

# An archive of good roads and racial capitalism in North Carolina

Human Geography

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Nicholas Gerstner<sup>1</sup> , Adrienne R. Hall<sup>2</sup> and Scott Kirsch<sup>2</sup>

“Good Roads, leading to Winston-Salem, N.C.,” a postcard produced by the national retailer S.H. Kress & Co. to sell in its North Carolina five-and-dime stores, pulls us in different directions at once (Figure 1). The road, well-graded, neatly surfaced, and bright, is the dominant element of the frame, winding gently away from the viewer over the piedmont to the landscape’s vanishing point. In the foreground, an open-topped automobile, seemingly in motion, is about to zoom past, an ambiguous chauffeur at the wheel driving a finely dressed White lady, who appears elegant and composed in the back seat. The dark figures of what appear to be mules stand yoked to the right of the roadbed, while three tiny human figures can be discerned down the road beyond them, perhaps watching the second car go by. The lines of the road, suggesting mobility and flow, contrast with relative stasis of the forests and fields that the road bisects. In the face of this paradox, the image evokes a neat sense of order and harmony, a timelessness that, like more classical forms of landscape (Cosgrove, 1990), tends to erase the conditions of its production.

The postcard was likely produced in the 1910s or 1920s during the height of the “good roads movement” in the American South. Alongside maps of thickening road networks and upgraded “backways,” landscape imagery offered a visual grammar for a widely distributed political movement, one that brought together “the common interests of the farmer and the merchant.”<sup>1</sup> Expressed in the lobbying efforts of local, state, and national good road associations, often in cooperation with university engineering departments, the language of “good roads” was honed at good roads conferences, in illustrated magazines like *Southern Good Roads*, and in all manner of state legislation and local bond issues financing road construction and repair. In the South, as labor historian Alex Lichtenstein has shown, the movement—and subsequent expansion and modernization of the road network—became virtually synonymous with forced convict labor, as the chain gang, comprised primarily of African Americans, emerged as the region’s dominant penal institution. For some Good Roads enthusiasts, like the American commercial geographer Albert Perry Brigham (1904: 731), convict labor could be seen as a win-win, “especially in the Southern States,” in that “out-of-door exercise is good for the men, and the sight of

them is claimed to be a deterrent from crime.” While states had commonly generated revenue by leasing convicts to coal mines, brickyards, plantations, and turpentine farms through “a system of contracts made with irresponsible and often cruel private parties,” under the shift to roadwork, Brigham insisted, the “humane care of public authorities would be a kindness to the convicted criminal.”

While convict labor could thus be viewed through the lens of the Progressive state, led by the states of Georgia and North Carolina, which shifted toward mandatory roadwork for misdemeanor crimes (and for felony sentences up to 10 years) in the 1900s and 1910s, the emerging regime of unfree labor on the roads is better understood as part of a system of spectacular racial domination. In Georgia, where misdemeanors of gambling, disorderly conduct, loitering, and vagrancy could result in sentences of 30 days to 1 year in chains for Black convicts (though not for White convicts whose “moral standard” would be “lowered by this form of publicity”), the role of the chain gang was seen, by the “farmers” whom the roads were expected to benefit, as a “highly visible, and economically beneficial, means of controlling rural African Americans, who were habitually castigated by powerful whites for their alleged reluctance to enter and remain in the agricultural labor market” (Lichtenstein 1993: 109). The most impressive effect of the convict camp, according to one state road engineer, was the “abundance of labor on the plantations.”<sup>2</sup> Clyde Woods (1998: 93) has similarly described the “emerging system of unfree labor” in the post-Reconstruction Mississippi Delta, wherein planters’ persistent demands for levee construction had historically been met through the forced labor of enslaved Blacks. Made possible by the subversion of Reconstruction laws, institution of debt peonage, and, after

<sup>1</sup>Department of Communication, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

<sup>2</sup>Department of Geography, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

#### Corresponding Author:

Scott Kirsch, Department of Geography, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-3220, USA.

Email: kirsch@email.unc.edu

1904, increased prosecutions for vagrancy, the new regime, Woods argues (1998: 77), constituted “a political and ethnic policy designed to recapture labor without compensation,” while generating revenue for post-bellum states leasing convicts to planters and levee contractors or putting them to work on prison farms. In North Carolina, much of that captured labor, for the first half of the twentieth century, was put to work on the roads.

This visual intervention asks “who made good roads” and “what made roads good” in modernizing North Carolina and the US South, reading the intersections of labor and landscape, race and the Progressive state, through an archival object study.<sup>3</sup> Of course, visual artifacts, however compelling, do not speak for themselves, and in what follows we highlight the tensions between visibility and invisibility, and free and unfree labor, that characterized the good roads campaign and its afterlives. If, as Deborah Cowen (2020: 4471) argues, “Infrastructure, almost by definition, reproduces relations,” then these archival traces offer resources for understanding the cultural, meaning-making work of “good roads,” alongside the brutality and backbreaking labor, in the modernization of racial capitalism in the early twentieth-century “Southern States.” In the wake of events like the 1898 Wilmington coup d’état and subsequent endorsement of revanchist White supremacy by North Carolina’s General Assembly that foreclosed the multi-racial Fusion politics of the 1890s,<sup>4</sup> the

imagery of the Southern Good Roads Movement offers a particular “view from the road” as politics by other means, linking infrastructural development and institutional racism as matters of science, aesthetics, law, and common sense.

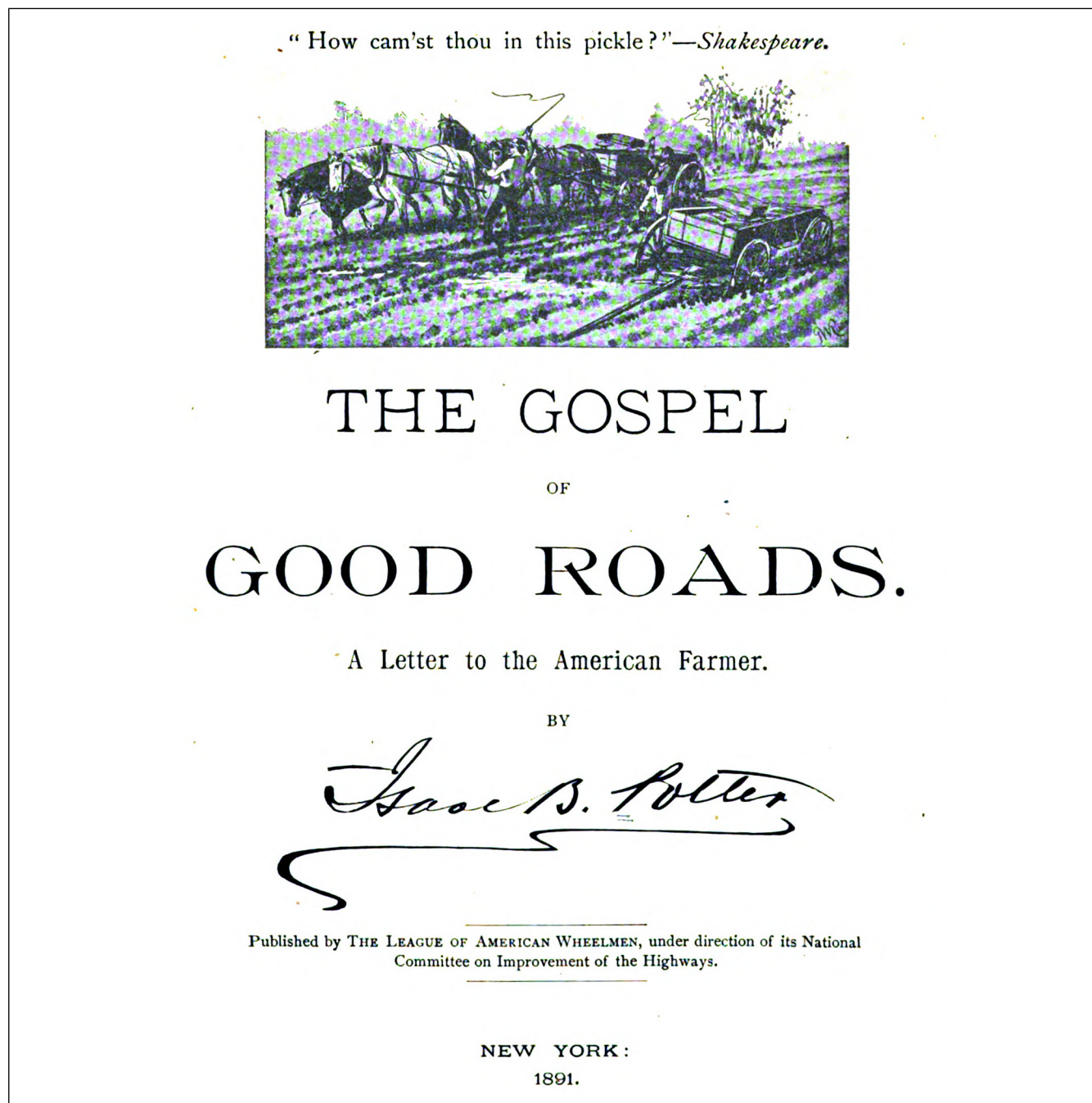
### Gospel of good roads

The cover illustration of Isaac Potter’s pamphlet, *The Gospel of Good Roads: A Letter to the American Farmer* (1891), features farmers struggling over muddy, rutted roads (Figure 2). The image may have resonated with its intended audience, who would be able to imagine the crack of the whip, the pained squeals of struggling horses, the smells and textures of damp, muddy roads, and the frustration and boredom of delayed travel. Two decades before the popularity of Ford’s Model T provided new reasons to reimagine roads as objects of technical expertise and consumer use, Potter, a member of the League of American Wheelmen — an organization that promoted cycling and the roads needed to do so — published his gospel, featuring pictures “made from photographs” illustrating the distinction between good roads (drawn mostly from France and Italy) and bad roads, images which, the author suggests, “spoke for themselves.” Just a few years after the Eastman Kodak Company had developed photographic technologies that were cheaper and more mobile than earlier methods, however, readers still



**Figure 1.** S.H. Kress & Co, “Good Roads, leading to Winston-Salem, N.C.” North Carolina Postcard Collection (P052; 0034–0012), North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



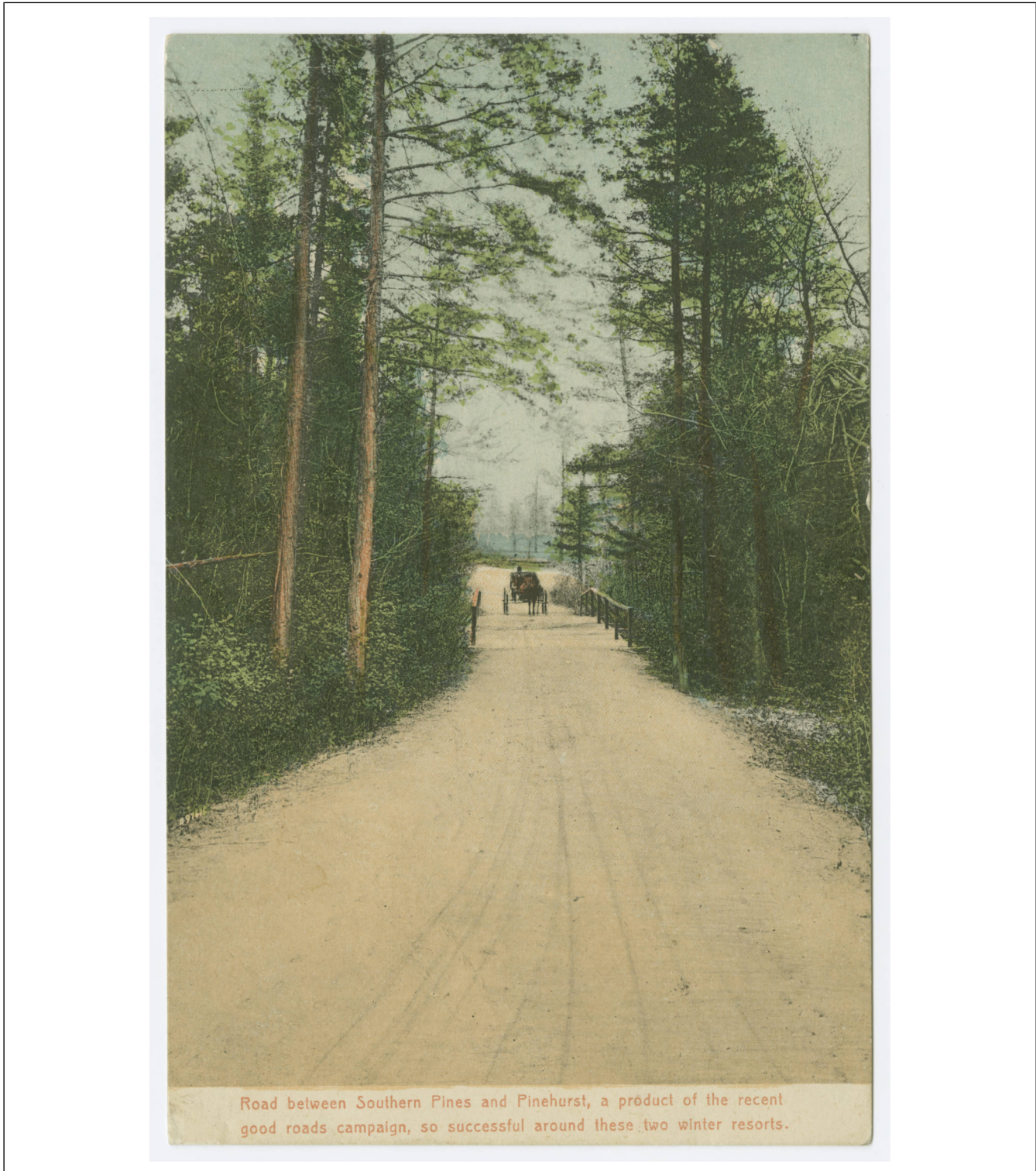


**Figure 2.** Cover illustration for Isaac B. Potter's (1891) *Gospel of Good Roads*.

had to be told that photographs were “better than words.” Texts like the *Gospel* thus taught readers the benefits of new technologies in ways that articulated visual perception and common sense: roads should appear a certain way, and that appearance, which could be conveyed beautifully in painted postcards, was *obvious*.

The growth of the Good Roads Movement across the American South over the following decades was understood largely as a Progressive venture, elevating the role of the

state, and the expertise of geologists and engineers, as builders of roads, and also aligning the movement with elements of reform politics, including calls for supporting public schools, prison reform, prohibition, anti-monopolism, opposition to child labor, and agricultural labor reform (Figure 3) (Grantham, 1981). As material channels for the expansion of urbanism, industrialism, and commercial agriculture, roads capable of bearing loaded horse-drawn carts (and soon, automobiles) were critical to the Progressive imaginary. Unlike

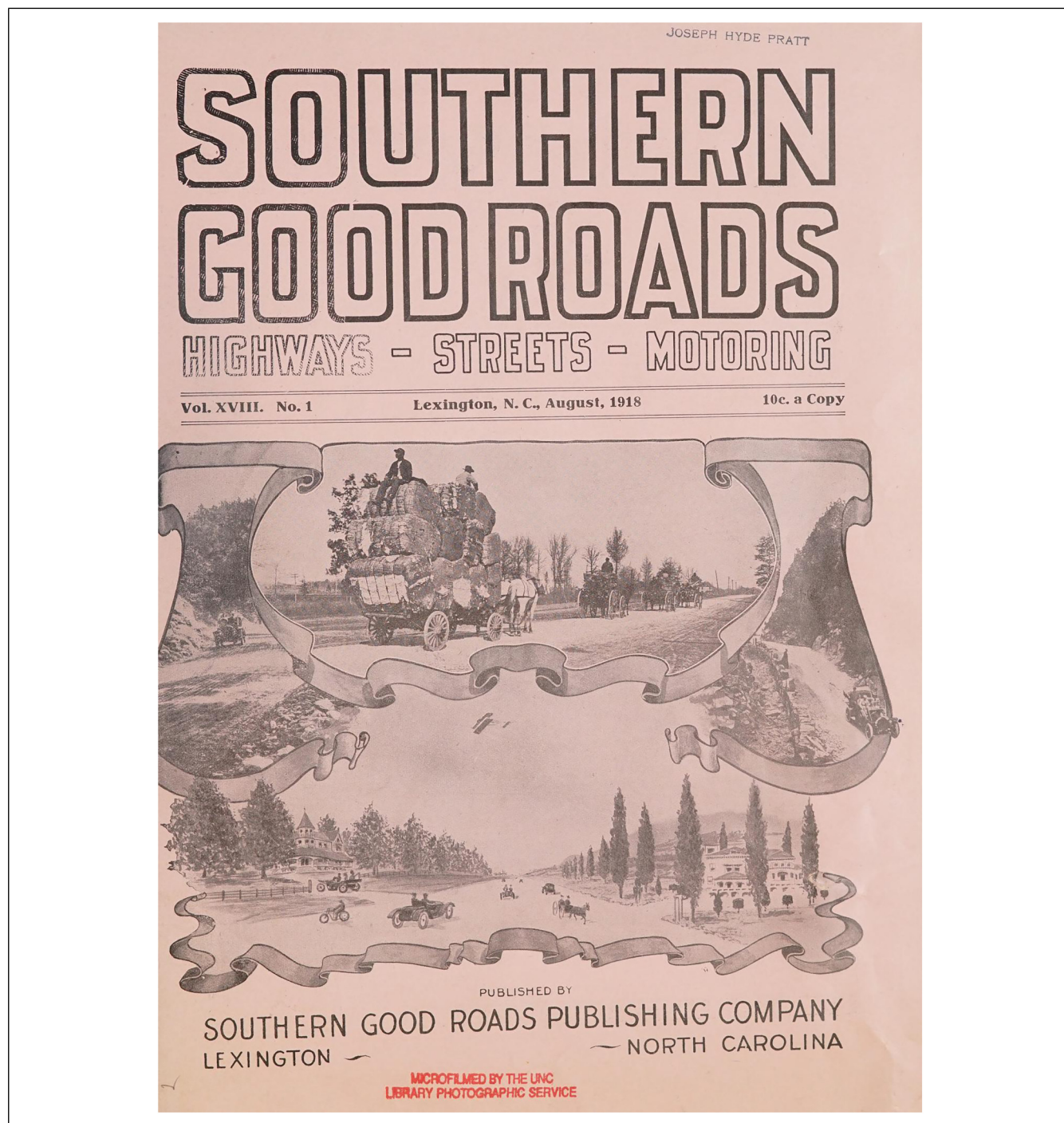


**Figure 3.** C.L. Hayes, Southern Pines, N.C., “Road between Southern Pines and Pinehurst, a product of the recent good roads campaign, so successful around these two winter resorts.” Durwood Barbour Collection of North Carolina Postcards (P077; 6–271), North Carolina Collection Photographic Archives, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

the muddy, rutted roads of Potter’s *Gospel*, the South required well-drained, hard-packed surfaces that could be maintained year-round. The construction of roads was also

understood by Progressive advocates as a solution to racial problems, a racial settlement that involved the functional enslavement of a significant portion of the Black population,





**Figure 4.** The cover illustration of *Southern Good Roads* 18, retrieved from <https://archive.org/details/southern-good-road-1811-unse/page/n5/mode/2up>.

as some contemporary observers noted (Lichtenstein 1993; see also Scott 2018: 122–153). The language of good roads, including its associated visual landscape ideology, did the cultural work of resolving these contradictions.

For the North Carolina state geologist (and UNC – Chapel Hill professor of geology) Joseph Austin Holmes (1902),

evinced an “economic geology of roadbuilding” intended to reinvigorate the region’s plantation economy, it would be a waste for the state *not* to utilize convict labor on the roads, given evidence of its efficiency (Figure 4). By the 1910s, North Carolina became known as the “Good Roads State,” home to leading figures like Holmes, Joseph Hyde

Pratt (another state geologist and UNC – Chapel Hill geology professor), the “Good Roads Governor” Locke Craig, and Hattie Morehead Berry, the “Mother of Good Roads.” Henry Varner, the second president of the North Carolina Good Roads Association, published *Southern Good Roads*, a successful trade magazine filled with articles on road building, investment, signage, government efforts, automobiles, and advertisements for everything from trucks and trailers to culvert producers, rock drillers, and demolition companies. The cover illustration of the 18th volume offers insights into the movement. The top center photograph depicts four horse-drawn carriages traveling a good road, as denoted by its well-drained, hard-packed surface. The massive load of hay bales in the foremost cart tells readers that in addition to supporting heavy loads, this road greatly benefits local farmers and thus the wider community. At the same time, the presence of electric lines at the edges of the image suggests Progressive desires rooted in urban and industrial expansion. The photographs on either side tell a different story. These roads are curved and hilly, clearly cutting around and through a mountainous region. While still “good,” these roads reflect more tangible evidence—in broken rock and stacked stone—of the chain gangs that likely built them. But in contrast to the agrarian industrialism of the center image, the filled automobiles suggest the consumer at play, perhaps traveling from city to countryside during the “weekend” popularized after Henry Ford instituted the 5-day work week during this time.

The illustration at the bottom of the image offers an imagined future that cannot be captured photographically. From the foreground extends a flat, straight, and improbably wide road filled with bicycles, automobiles, and horse-drawn carriages, each a marker of prosperity and technological progress. The biplane flying overhead and the road extending to the horizon suggest a world without limits. Unlike the photographs to either side, there are no markers of the labor that went into the road, markers that would remind viewers of the toil and suffering required for such a future to exist. To the left lies a carefully cultivated image of Antebellum opulence and architecture; an indistinct family of three drives into their home, suggesting that this could very well be part of the viewer’s future. That it was not a future available to everyone would have been taken for granted by the readers of *Southern Good Roads*. Like the roads movement more generally as it was realized in the “Southern States,” the image offered a pleasing patina of technological modernization that overlay a deep-seated and institutionalized anti-Black racism, its logics set in stone, gravel, and flesh. Meanwhile, county maps depicting an expanded network of state and county roads, like the 1936 Orange County (NC) road survey tracking road surface types and grading, alongside the location of prison camps, schools, and churches, were artifacts of this process, but bore no visible traces of the labor regime that made them possible, except for the deft lines of the surveyor and skillful pen of the cartographer. Yet traces of the labor that built the roads have

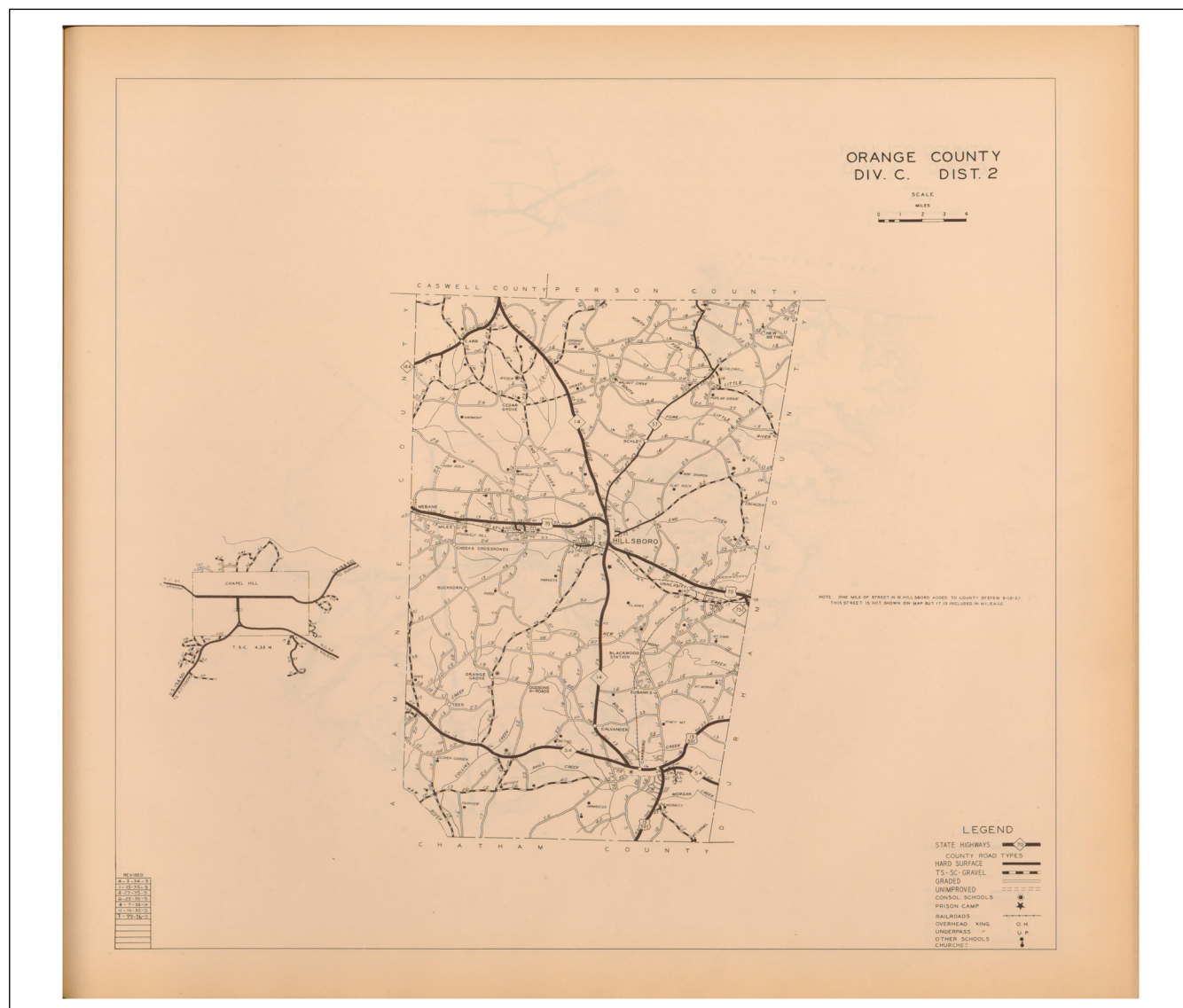
continued to circulate, including prison artifacts that offer a record of how, after Alagraa (2021), “good roads” were made possible precisely by thrusting Black life into catastrophe (Figure 5).

## Mobile prisons

Buried in the B section of the 23 August, 1996, issue of a Raleigh newspaper is a haunting reminder of how southern White progressives espoused prisons, and prison reform, as the technical solution to post-Reconstruction social order (Gilmore 2009: 82; Lichtenstein 1993; McKittrick 2011: 955–960). The article features two images. The first is a close-up of Franklin Freeman, the then North Carolina state Correction Secretary (1993–1997). Freeman, a middle-aged White man, is dressed in a light-colored dress shirt, checkered tie, and suspenders. He stares with a look of awe through the crisscrossed bars that crop his face. The occasion for the photo was Freeman’s acceptance of an early twentieth-century mobile prison cage that was once used to transport and hold convict laborers as they built the state highways. The second, larger image, is of a crane lifting the steel cage out of the woods behind a local steakhouse chain. Staff at the Angus Barn restaurant in Raleigh had seen the object on numerous occasions, but once someone realized it was an “antique Manly Portable Convict Cage” they donated the artifact to the state for refurbishing (North Carolina Department of Corrections [NC DOC], 1996). The Angus Barn donation marked the third of such objects held at local correctional storage facilities in the state (NC DOC, 1996).

In the article’s title, “A hard place for prisoners to lay their heads”, it is unclear whether “a hard place” refers to the physical material that made up the mobile prison structure or a broader critique of the horrid conditions of stowing 20 convict laborers in a 7-foot wide by 22-foot-long cage (News & Observer, 1996). The brief description of the cage as having “provided secure housing for prisoners in the fields each night” does more to sanitize the prison cage as an artifact rather than critically evaluate its uses and meanings in relation to historic and ongoing carceral labor regimes. Without the slightest bit of irony, we learn that inmates at the Wake Correctional Center were to be tasked with refurbishing the cage before it could be displayed to the public. According to a specialist at the North Carolina Transportation Museum, in 2016 one of these cages was transferred to a prison in Salisbury to be refurbished and displayed at the museum, however that work remains incomplete (personal communication, 17 March and 22 April 2021). Though not mentioned in the article, the collection of antique prison cages coincided with Freeman’s efforts to expand North Carolina’s prison infrastructure and population to unprecedented levels.<sup>5</sup>

In 1888, Robert Manly founded a steel and iron manufacturing company in Dalton, Georgia that would later be known as Manly Steel (Figure 6). In 1906, Robert’s cousin Frank



**Figure 5.** North Carolina State Highway and Public Works Commission (1936), “North Carolina County Road Survey of Orange County,” retrieved from <https://dc.lib.unc.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/ncmaps/id/2157/rec/2>.

Manly created a separate company called Manly Jail Works, which worked exclusively to produce smaller, custom jail products (Jones, 2006). Manly Jail Works produced steel metal cages mounted on large wheels that could be drawn by mules as an economically efficient means of transporting and holding prisoners along public road-building labor camps. Dubbed “Manly Portable Convict Cages,” Manly sold at least two models, 18-capacity and 12-capacity, the larger of the two sold for \$500 and weighed 6500 pounds (NC DOC, n.d.). Endorsed by prison superintendents throughout the south, including by a superintendent from Sampson County, North Carolina, the mobile cage was boasted as a secure and humane penological development during the good roads era (NC DOC, 1996).

Prior to the use of mobile cages, convict laborers were housed at fixed camp locations where they would be transported back and forth from the roadwork site each day. Some camps consisted of tents and steel-bolted wood houses that could be dismantled and reconstructed by the convicts as they moved along the road. Prison camps were known for their inhumane and unsanitary conditions, such as overflowing toilets next to eating stations and the close confinement of inmates with known infectious diseases like tuberculosis, and the vicious treatment of prisoners. The portable convict cages were marketed as more humane in part because the cages were exposed to the open air, which was viewed as a health improvement. This meant that laborers slept on steel beds in close quarters exposed to the elements.





**Figure 6.** Manly Portable Convict Transport Cage, Charleston County, South Carolina. Historic American Buildings Survey (Library of Congress) <https://www.loc.gov/resource/hhh.sc0902.photos/?sp=37>.



**Figure 7.** Portable convict transport cages, prison laborers, and guards at a road camp in Pitt County, North Carolina, 1910. Photograph retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/2017761945/>.



In cases of cold and wet weather, a covering was placed over the cages and each cage contained a heating structure in the center. A single toilet was included in each cage, and it was recommended to clean the cage only once or twice a month with disinfectant (NC DOC, 1996). The cages were celebrated because they were mobile and because laborers could be locked inside, and often chained within the cages when they were not working on road building (Thomas, 2011: 29). Despite the claim to being a humane, safe, and sanitary solution, health and welfare officials condemned the cages and eventually in 1933 they were put out of use.

A photograph taken in Pitt County, North Carolina, in 1910 offers a glimpse into the many meanings of this object in relation to racial domination, labor, and Southern landscapes (Figure 7).<sup>6</sup> The highly staged picture includes three mobile prison cages with the curtains drawn up to show what appears to be a band of all Black laborers packed to capacity inside the structures. The men sit inside the cages with their backs to the photographer as most glance over their left shoulders to make their faces visible to the camera. Some have their backs completely turned and remain faceless. The photo amplifies the crowdedness of such tight quarters, where prisoners were locked in and piled three high to sleep at night (NC DOC, 1996). Five White men are positioned in front of each opening of the prison cages, the casualness of their postures, three seated and two leaning, are intended to signify the ease of their control and a visual ideology of White supremacy. The idle bloodhounds and rifles upturned toward the cage depict the violent means through which these prisoners were held captive. Three Black boys, the only Black persons not inside the cages, are cast in different subservient positions. One holds two dogs, while two others stand above the White man seated in the center of the frame, one stands upright holding a guitar, while the other wears an apron and poses as if to serve a cup of tea or coffee. The photo seems consistent with the meticulous calculations of guard-to-prisoner ratios and techniques for discouraging escape. Prison road camps generally consisted of fifty to sixty laborers, with one guard for every 10 to 15 road workers. Beside the steps is likely Jerry “J.Z.” McLawhon, the County Prison Superintendent who was called in to stage the photograph. The image was likely produced some time in the fall, as evident by the trees that surround the cages and the dry foliage that lines the earth. The framing of the photograph suggests that the camp was, paradoxically, both hidden and prominently visible, somehow both distinguishing and blurring the lines between human and animal, natural and built, naturalizing the carceral structures within the surrounding landscape.

The Good Roads Movement was active well into the 1920s, but if the movement might then be described as in decline, it would be more accurate to say that by this point its work was done. In 1931, North Carolina consolidated its State Prison Department and State Highway Commission, offering

new funding for state highway construction while stabilizing the supply of road labor, a consolidation that lasted until 1957.

Meanwhile if landscape, after Cosgrove, still tends to obscure the conditions of its production, then some landscape *objects* exist in more complex visual relation to their surroundings. How might a Manly Portable Convict Cage have ended up on the property of a local steakhouse? Thad Eure Jr. co-founded Angus Barn in what was a remote north Raleigh location in the 1960s (Chandler, n.d.). Eure Jr., whose father, Thad Eure, was the North Carolina Secretary of State from 1936–1989, also founded an eccentric pizza house chain, Darryl’s, that was known for displaying strange artifacts that Eure Jr. had collected from public auctions. Other cages have been displayed as historical monuments to educate the public on the horrendous conditions of early twentieth-century road camps, as the NC DOC claims to have planned for the one donated by the Eures. Any histories of the Good Roads Movement’s artifacts must reckon with the embeddedness of plantation-prison logics in the political economy of public infrastructure and the depths of its dehumanizing effects, such that they could be displayed as a carnival-like amusement for restaurant guests.

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### ORCID iD

Nicholas Gerstner  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2087-1893>

### Notes

1. According to Georgia Governor Joseph M. Brown in 1910, quoted in Lichtenstein (1993: 86).
2. In Lichtenstein (1993: 109).
3. Our intervention is largely a descriptive one. By linking close visual description of several artifacts of the Good Roads movement and state roadbuilding in North Carolina with a contextualization of the conditions under which the roads movement “made sense,” our aim is to offer, *through* the visual, an adequate critique of ideology, that is, of the cultural work that such images did supporting a system of spectacular racial domination. While the efficacy of such cultural work is vastly

overdetermined, and we examine only a handful of images in *this* archive, we hope that they provide a compelling meeting point for author(s) and reader to engage with the past and how it persists both in archives and the roads beneath our wheels and feet.

4. On the Wilmington coup and its aftermath, see Ceceski and Tyson (1998); and *Wilmington on Fire*, the film by Christopher Everett (Black House Publishing, 2015).
5. Under the direction of Governor James B. Hunt and Correction Secretary Franklin Freeman, North Carolina's prison population increased by more than 50% from 1992 to 1996. Governor Hunt and Secretary Freeman aimed to eliminate the early parole by increasing prison capacity, which they achieved through the construction of new prisons and leasing beds from county jails and out-of-state prisons (Avery, 1996; NC DPS, n.d.).
6. The image was acquired by the Library of Congress in 1949 from the Farm Security Administration/ Office of War Information (FSA/OWI) collection. According to a specialist at the LOC, the image is a photo taken of an original print image sometime between 1937 and 1949 (personal communication, 31 March 2021). The photographer and owner of the original 1910 print are unknown. One of the Farm Security Administration's photographers might have taken the photo for their own reference. Photographers who shot in North Carolina for FSA/OWI included Jack Delano, Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Alfred Palmer, John Vachon, and Marion Post Wolcott.

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## Author Biographies

**Nicholas Gerstner** is a doctoral researcher in the Department of Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. He researches culture, media, and technology, with particular attention to the cultural politics of common-sense narratives of identity. Nicholas' current research traces a techno-cultural history of "polarization" that describes how an idea once limited to the study of electro-magnetism has become a common and apparently obvious way to describe society.

**Adrienne R. Hall** is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Geography at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

**Scott Kirsch** is a professor in the Department of Geography at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His new book, *American Colonial Spaces in the Philippines: Insular Empire* (Routledge, 2023), includes a chapter on Philippine roadwork and the production of space.