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Other Antebellum U.S. Government Pacific Exploring Efforts

The U.S. Exploring Expedition’s accomplishments and legacy extended beyond its scientific contributions, political bickering, and the interpersonal turmoil that represent intrinsic characteristics of its historical record. Thanks to this journey, Americans began to examine seriously possible roles that the Pacific Ocean region and its peoples, might play in the U.S.’ economic, political, and strategic development. U.S. Government policymakers and employees would soon be at the forefront of such efforts.

One area of particular relevance to American shipping interests and U.S. policymakers was the time and expense required to reach the Pacific due to the need to journey around Cape Horn at the southern tip of South America. The desire to reduce the time and cost of reaching the Pacific caused many to consider the possibility of a canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. While the Exploring Expedition was underway in 1839, a congressional report explicitly advocated construction of such a canal. Recognizing the increasingly important role access to the Pacific would play in national economic development, this report asserted:

The saving of above *twelve thousand miles* in the circumnavigation of South America by Cape Horn, and avoiding these delays and dangers of doubling that cape, at all seasons of the year; would be the first general effect; which would be a reduction of *distance, time, expense, and risk, far exceeding what the globe admits of being effected anywhere else* (*House Report 322, 25th Cong., 3rd Sess., (1839), p. 109*).

This prescient document went on to argue that the presence of a canal would reduce the amount of time required for American ships going to South Pacific whaling grounds from the east coast from more than four months to one month and that this would produce savings on ship insurance costs, vessel wear and tear, and navigational costs (*House Report 322, 25th Cong., 3rd Sess., 1839, p. 111*). Although more than six decades passed before completion of the Panama Canal, the advocacy of such a structure at

this date is a compelling demonstration of how important efficient access to the Pacific Ocean was becoming for U.S. policymakers.

The Exploring Expedition was not the only example of antebellum U.S. Government support for Pacific exploration. Another naval expedition under the initial leadership of Exploring Expedition participant Cadwalader Ringgold, left the U.S. in 1853. Although it did some charting in the Coral Sea of the Australian coast, the expedition's primary area of coverage was the North Pacific including the Sakhalin Islands, eastern Russia, and the Aleutian Islands, where it gathered significant quantities of scientific material (*American National Biography*, 1999, 18:525-26; *Senate Executive Document 1*, 34th Cong., 1st Sess., (1855), pp. 7-9; *Senate Executive Document 1*, 36th Cong., 2nd Sess., (1860), pp. 44-48; Goetzmann, 1986, pp. 349-56; Cole(a) 1947; Cole(b) 1947, p. 62; McDougall, 1993). Advances in nautical charting and hydrography made by these exploring expeditions also stem from the contributions of naval oceanographer Matthew Fontaine Maury (1806-1873). Maury served as the head of the Navy Department's Depot of Charts and Instruments and Naval Observatory while writing works such as *Abstract Log for the Use of American Navigators* and *The Physical Geography Sea* which exerted significant influence over antebellum American oceanographic activities (*American National Biography*, 1999, 14:743-44, Williams, 1963).

Another major antebellum governmental exploring expedition was lead by Commodore Matthew Perry (1794-1858) (*American National Biography*, 1999, 17:367-69). This expedition opened Japan to U.S. economic and political interests and began a fateful and tumultuous relationship between these two countries that would be felt throughout the Pacific. It would also produce an important collection of government publications that would shape U.S. perceptions of Japan (*House Executive Document 97*, 33rd Cong., 2nd Sess., (1856); Wiley and Ichiro, 1991).

These expeditions, the materials gathered from them, and the reports generated by them increased the United States' interest in playing an expanded economic and strategic role in the Pacific. This desire for an expanded American presence in the Pacific is visibly demonstrated by the following proclamation in the 1856 annual report of the Secretary of the Navy: "It is my opinion that the interests of our country would be promoted, and could be much better protected, by having two Pacific squadrons instead of one, as at present; and I recommend that, as soon a sufficient number of vessels can be assembled in that ocean, this additional squadron be established" (*House Executive Document 1*, 34th Cong., 3rd Sess., (1856), p.

408; Morrison, 1961, pp. 5-56; Schroeder, 1985, pp. 57-78; Long, 1988, pp. 286-307).

The impending winds of civil war would delay but not end this desire for an expanded U.S. military presence in the Pacific Ocean. Following the Civil War, the United States and European colonial powers would become increasingly interested in the South Pacific with the Samoan islands being a source of acute international interest and tension (Kennedy, 1974). Despite being a late entrant to international colonial power politics, the U.S. succeeded in gaining a South Pacific territorial presence with its 1900 acquisition of Samoan territory, which would become and remains American Samoa (U.S. Department of the Interior, 1999, p. 10).