

The Panama Canal

Opening Discussion: Look at a map of the world. In the 1800s, prior to the building of railroads, people would travel from the East Coast to the West Coast by boat. They would have to travel all the way around South America to reach the other side of the country. How long do you think that took? Was that an efficient way to travel?

In 1901 President McKinley was assassinated. Theodore Roosevelt returned to the United States after the war and became president from 1901 to 1909. President Roosevelt believed that traveling around South America to ship people and goods to the West Coast was unreasonable. He decided that we needed to build a canal that would link the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans and save ships the lengthy and costly trip around the southern tip of South America.

The easiest place to build this was at the narrowest point in Central America. This point was the isthmus of Panama. An **isthmus** is a slim strip of land that has sea on either side and forms a link between two larger pieces of land.

Panama was a part of the South American country of Colombia. Roosevelt attempted to purchase the land from the Colombian government but they would not sell it. Roosevelt then came up with another plan. He told the

people of Panama that he would help them get their independence if they would sell him the land. Once they had their independence, Panama agreed to sell the land to the United States. The Panama Canal could now be built.

Building the canal turned out to be a long, arduous, hazardous, and expensive task, though. It took about 10 years to complete. At one point, construction on the canal stopped and the U.S. had to take over. Many of the workers got sick in the process of building it. Some even got sick with malaria and yellow fever. The workers had to cut through jungles and swamps to get the job done and they came across many dangerous creatures, including rats that carried the bubonic plague. In addition, there were roughly 30 million pounds of explosives that had to be detonated. Approximately 5,600 people died during the U.S. construction of the canal. When the entire process was finished, the project had cost \$40 million to complete.

In August of 1914, the Panama Canal was finally finished. While it took about 8 to 10 hours to travel through the canal, this was a fraction of the time ships had once spent traveling around South America. The canal uses locks to move boats from one level to the next. In order to pass, boats pay a toll based on the ship's cargo space or weight.