

## Introduction

The American Cemetery on Cuba's Isle of Youth is a largely forgotten place. No sign, no marker, no memorial identifies the site holding the remains of some 200 U.S. citizens who lived on what was once called the Isle of Pines.<sup>1</sup> The cemetery lies in a pastoral area nearly eight miles from Nueva Gerona, the Isle's largest town. A bus line runs past it, but little else. Time and nature have eroded one of the few relics of the sixty-year U.S. presence. Although the cemetery is maintained by the Isle's municipal government, many of the headstones are chipped, cracked, or faded. Animal droppings dot the landscape. Most of the wooden fence posts that mark the boundary between the cemetery and the road have rotted away.

The cemetery's sad twenty-first-century condition contrasts starkly with how it once appeared and the attention locals gave it. Founded in 1907, the cemetery was located in the town of Columbia, the first settlement created by U.S. citizens who moved to the Isle after the War of 1898. For decades, private American clubs financed and landscaped the cemetery. It was a point of pride to U.S. settlers because it marked the final resting place for the pioneers who had created an American community there. An English-language newspaper on the Isle in 1932 boasted, "This has become one of the most perfectly kept cemeteries to be found

<sup>1</sup> Fidel Castro changed the island's name in 1978. One writer, citing the work of Cuban historian Juan Colina la Rosa, states that 280 Americans are buried at the cemetery. Luis Sexto, "El Cementerio de los Americanos," <http://luisexto.blogia.com/2006/080101-el-cementerio-de-los-americanos.php> (accessed May 1, 2016). That number could not be confirmed. My own count in April 2010 found nearly 175 headstones. For a video of the cemetery as it appeared in 2008, see <http://youtu.be/p3WGeUOoGMA> (accessed May 1, 2016).



FIGURE 1.1. The American Cemetery on the Isle of Youth as it appeared in 2010. Created in 1907, it holds the remains of some 200 U.S. citizens who lived on the Isle.

Source: Author's photo.

anywhere and holds the remains of many others who came here to find fortunes and, most of them, found the greater riches of contentment and peace in this fairest land of perpetual springtime.”<sup>2</sup>

The newspaper's claim notwithstanding, many of the early settlers found neither wealth nor leisure. Clearing, planting, and building were more taxing and more expensive than they had anticipated. Most businesses failed. Natural disasters wreaked havoc on their properties. In short, living as pioneers was a more difficult proposition than they had expected. Settlers who remained for more than a few years often struggled to make ends meet. Most returned to the United States disillusioned. Those who stayed for the long term, however, developed a deep affinity for the Isle, its people, and its customs. In contrast to the self-isolation and annexationist aims of turn-of-the-century settlers, Americans at mid-century demonstrated a greater willingness to engage socially and commercially with their island neighbors. The onset of the Cuban Revolution,

<sup>2</sup> “Ira Asa Brown,” *Isle of Pines Post*, April 25, 1932.

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though, changed that dynamic. The American Cemetery, then, stands as an enduring reminder of settlers' hopeful expectations of social and financial prosperity, and its abandonment fittingly embodies a forgotten chapter in the history of U.S. expansion and U.S.–Cuban relations.

Geographically, Cuba is more than just one island. While the main body encompasses most of the country, Cuba is also comprised of archipelagos and keys. The largest of these other islands is the presently named Isle of Youth (Isla de la Juventud) located about forty miles off mainland Cuba's southwest coast. At 934 square miles, it is roughly three-fourths the size of Rhode Island. Most of the population clusters on the northern half of the island, where the land is low, flat, and dry. The Lanier Swamp runs like a belt around the Isle's midsection and virtually divides it. South of the swamp, the lower portion of the island is dense forest that is a national park accessible only by special permit with a licensed guide. Surrounding the north, east, and west of the Isle, the Gulf of Batabanó is only ten to fifteen feet deep in some stretches. To the south, however, the Isle sits on a shelf that leads out to deep water popular among divers.

Throughout most of its history, the Isle of Pines was sparsely populated. Little is known about its pre-Columbian inhabitants. One scholar surmised that the native population never reached more than 200.<sup>3</sup> Christopher Columbus is widely credited as the first European to set foot on the Isle of Pines, arriving in June 1494 during his second westward voyage. Spain's attempts to populate the Isle thereafter went through fits and starts. A late sixteenth-century Spanish settlement was reportedly wiped out by Sir Francis Drake in 1596 and for decades thereafter colonization stalled. Most of the land later was divided into seven *haciendas* (large estates) owned by descendants of a Spanish noble who had received a royal title to the Isle in 1630.<sup>4</sup> Succeeding generations further subdivided title to property so that by the late eighteenth century, an estimated twenty estates dominated the Isle.<sup>5</sup> Aside from cattle raising and farm production for local consumption, little industry or export activity took place.

The Spanish crown renewed efforts to organize the Isle more formally in 1830, when it founded the Reina Amalia colony while establishing a

<sup>3</sup> Morton D. Winsberg, "The Isle of Pines, Cuba: A Geographic Interpretation" (PhD diss., University of Florida, 1958), 35.

<sup>4</sup> Irene A. Wright, *Isle of Pines* (Beverly, MA: Beverly Printing Company, 1910), 20–2.

<sup>5</sup> Irene A. Wright, *The Gem of the Caribbean* (Nueva Gerona: Isle of Pines Publicity Company, 1909), 16–18.

Cambridge University Press  
978-1-107-13685-4 — America's Forgotten Colony  
Michael E. Neagle  
Excerpt  
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FIGURE 1.2. Map of the Isle of Pines, Cuba, and Florida (provided by Cambridge University Press)

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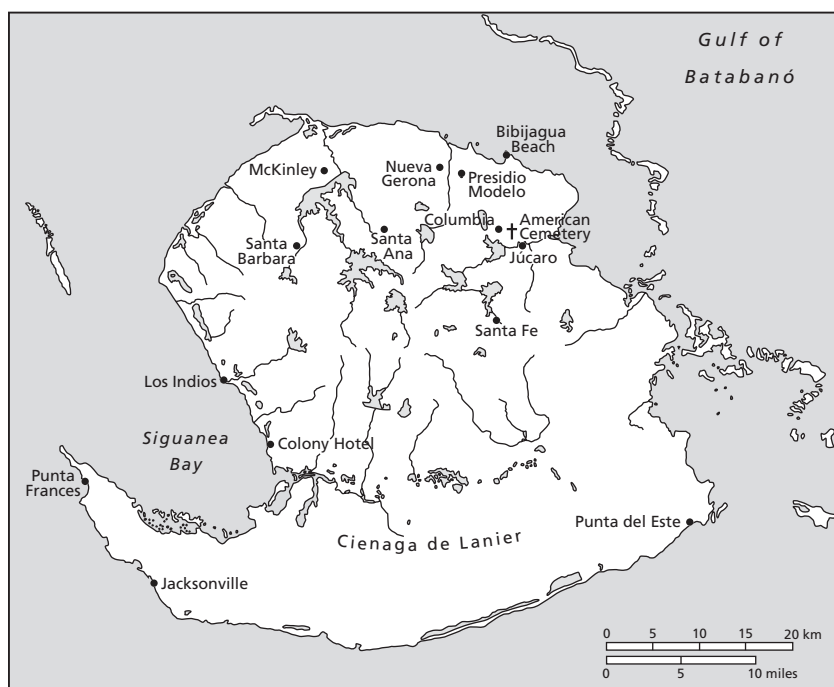


FIGURE 1.3. Map of the Isle of Pines (provided by Cambridge University Press).

garrison to protect Cuba's southern flank from pirates. That garrison, in turn, spurred the foundation of Nueva Gerona, which by the end of the century would become the Isle's largest town.<sup>6</sup> According to one author, the colony initially struggled because public lands were scarce, so the crown came to depend on *hacendados* (large landowners) to donate property for settlement. Few *hacendados* or settlers took up the offer, however, and the Isle's population remained in the hundreds a decade later.<sup>7</sup> As a result, the Spanish crown sent common criminals and political prisoners there. The move backfired as it created the popular perception that the island was nothing more than a penal colony and pirate lair, a reputation that would stifle Spanish efforts to transform it into a flourishing colony and tourist destination.<sup>8</sup> Journalist Irene A. Wright, who wrote two histories of the Isle, argued that this negative association

<sup>6</sup> Wright, *Gem of the Caribbean*, 23–4.

<sup>7</sup> Jane McManus, *Cuba's Island of Dreams: Voices from the Isle of Pines and Youth* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 3.

<sup>8</sup> Winsberg, "Isle of Pines, Cuba," 54–5.

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extended into the twentieth century with the view “that the people of the Isle of Pines are necessarily (by nature or by acclimation) a lawless and turbulent lot.”<sup>9</sup>

Although Cuba was ravaged by rebellions in the late nineteenth century – including the Ten Years' War (1868–78), *la Guerra Chiquita* (1879–80), and the War of Independence (1895–8) – the Isle of Pines remained largely unaffected. This isolation from mainland Cuba was also evident during the country's republican era (1902–58). For the most part, news from the Isle drew scant attention from the Havana press, save for instances in which U.S. settlers threatened annexation. Cuban writer Eduardo Lens, for example, titled his 1942 study of the Isle *La Isla Olvidada* – the forgotten island.<sup>10</sup> He was not the only writer to use the phrase. Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta in 1926 wrote a short travelogue about her trip from Havana and referred to her destination as both a “forgotten Isle” and a “sleeping beauty.”<sup>11</sup> Other scholars, including Waldo Medina and Antonio Núñez Jiménez, gave the Isle another sobriquet – the Siberia of Cuba.<sup>12</sup> The title not only suggested the Isle's physical and emotional detachment from the heart of Cuba, but also that it was a place of banishment. Moreover, Medina and Núñez Jiménez agreed that *pineros* (Isle natives) historically had been treated like second-class citizens within Cuba. Medina wrote that *pineros* generally felt overlooked and unappreciated by more cosmopolitan *habaneros*. He blamed this dynamic on Cuban politicians who ignored the Isle's common heritage with mainland Cuba.<sup>13</sup> Such attitudes help to explain the relative ease with which U.S. settlers entered the Isle during the early twentieth century.

### The Imperial Project

U.S. interest in the Isle began as the country was taking tentative steps toward becoming a global power. If Latin America was an “Empire's

<sup>9</sup> Wright, *Isle of Pines*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Eduardo F. Lens, *La Isla Olvidada: Estudio Físico, Económico y Humano de la Isla de Pinos* (La Habana: 1942).

<sup>11</sup> Ofelia Rodríguez Acosta, *Apuntes de Mi Viaje a Isla de Pinos* (La Habana: Montiel y Co., 1926), 30, 36.

<sup>12</sup> Waldo Medina, “Isla de Pinos en el XXII Aniversario de la Ratificación del Pacto Hay-Quesada,” *Aquí, Isla de Pinos* (La Habana, 1961), 35; Antonio Núñez Jiménez, *Autobiografía de Isla de Pinos* (La Habana: 1949), 18. Both writers credited José de la Luz y Caballero for coining the phrase in the mid-nineteenth century but suggested that the sentiment remained much the same among Cubans in the mid-twentieth century.

<sup>13</sup> Medina, “Amor y Dolor de la Isla,” *Aquí, Isla de Pinos*, 121.

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Workshop” for the United States, then Cuba was one of its key laboratories.<sup>14</sup> U.S. actions in Cuba foreshadowed other engagements in the region and the world throughout the twentieth century. Amidst the various U.S. occupations of Cuba (1899–1902, 1906–9, 1917–22), the United States landed troops elsewhere in the Caribbean basin, including Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua. These actions produced long-standing occupations that ushered in new leaders and systems of government subject to U.S. approval. The U.S. naval base at Cuba’s Guantánamo Bay – a location established after the Theodore Roosevelt administration rejected the Isle of Pines – also set a precedent. A century later, the United States would have hundreds of overseas bases around the world.<sup>15</sup> U.S. commercial expansion into Cuba, both as a market for American products and as a place from which to extract resources, set the stage for similar engagements elsewhere. Finally, the U.S. cultural incursion into Cuba, by way of goods, schools, technology, and other forms, presaged the penetration of U.S. styles and customs in virtually every corner of the globe.

The U.S. presence on the Isle of Pines illustrated these elements in microcosm. Historians in the United States and Cuba, however, have given this illuminating story short shrift. This book aims to rescue this overlooked story of American imperialism from obscurity to both elucidate and complicate our understandings of the United States and U.S.–Cuban relations during the early twentieth century.

U.S. hegemony – that is, the manipulation of a country’s politics and economy to the disproportional benefit of U.S. interests – was evident in three forms. First, settlers colonized the Isle with the aim of annexing it to the United States. The drive for landed expansion through purchase or conquest had been a hallmark of U.S. imperial growth during the nineteenth century. The U.S. engagement on the Isle of Pines shows that the quest for territory continued into the twentieth century. Although geo-strategic considerations and Cuban resistance prompted the Roosevelt administration to eschew annexation, the question would linger for nearly a quarter-century. Secretary of State John Hay and Cuban Foreign Minister Gonzalo de Quesada in 1904 signed a treaty that recognized

<sup>14</sup> Greg Grandin, *Empire’s Workshop: Latin America, the United States, and the Rise of the New Imperialism* (New York: Henry Holt, 2006). William Appleman Williams makes a similar argument about Cuba and U.S. imperialism. Williams, *The Tragedy of American Diplomacy*, New Edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1972), 1–13.

<sup>15</sup> Chalmers Johnson, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006), 137–70.

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Cuban sovereignty on the Isle. The U.S. Senate, however, did not ratify the agreement until 1925. During this diplomatic limbo – in which Cuba administered the Isle – private U.S. citizens purchased an estimated 90 percent of the island's arable land, founded a dozen towns, and developed a community of Americans perhaps 2,000 strong at its height in the 1910s.

The second form U.S. expansionism took was commercial. Over six decades, settlers and entrepreneurs commodified economic activity on the Isle. What had been an insulated, largely pastoral economy during the Spanish colonial era changed into an economy grounded in export-oriented capitalism. Settlers introduced citrus fruits and winter vegetables for sale in U.S. markets. Entrepreneurs presumed this activity would finance their livelihoods. Moreover, U.S.-based landholding companies depicted the Isle as an exotic tropical paradise to attract migrants, tourists, and land buyers. This activity was not wholly unwelcome by Cubans. Havana policymakers gave their tacit approval in the hopes that U.S. settlers and entrepreneurs would develop a place once generally ignored under Spain. Meanwhile on the Isle, *pineros* and other foreign nationals, particularly Jamaicans and Cayman Islanders, relied on U.S. business- and grove-owners for work.

Third, Americans on the Isle exerted a profound cultural influence throughout their sixty-year presence. Settlers at the turn of the century looked to Americanize the island, not necessarily to uplift their neighbors but rather to strengthen their case for annexation. As historian Brooke Blower has argued, the United States was not only rooted in physical geography, but also in the values, customs, and social institutions it projected abroad.<sup>16</sup> Examples of such American-ness evident on the Isle included promotion of export-oriented capitalism, proliferation of schools and social clubs, introduction of American goods, products, and technology, and widespread use of the English language and the U.S. dollar. Even after 1925, when the question of the Isle's sovereignty was resolved and most settlers returned to the United States, U.S. cultural influence persisted. The most notable example was the American Central School, a private institution that provided English-language instruction to children from grades one to twelve. While serving as a key space for mutual cooperation and sociability, the school was partly financed by the U.S. government and followed a U.S.-based curriculum taught by

<sup>16</sup> Brooke L. Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris: Transatlantic Politics and Culture between the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.



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American teachers and run by American administrators. This distinctly American flavor, moreover, was a key draw for students, a majority of whom were Cubans wanting to learn English.

Rather than a deliberate system imposed by Washington or by wealthy elites, this hegemony was more of a process that featured ebbs and flows of influence based on a variety of factors. Multiple actors such as politicians, businessmen, landowners, settlers, and laborers – all with their own interests and contingent authority – shaped the contours of the imperial relationship in ways that belie a static center-periphery dynamic. This complex arrangement was evident in how Cubans accommodated and frustrated Americans' designs. Policymakers in Havana, as well as elites and locals on the Isle, mostly supported the U.S. presence. Settlers' infusion of capital helped to grow the local economy, generating commercial interest in a place largely considered a backwater. This activity included the proliferation of stores, banks, transportation networks, and infrastructure. The U.S. presence created a market for real estate that had been virtually nonexistent, which benefited the *hacendados* who had dominated the Isle for generations. Many elites were only too happy to see Americans – and U.S. dollars – flood into the Isle. There were limits to this welcoming spirit, however. Class differences aside, *pineros* shared a resentment against settlers' quest for U.S. annexation, and occasionally they mobilized in public protest. Cubans also gathered to hold public celebrations when the U.S. Senate ratified the Hay-Quesada treaty, a spectacle that demonstrated *pineros'* Cuban nationalism. Nevertheless, Americans depended on *pineros* for the success of their pioneering enterprises. They needed *hacendados* to be willing to sell their land – and they did, often in large parcels. Settlers who initiated export-oriented commercial farming also relied on local labor to establish and maintain their groves. In short, Americans could not have maintained a presence on the Isle without locals' active participation. It is an important distinction that reveals the limits of U.S. hegemony.

Uncontrollable elements also hemmed the hegemonic project on the Isle: geography, soil conditions, dearth of deep harbors, market forces, and tropical storms. U.S. settlers could do little to control these variables, which forced them to adapt. Some intensified their lobbying of the U.S. and Cuban governments. Some pursued commercial alliances with locals. Some put more money into their ventures. Some gave up and returned to the United States. These contingencies help to demonstrate how U.S. power and influence adapted and ultimately eroded in the years well before the Cuban Revolution.

Nevertheless, the U.S. presence on the Isle endured, undergoing a remarkable shift over roughly six decades. The first generation of settlers, spurred by fears of a “closing” continental frontier, sought to Americanize the island in preparation for annexation and showed little affinity for local customs. Later generations, however, showed a much greater willingness to integrate socially and commercially with their Isle neighbors, among whom were Europeans, Asians, and West Indians. This changing attitude produced deeper intercultural exchanges as well as a détente between Americans and Cubans that contrasted with the growing anti-Americanism in mainland Cuba on the eve of the 1959 Cuban Revolution.

U.S. foreign relations scholarship in the early twenty-first century has tended to gravitate toward the transnational, examining trends and ideas that transcend the boundaries of the nation-state. I maintain that the nation-state is still an important area of study, particularly as a marker of identity. U.S. national identity – in addition to considerations of class, race, and gender – was critical to settlers’ self-perceptions, especially those of the first generation at the dawn of the twentieth century. Early settlers’ connection to the United States helped to set them apart from native Cubans and other foreign nationals. That is not to say those ideas were immutable. Indeed, by mid-century, U.S. citizens were socially engaging their Isle neighbors more often and some were even calling themselves “*pineros*.” Being a U.S. citizen was still an important marker, though, and no instances are on record of Americans renouncing their U.S. citizenship. But the long-term trend illustrates the fluidity of identity and the importance of nationality.

### The Sovereignty Question

The U.S. presence on the Isle of Pines can be divided into two periods. The first, from 1898 to 1925, I call the Hay-Quesada era after the treaty that formally recognized Cuban sovereignty yet remained unratified for more than twenty years. It constituted the period when Americans flocked to the Isle in the belief that they were colonizing a new territory for the United States. Sovereignty over the Isle remained an open diplomatic question stemming from Article VI of the Platt Amendment, which read: “That the Isle of Pines shall be omitted from the proposed constitutional boundaries of Cuba, the title thereto being left to future adjustment by treaty.” U.S. entrepreneurs widely interpreted this clause as proof that the U.S. government would eventually annex the Isle. After the