

This Day in History... June 29, 1858

Birth of George Washington Goethals

US Army general and civil engineer, George Washington Goethals was born on June 29, 1858, in Brooklyn, New York.

Born to Belgian immigrants, Goethals attended the College of the City of New York before receiving an appointment to West Point. After graduating second in his class in 1880, Goethals was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the Army Corps of Engineers.



Canal Zone stamp issued nine months after Goethals's death.



1934 Goethals stamp

After graduating, Goethals spent some time as an assistant instructor in practical astronomy at West Point before attending the Engineer School of Application at Willets Point. From there he was made an engineer officer in Vancouver, Washington, where he oversaw the replacement of a bridge across the Spokane River. Goethals returned to West Point to teach engineering for four years and was then placed in charge of the Muscle Shoals Canal construction on the Tennessee River. He also built canals near Chattanooga, Tennessee, and at Colbert Shoals, Alabama. During the Spanish American War, he served as chief of engineers in the Volunteer Army with the rank of lieutenant colonel.

In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed Goethals chief engineer of the Panama Canal. In addition to serving as chief engineer, Goethals was named the chairman of the Isthmian Canal Commission, and president of the Panama Railroad Company and its steamship line. Responsible only to the secretary of War and the president, Goethals wielded more power than the previous chief engineers.



1960 Goethals stamp

Goethals was highly respected for his honesty and fairness and was considered to be an excellent administrator. He quickly erased the fears of those who thought they would be working in a military regime, saying "I am no longer a commander in the United States Army. I now consider that I am commanding the Army of Panama and that the enemy we are going to combat is the Culebra Cut and the locks and dams at both ends of the Canal, and any man here on the work who does his duty will never once have any cause to complain of militarism." Goethals never once wore his military uniform on the isthmus.



The Goethals Memorial in Panama City, which opened in 1954.

Under Goethals's leadership, the canal was completed in 1914, two years ahead of schedule. That same year, he was also appointed the first civil governor of the Panama Canal Zone. He remained in that position until he resigned in 1917. Goethals went on to serve as the state engineer of New Jersey and manager of the Emergency Fleet Corporation before being appointed acting quartermaster general that December. Goethals reorganized the Quartermaster Corps, took control of purchasing away from outside agencies, and transformed the corps into the War Department's most important purchasing agency.

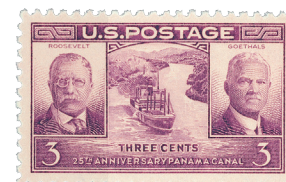


Goethals overprinted 1929 airmail stamp



Goethals overprinted 1941 Official stamp

After the war, Goethals received the Distinguished Service Medal, was named a commander in France's Legion of Honour, and an honorary knight commander in Great Britain. Goethals went on to form his own engineering and construction firm and became the first consulting engineer of the Port of New York Authority. He died on January 21, 1928. Later that same year, the Goethals Bridge was named in his honor and he was featured on one of the first original (non-overprint) Panama Canal stamps.



Stamp issued for the 25th anniversary of the start of the canal project and pictures Goethals along with Theodore Roosevelt and the Culebra Cut.

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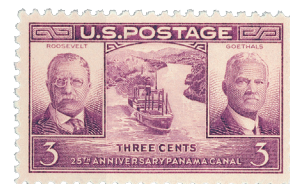
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