

The SS Ancon and the Opening of the Panama Canal

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U.S. construction on the Panama Canal began with an official ceremony on 4 May 1904, and the canal officially opened on 15 August 1914. Opening ceremonies were dramatically scaled back due to the outbreak of World War I on 28 July 1914. The Panama Canal was completed at a cost of more than \$350 million, the most expensive construction project in U.S. history to that point. Of the approximately 56,000 workers employed between 1904 and 1913, about 5,600 died during construction. Recognized by the American Society of Engineers in 1994 as one of the seven wonders of the modern world, the canal hosted its 1 millionth passing ship in September 2010.

The first ship to officially transit the Panama Canal was the SS *Ancon* on opening day. This official crossing was the centerpiece of the scaled back opening ceremonies and carried 200 foreign dignitaries. Her sister ship, *Cristobal*, had unofficially transited on 3 August, as had *Alexandre La Valley* (an old French crane boat).

The vessel was launched in December 1901 and completed in 1902 by Maryland Steel for the Boston Steamship Line. Originally the ship was known as the SS *Shawmut* with sailings from the Pacific Northwest to the Philippines, Japan, and China. In 1909 the ship came under the ownership of the Panama Railroad Steamship Line. It was in turn owned by the Panama Railroad Company that was part of the Panama Canal since having been bought by the U.S. government in about 1903. The ship was renamed *Ancon* in 1909 for the Pacific terminal of the canal at Ancon. The ship was



used mainly to transport cement from the U.S. to Panama during construction.

Each of the 200 dignitaries received a 38 millimeter diameter bronze medal, shown above. It has a very ornate design depicting a ship passing through the canal with a classic female figure standing on the prow. With outstretched arms, she touches two world globes depicting the eastern and western hemispheres. The design also depicts two ribbons, one inscription in Latin reads “COLUMBIA UNITES THE OCEANS” and the other “PROSPERITY TO ALL NATIONS.”

A total of 50,000 individually numbered medals were produced which were apparently also available in some fashion at the 1915 San Francisco World’s Fair that celebrated the completion of the Panama Canal. The medals are not rare, nor are they made of precious metal, but to my surprise are nevertheless counterfeited quite often. I also found in a cursory search that at auction the medals run in the range of \$225 to \$250.

Two stamps depicting the *Ancon* are shown at bottom left. The 5¢ Canal Zone stamp (Scott #123) was part of a set issued 15 August 1939 – the 25th anniversary of the opening of the canal. A 4¢ green stamp had been prepared as part of the set, but it was never printed. The second stamp to show the *Ancon* and Panama Canal was released by the USPS in 1998 as part of the Celebrate the Century series. The 32¢ stamp is Scott# 3183f.

The Panama Canal Zone acquired another ship in 1939, an ocean liner, that was also named *Ancon*. A few years later it was requisitioned by the U.S. military for use during World War II as a troop transport to Australia and other South Pacific ports. Do not confuse the ships if doing research.

I have a personal connection to the opening of the Panama Canal: Arturo Primelles, my great-grandfather, was the Cuban representative at the opening ceremonies and was on board the SS *Ancon* as it transited the Panama Canal on 15 August 1914.



Two stamps showing the *Ancon* transiting the Panama Canal.