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Pacific Historical Review (1945) 14 (3): 290–302.

<https://doi.org/10.2307/3635892>



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The Diplomatic Struggle for the Carolines, 1898

PEARLE E. QUINN

I

AT THE CONFERENCE of the United Nations in San Francisco, there was considerable discussion of strategic islands in the Pacific. Among these islands are the Carolines, a group of atolls scattered over a vast expanse of ocean and lying north of New Guinea, east of the Philippines, south of Guam in the Marianas, and west of the Marshalls. Among the Carolines are some names that are familiar because they have appeared in headlines—Yap and Truk for instance—and some less familiar such as Ponapé and Kusaie. The United States might have come into possession of all of these islands in 1898 when, as a result of our victories, the Spanish empire in the Pacific was in liquidation. Our Department of State and our representatives at the peace conference with Spain took a lukewarm interest in acquiring one of the islands as a possible cable station, but neither our statesmen nor our public opinion considered the Carolines of enough strategic importance to be worth more than a perfunctory effort to get them. But there were others who did realize the strategic importance of these atolls. They made the effort and secured them. How the Germans went to work and in the end obtained the Carolines and our blessing is an interesting story revealing the immaturity of our diplomacy at the moment of our debut as a world power and our lack of knowledge and interest in a part of the world destined, because we were a world power, to become increasingly important to us.

American contact with the Carolines began in the early part of the nineteenth century when New England whaling ships used to stop at Port Lot on the island of Aru in the Ponapé group.¹ Missionaries went out from Boston to establish stations in 1852 on the islands of Ponapé and Kusaie. Their work progressed slowly at first, but in 1887 Judson Smith, Foreign Secretary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, reported missionary activity on more than thirty islands; this activity had resulted in fifty churches with 5,250 communicants, six high schools with 175 pupils, and thirty-seven day schools with 2,600 pupils, and the translation of the Bible into five native languages.² Following the missionaries a few American traders went to the islands, and in 1882 a party of American scientists sailed for the Carolines to

¹ United States, *Consular Reports*, September, 1898, Vol. 216, p. 15.

² Smith to Bayard, August 30, 1887. *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1892, Vol. 397. Cited hereafter as U.S., *Foreign Relations*.

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