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Source: *The Mississippi Valley Historical Review*, Vol. 27, No. 2 (Sep., 1940), pp. 263-266

Published by: [Organization of American Historians](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1896815>

Accessed: 23-05-2015 19:28 UTC

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## NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

### ROBERT J. WALKER ON ACQUIRING GREENLAND AND ICELAND

BY BRAINERD DYER

That Robert J. Walker was an ardent expansionist<sup>1</sup> and imperialist<sup>2</sup> is not new. His advocacy of the annexation of Texas and the acquisition of all of Mexico and his activities in connection with the purchase of Alaska are well known.<sup>3</sup> Previous writers have also pointed out that he argued for the purchase of St. Thomas from the Danish government in 1868,<sup>4</sup> and joined Senator Charles Sumner a year later in urging the annexation of Canada.<sup>5</sup> In spite of the wide interest in Walker's career, the full extent of his expansionist sentiments has not been presented.

In the summer of 1867 when William H. Seward, secretary of state, was negotiating with Denmark for the acquisition of St. Thomas and St. John, Walker suggested to him "the propriety of obtaining from the same power Greenland, and probably Iceland also."<sup>6</sup> Seward, an equally ardent expansionist, requested Walker to put in writing his views "and the facts on the subject, that they might be on the files of the department and

<sup>1</sup> H. Donaldson Jordan, "A Politician of Expansion: Robert J. Walker," *MISSISSIPPI VALLEY HISTORICAL REVIEW*, XIX, 1932, pp. 362-381.

<sup>2</sup> William E. Dodd, *Robert J. Walker: Imperialist* (Chicago, 1914).

<sup>3</sup> In addition to the above cited works of Jordan and Dodd see the sketch of Walker by Jordan in the *Dictionary of American Biography* (New York, 1926-1938), XIX, 355-358; William E. Dodd, "The West and the War with Mexico," *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* (Springfield, 1908-), V, 1912, pp. 159-172; John D. P. Fuller, *The Movement for the Acquisition of all Mexico, 1846-1848* (Baltimore, 1936), *The Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science*, Series LIV, No. 1; William A. Dunning, "Paying for Alaska," *Political Science Quarterly* (Boston), XXVII, 1912, pp. 385-398.

<sup>4</sup> Charles C. Tansill, *The Purchase of the Danish West Indies* (Baltimore, 1932), 126-127.

<sup>5</sup> Dodd, *Robert J. Walker: Imperialist*, 39.

<sup>6</sup> R. J. Walker to William H. Seward, April 24, 1868, in U. S. State Department, *A Report on the Resources of Iceland and Greenland*, compiled by Benjamin Mills Peirce (Washington, 1868), 1-5.

ready for use whenever the question might be considered hereafter by the government.”<sup>7</sup> Several months later Walker submitted to the secretary of state a report on the condition and resources of Iceland and Greenland prepared for him by the United States Coast Survey. Seward was sufficiently interested in this project to authorize the printing of the report prefaced by a letter from Walker explaining its origin and pointing out its significant passages.<sup>8</sup>

With years of experience as a promoter and lobbyist behind him, Walker skilfully marshalled the arguments, commercial and political, for the acquisition of these islands by the United States. His commercial reasons, based on the facts in the report, included the “superb” fisheries of both Iceland and Greenland, Iceland’s “vast beds of lignite” and “rich and extensive” sulphur mountains whose possession by the United States he regarded a question of “vital magnitude,” the valuable coal and apparently “inexhaustible” kryolite deposits of Greenland, and the possibility of “summer ocean steam navigation” from the northern harbors of Greenland “1,500 miles to Alaska, extending, also, through Behring’s straits to China or Japan, or southward to Sitka, Puget sound, the Oregon river, San Francisco, etc., etc.” He also argued that the possession of Iceland and Greenland would enable the United States to establish “an independent line of interoceanic telegraph,” no ocean span of which would exceed 660 miles.

Walker’s political reasons for the purchase of these northern lands were related to his desire to acquire Canada. On this point he wrote:

The proof has heretofore been submitted by me, that the government, recently partially established in British America, called the Dominion of Canada, was gotten up in England in a spirit of bitter hostility to the United States. It then was, and still is, intended to embrace all British America, extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific, with a railroad from Halifax to Puget sound, and an area exceeding that of the United States prior to the purchase of Alaska. By this great pur-

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* This report, a 72 page document with two maps, may be found in the University of California Library, the Library of Congress, and the Library of the Department of State. Other copies probably are available but their location is not known to the writer.

chase, we have flanked British America on the Arctic and Pacific, cutting her off entirely from the latter ocean from north latitude  $54^{\circ} 40'$  to  $72^{\circ}$ , leaving the new dominion but  $5^{\circ} 40'$  on the Pacific, pressed between Alaska on the north and California, Oregon, and Washington Territory on the south, with even British Columbia now being rapidly Americanized. Now, the acquisition of Greenland will flank British America for thousands of miles on the north and west, and greatly increase her inducements, peacefully and cheerfully, to become a part of the American Union.

When Walker began to press upon Seward the purchase of these northern Danish possessions both men expected that Seward's treaty for the purchase of the Danish West Indies would receive the approval of Congress. The failure of Congress to give its approval to this treaty doubtless convinced Seward and Walker that it would be useless to enter upon negotiations for distant northern lands.<sup>9</sup> Perhaps they were influenced also by the adverse notice of Walker's report on the floor of Congress, for even before it had left the printer's hands it was called to the attention of Congress by Representative C. C. Washburn of Wisconsin in a speech of July 1, 1868, opposing the appropriation of money for the purchase of Alaska. The Wisconsin congressman declared that more than the \$7,200,000 for Alaska was involved, for if we paid for Alaska we would soon be called upon to pay for St. Thomas, and then continued:

But are we to stop with the purchase of Alaska and St. Thomas? No, sir. I believe a treaty is now being negotiated with Denmark for the purchase of Greenland and Iceland. [Laughter.] . . . I have had placed upon my table since I began to speak to-day some pages of a document now printing at the Government Printing Office for the State Department, which shows that the purchase of Greenland is in contemplation.<sup>10</sup>

Washburn read a paragraph of Walker's letter accompanying the report and went on with his argument against the Alaska appropriation.

As the debate on the appropriation continued others who were opposed to it also made reference to the possible purchase of the northern Danish possessions. Benjamin F. Butler referred

<sup>9</sup> For a full discussion of this treaty and Congress' attitude toward it, see Tansill, *Purchase of the Danish West Indies*.

<sup>10</sup> *Congressional Globe*, 40 Cong., 2 Sess., append., 399.

to "one insane enough to buy the earthquakes in St. Thomas and ice-fields in Greenland."<sup>11</sup> Representative Williams of Pennsylvania indulged in sarcastic remarks about the great need for acquiring the valuable glaciers of Greenland and geysers of Iceland.<sup>12</sup> Representative Shelby M. Cullom of Illinois who believed that we were "destined to own and control the whole western continent from Baffin's bay to the Carribbean [*sic*] Sea" was more sympathetic toward the eventual acquisition of Greenland, but he thought it would be "time enough to treat for Alaska, St. Thomas's Island, Greenland and Cuba" after some of the national debt had been paid.<sup>13</sup>

That this report did not become widely known at the time of publication is evidenced by the fact that three years later Professor Francis Lieber, a man who kept well-informed on public affairs, could write to Senator Charles Sumner:

Have you ever become acquainted with the fact that before the Alaska business, there was a talk about the U. S. buying Greenland and Iceland, and that the Department printed a pamphlet concerning it? This pamphlet however was suppressed, and is of course a great rarity. Dr. Hough<sup>14</sup> told me last night that he possesses a copy, and will send me the title from Albany. The most entertaining portion is that it is accompanied by a map, on which the Danish possessions in America are drawn so that they have a strong *proclivity* toward Russia's possession on our continent.<sup>15</sup>

This letter seems clearly to refer to the report fathered by Walker. The statement that it was suppressed would explain why it received little attention, but the records of the state department and of the office of the Superintendent of Government Documents reveal no evidence that the report prepared at Walker's request was suppressed.<sup>16</sup> The fact that his project received so little attention at the time it was proposed doubtless explains why students of Walker's career have also overlooked it.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 401.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 493.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 474.

<sup>14</sup> Doubtless Franklin B. Hough. His papers at the New York State Library, Albany, New York, contain no correspondence with Lieber for this period, however.

<sup>15</sup> Francis Lieber to Charles Sumner, March 26, 1871, *Lieber Papers* (Huntington Library). These papers do not contain any letter from Dr. Hough giving the title.

<sup>16</sup> Philip M. Hamer of the National Archives to the writer, August 27, 1938.