

Panama Canal

Narrator:

Once American dominance was established in the western hemisphere, Theodore Roosevelt realized it would be strategically important to build a canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

Previously, if a ship wanted to sail from New York to San Francisco, it needed go sail around the tip of South America -- a 12,000 mile journey.

With the American navy needed around the world, they needed a faster route. Roosevelt felt that building a canal to connect the two oceans would be his legacy and he was determined to follow through.

Roosevelt needed to overcome many obstacles. With the 1850 Clayton-Bulwer Treaty, the United States and Great Britain both agreed neither country would build a canal for fear of using it for national advantage.

Over half a century later the United States, now the dominant nation, needed to nullify this agreement. Great Britain was involved in the Boer War in South Africa and was unsure about relations in Europe.

Wanting to stay on good terms with the Americans, the British signed and updated treaty which permitted the U.S. to build a canal through Central America as long as they charged the same tolls for all nations.

Roosevelt then had to decide where to build the canal.

A French engineer, Ferdinand de Lessups, had previously attempted to build in Panama in the 1870's but was halted by financial problems and disease.

The U.S. felt it made sense to finish what he started especially since Panama was the narrowest nation in central America.

Although being the narrowest,

Panama was also the most mountainous and a complex series of locks was necessary to move the ships through.

They decided to try to purchase the territory in Panama anyway.

The problem with purchasing land in Panama was that it was not an independent nation -- it belonged to Columbia.

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In 1903, the U.S. signed a treaty with Columbia which permitted the U.S. to lease a six mile stretch of land for an annual fee.

The treaty passed in the U.S. Senate but the Columbian Senate was holding out for more money. Roosevelt would not allow it and soon after sent a gunboat to the shores of Colombia.

At the same time, the Panamanians were staging an uprising for independence.

The Colombians were powerless to stop it and the U.S. soon was the first nation to recognize Panamanian independence. The Americans were rewarded with the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty which gave the U.S. a 10- mile strip of land to lease.

The next step was the actual construction of the canal which proved extremely difficult.

This feat of engineering was unprecedented.

Construction began in 1907 with the Americans blasting through tons of mountain stone.

Many lives were lost in this process. They could do less about the threat of malaria thanks to the work of Walter Reed and William Gorgas who developed drugs to protect against yellow fever and malaria.

Even president Roosevelt visited the blast site and became the first American president to venture abroad.

Canal facts:

The canal was completed in 1914 with a final \$345 million price tag.

About 3.4 million cubic meters of concrete went into building the locks, and nearly 240 million cubic yards of rock and dirt were excavated during the construction

5,600 of the 56,000 workers employed between 1904 and 1913, died on the job.

There are 12 locks in the canal and a ship up to an elevation of 85 feet.

Each lock chamber over 26 million gallons of water to fill it from the lowered to the raised position

Control of the canal was ceded to Panama in 1999.

The most expensive toll ever paid for a ship to pass through the canal was for a cruise ship -- \$375,600

The lowest toll ever paid was 36 cents, by an American who swam the Panama Canal in 1928.
