Panama Canal 3 Essay, Research Paper

Panama Canal

It didn t take long for the world to realize that Panama is the narrowest strip of land between the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. From the early sixteenth century, explorers, conquerors, treasure seekers, settlers, the military and engineers have descended on Panama to find a route that would join the two oceans. A modern day Panamanian anthropologist says, A road, a railroad, or a canal; they didn t concern themselves with the rest. That s been the story here for hundreds of years. The eventual completion of this waterway connecting the Atlantic and Pacific came about from strong presidential influence and advancements in engineering.

In 1502 Christopher Columbus was searching for a water route to India when he anchored off the Atlantic coast of Panama. While exploring the island Columbus climbed a mountain, gazed to the south and then fell to his knees in prayer. He had sighted the Pacific Ocean, from this point on the world, not to mention Panama, would never be the same again. About twenty years after the arrival of Columbus the Spanish completed a seven foot wide road across Panama. This road was known as the Royal Road, over which they transported thousands of tons of gold and silver that they got from Peru and Mexico. The first plans for a canal came in 1529, when a Spanish priest, Alvaro de Saavedra, drew up plans for a canal route across Panama. The reasons that nothing really ever came of these plans was because the Spanish controlled all the all the Caribbean Sea and Central America. They did not want to build a canal that would open the riches of the new world to other nations.

Considering, that a passageway across Central America would shorten the sailing distance between the east and west coasts of the United states by almost eight thousand miles, it was just a matter of time before the U.S. would notice the significance and difficulty of constructing such a canal. The turning point for the United States came with the discovery of gold in California. Many gold rushers sailed to the Atlantic coast of Panama where they trekked across the old Royal Road. Rain, heat, humidity, mud, wild animals and most importantly sickness were present along the Royal Road. One man wrote back to his family, I say in fear of God and love of man, to one and all, for no consideration come this route. Despite the dangerous journey the gold rushers continued to sail to Panama in such numbers that businessmen in New York decided that a railroad would be very profitable. By 1850, workers most of whom were from the West Indies began to tear through the jungle.

Right from the beginning of his presidency, Teddy Roosevelt wanted a canal in Panama that would join the Atlantic and the Pacific. He described the importance of the canal stating no single great material work which remains to be undertaken on this continent is of such consequence to the America people. Roosevelt put the full force of his presidential powers to begin the construction of the canal. The United States in 1903 were finally given permission to build a canal in Panama through a zone ten miles wide. The United States would receive as much authority over the canal as if it were built in the U.S. When plans were finally getting underway, John Findley Wallace was hired as chief engineer. At age fifty-one Wallace was a respected civil engineer who had won national honors. Even with these honors, many felt him incapable to fulfill such a huge project.

Teddy Roosevelt and John Findley are the key factors to the completion of the Panama Canal. Without Roosevelt the canal would have never been started. He made it clear that the canal was one of his main projects. No president had ever left the country while serving yet president Roosevelt left the country to view the advancements of the canal. He visited Panama in the middle of the rainy season, because he wanted to see work done in the most adverse of conditions. He later said, For two days there were uninterrupted tropic rains without a glimpse of the sun so that we saw the climate at its worst. It was just what I desired to do. On the third day of his visit, three inches of rain fell in two hours, the worst downpour in fifteen years. The terrible weather never bothered Roosevelt, and many reported seeing him knee deep in mud, viewing work in the pits. There is a story of Roosevelt while traveling along the canal route by train, he spotted several steam shovels excavating for the channel. He ordered the train to stop. Walked through the mud, climbed onto the drivers seat and asked the driver how it worked. By the time they left from their three-day visit the canal staff was exhausted and Findley later replied I have blisters on both my feet and am worn out. Roosevelt obviously proved what he said about the canal being one of his top priorities for his presidency.

The chief engineer John Findley Wallace was the first engineer to try his hand at the completion of the canal. He arrived in Panama on July 1, 1904, he and seven commissioners had many important decisions they had to make on the bridge. About half a year later in a report from a commissioner to Roosevelt the commissioner said of Findley So pronounced and so extensive have been the improvements made by Chief Engineer Wallace in the past half year that they seem almost incredible. Despite these reports Wallace was not pleased with the environment he was in. He found that the city was ankle deep in foul mud during the rainy season. More importantly than even the weather is the terrible equipment that they had to work with. With the rarely functioning Panama railroad there was few ways to transport the items that were necessary to construct the canal. A reporter described the working conditions We inherit a graveyard of many hopes and wrecked lives. At first Wallace thought the conditions to be hopeless, but then six machine shops, and a power plant were found to be working. Once Wallace really began to work on the canal the Canal Commission frustrated his efforts. Six of the members were not even in Panama but two thousand miles away in Washington arguing over every dollar. Chief Engineer Wallace s approach to the job further slowed progress. When faced with the largest engineering project ever attempted, Wallace should have spent months if not years in preparation. When Wallace traveled to Washington in September of 1904 to meet with President Roosevelt, Secretary of War Taft and the Commission, he apparently never made his demands known. Wallace on top of this hated Panama, which he called God-forsaken country, but he was also terrified of disease. Wallace for his lack of progress on the canal and general bad attitude was asked to resign.

President Roosevelt immediately appointed John Frank Stevens as the new chief engineer. Like Wallace Stevens was a railroad engineer, but unlike Wallace, he was a rugged wilderness man. He built his way up from a track hand to one of the best engineers in the world. Also unlike Wallace Stevens knew that without workers the canal couldn t be built, and without decent, healthy living conditions, there wouldn t be any workers. Half of the canal s workers were put into constructing a total of two thousand buildings. Stevens also organized recreational activities for the workers and encouraged married workers to bring their families. In 1906 President Roosevelt reports of Stevens work It is stupendous work upon which our fellow country men are engaged in down there on the Isthmus. Stevens wrote to President Roosevelt saying what a hard toll the canal has taken on him and his family. Roosevelt felt that Stevens s attitude was basically a resignation and Stevens was let go. Workers signed huge petitions asking for Stevens to be able to stay, Roosevelt in his usual form ignored all of these requests.