

# Primary Source: Opening of the Panama Canal

from The Times-Picayune, August 16, 1914

*Formally opened on August 15, 1914, the Panama Canal was considered a "wonder of the modern world." The project involved digging over 50 miles across the tropical Isthmus of Panama to connect the Atlantic Ocean/Gulf of Mexico with the Pacific Ocean. Previously, to navigate from one ocean to another required going thousands of miles south around the tip of South America and Cape Horn.*

*Work on the canal began in 1881 by France, but construction ceased because of numerous problems. The United States took over construction in 1904, and the canal was completed in 1914. The formal opening came just weeks after Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia which was the start of World War I.*

*This article from The Times-Picayune newspaper of New Orleans describes the opening and its impact for American shipping.*

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## OPENING OF THE PANAMA CANAL

The Panama Canal was officially opened yesterday when a large vessel of the War Department, the Ancon, went through from ocean to ocean. The event was celebrated locally—it was a public holiday along the isthmus—and from New Orleans and other cities interested in the canal and expecting to use it and profit by it, congratulatory telegrams poured in. The big affair will not come for several months. It has been expected and arranged for that every maritime nation should send some of its crack men-of-war to take part in a great naval parade through the canal next year, and naval displays were proposed for New York, New Orleans and San Francisco. Invitations had been extended to all countries, and even Switzerland had been asked to have some vessel as its representative at Panama.

What the celebration will be in the face of present European conditions it is impossible to say. It may be confined to our own fleet and that of our immediate neighbors. Even if the war is ended the chances are against such an international display as had been planned and as that attending the opening of the Suez Canal. Europe will be tired out, with no fever of festival and no desire for naval demonstrations. In the meanwhile, although the canal is now open, and vessels can operate through it, the government will continue to improve, to deepen it for larger vessels, and to make it wider, especially at the Culebra cut, which has been the most difficult portion of the canal from the very beginning.

Because of the European trouble and the generally demoralized condition of the world's merchant marine, the canal will not be used for commerce at the start to the extent that we had hoped for, and it will not be fair to take the first few months' record as giving any idea what it will do. It is

probable that a very large amount of the steamship tonnage going through the canal will be American coastwise vessels running between our Pacific and the Atlantic and Gulf coasts. It is gratifying to know that these vessels will include one or more lines from New Orleans, so that this city will get the share of the canal business it has expected.

While there may be some slight disappointment over the fact that the canal was completed during a period of war, when it will not receive the attention it deserves, Americans will realize how much it means for us, how opportune it is. We can now send vessels to the Atlantic or Pacific as we wish, and be ready for any emergency in either ocean. Let us note that it is completed just in time, when, because of the European war, America has been given an opportunity to extend its merchant marine and its commerce. We will enter the trade of the Pacific under the most encouraging circumstances and conditions.

All Americans will hail this great work of American genius, enterprise, courage and skill, the greatest engineering feat ever accomplished or even attempted by any land. In that rejoicing New Orleans, as the nearest American port to the canal, heartily and enthusiastically joins.

## Questions

1. The text says "naval displays were proposed for New York, New Orleans and San Francisco." Why do you think these cities were mentioned especially?
2. The text refers to the plan for all countries to participate, "even Switzerland." Why do you think it singled out Switzerland?
3. The article is from a New Orleans newspaper. Cite one quotation from the text that shows the article has a distinct point of view for New Orleans readers.
4. What does *demoralized* mean here: "the generally demoralized condition of the world's merchant marine"?