THE AMERICAN INTER-OCEANIC SHIP CANAL QUESTION

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DANIEL AMMEN

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Inter-Oceanic Ship Canal

QUESTION.

BY

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INTRODUCTORY.

Circumstances which occurred nearly a quarter of a century ago, briefly mentioned in the following paper read before the American Geographical Society of New York, fixed my attention on the question of the possibility of the construction of an inter-oceanic ship canal across this continent.

Owing to the approaching struggle into which we soon passed, and the perturbation which preceded and followed it, no possibility of making further explorations occurred for years.

In the early part of the winter of 1866 I was in Washington, in command of a vessel of war. At my request, Rear-Admiral Chas. H. Davis, Superintendent of the Naval Observatory, prepared a map on a large scale of the narrow part of this continent for General Grant, with whom I had the pleasure of discussing what was then known and what was still in doubt respecting the topography of that region. This led to one or more visits to Mr. Seward, then Secretary of State, whose reception of the subject of making further explorations at that time made General Grant averse to seeing him further in relation to this matter.

Mr. Conness, then Senator from California, offered a Resolution calling for information from the Superintendent of the Naval Observatory, which was given during that year, 1866. He continued his interest in this subject, and finally obtained an appropriation for making inter-oceanic surveys in the winter of 1869. In the mean time General Grant had been elected President, and did not fail to do all in his power, through his subordinates, in forwarding surveys, which, when terminated, left no part of the topography of the Isthmus in doubt, so far, at least, as their possibility for the construction of a ship canal was concerned.

Under a Resolution of Congress, as President, he appointed a Commission on March 13th, 1872, consisting of the Chief of Bureau of Engineers, U. S. A., the Superintendent of the Coast Survey, and the Chief of Bureau of Navigation, U. S. N., to examine into, make suggestions, and report upon the subject.

This Commission found further information indispensable; it informed the President that a close instrumental examination of the Isthmus of Panama in the immediate region of the Panama railroad was necessary to a full consideration of the subject. The President directed an immediate execution of this work, which was completed with the least possible delay. The Commission then decided, and reported to the President on the 7th of February, 1876, in the following terms:—

"That the route known as the 'Nicaragua route' possesses, both for the construction and maintenance of a canal, greater advantages, and offers fewer difficulties from engineering, commercial, and economic points of view, than any one of the other routes shown to be practicable by surveys sufficiently in detail to enable a judgment to be formed of their relative merits as will be briefly presented in the appended memorandum."

Owing to reasons not fully known to me, and difficulties which I will not surmise, no actual progress was made in bringing about or furthering the construction of the work previous to the expiration of the Presidential term in March, 1877, when General Grant went out of office.

To my personal knowledge, General Grant did not at that time, nor until recently, have any disposition to participate in the work of construction of a ship canal. When great difficulties arose, in propositions for making a canal at the ocean-level at Panama, apparently without regard to any commercial consideration of the question, or of the permanency of the work, he probably regarded it of such great importance to our future commerce, and that of the world generally, as to express a willingness to aid actively in its construction on a route which presents relatively economical conditions for construction, and permanency, as far as it is possible in such works.

Whether this canal will or will not be made depends upon the appreciation of its merits; not upon what is *possible*, but what is certain of realization with a given amount of expenditure. To make its construction an assured fact, its appreciation must be by the moneyed interests of the world, and notably by those of the United States and of Great Britain, whose interests in the construction of such a work are so largely preponderant to those of other peoples and nations.

From page 608 of the "Proceedings of the Royal Geographical Society of London" for September, in noting the proceedings of the Geographical Society of Paris, I quote the following:—

"M. de Lesseps announces that the subscriptions for 800,000 shares, at 500 francs each, of the Panama Inter-Oceanic Canal Company, would be opened on the 6th of August. He expressed himself astonished, and even disappointed, that the project was advancing so smoothly. A little serious opposition would have been agreeable to him."

Whilst not sharing his sentiments as to the agreeability of contentions, I should say that if an opposition to him, or rather his project, from a preference of another route for a ship canal, is agreeable to him, so much the better. We may well wish him all the success that the merit of his project possesses on physical conditions only, and may regret any injury to it from "diplomatic or political intervention," should it be supposed desirable or possible.

SURVEYS AND RECONNOISSANCES FROM 1870 TO 1875 FOR A SHIP CANAL ACROSS THE AMERICAN ISTHMUS.

BY COMMODORE DANIEL AMMEN.

WASHINGTON, D. C., October 21, 1876.

HON. CHAS. P. DALY, *President Am. Geographical Society, N. Y.*

DEAR SIR:—In reply to the request of the Society for information in regard to the recent surveys which have been executed by the Government of the United States for a Transcontinental Ship Canal across the American Isthmus, I very cheerfully send you the enclosed communication, placing it at the disposal of the Society. In presenting the paper relating to these surveys, a brief explanation may, however, be expected from me by at least some of your members.

More than twenty years ago I was attracted to the consideration of this subject by the then published accounts of the coincident attempts by the English, the French, and ourselves, in the vicinity of Caledonia Bay, to discover the pretended Cullen route,—a route disproved by those three parties, but which, having been again insisted upon as feasible, was recently shown by the American Expedition (1870) to be a physical impossibility, by reason of the elevation of the water-shed adjacent to and across the "divide" near Caledonia Bay, the chief streams of which water-shed flow into the Pacific.

At the date referred to, the English, working from the Savannah River, ran a line of levels towards Caledonia Bay and reached the waters of the Sucubti, the stream north and west of the Caledonia Bay range of mountains, at a height sufficient to show the impracticability of the route.

The French seem to have abandoned their work without producing instrumental results indicating in any degree a hope of success.

The American party, under Lieut. Strain of the Navy, ascended the mountain range from the bay, reached the Sucubti on the Pacific slope, and without the use of instruments of precision, followed the tortuous stream to the Chucunaque, and made their way down that still more tortuous stream, with the loss of more than half of their