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“Dome of the Continent”: Mount Whitney, Continental Expansion, and the Democratization of the Sierra Nevada

Cover Page Footnote
Joseph Esparza, who presented this paper at the 2023 Eastern Sierra History Conference, is a graduate student in history at Montana State University. He is grateful for guidance of Prof. Mark Fiege.

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Sunrise illuminating the eastern face of Mount Whitney is one of the grandest natural spectacles in the American West. Slowly, the darkness lifts as the last vestiges of stars disappear into the predawn haze. The early morning orange-tiled light from the east rises over the Great Basin, illuminating the Inyo Mountains across the Owens Valley from the mountain. The first rays gently rise onto Mount Whitney’s immense white granitic pinnacles and snow-filled couloirs 10,000’ above the Owens Valley, the continent’s deepest valley. A reddish alpenglow then produces a fantastical light show on the highest reaches of Mount Whitney and the High Sierra Crest. Mid-elevation regions on the mountain stand below the enlightened heights in a purplish haze. Sunlight has yet to penetrate the valley, as the great mass of the high and dry Inyo Mountains block direct sunshine into the valley floor. For a few minutes, Mount Whitney, the
“unquestioned Monarch of the Sierra,” the crown of the John Muir’s beloved “Range of Light,” bask in the fresh glories of a new day’s light.²

Few mountains tower over their surroundings as Mount Whitney does. Famed mountaineer and surveyor Clarence King wrote that the mountain “springs up and out like the prow of a sharp ocean steamer.”³ Mount Whitney is the zenith of a landscape of extremes at 14,505ft, it is the highest point in California and the contiguous United States. It offers the longest continuous line of sight in the Lower 48, and is located within one hundred miles of Death Valley, the lowest point in the United States. At the climax of the Sierra Crest, Mount Whitney splits the watershed between the insular Great Basin and the Pacific. The mountain’s bright granite reflects much sunlight, giving the mountain a soft, glowing appearance, which wonderfully contrasts with its jagged and craggy eastern face. When the Pacific or subtropical jet stream runs off the ocean in the winter, Mount Whitney receives enormous amounts of snowfall in short periods, as orographic lift releases vast amounts of Pacific moisture despite its geographic location on the eastern end of the range and in the rain shadow of the 13,000’ Great Western Divide. Winters are moderate for a mountain of its height and intense solar radiation in the Spring coupled with desert heat rising from the Owens Valley contributes to rapid snowmelt cascading thousands of feet down to cool the valley floor. Summers are often bright, warm, and sunny, interspersed with violent monsoonal thunderstorms flowing from the south over the heights. Autumn is clear and dry, with lakes freezing below snow-free granite peaks for many weeks awaiting imminent Pacific snows. Deeply eroded by millennia of glaciation, rock glaciers, ice buried beneath layers of granite are relics of the older, colder world, and clinging in the shade of its northern slope.⁴
From the west, the mountain rises relatively gently above the Kern River Canyon to its flat-topped and broad summit. The mountain’s eastern slope is renowned for its epic appearance as it drops 10,000’ rapidly into the Owens Valley. Intense fault-blocking has created an eastern escarpment of the mountain unrivaled in ruggedness and steepness in the American West. Euro-Americans were not the first people to be captured by the mythical mountain. Defined by an imagination of extremes over its dramatic landscape, Mount Whitney, or *Tumanguya*, is a storied peak, an imaginative landmark mountain for the Paiute peoples from time immemorial. For the local Paiute Shoshone, the mountain was and remains a sacred and spiritual place where the “old man” overlooks the valley of his children below.

During Western expansion, *Tumanguya* also became significant in the settler imagination. Through examining journals, maps, memoirs, images, and photographs, this article explores the creation of Mount Whitney as a towering presence in American environmental culture during two distinct periods: the landmarking stage and the experiential stage. During the landmarking stage (1864-1890), settlers climbed, explored, surveyed, mapped, and wrote about the peak often within the ideological context of expansion and nationalistic land acquisition. These settlers helped place the mountain within the national and regional spatial imaginations, thus solidifying control of the vertical axis of a horizontally expanding nation. During the experiential stage (1890-1930s), the mountain became a democratized and recreational place for Progressive-Era visitors and communities. Accessible to that era’s growing white middle class, Mount Whitney once again was transformed into a recreational zone, featuring a new kind of conquest in the form of personal feats of climbing or hiking the mountain’s rugged trails.

Western historians have long understood the deep relationship between Western expansionism and what William Goetzmann called “romantic imperialism.” This notion
compared the “unknown” West to the romantic ideas of Eden or the sublime and helped forge an image of an American West that was steeped in Euro-American ideals of exceptionalism and scientific knowledge. The landscape aesthetic of romantic imperialism greatly influenced paintings, photographs, and written narratives of Western landscapes, helping to instill a romantic and distinctly sublime Western American imaginative ethos in the minds of white Americans. For Goeztmann, this process was tied up in the knowledge of the region through survey, mapping, scientific observation, and rapid mobility. Mount Whitney was a center of this romantic, scientific process in the Far West, and thus has been overlooked by historians for its role in the solidification and imagination of the Pacific region. Likewise, Anne Hyde argues that Americans created a new Western aesthetic of landscape appreciation with its own terms and language accounting for the region’s geology, indigenous history, and vibrant landscape colors. Combining with the Eastern ideals of nature, the aesthetics of the West helped form a particularly American form of landscape culture and shaped American environmental ideas into the twentieth century. This imaginative experience though could only be achieved through survey, acquisition, and, I add, a vertical dimension of view and scope to the horizontal expansion of the nation.
Flanked by Yosemite Falls, granite walls, Giant Sequoia trees, and a cascading stream, the scene encapsulates the highlights of the Sierra Nevada Mountains under the shadow of its highest peak, Mount Whitney. While the mountain range name is incorrect, and from a realism perspective the scene is geographically and ecologically inaccurate, the figure of Mount Whitney itself is distorted, and the painting represents the idealized aesthetics of American expansionism. Bierstadt often exaggerated well-known landscape features to create for his viewers a specific geographic imagination. Here he is compressing the essence of the Sierra Nevada, that great range at the end of the continent a place summarized by the culmination of the imperial project of Manifest Destiny, into one vicarious geographic imagination. Contextually, for his viewers in the East, this painting is an argument. It represents the glorious and serene landscape of a now-continentally controlled American empire. Here is the end of a continent and despite Native resistance to imperial acquisition and control, the empire was beautiful and worthy of vernacular, or popular, experience. In 1877, Yosemite and parts of the Sequoia groves were already protected from resource-consumption activities, turning gradually into recreational commodities. The mountain, once a barrier to the empire had recently been conquered, becoming a sign of the inevitable progress of empire. Mount Whitney, recently climbed and conquered earlier in the decade and known as the nation’s highest peak, lords over these imperial natural treasures as a mountain of conquest and control.

Patty Limerick's field-changing argument about the American West states that the conquest of the West is an ongoing process: first, a material process, the drawing of lines on a map from a Euro-American perspective (the “frontier stage”) and a cultural process, or the creation of meaning on the map for the settlers (the ongoing stage). In this way, Mount Whitney’s history is related to both of these Western processes. More recently, Elliott West has argued that the expansionistic phase of the American West was both a product of and response to the Eastern states, while in this process created its own regional story and identity. As both the
“child” and “midwife” of the nation, the West became the nation’s proving ground for American ideas in the making of the modern world. Mount Whitney casts a long shadow over the arc of Western history, where the meaning-making of the region so often took place associated with mountain spaces. Mountains like Mount Whitney gave the West the mythical meaning that American culture used to form new responses to conservation, environment, and recreation. Mount Whitney and other landmark mountains can function as the theater and actors in the stage play of Western American history.

Often, expansionistic states follow a simple development across landscapes. As historian of mountains Michael Reidy argues, empires seek to control both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of space and mountains are foundational practically and imaginatively to state formation and national identity. First, these polities seek the conquer of the land, the physical manifestation of the power of the imperial state upon a certain geographic space. This includes explorations from centers of imperial powers into unknown space and is replete with symbolic gestures that embed the idea of imperial and personal conquest on a landscape. Empires then seek knowledge of these spaces through surveys, mapping, science-making, and the imaginative construction of space. Concerned with control and consumption, empires can only control what they know, and what they can know depends upon science and knowledge of the land. Once spatial knowledge is complete, physical control of the land and people, and extraction of resources can then occur.

During the late nineteenth century, it was almost natural to see Mount Whitney, at the far end of the contiguous United States, as a marginal space. Continentally, the republic’s capital, Washington D.C., could not be further; the Rockies and the vast mountainous and arid Great Basin separated the region from eastern markets. Even from the California cities of Sacramento
and San Francisco, the great wall of the Sierra blocked efficient transportation. Los Angeles and its Pacific markets lay hundreds of miles to the south across the Mojave Desert. No great railroad system has ever crossed the High Sierra as so many did through the Rockies and Cascades for extractive industry, and even today only one windy two-lane highway, open for brief summer months, crosses the High Sierra. In one sense, then, this region was as remote and disconnected as any in the West, a true margin of empire.

Some mountains, through their immense topographic relief, prominence, and visibility “crystallize myth” and strike the hearts of those living below them powerfully and profoundly. Some mountains are charismatic mountains, engendering certain qualities that resonate with communities and cultures. These mountains when combined with the minds and imaginations, become landmark mountains. Environmental historian Jared Farmer argues that physical landmarks are created when “a perceptual landscape overlaps with the physical one…they are icons of our mental maps. Landmarks fall within a certain size range: big enough that humans can see them, not so big that humans cannot visualize them…” For Farmer, such high ground become “storied landmarks,” places imbued with narrative and meaning.

While seemingly on the geographic margins, Mount Whitney was an imaginative center of the continental American nation. Its very nature as a vertical space helped transform it into what historical geographer Kevin Blake calls a “mythic landscape,” or one that held a symbolic place of meaning. As a symbol of national expansion and Manifest Destiny, Mount Whitney is a mythical and imaginative landscape forming part of the central geographic imagination of the American West. Mountaineering historian Peter Bayers writes that in a colonial framework, mountains are often aesthetic expansions of empire that demonstrate state control and masculine attitudes of conquest. For Western American historians, mountain exploration and place-
making represented the upward movement of the frontier, and state-funded mountaineering projects were part of the making of vertical frontiers. All the myths, violence, and cultural ideals that were associated with the horizontal frontier of Western expansion are often taken upwards in the exploration and making of the region’s mountains.

Upward the Course of Empire: Vertical Frontiers

In the summer of 1864, Clarence King joined a group of geoscientists, organized by California State Geologist Josiah Whitney, to survey and explore the Sierra Nevada. Born to a wealthy merchant family in Hong Kong, educated in classical New England schools, and a Harvard graduate, King left his life of wealth for an opportunity for mountain exploration and conquest. As a geologist, King was fascinated with the American West and is today remembered for his first ascents of many of its preeminent peaks. King represents a character, and agent of empire and science yes, but also an individual deeply interested in personal exploration of the region’s mountains.

King and the Whitney survey were part of the legacy of conquest in the Sierra Nevada, pushing the notions of imperialism to the heights and making, King’s words, “brave campaigns into the unknown realms of Nature.” In either scientific or symbolic nationalism, the Sierra was now part of an American “Empire in the Sky,” where white explorers in the past “came…saw…and conquered…” Mountaineering historian Caroline Schumann sees King as a man consumed with competitive drive, who believed that westward expansion and the expulsion of Indigenous people were fundamental to creating a national identity. King was heavily influenced by Romantic ideas of the dangerous sublime, as well as racial and ethnic stereotypes, and “cast himself as a Western hero bent on American masculinity based on a conservative outward demeanor, on physical prowess, personal restraint, and doing rather than thinking.”
survey was the first systematic exploration of the High Sierran landscape and thus was a herald of imperial consumption and conquest.²⁰ Many High Sierra peak names, Darwin, Russell, Lyell, Ritter, Tyndall, Abbot, Langley, LeConte, Williamson, and Brewer, read as a “who’s who” of great imperial and scientific minds of the mid-to-late twentieth-century Anglo-American world. The geographic naming of these vertical spaces demonstrates the cultural currency of science and empire in an expansionist nation. As previous scholars have noted, the link between imperialism and scientific exploration and surveys was deeply intertwined. For Michael Reidy, mountaineering and mountain imaginations fundamentally altered major discoveries and paradigm shifts in the history of science.²¹ This scientific “vertical consciousness” empowered men such as King to combine masculine notions of physical prowess, scientific knowledge, and imperial ideas of superiority on a range’s highest or most difficult peaks. Men such as King called their Sierran climbs the “conquest of the great terra incognita.”²² King wrote that in exploring the higher reaches of the eastern Sierra, he had one goal, “to reach the highest peak in the range.”²³ King and his climbing partner Richard Cotter, summited what they mistakenly believed to be the highest peak in the range, Mount Tyndall (14,026’) on July 6, 1864.

Upon reaching the summit King noted that, “to our surprise...there appeared two peaks equal in height with us, and two rising even higher.” The two “equal” were likely Mount Williamson (14,375’) and Mount Barnard (13,996’) and the “two rising even higher” were Mount Langley in the south (14,042’) and “lying about six miles south, and fronting the desert with a bold, square bluff which rises to the crest of the peak, where a white fold of snow trims in gracefully,” was Mount Whitney. King named the mountain “…in honor of our chief,” and “probably the highest land within the United States. Its summit looked glorious but
inaccessible.” After trying once more that summer to summit Mount Whitney from Visalia in the south, King found himself unable to conquer the jagged Arc Pass to Whitney.

In 1871, King again attempted to summit what he believed to be the highest mountain in the nation. Eventually, he and his partner Paul Pinson, “stood…and Mount Whitney was under our feet.” In their excitement, they looked around and noticed material evidence of previous summits by Shoshone Paiute Indians when they found a “…small mound of rock piled upon the peak, and solidly built into it an Indian arrow-shaft, pointing due west.” Still, he acknowledged his physical prowess and the dangers overcome where death might find “one who had not coolness and muscular power at instant command.” King was surprised that others, especially non-white climbers, had made the summit. He writes of his surprise to find evidence of Native Americans who had been one to find “the one pathway to the summit of the United States, fifteen thousand feet above two oceans.” This kind of language is typical of the era’s conquest-minded ascents, where it is almost inconceivable for a non-Euro-American to have participated in climbing. Mountain scholars have recently expanded the history of mountaineering to include such indigenous actors and even expanded the notion of the activity of mountaineering itself to include the climbing traditions of other cultures. A product of the expansionist era, King’s casual dismissal of Paiute ascents and expansion of his exploits is a soft erasure of a spiritual tradition of Paiute people around Tumanguya and the wider Eastern Sierra.

For King, Mount Whitney was a symbol of American national expansion where “like Moses from Pisgah” one could behold “the Promised Land.” Mount Whitney was the mountain of the conquered promised land of the West. For King and the imperial geographic imagination, the mountain was the zenith of the Empire of Liberty that now stretched from the Atlantic to the Pacific. It was one in which the old world of Native peoples was giving way to a new symbol of
a unified American state, the Mount Whitney of settler-colonists. Or it would have been, except that King had not climbed Mount Whitney, but Mount Langley, about five miles south of Whitney. In the early map-making of the eastern Sierra after the 1864 survey, a variety of errors or omissions appeared, one of which included mislabeling Mount Langley as “Sheep Mountain.”

*Figure 3:* 1864 "Johnson's California, Utah, Nevada, and Colorado, and New Mexico." Published in 1864, after reports from the Whitney survey, this map, produced by New York-based Alvin J. Johnson and Son’s, incorrectly shows Mount Whitney at 15,000’ and about 5 miles too south, as if it is rising above Owens Lake and south of Lone Pine, CA (see map). In reality, Mount Whitney sits just due west of Lone Pine.
Mount Whitney in this image is the actual location of Sheep Mountain, known as Mount Langley, today. This is one of the maps King would have had access to before his 1871 Whitney attempt.  

Figure 4: “Topographical Railroad and County Map of the States of California and Nevada.” Published in 1868, this map expounds on Johnson’s map’s errors. Again, it places Mount Whitney where Mount Langley is, but it is more detailed. It shows Lone Pine Creek between Mount Tyndall and “Mount Whitney,” running towards Union Mill (Lone Pine). Mount Whitney sits just north of the western terminus of Lone Pine Creek. King writes that he used a similar map in 1871, “to identify the peak,” but later realized that it had a “serious error.”

Figure 5: “Topographical Map of Central California, together with a Part of Nevada,” by the State Geological Survey of California, 1873. This highly detailed map shows the development of understanding of the local terrain between 1864-1873. It was made by Charles F. Hoffman, J.D. Whitney (state geologist), among others, including members who were part of the 1864 Whitney-King Survey of the Sierra Nevada. However, it still shows Mount Whitney is where Mount Langley is. The town of Lone Pine and Lone Pine Creek are clearly demarcated, but no cartographic demarcation shows the true Mount Whitney in the blank spot between Mount Williamson and “Mount Whitney.” For nearly ten years, the public’s symbol of continental conquest was misunderstood and mislabeled as the wrong mountain. Despite this, vicarious geographic imaginations and associations are strong, as was demonstrated by earlier mountaineering conquests in the Wind River Mountains in the 1840s.
Summer 1873 was the year in which the imagination of Mount Whitney began expanding from a mountain associated with professional, scientific, and imperial conquests to wider, democratic, and accessible imaginaries of conquest; it was the beginning of a decidedly new era in the history of Mount Whitney. Lone Pine residents made the first ascent of the real Mount Whitney. Three ranchers and recreational fishermen conquered what the King, the government, and professional cartographers had failed to properly climb or map. They even summited before John Muir, the California conservationist, mountaineer, and aesthetic interpreter of the Sierra. Popular conquests of the mountain were soon to be a real possibility. Soon, any fit person could theoretically climb the “Dome of the Continent.”

In August 1873, three local recreational fishermen, Charley Begole, Johnny Lucas, and Al Johnson, whom the *Inyo Independent* called the “immortal three,” climbed Mount Whitney from the Kern Canyon side. They likely ascended the same route other early climbers would use via the Southwest chutes, a route where they found a small opening up the broad slope at an angle of about 40 degrees. After hearing about this ascent of “Fisherman’s Peak,” controversy erupted in the Lone Pine community about whether the men ascended the correct peak. Given that all the maps at the time incorrectly labeled the mountain, and the “name of Whitney has done so only by mistake,” this is understandable. For years, naming controversies dominated the discussion of the mountain. Should it be known as “Whitney”, after the man, whom the locals viewed as an outsider who “draws heavy salaries as State Geologist…” and did not follow through on his promise to provide locals with “copies of his maps…”? Until 1881, “Fisherman’s Peak,” “Dome of Inyo,” “Mount Whitney,” and “Dome of the Continent,” were all colloquially acceptable names for claiming the mountain for the settler community.
John Muir entered the Mount Whitney fray in October 1873 and was the first person to climb the mountain from the east. Pioneering the “Mountaineer’s Route,” as it would later be called, Muir extolled his route and conquest of the mountain over others, writing of the standard Southwest Chute route (whose approach was passable to the base of the chutes by mules), “well-seasoned limbs will enjoy the climb of the 9000 feet required for this direct route, but soft succulent people should go the mule way.”

Clarence King later wrote that he was surprised to hear other climbers had made it to the “real peak,” and that he had summited a false Whitney. He described the day he ascended “Mount Whitney” as “through the windows in the storm,” and the cloudy weather precluded him from seeing that a higher peak was only just a few miles northward. He notes that “my little granite island was incessantly beaten by the breakers of vague, impenetrable cloud, and never once did the true Mount Whitney unveil its crest to my eager eyes.” So in Fall 1873, King made off to the Sierra Nevada, taking the Hockett Trail from the west side into the high backcountry. After creating maps and completing surveys a few years later, King explored the extended landscape of Mount Whitney to the south writing, “The Kern Plateau, so green and lovely on my former visit, in 1864, was now a gray sea of rolling granite ridges, darkened at intervals by forest, but longer velveted with meadows and upland grasses. The indefatigable shepherds have camped everywhere, leaving hardly a spear of grass behind.” The landscape of conquest that King and the survey party had set out to know and control through their maps and surveys, was transitioning into a landscape of economic consumption and extraction.

Upon arriving on the summit, King noted the number of popular conquests of the mountain since the first ascent just a few weeks prior where he found the “monument of stones, and records of the two parties who had preceded us...the former were, save Indian hunters, the
first, so far as we know, who achieved this dominating summit.” King was transfixed with transatlantic ideas of the sublime, scientific colonialism, and Western American imperialism. Mixed with imaginaries of spirituality, science, and conquest on a prominent, visible, and steep mountain, King imagined Mount Whitney as an icon of rationalism, materialism, and the inevitable progress of American imperialism. At the end of his chapter on Mount Whitney, King recounts that “a week after my climb I lay on the desert floor at the foot of the Inyo Range and looked up a Mount Whitney…and I entered for a moment deeply and intimately into that strange realm where admiration blends with superstition.” He imagined Mount Whitney as an icon of the naturalistic, rational white man of science overcoming the transcendent mystical qualities of nature. He wondered about the relationship between a mountain’s physical, external form and its interior meaning as many historical geographers do today. He writes that these moments are “rare enough in the life of a scientific man when one trembles at the edge of mythmaking…realizing fully the geological history and hard, materialistic reality of Mount Whitney, its mineral nature, its chemistry; yet archaic impulse even then held me”.

White Americans had violently taken the Paiute land and the peak that King contemplated. At least at some level, King recognized this injustice. He wrote that a “gaunt old Indian who came slowly toward me…and silently fixed his hawk eyes upon the peak [and told] me the peak was an old, old man, who watched this valley and cared for the Indians, but who shook the country with earthquakes to punish the whites for injustice towards his tribe…” Seeing himself as a man of progress and science, he wrote that as the Native man “trudged away across the sands I could but feel the liberating power of modern culture, which unfetters us from the more than iron bands of self-made myths.” Oh, the irony! After this dismissal of Native story and meaning, King concluded that he only saw the mountain through his scientific-colonial
imagination as a “splendid mass of granite 14,887’ high, ice-chiseled, and storm-tinted; a great monolith left standing amid the ruins of a bygone geological empire.”

A Democratic Mountain: Early Recreation and the Experiential Stage

By the late nineteenth century, the landmarking process had solidified Mount Whitney as an emblem of the continent. In Progressive Era America, rising middle-class wages, conservation and moral reform, a widening populist and democratic ethos, and an optimistic belief in inevitable progress in culture and science helped transform Western landscapes into experiential spaces for recreation and a nascent tourist industry.

On the recommendation of Clarence King, Samuel Langley, then director of the Allegheny Observatory and later Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, climbed to the summit of Whitney to study solar radiation. Knowing that Mount Whitney was the highest point in the United States, Langley wanted to take a variety of other astrophysical observations in the clear,
high, dry air of the mountain. He was impressed by the usability of the summit for his experiments, writing, “In no country is there a finer site for meteorological observation and atmospheric observations than…Mount Whitney and its neighboring peaks…the sky is of the most deep violet-blue….and incomparably beautiful sky for the observer’s purposes.”

Langley's purpose for summiting Whitney was to “determine the solar constant…to evaluate the quantity of radiant heat received from the sun by the outer layer of the atmosphere…” Mount Whitney was chosen because of its the controllable environment of typically good weather and the “very easy ascent” of a mountain of its size. Langley first developed the idea of building a “permanent shelter” on Mount Whitney where “it is hoped that something…will be erected here…and developed by the government.” In the following years, other scientists ascended the southwest chutes on the western slope of the mountain to conduct a variety of meteorological and geological observations and experiments.

After Langley’s ascent of Mount Whitney, the popularity of the mountain continued to rise. In 1896, a Swedish scientist, Svante Arrhenius, climbed the mountain to determine how carbon dioxide could alter temperature in the lower atmosphere. Over the decades, a near popular user path going up the southwest chutes had been developed, thanks in no small part, to the work of scientific ascents. The building of an officially maintained trail to the summit of Mount Whitney is the precursor to the modern Mount Whitney Trail, one of the nation’s most popular routes, originated from a syncretic motivation between the popularity of climbs, and the building of a summit scientific shelter.
By the late 1880s, local hiking clubs began having regular outings to Mount Whitney. These groups approached from the western side of the mountain, following the quasi-official path up the “southwest chimney” that by this time had become a popular unmaintained trail for ordinary, non-technical ascents. Groups such as the Sierra Club, founded in 1892, and the Mount Whitney Club, founded in 1901, had regular outings across California and the Sierra, with a special focus on the Whitney area, the highest peaks in the nation. Composed of upper-middle professionals from cities and towns, the early climbing groups encouraged both men and women to scale and conquer great heights through physical exertion. At the beginning of the 1900s, with a robust economy spurred by American industrialization and imperial acquisitions both at home and abroad, ordinary people with money had newfound time for tourism and outdoor recreation. From the late nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, mountaineering and hiking to high places became common. For many, vacations were becoming an opportunity for “accessible” conquests on newly constructed trails to high peaks. The San Francisco Call reflects this attitude of class, conquest, and mountain climbing associated with Mount Whitney writing:
This being the vacation season, when all classes of citizens who have any leisure devote to seeing the picturesque sights of California find representation in mountain climbing parties on a greater or less ambitious scale, the popular mind turns naturally to the subject of trails and to the charms of nature made accessible thereby. The mountain climbers may be divided into two classes who seek diversion purely and those who desire at once to enjoy and overcome difficulties...Mount Whitney has so many devotees that the season is marked by the issuance of a Mount Whitney Club Journal. From that veracious publication glimpses of the enlargement of means to reach the Mount Whitney scenery are obtained.55 In an intermingling of national and local motivations, the Smithsonian and US Army wanted that same thing that local Lone Pine residents wanted: an official trail to the top of the nation.56 Both groups wanted mules and horses to be able to approach so they designed a “a direct trail...which is easy of ascent with saddle horses and pack mules.” Upon completion, hikers could “complete the circuit,” from the western to eastern sides of the range, after which they could continue from “the place nearest to heaven in the United States, Mount Whitney...into the sink of Death Valley, 500 feet below sea level, next to Hades.”57

During the summer of 1903, Captain Charles S. Young, a high-ranking Black officer in the army who served as administrator for Sequoia National Park, sent a detachment to the eastern side of the range to preserve meadows from overgrazing. As an additional task, his soldiers were instructed to build an official trail from Guitar Lake on the west face of Mount Whitney to its summit. Following the now-popular southwest chimney route. Young and his men worked for an entire month constructing a trail that would be passable by hardy mules.58 While Young and his men were working on the new trail, a Sierra Club outing of over one hundred hikers, using mules to approach the mountain, ascended the slopes of the mountain, the largest group to have
summitted to that date.\textsuperscript{59} By the end of 1903, \textit{The San Francisco Call} reported that there was an official “pathway to the summit of Mount Whitney…that will make it easier to reach those famous places.” Thousands of tons of granite were soon about to be blasted off the Sierra Crest to create another, far more publicly accessible trail, from Lone Pine.\textsuperscript{60} Simultaneously, another group of fifteen soldiers were constructing a trail from the Lone Pine Creek beginning, through the drainage area of the South Fork of Lone Pine Creek. This is the general route that today’s trail from the Whitney Portal still follows. The group labored high into the Sierra skies, carving a trail out of solid granite and over steep hanging valleys. Eventually, progress stalled above Consultation Lake (11,700’) as the men slowly blasted dynamite through the Sierra wall. In early October, the men made as much progress as they could on the east side of the mountain.

The following year, local Lone Pine resident, Gustave Marsh, completed the trail to Mount Whitney, financed by the citizens of Lone Pine. Marsh set the trail to go over Whitney Pass and follow the Sierra Crest before dipping to Trail Crest Pass (13,700’). The final two miles of the east side trail would have been extremely difficult to construct. Sheer granite pinnacles on the east rise abruptly from steep chutes on the west. However, by July 1904, the full Mount Whitney circuit was completed, and the 1907 USGS map shows the original Mount Whitney Trail from both the east and west.\textsuperscript{61} A trail had been blasted through Sierra Crest to assist the growing nation in a common man’s conquest of the nation’s highest peak.\textsuperscript{62} In 1909, scientists finally got their wish when Gustave Marsh also led a team to build the Smithsonian Summit Hut on the summit of Mount Whitney. Envisioned two decades earlier, the hut was a place for astrophysical and atmospheric scientists to conduct a variety of experiments for the next decade “before prolonged human flight was possible” to conduct such experiments.\textsuperscript{63} The construction was a brutal task in this unforgiving environment. Teams of mules hauled the construction
supplies up the mountain to build the hut. The building was completely wood-free and equipped with a functioning telescope. Additionally, the building was the highest human structure in the nation, and in 1977, was placed on the National Register of Historic Places for its significance in the history of science before human flight. Imaginaries of common consumption and common conquest of the mountain became commonplace around the mountain at the turn of the century, and the desire to tame the mountain would continue to grow.

*Figures 8 and 9:* Photos from the Sierra Club conquest of Mount Whitney in July 1903. One hundred and ten climbers ascended to the west face via mules before hiking to the summit in the early original Mount Whitney Trail on the west side.
Figure 10: 1907 Mount Whitney USGS Quadrangle. The map shows the original route of the Mount Whitney Trail via the west side’s southwest chimney and the east side’s climb over Whitney Pass. It also corrects the mistakes of previous maps of where Mount Whitney was.66

Other, more eccentric proposals were put forth for greater—meaning larger numbers of? common conquests and recreational experiences of the mountain. One of these was the almost laughable idea of the “Mount Whitney Skyway,” a planned cable suspension route carrying visitors from the valley floor near the mouth of Lone Pine Canyon (7,000’) to the summit (14,505’). In February 1926, the Los Angeles Times ran a full-page article with pictures and images of the skyway and described the idea as a new and better way to “scale the heights of Mount Whitney.”67 A Bishop local, electrical engineer Cooper Shapley helped develop the “novel enterprise after a decade of stud of the situation in all seasons…” The plan touted its superiority to the French trams and compared its Sierra landscape as superior to that of the Alps. The main impetus was to democratize the mountain experience while profiting from tourism. The “roof of America” with its view to the “cellar…Death Valley” would be united in a single transportation network where “highway and skyway may soon bring the uppermost and lowest spots in neighborly contact.” Plans even suggested building a hotel on or near the summit. It was
hoped that this road would become an icon of the West as it would become, “undoubtedly one of the greatest attractions of the West...the greatest mountain road in America.”  

The tram represented a distinctive form of experiencing the mountain through networks of recreation technology. While the plan never came to fruition on the west side, it is still suggestive of the ever-growing desire to domesticate and democratize Mount Whitney for white recreationalists.

![Figure 11: Drawing of Mount Whitney and its Proposed Tram.](image-url)
Figure 9: Construction of the Whitney Portal, "Tom to Bottom" Road, c. 1936.

Figure 10: Altitude Flight Record on Mount Whitney. On June 24th, 1914, Silas Christofferson flew an airplane by his own design over the summit of Mount Whitney, marking a new elevation record for human flight on the North American continent. In a public aviation event celebrating human flight, Mount Whitney was a vertical frontier, a benchmark, to conquer. After a first attempt failed due to high winds, Christofferson flew above the summit at 15,728’, breaking the record above mountains as well.

Around the same time, a far more realistic suggestion was seriously considered in the 1910s in the construction of a road approaching the mountain. To facilitate the growing popularity of the Mount Whitney Trail, the original proposition for this road was from the western Sierra, through the rugged Kern River Canyon landscape. The proposed road would
begin at the “South Fork of the Kern…to… a series of tablelands and meadows which are said to extend at a gradual rise to within 3000’ of the summit of Whitney.” From the description, it seems that the road would end somewhere near Guitar Lake, or just below the entrance to the original southwest trail chimney route.\textsuperscript{73} This road was never built, and today the area it would have traversed remains one of the more remote in the range. A road facilitating an ordinary person’s conquest would be built on the eastern side from Lone Pine to the Whitney Portal up Lone Pine Canyon.

In 1936, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) built a camp at the base of Mount Whitney known as Camp F-28 for Company 2921. This camp, housed up to two hundred young men, ranging in age from eighteen to twenty. They were tasked to create a road from Hunter’s Flat (6,500’) to Whitney Portal (8,300’).\textsuperscript{74} According to one of the men, their first challenge was to widen the trail from Hunter’s Camp to Lone Pine “so that the trucks could get in and out of camp…this road was about ten miles I would say. It went right to the foothills of the Sierras.”\textsuperscript{75} After a few years of work, the \textit{Evening Star} wrote that National Park Service director, Arno B. Cammerer announced, “the Lone Pine-Mount Whitney Road” was open and that it would carry visitors up to “8,500’ of Mount Whitney’s total height of 14,495’.” Known as “Top-to-Bottom Road,” the road allowed visitors to experience the dynamic “scenery of the United States” and would surely become “one of the most popular [roads] on the North American continent.”\textsuperscript{76} While the practical feasibility of road building was less unconventional than the tram, the motivations were similar: technoscientific engineering, ordering, and control of nature, economic commodification of the mountain, and the promotion of popular feats of climbing.

By the end of the Great Depression, Mount Whitney had been gradually reimagined. Through recreational experiences and the creation of public-land infrastructure designed to
increase access, the landscape has become domesticated and democratized. The intermingling of scientific and local interests created trails, maps, roads, and imaginations that defined an evolving notion of what it meant for every day, mainly white, Americans to experience personally the continent’s finest mountain landscape. Ordinary weekenders from Los Angeles could now travel to Lone Pine on Friday, take a packed mule train to the summit, and theoretically be back by in middle-class suburbia on Monday.

Figure 11: Death Valley and Mount Whitney are shown together in a legacy of American conquest and shifting notion of imperialism. While in the past conquest and control of a landscape occurred through settler-colonialism (pioneer wagon) over horizontal spaces, the new conquest of these landscapes of the twentieth century of extremes was consumptive and recreational (tour bus). In both instances, roads and horizontal movement are prominently displayed, while the extreme vertical frontiers of Mount Whitney and Death Valley are contrasted.
Mount Whitney is defined by its relationship with extreme verticality, both high and low. In the early twentieth century, Mount Whitney, the highest point in the United States at the time, allured many nature tourists with its proximity to the nation’s lowest point, Badwater Basin in Death Valley (-282’). Postcards such as this one by eminent photographer Burton Frasher, demonstrate the era’s fascination with extreme verticality and the popular imagination of consuming and conquering these extreme environments. The top image is of Mount Whitney (14,505’) on the approach to Whitney Portal (-282’), while the middle lower image is of Badwater Basin in Death Valley National Park. The middle photograph is taken from Mahogany Flats (8,200’), a popular campsite in the Panamint Mountains between the two vertical extremes. In time, the fascination with extreme verticality, consumption, and conquering these landscapes for ordinary tourists would come to be part of the modern place-making of Inyo County, California.78

Conclusion

Across the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Mount Whitney was transformed into a storied mountain in the settled West in its landmarking and experiential stages. Mount Whitney first became a symbol of American expansion and imperial might as the highest mountain in the nation. Sometimes, this imagination of conquest and control was imperial, reflecting the long history of symbolizing Western mountains as places of domination. During the experiential phase, Mount Whitney gradually became imagined as a democratic space where conquest meant popular recreation and climbing, and through the interplay between democratic
recreation and science, the two merged in the creation of the Mount Whitney trails and the Whitney Portal Road. Using technology and science to create both, they are material examples of attempting to control the mountain through spatial ordering and democratic conquest.

There is, then, a complicated colonial history different from much of the contemporary popular imagination of Mount Whitney. It is one that often erases the Paiute stories of Tumanguya and it is a place whose climbing and recreational history is intertwined with the control and meaning-creation of the West. Can Mount Whitney still be a democratic place if it rests on public lands that dispossessed Native communities? Can it be a symbol of democratic ideals of cultural universality around an appreciation for mountain spaces and can be reimagined as public spaces for a common humanity and its underlying values of understanding, unity, and reconciliation? In some way, the geographic imagination of Mount Whitney in the landmarking and experiential phases should compel us to reimagine what republican principles of citizenship and native notions of sovereignty might look like in high places and within our common humanity. While imperfect, parks and protected areas were idealized as part of a healing process of a reconstruing nation in the wake of the Civil War and in response to the disruptive power of the Industrial Revolution. They were spaces where the beauties and transcendent goodness of the natural world could lift a common human spirit. Yes, the parks ideal was imperfect, tied up with a history of Native displacement, violence, and exclusion. Nonetheless, is there not a principle of responsible citizenship and social healing at the core of our public lands? Mountains are places of myth, meaning, and stories, and these narratives are constantly changing. The story we chose to craft about Western mountains on public lands in this century could have profound social implications for the future identity of Western spaces, and our collective place within these storied lands. Mount Whitney’s landmarking history shows there was something in the human

https://scholarship.claremont.edu/eshj/vol5/iss1/3
imagination of both Natives and settlers who recognized the landscape as good, beautiful, and transcendent. Maybe this connection offers us a chance to reimagine what citizenship and sovereignty might look like in a twenty-first-century West.

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14 Farmer, On Zion’s Mount, 4.
17 Clarence King, Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada, 131
19 Schumann, Peak Pursuits, 234-235.
20 Schumann, Peak Pursuits, 234-235, 239.

https://www.yosemite.ca.us/library/mountaineering_in_the_sierra_nevada/mountaineering_in_the_sierra_nevada.pdf


26 King, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*, 129.


30 “Johnson's California, also Utah, Nevada, Colorado, New Mexico, and Arizona,” A.J. Johnson and Son’s, New York, NY, 1864, digitized at Dave Rumsey’s Map Collection, [https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~305445~90075776:Johnson-s-California.-also-Utah.-Ne?sort=Pub_List_No_InitialSort](https://www.davidrumsey.com/luna/servlet/detail/RUMSEY~8~1~305445~90075776:Johnson-s-California.-also-Utah.-Ne?sort=Pub_List_No_InitialSort).


32 King, *Mountaineering in the Sierra Nevada*, 134.


34 *Inyo Independent*, Vol IV, No. 176, November 1, 1873.


38 Mount Whitney History, Lone Pine Chamber of Commerce, [https://lonepinechamber.org/history/mt-whitney-history/](https://lonepinechamber.org/history/mt-whitney-history/)


Farquhar, History of the Sierra Nevada, 181.

Schwaller, “The Smithsonian Institution Shelter on Mount Whitney.”

Schwaller, “The Smithsonian Institution Shelter on Mount Whitney.”

Holden, Mountain Observatories in America and Europe, 57.

The San Francisco Call, “Paths to Picturesqueness,” July 6, 1904, Image 8, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1904-07-06/ed-1-seq-8/#date1=1904&index=1&rows=20&searchType=advanced&language=&sequence=0&words=Mount+trail+trails+Whitney&proxdistance=5&date2=1904&ortext=mount+whitney&proxtext=&phrasetext=&andtext=trail&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1.

Farquhar, History of the Sierra Nevada, 181-183.

The San Francisco Call, “Paths to Great Scenery,” December 24, 1903, Image 8, https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn85066387/1903-12-24/ed-1-seq-8/#date1=1903&index=0&rows=20&searchType=advanced&language=&sequence=0&words=Mount+trail+Whitney+y&proxdistance=5&date2=1904&ortext=&proxtext=&phrasetext=mount+whitney+trail&andtext=&dateFilterType=yearRange&page=1.


Note: It is likely that the Summit Plaque was placed at the summit celebration for the completion of the High Sierra Route. See: Dave Woodruff, “Tales Along El Camino Sierra,” Owens Valley History, http://www.owensvalleyhistory.com/whitney_trail/page116.html.


Tweed, “Smithsonian Institution Shelter.”

Figure 10: Asahel Curtis, “Entering the ‘Chimney’ on Mount Whitney,” The Camden Chronicle, November 20, 1903, Image 3; Figure 11: Henry Brown, Mineral King Country, from Owens Valley History, “1903 Sierra Club High Trip Photos,” http://www.owensvalleyhistory.com/1903_scht/page84.html.

“Mount Whitney Quadrangle,”[1:25,000], USGS, 1907, https://ngmdb.usgs.gov/ht-bin/tv_browse.pl?id=9c041c5f0824fc4aed6c19f9869153d2.


Inyo Independent, “Road to Mount Whitney,” April 21, 1916, https://cdnc.ucr.edu/?a=d&id=II19160421.2.3&srpos=3&c=&-------en--20-II-1--txt-txtIN-whitney+road--------.


Leo D. Thompson, quoted in Martin, “Inyo National Forest and the CCC,” 15.


For more on the history of Native dispossession and public lands see: David Spence, Dispossessing the Wilderness: Indian Removal and the Making of the National Parks, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1999).