

A VENEER OF COMPETITION: THE MAHOGANY ASSOCIATION, 1918-1964

By

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(Under the Direction of Daniel Rood)

ABSTRACT

A business history of select activities of the Mahogany Association, a business interest association (BIA) in the United States active from 1918 to 1964. Several competing companies in the mahogany trade came together to form the Mahogany Association, which acted as a self-regulatory trade association. These companies leveraged economic power into political influence (and vice versa). The time period examined is between World Wars I and II, with some history of the mahogany trade in general for context in the periods before and after. The activities of the Mahogany Association discussed are its formation, its advertisements, its labels, its litigious efforts, and its members' appearances before Congress.

INDEX WORDS: Mahogany, Mahogany Association, Business Interest Group, Trade Association, Tropical Timber, Business History, American History, Latin American History, Caribbean History, Twentieth Century, Mexico, Cuba, Capitalism, Corporate Commonwealth, Associative State, Public-Private Partnership

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the United States strode confidently onto the world's stage. Concurrently, US business interests expanded their influence in overseas trade on an unprecedented scale. US-controlled production of bananas, coffee, oil, and myriad other commodities expanded drastically in Latin America.¹ Although mahogany had historically been a valuable commodity in Caribbean and Central American trade, US companies were not prominently involved in the shipping or direct sourcing of the fine hardwood until the 1880's. Instead, they relied on auction markets in the European port cities of London, Liverpool, and Hamburg.² However, beginning in the 1880's and increasingly through the 1920's, companies operating in the United States began to steer the flow of mahogany away from London and Liverpool, redirecting it to the ports of New York and New Orleans.

The British historically dominated the American mahogany trade, but by the early twentieth century, European brokers increasingly sourced their tropical timber from Africa. At the same time, an increasingly prosperous United States furnished enormous demand for mahogany furniture – with mahogany being arguably the finest of all the so-called “cabinet-

¹ The two studies most relevant to my work in this respect are: John Soluri, *Banana Cultures: Agriculture, Consumption, and Environmental Change in Honduras and the United States* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2005); Richard Tucker, *Insatiable Appetite: The United States and the Ecological Degradation of the Tropical World* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000).

² John C. Callahan, *The Fine Hardwood Veneer Industry in the United States: 1838-1990* (Lake Ann, MI: National Woodlands Publishing Co, 1990), 32; Samuel J. Record and Clayton D. Mell, *Timbers of Tropical America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1924), 352.

woods.”³ Even today, the word mahogany is synonymous with refined luxury, elegance, and sophistication. However, before mahogany was ever used for home décor, it was primarily a shipbuilding material.

Between 1865 and 1965, mahogany served two quite distinct purposes in the US market. First, it functioned as a prestige good. Mahogany wood was used to make expensive objects to denote class. Items such as cigar boxes, musical instruments, wall panels, and furniture of all varieties were made from mahogany. Mahogany was romanticized and frequently depicted as regal – an association that underscores mahogany furniture’s class connotations. In 1924, Walter Dwight Wilcox of Cook County, Illinois published a novel called *Caoba: The Mahogany Tree*. In it, Wilcox portrays the towering mahogany tree as “A Forest Monarch,” which speaks to the protagonist.⁴ Wilcox anthropomorphizes the mahogany, telling the story from its perspective as it grows from seed, to sapling, to forest sentinel. Wilcox exalts the beauty of the natural world, juxtaposed as pure and clean against the polluting influence of man. Ultimately, the tree is felled and transmuted into objects for use by “man-apes.”⁵ Wilcox’s romanticism was in lockstep with the zeitgeist of his day, when the United States first began protecting land as national parks. For Wilcox, the idea of a disappearing wilderness inhabited by “forest monarchs” must have hit close to home – beginning in 1906, he was a mahogany timberman active in Cuba for several decades.⁶

³ George N. Lamb, *The Mahogany Book*, 5th Ed. (Chicago, IL: Mahogany Association, Inc., 1946), 1 & 45.

⁴ Walter D. Wilcox, *Caoba: The Mahogany Tree* (London: The Knickerbocker Press, 1924), 9.

⁵ Wilcox, *Caoba*, 9.

⁶ Walter D. Wilcox, “Among the Mahogany Forests of Cuba,” *National Geographic Magazine* 19, no. 7 (1908): 485-498.

Second, and more importantly, mahogany became a strategic resource during wartime. Due to specifications by shipbuilders and aircraft manufacturers, mahogany production soared to meet US government demand for propellers, gliders, and boats during World Wars One and Two.⁷ The properties that make mahogany a good cabinet-making material are the same that make it good shipbuilding timber; mahogany is a compact, durable hardwood with high buoyancy that resists rot, temperature changes, and impacts – and it “can be turned around difficult curves without splitting, and metal placed in contact with it does not corrode.”⁸

Only one commodity history of mahogany exists to date. Though excellent and exhaustive, it does not treat the twentieth century in detail, even though this period of the mahogany trade carries important historical significance.⁹ From 1918 to 1964, almost all of the mahogany brought into the United States was imported through some member company of the Mahogany Association. Business interest associations, or BIA’s, “have had a significant impact on the evolution of capitalism” and come in two types: trade associations and employers’ associations.¹⁰ This thesis examines the Mahogany Association as a trade association, and how its members acted as “*producers (or businessmen)* in their relationships with customers, suppliers, politicians, and other firm managers in product and capital markets.”¹¹ By providing a vehicle to partition market and supply territories as well as to influence political decisions, the

⁷ G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 56.

⁸ G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 55; Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 42; Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs, *Honduras, Where Old Meets New* (Washington: Department of Commerce, 1944), 8.

⁹ Jennifer Anderson, *Mahogany: The Costs of Luxury in Early America* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2012).

¹⁰ Luca Lanzalaco, “Business Interest Associations,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Business History*, eds. Geoffrey Jones and Jonathan Zeitlin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 293-294.

¹¹ Lanzalaco, “Business Interest Associations,” 294. Italics in original.

Mahogany Association's activities are thus representative of larger phenomena – namely, state-driven creation and consolidation of oligopolistic market control through trade associations.¹²

Furthermore, mahogany's idiosyncratic use-value as a commodity and its methods of procurement mark it as unique: it was a luxury good. Whereas much work has sought to understand how trade associations affected the markets for cotton, steel, leather, oil, and other high-volume commodities, there has been less effort to understand how trade associations affected market dynamics for goods with highly elastic demand, such as mahogany.¹³ Items such as steel, for example, have low demand elasticity. This means steel may experience variations in demand over time, but because it is such a widely used commodity and has few substitutes, the overall demand remains robust. Mahogany, on the other hand, faces many substitutes. As a luxury commodity, demand for mahogany is volatile and depressive economic conditions significantly reduce it. Like so many industries, the steel industry and the mahogany industry both had business interest associations for advancing their respective agendas.¹⁴ Historians have identified the period between the World Wars as “foreshadowing the ‘modern capitalism’ of a later era” due to the proliferation and power of trade associations.¹⁵ For these reasons, the Mahogany Association's activities warrant careful scrutiny.

Additionally, understanding that mahogany is a commodity that can only be sourced from abroad ramifies into an understanding of the development of the countries that export it.

¹² Lanzaoco, “Business Interest Associations,” 295-297; Louis Galambos and Joseph Pratt, *The Rise of the Corporate Commonwealth: U. S. Business and Public Policy in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1988), 2-3, 41, 62-64, 84-89, & 92-94.

¹³ In addition to Lanzaoco, Galambos, and Pratt, see also Robert D. Cuff, *The War Industries Board: Business-Government Relations during World War I* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973).

¹⁴ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 11 & 84-86.

¹⁵ Ellis W. Hawley, *The Great War and the Search for a Modern Order: A History of the American People and Their Institutions, 1917-1933* (New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1979), vi & 58.

The 1700s saw several failed attempts to transplant mahogany seeds to temperate regions like South Carolina, meaning that mahogany firms would have to source their timber from the tropics.¹⁶ In the 1800s, mahogany took on revenue-generating importance for various new Latin American republics. As Jennifer Anderson relates, “Francisco Morazán, president of the short-lived Central American Federation, sought to monopolize the land’s mahogany trees to fund his new government.”¹⁷ Nelson Reed also notes how mahogany played a role in the regional politics between Great Britain, México, and the Mayan insurgents during the Caste War of 1846 – a conflict not effectively resolved until the early twentieth century.¹⁸ The environmental legacies of the Classic Maya civilization may even have laid the foundations for a mahogany-rich Yucatán hundreds of years after their civilization experienced a traumatic population decline in the thirteenth century, according to Michael Steinberg.¹⁹ In his work on Honduras, John Soluri tangentially notes mahogany’s role in the business strategies of United Fruit Company and Standard Fruit Company.²⁰ Additionally, Richard Tucker emphasizes the ecological effects of extracting mahogany and other high value hardwoods from the tropics.²¹ Belize has received the most attention in English literature on mahogany, but several Spanish-language authors have also tackled various aspects of the economic, environmental, and social effects of the mahogany industry in México.²² The US mahogany trade also deserves a place in the dialectic

¹⁶ Anderson, *Mahogany*, 238.

¹⁷ Anderson, *Mahogany*, 269.

¹⁸ Nelson A. Reed, *The Caste War of Yucatán, Revised Edition* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 125, 135, 144, 205-206 & 310.

¹⁹ Michael Steinberg, “Mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*) in the Maya Lowlands: Implications for Past Use and Environmental Change?” *Journal of Latin American Geography* 4, no. 1 (2005): 127-134.

²⁰ Soluri, *Banana Cultures*, 18, 24, 43, 47-50, 70, 93-95, 169, & 255.

²¹ Tucker, *Insatiable Appetite*, 345-363.

²² Jan De Vos, *Oro Verde: La Conquista de la Selva Lacandona por los Madereros Tabasqueños 1822-1949* (México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1988); Antonio Higuera Bonfil, *Quintana Roo Entre Tiempos: Política, Poblamiento y Explotación Forestal 1872-1925* (Chetumal, MX: Impresora Editora Norte Sur, 1997).

on US Empire. Scholars interested in the relationship between business and government with respect to overseas expansion, intervention, and influence during the twentieth century should take note of mahogany's economic value.²³

Representative of the interests of US mahogany firms at large, the story of the Mahogany Association illustrates numerous different theoretical underpinnings of the twentieth-century US business environment. The Mahogany Association embodies several trends identified by Louis Galambos and Joseph Pratt in this respect. First, the Mahogany Association's formation during World War One is significant because it was compelled into existence by the United States government. Scholars have debated the political, social, and economic forces necessary to bring entities otherwise in competition with one another into collaboration instead.²⁴ The formation of the Mahogany Association thus epitomizes one of the most straightforward means of coopting erstwhile competitors into cooperation: government mandate. Wartime exigency was certainly the driver behind the formation and policies of the Mahogany Association. While disputed, this agrees with Mancur Olson's theory that capitalists will not spontaneously combine to defend their collective interests unless "the group is small and provides some selective incentives ... [or] some coercive mechanism (compulsory membership, control over monopolistic goods, etc..) is deployed."²⁵

²³ On the US Empire and overseas influence, see Carl P. Parrini, *Heir to Empire: United States Diplomacy, 1916-1923* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1969); Ernest Feder, *Strawberry Imperialism: An Enquiry into the Mechanisms of Dependency in Mexican Agriculture* (Netherlands: Institute of Social Studies, 1977); Timothy J. Henderson, *The Worm in the Wheat: Rosalie Evans and the Agrarian Struggle in the Puebla-Tlaxcala Valley of Mexico, 1906-1927* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998); Mona Domosh, *American Commodities in an Age of Empire* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Sterling Evans, *Bound in Twine: The History and Ecology of the Henequen-Wheat Complex for Mexico and the American and Canadian Plains, 1880-1950* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2007); Greg Grandin, *Fordlandia: The Rise and Fall of Henry Ford's Forgotten Jungle City* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009).

²⁴ Lanzaoco, "Business Interest Associations," 294-295.

²⁵ Lanzaoco, "Business Interest Associations," 295.

Second, trade associations generally acted to preempt antitrust legislation through self-regulation and lobbied for protective tariff measures during the 1920s. Galambos and Pratt emphasize that historians often talk of sweeping changes in the nature of business relationships during the interwar years, but counter that these changes were by no means uniform.²⁶ Instead, they contend that such changes occurred iteratively as government sought to intervene in monopolistic industries and bolster the domestic economy with tariffs.²⁷ The Mahogany Association's actions are consonant with this theory; it filed numerous lawsuits with the Federal Trade Commission, lobbied Congress over tariffs, and its members coordinated amongst themselves to self-regulate their industry according to their own best interests.

Lastly, the Mahogany Association is representative of a decline in power of oligopolistic elite businessmen over the course of the twentieth century. This power declension must also be understood in the context of changing business-government relationships – most strikingly between 1918 and 1945. During these years and after, “the focus of governmental innovations gradually shifted from single- to cross-industry regulation and then to government-directed functions.”²⁸ In a close parallel, the Mahogany Association was brought into being to furnish reliable mahogany supplies during World War One, it was given broad jurisdiction over almost all imported hardwoods during Franklin Roosevelt's efforts to combat the Great Depression, and it was ultimately rendered defunct due to wide-reaching consumer protection legislation in the 1960s.

²⁶ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 43-44.

²⁷ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 63-64.

²⁸ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 2-3.

Due to mahogany's dual values as a class-defining furniture and as war materiel, demand for mahogany in the United States steadily increased during the twentieth century. That it could only be sourced from abroad meant that US mahogany companies would inevitably be interested in the political status of its countries of origin. These same companies also took an active role in US domestic politics. For the nearly fifty years of its existence, the Mahogany Association was thus of seminal importance for channeling the interests of its constituent members into actionable litigation, advertising, and lobbying. Their activities carry weight not just for embodying the trends of business within the United States, but also for their activities abroad in sourcing their timber.

CHAPTER 2

BOTANICAL INFORMATION AND PRE-NINETEENTH-CENTURY HISTORY

Mahogany wood comes from trees that cannot be sourced commercially in any of the fifty states.²⁹ Botanically, mahogany exists as three species of tree: *Swietenia mahogoni*, *Swietenia macrophylla* and *Swietenia humilis*.³⁰ All three are slow-growing species, taking up to fifty years before a sapling reaches “merchantable size.”³¹ However, because of this slow growth, the trees can reach sizes of up to one hundred and fifty feet tall and a whopping ten to twelve feet in diameter (see Figure 8, Appendix A).³²

Swietenia mahogoni is native only to a few islands of the Caribbean and southern Florida. *Mahogoni* is not only the most universally prized of the mahogany species, but it also has the most limited natural range. These two factors, combined with the early discovery of its utility, led to the near disappearance of *Mahogoni* as a commercially viable species by the early twentieth century due to over-harvesting.³³

Swietenia macrophylla is found in Latin America, from the Atlantic coast of México in the north to the Amazon jungle in the south. Its binomial name literally means “big leaf” in

²⁹ Mahogany is native to the southern tip of Florida, but its limited supplies were exhausted in the early 1800's. G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 8.

³⁰ Peter L. Weaver and Oswaldo A. Sabido, *Mahogany in Belize: A Historical Perspective* (Río Piedras, PR: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1997), 1.

³¹ Raphael Zon and William N. Sparhawk, *Forestry Resources of the World, Vol. 2* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1923), 580.

³² G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 10.

³³ The British demand for mahogany was originally satisfied from sources in Jamaica, the Bahamas, and British Honduras. By the early nineteenth century, Jamaican supplies were so reduced that the British began to intensively tap the remaining Caribbean supplies. Anderson, *Mahogany*, 210 & 286.

Greek, which it is also called colloquially. This species has been most heavily exploited from what is modern-day Belize. It is thus also known as “Honduran mahogany.”³⁴ Although less prized than *mahogoni*, *macrophylla* is the most plentiful and seemingly robust of the three species. *Macrophylla*’s wide range also means that it grows in various topographical and climactic micro-environs. The forests where mahogany trees are found are not mahogany forests per se, as one might find pine forests, for example.³⁵ Although mahogany can be found in clusters or groves, this is rare. More often, trees are sparsely spaced throughout the forest landscape. Whereas historically it had been more prolific, beginning in the nineteenth, and certainly by the twentieth, century, finding more than one mahogany tree per acre was considered a boon.³⁶

The third species, *Swietenia humilis*, is found on the Pacific coasts of México and Central America and surfaces occasionally in the literature about mahogany.³⁷ Whereas mahogany trees are famous for their gigantic size, *humilis* – as its binomial name suggests – is by contrast reported to be of a shorter, stockier nature and thus of inferior quality. Historically, the commercial viability of *humilis* is negligible because it is typically found in mountainous areas that are difficult to access.

Commercially, mahogany also occurs in Africa (see Figure 1, Appendix A). However, African mahogany is controversial because it is a closely related, though distinct, species of

³⁴ For convenience, I refer to the region of modern Belize interchangeably as British Honduras or Belize.

³⁵ One publication lists Mahogany, Spanish cedar and 21 other commercially valuable species of México’s Tropical Forest, as well as “many other woods valuable for cabinet work and construction.” Zon and Sparhawk, *Forestry Resources*, 599.

³⁶ G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 9; Wilcox, *Caoba*, 113.

³⁷ Arthur Koehler, *Bulletin No. 1050: The Identification of True Mahogany, Certain So-Called Mahoganies, and Some Common Substitutes* (Washington: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1922), 4-5; Clayton D. Mell, *Bulletin No. 474: True Mahogany* (Washington: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1917), 15.

tree. Whereas American mahogany carries the genus *Swietenia*, the African tree is classified under the genus *Khaya*.³⁸ However, the two woods are indeed so similar that early botanists attempted to classify the African tree as *Swietenia senegalensis*.³⁹ Today, both *Swietenia* and *Khaya* are recognized as belonging to the family *Melicaea* and can be understood colloquially as being very close cousins. Interestingly, the English word “mahogany” itself probably derives from a Yoruba word for the African tree: “*M’oganwo*.”⁴⁰ This etymological origin is likely due to the transatlantic slave trade and early British logging in Jamaica, which deployed slave labor to clear land for sugar plantations. The enslaved labor force presumably recognized the tree for its similarities to the more familiar African *Khaya* and called it accordingly.⁴¹

The botanical distinction between African and American mahogany would come to play an important role in the Mahogany Association’s ultimate demise. The most powerful companies in the association traded substantially in African mahogany. Decades of promotional efforts by the Mahogany Association equating the two mahoganies as “genuine” would ultimately unravel the organization. This is because African mahogany and American mahogany are close cousins; however, mahogany’s biggest competitor in the US market was a mahogany that is not actually mahogany at all. During the twentieth century, “Philippine lumber marketed in the United States [we]re of the Tanguile and lauan [species of] hardwood... These woods [we]re known in the United States as Philippine mahogany. They have distinct qualities and

³⁸ Two species commonly sold as African mahogany were *Khaya Ivorensis* and *Khaya Senegalensis*, referring to the geographic regions where they were found and sourced. De Vos, *La Conquista*, 204.

³⁹ G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 11.

⁴⁰ Kemp Malone, “Notes on the Word Mahogany,” *Economic Botany* 19, no. 3 (1965): 286-292; F. B. Lamb, *Mahogany*, 1.

⁴¹ F. Bruce Lamb, “Mahogany Name Controversy,” *Economic Botany* 22, no. 1 (1968): 84-86.

uses and therefore... are competitors of foreign mahogany woods imported from Mexico, Central America and Africa."⁴²

Unlike African mahogany, Philippine mahogany is not closely related to American mahogany – it is not in the same botanical family: *Melicaea*. By the time Philippine mahogany entered the US market through West Coast ports, mahogany companies were firmly established on the East and Gulf Coasts and were unwilling to tolerate an upstart competitor which misused the term. However, they were playing the same game themselves by referring to *Khaya* as African mahogany. Despite its more ready similarity to true mahogany (compared to Philippine mahogany), African mahogany was, irreconcilably, not a species of mahogany. Thus, the course was set for the Mahogany Association to founder against the rigid classifications of botany, rendering thirty years of promotional efforts to naught overnight. Before then, however, the men of the Mahogany Association were able to dictate the terms of their market competition and build a veritable empire of mahogany.

The first empire to lay claim to mahogany, though, was Spain. The Spanish valued mahogany for its durability and buoyancy. Taking their cue from indigenous peoples who used it to fashion dugout canoes, the Spanish used mahogany primarily for shipbuilding.⁴³ In Cuba, large swathes of forest were held in reserve by the Spanish Crown for the express purpose of providing timber for the Spanish Royal Navy.⁴⁴ The Spanish word for mahogany, *caoba*, even

⁴² To Provide for the Rehabilitation of the Philippine Islands: Hearings Before the Committee on Insular Affairs, House of Representatives, Seventy-Ninth Congress Second Session on S. 1610, Part 1, 79th Cong. 2 (1946), 269.

⁴³ Michael K. Steinberg, "Mahogany (*Swietenia macrophylla*) in the Maya Lowlands: Implications for Past Land Use and Environmental Change?" *Journal of Latin American Geography* 4, no. 1 (2005): 129.

⁴⁴ Anderson, *Mahogany*, 22.

derives from the language of the Arawak Indians.⁴⁵ At this time, *caoba* – in this case referring exclusively to *Swietenia mahogoni* – proliferated on Cuba, Jamaica, Hispaniola, southern Florida, and the Bahamas.⁴⁶

In 1655, England took Jamaica from Spain. This acquisition injected mahogany into Anglo trade lanes and coincided with the first usage of the word mahogany in English print.⁴⁷ For the English too, the wood's function initially remained confined to shipbuilding. However, during the eighteenth century, the British forced enslaved people to fell large numbers of mahogany trees, as they cleared huge swathes of Jamaican jungle for sugar plantations. Consequently, the mahogany trade increased. London's cabinetmakers recognized mahogany's aesthetic qualities and took advantage of the influx in mahogany supplies. In this way, mahogany transitioned from a shipbuilding material to a decorative, furniture wood.⁴⁸

The North American colonists, always imitating the consumption habits of their British cousins, developed a taste for elegant mahogany furniture. As with tobacco, sugar, coffee, and tea, the British fetishization of mahogany was imitated by elites in its North American colonies. Mahogany's deep, rich reddish hues and intricate grain patterns appealed to their aesthetics. Its prohibitively expensive cost appealed to their sense of luxury and class. Appropriating commodities from the Spanish empire appealed to their sense of Anglo-superiority.⁴⁹ Indeed, the late colonial period and early independence periods are universally considered the "golden

⁴⁵ Craig Stephen Revels, "Timber, trade, and transformation: a historical geography of mahogany in Honduras," (LSU Doctoral Dissertation, Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, 2002), 3.

⁴⁶ *Swietenia Macrophylla* was not formally classified as a distinct species until 1886 by George King, superintendent at the Calcutta Botanical Garden. Anderson, *Mahogany*, 243-244.

⁴⁷ Revels, "Timber, trade, and transformations," 3.

⁴⁸ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 334; Mell, *True Mahogany*, 9.

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Mahogany*, 1-17; Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 334.

age” of mahogany furniture.⁵⁰ This period’s mahogany furniture was primarily made from *Swietenia mahogani* trees sourced from the Caribbean; early US production centers clustered around the port cities of New York, Boston, and Philadelphia.⁵¹

The United States remained a peripheral player while the British dominated the mahogany trade. In the early 1800s, global mahogany supplies came primarily from Cuba, Hispaniola, and British Honduras, with Jamaica’s supplies already having fallen so low as to render direct export unviable. Around the mid-nineteenth century, British timber interests “discovered” African mahogany and began using it to supplement their Caribbean imports.⁵² The British continued to dominate the global mahogany trade throughout the nineteenth century. The French, who played a minor role in the eighteenth-century mahogany trade through their possession of San Domingue, leveraged their colonial possessions in West Africa to supply luxury cabinet markets in the metropole as well.⁵³

Cuba’s early adoption of railroad infrastructure in 1837 laid the foundation for a century of ruthless forest exploitation. Cuba was several decades ahead of Belize in this respect.⁵⁴ However, by the end of the nineteenth century, Belize had sufficient infrastructure to facilitate the shipment of large amounts of timber from the Guatemalan Petén jungle highlands.⁵⁵ As mentioned above, centuries of heavy exploitation on the Greater Antilles resulted in most timber supplies there being commercially exhausted by the early twentieth century. The

⁵⁰ F. Bruce Lamb, *Mahogany of Tropical America: Its Ecology and Management* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 1966), 13; G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 7.

⁵¹ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 22-29 & 45; Anderson, *Mahogany*, 202-209.

⁵² De Vos puts the British introduction of African mahogany onto world markets around 1880, somewhat later than Anderson does. Anderson, *Mahogany*, 287; De Vos, *Conquista*, 204.

⁵³ F. B. Lamb, *Mahogany*, 17.

⁵⁴ Anderson, *Mahogany*, 253.

⁵⁵ Anderson, *Mahogany*, 269.

pattern of diminishing resources in one locale prompted mahogany importers to look further afield for their product, moving first from the Caribbean islands to the mainland areas of México and Central America, and then to Africa and South America.

In searching for new mahogany sources, companies brought wood to market under the name mahogany, even though it was not always mahogany. As botanists strove to keep pace of forest exploitation, their naming conventions were hardly universal.⁵⁶ Uncertainty thus allowed for the practice of calling exotic hardwoods “mahoganies” based on their superficial resemblance to the genuine article. This practice would lead to the acceptance of the word “mahogany” – paired with a geographic qualifier – as a synonym for “fine hardwood,” even if it was not actually mahogany. Indeed, mahogany’s meaning hovered somewhere between botanical specificity and abstract trade name. African mahogany is the example of this par excellence, although a century later Philippine mahogany would draw the ire of African mahogany traders for the same reason.

European interest in Africa during the nineteenth century presented US companies with their roadmap for future exploitation as well. The relative proximity of Africa to Europe and Latin America to the United States would also lead to a certain differential relative exploitation. US companies could source mahogany with less transport cost from Latin America, and European companies could do the same for African mahogany sources. European (primarily British) interest in African timber also laid an administrative framework that would nonetheless make the importation of African mahogany profitable, despite the longer voyage to the US. This is primarily because it was marketed as the same “genuine” mahogany that US markets were

⁵⁶ Mell, *True Mahogany*, 24; Zon and Sparhawk, *Forestry Resources*, 558-666.

willing to pay a premium for. This would become particularly important during the twentieth century as Latin American mahogany sources were increasingly depleted.

CHAPTER 3

FROM THE NINETEENTH CENTURY TO WORLD WAR I

Until the 1880s, US mahogany operations were less than formidable – being restricted by the relatively high costs of both transport and manufacture. Some firms were nonetheless successful; these firms clustered around ports on the east coast, most notably in Philadelphia, Boston, and New York. Prominent among these early companies were Ichabod T. Williams & Sons of New York, Thompson Mahogany Company of Philadelphia, and C.C. Mengel Company of Louisville, Kentucky.⁵⁷

Ichabod T. Williams & Sons was founded in 1838. Imitating British trading strategies, they looked to the forests of the West Indies for mahogany supplies, often buying through brokers in London.⁵⁸ However, trees were becoming scarce by the time Ichabod T. Williams & Sons became directly involved in harvesting trees from Cuba, sometime between 1880 and 1900.⁵⁹ This prompted a greater reliance on African *Khaya*, while also shifting to mainland mahogany sources of *Swietenia macrophylla*.⁶⁰ The Williams family obtained a near-vertical monopoly on procurement, owning their own fleet of steamships to bring trees to their New York mills directly from Africa, where they owned land concessions.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Palmer & Parker Company, Inc. of Boston is the oldest of the mahogany concerns that operated in the twentieth century, being founded in 1833. They were also to become members of the Mahogany Association. Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 23-28.

⁵⁸ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 29-36.

⁵⁹ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 327 & 334.

⁶⁰ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 29-36 & 327-334.

⁶¹ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 334.

The Thompson Mahogany Company began in Philadelphia in 1858 as Louis Thompson and Company. Thompson's company was involved in shipping Mexican mahogany, operating a timber business in "Laguana."⁶² In contrast to Williams, Thompson extensively sourced his mahogany directly from Central America and México in the nineteenth century, likely purchasing through established hubs in Belize and in the Mexican states of Tabasco and Campeche.⁶³ Both companies continued to be privately owned and operated as they grew, a trend that later companies would also follow. By the time the Mahogany Association formed in 1918, one Thomas Williams and one Charles H. Thompson were two of the first three elected officers.⁶⁴

It is difficult to overstate the importance of the family-run company during this period. Scholars have argued that during the nineteenth century, "personal ties were more important than organizations, and most businesses were run by a single proprietor or by partners."⁶⁵ An emphasis on personal ties lent itself to the family-run entrepreneurial model. In large part, this was because, "obtaining capital and credit for the firm was one of the businessman's most important activities;" these activities required that a businessman "[be] known personally by the bank's officers" and "to have a solid reputation."⁶⁶ In a poignantly parallel example, Galambos and Pratt single out Frederick Weyerhaeuser as "typical of the business of that era"

⁶² This could refer to various places on Mexico's Caribbean coast but is likely the Laguna de Términos by Campeche. Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 45.

⁶³ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 46-7. De Vos, *Conquista*, 205.

⁶⁴ The third was R.S. Huddleston of the Huddleston-Marsh Company in New York. Huddleston-Marsh was acquired by Astoria Veneer Mills in 1917. This company and the Otis Mahogany Company were then both purchased by I.T. Williams & Sons in 1932. Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 41-42 & 297.

⁶⁵ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 18.

⁶⁶ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 19.

when he started his lumber enterprise in Illinois during the 1850s.⁶⁷ However, the mahogany industry was unique in that it catered to a highly selective furniture market. Although larger mahogany firms diversified into other fine timbers, their business operations, in contrast to Weyerhaeuser's, specialized in a product with high demand elasticity. This precarious position meant that personal relations took on outsized importance – a fact noteworthy because the Williams and Thompson families continued to dominate the Mahogany Association throughout its operational life, evidently successful in securing capital and credit on easy terms.

Despite the actions of Williams, Thompson, and a handful of others, US companies did not begin to compete seriously in the mahogany market until after the Civil War. Due to the extremely high cost of shipping mahogany logs – reflecting their huge size in cargo space and difficulty to bring to market – profitability of firms operating in this period was increasingly predicated on deployment of technology, specifically the veneer saw. Although veneering as a technology goes back as far as ancient Egypt, its pragmatic application to industrial operations only began in 1793 when Samuel Bentham successfully invented the first rudimentary veneer machine.⁶⁸

Despite this early start, the evolution of veneer technology remained slow until the 1870's. In 1876, there were only two US manufacturers capable of producing the machinery required for handling massive logs: Coe Manufacturing Company and Capital Machine Company, Inc.⁶⁹ After these companies' machines hit the market, the mahogany veneer business began to grow steadily. Consequently, mahogany imports increased as well. In

⁶⁷ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 19.

⁶⁸ Samuel's better-known brother was Jeremy Bentham, of pan-opticon fame. Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 1-3.

⁶⁹ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 6.

addition to Louis Thompson’s aforementioned operations in México, at least one other US company had obtained large mahogany concessions in the Mexican state of Tabasco by 1885.⁷⁰

One other company of this period bears mentioning for its later role in the Mahogany Association: C. C. Mengel Company of Louisville, Kentucky. The C.C. Mengel Company was founded in 1877 as the Mengel Box Company, which sold cigar boxes, by a pair of brothers who were shortly afterwards joined by their third. They quickly diversified into mahogany importation. By 1900, one of the brothers was dedicated exclusively to the mahogany business. C. C. Mengel Co. would eventually own mills in New Orleans and Louisville, as well as their own steamers and land in West Africa – following the lead of I.T. Williams & Sons.⁷¹

Veneer technology, combined with increasingly sophisticated transnational rail and steamship networks, provided the fundamental ingredients for the mahogany industry to expand rapidly in the final decades of the nineteenth century. Jennifer Anderson also identifies a fad from the 1850s to 1870s that sparked the “Colonial Revival” movement, which helped spur demand for colonial-style mahogany furniture as well.⁷² Import data before the twentieth century is scanty, but records do exist for the port of New York (see Figure 2, Appendix A).⁷³ The 1892 record suggests a growing trade, with imports worth about \$640,000 brought into New York alone.⁷⁴ New York’s import data mark two clear trends. The first is an initial expansion and

⁷⁰ Record and Mell, *Timbers*, 352.

⁷¹ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 141-144.

⁷² Anderson, *Mahogany*, 305.

⁷³ Before 1892, no US mahogany trade statistics exist. Mell seems to have gathered the nineteenth-century data from a single New York merchant, one George F. Herriman. However, Herriman’s data-collection methods are unclear and, despite being widely cited, should perhaps be understood more as approximation. Mell, *True Mahogany*, 12.

⁷⁴ Dollar value of imports calculated by multiplying New York’s import quantities by \$54.49 (average price/board ft. for years 1901 through 1904). Mell, *True Mahogany*, 12 & 14.

plateau between 1899 and 1903.⁷⁵ The second trend suggests that the mahogany trade was expanding faster in New Orleans than in New York as the nation recovered from the financial panic of 1903. Indeed, there seemed to be a push-and-pull between these two centers of trade. Whereas New York began the twentieth century with nearly half the nation's market share, by 1907 this had waned to thirty percent. In 1909, New York achieved a robust forty-five percent, before trailing off again.⁷⁶ Beginning in 1901, national data is available for mahogany (see Figure 3, Appendix A). The year 1905 was a low point nationwide, with import quantity below 1901 levels. However, despite importing fewer total board feet, the wood itself was worth more. Mahogany's market value had increased pound for pound – indicating a marked increase in demand. In 1914, imports nationwide were valued at \$4.9 million, having doubled in just over a decade.⁷⁷

Perhaps the seminal moment during this phase of the US mahogany industry was the Spanish-American War. Like British corporations, ambitious US firms wished to dominate commodity markets by controlling them at their source. Although by no means the primary motivation for the Spanish-American War, direct possession of mahogany-bearing forests held appeal to at least one statesman, and surely to the Williams, the Thompson, and the Mengel families as well. In 1898, senator Albert J. Beveridge alluded to this lust for virgin timberlands in his famous "March of the Flag" speech. "In Cuba, alone," he said, "there are 15,000,000 acres

⁷⁵ 1899's import value would have been about \$1.2 Million, thereby doubling in just seven years. The intervening dip in imports corresponds to the lasting effects of the 1893 Depression and hostilities in Cuba.

⁷⁶ Mell, *True Mahogany*, 12 & 14.

⁷⁷ Mell, *True Mahogany*, 14.

of forest unacquainted with the ax... [and] The riches of the Philippines have hardly been touched.”⁷⁸

Historically, Cuba’s mahogany stocks had been so prolific that as landscapes were cleared for sugar production, mahogany trees were reportedly used for everything from fence posts to railroad ties – even kindling for boilers.⁷⁹ However, by 1900, just two years after the war, Cuba’s forest had already shrunk to fifteen percent of its land cover.⁸⁰ Despite this, there were still mahogany trees to be exploited. Military success in the Spanish-American War secured rich sources of woodlands for exploitation, and US mahogany firms profited from the victory. Between 1885 and 1898, “the United States alone took 235,000 logs of mahogany [from Cuba], aggregating 35,700,000 board feet, and valued at over \$5,000,000.”⁸¹

US presence in Cuba may have been the single most important factor for the young mahogany industry. Prior to 1880, the port of Santiago, Cuba was a main exporter of mahogany to European markets. By the close of the nineteenth century however, Santiago’s trade was definitively reoriented to the US market, no doubt fostered in large part by the transformation of Cuba into a US protectorate.⁸² Cuba’s remaining mahogany supplies were quickly depleted, falling by a stark sixty percent between 1914 and 1919, and then to practically nothing by 1921, with much of this trade going to the US.⁸³ According to one source, the United States received between one-half to three-quarters of Cuban hardwood timber exports between 1898 and

⁷⁸ Albert J. Beveridge, “March of the Flag” (Indianapolis, IN, 16 September 1898).

⁷⁹ F. B. Lamb, *Mahogany*, 44.

⁸⁰ Anderson, *Mahogany*, 260.

⁸¹ Zon and Sparhawk, *Forestry Resources*, 636

⁸² F. B. Lamb, *Mahogany*, 17.

⁸³ F. B. Lamb, *Mahogany*, 50.

1923, taking two-thirds of Cuba's mahogany exports in 1915 alone.⁸⁴ The situation became so dire that Cuba placed an embargo on mahogany entirely in 1947.⁸⁵ For those Cubans who believed they had simply transitioned from being a colony of Spain to a colony of the United States, seeing their mahogany resources dwindle under US-guided rule confirmed this suspicion.

Investments in México also grew in the twentieth century. Beginning in 1890, there was a marked increase in the number of US firms operating in México.⁸⁶ As in Cuba, the geographic proximity of the United States meant that US companies could offer better prices than their British competitors, and by 1908 they dominated the supply of Mexican mahogany.⁸⁷ In 1917, for example, a bulletin prepared for the US Forestry Service described, "Operators now exploiting mahogany in Mexican and Central American forests... [are] better systematizing [their] work. While felling is in progress men are building railroads and bridges over which carloads of logs are hauled to the port, where the timber is placed on steamers."⁸⁸ After Cuba, México was the most important exporter of mahogany to the US market during this period and remained so through the 1960s.

Additionally, Belize furnished a consistent supply of mahogany to European and US markets throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Despite being one of the earliest mainland areas to be exploited, Belize continues furnishing significant quantities of mahogany even today; British interest in the forestry products of their colony had cyclically exhausted

⁸⁴ Zon and Sparhawk, *Forestry Resources*, 636.

⁸⁵ F. B. Lamb, *Mahogany*, 161.

⁸⁶ De Vos, *Conquista*, 206.

⁸⁷ De Vos, *Conquista*, 206-7.

⁸⁸ Mell, *True Mahogany*, 15.

supplies, but mahogany's robust, albeit slow, growth patterns allowed Belize to maintain consistent exports.⁸⁹ Given mahogany's long life-cycle, Belize historically experienced large volatility in exports, as young trees matured and triggered harvest booms.⁹⁰ Moreover, many logs exported from Belize during the early twentieth century were actually felled in Guatemalan or Mexican territory.⁹¹ Guatemala and Honduras both also furnished mahogany to the US market through United Fruit Co. and Standard Fruit Co., who cleared jungle for their banana plantations and sold the mahogany to offset costs, relying on company-dominated railroad and steamship networks to cheaply get the wood to market.⁹²

In addition, US companies imported mahogany from Nicaragua, and small quantities from Panama and Costa Rica. However, the acquisition of the Philippines after the Spanish-American War spelled trouble for mahogany companies. In an era when botanists were still revising their understanding of speciation, some tropical hardwoods from the Philippines began to find their way to the US market under the name "Philippine mahogany".⁹³ However, despite not actually being a related species, this Philippine hardwood was easy to fell and transport. Having not already been logged intensively, it was thus extremely cheap on the US market. Philippine mahogany quickly made inroads as a serious competitor to so-called "true mahogany" or "genuine mahogany."⁹⁴

⁸⁹ By the 1920's, "Stands with one mahogany tree to the acre are considered good." Zon and Sparhawk, *Forestry Resources*, 578.

⁹⁰ Weaver and Sabido, *Mahogany in Belize*, 9-13.

⁹¹ Guatemalan timber was also routed through México, via the Usumacinta River. Zon and Sparhawk, *Forestry Resources*, 569.

⁹² Weaver and Sabido, *Mahogany in Belize*, 9-13; F. B. Lamb, *Mahogany*, 162; Soluri, *Banana Cultures*, 255.

⁹³ In *Forestry Resources of the World*, Zon and Sparhawk invariably (and inaccurately) referred to *macrophylla* species as *mahogoni*. They also refer to a huge number of other species as "mahoganies," sometimes making the distinction between them and "true" mahogany, sometimes not. In *Tropical Timbers of the World*, Record and Mell similarly often refer to species like Venezuelan mahogany as being an entirely different species than *macrophylla*.

⁹⁴ "So-called" because this includes African mahogany.

Finally, during this period, a proliferation of a more metaphorical veneer entered the mahogany market. That is to say, some companies began to produce wood which was stained to superficially resemble mahogany. Having a (non-literal) veneer of mahogany allowed cheaper woods, like yellow birch, to be sold at high markup and allowed undiscerning customers the ability to furnish their homes with something that superficially resembled mahogany furniture. The success of companies like the American Mahogany Company and its subsidiary, the Southern Mahogany Company, is evident by industry attempts to combat their market activity.⁹⁵

Mahogany is a high-volume good and these competitors specifically posed challenges to the industry because large logs were expensive to ship – they occupied valuable cargo space on steamships and railcars. In the 1800s, the British had introduced the practice of “squaring” logs in Africa; by “hewing logs square,” they hoped to achieve “better stowage in the hold of ships and ... [to] lower freight cost.”⁹⁶ However, with the advent of better veneering technology and an increasingly receding supply, this practice gave way to shipping whole logs in order to maximize yield per log.⁹⁷ Despite this, according to Thomas Williams, “at least 25 per cent [sic] of the mahogany log on which the freight and duty [wa]s paid, is lost in the process of sawing it into lumber.”⁹⁸ Williams also estimated shipping costs to be \$35 per thousand feet, substantially higher than the estimated manufacturing costs of \$22.⁹⁹ High costs underscored

⁹⁵ Mitchell & Smith Correspondence Letters (152.00), Box 6, Folders 25-26, South Carolina Historical Society, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC.

⁹⁶ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 331.

⁹⁷ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 331.

⁹⁸ Tariff Readjustment – 1929 Schedule 4, Wood and Manufacturers of: Hearings before the Committee on Ways and Means, 70th Cong. 2 (1929), 1949.

⁹⁹ Tariff Readjustment – 1929, 1956.

the importance of controlling logistical networks, such as railways and steamships. Companies that could control their costs by managing their infrastructure were the most profitable; for some companies, this meant opening offices in the tropics and relocating their sawmill operations further south, primarily in New Orleans. Indeed, by 1922 a veneer trade journal lamented, “The cost of delivering lumber ... must somehow be reduced ... The fact is that we ... must get closer to the tree.”¹⁰⁰

Thus, the trend of US companies becoming more heavily vested in Latin America can be seen in conjunction with a move by many companies further south (such as Mengel Bros’ New Orleans operations). For the old East Coast interests, the auction markets in London continued to furnish choice mahogany logs with sufficient room for high margins even after transshipment to New England ports. For the likes of I.T. Williams & Sons, it seems that their early reliance on British auction markets provided the contacts necessary to begin to move into Africa directly during the 1910s. By the dawn of the twentieth century, these transportation cost pressures had set the trajectory for exploitation of both Latin American and African mahogany sources, and the advent of veneering technology allowed for each log to provide sufficient margins to accelerate exploitation in both hemispheres. Yet, despite the advantages that imperialism provided (for the US in Cuba, for the British in Africa), imperialistic activity was not uniformly beneficial for US mahogany companies – as can be seen by the fledgling Philippine mahogany market that developed as a result of the US occupation of the Philippines during this same period.

¹⁰⁰ *Lumber and Veneer Consumer* 3, no. 1 (Chicago, IL: June 30, 1922), 13-14.

CHAPTER 4

FORMATION OF THE MAHOGANY ASSOCIATION

Despite competition from fake mahogany and Philippine mahogany, the first two decades of the twentieth century saw a boom in the mahogany-veneer business. The prime demand for mahogany remained the furniture industry, which was centered in Grand Rapids, Michigan during this period, but shifted south to High Point, North Carolina by the late-1930s.¹⁰¹ Furniture craftsmen in both places were renowned for churning out replicas of colonial furniture, which remained popular in elite circles into the midcentury. Businessmen with foresight sought to locate their enterprises nearby the logistical and demand hubs for imported mahogany – one such company with prudent planning in this respect was the Freiberg Mahogany Company.

Freiberg Mahogany began operations in Cincinnati, Ohio in the early twentieth century. By 1904, they opened an office in Belize City. Freiberg enjoyed cozy relations with the furniture executives in Grand Rapids, as well as the Pullman Company – which purchased their mahogany veneers for its train cars. Freiberg Mahogany, like the Mengel Co., soon acquired assets in New Orleans, and moved operations there. Freiberg's move was propitious, as World War One marked the start of a new boon for mahogany importers.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 41, 121, 174.

¹⁰² Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 74-79.

The constituent members of the Mahogany Association were in competition both as sellers to the furniture market and as importers of mahogany. Their formation, despite “conflicting interests in raw material and capital markets,” is consonant with the theory of BIA-formation requiring that the state initiate the push to overcome otherwise insurmountable conflicts of interests as a barrier-to-entry.¹⁰³ The Mahogany Association is thus representative of this aspect of state intervention in “the birth, development, and consolidation of BIAs” as proposed by scholars such as J. R. Bowman and others in the 1980s.¹⁰⁴ The Mahogany Association would also exacerbate tensions over conflicting interests in raw materials by bringing a debate over African mahogany into focus. Their relationship to the capital markets is less clear, although there is evidence that the dominant company in the association, I. T. Williams & Sons, maintained close relations with powerful financiers.¹⁰⁵

In the fall of 1917, as the United States mobilized for world war, government contracts were given to three companies for mahogany procurement for manufacturing airplane propellers; however, only one, Louis Thompson & Co., was able to make delivery.¹⁰⁶ This could have to do with timing – most logging usually happened either before the midsummer or November rains in order to float the logs down the swollen rivers.¹⁰⁷ It is possible that mahogany companies were just in a cyclical low period, or perhaps that particular season’s haul was already sold. For whatever reason, these several companies could not meet the surge in demand. After the failed deliveries and canceled contracts, the War Trade Board proposed the

¹⁰³ Lanzalaco, “Business Interest Associations,” 296-7.

¹⁰⁴ Lanzalaco, “Business Interest Associations,” 297.

¹⁰⁵ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 41.

¹⁰⁶ “To Investigate Airplane Mahogany Prices,” *American Lumberman*, no. 2269 (Chicago, IL: 1918), 45.

¹⁰⁷ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 329.

creation of the Mahogany Manufacturers' and Importers' Association so that competing suppliers would work together to secure a steady supply to meet government needs.¹⁰⁸

Their first meeting was held on January 21, 1918 and the constituent members strongly represented the old East-Coast interests.¹⁰⁹ The government hired employees from the association's member companies, because "the signal corps had no expert inspectors, and necessarily must get them from among mahogany men."¹¹⁰ However, several of these men, including one John C. Wickliffe, were later investigated over conflict of interests. Not only did Wickliffe receive compensation from C.C. Mengel Co. while receiving government pay, but he was also paid by the Mahogany Association itself. The Mahogany Association elected to pay Wickliffe after he renounced his Mengel Co. income.¹¹¹

Wickliffe worked closely with his superior, Henry K. S. Williams. Henry Williams had retired from I. T. Williams & Sons and was brother to Thomas Williams, then president of the Mahogany Association. Henry Williams was tapped to run the Hardwood Section of the Materials Department in the Signal Corps and seems to have handpicked men to oversee mahogany inspection and price-fixing, including Wickliffe. Indeed, it seems it was Williams who used his connections to help Wickliffe smooth over his troubles with the Justice Department over his conflict of interests.¹¹²

¹⁰⁸ "To Investigate Airplane Mahogany Prices," *American Lumberman*, 45.

¹⁰⁹ Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 1 (Aviation) of the Select Committee on Expenditures in the War Department, Sixty-Sixth Congress First Session on War Expenditures, Serial 2 – Part 34, 66th Cong. 1 (1919), 3796.

¹¹⁰ "To Investigate Airplane Mahogany Prices," *American Lumberman*, 45.

¹¹¹ Wickliffe sold his shares in C. C. Mengel Co. before starting his government work, but his wife held shares as well, which she was advised to sell sometime after. Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 1 (Aviation), 3797-3799; Wickliffe received pay from Mengel until February 23, 1918 and received pay from the Mahogany Association from April 1 to August 1, 1918. Charles H. Hughes, *Abstract of Aircraft Investigation* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1919), 338.

¹¹² Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 1 (Aviation), 3799-3800.

But petty graft and intra-industry nepotism were not the only symptoms of oligopoly that beset the early years of the Mahogany Association. There was no consensus among these “mahogany men” over what was a fair price for the government contracts. Joseph S. Otis resigned his post at a New Orleans mahogany business shortly after the United States entered the war and began advising the signal corps as a volunteer mahogany expert.¹¹³ Notably, Otis was not investigated for any conflicts of interest, as Wickliffe was. Two days after the Mahogany Association’s formation, Otis and Wickliffe each submitted price estimates for review. Otis – a New Orleans mahogany man with an eye towards México and Central America – represented the Signal Corps as their expert, and Wickliffe represented the mahogany industry via the Mahogany Association. Otis gave an estimate “considerably lower than the other, and was contested by Mr. Wickliffe.”¹¹⁴ A Justice Department investigation into the matter found Wickliffe saying Otis’s price offer was “too low, and that [the] mahogany business had changed greatly since he had left – two weeks previous.”¹¹⁵ Wickliffe’s statement seems implausible for an industry that had changed relatively little over its *long durée*. More likely, Wickliffe was simply defending his case for including African mahogany on the government’s list of approved woods (something which the government’s procurement officer disputed as unnecessary).¹¹⁶ Shortly after this disagreement, Otis was dismissed from government service.¹¹⁷ If there were any doubt as to the motive, a March 6, 1918 proposal by the Mengel

¹¹³ Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 1 (Aviation), 3796.

¹¹⁴ Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 1 (Aviation), 3796.

¹¹⁵ Hughes, *Aircraft Investigation*, 41.

¹¹⁶ Hughes, *Aircraft Investigation*, 288.

¹¹⁷ Hughes, *Aircraft Investigation*, 40-41 & 288.

Co. highlighted that they had some seven million board-feet that could be exported from “Axim, Africa (on the Gold Coast)” by June.¹¹⁸

After conferring with their British and French counterparts, the Signal Corps set government production standards for aircraft-propellor production. The propellor woods were, “listed in the order of preference: Black walnut, true mahogany (Honduras), cherry, quarter-sawed white oak, African mahogany.”¹¹⁹ However, the Mahogany Association, through John Wickliffe, contested this hierarchy. He argued that African mahogany was to be preferred over white oak, which could be sourced more cheaply domestically.¹²⁰ If Wickliffe could convince the Signal Corps of African mahogany’s superiority relative to white oak, then he would be able to present the Shipping Board with sufficient reason to furnish steamships for them to sell their product.

The issue took eight months to resolve, primarily because “throughout the controversy, Mr. Wickliffe ha[d] expressed his views with considerable emphasis” that African mahogany was superior to white oak; to do so effectively, Wickliffe relied on “the weight of his influence.”¹²¹ Wickliffe had officially severed ties with Mengel Bros., his former employer of fifteen years, to avoid corruption charges.¹²² However, Wickliffe’s presence was noted at a 1922 industry conference as “J. C. Wickliffe, of I. T. Williams & Sons, New York City, mahogany

¹¹⁸ Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 1 (Aviation), 3802; I. T. Williams & Sons had opened an office at Grand Bassam on Africa’s Ivory Coast in 1915 and Palmer & Parker Company, Inc. of Boston had also established a “West African branch” in 1913. Callahan, *Veneer*, 25 & 34; The other company implicated was Astoria Veneer Mills & Dock Co. Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 1 (Aviation), 3802-3803.

¹¹⁹ Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 1 (Aviation), 3803.

¹²⁰ Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 1 (Aviation), 3803.

¹²¹ Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 1 (Aviation), 3803.

¹²² Hughes, *Aircraft Investigation*, 338.

importers.”¹²³ Thus, Wickliffe’s influence was most likely activated through Henry Williams, Wickliffe’s immediate superior. Presumably, Henry Williams and his brother Thomas were pleased with Wickliffe’s work pushing African mahogany during the war and hired him to work for their family’s company after it ended.

The result of the controversy, though, was that the “shipping board for a long time declined to furnish ships to transport African mahogany, because of the differences of opinion.”¹²⁴ However, because “ships for African mahogany were finally provided” and due to “the persistent effort of mahogany men to have African mahogany used for airplane propellers,” Department of Justice official Charles E. Hughes became concerned that the prices paid by the government may have been too high.¹²⁵ Justice Hughes recommended a Federal Trade Commission investigation into the matter of mahogany pricing. His suspicion was clear: because mahogany could be furnished from Latin American sources more cheaply, the Mahogany Association had no business pushing higher prices and African mahogany. While they undoubtedly benefitted from increased and reliable sales of Latin American mahogany, Mahogany Association members shared financial motives to sell African mahogany, and these were accentuated once Joseph Otis was dismissed as the government’s expert. Despite an FTC investigation, nothing became of Justice Hughes’ allegations. The political influence of the Mahogany Association paid quick dividends.¹²⁶

¹²³ *Lumber and Veneer Consumer* 3, no. 1 (Chicago: June 30, 1922), 25.

¹²⁴ “To Investigate Airplane Mahogany Prices,” *American Lumberman*, 45.

¹²⁵ Hearings Before Subcommittee No. 1 (Aviation), 3804.

¹²⁶ Federal Trade Commission, *Annual Report of the Federal Trade Commission for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1919* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 27.

The association's name was shortened from the Mahogany Manufacturers' and Importers' Association to the less unwieldy Mahogany Association when it was formally incorporated in New York in 1922.¹²⁷ The original Mahogany Association members were all East Coast and Midwest firms; some had interests in the African mahogany trade, but none had interests in Philippine or stained mahogany.¹²⁸ Thomas Williams later recalled that "during the Great War, the Government commandeered [sic] for aircraft construction the entire output of the highest quality mahogany lumber which all of the plants could produce."¹²⁹

World War One created the incentive for US mahogany companies to expand rapidly into Latin America as well as defend their right to sell African mahogany as an equal to "true" mahogany.¹³⁰ Thus, although originally compelled by government mandate into cooperation, the companies in the Mahogany Association immediately found common ground and maintained their connections once the fighting stopped. The relationship established between the Mahogany Association and government officials is indicative of what Galambos and Pratt called the "corporate commonwealth."¹³¹ Although their use of the term speaks to labor relations, it is apt nonetheless to describe the relationship mahogany firms enjoyed vis-a-vis the government and amongst themselves as competitors. Ellis Hawley has called the same public-private partnership that characterized the post-war years the "Associative State."¹³²

¹²⁷ "To Investigate Airplane Mahogany Prices," *American Lumberman*, 45; Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 297; Jay Judkins, Jr., *National Associations of the United States* (Washington: U. S. Department of Commerce, 1949), 224.

¹²⁸ Original member firms were Ichabod T. Williams & Sons, Astoria Veneer Mills & Dock Co., Otis Manufacturing Co., C.C. Mengel & Bros. Co., Louis Thompson & Co., and Huddleston-Marsh Mahogany Co. Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 297.

¹²⁹ *Tariff Readjustment – 1929*, 1955.

¹³⁰ By 1914, African mahogany made up a whopping 48.3% of the US mahogany market, with Latin American mahogany claiming 50.8% and Philippine mahogany claiming a mere 0.9%. Mell, *True Mahogany*, 13-14.

¹³¹ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 41.

¹³² Hawley, *The Great War*, 101-104.

In an era where the accusation of monopoly could conjure public outcry, “oligopoly (that is, a market dominated by a few leading firms) generally passed the antitrust test and provided ... [them] with the degree of market control that they needed to stabilize their industries over the long run.”¹³³ While there is no evidence that the mahogany industry was ever a target for antitrust action, it was certainly oligopolistic and would have undoubtedly passed the “antitrust test.” Another quality of oligopolistic market control that the Mahogany Association embodied during this period was the tendency to refrain from “intense price competition.”¹³⁴ Instead, the Mahogany Association’s activities indicate a cooperative competition that advanced the dominant firms’ collective interests – in this case, by promoting African mahogany and high prices.

¹³³ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 63.

¹³⁴ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 72.

CHAPTER 5

POST-WAR MAHOGANY ASSOCIATION ACTIVITY

The mahogany business continued to expand rapidly after the Treaty of Versailles. Although state ownership predominated in the mahogany-bearing forests of many Latin American countries, nevertheless by the 1920's "American companies ha[d] secured large tracts of the best timber."¹³⁵ Companies began looking further abroad for sources too – in the 1920s, Perú began to ship mahogany to the United States via Brazil.¹³⁶ In Latin America, as competition heated up for the remaining "Forest Monarchs," aircraft were increasingly used to scout ahead and locate the largest trees.¹³⁷ This increase in imports caused some concern for the Mahogany Association because they wanted to ensure that their product did not lose its value, neither from oversupply nor to competition. Similar to other industries, like steel, the mahogany companies in this era "adopt[ed] a cooperative attitude toward their erstwhile competitors."¹³⁸

Even during the war, anxiety grew over what was being sold as mahogany. In 1917, a publication by the US Department of Agriculture listed a whopping sixty-one species being marketed under the name "true mahogany, but none [belong] to the same genus – *Swietenia*."¹³⁹ Of these so-called mahoganies brought into the United States around 1924, "less than half of these [species] belong to the mahogany family and the majority are not even

¹³⁵ Zon and Sparhawk, *Forestry Resources*, 601.

¹³⁶ F. B. Lamb, *Mahogany*, 42.

¹³⁷ Wilcox, *Caoba*, 9; Weaver and Sabido, *Mahogany in Belize*, 10.

¹³⁸ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 85.

¹³⁹ Mell, *True Mahogany*, 24.

remotely related to it.”¹⁴⁰ After the war, anxiety over what was “real” mahogany persisted. Additionally, the shock of returning to a peacetime economy affected all industries, not just mahogany. In 1920, mahogany imports were down to \$3.2 million, due to the post-war recession and competition from Philippine and stained mahogany woods.¹⁴¹ To combat the erosion of its brand name, the Mahogany Association’s immediate post-war activities were laser-focused on advertising. Despite being nominally in competition with one another, Mahogany Association members all agreed that by promoting mahogany generally, they were promoting their collective interest.

The cumulative result of their efforts was that mahogany itself became a sort of brand – the “sterling silver” of tropical hardwoods.¹⁴² By declaring themselves as the only legitimate gatekeepers of the mahogany-name “brand,” the Mahogany Association’s efforts resemble those of banana importers later in the twentieth century. John Soluri relates that in order to control the market for bananas, companies like United Fruit pushed their preferred species of import as the only one market-worthy of the banana “brand” – a brand which they were simultaneously inventing whilst marketing it.¹⁴³

One advertisement that promoted mahogany in this way has a photograph of a dining room, with curtained entrance and paneled walls (see Figure 5, Appendix A). The room is

¹⁴⁰ Wilcox, *Caoba*, 114.

¹⁴¹ Pan American Union, *What the United States Buys from Latin America: Quantities and Value* (Washington, 1921), 15-30; Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 297.

¹⁴² Decorative Wood Labeling and the Use of the Term “Mahogany:” Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce, Eighty-Eighth Congress, First Session on H.R. 1998, H.R. 6226, Bills to Protect Consumers and Others Against Misbranding, False Invoicing, and False Advertising of Decorative Wood and Simulated Wood Products, H.R.5669, H.R. 6210, H.R. 6365, H.R. 6370, H.R. 6604, H.R. 6911, Bills to Amend the Federal Trade Commission Act to Prohibit the Use of the Term “Mahogany” in Connection with Woods and Other Products which Are Not in Fact Mahogany, June 18-21 and November 5, 1963, 88th Cong. 1 (1963), 230.

¹⁴³ Soluri, *Banana Cultures*, 183-184.

spartanly bedecked in classic Gregorian style. The furnishings consist merely of a mirror hung on the wall between two light fixtures. A sideboard sits beneath the mirror, flanked by a chair and coffee table. The centerpiece of the room is a small, round table with two chairs at either end. The only other furniture in the room are two chairs astride the curtained entryway. All of the wood has the deep, rich hue of mahogany. This advertisement targets women, saying “the housewife of today is sophisticated. She knows that ... all the long list of Colonial furniture builders, used Mahogany and nothing else.”¹⁴⁴ In addition to determining that women make furniture purchasing decisions, this ad combats the imposition of false mahoganies into the marketplace too. Clearly targeting class-conscious, aspirational women, the ad states, “she also knows that the so-called ‘Mahogany finish’ is a delusion and a snare” and “there is real pride in the assertion – ‘my dining room is furnished in **Genuine Mahogany**.’”¹⁴⁵

The Mahogany Association’s members clearly perceived substitutes as a threat to their market dominance. They worried that the reputation of mahogany was being cheapened by the increasing prevalence of furniture made from Philippine mahogany, as well as stained woods. Reifying the colonial connotations of genuine mahogany furniture, the Mahogany Association positioned its products as superior to its imitation competitors. However, and importantly, Mahogany Association members marketed African mahogany as genuine throughout this period. This inclusion of African mahogany – a distinctly different species – as genuine would come back to bite the Mahogany Association.¹⁴⁶ Although they had benefitted from imperialist

¹⁴⁴ Mahogany Association Advertisement, *Good Furniture Magazine of Furnishing & Decoration* 19, no. 6 (Grand Rapids, MI: Dean-Hicks Company, 1922), 86.

¹⁴⁵ Advertisement, *Good Furniture*, 86. Bold in original.

¹⁴⁶ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 330-334.

expansion, imperialism itself was not unilaterally beneficial for the Mahogany Association members. European presence in Africa created downward pressures on African mahogany costs, as did US power projection in Cuba. Yet, US presence in the Philippines favored mahogany's nemesis competitor – Philippine mahogany. The complicated imperial legacy of the United States was thus not a straightforward win for mahogany companies.

In addition to advertising, the Mahogany Association also leveraged the regulatory framework of the Federal Trade Commission to their advantage. Historian Ellis Hawley notes that “in 1925, [the FTC] drastically reduced its investigatory activities, began negotiating more informal settlements, and started sponsoring trade practice conferences [where] private leaders and FTC officials agreed upon codes of ethical behavior.”¹⁴⁷ This was a “major transformation” for the regulatory body, which was quickly exploited by the Mahogany Association and underscores the public-private partnership that characterized the business environment of the 1920s.¹⁴⁸

In 1927, the Federal Trade Commission, in cases brought by the Mahogany Association, issued six cease-and-desist orders to companies marketing Philippine mahogany.¹⁴⁹ However, these FTC rulings were not unanimous. The FTC Chairman, William E. Humphrey, dissented. Humphrey saw through the legal arguments to the economic incentive which motivated the Mahogany Association's litigation. For each case, Humphrey noted “no public interest” because “it is a controversy entirely between the Mahogany Association and the users of Philippine

¹⁴⁷ Hawley, *The Great War*, 102.

¹⁴⁸ Hawley, *The Great War*, 102.

¹⁴⁹ Federal Trade Commission, *Findings and Orders of the Federal Trade Commission: November 5, 1926 to January 29, 1928* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1930), 293-313.

Mahogany.”¹⁵⁰ Humphrey also saw that, “Philippine Mahogany, being a product of one of our insular possessions, is admitted into this country free of duty, and ... is becoming a serious competitor of the Mahogany Association.”¹⁵¹ However, Humphrey’s dissent was the minority opinion. Their victory is a clear example of the Mahogany Association pursuing its members’ collective interests through litigation and the regulatory apparatus.

In 1929, in another effort to leverage political influence, members of the association appeared before Congress to lobby against the Fordney-McCumber tariff. Ultimately, the revisions to Fordney-McCumber became known as the Tariff Act of 1930, or the Smoot-Hawley tariff – known infamously for exacerbating the Great Depression. Leading the Mahogany Association’s 1929 testimony, Thomas Williams stated that the Mahogany Association represented “nearly all” of the mahogany companies in the United States.¹⁵² Under Fordney-McCumber’s 1922 legislation, US mahogany companies paid a ten percent duty on mahogany logs, the first such duty imposed since the Civil War.¹⁵³ Williams argued that mahogany-importing firms should be placed on the duty-free list because mahogany trees did not grow in commercially viable quantities on US soil and there was therefore no domestic industry needing protection.¹⁵⁴ Noting that Fordney-McCumber considered mahogany a luxury, Williams reasoned that the tariff was imposed for revenue-collection, not protective, reasons.¹⁵⁵ Citing the “total tax collected of about \$500,000 per annum” as too meagre to justify the

¹⁵⁰ Federal Trade Commission, *Findings and Orders*, 307.

¹⁵¹ Federal Trade Commission, *Findings and Orders*, 307.

¹⁵² Tariff Readjustment – 1929, 1952.

¹⁵³ Tariff Readjustment – 1929, 1952.

¹⁵⁴ Tariff Readjustment – 1929, 1952.

¹⁵⁵ Tariff Readjustment – 1929, 1951 & 1953.

government's costs of collecting the tariff, Williams urged placing mahogany logs on the duty-free list.¹⁵⁶

Williams also wanted to raise duties on foreign manufactured mahogany boards. Specifically citing México as a chief competitor because of low labor costs, Williams argued for an increase in tariff duties on imported mahogany lumber.¹⁵⁷ Williams most likely referred to a "new mill near Puerto Mexico [with capacity] to saw about 750,000 feet of mahogany logs."¹⁵⁸ When Congress finally passed the Smoot-Hawley tariff, it included raw mahogany logs on the duty-free list – thereby acceding to industry demands. This decision was crucial for helping mahogany maintain market share against Philippine mahogany, which was also brought to market duty-free. However, Congress did not grant Williams' other request for raising duties on foreign-manufactured wooden boards, leaving the door open for future foreign competition.¹⁵⁹

The 1920s were a favorable decade for US firms generally with respect to tariff protections because, "the government actively encouraged American firms to challenge the businesses of other countries – especially Great Britain."¹⁶⁰ While scholars often speak of broad changes in public-private relations during the interwar years, the Mahogany Association's tariff lobbying efforts reinforce the idea that these changes actually occurred idiosyncratically, resulting from each individual company's needs to "protect itself from antitrust action while lobbying – usually through its industry-wide associations – for as much tariff protection as

¹⁵⁶ Tariff Readjustment – 1929, 1949.

¹⁵⁷ Tariff Readjustment – 1929, 1949 & 1953-1954; "The annual cut of mahogany and cedar is considerable, but those woods are exported in the log and not sawed locally" according to William L. Cooper, *Markets for Sawmill and Woodworking Machinery in Mexico, Guatemala, Panama, Cuba, and Porto Rico* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1930), 3.

¹⁵⁸ Cooper, *Markets for Sawmill*, 3.

¹⁵⁹ Tariff Act of 1930, U.S. Code 19 (1930), § 4, Schedule 4, Paragraphs 401-405.

¹⁶⁰ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 64.

Congress would give it.”¹⁶¹ An uncertain political environment – as Williams’ half-success proves – meant that successful lobbying efforts were a far cry from a foregone conclusion.

Also in 1929, the FTC brought another lawsuit against another furniture company, again alleging unfair competition for marketing wood from the Philippines as mahogany.¹⁶² The case was dismissed two years later, with the stipulation that the wood could not be sold as mahogany “without the modifying term ‘Philippine.’”¹⁶³ This decision, like the one aforementioned, is significant because the FTC reinforced its endorsement of the Mahogany Association’s position. African mahogany, in which Mahogany Association members had economic interest promoting, could still be labeled as mahogany without any qualifying geographic prefix in the same way that Philippine mahogany was now legally required to be. All of the above examples demonstrate the ways in which the association manipulated the legal and regulatory apparatus of the United States to carve favorable market conditions for themselves, at the expense of their competitors.

¹⁶¹ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 64.

¹⁶² R. Maurice Myers, “The Utilization of Philippine Mahogany in the United States,” *Economic Botany* 17, no. 3 (1963): 233.

¹⁶³ Myers, “Philippine Mahogany,” 233-234.

CHAPTER 6

DEPRESSION-ERA MAHOGANY ASSOCIATION ACTIVITY

Unfortunately, favorable market conditions were to be short-lived. The Great Depression dealt the mahogany industry – supplier of a commodity with a highly-elastic demand and ready substitutes – a particularly harsh blow. Having mahogany logs on the duty-free list was good for Mahogany Association members’ supply-side. But, without demand for their products, reduced import duties hardly mattered. As in other industries during this period, many mahogany companies went bankrupt. The smaller companies were particularly vulnerable, but companies like Ichabod T. Williams & Sons could stave off disaster by relying on cheap financing to acquire their vulnerable competition. In 1932, I. T. Williams & Sons did just that, buying up “both the Otis Mahogany Company and the Astoria Importing & Manufacturing Company, Inc.”¹⁶⁴ These acquisitions provided I. T. Williams & Sons with expanded facilities in New York and a new mill on the New Orleans waterfront.¹⁶⁵ In Thomas Williams’ own words, they “weathered the Depression because we were better financed than our domestic competitors and had more capital resources available to us.”¹⁶⁶ Importantly, Williams and others could also rely on their company-owned steamers and mills to keep costs low.¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁴ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 41.

¹⁶⁵ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 41.

¹⁶⁶ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 41.

¹⁶⁷ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 41.

Meanwhile, the companies left standing resorted to price competition – or, as a 1936 publication more blandly put it, “the pressure of competition induced... departures [from uniform delivered pricing], particularly on shipments to consumers in a mill’s immediate markets.”¹⁶⁸ Galambos and Pratt note that, for some industries in the 1920s “the result of ineffective self-regulation was a distressing price decline.”¹⁶⁹ Scholars agree that the heyday of the “Associative State” was the 1920s and the onset of the Depression signaled a new era for the “Corporate Commonwealth.”¹⁷⁰ This trend is clearly exemplified by the Mahogany Association.

While I. T. Williams & Sons gobbled up their competition and surviving competitors resorted to aggressive price competition, the nation’s economy was suffering. As a result, President Roosevelt attempted to combat the global depression with the National Recovery Administration. In it, the Mahogany Association was singled out for broad control over not just the mahogany market, but almost all imported timbers – essentially excluding only “ordinary European and Canadian commercial hardwoods” and Philippine mahogany.¹⁷¹ This wide-ranging authority indicates that mahogany companies exercised market dominance over almost all demand-elastic timber. The term “mahogany” itself seems to have become almost metonymic for “fine hardwood” – as evidenced by the reprisals against, and market-exclusion of, Philippine mahogany – reflected in the Mahogany Association’s jurisdictional allocation

¹⁶⁸ Gustav Seidler, Jr. *The Control of Geographic Price Relations Under Codes of Fair Competition* (Washington: Office of National Recovery Administration, 1936), 188.

¹⁶⁹ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 96.

¹⁷⁰ Hawley, *The Great War*, 101-104; Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 99-100.

¹⁷¹ Seidler, *Price Relations*, 187.

under NRA legislation.¹⁷² Despite having such broad jurisdiction, nevertheless, “the bulk of the industry’s volume [wa]s mahogany.”¹⁷³

At large, the NRA sought to imbue trade associations like the Mahogany Association with federal authority to “regulate various aspects of the industry’s ... market behavior.”¹⁷⁴ One of those aspects was pricing – and, for the Mahogany Association, cooperation with the state offered an opportunity to affect beneficial prices. Reviewing the pricing practices of the Mahogany Association in this era, Gustav Seidler, Jr. wrote that despite aggressive price competition during the depression, prior to then, “the small number of producers and the fact that only a few controlled so large a proportion of the total volume made agreement on a mutually satisfactory delivered pricing policy possible.”¹⁷⁵

In 1933, being once again compelled into cooperation, the Mahogany Association was imbued by the short-lived NRA with the ability to fix delivered prices in a very favorable way. Prior to the NRA, Mahogany Association members sold their product at “delivered prices which... were uniform at all destinations in domestic markets east of the Mississippi River.”¹⁷⁶ With few exceptions, all shipments west of the Mississippi had “freight...added to the uniform delivered prices at rail rates” because the western market was too small to justify inclusion, estimated at a mere five percent of the US market.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷² The Philippine Mahogany Manufacturers Import Association was formed in 1933, seemingly because the Mahogany Association refused to share power with Philippine mahogany firms. They were headquartered in Los Angeles, CA. Judkins, *National Associations*, 233.

¹⁷³ Seidler, *Price Relations*, 187.

¹⁷⁴ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 107-108.

¹⁷⁵ Seidler, *Price Relations*, 188.

¹⁷⁶ Seidler, *Price Relations*, 188.

¹⁷⁷ Seidler, *Price Relations*, 188.

However, this changed with the NRA's mandate to the Mahogany Association to set uniform minimum prices across all sale destinations within the United States. To do this, they followed "cost protection" pricing that required mahogany "be sold at minimum prices which were uniform delivered prices at all destinations within the United States."¹⁷⁸ The stated purpose of this "cost protection" pricing was "the prevention of monopoly in the territory dominated by each of the mills," a clear reference to the unhealthy practice of aggressive price competition.¹⁷⁹ To comply, the Mahogany Association came up with a price that "included an average freight cost from all shipping points to all consuming points" – including the distant, expensive, and negligible markets in the West.¹⁸⁰ While Seidler "understood ... [the price to be] the weighted averaging of the freight bills of all mills to all domestic destinations over a representative recent period," he simultaneously admitted that "the method used in determining uniform delivered minimum prices... is not definitely known."¹⁸¹ Conveniently for the Mahogany Association, Seidler abashedly admits in a footnote that the "files of the Association... were in storage and unavailable for this study."¹⁸² That the Mahogany Association decided upon minimum prices that were favorable to them is almost certain; an opportunity to establish a favorable uniform price nationwide would be too good to pass up, especially with the sweeping authority granted to them by the NRA. Although the NRA itself would be ruled unconstitutional in 1934, the Mahogany Association members had rediscovered solidarity. In 1936, they were still "sell[ing] at uniform delivered prices... with no break in the price level."¹⁸³

¹⁷⁸ Seidler, *Price Relations*, 189.

¹⁷⁹ Seidler, *Price Relations*, 189.

¹⁸⁰ Seidler, *Price Relations*, 189.

¹⁸¹ Seidler, *Price Relations*, 189.

¹⁸² Seidler, *Price Relations*, 189.

¹⁸³ Seidler, *Price Relations*, 189.

Despite the opportunity to take advantage of a new form of private-public partnership, the mahogany industry remained in dire straits. Unlike in World War One, the NRA-era power given to the Mahogany Association did not come with a concomitant spike in demand. According to John C. Callahan, 1934 was a fifty-year low point in the mahogany business due to “the recession following World War I, the Depression of the 1932 era, and substitutes which misused the mahogany name.”¹⁸⁴ The Mahogany Association therefore sought to buoy demand again through advertising. Thus, in 1934, the association hired George Lamb, who had worked previously with manufacturers of walnut, one of mahogany furniture’s competitors in the US market.¹⁸⁵ Although walnut and mahogany furniture sold at nearly the same price points, the market competition was “determined more by style demands than by price.”¹⁸⁶

Under Lamb’s direction, the Mahogany Association began issuing labels that would guarantee authenticity to customers (see Figure 6, Appendix A). This action was meant to rekindle down-market consumer confidence. By regulating the issuance of Mahogany Association Labels, the association sought to control the marketplace by differentiating furniture made from their products as being superior, inimitable, and instantly recognizable. This effort was funded, in part, by selling the labels to furniture makers, thereby helping to generate some revenue as well. Each furniture manufacturer was issued a number, and so Mahogany Association labels are effective even today for tracing the provenance of furniture.

¹⁸⁴ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 297.

¹⁸⁵ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 297.

¹⁸⁶ Tariff Readjustment – 1929, 1957.

The manufacturers themselves saw benefit in this relationship because they could distinguish themselves as purveyors of guaranteed quality mahogany furniture.¹⁸⁷

In 1936, George Lamb and the Mahogany Association published *The Mahogany Book*. This short book was meant to spur demand and to educate consumers on how to distinguish real mahogany from imitations. *The Mahogany Book* was re-released over the next two decades in eight editions – each edition maintaining that African mahogany, unlike Philippine mahogany, was genuine.¹⁸⁸ Interestingly, the book’s publishing information details that the Mahogany Association had by this time relocated to Chicago – a fact reflecting the increased importance of the New Orleans-Chicago axis of the trade in this period. In keeping with previous advertisements and romanticism a-la-Wilcox, the book also provided sensational details on the acquisition of mahogany from the jungles of its origin. In introducing one of the later editions, Lamb wrote “presenting this most romantic of all cabinet woods in its latest and its most thrilling role.”¹⁸⁹ Lamb, echoing Wilcox’s monarchial imagery from a decade earlier, also stated “The mature Mahogany tree is truly the ‘King of the Forest’ having survived, whole and sound, a century or more of the most intense struggle for existence.”¹⁹⁰ Additionally, the Mahogany Association under Lamb collaborated with the US Forestry Service to produce two educational films that were “circulated... [to] schools and clubs throughout the country.”¹⁹¹ The films “depict[ed] the many exciting scenes in the logging and transport of Mahogany from the

¹⁸⁷ Decorative Wood Labeling and the Use of the Term “Mahogany”, 142.

¹⁸⁸ G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 8-14.

¹⁸⁹ G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 1.

¹⁹⁰ G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 11.

¹⁹¹ G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 68.

far-off tropics” and were called “Romance of Mahogany (the jungle story)” and “Mahogany Masterpieces (the furniture story)”.¹⁹²

Finally, in the 1930s, the Mahogany Association redoubled its efforts in court to edge Philippine mahogany out of the marketplace. During the five-year period preceding the outbreak of hostilities between Japan and the United States, the Philippines averaged yearly Philippine mahogany exports to the US market of between about \$338,070 and \$359,314.¹⁹³ This exceeded the 1935 genuine mahogany imports of a meagre \$206,000.¹⁹⁴ Thus, in 1937, the Federal Trade Commission reopened litigation against companies marketing Philippine mahogany, presumably under pressure from the Mahogany Association.¹⁹⁵ However, in the face of the Great Depression, the culmination of all these efforts was only moderately successful. By 1938, mahogany imports had risen only modestly to \$492,000.¹⁹⁶

¹⁹² G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 68.

¹⁹³ To Provide for the Rehabilitation of the Philippine Islands, 269-270.

¹⁹⁴ U.S. Tariff Commission, *Summaries of Tariff Information: Volume 4, Wood and Manufactures* (Washington, 1948), 28.

¹⁹⁵ Myers, “Philippine Mahogany,” 234.

¹⁹⁶ U.S. Tariff Commission, *Summaries*, 28.

CHAPTER 7

WORLD WAR II AND BEYOND

Demand did not rise significantly until the outbreak of World War II. Once again, mahogany's durability proved vital for wartime needs. The wood was used in aircraft construction and, harkening back to its earliest uses, in shipbuilding.¹⁹⁷ According to one source, the Germans also recognized the strategic value of mahogany to allied war efforts and sank ships carrying mahogany.¹⁹⁸

Beginning even in 1940, the Mahogany Association joined other business interest associations in the timber industry in a scheme "to buy up surplus and idle veneering machines... [with the goal to] scrap them or resell the[m]... to member firms as they expanded to meet the increasing demands for war-related veneer production."¹⁹⁹ In addition to further consolidating their industry control by manipulating the availability of machinery, the Mahogany Association was again tapped by the US government to facilitate wartime procurement and production.

In mid-1942 the Board of Economic Warfare dispatched mahogany lumberman Frank G. Otis (of the New Orleans Otis family) to México on behalf of the War Department to secure reliable mahogany supplies.²⁰⁰ Otis was charged with exploring alternative means of bringing

¹⁹⁷ Timothy S. Wilson, *Army-Navy 'E' Awards in New Orleans, Louisiana* (Master's Thesis: University of New Orleans, 2020), 16.

¹⁹⁸ G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 9.

¹⁹⁹ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 286-287.

²⁰⁰ Resources Corporation International to Frank Otis, Aug. 12, 1942. Frank G. Otis Papers [1940-1942] LaRC127, Box 1, Folder 17, Special Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane, New Orleans, LA.

mahogany logs into the United States. In addition to reviewing Mexican railroad networks, Otis's investigation prompted the suggestion of a barge-linked coastal transport system that would be less vulnerable to submarine warfare than steamers on the high seas.²⁰¹ There is no evidence this alternative was ever put into practice though – the cost of using steamships was far more effective. The short trip from New Orleans to Latin American ports of call helped mitigate the risk of being sunk.

Otis's papers also contain tabulations from George Lamb on US mahogany supplies. Lamb's reports are interesting because in one, he appears to tacitly acknowledge that African mahogany was distinctly inferior to *Swietenia macrophylla*. On July 1, 1942, Lamb submitted a tabulation of "Mahogany Logs at Mills" to the US War Department, assessing the supply on hand for the war effort. Lamb calculated 1,803,000 board feet of mahogany readily available between five companies. Although tabulated adjacent to other mills, one more mahogany mill's timber stocks were written off simply as "African" – indicating a government preference for the genuine article. Being compelled to furnish mahogany to the government left little room for clever advertising, and the ruse of maintaining the authenticity of African mahogany was not even attempted during this war. African mahogany was not good enough for government work.²⁰²

In March of 1944, as another testament to mahogany's importance for the war effort, the Freiberg Mahogany Company received the Army-Navy "E" award for production excellence.

²⁰¹ Resources Corporation International to Frank Otis, Aug. 12, 1942. Frank G. Otis Papers [1940-1942] LaRC127, Box 1, Folder 17, Special Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane, New Orleans, LA.

²⁰² Mahogany Logs at Mills, July 1, 1942. Frank G. Otis Papers [1940-1942] LaRC127, Box 1, Folder 17, Special Manuscripts Collection, Howard-Tilton Memorial Library, Tulane, New Orleans, LA.

To win the award, a company had to “avoid work stoppages,” “maintain a high rate or quantity of production,” and meet twelve other criteria.²⁰³ I. T. Williams & Sons also earned the award “for excellence and efficiency” in their role providing mahogany for Higgins PT boats.²⁰⁴ Only five percent of manufacturers in the United States were given this award by the war’s end.²⁰⁵ By 1943, mahogany imports were up to \$1,341,000.²⁰⁶ By 1947, they were up to \$5.4 million, with \$2.4 million coming from México alone.²⁰⁷

As World War II ended, the heightened demand for mahogany it had occasioned slowly eroded. Mahogany firms did enjoy a decade of postwar prosperity, contributing to the “thriving postwar economy.”²⁰⁸ However, there was trouble on the horizon. Perhaps most forebodingly for the Mahogany Association, the reopening of Pacific trade, combined with the explosive US investment in rebuilding Japanese industries, including sawmills, translated to a huge increase in importation of Philippine hardwoods.²⁰⁹ By the early 1950s, Philippine mahogany far outstripped both genuine (*Swietenia*) and African (*Khaya*) mahogany imports (see Figure 7, Appendix A).²¹⁰ Callahan reports that the 30th annual meeting of the Mahogany Association in Chicago in 1952 saw three firms dominating the agenda: Ichabod T. Williams & Sons, Freiberg Mahogany Company, and the Thompson Mahogany Company. Although sales had been good the previous two years, the mahogany barons were not as optimistic about future demand.²¹¹

²⁰³ Wilson, *Army-Navy*, 4-5 & 16-17.

²⁰⁴ John C. Callahan, “The Mahogany Empire of Ichabod T. Williams & Sons, 1838-1973,” *Journal of Forest History* 29, no. 3 (1985): 120-130.

²⁰⁵ Wilson, *Army-Navy*, 4.

²⁰⁶ U.S. Tariff Commission, *Summaries*, 28.

²⁰⁷ U.S. Tariff Commission, *Summaries*, 28.

²⁰⁸ Galambos and Pratt, *Corporate Commonwealth*, 128.

²⁰⁹ Myers, “Philippine Mahogany,” 235-237.

²¹⁰ Myers, “Philippine Mahogany,” 236.

²¹¹ Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 298.

Their pessimism was confirmed in 1957 by the Federal Trade Commission. In some ways similar to the 1931 decision, the FTC ruled that it was necessary “to prevent the use of the word mahogany as the name for wood other than genuine mahogany (*Swietenia*).”²¹² However, this decision was no victory for the Mahogany Association. The FTC decision essentially undercut the Mahogany Association’s long-held position – that African *Khaya* was mahogany and Philippine wood was not – by requiring that both conform to the same naming convention. Such a victory must have been bittersweet. In 1960, the Federal Trade Commission denied the Mahogany Association’s attempt to reopen the case.²¹³

In 1963, in a last-ditch attempt to leverage political influence, the Mahogany Association worked to get a bill debated in a House committee to amend the FTC ruling via legislation.²¹⁴ Despite some support, this bill died in a pocket veto shortly after Kennedy’s assassination. In 1967, Congress succeeded in passing the Fair Packaging and Labeling Act to affect consumer protection in advertising. Although far broader in scope than the Hardwood Labeling Act, the language of Congress’s new bill meant that African mahogany could not be called genuine mahogany and, just like Philippine mahogany, had to be distinguished by the prefix of its provenance: “African”.²¹⁵ Despite decades of court battles, the Mahogany Association finally lost definitively in Congress. After thirty years of labeling African mahogany as genuine, the Mahogany Association finally got an effective cease-and-desist of their own, albeit legislatively.

²¹² Myers, “Philippine Mahogany,” 234.

²¹³ Myers, “Philippine Mahogany,” 234.

²¹⁴ Decorative Wood Labeling and the Use of the Term “Mahogany”, 1-300.

²¹⁵ Fair Packaging and Labeling Act, U.S. Code 15 (1966), §§ 1451 et seq.; Decorative Wood Labeling and the Use of the Term “Mahogany”, 2-7.

Part of this story is mahogany's increasingly diminished significance in a growing economy. As Philippine mahogany dominated an increasingly large market share in the United States, it became important to guard against "possible impairment of the relations of the US government with the Philippines."²¹⁶ As Congress sought to pass broad-sweeping consumer protection legislation, the industry-specific arguments for protecting mahogany did not hold water botanically, but were also swept aside as larger geopolitical concerns overshadowed their particular interests. Indeed, it seems Congress found that Philippine mahogany's marketing, as such, did not constitute "unfair or deceptive competition" nor "that the consumer [wa]s being seriously misled" by the term "Philippine mahogany."²¹⁷

The disputes over the word "mahogany" essentially revolved around the question: "Is mahogany a trade name, or is it a botanical name?"²¹⁸ Ironically, because of the long-standing practice of referring to wood from the Philippines as "Philippine mahogany," the subsequent court battles allowed for the practice to continue. This was not for botanical or geographic reasons, but simply because the practice was common enough that it had established "secondary meaning;" in other words, Philippine mahogany became part of the common parlance – losing brand distinction on strictly botanical grounds.²¹⁹ Additionally, as the president of the Philippine Mahogany Association made clear to Congress, the Mahogany Association "want[ed] one set of rules to apply to a wood they control, *Khaya*, but want to deny it to Philippine mahogany. In other words, they want to have their cake and eat it to."²²⁰

²¹⁶ Decorative Wood Labeling and the Use of the Term "Mahogany", 12.

²¹⁷ Decorative Wood Labeling and the Use of the Term "Mahogany", 15-16.

²¹⁸ Decorative Wood Labeling and the Use of the Term "Mahogany", 201.

²¹⁹ Decorative Wood Labeling and the Use of the Term "Mahogany", 323.

²²⁰ Decorative Wood Labeling and the Use of the Term "Mahogany", 183.

By the mid-1960s, Congress was convinced that the use of the word “mahogany” could only be applied to wood with Caribbean or Latin American provenance. Wood from the Philippines should be called Philippine mahogany and wood from Africa should be called African mahogany. Contrary to the wishes of the Mahogany Association, the only “true mahogany” in the eyes of the US Congress was *Swietenia*.²²¹ As a result, the Mahogany Association subsequently “disappeared from the scene in 1964 with hardly a whimper.”²²²

²²¹ Myers, “Philippine Mahogany,” 233.

²²² Callahan, *Veneer Industry*, 288.

CHAPTER 7

EPILOGUE

In the 1960s, foreign competition, the widespread use of plastics, and shifting consumer aesthetics forced most mahogany companies to change operational strategies, sell out, or go out of business.²²³ Additionally, centuries of exploitation had stripped the forest landscapes of their most valuable trees. Twilight thus reached the US mahogany industry in the mid-1960s, with most dedicated mahogany companies being completely defunct by the mid-1970s. The market still exists today, but it is small and highly regulated by the international CITES Treaty.²²⁴ There are no longer any US companies dedicated exclusively to the procurement of mahogany. Experiments with transplanting mahogany around the globe also began to bear fruit in the 1960s and 1970s; for example, Fiji now supplies a large portion of the mahogany used in the Gibson company's guitars.²²⁵

However, for nearly half a century, the Mahogany Association defined and dominated the market for mahogany in the US. Overcoming barriers to formation during World War One's government-business partnership, the Mahogany Association immediately moved to secure the interests of its dominant members by removing Joseph Otis's ability to influence the government against their African investments. After the war, cronyism was rewarded,

²²³ Callahan, "Mahogany Empire," 129-130.

²²⁴ CITES stands for: Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. Anderson, *Mahogany*, 16.

²²⁵ Jose Martinez-Reyes, "Mahogany intertwined: Enviromateriality between Mexico, Fiji, and the Gibson Les Paul," *Journal of Material Culture* 20, no. 3 (2015): 313-329; F. B. Lamb, *Mahogany*, 162; Anderson, *Mahogany*, 312-314.

evidenced by Wickliffe's adoption into the I. T. Williams family's business – the largest mahogany concern in the US at the time. Expansion during the 1920s, when the Mahogany Association wielded the most influence, was followed by hard times and desperate efforts in the 1930s. By World War Two, the association was naturally sought after by the US government to provide the same procurement services it had during the First World War. However, a decade after the war, the mahogany market soured. By 1964, the Mahogany Association was a shadow of its former self and was dissolved.

One takeaway of this study is the dichotomy of speciation. African mahogany and American mahogany lent themselves naturally to differential relative exploitation. That is to say, the United States became the primary exploiter of American mahogany while European countries, like France and Britain, became the primary exploiters of African mahogany. Aside from the logistical and geographical reasons, this trend is complicated by the history of European colonialism in Africa, established auction markets in places like London and Hamburg, and the United States' late arrival to dominate the commercial scene. However, it seems fair to say that during the World Wars, Europe's inability to regularly access its African supplies pushed the United States to find added value in the mahogany stocks in the Americas. This impetus does not seem to be highlighted in the literature on the mahogany trade, but it is critical to understanding the trend in the US trade over the course of the twentieth century, as increasingly intense exploitation rapidly diminished the supply of old trees. This is also interesting because this same dichotomy provided the conflict of interest which ultimately undermined the Mahogany Association's legislative attempts to preserve market share against Philippine mahogany. Whereas African and American mahogany lent themselves to European

and US exploitation, respectively, Philippine mahogany's market share exemplifies another dichotomy under a market-speciation rubric. Both African and American mahoganies were imported via East Coast and Gulf Coast ports to service markets primarily east of the Mississippi river. Philippine mahogany, by contrast, was brought to the US market by West Coast firms to service the western half of the United States.

The Mahogany Association's attempts to define mahogany, principally in opposition to the Philippine imposter, are representative of a wider effort to transmute a commodity into a brand in the twentieth century. According to John Soluri, bananas underwent a similar process through efforts of United Fruit Co.²²⁶ Their ever-presence in Central America and periphery dealings in mahogany offer the tantalizing probability of intellectual cross-pollination in this respect. Among other similarities, the banana market was also susceptible to consumer sensitivities to substitute species. The Cavendish versus Gros Michel banana transition is somewhat analogous to the American versus African mahogany shift (insomuch as reliable supplies were chosen over consumer preference), as well as the true mahogany versus Philippine mahogany controversy (producer preference). The Mahogany Association members don't seem to have been directly involved in any coup attempts or other high-profile political maneuverings, as United Fruit is famously known for in Guatemala. However, their domestic power stimulated political interest in overseas affairs. Their varied appearances before Congress, litigation on behalf of the trade name of mahogany, and price manipulations clearly demonstrate such a capacity. With this as evidence, it can be safely said that the mahogany trade can be considered under the rubric of American Empire.

²²⁶ Soluri, *Banana Cultures*, 183-184.

The niche market that mahogany companies sought to cater to was ultimately eroded by a marketing strategy that deployed the term “mahogany” not in a strict botanical sense, but rather as a synonym for “fine wood.” This looser interpretation of the word mahogany was simultaneously adopted and criticized by the Mahogany Association. Indeed, in 1963 Thomas Williams admitted that, for wood, “the name mahogany” has the “equivalent” weight of prestige as “sterling in silver.”²²⁷ Embracing African mahogany as “genuine” contained some truth but was based on flawed logic. Increasingly contentious court battles ultimately exposed this flawed logic, which undermined decades of promotional work by the Mahogany Association. Thus, by the 1960s, the political winds had shifted, and the Mahogany Association’s market dominance was lost forever.

This essay does not treat the environmental aspect of over-harvesting in any meaningful depth. However, it should be obvious that centuries of over-harvesting hastened the downfall of the Mahogany Association by making procurement increasingly costly – too costly to compete with Philippine mahogany. Discussing the regulatory environment of business in the United States, scholar Edward Balleisen has noted a dearth in historians’ studies of trade associations. Balleisen notes that, starting in the mid-1990’s, “lumber and paper companies [began] abiding by industry codes that constrain clear-cutting and limit logging in slow growth forests, a process that has enabled large-scale purchasers of these products to differentiate between potential suppliers.”²²⁸ Balleisen points to this success of self-regulation in the timber

²²⁷ Decorative Wood Labeling and the Use of the Term “Mahogany”, 230.

²²⁸ Edward Balleisen, “The Prospects for Effective Coregulation in the United States: A Historian’s View from the Early Twenty-First Century” in *Government and Markets: Toward a New Theory of Regulation*, ed. Edward J. Balleisen and David A. Moss (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 467.

industry, which, along with unbiased public interest groups, has achieved a stable, successful regulation of over-harvesting. Balleisen champions this arrangement as a winning formula for regulation. This situation, however, did not emerge in a vacuum.

While Balleisen takes a broad approach to trade associations and business self-regulation, my own work helps to highlight one trade association's activity within the timber industry. The history of the Mahogany Association is inexorably tied to the history of the CITES treaty, perhaps the most successful of the "unbiased public interest groups" in Balleisen's winning formula. Mahogany's inclusion in the CITES treaty is a direct consequence of the actions of old-guard mahogany companies, who were historically uninterested in sustainable harvesting – preferring instead to simply relocate once supplies ran out in one area. Mahogany was first proposed to be added to the treaty in 1992, although it was not formally incorporated into the treaty until 2003.²²⁹

In examining the myriad methods of regulating businesses, Balleisen comments upon such giants as the Federal Trade Commission, The Securities and Exchange Commission, and the Institute of Nuclear Power Operators to reify the trade, financial, and environmental importance of understanding business regulation. However, Balleisen also ponders, "what degree of perceived threat is necessary to concentrate the minds of business elites? And what happens to the institutions of self-regulation, either within firms or across industries, when the prevailing political climate becomes hostile to regulatory action by the state?" Balleisen calls for scholars to answer these questions. Although not the goal of this essay, my work on the

²²⁹ "Big Leaf Mahogany," Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://cites.org/eng/prog/mwg.php>.

Mahogany Association should nonetheless help future scholars to better unravel those mysteries. For example, the adversarial relationship that mahogany importers maintained against Philippine mahogany importers is instructive, as far as pitfalls that self-regulatory trade associations may encounter (something that Balleisen is keen to address).

Should the Mahogany Association have been able to reconcile its adversarial position vis-à-vis the Philippine Mahogany Association, its labels might have continued to serve a useful market purpose. Even today, antiques hunters use old Mahogany Association labels to trace the provenance of mahogany furniture manufactured in the decades between the 1930's and the 1960's. This enduring value, despite misconstruing African mahogany as genuine, is a poignant reminder that trade associations can provide consumers lasting residual externalities – even though they were ostensibly formed for self-protective reasons. However, counter-factual propositions and the “what-ifs” of history are themselves of dubious value, even as mere thought experiments. What is undoubtedly true, however, is that the supply-chain methods deployed by mahogany companies directly contributed to a scarcity of tropical forest resources. This scarcity, in turn, provided the ultimate impulse for the inclusion of mahogany under the international CITES treaty amendments (which, again, Balleisen touts as emblematic of successful industry regulation). Mahogany is today listed under CITES treaty Appendix II, which recognizes the danger of, and protects the trees from, over-harvesting in order to prevent the species from any human-caused risk of extinction.²³⁰

²³⁰ The CITES treaty covers a very broad range of plant and animal species. All three species of mahogany (that is, the entire genus of *Swietenia*) are included under Appendix II of the treaty. This means they face risk of endangerment or extinction if over-harvested. Neither African mahogany nor Philippine mahogany appear in the treaty documents, a fact which further underscores the toll that centuries of exploitation have taken on American mahogany. “Big Leaf Mahogany,” Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://cites.org/eng/prog/mwg.php>.

Perhaps the most important takeaway, though, regards the power wielded by the men (and they were invariably men) who ran these mahogany companies. I. T. Williams' family's mahogany company was one of several who's infrastructural achievements were quite spectacular. Possessing a near-vertical monopoly that stretched from the wharves of their New York mills through ocean steamers to African and Latin American procurement offices, this company was determined to chaperone their product from *selva* to sawmill as best they could. Indeed, timber and veneer historian John Callahan has a short article about the William's family business titled outright "The Mahogany Empire of Ichabod T. Williams & Sons, 1838-1973."²³¹

²³¹ Callahan, "Mahogany Empire," 120-130.

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APPENDIX A

Figure 1:



“Map Showing Areas Where Mahogany is Grown.”²³²

²³² G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany*, 8.

Figure 2:

Year.	Cuba.	Mexico.	Central and South America.	Total.
	<i>Thousand feet.</i>	<i>Thousand feet.</i>	<i>Thousand feet.</i>	<i>Thousand feet.</i>
1892.....	3,884	7,871	.....	11,755
1893.....	5,960	10,941	.....	16,901
1894.....	1,506	3,909	.....	5,415
1895.....	2,549	5,818	.....	8,366
1896.....	451	6,794	.....	7,244
1897.....	94	6,202	1,756	8,053
1898.....	92	9,396	6,541	16,034
1899.....	689	11,477	8,985	21,150
1900.....	3,615	9,557	4,186	17,357
1901.....	3,822	7,877	3,302	15,000
1902.....	6,043	6,940	3,407	16,390
1903.....	4,742	9,145	3,580	17,466
1904.....	1,564	7,043	2,842	11,448
1905.....	1,829	3,195	2,615	7,638
1906.....	3,883	4,164	1,563	9,609
1907.....	3,458	8,387	3,304	15,149
1908.....	1,796	5,205	2,597	9,598
1909.....	3,037	3,452	11,557	18,046
1910.....	2,576	7,983	2,128	12,686

“Shipments of mahogany entering New York from 1892 to 1910.”²³³

²³³ Mell, *True Mahogany*, 12. The thousand feet measured here are most likely board feet, abbreviated as Bd. ft. Board feet was one common way of measuring timber and refers to a piece of sawed timber that measured one foot by one foot by one inch. De Vos, *Conquista*, 35.

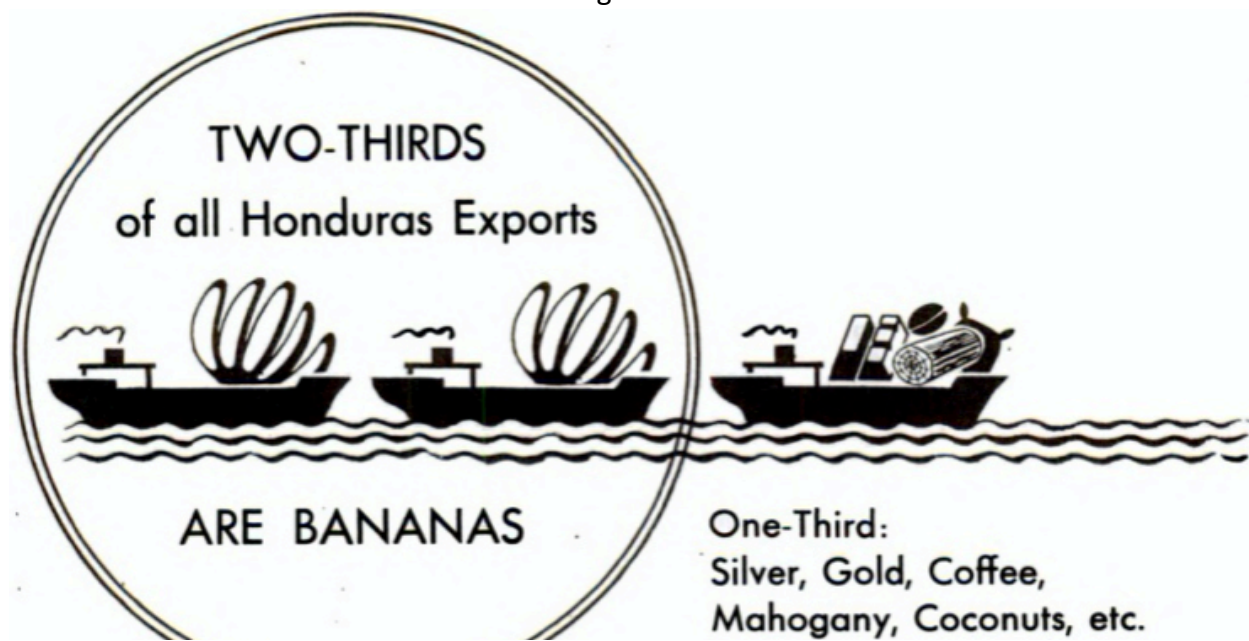
Figure 3:

Year.	Quantity.	Value.
	<i>Thousand feet.</i>	
1901.....	32,281	\$1,752,612
1902.....	44,795	2,361,483
1903.....	48,387	2,783,679
1904.....	50,370	2,690,382
1905.....	31,844	1,977,894
1906.....	36,619	2,470,072
1907.....	51,899	3,263,718
1908.....	41,678	2,566,594
1909.....	39,828	2,479,976
1910.....	44,524	3,224,152
1911.....	43,914	3,171,398
1912.....	43,194	3,038,043
1913.....	66,318	4,839,625
1914.....	70,470	4,925,126

“Quantity and value of true mahogany and other mahoganies (unsawed) imported by the United States from 1901 to 1914.”²³⁴

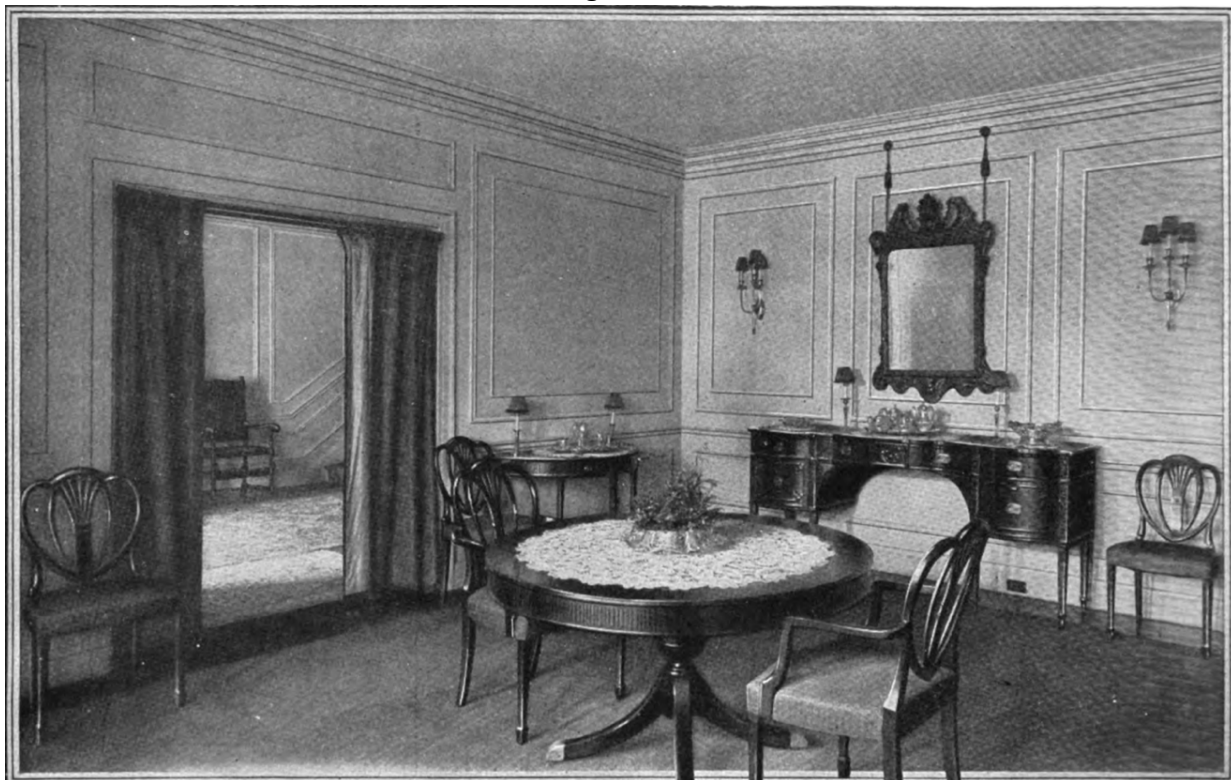
²³⁴ Mell, *True Mahogany*, 14.

Figure 4:

Image Depicting Primary Honduran Exports.²³⁵

²³⁵ *Honduras, Where Old Meets New*, 8.

Figure 5:



Photograph of living room depicted in Mahogany Association advertisement, 1922.²³⁶

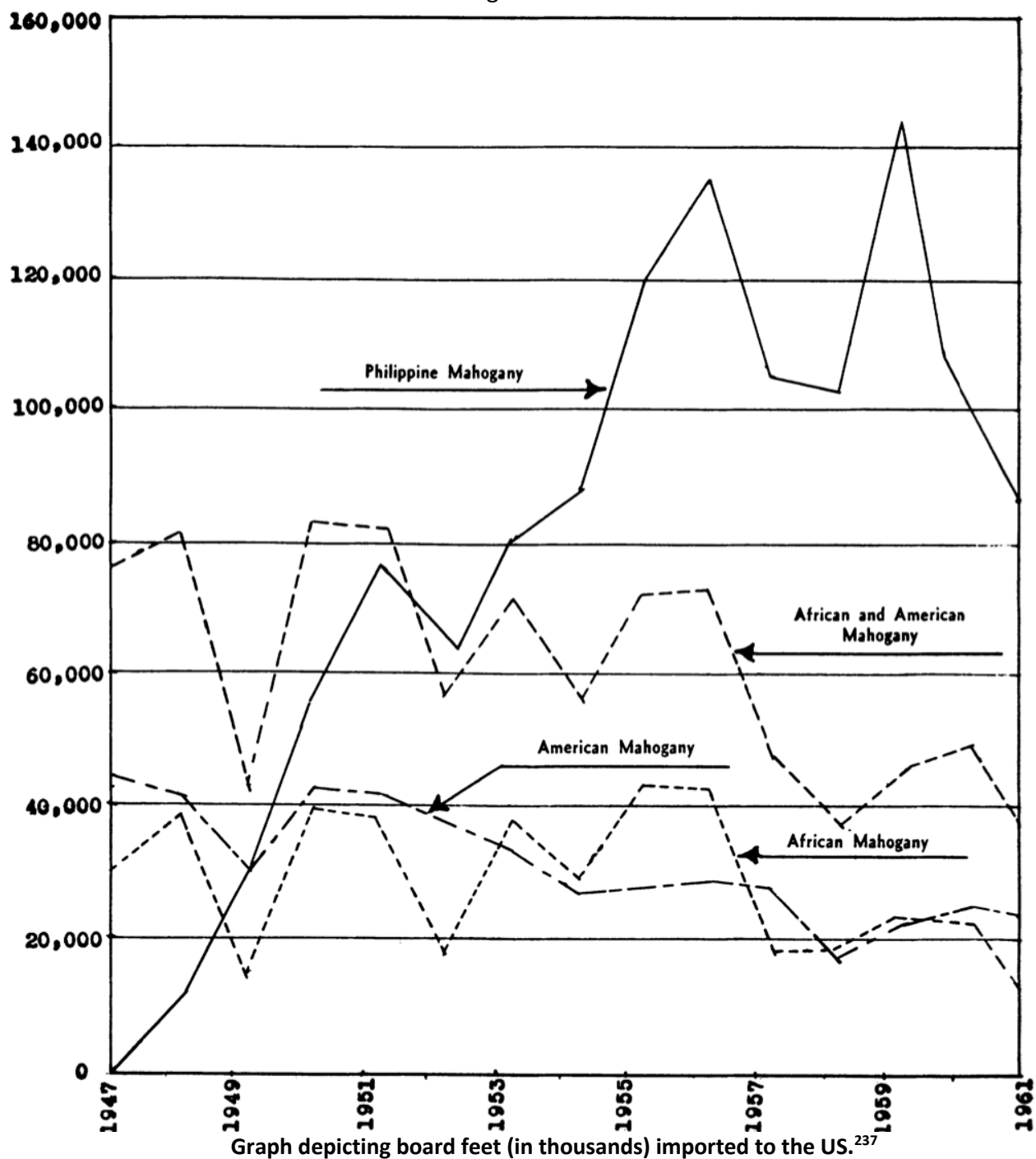
²³⁶ Advertisement, *Good Furniture*, 86.

Figure 6:



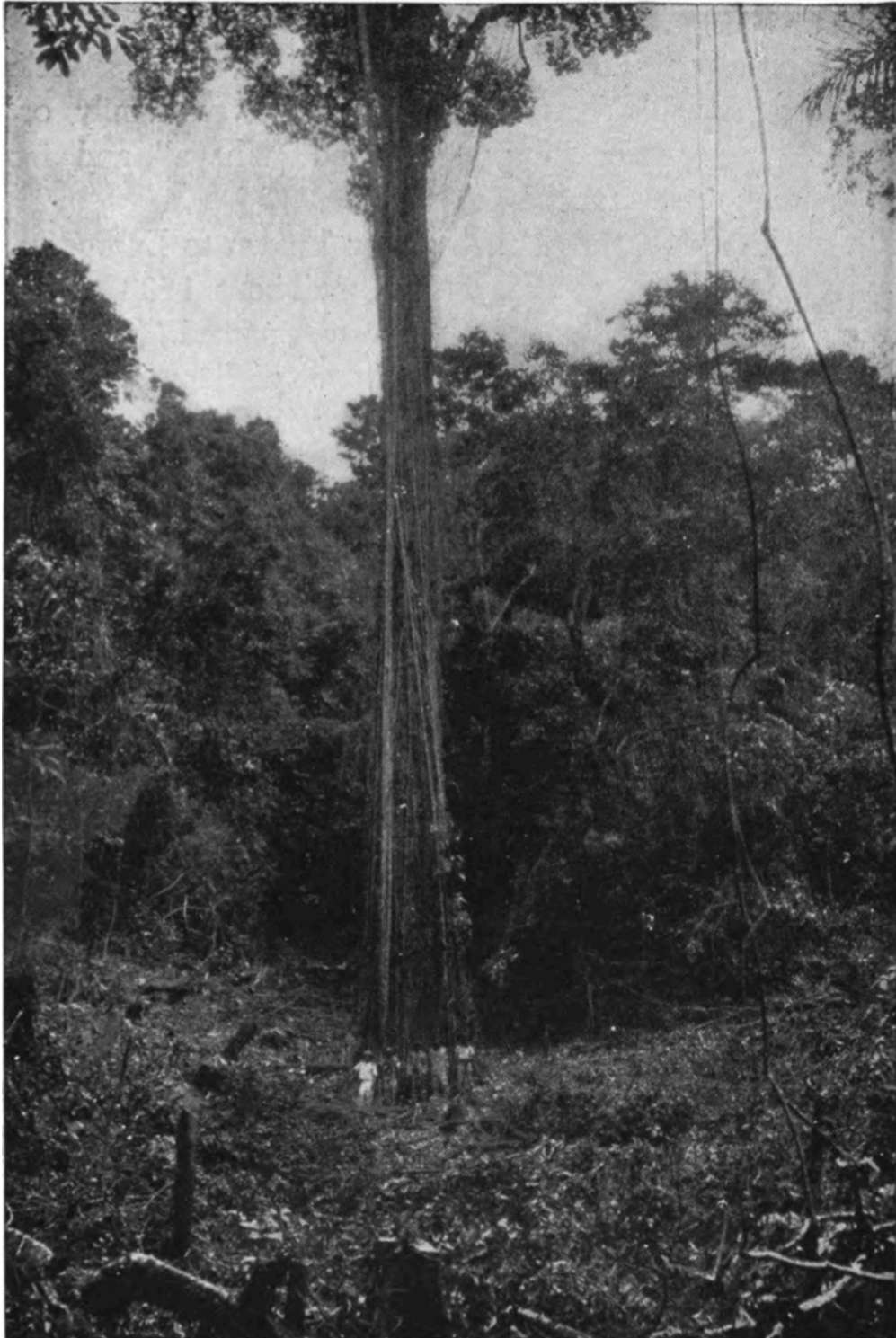
Mahogany Association Label, photo courtesy of my classmate Paige Collins.

Figure 7:



²³⁷ Myers, "Philippine Mahogany," 236.

Figure 8:



“Large Mahogany tree in Central American jungle.”²³⁸

²³⁸ G. N. Lamb, *Mahogany Book*, 11.