

Panama

Americans and Europeans had dreamed of building a canal across Central America to connect the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and to eliminate the long and dangerous sea voyage around South America. Now that the United States controlled territory in both oceans, a canal that would allow easier access to American overseas territory became increasingly important. In 1879 a French company had acquired a lease from the government of Colombia to construct a canal across its province of **Panama**. Panama was an **isthmus**—a narrow strip of land connecting two larger bodies of land—about 50 miles (80 km) wide. Wedged between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, Panama seemed like the perfect site for the canal. French efforts to build a canal failed, and in 1901 the United States bought the lease from the French for \$40 million. In 1903 Secretary of State John Hay negotiated a treaty with Colombia that granted the United States a 99-year lease on a strip of land across Panama in return for a payment of \$10 million and an annual rent of \$250,000. In Colombia, opposition to the low price offered by the Americans led the Colombian senate to reject the treaty. In a fit of anger, President Roosevelt referred to the Colombians who rejected the treaty as “bandits.” He believed the canal was vital to America’s national defense.

Revolution in Panama

Roosevelt began looking for other ways to get land for the canal, and he wrote that he would “be delighted if Panama were an independent state.” The Panamanians had staged revolts against Colombia in the past, but never with success. This time, however, the Panamanians had reason to believe that the Americans would support them in a revolt against Colombia. On November 2, 1903, the American warship *Nashville* steamed into the port of Colón on the Caribbean coast of Panama. Encouraged by this show of support, the Panamanians revolted the next day and declared their independence. When Colombia sent forces to stop the revolt, the United States intervened and turned them back.

The Panama Canal

On November 6, the United States recognized Panama’s independence. Less than two weeks later, Hay signed a treaty with the new nation of Panama. It gave the United States a 10-mile (16- km) strip of land across the country for the same amount offered earlier to Colombia. The United States now had land to build a canal. Roosevelt’s actions in Panama angered many Latin Americans and some members of Congress and other Americans. The president, however, took great pride in his accomplishment. “I took the canal zone and let Congress debate,” he said later, “and while the debate goes on, the canal does also.” The United States could now start work on the canal—not an easy undertaking. Disease struck the workers. An English writer described Panama as “a damp, tropical jungle, intensely hot, swarming with mosquitoes.” These mosquitoes carried two deadly diseases— yellow fever and malaria. Colonel **William Gorgas**, an army doctor who had helped eliminate yellow fever in Cuba, went to Panama to fight the diseases. Gorgas instructed workers to drain swamps, spray insecticides, spread oil on stagnant pools of water, and cut grassy marshes in order to destroy mosquito breeding places. By 1906 these measures had eliminated yellow fever and greatly reduced the number of malaria cases. Without controlling disease, the United States could not have built the canal. The Panama Canal was regarded as one of the great engineering feats of the time. Thousands of workers struggled to carve a path through the dense jungle and over mountains. They dug out huge amounts of earth and rock and used them to build a dam. They created a large lake and constructed giant locks to raise and lower ships from sea level over the mountains and then back to sea level again on the other side of the isthmus.

The Grand Opening

The Panama Canal opened on August 15, 1914, and a cargo ship, the *Ancon*, made the first trip through the canal. A great success from the start, the canal reduced shipping costs by cutting more than 7,000 miles off the voyage from New York City to San Francisco. The canal also helped extend American naval power by allowing the United States fleet to move freely between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. In the long run, the canal guaranteed a strong American presence in Latin America, where the United States now had a valuable property it intended to protect. Yet many Latin Americans remained bitter over how the Canal Zone was acquired. This resentment soured relations between the United States and Latin America for years.