

**“Down to the Gila”: A. J. Chandler’s Desert Land Scheme and the Gila River Indian Reservation, 1891–1911 [Abstract]**

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In the latter nineteenth century, few American Indians had rights that powerful economic interests were bound to respect. These speculative interests in central Arizona Territory’s Salt River Valley understood this and influenced federal bureaucrats and policymakers to adopt a scheme giving them access to the natural resources of the Gila River Indian Reservation. Led by A. J. Chandler and his Detroit investors, speculators took advantage of a series of poorly written, loosely interpreted, and badly managed federal laws at the turn of the twentieth century and initiated a battle over control of scarce American Indian land and water resources. At stake was the economic and cultural survival of the Pima residing on the Gila River Indian Reservation.

While the Pima successfully stopped Chandler’s scheme, they were unable to stop the economic transformation occurring around them. Lacking irrigation water needed to farm and sustain themselves, hundreds of Pima men cut thousands of acres of mesquite trees to sell. Chandler’s scheme also hastened allotment in severalty of the reservation, encouraged the consolidation of the Pima to the central portion of the reservation, and provided Pima funds for the continued development of the off-reservation Salt River Project.

But while it is easy to catapult Chandler into the role of a villain, the founder of the city that bears his name was a product of the social Darwinist philosophies of his day. Subscribing to the theory of survival of the fittest, Chandler used every means available to his advantage. A century later, the City of Chandler and the Gila River Indian Community remain neighbors and political partners that share common interests. In a twist of irony, the Gila River Indian community today accepts delivery of Salt River Project water through A. J. Chandler’s Consolidated Canal, and the northern branch of the Santan floodwater canal that a century ago was designed to carry water to Chandler’s ranch, now delivers irrigation water to reservation lands directly west of the former Chandler ranch. In ways A. J. Chandler never could have imagined, water today does indeed flow “down to the Gila.”

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