

Panama Canal

For many years, sailors had wished for a shortened way to navigate their ships from the Pacific Ocean to the Atlantic. At the turn of the century, the journey took seven thousand miles (11,270 kilometers). However, beginning on August 15, 1914, it became a trip of forty miles (64.4 kilometers).

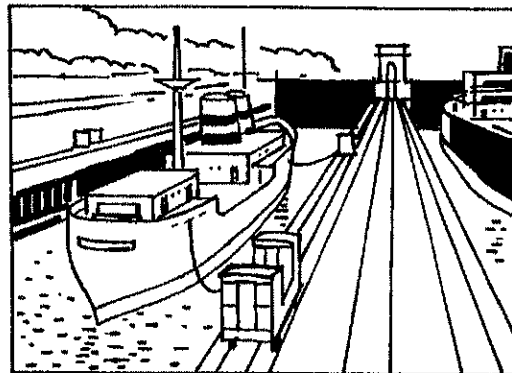
Panama is a small nation lying at the base of Central America and at the northwest corner of Columbia, South America. Its area is relatively narrow. In the 1880s, the French attempted to build a canal across the nation, but their plans were ineffective. They also had to deal with rampant jungle diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. France gave up its efforts.

In 1904, the United States, under the leadership of President Theodore Roosevelt, gained the rights to build a canal through Panama. The project began with a vengeance. Americans arrived in Central America by the thousands, hoping to capitalize on high wages. However, the problems of disease and climate were the same for the Americans as they had been for the French. In order to succeed, different tactics had to be taken.

President Roosevelt hired a chief engineer, General George W. Goethals, to head the project. Goethals and his team developed a system of locks that would raise and lower the water level for the passage of ships. General William Gorgas was brought on board to curb the effects of malaria and yellow fever. Although he was not able to stop the diseases, he did reduce the death toll from thirty-nine per thousand workers in 1906 to seven per thousand workers by 1914. However, throughout the project, nearly six thousand workers died.

The entire project required the removal of 240 million cubic yards of earth. The number of workers employed reached, at its peak, 40,000, and the cost for the project, which took ten years to complete, was more than \$350 million.

Finally complete in summer 1914, the Panama Canal let pass its first ship, the *Alcon*, on August 15 with a shipload of officials on board. As they sailed the meager miles from ocean to ocean, no one seemed to mind the toll the canal had taken, and they rejoiced in the fifteen or so hours it took to sail completely through the passage. Although the canal could never repay the lives lost, it has more than repaid the financial costs. Today, approximately seventy ships pass through the canal each day at a cost of approximately \$7,000 in tolls.



Suggested Activities

Cartography Draw Panama and the location of the canal on a map. Also draw a map showing the route that needed to be taken by ships prior to the canal's completion in 1914.

Disease Find out about malaria and yellow fever and how they were treated in the years of the Panama Canal's construction. Also find out how they are treated today.

Research and Discussion Find out the importance to the United States of the Panama Canal. Determine why it was considered worth spending lives and money in order to construct the canal. Discuss what you find.

History Trace the history of the canal from the time it was built until the present. Does the United States still maintain rights to the canal?