

CHAPTER 3

“Some Kind of Eldorado”

Eero Erkko and the Plan for a Finnish Settler Colony in Cuba, 1903–1905

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In April 1904, a father of a conscription-aged young man in northern Finland penned a letter to Eero Erkko, an exiled Finnish journalist living in Brooklyn, New York. The father explained in the letter how his son had decided to flee Finland with his friend to escape drafting to the Russian Imperial Army. To help his son find a suitable place of emigration, the father asked Erkko about opportunities in Cuba. Was Cuba really “some kind of ‘Eldorado,’” as Erkko had insinuated in a recent newspaper article? If reality did meet the image, the letter writer continued, young Finnish men would unhesitatingly head to “the Far West, where a dictatorship like ours would not be tolerated.”¹

Why did Eero Erkko entice Finnish political refugees and young men fleeing Russian conscription to emigrate to Cuba? Studies of Finnish immigration to Cuba have been scant, with Ritva Jarva’s 1971 well-researched article on Finnish settlements in Itabo (in Matanzas province) and Omaja (in Oriente) still the most authoritative account.² To understand why Erkko promoted Cuba in the early 1900s—and

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why he considered the island suitable for Finnish settlement—we must place his trajectory within the broader geopolitical context of the turn-of-the-century Caribbean. The Spanish-American War of 1898 had extended the United States’ imperial power beyond the North American continent. Puerto Rico, Guam, and the Philippines were annexed as US territories, while Cuba was given formal independence after a period of American military occupation (1899–1902). In practice, however, the United States retained a firm control over Cuban politics and economy; the Cuban constitution even included an appendix—the so-called Platt Amendment—which allowed the United States to militarily intervene in Cuba to protect “life, property, and individual liberty.” In the economic sphere, US dominance was most evident in sugar production, Cuba’s primary export industry. American companies bought vast tracts of land, especially in the eastern provinces, cleared land for sugarcane plantations, and built colossal mills to process the cane.³ In the early 1900s, proponents of Cuba’s unification with the United States saw immigration as a way to “Americanize” Cuba in preparation for its eventual annexation. Americans congregated in Havana and other commercial centers, but they also began to establish their own settlements and towns in rural Cuba, especially in the two easternmost provinces (Oriente and Camagüey) and the Isle of Pines.⁴ Eero Erkko’s idea of a Finnish colony in Cuba emerged in this context of expanding US imperialism in the Caribbean, and its practical realization was entirely dependent on American capital.

Yet the story of Erkko’s attempt to build a Finnish colony in Cuba also illustrates the diversity the actors who built “American” imperial presence in the Caribbean—as well as the diversity of interests that these actors possessed.⁵ The plan to settle a tract of Cuban land with Finnish settlers was born out of interactions between Finnish political activists, two American land companies and a Cuban real estate agent, Cesar Marrero González, whose active part in the plan has been largely ignored in previous studies. Thus, the case of planned Finnish settlement in Cuba also sheds light on Cuban participation in the building of “American” power in the island.⁶ The ultimate failure of his settlement plan also helps to appreciate the limits of American power.

In exploring the rhetoric and realities of Erkko’s Cuba plan, this chapter draws mainly on Erkko’s private correspondence and newspaper articles published in Finnish and Finnish-American newspapers. The chapter first examines Erkko’s vision of a Finnish settler colony in

Cuba within the context of his political thinking and the broader ideological currents on which it drew on. The chapter will then probe how Erkko attempted to make his vision a reality: the negotiations with other activists, business partners, American landholding companies, and prospective emigrants. The chapter closes with a brief look at the lives of the Finnish emigrants who followed Erkko's call and migrated to the Cuba Real Estate Association's farming colony of "Chicago," near Itabo in the western Matanzas province.

Dreams of a Finnish Deposit in the Tropics

On July 3, 1903, Finnish journalist and political activist Eero Erkko stepped on board the SS *New York* in New York City harbor. The ship's port of destination was Havana, where the steamer was set to arrive after a four-day journey. On board, Erkko had time to collect his thoughts about his Caribbean trip's objectives and to put some ideas down in his diary. He queried to himself why emigrants from Finland were so poor at choosing good places of settlement. Even though the Finns seemingly had the same opportunities as other nationalities to select fertile and resource-rich settling grounds, they appeared to orient themselves toward cold and arid sections of the globe. Erkko's recent visit with Finnish immigrant farmers in New Hampshire had left him thoroughly unimpressed. Finns there had purchased degraded farming lands from Americans who were only too eager to rid themselves of the derelict property. On the North American continent, Finnish immigrants were seemingly out of good options to establish themselves. "Do Finns have to either remain mining and factory workers, toiling to enrich American tycoons," Erkko wondered, "or plough lands in the North that are hard to cultivate and have been abandoned by others?"⁷ Erkko suggested a change in the geography of the emigrants' settlement patterns. Instead of crowding the north of America, Finns should perhaps seek to settle in "richer, warmer regions," where nature would be less unforgiving. Finnish immigrants to America should "go to the countryside" and attach themselves to land that was of quality superior to the soil they left behind in Finland. The new land should endow them with a livelihood with moderate labor and ample free time for intellectual development. "It is thus from the more southern regions where Finns should look for farming lands for themselves,"

Erkko concluded. Two days after putting down these thoughts, Erkko had the chance to inspect one such potential destination: Cuba.⁸

Erkko's visit to Cuba had a specific motivation related to his political activism in Finland. Erkko had earned the ire of the Russian authorities in Finland as the outspoken editor of the *Päivälehti* (Daily Paper), the main organ of the liberal nationalist Young Finns. He had also edited an underground newspaper, which advocated resistance against Russification, and organized campaigns to undermine Russian military conscription in Finland.⁹ In May 1903, the Russian authorities deported Erkko from Finland as part of a larger wave of expulsions (Figure 3.1). The leadership of the Finnish resistance activists suggested that Erkko travel to America to organize Finnish immigrants there for the nationalist struggle in Finland. Erkko left for the United States in June 1903, while his wife and three sons followed in August. In New York, Erkko established a Finnish-language publishing house and a nationalist newspaper (*Amerikan Kaiku*, or *The American Echo*), organized a nationalist organization for Finns in North America (the Finnish National League), and tried to incorporate a Finnish immigrant bank, which could have offered financial services for the activist underground in Finland.¹⁰ Erkko's decision to visit Cuba in early July 1903, mere weeks after his arrival to New York, was closely tied with this political aspect of his mission in America. Since 1899, Finnish nationalist activists had searched for a place of settlement for Finnish emigrants who fled Russification in Finland. When plans for a settler colony in Canada fell through, activists began to eye alternative regions in the Americas.¹¹ "Now you go look for a place, which resembles Finland, where we can all congregate when it will be our turn," an activist friend who stayed in Finland wrote to Erkko after the latter's expulsion.¹²

In July 1903, Erkko traveled to Havana to investigate whether Cuba would suit the needs of Finnish political refugees and other emigrants in need of settlement. During the week he spent in Havana, Erkko was chaperoned by a local real estate agent, Cesar Marrero González. Marrero took his Finnish companion first on a sightseeing tour of Havana, where Erkko could witness some of the architectural symbols of Cuba's newly won independence: the presidential palace, the two houses of Congress, and a customs office at the city harbor. Marrero took Erkko also to his villa in upscale Vedado, a leafy garden neighborhood inhabited by Havana's business and political elite. They also paid a visit to the



Figure 3.1: Eero Erkko with his wife Maissi Erkko boarding a train after Eero had received his deportation order. The Russian authorities deported Eero Erkko from Finland in May 1903. The Erkko family spent their years of exile (1903–1905) in Brooklyn, New York. Source: Finnish Heritage Agency/Finna.fi, Image HK19730524:1. Released under CC BY 4.0.

villa of Florentin Mantilla, a Spanish immigrant who owned a major cigar factory, where Black maids served the guests with sugary pastries and German beer.¹³ After touring Havana with Marrero, Erkko met Mr. Willick, the German-born chief engineer of the Cuban-American Land and Fruit Company. Erkko, Willick, and Marrero spent three days inspecting Cuban agriculture around Havana. They investigated American and German immigrant farms, a large sugar plantation, and a tobacco-growing area in the southern outskirts of the city. They also visited the Cuban government's agricultural experiment station in Santiago de las Vegas, where the station's director presented "excellent plantations" of pineapples, bananas, oranges, and other crops.¹⁴

Erkko's weeklong stay in Havana left him thoroughly impressed with Cuba's potential as a place of Finnish agricultural settlement. In a letter to a friend, composed on his fourth day in Havana, Erkko recorded his first impressions of the island and the opportunities it offered. Contrary to common beliefs, the Cuban climate was not overtly hot and humid, not even during the warmest summer months. Daytime temperatures did not rise above those in the northern United States (around 25–33 Celsius), while Havana nights could be even cooler than nights in New York.¹⁵ Erkko was also impressed with Cuba's soil. The island soil was so fertile that almost any plant could be cultivated in it: not only sugarcane, tobacco, and coffee but also pineapples, oranges, bananas, cotton, and other potentially profitable export crops.¹⁶ Indeed, Erkko was particularly enthusiastic about fruit growing. Because Cuba had good transportation connections to ports on the US east coast and a longer growing season than the continental United States, the island had vast potential as an exporter of fruits and vegetables to the United States, especially during the winter months.¹⁷ Moreover, Erkko surmised that fruit and vegetable growing were sufficiently easy endeavors to suit the kinds of Finnish settlers he had in mind. According to Erkko, Cuba would best accommodate the exiled middle- to upper-class officials and professionals, who had some capital but little or no experience in agriculture. The Finnish colony in Cuba could also accommodate perhaps a thousand young men fleeing Russian conscription, who had no capital but who could sell their labor to an American landholding company. After accruing some savings from their wages, they, too, could purchase a few acres of land and become independent farmers.¹⁸

Popular accounts of Eero Erkko's plan of a Finnish colony in Cuba have sometimes claimed that Erkko had magnanimous plans of a military colony for up to 100,000 Finnish settlers, complete with its own railways and a steamship connection with Finland.¹⁹ In fact, Erkko's plans were more moderate. In a letter to his older brother, Erkko denied that he was in the process of establishing a New Finland in the tropics. Distraught by his more conservative elder brother's insinuation that he was attracting Finns away from their homeland, Erkko exclaimed: "I have no intention of enticing Finns to Cuba!" Instead, Erkko saw Cuba as one potential place of settlement for either those Finns who were forced to emigrate as political refugees or those who had already left Finland for America. For these overseas Finns, Cuba offered the best available place to practice agriculture as independent

farmers. Moreover, in Cuba, Finns had a better chance than anywhere else in the Americas to preserve their language and culture at least for three generations, which was as long as one could expect Finnish traditions to survive in foreign lands. "In this day and age," Erkkö noted, "one does not establish new states amidst foreign peoples like in the age of Old Testament." He did not believe "in any 'Finnish national body' outside Finland." While the replanting of Finns was thus an unrealistic goal, Erkkö still believed it was possible to establish smaller Finnish societies to preserve the Finnish culture outside Finland. These kinds of small societies were especially important at a time when the culture and languages of Finland were under threat from Russification. Overseas colonies of Finns could serve as "deposits of Finnish nationality," where the culture could be saved and later "withdrawn" when times in Finland were more promising. The national culture preserved in these overseas colonies could rejuvenate and reinvigorate Finland after Russification, helping to eradicate the parts of Finnish culture that had disappeared or become "rotten." Thus, Erkkö did not see his Cuban colony as a New Finland but as a kind of offshore deposit of Finnishness in the Caribbean.²⁰

Erkkö's belief that Cuba offered the best available place to deposit Finnishness built on his conceptions of civilizational and racial hierarchies. Erkkö shared the common turn-of-the-century cultural belief system that categorized world peoples into races on different levels of civilizational development. Less powerful and less developed peoples faced always the threat of disappearance when they confronted a more powerful or more developed nationality. The highly developed Anglo-American culture threatened to assimilate Finnish immigrants in only two generations. When Erkkö had visited Finnish immigrant communities in Massachusetts after his arrival in the US in June 1903, he had been disappointed in the "low cultural level" of his overseas compatriots. The Massachusetts Finns seemed content in their dependency on low-paid wage work and appeared to waste their earnings on alcohol and other vices. Even more troubling, the antisocial behavior of the Finnish immigrant workers threatened the reputation of the whole nationality. "After the Chinese and the Italians, Finns have the worst reputation here and receive the hardest work with lowest pay," Erkkö lamented.²¹ Erkkö's fear over "his" nationality's low position in global racial and civilizational hierarchies was widely shared also among other contemporary East European nationalists.²²

While Finns faced assimilationist pressure from a more developed culture in the United States, Erkkö did not fear similar threat from the part of Cubans. Erkkö's observations of Cubans were heavily influenced by religious and racial stereotypes about Catholics, "Latin peoples," and Africans. While his older brother expressed alarm that the Cuban environment would render Finnish workers lethargic, reducing them in a few generations "to the level of the local people or even lower," Eero was more optimistic about the more advanced Finns' capability to ward off assimilation in Cuba. Cubans, "like all Latin peoples," were "incapable of national development" and would thus present no danger for the preservation of Finnishness, at least for three generations.²³ Spanish colonial exploitation explained part of Cuban lack of development, but the "origin of the people" also contributed to their "laziness."²⁴ Cubans' lack of initiative required that more industrious people come and make use of the island's riches. Erkkö wrote his brother that Cuba had a chance of becoming a "real paradise," but only if "capable people from the northern lands move there."²⁵ It should be noted, however, that Erkkö's conception of Cuban inferiority was not a static collection of received stereotypes impervious to change. In one letter to his wife from Havana, Erkkö marveled the seeming equality of races in Cuba: "It is delightful to see the freedom and equality, which is evident here between the whites and the negroes. [E]specially the latter have gone up in my valuation, because you can see [negroes who are] as fine and civilized as the whites."²⁶ Erkkö's liberal sympathies for the Cuban independence struggle could also temper his view of Cubans' race-based inferiority. In one article, Erkkö gave credit to Havana's "republican government" for its "vigorous" and "serious" efforts to develop the island's economy and education.²⁷

But while Erkkö expressed some admiration of Cuban republicanism and egalitarianism, he attributed most of the credit on the island's development to Americans. In an article for *Young Finland*, Erkkö touted the industrious Americans for cleaning the island of filth and many diseases, as well as of developing its infrastructure, industries, and government institutions. Erkkö conceded that American business interests had played a part in the US intervention in the Spanish-Cuban war in 1898, but these interests had not dictated American policy toward Cuba. It was to "the credit of the United States" that Americans did not "usurp the island as their colony" even though they had significant economic interests there. Instead, after making

major improvements to the island's derelict infrastructure and corrupt institutions, Americans left Cuba to be governed by the Cubans themselves.²⁸ Erkko's sympathetic account of American benevolent colonialism can be read as an indirect criticism of Russia, but he was undoubtedly sincere in his belief in the benevolence of American power in Cuba. Erkko's correspondence and published articles clearly demonstrate that his view of Cuba's society and economy was based largely on contemporary American journalism and prospectuses of American companies doing business in Cuba. In a letter to his wife onboard his Havana-bound steamer, Erkko told that he had spent most of his time on the ship smoking and reading English-language literature on Cuba and the West Indies.²⁹ Erkko believed that his idea of a "deposit of Finnish nationality" could be best realized under the protection of American power in Cuba. However, when Erkko entered actual negotiations with Americans on Cuba, he found his vision very difficult to execute in practice.

Negotiating Colonization

Turning ideas about a Finnish settler colony in Cuba into reality required political determination and economic capital. Unfortunately for Erkko, these were in short supply among Finnish nationalist activists in 1903. Deportations had caused financial ruin and political demoralization among the activists. Moreover, there was no consensus as to how the activists should view the so-called emigration question. The more conservative activists, led by Leo Mechelin, opposed any efforts to "encourage" emigration, and stood thus resolutely against any funding of colonization plans outside Finland. In October 1903, Arvid Neovius, one of the leading resistance activists, informed Erkko that opposition to colony ideas was too strong among older activists to warrant any major maneuvering on the matter.³⁰ Moreover, even the younger, more radical activists who supported the idea of a Finnish emigrant colony were divided over its preferred location. Konni Zilliacus, the most vocal advocate of the colony idea, was skeptical of Erkko's Cuban plan. Having himself lived in Costa Rica in 1889–1890, Zilliacus allowed that the Caribbean climate was in many ways favorable for a Finnish settlement, but he doubted if there existed capital for such a venture. Cuba might well accommodate a few of the wealthier Finnish exiles, but it was more difficult to settle thousands of conscription-

aged men with lesser means there. Zilliacus had since 1899 worked for a Finnish colony in Canada, and he told Erkkö that he still preferred the Dominion to other potential colony sites.³¹ The energetic and well-connected Zilliacus's lack of enthusiasm over Cuba was a major setback for Erkkö's plan.

Erkkö found a more willing associate in New York. Axel Hornborg was a Finnish businessman who had emigrated to the United States in 1882 and who headed the New York agency of the Finland Steamship Company, the dominant company in the Finnish emigration business. Hornborg saw his mission in assisting immigrants to go beyond his role as a shipping company agent. In a 1901 letter to the US Industrial Office, Hornborg noted that he had long been "interested in locating Scandinavians advantageously." For Hornborg, this meant guiding Finns and Scandinavians away from cities to productive agricultural areas in "the Central and Southern States, where the cost of a house is very little and the winters do not demand very much clothing." He owned an 8,000-acre tract of land in Tennessee, where he guided Finnish and Scandinavian immigrants to cultivate grapes and tobacco.³² He also owned another tract of land in Alaska, where he planned to establish a Finnish agricultural colony and a guano plant. The colony site on the Kenai Peninsula had yet to acquire its first settlers, but it already boasted a name befitting of Axel Hornborg's grandiose visions: "Port Axel."³³ Hornborg's imagination and experience were instrumental as Erkkö began to sketch his plan for a Finnish "deposit" on the Caribbean. August Edwards, the editor of the *Amerikan Sanomat* (American Dispatches) in Ashtabula, Ohio, apparently also collaborated with Erkkö and Hornborg in attracting Finnish immigrants to Cuba.³⁴

When Hornborg met Erkkö in New York in June 1903, he put Erkkö in touch with a landholding company operating in Cuba. The Cuban-American Land and Fruit Company, incorporated in New Jersey in early 1903 with a capital stock of \$5 million, was in the process of purchasing a large tract of land in the eastern Oriente province. It planned to subdivide the land into smaller plots, plant the land with fruits and vegetables, and sell the plots to farmers from North America. The company president, Alexander J. Milliken, explained to Erkkö that the company preferred American investors and farmers, but that it was also willing to do business with Finns. Erkkö also talked about Cuba with a fellow newspaperman, the American journalist Edwin Warren Guyol, who had edited the Havana newspaper *La Lucha*'s English sec-

tion before the Spanish-American War. Guyol had been "one of the influences behind the United States' entry into the war," Erkkö wrote to a comrade in Stockholm. The company offered to send Erkkö to Havana with Guyol to investigate the island's suitability for Finnish settlers; when Guyol had to cancel his trip, Erkkö made the trip to Havana alone.³⁵ After Erkkö's return from Cuba, he and Hornborg entered a contract with the Cuban-American Land and Fruit Company. The company agreed to sell them 5,000 acres of ready-planted fruit and vegetable farming land for \$120 per acre, with an option for further acquisitions later. For a commission of \$10 per acre, the Finns promised to "use their best effort to secure sales of [the company's] land."³⁶ Unfortunately for Erkkö and Hornborg, however, the Cuban-American Land and Fruit Company turned out to be one of the less successful American business ventures in the island. For unclear reasons, the company dissolved in 1904, a mere year after its incorporation.³⁷

Erkkö and Hornborg did not abandon their Cuban plan, however, but sought out a new business partner: the real estate agent Cesar Marrero González, whom Erkkö had met in Havana. Marrero had been active in securing Erkkö's partnership already in Havana. When Marrero had come to bid his farewell to his Finnish guest in the Havana harbor, he had indiscreetly slipped Erkkö an envelope and asked that he keep it a secret from the German engineer, Mr. Willick, who worked for the Cuban-American Land and Fruit Company. The envelope included a note with contact information to Marrero's private office, and offers of land in different parts of Cuba, sold by companies other than the one Willick represented.³⁸ The note suggested that Marrero could offer Erkkö better land on better terms than the company Willick represented. When Erkkö's business with the Cuban-American Land and Fruit Company folded, he took up Marrero's offer.

In April 1904, two friends of Erkkö, Jussi Canth and Karl Brofeldt, both recently deported from Finland, traveled to Cuba to explore the country's potential for agriculture.³⁹ When Erkkö wrote the Cuban agent Marrero about his two friends' visit, Marrero promised he would help them the best he could. "Well, you know that in Cuba, they will find plenty suitable tracts for any farming," Marrero wrote in his reply.⁴⁰ When Canth and Brofeldt arrived in Havana on April 20, they discussed land business with Marrero, before heading off on an investigative tour of the island. After ten days' travel, they returned to Havana, where they again met with Marrero. "Among other places,

they went to 'Itabo,'" Marrero reported to Erkko, where Canth and Brofeldt had taken a liking to the estates of Santa Clara and La Puente. "I'm disposed to do all my best in order that they might get the land on the most favorable terms!"⁴¹

Marrero wrote and dispatched to Erkko a description of the Itabo estates. The description was full of praise for these "very superior lands and forests unequaled for all kinds of cultivation," peppering his sales pitch with frequent superlatives and multiple exclamation points, mixing Spanish punctuation with American English colloquialisms: "¡This is the great business in Cuba to-day!"⁴² Marrero promised that Erkko would receive a substantial share of the profit made from land sales, and urged Erkko to do his utmost in "sending many people – purchasers and investors" to Cuba. Yet, to avoid the stereotype of a duplicitous land agent, Marrero was careful not to appear too profit-oriented. He referred frequently to his friendship with Erkko, and assured Erkko of their friendship's intimacy: "Now, please, remember that you have a serious, good and sincere friend, willing to serve you, all the time."⁴³ Although Canth and Brofeldt eventually abandoned their idea of moving to Cuba, Erkko's involvement with Cuba continued through Marrero, who urged Erkko to send more people to Cuba.⁴⁴

The Itabo estates were the property of the Cuban Real Estate Association, a landholding company incorporated in 1902 in South Dakota. The company's business model was similar to many other US-based land companies in Cuba: to subdivide land into lots, sell them to immigrants from North America, and have the settlers grow fruits and vegetables for export to the US.⁴⁵ The Cuban Real Estate Association began to advertise its land in local newspapers in New England and the South in June 1903. It also published pamphlets advertising its property (Figure 3.2).⁴⁶ Erkko's newly founded Brooklyn newspaper *Amerikan Kaiku*, along with August Edwards' *Amerikan Sanomat* in Ashtabula, Ohio, became the outlet for the company's marketing toward Finnish Americans. In March 1904, Erkko wrote an article for the newspaper on "Cuban fruit lands", in which he attempted to reply to the many inquiries he had received about Cuba. Erkko instructed prospective buyers to contact Axel Hornborg's office in New York, which was set to begin the selling of lands in Cuba.⁴⁷ During the spring, Hornborg's advertisements about Cuban "fruit lands" began to appear in the *Amerikan Kaiku*.⁴⁸ Erkko penned articles on Cuba also for *Nuori Suomi* (Young Finland), a liberal literary publication, which Erkko had

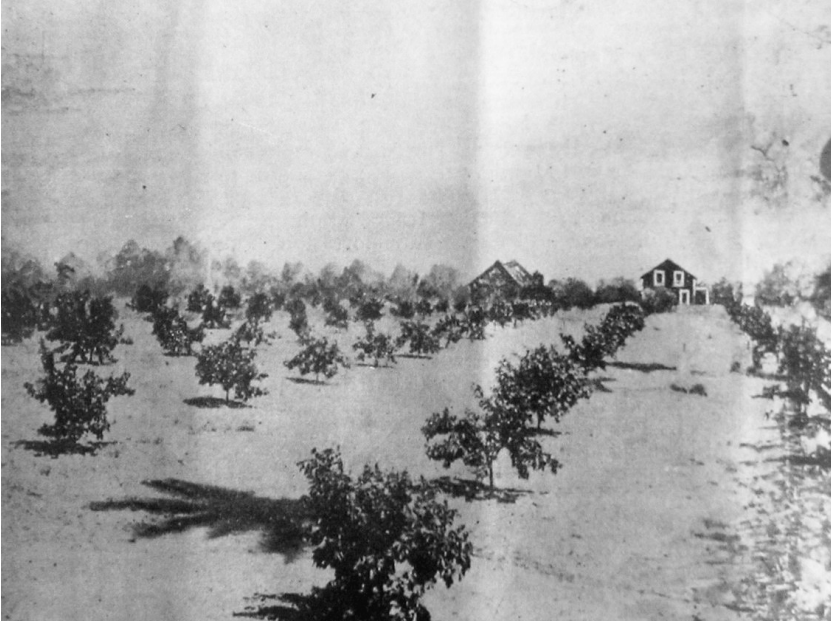


Figure 3.2: A two-year-old orange grove in the Chicago colony in Itabo, as depicted in a land company prospectus. Images like this were common in the promotional materials of the American land companies as they tried to attract settlers to Cuba. Images of developing plantations created an impression of the colonies' growing potential. Source: *The Chicago Colony, Itabo, Province of Matanzas, Island of Cuba: Seventy-Two Hours from New York* (Cuba Real Estate Association, 1908), 8.

helped to found in 1891.⁴⁹ In April 1904, a Swedish-language Helsinki newspaper also published an article on Cuba by Erkko.⁵⁰

The increasing political divisions among Finnish immigrants in the United States probably lessened the appeal of Erkko's promotion of Cuba as a place of settlement. Although Erkko came to the United States with the purpose of unifying the quarrelsome immigrant community, his attempts at establishing a common nationalist front among American Finns largely failed.⁵¹ Working-class Finns remained especially aloof from Erkko, seeing Erkko as a representative of Finland's bourgeoisie.⁵² This distrust deflated the appeal of Erkko's promotion of Cuba. One socialist later reminisced about how he had been intrigued by Finnish-American newspapers' articles on Cuba, but had become

angered when he learned that Erkko was behind the settlement project.⁵³

Developments in Finland and Russia in 1904–1905 worked to direct Erkko's gaze away from the Western Hemisphere. Following Russian military misfortunes in the Russo-Japanese War, the tsarist regime sought to placate opposition in Finland by relaxing some of the police state measures adopted earlier, allowing the return of deported activists in early 1905.⁵⁴ Erkko followed these developments intently in his Brooklyn exile. Financial difficulties, tiredness with internecine squabbles among Finnish immigrants, and exhaustion with life as an alien in the US had built in him a desire to return to Finland. In early 1905, Erkko sold his printing business in Brooklyn and left the US with his family.⁵⁵

Erkko did not completely lose interest in Cuba even after his return to Finland. In October 1905, Axel Hornborg sent Erkko a certificate of shares in a new land company that sought business opportunities in eastern Cuba. The East Cuba Colonization Company, incorporated in Maine in August 1905 with a capital stock of \$100,000, was a subsidiary of the Cuba Eastern Railroad Company and the powerful banking conglomerate Knickerbocker.⁵⁶ Hornborg encouraged Erkko to promote the company in Finland, but Erkko's involvement with the company remained apparently non-existent.⁵⁷ Erkko received Hornborg's letter at a time when Finland was experiencing the upheavals of the Russian Revolution and the Great Strike of late 1905. Himself heavily involved in the events, Erkko presumably did not find time to act on Hornborg's suggestion; Erkko's correspondence gives no trace of his involvement with the East Cuban Colonization Company beyond his holding of shares. Hornborg died unexpectedly in December 1905, but some of his associates continued their involvement in the Cuban endeavor into 1906. Their plans eventually crumbled with the broader collapse of the Knickerbocker businesses in Cuba.⁵⁸ Erkko's shares in the company—nominally worth \$3,000—proved worthless.

Finn Settlers of Chicago, Cuba

Eero Erkko never visited the "colony" in Itabo he had helped to establish; his July 1903 trip to Cuba did not take him east of Havana. In his promotion of the "Chicago" colony, then, Erkko relied on information provided to him by Cesar Marrero Gonzalez and the Cuba Real Estate

Association. Despite Erkko never venturing to Itabo, some of his readers did. Erkko apparently received several inquiries about emigration to Cuba from Finland and from Finnish immigrants in North America.⁵⁹ During the spring of 1904, Erkko exchanged letters with Adam Aleksander Karr (Karjalainen) (1854–1919), an owner of a hotel in Rocklin, California. Erkko had met Karr in Rocklin in August 1903, when Erkko had been on his lecture tour on the west coast. Karr had apparently agreed to become an agent for Erkko's new newspaper.⁶⁰ Karr had been born into a landowning peasant family in Juuka, a rural municipality in Northern Karelia, and worked as a seaman before his emigration to the US in 1902. He had first visited Cuba in 1876 on a ship he worked on, and been already then enthralled with the island. When Karr had read Erkko's article on Cuba in the *Amerikan Kaiku*, the text "rekindled" in him an "old dream" of settling as a farmer in Cuba. Fellow Finns in Rocklin warned him about Cuba's diseases and hot climate, but Erkko encouraged Karr to make the journey. "I am almost certain that you will never regret your having migrated to Cuba," Karr later recalled Erkko writing him.⁶¹

In May, Karr left California for Cuba with Juho Miettinen, a fellow Finnish immigrant from Rocklin. Karr and Miettinen had emigrated together from Juuka to Rocklin in 1902. In Havana, Karr met with Cesar Marrero, who showed Karr "several descriptions of different lands." Marrero assured Erkko that he would introduce Karr with "good & cheap land for his purpose."⁶² After the meeting with Marrero in Havana, Karr and Miettinen headed to the same tract of land in Itabo, which Canth and Brofeldt had visited earlier. Unlike Canth and Brofeldt, however, Karr and Miettinen decided to stay in Itabo. They both bought 20-acre lots from the Cuba Real Estate Association, and Karr at least became an agent for the company.⁶³ In 1904, Karr wrote four letters for Erkko's *Amerikan Kaiku*, where he urged Finns who wanted land in Cuba to contact him.⁶⁴ As early as his second letter, Karr stated that he had received so many letters of inquiry that he found it impossible to reply to them all individually.⁶⁵ Not all who wrote inquiries ended up moving to Itabo. One Finnish immigrant later recounted how his "Cuban fever" had receded after receiving an unimpressive reply to his inquiry for more details about Itabo.⁶⁶ Some Finns who did go to visit Itabo did not stay long. In September 1904, Erkko recounted in his newspaper a cautionary anecdote about "citizen Otto Rastas" from Michigan, who had gone to Itabo without sufficient financial

means and had returned disillusioned. Erkkö warned against going to Cuba without the capital to buy a farm and to cover the start-up costs.⁶⁷ Few prospective Finnish immigrants to Cuba, most of whom were working-class men, had the necessary capital. A Wisconsin Finn who inquired Erkkö whether \$300 sufficed to establish oneself as a farmer in Cuba was probably not an outlier.⁶⁸

By 1907, around 12 Finnish immigrant families had established themselves in Itabo, constituting perhaps a half of the Chicago colony's population.⁶⁹ Even these Finnish immigrants who stayed in Itabo experienced severe difficulties in establishing a farm. Contrary to Erkkö's assumptions about the easiness of fruit growing, the farming of citrus fruit required much skill and capital. The trees took at least five years to produce fruit after plantation, during which time the farmer had to rely on savings or alternative sources of income. Both Erkkö and Karr did warn against going to Itabo without sufficient funds, but they still underestimated the capital needed to cover the start-up and living expenses.⁷⁰ This was a common shortcoming of American land agents in Cuba. One American commentator noted that, since honesty went against the agents' interests, they shut their "eyes to the disadvantages which pertain to farming in Cuba" and expended their "eloquence solely on the roseate aspects of the situation." This resulted in many American immigrants coming to Cuba with "insufficient money to make a fair start."⁷¹ The Finnish immigrants' lack of English and Spanish skills was apparently also a factor in their misfortunes.⁷²

Still, the Finnish immigrants who stayed in Itabo found strategies to survive. Some Itabo Finns began to farm vegetables like cabbages, tomatoes, and potatoes, which took less time to grow than fruit trees.⁷³ Since sugar had long formed the backbone of local economy in Matanzas—in the early 19th century, the province had been "the ground zero of the Cuban sugar boom"⁷⁴—it made sense for Itabo Finns to orient their agriculture to that direction. An American journalist who visited Itabo in 1907 noted how "Finn settlers" experimented with sugarcane by planting small quantities of cane and selling it to a sugar mill in Perico, some 40 kilometers south of Itabo.⁷⁵ However, the soil in the Chicago colony was not apparently well suited for extensive sugarcane planting.⁷⁶ Itabo Finns immersed themselves in local economy also in other ways: they raised chicken, fished, hunted, and herded cattle. Two Finnish families in Itabo, the Karrs and the Huovinens, established general stores to sell groceries and tools to Cubans and Americans.⁷⁷

Since wages in Cuba were low, some Itabo men traveled to the United States or Latin America for seasonal wage work. Eemeli Huovinen, who had come to Itabo from Leadville, Colorado, traveled for work to the US, while Peter Niskanen, who had moved to Itabo in 1905, earned wages in the construction of the Panama Canal and the Pan-American Highway in Brazil.⁷⁸

Despite these many difficulties, many Finnish settlers in Itabo found settler life in Cuba at least tolerable. An American journalist who visited Itabo in the summer of 1906, amid a heavy rain season, could "not but be amazed at the splendid courage and cheerfulness of the people living in Itabo," who, despite the many disadvantages, "never lost their spirit."⁷⁹ This kind of optimism for future was common in many American colonies in rural Cuba in the early 1900s. The colonies were often marketed as places where settlers could still live out the Jeffersonian ideal of yeomen farmers on the frontier. Land companies touted community cooperation, individual hard work, and the appreciation of agriculture as the colonies' principal ideals. Progressive era populism added to the appeal of cooperative farm life as a rebuke to corporate-controlled industrial capitalism.⁸⁰ The American settlers' firm belief that Cuba would be annexed with the United States—a belief strengthened during the second US occupation of Cuba in 1906–1909—was for many an added source of optimism.⁸¹ While Finnish researchers have tended to view Itabo as an experiment grounded in a specifically Finnish utopianist tradition,⁸² the Chicago colony's ideological foundations were much more widely shared in the American communities of early 20th-century Cuba.

Indeed, considering that Erkkö envisioned Cuba as a "deposit" for Finnish culture, it is ironic that the immigrant experience in Itabo probably strengthened the Finnish-American settlers' identification as *Americans*. It was common that Cubans referred to all settlers who had come from North America as Americans, despite their ethnic or national background.⁸³ This appears to have also been the case in Itabo. Väinö Hoover, a Finnish-American engineer entrepreneur who spent his childhood in Itabo, remembered how a group of Cuban men referred to his mother as *americano muy malo*, when she had defended herself from harassment.⁸⁴ Life in the company-controlled colony also strengthened identification as Americans. The children of Finnish settlers received education in the land company's English-language private school, which had an American teacher. An American journalist

who visited the school in 1907 was particularly impressed with two “flaxen-haired little Finn girls [who] showed wonderful progress in reading.”⁸⁵ The English-language education gave the Finnish children in Itabo a good grounding in the American school system. Peter Niskanen, the Itabo Finn who stayed in Cuba the longest, sent two of his children to continue their education in the United States.⁸⁶

Yet, despite their strong attachment to the American colony of Chicago, the Itabo Finns did not live apart from the surrounding Cuban society. Since white American and European immigrants made up less than 5% of the population of Martí, the municipality that included Itabo, it was difficult to live a secluded settler existence.⁸⁷ The Finnish immigrant who succeeded best in Itabo, Peter Niskanen, exemplified well this dependency on local society. After earning enough savings by working on the construction of Panama Canal and the Pan-American Highway, Niskanen returned to Itabo in early 1914 with his wife, Hilda Niskanen, and their daughter and son. The family began to grow oranges, grapefruit, and sugarcane. The timing of their return was opportune, as the First World War greatly increased the demand of Cuban sugar on world markets. As a major sugarcane planter, Niskanen entered the social class of *colonos*, the major suppliers of sugarcane for sugar mills, who formed the middle class of the Cuban sugar-powered economy. The Neska family found also business opportunities in Cuba’s burgeoning tourist industry. They raised chicken, and delivered the fowl and eggs to hotels in Cárdenas. To better fit the esteemed status of *colono*, Niskanen Hispanicized his name to Pedro Neska, and began to refer to his estate as a “*colonia*.” The family also hired domestic servants: they employed a Chinese cook and an Afro-Cuban maid. The family’s economic fortunes apparently suffered from the plummeting of Cuban sugar prices in the early 1920s, but the Neskas did not leave the island. The Neska sons left Cuba for Florida only after the revolution in 1959; the daughter Alma Neska-Garcia followed in 1975.⁸⁸

Conclusion

In 2016, migration sociologist Ismo Söderling visited Itabo to look for clues on the locality’s Finnish past. He was surprised by how little even presumably well-informed locals knew of the region’s Finnish settler history. The staff at a local history museum appeared perplexed about

Itabo Finns, and visits to school and municipal archives paid few dividends. Oral history failed to fill the apparent gap in the archival record. When Söderling interviewed one of Itabo's oldest residents, Señor Chichi, the octogenarian could offer little help: "Oh, there were people from different countries here, but they were all Cubans. There was no distinct talk about the Finns."⁸⁹

Söderling's difficulties in finding information about Itabo's Finnish past point to a key conclusion of this chapter: there was little particularly "Finnish" about the Chicago colony in Itabo. Previous studies of Finns in Cuba have preoccupied themselves with Erkko's involvement in the settlement project, but Erkko's ideas on Cuba must be put into a wider context of empire-building in the Caribbean. The idea of encouraging Finnish settlement in Cuba becomes less curious when it is placed alongside the many similar contemporaneous plans working for Cuba's Americanization or whitening. Since this chapter has mostly relied on source material formed by Erkko, it has not been possible to fully examine the thinking and activities of the many other people who were involved in the plan of a Finnish settlement in Cuba. Future studies should shed more light on the role and motivations of these other actors. Yet, even Erkko's correspondence illustrates well the diversity of the cast of characters who had an interest in the plan. These actors included Finns and Americans, but also Cubans (Cesar Marrero) and Canadians (Robert Leeder). In other words, the planning of Finnish settlements in Cuba was not all that Finnish an endeavor, but neither was it a case of overbearing American hegemony. Rather, the case points at the heterogeneous dynamics of agency in the making of "American" power in the Caribbean.

Notes

- 1 J. F. Kerttula to E. Erkko, April 16, 1904, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection. On Eero Erkko's press and political career, see Zetterberg, *Eero Erkko*.
- 2 Jarva, "Cuba – 'Paradise' for Finns." See also Peltoniemi, *Kohti parempaa maailmaa*, 73–79; Lähteenmäki, *Colonia Finlandesa*, 51–58; Koivukangas, *Kaukomaiden kaipuu*, 241–45; Olin, Ärans medalj.
- 3 Pérez, *Cuba under the Platt Amendment*; Ayala, *American Sugar Kingdom*.
- 4 Jenks, *Our Cuban Colony*, 141–74; Deere, "Here Come the Yankees!"; Neagle, *America's Forgotten Colony*.
- 5 On transimperial and global histories of the US, see Hopkins, *American Empire*; Hoganson and Sexton, *Crossing Empires*.

- 6 On Cuban “middlemen’s” agency in building US power in Cuba, see McGillivray, *Blazing Cane*, 63–85.
- 7 For similar comments by Frank Aaltonen, see Chapters 2 and 6 in this volume.
- 8 Diary of Eero Erkko, entry on July 5, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 9 Zetterberg, *Eero Erkko*, 290, 313.
- 10 On the Erkko family’s years in the United States (1903–1905), see Zetterberg, *Eero Erkko*, 327–64; Hänninen, *Tulisydän*, 117–49.
- 11 Lähteenmäki, *Colonia Finlandesa*, 25–58.
- 12 Tekla Hultin to E. Erkko, May 18, 1903, box d:4, Eero Erkko’s private collection.
- 13 Ferrer, *Cuba*, 198.
- 14 Diary of Eero Erkko, July 12–13, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 15 E. Erkko to Juhani Aho, July 10, 1903, mf 196712, Juhani Aho’s collection.
- 16 E. Erkko to J. Aho, July 10, 1903, mf 196712, Juhani Aho’s collection.
- 17 Erkko, “Muistelmia Kuban matkalta,” 120–21.
- 18 E. Erkko to M. Erkko, July 6, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection; E. Erkko to J. H. Erkko, July 29, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen Collection.
- 19 Peltoniemi, *Kohti parempaa maailmaa*, 73.
- 20 E. Erkko to J. H. Erkko, September 24, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 21 Diary of E. Erkko, entry on July 5, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 22 Zahra, *The Great Departure*, 70–79.
- 23 J. H. Erkko to E. Erkko, August 23, 1903 and 29 August 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 24 Erkko, “Muistelmia Kuban matkalta,” 128.
- 25 E. Erkko to J. H. Erkko, July 29, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 26 E. Erkko to M. Erkko, July 8, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 27 Erkko, “Muistelmia Kuban matkalta,” 129.
- 28 Erkko, “Muistelmia Kuban matkalta,” 114.
- 29 E. Erkko to M. Erkko, July 6, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 30 Arvid Neovius to E. Erkko, October 22, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 31 Konni Zilliacus to E. Erkko, September 13, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 32 *Reports of the Industrial Commission on Immigration*, 510.
- 33 Olin, *Alaska*, 220–34.
- 34 Aug. Edwards, “Haluatteko mennä Cubaan?” *AK*, August 4, 1904; Storm, “Ponnistus siirtola.”
- 35 E. Erkko to L. Mechelin, August 15, 1903, box 10, Leo Mechelin’s collection; diary of E. Erkko, entry on July 3, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 36 Agreement between the Cuban-American Land & Fruit Co. and Axel G. Hornborg, July 29, 1903, folder fe:1, box f1, Eero Erkko’s private collection.
- 37 Smythe, *Obsolete American Securities and Corporations*, 281.
- 38 Diary of E. Erkko, entry on July 14, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection; Cesar Marrero’s undated note in box da:4, Eero Erkko’s private collection.
- 39 [Eero Erkko], untitled, *AK* April 14, 1904.
- 40 Cesar Marrero González to E. Erkko, April 19, 1904, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 41 C. Marrero to E. Erkko, April 30, 1904, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 42 C. Marrero to E. Erkko, undated, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 43 C. Marrero to E. Erkko, May 16, 1904, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.

- 44 C. Marrero to E. Erkko, June 16, 1904, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 45 *Sixth Biennial Report*, 67; "The 'Chicago' Colony at Itabo."
- 46 See, e.g., *The Meriden Weekly Republican*, June 18, 1903; *Groton Times*, June 19, 1903; *The Ocala Evening Star*, June 23, 1903; *Chattanooga Press*, September 11, 1903.
- 47 Eero Erkko. "Kuban hedelmämaista," *Amerikan Kaiku* (hereafter AK), March 17, 1904.
- 48 See, e.g., AK, March 24, 1904.
- 49 Erkko, "Kuban matkalla"; Erkko, "Muistelmia Kuban matkalta," 108–29.
- 50 Eero Erkko, "Cubas fruktfarmer," *Helsingfors-Posten*, April 9, 1904. The article had appeared originally in late 1903 in the almanac of Axel Hornborg's Finland Steamship Company's agency in New York.
- 51 Zetterberg, *Eero Erkko*, 340–58.
- 52 Eero Erkko, "Suomalaiset Amerikassa," *Uusimaa*, October 23, 1903; E. Erkko to J. H. Erkko, November 14, 1903, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 53 Storm, "Ponnistus siirtola."
- 54 Polvinen 1989.
- 55 Zetterberg, *Eero Erkko*, 365–438.
- 56 "New Corporations."
- 57 A. Hornborg to E. Erkko, October 17, 1904; certification of ownership of stocks in the East Cuba Colonization Company, September 6, 1905, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 58 Olin, *Ärans medalj*, 75–77.
- 59 In a March 1904 article (AK, March 17, 1904), Erkko claimed to have received these inquiries "almost daily," but his archived correspondence retains only few of these. See Hjalmar Öhman to E. Erkko, April 5, 1904, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection; Kaarlo Onas to E. Erkko, January 24, 1904, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection; J. F. Kerttula to E. Erkko, April 16, 1904, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 60 A. A. Karr to E. Erkko, February 24, 1910, box d:4, Eero Erkko's private collection; list of agents of *Amerikan Kaiku*, undated, box u:2, Eero Erkko's public service collection.
- 61 A. A. Kar, "Itabo, Cuba." AK, December 29, 1904.
- 62 C. Marrero to E. Erkko, May 16, 1904, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 63 A. A. Kar to E. Erkko, February 24, 1910, box da:4, Eero Erkko's private collection.
- 64 A. A. Kar, "Itabo, Cuba." AK, June 16, 1904; July 14, 1904; July 28, 1904; December 29, 1904. See also [A. A. Karr], "Suomalaiset Kuban saarella," *Helsingin Sanomat*, March 22, 1910.
- 65 A. A. Kar, "Itabo, Cuba." AK, July 14, 1904.
- 66 M. Storm, "Ponnistus siirtola. Omaja, Cuba." *TM*, December 19, 1907.
- 67 [Eero Erkko], unnamed, AK, September 1, 1904.
- 68 Kaarlo Onas to E. Erkko, January 24, 1904, box 33, Eino Parmanen collection.
- 69 V. Keskinen, "Voipiko suomalainen viihtyä Kuubassa." *Raivaaja*, March 12, 1907; [A. A. Karr], "Suomalaiset Kuban saarella," *HS*, March 22, 1910. In total, the Chicago colony had around 20 settler families in 1907. See "The 'Chicago' Colony at Itabo," 14.

- 70 [Eero Erkkö], *AK*, September 1, 1904; A. A. Kar, "Itabo, Cuba," *AK*, July 14, 1903. Karr suggested that newcomers should have at least \$500 but preferably \$1,000 to cover their expenses before their farms started to produce profit.
- 71 Forbes-Lindsay, *Cuba and Her People To-Day*, 242, 244.
- 72 A. A. Karr to E. Erkkö, February 24, 1910, box da:4, Eero Erkkö's private collection.
- 73 "Chicago' Colony at Itabo," 14; A. A. Kar to E. Erkkö, February 24, 1910, box da:4, Eero Erkkö's private collection.
- 74 Ferrer, *Cuba*, 94.
- 75 "Chicago' Colony at Itabo," 14.
- 76 A. A. Kar to E. Erkkö, February 24, 1910, box da:4, Eero Erkkö's private collection.
- 77 A. A. Kar to E. Erkkö, February 24, 1910, box da:4, Eero Erkkö's public service collection. In an apparent reference to Karr's store, an American visitor to Itabo noted that one settler family had opened a store "selling goods to Cubans in the neighborhood." See "Notes of a Visit to Itabo," 17.
- 78 Peltoniemi, *Kohti parempaa maailmaa*, 77–79.
- 79 "Notes of a Visit to Itabo," 16–17.
- 80 Neagle, *America's Forgotten Colony*, 148.
- 81 Deere, "Here Come the Yankees!"; Neagle, *America's Forgotten Colony*.
- 82 Peltoniemi, *Kohti parempaa maailmaa*, 73–79; Koivukangas, *Kaukomaiden kaipuu*, 241–43; Söderling, "Irtileikattuja sormia ja avaruusmatkailua."
- 83 Deere, "Here Come the Yankees!" 744.
- 84 Peltoniemi, *Kohti parempaa maailmaa*, 78.
- 85 "Chicago' Colony at Itabo," 14.
- 86 Peltoniemi, *Kohti parempaa maailmaa*, 79.
- 87 *Censo de la República de Cuba 1907*, 214–15.
- 88 Peltoniemi, *Kohti parempaa maailmaa*, 79. On Neska as a *colono*, see the letterhead in Peter Neska to the Embassy of Finland in Washington, DC, September 3, 1927, folder 5, box fbg:8, Papers of the Embassy of Finland in Washington.
- 89 Söderling, "Irtileikattuja sormia ja avaruusmatkailua," 48. Helped by a local journalist, Jesse Aquilar, Söderling did eventually find land records concerning the Neska Saastamoinen family.

Archive Material

Eero Erkkö's private collection, Päivälehti Archive, Helsinki.
 Eero Erkkö's public service collection, Päivälehti Archive, Helsinki.
 Eino Parmanen collection, the National Archive of Finland, Helsinki.
 Juhani Aho's collection, Archive of the Finnish Literature Society, Helsinki.
 Leo Mechelin's collection, the National Archive of Finland, Helsinki.
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