



Working the Houston Ship Channel: "Tote that barge! Lift that bale!"

By Debbie Z. Harwell

As Houston marks the centennial of its deep-water channel, the contributions of many individuals have been highlighted: the Allen brothers who selected the city's site on Buffalo Bayou, Charles Morgan who dredged the channel to accommodate the first ocean-going steamship, Congressman Tom Ball who secured approval for the "Houston Plan," a federal/local partnership to fund a deep-water channel, and Jesse H. Jones who persuaded local bankers to buy the bonds. Certainly without the vision of these men, Houston would not now rank as the largest port in tonnage and petrochemicals in the United States.

The success of the Houston Ship Channel and the Port of Houston is built on more than the determination of businessmen, however. Since its earliest days the city has acted as a magnet for people coming here to look for work, particularly in jobs associated with the ship channel and the burgeoning industries along its banks. Whether building the railroads to transport goods to and from the port, loading and unloading the ships that called here, or navigating vessels and barges along the waterway, the people—the Houston workforce—have made this economic engine successful.

Workers on the deck of the SS Sula on July 28, 1922, at the Port of Houston. Ship arrivals at the port had doubled between 1919 and 1921, doubled again in 1923, and again in 1926. By 1930 the number reached 2,100 ships, surpassing the Port of Galveston.¹

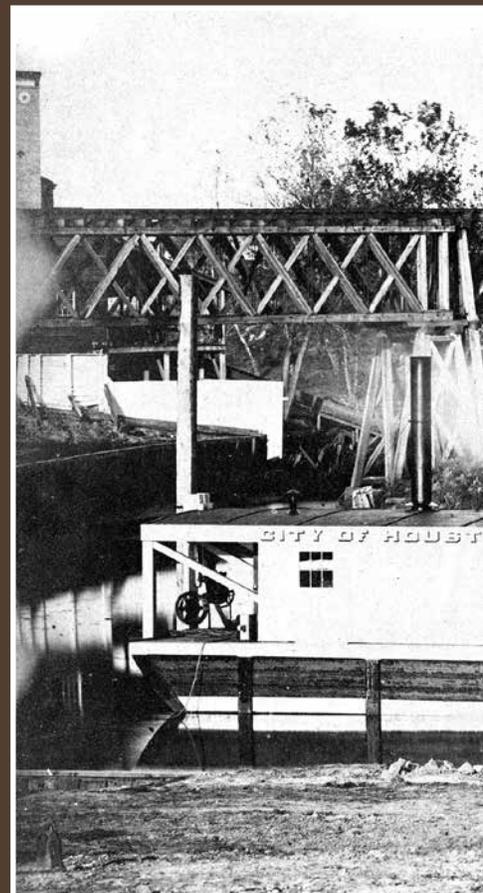
Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0100-0625.





Two sailors from the destroyer USS Purdy observe the submarine USS Odax, circa 1950. The Purdy, which saw action in World War II and Korea, was conducting naval reserve training during this time. In 1947, the two-year-old Odax became the first sub converted to a "Guppy" (Greater Underwater Propulsion Power), making it the fastest U.S. submarine.³

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGJ0001-0102.



Employers needed workers badly during World War II. Here Shipyard Bus Lines loads workers to transport them from downtown to the shipyards in 1943. Houston Shipbuilding Corporation (later Todd Houston) had a steam-powered train carrying workers to the shipyard three times a day.

Photo by John Vachon courtesy of the Library of Congress.





◀ *Agriculture products from across the country made their way through the Port of Houston, including this shipment of Thompson Seedless Sun-Maid Raisins from California.*

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS 0200-0042.



▲ *For the stevedores who loaded cotton onto freighters, the work was long, hard, and hot. Cotton, which had dominated local trade in the nineteenth century, remained an important commodity, and by 1930 the Port of Houston led the nation in cotton exports. Before 1950 it took men two to three weeks to load a ship's cargo in the Gulf ports, but that changed with containerization. Ships could turn around in a day.²*

Photo by Russell Lee courtesy of the Library of Congress.



From its earliest days, the Houston Ship Channel depended on dredge boats and dredgers to make the waterway accessible to increasingly larger ships as well as to maintain its depth. Captain Charles Crotty became superintendent of dredging in 1912 after directing surveying efforts on the channel for eight years. He served as assistant port director from 1922 to 1945, and in 1950 the port honored him by naming its new fireboat the Captain Crotty.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0029-0002.



Even trains can travel by sea. Crane operators unload a railroad car for the Mexican railroad company Ferrocarril del Sureste, circa 1950s. The completion of the company's line in 1950 marked a decades-long effort, which was stymied by mountainous terrain, torrential rains, disease, and World War II, to unite three railroads from different parts of Mexico.⁴

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGJ0001-0194.



◀ Although you rarely see their captains and crew, tugs regularly move cargo up and down the channel on barges like this one loaded with equipment for Brown & Root in 1967. Three tug companies operated in Houston at the time: Bay-Houston Towing Company, Intra-coastal Towing and Transportation Corporation, and Suderman & Young Towing Company.⁵

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGJ0001-0286.

▼ This 1964 exhibit for the fiftieth anniversary of the Houston Ship Channel focused on the Port of Houston as a center for global trade. Just two years earlier, the city had opened the Houston World Trade building, the first built as a “focal point for world trade activity of a port and community.” Designed as a central location for international trade, it included consular offices as well as transportation companies, importers, and exporters who depended upon Houston’s labor force to keep the flow of goods moving.⁶

Photo courtesy of the Digital Library, Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston.

