

# THE HOUSTON SHIP CHANNEL

By THOMAS HENRY BALL

**H**OW a "Navigation District"—composed of the City of Houston and a portion of Harris County, in which Houston is located—went into partnership with "Uncle Sam" to build a ship channel 50 miles long and 25 feet deep, at a cost of \$2,500,000, is interestingly told in the article which follows. Thomas Henry Ball, the writer of the article, represented the Eighth Texas District in Congress for eight years.

**T**HIS waterway project contemplates a channel 25 feet deep and 50 miles long, running from Galveston harbor to a point within the city limits of Houston, where it terminates in a turning basin 800 feet in diameter.

For one-half its length the channel runs through Galveston Bay, and for the other through Buffalo Bayou. This portion of the channel is a landlocked harbor, giving safe shelter from storms, and, being an arm of the sea, it depends on tidewater and not on rainfall for its water supply.

A section of the 12-foot channel made under the project of 1871, which extends from the turning basin at Long Beach to the foot of Main Street in Houston, will be maintained for the use of light-draft boats. The new project for a depth of 25 feet was recommended and the first appropriation for the work was made in 1900. Within the next ten years \$2,500,000 had been appropriated and expended, but the channel was only half completed.

The citizens of Houston and Harris County, being unwilling to wait upon the slow process of dribble appropriations, sent to Washington, in 1910, a committee representing the city, the county and all the commercial bodies, and proposed that, if Congress would authorize a contract for the completion of the work at a cost not to exceed \$2,500,000, the County of Harris and the City of Houston would organize a Navigation District and issue bonds to provide half the amount needed.

Congress accepted this proposal to match dollars with the Government,



which proved the confidence of the citizens of Houston in their own project, and, in the River and Harbor act of June 25, 1910, appropriated \$300,000 and authorized a continuing contract for the completion of the work at a cost not to exceed \$2,500,000, conditioned that the Harris County Ship Channel Navigation District should make provision for furnishing the sum of \$1,250,000 and place to the credit of the Secretary of War in a United States depository the sum of \$300,000.

Houston and Harris County complied with their part of the proposal, organized the district, issued the bonds, which were taken by the local banking institutions of Houston, made the required deposit, and satisfied the Secretary of War that the balance from the Navigation District had been provided. Thereupon a contract, calling for the completion of the work in about three years, was let for a total cost of \$2,365,791.

When completed, this channel will be a great factor in the commerce of Texas and of the entire country. Houston is the largest railroad center in Texas, having seventeen railroads, which here meet the sea. The principal railway systems have acquired extensive facilities for terminals on the channel, and numbers of persons and corporations have purchased waterfrontage to meet the demands of existing commerce and the largely increased volume which is sure to come.

The City of Houston has 177 acres of land abutting on the turning basin, and has constructed slips and is erecting



THE YACHT "HORNET," FORMERLY OWNED BY PIERPONT MORGAN, IN THE TURNING BASIN—THE TERMINATION OF THE HOUSTON SHIP CHANNEL

wharves to accommodate shippers without charge. The city thus has an investment worth more than half a million dollars to guarantee users of the ship channel against excessive port and wharf charges, and it is expected that this progressive action upon the part of the city will compel railway companies to absorb all wharf charges.

At Harrisburg, two miles below the turning basin, extensive improvements are being made in the way of warehouses and cotton compresses which are now in

use and capable of handling a large volume of business. In straightening the channel a number of cut-offs were made, and the bed of the old channel will form at such points valuable storage basins.

Twenty miles from Houston on the ship channel is the scene of the battle of San Jacinto, where the Texas troops under General Houston achieved a signal victory over the Mexican army led in person by General Santa Anna, which eventuated in freeing Texas from Mexican domination and its settled status as a republic, after-



BATTLEFIELD PARK—TWENTY MILES FROM HOUSTON ON THE SHIP CHANNEL—THE SCENE OF THE BATTLE OF SAN JACINTO



HOUSTON IS THE LARGEST INTERIOR COTTON PORT OF THE WORLD

wards to become the empire state of the Union. This historic spot is included in a tract of several hundred acres owned by the State of Texas and known as Battlefield Park.

Houston is the largest interior cotton port in the world and the ship channel, even in its uncompleted state, carries annually to deep water at Galveston for shipment about 500,000 bales of cotton. The tonnage now handled is valued at forty million dollars annually, which is only an indication of the great volume to come when the channel is ready for sea-going vessels drawing 25 feet of water. A greater depth is only a matter of digging and throwing out dirt, and the great and increasing demand for harbor facilities on the Gulf coast will insure additional depth when needed.

The Houston ship channel improvement is in no sense antagonistic to the great Gulf harbor at Galveston. The expenditure of many millions at Galveston by the National Government has been amply justified by the result. It is estimated that the saving to the grain growers of Kansas and Nebraska alone in one year after the completion of the Galveston

project saved shippers more than the entire amount expended by the Government in securing deep water.

Just across from Galveston, on the main land, Texas City has built extensive terminals, docks and wharves and is handling a large commerce, served by a deep water channel from Texas City to Galveston harbor. At Bolivar, on the opposite main land, the Santa Fe Railway has constructed large terminal facilities, and added to the value of the Galveston harbor as a national improvement.

Thus, with Galveston harbor proper and the splendid facilities already existing there, the use of the Bolivar and Texas City facilities, in connection with the greater Galveston improvement to come; supplemented by the Houston Ship Channel which, after entering Buffalo Bayou, has 25 miles on either bank of opportunity for commercial facilities, we shall have on the Gulf coast to accommodate the vast commerce of Texas and the section west of the Mississippi River, harbor, dock, wharf and terminal facilities unequalled elsewhere in the United States, with the possible exception of the great harbor of New York.