

**EXTRACTS FROM OFFICIAL  
PAPERS RELATING TO THE  
ISTHMIAN CANAL. 1515-  
1909, NO. 34, MARCH 1910**

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**ALBERT BUSHNELL HART & EDWARD CHANNING**

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1515-1909.

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### 1—1515, Sept. 25—Balboa's Discovery.

*Vaschus Nunnes* \* \* \* gathered an armye of a hundreth fourescore and tenne men. \* \* \* marched forward with his armye towarde the mountaynes, by the conducte of certeyne guydes and labourers which *Poncha* had gyuen hym, as well to leade hym the way, as also to cary his baggages and open the straights through the desolate places and craggy rockes full of the dennes of wylde beastes. \* \* \* By the helpe therfore of theyr guydes and labourers, with owre carpenters, he passed ouer the horrible mountaynes and many greate ryuers lyinge in the way, ouer the which he made brydges eyther with pyles or trunkes of trees. \* \* \* From the pal-aice of kynge *Poncha*, to the prospect of the other south sea, is only syxe dayes iorney: the which neuertheless by reaso of many hynderances and chaunces, and especially for lacke of vytayles, he coulde accomplyshe in noo lesse then. xxv. dayes. But at the length, the seuenth daye of the calendes of October, he behelde with woonderinge eyes the toppes of the hygh mountaynes shewed vnto hym by the guydes of *Quarequa*, from the whiche he myght see the other sea soo longe looked for, and neuer seene before of any man comynge owte of owre worlde. Approching therefore to the toppes of the mountaynes, he commaunded his armye to stey, and went him selfe alone to the toppe, as it were to take the fyrst possession therof. Where, faulynge prostrate vpon the grounde, and raysinge hym selfe ageyne vpon his knees as is the maner of the Christians to pray, lyftyng vppe his

eyes and handes towarde heauen, and directinge his face towarde the newe founde south sea, he poored fourth his humble and deuout prayers before almyghtie God as a spirituall sacrifice with thankes gyuing, that it had pleased his diuine maiestie to reserue vnto that day the victorie and praise of so greate a thyng vnto hym, beinge a man but of smaule witte and knowlege, of lyttle experience and base parentage. When he had thus made his prayers after his warlike maner he beckened with his hande to his coompanions to coome to hym, shewyng them the greate mayne sea heretofore vnknownen to th[e] inhabitantes of Europe, Aphrike, and Asia. \* \* \* he commaunded them to raise certeine heapes of stones in the steede of alters for a token of possession. Then descendyng from the toppes of the mountaynes, least such as might come after hym shulde argue hym of lyeing or falshod, he wrote the kyng of Castelles name here and there on the barkes of the trees bothe on the ryght hande and on the lefte: and raysed heapes of stones all the way that he went, vntyll he came to the region of the nexte kyngdome towarde the south whose name was *Chiapes*. \* \* \* Shortly after, by the conduct of *Chiapes* hym selfe, and certeyne of his men, departinge from the toppes of the mountaynes, he came in the space of foure dayes to the bankes of the newe sea: where assemblynge al his men togyther with the kynges scribes and notaries, they adicted al that maine sca with all the landes adiacent there vnto to the dominion and Empire of Castile.—*The Decades of the newe worlde* \* \* \* *wrytten* \* \* \* by Peter Martyr of Angleria, and translated into Englysshe by Rycharde Eden, 1555, folios 88-91.

## 2—1554—Gomara on a Canal.

Chap. CIII. As to the passage which might be made in order to go more quickly to the Moluccas.

So difficult and so long is the navigation to the Moluccas from Spain through the Strait of Magellan that, speaking thereof many times with men familiar with the Indies and with others versed in history and of inquiring minds, we have heard of a good passage, although a costly one. Which would not only be an advantageous one, but honorable for the maker of it, if it were made. This passage should be

made on the terra firma of the Indies opening from one sea to another, through one of four parts. Either by the river of Lagartos, which runs to the coast of the Nombre de Dios, rising in Chagre, four leagues from Panama, which are traversed in a cart. Or by the channel from the lake of Nicaragua, by which there ascend and descend great boats, and the lake is not more than 3 or 4 leagues from the sea: by either of these two rivers the passage is directed and half made. Also there is another river from Vera Cruz to Tecoahtepéc, along which vessels take to and fro, from one sea to another, the people of New Spain. From Nombre de Dios to Panama it is 17 leagues, and from the Gulf of Brava [Vraua] to the Gulf of San Miguel 25. Which are the two other parts, and the most difficult to open. Mountains exist, but there are hands. Give me who has the will to do it, and it can be done. Let there be no lack of courage and money will not be lacking, and the Indies, where the thing is to be done, give this. Considering the trade in spices, considering the wealth of the Indies, and for a King of Castile little is that which it is possible to do. [This last sentence is ambiguous.] \* \* \* If this passage which we have spoken of were made, there would be cut off a third part of the navigation. Those who went to the Moluccas would go always thither from the Canaries, along the Zodiac and through a climate free from cold, and through territory of Castile without the opposition of enemies. It would be of advantage also for our own Indies, for people would go to Peru and to other provinces in the same vessels which they took from Spain, and so there would be avoided much expenditure and labor.—Translated by J. D. M. Ford from Francisco Lopez de Gomara, *La Historia General Delas Indias*, 1554, folios 135-136.

### 3—1602—Champlain on a Canal.

In this place of Panama is collected all the gold and silver which comes from Peru, and where it is embarked, with other riches, upon a little river, which rises in the mountains, and descends to Porto-bello; which river is four leagues from Panama, from whence all the gold, silver, and merchandise must be conveyed on mules: and being embarked on the said river, there are but eighteen leagues to Porto-bello.



One may judge that, if the four leagues of land which there are from Panama to this river were cut through, one might pass from the south sea to the ocean on the other side, and thus shorten the route by more than fifteen hundred leagues; and from Panama to the Straits of Magellan, would be an island, and from Panama to the New-foundlands would be another island, so that the whole of America would be in two islands.—Samuel Champlain, *Narrative of a Voyage to the West Indies and Mexico*, pp. 41-42.

#### 4—1701—William Paterson's Exposition.

The first and most considerable of these places is the Isthmus of America, \* \* \* This country is in a great degree mountainous, and in most places not easily passable, especially from the north to the south; and therefore it is that in all this tract of land there is reckoned but four ordinary passes between the one and the other sea, \* \* \* The first of the passes is that of the before-mentioned river of Chagre; the which, although it be barred, as are almost all those upon this coast by reason of the contrary or interfering winds, tides, and currents, yet is not the bar such but that ships of two or three hundred tons may go in and out; and, when in, there is safe riding under a very strong and almost inaccessible castle. The convenience of the water carriage of this river continues for about eighteen Spanish, or twenty-two French leagues, to a place called Venta Crucis. From Venta Crucis to Panama, upon the South Sea, there is by land about eight short French leagues, six whereof is so level that a canal might easily be cut through, and the other two leagues are not so very high and impracticable ground, but that a cut might likewise be made were it in these places of the world, but, considering the present circumstances of things in those, it would not be so easy. However, in the mean time, with no great pains and expense, a good and passable way, not only for man and horse, as it already is, but for carts, waggons, or other sort of carriage, might easily be made.

The South Sea part of this pass, being that of Panama, might also be made an excellent harbour as any in the world, although, by the negligent and untoward management of the Spaniards, it be not very convenient, and no ways

safe, had they but the least apprehension of enemies in the South Seas.—*The Writings of William Paterson*, Vol. I., pp. 140-141.

### 5—1825—Humboldt's Observations.

The five points that present the practicability of a communication from sea to sea, are situated between the 5th and 18th degrees of north latitude. \* \* \* The isthmus of Nicaragua and that of Cupica [Darien] have always appeared to me the most favourable for the formation of *canals of large dimensions*, \* \* \* the trade of Europe and the United States with the *fur coast* (between the mouth of the Columbia and Cook river), with the Sandwich Islands, rich in sandal wood, with India and China, \* \* \* require[s] ships of great tonnage, that admit of being heavily laden, natural or artificial passes, of the mean depth of from 15 to 17 feet, and an uninterrupted navigation, requiring no unloading of the vessels. These conditions are indispensable, \* \* \*

With respect to the mode of execution, on which I have been recently consulted by well-informed persons belonging to the new governments of Equinoxial America, I believe that a joint stock association can only be formed when the practicability of an oceanic canal capable of receiving vessels of three or four hundred tons, between the latitudes 7° and 18°, has been proved, and the ground fixed upon and recognised. I shall abstain from discussing the question whether this ground "should form a separate republic by the name of *Junctiana*, dependant on the confederation of the United States," as it has been recently proposed in England, by a man whose intentions are always the most praiseworthy and disinterested. But whatever government may claim the soil on which the great junction canal of the Ocean shall be established, the benefit of this hydraulic work ought to belong to every nation of both worlds who shall have contributed to its execution by taking shares. \* \* \*

When we study attentively the history of the commerce of nations, we observe that the direction of the communications with India has not been changed solely according to the progress of geographical knowledge, or the improvement of the art of navigation, but that the change of the seat of civilization in the world has also powerfully contributed to

this effect. From the time of the Phenicians to that of the British empire, the activity of commerce has been carried progressively from east to west; from the eastern coast of the Mediterranean to the western extremity of Europe. If this change continues moving towards the west, which every thing leads us to presume, the question on the preference given to the way to India by the southern extremity of Africa, will no longer be such as it now is. The canal of Nicaragua affords additional advantages to ships going from the mouth of the Mississippi, beyond what it promises to those which take in their lading on the banks of the Thames. In comparing the different routes round the Cape of Good Hope, round Cape Horn, or across a cut of the isthmus of central America, we must carefully distinguish between the objects of trade, and the nations engaged in it. The problem respecting the way presents itself in a manner altogether different to an English merchant, and to an Anglo-American; as the problem regarding Chili, must be differently solved by those who trade directly with India and China, or those whose speculations are directed either towards northern Peru and the western coast of Guatimala and Mexico, towards China, after having visited the north-west coast of America, or towards the fishery of Cachelot in the Pacific Ocean. These three latter objects of the navigation of the nations of Europe and of the United States, would be the most indubitably benefited by the cutting of an American isthmus. \* \* \* The comparison is much less favourable across central America, with respect to space and time, for a direct trade with India and China. \* \* \* The principal and real object of the opening of the isthmus is the prompt communication with the western coast of America, the voyage from the Havannah, and the United States to Manilla, the expeditions made from England and the Massachusetts to the fur-coast (north-west coast) or to the islands of the Pacific Ocean, to visit afterwards the markets of Canton and Macao.

I shall add to these commercial considerations some political views on the effects which the projected junction of the seas may produce. Such is the state of modern civilization, that the trade of the world can undergo no great changes that are not felt in the organization of society. If the project of cutting the isthmus that joins the two Americas,