction of a railroad from Lake Michigan to the Pacific Ocean,” H. Doc. 72, 28th Cong., 2d sess. (28 Jan. 1845); “Memorial of Asa Whitney, of the City of New York, praying a grant of land, to enable him to construct a railroad from Lake Michigan to the Pacific Ocean,” S. Doc. 69, 28th Cong., 2d sess. (28 Jan. 1845).

at special public meetings, railroad conventions, and in state legislatures from Alabama to Maine.

His energy was rewarded with a great deal of public attention and enthusiasm. By 1849, over a dozen public assemblies had approved of his project, and eighteen state legislatures (out of the thirty then in the Union) had sponsored resolutions in favor of his plan.⁷ But despite this support, Whitney's efforts ended in failure. Disagreements in Washington over the precise route condemned the proposal to a decade-long half-life in various sub-committees. After a brief trip to London to try to sell Parliament on a similar scheme—a railroad across Canada—Whitney bowed out from public life in 1852. Marrying into a wealthy planter family, he spent the rest of his days quietly, living as a gentleman farmer near Washington D.C.⁸

Though his particular scheme was never adopted, Whitney has been credited—by contemporaries as well as by subsequent historians—with bringing the idea of a transcontinental railroad forward in the national consciousness, and with providing the intellectual and organizational impetus that led to 1862's Pacific Railroad Act.⁹ A colorful character who aroused intense feelings among his fellow Americans, Whitney has not been erased from the historical record; too useful a narrative device to be forgotten, he has long been a supporting character in histories of U.S. railroads.¹⁰

However, the deep resonance of his arguments within early American political culture and ideas about political economy have undergone less

⁷ Copies of the resolutions and memorials can be found in the Congressional Serial Set and in Whitney, *A Project for a Railroad to the Pacific*, 89–107.

⁸ On Whitney's publicity efforts, see: Robert Spencer Cotterill, "Early Agitation for a Pacific Railroad 1845-1850," *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 5 (1 March 1919): 396–414; Brown, "Asa Whitney and His Pacific Railroad Publicity Campaign"; Bain, *Empire Express*, 13–46; H. Craig Miner, "Mr. Whitney's Dream," in Miner, *A Most Magnificent Machine: America Adopts the Railroad, 1825-1862* (Lawrence, Kansas, 2010), 226–38.

⁹ Whitney's association with the idea of a national highway is so strong—and his erasure from public view after 1852 so complete—that during a House debate on the 1862 act one frustrated representative grouched that "shade of Whitney—for I believe he is dead" should have been enough to convince his colleagues that such a road would be useful for more than the transport of teas and opium. This last burst of influence was indeed a miracle of astral projection, as Whitney was still alive, a mere hour away from the capital at his farm in Maryland, and remained so until typhoid fever took him a decade later, on September 17, 1872. See: "Pacific Railroad," *Cong. Globe*, 37th Cong., 2d sess. (Friday 18 April 1862), 1727; Brown, "Asa Whitney and His Pacific Railroad Publicity Campaign," 223; Bain, *Empire Express*, 46.

¹⁰ For a representative example of how Whitney appears in modern railroad historiography, see the skillful deployment of his story in William G. Thomas, *The Iron Way: Railroads, the Civil War, and the Making of Modern America* (New Haven, Conn., 2011), 1–2, 37–38, 199.

scrutiny. Investigating Whitney's project reveals that his plan was more than merely representative of the temporary interests and coincidences of his time, but rather continued a long tradition in American politics—that of imagining Asian commerce as an agent for binding the union together and preserving republican independence from the intrigues of Europe. The idea of dominating Asian commerce was in fact integral to the early American approach to international political economy and shaped Americans' receptivity to plans that sought to use the power of the state to further the capacities of private enterprise—like railroads.

Whitney's Plan

Whitney's case for his "road to the Pacific" turned on one key idea: that a railroad across North America would grant the United States hegemony over global trade by reducing the cost of freight between Asia and Europe.¹¹ As he explained in his 1849 tract promoting the project, its "first great object" was "to change the route for the commerce and intercourse of Europe with Asia, and force it, from interest, to pay tribute to us."¹²

The benefits he envisioned from this land-locked Northwest Passage were extensive. At times, his plan sounds like the key to a new millennium: the road would tame the "wilderness" of the American West by connecting it to new markets; it would "enlighten, and enliven the heathenism of all Asia"; and it would even end all war, by removing the necessity for competition over scarce resources. "Here, then," he proclaimed,

would be the consummation of all things; . . . Here we should stand forever, reaching out one hand to all Asia and the other to all Europe, willing that all may join the great blessing which we possess, claiming free intercourse and exchange of commodities with all, and seeking not to subjugate any; but all, the entire, the whole, tributary, and, at our will, subject to us.¹³

The economic argument behind these prophecies was more pragmatic. By creating a more efficient channel for the global exchange of goods, Whitney argued, new markets—250 million "souls" in Europe, and another 700 million in Asia—would unleash the productive capacities of the United States.¹⁴

¹¹ The core details of Whitney's plan—how it would be funded, its route, and how it would alter global flows of commodities—remained largely the same from his first proposal in 1845 to the end of his public efforts, reaching the fullest extent of their elaboration in his 1849 tract. Two changes of note occurred in the course of this evolution: first, with the capture of California in the Mexican-American War, Whitney added a second terminus, on San Francisco Bay, to his original idea for one in Oregon; and second, in response to criticism, he expanded his plan for congressional oversight on the road's construction, which included giving up any claims to future profits from the road.

¹² Whitney, *A Project for a Railroad to the Pacific*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

It all came down to distance and position. Whitney went to great lengths to prove that transit directly across the continent would be cheaper and more efficient than maritime travel—either by way of Cape Horn, the Cape of Good Hope, or through a proposed canal in Central America—and to this end he amassed detailed tables of travel times and compiled statistics on the per pound cost of shipping hyson teas, winter wheat, and other commodities.

In his public lectures he added some visual flair to these figures. Observing that most maps of the world placed North America “to one side of all, as if of no importance,” Whitney displayed his own “skeleton map,” made to showcase “our continent” in its “actual position on the globe.” “We are in the centre of all,” he explained, “Europe on the one side . . . and all Asia on the other. . . . the population and the commerce of all the world is all this belt of the globe, which makes a straight line across our continent.”¹⁵

The means envisioned for constructing this “belt of the globe” were similarly bracing, at least from the perspective of the limited antebellum federal state. He proposed that the national government grant him a 60-mile wide swath of public land—30 miles on either side of his proposed road, running from the western shore of Lake Michigan to the mouth of the Columbia River in the Oregon Territory—which he would then sell to finance the road’s construction (under government oversight) in alternating 5-mile blocks. He estimated that the road would cost a little over \$68 million dollars, and to raise those funds he would need to sell 78 million acres of what he termed “waste” land.¹⁶ Crucially, he denied any pecuniary interest: the land would be sold only for construction costs, and the road’s tolls would go only to maintenance; and if the road failed, then all the property would revert to government ownership.¹⁷

Even so, the prospect of granting that much land to one individual raised eyebrows in Congress—but it was also one of the plan’s key selling points.¹⁸ Construction of the road by one person, as opposed to a corporate or government institution created for the purpose, would circumvent constitutional objections that the peculiar politics of American federalism

¹⁵ Asa Whitney, *Address of Mr. A. Whitney Before the Legislature of Pennsylvania on His Project for a Railroad from Lake Michigan to the Pacific* (Harrisburg, Pa., 1848), 3.

¹⁶ For Whitney’s explanation of how he would sell land to build the road, see Whitney, *A Project for a Railroad to the Pacific*, 6–12.

¹⁷ “I have but one motive, or object, and that is, to see this great work successfully accomplished, which would be a sufficient reward for my labors.” *Ibid.*, iv.

¹⁸ When Whitney spoke in New York at the Brooklyn Tabernacle on January 4, 1847, his address was riotously interrupted by a group of “National Reformers” led by one “Ryckman,” who objected to what they thought was Whitney’s plan to donate public land to a corporation. Ryckman later apologized, in print, for the uproar. See Brown, “Asa Whitney and His Pacific Railroad Publicity Campaign,” 215–16.

in the period might have otherwise raised—the same objections that had repeatedly killed attempts to create any national institution with significant economic power, like a central bank. As an 1850 Senate report noted, “the constitutional difficulties” were daunting, only surmountable by “substituting *the principle of private enterprise and private responsibility*”—exactly as Whitney proposed to do.¹⁹

A more recent assay of Whitney’s plan agrees. In his study of early American attitudes toward public works, John Larson notes that Whitney’s plan was cleverly tuned in to the politics of the day: “[a]s a private but not corporate enterprise, Whitney’s bill escaped both constitutional and ideological objections.” Rejecting a separate institutional framework, like a corporation, was probably the most important aspect of the plan—but there were other factors that worked in its favor. In keeping with a recent revulsion against publicly managed internal improvements (one that originated in canal building failures that cascaded through the 1830s), Whitney’s presentation of his project as private enterprise fit the tone of the times; and by crafting a scheme that gave government officials an ultimate check on his activities, “he could hardly be faulted for taking advantage of political failure.”²⁰

So while his plan had its detractors, Whitney nonetheless met with a significant amount of support.²¹ Still, a current of reluctant surprise is discernible among his allies; his backers seem to have been convinced of the plan’s promise—and necessity—only in spite of themselves. For example, in their official resolutions supporting the plan, Kentucky legislators related they had been struck “with astonishment” at the “idea of undertaking and accomplishing such an enterprise.” But after a “very lucid explanation” by Whitney, the statesmen of the Bluegrass State became convinced that, despite its audacity, the plan “deserves the strong arm of the government.” And at the very least, they said, they knew of “no plan less obnoxious” for using public lands.²² Similarly, the New York Chamber

¹⁹ Emphasis in original. “Memorial of Thomas Allen and others . . .,” S. Rpt. 194, 31st Cong., 1st sess. (12 Sept. 1850), 2. Whitney framed this aspect of his plan in terms familiar to our own moment: “I ask, what works have our government ever done that could not have been done by individual enterprise in less than half the time, better, and cheaper, and more to the satisfaction and interest of the country at large?” Whitney, *A Project for a Railroad to the Pacific*, 34.

²⁰ John Lauritz Larson, *Internal Improvement: National Public Works and the Promise of Popular Government in the Early United States* (Chapel Hill, 2001), 241.

²¹ “Humbugs of the Day,” *New York Herald*, 10 Oct. 1845. Though the editors of the *New York Herald* were by no means alone in regarding Whitney’s plan as silly—or diabolical—their antipathy to Whitney’s plan was particularly long-lived and vituperative, lasting the life of Whitney’s public career.

²² “Resolutions of the Legislature of Kentucky, relative to Mr. Asa Whitney’s plan of a railroad from Lake Michigan to the Pacific Ocean,” H. Misc. Doc. 55, 30th Cong., 1st sess. (22 March 1848).

of Commerce praised Whitney's "practical views, detailed information, and untiring zeal"—but only after it had investigated other plans and concluded that the road was "too important a work to be accomplished by a corporation."²³ Even supporters who took the step of publicizing his public meetings exhibited discomfort with the scale of his ambitions: "Having been acquainted with Mr. Whitney for many years, and heard his arguments and explanations, based upon statistical facts," one Philadelphian wrote, "I may confess that there is more ground to sustain his scheme than any one would imagine who had not heard him."²⁴

Routes and Resonances

After Whitney's memorial to Congress in 1845, "[p]roposing Pacific railroads became an industry."²⁵ Transcontinental plans proliferated, and diverged on many matters, from the funding structure to the estimated pace of construction—but most importantly, they differed on the route. Disagreements over where the railroad's termini should be, and what sections of the country it should run through, paralyzed Washington. In the end, local boosterism and sectional rivalry spoiled the chance that *any* railroad plan would get through an antebellum Congress.²⁶

But what remained constant among all this infighting is revealing. All the plans on offer agreed on the motivation for the road as a commercial project, and the key to making the United States a success as a commercial nation: the capture of Asian trade. George Wilkes, a self-proclaimed Oregon expert and rival railroad promoter, only stated the conventional wisdom when he noted that "[t]he commerce of the East, in every age, has been the source of the opulence and power of every nation which has engrossed it." An illustrious list of world powers that had benefitted from controlling Asia's trade, according to Wilkes, included: "[i]n turn, Phoenicia, Israel, Carthage, Greece, Rome (through her vanquished

²³ Emphasis in original. Progress, "Chamber of Commerce and Whitney's Railroad Project," *Hunt's Merchants' Magazine and Commercial Review* 21, no. 4 (1 Oct. 1849): 417, 416. See also "Resolutions of the Chamber of Commerce of New York, in favor of Whitney's plan for a railroad from Lake Michigan to the Pacific," S. Misc. Doc. 3, 31st Cong., 1st sess. (7 Aug. 1849). For a recent survey of how Americans wrestled with incorporation as a means of doing business—public and private—during the long nineteenth century, see Robert E. Wright, "Capitalism and the Rise of the Corporate Nation," in *Capitalism Takes Command: The Social Transformation of Nineteenth-Century America*, ed. Michael Zakim and Gary John Kornblith (Chicago, 2012), 145–68.

²⁴ As quoted in "Whitney's Railroad Meeting," *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, 22 Dec. 1846.

²⁵ Miner, *A Most Magnificent Machine*, 232.

²⁶ There were several bills based on Whitney's plan; none made it out of the chamber they were first reported in to: H.R. 468, 30th Cong. (1848); S. 297, 30th Cong., (1849); H.R. 156, 31st Cong. (1850); S. 333, 31st Cong. (1850); H.R. 186, 32d Cong. (1852).

tributaries,) Venice, Pisa, Genoa, Portugal, Holland, and lastly, England,” among those who “have won and worn the ocean diadem.” A Pacific railroad, Wilkes argued, would crown the United States with that honor—and power.²⁷ Indeed, this perspective became so commonplace after Whitney’s plan joined the public conversation that it hurt his claim to originality.²⁸

Which leads to an interesting question: why, in the late 1840s, did the idea of a “road to the Pacific” gain such a hold on the American political imagination? Scholars of U.S. expansion have considered a number of factors in addition to the success of smaller railroads. Necessary elements certainly include the increase in emigration to Oregon, concomitant disputes with Britain over the dividing line for sovereignty there, and the successful war against Mexico, which brought yet more Pacific Coast territory into play. More diffuse cultural factors were active, too: a growing “Young America” nationalism among Democratic partisans and increasingly active fantasies of imperialist white supremacy among all political persuasions contributed as well.

The events Whitney witnessed first-hand while a merchant in China help explain things further, as proximate causes: Britain’s successful termination of the Opium War not only “opened” China as a market by creating new enclaves for Western traders, but also exposed the Middle Kingdom (and Asia more generally) to American state surveillance. For complex reasons, Britain’s invasion of the China coast in the late 1830s had struck a deep chord in the United States. The resulting press coverage and congressional interest shone a spotlight on Americans’ trade in Asia—which, in turn, led Washington to sponsor a formal treaty mission of its own.²⁹ The 1844 agreement with China that granted Americans trading

²⁷ “Our destiny now offers it to us!” Emphasis in original. George Wilkes, *Project of a National Railroad from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean for the Purpose of Obtaining a Short Route to Oregon and the Indies*, 2d ed. (New York, 1845), 6.

²⁸ J. D. B. DeBow, editor of the well-regarded eponymous *Review*, argued that “[t]he world having dreamed so long of reaching the Indies by reduced travel,” it would be pointless to try to determine the true originator of the idea of a transcontinental railroad scheme. “Such is the progressive nature, of American mind,” he opined, that “we may argue that this idea of a passage across the continent, must have occurred to many simultaneously with the first successful railroad results among us.” See: J. D. B. DeBow, “Additional Remarks by the Editor on the Projected Southern and Northern Routes Across the Continent to the Pacific—The Importance of These Routes—Eastern Coasts of Asia and Islands of the Pacific—Trade of the Indies, Etc. Etc.,” *DeBow’s Review: Agricultural, Commercial, Industrial Progress and Resources* 3 (June 1847): 485.

²⁹ The causes for Americans’ interest in the war were complex. Americans’ interpretations of Britain’s invasion of the China coast (the Opium War, c.1839-1842) were deeply tied to the controversy over states’ rights, because American notions of the limits of state sovereignty—the issue that Americans’ debate about the war turned on—were of a piece with their ideas about the circumstances that would legitimize the use of force to impose a liberal political economy on another

rights equal to those won by British arms not only made the United States a stakeholder in the *quasi*-colonial “treaty system”; it also laid the basis for an unprecedented American military and diplomatic presence in East Asia. While the nascent U.S. official establishment was often understaffed and sometimes marred by incompetence and corruption—in the way that most administrative outcroppings of the antebellum federal state were—the ongoing presence of politically appointed consuls, commissioners, and commodores nonetheless injected a new and influential stream of information about the East’s economic and political value into the body politic.³⁰

The impact of this novel flow of news and data can be seen in Whitney’s work and in arguments marshaled by others. For example, a widely disseminated 1846 report by the Senate Committee on Public Lands supported Whitney’s proposal with a dozen tables of Asian trade statistics and lengthy, detailed descriptions of commercial opportunities in Manchuria, China, Japan, Polynesia, Australia, India and Singapore—all of which Congress would have been hard-pressed to compile before the

polity. For example: in Congress, John C. Calhoun, Anglophobic and virulently pro-slavery, analogized Britain’s incursions on Chinese sovereignty to British and Northern attacks on Southern slave trading; while John Quincy Adams, who at that moment favored the imposition of federal power in order to limit slavery’s expansion, also supported Britain’s efforts to impose a liberal commercial order and Westphalian diplomatic system on China. (Both politicians made the explicit connection between their two positions clear, though they were slightly unusual in that respect; most commentary was a bit more murky.) The Opium War thus attracted a great deal more attention and intense discussion than it might have otherwise, because it served as a proxy through which emerging arguments about free-state versus slave-state political economies could be had. In a reciprocal motion, this debate gave Asian affairs a new relevance, leading Washington to initiate direct diplomacy with China. These arguments are explored in greater detail in my forthcoming dissertation, “Trading in Liberty: The Politics of the American China Trade, c. 1784-1862” (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 2012). For a general overview of Americans’ reactions to the Opium War, see: Macabe Keliher, “Anglo-American Rivalry and the Origins of U.S. China Policy,” *Diplomatic History* 31 (1 April 2007): 227–57; Tyler Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia: A Critical Study of the Policy of the United States with Reference to China, Japan, and Korea in the 19th Century* (New York, 1922), 91–194.

³⁰ For more on this new establishment, see: Dennett, *Americans in Eastern Asia*, 175–94; Eldon Griffin, *Clippers and Consuls: American Consular and Commercial Relations with Eastern Asia, 1845-1860* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1938); Curtis T. Henson, *Commissioners and Commodores: The East India Squadron and American Diplomacy in China* (Tuscaloosa, Ala., 1982).

Opium War.³¹ And the reach of this new information spread well beyond railroads—projects advocating canals, scientific expeditions, and other, more esoteric commercial, religious, or political schemes all used the promise of a new era of global commerce as their keystones.³²

Still, new information does not explain acceptance. Early in the twentieth century, historian Robert Cotterill concluded that this “fundamental idea”—that Asian trade would grow only with a railroad—“can only be described by the word absurd.”³³ And indeed, the pure business case for

³¹ [Breese Report], “The Committee on Public Lands, to whom were referred a memorial of sundry citizens of Indiana, praying construction of national railroad from the Mississippi to Columbia river, and the memorial of Asa Whitney, proposing to construct railroad from Lake Michigan to Pacific ocean, report,” S. Doc. 466, 29th Cong., 1st sess. (31 July 1846), 14-23 and 27-46. The committee was chaired by Illinois Democrat Sydney Breese.

³² Vevier surveys a few such, including Whitney’s, under the rubric of “geopolitics.” Charles Vevier, “American Continentalism: An Idea of Expansion, 1845-1910,” *American Historical Review* 65 (1 Jan. 1960): 323–35. One proposal of particular interest is Aaron H. Palmer’s “Plan for Opening, Extending, and Protecting American Commerce in the East,” which integrated railroads, canals, and sweeping diplomacy all into one plan designed to grant “this magnificent and mighty American empire republic” hegemony in Asia. While it attracted the attention of a few Northern Whig supporters in Congress, it does not appear to have gotten much further than a memorial to Congress. See: Aaron Haight Palmer, *Letter to the Hon. John M. Clayton, Secretary of State, Enclosing a Paper, Geographical, Political, and Commercial, on the Independent Oriental Nations; and Submitting a Plan for Opening, Extending, and Protecting American Commerce in the East, &c.: Respectfully Submitted to the President and Cabinet*, Revised, and now republished with an appendix (Washington, D.C., 1849).

³³ Cotterill continues:

This trade was not then nor was it ever to be of such proportions as the enthusiasts imagined. Railroads built with it as chief objective must inevitably have gone into the hands of receivers. The other plan—that of supporting the railroad on the trade of the people who were to settle along the right of way—does more credit to the heart than to any other organ of the promoters. In fact the whole body of the commercial calculations of the promoters of this period would be overvalued if termed elementary. As we read their trade calculations it is difficult for us to believe that Whitney and Maury could have been the cool-headed successful businessmen we know they were. Nor did they show themselves a whit more practical in their plans for constructing the roads. They underestimated the costs and even dealt in figures far above the reach of the business world of their day. It is nothing short of inspiring to read how easily these men talked of millions to communities that would have been hard put to it to raise hundreds.

Cotterill, “Early Agitation for a Pacific Railroad 1845-1850,” *Mississippi Valley Historical Review* 5 (1 March 1919): 414–15.

antebellum transcontinental railroad projects was flawed in its most basic premises; establishing a new route across North America did not, in point of fact, re-route global trade from the high seas, nor did it usher in an age of American global hegemony.³⁴

A different framework is therefore needed to understand the appeal of a transcontinental railroad. For all its careful accounting and weighty statistics, Whitney's plan for a road to the Pacific can perhaps be best understood as an attempt to solve problems in American politics through the realignment of the global economy. Seen in this light, his plan accords with how Asian trade had been used in the early republic's politics since before the end of the Revolution: as a component of American political economy, which operated on nothing less than a global scale.

A detour into the intellectual biography of Senator Thomas Hart Benton, one of Whitney's chief opponents in Congress, gives us some insight into the longer history of Whitney's ideas.³⁵ In 1848, as he was

Richard White's recent work expresses a similar incredulity with regard to the discrepancy between projectors' talk and the underlying economic realities, but, unlike many other writers on the subject, he attributes it to intentional dishonesty and endemic corruption. Though his analysis is convincing for this later period, I think its logic does not quite apply here, not least because the roads Whitney and others proposed were never built. See Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York, 2011), xxi–xxxiv.

³⁴ Though the grand profits predicted in these proposals never materialized, a recent econometric analysis of the early stages of the first true transcontinental railroad—Theodore Judah's proposals for what became the Central Pacific Railroad—has found that enough demand did exist for local traffic to justify the construction of the road, even ahead of settlement in Western territories; however, this demand was not sufficient to justify the outsized government subsidies granted by the Pacific Railroad Act. See Xavier H. Duran, "Was the First Transcontinental Railroad Expected to Be Profitable? Evidence from Entrepreneurs' Declared Expectations, an Empirical Entry Decision Model, and Ex-post Information" (Ph.D. diss., London School of Economics, 2010); Xavier H. Duran, "A Model of Formation of Profit Expectations of Theodore Judah and the Expected Private Profitability of the First Transcontinental Railroad" (unpub. working paper, 10 April 2010).

³⁵ Because Benton's ideas, and their connections to both Whitney and Jefferson, are the subject of a limited but persuasive and distinguished historiographical tradition, it is necessary to delineate where this chapter attempts to carve out new territory from what has come before. In contrast to the mid-twentieth-century work of the diplomatic historian Norman Graebner, I do not see these plans as primarily rooted in long-standing commercial realities; if maritime interests drove westward expansion, as Graebner argues, then it stands to reason that actors deeply engaged in precisely these maritime affairs—the merchants engaged in the China trade—should have been counted among the supporters of plans like Whitney's; but they were, by and large, absent from these debates. (To a limited extent, they preferred plans for a railroad or canal across Central America.) The enthusiasm for such schemes in journals like *Hunt's* or *DeBow's*

threatening to filibuster a bill granting Whitney the land needed for his plan, Benton reminded his colleagues that he had “studied the history of California long before Mr. Whitney thought of it” and therefore knew the

are a better proxy for what the business community, broadly speaking, *hoped* would be true; but these publications’ support should not be read as an indication of what ventures the capitalists who knew this area best were willing to risk their capital upon (in the form either of dollars or of political influence). Likewise, visions of having access to the Pacific were a component of “manifest destiny,” but the role of ideas about Americans’ capture of Asian commerce were simultaneously bigger and more solid than that, having been a consistent part of republican notions of global political economy since the Revolution, at least.

In contrast to historians like Van Alstyne or, more recently, Weeks, I see little evidence that a consistent conception of “American empire” ran from the nation’s founding to the era manifest destiny, and beyond—or even through the arc of one politician’s career. While I agree with these scholars that imperialism was a core component of American nationalism—and certainly “empire” was the term commonly used by contemporaries to describe the polity, in its present as well as its future—I do not see evidence that the category was a stable one, with a consistent track, either moving westward toward the Pacific coast or radiating outward to dominant the hemisphere. Rather, as the work of scholars like Peter J. Kastor has shown, American “imperialism” was in its key moments a contested and malleable concept—one whose aims were not always expansionary, but rather shifted in dialogue with new developments in global politics.

Smith is more nuanced in his treatment, but the mode by which his argument proceeds presents its own difficulties. By analyzing the attachment various American politicians and projectors bore to the “road to India” as a recurring cultural trope or literary theme, he neglects how these plans and proposals were matters of serious political calculation, as opposed to individual obsession (or delusion). This framework also leads him to treat all ideas about U.S. commerce with Asia as equally fantastic—or perhaps, better said, as equally fictional—thus eliding how the enthusiasm of Jefferson’s time for Asian trade was based on decades of solid returns from Canton-bound voyages, and not just pure ideology.

See: Henry Nash Smith, *Virgin Land: The American West as Symbol and Myth* (Cambridge, Mass., 1950); Norman A. Graebner, *Empire on the Pacific: A Study in American Continental Expansion* (New York, 1955); Richard Warner Van Alstyne, *The Rising American Empire* (New York, 1960); William Earl Weeks, “American Nationalism, American Imperialism: An Interpretation of United States Political Economy, 1789-1861,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 14 (Winter 1994): 485–95; William Earl Weeks, *John Quincy Adams and American Global Empire* (Lexington, Ky., 1992); William Earl Weeks, *Building the Continental Empire: American Expansion from the Revolution to the Civil War* (Chicago, 1996); Peter J. Kastor, “‘What Are the Advantages of the Acquisition?’ Inventing Expansion in the Early American Republic,” *American Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (2008): 1003–35. For a thorough, if ultimately descriptive, account of Americans’ politicized interest in “communication” with the Pacific slope, see Robert Russel’s classic work, *Improvement of Communication with the Pacific Coast as an Issue in American Politics, 1783-1864* (Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 1948).

United States should “not go blindfold, haphazard, into such a scheme.”³⁶ Though prone to legislative tantrums, in this Benton was sincere. Indeed his entire career was rooted in a vision of American empire powered by Asian commerce—a plan he had first sketched out in a series of editorial essays in the *St. Louis Enquirer* during the fall of 1819, almost thirty years earlier.³⁷ Writing as the future of Missouri’s statehood and the expansion of slavery were being debated, Benton’s essays advanced a complex development program that had as its core an overland route he called the “American road to India.” A series of simple roads and improved waterways linking the Mississippi river valley to the Columbia’s outlet on the Pacific, Benton’s route, he believed, clinched the case for Missouri’s

³⁶ “Railroad to the Pacific,” *Cong. Globe*, 30th Cong., 1st Sess. (29 July 1848), 1011. Whitney responded to Benton’s accusations in print a few months later: Asa Whitney, “The Proposed Railroad to the Pacific [Reply to Senator Benton],” *Hunt’s Merchants’ Magazine and Commercial Review* 19, no. 5 (Nov. 1848): 527–31. For Benton’s own railroad plans, see: Thomas Hart Benton, “Highway to the Pacific,” Senate, *Cong. Globe* (16 Dec. 1850), 56-58, and Thomas Hart Benton, *Discourse of Mr. Benton, of Missouri: Before the Boston Mercantile Library Association, on the Physical Geography of the Country Between the States of Missouri and California, with a View to Show Its Adaptation to Settlement, and to the Construction of a Railroad. Delivered in the Tremont Temple, at Boston . . . December 20, 1854* (Washington, D.C., 1854).

³⁷ The fourteen-part series of editorial essays by Thomas Hart Benton that originally appeared in the *St. Louis Enquirer* under the heading “Commerce with Asia” in the fall of 1819 were subsequently republished in 1844 as part of a campaign pamphlet published by the St. Louis County delegates to the state Democratic convention. For the essays in their original form, see: “Commerce with Asia,” *St. Louis Enquirer*, 25, 29 Sept., 2, 6, 13, 27 Oct., 3, 17 Nov. 1819. These dates for the *St. Louis Enquirer* are available in two databases as of November 1, 2010: 19th Century Newspapers (InfoTrac), Gale Databases, and America’s Historical Newspapers (Readex), NewsBank, Inc. For the republished versions, see: Thomas Hart Benton, *Selections of Editorial Articles from the St. Louis Enquirer on the Subject of Oregon and Texas, as Originally Published in That Paper in the Years 1818-1819; and Written by the Hon. Thomas H. Benton, to Which Is Annexed, His Speech in the Senate of the United States, in March, 1825, on the Bill for the Occupation of the Columbia River* (St. Louis, Mo., 1844). (The pamphlet is rare, but available on microfilm: Yale Collection of Western Americana and Newberry Library, *Western Americana: Frontier History of the Trans-Mississippi West, 1550-1900*, 617 (reels) vols. (New Haven, 1977), reel 50, no. 475. Neither source is complete: we do not have the original *St. Louis Enquirer* issues for essays VIII, IX, X or XI, and *Selections* lacks essays XII and XIII. For the sections that appear in both, the text appears to be the same, except section XIV, which is truncated in *Selections*. Other scholars who have discussed these essays have generally cited from the 1844 version, which appeared in *Selections*; here I have cited from the original *St. Louis Enquirer* columns whenever possible, and the republished *Selections* versions only as necessary, as scans of the newspaper originals are now more readily accessible—through online databases—than the microfilm.

admission into the Union on its own terms—because Missouri, and the river that flowed through it, were crucial components of his plan to capture Asian trade for the benefit of the United States.³⁸

Benton's editorials were conceived and articulated in the context of a resurgence in expansionist Western boosterism. It was, in 1819, in its early stages, hitting its full stride only in the spread-eagle nationalism of the Polk years, when Whitney's appeal first reached the public. But when Benton was writing, promoters of the West were still waging a public relations battle. As Peter Kastor has noted, reactions to the Louisiana Purchase, the last great moment of expansion, had been notably ambivalent. Though as individuals Americans had voted with their feet, moving West to exploit the opportunities provided by the additional territory, "boosterish celebration" in print culture and among policy-makers was absent.³⁹ Published descriptions of the Far West—of which, in 1819, the Missouri Territory was still conceptually a part—emphasized the region's sterility and the threats posed by rival native and European powers.⁴⁰ This unromantic portrayal, rooted in the travel narratives produced by explorers like Zebulon Pike and Lewis and Clark, had purchase even among Benton's readers. Missourians viewed the region to their west as a "desert," which had led some of them to petition Washington for borders hugging the river valley instead of incorporating

³⁸ In other respects, his plan closely resembled Whitney's later proposal. For details on Benton's proposed route, see: "Commerce with Asia," *St. Louis Enquirer*, 6 Oct. 1819; Benton, *Selections*, 25.

Here, and in most of Benton's other writings, the word "India" functions as a metonym for "Asia" (as in, the "East Indies"), and in particular, East Asia. Benton's usage, like that of other Westerners, lagged behind that of Americans who lived in areas more directly exposed to the contemporary Asian trade (that is, cities on the Eastern seaboard); he still used the term in a manner reminiscent of the older sources (ranging from the Bible to the Jesuits to Abbé Raynal), which he was fond of citing.

³⁹ Kastor, "'What Are the Advantages of the Acquisition?'" 1005.

⁴⁰ To cite just one example: John Melish's 1816 map of the United States labeled *all* of the territory from the Mississippi to the Pacific that was leftover from the Louisiana Purchase (after Louisiana's admission to the union in 1812), simply "Missouri Territory." His map may have also contributed to Benton's topographical optimism—it featured a river running from the Great Basin of the Rockies to San Francisco Bay, helpfully labeled "*Supposed course of a river between the Buenaventura and the Bay of Francisco which will probably be the communication from the Arkansaw to the Pacific Ocean.*" John Melish, "Map of the United States of America: With the Contiguous British and Spanish Possessions" (Philadelphia, 1816), Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress; Richard V. Francaviglia and Jimmy L. Bryan, "'Are We Chimerical in This Opinion?' Visions of a Pacific Railroad and Westward Expansion before 1845," *Pacific Historical Review* 71 (May 2002): 189–90.

territory to the west.⁴¹ In response to this rhetoric, Benton moved to recast his would-be state—and his region—as the center of a commercial empire, reimagining the Western territories as a geopolitical boon to the United States, rather than as a cause for concern.

What is particularly striking about Benton's proposed system was that he looked to Asian trade as a solution for the problem of integrating new territory into the Union just as politicians in the settled Eastern states were turning against Asian commerce as a tool of state. This was a recent change. The Founding generation had thought of Americans' success in Asian trade as a source of power, a lever by which to extricate themselves from the mercantilist and monarchist Atlantic world. The first post-Constitution congresses had granted American merchants special tariff protections in order to promote the trade, and the Washington, Adams, and Jefferson administrations worked to protect the neutral status of American commerce with Asia—and it boomed as a result. However, the post-1812 generation of political leaders turned against the commerce, as the war's experience had increasingly proved that American shipping in Asia was just as susceptible to European interference—and thus, foreign entanglement—as other branches of overseas trade.⁴²

⁴¹ John D. Morton, " 'This Magnificent New World': Thomas Hart Benton's Westward Vision Reconsidered," *Missouri Historical Review* 90 (April 1996): 288.

⁴² On early enthusiasm for American trade with Asia, see Philip Chadwick Foster Smith, *The Empress of China* (Philadelphia, 1984); James R. Fichter, "So Great a Proffit": *How the East Indies Trade Transformed Anglo-American Capitalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 2010), passim. The tariff protections given to American trade with China granted American merchants an effective monopoly on importing Asian goods into the United States, and additional regulations about warehousing and re-exportation facilitated outgoing shipping of Asian goods for other markets, especially continental Europe. See: 1 Stat 24, Chapter 2, 1 Congress, Session 1, "An Act: For laying a duty on goods, wares, and merchandises imported into the United States" (4 July 1789); 1 Stat. 27, Chapter 3, 1 Congress, Session 1, "An Act: Imposing duties on tonnage" (20 July 1789); 1 Stat 29, Chapter 5, 1 Congress, Session 1, "An Act: To regulate the collection of the duties imposed by law on the tonnage of ships or vessels, and on goods, wares, and merchandise" (31 July 1789).

Mathew Carey's influential writings on political economy are a representative example of the postwar turn against Asian trade. He believed that the early congressional support for Asian trade furnished "no instance of grosser or more revolting partiality." See Mathew Carey, *The New Olive Branch, or, An Attempt to Establish an Identity of Interest Between Agriculture, Manufactures, and Commerce and to Prove, That a Large Portion of the Manufacturing Industry of This Nation Has Been Sacrificed to Commerce, and That Commerce Has Suffered by This Policy Nearly as Much as Manufactures* (Philadelphia, 1820), 213–15, and passim; Mathew Carey and the Society for the Promotion of National Industry Philadelphia, *Addresses of the Philadelphia Society for the Promotion of National Industry* (Philadelphia, 1819).

Benton bucked this second-generation trend, by reimagining—and re-routing—Americans’ Asian trade so as to make it compatible with the new turn in domestic political economy. In essence, Benton’s plan, like Whitney’s later, took the internally focused sectional economic integration imagined by Henry Clay’s “American system” and expanded it outward to include the entire world, thereby resolving the tension between rival ideological visions for the republican experiment. With Asian commerce secured by rerouting, the nation could simultaneously be agrarian and commercial, extensive and developed, globally dominant and peaceful.⁴³

Conclusions

The deep resonances of Whitney’s plan illustrate the long-standing global scope of American ideas about commerce, nation, and empire. The impact of this idealization of Asian commerce was quite real in terms of policy, even if its results were different than projectors sometimes hoped. The global vision men like Benton and Whitney articulated, one that was

The fact that prominent American merchants engaged in the overseas Asian trade had worked to undermine both Jefferson’s embargo and Madison’s defensive efforts during the War of 1812 had not helped the trade’s reputation, either. Though smuggling and state-level efforts to deny the national government troops and funds did significant damage, these antiwar efforts were perhaps most efficacious, politically, as symbolic gestures: one of the commissioners sent by Massachusetts Federalists to deliver the Hartford Convention’s demands was Boston’s most prominent China trader, Thomas H. Perkins. For details on Perkins’s trip to Washington in 1815, see Carl Seaburg and Stanley Paterson, *Merchant Prince of Boston: Colonel T. H. Perkins, 1764-1854* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), 255–60.

⁴³ From this perspective, Benton was a “Jackson Man with Feet of Clay” twice over—once in the way Charles Sellers suggested that other early Jackson supporters had been (shifting his alliances away from Clay as Jackson became a viable party leader), but again, and in a more lasting sense, by modeling the system that guided his geopolitics on that which Clay championed. Charles Grier Sellers, “Jackson Men with Feet of Clay,” *American Historical Review* 62 (April 1957): 537–51. The rival visions for development have been usefully described as mapping on to different poles of the partisan conflict (Federalist/Jeffersonian, Whig/Democrat). However, the widespread support enjoyed by transcontinental schemes like Benton’s or Whitney’s blur these lines; it may make more sense to separate partisans on the basis of the type of political unit they wanted the United States to be (for example, Hendrickson’s division between “union,” “nation,” and “empire”). In that case, projectors like Whitney and Benton would best be described as agitators for “empire” who wanted to avoid any threats to “union.” See Major L. Wilson, “The Concept of Time and the Political Dialogue in the United States, 1828-48,” *American Quarterly* 19 (Winter 1967): 619–44; Drew R. McCoy, *The Elusive Republic: Political Economy in Jeffersonian America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980); David C. Hendrickson, *Union, Nation, or Empire: The American Debate over International Relations, 1789-1941* (Lawrence, Kansas, 2009).

premised on the actual as well as the hoped-for value of American trade with Asia, had a serious impact on politics, both domestic and international, touching on relations with native Americans, the annexation of Texas and Oregon, the war with Mexico, and increased tensions with Britain, as well as, of course, railroad construction. These ideas continued forward beyond Whitney's time, finding purchase in William H. Seward's Pacific policies of the 1860s, and even decades later in the consuming anxiety over finding new markets for industrial overproduction, the problem that preoccupied policymakers at the end of the nineteenth century. In this way, Whitney's vision for manifesting "manifest destiny" continued a tradition of looking to Asian trade for geopolitical advantage—and contributed to the outlines of the post-transcontinental American empire in the Philippine archipelago and beyond. Whitney's case for a "Pacific highway" in other words, began further back in time than 1845, and further east than Lake Michigan—and led, in unexpected ways, to the "China Market."⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Thomas J. McCormick, *China Market: America's Quest for Informal Empire, 1893-1901* (Chicago, 1967).