

## The Panama Canal - From the Atlantic Through the Pacific

The Panama Canal is a man-made transoceanic route that was first constructed by the French and completed by the Americans in 1914. It was made to shorten the travel time needed by ships needing to get to the Atlantic from the Pacific, and vice versa. Its two ends are at the Gulf of Panama, and the Caribbean.

The United States previously controlled the Panama Canal Zone, but it was turned over to the Panama Canal Authority on December 31, 1999.

### How the Canal Came to Be

The idea to build a canal in the Gulf of Panama was the brainchild of Charles V of Spain, the Holy Roman Emperor, who suggested in 1532 that the passage would ease shipping for the Spain-Peru route. The suggestion was then studied by explorer Alessandro Malaspina during a voyage in 1788-1793. Malaspina even came up with construction plans.

It was not until the 19th century that construction of the Canal was initiated. Before that, however, Scotland has tried to initiate trade links between the Atlantic and the Pacific through the Darien scheme, an attempt to establish a colony on the Isthmus of Panama. The scheme was ill-fated, however, which caused high numbers of deaths in the ranks of the colonists due to the inhospitable conditions of the isthmus and England's refusal to support the effort.

Finally, the US\$8-million Panama Railway was established by the United States. Opened in 1855, the overland trans-oceanic link was able to facilitate easier and speedier trade between the two oceans. However, some people still think that an all-water route would be more effective and ideal.

### The French Attempt at Building the Canal

On January 1, 1880, the French decided to start constructing the canal at sea level through Panama, then a province of Colombia. The project was as ill-fated as the Darien scheme, because the French did not make any studies as to the geology and the conditions of the water in the region. Mosquito-borne diseases like malaria and yellow fever struck mercilessly on the French work-force, resulting to a high mortality rate among them. At that time, nobody suspected mosquitoes of being capable of carrying deadly diseases.

The high mortality was compounded by the hospitals instead of helping, because the wards in which the sick workers were confined had no screens. The hospitals were also breeding grounds for mosquitoes because health officials had no idea about the mosquito's role in disease transmission.

The working conditions were not the only factors in the failure of the French attempt. Other factors included the lack of field experience by the French, and the difficulty of the concept itself.

During the 8 years that the French spent on their attempt – from 1881-1889 – they had lost as much as 22,000 workers due to the work conditions of the canal.

### The Americans Take Over

The American idea was to build a canal across Nicaragua, and not Panama as was attempted by the French. In a bid to realize their own plans, Philippe Bunau Varilla of the French Canal Syndicate tapped the services of William Nelson Cromwell to convince the United States Congress to build the canal across Panama instead.

Cromwell then took advantage in 1902 of an erroneous 10-cent Nicaraguan postal stamp made by the US American Bank Note Company, which showed the Momotombo volcano fuming with smoke and about to erupt. It was also the part of the year in which the Caribbean experiences high volcanic activity, something that Cromwell also took advantage of. Cromwell used the opportunity to make a false story about Momotombo erupting and causing seismic shocks, and published it in the New York Sun. He also sent leaflets with the Nicaraguan stamps to all senators.

In reality, Momotombo was a nearly dormant volcano that is also 100 miles from the proposed Nicaraguan canal. However, Cromwell's efforts paid off and the U.S. legislative assembly voted to build the canal in Panama.

The rest is history. The United States started building the Panama Canal on May 4, 1904 after gaining Panama's graces by helping it achieve independence from Colombia. The U.S. this time took careful attention for extensive sanitation and control of mosquitoes, something the French failed

to do which resulted in the deaths of its workers. Because of this, the Americans had a lower death toll although the toll did reach 5,609 workers from the 10-year construction period. The canal was completed on 1914, and was opened on August 15 of that year.

### About the Author

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