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SUGAR, EMPIRE, AND REVOLUTION IN EASTERN CUBA: THE GUANTÁNAMO SUGAR COMPANY RECORDS IN THE CUBAN HERITAGE COLLECTION

Matthew Casey

ABSTRACT

The Guantánamo Sugar Company Records in the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami represent some of the only accessible plantation documents for the province of Guantánamo in republican Cuba. Few scholars have researched in the collection and there have not been any publications to draw from it. Such a rich collection allows scholars to tie the province's local political, economic, and social dynamics with larger national, regional, and global processes. This is consistent with ongoing scholarly efforts to understand local and global interactions and to pay more attention to regional differences within Cuba. This research note uses the records to explore local issues of land, labor, and politics in republican-era Guantánamo in the context of larger national and international processes. The collection is especially useful for what it illustrates about Cuban sugar companies during the Revolution that succeeded in 1959. The note then identifies sources that could be useful for scholars researching in the growing fields of the history of business, science and technology, and the environment.

Keywords: sugar, Guantánamo, Cuba, land, Cuban Revolution, primary sources

RESUMEN

Los archivos de *The Guantánamo Sugar Company* en la Colección Herencia Cubana en la Universidad de Miami representan uno de los pocos fondos documentales accesibles sobre una plantación azucarera de la provincia de Guantánamo en la Cuba republicana. Pocos investigadores y prácticamente ninguna publicación han usado la colección. Esta rica colección de documentos sobre Guantánamo permitirá a los investigadores vincular las dinámicas políticas, económicas y sociales locales con procesos nacionales, regionales y globales más amplios. La colección también es de utilidad para los estudios académicos actuales sobre las interacciones locales y globales, así como para aquellos centrados en las diferencias regionales dentro de Cuba. Esta nota de investigación utiliza los fondos para explorar asuntos locales de tierra, trabajo y política en el Guantánamo de la época republicana, dentro

del contexto de procesos nacionales e internacionales más amplios. La colección es especialmente útil por lo que ilustra sobre las compañías azucareras durante la Revolución que triunfó en 1959. Por ello, esta nota identifica fuentes útiles para investigadores trabajando la historia de los negocios, la ciencia y la tecnología, y el medio ambiente.

Palabras clave: azúcar, Guantánamo, Cuba, tierra, Revolución Cubana, fondos documentales

RÉSUMÉ

Les archives de *The Guantánamo Sugar Company* dans la Collection Héritage Cubaines à l'Université de Miami représentent peu de sources de documentaires accessibles sur la plantation sucrière de la province de Guantanamo à Cuba républicain. Peu de chercheurs et pratiquement aucune publication ont utilisé cette collection. Cette riche collection de documents sur Guantanamo permettra aux chercheurs de comprendre et d'établir des relations entre les dynamiques politiques, économiques et sociales avec des processus nationaux, régionaux et globaux. Cette collection servira aussi à tous ceux qui s'intéressent aux différentes questions régionales à l'intérieur du Cuba. Cette note de recherche a utilisé les archives pour explorer les dossiers locaux du territoire, le travail et la politique de Guantanamo durant l'époque républicaine dans le contexte plus profond des processus nationaux et internationaux. La collection est spécialement utile à cause de ses illustrations sur les compagnies sucrières durant la Révolution proclamée en 1959. Cette note identifie des sources utiles pour les chercheurs travaillant sur l'histoire des commerces, la science, la technologie et l'environnement.

Mots-clés : sucre, Guantanamo, Cuba, terre, Révolution, fonds documentaires

In early 1958 in the thick of the Cuban Revolution, the directors of the Guantánamo Sugar Company debated whether to inform their stockholders about an event that had threatened production on their Central Isabel. Vice President Gonzalo de la Vega warned against writing a special letter about “the Isabel incident” because he didn’t want the company to be “drawn into sending out what might be facetiously labeled ‘a weekly report of revolutionary activity’” (de la Vega 1958). Unfortunately for posterity, de la Vega won the day; sugar administrators never sent the letter or compiled weekly reports on the revolution that was unfolding in their midst. Notwithstanding, the records of the Guantánamo Sugar Company (hereafter GSC) in the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami are a rich and underutilized resource for addressing ongoing research questions in

Cuban historiography.

The GSC is but one of numerous repositories of republican-era plantation records in Cuba and the United States—and the only available one for a company based in the province of Guantánamo. The records were donated to the Cuban Heritage Collection at the University of Miami in 2006. They are open for research, but the creation of a box-level inventory did not begin until summer 2014. Few scholars have used the collection and there does not appear to be a single publication that draws from them. I had the opportunity to view 40 of the collection's 83 boxes. Despite its heft (83 linear feet), it is not as big as other similar collections. Unlike the University of Florida's Braga Brothers Collection, whose holdings on sugar and steamships begin in the middle of the nineteenth century and extend into the late twentieth, the GSC operated sugar mills and railroads only during the republican period. In terms of operations and chronology, it is more similar to the Cuba Company Archives housed at the University of Maryland.¹ Among these resources, the GSC is the only collection of records, for this or any other company, operating in the province of Guantánamo. This includes the Provincial Archive of Guantánamo itself, where as of my 2008 visit, the records for the *Compañía Azucarera Oriental* were mostly inaccessible to researchers. This has significance beyond the sake of mere completeness.

The GSC provides insight into themes that scholars of Cuban sugar have perennially addressed, such as land, labor, and politics (Zanetti and García 1976; Ayala 1999). The collection is especially significant given more recent endeavors to integrate fine-grained local-level analyses with regional, national, and supranational processes (McGillivray 2009; Scott 2005; Whitney and Chailloux Laffita 2013:4). As local dynamics and regional differences within Cuba become a greater concern to scholars, the scholarly potential of the GSC increases. This essay will highlight some of the GSC's revelations about the local dynamics of land, labor, and politics in republican Cuba. It will conclude with brief but less systematic references to the collection's potential strengths for scholars in the growing fields of the history of business, the environment, and science and technology.

The Guantánamo Sugar Company in Republican Cuba

We have long known that U.S. companies purchased massive amounts of land in eastern Cuba in the early twentieth century. But as McGillivray (2009:75-77) has demonstrated, this was a process tempered by local intermediaries who were navigating a region shaped by centuries of colonial rule and decades of independence warfare. Between 1905 and 1915, the company purchased *ingenios* and surrounding lands to

construct sugar *centrales* and railroads. Cuban property deeds contain data about the previous landowners, thus providing a textured picture of eastern Cuba and the arrival of foreign capital in the late colonial period. For example, the company purchased the *ingenio* Soledad and its adjacent territory from the Guantánamo-based “Brooks y Compañía” in 1905. That company had registered in Cuba in 1888 between the major independence wars; one owner had been a British subject before he died. The other, whose nationality was unknown, may have originally been from Caracas, Venezuela, like the widow who inherited his property and remained in Guantánamo with her children (Copia de Venta 1905; Colegio Notarial de Santiago de Cuba 1905). Other purchases were of more modest properties from local owners. In 1914, the company purchased a *finca rústica* from an individual named Edilberto Negret, who had owned the property for only a single year. His designation as a person “*sin otro apellido*” [without a second surname] and his apparent late acquisition of land suggest that he may have been a person of African descent (Copia de la escritura 1914).² Documents also reveal the processual and non-linear nature of land acquisition and resale. In the decades after first purchase, the company’s legal department interacted with Cuban courts because of lingering ambiguities in land titles (Vice Pres & Gen. Manager 1919). In the 1940s and 1950s they resold some of their holdings before all of their property was expropriated by the Cuban government in August 1960 (Brown 1960).

Like other plantations in early twentieth century Cuba, much of the cane ground by the company was supplied by small and medium sized farmers (*colonos*) who grew cane on contract. The collection contains extensive lists of *colonos* with the names of the farms they operated, the *centrales* they supplied, their annual production, debts and credits to the company, and other financial information.³ Correspondence thickened around moments of irregularity or competition with other mills. Between 1927 and 1957, the Salcines family sent most of the cane from their *colonia* to the Central Soledad. When state regulations and price differentials permitted it, the Salcines sold cane to other companies’ mills instead, creating a dispute among various corporations that came to a head in 1957 (Froment 1957).

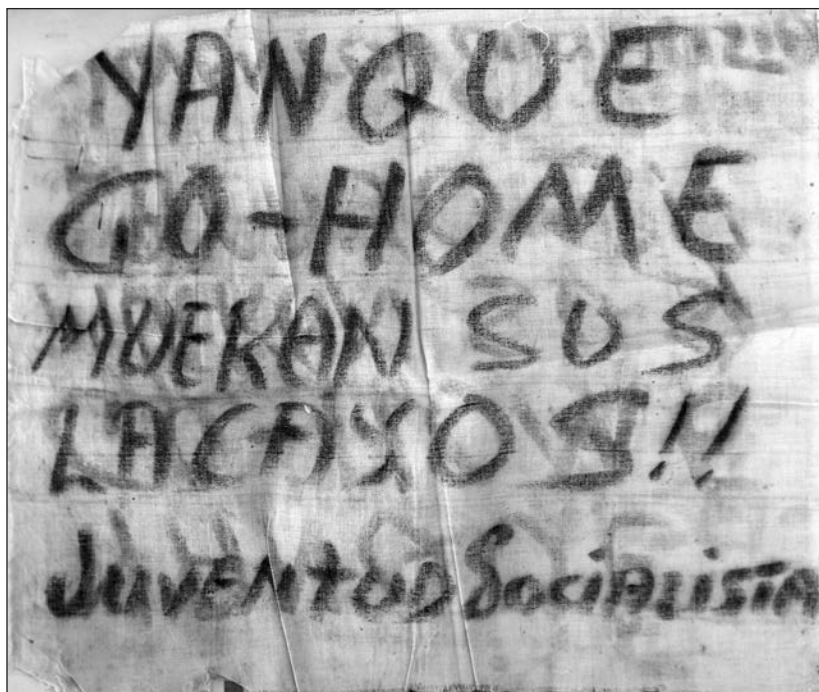
Sources related to labor are scarce but rich. The company’s annual reports to the Board of Directors from 1907 to 1959 provide laconic reflections on the labor situation, at least when it was noteworthy. The 1907 report hints at the effects that the U.S. naval base had on local labor markets and the sugar industry: “labor is at present plentiful, owing to cessation of work at the Naval Station and new railroads” (Guantánamo Sugar Company 1907:5). Work accident reports tied to insurance claims provide the names and occupations of both mill workers and cane

cutters, offering a snapshot into the world of work on plantations (“List of Claims” 1955).

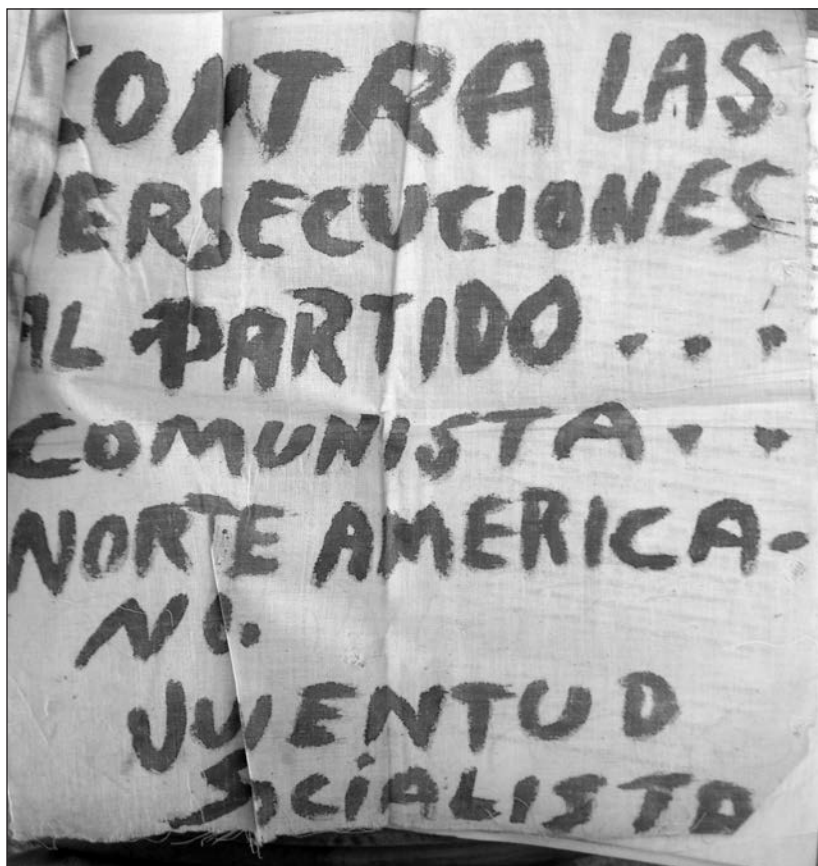
Financial irregularities shed even more light onto local labor relationships and business practices on the ground. Documents from the 1940s and 1950s trace the company’s efforts to reconcile discrepancies between cash holdings and account books. Their efforts reveal payment systems and moments of administrative corruption. Low level and temporary workers were paid through a sequence of intermediaries. After organizing and supervising work, a contractor or foreman received approval from the company to draw funds from a local source, which could be a salaried company representative or even a *cantinero*. The contractor would then distribute funds to workers according to their own agreements, which could differ from the company’s original payment formula. For instance, in the port of Caimanera in 1944, a labor union handled work contracting and drew funds from a designated company employee at the end of each day. Although the company paid the group according to the number of bags that were unloaded, a union representative distributed cash according to “time worked at rates agreed upon among themselves.” These local practices came to light only because the salaried company representative who was acting as a local treasurer had skimmed over \$4,000 from the company over a thirty-year period (“Interoffice Memorandum” 1944).

The few workers’ letters that managed to make it to the New York offices come from skilled laborers and office workers. Such workers have received increased attention from scholars in recent years (Bosma and Curry-Machado 2012; Curry-Machado 2011). These provide insights into their grievances and means of redress. In 1925, a group calling itself “*La Comisión secreta de trabajadores y empleados*” [The Secret Commission of Workers and Employees] sent a damning letter to the company’s New York office complaining that administrators paid some workers to be “*botelleros*”—individuals who drew salaries only to snitch on fellow workers. According to the *Comisión*, they made false accusations against “honorable workers” in order to steal for themselves. One of them, “a black Jamaican named Fritz Van Bacle,” apparently worked with a *colono* to take cane from one farmer’s car and to put it into their own, in effect stealing payment from small farmers (La comisión secreta 1925). In another letter from four years later, a disillusioned “ex-employee of the General Office” warned that American administrators’ habit of “doing nothing more than drinking rum and associating with loose women” was threatening productivity. Apparently, the administrators’ nationality and connections allowed them to skirt the law. The ex-employee accused them of bribing local judges to avoid prosecution for public scandal. “If Cuban employees had done that, they would have been left jobless” (Salas 1929).

Nor was the company immune from internationalist forms of worker radicalism that linked territories throughout the western hemisphere (Sullivan 2012; Shaffer 2013; Putnam 2013). Though such sources do not normally appear in these types of collections, there are some truly unique documents and artifacts. Stashed within one box of financial records were loose documents and even linen banners created by radical organizations in Cuba. A manifesto published at the start of the 1955 sugar harvest by the “Sindicato de Obreros Azucareros del C[entral] Los Caños” followed a litany of political and bread-and-butter issues with the ultimatum: “Not one *machete* swing if they do not approve our demands” (Sindicato 1955). It may have been enclosed in an envelope that the *Juventud Socialista* sent to the company’s New York office the following year. It’s exterior criticized the “fascist persecutions to which the North American Communist party is victim,” the repression of a newspaper called “el ‘Daly [sic] Work,’” and U.S. imperialism in Cuba (Juventud Socialista 1956). These were pushed against two folded linen protest banners with scrawled declarations of Cuban solidarity with their U.S. brethren: “Yanque/ Go-Home/ Mueran sus lacayos!!/ Juventud Socialista.” The other proclaimed: “Contra las/ Persecuciones/ Al



Linen protest banner, GSC, Box 25 (3): “Yanque/Go Home/Mueran sus Lacayos/ Juventud Socialista.



Linen protest banner, GSC, Box 25 (4): Contra las/Persecuciones/Al Partido... Comunista...Norte America-/no./Juventud Socialista.

Partido...Comunista...Norte America-/no./ Juventud Socialista" (Juventud Socialista n.d.).

Documents in the GSC illustrate the company's other political interactions at scales ranging from the municipal to the international. Since it was a foreign-owned, economically significant entity that was distant from Havana but close to the U.S. naval base, the company had unique local experiences of Cuba's national politics. As students of Cuban history know well, the Platt Amendment's clause allowing U.S. intervention in Cuban affairs in the name of democracy actually encouraged electoral violence in the early republic. Five years after violence hastened intervention in 1906, a company official reminded his superiors of the advantages of being so close to the U.S. base. "The presence of several thousand United States troops already at the Naval Station on Guantanamo Bay

would have an important influence in securing properties in the valley from molestation in case of disturbance” (Poland 1911:1).

That “disturbance” would arrive one year later, though U.S. troops never officially landed. In the spring of 1912, the *Partido Independiente de Color*, a party composed of Afro-Cuban veterans of the independence wars, led an armed protest to criticize the outlawing of their party. The Cuban government responded with mass violence against people of African descent in the eastern regions of Cuba, killing thousands (Helg 1995). Company officials were interested in the protest and counter-repression to the extent that these influenced a complicated ongoing land sale. At the time of the repression, the company was in the process of pressuring a number of indebted *colonos* to sell some land. Their description of this process provides some clues to events on the ground, which are still clouded in uncertainty:

If the present disturbance should last it might alter the situation as Mr. Cueria had to pay the rebels \$1,000.—two days ago to save his place as [sic] Manantial from burning and he himself has had to come down to town with his family. If the disturbance continues Mr. Cueria may be anxious to realize and return to Spain as he is thoroughly frightened (Vice-Pres & Genl. Manager 1912).

Cuba’s national racial politics intersected with local issues of *colono* debt, company expansion, and the local manifestations of political violence.

The company’s ties to local electoral politics could be dense and entangled as well. During the 1950 election, Ladislao Guerra, an auditor for the company was running for mayor of Guantánamo with support from numerous parties. The Communist Party painted the company employee-cum-candidate as a puppet for the plantation who would “serve the interests of...‘Yankee Imperialism.’” In response, Guerra himself called his own employer “an ‘Imperialistic Company.’” He claimed that the GSC “had suppressed the payment of rent, telephone and electric light in his home,” itself part of a larger dispute he had had with the company (Olivet and Castro 1950).

In terms of Cuban national politics, the collection is probably richest for it’s insights into the Revolution that toppled the Batista government in January 1959. Scattered throughout the collection are references to actions by Cuban revolutionaries on company lands, such as a report about “material taken from Isabel by a Group of armed men on June 3, 1958” (Hennis 1958a). Even the necessarily optimistic annual stockholder reports reminded readers that all

operations are located in Oriente Province at the eastern end of the island where the political situation is most acute. Although your Company expects to be ready and able to produce its share of the 1959 crop, there is, of course, the possibility that these plans may be upset

by political developments (Guantánamo Sugar Company 1958:5).

Privately, they were more blunt: “The Rebels are much stronger than what the general news would lead you to believe” noted one employee from self-imposed exile in California less than a month before Batista fled (Hennis 1958b).

Business, Science and Technology, and the Environment

As a multi-national agricultural and industrial company whose twin goals were production and profit, the GSC produced massive documentation that will be of interest to scholars in the expanding fields of business, science and technology, and even environmental history (Fernández Prieto 2013; Funes Monzote 2004; McAvoy 2003). The majority of the documents I viewed touch on financial matters and company stocks.⁴ To list a few examples: the company kept a close watch on U.S. trade and tariff policies, and collected congressional transcripts and copies of U.S. and Cuban laws.⁵ Insurance records, inventories, and lists of assets exist for many years as well.⁶ The collection holds the company’s punctilious tax records for their New York and New Jersey offices. Other correspondence points to debates between the company and the city of Guantánamo over municipal taxes. In the late 1950s, they were faced with “urbanization” taxes for their sugar *bateyes*, illustrating the local-level interactions of a multi-national company.⁷

GSC records illustrate the company’s relationships with their stockholders as well as other sugar companies operating in Cuba. The collection contains annual stockholder reports from as early as 1907. By the 1950s, boxes contain annotated and corrected drafts of reports, providing insight into how the GSC chose to describe their activities to stockholders.⁸ Various types of sources reveal their working relationship with other firms. Systematic invoices for parts and equipment show the company’s extensive purchases of industrial parts from suppliers in the United States. Unlike some sugar companies in Cuba, the GSC does not appear to have owned steamships. Instead, they depended on neighbors, like the United Fruit Company and other shipping agents, for their deliveries, revealing lateral relationships among companies.⁹

The collection is especially interesting for the unique insights into how businesses navigated the events of the Cuban Revolution. Company officials sought to maintain production and profits even after the revolutionary government took punitive measures against large landholders in 1959. In March of that year, company statements list an “extraordinary tax paid to the Revolutionary government” of \$45,000, which was calculated at ten cents per bag of sugar (Guantánamo Sugar Company, 1959a). The company persisted even after a June 1959 “Cuban Agrarian Law”

limited its holdings to “about 4% of the land now owned.” Perhaps in an effort to maintain investor confidence, the 1959 annual report bragged that “repairs have been completed at the company’s mills and railroads and it is to be hoped that the coming crop will be produced without difficulty” (Guantánamo Sugar Company, 1959b:4-5). Such optimism would be dashed less than a year later, when all of the company’s property, along with everything owned by “physical and corporate persons who are nationals of the United States of North America” was forcefully expropriated by a July 1960 decree (Brown 1960).

In the wake of the Cuban Revolution, the company and its employees made individual and institutional overtures to sugar producers elsewhere in the world. In 1958, individual employees left for jobs in Mexico and elsewhere as “the situation in Cuba” became “rapidly more severe” (Hicks 1958). In 1961, company officials corresponded with the Soorajmull Nagarmull company, a firm that operated sugar mills in East Pakistan, about providing employment for displaced engineers. In terms of geopolitics, the engineers were leaving the United States’ newest Cold War enemy to work with a staunch ally. A representative from the South Asian firm affirmed: “Political situation in East Pakistan is quite normal and American citizens are highly respected as Pakistan Government is getting considerable financial assistance and technical advice from the United States Government and there is ample goodwill among the people for American citizens” (Soorajmull Nagarmull 1961). GSC officials also corresponded with a French company operating plantations on the Caribbean island of Guadeloupe with offices based in Paris.¹⁰

The collection contains numerous sources that would allow a study of science, technology, or the environment. Detailed maps, quantitative production data and technical records related to sugar production appear with frequency throughout the collection.¹¹ Like other agricultural producers, the company sought to employ scientific technologies to increase annual output in the fields. For instance, in the 1950s, the company maintained detailed records about their efforts to stimulate rainfall through “cloud seeding.” Multiple folders contain data readouts from the rain gauges that were kept throughout their properties along with details about efforts to alter the environment.¹² In another example, purchase orders of mechanical equipment and building materials often contained brief written justifications for the parts, illustrating administrators’ technical aspirations.¹³

Conclusion

The Guantánamo Sugar Collection has much to offer students of the Cuban sugar industry. The fact that it is the only fully accessible

collection with records from Guantánamo is especially relevant now that scholars outside of Cuba are paying increasing attention to the country's regional history as well as what Rebecca Scott calls the "small-scale dynamics of large-scale processes" (Scott 2000; Whitney and Chailloux Laffita 2013). Though given less attention in this essay, the collection is equally useful for those venturing into the fields of business, science and technology, and environmental history. Lastly, but just as important is the fact that the Cuban Heritage Collection is an excellent place to conduct research with a talented, knowledgeable, and helpful archival staff.

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Notes

- ¹ The Braga Brothers Collection spans a long century from 1860-1984. Braga Brothers Collection, Special Collections, Smathers Library, University of Florida, Gainesville. The Cuba Company archives begin in 1894 and extend until 1960. Cuba Company Archives, Special Collections, College Park Libraries, University of Maryland. There are also extensive plantation records in the provincial archives of Las Tunas, Santiago de Cuba and other parts of Cuba.
- ² See Zeuske 2002:214-215 for a discussion of the meaning of "sin otro apellido."
- ³ For instance, see "Colonos Statements" 1947.
- ⁴ Guantánamo Sugar Company Records (hereafter GSC) boxes 1-9 mostly contain tax and financial information, including multiple "Recordak film records" that I was not able to view, in box 4.
- ⁵ GSC box 28 contains numerous published government documents from both the United States and Cuba in the 1930s through the 1950s.
- ⁶ Inventories and assets are housed in GSC boxes 32 and 34. Insurance records appear in boxes 11 and 28, 34.
- ⁷ GSC boxes 19 and 20 contain state and franchise tax records for New

York and New Jersey from 1910 to 1959. Urbanization tax records are housed in box 3.

⁸ See, for instance, GSC Box 35, Folder: Letters to all common stockholders. [1950-1959].

⁹ See, for instance, GSC Box 9.

¹⁰ This correspondence is collected in GSC Box 21.

¹¹ The largest collections of maps I encountered were in GSC boxes 19, 26 and 38.

¹² See GSC boxes 23-24, 35.

¹³ See for instance, GSC Box 1, Folder 2: 1932-1941.

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