

This Day in History... August 15, 1914

Opening of the Panama Canal

After a decade of construction, the Panama Canal opened to traffic on August 15, 1914. Dubbed one of the seven wonders of the modern world, the canal helped to significantly cut down on the travel time between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans.

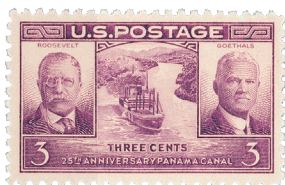
Proposals for a canal across Nicaragua or Panama began as early as 1889. United States' public opinion of the canal was generally unfavorable until 1898, when the battleship *Maine* blew up at a Cuban naval base. As the Spanish-American War loomed, the battleship *Oregon* sailed through San Francisco's Golden Gates to save the day. The eyes of the world were on its 16,000-mile course around Cape Horn and through the dangerous Strait of Magellan. The 67-day journey clearly showed the military significance of an isthmian canal. However, President McKinley was assassinated before he could negotiate rights to a canal.

Successor Theodore Roosevelt saw the canal as vital to America's role as a global

power. With negotiations underway in both Nicaragua and Panama, Roosevelt's strained relationship with Columbia and the asking price of \$100 million for the Panama venture could have tipped the scales in favor of a Nicaraguan canal. However, a Nicaraguan postage stamp picturing a volcano was sent to every US senator, stating it could cause problems, and that Panama had no volcanoes. This helped persuade the US Senate's decision. Construction began in 1904.

Almost immediately, administrators began preparations for the tremendous influx of people who would eventually assemble to work on the project. Faced with the knowledge that most of the work force would be imported to the region from America and Caribbean countries, authorities quickly established a postal service to serve their needs as well as those of the Canal Commission. A postal service was established in June 1904, using Panama stamps overprinted "Canal Zone." Later, US stamps were overprinted, and

Pictures President Theodore Roosevelt, who was one of the major proponents of creating the canal, as well as George Washington Goethals, the project's chief engineer.



eventually brand-new Canal Zone stamps were produced.

In November of 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt became the first president to travel outside the continental United States. His visit to the Panama Canal Zone reflected an evolution in his views regarding the canal's role in the world. While he initially spoke of the canal in terms of a political, commercial, and military necessity, Roosevelt now allowed himself to be inspired by the romance of the project. Roosevelt spoke of the dramatic challenges in its structural design and

of the tremendous difficulties that must be overcome to complete the project – a mighty battle involving both national honor and that of the work force.

The construction was an arduous undertaking, costing the US \$375 million and 5,600 lives. Over the course of the 10-year project, over 75,000 people from the US, Barbados, Martinique, Guadeloupe, and other nearby islands braved the harsh conditions to help make the canal a reality.

A grand celebration was to be held on August 15, 1914, to celebrate the official opening of the Panama Canal. A fleet of international warships was to assemble off Hampton Roads, Virginia. From there, they would travel through the Panama Canal to San Francisco for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition.

Issued to promote the Panama-Pacific Exposition, which celebrated the completion of the canal as well as San Francisco's recovery from a devastating 1906 earthquake.



However, World War I intervened. The grand opening was a modest affair. There were no international dignitaries in attendance, although Colonel Goethals watched from a railcar as the cement-carrying American steamship SS *Ancon* traveled the canal.

When it first opened, the canal saw annual traffic of about 1,000 ships, and that number rose to over 14,000 in the 2000s. The canal has been updated and expanded over the years and the average ship takes a little over 11 hours to get through the locks.



Issued in 1998 as part of the Celebrate the Century Series



Pictures the "Gaillard Cut" – an artificial valley dug through the continental divide.



Pictures the SS Ancon, the first ship to pass through the canal in 1914.

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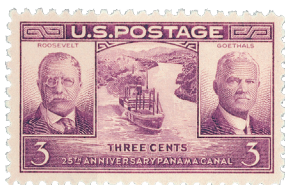
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