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When did the United States acquire its first overseas possession? The answer to that question depends upon whom one asks. Some, as historian Daniel Immerwahr recently noted, have had the long history of American imperialism entirely hidden from them. Others, possessed only of a passing familiarity with the country's past, might point to the 1898 moment when the United States seized the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Guam from Spain. A few well-read individuals could push the clock back even further, citing the antebellum appropriation of several guano islands or the creation of a colony in Liberia. Those are certainly all fine guesses, but it is the rare person indeed who could offer the correct answer: the northwestern Marquesas, claimed by an American navigator during the Washington administration. The fascinating story of the United States' earliest foray into imperialism beyond the North American continent is the subject of eminent scholar Nancy Shoemaker's most recent article. Shoemaker's article joins a growing list of books and articles investigating the history of America's empire.¹

In April of 1791, Captain Joseph Ingraham and his crew, aboard a Boston brig bound for the Pacific Northwest, sighted seven Polynesian islands that were not found on any extant European chart. A proud nationalist, Ingraham named them Washington, Adams, Federal, Lincoln, Hancock, Knox, and Franklin. After orchestrating a short 'ceremony of taking possession,' the navigator assumed he had formally established an American claim to a portion of the Pacific world. As Shoemaker argues, the motivation for doing so had nothing to do with settler colonial ambitions, even if the islanders themselves were sometimes referred to as 'Indians.' Rather, Shoemaker states that Ingraham's Marquesan maneuver can best be categorized as "imperial power colonialism"—a desire for the international prestige and status associated with overseas possessions (849). With its flag now planted in the Pacific, the United States could ascend into the pantheon of the world's other great nations. A country that had itself once been a colony now claimed to be a colonial power. As a point of patriotic pride, therefore, the Marquesas mattered to early Americans. By claiming 'savage' shores in the name of the newly constituted republic, Ingraham asserted America's status as

¹ Daniel Immerwahr, *How to Hide an Empire: A History of the Greater United States* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2019). It is interesting to note, however, that even this history of "hidden empire" fails to acknowledge the early entanglement of the United States with the Northwest Marquesas. The list of books and articles on early American empire is voluminous. Some recent overviews include Piero Gleijeses, *America's Road to Empire: Foreign Policy from Independence to World War One* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2022); Alan Taylor, *American Republics: A Continental History of the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2021); A.G. Hopkins, *American Empire: A Global History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017); Steven Hahn, *A Nation Without Borders: The United States and Its World in an Age of Civil Wars* (New York: Viking, 2016); Walter Nugent, *Habits of Empire: A History of American Expansion* (New York: Alfred K. Knopf).

a ‘civilized’ place. This was another instance of the United States, as Kariann Yokota memorably phrased it, “unbecoming British.”²

These acts (the captain gathered his officers and men on deck and made a short speech announcing US possession of the islands by right of discovery) were mostly theatrical. The ship *Hope* barely interacted with the islands’ indigenous population and departed very soon after it had arrived. French, British, and American voyagers followed closely in Ingraham’s wake and repeated the ritual. This muddled the question of the technical title to the Marquesas, at least according to international legal theorist Emerich de Vattel. As Vattel argued, ‘civilized’ nations could take permanent possession of ‘savage’ persons’ ‘unimproved’ land only through occupation. But here too, the United States led the way. During the War of 1812, Captain David Porter of the US Navy sailed a small fleet into a bay at the Marquesan island of Nuku Hiva in October 1813. As Porter repaired his flagship, he ordered the construction of fortifications ashore. The resulting encampment was named Madisonville after the then-serving president. Sailors unfurled an American flag, cannonaded a salute, and listened as Porter formally announced the solidification of his nation’s title to the territory. A written declaration of ownership was likewise buried ashore. “I believed,” said Porter, “that the possession of this island might at some future period be of importance to my country, and I was desirous of rendering her claim to it indisputable” (862).

Interesting to note, however, is the reaction of the Native Marquesans to these machinations. Porter did not pretend to play the role of disinterested neutral. Almost immediately upon his arrival at Nuku Hiva, he inserted himself into the island’s internecine conflicts. He negotiated an alliance with the Tei’i people, and went to war against their traditional enemies, the Hapa’a and Taipi. Porter sought to cajole Nuku Hivans with promises of American friendship and protection, while threatening to punish those who refused his demands for food and other forms of tribute. Porter’s narrative account of these events, of course, is shot through with self-aggrandizement. A more objective telling, like that of historical anthropologist Greg Denning, suggests that Porter was subtly manipulated by the Marquesans themselves. The Tei’i used Porter (and his advanced military technology) to pursue their own political goals on the island.³

One does wish, however, that Shoemaker had further examined the events she describes from the indigenous perspective. Or, for that matter, from the perspective of individuals beyond the realm of a diplomatic elite (captains, commodores, and consuls) upon whom the author’s analysis depends. How, for example, did the Marquesas factor into the less formal (but no less significant) networks of communication and rituals of ownership that characterized America’s globally influential seafaring community?

Working-class mariners, after all, performed their own ‘ceremonies of possession’ in the Pacific. Annexation, for them, often became a question of sexual conquest. Gender more generally—and relations between American men and Marquesan women specifically—is thus an angle that might have enriched the analysis. In addition, the issue of cannibalism is curiously absent. It is certainly not alien to Shoemaker’s work more broadly; she wrote a truly exceptional book on Fiji’s reputation as an archipelago of ‘man-eaters.’ Did it matter that America’s first overseas possession was allegedly (at least according to some) populated by a race of cannibals?⁴

² Kariann Yokota, *Unbecoming British: How Revolutionary America Became a Postcolonial Nation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

³ Greg Denning, *Islands and Beaches: Discourse on a Silent Land, Marquesas, 1774-1880* (Chicago: Dorsey Press, 1980).

⁴ Nancy Shoemaker, *Pursuing Respect in the Cannibal Isles: Americans in Nineteenth-Century Fiji* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021).

One is reminded of the 1820 tragedy aboard the whaleship *Essex*. Rammed and sunk by an agitated sperm whale, the vessel was abandoned by its crew in the eastern Pacific. The men, huddled together aboard a few small dinghies, could have made it to the Marquesas in short order. But they instead elected to set a far more difficult course for South America. Why? Because the crew were convinced they would be killed and eaten by the Marquesan islanders. The irony, of course, was that in fleeing the supposed danger of cannibalism, they pursued a path that resulted in their being forced to consume one another. Only eight of the original twenty sailors survived; the others were lost at sea or devoured by their starving shipmates. Critical here is the role that rumor and reputation played in decisions made by members of the maritime community.⁵ After Ingraham's visit, the Marquesas may not have been so much forgotten as 'erased,' rejected as a viable US outpost thanks to circuits of knowledge that kept sailors away from allegedly unsafe places in the Pacific. Marquesan cannibalism was never grounded in fact, but, it was treated as such by many, and, as a result, likely had some bearing on how subsequent events played out.

At any rate, formal overtures to US ownership did not last very long. Porter and his contingent had all departed the islands by early 1814. Soon thereafter two British warships arrived. Their crews dug up and destroyed the American declaration of sovereignty while replacing the Star Spangled Banner with the Union Jack. Porter returned to the United States and urged his superiors to organize subsequent expeditions to the region in an effort to secure the republic's title to the Marquesas. Such entreaties, however, mostly fell on deaf ears. No one repudiated Porter's actions, but, no real effort was made to defend American claims. For the next two decades, the archipelago was mainly visited by whalers and sandalwood loggers, individuals interested in little else besides the islands' natural resources. Not until 1842, when the French garrisoned and annexed the Marquesas, did formal colonization occur. No official protest emerged out of Washington, D.C. By then, the United States had become more interested in Hawaii, California, Oregon, and other Pacific territory. It is telling, Shoemaker suggests, that when the federal government finally commissioned the large Pacific excursion Porter had suggested many years before—the 1838 US Exploring Expedition—the ships did not bother stopping at the islands Joseph Ingraham had originally claimed for America in 1791.

After Porter's aborted occupation, "the islands nearly disappeared from the US imagination" (865). The country instead preoccupied itself with transcontinental expansion. But at an earlier time, a certain degree of public interest was clear. As Shoemaker's diligent research into the relevant records (such as maritime logbooks, travelogues, and correspondence) shows, newspapers covered in detail the early assertions of sovereignty over a land distant from the United States. And that may be the most significant consequence, on the diplomatic front at least, of this mostly forgotten foray into the Pacific on the part of early Americans. It set an important precedent for the country's continued involvement on the other side of the world. As Shoemaker suggests, Britain and France now had to contend with another power as they attempted to carve up the Pacific Ocean's territory and people. No matter how short-lived, this sequence of events planted the idea of the United States as a global player in the minds of many people. "As a fantasy colony," Shoemaker concludes, "the northwestern Marquesas contributed to the U.S. rise to power" (872). Ingraham, Porter, and others fueled further American aspirations throughout the Pacific. And those aspirations later produced more concrete forms of colonialism.

In recovering America's forgotten first overseas possession, Shoemaker has therefore performed a remarkable feat of archival excavation. Historians of American foreign relations, the Pacific world, the

⁵ Nathaniel Philbrick, *In the Heart of the Sea: The Tragedy of the Whaleship Essex* (New York: Viking, 2000).

maritime realm, and US empire (among others) will surely benefit from the numerous insights contained in this fascinating article.

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