

THEODORE ROOSEVELT

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Resource Packet

PANAMA CANAL



PANAMA CANAL

Before Theodore Roosevelt was president, traveling between the Atlantic Ocean and the Pacific Ocean was nearly impossible. If a traveler did not want to go overland, they had to sail around Cape Horn, the southernmost part of South America, a trip that took months. Many people at the time saw the need for a canal that would eliminate thousands of miles from the journey. One company was the French Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interoceanique. This French company, mainly financed by small investors, began construction on a 50-mile-long canal across the isthmus of Panama on February 1, 1881. The task proved more difficult than expected due to dense jungle, torrential rain, and debilitating disease. In December 1888, the French company failed, having lost 20,000 workers and dug only 11 miles of the canal.

Theodore Roosevelt saw the Panama Canal as a vital project for the United States to take on. He succeeded in buying the French canal property and equipment in 1902 for \$40 million. At the time, the Panamanian Isthmus was part of the country of Colombia, which did not want to allow Americans to build the canal. Roosevelt advised Panama on obtaining its independence from Colombia, and on November 3, 1903, the nation of Panama was born.

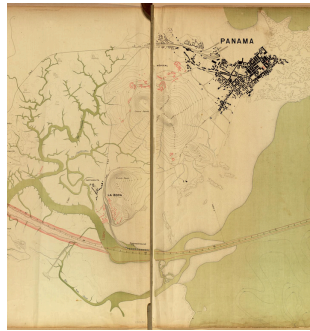
America's process of building the canal started out with the same issues France had faced. With Chief Engineer John Stevens's sanitation efforts, conditions eventually improved. Theodore Roosevelt visited the construction site in 1906. In 1907, Stevens was replaced by Colonel George Washington Goethals, an Army engineer with experience building lock-type canals. The Panama Canal officially opened on August 15, 1914, five years after Roosevelt left office. Theodore Roosevelt considered the Panama Canal the greatest achievement of his presidency.

Primary sources pertaining to the Panama Canal are available in collections across the country. Students and teachers can find over 130 pages of primary sources in the [Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library](#) related exclusively to the Panama Canal. **This resource packet includes 13 primary sources related to Theodore Roosevelt and the Panama Canal.**

1 Maps of proposed Panama Canal between Gorgona and Panama City



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Source 1 is a map of the proposed Panama Canal between Gorgona and Panama City. Encourage students to notice the language in which the map was written. Also encourage students to compare a modern map of the Panama Canal to this one from around 1895. Is the finished canal the same as the original plan?

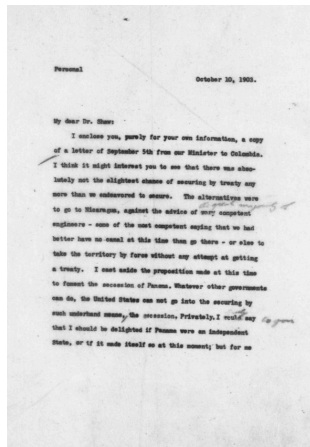
DATE: c. 1895 **CREATED BY:** Unknown

Courtesy of Library of Congress Geography and Map Division

2 Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Albert Shaw



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Source 2 is a letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Albert Shaw saying that he would be delighted if Panama was an independent state but knew that speaking publicly on the matter would be interpreted as instigation for a revolt. Roosevelt enclosed a letter from the Minister to Colombia that showed there was no chance of securing rights to a canal by treaty. Encourage students to consider the gamble Roosevelt had to make. Was building the Panama Canal worth aiding a revolution?

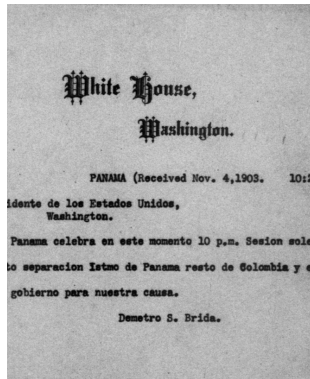
DATE: 10/10/1903 **CREATED BY:** Theodore Roosevelt

Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

3 Telegram from Demetro S. Brida to Theodore Roosevelt



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Source 3 is a telegram from Demetro S. Brida to Theodore Roosevelt stating that municipal leaders of Panama City decided to join the Isthmus's independence movement from Colombia. The leaders asked the United States to recognize their cause. Encourage students to research maps of Central America and South America from before and after Panama gained independence from Columbia. What differences do they notice?

DATE: 11/04/1903 **CREATED BY:** Demetro S. Brida

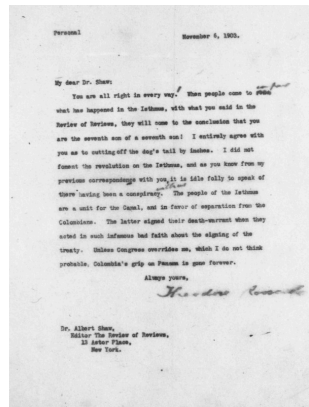
Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

Resource Packet: Panama Canal

4 Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Albert Shaw



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Source 4 is a letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Albert Shaw rejecting the claim that Roosevelt incited a revolution in Panama. Roosevelt said that the people of the Isthmus were in favor of both the canal and separation from Colombia. Encourage students to research Panama's revolution from the perspective of a citizen of Panama. What was life like for people during that time?

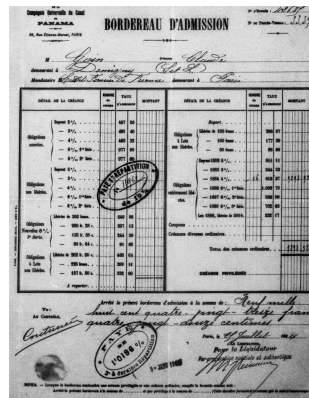
DATE: 11/06/1903 **CREATED BY:** Theodore Roosevelt

Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

5 Bordereau D'admission: Liquidation de la Compagnie Universelle du Canal de Panama



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Source 5 is a statement related to the liquidation of the French company that had been attempting to build a canal through Panama. Encourage students to think about some of the factors that caused the French company to fail, like disease, unfamiliar jungle terrain, and dissatisfied investors. Why do they think the United States was able to finish the difficult project that France started?

DATE: 1904-07-29 **CREATED BY:** Unknown

Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Papers, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

6 He Will Dig it Himself!



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Source 6 is a cartoon depicting Theodore Roosevelt using a shovel to dig the Panama Canal as he throws a rock with the word "delay" onto a pile of other rocks: "R.R. 'interests,'" "pull," "opposition," "obstruction," and "influence." Encourage students to consider the enormity of the Panama Canal project. Can they name some of the obstacles Roosevelt had to "throw aside?"

DATE: 01/05/1905 **CREATED BY:** Robert W. Edgren

Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

7 Opening of the Panama Canal



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Source 7 is a cartoon picturing a variety of flying boats and ships, loaded with tourists, floating above the Panama Canal. The caption reads “At which distant day ocean navigation will be a trifle out of date.” Encourage students to research how the Panama Canal is being used today. Has aviation made the canal obsolete, or does it still serve a purpose?

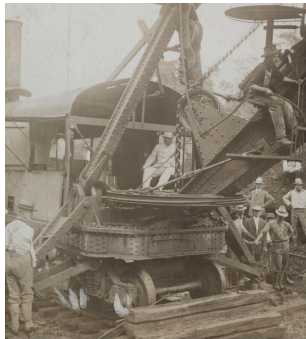
DATE: 01/31/1906 **CREATED BY:** John S. Pughe

Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

8 Theodore Roosevelt at the Panama Canal



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Source 8 is a photograph of Theodore Roosevelt running a steam shovel at Pedro Miguel, the Culebra Cut of the Panama Canal. Encourage students to look at the clothes the people in the photo are wearing. Can they tell who the workers are and who is visiting?

DATE: 1906 **CREATED BY:** Underwood & Underwood

Courtesy of Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace National Historic Site, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

9 A Strenuous Exhibition on the Isthmus



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Source 9 is a cartoon of a larger-than-life Theodore Roosevelt greeting workers in the Panama Canal, telling them, “I am mighty proud of you.” Encourage students to consider how this caricature compared to reality. Do they think everyone was truly happy to be working on the Panama Canal?

DATE: 11/19/1906 **CREATED BY:** Clifford Kennedy Berryman

Courtesy of Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

10 Pres. At Panama



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Source 10 is a photograph of Theodore Roosevelt at the Panama Canal construction site. Encourage students to research equipment like the machine pictured used to build the canal. What construction technology was available at the time?

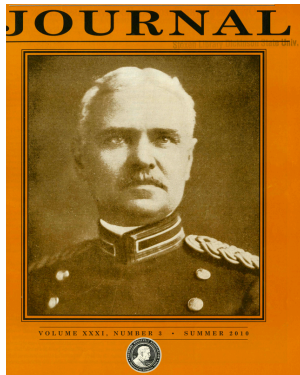
DATE: 11/26/1906 **CREATED BY:** Unknown

Courtesy of Library of Congress Prints and Photographs, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

11 Theodore Roosevelt Association Journal Cover



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Source 11 is a cover of volume 31, number 3 of the Theodore Roosevelt Association *Journal*, featuring a photograph of Colonel George W. Goethals, who replaced John F. Stevens as Chief Engineer of the Panama Canal project. Encourage students to research Goethals. Did his experience in the Army make him a more effective leader in Panama?

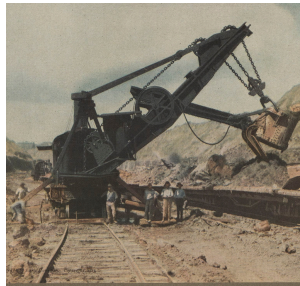
DATE: 1912 **CREATED BY:** Joseph Pennell

Courtesy of Theodore Roosevelt Association Journal, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

12 Digging the Panama Canal



[Download](#)



Source 12 is a photograph of a central crane on railroad tracks and six workmen in the Panama Canal. Encourage students to look closely at the photograph. What part of the construction process is being shown?

DATE: 1913 **CREATED BY:** Earle Harrison

Courtesy of Theodore Roosevelt Birthplace National Historic Site, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

13 Panama Canal Scenes



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Source 13 is an eight-minute compilation of different scenes of construction filmed at the Panama Canal, including barges, steam shovels, trains, and workers moving dirt and rubble out of the canal area. Encourage students to compare different parts of the process. Which step in construction looks the hardest? Most exciting? Most dangerous?

DATE: c. 1900s–1910s **CREATED BY:** Unknown

Courtesy of Library of Congress Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University

IMPORTANT DATES

- **February 1, 1881:** The French Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interocéanique begins work on the Panama Canal.
- **December 1888:** The French company fails, leaving the canal unfinished.
- **1902:** The United States agrees to buy the French canal property and equipment and begins negotiating a Panama treaty with Colombia.
- **November 3, 1903:** Panama wins independence from Colombia with the help of the United States.
- **December 1905:** Yellow fever is officially eradicated on the isthmus.
- **November 1906:** Theodore Roosevelt visits the Panama Canal Zone.
- **February 12, 1907:** Chief Engineer Stevens resigns and is replaced by Colonel George Washington Goethals.
- **August 15, 1914:** The Panama Canal officially opens.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Books

- Keller, Ulrich. *The Building of the Panama Canal in Historic Photographs*. New York: Dover Publications, 1983.
- Maurer, Noel and Carlos Yu. *How America Took, Built, Ran, and Ultimately gave Away the Panama Canal*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- McCullough, David. *The Path Between the Seas*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- Parker, Matthew. *Panama Fever: The Epic Story of the Building of the Panama Canal*. New York: Doubleday, 2007.

Articles

- Shapell, Benjamin, and Sarah Willen. "The 20th Anniversary of the Transfer of the Panama Canal." Shapell, January 4, 2024. <https://www.shapell.org/historical-perspectives/between-the-lines/the-20th-anniversary-of-the-transfer-of-the-panama-canal/>.
- "TR and the Panama Canal." Public Broadcasting Service. Accessed June 28, 2024. <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/tr-panama/>.

SUGGESTED ACTIVITIES

Map activity: Trace the route a European traveler would have had to take to reach the Pacific Ocean before the Panama Canal was built. In a different color, draw what the same route would look like through the Panama Canal instead of around Cape Horn in South America.

Research steam engines (and build one!): Look at various images of equipment used to build the Panama Canal. Learn how they worked, what jobs they performed, and what technology they replaced. If desired, build a model of one of the machines using popsicle sticks.