

*Indian Trust Funds and the Routes of American Capitalism, 1795-1865*

My research focuses on the fiscal dimensions of United States colonialism. “Indian Trust Funds and the Routes of American Capitalism, 1795-1865” reconstructs the financial architecture of Indigenous dispossession through an analysis of a little-known federal practice of purchasing Indian land with funds held in trust. In the early national period, federal treaty commissioners began offering trust funds as payment for Indian lands ceded between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River. Federal officials invested the bulk of Indian trust fund wealth in state bonds, securities that state governments issued to finance infrastructural developments such as roads, canals, railways, and banks. By converting Indigenous wealth into capital for an array of states, from Alabama to Illinois, Florida to New York, trust funds created vectors of investment that spread Native wealth throughout the country that dispossessed them. My dissertation tracks three such cases: that of the Seneca, displaced from western New York; the United Nations of Odawa, Ojibwe, and Potawatomi, displaced from Wisconsin and Illinois; and the Chickasaw, displaced from Mississippi and Alabama. Situating these people and their investments within a trans-Atlantic web of sovereign debts, my analysis weaves Indigenous dispossession into a broader narrative of market integration, recurrent financial crisis, and continental empire.

Support from the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking proved absolutely vital in allowing me to pursue my ambitious research program. I set out on these research trips interested in clarifying federal fiduciary administration, and in better understanding the regional settings for removals in the Midwest and southeast. With this aim, I set out to research in three different cities: Chicago, Montgomery, and Washington, D.C.

In the latter city I consulted the Office of Indian Affairs records, which, along with congressional documents and other governmental records, form the spine of my research, allowing me to reconstruct the Indian trust fund program in its most granular, administratively detailed guises. While I had already visited the National Archives and Records Administration building in Washington before, this trip also brought me to the second facility, located in College Park, Maryland. There, I discovered materials previously unknown to me, housed in the records of the Department of the Interior, which oversaw the Office of Indian Affairs upon its creation in 1849. These unknown materials, called “Indian trust funds: special files,” were especially interesting for the number of financial issues they addressed, including problems with land speculation, trust fund management, and claims to mismanaged funds. While many historians consult the correspondence held in the National Archive’s Office of Indian Affairs agency files, the Office’s financial documents are more often ignored; my project is centered on them, and this History Project-funded trip allowed me to discover an entire new trove.

I also traveled to Chicago, Illinois, to examine records that documented the expropriation and displacement of the United Nations of Ojibwe, Odawa, and Potawatomi peoples. Working in the Newberry Library, I mined the Everett Graff collection of rare printed travel narratives, in order to understand early transportation networks in the Midwest. As my chapter on the United Nations details, Indian trust funds helped power the Midwest’s transportation revolution. Learning how these changes unfolded on the ground, from a traveler’s-eye perspective, enriched my narrative immensely. At the Chicago History Museum, I consulted an array of cartographic and manuscript collections that included some delightful finds – especially three hand-drawn maps illustrating transportation innovations alongside pathways of Indian removal, created to accompany a former Indian agent’s oral history.

Finally, I undertook ten days of research in Montgomery, Alabama, to better understand the relationship by southeastern Indian removal and the proliferation of banks across the Cotton Kingdom. In Montgomery, my research focused on the Bank of the State of Alabama records, contained in the State Archives. These included administrative records, minute books, account ledgers, and liquidation records that allowed me to piece together the process by which Alabama state officials, bond brokers, and federal Indian affairs compelled the Chickasaw and Choctaw to invest in the state from which they had been forcibly removed. From these records I also learned that the State Bank underwrote a number of private firms who secured contracts with the federal government to transport and provision Indigenous polities during their removal journeys.

Ultimately, I gained from my research in these three cities a crisper understanding of the financial network that surrounded Indigenous dispossession. Being able to link bankers in Washington, D.C. and New York City, canal commissioners in Indiana, state bank commissioners in Alabama, and federal Indian department officials spread from the capital westward has allowed me to buttress my interventions in the field. Prevailing historiographies on Indian removal, especially during the Jacksonian era, continue to portray the process primarily as a political campaign motivated by Andrew Jackson's personal proclivities, and met with a counter-movement of northeastern religious dissent. While Indian removal was significant for partisan politics and reform movements, its legacies on the nation's political economy and on Indigenous polities themselves were far more important, and much less understood. My project's central aim, then, is to demonstrate that battles over Indigenous financial wealth – battles triggered by the ordeals of removal – were of immense consequence in the making of the United States' continental empire.

Once I processed the materials consulted in my research and began writing, I started to understand the Indian trust funds as vehicles of an imperial strategy that I now call “fiduciary colonialism”: a form of territorial acquisition carried out primarily through the expansion of administrative control over Indigenous wealth. In the aftermath of post-Revolutionary frontier warfare, federal officials embraced fiduciary control in order to minimize the billowing costs of militarized conquest, repurpose Indigenous wealth as capital, and skew bilateral diplomacy in the federal government’s favor. As a colonial strategy, fiduciary colonialism proved stunningly effective – and enduring. When Congress abandoned treaty-making in 1871, fiduciary control evolved into the so-called “trust responsibility,” which remains a pillar of federal Indian affairs policy in the present day. Yet federal control over Indigenous wealth was never total, nor was it exercised without challenge. Rather, Indigenous peoples responded to fiduciary colonialism by developing political structures of fiscal governance – from business-focused council committees to legislatively controlled treasuries – that managed to reclaim control over their national economies. By detailing these counter-movements, my dissertation emphasizes the importance of economic autonomy to Indigenous sovereignty, and recounts the intertwined development of federal and Indigenous fiscal states. This project could not have been undertaken in its current form without the generous support of the History Project and the Institute for New Economic Thinking. I express sincere gratitude for the funding, and to all who help keep these vital programs running.