

Branden Adams
Stanford University

Coal in California: Industrial Energy on the West Coast of America, 1850-1900

Historians of American industrialization always acknowledge the importance of coal as a factor of production. Alfred Chandler, in particular, made the opening of the Pennsylvania anthracite coalfields crucial to his story of the rise of large American businesses. By looking at a heavily industrialized place, the San Francisco Bay area, where no anthracite could be found, a much messier view--one where industrialization proceeds in the face of a wildly volatile energy supply--of the relationship between energy and industrialization can be seen. The San Francisco Bay was one of the most dynamic industrial areas of the late nineteenth century, but it faced an intractable problem unlike most industrial regions in America: coal had to be shipped from very, very far away. Coal from places as far away as England and Sydney found its way to the area, often as ballast on ships looking to procure cargoes of California wheat. In this way, the volatile supply of coal was fundamentally intertwined with the bust-and-boom wheat cycles. Railroad men hoped that long-term contracts would blunt volatility, thereby regularizing the supply of coal to Western industry, but their plans were often thwarted, sometimes by people within their own organizations, sometimes by international trade. Looking at the west coast qualifies typical narratives of industrialization that make regular supplies of energy central to their stories.