

The Panama Canal

Directions: Read the paragraphs below and study the map carefully. Then answer the questions that follow.

Interest in a water passage between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans dates back to the time of Spanish colonization. However, not until the mid-1800's did the steam engine and improvements in hydraulic engineering actually make a canal possible.

In 1901, under the Hay-Pauncefote Treaty, Great Britain gave the United States exclusive rights to build, control, and maintain a canal across the narrow part of Central America. In return, the United States pledged equal access to the canal to all nations, without discrimination.

Congress proceeded to debate the location of the canal. The choice was between a site in Nicaragua and one in the province of Panama in Colombia. In 1903, the Hay-Herrán Treaty granted the United States possession of a six-mile-wide strip across the Isthmus of Panama in exchange for payment of \$10 million plus an annual rent of \$250,000 to Colombia. However, a new government in Colombia turned the treaty down, even though the canal would have been an economic boon to Panama.

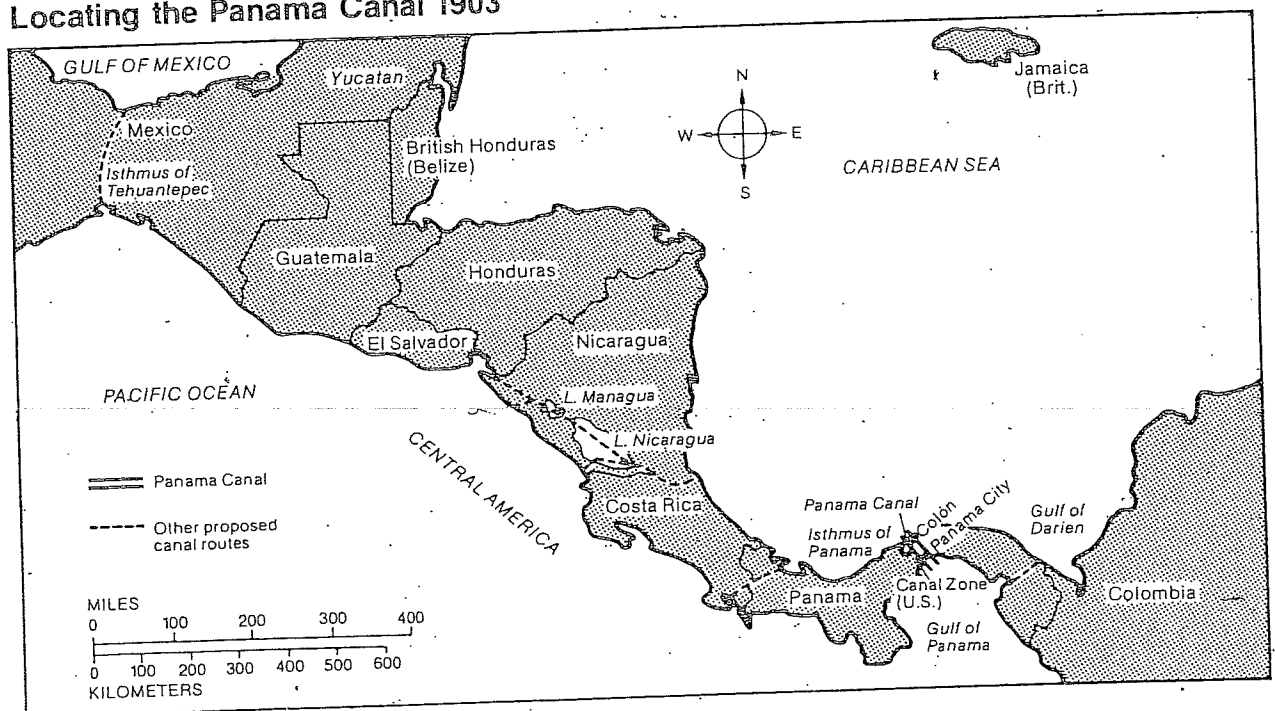
On November 3, 1903, a Panamanian rebellion broke out against Colombia. United States warships prevented

Colombian troops from defending their province, and Panama declared its independence. On November 18, 1903, a new treaty, this time between the United States and the newly independent Panama, gave the United States a ten-mile-wide area of land called the Panama Canal Zone on which to build and operate the waterway. The United States was also to govern the area.

The canal was completed after ten years of monumental effort and the deaths of about fifty-six workers, more than half of whom were African Americans. The cost to build the canal—about \$380 million—was more than five times as much as the United States had paid for the Louisiana Territory, Florida, California, and Alaska together.

The Panama Canal opened on August 15, 1914. It cut the sea journey between New York and San Francisco from about 13,000 miles (20,900 kilometers) to about 5,200 miles (8,370 kilometers). Even though it proved a great boon to world trade, some critics believed the building of the canal represented interference by the United States in the affairs of Central America.

Locating the Panama Canal 1903



Interpreting Information

1. Describe the physical characteristics of the Nicaraguan site that would have made it a desirable location for the canal.

2. What is it about the western Panamanian site that would have complicated plans to build the canal there?

3. Compared with the other proposed routes, what would you say are the advantages of the site that was finally chosen?

Inferring Information

4. During the Panamanian rebellion, how could United States warships have prevented Colombian troops from coming to defend their province?

5. Compare this map with a map of the world in an atlas. Why did the Panama Canal cut the sea journey between New York and San Francisco by more than one-half?

6. In what direction do ships passing through the canal from the Caribbean Sea travel?

7. How do ships passing through the canal from the Caribbean Sea reach the Pacific Ocean?

Relating Past to Present

8. In 1978, two treaties between the United States and Panama gave Panama control of the canal beginning December 31, 1999. They also gave the United States the right to defend the canal's neutrality. What do you think are the pros and cons of these treaties?

