

THE PANAMA CANAL

A Vital Maritime Link for the World

When the *SS Ancon* sailed across the Isthmus of Panama on August 15, 1914, it ushered in the transformation of the American continent and the creation of a vital sea link for the entire world. The American historical writer David McCullough said that the construction of the canal that linked the Atlantic and Pacific oceans was more than a vast, unprecedented feat of engineering.

Its construction was of sweeping historic importance not unlike that of a war, he wrote in his book about the canal, and it has impacted the lives of tens of thousands of people, regardless of class, of virtually every race and nationality.

The earliest concept for the canal dates to the early 16th century when Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor and king of Spain, suggested it might shorten travel to and from Ecuador and Peru. However, the first attempt to build it began in 1880 under a French-led consortium, similar to one created to build the Suez Canal. The effort ultimately collapsed and the United States stepped in to finish construction. In 1902, the U.S. Senate

considered legislation to build a canal in Nicaragua instead of Panama, but an amendment offered by Senator John Spooner of Wisconsin won over the Senate. The U.S. House of Representatives easily approved the legislation that President Theodore Roosevelt (1901-1909) signed into law. After considerable problems negotiating a treaty with Colombia, which at the time controlled Panama, the United States finally won approval to build the canal with the newly independent government of Panama in 1904.

Construction on the canal was completed in 1914. It is approximately 77 kilometers (48 miles) in length and consists of two artificial lakes, several improved and artificial channels, and three sets of locks. An additional artificial lake, Alajuela Lake, acts as a reservoir for the canal. The canal is a key conduit for international shipping, accommodating more than 14,000 ships annually, carrying more than 203

million metric tons of cargo. The S-shaped canal connects the Gulf of Panama in the Pacific Ocean with the Caribbean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean.

During construction, approximately 27,500 workers died out of the more than 80,000 total workers employed by the French and the American companies, in particular from two tropical diseases—malaria and yellow fever. Work by Army surgeon Walter Reed led to the creation of a yellow fever vaccine that, along with new preventive medicine techniques, eradicated the disease in the area.

The key value of the canal is the reduced time needed to reach one ocean from the other. Prior to its construction, ships had to sail around Cape Horn at the southernmost tip of the American continent with a distance of 22,500 kilometers (14,000 miles) from New York to San Francisco. Today, travel from New York to San

Francisco through the canal is a distance of 9,500 kilometers (6,000 miles).

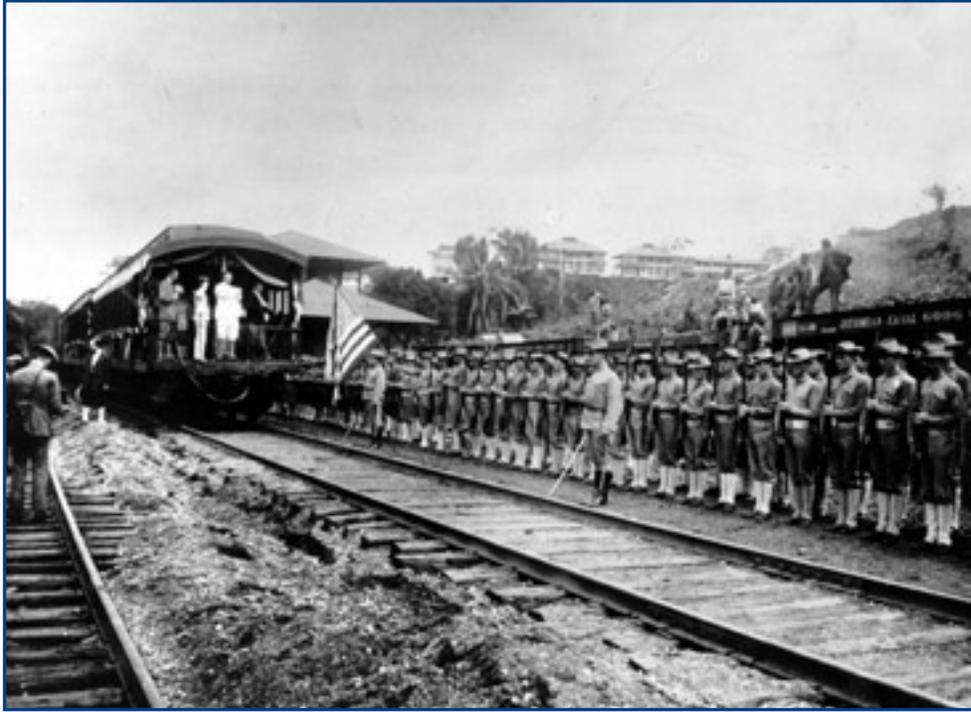
Negotiations to settle Panamanian claims, after World War II, that the canal rightfully belonged to Panama began in 1974 and resulted in the Torrijos-Carter Treaty. President Jimmy Carter (1977-1981) and Panamanian President Omar Torrijos signed the treaty on September 7, 1977. Final handover of the canal was completed on December 31, 1999. ■



AP/WWP

President Theodore Roosevelt, center, tests a steam shovel at the Culebra Cut during construction of the Panama Canal, a project he championed, November 1906. Roosevelt's visit to Panama made him the first sitting U.S. president to travel abroad.

Building the Canal



AP/WWP

President Theodore Roosevelt, wearing white at the rear of the train, reviews American troops in the Panama Canal Zone during an inspection of canal construction work in November 1906.

The Pedro Miguel Locks are pictured under construction in the Panama Canal Zone on June 9, 1912. The 48-mile-long canal, which opened August 14, 1914, comprised of six locks, became a shortcut for sea passage across Central America. The canal cost approximately \$352 million.



AP/WWP

Transferring Control

A cargo ship passes through the Miraflores Locks on the Pacific side of the Panama Canal, December 13, 1999. Then President Jimmy Carter represented the United States in a ceremony transferring the canal to Panamanian control, which took effect on December 31, 1999.



AP/WWP



Courtesy: Jimmy Carter Library

Then President Jimmy Carter (left) and Panamanian President Omar Torrijos at the signing of the Panama Canal Treaty September 7, 1977. The United States agreed in the treaty to transfer control of the canal to Panama by December 31, 1999.

Panamanian Foreign Minister Jose Miguel Aleman, from left, Minister of the Panama Canal Ricardo Marinelli, Panamanian President Mireya Moscoso, U.S. Secretary of the Army and chairman of the Panama Canal Commission Louis Caldera, and U.S. Ambassador Simon Ferro stand during ceremonies transferring the Panama Canal to Panamanian control December 31, 1999. The United States had controlled the canal since it opened in August 1914.



AP/WWP