

The Panama Canal – Reading

Need

As early as the 1600s, people had dreamed of building a canal through the isthmus of Panama in Central America. Before the canal, ships traveling from the Atlantic to the Pacific had to make the long journey around the southern tip of South America. Goods shipped by sea from the East Coast of the United States to the West in the 1800s traveled more than 13,000 miles and took several weeks. A canal across Central America would cut the miles and time by more than half. This would save time and money for both commercial and military shipping. The Spanish-American war also highlighted the need for a canal. After the war, it was more important for the U.S. Navy to move quickly between imperial possessions in the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean. Roosevelt and others viewed the construction of a canal through Central America as vital to American power in the world.

There were two possible routes for a canal – one through Nicaragua and one through Panama, a province in northern Colombia.

Early Attempts

As early as 1850, Britain and the United States had agreed to share the rights to a canal. The two nations signed a treaty and agreed not to build a canal without the other's participation. Because of strong interest in a canal, however, the United States negotiated a new treaty. In 1901, the United States and Great Britain signed the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty. This treaty gave the United States exclusive rights to build and control any proposed canal through Central America.

A French company had already begun digging a canal through Panama in 1881. By 1889, however, it had to abandon its efforts because of bankruptcy and terrible losses from disease among its workers. The company then tried to sell its rights to digging the canal to the United States.

But Panama was still part of Colombia. In 1903, Secretary of State John Hay offered Colombia \$10 million and a yearly rent of \$250,000 for the right to construct the canal and to control a narrow strip of land on either side of it. The Colombian government refused the offer. Colombia wanted to wait until French rights expired in 1904 and then sell rights to the United States for a higher price. President Roosevelt wanted to build the canal and was angered by Colombia's attempt to raise the price.

The Panama Revolution

Some Panamanians feared losing the commercial benefits of the canal. Panama had opposed Colombian rule since the mid-1800s and the canal issue added to the tensions. Also, the French company was still concerned that the United States would build the canal in Nicaragua instead. As a result, the French companies agent, Phillipe Bunau-Varilla, and Panamanian officials decided that the only way to ensure the canal would be built was to declare independence and make their own deal with the United States. Bunau-Varilla arranged for a small army to stage an uprising in Panama.

On November 3, 1903, Bunau-Varilla's forces revolted. President Roosevelt sent U.S. warships to Panama to help the revolution and prevent Colombian interference. Within a few days, the United States recognized Panama's independence. Less than two weeks after that, the two nations signed a treaty allowing the canal to be built. The United States paid the Panamanians \$10 million plus annual rent for the use of the land. The United States would have full control of the canal and the land on either side of it – called the Panama Canal Zone. No Panamanian representatives were present at these treaty negotiations.

Protesters condemned Roosevelt's actions as unjustifiable aggression. They claimed that he had basically stolen the land for the canal from Colombia. The President defended himself by saying that he had advanced the needs of civilization and that a canal would benefit the entire world.

Building the Canal

The canal is one of the greatest engineering feats in the world. Work began in 1904 and was completed in 1914. The United States spent about \$380 million to build it. Disease and accidents killed more than 5,600 workers. Most workers were blacks from the British West Indies. Some came from other countries. The builders had to overcome many obstacles. They had to figure out how to deal with Panama's difficult terrain and climate. They also had to figure out how to eradicate tropical diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. The canal was finally built with a series of locks that would raise and lower ships as they crossed the isthmus.

Countries in South America were angry about the U.S. role in the Panama Revolution for many years. In 1921, the United States paid Colombia \$25 million to make up for the territory it had lost. In 1977, the United States negotiated a new treaty with Panama that gave that country full control of the canal in 2000.

The Panama Canal Study Guide

1. What were three reasons that a canal in Panama was needed?

- Need #1 –
- Need #2 –
- Need #3 -

2. Complete a timeline showing the key events that led up to U.S. involvement in building the canal:

- 1850 –
- 1881 –
- 1889 -
- 1903 –
- 1904 –

3. What were three reasons for the Panama Revolution?

- Reason #1 –
- Reason #2 –
- Reason #3 -

4. How did the United States assist the Panama Revolution?

5. Why did protesters condemn Roosevelt's actions?

6. How did Roosevelt defend his actions?

7. What obstacles and difficulties did the U.S. have to overcome to build the canal?
 - Obstacle #1 –

 - Obstacle #2 -

8. In what ways did the United States later try to make up for its role in the Panama Revolution?
 - First Way –

 - Second Way –