UNIVERSITY OF OKLAHOMA

GRADUATE COLLEGE

# HOMESTEADING VEGAS:
# PROMOTION, RACE, AND WATER IN THE EAST MOJAVE

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY

in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the

Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

By

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Norman, Oklahoma
2020

HOMESTEADING VEGAS:
PROMOTION, RACE, AND WATER IN THE EAST MOJAVE

A THESIS APPROVED FOR THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

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# Abstract

The East Mojave is a hot, dry place. As Americans moved into the desert during the early twentieth century, motivated by a national movement championing country life, promotional literature from railroads, and advertisements from individual boosters, they confronted an unforgiving environment ill-suited for agriculture. In early Las Vegas, Nevada, external promoters and local powerbrokers obscured the environmental realities of the budding desert railroad hub, contributing to the rapid deterioration of the local aquifer, and setting the stage for the eventual Boulder Dam project. In Lanfair Valley, California, African American homesteaders escaping the brutalities of the Jim Crow South and unrealized expectations for racial advancement in Los Angeles, found community and security in one of the early twentieth century's most ambitious, albeit never fully realized, farming communities. Informed by a Progressive Era belief in envirotechnical solutions to environmental problems, homesteading communities in the East Mojave demonstrate the pivotal role of outside capital and government intervention in the success of desert farming communities. As migrants arrived in the East Mojave, climatic conditions, not hard work or new technology, determined the limits of personal and community success.

# Acknowledgements

This project benefitted from the staff and resources of multiple archives. Laura Misajet, director of the Mojave Desert Heritage and Cultural Association (MDHCA), provided invaluable documents on the East Mojave. Dennis Casebier, founder of the MDHCA, shared crucial interviews with black homesteaders. The staff at the University of Nevada-Las Vegas' Special Collections aided my research on early Las Vegas. Crystal Van Dee, curator of the Cahlan Research Library, provided access to many of the pamphlets discussed in Chapter One. Ginny Kilander, at the American Heritage Center, assisted greatly in my research of dry farming. The outstanding staff at the National Archives assisted me in my hunt for homestead files.

My greatest intellectual debts are to individuals. Dr. Kathleen Brosnan at the University of Oklahoma deserves more appreciation than I could ever offer. In a year of unexpected challenges, Dr. Brosnan's light humor and keen editorial eye kept me on track. Drs. Anne Hyde and David Wrobel led seminars that were fundamental to this finished product and provided personal support when it was needed most. I must also thank Dr. Sara Gregg, from the University of Kansas, for seeing value in my project and for serving on my committee, Dr. Jennifer Holland for her guidance, and my graduate student colleagues at the University of Oklahoma, especially Louisa Brandt, Brendan Thomas, Joshua Mika, Alex Finkelstein, Taylor Cozzens, and John Truden, for serving as the backbone to my graduate education. Thanks also to Matthew Rogers, a climate scientist in a league of his own. Each of these individuals contributed to the successes of this project; its flaws and shortcomings remain mine alone.

This project needed its share of lucky breaks. I must thank anonymous donors from the University of Oklahoma for funding my trip to the 2019 Western History Association meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada. At WHA, I met a number of historians who helped shape this finished

product, including Sara Gregg, Frank Norris, Mikal Eckstrom, and Patricia Nelson Limerick. A second lucky break was connecting with Rebecca Austin, of Fort Lewis College. To Dr. Austin and Ginny Bengston, I owe many thanks for their contributions and sharing of archival materials. Educators from earlier in my life also deserve thanks: Nancy Allison, Jim Hardy, Scott Rhodewalt, Scott Clothier, Brandon Woods, and Steve Jennings all laid the groundwork for this project. At the University of Pittsburgh, Dr. Elspeth Martini served as chair of my undergraduate honor's thesis on desert homesteading, and I hope that this project makes up for the books I skimmed in her seminar on the American West.

My interest in the environmental history of the American West comes from my background in archaeology. I have been blessed in my life to work with some exceptional archaeologists. David Nichols, who first introduced me to the East Mojave's cultural resources, Linda Wheelbarger, John Williams, Jerry Lyon, Autumn Cool, Sarah Simeonoff, and Emily Abramowicz all contributed to this project by educating me, one pottery sherd, one flake, and one fire ring at a time. Kegan Roady and David Sabata deserve special recognition. Among friends and archaeologists, there are few with their integrity, aptitude, and willingness to do.

I am especially grateful to the friends who supported me from afar. Peter Herron, Eric Comeger, Dean Avgerinos, Marcus Bonner, Calynd Johnson, Jermaine Young Jr., Julian DeOliveira, Tessa Kuhn, and Samuel Finkelman all kept me moving forward. Geoff Goins, a ranger who embodies what makes the National Park Service "America's best idea," was a dear friend throughout this project. Without his and Kelly Ricks' hospitality, winter research trips would have been much colder. If we are all lucky, Geoff will lead the Park Service one day.

It is bittersweet thanking my family, as I am unable to share this project with all of those who should read it. I dedicate this thesis to my late father, Mark Lawrence Schoenkopf, who I

miss dearly. I was lucky that two good men filled his shoes: the late Donald “King” Kerry, who taught me that passion is the key to all success, and Wendell Evans, who has always been my best editor. I also must thank my mother for her continuing support and love. My late grandfather, Richard Schoenkopf, taught me the importance of family, perseverance, and education. Gretchen Schoenkopf, my sister, continues to inspire me with her own strength and brilliance. Desert adventures with my best friend and brother, Michael Kerry, got this project off the ground. I am eternally thankful for his love, support, and ability to drive for endless miles. My partner, Elizabeth Nagle, supported me through the last year of this project. Ella’s love is as powerful and timeless as the desert sun. I am deeply thankful to share this world with her.

A.W.S.

# Introduction

"Here there was grass, but no water."[1]

In June of 2014, I hopped into the passenger seat of a white National Park Service (NPS) truck and headed into the heart of the East Mojave Desert. NPS archaeologist Dave Nichols needed to look at private land holdings being turned over to Mojave National Preserve, the second largest and the least visited of the park units created by the California Desert Protection Act of 1994. Having only arrived in the East Mojave a few weeks before, I remained awestruck by the sweeping vistas, the eerie Joshua Trees, and the sweltering albeit dry desert heat. Dave, a self-proclaimed desert rat, lit a cigarette and took off, our truck's dust trail obscuring the Pinto Mountains in our rearview.

Dave and I followed the winding dirt roads until we entered a large, open valley that had noticeably less vegetation than the rest of the surrounding Joshua Tree forest. As we passed the OX Ranch, a successor to the Rock Springs Land and Cattle Company, I started to see posts in the sand; soon, I could make out what were once fence lines. After a few miles down a sandy road, Dave stopped the truck and stepped out, clipboard and GPS unit in hand. "Something should be here," he told me, as he looked around a seemingly cleared square of land in what I could only consider to be the middle of nowhere.

Relics soon brought the land to life. First, we found a midden of rusted car parts and purple glass, signaling that these artifacts appeared after the turn of the century, when cars first

[1] Francisco Tomás Hermenegildo Garcés, *On the Trail of a Spanish Pioneer: The Diary and Itinerary of Francisco Garcés (Missionary Priest) in His Travels through Sonora, Arizona, and California, 1775–1776*, trans. Elliot Coues, vol. 1 (New York: Francis P. Harper, 1900), 238. Historians and translators have pinpointed the location for this entry, dated 7 March 1776, to the area around Needles, California.

arrived in the desert, but before World War I, when America could no longer access the German magnesium that turned glass purple. We walked around for another ten or so minutes, searching for anything of historical value.[2]

As we scoured the landscape, I literally fell into this project. I was stuck. My leg had fallen through a thin piece of particle board, hidden by a layer of sand. With Dave's help, I freed my leg and lifted the wooden sheet. Underneath, we found a hand-dug cellar, no less than five feet deep, lined with cobbles. "It's how they kept their food," Dave informed me.

"Who?"

"The homesteaders. It's how they kept the animals and sun away."

Incredulous, I could not help but to ask, "why in hell would anybody farm out here?"

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In 1932, University of California-Berkeley anthropologist, archaeologist, and ethnographer Isabel T. Kelly packed her belongings into a new Ford and headed for the East Mojave. Kelly was bound for the historical homelands of the Southern Paiute and Chemehuevi peoples. She arrived, however, at a landscape already transformed—a landscape with the city of Las Vegas at its center. Kelly believed that the window for documentation was closing; she presumed that white culture was wiping out indigenous practices. She hoped to study how ethnic groupings connected to "the geographic and subsistence bases" that provided for their livelihood.[3]

[2] According to the Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act, historical artifacts are fifty years old or older.

[3] Catherine S. Fowler and Darla Garey-Sage, ed., *Isabel T. Kelly's Southern Paiute Ethnographic Field Notes, 1932–1934: Las Vegas* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2016), 2.

Kelly was partially correct. Humans were responsible for biological and ecological change in the East Mojave, just as they had been for hundreds of years before the settling of Las Vegas by Anglo-Americans near the end of the nineteenth century.[4] With the help of interpreters and indigenous consultants, Kelly grasped the changing nature of the East Mojave: people chased the water, and water gave them power.

The indigenous populations of the East Mojave organized their communities around water sources. Practicing minimally intensive irrigation at springs and along creeks, Southern Paiutes planted corns, beans, squash, and other indigenous crops to supplement their hunting and gathering practices. The Mohave people, a powerful group that provided Friar Garcés with food and accommodation on his trek across the Southwest in 1776, practiced irrigated agriculture around the Colorado River.[5] Chemehuevis, at first allies and later enemies of the Mohave, may have practiced limited agriculture and camped by springs.[6] Springs were the geographic centers

[4] For more on Kelly's group of native people, see Fowler and Garey-Sage, Isabel T. Kelly's Southern Paiute, 21. It is also necessary to note that this was an extractive process: as much as Kelly documented native subsistence and social practices, her contract also demanded that she collect anthropological samples such as baskets and pottery, and she often criticized the seemingly extortionist prices offered by the Southern Paiute.

[5] Garcés, *The Diary of Francisco Garcés*, 1:200–34; Eric Charles Nystrom, "From Neglected Space to Protected Place: An Administrative History of Mojave National Preserve" (Mojave National Preserve, March 2003), 12. For spelling variations of Mojave/Mohave, see Garcés, 226n34.

[6] Anthropologists continue to struggle to delineate between East Mojave groups, especially the highly mobile Chemehuevi. Elliot Coues, translator of Friar Francisco Garces's 1775–76 journal from his travels across the Californian deserts, describes the Chemebet and Chemeguagua (Chemeheuvi) as being "of Shoshonean stock…agriculturalists and… physically inferior to their Yuman (Mohave) neighbors." Coues asserts "their own name is Tantawats," signaling their southern location in relation to "that of the other Paiute tribes," in Garcés, *The Diary of Francisco Garcés*, 1:219–20. For more on the connections between Mohaves and Chemehuevi, see Ronald Dean Miller and Peggy Jean Miller, *The Chemehuevi Indians of Southern California* (Banning, CA: Malki Museum, 1967), 2–4. For more on the native peoples of southeastern California and southwestern Nevada, see R.F. Heizer and M.A. Whipple, *The California Indians: A Source Book*, (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1951); Elizabeth Warder Crozer Campbell, "An Archaeological Survey of the Twenty-Nine Palms Region," *Southwest Museum Papers*, no. 7 (1931);. Lorraine M Sherer, *Bitterness Road: The Mojave, 1604 to 1860*, ed. Sylvia Brakke Vane and Lowell John Bean (Menlo Park, CA: Ballena Press, 1994). For more on the Chemehuevi, see Carobeth Laird, "Chemehuevi Myth as Social Commentary," *Journal of California Anthropology* 4, no. 2 (Winter 1977): 191–5. And Carobeth Laird, "Chemehuevi Religious Beliefs and Practices," *Journal of California Anthropology* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1974): 19–25. For more on the problems confronted by Kelly, see Elizabeth Warder Crozer Campbell, "Archaeological Problems in the Southern California Deserts," *American Antiquity* 1, no. 4 (1936): 295–300.

of East Mojave indigenous life but also tools for establishing social hierarchies.[7] The entrance of whites into the East Mojave upset those hierarchies through the dispossession of springs from their earlier, indigenous users.

The rapid growth of Las Vegas worried Kelly, and, more importantly, endangered indigenous subsistence practices in the East Mojave. Well-armed whites took over the most significant springs of the Las Vegas Valley, *Kweɨntoiɨm* and *Wípɨ*, and renamed them Taylor Ranch and Kiel Ranch, respectively.[8] Sites that one Chemehuevi called "the most important agricultural centers near Vegas," retained their importance but for the subsistence of Anglo-Americans, not indigenes. *Wiɨya*, a key Chemehuevi spring and camp, eventually became the Clark Townsite, the first steps toward turning Las Vegas from a desert oasis to a desert metropolis.[9] Kelly studied the Southern Paiute during this transitional period.

By anticipating the replacement of an indigenous people by incoming white settlers, Isabel Kelly watched settler colonialism in action. In a traditional colonial system, colonizers exploit indigenous bodies to perform the laborious process of extracting from imperial hinterlands.[10] Compared to this traditional colonial structure, settler colonialism does not seek extraction of resources, but elimination of peoples, calling for the removal of indigenous peoples from a landscape. By removing or eliminating native peoples, settlers from the colonizing regime replace them and take up their lands. Elimination can mean physical extermination, assimilation, or the process of dehumanization. Additionally, settler colonialism does not only seek to

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[7] Although later Southern Paiute consultants refute her characterization of privately-owned springs, Kelly noted that springs were owned by individuals and passed down to subsequent generations. Fowler and Garey-Sage, *Isabel T. Kelly's Southern Paiute*, 29.

[8] Garey-Sage and Fowler, in their annotations of Kelly's notes, suggest that *Wípɨ* is Las Vegas Creek, the water source for the later steam engine refilling station.

[9] For ownership of the Las Vegas townsite, see Eugene P. Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt: Las Vegas, 1930–1970* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1989), 3; Stanley W. Paher, *Las Vegas: As It Began–As It Grew* (Las Vegas: Nevada Publications, 1971), 80–97.

[10] British India is an example of traditional colonial structures.

eliminate indigenous peoples, but to recreate the imperial metropole on the footprint of the eliminated indigenous population. Wolfe argues that settler colonialism is both destructive (negative) and generative (positive), as it destroys indigenous people in order to create a new settler nation on their ashes.[11] Settler colonialism has become an important lens of analysis for historians of the American West.[12]

Even as she herself served as an agent of such colonialism, Kelly's grief about whites closing off traditional spring use in the East Mojave unintentionally described settler colonialism. By engaging the myth of the vanishing Indian, Kelly played into a classic and misguided settler colonial trope.[13] The Southern Paiute, like other Native Americans across the West, were not vanishing, but adapting as they always had. Implicitly asking how the relationship between these people and their subsistence bases had changed, Kelly found answers in how arriving Anglo-Americans shifted power dynamics within the Las Vegas Valley.

Mormons and other Anglo-Americans, arriving with goals of agriculture, settlement, and profit, also transformed the East Mojave. As early as 1855, Mormon missionaries sent to convert the Southern Paiutes and to establish a permanent agricultural colony used superior armaments to capture key springs, including *Wiɨya,* in the Las Vegas Valley.[14] The Mormons abandoned their

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[11] Lorenzo Veracini, "Introducing Settler Colonial Studies," *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (February 2013): 1–12; Patrick Wolfe, "Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race," *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (June 2001): 866–905. Thanks to Brendan Thomas for clarity on settler colonialism.

[12] For examples of settler colonial studies, see Margaret Jacobs, *White Mother to a Dark Race: Settler Colonialism, Maternalism, and the Removal of Indigenous Children in the American West and Australian, 1880–1940* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2009); Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 7, 23; Benjamin Madley, *An American Genocide: The United States and California Indians Disaster* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

[13] For conflicting myths of the West, see Richard White, "Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill Cody," in *The Frontier in American Culture*, ed. James R. Grossman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 7–65 and Philip J. DeLoria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 2004), 21–50.

[14] Paher makes expert use of letters, memoirs, and other primary documents to outline the early settlers of the Las Vegas Valley, but his work is also imbued with racist assumptions, such as that "the natives relied on their natural inclination to steal instead of working as the church had taught." Paher, *Las Vegas: As It Began–As It Grew*, 27–31. For more recent coverage of Las Vegas, see Hal K. Rothman, *Playing the Odds: Las Vegas and the Modern West*, ed. Lincoln Bramwell (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007); Hal Rothman, *Neon Metropolis: How*

fort and their hopes of establishing a successful agricultural colony due to overly alkaline soil. Arriving in 1865, settler, trader and promoter Octavius Decatur Gass solidified the Anglo-American presence in the valley by establishing trade and social relations with the Southern Paiute.[15] By demonstrating his weaponry and a growing mastery of the Paiute language, Gass strengthened his control over the desert oasis, threatening native peoples with "swift and severe punishment" for perceived indiscretions.[16] Gass sold his ranch to the Stewart ranching family, who later sold it to William Clark, a U.S. senator from Montana. Clark, in turn, transformed the property into the Las Vegas townsite. The Union Pacific Railroad's decision to make Las Vegas a refilling station guaranteed the town's continuation. But why did Americans born outside of the region first believe that they could squeeze additional profit from this harsh desert landscape?

There were multiple reasons to trust in the economic blooming of the desert. National anxieties about the disappearance of the small farmer, promotional pamphlets meant to enrich promoters more than to successfully settle new arrivals, and an increasing belief in envirotechnical expertise informed the settling of the East Mojave, including the Las Vegas Valley. Dry farming pamphlets convinced settlers that they could succeed if only they had the mettle to prove it. The development of an envirotechnical faith, however, did not occur in a vacuum. National economic and infrastructural developments paved the way for the promise of dry farming.

Infrastructural expansion and economic downswings set the stage for Progressive Era agricultural solutions. The spread of the railroads, decades earlier, motivated western settlement.

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*Las Vegas Started the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Routledge, 2003); Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt: Las Vegas, 1930–1970*.

[15] For the many reasons the Mormons abandoned their mission, see Paher, *Las Vegas, As It Began–As It Grew*, 31. For more on Gass, see Ralph J. Roske and Michael S. Green, "Octavius Decatur Gass: Pah-Ute County Pioneer," *The Journal of Arizona History* 29, no. 4 (1988): 371–90.

[16] Paher, *Las Vegas: As It Began–As It Grew*, 41.

Funded by government bonds and enriched by federal land grants, the transcontinentals, in the words of historian Richard White, "annihilated time and space" by relating distance to abstractions such as time and cost, thus resituating the spatial politics of western settlement and making semi-arid homesteading an increasingly accessible and seemingly achievable way of making a living.[17] To maintain their revenue streams, the transcontinentals attempted to sell parcels of their land grants to prospective settlers.[18] Promotional materials from railroads and their agents prompted thousands to take up farms in the West. Their successes and failures exposed structural weaknesses within an economic system dependent on western agriculture.

While the extension of a national rail network brought the semi-arid lands of the West into reach, the Panic of 1893 created demand for agricultural solutions distinctive to the West's environmental conditions. Real or imagined fears of lessened agricultural yields prompted localized bank runs in the West. As fears of agricultural downturn spread, localized bank runs became regional and then national in character, projecting the failure of the small western farm across the national economy. Also accounting for commercial failures and the fight over bimetallism, economist B.R. Dupont discusses a theory of an economic "contagion" and argues that the greatest downswings in agricultural yields were in regional alignment with the highest rates of bank failures, suggesting that fears of farm failures was a more direct cause of the Panic than earlier studies have suggested.[19] As the national economy emerged from the Panic, economists and small farmers both refocused their attention on making western farms more predictably productive.

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[17] Richard White, *Railroaded: The Transcontinentals and the Making of Modern America* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2011), xxix. For more on spatial reordering, see 140–59, 328.
[18] For the connection between rail growth and the public domain, see White, *Railroaded*, 202–9.
[19] For more on the bimetallism debate, see Kathryn Morse, *The Nature of Gold: An Environmental History of the Klondike Gold Rush* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 19–29. For more on agriculture and the Panic of 1893, see Brandon R. Dupont, "Panic in the Plains: Agricultural Markets and the Panic of 1893," *Cliometrica* 3, no. 1 (January 2009): 27–54.

Agricultural problems were twofold at the dawn of the Progressive Era. On one hand, there was a concerted effort by the railroads to put more agricultural land into production, albeit to fill company coffers rather than for idealistic visions of extending yeomanry across the West. On the other hand, there was a well-founded understanding that failing western agriculture could undermine the national economy. Not only did western lands need to be settled, but they had to be productive and profitable. Progressive Era agricultural scientists found purpose at this nexus of demands for settlement and productivity.

Economic and ideological developments underwrote Progressive Era faith in farming the West. Although the Panic of 1893 loomed large in the public consciousness, economic conditions made arid-land farming a promising proposition at the turn of the century. In her study of dry farming efforts on the northern Great Plains, agricultural historian Mary Hargreaves points to the rapid recovery of the farm product market. The purchasing power of wheat, for example, nearly doubled between 1899 and 1909.[20] Within a decade of Frederick Jackson Turner's 1893 alarm about a dwindling public domain, some eighty-six million acres of federal land had been taken out of circulation for national parks and forest reserves.[21] The rising value of agricultural products paired with anxieties about the end of free farmlands caused rural property values to double between 1900 and 1910.[22] Less than a decade after failed farms ushered in the Panic of 1893, taking up a western homestead seemed like a promising economic venture. With the more recent Panic of 1907 signaling instability in non-physical capital, farms seemed like a

[20] The purchasing power metric finds a net-value of farm products compared to their cost of production. Mary W. M. Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains, 1900–1925* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 17.
[21] Barbara Allen, *Homesteading the High Desert* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1987), 125.; Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1893* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1894), 199–227.
[22] Allen, *Homesteading the High Desert*, 125.

safe bet.[23] A question lingers: even if a farm was a valuable thing, what made people believe they could succeed where others had failed?

In short, they thought that they knew better. A distinctively Progressive Era belief in envirotechnical solutions motivated settlers to claim homesteads. Engaging what environmental historian Sara Gregg refers to as "a massive project to rationalize the use of valuable resources in the West," western legislators jostled with one another to not only make the best use of lands still available for settlement, but to ensure that their respective states would most benefit from an influx of settlers.[24] Politicians placed the public domain at the center of campaigns, and environmental planner Richard Andrews argues "these 'public domain' lands were the single most important tool of government environmental and economic development policy."[25] To promote the farm was to promote national economic and social health.

Concerns about urbanization and industrialization also motivated people to take up homesteads. In response to a rural exodus and the rise of large, corporate farms, President Theodore Roosevelt formed the Country-Life Commission in 1908.[26] The commission's 1909 report summarized widespread anxiety about the fall of the yeoman farmer, professing "that farming represented a highly dignified and virtuous way of making a living," and that a rural

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[23] Allen, *Homesteading the High Desert*, 136. For late nineteenth-century writing about aridity in the American West, see Frank H. Spearman, "The Great American Desert," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 77, no. 458 (1888): 232–45. For a nineteenth-century consideration of how the railroads redefined the West, see William F. G. Shanks, "The Great American Desert.: Railway Mileage in the Desert States.," *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine (1886–1915); Philadelphia*, June 1892. For federal expansion into the Great American Desert see Erik Lee Altenbernd, "Great American Desert: Arid Lands, Federal Exploration, and the Construction of a Continental United States" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Irvine, 2016), 152–209. "The Great American Desert," originally used to describe the plains in the 1820s, was later used to describe the Far West, including the East Mojave.

[24] Sara M Gregg, "Imagining Opportunity: The 1909 Enlarged Homestead Act and the Promise of the Public Domain," *Western Historical Quarterly* 50, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 259.

[25] Richard N.L. Andrews, *Managing the Environment, Managing Ourselves: A History of American Environmental Policy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 71.

[26] Clayton S. Ellsworth, "Theodore Roosevelt's Country Life Commission," *Agricultural History* 34, no. 4 (1960): 155–172; "Report of the Country Life Commission," 60th Congress, 2d sess., Senate Doc. 705, Feb 9, 1909, Washington: GPO, 1909.

farming environment was "best suited to the raising of responsible and well-adjusted children." Liberty Hyde Bailey, the Country-Life movement's loudest voice, stressed that "most city people would find a better life in the country." Frank W. Mondell, the congressional representative from Wyoming and chairman of the House Committee on Public Lands, championed the commission's report.[27]

Frank Mondell argued for farm life's centrality to American progress. Speaking in Weston County, Wyoming in 1908, Mondell parroted the eventual findings of the Country-Life Commission, proclaiming, "the farm and farm home is the essential foundation of safe, sane and sound national life, moral, social, and industrial." Influenced by the legislative success of Francis Newlands, the lead irrigationist and namesake for the 1902 Reclamation Act, and fueled by his own ascension to the chair of the House Committee on Public Lands, Mondell lauded the "lessons of constant thoughtfulness and unflagging industry" taught by life on the farm.[28] National and local newspapers alike gave positive coverage to Mondell's efforts.[29] Native Americans, who lost considerable land during the allotment process under the Dawes Act, must have felt bitter about their expected replacement by a white yeomanry.[30] Nonetheless, Mondell

[27] Liberty H. Bailey, *The Country-Life Movement in the United States*, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1911); See Charles Robert Bard, "Settlement Patterns of the eastern Mojave Desert," (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1972), 42–8; Mondell himself took up a homestead, only to have his service as congressman prevent him from fully proving up. Mondell's own EHA claim was denied and withdrawn, see Richard A. Ballinger to Frank W. Mondell, 10 May 1907, Box 7, Frank W. Mondell Collection, American Heritage Center (hereafter FWM-AHC), University of Wyoming, Laramie.

[28] Frank W. Mondell, "The Farm Home and Its Influence on National Life," Speech, Boyd, WY, 15 August 1908, Scrapbook 7, Box 7, FWM-AHC.

[29] For positive news coverage on Mondell, see "Editorial Comments," *The Sheridan Enterprise*, 13 December 1908, Box 7, FWM-AHC; "A Notable Speech," *Newcastle News-Journal*, 22 November 1907, Box 7, FWM-AHC; "A Land Expert," *Rawlins Republican*, December 1906, Scrapbook 6, Box 7, FWM-AHC; "Stories About People," *Portland Oregonian*, June 1908, Scrapbook 7, Box 7, FWM-AHC. For Mondell promoting dry farming, see "Mondell on Dry Farming," *The Sheridan Enterprise*, 11 September 1908, Scrapbook 7, Box 7, FWM-AHC; Frank Mondell, "To Make the Desert Bloom," *Washington Post*, 24 February 1907, Scrapbook 6, Box 7, FWM-AHC.

[30] For more on the effects of the Dawes Act, see Donald J. Pisani, *Water, Land, and Law in the West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996), 164–79; Patricia Nelson Limerick, *The Legacy of Conquest* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1987), 196–8.

and his colleagues in the House passed a series of increased-acreage homestead laws, reflecting the perceived needs of further western settlement.

Mondell and other progressive reformers believed that land size, rather than land type, could guarantee success. As settlers moved past the 98th meridian, decreasing rainfall made farming an increasingly risky proposition that demanded government intervention.[31] In a speech calling for an enlarged homestead law, Mondell claimed, "there is not today under the flag a single 160 acres of land…that is worth one-tenth part what that homestead was in Iowa." [32] Managing a public domain with poor prospects for agriculture, Mondell insisted that an enlarged homestead would increase settlers' ability to diversify their rural activities. Another speech delivered in 1908 solicited for "a 320 acre dry farm homestead…[for, the dry farmer] must combine stock raising in a small way with farming."[33] To this end, Congress passed the Kinkaid Act of 1904, granting 640-acre homesteads in Nebraska's Sandhills, the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909, and the Stock-Raising Homestead Act of 1916.[34] The passage of any enlarged homestead act constituted an implicit support of dry farming strategies and a codification of a settler colonial process. Mondell and fellow boosters lauded the potential of scientific farming.[35]

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[31] Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 12–5, 110, 123, 158, 167, 187, 243.
[32] "Shows Discrimination Against Great West," *Cheyenne Leader*, 7 April 1908, Box 7, FWM-AHC.
[33] "Make it 320 Acres," *The Wyoming Tribune*, 1 December 1908, Scrapbook 7, Box 7, FWM-AHC. The EHA was not the first 320-acre homestead law, but it was the first national homestead law that advocated for an enlarged homestead to deal with aridity west of the 98th meridian on a large scale.
[34] Paul W. Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development. Written for the Public Land Law Review Commission* (Washington, D.C.: G.P.O, 1968), 498–517. The filing requirements for these acts varied, but they generally consisted of a homesteader making a claim on a plot of land, constructing a building of specified size, continually cultivated a specific portion of the claim, and residing on the claim for a specified number of years. The specifics of the improvement and residency requirements varied between laws. *Act of May 20, 1862 (Homestead Act), Public Law 37-64,* Record Group 11, General Records of the United States Government, National Archives and Records Administration (hereafter NARA), College Park, MD. *Act of February 19, 1909 (Enlarged Homestead Act), Public Law 245*, 60th Congr, 2nd sess., Chap. 160, S. 6155, p .639.
[35] William E. Curtis, "New Dry Farm Law Held Boon to West," *Chicago Record-Herald*, 2 August 1909, Box 7, FWM-AHC. For whether human-initiated disasters set against a natural landscape are natural or not, see Richard M. Mizelle Jr., *Backwater Blues: The Mississippi Flood of 1927 in the African American Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 53–69; Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979).

In the semi-arid and arid West, scientific agriculture meant dry farming. Dry farming agriculture provided prescriptions for proper tillage, fallowing, and crop rotation in the West. First promoted by Hardy Webster Campbell, dry farming differed from traditional agricultural practices in that it stressed dust mulching and packing, deep plowing in the fall, tilling the soil after every rainfall, and summer fallowing.[36] Championed by boosters and legislators alike, dry farming was promoted as the panacea to arid conditions on the western farming frontier.

At the turn of the century, dry farming was an attractive alternative to farmers weary of how climatic conditions limited the effectiveness of irrigation.[37] Historian Barbara Allen likens irrigationists to atheists, for their disbelief that hard work could change climatic conditions.[38] However, as the value of irrigation became self-evident towards the turn of the century, with irrigable lands on the Great Plains consistently out-producing non-irrigable lands, some posited dry farming as an alternative method for productive agriculture farther West.[39] Progressive Era concerns about large agribusiness squeezing small farmers also shed a favorable light on dry farming, as irrigation had come to be associated with "large capital investments, cooperative efforts, or protracted construction." Allen argues that dry farming appealed as an alternative appropriate for the single-handed or family-supported farmer.[40]

It was to these family farmers that Campbell and his contemporaries hoped to sell their scientific methods. Campbell, himself a homesteader in the James River Valley in what is today

[36] Summer fallowing is the practice of letting a field sit unplanted, with the understanding that an extra season without crops would allow the soil to rejuvenate and retain moisture.
[37] For more on irrigationists, irrigationism, and how it blended "idealism and dollar and cents promotionalism," see Lawrence B. Lee, "William Ellsworth Smythe and the Irrigation Movement: A Reconsideration," *Pacific Historical Review* 41, no. 3 (August 1972): 289–311.
[38] Allen, 127-128.
[39] For more on irrigation successes on the Great Plains, see Timothy J. Richard, "The Great Plains as Part of an Irrigated Western Empire, 1890–1914," in *The Great Plains: Environment & Culture*, ed. Brian W. Blouet and Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 81–98.
[40] Allen, 129.

North Dakota, invented a type of sub-surface packer that packed the subsoil to retain moisture while loosening the topsoil for easy seeding. Campbell promoted a summer culture, packing a deeply plowed field six or seven inches early in the planting season but also packing, seeding, and harrowing on the same day. Starting as a family farmer, Campbell transitioned to a promotor of dry farming and railroad plots by 1895, and within two years, he managed at least forty-three railroad farms across five states.[41] Newspapers and periodicals reported advantages to adopting the Campbell system, making Campbell the national face of scientific farming.

Because of his success and publicity, "the Campbell Method" and dry farming became synonymous. Publishing the first edition of his *Soil Culture Manual* in 1902, Campbell came to be regarded as the expert on dry farming. He spoke at the first meeting of the Dry Farming Congress, a promotional organization, in 1907.[42] The Dry Farming Congress, not wanting to scrutinize any justification for further western settlement, whole-heartedly endorsed Campbell's agricultural practices. Promoters of dry farming sought to make it attractive to all comers. By tying dry farming to both the cutting edge of agricultural science and a tradition dating back to ancient Egyptian culture, promoters such as Campbell wrote with what Allen calls an "almost biblical authority."[43] By combining the scientific agriculturalist and the yeoman farmer, promoters opened their settlements to all prospective settlers regardless of their agricultural experience. Some experts, at least those who did not support the rash of promotional writing at the turn of the century, sought to limit the spread of misleading information.

[41] Jeffrey B. Roet, "Agricultural Settlement on the Dry Farming Frontier, 1900–1920" (PhD Diss., Northwestern University, 1982), 226. Mary W. M. Hargreaves, "Hardy Webster Campbell (1850–1937)," *Agricultural History* 32, no. 1 (January 1958): 62–5.
[42] Frank W. Mondell became the president of the International Dry Farming Congress in 1910.
[43] Allen, *Homesteading the High Desert*, 130.

Some within the federal government hoped to stop the flood of understudied promotional claims. E.C. Chilcott, appointed in 1905 to head the office of Dry-Land Agriculture within the Department of Agriculture (USDA), spearheaded an aggressive campaign to discredit the Campbell Method. Chilcott was concerned that Campbell's unproven system was being used to justify the movement of thousands of underprepared and overly confident settlers to the semi-arid Great Plains. Geographer Jeffrey Roet empathizes with Chilcott's criticism that Campbell's system was understudied, as "Campbell misunderstood the semiarid climate and believed that proper tillage based on his cultural system, and not the weather, controlled crop yield."[44] Chilcott and Campbell were not fully opposed; Chilcott wanted farmers to practice scientific crop management, but considered studies of physical and commercial farming to be more directly beneficial than uncritical readings of *Campbell's Soil Culture Manual*.

Unfortunately for Chilcott and the wave of homesteaders taking off for western plains, the federal government was too disorganized to effectively warn incoming settlers of dry farming's shortcomings. Historian Paul Wallace Gates laments the lack of conservationist principles within the Department of the Interior (DoI), the department directly responsible for doling out western homesteads. The DoI had little understanding and took insubstantial action to prepare settlers for farming lands unsuited for irrigation, a prerequisite for entering lands under the Enlarged Homestead Act.[45] According to Gates, the DoI "had no agronomists, no agricultural economists, no authorities who could speak on the value of [various] grasses, no informed leaders on irrigation," all of whom were available and willing to share from within the USDA.[46] Despite their involvement in the drafting of the various enlarged homestead acts, the DoI

[44] Roet, "Agricultural Settlement on the Dry Farming Frontier, 1900–1920," 228.
[45] For more on the various enlarged homestead acts, see Gates, *History of Public Land Law Development*, 497–516.
[46] Ibid., 511.

contributed without the "intensive analysis they needed."[47] For a group self-defined by its scientific mastery, dry farming advocates surely misunderstood the science of western agriculture. However, what they lacked in scientific training, they made up for with promotional vigor.

Hardy Webster Campbell and his contemporaries were, if nothing else, effective promoters. Despite warnings from agronomists at the USDA, dry farming promotional materials convinced thousands to head westward for their free government plots. Chilcott had made some progress in de-sanctifying Campbell, but other promoters such as Thomas Shaw and John Widstoe reaffirmed Campbell as an authority of dry-land agriculture.[48] But dry farming was not working. While Webster and Chilcott exchanged polemics, while Frank Mondell carried the work of the Dry Farming Congress into the United States Congress, and while printing presses continued to produce promotional materials, thousands of homesteaders failed on the Great Plains.[49] Despite homestead failures across the western states, these promotional writings played an outsized role in successfully drawing more settlers to the West.

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[47] Ibid.

[48] For promoters seizing "science," see John A. Widtsoe, *Dry-Farming: A System of Agriculture for Countries Under a Low Rainfall* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1920); Thomas Shaw, *Dry Land Farming* (St. Paul, Minnesota: Pioneer Co., 1911); William E. Smyth, *The Conquest of Arid America* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1899).

[49] For more on the shortcomings of dry farming, see Marshall E. Bowen, "Crops, Critters, and Calamity: The Failure of Dry Farming in Utah's Escalante Desert, 1913–1918," *Agricultural History* 73, no. 1 (Winter 1999): 1; Marshall E. Bowen, "A Step Backward: From Irrigation to Dry Farming in the Nevada Desert," *Agricultural History* 63, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 231–42; Marshall E. Bowen, "Bitter Times: The Summers of 1915 and 1916 on Northeast Nevada's Dry Farms," *Northeastern Nevada Historical Society Quarterly* 93, no. 1 (March 1993): 2–26; Marshall E. Bowen, *Utah People in the Nevada Desert: Homestead and Community on a Twentieth-Century Farmers' Frontier* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1994); Mary W. M. Hargreaves, "The Dry-Farming Movement in Retrospect," *Agricultural History* 51, no. 1 (Winter 1977): 149–65; Mary W. M. Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains: Years of Readjustment, 1920–1990* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1993); Mary W. M. Hargreaves, "Dry Farming Alias Scientific Farming," *Agricultural History* 22 (January 1948): 39–56; Garry L. Nall, "Dry-Land Farming on the High Plains - a Perspective," *Red River Valley Historical Review* 1, no. 2 (March 1974): 122–6; Robert G. Rosenberg, "'To The Man Who Will Roll Up His Sleeves': Dry Land Farming in Southeastern Wyoming," *Annals of Wyoming: The Wyoming History Journal* 82, no. 3 (Summer 2010): 2–19; Allen, *Homesteading the High Desert*; William P. Fischer, "Homesteading the Thunder Basin: Teckla, Wyoming, 1917–1938," *Annals of Wyoming: The Wyoming History Journal* 71, no. 2 (April 1999): 21–34; Gary D. Libecap and Zeynep Kocabiyik Hansen, "'Rain Follows the Plow' and Dryfarming Doctrine: The Climate Information Problem

However, the importance of Campbell fades when investigating the settlement of African Americans in the arid West. Rather than looking to Campbell, Widtsoe and other white scientific agriculturalists, African Americans instead turned to black national leaders such as Booker T. Washington. Washington, founder of the Tuskegee Institute and an advocate for a system of racial advancement hinged upon self-sustaining agriculturalism, worked separately but in dialogue with the Country-Life Movement and dry farmers generally. For both white and black Americans at the turn of the century, Washington and others contended, life on the farm was the most expedient means of supporting the moral and physical well-being of a family. Just as some white land speculators seized upon the Campbell method to promote sellable plots, so did their black counterparts seize upon similar lessons from Washington.[50] As active participants in a settler colonial process of replacing earlier indigenous landholders, African Americans, like their white counterparts, claimed land for their own chance at personal and collective advancement.

The promotion of western spaces, whether altruistic, self-interested, or quixotic, successfully contributed to the settlement of the West. Often, big capital from railroads, land speculators, and other easterners helped settle these areas. Looking at the movement of Utah farmers into northeastern Nevada to take up homesteads, historian Marshall Bowen points to local speculation and mercantile companies immediately funding promotional blitzes.[51] If the tropes of western agriculture were a dead horse, these pamphlets kept on beating. Examining linkages between promotion, memory, and the cultural creation of the American West, historian

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and Homestead Failure in the Upper Great Plains, 1890–1925," *Journal of Economic History* 62, no. 1 (March 2002): 86; Craig L. Torbenson, "The Promontory-Curlew Land Company: Promoting Dry Farming in Utah," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 66, no. 1 (January 1998): 4–25.

[50] Historian Kenneth Hamilton argues "it was the land speculators who ultimately determined which areas of the West would be rural and where the urban centers would develop," although I take exception with his lack of consideration for environmental factors. See Kenneth Marvin Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit: Promotion and Development in the Trans-Appalachian West, 1877–1915* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 3.

[51] Bowen, *Utah People in the Nevada Desert: Homestead and Community on a Twentieth-Century Farmers' Frontier*, 12–4.

David Wrobel explains how "supremely optimistic and imaginative accounts of western wonderlands could make even the Garden of Eden seem a little plain."[52] Everywhere, but distinctively *here*, had rich and deep soil free of alkali accumulations. Everywhere, but distinctively *here*, there was sufficient water to make unlimited profits from dry farming. Everywhere, but distinctively *here*, the apples were sweeter, the wheat was taller, and yields were greater. However, there were two major problems: first, that "here" was everywhere; second, local conditions "here" were often antithetical to descriptions found in promotional writing. Almost nowhere was the disparity between promotional claims and environmental realities more striking than in the East Mojave Desert.[53]

Scales of aridity create regional differences in farming the West. Geographers, more so than historians, delineate between the semi-arid and arid regions of the United States. In his dissertation on settlement patterns of the East Mojave, Charles Robert Bard acknowledges the value of early environmental histories such as Walter Prescott Webb's *The Great Plains* (1936) and Carl Kraenzel's *Great Plains in Transition* (1955), but is quick to point out that "their work dealt mainly with a different type of region, the semi-arid Great Plains," and that technological limits would continue to dictate desert settlement.[54] The "true deserts," to borrow from regional planner and land use expert Elisabeth Hamin, have conditions distinctively less advantageous to farming than the more watered semi-arid regions.[55]

Dry farming in the East Mojave and other arid areas posed distinctive challenges to arriving homesteaders. In a study of shifts from irrigation to dry farming in northeastern Nevada,

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[52] David Wrobel, *Promised Lands: Promotion, Memory, and the Creation of the American West* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2002), 6.
[53] For more on rising regional differences, see Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains*, 9.
[54] Robert Charles Bard, "Settlement Pattern of the Eastern Mojave Desert" (PhD. Diss, University of California, Los Angeles, 1972), 1, 3, 13.
[55] Elisabeth M. Hamin, *Mojave Lands: Interpretive Planning and the National Preserve* (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 2003), 8–12.

Marshall Bowen suggests that dry farming in the most marginal lands of the West, a title surely deserved by the eastern Mojave, was a fundamentally different process than dry farming elsewhere "in the more favored parts of the West."[56] Bowen explains how dry environmental conditions motivated purchasers of company town plots to throw good money after bad, doubling down and taking up additional homesteads in an attempt to protect themselves from the inconsistent harvests. The areas discussed by Bowen experienced moisture trends similar to Lanfair Valley, California, subject of this project's second chapter, with especially wet years immediately after settlement, followed by a return to climatic norms of dryness.[57] In both northeastern Nevada and southeastern California, homesteaders drawn in by the promise of dry farming's success and unusually wet years attempted to persevere and still make a living despite the difficult, laborious environmental conditions of their workscapes.[58] However, unlike in Lanfair Valley, where dry farming was always the expected method of crop production, Bowen claims that northern Nevadan "decisions to dry farm were little more than acts of desperation," once settlers found their plots to be non-irrigable.[59] Despite Bowen's description of "desperation," the failing settlers of the desert regions did not revert to blaming the promotional materials that brought them into the arid West, but instead took personal responsibility for failed harvests.

Dry farming shifted the onus for good climatic conditions off of the land and onto the settler. By practicing dry farming methods, promoter's suggested, settlers would fundamentally change their agricultural environments. While this belief empowered some settlers to invest

[56] Bowen, "A Step Backward," 231.
[57] Nystrom, "From Neglected Space to Protected Place," 32; Bowen, "A Step Backward," 239.
[58] For more on workscapes, see Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 125.
[59] Bowen, "A Step Backward," 240.

energy and capital into their farms, it worsened the gut punch of a failure harvest. Allen describes the belief that, "if dry farmers failed, it was their own fault and not that of the land."[60] While this added pressure may have weakened some settlers' resolve, it added to their sense of American pride, for it returned to what Allen describes as "the traditional American ideal of agriculture as a simple, natural, individualistic calling."[61] The climate, supposedly operating at the whims of agriculturalists, was not to blame. Instead, settlers pointed the finger at themselves and other local conditions like garden pests. Looking at the disastrous summers of 1913 through 1915 in South Sahara, Utah, a homesteading community near St. George, Bowen concludes that local farmers rarely blamed drought for their crop failures. Instead, Bowen suggests that "perhaps this was because some individuals were unable to admit, to themselves or anyone else, that they had been duped" by dry farming promotional materials.[62] By accepting blame for their failures, homesteaders freed promotional writers from any obligation to honestly present the conditions as they existed, even in the bone-dry East Mojave.

The East Mojave is an especially dry place. Defined in many ways by its aridity, the East Mojave serves as a distinctive transitional zone between the lower Sonoran desert to the East and the higher Great Basin desert to the north, creating what ecologist Bruce Pavlik describes as “an ecotone” that draws plant and animal species from “high and low elevations, from cold and hot climates, and from north and south into a recognizable, if not consistent, mix.”[63] Defined by its ability to evaporate water as quickly as it falls–creating entrancing virgae, rain columns that both fall and evaporate without ever touching the ground– the East Mojave is a true desert.[64] As the

[60] Allen, *Homesteading the High Desert*, 129.
[61] Ibid., 130.
[62] Bowen, “Crops, Critters, and Calamity,” 14.
[63] Bruce M. Pavlik, *The California Deserts: An Ecological Rediscovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 212.
[64] Hamin, *Mojave Lands*, 10.

smallest and hottest of the Californian deserts, the Mojave offers little promise for any water-intensive practices.[65] That lack of promise, however, did not stem the westward flow of homesteaders entering the arid West. Rather, settlers, influenced in no small part by a herd mentality, either ignored or failed to understand the physical geography of western landscapes in favor of booster literature, prompting a flood of unprepared farmers to take up lands in marginally farmable environments.

This thesis hopes to shift what Jeffrey Roet calls "the last true agricultural frontier in the continental United States" from the northern Great Plains to the eastern Mojave Desert.[66] In many ways, this is a story of migrations. I argue that the East Mojave offered distinctive opportunities for various forms of social and economic growth, but that growth was limited by the natural environment and by varying degrees of government intervention.[67] The East Mojave was home to both successful and failed settlements. Las Vegas, America's adult playground, started as a Mormon farming colony that initially failed before later railroad investment and federal development made the town's continued existence viable. Lanfair Valley, a few miles across the California-Nevada border, was not so fortunate, but still provided an important landscape for social and environmental change. That the federal government saved Las Vegas but let Lanfair fade demonstrates the significant role of outside capital in the development of the desert. For both Las Vegas and Lanfair Valley, promotional writing, national concern about the death of the small farm, and uncharacteristically wet climatic conditions drew settlers to the East Mojave.

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[65] Pavlik, *The California Deserts*, 69.
[66] Roet, "Agricultural Settlement on the Dry Farming Frontier, 1900–1920,", 1.
[67] When measuring growth, I eschew larger arguments about the effects of infrastructural development in the West in favor of ways to document the positive effects of collective and intimate personal advancement. For "how the domination of nature can lead to the domination of some people over others" see Worster, *Rivers of Empire*, 50.

Chapter One exposes an environmental paradox of desert settlement. The growth of Las Vegas demonstrates the competing needs of capital and water in settling western population centers. Power brokers needed a continued influx of settlers and capital to justify the expansion of Las Vegas from a small, well-watered desert hamlet to an industrious railroad town and county seat. At the same time, leaders in the region intentionally obscured the environmental reality of this arid valley so that they might continue to promote Las Vegas as a dreamscape for profitable farming. In the end, Las Vegan taps ran dry, justifying the construction of the Boulder Dam and the extension of federal power in southern Nevada.

Chapter Two frames the use of federal homesteading laws and black nationalism to create black and mixed-race communities in the East Mojave. Lanfair Valley, California, sixty miles southeast of Las Vegas, opened to homesteading in 1910 following the passage of the Enlarged Homestead Act. This dry valley was home to one of the early twentieth century's most ambitious, albeit never fully realized, farming communities. With black settlers coming eastward from Los Angeles after an earlier migration from the South, the farming community at Lanfair served as a midpoint between the painful legacy of sharecropping in the postbellum South and the unrealized expectations of black life in Los Angeles. In Lanfair Valley, homesteaders' inability to reconcile agricultural traditions with environmental realities is imprinted on the land, demarcated by straight lines of tamarisk and squares without brush.[68]

The varying successes of Las Vegas and Lanfair Valley can be linked to the availability of outside capital. For Las Vegas, railroads promoted economic activity and ensured connections

[68] For more on how vegetation can indicate earlier histories of homesteading and mining, see Bard, "Settlement Pattern of the Eastern Mojave Desert," 33. The tamarisk (*tamarix aphylla*) serves as a demarcation of earlier mining and homesteading activities, as it often proliferated along fence lines. Similarly, the east Mojave Joshua Tree (*yucca brevefolia* var. *jaegeriana*) dominates the landscape. The largest and densest Joshua Tree forest in the world is located in Mojave National Preserve, of which Lanfair Valley is a part. Today, empty 40-, 160-, and 320-acre squares without Joshua Trees mark where homesteaders once labored to farm profit from the desert.

to the rest of the nation. In Lanfair Valley, a lack of infrastructural investment hampered long-term prospects for development. Whereas the Boulder Dam alleviated Las Vegas' concerns, no similar project came to Lanfair, leaving it to wilt in the desert sun. These two valleys, connected by their differences, demonstrate the significant role that the railroads and government played in shaping population centers of the East Mojave.

For the Southern Paiutes and Chemehuevi studied by Kelly, life both changed and remained. Anglo-Americans, through threats and actual instances of violence, seized their springs. However, indigenous notions of water's power persisted. Anglo- and African Americans, like the native peoples they dispossessed, organized agricultural communities around important springs. Life always has centered around water for all the peoples of the East Mojave. Without it, the railroads might not have come to Las Vegas, black settlers in Lanfair Valley might not have patented more than twenty homestead claims, and the neon lights of Las Vegas might never have flickered.

# Chapter 1

## "You Need Not Have Had Any Experience": Promotion and Water in Las Vegas, Nevada

> "No water in Nevada? Do you realize, dear reader, that a topographical map of Nevada looks like the surface of your wife's washboard…[water] stays right here, underground, waiting for the bit of the artesian well drill to release it from its subterranean prison."[1]

On a stifling summer day in 1908, Las Vegas farmer Walter Bracken, hat pulled low over his eyes, watched the heat rise off the desert floor. The thermometer read 110˚F and would climb higher yet. Pulling the straps to his overalls around his shoulders, Bracken lumbered from his house on the edge of the Union Pacific company town toward the water pump at the head of his fields. Nearly burning his hand on the valve, Bracken opened the lines and water gushed across the hay field. Brackish and contaminated with oil, the water would not save the year's harvest. Livid, Bracken wrote to his local water company threatening to invalidate his lease if the water quality did not improve. His crop failed while he waited for a response.[2]

A year later, an agent for both the Union Pacific Railroad and its subsidy, the Las Vegas Land and Water Company, sought to ease Las Vegans' concerns. The town's water was exceptional for growing crops and he would prove it. Needing to allay fears that the valley could not support further development, this land and railroad agent doctored water samples to be sent to the state university's hydrologist. With the many-times-boiled water samples deemed safe, the

[1] "Las Vegas, Nevada: Where Farming Pays," 1913, Vertical Files: Las Vegas-Agriculture-Farming, 5, Cahlan Research Library, Nevada State Museum, Las Vegas (hereafter CRL-NSM).
[2] Walter R. Bracken to C.O. Whittemore (Los Angeles), Letter, 17 January 1908, Folder 14, Box 1, San Pedro, Los Angeles and Salt Lake Railroad Collection (hereafter SPLASLRC), University of Nevada Las Vegas Special Collections (hereafter UNLVSC); John F. Cahlan and Florence Lee Jones, *Water: A History of Las Vegas*, vol. 1 (Las Vegas: Las Vegas Valley Water District, 1975), 45–6; Harry O. Green, "Nevada Section of the Climatological Service of the Weather Bureau" (Carson, City, NV: U.S. Department of Agriculture, June 1908), 43.

agent plastered the test results on the post office door, for all to see. The land agent was Walter Bracken.[3]

Both Bracken and Las Vegas typify the story of western boosterism in the early twentieth century. Bracken, wearer of many hats, was invested personally as a farmer but also corporately as an extension of the Union Pacific apparatus. Often, Bracken the corporate booster took priority over Bracken the farmer. Las Vegas, regarded at the time as a well-watered hamlet in the East Mojave Desert known for its artesian springs, was to be the next epicenter of western growth. Citing boundless opportunity empowered by a presumably unlimited and pure water supply, promotional literature claimed that all varieties of crops could be successfully farmed in the arid valley. While a complex amalgam of factors attracted settlers to the Las Vegas Valley, ubiquitous promotional literature played a part in drawing some people into the region. Indeed, booster campaigns were so successful that by 1927, the city's population and water use outpaced the recharge rate of the local aquifer, disrupting the delicate equilibrium of the arid environment. Early Las Vegas was a victim of its own progress, with locals, sometimes playing both farmer and booster, caught in a cycle of promotion, settlement, and depletion.

In the mid-nineteenth century, few promoters saw promise in Las Vegas. In 1855, Brigham Young dispatched thirty Mormon missionaries to the region, hoping to convert local Paiutes and to form a settlement in the Las Vegas Valley.[4] Despite the missionaries' hard work, the soil did not cooperate. Irrigable land proved insufficient for successful agriculture. Among other problems, "alkali in the soil was a deterrent to great success in farming," and the Mormons

[3] "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada: A Brief Review of Climate, Resources, Growth, Opportunities," 1914, F.849, L.35, L.24, UNLVSC; H.I. Bettis to Governor J.G. Scrugham, 1 April 1923, MS-00397, W 23-3-3, Union Pacific Railroad Manuscript Collection, UNLVSC; Cahlan and Jones, *Water,* 42–5.
[4] Cahlan and Jones, *Water*, 6.; Eugene P. Moehring and Michael S. Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005), *xii*.

informed their president that the uncooperative soil made supporting a large colony difficult. Despite early Mormon failures in settling the valley, later promotional materials would frame Las Vegas as an Edenic valley of limitless potential for farmers.[5] What had changed in fifty years?

Federal expansion into the Far West prompted Las Vegas' growth. The extension of the transcontinental railroads across the West demanded the steam-engine filling station that would become Las Vegas.[6] The Country-Life Commission's report, when paired with a dangerous rash of promotional writing, drove unprepared settlers into the hot valley. Although the townsite sold private plots, the Enlarged Homestead Act enabled the development of nearby hinterlands that supported the local economy but also gave governmental sanction to taking up western lands, providing a window of growth for the local agricultural economy to develop regardless of whether farmers bought Las Vegas plots from the railroad or struck out on their own 320-acre plots. National trends pushed capital and settlers into the Las Vegas Valley.

The self-interest of promoters and early Las Vegan powerbrokers also contributed to the rise of Las Vegas. Through a combination of misunderstanding, greed, and quixotic hopefulness, foundational members of Las Vegas' early institutions, such as farmer and water agent Walter Bracken, worked to continuing drawing new settlers into their town. By promoting the region's environment as a cause for growth instead of a sign of natural limitations, Bracken and other western boosters were caught in a paradox of promotion and depletion.

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[5] Cahlan and Jones, 8; "The Old Mormon Fort," National Park Service, accessed 24 April 2019, https://www.nps.gov/nr/TWHP/wwwlps/lessons/122fort/index.htm; Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, 4–5.
[6] For a further discussion of the railroad opening regional and national markets, albeit in Idaho, see Mark Fiege, *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1999), 146.

Early Las Vegans envisioned an oasis, not a desert. Having taken control of the old Mormon Fort, Octavius Decatur Gass in late 1865 restarted large-scale agriculture within the Las Vegas Valley.[7] Like the Southern Paiutes who farmed before the Mormon arrival, Gass organized his fields around local springs, engaging a settler colonial process of dispossessing native peoples for the benefit of arriving whites.[8] As Gass came to recognize the limits of East Mojave agriculture and invested elsewhere, he realized the need to pass his property onto whoever might buy into the promise of the Las Vegas Creek (*Wípɨ* to the Southern Paiutes).[9] So entered Frank Stewart and his wife Helen, who after being widowed would be referred to as "the First Lady of Las Vegas," and who oversaw the 1,800-acre ranch until 1902. It was Senator William Clark of Montana, purchaser of the Stewart ranch and investor in multiple railroads, that first saw Las Vegas's potential as more than a small farming hamlet.

To Clark, Las Vegas was an ideal location for a filling station. Conveniently located at the precipice of a highly graded section of rail line and equipped with the water necessary to refill the powerful steam engines that tied together Salt Lake City and Los Angeles, Las Vegas was a seemingly obvious choice for a new Union Pacific town. While the town would always focus on the railroads – and, indeed suffered from the booms, busts, and labor unrests of early twentieth-century rail economy – the development of Las Vegas the town was as crucial as Las Vegas the rail station. To keep this desert railroad town viable, local agriculture was needed to sustain the market and population. At the turn of the twentieth century, there was good reason to believe in Las Vegas' potential, despite its obvious aridity.

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[7] Roske and Green, "Octavius Decatur Gass," 377.
[8] Paher, *Las Vegas: As It Began–As It Grew*, 37–41. For an introduction to settler colonial studies, see Wolfe, "Land, Labor, and Difference," 866–905; Veracini, "Introducing Settler Colonial Studies," 1–12.
[9] Gass was not looking for a rube, necessarily, but somebody willing to take up the calls of individualism's success. An investor with diverse holdings across the West, Gass was also a major player in the development of port towns along the Colorado River. For more on Gass, see Roske and Green, "Octavius Decatur Gass."

Las Vegas was situated in an environment starker and more dramatic than most of the semi-arid West, creating a distinctive culture within the valley. Dry, hot, and without readily available sources of timber, the Las Vegas Valley was and remains situated within an inhospitable environment. But the same defining characteristics that made the valley so intimidating also drew outsiders into the desert. The spirit of the place, in the words of historian Dan Flores, "refers to a more modern–one might even say more holistic" means of situating humans within a particular nature.[10] In Las Vegas, an environmental ethos of hardship demanding hard work created a culture that rewarded the hardy, the brave, and, perhaps, the foolhardy. Las Vegas presents a distinctive spirit, as its founding culture was based more on disharmony, on working outside of nature to subvert the environment to the whims of capitalists, than on the "universal ideas of balance and harmony," demonstrated by the Pueblos of New Mexico, among others.[11] In some ways, the very lack of balance and need for mastery, itself reflective of Progressive Era belief in its envirotechnical solutions, made Las Vegas attractive.[12] Situated within a cultural milieu that valued industriousness, individualism, and hardiness, the challenge of Las Vegas was eagerly accepted by those wanting to prove their worth. In a similar vein, the promise of Las Vegas' springs within the otherwise bleak and desolate desert proved the city's exceptional status for arriving settlers wanting to make the desert bloom.

[10] Dan Flores, "Spirit of Place and the Value of Nature in the American West," in *A Sense of the American West: An Anthology of Environmental History*, ed. James E. Sherow (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 31–40.
[11] Flores, 33.
[12] For reading on turn-of-the-century belief in conservationist principles, see Smythe, *The Conquest of Arid America*; for mid-twentieth-century considerations of how the Progressive Era informed conservationist action, see Samuel P Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890–1920* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1959), 5–26, 91-121. For more recent criticisms of the limits of public policy, see Pisani, *Water, Land, and Law in the West*; Donald J. Pisani, *Water and American Government: The Reclamation Bureau, National Water Policy, and the West, 1902–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

The Union Pacific Railroad, the proprietor of the Las Vegas townsite, positioned itself to become the market and transportation center for agricultural products produced by desert homesteads. Selling three hundred feet by four hundred feet plots within the townsite, the Union Pacific, in 1905, sought to create an entrepôt with hinterlands, both immediately outside of the townsite and in other nearby locations like the Moapa Valley, built up by claimants making use of the Enlarged Homestead Act. While the Union Pacific was not directly involved in farming, it wished for Las Vegas, with its plentiful water and boundless available land, to become the center for the agricultural products of the East Mojave. Empowered by dry farming techniques and cheap, government-provided lands through the Enlarged Homestead Act, settlers came to this seemingly advantageous community.[13]

Considered exceptional for its meadows and artesian springs, Las Vegas served as a respite from the harsh Mojave Desert. Founded in 1905, Las Vegas had much potential. Luckily for the fewer than two hundred early settlers, there was enough water to go around. In 1909, still two years before the town was incorporated, the Las Vegas springs produced some 6,400 acre feet of water per year, more than enough for the domestic and industrial supply of early Las Vegas, at the time focused on the Pacific Fruit Express Company's ice plant, the Las Vegas & Tonopah railyards, and local hotel traffic.[14] The supply of usable groundwater was at least sufficient for the young town's small population. For Las Vegans in the first decade of the twentieth century, the water existed, and they could make a living from it. Promoters of the

[13] Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 9–16, 20–1, 39. For other examples of entrepôt-hinterland developmental relationships, see Morse, *The Nature of Gold*, 166–90; William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1991); Kathleen A. Brosnan, *Uniting Mountain & Plain: Cities, Law, and Environmental Change along the Front Range* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 10–6, 88. For more on the Union Pacific Railroad and its growth across the West, see White, *Railroaded*.

[14] That aquifer, Glenn Malmberg suggested in 1965, recharged at an average of 25,000 acre-feet per year. See Glenn T. Malmberg, "Available Water Supply of Las Vegas Ground-Water Basin Nevada," in *Geological Survey Water-Supply Paper 1780* (Washington: United States Govt. Printing Office, 1965), 36–58

valley seized on this seemingly endless natural resource, and from it, sought to make Las Vegas "the center of a great underdeveloped empire."[15]

The Las Vegas Promotion Society seized on their valley's water supply as an asset worth promoting. Founded by local business leaders in 1908 to aggressively promote Las Vegas, the Promotion Society's initial purpose was to shift the county seat from Pioche to Las Vegas, but soon extended its focus to increasingly settlement.[16] With plenty of groundwater, and a presumably unlimited and untapped underground supply, the promoters expressed little concern about the future viability of the growing railroad center. So, with plenty of water underfoot and boundless land for development, regional boosters tried to bring more settlers into the valley.

Boosters promoted Las Vegas as the well-watered hamlet within the desert during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Promotional materials were often pocket-sized booklets featuring a mix of text and photographs. The pamphlets rarely identified their authors. In the 1910s, larger pamphlets increasingly relied on pictures and data, as if only photographs and statistics could prove the sensational claims of agricultural success. And sensational they were.

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[15] "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada," 1927, F.849, L.35, L.245, UNLVSC; Malmberg, "Available Water Supply of Las Vegas Ground-Water Basin Nevada," 36–58; Cahlan and Jones, *Water*, 3.

[16] "Semi-Tropical Nevada: A Region of Fertile Soils and Flowing Wells," c. 1916, NSM; "Ranching in Nevada," Permanent Gallery, NSM. Boosters, or promoters of a local area, came from many backgrounds and interests but all shared the goal of bringing more people into the Valley. This group of boosters included, but was not limited to, railroad company representatives, local chambers of commerce and promotion societies, ranchers wanting to sell or divide up their plots, and, of course, the national government's land agents seeking to fill homestead plots for the development of antecedently useless land for the benefit of reaching towards a Jeffersonian ideal of a landed nation filled and tilled by a yeomanry.

The Las Vegas Promotion Society and its successor, the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, assured potential settlers of a plentiful supply of usable water. Images of water shooting into the air were reproduced to counter perceptions of the desert as dead and dry. Four different pamphlets utilized the same gushing picture of the Eglington Well **[Fig. 1],** claiming 600 gallons per minute rushed to the surface. Sensational photos of wells can be found in many early pamphlets from the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, promising "the water comes up under its own power." The messages were clear. Water was ubiquitous. Las Vegas was no desert – water's availability, and pictures thereof, attested to this fact.[17]

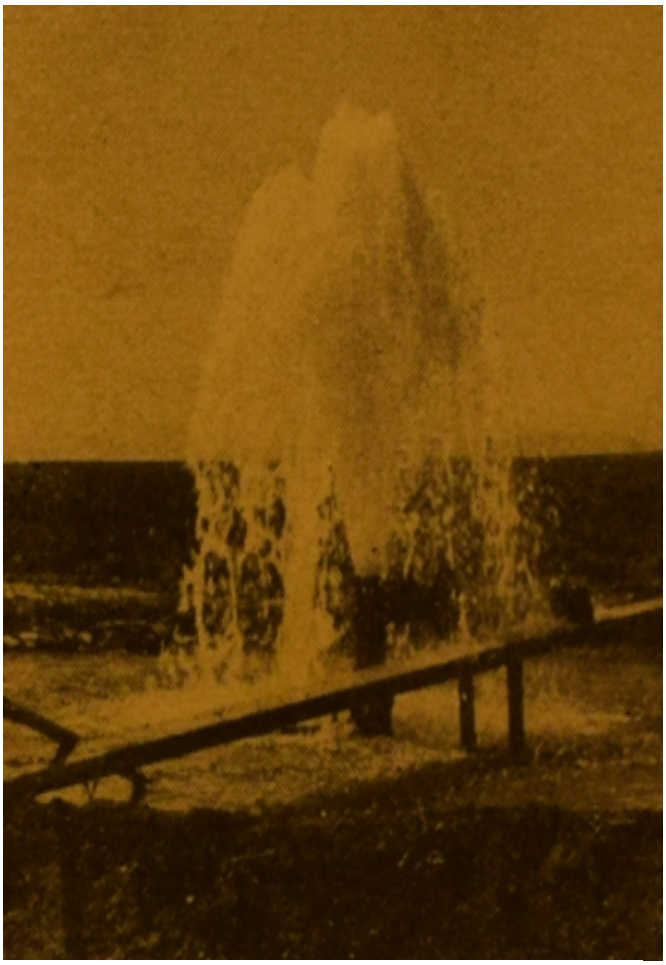

**Figure 1: Water gushing from the Eglington Well, near Las Vegas Nevada. From "Las Vegas, Nevada: Where Farming Pays," cover.**

Promoters of the region described a seemingly limitless supply of water that was easily within reach. One pamphlet, entitled "Las Vegas, Nevada: Where Farming Pays," (1913) outlines the "artesian belt of semi-tropic Nevada," and claimed the valley had absolute and unfettered access to water for use in irrigation: "anywhere within this [artesian] belt flowing water can be secured with absolute certainty." Promoting the state of Nevada as well as the city

[17]In one such promotional picture book from 1927, a gushing well, captioned "abundant artesian water supplies the city of Las Vegas," lies front-and-center in the middle page of the booklet. "Las Vegas, Nevada: Where Farming Pays," 10; "Nevada: Las Vegas and Vegas Valley," F849, L35, L36, UNLVSC.

and valley of Las Vegas, the author(s) of the pamphlet pointed to new laws requiring the capping of wells to demonstrate active efforts to sustain growth. With this legal precaution for the preservation of water resources, pamphlets claimed in bold typeface, "the water supply will more than meet all demands made upon it." One pamphlet claimed that the "approximately 100 artesian wells" active at time of publication would pour "out their water whenever allowed to, without expense for pumping or maintenance." The water's availability, which ensured both urban growth and farms' profitability, could only improve with the implementation of new pumping technology.[18]

Technological developments during the early twentieth century made desert farming an increasingly attractive venture. The centrifugal pump, which uses rotational mechanical energy to pull water up from deep underground, was a crucial new technology for irrigating the West. Irrigated lands on the Great Plains produced higher yields than their dry farming counterparts.[19] Las Vegas, from its inception as a Mormon colony, relied on irrigation, but these new centrifugal pumps made accessible waters that had formerly been imprisoned by their relatively great depths. However, centrifugal pumps did not address the soil alkalinity that drove away the Mormon missionaries in the mid-nineteenth century.[20]

Las Vegas' boosters seized the new pumping technologies as a surefire solution to the desert's aridity. Despite an overabundance of alkali in the soil, an environmental shortcoming documented by early Mormon missionaries, promoters believed the pump could make the valley wholly profitable. "Where Farming Pays," while falling short of providing cost-based analysis

[18] "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada*,"* 11; "Where Farming Pays," 11; Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 41.
[19] For more on irrigation successes on the Great Plains, see Richard, "The Great Plains as Part of an Irrigated Western Empire, 1890–1914."
[20] For effects of centrifugal pumps on the more-watered but still semi-arid Great Plains, see Robert W. Adler, "Drought, Sustainability, and the Law," *Sustainability* 2, no. 7 (July 2010): 2183.

for the purchase and use of centrifugal pumps, claimed, "[p]ump irrigation in the Las Vegas Valley has thus been demonstrated as not only possible, but profitable, which means that every acre of ground in this section that can be tilled can be put under water."[21] Promoters used this technology as a red herring: with enough water, why worry about alkali in the soil? Losing sight of earlier lessons hard-learned by the Mormons, the town, promoters, and farmers of the Las Vegas Valley believed that the centrifugal pump represented a silver bullet for the desert's daunting aridity, alkalinity, and under-development.

Promoters also seized on the Enlarged Homestead Act and its promise of 320-acre tracts as a solution to desert agriculture's inherent problem of insufficient water. The Enlarged Homestead Act, passed in an era of agrarian possibility, reflected a larger Progressive Era tendency toward rationalizing natural resources.[22] Its passage helped along by the development, proliferation, and dissemination of dry farming scientific literature. That literature convinced otherwise weary settlers that western settlement was not only viable but supported by the weight of the United States government.[23] Thanks to the Enlarged Homestead Act, settlers felt safe entering homesteads in the arid West.

Despite less than four inches of rain per year in the Las Vegas Valley, promotional pamphlets, echoing the sentiments of the Enlarged Homestead Act, promised that settlers could look forward to easy farming and comfortable living. Farmers might not need to apply dry farming techniques in the Las Vegas Valley, as all tillable land could be put into use with the water rising from underground. Promoters had forgotten or purposefully omitted the earlier

[21] "Where Farming Pays," 12, emphasis removed.
[22] For a good start on the rationalizing of natural resources, especially as a counter to Hays' *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency*, see Pisani, *Water, Land, and Law in the West*, 119–23.
[23] For the United States' tacit endorsement of dry farming practices, albeit in northeastern rather than southwestern Nevada, see Bowen, "A Step Backward."

Mormon lesson on alkalinity. In "Where Farming Pays," promoters promised comfortable lives for prospective settlers, with or without the use of pumps, as they could "look forward to everything essential to a pleasant home." Claiming that the newcomer "can have flowing water in his house without the use of pumps, windmills, or any kind of artificial pressure" pamphlets assured readers of water's availability. The bountiful water, in turn, guaranteed a modern, aesthetically pleasing city in which "lawns flourish…flowers bloom in profusion and roses climb to the roofs of the houses, blossoming ten and eleven months in the year." Thanks to the town's unlimited water, there was no questioning the viability and comfort of farming Las Vegas. [24]

With water's availability seemingly proven, promotional materials also celebrated the water's quality. In "Semi-Tropical Nevada: A Region of Fertile Soils and Flowing Wells" (1916), authors used bold typeface when writing "Las Vegas artesian water is as pure and sweet as any water in the world, without a trace of unpleasant or injurious minerals." With the water's purity established through assertion, another pamphlet emphasized the high-quality water available for the valley's residents, claiming, "of all its advantages, probably the greatest blessing the City of Las Vegas enjoys is its supply of pure spring water piped directly from its source without exposure to any kind of contamination. The water is most agreeable to the taste and is entirely free from any harmful minerals." Even further, pamphlets claimed that the water rising from the underground aquifer surfaced at the preferred temperature for successful irrigation. Other areas of the West, such as Colorado's eastern range, similarly framed their water as ideal. In *Uniting Mountain and Plain*, environmental historian Kathleen Brosnan exposes how the Platte River Land Company used the imagery of the steamboat to promote its Green City colony, despite the South Platte being an unnavigable river.[25] Whereas navigation

[24] "Where Farming Pays," 28, emphasis removed from original.
[25] Brosnan, *Uniting Mountain & Plain*, 77.

appealed to settlers of the front range, water for irrigation helped sell farms in the desert. For western towns, cities, and farming colonies, water was the key to a guaranteed future. With its supposedly limitless and untainted water, all signs of profitability pointed to the Las Vegas Valley.[26]

Soil quality was similarly promoted as a natural advantage to settling in Las Vegas. Despite early Mormon missionaries' reports of overly alkali soil, one pamphlet subtitled "a region of fertile soils and flowing wells," claimed, "few sections of the Southwest contain as little alkali land." Another, influenced by Progressive Era ideals of technology overcoming natural disadvantages, claimed that the "small proportion" of valley acreage rendered "comparatively worthless on account of excessive alkali," could be "redeemed and rendered very productive by proper treatment…[w]hat Nature has left undone, man can do in a few months' time."[27] The majority of the valley's soil was not problematic, and the valley's pure and plentiful water was capable of improving the areas demanding soil adjustments. After all, other settlers had already proven the ease of farming.[28]

With an abundance of pure water so readily available and with soil willing to cooperate, promotional material boasted that nearly anything could be grown around Las Vegas. Alfalfa could be cut six to eight times a year. Indian Corn "grown on virgin soil…in the Summer of 1912 was ten feet tall." Sorghums, potatoes, and grains all benefitted from the long growing

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[26] "Semi-Tropic Nevada," 11, 12; "Las Vegas and Clark County," 13–5; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada: A Brief Review of Climate, Resources, Growth, Opportunities," 1914, F.849, L.35, L.24, UNLVSC. It is worth noting that there were two pamphlets entitled "Las Vegas and Clark County," one published in 1914 and the latter, a picture booklet, in 1927.

[27] For more on Progressive Era belief in envirotechnical solutions, see Fiege, *Irrigated Eden*, 94; Gregg, "Imagining Opportunity," 262.

[28] Semi-Tropical Nevada;" "Where Farming Pays," 16–7. Eugene Moehring claims that while some early Las Vegan farmers "fared well enough, agriculture never became the cash cow for which early Las Vegans hoped because the local soil was so high in alkalinity." Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, 3; Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 42.

season. Garden vegetables, especially asparagus which was "beyond question, in flavor, quality and yield, the best grown in the United States," could purportedly gross over $1,000 per acre annually. Experimental stations, funded by the Division of Agricultural Engineering of the U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, produced encouraging studies on the farmability of Las Vegas.[29] Promoters championed all fruit crops, including that "Clark County Cantaloupes are prize winners…[and] they are admittedly superior in quality" to competing Imperial Valley cantaloupes. One farmer in the Las Vegas Valley, William Laubenheimer, supposedly "sold over $900 worth of cantaloupes from one acre of ground in the Summer of 1912." Sweet potatoes and other crops were similarly promising for the prospective settler seeking profits and success. Promoters of the region especially advertised the success of vineyards, fruit orchards, and cotton fields in the valley. [30]

If one were to believe the pamphlets promoting Las Vegas as a farming center, there was no greater paradise.[31] Peaches, apples, apricots, and figs, "both early and late, in size, flavor, color and yield, are the equal of any in the world." Pomegranates, pears, plums, prunes, nectarines, almonds, walnuts, and pecans, pamphlets claimed, all "do well" in the heat of the Las Vegas Valley. With shade, raspberries, blackberries, and strawberries "make a vigorous growth and an abundant yield." Farmers in the valley even experimented with cotton, "with flattering results," proving "that the Las Vegas Valley is perfectly adapted to the production of cotton." Seemingly nowhere surpassed the valley's potential for growing crops. With potential for crops,

[29] Sherryl L. Weber, "A Garden in the Desert?: A Regional Study of Ranching and Farming in Southern Nevada, 1870–1930" (master's thesis, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 1995), 101.
[30] "Semi-Tropic Nevada," 17–24; "Where Farming Pays," 15–21.
[31] Similar promises were made by irrigators in Idaho, who "blended the garden and the factory, creating complex, sometimes contradictory images that rested on combinations of organic things through the major theme of transition from desert to garden." Fiege, *Irrigated Eden*, 172.

came potential for similarly exceptional livestock.[32] Las Vegas similarly offered what all farmers need: access to markets.[33]


Figure 2: ***Railroads in Nevada***. Scale [ca. 1,710,720]. 1 in. = 27 miles (W 120°--W 114°/N 42°--N 35°). In: Rand McNally's New Business Atlas Map of Nevada. Chicago: Rand McNally & Co, 1911. Page 321. UNLV Special Maps Collections: G4351.P3 1911 .R35.

[32] Ibid., 20–2; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada: A Brief Review of Climate, Resources, Growth, Opportunities," 8–9.
[33] "Semi-Tropic Nevada," 20–2; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada;" "Where Farming Pays," 15–21.

Promoters used Las Vegas' proximity to the railroad to undercut California's agricultural hegemony. Las Vegas' role as the lynchpin within southwestward rail lines guaranteed that farmers would have markets for their produce, and pamphlets assured farmers that they need not concern themselves with lack of buyers.[34] Boosters pointed to Las Vegas' large ice factory and its placement along the railroad to show Las Vegas' preferred location and its advantage of "being twenty-four hours nearer the Eastern markets than the peach-growing sections of California." Further yet, the railroad similarly offered cattlemen new markets for sale and also allowed the valley to become a fattening station for horses sent from throughout the Southwest, including "all the way from the Cache Valley, in Utah, to Los Angeles, … 400 miles nearer the market, to better advantage." With multiple railroads to service Las Vegas' farmers, including the Las Vegas & Tonopah, the Southern Pacific, and Union Pacific, one would never need to worry about having purchasers of the valley's exceptional products. With evidence of plentiful water, successful crops, and accessible markets, the valley was not in a desert, but was simply not yet filled with farms. [35]

Las Vegas boosters tried to reinvent the very meaning of what it meant to be in a desert. According to multiple pamphlets produced by the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce and printed through the *Las Vegas Age*, Las Vegas was a desert only in that it did not yet contain farms:

> A **farm** in a desert seems like an anomaly. Yet a desert is merely a country where there are not many farms. All the world was "desert" until the hand of man made it productive. In this sense, and this only, Nevada is a desert.[36]

[34] For more on regional specialization, marketing, shipment, and processing of fruit and vegetable crops in CA, see Steven Stoll, *The Fruits of Natural Advantage: Making the Industrial Countryside in California*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).
[35] "Where Farming Pays," 20–3.
[36] "Semi-Tropical Nevada," 3, emphasis in original; "Where Farming Pays," 5.

Boosters suggested that the desert was best known for its mines, because "a mine in a desert is romantic, alluring. It gets the money," but that the valley would cease to be a desert with an influx of farmers.[37] Despite questions as to whether Las Vegas was a desert as defined by annual rainfall, the Las Vegas Valley would cease to be a desert once settlers wised up and moved into a land of seemingly endless potential. With the productive nature of the valley supposedly proven, it was up to future settlers to extend its reach. The desert was a perfect place to take up a homestead, and in doing so, farmers would turn a desert valley into a proper valley filled with farms. The Las Vegas Valley would be best known for its meadows, not its sandy loam.[38]

The writers of promotional material for the Las Vegas Valley promised potential settlers the world. There would be plenty of water for agricultural purposes, and what pure and tasteful water it would be. All crops, from peaches to alfalfa to cotton, could and would be grown in the valley. Horses, hogs, and poultry were all sources of seemingly endless profits. The trains placed Las Vegas' within reach of eastern markets. By championing the successful nature of seemingly every agricultural venture, prospective settlers could be convinced that they would thrive regardless of what project they undertook. The world was the settler's oyster, as long as they were willing to buy the ticket, take the ride, and farm in the Las Vegas Valley.

Farming was not the only advantage worthy of advertisement within the Las Vegas Valley. Across western promotional material, communities worked to make themselves stand out, both as farming and cultural centers. With every community promoting its environment as extraordinary, boosters needed to contrast their cultural infrastructure and proclivities with the relative backwardness of Las Vegas' neighbors. Las Vegas, with its wide streets, shining

[37] "Semi-Tropical Nevada," 15.
[38] "Las Vegas" means "the meadows" in Spanish.

courthouse, and new schoolhouse, seized on its developmental advantages over competing towns.[39]

Following the rise of photojournalism during coverage of World War I, boosters increasingly used pictures highlighting cultural amenities to sell newly developed lands. One 1927 pictorial booklet, "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada," used photographs to highlight the development of Las Vegas.[40] Introducing the reader to the region with promises of good weather, prime soil, and mineral wealth, this booklet quickly turned to a demonstration of Las Vegas' superior cultural infrastructure. The first picture inside this large pictorial-style booklet is of the courthouse. The building's style, highlighted by rusticated lower arches, demonstrated both the stability of the state and the modernity of the city. Additionally, the picture is captioned "The Court House, Las Vegas, Nevada, $100,000 cost," proving Las Vegas' willingness to spend on the internal development of the city. Interestingly, this pamphlet inflated the cost of the grey marble-lined courthouse from $75,000 as published in pamphlets a decade earlier. Las Vegas was no backwater, but a well-funded cultural jewel shining in the desert between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles.[41]

Las Vegans claimed all of the conveniences of a modern city. Paved, well-lit roads provided an efficient, modern grid for the townsite. Local telephone systems, "a fine sewer system" and "unexcelled" sanitary conditions all pointed to Las Vegas' modernity. Local homes were "unusually attractive" and the entire city was "bowered in shade trees," a necessary claim to downplay concerns about the sun and heat. Farming may have offered the most obvious

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[39] Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 35–41; Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, 29–34.
[40] For more on the Edenic visions of gardens making progressive societies, see Douglas C. Sackman, "A Garden of Worldly Delights," in in *Land of Sunshine: The Environmental History of Greater Los Angeles,* Greg Hise and William Deverell, eds. (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2005): 245-266, 329-334.
[41] "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada," 1–16; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada: A Brief Review of Climate, Resources, Growth, Opportunities," 15.

economic motivation for bringing people to the valley, but Las Vegas' infrastructure and cultural resources would keep the newly arrived in the region.

Like elsewhere across the West, Las Vegan promotional material featured examples of investment in education, promising both concern for the present and foresight to the future. Pictures of the recently built public school adorned many pamphlets, often featuring images of children at play and in class. Other pamphlets proved the importance of education to city by noting that both the grammar school and high school occupied entire blocks. Pointing to the $35,000 cost of the grammar school showed the meaningful investment behind platitudes supporting education. Promoters also endorsed the "high character" of Las Vegas' teachers and that the school managed to deploy a thirty-student strong, "excellent brass band." All of these descriptions point to the schools being well equipped and sufficient for the support of arriving settlers. [42]

Pamphlets describing early twentieth-century Las Vegas promoted the town as a center of metropolitan activity. Las Vegas' cultural infrastructure went beyond schools and courthouses. There was an "opera house, [and] business blocks of substantial build and fine finish." As of 1914, there were three church organizations, all offering regular services. The city maintained a public library for the "benefit of the people." A hospital, many fraternal organizations, and lively shops all proved Las Vegas' eminence among the cities of the West. Las Vegas offered "churches clubs, schools, associations, and activities that make a LIVE MODERN COMMUNITY." Although located far from the next major city, Las Vegas offered all of the

[42] Wrobel, 39, 62-3; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada: A Brief Review of Climate, Resources, Growth, Opportunities," 13-15; "Semi-Tropical Nevada," 30.

cultural conveniences of New York, Philadelphia, or San Francisco. It also offered natural conditions and "inspiring scenery" which other, more developed, urban spaces could not.[43]

Broadening its appeal, promoters of the Las Vegas Valley tied the cultural importance of leisure to the valley's natural environment. Returning to the environment, boosters advertised the diversity of the Las Vegas Valley and the city's relatively easy access to other natural wonders, pointing to its distinctive ability to offer inhabitants some pieces of the rapidly fading frontier experience within a day's drive from downtown. Las Vegas' recreation opportunities revolved around the Charleston Mountains. The mountains, named by John C. Frémont for Charleston, South Carolina, in 1844, offered cultured Las Vegans a reminder of their city's natural wonder, with "invigorating mountain air, noble evergreen forests, ice-cold streams…[and] scenery as rugged as the Canadian Rockies and a vista across mountain and valley that seems to reach the edge of the world." Directly competing with other mountain resorts budding up across the West, Charleston Park offered "mountain scenery, in grandeur and sublimity… unexcelled by even the most famous resort of Tahoe." A mere two-hour drive from downtown, Mt. Charleston and its sister peaks gave Las Vegans a respite from any season:

> Las Vegas people can spend their summers in SWITZERLAND and their winters in ITALY or EGYPT without going forty miles from home or outside the confines of their own County.

If prospective settlers remained concerned with the summer heat of the valley, the Charlestons provided a welcomed escape in an unrivaled setting. Although the vistas and streams provided

[43] "Nevada: Las Vegas and Vegas Valley"; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada," 15; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada: A Brief Review of Climate, Resources, Growth, Opportunities," 12–5, 21–3, emphasis in original; "Semi-Tropical Nevada," 29; Moehring, 66–8.

Las Vegans with access to a natural setting of exceptional quality, the mountains offered other advantages beyond recreation.[44]

The Charlestons offered beauty, relaxation, and potential for power development. The earliest known promotional pamphlet called for development of "several small waterpower locations that can be made available." As of 1913, promoters predicted that "a power project, utilizing the flow of natural springs and steams in the Charlestown mountains…is practically assured." The Charleston range also offered 115,000,000 board feet of timber, an invaluable protector of the watershed and guarantor of commercial development. Lastly, the Arrowhead Trail offered auto-tourists coming from Salt Lake City "good assurance that they will be able to carry on their journeys into California without serious difficulty." That the Charlestons offered both recreation and development further supports Las Vegas' angling as a town with appeal for the settler, the investor, and the tourist.[45]

Between promises of mountain getaways, bountiful cotton yields, and tree-lined streets lay the heart of Las Vegas' appeal: ease. The environment, the soil, and the experience of earlier farmers all pointed to the lack of hardship facing settlers. Pamphlets claimed that only $2,000 was required for the average man to establish himself in the Las Vegas Valley. With low cost, helpful neighbors, and an agreeable climate, Las Vegas could easily put success within arm's reach.[46]

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[44] block quote wording appears, verbatim, in both "Semi-Tropical Nevada," 32 and "Where Farming Pays," 32, emphasis in original. These two pamphlets, clearly written by the same unnamed author(s), often share descriptions. "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada: A Brief Review of Climate, Resources, Growth, Opportunities," 17; Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 2–3. Today, with improved roads and automobiles, the drive to the Charleston Peaks takes forty minutes from Las Vegas' city limits.

[45] "Nevada: Las Vegas and Vegas Valley;" "Where Farming Pays," 30, 32; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada: A Brief Review of Climate, Resources, Growth, Opportunities," 21.

[46] "Where Farming Pays," 25–6.

Pamphlets promoted the climate as naturally healthful. Despite the fact that the auction of original lots, on May 15, 1905, closed early due to high temperatures, pamphleteers saw no problem with the sweltering desert heat. One pamphlet described the valley as a "POOR PLACE FOR DOCTORS AND UNDERTAKERS." For young and old, the environment was productive such that "babies grow fat on [the climate] – there never was such a country for babies." Another claimed, "Malaria doesn't exist," and that the heat was of such little concern that "nobody ever heard of sunstroke or heat prostration here." A third claimed "a temperature of 105 degrees in Las Vegas is endured with comfort…although a temperature of 85 degrees in any of our eastern cities brings great suffering." Appealing to prospective settlers coming from the eastern states and alluding to the lack of humidity, pamphlets claimed "The summers are hot – yes. But they are not as hot as Illinois or Iowa or Nebraska or Kansas or Missouri summers." Contrary to modern considerations of Las Vegas' heat, promoters framed the climate as one of the valley's greatest advantages. [47]

That the Las Vegas Valley was not a difficult site for settlement had been proved by earlier settlers. According to a number of pamphlets, "YOU NEED NOT HAVE HAD ANY EXPERIENCE" to establish oneself as a farmer. Las Vegas was unique in both the ease of farming its valley and the assistance from the local community. Unlike other communities, in which "it is not uncommon for settlers [of other regions] to waste their first year…doing the wrong things," boosters wished "to emphasize the fact that [struggling] is entirely unnecessary in the Las Vegas Valley." In looking for proof of such a claim, one must only consider the continued success of former settlers, "people who know the West and Southwest thoroughly."

[47] "Semi-Tropical Nevada," 13, 15–6, emphasis in original; "Where Farming Pays," 13, emphasis in original; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada: A Brief Review of Climate, Resources, Growth, Opportunities," 17; Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, 9-13; Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 13.

These earlier settlers, having "traveled over every State West of the Rockies looking for land," were so pleased with the local environment that they "selected the Las Vegas Valley as their permanent home because they have found it offers far and away the best opportunities for the man of moderate means." That there were farmers already in the Las Vegas Valley proved its viability as a farming center. Likewise, those already in the region "are kindly and hospitable to strangers," suggesting that any void in experience could be filled with help from the community. After all, "the farmer in the Las Vegas Valley…has fifty years of success from which to pattern his own efforts." The valley's viability had been proven.[48]

Las Vegas offered all that a settler could ever need. There was pure and plentiful water for crops. There was cheap land to be had, and trains to carry the products of one's labor. The mountains surrounding the valley offered unlimited recreation and potential for power production. The town itself was a cultured metropolis, offering schools, churches, and fraternal organizations. The older ranchers were quick to share, and the land agreeable. In wishing their valley to be "settled with progressive people," promoters of Las Vegas offered pamphlet readers the world. Unfortunately for both settlers and the aquifer of valley, more people bought into the promise of the Las Vegas Valley than local hydrology could support. [49]

Las Vegas' artesian wells were undermined by the very growth they helped fuel. Despite the beautiful homes, new schoolhouses, and a $100,000 courthouse, new Las Vegans still grappled with an inhospitable environment. How many settlers specifically followed the pamphlets to Las Vegas is difficult to discern, but the link between Las Vegas' rising population and the overdrafting of the valley's aquifer is clear. Between the publication of the pamphlets "Nevada: Las Vegas and Vegas Valley" (1909) and "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada"

[48] "Semi-Tropical Nevada," 26, emphasis in original; "Where Farming Pays," 8, 26.
[49] "Nevada: Las Vegas and Vegas Valley".

(1927), the population of the city grew from 1,500 to 5,500 people. The higher population strained the local water table. 6,400-acre feet per year was enough water to support the 1909 population of the valley. However, with an aquifer that could recharge a maximum of 25,000-acre feet per year, this nearly four-fold increase in population undermined the long-term sustainability of water use in the valley. The very arrival of settlers undermined the delicate natural equilibrium of the desert springs and aquifer.[50]

Promoters of early Las Vegas struggled to understand the hydrological conditions of their budding city. Earlier considerations framed the Las Vegas area as an oasis, but power brokers struggled to level their expectations with the conditions they encountered. Bracken's 1908 letter lamenting the oil in Las Vegas Creek places blame for the contamination onto the Union Pacific railyard manager W.C. Frazier, who insisted the railway would continue to dump oil into the creek.[51] Without a guarantee of "good, clean water for irrigation purposes," Bracken did not understand how he might succeed as an agriculturalist. Bracken, being untrained in hydrology, needed the help of experts who were in short supply.

The town grew without scientific studies of its viability. In a 1913 letter to railroad lawyer F.R. McNamee, Walter Bracken asked for help in discerning how the drilling of a new well might affect the townsite. Requesting the opinion of "an engineer of geological knowledge," Bracken acknowledges that "I do not wish to express a personal opinion in this matter for my knowledge…is very limited."[52] Despite his close involvement with the Las Vegas City

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[50] Cahlan and Jones, *Water*, 3–5; "Nevada: Las Vegas and Vegas Valley;" "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada." These population statistics are from the promotional pamphlets and may lack absolute accuracy, as promoters often conflated county and city populations so as to make the city seem more significant than it may have been. The 1920 census listed Las Vegas' population as 2,304, per Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 37.
[51] Walter R. Bracken to C. O. Whittemore (Los Angeles), 17 January 1908, Folder 14, Box 1, LVL&WC Leases on Stewart and Kyle Ranches/Las Vegas Ranch, Union Pacific Railroad Manuscript Collection (hereafter UPRRMC), UNLVSC.
[52] Walter R. Bracken (Las Vegas) to F. R. McNamee (Los Angeles), 29 August 1913, Folder S23-3-3, Box 13, LVL7WC, UPRRMC, UNLVSC. .

Commissioners, the Chamber of Commerce, and the local railroad – all of which promoted the limitlessness of Las Vegas' water – Bracken did not have the experience or training necessary to effectively gauge the town's water resources.

Tension between the railroad town and the budding city worsened the effects of drawing from the understudied springs. Bracken needed to balance the needs of Las Vegas' residents and their chief benefactor, the railroads. In a telegram from 1919, Bracken described a dire water situation to W.H. Comstock, President of the Las Vegas & Tonopah Railroad. Although the ice plant in town would survive a cutting of water while trains were filled, the cutting of water to the rest of the town "would mean serious trouble for the city main and should not be done."[53] If the town, considered necessary for the Salt Lake-Los Angeles route, went dry, the economic engine of Las Vegas would stop with the locomotives held idly in the railyard.

The boosters behind Las Vegas' growth struggled to maintain their towns' water supply. By June 1921, leaks within the water main paired with decreasing pressure from the overextended water table left the city high and dry. In an urgent telegraph dispatched to the Las Vegas & Tonopah Railroad directors, Bracken pleaded for immediate assistance, informing them that there was "no water in any second story building in town." Given that many of the two-story buildings were hotels, that the railroad needed water to keep trains moving, and that the residents needed water to survive, Bracken voiced concerns about the total destabilization of the town.[54]

Despite concerns about the lack of water in town, Bracken remained optimistic if not quixotic. By November 1921, the drilling of another well alleviated Bracken's summertime concerns. Writing to Union Pacific Vice President E.E. Calvin, Bracken described the security

[53] Walter R. Bracken (Las Vegas) to W. H. Comstock (Los Angeles), 3 July 1919, Folder W23-3-3, Box 13, LVL&WC, UPRRMC, UNLVSC.
[54] Walter R. Bracken (Las Vegas) to W. H. Comstock and C. F. Miller (Los Angeles), 11 June 1921, Folder W23-3-3, Box 13, LVL&WC, UPRRMC, UNLVSC.

provided by the new well and doubted that the town would exhaust its water supply. Enclosing pictures of the new, bursting well, Bracken remarked, "I do not believe it will be possible to ever pump the well dry. This well will prove quite an asset in any time of trouble without springs or pipe line."[55]

The trouble that Bracken described arrived two years later, and the water situation became even more drastic. In 1923, mayor pro tempore W.H. Dentner wrote to Bracken, by then appointed to the position of vice president of the Las Vegas Land & Water Company. Despite earlier pamphlets' claims of a seemingly inexhaustible supply of usable water, Dentner sought guidance, as "one of the most vital and pressing questions confronting the City of Las Vegas is the matter of an increase of water supply and the extension of the water mains to subdivisions which are very badly in need of water." The more recently settled "are now complaining that they have not water enough for family use."[56] The water, despite boosters' best wishes, could not "meet all demands made upon it." Dentner sought advice from the man who controlled the spigot for how to solve a problem that was not supposed to exist.[57]

Bracken's response to Dentner showed his own growing awareness of the precarious nature of water's availability and best use. Bracken acknowledged Las Vegas' "limited supply of water, and excessive use in the summer time by each and every family…and the marked increase for railroad purposes, consume the entire flow of our springs." However, always the booster, Bracken remained focused on the future growth of Las Vegas, seeing water's use as central to beautifying the city: "we are making no request of curtailment of this [overuse], as we are very

[55] Walter R. Bracken (Las Vegas) to E. E. Calvin (Omaha), 2 November 1921, Folder R11, Wells & Spring Railroad Company, UPRRMC, UNLVSC.
[56] W.H. Dentner (Las Vegas) to Walter R. Bracken (Las Vegas), 20 March 1923, Folder W23-3-3, Box 13, LVL&WC, UPRRMC, UNLVSC.
[57] "Where Farming Pays;" Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 11; Moehring, *Resort City in the Sunbelt*, 6-8.

desirous of seeing the town beautified by lawns, trees, and shrubbery." Bracken worked to meet the expectation created by earlier pamphlets, an expectation naturally at odds with the arid environment. Pamphlet after pamphlet showed the homes of Las Vegas hidden under large trees, often using the same image of an estate at the corner of Fourth St. and Fremont, the main promenade. Bracken ensured deliverance on promises that the city was kept cool and shaded by its abundance of water. However, even Bracken understood that such deliverance would be short lived.[58]

Whereas Bracken may have anticipated later water developments, thus maintaining Las Vegas' viability as a settlement, other boosters discussed the insufficient water supply and sought to limit the influx of settlers. In 1923, five years before a pamphlet claimed enough water to support a population of 50,000, Union Pacific Vice President H.I. Bettis acknowledged the lack of sufficient and usable water. Writing to Governor Scrugham, Bettis implored him to stem further settlement of water users. Citing the demands that as of yet unimproved lots would have on the local water supply, Bettis warned Scrugham that "there is positively no doubt but that our water supply is only sufficient for the demands now made upon it." Bracken's superiors, despite their underling's desire to maintain the illusion of a well-watered oasis, appealed to the state government to either cease the settlement of lots within the townsite or to find alternative sources of water. Water use in Las Vegas undermined the long-term security of the aquifer.[59]

The situation regarding water in the valley became increasingly precarious. According to one estimate, by 1924, "the overdraft of the [aquifer] was estimated at close to 25,000-acre feet

[58] Walter R. Bracken (Las Vegas) to W.H. Dentner (Las Vegas), 26 March 1923, Folder W23-3-3, Box 13, LVL&WC, UPRRMC, UNLVSC; "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada: A Brief Review of Climate, Resources, Growth, Opportunities," 12; "Where Farming Pays," 28.
[59]"Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada"; H.I. Bettis to Governor J.G. Scrugham, 1 April 1923, Folder W23-3-3, MS-00397, UPRRMC, UNLVSC.

per year," meaning Las Vegans were withdrawing twice the water that was being recharged each year. Within a decade, the water table would drop up to 100 feet in some parts of the valley. Local power brokers, especially Walter Bracken, sought to bury information regarding both the insufficient supply of water and its lack of purity.[60]

Crossing the line from ambivalence to dishonesty, Walter Bracken actively misled residents and potential settlers as to the purity of the valley's water. Back in 1909, the state called for an analysis of the water being supplied to residents. After sending a sample to the University of Nevada-Reno, Bracken bragged to C.O. Whittemore, president of the Las Vegas Land and Water Company, an administrative subsidiary owned and operated by the Union Pacific, that the test results were a guaranteed pass: "I took particular care in preparing the demijohn and rinsed it out many times with boiling water, so that it would be absolutely pure." When the expected positive analysis was returned, citing the water as "excellent for domestic, and as well, general industrial purposes," Whittemore and Bracken conspired to deceive the public. Advised by Whittemore to spread the analysis results to local papers, for the purpose of quieting "any fears there may be among the water users of Las Vegas to the purity of the water being furnished them," Bracken went a step further and pasted the water analysis letter onto a street-facing window of the post office. Bracken and Whittemore would not have the customer base of the Las Vegas Land and Water Company learn that their water was contaminated, despite Bracken's own documented concerns about oil in the water.[61]

Bracken, himself an investor in local agriculture, worried about the valley's water quality. In 1908, just a year before he doctored water analysis samples, Bracken threatened to invalidate his lease with the Las Vegas Land and Water Company. After losing an entire crop of

[60] Cahlan and Jones, *Water*, 5.
[61] Ibid., 42–5.

hay, Bracken suspected oil contamination in the water of the valley. Writing to Whittmore, Bracken lamented his troubles and accused the Land and Water Company, owned by the Union Pacific, of not sufficiently addressing oil in the water. According to Bracken, "it is an undisputed fact that the amount of oil that is flowing down the waters of this creek will eventually destroy not only all of the hay crop, but all of the vegetation, and fruit trees at the ranch." Bracken was convinced there was oil in the water. Others agreed. J.T. McWilliams, founder of a competing Las Vegas townsite and frequent critic of the Land and Water Company, sent an additional sample for analysis. The hydrologist at the University of Nevada-Reno concluded "this water is contaminated and should be regarded with suspicion." Unfortunately for settlers struggling with contamination in their water, the Clark County Commission, headed by local real estate, railroad, and mining interests, disregarded the McWilliams complaint. The power brokers of early Las Vegas buried critical reports while professing neutrality.[62]

The Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce sold a dream but claimed impartiality. Seeking to establish a "progressive… NEW GROWING WESTERN COMMUNITY," pamphlets produced by the Chamber claimed to have "nothing to sell, no land schemes to promote," and only aims of furnishing "free, fair and accurate information."[63] The Las Vegas Promotion Society, a forerunner to the Chamber, used the motto "nothing to sell." But salesmen they were, selling a dream of farming Eden, a dream of a modern metropolis in the desert, and a dream of success limited only by the work ethic of the settler. The dream proved illusory, and newly arrived Las Vegans had to measure the truthfulness of the promotional materials that may have motivated

[62] Walter R. Bracken to C.O. Whittemore (Los Angeles), 17 January 1908, Folder 14, Box 1, SPLASLRC, UNLVSC; Cahlan and Jones, *Water*, 45–6.
[63] "Where Farming Pays," 34, emphasis in original

them to immigrate to the valley. Some, facing realities disparate from their expectations, must have wondered as to who had a hand in producing pamphlets.[64]

It is important to investigate the inherent tension between internally and externally produced promotional literature. In *Promised Lands*, historian David Wrobel assesses how pamphlets "were filled with optimism, grandiose claims, and magical descriptions."[65] However, boosters had differing motives for exaggerating the cultural and climatic advantages of their regions. Insiders, even those still relatively new to the West, may have been motivated by emotional attachment to the land and the communities which welcomed them. Outsiders, on the other hand, were driven by economic incentives to become "bold-faced liars selling promises for financial profit and nothing more."[66] However, outsider boosters did sincerely wish for the success of the valley, as a settlement holding up to its promises ensured future investment. Even if outsiders sought investment for their own gain, they did genuinely wish for people to settle the valley – the success of those settlers, however, was not the problem of the promoter. The role of the booster, from within or without, with community or profit in mind, did honestly seek the improvement of, or at least investment in, the locations being promoted. Las Vegas is a distinctive case in that the external and internal promoters were often one and the same.

Walter Bracken's multiple roles as Union Pacific agent, Las Vegas Land and Water Company executive, and local farmer exposes how the tension between local and external boosters obscures the motivations behind promoters of the Las Vegas valley. In 1908, Bracken complained to the Union Pacific about oil in the water destroying crops on a plot he had leased, presuming that local railroad activity caused the contamination. A year later, at the direction of

[64]"Nevada: Las Vegas and Vegas Valley."
[65] Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 20.
[66] Ibid., 6–7.

Whittemore, Bracken manipulated water samples sent to the University of Nevada-Reno so as to convince other settlers that the water about which he had complained was pure and usable. Bracken sought to both promote the continued settlement of the valley while also seeking to solve his own problems of contaminated water, leaky water mains, and insufficient water pressure. Later, despite being a local resident with a vested interest in farming, Bracken would call for the continued misuse of water for the beautification of the city. Bracken, as both Las Vegan and as external actor, could not solve both the problems of insufficient and contaminated water, on one hand, and the need for continued investment in the valley, on the other. The tension between external and internal goals could be embodied by one man, but could less easily be read in promotional literature, all of which claimed with sanguinity that the Las Vegas Valley was the place to be.

The dishonesty that historians "find" in early twentieth-century promotional materials may be misplaced. In truth, the people and promoters of the Las Vegas Valley believed in their community and environment, even if they presented opportunities beyond those attainable by incoming settlers. Some farms succeeded, industry grew, and people continued to arrive. Yes, they may have exaggerated the size of cantaloupes, and they may have minimized the effects of the summer heat or the less-than-ideal water quality, but not all boosters were equally disingenuous in intent, nor were all settlers equally helpless in confronting their new realities. There was genuine faith in Las Vegas' future role as a desert metropole. Historians must avoid drawing "direct casual relationships between the assumed malign intent of boosters and the suffering of innocent settlers," as this approach too easily falls into tropes of the dishonest

promoter pulling the wool over the eyes of the helpless settler. Drawing settlers, and being drawn by boosters, was a more nuanced set of processes than allowed by accusatory narratives.[67]

There were some truths in the promotional literature. Las Vegas did grow as promised. Despite a downturn in the early 1920s, linked to the Railroad Shopmen's Strike of 1922, Las Vegas was soon expanding its townsite and looking for new sources of water. The courthouse and schools did help legitimate the town as a cultural center, and Fremont Street became the epicenter of a rapidly growing metropolis. The Charleston Peaks provided recreation and escape from the city, and still do. The railroad did provide farmers with reliable markets, and the land was as cheap as promised. Although the city's population would outpace the ability of the aquifer to recharge itself, Las Vegas did have water in the first two decades of the twentieth century. While there was an acknowledged lack of rainfall, it was generally accepted that the aquifer "could be tapped with impunity for years with no danger of diminishing supply."[68] In some ways, their belief in enough underground water excuses their problematic claims of farmability despite precipitation averaging less than four inches per year. Armed with optimism and lack of scientific awareness of the aquifer's health, there was no reason to doubt the potential of Las Vegas. Rather than thinking of booster materials as a trap, historians might see promotional pamphlets as an extension of Las Vegans' hopefulness, an attitude shared by railroad bigwigs, local commissioners, and arriving settlers alike. These sentiments were commonly employed in western promotional literature.

Promoting the cultural facilities, prospects for farming, and exceptional climate of the valley, Las Vegan boosters fell into some standard tropes used by most western promoters. Their land was uniquely suited to the needs of whatever type of farmer might buy in; their climate was

[67] Ibid., 10.
[68] Cahlan and Jones, *Water*, 5, 35.

neither too hot nor too cold, but ideal for extended farming seasons; their towns had cultural amenities superior to the next town over, and their state had better access to global markets than its neighbors. Promoters needed to stress and exaggerate the distinct advantages of the region, as Wrobel explains how "to have offered lands any less fertile than that along the Nile would have betrayed a lack of enthusiasm on the boosters' part, and that would have been unwise given the ferocity of the promotional competition."[69] Las Vegas, like all western settlements with a publishing wing, was exceptional, and pamphlets claiming unparalleled advantages could have motivated some settlers to move to the valley.

While promotional materials probably convinced only a limited number of settlers to head towards the Las Vegas Valley, it is impossible to quantify how many souls moved because of the multifaceted nature of western growth in the early twentieth century. What we do know is that these materials were ubiquitous, and their production suggests that they played a part in the promotion of place. The archives say little on where these pamphlets were distributed, but some were available only "by request," suggesting that they may have played a hand in convincing interested settlers to come to the Las Vegas Valley. Nonetheless, the development of the tourist industry, the growth of the railroad, and the building of the Boulder Dam, starting in 1931, all brought people into the valley. Soon, there would be enough people in Las Vegas to far outpace the recharging of the local aquifer, the lifeblood of the valley's growth. But, in the first decade of the twentieth century, that seemed unlikely, and "unbridled optimism, exaggeration, and imagination were the keys to future kingdoms."[70]

None of this is to say that the growth of Las Vegas came without cost. By 1927, when one pamphlet claimed enough water in the Las Vegas Valley to support a population of more

[69] Wrobel, *Promised Lands*, 41
[70] Ibid., 71.

than 50,000, overdraft of the aquifer was already a major problem. The water table was tainted and becoming more elusive. Aware yet concealing of the valley's limitations, promoters looked toward the next chapters in Las Vegas' history: tourism, on one hand, and the Boulder Dam, on the other.[71]

Water defined early Las Vegas and the Boulder Dam guaranteed its future. Once known for its artesian springs, the valley has outgrown the promises of early promotional material. While power brokers in early twentieth-century Las Vegas actively tried to obscure the reality of the arid environment, historians benefit from promotional documents nonetheless, as they reflect sanguineness during the early days of America's driest city. This optimism justified the uncontrolled mining of water in the Las Vegas Valley, a prerequisite for commercial farming in the area, but also the cause of future aquifer depletion and one of the justifications for the later Boulder Dam project. Promising good, cheap land, unique cultural amenities, and limitless profitability, boosters sold their readers a vision at once both true and misleading.

Farming in Las Vegas was distinctive from other East Mojave farming communities. Only in Las Vegas did continued capital investment, fueled by promotional materials, force a community into existence. Quickly growing from rural outpost to desert urban center, Las Vegas serves as an example of western growth, growth limited by nature but advanced by capital, technology, and infrastructure.

Other Mojave lands, further removed from major rail lines and more susceptible to climatic forces, proved less permanent than Las Vegas. Settlers in rural outposts such as Lanfair, across the California-Nevada border, were less successful in establishing sustained farming communities. However, although communities like Lanfair did not survive beyond their initial

[71] "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada."

booms, these sites had lasting impacts on the communities they hosted. At Lanfair, a racially mixed community in the East Mojave, success went beyond crop production and must be measured not only in bushel by intangibles such as freedom and community. For at Lanfair, black homesteaders found agricultural opportunity, space for racial advancement, and discrimination.

# Chapter 2

"To Plough My Strip":
Black Community and Environmental Challenges in Lanfair Valley, California

> "The project of making the desert blossom as a rose, or (more prosaically) of turning desert areas into productive farmland, has held the imagination of western settlers for more than half a century."[1]

Howard Folke's first sight of the East Mojave Desert in 1910 must have sent a shock through the self-assured southerner. This landscape did not look like farming country. Where there should have been grass, there was sand; where there should have been timber, there was creosote, scrub brush, and Joshua Trees; where there should have been streams of water, there were sandy washouts. As a new African-American homesteader and mining speculator in the region, Folke worried that he might have bitten off more than he could chew.[2]

The East Mojave was the most recent stop in Folke's lifetime of migration. Born in Alabama in 1857, Folke had survived the troubling years of war in the South, and married Mary Appleby in Troup County, Georgia, in 1875 after two years of college. The West, full of opportunity and free land, beckoned to the Folkes as it had many southern families before them. The Folkes imbibed the spirit of the times and landed in Crawford Country, Arkansas, for the birth of their first daughter in 1884. As a postmaster, Howard worked across the state during the last decade of the nineteenth century but kept his eyes locked on opportunities farther West.[3]

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[1] Federal Writers' Project of the Works Progress Administration for the State of California, *California: A Guide to the Golden State*, (New York: Hastings House, 1939,) 31

[2] Title from Paul Laurence Dunbar, "An Easy-Goin' Feller," in *Majors and Minors* (Toledo, OH: Hadley & Hadley, 1895). Dunbar was a leading black poet and served as the namesake for Folke's Dunbar Water Co.

[3] U.S. Census Data, 1880 (Washington: GPO, 1880); U.S. Census Data, 1890, (Washington: GPO, 1890); U.S. Census Data, 1900 (Washington: GPO, 1900). Catcher, AR, one of the Folkes' stops on their way westward, has been characterized as "a racially charged community where…African-Americans were very unwelcome" in Joe Blackstock, "The untold story: African Americans once farmed the Mojave Desert," *Inland Valley Daily Bulletin*, 3 July 2017, accessed November 2, 2019, https://www.dailybulletin.com/2017/07/03/the-untold-story-african-

The Folkes soon answered California's siren call. By 1905, Howard, Mary, and their four daughters had landed in Los Angeles, enjoying a community centered around their church. As they found both social and economic opportunity in their new state, Howard and a local reverend, George W. Harts, looked slightly eastward to the desert for potential mining and farming opportunities. In April 1910, Folke and Harts advertised their newly formed Gold Star Mining Company in the *Los Angeles Herald,* calling for a permanent agricultural colony to support their nascent operation. Howard Folke understood that the remote nature of their claims, in the East Mojave Desert's El Dorado mining district, south of Searchlight, Nevada, demanded local food production and a sustainable working population if their company was to survive. The renamed Eldorado Gold Star Mining Company was to be the foundation for a community. The company's advertisements recruited young men for a college of mineralogy, workers to fill their mines, and farmers for an agricultural colony. The establishment of this colony, on government lands opened by the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1908, was central to the sustainability of the Gold Star operation. While the eastern Mojave's climate may have intimidated potential settlers on arrival, the company's advertisements claimed that "the Eldorado Gold Star Mining Company has hit upon the right location," Lanfair Valley, "for carrying on their quest for riches."[4]

The company's advertisements belied the environmental realities of desert agriculture. Lanfair Valley in southeastern California is a hot, dry place. Located in the East Mojave Desert, this sand and gravel-lined valley was home to one of the early twentieth century's most ambitious, albeit never fully realized, farming projects. Coming eastward from Los Angeles after an earlier migration from the South, black homesteaders such as Howard Folke hoped to

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american-homesteaders-once-farmed-the-mojave-desert/. Folke attended Talladega College, Alabama's oldest private historically black college, from 1872–73.

[4] "West'rn Tuskegee is Great Scheme: Colored Preachers Plan College of Mineralogy in Eldorado District," *Los Angeles Herald*, 24 April 1910.

establish a farming community that allowed for racial advancement and served as a counter to discrimination in the City of Angels. Enabled by a misapplication of the Enlarged Homestead Act and empowered by black nationalist ideas, the settlement at Lanfair constituted a racially mixed community and also served as a midpoint between the legacy of life in the South and the unrealized expectations of Los Angeles. Homesteaders of color found both opportunity and constriction in the East Mojave.

At Lanfair, the settlement within Lanfair Valley, black homesteaders used community to find both collective and individual security in an inhospitable physical environment. In moving to the desert, these African Americans followed famed educator Booker T. Washington's model for racial advancement which identified agriculture as a lynchpin in black self-assertion, speaking in parallel with the Country Life Movement. Working in community with each other, homesteaders of color found security and land ownership, even as they encountered obstacles such as insufficient rainfall and discrimination. Embodying what historian Emory Tolbert describes as a black pioneering spirit, the homesteaders in Lanfair struck a blow for personal and group independence.[5] Agriculture in the East Mojave, when viewed with hindsight, seems like a fool's errand.[6] However, in interrogating the folly of desert farming, one also sees Lanfair as a distinctive place of opportunity for black Angelenos, particularly those who had been born in the American South.[7]

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[5] The "black pioneering spirit" must be considered critically, as arriving African Americans were at once refugees from the terror of the South but also settlers, engaged in the dispossession of native peoples and lands. Thanks to Jennifer Holland, for clarity on historiographical uses of the term "pioneer."

[6] Historian Frank Norris adds a nuance to this folly, pointing to Lanfair Valley's relatively high rainfall compared to the rest of the East Mojave, and that "lack of rainfall was a major factor forcing settlers to leave the valley, but other contributing factors included conflicts with local ranching interests and the demise of the railroad in 1923." See Frank Norris, "On Beyond Reason: Homesteading in the California Desert, 1885–1940," *Southern California Quarterly* 64, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 302.

[7] Emory J. Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles: Ideology and Community in the American Garvey Movement*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980), 25.

Black southerners migrating westward did not forget what they left in the South, nor the many good reasons they had to leave. In some ways, the very act of movement was an assertion of black freedom. Under chattel slavery, white slave owners limited African American mobility. In the years immediately after the Civil War, many African Americans traversed the South as a means to test their freedom.[8] The act of moving was a form of resistance to the racist practices and limited economic opportunities for African Americans in the South.

The failures of Reconstruction pushed southern blacks into tenancy and sharecropping, limiting their avenues for economic advancement. Caught in a cycle of indebtedness, often to whites who they or their ancestors had once belonged, black southerners found their economic opportunities restricted at the same time that racial violence forced them to live under a system of white supremacy.[9] In his census-driven dissertation, historian Lawrence de Graaf estimates that "over 75 percent of [southern blacks] were tenants and nearly 42 percent sharecroppers."[10] This exploitative mode of racial capitalism reinforced, for many black southerners, the need to head elsewhere.[11] Violent actions by white supremacist groups and codified segregation further motivated an outmigration by black southerners.

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[8] Henderson H. Donald, *the Negro Freedman* (New York: Henry Shuman, 1952), 9 quoted in Lawrence de Graaf, "Negro Migration to Los Angeles, 1930–1950" (PhD diss., UCLA, 1962), 1.

[9] For more on racial violence and memory, see Karlos K. Hill, *Beyond the Rope: The Impact of Lynching on Black Culture and Memory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.

[10] De Graaf, "Negro Migration," 2.

[11] Thanks to Dr. Anthony Levenda for insights on spatial analysis. For more coverage of racial capitalism and conceptions of race, space, and place, see Walter Johnson, "To Remake the World: Slavery, Racial Capitalism, and Justice," *Boston Review*, 20 February 2018, https://bostonreview.net/forum/walter-johnson-to-remake-the-world. For more on black geographies, see Katherine McKittrick and Clyde Woods, ed., *Black Geographies and the Politics of Place* (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 2007); David Delaney, "The Space That Race Makes," *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (February 2002): 6–14; Katherine McKittrick, "On Plantations, Prisons, and a Black Sense of Place," *Social & Cultural Geography* 12, no. 8 (December 2011): 947–63; Clyde Woods, "Life After Death," *The Professional Geographer* 54, no. 1 (February 2002): 62–6.; Reconstruction was a contested process in California as in the South. See Stacey L. Smith, *Freedom's Frontier: California and the Struggle over Unfree Labor, Emancipation, and Reconstruction* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2013), 46–72.

Spatial restrictions in the South encouraged movement into other parts of the nation. The codification of racism and discrimination between the end of Reconstruction and the turn of the century limited black mobility. In some parts of the South, laws limited African Americans' access to most sites of consumption, amusement, and leisure. Parks, central to black community growth in the North, became loci of white supremacy.[12] Violence, especially in the form of lynching, became the ultimate tool with which whites would keep former bond people and their descendants in a state of fear. In the decade after the war, whites lynched at least 295 African Americans in just one parish in Louisiana.[13] De Graaf estimates that whites lynched 1,035 blacks between 1887 and 1896 across the nation.[14] Ida B. Wells, investigative journalist and civil rights leader, warned that the insecurity of black southerners worsened after Reconstruction.[15] Southern whites felt little compunction or shame for these acts of violence, particularly as rising psuedo-sciences such as eugenics and theories like Social Darwinism offered false confirmation of the inferiority of African Americans. Black southerners, such as Howard Folke, did not believe in their assigned inferiority and they sought to prove it out West.

Folke was in good company: black settlers elsewhere across the West had already demonstrated African Americans' ability to form communities for racial advancement and agricultural production. The African American homesteaders of Lanfair Valley fit within larger black homesteading movements that emerged, in part, from these southern conditions. In his study of social claims to property by black Georgians, Dylan Penningroth demonstrates that the

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[12] For more on the power of parks, see Brian McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope: Nature and the Great Migration in Chicago* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2017), 7–21, 34, 40, 48, 52–4. For more on local power elites using parks to control marginalize peoples, albeit in a northern antebellum context, see Catherine McNeur, *Taming Manhattan: Environmental Battles in the Antebellum City* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2014), 57–81, 182–219.

[13] Gilles Vanda, "'Bloody Caddo': White violence against Blacks in a Louisiana Parish, 1865–1876," *Journal of Social History* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1991), 374–5.

[14] De Graaf, "Negro Migration," 3.

[15] Ida B. Wells-Barnett, "Lynch Law in America," *The Arena* 23 (January 1900): 15–24.

importance of land ownership for the black community in the South predated the failures of Reconstruction and carried into the postbellum period.[16] According to historians Mikal Eckstrom, Jacob Friefeld, and Richard Edwards in the Winter 2019 issue of *Great Plains Quarterly*, black homesteading colonies on the Great Plains served as a means for personal and psychological security following the horrors of slavery and Reconstruction-era violence and oppression. As black colonists moved westward to escape violence, intimidation, and memories of bondage, they brought with them skills and knowledge from their time working fields as bondspeople and sharecroppers, applying those skills for the chance to become landowners. Many Lanfair residents of color, including the organizers of the black community, exemplify this westward movement out of the South. Other communities include Allensworth, California; Nicodemus, Kansas; Dearfield, Colorado; Empire, Wyoming; DeWitty, Nebraska; Sully County, South Dakota; and Blackdom, New Mexico.[17] Through their work on new western lands, black homesteaders established communities which reinforced their freedom.[18]

The African American homesteading community in Lanfair, with residents moving eastward from Los Angeles and Pasadena, adds an important nuance to the narrative of black

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[16] Dylan Penningroth demonstrates that former bondpeople engaged a national dialogue about the importance of land ownership in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. Dylan Penningroth, "Slavery, Freedom, and Social Claims to Property among African Americans in Liberty County, Georgia, 1850–1880," *The Journal of American History* 84, no. 2 (1997): 408.

[17] See Jacob K. Friefeld, Mikal Brotnov Eckstrom, and Richard Edwards, "African American Homesteader 'Colonies' in the Settling of the Great Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly* 39 (Winter 2019): 11–38; Beatrice Reynolds Cox, "The Archaeology of the Allensworth Hotel: Negotiating the System in Jim Crow America" (PhD diss., Sonoma State University, 2007), iv, 27–32; Timothy E. Nelson, "The Significance of the Afro-Frontier in American History: Blackdom, Barratry, and Bawdyhouses in the Borderlands, 1900–1930," (PhD diss., University of Texas-El Paso, 2015), 40–56; Andrew Poertner, "New Mexico's Blackdom Township: A Turn-of-the-Century Experiment in Multiculturalism," *Los Angles Sentinel*, 20 August 1998, A9. For a fairly exhaustive list of black towns in the trans-Appalachian West, see Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit*, 153. For a more personal account of black community formation during and after Reconstruction, see Kendra Taira Field, *Growing Up With the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 59–106.

[18] Friefeld, Eckstrom, and Edwards, "African American Homesteader 'Colonies,'" 11–38; Nell Irvin Painter, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas After Reconstruction* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977), 4–9, 108–9, 256–61.

migration and resettlement.[19] It deemphasizes the movement out of the South and onto the Great Plains while supporting Eckstrom's claim that "Black southerners' experience under slavery and vicious postwar labor contracts gave land ownership a different meaning for African Americans" than it carried for white settlers. While shifting the story of Nell Irvin Painter's *Exodusters* more than a thousand miles westward, the homesteading community in the East Mojave retained the centrality of land ownership to a larger narrative of black progress and self-assertion. It also considers that Exodusters responded to unfreedom across the country, along the West Coast as well as in the American South and on the Great Plains. For Lanfair leaders born into communities defined by slavery or the legacy of slavery, such as Stonewall Jackson from Georgia or Alfred Summers from Virginia, who also faced the threat of violence in western urban centers such as Los Angeles, the significance of land ownership and the personal freedom it delivered must have carried both economic and psychological importance.[20]

Black Lanfairians did not see their settlement as a transitional occupation. Having reached the Pacific and established themselves as members of a growing community in Los Angeles bonded by family and the church, the black homesteaders of Lanfair saw their farming experiment as a long-term project, with visions of replicating the multi-generation farms characteristic of white homesteads elsewhere in the nation.[21] These homesteaders of color may be exceptional in their hoped-for permanence, as black homesteaders on the Great Plains

[19] Pasadena, like Los Angeles, offered both opportunity and restriction to arriving African Americans. While a number of southern blacks moved to Pasadena at the turn of the century, de Graaf posits that "the city of Pasadena excluded [African Americans] from most of its public parks, and in 1918 set up an exclusive Negro playground to avoid admitting colored children to others." De Graaf, "Negro Migration," 22.
[20] De Graaf, "Negro Migration," 22; Homestead Entry of Alfred Summers, Serial Patent #858380, Box 30750, Shelf 1, Compartment 13, Row 9, Stack 15W3, Record Group (hereafter RG) 49, NARA; Homestead Entry of Alfred Summers, Serial #855808, Box 30630, Shelf 5, Compartment 10, Row 9, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA.
[21] There is no evidence for successful multigenerational farms, neither white nor black, in Lanfair. Some homesteads continued to be passed down to subsequent generations, but there has not been an active farm in Lanfair Valley since the late 1920s.

generally saw farming as a temporary expedient on their way out of the South.[22] Disillusioned with the opportunities afforded them by western cities, the African Americans of Lanfair may have reflected a larger shift in American social thought that reemphasized the importance of farm life for the health of both communities and for the betterment of one's soul.[23] Washingtonian black nationalism, set against a backdrop of sage brush and yucca plants, fits within, not in opposition to, a larger pattern of early twentieth century environmental and racial thought.[24]

The desire for black independence tied into burgeoning black nationalist movements, such as Garveyism and the inward-looking black nationalism promulgated by Booker T. Washington. With Tuskegee as a model of success, Washington's calls for black economic independence appealed to many people of color.[25] Answers to why African Americans settled the East Mojave are more easily found when contextualized within Washington's calls to "devalue any physical proximity to whites…and to strive for an autonomy that would insure their own survival."[26] Washington and other Tuskegee Institute leaders believed that black farmers' distinctive and generational experiences of farming in the South would prove "peculiarly advantageous" for a "permanently progressive [and presumably black] civilization."[27] By placing agriculture at the center of racial advancement, Washington was also in dialogue with proponents of the Country Life Movement and their own emphasis on the morality of farm-life. Further,

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[22] Eckstrom, 30.
[23] For more on the national anxieties about the closing agricultural frontier and using farm life to solve urban crises, see introduction.
[24] Kimberley K. Smith, *African American Environmental Thought* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 2.
[25] Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles*, 39.
[26] Ibid., 39.
[27] Booker T. Washington, ed., *Tuskegee & Its People: Their Ideals and Achievements* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1906), 10–1. For tension between Washington and Du Bois see "The Case against Washington–Untrue to Own Race–Losing Friends, *The Liberator* 9, no. 4 (December 1910): 5. *The Liberator* serves as the best example of a local "race paper," which focused their news coverage on articles that especially spoke to or affected the lives of African Americans. For more on "race papers," see Douglas Flamming, *Bound for Freedom: Black Los Angeles in Jim Crow America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 26–7.

Washington called for work and service as the core solutions to America's "race problem."[28] Invitations to speak in Los Angeles from the local NAACP, as well as articles written about prospects for "Colored California," illustrate the central role that both Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois played, despite their differences, in black intellectual movements of early twentieth century California.[29] Though diverging on their preferred methods, both Du Bois and Washington advocated for black self-assertion in the face of white violence.[30]

This need for self-assertion carried into the West, where discrimination and violence defined black urban life. Emigrants to Los Angeles entered into a charged racial climate matching other patterns of urban life during the eras of the Talented Tenth and Great Migration.[31] Not only did those newly arrived from the East and South need to contend with racial discrimination from white Angelenos, but they also struggled to join the pre-established black communities.[32] Immigrants from the South had to contend with old-guard black community leaders concerned with newcomers defiling a hard-earned reputation.[33] Local black

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[28] Booker T. Washington, "On Making Our Race Life Count in the Life of the Nation," in *Negro Social and Political Thought, 1850–1920: Representative Texts*, ed. Howard Brotz (New York City: Basic Books, 1966), 381.
[29] Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles*, 41; W. E. B. Du Bois, "Colored California," *The Crisis* 6, no. 4. (August 1913): 191–5.
[30] In his last interview, Du Bois cited his and Washington's different backgrounds as one source for their divergent ideas of black advancement. See Ralph McGill, "W.E.B. Du Bois," *The Atlantic Monthly* 216, no. 5 (November 1965): 78–81. For more on Du Bois' ideology, see W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction, 1860–1880* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935); W. E. Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg & Co., 1903); Dan S. Green, "W. E. B. Du Bois' Talented Tenth: A Strategy for Racial Advancement," *The Journal of Negro Education* 46, no. 3 (1977): 358–66. For an example of how Washington promoted African American education and advancement, see Washington, *Tuskegee and its People*.
[31] Douglas Flamming argues that the influx of southern-born African Americans into the West between 1900 and 1910 was not part of the Great Migration, but rather an earlier migration that he, borrowing from Du Bois, refers to as the "Talented Tenth Migration," a migration of "the more educated, ambitious, and affluent African Americans," that preceded the later Great Migration of World War One without much fanfare. Diverging slightly from Flamming, I position turn-of-the-century black migrants, such as Howard Folke, as a vanguard for the migration patterns of the first two decades of the twentieth century that also came on the tails of earlier Exodusters, rather than fully distinct from the later arrivals. By placing the Exodusters, the Talented Tenth, and the Great Migration on one timeline, the movement of black southern demonstrates both change and continuity at the turn of the century. See Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 45–6; de Graaf, "Negro Migration," 2.
[32] Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles*, 33.
[33] McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope*, 21, 45–7, 152–8. Tolbert describes the black community's "sedate" reputation. Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles*, 33.

elites demonstrated interracial paternalism and hoped to prevent further cause for white bigotry against all members of the black community. The emigration of Lanfair's community members may have been tied to prejudicial treatment from both established white and black Angelenos.

Black Angelenos faced prejudice and systemic oppression in the growing "City of Angels." Historian J. Max Bond pointed to many economic and social issues facing African Americans in Los Angeles. Although people of color seemingly lived in all neighborhoods of the city, there was limited opportunity for social mobility.[34] While African Americans may have attained the capital necessary to move into more respected neighborhoods, Bond argues they were often "unable to effect the change, because of race restrictions operating through public opinion and legislation."[35] As African Americans moved into white neighborhoods, "the whites viewed their encroachment with alarm," and soon integrated racial covenant conditions into the titles of urban properties.[36] Despite the high resale value of white homes, property owners refused sale to the black population, as "matters of rank, superiority, and certain factors of supremacy" needed to be upheld.[37] Historian Douglas Flamming ties the restrictive housing prospects for black Angelenos to the demographic makeup of other arriving Californians, namely that the large influx of white southerners created a social environment imbued with some of the same insecurities for black Angelenos that characterized the postbellum South.[38] Flamming,

[34] De Graaf, "Negro Migration," 21. "City" is an imprecise term for Los Angeles at the turn of the century. It was not Chicago, Philadelphia, or New York, all of which were more fully developed and demarcated from the local countryside, but it did have a substantial and skyrocketing population. Black "old-timers," to borrow from Douglas Flamming, recalled the mixed setting of early Los Angeles, where farmlands pushed up against neighborhoods that sat "knee deep" in mud and where oil wells dotted the urban hillsides. See Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 66–7.
[35] J. Max Bond, "The Negro in Los Angeles," (PhD diss., University of Southern California, 1936), 64. Bond's sociology dissertation is both illuminating and problematic. While his census-driven analysis points to the proliferation of racist attitudes in Los Angeles, Bond also makes less-substantiated claims, like the general attitude of self-hate by the black population. Bond, "The Negro in Los Angeles," 344–5.
[36] Ibid., 66.
[37] Ibid., 74–6.
[38] Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 21.

citing a number of violent responses to black settlement in presumably white neighborhoods, argues that "incidents of white resistance to black neighbors actually occurred fairly regularly from the turn of the century onward."[39] One black Angeleno, H.A. Reeves, claimed that "95 percent of the city's housing…was restricted against blacks" by the 1920s.[40] Forced towards the most marginal and inexpensive land and constricted by racial covenants, black Angelenos could claim only limited physical mobility.[41]

White business practices actively worked to suppress black economic advancement in the city. Using census data to measure black employment and vertical mobility, Bond points to the lack of high-level employment available to African Americans. Although Los Angeles led urban centers across the United States in black employment rate from the 1910s through the 1930s, Bond claims that "the occupational attitude of the white industrialists and the white employers seems to tend toward the restriction of Negroes in industry," providing a justification for the majority of black workers to be employed in domestic industries.[42] Woolworths department stores were notoriously adverse to the hiring of black employees.[43] Bond argues that white business owners relied on racial assumptions, such as ideas that "white workers resent working with Negroes" and "Negroes do not follow directions," to justify the non-hiring of black employees.[44] Although historian Frank Norris has pointed to the nation-leading rates of black home ownership and Du Bois lauded of black Angelenos' "efficiency and intelligence," racism

[39] Ibid., 67.
[40] Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles*, 34–5.
[41] Bond, "The Negro in Los Angeles," 103b. Douglas Flamming highlights that housing was available and "nice," "but there was a catch. The balance sheet on housing conditions was always qualified by the question of *where* African Americans were allowed to purchase homes in Los Angeles." Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 51, 66.
[42] Bond, "The Negro in Los Angeles," 200.
[43] Ibid., 280.
[44] Ibid., 191.

continued to define labor relations in Los Angeles.[45] Beyond the general lack of skilled laborers in the black community, Bond pointed to the black worker being "confronted by the problems accruing from a deep-seated prejudice – problems that grow out of a status frequently defined as 'inferior.'"[46] The lack of black teachers in public schools was one effect of anti-black hiring practices, depriving the black community of models for leadership.[47] Black Angelenos faced constriction in both the housing and labor markets. More so, white Californians used violence to resist what they perceived to be black encroachment onto their lands.

The Ku Klux Klan was a powerful force in early twentieth century southern California. Using verbal and physical violence, the revived Klan gained power through the 1910s. Although historian Emory Tolbert contends "western Klansman dealt more in threats than in violence," black Angelenos' practice of purchasing property wherever was available frequently placed community members within direct reach of the Klan which sometimes used physical violence in attempts to cement a system of white supremacy. Racially motivated violence against black Angelenos often went unpunished. When James Logan's burnt body was discovered on May 18th, 1906, and when a man named Godfrey had his head "crushed" following an assault by a white man on Labor Day, 1905, Du Bois' *Liberator* accused prosecutors of being unable to "rise above their prejudices."[48] Defensive posturing and attacks of black Angelenos was often justified through a defense of white womanhood, especially in racially integrated workplaces.[49] In the

[45] W. E. B. Du Bois, "Editorial," *The Crisis* 6, no. 3 (July 1913): 131; Frank Norris, "Racial Dynamism in Los Angeles, 1900–1964: The Role of the *Green Book*," *Southern California Quarterly* 99, no. 3 (Fall 2017): 256.
[46] Bond, "The Negro in Los Angeles," 199.
[47] Ibid., 275–6.
[48] "Weighed in the Balance and Found Waiting," *The Liberator* 9, no. 3 (November 1910): 2–3. Historian Frank Norris holds a contrasting view of black freedom and mobility in Los Angeles and has emphasized "that both black residents and black visitors to that region were not uniformly treated like second-class citizens during this period—unlike in many areas in the northeastern, southern, and midwestern states." Norris, "Racial Dynamism in Los Angeles," 252.
[49] Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles*, 36–7. For more on aggressive and violent defenses of white womanhood, see Danielle L. McGuire, "Negroes Every Day Are Being Molested," in *At the Dark End of the Street:*

face of attacks on black Angelenos, like one that left a branded "K" on the left cheek of Mrs. P. Reynolds in 1921, some resisted violently.[50] In many ways, the conditions born in the South and replicated in California, defined by restrictive housing and labor markets and direct instances of violence perpetrated by the white community, directly motivated arriving settlers of color to seek out independent and prosperous lives in the East Mojave. For African Americans leaving the South, opportunities for homeownership and stable employment outweighed the worry of Jim Crow following them West.

Howard Folke entered this scene of racial contestation and racial uplift upon his arrival in California. Arriving from Arkansas after an earlier life in the Deep South and chasing a vision of freedom in the West, Folke fits the immigration pattern of many black Californians in the early twentieth century. At the urging of John J. Niemore's *California Eagle*, which published encouraging stories of black migration and success in the urban West, African Americans left a southern sharecropping system that pushed farmers of color into poverty and headed for greater opportunities for land ownership and independence in California.[51] The movement westward was a visible and physical means of freedom; in the words of one historian of black Los Angeles, "one way to get free is to get gone."[52] The Folkes were among the multitudes chasing opportunity in the Golden State.

The Folkes arrived in California by 1905 and got to work, quickly falling in with George W. Harts, reverend at the First African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church of Pasadena.

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*Black Women, Rape, and Resistance – A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* (New York: Vintage Books, 2010), 48–83.

[50] *California Eagle*, 29 October 1921, 1.

[51] Emory Tolbert, "Outpost Garveyism and the UNIA Rank and File," *Journal of Black Studies* 5, no. 3 (March 1975): 242.

[52] Flamming, *Bound for Freedom*, 35–6. Flamming contends that the movement westward was also time sensitive, as turn-of-the-century southern blacks worried about the West becoming a new South, replicating their inferior social status from the South.

Together, they formed the Gold Star Mining Company, a black mining enterprise with interests in the East Mojave. Soon renamed the Eldorado Gold Star Mining Company, the firm hopped on the bonanza of the Eldorado mining district near Searchlight, Nevada, later home of Senator Harry Reid. The Gold Star Company was distinctive in that it was underwritten entirely by black capital and organized by leading members of Los Angeles' and Pasadena's AME community. An outlier due to its racial composition, the Gold Star Company saw potential for mining profits, but "stranger, too," as the *Los Angeles Herald* described its efforts, leading men within the organization also planned for an industrial training school using the language of a "western Tuskegee" and visions of a "negro colony." [53]

[53] "West'rn Tuskegee is Great Scheme," 2; "Colored Men Develop Mine at Searchlight," *Los Angeles Herald,* 16 April 1910, 13; "Negro Colony Planned Near San Bernardino," *Santa Ana Register*, 10 January 1911, 4.

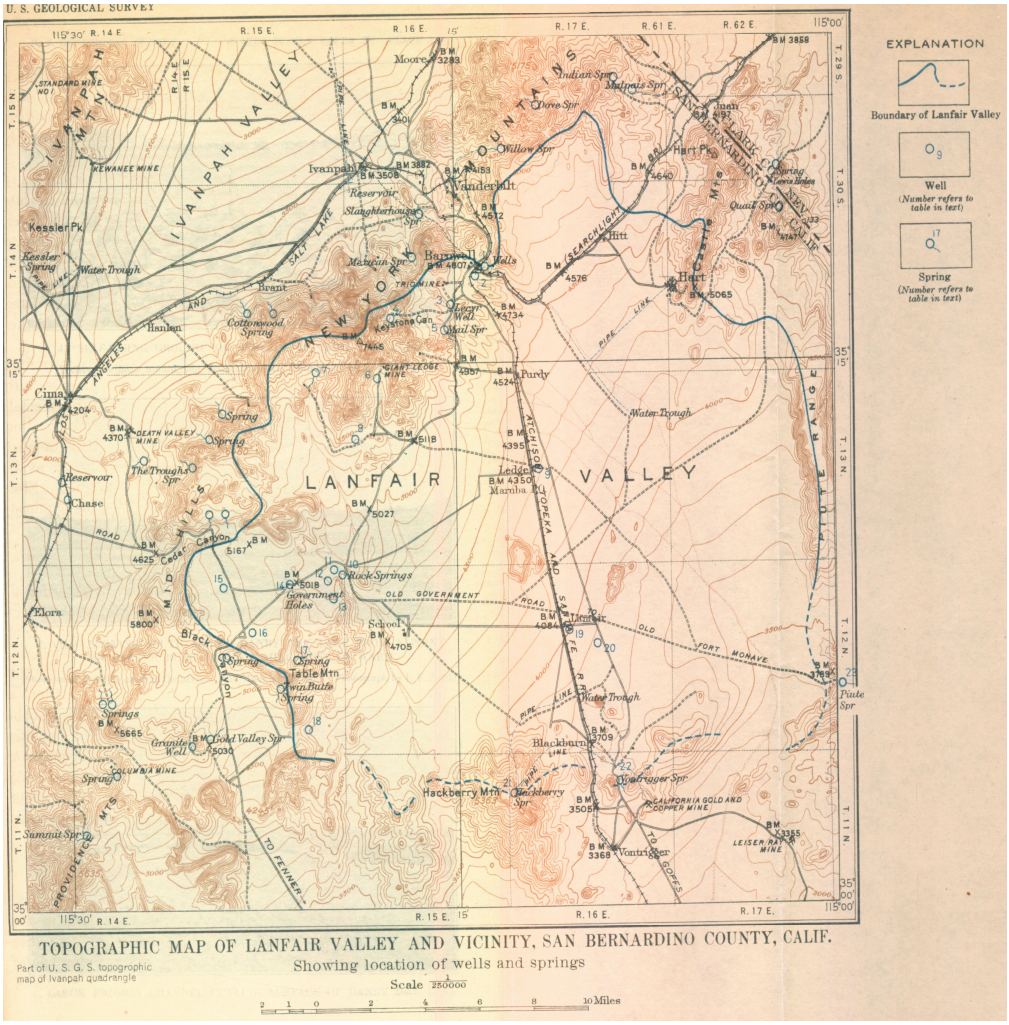


Figure 3: Hydrology of Lanfair Valley. Note the lack of springs within the valley's interior, not one was owned or operated by African American homesteaders. From David G. Thompson, *The Mohave Desert Region, CA*, U.S.G.W. WSP 578 (Washington: GPO, 1929), Plate 33.

The language of Tuskegee deserves some consideration. Howard Folke promoted a colony and western school in the same vein as the Tuskegee Institute founded by Washington. Folke hoped that the East Mojave's industrial school would teach young black men the sciences of metallurgy and mining while also intending "to follow the great educator of our race, Booker T. Washington, in making our boys practical tillers of the soil."[54] The model of Tuskegee demonstrated how to make productive the agricultural skills and knowledge learned in the South,

[54] "West'rn Tuskegee is Great Scheme," 2

and Folke appealed to black Angelenos' need for work and want of education.[55] Providing agricultural education for men of color, Folke and Washington alike envisioned "the Negro's most inviting [opportunity] for taking the rudimentary elements that ultimately make for a permanently progressive civilization."[56] Farming, distinctively promoted during the Progressive Era, was to help fulfill visions of black racial advancement.

During the Progressive Era, western lawmakers and westward migrants, both black and white, put their faith in the envirotechnical innovations of dry farming experts. Motivated by dry-farming literature from Hardy Webster Campbell, John Widtsoe, and Liberty Hyde Bailey, thousands of Americans took up homesteads in the semi-arid West.[57] As choice lands became fewer and farther between, western lawmakers led by Frank Mondell helped pass the Enlarged Homestead Act of 1909, promising future homesteaders the land required to successfully dry-farm even in the West's most arid environments. Generally, farming was a good economic proposition: the recent creation of federal forest reserves fueled anxieties about the closing public domain, increasing the value of farmland; the price of wheat doubled between 1898 and 1909, climbing higher with the outbreak of World War I; and the report of the Country Life Commission positioned farm life as the panacea to urban problems.[58] However, despite hopes that dry farming might tame the Great American Desert, enriching farmers along the way, aridity

[55] "An Appeal to Colored Men," *Los Angeles Herald*, 1 May 1910.
[56] Washington, *Tuskegee & Its People* 10–1.
[57] See introduction for a more thorough discussion of dry farming, Progressive Era belief in envirotechnical expertise, and the Country Life movement.
[58] For more on motivations of dry-farm homesteaders, see Bowen, *Utah People in the Nevada Desert*, 4–5; U.S. Congress, Senate, Country Life Commission, *Report of the Country Life Commission*, 60th Cong., 2d sess., 1909, S. Doc. 705 https://www.fca.gov/template-fca/about/Report_of_the_Country_Life_Commission.pdf; Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains, 1900–1925*, 16–20; Stanford J. Layton, "The Politics of Homesteading in the Early Twentieth-Century American West: The Origin and Supersession of the Enlarged Homestead Act and the Stock Raising Homestead Act" (PhD. diss., University of Utah, 1972), 8–36.

in the West often undermined the successfulness of underprepared homesteaders.[59] For some African Americans, success or failure was not measured only in bushels harvested from their homestead but also by their own self-sufficiency and physical distance from the South. Washington, promoting a black nationalist ideology that paralleled the conclusions of the Country Life Movement, considered the moral benefits of rural living.

Howard Folke seconded Washington's call to tie racial advancement to agricultural self-sufficiency. Washington believed "pride of race…is as much a part of Tuskegee's work as agriculture…or any other trade, and quite as important."[60] Folke echoed this sentiment in an article appealing to prospective settlers in the *Los Angeles Herald*.[61] Folke's vision of a western settlement for and by members of the black community aligned with early twentieth century considerations of "The New Negro, self-respecting, educated, prosperous, race-proud, [and] self-dependent."[62] Folke embodied some characteristics assigned to the New Negro, and sought to use racial uplift and self-assertion as the foundations of a new desert farming and mining community.

Howard Folke connected a vision of a western Tuskegee to the East Mojave's seemingly limitless potential and profitability. In advertising the black colony in the desert, Folke deployed many tropes of western boosterism. He described lettuce, radishes, and "other garden stuff" and that the crops' "rapid growth [had been] a marvel."[63] Despite environmental conditions unsuited for most crops and his own failed homestead claim, Folke suggested that "energy rightly used on

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[59] For more on homesteaders' unpreparedness, see Gary D. Libecap, "Learning About the Weather: Dryfarming Doctrine and Homestead Failure in Eastern Montana, 1900–25," *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 52, no. 1 (March 2002): 24–33.
[60] Washington, *Tuskegee and its People*, 23.
[61] "West'rn Tuskegee is Great Scheme," 2
[62] August Meier, *Negro Thought in America, 1880–1915: Racial Ideologies in the Age of Booker T. Washington*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1963), 259.
[63] "West'rn Tuskegee is Great Scheme," 2.

that tract of land will make it a great producer. It is perfectly suited to cotton."[64] To center the importance of the agricultural community to any prospective mining operation, the colony was promoted as if "the Eldorado Gold Star Mining company [had] hit upon the right location for carrying on their quest for riches and their plan to identify their race with the mining industry."[65] Mining, a distinctively western industry, paired with agriculture, the defining economic motor of the South, to create a distinctive economic landscape for African Americans in the desert. At a time with limited agricultural work for black emigres from the South, an agricultural community appealed specifically to former sharecroppers.[66] Howard Folke and other Eldorado Gold Star promoters seized on the language of "Western Tuskegee" to position their agricultural and mining enterprises as productive, opportunistic, and in line with New Negro ideology. Also, Folke and other promoters used that language to turn a profit. Similar melding of profiteering and community forming took place elsewhere across the West.[67]

Lanfair Valley, the eventual landing place for Folke and Harts' agricultural colony, existed within a larger movement of black farmers in California.[68] Southern California's most widely read black newspaper of the 1910s and 1920s, The *California Eagle*, advertised the Los Angeles People's Realty Company's calls for a colony in Baja California.[69] Similarly, in 1914, black Californians tried to settle the Victor Valley, claiming at least 20,000 acres of government

[64] Ibid. Unfortunately, the cancelled (unsuccessful) patent files of Howard Folke and other black Lanfairians have been lost, possibly discarded when California's archives were reorganized. Randy Thompson (Senior Archivist at NARA-Riverside) to author, 21 October 2019.
[65] "West'rn Tuskegee is Great Scheme," 2.
[66] Lawrence B. de Graaf, Kevin Mulroy, and Quintard Taylor, ed., *Seeking El Dorado: African Americans in California* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 5.
[67] Eckstrom points to the profit-driven motives of both black and white organizers, as "several of the Black colonies were initially organized as for-profit enterprises, as were some white settlements. Kenneth Hamilton similarly contends that "economic motives, rather than racism, led to the inception of western black towns," although I question his minimizing of responses to racism. Eckstrom, 23; Hamilton, *Black Towns and Profit*, 1.
[68] Delores Nason McBroome, "Harvests of Gold: African American Boosterism, Agriculture, and Investment in Allensworth and Little Liberia," in *Seeking El Dorado*, 173.
[69] Ibid., 149–180; Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles*, 38.

land.[70] Black entrepreneurs in Los Angeles saw racial advancements and personal profits in the fields of southern California, with one suggesting, "Lower California is a garden only waiting to be tilled by American genius to yield a harvest of gold."[71] The desert also offered space for acting out what historian Brian McCammack calls a black primitivist ideology, where the rural linkages of African Americans to the land of the South could be exported onto a western landscape.[72] Whereas Lanfair was distinctive for its high desert landscape, and convenient north-south running California and Eastern Railroad line, it fit into Washingtonian calls for racial autonomy and larger pushes towards black agricultural communities.[73]

Pulled to the desert by promises of free, farmable land and pushed out of the South and Los Angeles by discrimination and violence, black homesteaders in Lanfair Valley relied on one another to find security in the East Mojave. Community underwrote security for black homesteaders in Lanfair Valley. Placing themselves in a race-advancing black intellectual tradition growing out of southern California, black Lanfairians organized themselves around church and family. Using special environmental knowledge developed through agricultural work in the South, black homesteaders planted crops found throughout the postbellum Black Belt. Some found success only through a reliance on their neighbors for labor and water. Others used their community to reassert their value in the wake of racial violence. Community was foundational to African American homesteaders' security in the East Mojave.

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[70] Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles,* 39.
[71] "Edward J. Sullivan Paints Glowing Picture," *California Eagle*, 15 October 1921, 1.
[72] McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope*, 62–3.
[73] Norris, "On Beyond Reason," 302. The rail lines grew in spurts. The Nevada Southern Railroad Company laid the first lines through today's Mojave National Preserve in 1893. This company reorganized as the California Eastern Railroad Company in 1895. In 1902, the Burlington Northern Santa Fe Corporation (Santa Fe) took over the failing California Eastern Railroad Company. The Santa Fe built a branch line through Lanfair Valley during 1906–07. The rail lines would remain the possession of the Santa Fe line until economic conditions led to the termination of rail services to Lanfair Valley in 1923. See National Park Service, Mojave National Preserve, *Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement and General Management Plan* (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 2000), 235.

Some African American Lanfairians found each other through the church. Alfred Summers, pastor of the First AME Church of Pasadena, may have served as a unifying force behind the black community at Lanfair. Summers, born into a community defined by slavery in Virginia, migrated west with his wife by the 1890s. In 1892, Summers was counted among the trustees of the First AME church of Pasadena at the time of its incorporation.[74] In 1896, Summers was nominated as a delegate to the state's Republican Convention, serving Precinct 1 out of Pasadena.[75] Summers' high standing in Pasadena allowed him to organize new avenues to explore black economic independence. Having served in the Tenth Cavalry, Troop F, of the U.S. Army, the former Buffalo Solider likely carried a distinctive prestige in the black community. As the second-oldest member of the community at Lanfair, the sexagenarian served as a witness to no fewer than one-fifth of all successful black claimants' entry papers.[76] Summers' own claim was supported by four black homesteaders, all of whom may have followed Summers into the desert sun.

Alfred Summer's movement from Pasadena to Lanfair might have prompted others to follow suit. The formation of homesteading communities was, to borrow from historian Marshall Bowen, "anything but a random affair." Rather, in the East Mojave just as in the Great Basin and other desert regions, "migrants were almost always friends and relatives of one another,

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[74] "News Notes," *Los Angeles Herald*, 25 August 1892, 8, It is worth noting that Emory Tolbert lists 1888 as the establishment of Pasadena's AME church. Tolbert, *The UNIA and Black Los Angeles*, 40.
[75] "Pasadena Republicans: Delegates Nominated for The Convention March 9," *Los Angeles Herald* 26 February 1898, 8.
[76] Homestead Entry of Alfred Summers, Serial Patent #858380, Box 30750, Shelf 1, Compartment 13, Row 9, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA; Homestead Entry of Lila A. Smith, Serial Patent #914927, Box 33008, Shelf 6, Compartment 28, Row 10, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA; Homestead Entry of George Lindsay, Serial Patent #961829, Box 35307, Shelf 2, Compartment 10, Row 12, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA; Homestead Entry of John Richard Moulton, Serial Patent #869633, Box 31160, Shelf 5, Compartment 21, Row 9, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA. To finalize a homestead entry, a claimant needed at least three witnesses to support both the claimant's character and the state of the land in question, including improvements and crops. When homestead entries were completed, both the claim's location, the claimant's name, and their witnesses' names would be posted in the local paper, making a public display of community building. Most Lanfairians published their notices in the *Las Vegas Age* or the *Needles Nugget*.

ordinarily guided by a few influential persons."[77] Although promotional materials disseminated in newspapers and pamphlets may have convinced some settlers to head toward the desert, it was probably the advice of friends and community members, such as Alfred Summers, that led other homesteaders into the East Mojave.

As a pillar of the community, Summers stood alongside men like Howard Folke and Richard Hodnett. Richard Wesley Hodnett exemplifies how personal ties forged in the South brought new lives for African Americans in the desert lands of the American West. Hodnett and Howard Folke were lifelong companions. Like Folke, Hodnett landed in Crawford Country, Arkansas in time for the 1880 census. He had already married Amanda Appleby, probably the sister of Howard Folke's wife, Mary. Folke and Hodnett apparently moved in parallel towards the West. Years after arriving in California, they set out together for the East Mojave.[78] The two men served as incorporators of the Dunbar Water Company, a nod to Paul Laurence Dunbar, one of America's first influential black poets, and namesake for the later Dunbar Hotel, a cultural hub for Los Angeles' black intellectual movements of the early twentieth century.[79] In forming the Dunbar Water Company, Hodnett and Folke demonstrated their mutual interests in community formation and personal profit-making. Hodnett's close ties to Howard Folke brought him westward, and their enduring connection, in combination with the large Hodnett family, helped him acquire 160 acres at Lanfair.

Richard Hodnett would not have successfully claimed desert land without his family. Estella, Matthew, Ulysses, and William Hodnett, some of Richard's children, all claimed lands in Lanfair Valley with their father. Building the Lanfair community thirty years before entering the

[77] Bowen, *Utah People in the Nevada Desert*, 22–3.
[78] "Colored Men Develop Mine at Searchlight," 13.
[79] Anthony Charles Sweeting, "The Dunbar Hotel and Central Avenue Renaissance, 1781–1950," (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1992), 91–3; "Incorporations," *The Los Angeles Times*, 8 July 1913, 20.

East Mojave, the Hodnetts' familial connection would remain central to their later success in filing homestead patents. Richard's family provided much needed assistance on his Lanfair claim. His son, William, himself a father of thirteen children, lived a half-mile from his father. The two exchanged work for both of their betterment.[80] William and Ulysses also served as witnesses to their father's claim. Without familial assistance and masculine labor, some family members would have failed in their attempts to claim government land.

The farming experiment in Lanfair Valley demonstrates how masculinity informed homesteading efforts. Anna Jones and Estella Baker, the only black women homesteading claims at Lanfair, were both widows whose homestead patent files suggest that they only moved to the East Mojave to fulfill their deceased husbands' claims. Considering that the state only recognized slave families after 1860, the role of family and gender qualifies any consideration of masculinity in the desert. Most notably, there were significant ties between ideas of landownership, manhood, and self-sufficiency. Estella Baker's own claim demonstrates the significance of family and male labor to successfully homesteading in the desert.

Estella Baker, Richard Hodnett's daughter, relied on her father and cousins to watch over her lands and to care for her two young sons. Born in Arkansas but having landed in Los Angeles, Baker was a widow and mother to two young boys, ages eight and eleven when she successfully patented her claim in 1922. Over the three years of her claim, Baker was only present on her land for about two consecutive days every six months, as she "had to go to Needles[, California] and Los Angeles to work to earn money to support herself and family." Baker worked in Los Angeles as a general houseworker, but also kept a small shack in Needles to enable her employment in town, ensuring multiple sources of income for her family. Her boys,

[80] Homestead Entry of Richard Wesley Hodnett, Serial Patent 855809, Box 30630, Shelf 5, Compartment 10, Row 50, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA.

left on the land without their mother, were "never absent" except when sick and taken to the doctor in Needles.[81]

Luckily for Estella Baker, she was able to rely on her family to raise her boys and cultivate her land. In his witness testimony, Richard Hodnett claimed to see the children "300 plus days a year" and that "our families visit each other almost daily; I do most all of claimant's work." Estella's reliance on her kin enabled her success, as both of her boys survived the homesteading years and the government land office granted her claim on March 23, 1922.[82] Without her family and community, Estella Baker's claim would have surely failed. That her father, herself, and her sons engaged this homestead experiment serves as an example of Lanfairian African Americans achieving multi-generational farms. The cohesion of the black community in the desert was a crucial piece of their success. That cohesion also allowed for personal and communal security in the East Mojave.

For African American homesteaders in Lanfair Valley, conditions of financial instability, forced absences from the land, and instances of violence demonstrated their insecurity. Each manifestation of insecurity carried racialized undertones, as white and black homesteaders in Lanfair Valley faced challenges different from one another. Whites in Lanfair Valley, a mixture of merchants and established cattlemen using the homestead laws to acquire title to grazing lands, had secure financial and propertied capital, but black homesteaders were undercapitalized.[83] With sufficient financial security, white homesteaders could afford to stay on

[81] Homestead Entry of Estella Baker, Serial Patent #855811, Box 30630, Shelf 5, Compartment 10, Row 50, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA.
[82] Ibid.
[83] There were also less affluent whites in the valley, who saw their homesteading experiment as an adventure. Many of these whites were in some way connected to local mining and ranching interests, and used their time of employment in the East Mojave to also claim some free government land. See Maud Morrow Sharp, *Maruba*, *Tales of the Mojave Road 10* (Norco, CA: Tales of the Mojave Road Pub. Co, 1984); Bob Ausmus, *East Mojave Diary* (Norco, CA: Tales of the Mojave Road Publishing Company, 1989).

their claims yearlong, spare vacations for leisure. Black homesteaders, conversely, often took the maximum allowed absence from their claims out of need to work for money to provide for basic needs. In the Mojave, wealth informed the security of white homesteaders while blacks found personal security through their community. Despite issues facing settlers of color, black homesteaders saw in the desert a rare opportunity for self-assertion and community building.

African Americans entered Lanfair Valley with less financial security than their white counterparts. With the need for dry farming techniques, the rise in equipment prices, and the remote nature of western lands, the cost of western homesteading was great. Given the relative lack of accessible groundwater and the high cost of well drilling, hydrologist David Thompson warned in the late 1920s that "no one should begin to drill a well unless he is prepared to go to a depth of 300 to 500 feet." The great cost of well drilling was especially prohibitive to homesteaders of color, none of whom made more than $1,100 worth of improvements to their plots.[84]

White homesteaders occasionally took leaves from their land, often citing leisure as the justification for their absences. Ernest Lanfair, Massachusetts native, Searchlight merchant, and namesake of Lanfair Valley, twice took leaves. During his first, he spent a week at the San Diego Exposition. In the second, he took a vacation on the Pacific coastline. With more than $7,000 in improvements to his claimed lands, Ernest Lanfair must have felt confident that his homestead could survive a few days without him.[85]

Black homesteaders in Lanfair frequently took leave from their lands as well, but pointed to a need for greater financial security as the justification for their time away. Stonewall Jackson,

[84] Thompson *The Mohave Desert Region, California*, U.S.G.S. WGSP-578, 672.
[85] Final Proof, Homestead Entry of Ernest Lanfair, Serial Patent #800076, Box 28447, Shelf 2, Compartment 3, Row 8, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA.

born in Georgia in 1861, and his wife Ethel, three decades his junior, took numerous leaves of absence "to work to earn money to live on."[86] The undercapitalization of black homesteaders is glaring when compared to other homesteaders across the West, especially their white neighbors at Lanfair. The Jacksons, having moved most recently from Los Angeles, returned to the coast to work whenever and wherever was possible. Like other black homesteaders in the East Mojave, the Jacksons may have been the victims of arson, as their house burned down, taking with it "all the contents provisions, eighty dollars in money, clothes, and everything [they] had." The burning of houses was not uncommon in the East Mojave, with white Lanfair resident Bob Ausmus remembering a number of cabins "'struck by lightning' from cloudless skies."[87] Excepting the barb wire fence surrounding their property, the fire left the Jacksons with nothing. With the Jacksons' earlier property valued at only $800, their sudden houselessness redoubled their need to seek additional work.[88]

Other black homesteaders similarly left their claims for need of work. Of the twenty-five successful patents filed by black homesteaders at Lanfair, twenty-three explicitly list need of work and money as a justification for extended absences. Ulysses Hodnett, the youngest of the Hodnett homesteaders, twice left for extended periods, as "he ran out of money and had to go away to earn money to live on and buy supplies with."[89] Millard F. Bronson, a former slave from Georgia, left his farm for nine months "to earn money to buy food and to buy a horse."[90] Black homesteaders needed influxes of cash to upkeep their properties.

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[86] Stonewall Jackson's name implies his being born into slavery. I developed this presumption through conversations with Dr. Adam Malka, professor of history at the University of Oklahoma.
[87] Ausmus, *East Mojave Diary*, 137.
[88] Final Proof, Homestead Entry of Stonewall Jackson, Serial Patent #855808, Box 30630, Shelf 5, Compartment 10, Row 9, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA.
[89] Final Proof, Homestead Entry of Ulysses Hodnett, Serial Patent #855812, Box 30630, Shelf 5, Compartment 10, Row 50, Stack 15W3, RG 59, NARA.
[90] Final Proof, Homestead Entry of Millard F. Bronson, Serial Patent #464045, Box 15902, Shelf 1, Compartnment 22, Row 15, Stack 14E3, RG 49, NARA.

Howard Frank Carter spent considerable time away from his land. Carter, a homesteader whose file suggests that cattlemen burned his original claim, left for the legally defined maximum of six months in consecutive years.[91] He worked in nearby Needles, California to try to quickly rebuild what one witness, Charles A. Gayle, described as "one of the best homes in the valley." A man of exceptional standing in the community, Carter had the support of the local notary, Zachary C. Farmer. Farmer, sympathetic to Carter's sudden houselessness, wrote a letter to the local land office defending, "this man Carter–who is a Negro," as "so damnably honest in all of his dealing," and claiming that Carter's burnt property "had over a hundred and fifty acres fenced, and there [was] not a better fence in any country."[92] Despite his exceptional standing in the community, Carter needed to find work outside of Lanfair Valley.[93]

There was tension between the rural hopes that farming the desert provided and the logistical difficulties of proving up remote desert lands. The Mojave may have been marketed as a haven for farmers, but it was devoid of markets for one's labor. For white homesteaders, like Ernest Lanfair and George Carruthers, both namesakes of local valleys, their improvements and saved capital provided a safety blanket rarely shared by their black counterparts. Black homesteaders, in near constant need of work and money, often left for Needles or Los Angeles. To farm in the desert was to confront physical and financial insecurity.

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[91] Homestead Entry of Howard Frank Carter, Serial Patent #1039916, Box 39020, Shelf 5, Compartnment 28, Row 14, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA; Maud Morrow Sharp and Margaret Sharp Moore, *Maruba: Homesteading in Lanfair Valley* (Goffs, CA: Tales of the Mojave Road Publishing Company, 2004), 37–49. Although Carter's claim was targeted for his relative success, the archive remains silent as to whether race motivated the attack on his property. Cattlemen were similarly ornery toward the Alexanders, a white homesteading family in nearby Pinto Valley to the north. Ausmus, *East Mojave Diary*, 121–6.

[92] I choose to use houselessness instead of homelessness, as Carter's retention of his land provided space for a home, albeit one without his recently burned house. Further, Carter's near-permanence on his plot suggests that the burnt parcel remained his home.

[93] Homestead Entry of Howard Frank Carter.

Despite violent threats from the local cattle outfit and the existential threat of drought, African Americans in Lanfair used their community to find measures of security.[94] Without foundational community members like Howard Folke, the Hodnetts, or Alfred Summers, black Lanfairians would have relied heavily on white neighbors and the local hegemonic ranch, the Rock Springs Land and Cattle Company. African Americans shared labor, assisting one another in their claims and tightening their community connections. The extent to which white farmers helped their black neighbors is unclear, but the presence of both white and black homesteaders constituted a racially mixed, if not purposefully integrated, community.

Lanfair was a racially mixed community. In oral histories recorded by desert historian Dennis Casebier, neither black nor white homesteaders expressed sensing discrimination towards people of color. Hazel Waer Grady, whose white family homesteaded near Lanfair, remembered that the children of color were "just kids to me. I [didn't] care whether they were pink, red, or white." Grady further claimed that she "never heard a word" of regret about the school's integration from the adults. According to Grady, "[the black homesteaders] caused no trouble up there at all," and she fondly remembered "Mrs. Hodnett," serving local children warm biscuits

[94] While community certainly underwrote the black experience in Lanfair, the significance of community to farming settlements is not exclusively reserved for African Americans. White women in upstate New York during the nineteenth century used community and organizations to establish mutuality as an strategy for empowerment. See Nancy Grey Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), 275–88. Community was also central to the development and reproduction of Norwegian settler communities in the upper Midwest, with patterns of marriage and childbirth adding rigidity to community work roles as Norwegian immigrants transitioned to American life. See Jon Gjerde, *From Peasants to Farmers: The Migration from Balestrand, Norway, to the Upper Middle West* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 201–7. Community also helped define ideas of land and family for Swedish Immigrants entering the Midwest and how those ideas "describe the American outcome of the trans-Atlantic [immigrant] experience." See Robert C. Ostergren, *A Community Transplanted: The Trans-Atlantic Experience of a Swedish Immigrant Settlement in the Upper Middle West, 1835–1915,* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 245. The black reliance on community was not distinctive, but the degree to which they relied on each other was magnified by their limited capital compared to their white counterparts.

on their way home from school. For white schoolchildren, remembering their experience decades after they last visited Lanfair, the community was grounded in egalitarian principles.[95]

White homesteaders directly benefitted from their black neighbors. Hazel Waer Grady's father and John David Jones, white and black, respectively, shared labor during the plowing season. Settlers bettered their community by transcending racial lines that calcified elsewhere in the nation. Grady remembered taking refuge from a flash flood inside of the Jones' house during an especially strong summer storm. Despite mutual assistance in times such as floods, African Americans still suffered from inequalities.

The black and white homesteaders worked together, but black children bore the brunt of corporal punishment in the local school.[96] Although the school was integrated, the schoolteacher punished black children severely and arbitrarily. While some homesteaders of color remembered minimal difference in the treatment of black children by the "ornery old bitty" schoolteacher Henrietta Adams, others disagreed. Hazel Grady, who attended fourth grade at the school in Lanfair Valley, remembered how Ms. Adams would "take those little old black boys if they wouldn't behave and she'd just jam them up against the door and beat their head on it. Oh was she ornery." The punishments were severe, and the schoolteacher made use of the sharp end of the door jam to "crack their skulls." While white children also faced corporal punishment, it is the punishment of the "little old black boys" that hung most vividly in the memory of homesteading children, suggesting the inequitable distribution of punishment, possibly influenced by racial prejudice.[97]

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[95] Hazel Waer Grady, Interview by Dennis Casebier, 28 August 1991, Paso Robles, CA, Transcription unpublished and in author's possession, p. 47.
[96] Ibid., 46–8.
[97] Ibid., 82; for more on racial discrimination in rural western spaces, see Modupe Labode, "The 'stern, fearless settlers of the West': Lynching, Region, and Capital Punishment in Early Twentieth-Century Colorado," *Western Historical Quarterly* 45, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 389-409.

Segregation was a fact of Lanfair's early years. In some histories, the black community is given the name Dunbar and is treated as an entity separate from Lanfair. Howard Folke was the postmaster at Dunbar until it merged with Lanfair in 1914.[98] Despite being conjoined with the Lanfair post office, African Americans still needed to receive mail from the Dunbar side, at the back of the building. That one building serviced two distinctive populations exemplifies the segregated nature of the mixed-race farming community in Lanfair Valley.[99]

Discrimination against homesteaders of color also manifested itself through their silences. Ernest Lanfair hosted large May Day and Fourth of July picnics. Despite the interchange of labor between people such as the Gradys and the Joneses, black homesteaders were not welcome at the community celebrations. While Hazel Grady "never heard anybody talking about their color," she does not remember "any of them coming to any of our dances." Hazel did not remember people of color at their celebrations because the local social club, the Yucca Club, stated that membership could only be extended to "any white person in the valley."[100] Historian Eric Nystrom has pointed out the irony that "blacks and whites could plow together, but they could not play together."[101] The silent exclusion of black homesteaders

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[98] According to the Environmental Impact Report produced for Mojave National Preserve, Dunbar was a settlement founded by Folke and Harts "one mile north of the Lanfair townsite…in 1911…but the settlement was short-lived." See National Park Service, Mojave National Preserve, *Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement and General Management Plan* (Washington, DC: GPO, 2000), 238; Dennis G. Casebier, *Guide to the East Mojave Heritage Trail: Needles to Ivanpah*, *Tales of the Mojave Road 12* (Norco, CA: Tales of the Mojave Road Pub. Co, 1987), 159.
[99] Nystrom, "From Neglected Space to Protected Place," 32; California Voter Registrations, 1900-1968.
[100]Dennis Casebier, "Black Homesteaders in Lanfair Valley," *The Branding Iron*, no. 277 (Winter 2015): 5; Nick Ervin to Author, 21 October 2019. Casebier is a desert story in his own right. Founding member of the Mojave Desert Historical and Cultural Association (MDHCA), Casebier is the first historian to deeply investigate the black experience in the East Mojave. A prodigious self-trained historian, Casebier has spent the last thirty years compiling oral histories with people associated with Lanfair's farming experiment, creating an impressive archive of deep historical value. His personal archive and desert experience influenced a number of the works cited in this paper, including Darlington, Norris, and Nystrom. As a pro-ranching character, Casebier also organized the local resistance to passage of the California Desert Protection Act. Dennis Casebier, Interview by author, 19 March 2019, Bullhead City, AZ.
[101] Nystrom, "From Neglected Space to Protected Place," 32. It is worth noting that African Americans are wholly absent in a photograph documenting a 1965 reunion of East Mojave homesteaders, supposedly "the largest number of East Mojave folks ever photographed together." Ausmus, *East Mojave Diary*, 128–9.

suggests that the local community was not fully integrated, even if it lacked some of the overtly racist trappings of other mixed-race early-twentieth century farming communities.[102]

Racial divisions in Lanfair had a mixed effect. White and black homesteaders supported one another's farming efforts, but white community organizations excluded the local black population from celebrations. Despite documented cooperation between the white and black homesteaders of Lanfair, local newspaper coverage treated the groups as separate and distinctive.[103] Although neither black nor white homesteaders mention racial discrimination in oral histories, the school teacher's abuse of black children hung vividly in the memories of white settlers. Whether productive or antagonistic, the racial makeup of Lanfair did not dictate success or failure in the East Mojave, as interracial cooperation in the fields was insufficient for combating local environmental conditions.

Environmental realities underwrote all difficulties faced by African American settlers in the East Mojave. As noted above, Lanfair, California, located sixty miles south of Las Vegas, Nevada, offered an inhospitable environment. The valley's defining characteristic was that it is located in what historian Elisabeth Hamin calls a "true desert," an environment averaging fewer than ten inches of rain per annum. It was also a landscape defined by its ability to evaporate moisture more quickly than precipitation might fall.[104] Lanfair Valley appeared to have insufficient water resources to sustain a large homesteading community.[105] Nonetheless, the dry

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[102] Grady Interview, 47. Farming and mining were not the only black ventures in the East Mojave. In 1912, Dr. C.H. Duvall may have established an orphanage and school for black children. The orphanage, if it existed, closed within two years. See Casebier, *Guide to the East Mojave Heritage Trail: Needles to Ivanpah*, 153.
[103] "Desert Springs Support Cattle. Rock Springs Land & Cattle Co. Has Large Range and Many Cattle," *Searchlight* (NV) *Bulletin*, 22 March 1907; "Farming Section Being Tried Out. District Along Barnwell Branch of Santa Fe Gives Much Promise," *Searchlight* (NV) *Bulletin*, 28 July 1911; "Happenings Along the Local Branch," *Searchlight Bulletin*, 17 November 1911; "Will Plow with a Big Traction Engine," *Searchlight* (NV) *Bulletin*, 12 April 1912.
[104] Hamin, *Mojave Lands*, 10; Frank Norris to Author, 30 December 2019; David Darlington, *The Mojave: A Portrait of the Definitive American Desert*, (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1996), 10–1.
[105] Bard, "Settlement Pattern of the Eastern Mojave Desert," 13.

and hot valley, fenced in by the Castle Mountains and Piute Range to the east, the New York Mountains, Mid Hills, and Providence Mountains to the west, and Hackberry Mountains to the south, opened to homesteading in 1910.[106] David G. Thompson, a hydrologist for the U.S. Geological Survey, spent considerable time in the East Mojave and documented its limited water supply. A decade after the first settlers arrived, the United States government instructed Thompson to publish the brief report on the issue "because a large number of settlers have already taken up land in the valley or are planning to settle there."[107] The homesteaders of Lanfair Valley confronted sand-and-gravel rich soil and limited access to water. Despite practicing dry farming techniques popularized across the Great Plains and the arid West, homesteaders learned firsthand the difficulty of maintaining farms capable of sustaining the population.[108] As Thompson observed, the water of Lanfair Valley was overly brackish, inappropriate for domestic use, and buried at an unattainable depth.[109] Aware of the valley's shortcomings, Thompson questioned the validity of dry-farming activities at Lanfair, writing "The prospects of the dry farmer in the valley do not seem to be bright. At best, he will be laboring precariously in that borderland which separates success from failure," a borderland defined by local arid conditions.[110]

Lanfair received insufficient rainfall for dry farming. Studying dry farming practices on the northern Great Plains, agricultural historian Mary Hargreaves emphasizes the need for more

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[106] "Homesteading History in the Mojave National Preserve," Digital-Desert, accessed 7 November 2014, http://digital-desert.com/mojave-preserve/homesteading-history.html.
[107] David G. Thompson, *Ground Water in Lanfair Valley, California*, U.S. Geological Survey Water Supply Paper 450–B, (Washington: GPO, 1920), 20; David G. Thompson, *The Mohave Desert Region, California*, U.S. Geological Survey Water Supply Paper 578 (Washington: GPO, 1929), 662.
[108] Thompson, *Ground Water in Lanfair Valley*, 30–3; Thompson, *The Mohave Desert Region*, 662–75 . By "sustainable farm," I mean any farm that produces enough products (agricultural and otherwise) to provide sustenance to its planters, whether through consumption of crops or the sale of crops to local markets.
[109] Thompson, *Ground Water in Lanfair Valley*, 32; Thompson, *The Mohave Desert Region*, 673.
[110] Thompson, *The Mohave Desert Region,* 675.

than ten inches of rain to sustain farming, a bar not met by climatic conditions at Lanfair.[111] Relying on the incomplete weather records of the valley's namesake and first white homesteader, Ernest Lanfair, Thompson reported that Lanfair received between 6.63 inches and 14.40 inches of rain per annum between March 1912 and March 1915, with the latter figure well outside of regional norms. Both figures stood dramatically below the sixteen to eighteen inches suggested as the minimum precipitation necessary for agriculture by dry farming expert V.T. Cooke during testimony in support of the Enlarged Homestead Act in 1908.[112] In estimating local rainfall, Thompson concluded "the rainfall in the valley is probably about 10 inches."[113] Further, groundwater was most accessible at springs near the alluvial fans on the periphery of the valley [Fig. 1], springs that were under control of the Rock Springs Land and Cattle Company, which had little intention or desire to share with homesteaders.[114]

The Rock Springs Land and Cattle Company, founded in 1894, did its best to drive out the invading "nesters," a derogatory term for arriving homesteaders.[115] According to desert historian David Darlington, the Rock Springs Land and Cattle Company, sometimes grazing twenty-five thousand head of cattle over more than a million acres, exchanged some "national-

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[111] Hargreaves, *Dry Farming in the Northern Great Plains,* 11.
[112] Thompson, *Water Supply Paper 450-B*, 36; Increasing Size of Homestead Entries: Hearing Before the Committee on the Public Lands, House of Representative, 60th Cong. 11 (1908) (Statement of Dr. V.T. Cooke, Dry Farm Expert, Wyoming), 5. Cooke worked hand-in-glove with Frank Mondell, and went as far as to send the chairman of the House Committee on Public Lands a congratulatory telegram after the passage of the Enlarged Homestead Act. V.T. Cooke to Frank W. Mondell, 20 February 1909, Scrapbook 7, Box 7, FWM-AHC.
[113] Thompson, *The Mohave Desert Region, California*, 667.
[114]Sharpe and Moore, *Maruba: Homesteading in Lanfair Valley*, 30; Ausmus, *East Mojave Diary*, 126. Both *Maruba* and *East Mojave Diary* are memoirs that give readers some insight into the wider conflict between homesteaders and cattlemen. By "control," I point to the Rock Springs Company's ability to have company members claim homesteads for the purpose of breaking up their claimed lands into 40-acre plots and spreading those plots across the edges of the valley, at the alluvial fans where water collected. After the incorporation of the Rock Springs Land and Cattle Company, it "secured government patents on all permanent water on surveyed ground by use of Forest Reserve script." See "Desert Springs Support Cattle. Rock Springs Land & Cattle Co. Has Large Range and Many Cattle."
[115] The Rock Springs Land and Cattle Company was the result of a merger between George S. Briggs and LeRoy W. Blackburn. Briggs, originally from Needles, had established his operation with headquarters at Marl Springs no later than 1882. See *Revised Draft Environmental Impact Statement and General Management Plan*, 238; Casebier, *Guide to the East Mojave Heritage Trail: Needles to Ivanpah*, 129.

forest inholdings for a bunch of acreage over water holes in the East Mojave. With that and gunmen," the company controlled this valley.[116] The Rock Springs outfit, which monopolized springs on the alluvial slopes on the valley's wetter, western edge, sometimes refused to sell water to homesteaders. Of the wells in the valley's interior, not one was owned or operated by African American homesteaders.[117] Without opportunities for irrigation, a refusal to service water would be a death blow to water-hungry farms, although the water from Rock Springs was mostly reserved for household uses. Historian Eric Nystrom has indicated that "cattle trampled carefully nurtured crops" and "the cattle company brought in hired thugs, and rumors swirled claiming some homesteaders' cabins burned to ashes under mysterious circumstances."[118] The Rock Springs (or "88") outfit justified these abuses as retribution for homesteaders' theft of beef. In 1925, a shootout between a homesteader and a Rock Springs cattleman left both men dead. Newspaper reports suggested that this duel stemmed from an earlier conflict over spring access.[119] While the Rock Springs Land and Cattle Company did its best to drive out the

[116] Local historian Dennis Casebier claims that the Rock Springs outfit was at one time second only to Miller-Lux in both heads of cattle and grazing range. Casebier Interview. When the National Forests were formed, the government issued "forest script" to inholders, or those who owned private land within the newly defined forests. The inholders were allowed to exchange this script for acreage on other, non-forest lands. Through the accumulation and exchange of forest script, the Rock Springs outfit came to dominate various springs in the East Mojave. Casebier, *Guide to the East Mojave Heritage Trail, Needles to Ivanpah*, 27, 131; for more on cattle operations using intimidation campaigns, see Leisl Carr Childers, *The Size of the Risk: Histories of Multiple Use in the Great Basin*, Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 2015, 15-53.
[117] Bard, "Settlement Patterns of the eastern Mojave Desert," 95.
[118] Nystrom, "From Neglected Space to Protected Place, 32.
[119] "Two Die in Old Western Style," *Los Angeles Times*, 10 November 1925, 3; Earl E. Buie, "'Man Who Did Not Run' and Foe Aim True: Another Dramatic Chapter of Desert History is Written with Lead," *San Bernardino County Sun*, 10 November 1925, 1–2; "Enigma Added to Desert Duel," *Los Angeles Times*, 11 November 1925, 5; "Range Gossip is Said Cause of Death Duel," *San Bernardino County Sun*, 12 November 1925, 11, 19; "Old Feud Idea as Duel Cause Again Revived," *San Bernardino County Sun*, 14 November 1925, 10; "Fulton Youth Gives Coroner Story of Duel," *San Bernardino County Sun*, 11 November 1925, 10, 19; "Two Cowboys Fight Duel to Death in Cabin," *Fresno Morning Republican*, 11 November 1925, 1; "Questions Mrs. Ridell about Desert Duel," *Colton Daily Courier*, 11 November 1925, 1; "Desert Duel Charges Drop," *Stockton Independent*, 12 November 1925, 1; Betty Pettit Papierski, *Flat Tires & Coffee Fires: Being Tales from the 7IL Ranch*, (Essex, CA: Tales of the Mojave Road Pub. Co., 1993), 66.

invaders, it was the arid nature of the East Mojave that ultimately proved overwhelming for most homesteaders.[120]

Both white and black Lanfair residents had to contend with a fleeting water supply. Often, homesteaders needed to travel up to twelve miles with a mule team to find water and then lug it back for crops and living. Hazel Waer Grady, remembered that, "a company [came] from Los Angeles" to build a reservoir, but it did not live up to its promise. According to Grady, shortcuts were taken in the reservoir's construction, and the unnamed water company used insufficient qualities of cement of subpar quality. The water's control was never guaranteed, and when the reservoir was filled, "it broke and flooded out over everything." Attempts at controlling water made for poignant examples of both the environment's dynamism and the homesteaders' plight.[121] Even when water came to Lanfair, it was not necessarily conducive to farming practices. Thompson noted that the rainfall in dry months "comes when it can do no appreciable good," or falls so dramatically with summer monsoons that "it may do more damage than good."[122] Beyond the unpredictable nature of rainfall in the East Mojave, settlers also needed to find expedient means of transporting waters to their claims.

Horses provided homesteaders a means of mobility, both for themselves and their water supply. Despite the local short line railway, settler children often had to walk to and from school. The Waers, a white family, bought "a couple of sorrel mustangs from the Indians," presumably the Southern Paiutes or Mohave along the Colorado River. Obtaining horses from a local native group afforded both white and black homesteaders more expedient means of travel. Claimants also used horses to transport much-needed water to their lands. Settlers sometimes struck deals

[120] Nystrom, "From Neglected Space to Protected Place," 31–2; Darlington, *The Mojave*, 80.
[121] Grady Interview, 15.
[122] Thompson, USGW WSP 578, 675.

with the Rock Springs Land and Cattle Company so as to provide water for their lands and personal subsistence, but the Rock Springs outfit was notoriously apathetic toward the homesteaders' struggles.[123] Although farming in a climate exceptionally different from that of the South, black homesteaders retained some agricultural practices from their community's sharecropping past.

Crop selection in Lanfair served as a legacy of southern agriculture. The well-documented abuses of sharecroppers helped push farmers of color out of the postbellum South, but a government report on black migration also noted that continued nostalgia motivated "many of them [to] write longingly of their homes."[124] Armed with knowledge learned firsthand, or passed down a generation or two since, black homesteaders planted many crops associated with their time in the South. Despite proclamations of cotton-worthy soil, black Lanfairians planted many of the less labor-intensive crops from their ancestors' days of bondage: corn, beans, oats, and sorghum, all of which required "70 to 80 per cent the labor which an all-cotton crop requires."[125] Of the twenty-five black claimants who succeeded in patenting their claims, twenty planted at least one of the aforementioned crops characteristic of southern agriculture, demonstrating continuity from earlier times in the South. These crops were often reserved for animal fodder rather than human consumption. The planting of crops in the desert, whether food stuffs, cotton, or fodder, reflected a Progressive Era national belief in overcoming environmental challenges.

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[123] Grady Interview, 21.
[124] R.H. Leavell, T.R. Snavely, T.J. Woofter, Jr., W.T.B. Williams, and Francis D. Tyson, *Negro Migration in 1916–17*, (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1919), 100–11.
[125] Leavell, et al., *Negro Migration in 1916-17*, 79. Only sorghum was distinctive of southern agriculture, but Leavell and others tie the process of growing corn, beans, and oats to the South to contrast the cultivation of cotton with that of other, less labor-intensive crops and how participants in the Great Migration both continued and disrupted distinctively southern agricultural cycles.

Environmental conditions prevented Lanfair Valley's black homesteaders from reaping successful harvests, despite working diligently with what may have been familiar crops. Notwithstanding the intensive labor of dry farming, which required frequent tilling, homesteaders struggled to successfully grow anything in the arid valley. Only six of the eighteen black homesteaders filing claims during the summer of 1916 harvested any crops. The most successful black homesteader of 1916, and of the entire farming experiment, Millard Fillmore Elliot, was known to turn up his soil every morning to maximize any accumulated moisture.[126] Elliot's hard work paid off, and he later claimed an additional 480 acres, bringing his holding to a full, 640-acre, section, complete with fencing, a corral, barn, lumber shed, and house.[127] His choice to diversify his crops with orchards and melons also helped him weather the difficult year.[128] However, Elliot's success proved to be the exception, not the norm.

Most Lanfair farmers struggled under the East Mojave's arid conditions. John Richard Moulton, who combined two homestead applications into one 320-acre parcel granted June 6, 1922, suffered through the 1910s.[129] Despite planting dozens of acres, Moulton's harvest failed in 1915, 1916, and 1917.[130] Unfortunately for the homesteaders of Lanfair Valley, more of them could relate to Moulton's failures than Elliot's successes. Some, such as William H. Carter, suffered under dual burdens of aridity and vermin, as "rabbits ate up the wheat and the oats did

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[126] Alan Hensher, "Abandoned Settlements of the Eastern Mojave," *Western Places* 8, no. 3 (2007): 44.
[127] Final Proof, Homestead Entry of Millard Fillmore Elliot, Serial Patent #855813, Box 30631, Shelf 5, Compartment 10, Row 50, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA; Final Proof, Enlarged Homestead Entry of Millard Fillmore Elliot, Serial Patent #1017495, Box 37820, Shelf 5, Compartment 3, Row 14, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA; Final Proof, Stock-raising Homestead Entry of Millard Fillmore, Serial Patent #1057068, Box 39988, Shelf 3, Compartment 12, Row 15, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA.
[128] Elliot was known for his orchards and melons. Often, visitors from nearby Needles, CA, would carry his produce off by the truckload. Later, in 1924, "the only harvest worth mentioning was from the melons." See Stock-raising Homestead Entry of Millard F. Elliot.
[129] Claimants could file for two distinct claims of 160-acre and combine them to complete an Enlarged Homestead entry, earning the full 320-acre in one serial patent.
[130] Final Proof, Homestead Entry of John Richard Moulton, Serial Patent #869633, Box 31160, Shelf 5, Compartment 21, Row 9, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA.

not come up" in 1916.[131] In 1928, toward the end of the homesteading era in Lanfair Valley, Howard Carter harvested nothing, "mainly owing to [the] fact that there was no rain for over a year."[132] When the rains failed, so did the harvests, and dry farming practices could not save the year's crop.

Despite the promise of dry-farming techniques celebrated by promoters, Lanfair was a failed farming experiment. Most homesteaders abandoned Lanfair Valley by the 1930s. The closing of the Santa Fe railway spur in 1923 accelerated the exodus of homesteaders.[133] The closing of the post office in 1927 further marked the community's decline.[134] Lacking reliable access to water and hampered at each turn by the increasingly violent Rock Springs Land and Cattle Company, most of Lanfair's homesteaders abandoned their plots by 1929.[135] According to geographer Robert Bard, "many of the homesteaders were unsuccessful" for lack of irrigation, and "without irrigation, the land parcel was too small to make a living," despite the proponents of the Enlarged Homestead Act's best wishes.[136] Although some community members strove to demonstrate their resilience, there were no permanent Lanfair residents after 1946.[137] The East Mojave farming experiment ended without fanfare and desert scrub brush has since reclaimed the once-cleared plots of homesteaders.

Lanfair was, and remains, an imperfect location for farming. Hampered by insufficient rainfall and inaccessible groundwater, settlers of this East Mojave valley struggled to mete out a

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[131] Final Proof, Homestead Entry of William H. Carter, Serial Patent #578156, Box 20518, Shelf 5, Compartment 21, Row 2, Stack 15W3, RG 49, NARA.
[132] Homestead Entry of Howard Frank Carter.
[133] Nystrom, "From Neglected Space to Protected Place," 32.
[134] Bard, "Settlement Patterns of the eastern Mojave Desert," 76, 98; Dennis G. Casebier and Chester King, *Background to Historic and Prehistoric Resources of the East Mojave Desert Region*," (Riverside, CA: California Desert Planning Program, 1976), 313.
[135] Sharp and Moore, *Maruba: Homesteading in Lanfair Valley*,12; Frank Norris, ed., *A History of Land Use in the California Desert Conservation Area* (San Diego: Westec, 1978), 82.
[136] Bard, "Settlement Patterns of the eastern Mojave Desert," 94.
[137] Sharpe and Moore, *Maruba*, 13.

living in this harsh desert locale. Despite these environmental restrictions, Lanfair represented an opportunity for personal and racial advancement for African Americans in the early twentieth century. With agriculture placed firmly at the center of calls for black progress, black homesteaders, unified by church, family, and the legacy of slavery in the South, sought to make a community in which they set their destiny. During the Progressive Era, an era cast as the nadir for black America, homesteaders of color seized the opportunities promoted by Frank Mondell, the Country-Life Movement, and Booker T. Washington. By coalescing around their created community, African Americans sought and found measures of security in America's hottest and driest desert.

# Epilogue

"Why in hell would anybody farm out here?"

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As it turns out, there were many reasons people tried to farm the East Mojave. Informed by a Progressive Era belief in mastering the environment, farming seemed both viable and healthful. Some settlers, drawn to the more populous Las Vegas Valley to the north, envisioned profits. By promoting the East Mojave as a farming and cultural haven, farmers such as Walter Bracken worked to make Las Vegas the budding center of a western empire. Pairing white lies with self-deception, Bracken and other promoters of the valley created a city out of pure will and no small amount of government assistance. The Boulder Dam secured Las Vegas' future and farmers continue to make their livings in the East Mojave.

Others came for racial advancement. Richard Hodnett, Alfred Summers, and Howard Folke, among others, saw freedom in the open lands of Lanfair Valley. Having left the South for better lives in Los Angeles, and then turned away by the racial prejudices of urban California, the black homesteaders of Lanfair Valley saw a place for profit, community, and security. Tilling sand, these African Americans sought farms for themselves while also recognizing the need for collective labor to ensure some permanence for their new settlement. By supporting one another, African Americans acquired their own strips to plow.

Others just came for the adventure of it all. Some sought fortunes in the desert mines, seeking copper, silver, cinder and other precious and base materials. Others wanted to get away from loud, dirty, and busy cities undergoing industrial transformations. Some came for the clean air, the open space, and the chance to make their own way. Others just happened to end up here.

As the twentieth century progressed, the East Mojave increasingly appealed to tourists. The tourism industry was the first step toward redefining Las Vegas from a railroad town to a desert playground. Pamphlets, promising that the first tourist hotel would ensure the city's "rosy" future, saw new money and new visitors as a lifeline for the parched city.[1] By stressing Las Vegas' natural advantages, rather than admitting the natural limitations of the under-watered valley, promoters posited their city as the adventurer's gateway to the West. The Automobile Club of Southern California promoted Las Vegas' well-paved roads and the newly realized accessibility of far flung but well-known locations such as Lake Tahoe and Twentynine Palms. Already having secured more than a half-million dollars for the construction of a "high priced hotel project," Las Vegans looked to new sources of water and cheap power.[2]

The Boulder Dam project proved to be a boon for the Las Vegas Valley. Planning for the dam began as early as the townsite itself, in 1905. A decade before its completion, pamphlets claimed Las Vegas would benefit from the thousands of workers who would stimulate the local economy. More than anything, Las Vegas and its hinterlands would benefit from the dam's cheap hydroelectric power. The dam would increase the output of local mines and would advance agricultural endeavors in the valley, providing cheap electricity to pump subsurface water for irrigation. Not only would the dam bring inexpensive electricity into every home in Las Vegas, but, coupled with the East Mojave's natural wealth of minerals, the dam would serve as a "magnet that will draw to Las Vegas hundreds of industries."[3] The project would also form a reservoir (today's Lake Mead) that would ensure a stable water supply and "grow to be one of the greatest winter resorts in America." While promoters of the region promised much, the dam

[1] Automobile Club of Southern California advertisement in *Sunset Magazine*, v.30, June 1913, 867; Moehring, 41.
[2] "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada: A Brief Review of Climate, Resources, Growth, Opportunities," 21-22, 24.
[3] "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada," 19

indicated "a future beyond even the dreams of chamber of commerce boosters."[4] A new source of water, a generator of cheap power, and a magnet for industry, the Boulder Dam project would open the next chapter in Las Vegas' history.[5]

The same centrality of water carried into Lanfair Valley, but served to limit, not expand, the rural desert community. When Lanfair farmers failed, most simply left. Sara Hodnett Dean, daughter of Richard Hodnett and younger sister to Estella Hodnett Baker, remembers leaving Lanfair as soon as her family could prove up. Unlike the older Baker, who was in her thirties, Sara was only 8 years old when she arrived in Lanfair Valley. After "three or four years," the family proved up, moving to Needles, California, but maintained property rights to what had suddenly become a multigenerational farm.[6] Worked by him, his children, and his grandchildren, Richard Hodnett had successfully created the family farm sought by homesteaders across the West. However, the desert would have the final say, and, with no small assistance from the Rock Springs Land and Cattle Co., would drive the Hodnetts out of Lanfair Valley by 1923. Without the direct governmental intervention seen in Las Vegas, Lanfair wilted in the sun. It was not, it turned out, "the right location for carrying on [the El Dorado Gold Star Company's] quest for riches" as touted in 1910 by the *Los Angeles Herald*.[7] Instead, Lanfair homesteaders confronted a dry, desolate valley with minimal infrastructure, open conflict with neighbors, and no federal investment to make viable any long-term settlement.

Decades after the last homesteader left Lanfair Valley, the East Mojave still draws people to its wonder. Artists, such as Carl Faber, found inspiration in the desert's distinctive landscapes.

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[4] "Las Vegas and Clark County, Nevada," 19-20
[5] Moehring and Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History*, 58-9.
[6] Interview with Sara Jean (Hodnett) Dean by Dennis Casebier, August 18, 1999, Los Angeles, CA, interview in possession of author.
[7] "West'rn Tuskegee is Great Scheme."

The Mojave Road, once a route connecting East Mojave and coastal California tribes, now serves as a popular four-wheel drive adventure. The East Mojave is a haven for rock collectors, bird watchers, night-sky enthusiasts, and amateur archaeologists. Quail hunters come every spring. Rock climbers seek fresh challenges on the desert granite. I came for the chance to work on America's public lands.

As we enter an era increasingly defined by the effects of human-induced climate change, protection exceeds the scope of the National Park Service, the Bureau of Land Management, or the Forest Service. The desert will get hotter and drier. The desert tortoises, jackrabbits, and bighorn sheep that call the East Mojave home will be increasingly endangered without drastic, global action. New government projects, such as the Boulder Dam that guaranteed Las Vegas' twentieth-century growth, will need to be bigger, broader, and coordinated with the international community. Without immediate action, the future of the desert is in question.

However, the East Mojave is not yet lost. With serious government protection, its flora and fauna have recovered from the open-recreation days of the 1970s. Dirt bikes can no longer cut wildly across its open spaces. Mining speculators can no longer file new claims. Park Rangers police desert roads, minimizing threats of open shooting and human-ignited fires. Most importantly, many humans increasingly recognize its value. The East Mojave is a place worth protecting and water remains the source of all power.

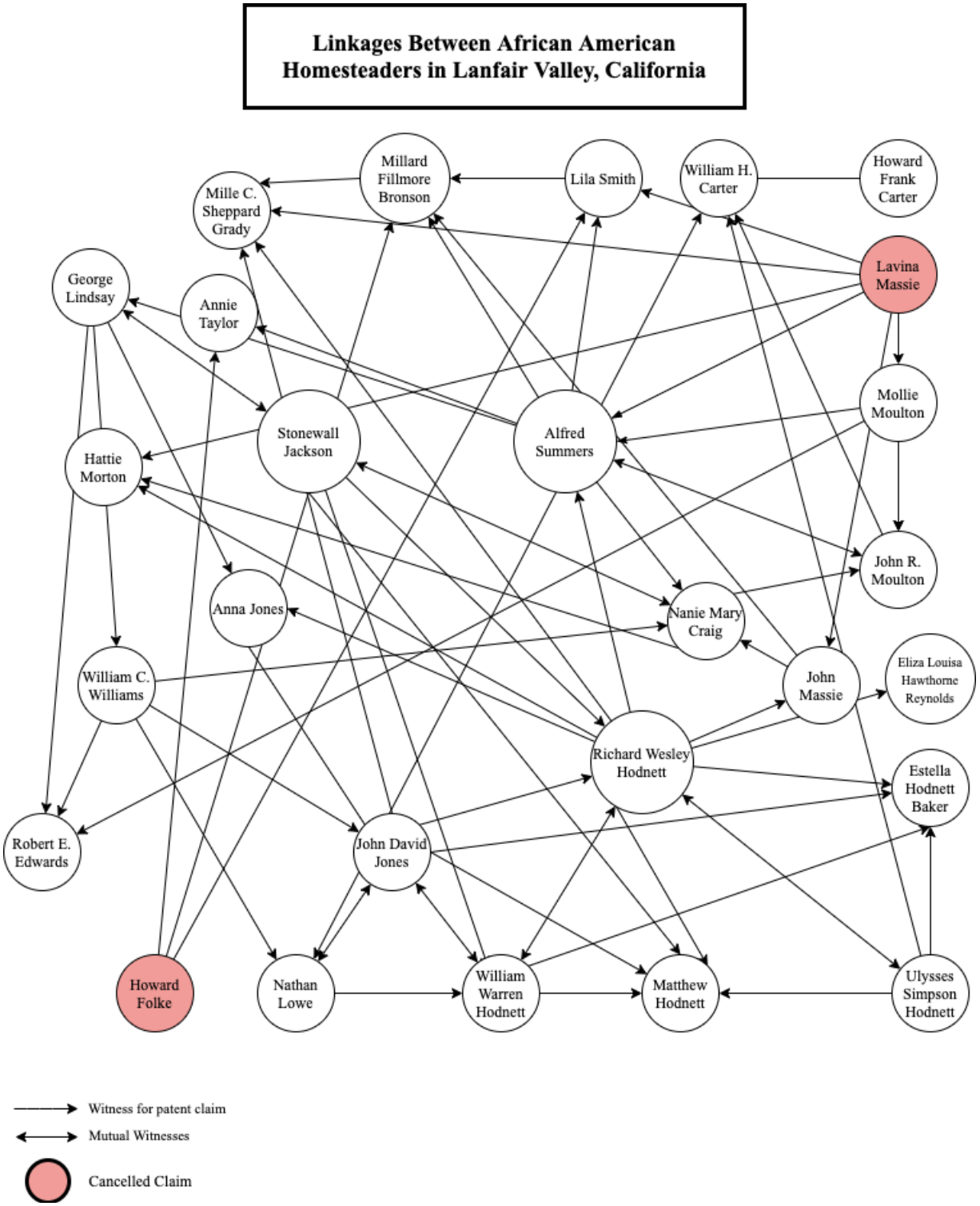
William Cronon argues that environmental historians "offer *parables* about how to interpret what *may* happen."[8] The history of the farmer in the desert resonates today as such a parable. Early twentieth-century Americans in the East Mojave, entering with no small dose of arrogance, learned a lesson in humility. Now, we must look for lessons from the past. Just as

[8] William Cronon, "The Uses of Environmental History," *Environmental History Review* 17, no.3 (Autumn, 1993): 1-22.

homesteaders in the 1910s believed they could subvert nature to their whims, only to be sent out of arid lands, so does modern humanity in the 2020s trumpet its own ability to confront the existential crises of climate change and its adherent disasters. Will we continue to learn, improving our understanding of humanity's relationship with an increasingly tenuous natural system? Will ecology be read with the same sacrosanctity as economics? Will the western policymaker heed the parable of the desert farmer in dictating future environmental initiatives?

If humans are to remain among the Joshua Trees, we must continue to learn.

# Appendix


Linkages Between African American Homesteaders in Lanfair Valley, California
Millard Fillmore Bronson
Lila Smith
William H. Carter
Howard Frank Carter
Mille C. Sheppard Grady
Lavina Massie
George Lindsay
Annie Taylor
Mollie Moulton
Stonewall Jackson
Alfred Summers
Hattie Morton
John R. Moulton
Anna Jones
Nanie Mary Craig
William C. Williams
John Massie
Eliza Louisa Hawthorne Reynolds
Richard Wesley Hodnett
Estella Hodnett Baker
Robert E. Edwards
John David Jones
Howard Folke
Nathan Lowe
William Warren Hodnett
Matthew Hodnett
Ulysses Simpson Hodnett
Witness for patent claim
Mutual Witnesses
Cancelled Claim

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