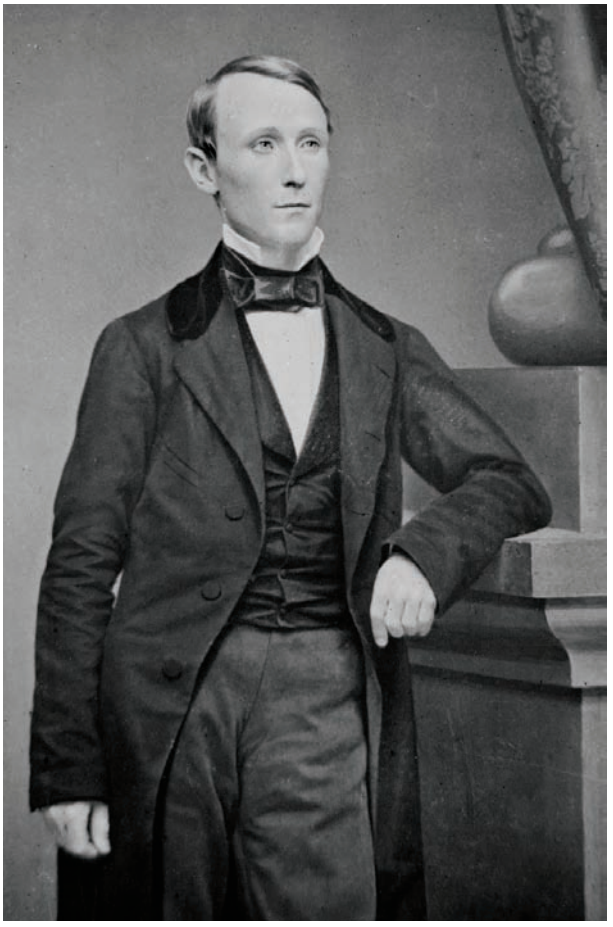
Gray-Eyed Man of Destiny

Tennessee's William Walker aimed to create a U.S. empire in Central America

BY MARIA BLACKBURN



The roadsides of Tennessee are dotted with more than 1,500 historical markers chronicling the rich history of America's 16th state. Some mark the location of Tennessee's numerous Civil War battles. Others celebrate such famous natives as Dolly Parton and Davy Crockett. And more establish the state as the place where engineer Casey Jones launched his last train ride, bluegrass was born and Elvis Presley and U.S. President Andrew Jackson made their homes.

One of these signs, Historical Marker No. 35 in downtown Nashville, briefly relates the compelling story of native son William Walker—a doctor, lawyer, journalist and adventurer born in 1824 and nicknamed "The Gray-Eyed Man of Destiny." If you've never heard of Walker, you are not alone. Read the five brief sentences on the marker chronicling his 36 years, a life that included being elected president of Nicaragua in 1856, however, and you'll wonder how he ever could have escaped notice.

The only native Nashvillian to ever be elected a head of state, Walker is perhaps the most famous American filibusterer who ever lived. Years before filibustering became known as a parliamentary procedure used to delay or prevent a vote, it described people like Walker who set off on unauthorized military expeditions in foreign countries to support revolutions. Some were motivated by adventure; others by the promise of financial gain. For Walker, filibustering was about nation building and political power. He ventured into Central America with a vision of creating an American empire of English-speaking colonies there and installing himself as its leader.

Walker was the son of a successful Nashville businessman. He entered the University of Nashville at age 12, graduated summa cum laude at 14 and went on to study and practice medicine and law. He worked as a newspaper editor in New Orleans and in 1849 moved to San Francisco, where he hatched his master plan of privately conquering regions of Latin America. Like many 19th-century Americans, Walker believed in Manifest Destiny, the idea that the United States was meant to expand across the North American continent. He was skilled at recruiting men to join him in his quest for new territory. Although soft-spoken, Walker had a commanding presence. He "never took advice, but always gave commands and they must be obeyed," the California poet Joaquin Miller wrote.

Walker's first attempt to colonize another country occurred in October 1853 when he and 45 men set out to establish the independent Republic of Sonora, in Mexico's Sonora and Baja, Calif. His effort failed and he was tried for conducting an illegal war and acquitted. Walker persevered.

In 1855, Walker was contracted by Nicaragua's Democratic party to bring

as many as 300 "colonists" to Nicaragua. He set sail from San Francisco in May with some 60 men and gained 270 more when he landed. Upon their arrival, the men—really soldiers of fortune—were granted the right to bear arms to help fight the ongoing civil war against the Legitimist party. The fighting was difficult but by September Walker's men had defeated the Legitimist army and he soon took control of Nicaragua. On May 20, 1856, U.S. President Franklin Pierce recognized Walker's regime. Walker was elected president of Nicaragua and inaugurated on July 12, 1856.

Nicaragua was no mere backwater to the U.S. Because the transcontinental railway and the Panama Canal had not yet been built, the country was of critical importance as part of a trade route between New York and San Francisco. Cornelius Vanderbilt's Accessory Transit Co. owned the rights to the route and when two of his competitors managed to get Walker to revoke his company's charter, Vanderbilt vowed to take Walker down. He successfully pressured the U.S. government to withdraw their support for Walker and his men. The government agreed, motivated in part by Walker's desire to annex Nicaragua as a new slave state—a move that would further fan the flames of growing sectional conflict in the U.S.

Disease and defections took their toll on Walker's army, and he ruled until 1857, when he was defeated by a coalition of Central American armies—a drawn-out effort that resulted in the loss of thousands of Central American lives. In May 1857, he surrendered to the U.S. Navy and returned to the United States. He wrote *The War in Nicaragua* about his exploits and the book became a best-seller soon after its publication in 1860. Continuing to believe himself the legitimate president of Nicaragua, Walker mounted several return expeditions, including a failed attempt through Honduras in 1860. He surrendered and was turned over to Honduran authorities. On Sept. 12, 1860, Walker was executed for piracy in Trujillo, Honduras.

Although Walker remained a popular figure through the end of the U.S. Civil War, especially in the South where he was embraced for his pro-slavery stance, filibustering fell out of favor and he was largely forgotten. In Central America, however, Walker remains infamous more than 150 years after his death.

"Throughout Central America today, Walker's name ranks with that of Hitler and Stalin," Stephen Dando-Collins writes in *Tycoon's War: How Cornelius Vanderbilt Invaded a Country to Overthrow America's Most Famous Military Adventurer* (Da Capo Press, 2008). Moreover, Walker's defeat remains a source of national pride. In Costa Rica, a national holiday has long been celebrated on April 11—the day Walker was defeated at Rivas.