In this essay, a historical geographer and cartographic historian interprets Walt Disney's Frontierland as both a miniaturized environment and a stylized map. He speculates that Frontierland perpetuates deeply rooted, and widely shared, mainstream American attitudes toward United States expansionism from the late nineteenth century through the Cold War.

Now when I was a little chap I had a passion for maps. . . . At that time there were many blank spaces on the earth and when I found one that looked particularly inviting on a map (but they all look that) I would put my finger on it and say: When I grow up I will go there.

—Joseph Conrad
Heart of Darkness (1902)

Many people are fascinated by maps, especially those maps of continents that show empty spaces suggesting unknown peoples and places. Cartographers draw maps that have the power to both inform and beguile their users.1 On one level, maps perform the mundane task of depicting places well enough so that we can locate them, and, hopefully, travel there. Resulting from centuries of artistic refinement and scientific thought, maps are essential in describing the world and places on it.2 To do so, they rely on some ground rules. Cartographers usually recite a litany of features that make maps effective: they should be drawn with reference to geographic coordinates (latitude/longitude), use recognized projections, be

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2 In reality, the western cartographic tradition builds on African, Arabic, and even Chinese traditions, as described in David Woodward and J. B. Harley, eds., History of Cartography [a multi-volume series] (Madison, 1993–1999).

drawn to scale, and be clearly oriented (north customarily being "up").\(^3\) Maps, moreover, always have contexts. Cartographic historians interpret maps in light of their sponsors, map makers, society, and other earlier maps that often serve as their inspiration.\(^4\) Maps, in other words, serve as barometers of geographic knowledge.\(^5\) Through them, for example, the western portion of North America was first defined by Spanish cartographers, and later refined by Mexican and American military and scientific expeditions.

At another level, however, maps transcend their claims to scientific objectivity. We have a passion for maps because they possess the power to inspire the imagination. At this level, maps are tools of the spirited mind—the empire builder and the storyteller: they fuel the desire to experience, even claim, the geographic area that they represent. Cartography in this context becomes motivational (or invitational), for it empowers the map reader to experience place vicariously. Read collectively, maps may thus represent broadly shared aspirations, fantasies, and beliefs about places. This explains why cartography and expansion are inextricably linked. The beautiful historic maps of western North America seen in catalogs and archives represent not only the geographic knowledge, but also the geographic objectives, of the time. Through them, the frontier was delineated—given spatial form in reference to that which was known and settled, versus that which was unknown and conquerable. In reality, the places mapped were known by other (Native) peoples, and their input even found its way into the explorers' maps, but the voices of these Native peoples were not credited in the final product. Maps are powerful tools of appropriation.

As definitions of cartography broaden to embrace all representations of place, including mental maps, so too has the definition of a map expanded to include more than drawings of places on flat paper or parchment. Just as non-Western peoples used pictographs and objects such as sticks to represent places, we now recognize that maps can take many forms. Consider, for example, an accepted three dimensional artifact—the globe—that signifies the shape of the earth. It, too, is a map, but one shaped more like the sphere it represents. But what about maps that take great liberties in depicting places, such as the whimsical cartograms or cartoons that show Texas stretching from coast to coast, or even ashtrays in the shape of Texas?\(^6\) These, too, are maps, but their purpose is as iconic as it is informational.

At yet another level, even shaped environments may be maps. A farmer's pond excavated, or a grove of trees planted, in the shape of Texas come to mind, but an even better example is an imperial Chinese city that also serves as a map of the cosmos. In


\(^6\) See Richard Francaviglia, *The Shape of Texas: Maps as Metaphors* (College Station, 1995).
these cases, maps become metaphors and artifacts. When studied carefully, large scale features such as miniature golf courses or theme parks often embody visions of places—either places on earth or utopian places conceived in the mind of their creators and designers. These are also three dimensional topographic representations of places real or imagined, and are thus maps.

Using the definition of cartography in this broadest of senses—as iconography of the geographic imagination—allows us to explore the vision of the West held by Walt Disney (1901–1966). Although no one can delineate precisely Disney’s mental map of the West, he did configure a portion of Disneyland, his theme park in Anaheim, CA, to represent it, and the shape of his creations suggests its general contours. The historian and geographer may thus interpret this portion of his park, Frontierland, much like they do real places—deciphering, as it were, what Disney placed on his three dimensional map. Doing so involves considerable speculation, for as will be seen, Disney was circumspect about the actual design process involved in the creation of Frontierland. That, however, simply adds to the challenge of understanding his creations as environments that invite interpretation both as material culture and as symbols.

This paper focuses on Frontierland, one portion of Disneyland, and one of Disney’s most popular environments. To facilitate this interpretation, this paper uses a cartographic metaphor to identify the historical and geographic themes that appeared to inspire Disney’s western frontier vision. It is not coincidental that the theme park he created is called the “Magic Kingdom,” for Disneyland builds upon images of places associated with history and fantasy. It is especially significant that Frontierland was specifically designed to represent a particular geographic locale—the American West. By interpreting Frontierland as a cartographic manifestation of a real place, it becomes apparent that this three-dimensional mental map of the West, like its paper counterparts, is closely tied to empire building and cultural identity formation.

So powerful is the name “Frontierland” that its mere mention evokes images of “the West” to most people. Those images are derived from television and novels rather than serious historical research. They are, nevertheless, valid representations of the frontier in popular culture. Although the name Frontierland appears contrived, it reaffirms an axiom of perceptual geography: places, by definition, must be named in order to enter our consciousness. Words serve as the basis for all place names. It is impossible to conceive of a place without using words to describe it. Stated another way, place names are very short stories that summarize a lengthy narrative. Consider, for example, the names Wounded Knee, Virginia City, Bakersfield, or Austin—they


resonate with cultural and biographical history because they are stories of origins and subsequent events. The names of these individual locations—which is to say stories abbreviated in place—are woven into a larger narrative when they are placed on a map. Thus, although it is tempting to think of a map as a purely graphic device, maps, like the places they represent, could not exist without language. Maps, in fact, occupy a unique interface between images and narratives.

Following the geographers’ and anthropologists’ advice, let us begin with the name: Frontierland. Turning to a dictionary for help in defining the place name, we immediately recognize its dual roots in two separate nouns—frontier and land. Frontier is defined either as 1) “a border between two countries,” or 2) “a region that forms the margin of settled or developed territory,” while land is defined as “a portion of the earth’s solid surface distinguishable by boundaries or ownership.” Note that frontier is also used as an adjective; it tells us about the condition of that particular land. The word land also works to describe the frontier as a realm. Note too that both words frontier and land are inextricably tied to ownership, either geopolitical, individual, or both. This is especially significant, for Disney’s Frontierland works metaphorically at several levels, namely political, cultural, and geographic. Its importance, moreover, is best understood cartographically, that is, as a material manifestation of Disney’s—and, broadly speaking, America’s—mental map of the national experience. A closer look at the history and geography of Frontierland is in order, for a dispassionate study of it reveals its association with American mythology.

Viewed comprehensively, Frontierland fits into a continuous tradition of storytelling about American frontiers, that is, lands at the periphery of the settled and appropriated world. From Columbus to John Wesley Powell, four centuries separate “the unselfconsciously late-medieval discoverer from the self-consciously modern explorer.”10 These discoverers and imperial explorers operated from about 1500 to 1900. They often wrote extensive reports about their exploits for future generations. To these chroniclers we may add twentieth-century interpreters like Walt Disney, who ultra-self-consciously portrayed the process of exploration and discovery in order to both educate and entertain. In Frontierland, Disney encouraged visitors to vicariously experience the unknown, turning theme park visitors into latter-day explorers far removed from the original time and place of exploration. In doing so, Disney also built on celluloid experiences and historically-themed docu-dramas, such as his 1960 film Ten Who Dared, which portrayed John Wesley Powell’s discoveries in the Grand Canyon.11 These vehicles of literature, film, and theme park helped build upon the nation’s enduring popular fascination with frontiers, notably the interior American West. Through them new generations could still “discover” wondrous peoples and landscapes, albeit vicariously.

10 Anthony Pagden, European Encounters with the New World: From Renaissance to Romanticism (New Haven, 1993), 1.

What Columbus triggered as an irrepressible westward quest for new lands continued unabated through centuries of exploration and discovery until military surveyors and geologists essentially completed the process by about 1900. They cleared a path for those who would not be satisfied merely claiming and settling the periphery, that is, the more accessible coastal margins of the new continents. They directed their quests toward the interior—the very heart—and to what lay beyond. Significantly, Disney was born at just the time (1901) the era of American expansion on the continent was ending, and the United States became a world power to be reckoned with. This essay suggests that the frontier of westward expansion is held in the collective consciousness as a signifier of the search for many frontiers, including individual freedom, economic growth, and cultural/social development. If all westerns are morality plays reenacted at the margins of established society, then the locale of this action—the western frontier—is rich in contextual meaning. Frontierland is, above all, a historical, geographical, and ultimately mythical story given form by Disney.

That this energetic westward colonization drama continues to have broad public appeal is evidenced by the enduring popularity of the taming of the West in song, movies, cartoons, and theme parks. Consider the westward move as interpreted by shapers of popular culture in the animated film An American Tail (1986) produced and directed by Don Bluth shortly after he left The Disney Company. Building on Disney’s tradition of anthropomorphizing, An American Tail featured an immigrant family of mice (named, appropriately, Mousekewitz) who arrive in the United States from Russia after many trials and tribulations. In the popular sequel, An American Tail: Fievel Goes West (1991), still under the influence of the original, the mice remain restless. Finding their opportunity limited in the grimy cities of the East, they naturally look farther westward for opportunity. After hearing glowing descriptions of the region, the Mousekewitz family travels westward to the Wyoming frontier, where they triumph over adversity. Their son Fievel becomes a hero in the process of moving West. In popular stories of this genre, the frontier serves as a crucible in which tenacity and valor are rewarded by success and possession. That the genre is flexible is verified in An American Tail: Fievel Goes West, for the mice appear to be cast as ethnically Jewish (not Anglo American) characters, and the message of their exploits is decidedly anti-corporate. However, this frontier fable still works as a tale of liberation from oppression. There is another theme operative in the genre of frontier stories, and that is re-generation. Horace Greeley’s admonition to “Go West Young Man” suggests that youth would prosper, but it also suggests the West’s ability to sustain youthful vigor and initiative. Even though he discovered the West in the 1920s, several generations after

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the "real" pioneers, Walt Disney sensed new opportunities there. Perhaps he also sensed its regenerative powers. It is important to remember that Walt Disney's brother Roy (who would play a major role in the development and financial management of the Disney enterprises) moved to California for health reasons in the 1920s. It was this move that first brought Walt Disney to the Golden State for a visit, but the move ultimately regenerated both brothers.\(^\text{15}\)

The belief in the regenerative powers inherent in the westward "American" migration is deeply embedded in our popular culture, and Disney capitalized on it. In doing so, he built on the sweeping literary generalizations about the West that would outlive Disney himself. Published a year before Disney's death, the popular 1965 novel, *The Ordways*, by Texas writer William Humphrey, captured the essence of the ethnocentric cause-effect quality of the West as youth and new beginnings:

> When a man decides to pull up his roots and set off in search of a new life, he instinctively heads west. No other point of the compass exerts that powerful pull. The West is the true magnetic pole. Ever since his expulsion from the garden to a place east of Eden, man has yearned westward as towards a state of remembered innocence, and human history is one long westward migration.\(^\text{16}\)

It is easy to dismiss such novels, films, and cartoons about the frontier as drivel, but they endure despite sustained withering criticism from academicians. Why? This essay suggests an answer: such seemingly trite stories have deeper significance. As historians of the West, we can study The Walt Disney Company and Disney's conception of the West to gain insights into the broader role of the West in Western/American culture. Disney was a remarkably successful purveyor of western icons, stories, and memorabilia. He used media and technology to tell, and retell, the engaging story of the frontier. The company took form with Walt Disney’s animated films, beginning in the 1920s and 1930s (One of the earliest, "Steamboat Willie," featured Mickey Mouse aboard a steamboat on the western rivers). Disney's feature films in the 1950s and 1960s, and his masterful use of television and theme parks beginning in the same period, earned him a reputation as America's premier shaper of popular culture in the mid-twentieth century. Although it is now commonplace to debate the significance of the “Disney version” of history, that vision continues to be conveyed through cartoons, films, products, and theme parks.\(^\text{17}\) And it continues to have broad popular

\(^{\text{15}}\) Michael Duchemin, "Walt Disney’s Wild West" (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Western History Association, St. Paul, MN, 18 October 1997).


\(^{\text{17}}\) This term was inspired by the title of Richard Schickel’s *The Disney Version: The Life, Times, Art and Commerce of Walt Disney* (1968; reprint New York, 1985) which provided an interpretation of Disney in context. For other interpretations see Christopher Finch, *The Art of Walt Disney: From Mickey Mouse to the Magic Kingdoms* (New York, 1975); Bob Thomas, *Walt Disney: An American Original* (New York, 1976); Alan Bryman, *Disney and His World* (New York, 1985); Randy Bright, *Disneyland: Inside Story* (New York, 1987). For more recent revisionist
appeal. Recent scholarship confirms that historians in general—and western historians in particular—can profitably study Disney’s creations for their deeper content and meaning, and for the multi-layered messages that resonate from them.¹⁸ As historians, we are most effective when interpreting Disney neither as villain nor saint, but rather as a biographical figure who ably captured America’s nearly mythical fascination with the westering experience. One thing about Disney is undeniable: he is an immensely important—perhaps the most important—representative and shaper of twentieth-century American culture.¹⁹


¹⁸ That scholars are taking Disney and other shapers of popular culture seriously is evident in a spate of recent book chapters and journal articles. See, for example, John Dorst, “Miniaturizing Monumentality: Theme Park Images of the American West and Confusions of Cultural Influences,” in Cultural Transmissions and Receptions: American Mass Culture in Europe, ed. R. Kroes et al. (Amsterdam, 1993), 253–70 and Mike Wallace, Mickey Mouse History and Other Essays on American History (Philadelphia, 1996).

Disneyland, too, is of vast importance as an environment of popular culture that shapes world views. That magic kingdom is dialectically complex; it is traditional in that it built on popular mainstream values, but it is radical in that it helped revolutionize the way most people conceptualize and interpret the American experience. Understanding how the park functioned in this ambivalent role requires putting Disneyland in its historic context: as a phenomenon in time and space, Disneyland represented the decentralized, automobile-oriented entrepreneurism of Southern California in the early 1950s. When Walt Disney and his designers wrested Disneyland from the rectangular grid landscape of orange groves near Anaheim in 1954–1955, the park’s design and small size necessarily represented both the genius of its creators and the compromises that they made in order to accommodate large numbers of visitors. But Disneyland definitely shaped, and was shaped by, the American psyche of the times. Disneyland’s design even influenced the recent urban and suburban settlement of the real West.20

Viewed from the air, Disneyland presents a non-euclidean, but beautifully geometric, design that suggests a sense of cosmic order and symmetry. (See Fig. 1.) The design is simple enough at first blush; visitors to Disneyland enter the park through Main Street USA, that serves, metaphorically speaking, as a key by which the contents of the theme park are unlocked. Upon reaching the end of Main Street USA at the park’s center, visitors make a taxing decision: here at the plaza hub, they must decide which land to enter first. To the southwest is Adventureland, to the east Tomorrowland, to the north Fantasyland, and—significantly—to the west and northwest lies Frontierland. Hinting at the theme park’s overall cartographic design, Walt Disney himself noted that Frontierland is located “to the west, of course,” of the central plaza hub.21 This confirms that Disney conceptualized his creations geographically; like our culture, he constructed a mental map that was likely based on actual maps of the American West.

Although the word “west” is not used in its name (as it was in Westworld, a masterful 1973 film parody about theme parks), Frontierland, in this theme park, is obviously the American West.22 We can tell this by the clues Disney provided: simulated cacti, false front buildings, and colorful characters. It is noteworthy that even the Main Street, USA by which visitors reach Frontierland also hints at the West, for it was based in part on real streetscapes in the towns of Marceline, Missouri, and Fort Collins, Colorado.23 Disney believed that his railroad-straddling, market-oriented hometown of Marceline was not very far removed from the western frontier of the

23 Richard Francaviglia, Main Street Revisited: Time, Space and Image Building in Small Town America (Iowa City, 1996), 142–51.
nineteenth century. It was in Marceline that Disney developed his love of the Missouri countryside that so enchanted him with its legends, railroads, steamboats, frontier characters, and Indian peoples. Of all the lands in Disneyland, however, Disney himself revealed that “Frontierland evokes a special response” and “occupied a great deal of my thought.” Significantly, it is the largest part of the 95 acre theme park.

A Disney interpreter wrote, “The Disney vision was clear. Scale meant everything, whether it was the fairy-tale size of the railroad, or the nostalgic foreshortening of Main Street, or the romanticism of Frontierland.” If this is so, then Disneyland itself must be viewed as a stylized model of the world (if not the entire universe) and Frontierland a microcosm of that larger universe—the West. Like most of Disney's creations, however, Frontierland is richly layered with meanings derived from both American folklore and literature. Disney's representation of the West involved linking a vivid narrative about the region to a design that could sustain the storyline. Each part of the story was carefully conceived, named, and arranged in space to create a representation of a place. This makes Frontierland a cartographic manifestation of reality—a map—by which people may also collectively get their bearings on the landscape of imagination. (See Fig. 2.) Continuing the cartographic metaphor, Frontierland is actually a historical, or antiquarian, map. It represents Disney’s vision of what the West was like in the time period that ended just before his birth. This golden time that Disney immortalized ended in the 1890s, the same decade during which Frederick Jackson Turner wrote his provocative frontier thesis. Using this era suggests that Disney called upon late-nineteenth-century sentiments from his parents’ time. Thanks to Disney and others, such sentiments about the frontier lingered well into the twentieth century.

In contrast to literary writers who cast doubt on the indefatigability of the western spirit in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Disney’s belief in the value of American society and technology was unshakable. If Frank Norris castigated western railroads in novels like The Octopus (1901), Disney later vindicated these same corporations in his theme park. Disney’s faith persisted, despite his fatigue and mental breakdown in 1931, and his refusal to yield to the numerous setbacks that threatened him and his family with financial ruin. Disneyland, in fact, represented the blueprint of an obsession (euphemistically called a “dream”) that Disney refused to give up despite its seeming impossibility. Frontiersman that he was, Disney mortgaged everything that he had to build the theme park. But if Disney was tenacious, he was also surprisingly naïve. Many observers claim that Disneyland represents Disney's childlike vision of the world, if not universe, a fact often attributed to its appealing to the

24 Walt Disney, “Frontierland,” 10–1.
25 Ibid., 11.
26 Bob Thomas, Walt Disney, 266.
27 Frank Norris, The Octopus (New York, 1901).
Deliberately located in the western portion of Disneyland, Frontierland was carefully designed by Walt Disney himself. As seen on this map, it features a core and periphery: The prominent Tom Sawyer Island is surrounded by the Rivers of America, which is in turn bordered by Nature's Wonderland and the railroad encircling the perimeter of the theme park. Photo © Disney Enterprises, Inc. (detail)

child in all of us. That being the case, some see Disney as a man who never matured, a man who retained his child-like innocence. This attitude, however, was not simply impotent innocence; it was the innocence of youth envisioning new empires. If Disney never lost his youthful, even naïve, fascination with both the vanishing frontier and the peoples and machines that transformed it, then that naiveté or faith became his strength or asset. It clearly distinguished Disney from the cynics of his age. Thus, as Sinclair Lewis wrote Main Street (New York, 1920) to share his discontent with the pettiness of small town life in America, Disney countered by “imagineering” Main Street USA as a paean to it. By his actions, Disney created a simplified American West in Frontierland that, like literature and film, had undeniable power to shape popular perceptions.

Despite his appreciation of popular American literature, Disney wrote surprisingly little. He did, however, write an occasional article for popular magazines. Of special interest to students of the West is Disney’s 1958 article in True West magazine.

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28 Sinclair Lewis, Main Street (New York, 1920).
In it, he used the travelogue format to advantage by taking readers on an imaginary tour of Frontierland from its portal at the log stockade, through Frontier Village, and then farther into the wilderness. Disney's appreciation of the topography, flora, and fauna of the West is evident in the features that he depicted and described: colorful Rainbow Canyon, mysterious Devil's Paint Pots (mud geysers), rugged Rock Gorge, stylized Coyote Rock, peculiar Elephant Rock, and the realistically-prickly Cactus Gardens. Note that these names are all Euro-American; there is no hint of other cultures in these ostensibly English names. These names reflect Disney's fascination with the region's unique natural history as immortalized in his popular early 1950s nature films, *The Living Desert* and *The Vanishing Prairie.*

As experienced in Disney's words and in the theme park, Frontierland unfolds much like a cyclorama, that is, a sweeping panoptic vision of American expansion. Disney packaged this frontier as a series of memorable physical or scenic features into which human activity was placed. He intuitively recognized the significance of geography in American history and in the American imagination. Stated another way, the West's "distinctive and unfamiliar landscapes," that "defied notions about utility and beauty" also helped to "shape the culture and character of the United States." Disney was well in tune with popular historic sentiment about the role of nature in the nation's destiny. Taken together, Disney's *True West* travelogue-style article and Frontierland itself reveal a deeply conflicted vision of the region as possessing incredible natural beauty that should both be exploited and preserved.

Disney laid out the parameters of Frontierland much like a cartographer draws a map. Of all of the sections or lands in the theme park, Frontierland's "Rivers of America" (the largest single geographic feature in the entire theme park) truly enchanted him. Disney wrote that "one of the biggest joys of my life is sitting on the levee in the Frontierland section of our park . . . watching the steamboat *Mark Twain* belching smoke and skirting along toward the tip of Tom Sawyer Island." Disney adored this part of Frontierland, with its pirates, keelboats, *Mark Twain* steamboat, "Indian Village," and the wilderness. (See Fig. 3.) He described Tom Sawyer Island in nearly mystical terms in the *True West* article. To him, its caves and harbors resonated with Indian and frontier lore. On Tom Sawyer Island, Disney constructed the mythical Fort Wilderness. Crowning a bluff overlooking the river, the fort served as headquarters for

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31 Walt Disney, "Frontierland," 10.
Fig. 3. The "Explorer's Map of Tom Sawyer Island" reveals that this prominent portion of Frontierland contains several features—such as Fort Wilderness, Smuggler's Cove, and Indian Territory—that help sustain popular literary and folk narratives about the historical geography of the western American frontier. Photo © Disney Enterprises, Inc.

Davy Crockett and George Russell, who, Disney noted, "reported to Major General Andrew Jackson in the Indian campaign of 1813."32

To the public, Frontierland presented living history based on actual historical events and the Disney films in which these events were depicted. Disney wrote his True West article on Frontierland as an introduction to what he hoped to accomplish there, adding that it "isn't the end of the story," for, "as with all the park, I want to keep adding new features to Frontierland, new exhibits that will show today's youth the America of our great-grandparents day—and before."33 Continuing the cartographic metaphor, Disney realized that the map of Frontierland, too, would change through time. This, of course, was progress. Disney, as master cartographer, empowered himself and his designers to change the map from time to time.

32 Ibid., 13.
33 Ibid.
Designed to be expanded and improved, Frontierland has indeed changed over the years. Although those four decades are fascinating, Frontierland in its first decade (1955–1965) stayed under Disney's close supervision, that is, remained closest to the ideals of its creator. Significantly, as Michael Steiner recently observed, Disney's Tomorrowland quickly became passé as it was impossible to keep futuristic. Frontierland, however, was prophetic in that it sustained a popular vision that led to the creation of the “New West” where the designer log cabin and computer coexist. In other words, Disney intuitively sensed the strong role that the past would play in America's postmodern and post-industrial future. His romanticizing of the “Old West” helped lay the groundwork for the “New West” of amenity tourism and chic residence.

Disney's writings and reminiscences reveal a Turnerian view of the frontier. Like historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1861–1932), Disney felt that both his own life and that of the nation had been affected, even forged, by the frontier experience. He suggested as much in the True West article when he alluded to the pluck, grit, and character of the pioneers. As if taking cues from Turner's essay, the works of Disney help enshrine the frontier and sustain the dialogue about its validity that continues into the twenty-first century. As western historians, we debate the importance (even the existence) of a singular frontier, but for a generation of political conservatives like Walter Knott, creator of Knott's Berry Farm, and Walter Elias Disney, and most Americans, there was simply no argument about its significance: to them, the frontier defined the American experience and synergistically shaped the American character and spirit. It made Americans a different (and better) people than even their (European) forebears. The East suggests Europe and European roots, and hence is tainted by the Old World, while the West suggests a tabula rasa, ready for new beginnings and opportunities.

Although Disney's Frontierland celebrated the triumph of Anglo American manifest destiny, his frontier actually reached beyond the West because it was synonymous with the American spirit. That spirit is ultimately political in that it is closely linked to the national expansion that continued long after the frontier ceased to be geographical and became ideological. This is to say that the frontier came to symbolize our national character even after the fact.

Disneyland and Frontierland are best viewed in the context of the Cold War. During that ideological dispute following World War II—a dispute that found the United States and other “free” countries pitted against the socialist and communist

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34 This change is revealed by comparing the many illustrations in Bruce Gordon and David Mumford, Disneyland: The Nickel Tour—A Post Card Journey through 40 Years of the Happiest Place on Earth (Santa Clarita, CA, 1995).

countries—Disney weighed in heavily on the patriotically conservative side. During those volatile times when the United States became obsessed with defending its ideology against communism, the word “frontier” also signified the boundary between two political systems. To pursue this thought further, Frontierland can perhaps be viewed, in an ideological sense, as a Cold War statement about the irrepressible spirit of America in overcoming the hostile frontier of that part of the world behind the Iron Curtain where individual aspirations were crushed. To a political conservative like Disney, who grew increasingly conservative as the Cold War heightened in the 1950s, the triumphs of the western frontier were applicable to meeting the international political challenges of both the present and future. This time, however, the battle would not be for land or resources per se, but for the minds and hearts of humanity. It is therefore no surprise that a man who would claim to do just that, Ronald Reagan, was present at the grand opening of Disneyland in July 1955. Reagan and Disney shared many conservative values regarding the evils of communism, the inviolability of individual rights, and the essential purity of the American spirit. Disney also shared these values with another political conservative, Walter Knott, whose Ghost Town in Knott’s Berry Farm was created in 1953 with a political agenda in mind. In a booklet about his theme park, Knott candidly noted that:

Ghost Town depicts an era in our nation’s history when men were forging ahead and crossing new frontiers. Ghost Town also represents an era of free people who carved out their salvation without let or hindrance. The people, the things, the buildings of Ghost Town are long dead, but the same pioneer spirit still lives on.36

Like Ghost Town, Frontierland is ultimately a statement about the role of the individual in achieving success through faith, tenacity, and perseverance—without the intervention or oppression of government. In the Disney version, the victory could be couched in a play on words: the West was won, and the West won.

Just as Disney never lived to see the victorious conclusion of the Cold War, he likely never understood that the American West was not actually won at all. As the New Western historians demonstrate, there remained much unfinished business on the frontier, business that now forces the rethinking of the concept of conquest: those indigenous peoples headed for oblivion in Frontierland were not ever completely subdued or assimilated, but rather survived well enough to be participants in the multicultural West we know today. However, because the Disney version of history is closely connected to American popular culture, which views progress and civilization marching to the Pacific and settling everywhere along the way, it simplifies the western experience. It does so through allegory—defined as the expression by means of symbolic fictional figures and actions of truths or generalizations about human existence, and a symbolic representation. Frontierland is allegorical in both a historical and a geographical/cartographic sense. Through its creation, Disney shaped the West

36 Knott’s Berry Farm, Ghost Town & Calico Railway (Buena Park, CA, 1953), 59.
into a stylized iconic form, a place where heroes make history and pave the way for civilization. To do so, he called upon historical western figures such as Davy Crockett and Mike Fink to affirm the conservative tenet that there is no civilization without individual freedom. The fact that two famous and conservative actors, Fess Parker and Buddy Epsen, were present at the opening of Frontierland confirmed a basic fact about the entire theme park. It was an elaborate set where Disney's films could be further dramatized, and where the park's visitors could actually take part in the drama they had seen on movie and television screens.

Temporally, Frontierland depicted mythically heroic, herculean efforts over a vague and rather long period of time, from about 1790 to 1890. And yet, Disney presented this history as if it were currently in progress because this would convey a deeper message: the spirit of the frontier was not dead. He thus further refined Walter Knott's tenet about the frontier West, but with a twist in the plot line. Although Disney and his designers were intrigued by nearby Knott's Berry Farm's decadent western flavor, Disney elected not to recreate a decrepit ghost town in Frontierland because this would imply failure. Rather, Disney went one step farther than Knott and re-created a vigorous West in its period of booming growth.37

A closer look at the spatial configuration of Frontierland reveals much about Disney's world views. To Disney, the penetration and settlement of the West was an ongoing drama that, by its continued replaying, taught both history and geography lessons about manifest destiny. This Disney version of the relationship between people and place forms the basis of Frontierland's historical geography, both real and imagined. It underscores Frontierland's function as both an environment and as a map. Through cartography, people conceive of, and then represent, places even as vague as "the frontier." Frontierland is a rich subject for cartographic interpretation, for it too has identifiable geographic antecedents and resulted from individual vision and group collaboration about where and when the frontier existed. If a map is, as dictionaries claim, "a representation . . . of the whole or part of an area," then Frontierland indeed serves as a stylized, three-dimensional relief map.

Although Disneyland developed through a complex process of sketch mapping—most of which wound up in the trash bin—Disney himself had a strong hand in designing Frontierland.38 What did Disney and his designers include in this map of the frontier? What, likewise, did they omit? Less concerned with the formalities of scientific map making, Disney nevertheless used direction, scale, and proportions. Through miniaturization and stylization on one level, and constant refinement on another, Frontierland served several cartographic purposes. It was used for navigation (that is, to get people from one discrete place to another), but it was also didactically used to instruct individuals how to view places and the peoples who occupy (or should

37 Wally Boag, Disney employee, phone interview with author, 28 May 1997, Santa Monica, CA.

38 Karal Ann Marling, commentary at the Walt Disney and the West session, annual meeting of the Western History Association, St. Paul, MN, 18 October 1997.
occupy) them. Disney used Frontierland as a stage on which to tell the story of how the western part of the country functioned in American history. Although Frontierland is idiosyncratic (i.e. Disney's), it is also populist in that it incorporated popular views. Embraced by large numbers of people, it tells or endorses "our" story, not Disney's story alone. Disney had a phenomenal ability to capture public sentiment in his products, stories, and theme parks; thus, Frontierland works so well because it fits popularly-conceived images of the frontier. It served as a simplified depiction of how the West became part of America through the construction of towns and forts, and the development of transportation systems, that reached into the heart of the region. "Cartography is often intimate with imperial necessity . . ." and Disney's cartographic design of Frontierland is a less than subtle recollection of American empire-building.

Disney's design of Frontierland also exhibits intriguing similarities to other stylized maps, some utopian, some ancient. When compared, Frontierland's design and that of an ancient Babylonian map are strikingly similar. (See Fig. 4.) Although the former is a stylized and miniaturized map of the frontier, while the latter depicts the known world and even the heavens surrounding it, both, significantly, are closely tied to narratives of origin and evolution. Both also feature centers that are, in effect, insular and surrounded by waters. Toward the outer edge of the Babylonian map, features become increasingly abstract and peripheral to local narrative because less is known about them; so, too, in Disney's design there is a distinct core and a periphery. Both

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designs are, in effect, cosmological statements given recognizable form through the process of imaginative map making. Frontierland's cartographic design is also similar to Chinese world maps (ca. 1500 CE) and to the earlier narratives of Homer, which feature water as a central part of the narrative.\footnote{For an interpretation of the latter two, including a map of "The Homeric World: A Conjectural Reconstruction," see Peter Whitfield, New Found Lands: Maps in the History of Exploration (New York, 1998), 1–11.}

Like his cartographic counterparts in ancient and historic times, Disney used water to create boundaries and delineate arteries of travel. If Frontierland's essentially circular or kidney shape encloses a body of water and island at its center, these features are at once geographical and metaphorical: in the American West, especially in the West of popular imagination of the nineteenth century, water both beckoned settlers and entrepreneurs into the frontier and defined the perimeter of the known world. Water fascinated Disney as it has our culture for centuries. To Disney and generations of Americans preceding him, the western waters were alluring, even seductive. They both defined the physical world and hinted at the rejuvenation or regeneration of the American character that would be attained by following them to their sources, and then beyond. The goal of this search was either youth (as Ponce de León's search for the fountain or springs implies), or restored health—both mental and physical. It is thus not surprising that American culture, ever in search of renewal in the (westward) move into the interior, would cast the rivers as entryways and passageways to both opportunity and adventure. As hydrographer, Disney touched a deep chord that may even resonate across cultural boundaries. Water is often associated with creation, and especially spiritual birth/rebirth in recurrent creation myths of cultures worldwide.\footnote{Water figures heavily in myths of emergence: see, for example, Northrop Frye, The Great Code: the Bible and Literature (New York, 1982), 144–7; Joseph Campbell, The Myth Image (Princeton, 1974); Carl G. Jung, Man and His Symbols (Garden City, 1964); Mircea Eliade, Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism (New York, 1961).}

Water serves as a powerful symbol in Frontierland, where Disney used it to convey visitors back into the American past.

Although Disney's love of the rivers in the trans-Mississippi West is beautifully revealed in the Rivers of America, it is not simply a personal infatuation. Rather, Disney's view is deeply embedded in popular culture and history, where the rivers were widely portrayed and promoted as beckoning explorers into the interior of the region—and even through it to the Orient. One can speculate that these waters were in a sense symbolically uterine, drawing the traveler deeper into mystery and, ultimately, to the forces of creation. In building upon this metaphor of exploration and discovery in the Rivers of America, Disney thus perpetuated a folk narrative reaching back at least five hundred years. As early as 1498, on his third voyage, the beguiled Christopher Columbus reportedly used sexually-charged and metaphorically-loaded wording.
to describe the interior he had not yet seen. In the centuries that followed, the quest continued as the river or water passages promised a rebirth of empires. Both the Spanish explorers' search for the Straits of Anian and the British, French, and Anglo American quest for the Northwest Passage are manifestations. Aware of these quests and visions, both historians and common folk came to believe that "the river is a defining agent in the metamorphosis of colonies to republic, serving as entrance or border but always a symbol of what might be obtained beyond." 

It is worth restating that Disney played a crucial role as both storyteller and cartographer in Frontierland. He personally designed the river system and its centerpiece, the intriguing Tom Sawyer island. Because his designers seemed stymied by the challenge, Disney "laid out the island to scale, with all the little inlets on the island" admonishing his designers to "quit fooling around and draw it as it should be." The Rivers of America have their mythical headwaters in the springs that issue from the mountain close to the geographic center of Frontierland. Cascading from their source, they soon take on the status of full-fledged rivers in a creative example of selective compression. Due to their relatively small size and height, the mountains in Frontierland appear distant (hence increasing their mysteriousness): they represent the higher peaks of the West that rise above the timberline. Like the Rockies and Sierra Nevada, these peaks are devoid of trees and perpetually snow clad. Despite the prominence of these mountain peaks, however, it is the rivers that they feed that are obviously the most important topographic—or rather hydrographic—feature in Frontierland. Waterfalls and rapids are seen near their headwaters in the mountains, but throughout most of their course, the rivers are broad, and fairly placid. The depiction of rivers considerably downstream from their source (that is, where the gradient has flattened at the Great Plains) is significant, for that is where Disney experienced them in his youth. (See Fig. 5.)

As cartographer, Disney manipulated American geography to conform to his perceptions of the frontier. He insisted that a part of the Rivers of America depict a distinctly southern locale, as evidenced by a plantation house located on one bank. Like the early nineteenth-century frontier, Disney's West evidently began in the South, in the vicinity of New Orleans, a reminder, perhaps, that this part of the country was popularly called the "Southwest" in the early nineteenth century. Disney's West also began on the great Ohio River, that "shining gateway" to the Old Northwest in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Frontierland's Rivers of America thus represents the generic "Western Rivers" that rise west of the Appalachians and extend into the fabled lands of the Louisiana Purchase. But Pacific slope rivers are also repre-

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43 See the chapter "Gender and Discovery," in Margarita Zamora, Reading Columbus (Berkeley, 1993), 152–79.


45 Gordon and Mumford, Disneyland, 99.
presented, at least subliminally, by Disney—as suggested by the name of the Columbia sailing ship that plies the Rivers of America. The actual Columbia became the gem of the ocean, on one occasion sailing into the aptly-named Columbia River, the artery by which the Pacific Northwest would be explored and settled.

Water is a dominant element in Frontierland, occupying approximately 30 percent of the area of this part of the park. This is significant for, in reality, water bodies occupied only about 2 percent of the Trans-Appalachian and Trans-Mississippi West. Some might argue that Disney and his designers had to devote that much space to water for simple logistical reasons. River boat rides, for example, take space. However, Frontierland’s design reaffirms both the actual importance of the western rivers to transportation and their symbolic importance to Disney’s (and America’s) imagination. Also significant is the manner in which Disney configured Frontierland’s Rivers of America to form a circular, rather than linear or dendritic, system. The rivers surround the land at the center of the river system, which is configured as a large, irregularly-shaped island. This design reflects a deep literary heritage that is evident in Disney’s appreciation of the writings of Mark Twain (and the islands of the Missouri/Mississippi system that Twain depicted). It also reflects the thrilling discovery-and-exploration-based eighteenth century and early nineteenth century novels, such as Treasure Island.46 By placing literary events and characters in an island setting, Disney geographically isolated them—an action that further emphasized their importance and sacredness in American popular culture. Frontierland’s design suggests that the frontier was, for Disney and America, both geographical/historical and imaginary/literary. Although Disney himself intimated that he designed the Frontierland experience to provide a history lesson to the public, one suspects that Disney’s history was—both metaphorically and literally—never far from fantasy [land].

As cartographer, Disney configured the frontier to depict many ecotones. Closely related to hydrography and topography, Frontierland’s diversity of vegetation varies from boreal forest to sub-tropical desert. Stylized saguaro cacti and Joshua trees evoke the desert areas of the Southwest (Sonoran and Mojave deserts, respectively). The

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46 Robert Lewis Stevenson, Treasure Island (New York, 1923).
nearly barren, colorful, stratified, and heavily eroded sedimentary rocks in parts of Frontierland personify the badlands seen in parts of the semi-arid West. Disney undertook an ambitious geographic depiction: he created in Frontierland a microcosm of the American West, capturing a glimpse of the environmental variation that exists there. Disney’s role as storyteller of both natural and cultural history is underscored by his juxtaposition of man-made features, notably towns, with natural/wilderness features, including deserts and spectacular rock formations. In the portion of Frontierland called Nature’s Wonderland, he abstracted many of the distinctive features of western topography and vegetation found throughout the entire region. (See Fig. 6.) By way of analogy, Disney’s Frontierland depicts the scenic highlights seen in the national parks of the West, which, like their counterparts in Frontierland, were reached by an elaborate transportation system that included railroads. To people of Disney’s parents’ generation, the national parks and the railroads were closely tied in an elaborate pattern; Glacier, Yellowstone, Grand Canyon, and Bryce were reached by—and promoted by—the railroads.\(^{47}\) These parks became meccas for the patriotic. To see their natural wonders was to reaffirm one’s sense of nationalism and to confirm that American civilization respected the sublime. Spectacular topography continued to be equated with political strength throughout Disney’s life, as evidenced by 1966 California billboards that featured then gubernatorial candidate Ronald Reagan posing in front of a mountain range backed by the slogan “A Man to Match our Mountains.”

Despite its suggestion of unconquerable wilderness in Frontierland, the human presence is also palpable there. To the cultural or social historian, Frontierland exhibits considerable cultural and ethnic diversity. It also depicts the frontier as the proving ground of both agrarian pioneers and industrial capitalists. Disney wanted the public to experience the colorful history of the frontier period of the West in this special part of the park, the economic agenda of private enterprise being an important subtext. Thus, most of Disney’s “frontiersmen” are Anglo Americans performing varying roles, such as miner, riverboat crew member, saloon keepers, and dance hall girls (all, of

course, sanitized)—occupations popularly depicted as “opening the West” for settlement. But if Anglo Americans dominate Frontierland’s cultural landscape (in keeping with the prevailing popular interpretation of western history as the progressive, westward move of “civilization”), they are not the only people represented here. A closer look at the social geography of Frontierland reveals that Disney did indeed populate this land with other peoples—notably Hispanics and Native Americans. Reminiscent of the way in which cartographers depicted “Apaches” here and “Comanches” there, Disney provided a place for ethnicity. That these ethnic peoples lived in separate communities is telling, for it mirrors the racial segregation that only became illegal at about the same time (1954) that Disney’s theme park opened.

And yet, despite segregation, Anglo America has long had a fascination with ethnicity vis-à-vis mainstream culture. No popular depiction of the West, such as restaurateur and hotel owner Fred Harvey’s string of attractions across the region, left out Indians. Working closely with the Santa Fe Railroad, Harvey helped both popularize and preserve aspects of Native American cultures in the West and Southwest. The Indians’ communities and “primitive” or “ancient” cultures were contrasted with the “civilization” of the Anglo-American travelers who gazed at them from railroad car windows. Given Disney’s ability to perpetuate commonly-held sentiments and his admiration for Fred Harvey and the Santa Fe Railroad, Native Americans were destined to be part of Disney’s characteristically American drama. Present in the frontier of Disney’s youthful imagination, Indians were portrayed at river’s edge as part of the Frontierland experience. Disney would concur with the observation that “as the river opening inland provides the epic route for the New World hero, so the Indian becomes his chief ally and his most treacherous and ubiquitous threat.”48 When Frontierland opened in 1955, Disney located Native Americans peripherally, that is, at the far [western] edge near the railroad that circles the perimeter of the park. (See Fig. 7.) These Indians (many of whom were Native American actors) were depicted as a variable part of the “drama” of the West. The script recited on the Santa Fe and Disneyland Railroad ride around the park in 1962 is noteworthy. It commented on the “authentic Indian Villages . . . where Indians of thirteen tribes perform ancient ritual dances.” After noting that the Frontierland station was “also the embarkation point for the Indian War Canoes which encircled Tom Sawyer’s Island,” the message then admonished passengers to “watch for Indians and wild animals along the riverbanks.” It further noted that “some Indians are hostile, and across the river is proof . . . a settler’s cabin afire. The pioneer lies in his yard . . . victim of an Indian arrow.”

That not all the Indians were menacing was apparent in the script’s next words: “Ahead is a friendly Indian village with the inhabitants active in their daily tribal chores.”49 These were industrious, “good” Indians that existed on Disney’s frontier.


49 This quote and those in the preceding paragraph that refer to the railroad script come from Michael Broggie, *Walt Disney’s Railroad Story* (Pasadena, 1997), 256–8.
Although some of the Frontierland Indians were non-threatening, Disney cast others as savages. The burning settler’s cabin thus made a statement at several levels. It obviously signified danger and loss, but at yet another level it may be interpreted as a mythic “need fire,” which is to say it had a role in “reenacting the fundamental drama by which humanity distinguished itself from the rest of creation, playing on myths in which fire destroyed and renewed, appeasing the gods through burnt sacrifice.” If so, this would be the ultimate “trial by fire” wherein a culture’s mettle is tested. The individual settler would thus be vanquished to confirm that the ultimate sacrifice had been made. This trope would in turn validate the colonization of the wilderness by a chosen people. One suspects that visitors to the park intuitively know that regeneration will occur from the ashes; that for every such cabin burned a dozen will sprout, endorsed, as it were, by a higher power. It is worth noting that in more recent times, all references to Native Americans as threatening or war-like were expunged. The burning cabin is now described as the result of a lightning strike, not human conflict!

Just what Indians did Disney depict on his allegorical map of the American West? As designed by Disney, the Indian village glimpsed from the Mark Twain riverboat suggests a Plains Indian encampment, perhaps along the Upper Missouri. Their dress suggests Cheyenne and Arapaho, but others are also represented. Disney felt obliged to include these Native Americans, for they were not only part of the real West, they also figured heavily in the Wild West shows and dime novels read by Disney and the preceding generation. Although Disney depicted ethnicity selectively, he built on widely-held racial stereotypes. Disney’s generation continued to believe that Native Americans could become good citizens by assimilating (a central tenet of the Dawes Act of the late nineteenth century—that Indians could even become pioneer yeoman farmers). Yet, Americans also recognized, even endorsed, Indian tribal identity by the 1930s, as manifested in the passage of the Native American Reorganization Act of

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50 Stephen J. Pyne, *Vestal Fire: An Environmental History, Told through Fire, of Europe and Europe’s Encounter with the World* (Seattle, 1997), 69.
1934. This legislation helped set the scene for today's widely accepted tribal self-determination.

But what of the other ethnic peoples? How did they fit into Disney's map of the West? In contrast to the independent (war-like or defiant) Native Americans, Disney depicted Mexican/Hispanic Americans as somewhat innocuous, even passive. Disney romanticized the action-oriented Zorro (originally a 1919 Anglo American pulp novel about Spanish/Mexican California) and thus perpetuated mainstream myths about the golden days of Spanish California. As sets for this frontier action, the architecture of vestigial New Spain, or Mexico, was stereotyped and commercialized in Frontierland. The original Casa de Fritos, and the stylized adobe “Casa Mexicana,” reaffirm the Hispanic presence. The design and cultural complexion of early Frontierland suggests that Disney himself was likely ambivalent about the multicultural makeup of the West. He evidently recognized that non-Anglo peoples were important in the history of the region. Yet, he stereotyped them and put them in their “place” (often peripheral) in the Anglo-centric cartographic order and design of Frontierland.

Frontierland reminds visitors that the American westward moving frontier was both irrepressible and tyrannical, for “the United States was . . . an unusually severe imperial state, not just because of its enormous and ever expanding material power, but because it was intolerant of cultural diversity in territorial form.”51 The Cold War Era romanticized the power that Americans wielded over other non-Western peoples and over the environment. Disney captured the consequences of this unstoppable westward move on various indigenous ethnic peoples in Frontierland. Like the post-colonial West itself, Frontierland compartmentalized peoples of Indian and Mexican origin, so that they lived in enclaves, when in fact they were once nearly omnipresent. Disney certainly did not initiate the cruel process of expansion, but he justified it by inclusion in his map of Frontierland. Although it is easy to criticize such treatment of peoples from today's more culturally-sensitive perspective, Disney simply reflected and espoused the mainstream values of his time. In the final assessment, Disneyland is largely about assimilation and conformity to American (i.e. Anglo American) values in the 1950s.52

There was, however, a glimpse of non-conformity in Frontierland. Disney cast some characters on the frontier as rough or shady. These included pirates, outlaws, and other miscreants. Their presence squares with Disney's vision of the frontier as a place of adventure and risk taking. In perpetuating this image of the frontier, many of Frontierland's rides emphasized “close calls” with both natural hazards (raging rivers, falling rocks) and cultural/social misfits (stage coach robbers, marauding Indians). By overcoming these physical and cultural hazards, Frontierland allowed proper Anglo American civilization to penetrate to the very interior of the untamed West.

52 Francaviglia, Main Street Revisited, 175–6.
This was accomplished, in part, by an elaborate transportation infrastructure. Frontierland—which is connected to the rest of the theme park by the Santa Fe and Disneyland Railroad and a series of walking paths that convey the guests from either the plaza or (later) New Orleans Square—is internally served by a transportation network that doubles as rides. This network is the only way to experience much of the landscape. Central to the circulation pattern of Frontierland, the Rivers of America showcases developments in transportation technology, notably keel boat, sail, and steam power. (See Fig. 8). These various transport forms are in turn linked to varied frontier experiences; for example, swashbuckling sailing adventures or a more genteel and serene steamboat journey. (The pirate ship was said by Disney to depict Jean Lafitte, and thus has a Gulf of Mexico connection.) The Columbia sailing ship that traverses the rivers provides a direct reference to U. S. expansionism: because it replicates the real sailing vessel Columbia that circumnavigated the globe carrying the U. S. flag in 1787–1790, one suspects that Disney’s “frontier” actually transcended the American West. It was, in a sense, the entire, not-yet-Americanized globe.

No late-nineteenth-century map of the West was complete without railroads, and Frontierland also reveals Disney's near obsession with them.53 Frontierland had a station on the line that encircled the entire park, and featured another railroad line that ran

53 See Michael Broggie, Walt Disney's Railroad Story (Pasadena, 1997).
into the heart of Nature’s Wonderland. Beginning in 1956, the narrow gauge mine train
through Rainbow Caverns conveyed visitors through a simulated underground cave. In
1960, the expanded mine train began operating through Nature’s Wonderland in yet
another intrusion of the machine in the garden. Frontierland also hints at other indus-
trial developments that transformed the map of the American West. One of the region’s
stereotypes—a booming mining town—forms the backdrop for the narrow gauge train ride. To further link the western experience with industry, Disney’s early railroad equipment in Frontierland bore the evocative name “Rainbow Mining
and Exploration Company.” That reference to “exploration” suggests Disney’s never-
ending fascination with geographically-based adventure and its corollary, exploitation.
Although mining is still represented in the runaway mine train (which is in reality a
small roller coaster added in 1979), a wrecked narrow gauge mine train is now preserved
as a reminder of the earlier railroad. Seen from the Mark Twain riverboat, this wrecked
train confirmed that even a theme park has its own history.

If railroads girdled much of the West (and much of the colonized world) by the late
nineteenth century, they also girdled the theme park, where they serve several purposes.
They symbolically open (and hint at the taming of) Disney’s frontier, while serving yet
another more immediate purpose. Disney actually developed the park’s encircling Santa
Fe and Disneyland Railroad as a huge model railroad that he could operate, in part as
therapy, on the days that the park was closed to the public.54 This railroad replaced the
large-scale live-steam railroad—the Carolwood Pacific—that encircled Disney’s home
in the hills above Los Angeles. Significantly, the 5/8 scale, steam powered railroad around
Disneyland had only one other major stop—Main Street. The locations of the two sta-
tions appear to reflect Disney’s never-ending fascination with both the small town and
the West.55

Disney’s cartographic interpretation of the West was built on the changing role of
technology. The transportation technology depicted in Frontierland spans a broad time
period, celebrating transitions in the industry, notably the nineteenth-century shift from
manual, animal, and sail power to steam technology. For Disney, the Frontier without
both the riverboats, and the railroads that ultimately replaced them, would be unthink-
able. This transition to steam captivated Disney, for it symbolized the Anglo American
domination of the West by technology. The touted superiority of steam-driven

54 Karl Ann Marling, interview by author, 27 January 1995, Anaheim, CA; see also
Marling’s essay “Disneyland, 1955: Just Take the Santa Ana Freeway to the American Dream,”

55 Disney’s romanticism came face to face with reality when he depicted transportation
in the West. Statistics show that nineteenth-century travel by rail and river boat was hazardous,
and horse and wagon travel was especially so. In transporting the theme park visitors, Disney com-
promised (as did other parks, including Six Flags Over Texas): Whereas park guests originally rode
horse-drawn stage coaches and traversed Frontierland’s waters in real canoes, these yielded to
more vicarious, and safer, rides after a number of minor accidents and close calls raised Disney’s
concerns about liability and adverse publicity. To Disney’s disappointment, the more or less “au-
thentic” forms of transportation were replaced by safer rides that were more controllable. As origi-
nally designed, the Frontierland transportation experience was, in retrospect, too realistic.
technology may have helped Disney and others of his generation define the West racially/culturally in much the same way that Euro-centric, technologically advanced peoples thought of themselves as racially superior to indigenous people who did not possess such technology. \(^{56}\) However, as early as the nineteenth century, Euro-American culture itself often looked back with a mix of nostalgia and derision at early technology and the peoples—sometimes their own forebears—who possessed it. Paradoxically, Anglo Americans revered the industrial/technological progress that transformed the West (and helped exclude the peoples who did not possess it), yet they also longed for the lost or vanished era of the pioneer as the frontier receded. As Washington Irving lamented as early as 1852, gone were the “good old times before steamboats and railroads had driven all poetry and romance out of travel.”\(^ {57}\) That magic word—travel—suggests the mobility that Disney built into his evolving map of the West. Unlike Washington Irving a century earlier, Walt Disney had it both ways in Frontierland. Like Irving, he romanticized the earliest (i.e. most “primitive”) aspects of Native American and Anglo American technology to the region (canoe, keel boat, and the sailing vessel Columbia) and, without a hint of anxiety about anachronism, he also joined the barons and magnates in celebrating the most “modern” developments of the mid-nineteenth century, such as the ornate steam train and elaborate steamboat Mark Twain.

The steam power that so enthralled Disney was itself a complex and arresting metaphor for geographic expansion. In wedding two of the basic classical elements, water and fire, steam suggested both urgency and power. Through the machines it propelled, steam proved a perfect metaphor for the march of civilization into the wilderness. Simply stated, “steam replaced flame as the symbol of human power” by the late nineteenth century.\(^ {58}\) Through both the commanding note of the steam whistle and the persistent chugging of cylinders, the steamboat and steam locomotive may be interpreted as bringing the Victorian’s sense of regimentation and control to the frontier lands they penetrated. The use of steam power connoted, above all, the ingenuity of Western technology in shaping the map of the West. As the diesel-powered streamlined train came to symbolize the 1940s and 1950s, Disney enshrined its steam predecessor in Disneyland. But by the time he depicted it, steam power was doomed, and Disney knew it.

Walt Disney beautifully exemplified “technostalgia”—the nostalgic appreciation of earlier forms of technology for what they conveyed about our lost connections with time and place.\(^ {59}\) Although he and his designers partly copied the pioneer western-themed Knott’s Berry Farm, which featured operating restored Denver and Rio Grande narrow gauge equipment, Disney also built upon the traditions of nineteenth and early twentieth century fairs and expositions. In the company of railroad buff and designer Ward

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\(^{56}\) Michael Adas, Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance, (Ithaca, 1989), espec. 112–3.

\(^{57}\) Washington Irving, The Home Book of the Picturesque or American Scenery, Art, and Literature (New York, 1852), 73.

\(^{58}\) Pyne, Vestal Fire, 255.

\(^{59}\) Richard Francaviglia, Hard Places: Reading the Landscape of America’s Historic Mining Districts (1991; reprint Iowa City, 1997).
Kimball, Disney attended the 1948 Chicago Railroad Fair, a major exposition at which the more modern forms of railroad machinery/technology were exhibited side by side with the old for comparison. As in all such expositions, that comparison was never value-free, for one would secretly admire and fear the new, while simultaneously berating and romanticizing the old. This dichotomy had both technological and cultural implications; in Frontierland, the presence of Native Americans, that most romanticized group of pre-technological peoples, suggested what the West, and perhaps all human culture, had been like before industry transformed it. In this regard, the Disney message again mirrored that conveyed by the Fred Harvey Company, which worked in close harmony with the Santa Fe Railroad to depict Native Americans as a people both lost/doomed and yet pure/noble.60

The three elements of Frontierland discussed in some detail above—scenery, culture, and technology—reveal that everything had both a meaning and a place in this carefully engineered, but ever-evolving, part of the park. These elements were enunciated as historical metaphors positioned in time. Through their placement in a carefully arranged spatial pattern, Disney created more than a contrived place. In Frontierland, he presented a simplified image of the region that reaffirmed widespread popular beliefs about the historical geography of the West. It may be tempting to dismiss such popular conceptions, but we do so at our own peril: like the dime novels and Wild West shows originating in the nineteenth century, they sustain the region’s past as a significant mythological element in American culture.

Viewed symbolically, Frontierland’s design reveals deeply-embedded binary distinctions—such as nature vs. man, them vs. us, past vs. present, technology vs. pre-technology—that continue to characterize not only American, but also Western civilization. It is ironic that Disney depicted the western frontier as a place of individual initiative when, in fact, its settlement resulted from large scale federal presence in the form of troops, infrastructural improvements (roads), and economic incentives such as land grants. This irony is doubled when one realizes that Disney romanticized the West of the individual frontier at just the time that federal dollars poured into the region’s Cold War defense industry.

It is telling, too, that in designing the Rivers of America, Disney elected to omit the story of the active construction of canals and dams, much of it subsidized, that transformed America’s western waters in the nineteenth century (although his entire project was, in fact, just such a hydrologic engineering coup). Those untamed rivers were essential to Disney, who employed them to contrast transportation technology with the force of nature. This juxtaposition reveals Disney’s nostalgia and romanticism. To Disney, the primordial Western American landscape was an instructional stage setting. It demonstrated both the purity of that supposedly pristine landscape and the inevitability of the frontiersman transforming it into civilization. That inherently unresolvable dilemma is essentially tragic. And yet, it is a common theme that reaches back to the Enlightenment and the Renaissance—if not into earlier classical times.

Frontierland is a cartographic icon with a deep narrative story line. It is ultimately a story about, and a longing for, what would be lost in the transition from nature to civilization. Disney, that master of visual imagery and design, plumbed American culture for inspiration. Cartographically speaking, Frontierland's essentially concentric design—with its core embedded in narratives of creation, its circular waterway, surrounding the core and serving as a middle ground, and its periphery of wild lands and communities that portend the encroachment of civilization and the order that would soon follow—is significant. Frontierland's design imitates a mandala, the abstract representation of the cosmos within a circle. However, in keeping with Disney's pragmatism, the design would change, as would everything in a progressive America. To continue the cartographic analogy, Frontierland as a map of the West is not static. It is constantly evolving to accommodate new values and philosophies in edutainment, and so must be revised from time to time. Viewed in this way, Frontierland is a constantly revised sequential map, much like the Sanborn fire insurance maps that are updated periodically through the addition of new overlays to answer present needs. As in Six Flags Over Texas, the history lessons in Frontierland have yielded somewhat to the demand for faster and more thrilling rides; yet, Disney's fundamental vision of history and geography is still visible in Frontierland.61

In its spatial organization, Frontierland represents the cartography of expansion: it is a locale in which the process of imperial colonization is constantly depicted and celebrated. As an allegorical map, Frontierland is perpetually animated, much like the sequential weather maps on the evening news or on the Weather Station. In much the same manner that the sequential replaying of these maps depicts changes in weather patterns that we grasp only by replaying, the drama of western expansion is reenacted in Frontierland until the sequence is learned by heart. The looping of railroad, sailing vessels, steamboat and mine train, all reaffirm the circularity of a model that runs like clockwork, conveying the observer through the once-exotic, now-familiar, territory of the stylized West.

Like all maps, Frontierland is also a representation of place in time(s) that contains deeply-embedded messages about power and ownership. As a microcosm of one section of the world—the Trans-Appalachian and Trans-Mississippi West—Frontierland reveals that the supposed conquest of the West was an event so significant, and so instructive, that it needed to be repeated endlessly as part of both the education and entertainment of first American, and then world, culture. Walt Disney himself concluded that “in Frontierland we meet the America of the past, out of whose strength and inspiration came the good things of life we enjoy today.”62 What better way to reaffirm that unabashedly patriotic message than through miniaturization and stylization—processes that, like all map-making, transform places like the real West into both icons and symbols.

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62 Gordon and Mumford, Disneyland, 53.