History of the Las Cruces Trail and Adjacent Canal Area

A Historic Review of the Events and Persons Associated with the Different Trans-Isthmian Crossings and Routes in Panama from the Camino Real and Las Cruces Trail, the construction of the Panama Railroad and the subsequent construction and operation of the Panama Canal and the Trans-Isthmian Highway

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Introduction

When satellites took the first photographs of tiny earth from space, the Isthmus of Panama showed up as a slender thread connecting the North and South American continents. Unlike Michelangelo's almost-but-not-quite touch between God and Adam in the heavens of the Sistine Chapel, Panama's reach between the two continents was solid and complete for three million years – until humans rendered it in two with the construction of the Panama Canal. They had dreamed about an all-water route between the great seas for 400 years.

The land link between the continents began as a slow, gradual rise from the ocean bottom 20 million years ago. When it finally formed a solid link between the continents 17 million years later, it had emerged as an influential focal point in world geography and natural history. The rise of the isthmus changed the ecology of the earth's oceans, continents and climate. The link also became an important player in human history.

By virtue of Panama's unique geography, a path across the link became key to transcontinental travel and commerce. First the Las Cruces Trail, then the Panama Railroad and the Panama Canal provided the path and, in the process, shaped five centuries of local, regional, national and international history. This article focuses on the events and the players that created these unique pathways, from Fort San Lorenzo and Portobelo on the Atlantic coast to Panama City on the Pacific shore. We begin our story three million years ago in geological pre-history.

Three million years ago

Although today Panama is best known for the Panama Canal, the waterway that links the Atlantic and Pacific oceans for maritime trade, its first important link was not as a path between two oceans. It was as a path between two continents. When the Isthmus of Panama rose from one great ocean three million years ago, it connected the North and South American landmasses and opened the way for a north/south migration of plants and animals. Giant anteaters and sloth and 12-foot-tall predatory birds began moving northward. Bears, early horses, deer, weasels, dogs, cats and mice ventured south across the new link.

The isthmus also blocked a once-immense ocean. The west-moving equatorial current in the newly formed Atlantic was forced to turn north, and it

eventually developed into the Gulf Stream. The northward movement of that warm water triggered rain in northern latitudes and the water froze and formed new glaciations and ice ages in the far north; but the Gulf Stream also warmed western Europe.

The ocean on the Pacific side grew cooler, its upwelling currents carrying rich nutrients and developing abundant fishing grounds. The Atlantic side grew warmer and nutrient poor; coral reefs grew in the shallow Caribbean Sea. Marine species that had been separated turned in different evolutionary directions.

Twelve thousand years ago

Land link between two continents

Eons later, humans arrived from the north. East Asian peoples crossed the Siberian Peninsula land bridge into what is now Alaska and made their way south across the North American Continent toward warmer climates. Bands of hunters and gatherers arrived in Panama at least 12,000 years ago. A myriad of separate culture groups developed all over the isthmus, from the lowland rainforest at the easternmost point to the highlands at the western end. Some estimates put Panama's indigenous population at the time of European contact at 2 million, just slightly less than Panama's modern-day population of 2.8 million in the year 2000.

Before the time of European contact (1500), hierarchical chiefdoms with agriculture and highly developed art forms had developed in Panama's western sector. Their artisan skills in the highly complex craft of making solid gold figurines, called *huacas*, created a demand for Panamanian art, and the *huaca* trade reached as far north as the Mayan culture in Mexico and south into Colombia.

Sixteenth to eighteenth centuries

Time of the Conquistadors

But Panama's fame for gold eventually brought downfall for its native residents, as was true for all New World people who revealed golden treasures to the Spanish Conquistadors who arrived on their shores in the 1500s. Gold drove Spaniards mad with desire; it drove them right into the heart of Panama and up and down the length and breadth of Latin America. Beginning with their arrival, Panama was transformed into an important link between the two oceans. The new discovery immediately attracted merchants and middlemen, experts in extracting their share of the riches that passed through on their way to other destinations.

The importance of gold continued to dominate the course of Panama's history for three centuries of Spanish rule.

Nineteenth century

Gold Rush

After a brief lull in activity in Panama, the discovery of gold nuggets in California in 1848 triggered a rush of people seeking the fastest route from the east coast of the United States to San Francisco. Because there was no railroad transportation built across the United States at that time, many traveled by sea on a route that required a land-trek across Panama. The Gold Rush brought thousands of prospectors to Panama, and the sudden activity brought the Las Cruces Trail and the new Panama Railroad into the limelight again.

Twentieth century

Golden commerce

Activities in the 20th century created a new kind of gold for Panama: an all-water passage between two oceans. In the 1500s, explorers had confirmed there was no all-water westward passage to the Orient; in the 1900s, industrialists built their own. The Panama Canal gave the isthmus renewed importance for maritime commerce and opportunities for the merchants and middlemen to take advantage of its return to a prominent role in world commerce.

The path across

Throughout the past five centuries, Panama's mighty Chagres River played an important role in the system of trails leading across the isthmus. From the Caribbean Sea, the mighty river provided a water route halfway across, where the Las Cruces Trail continued on land to Panama City. In the twentieth century it would provide water for the Panama Canal. In the sixteenth century, the Spanish recognizing the strategic importance of the river and built the Castle of San Lorenzo to guard its entrance. For almost 300 years the fort remained a symbol of Spanish control over access to Latin America, and the history of its rise and fall provides a barometer for the general state of Spanish dominance in the region.

The History of the Las Cruces Trail and Surrounding Area

Spanish discovery and dominance, 1500-1821

The discovery of Panama in 1500 may have changed the significance of the narrow isthmus, but not its importance. Its geographical heritage meant that the monarchy that controlled a path across Panama could dominate the New World.

Early explorers

Rodrigo de Bastides

The Spaniard Rodrigo de Bastides was the first European to visit the coast of Panama. He arrived in 1500 by sailing up the Atlantic coast of South America to what is now called the Darien, which even today forms a formidable barrier between Panama and Colombia. On board his ship were two men who would later make history in their own right, the ship's chandler, Amerigo Vespucci (from whom the word "America" evolved), and an adventurer named Vasco Núñez de Balboa (who would become the first European to see the Pacific Ocean). However, the group set sail for Hispaniola, (the island that today hosts Haiti and the Dominican Republic) before they reached the Chagres River and the narrow portion of the isthmus.

Christopher Colombus

In October 1502, Christopher Columbus (*Cristobal Colón*) and his men were the first Europeans to see the Chagres River during Columbus's fourth and last voyage to the New World. Columbus was still searching for an ocean passage to the Orient, working his way south in four caravels along the Caribbean coast of Costa Rica toward the coordinates that Bastides had mapped. After stopping in Bocas del Toro near the border between what is now Panama and Costa Rica, he proceeded east until reaching a great river. Seeing a large number of crocodiles on its banks, Columbus named the waterway River of Crocodiles. Later it became known as the Chagres.

The Chagres River

Hearing native accounts of a hill where he could look out to another sea, Columbus started up the Chagres in longboats, but turned back after realizing the journey would take him too far from the safety of his ships. He explored what is now called Limón Bay, thinking it was perhaps a strait leading to the Indian

Ocean. He left disappointed, never to know that the bay would someday become the northern entrance to the Panama Canal.

Charting Portobelo

Eventually, the ships arrived at an excellent harbor where natives maintained productive gardens along the banks of a river there. Columbus and his men stayed a week in this place to shelter from a storm, and named it Porto Bello (Beautiful Port, now called Portobelo). Traveling farther east, they reached the same coordinates charted by Bastides and realized there was to be no Westward Passage for their ships. Disappointed, they named the point of land near the coordinates "Nombre de Dios" (Name of God). Six later, the place would have the distinction of becoming one of the two earliest permanent Spanish settlements on the mainland.

Exploring Manzanillo

After fighting a storm for nine days, Columbus re-entered Limón Bay and stopped at Manzanillo Island. He looked for a site to establish a settlement on Tierra Firme in order to solidify his legal claim on the land. (By order of the Crown, he was entitled to the viceroyalty of all lands that he charted as well as a tenth of all the revenue produced by them.) But Manzanillo Island was too low lying and infested with insects and crocodiles. Columbus rejected it. Ironically, 400 years later the island would become the site for two cities, aptly named Cristobal and Colon, that formed the Caribbean terminus for the first trans-continental railroad in the Americas and, subsequently, for the Panama Canal. But Columbus sought a healthier site and made his way westward along the Caribbean coast toward Bocas del Toro.

Settling Belén

Reaching a grand river, they chose a settlement site and christened the site. The first attempt to establish a settlement on the Americas mainland endured only four months, for hostile Indians and the lack of food were reason enough for the men to abandon the settlement and return to Hispaniola.

Change of command

New opportunities

Columbus died in 1506, soon after leaving Panama. His son Diego inherited claims to vast amounts of newly discovered lands in the New World, claims that hindered King Ferdinand's desire to control them. In a clever maneuver to take the mainland away from Diego's jurisdiction, the king awarded Diego the viceroyalty of Hispaniola in 1508 in exchange for his relinquishing control over the mainland. The king divided the newly discovered continent in half, with the dividing line going right through Panama's Darien province at the Gulf of Urubá. He appointed Alonso De Ojeda ruler of everything south of the line and Diego de Nicuesa master of everything north. Included in their jurisdiction were the lands

and all native inhabitants, who instantly had the status of “slave” bestowed upon them.

Spain focuses on Panama

Just ten years after proving the earth was round and discovering the New World, Spain had claimed the entire – but only partially mapped – American Continent and placed it under the jurisdiction of just two men. Europeans had not even discovered the Pacific Ocean at this time. By some fluke of luck, Spain chose to establish the first New World mainland settlements in Panama – ostensibly for the abundance of gold they believed existed there. Their luck would bring them control over Panama’s geographic advantage: of the entire continent, Panama was the narrowest strip of land separating the Pacific and Atlantic oceans. But by another, more sinister fluke of luck, the location was also one of the most disease ridden.

First conquest settlements

Diego de Nicuesa was named lord of everything north of the dividing line to include all of Central and North America (still undiscovered). Nicuesa chose Portobelo as the first settlement site, but hostile Indians forced his group to flee. They headed east to their second choice, Nombre de Dios.

Alonso de Ojeda sent an envoy, Martín Fernández de Enciso, with a group to settle Santa María de la Antigua, far down the Darien coast toward what is now Colombia. Accompanying Enciso was the young Vasco Nuñez de Balboa, who had seen this coast before with Bastides. Balboa had stowed away on one of Enciso’s ships in order to escape his debtors on Hispaniola. He joined the settlers at Antigua.

Vasco Nuñez de Balboa

In two years, Balboa emerged as the leader of the new settlement. He rallied the group to defend themselves against Indian attacks and succeeded in establishing friendly relations with some of the neighboring groups. Enciso was jealous of Balboa’s natural leadership skills and spread malicious gossip about Balboa during a trip to Spain. Understanding what Enciso was up to but left at a disadvantage in Antigua, Balboa reacted by sending gold that he had collected from the natives to Diego Colon on Hispaniola. Colon reacted with goodwill, and approval of Balboa as a leader. Balboa also wisely dispatched a ship carrying the king’s royal share of gold directly to Spain in order to improve his reputation.

As a leader, Balboa’s policy was to deal fairly but firmly with the Indians. The history of Latin America might have been different if he had remained in charge, for these were the formative years before the discoveries of Central and South America. Balboa established good relations with the Indians, but also collected all the gold he could find. When the starving and feverish men at Ojeda’s settlement abandoned Nombre de Dios, Balboa helped them establish a new settlement at nearby Acla.

Search for a new ocean

After hearing many tales of a great ocean on the other side of the mountains from the Indians, Balboa finally embarked on his historic expedition across the isthmus on September 1, 1513. On September 24th, his Indian guides led the group to a mountain lookout along the Continental Divide. Balboa walked alone to the summit and became the first European to see the Pacific Ocean. Five days later, the expedition reached the Pacific shore. Wading into the salt water, Balboa claimed all the seas and lands, coasts, ports and islands there and to the west in the name of King Ferdinand. Unknowingly, he had just claimed most of the world for Spain, including all of the Americas and Asia,

For four months Balboa explored the new coast. The expedition returned to Antigua on January 19, 1514, with a treasure of pearls from the coast and a respectable sum of gold. Elated, Balboa immediately dispatched samples of the treasures to King Ferdinand with the great news of the Pacific Ocean.

Unlucky timing

However, Balboa was not destined to reap the benefits he had worked so hard to earn. Burning to find a Westward Passage, King Ferdinand had appointed Pedro Arias de Avila (more commonly known as Pedrarias) the new governor of the isthmus and provided him with 1,500 men to continue the search.

Balboa's ship arrived in Spain just a few days after Pedrarias set sail. It was too late for Ferdinand to cancel the expedition, and the bloody future of Latin America began with Pedrarias's arrival at Acla.

Pedro Arias de Avila

Pedrarias the manipulator

Pedrarias soon realized the residents had chosen Balboa as their leader by popular vote. Seeking to gain Balboa's allegiance, Pedrarias offered his eldest daughter (then living in Spain) in marriage. Balboa accepted.

The future father-in-law kept Balboa busy by sending him across the isthmus to build ships and explore the new coast. Meanwhile, word arrived from King Ferdinand rewarding Balboa with the titles of Admiral of the South Sea for Life and Governor of the Pacific Shores of *Castilla del Oro* ("Castle of Gold," the Spanish name for the isthmus at that time).

Treachery

Fearing that these appointments were encouraging Balboa to be too powerful and independent, Pedrarias made trumped-up accusations of treason against Balboa and sent Francisco Pizarro (the future conquerer of Peru) to arrest Balboa and his supporters. Balboa, trusting in his personal view of a just world, accepted his arrest with the conviction that a face-to-face conversation with Pedrarias would clear up any misunderstanding. But the entire group, including Balboa, was found guilty. All were beheaded on January 17, 1517.

First trail across the isthmus

History almost took a different turn at this point, with King Ferdinand's death occurring shortly before Balboa's demise. Ferdinand's young son, Charles I of Spain, (also called *Carlos V*) replaced Pedrarias with a new governor, Lope de Sosa. Scrambling to strengthen his own seat of power before Sosa arrived to kick him out, Pedrarias sent a soldier named Gaspar de Espinosa to build a royal road, the Camino Real, across the isthmus. Espinosa took 4,000 Indian slaves and, starting from Nombre de Dios, hauled river cobbles to pave the road. The trail intersected with a trail coming from Portobelo, continued southwest along the eastern bank of the Pequeñi River, crossed the Chagres at Venta de Cruces, and turned south to climb over the Continental Divide. It descended onto the Pacific shore to a fishing village called "Panama" by the local fishermen.

Pedrarias's legacy

Despite his cruel nature, Pedrarias seemed to be blessed with good fortune. His replacement, Governor Lope de Sosa died on the trip to Panama. Pedrarias would remain governor for twelve more years. With the elimination of Balboa's fair-minded but firm conquest methods, Pedrarias was free to proliferate his brutal ways of treachery and torture of the Indians.

These activities set the stage for the entire Spanish conquest of Latin America, including Peru and Mexico. Memoirs written by the historian Oviedo y Valdes, who traveled the New World during that time, estimated that Pedrarias caused the death or enslavement of some two million people. (Howarth, 53) The Spanish spent the decade (1520-1530) exploring the Pacific coast. Many conquistadors lived in Panama before leading expeditions to their destiny and fame.

Panama

Balboa had named the northern area's provincial department "Chagre," after a district in Spain. The name was soon applied to the River of Crocodiles as well, becoming the River "Chagres." By August 1519, a road at least three feet wide stretched from Nombre de Dios and Portobelo to the Pacific coast.

On August 15, 1519, Pedrarias rode his horse across the isthmus on the new road and officially established Panama City. He named the loyal Gaspar de Espinosa governor of Panama City and returned to the Atlantic coast. These acts marked the beginning of European commerce across the isthmus.

Some history books (Anderson, 213) claim it was fortunate coincidence that the first permanent settlements on the isthmus (Portobelo and Panama City) were located at the narrowest part and in an almost directly north-south path crossing one of the easiest Continental Divide passes. But the first discoverers of the American Continent, migrant hunters and gatherers from the Siberian Peninsula, had occupied these lands for at least 15,000 years before the Europeans' arrival. Certainly the Indians had ample time to identify the best and

shortest trails in their areas. They graciously shared this information with the Spanish as they led them on their expeditions.

What *is* absolutely amazing is that the early Spanish explorers, without any idea of how huge the New World land mass actually was, established the first mainland settlements on the very thread that connected North and South America. Santa María la Antigua, Nombre de Dios, Acla and Portobelo – the first four settlements were all located on what would later become the Republic of Panama. They were also located on one of the rainiest and most disease-ridden coasts.

Early explorers

Gil González Davila

Under Pedrarias, Gil González Davila, the treasurer of Hispaniola, mounted an expedition north along the Pacific shore as far as Lake Nicaragua. Warned that Pedrarias was plotting to kill him and claim Nicaragua for himself, Davila quietly left for Hispaniola instead of returning to Panama. Pedrarias went on to become governor of Nicaragua in 1529.

Ponce de Leon and Hernan de Soto

Ponce de Leon and Hernan de Soto had a lucrative contract to deliver slaves to the isthmus. Later, de Leon later was the first Spaniard to explore Florida, and de Soto explored the Mississippi River.

Francisco Pizarro

Francisco Pizarro, the conqueror of Peru, mounted three expeditions from Panama. On November 14, 1524, Pizarro set sail in one of the boats that Balboa had built to explore the southern Pacific coast. Thus Pizarro instead of Balboa, discovered the Incan Empire. On his third voyage in 1531, Pizarro succeeded in conquering the Incas and gaining access to Peru's rich gold and silver mines.

Golden crossroad

The Spanish immediately began stripping Peru of all its gold and silver. The vast silver mines of Peru would provide an enormous amount of treasure for the next 100 years. Panama was transformed into a conduit for all goods traveling between Spain and Peru, and the Camino Real trail system was the only way to cross the isthmus. The gold route to Spain began in Lima, with ships carrying the treasures to Panama City. Then the precious metal crossed by mule on Pedrarias's road and was registered and cleared in Portobelo for the trip to Spain.

Spain rises, Panama follows

This enormous influx of wealth into Spain helped finance the ongoing Spanish Inquisition, the Spanish Armada and King Charles's domination of Europe (until his abdication in 1556). It also created an extremely wealthy merchant and

bureaucrat class in Panama. Silks, pearls and spices began arriving on Spanish ships returning from exploring the western Pacific. Panama established itself as the middleman for all maritime trade going to and from the Pacific, supported by the king's monopoly on all ships landing in Panama. Its geographical position, development of the Camino Real and Spain's domination of the seas gave Panama a monopoly on east-west trade. Panama's special status also made it a target for thieves, pirates and unscrupulous businessmen.

Las Cruces Trail

Along the Camino Real, way stations sprang up for the weary traveler. The most important one was at Venta de Cruces, where the trail from Panama City crossed the mighty Chagres River. But during the wet season, from April to December, the road was muddy and slow. A new route that included travel along the Chagres River was established.

This route allowed boats to enter the Chagres from the Caribbean and follow it almost halfway across the Isthmus to a landing at Las Cruces, where goods could continue by mule on the road to Panama City. Most merchandise followed this combined sea-land route, but precious metal was seldom sent by river because the short coastal leg from the Chagres to Portobelo was too exposed to pirate attacks.

Trade fairs and Spanish monopoly

Because of the danger of piracy, all the gold, silver, pearls and jewels from Peru, Bolivia and the Pacific were held in the king's treasury house in Panama City or at either Las Cruces or Venta de Cruces until January, when drier weather allowed easier mule-train passage. The expedition began after confirmation that the Spanish caravels had arrived in Cartagena (Colombia) and would soon appear in Portobelo. The caravels unloaded manufactured goods, such as furniture and European foods, and took on the treasures headed for Spain.

Much to the frustration of the Dutch and English sea traders, Spain enforced a strict monopoly on ships landing in Portobelo. The Spanish monarchy sent only its own ships and collected high taxes on every imported item sold in the streets of Portobelo. Since the trade fair was held only once a year, the wealthy citizens of Panama City were desperate and paid high prices for the European goods they missed. But they also realized they only had to be in Portobelo for the fair. They abandoned the fever-ridden cities of Portobelo and Nombre de Dios for Panama City, returned once a year for the trade fair.

Spanish economy

The Spanish kings welcomed the arrival of new riches from the New World, but there was so much gold and silver that it actually disrupted the European economy and devalued the price of gold. It is estimated that 200,000 tons of silver crossed the isthmus between 1545 and 1600. Free spending and

devaluation caused the Spanish monarchy to go bankrupt three times during this time period. (Howarth, 55)

Rebellion and attack, 1560 – 1597

The Cimarrones, 1560

By the 1560's Panama had a large merchant population supported by slave labor. All native peoples of the New World were considered the property of their Spanish conquerors. European diseases – such as smallpox – that New World peoples had never seen and had no natural resistance to, ravaged their populations. The Spanish began importing African slaves, who proved to have natural resistance to malaria and other diseases. The Africans took every opportunity to escape, however, and small groups soon banded together in hidden jungle settlements. They took their revenge on the Europeans by hiding along the Camino de Cruces trail system (the Camino Real and the Las Cruces Trail) and attacking unfortunate travelers and mule trains. They also allied with pirates who were hungry for a share of the treasure.

Sir Francis Drake, 1572-1573

Spain's good fortune fostered piracy, some of it sanctioned by England's royal court. In 1572 a young rogue pirate named Francis Drake sailed from Plymouth, England, with his two brothers and only 70 crew. They landed along the Darien coast on July 12 that same year. They attacked and overcame Nombre de Dios, finding huge piles of silver bars stacked 12 feet high in storage. But Drake had been wounded and his men insisted on leaving the silver and retreating in order to save their leader. (Anderson, 346; Minter, 128; Howarth, 65)

Joining forces – the gentleman pirate

While recovering, Drake befriended the Cimarrones, who informed him that no Spanish gold would cross the isthmus until the rains abated in January. Drake decided to wait and attack the mule trains. To pass the time, the pirates manned two small ships and began harassing Spanish ships sailing between Cartagena (Colombia) and Panama. During this time, Drake gained the reputation of a "gentleman" pirate because he only stole supplies and cargo and never sank a ship or executed its crew. As a result, his victims surrendered almost as soon as Drake's ships overtook them instead of risking being wounded or killed in a fight.

Ambush

Drake's skill as an excellent sailor and navigator gave him much success at sea, but his skills for land-based attacks were plagued by bad luck, despite all of his careful planning. As January approached, the Cimarrones led Drake and his crew across the isthmus by blazing their own trail. They kept the group from starving by hunting wild game and collecting fruit. They marched to within sight of Panama City, where the pirates were awestruck upon seeing the legendary city and the Pacific Ocean. They sent a spy into the city and soon discovered

that the treasurer of Lima (Peru), was in town and planned to cross the isthmus with a mule train carrying his personal fortune that very night. The group retreated to Venta de Cruces to plan their ambush. There they hid along the trail, waiting until they heard the tinkling bells of the mule train approaching.

Unfortunately, some of the corsairs passed the waiting time by drinking liquor. As fate would have it, a lone rider passed the group first, riding toward Panama City. Also as fate would have it, one inebriated pirate raised his head to be the first to spy the treasure. The rider spotted him but rode on and was able to warn the treasurer and his entourage, who hurriedly turned back toward Panama City. However, a mule train carrying their food continued on toward the pirates.

The pirates gleefully seized the group, but were crestfallen to discover absolutely no treasure. The Cimarrones were more than glad to take the food, as for them it was a greater treasure than gold.

Second attempt

With only 31 men left alive, Drake returned to the Atlantic coast, where he met and allied with a French pirate named Captain Tetu and 19 of his men. They planned another attack on the trail, this time against three mule trains laden with silver and gold. With the Cimarrones's help, they captured about 200 mules carrying almost 30 tons of silver and a quantity of gold near Nombre de Dios. There was no way to carry it all, so they began burying the silver. But the delay gave time for an armed group from Nombre de Dios to arrive and send them running. Captain Tetu lost his life during the retreat. A captured Frenchman revealed the buried silver's hiding place, and the Spanish set about digging it up. Meanwhile, the unlucky Drake retreated to the coast, only to find that his ships had disappeared. Undaunted, he and three others constructed a log raft and, using biscuit sacks for a sail, set out to find the boats. Through sheer tenacity, they finally located them in another anchorage.

Success at last

Disappointed in the loss of men and with very little booty to show for their efforts, some of Drake's crew risked capture by returning to the ambush site and digging up a small amount of overlooked silver and gold. They ended up with a reported 130,000 pesos, an immense sum of treasure that they divided 50-50 with the remaining French corsairs and at last set out for their homeport in Plymouth, England.

Twenty years later - Drake's end

Drake went on to distinguish himself by being the first Englishman to circumnavigate the globe (in the ship, the *Golden Hind)* and then by participating in the defeat the Spanish Armada. He became an admiral and was knighted, but seemingly that was not enough. Panama City's legendary riches still called to him. Drake was over 50 years old in 1595 when he set sail once more for Panama with an immense army – 27 ships and 2,500 men – to fulfill his dream. But Drake had lost his fire, and attacks on both Nombre de Dios and along the

Camino de Cruces failed. Disappointed at their defeat, his ships had just set sail for Nicaragua when Drake fell ill with fever. When his conditioned worsened, they returned to the harbor at Portobelo, where Drake died. Legend has it that he was buried at sea just outside the bay.

Drake's legacy – San Lorenzo and San Felipe

However, as a result of Drake's attacks, in 1597 King Philip II ordered the installations at Nombre de Dios moved to Portobelo, the building of a fort at Portobelo and reinforcement of fortifications at the mouth of the Chagres River. The results were the San Felipe Castle in Portobelo and Castle San Lorenzo at Chagres.

The Privateers, 1625 – 1698

Privateers were privately funded naval defense forces that sailed under commissions, also called letters of marque, to protect British, French and Dutch colonies in the Caribbean. Investors paid for the ships and armed them. In return, the privateer crew paid the owners a percentage of any ship or cargo they captured. Spanish ships were the preferred target, as the Spanish monarchy held a monopoly on all trade with its New World colonies. The Spanish trade ships were few, but were always heavily laden with luxury items on the westbound journey and with gold, silver and other treasures on the return trip.

In addition to the ships, treasure held in Portobelo and Panama City was the target of every privateer's dream.

In addition to the lure of treasure, hunger played an important part in the raiders' attacks as well as their success rate. With hundreds of men to feed, many of their raids were to acquire provisions, by either confiscating food or by holding hostages for ransom payed in food. The nature of sail-powered travel (long sea journeys, uncooperative winds) frequently led to food shortages on board and thus influenced the privateers' decisions on when and where to go ashore. When they sought treasure on land, they carried heavy weaponry and lightened their load by leaving the food behind. They reasoned that they could steal food from their victims or from the towns and farms they came upon.

Under the British flag

The British had taken Jamaica from the Spanish in 1655 and recruited privateers to defend the island. But by 1664, a new treaty prohibited privateers operating under British letters of marque from attacking Spanish ships. The privateers refused to give up a chance to capture Spanish goods and began operating under French or Dutch commissions, leaving Jamaica with little naval protection and vulnerable to attack by the privateers themselves. The Jamaican governor, Sir Thomas Modyford, knew the only way to entice the privateers back was to issue new commissions that named Spanish ships as legitimate targets. On March 4, 1666, he began to do so.

Division of goods

When British privateers captured a ship, their commission bound them to return to Jamaica, where the booty was inventoried and approved by the Admiralty Court. Detailed rules dictated how the goods would be divided up among the crew, according to rank and risks taken during battle. First, however one tenth was separated out for payment to the Duke of York (the Lord High Admiral of England and the king's younger brother) and one-fifteenth was due the King of England.

To benefit Jamaica, certain Admiralty Court fees, including a fee to the governor, had to be paid. Of the remainder, one fourth was separated for the respective ships of the fleet and their owners, who were frequently plantation men and other merchants based in Jamaica. The remaining three-fourths was divided into shares and distributed among the ship captain and crew. For example, boys received a half-share, specialists such as carpenters and surgeons received more than one share, captains got two shares and the admiral received five shares. (Earle, 42)

Privateer's code

It is important to understand that commissions only addressed the division of goods from ships taken *at sea* and did not mention anything *about land operations*. This created great incentive for the privateers to attack on shore under the pretense of following up on intelligence gathered from Spanish ships. Booty taken on land was not included in the rules and therefore did not have to be shared with the king or ship owners. This made Portobelo and Panama City even more desirable targets.

Santa Catalina Island

Just two months after Jamaica restored its privateer commissions, a Dutch privateer, Captain Edward Mansfield, led the first expedition against the Spanish. The taking of Santa Catalina Island (called Providence by the Brits), marked a new phase in the privateer war against Spain that lasted for four and a half years and ended with Henry Morgan's sack of Panama. Technically, Mansfield attacked the island (located just off the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua) without an official commission, but he reasoned that he was really just retaking it, since Spain had captured the island from the British on May 25, 1641, exactly 25 years previously.

English possession of Santa Catalina gave the privateers a place to rest and provision. The island was strategically close to Cartagena (Colombia), Panama and the main route for Spanish gold.

Panama responds

After Mansfield took Santa Catalina, he released the island's Spanish governor, Don Estevan de Ocampo, and his soldiers, who hastily retreated to Fort San Lorenzo in Panama. They reported to Don Juan Perez de Guzmán, Governor of Panama and Captain-General of the province of Tierra Firme. Don

Juan reacted quickly by sending a ship and successfully retaking Catalina just three months later in August. The English prisoners were sent to Portobelo to work along with Indian and black slaves to build a fort.

These events, the British attack on Santa Catalina and the arrival of English prisoners in Portobelo, set the scene for events that were still seven years away. A young Brit, Henry Morgan, was part of Mansfield's crew, and both he and the prisoners were later to play an important role in the 1668 sack of Portobelo and the 1671 sack of Panama City. (Earle, 63)

Sir Henry Morgan attacks, 1666 – 1671

Sir Henry Morgan gained his fame and knighthood as a privateer and the first to successfully devastate all three Spanish strongholds – Portobelo, San Lorenzo and Panama City.

Panama – the prize

Portobelo was officially the only arrival point for Spanish ships carrying luxury items, such as furniture and fine china, to the new Spanish aristocracy in Peru and Panama. During the rainy season – April to December – the ships continued on to the fort at San Lorenzo. Goods then traveled up the Chagres River by boat and then continued by mule along the Las Cruces Trail to Panama City. During the dry season, goods followed an all-land route from Portobelo by mule train along the Camino Real trail to Venta de Cruces and Panama City.

The two trails paralleled each other as the led out of Panama City, one turning northwest to the Chagres River, the other crossing the river and heading northeast to Portobelo. Peruvian silver usually followed the land route across the isthmus. Sailing from Lima be Spanish galleon, it arrived on the Pacific coast and made the arduous crossing by mule to Portobelo for shipment to Spain.

The governor of Panama avoided using the water route because sending the king's fortune down the Chagres River and over the open ocean to Portobelo exposed it to pirate attacks. For many decades, Portobelo held a huge fair upon the annual arrival of the royal fleet from Spain and, simultaneously, Peruvian riches from Panama City. The residents of Portobelo and Panama became wealthy from this commerce, and at certain times of the year the vaults were full of treasures awaiting passage to Spain.

Fortifications, 1666

Two Spanish castles, Santiago and San Felipe, and a garrison of soldiers fortified Portobelo. The Castle San Lorenzo guarded the sea entrance to the Chagres River. Panama City itself was not walled, as few ships other than the Spanish galleons sailed the Pacific, and a successful land attack from across the isthmus seemed unlikely. During the 1660s, the garrison in Panama City held about 500 regular soldiers and relied on the additional services of all able-bodied citizens and slaves. Even with such a small number of soldiers, a serious attempt on the city had not been made since the days of Sir Frances Drake, more than five decades in the past.

Morgan appointed admiral

In late 1667, Mansfield was captured by the Spanish and killed. Henry Morgan received a new commission with the rank of admiral from the Jamaican governor. Fearing the Spanish would attack Jamaica, the governor permitted the privateers to apprehend Spanish ships under the pretense of interrogating those on board about Spanish intentions and movements. Morgan set his sights on Portobelo first.

Morgan's plan

Incredibly, Morgan's capture of Portobelo took less than a day. Growing Spanish complacency, combined with a sneak attack, contributed to its success. With 12 ships in his fleet, Morgan knew he could not approach Portobelo undetected. As he approached from Nicaragua, he was surprised to meet six Englishmen paddling in a canoe. The men had escaped from Portobelo and some part of the Catalina Island prisoners who were forced to build Fort San Geronimo in Portobelo.

The escapees provided invaluable information about the state of defenses in Portobelo and gladly volunteered to take revenge on the Spanish. They reported that there were less than 500 regular soldiers at Portobelo, the guns and cannons at both forts had been greatly neglected and the gunpowder was damaged by humidity.

Under cover of night

Morgan's fleet was carrying 23 small boats that they had stolen in Cuba. With 500 men, Morgan left the main fleet in Bocas del Toro, 150 miles west of Portobelo, and paddled the small boats down the coast of Panama under cover of night, escorted by just one ship. During the voyage, the privateers came upon three men of Indian-black mix, two of whom they killed. The third saved his life by agreeing to lead them to a safe landing near Portobelo. They paddled for four nights, passed the castle at San Lorenzo undetected and arrived at Orange Bay. Remaining under cover, Morgan's men marched across land to reach Portobelo, arriving at the city just before dawn on July 11, 1668.

Attack on Portobelo

They first had to pass by the castle of Santiago, but their informants had already told them the cannons were in disrepair. Armed only with muskets and scabbards, the privateers attacked the castle. Just as reported, wet gunpowder caused many of the Spanish cannons to misfire; others were blown off their tracks when they did fire. The panicked defenders contributed to the fiasco by misloading the cannons or loading them with cannonballs meant for firing at ships instead of grapeshot that was more lethal for foot soldiers.

Morgan and his crew passed by the castle to take the town first. The citizens had scant warning of their arrival. While some of the wealthy residents threw their valuables into water cisterns or in holes hidden in walls, others turned to their guns, only to find the gunpowder supply had been moved to one of the forts

to protect it from the humidity. The privateers quickly rounded up the citizens and held them at the church.

Santiago Castle

The castle at Santiago still had to be taken, and the element of surprise was over. After several unsuccessful assaults and heavy losses, Morgan selected some of the town's friars and nuns and used them as shields to escort his men to the castle's front gate. The Spanish soldiers, after some hesitation, did fire on the nuns and priests, but too late to succeed in stopping the privateers. Historians differ in the exact details of their demise. Esquemeling's eyewitness but embellished report says that the religious captives carried ladders that the privateers used to climb the fort's walls. Earle writes that the privateers used the captives as shields to walk to the front gate, where the attackers set to work hacking and burning their way through the door.

Meanwhile another group staged a sneak attack from the opposite side of the castle, which had remained almost unguarded. One group entered the castle and planted a red flag, the signal for the rest of the army to join in the attack. The castle fell by 10 a.m. (according to Earle, 73), or at least by nightfall (according to Esquemeling, 140) whereby the privateers fell to celebrating with captured wine and with the unfortunate lower-class female prisoners. Morgan reportedly held upper class women apart for ransom. In the end, Morgan's men collected an estimated 250,000 pesos worth of goods and took control of 300 black slaves. (Earle,

Torture

The privateers proceeded to torture the citizens to make them confess where their valuables were hidden. Earle reports that Doña Agustina de Rojas, a lady of Portobelo, was placed in an empty wine barrel that was then filled with gunpowder. A lit match was held to her face to persuade her to reveal the location of her treasure. Another woman was laid bare upon a baking stove and roasted because she did not confess, although the money the privateers assumed many of the citizens had hidden may not have existed at all. Another torture, 'woolding,' involved the tying of a band around the victim's head and tightening it with a rotating stick until his eyes popped out. (Earle, 74)

San Felipe castle

Morgan still had to capture the remaining castle, San Felipe, which was manned by 49 men led by a young Castellan, Alexandro Manuel Pau y Rocaberti. The castle had no stock of food to withstand a siege, but their weapons were in good order. They repulsed the first three attacks, killing five of Morgan's men. Then some of the attackers found shelter under an overhanging rock on the wall of the castle and began trying to set a wooden gate on fire. To the surprise of his own men, Rocaberti panicked, sounded a cease-fire and prepared to surrender. While his own lieutenants were protesting the surrender, the attackers swarmed up a ladder and opened up the main gate. Realizing he

would be branded a coward for the rest of his life, the Rocaberti begged his captors to bring him a flask of vitriol, which he drank. He died two days later.

Rocaberti was not the only one to commit suicide, as the Constable of Artillery who had neglected to maintain the weaponry and gunpowder at the castle Santiago begged the English to shoot him instead of face his disgrace. They obliged.

Panama learns of the attack

Within 24 hours, on July 12, Panama City received news of the attack. The acting governor of Panama was a young nobleman named Don Agustin de Bracamonte. (The appointed governor, Don Juan Perez de Guzmán, was in jail in Peru, a victim of a jealous viceroy.) Bracamonte immediately set out across the isthmus on horseback with 800 soldiers and militia to aid in what he assumed would be Portobelo's defense, since he had not heard of its fall. They reached Venta de Cruces within a day, but in their haste to leave had brought little food, and the mulatto militiamen had even forgotten to bring their weapons and had no footwear.

The Spanish set up camp and waited three days for food and shoes to arrive. At Pequení they met some of the Portobelo refugees, who informed them of Portobelo's fall. This shed a new light on their mission, and Bracamonte, keenly aware of Spanish bureaucracy and the necessity of documenting and justifying his every action, called a military *junta* to decide how to proceed. The majority agreed to continue their march. Bracamonte sent a letter to Cartagena, Colombia, requesting help. The messenger traveled 19 days by foot and canoe before arriving in Cartagena. By the time a fleet of seven ships left Cartagena on August 31, Morgan had already sailed from Panama.

Ransom

During his occupation of Portobelo, Morgan released one of the prisoners, Sergeant-Major Antonio de Lara with a letter for the governor. Morgan sent cordial greetings and informed the Spanish that he would burn Portobelo to the ground and take all the guns, munitions and prisoners unless he received a ransom of 350,000 pesos.

This was a lot of the Royal Crown's money, much more than was being held in the Spanish garrisons at the time. Because of the state of Spain's finances at the time, the soldiers at Portobelo had not received their pay for 18 months, and no supply ship from Spain had arrived for almost a year. However, the merchants of Portobelo and Panama City were wealthy. Bracamonte rejected Morgan's demands, writing back, "I take you to be a corsair and I reply that the vassals of the King of Spain do not make treaties with inferior persons" (Earle, 83)

Morgan replied with insolence, taunting Bracamonte to hurry up and arrive at Portobelo or Morgan would have to go to Panama City. He even offered to release his Spanish prisoners to help Bracamonte's inadequate army. Morgan signed his letter with the epithet "Portobelo, city of the King of England," (Earle,

84) even though he did not have an official British commission to invade Spanish territory.

Disease strikes

Both the Spanish and Morgan's troops began suffering from the unhealthy effects of rainy season. Unbeknownst to them, the swarms of mosquitoes were infecting them with diseases like malaria and yellow fever, and men in both camps began to sicken. Although Morgan had only lost 19 men during the attack, many more began to fall. In the camp at Matapalo, just a mile or two outside Portobelo, Bracamonte's army began to literally bog down in their low-lying campsite.

Counter-intelligence

A few skirmishes resulted in the escape of some of the Spanish prisoners, the taking of one English prisoner, and the death of eight Spaniards and one of Morgan's men. Bracamonte interviewed two 'escaped' Spanish seamen, who misinformed him that Morgan's plan was to distract Bracamonte at Portobelo while a group of French allies marched across the isthmus to sack Panama. (Morgan, during a previous council of war in Nicaragua, had indeed invited the French to join him, but the French had declined because they doubted he would be successful.)

The pressure was on the young governor to make the right decision: attack the English who had already taken Portobelo and controlled the heavy artillery, or return to defend Panama City, the stronghold of the Spanish and the vital link to Peru? After another *junta* meeting, the majority of the officers voted to return to Panama City. Records officially note the lack of food and troop illness as additional circumstances, in case their superiors ever questioned the retreat.

Negotiations

They left Captain Francisco de Aricaga to try to negotiate with Morgan. And negotiate he did, assuring Morgan that 100,000 pesos worth of silver and gold was the highest possible amount they could produce. Aricaga had the nerve to say the Spanish would pay only 50,000 pesos in cash and the rest in a note of credit from a Genoese slave contractor.

Morgan scoffed at the idea of receiving a note of credit, but kept quiet about his concern that further delay would allow sickness to debilitate his already weak men and the Spanish would take back Portobelo. He continued to negotiate with the commander of the rearguard, Cristoval Garcia Niño, and came to an agreement for the payment of the entire 100,000 pesos and a prisoner exchange within ten days. Garcia suggested that the English should show good faith by leaving Portobelo first and then receiving the money and handing over the prisoners from their ships. Morgan would have none of that, but he did agree to take payment at Portobelo and allow the Spanish hostages to inspect the castle guns to ensure they were not sabotaged.

Garcia hastened back to Panama to report to a grateful Bracamonte, who had found not one French privateer near Panama City and was anxious to find a way to avoid receiving a reprimand for abandoning his rescue mission at Portobelo.

The payoff

Some of the ransom came from the Royal Treasury, but the majority was borrowed from private citizens. However, the governor decreed that the city of Portobelo had to pay the money back from the profit made on the next trade. The citizens of Portobelo would loudly protest this decree when they were at last freed, and many would later file lawsuits protesting the measure.

Nevertheless, on August 3, 1668, two mule trains crossed the isthmus carrying 27 bars of silver worth 43,000 pesos, several chests of silver plate worth 13,000 pesos, 4,000 pesos in gold coins and 40,000 in silver coins. Morgan, who was well known for his gentlemanly way of speaking, formally thanked the Spaniards, loaded up the ransom with all the other loot he had gathered, and sailed away less than one month after his arrival.

Panama recovers

Morgan had mistimed his attack on Portobelo at about the midpoint of a two-year cycle between the Spanish fleet's arrival from Europe and Peru. The next arrival was scheduled for October 1669. Viceroy Conde de Lemos released Governor Don Juan Perez de Guzmán from prison, and Don Juan arrived in Panama as preparations were being made for the fleet's arrival from Lima. He found the city of Panama guarded by only 200 regular soldiers augmented by the town's militia groups organized by race – white, black, mulatto (white/black) and zambo (black/Indian). He immediately sent letters to Spain asking for more troops, but help never came.

When the Peruvian treasure arrived, mule trains carried 5 million pesos of merchandise and over 17 million pesos of silver coin and bullion over the Las Cruces trail to Portobelo. (Earle 140) Now was the time for the pirates to attack before the royal fleet arrived from Spain! But the fleet arrived, the treasures were loaded safely and the ships sailed away in early December. During that brief time, 450 men died of fevers contracted in Cartagena and Portobelo. The ships had arrived in Panama at the peak of the heavy rains, when disease-carrying mosquitoes were at their height.

Fortifications at Portobelo and San Lorenzo, 1699

Earle writes that the designs of the original castles in Portobelo and San Lorenzo broke many of the rules of good military architecture. The Santiago castle was surrounded by higher ground that provided good attack positions for snipers. Another problem was the lack of good construction stone and lime. Most of the castle blocks were made of cut coral reef.

On the other hand, San Lorenzo's exterior was built of timber palisades reinforced with sand and earth, and the living quarters were made of earth and straw with palm-thatch roofs. Governor Guzmán tried to improve defenses at

San Lorenzo, but lacked funds. He did build a new gun platform at sea level to augment defenses stationed at the castle at the top of the cliff. The fort's wooden palisades and thatch roofs would later contribute to the fall of San Lorenzo under the attack of Sir Henry Morgan and the largest gathering of privateers ever.

The final attack

In 1670, Morgan amassed a fleet of 38 ships and some 2,000 men for one last attack on the Spanish. They knew that news of an official declaration of peace between England and Spain would soon arrive in the Caribbean. During a summit meeting, the privateers chose Panama as their final target over Santiago, Cuba; Veracruz, Mexico; and Cartagena, Colombia. On Christmas Eve, they attacked Santa Catalina Island, which fell without losses on either side. Reports say the frightened defenders of the island sent word to Morgan that they would prefer to stage a mock defense, firing into the air, in order to fall with honor instead of surrendering. (Esquemeling, Earle, Minter)

Fort San Lorenzo

The privateers' next target was the fort at San Lorenzo, Panama. San Lorenzo had to be taken before the great pirate fleet could sail up the Chagres River. Morgan knew their arrival and huge fleet size would immediately be reported to Panama. Instead, he sent only three ships and 400 men under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Joseph Bradley to take San Lorenzo. Morgan and the remaining ships stayed at Santa Carolina a few days more, passing the time by systematically destroying the island's fortifications and guns.

Bradley and his 400 men landed east of the castle and hacked their way through dense undergrowth until reaching a large cleared area next to the fortifications. They attempted an attack across the clearing in broad daylight. But accurate Spanish cannon fire and gunfire, accompanied by a shower of arrows, caused heavy casualties, and they fell back into the trees. An hour later, they attacked a second time, only to be beaten back again. Near sunset, the privateers successfully reached a ravine near one of the walls in their third attack. In the failing light, it was harder for the Spanish to pick out their attackers in the ravine, but the sun setting behind the fort made it easy for the privateers to spot the Spanish soldiers' silhouettes.

Among the attackers was a group of grenadiers who prepared and threw pots containing burning oil, an early-day Molotov Cocktail. The January dry season had dried out the fort's palm-leaf roof, and the explosives ignited the thatch. The fire caused an explosion in a storage room containing arms and gunpowder and the wooden palisades began to burn and collapse.

Turn of events

Much is known of this attack from a published account of and eyewitness and participant in the attack. John Esquemeling, who served as a barber-surgeon to the privateers, published his account in Dutch in 1678. The book was very

popular, and recounts how the battle turned in favor of the English. It seems an English musketeer wrenched an arrow from his own shoulder, wrapped a cotton wad around the arrow and fired it from his musket onto the fort's palm-leaf thatch. The gun's blast ignited the cotton, which began to burn the thatch. Other privateers fired more burning arrows, and the Spanish were soon trying to put out fires with a bucket brigade.

But luck was not with them.

Their prize bronze cannon that had inflicted much damage blew up, ripping up the palisades below it and collapsing a long section of wall on either side. The grenadiers took advantage of the hole and threw more burning oil pots. One landed on the main gunpowder room, causing a great explosion. The fires and explosions devastated and demoralized the Spanish. Many began to retreat down the cliff and make their way to canoes at the water's edge.

San Lorenzo falls

With only 150 Spaniards defending the castle, Bradley attacked again at dawn. He suffered heavy casualties in the first two assaults, but on the third attempt, the attackers entered the fort. The Spaniard in charge, Don Pedro de Elizalde, and some 70 loyal men refused to surrender and fought until they were all killed. Equemeling maintains that 30 remained alive and informed the privateers that the Spanish had fortified the way stations along the trail to Panama City.

Despite their success, Colonel Bradley and 76 others suffered fatal wounds in the assault. Thirty others were killed outright. While waiting for Morgan to arrive, the remaining privateers began rebuilding portions of the fort with the help of the slaves they had brought from Santa Catalina or captured from a nearby village. They had to make the fort defendable in order to guard against a Spanish counter-attack.

Esquemeling's description of the battle at Castle San Lorenzo (pages 189-190)

> *"At last, after many doubts and disputes, resolving to hazard the assault and their lives desperately, they advanced towards the castle with their swords in one hand, and fireballs in the other. The Spaniards defended themselves very briskly, ceasing not to fire at them continually; crying withal, "Come on, ye English dogs! Enemies to God and our king; and let your other companions that are behind come on too, ye shall not go to Panama this bout." The pirates making some trial to climb the walls, were forced to retreat, resting themselves till night. This being come, they returned to the assault, to try, by the help of their fire-balls, to destroy the pales before the wall; and while they were about it, there happened a very remarkable accident, which occasioned their victory. One of the pirates being wounded with an arrow in his back, which pierced his body through, he pulled it out boldly at the side of his breast, and winding a little cotton about it, he put it into his musket, and shot it*

back to the castle; but the cotton being kindled by the powder, fired two or three houses in the castle, being thatched with palm-leaves, which the Spaniards perceived not so soon as was necessary; for this fire meeting with a parcel of powder, blew it up, thereby causing great ruin, and no less consternation to the Spaniards, who were not able to put a stop to it, not having seen it time enough." (Esquemeling, 189-190)

"The pirates perceiving the effect of the arrow, and the misfortunes of the Spaniards, were infinitely glad; and while they were busied in quenching the fire, which caused a great confusion for want of water, the pirates took this opportunity, setting fire likewise to the palisades. The fire thus seen at once in several parts about the castle, gave them great advantage against the Spaniards, many breaches being made by the fire among the pales, great heaps of earth falling into the ditch. Then the pirates climbing up, got over into the castle, though those Spaniards, who were not busy about the fire, cast down many flaming pots full of combustible matter, and odious smells, which destroyed many of the English." (Esquemeling, 190)

"The Spaniards, with all their resistance, could not hinder the palisades from being burnt down before midnight. Meanwhile the pirates continued in their intention of taking the castle; and though the fire was very great, they would creep on the ground, as near as they could, and shoot amidst the flames against the Spaniards on the other side, and thus killed many from the walls. When day was come, they observed all the movable earth, that lay betwixt the pales, to be fallen into the ditch; so that now those within the castle lay equally exposed to them without, as had been on the contrary before; whereupon the pirates continued shooting very furiously, and killed many Spaniards; for the governor had charged them to make good those posts, answering to the heaps of earth fallen into the ditch, and caused the artillery to be transported to the breaches." (Equemeling, 191)

"The fire within the castle still continuing, the pirates from abroad did what they could to hinder its progress, by shooting incessantly against it; one party of them was employed only for this, while another watched all the motions of the Spaniards. About noon the English gained a breach, which the governor himself defended with twenty-five soldiers. Here was made a very courageous resistance by the Spaniards, with muskets, pikes, stones and swords; but through all these the pirates fought their way, till they gained the castle. The Spaniards, who remained alive, cast themselves down from the castle into the sea, choosing rather to die thus (few or none surviving the fall) than to ask quarter for their lives. The governor himself retreated to the corps du gard, before which were placed two pieces of cannon: here he still defended himself, not demanding any quarter, till he was killed with a musket-shot in the head." (Esquemeling, 191)

Morgan arrives

On January 12, Morgan and 33 ships arrived from Santa Catalina. They sighted the English flag flying and their comrades lining the walls of the fort and began cheering. The crew on Morgan's flagship, the *Satisfaction*, were so enthusiastic that they did not notice the shallow Laja Reef lying at the entrance to the mouth of the Chagres River. The *Satisfaction* ran right up onto the reef, and, like some slow-motion freeway pileup, four more ships followed. The most feared pirates in the region were soon frantically trying to recover from their own self-destruction. All five ships were a total loss, but the crew and most of their provisions were saved.

Morgan immediately prepared to sail further up the Chagres River. He left Captain Richard Norman in charge of 300 men to guard his rear flank at San Lorenzo. On January 19, 1671, Morgan sailed with more than 1,400 men in seven small ships and 36 boats and canoes. They planned to follow the Chagres to the Las Cruces Trail to Panama City. But they did not know the start of dry season triggered a drop in the river's water level. Soon the shallow water forced them to abandon the ships and rely on small boats to carry the equipment while the men marched along the banks.

Panama prepares for the attack

Word of the attack on San Lorenzo had reached Panama City within 24 hours. The unlucky Governor Guzmán was bedridden with a terrible fever, but rallied and began organizing the city's defense. He sent Francisco Gonzalez Salado and 400 men out to ambush Morgan along the Chagres. Gonzalez and his men prepared four defense sites along the banks of the river at Barbacoas, Caño Quebrada, Tornomarcos and Barro Colorado. Most of his men were blacks, half-castes and Indians who were well-suited for ambush assaults because of their jungle knowledge.

Up the Chagres to the Las Cruces Trail

Gonzalez was waiting at an advance post at Dos Brazos when they heard cannons firing at San Lorenzo. When the wounded deserters began filtering upriver, however, Gonzalez faltered and retreated further upriver to the nearest fortification at Barro Colorado. When he heard next of the castle's fall, he left Captain Luis de Castillo in command and retreated as he sent all of his men from the other stations to Barro Colorado. Castillo himself cowered at Barbacoas, the fortification furthest from the approaching privateers.

At this point, the Spanish still though Morgan's force numbered only about 400 men. When the first group of advance Spanish scouts saw the huge flotilla coming up the river, they were so surprised that they kept hidden. Instead of attacking, the two companies of about 300 men tried to retreat to a lookout further upstream. On the way, they conveniently "got lost" for the remainder of the altercation.

For the privateers, following the river was difficult, since water levels were low. When Morgan reached Barro Colorado, some of his men made a sneak

attack on the site's fortification, only to find that Castillo and his men had abandoned the fort and burned it and any food that they could not carry away. After the disappearance of the 300 advance scouts, Castillo had just 216 remaining men at Barro Colorado when he learned of the true size of Morgan's army. The Spanish had lost their nerve and retreated even further upriver.

Starving the enemy

Morgan proceeded unopposed by men, but nature in the form of fallen trees and other debris blocked his progress on the river bank. The privateers took to land, carrying their weapons but leaving their food behind. They assumed they would be able to shoot game and steal food from the Spanish and native villages as they made their way across the isthmus.

But everyone fleeing in their path systematically carried away or hid their food supplies, and the game retreated in front of their noisy progress. Hunger began to weaken the more than 1,000 men. At one point, they came upon some empty leather pouches. In desperation, they cut them up into pieces and boiled and ate them. Then they found a barn full of dried corn that they devoured raw.

On Sunday, January 25, they had been marching three days without food when they finally reached the beginning of the Las Cruces Trail to Panama. Here they expected to meet resistance, but again Gonzalez and Castillo had burned the village of Cruces, taken all the food and retreated. If only they had known how weakened Morgan's men were from hunger, they could have successfully ambushed them and turned them back at this point.

At the Cruces settlement, the privateers found a few unfortunate dogs that were immediately turned into meals and 16 jars of Peruvian wine. After drinking the wine, the majority of the men became ill and declared that the Spaniards had poisoned it. Most likely, however, the revolting combination of leather, raw corn and wine in their stomachs was the real cause of distress.

Las Cruces Trail

Now the attackers had the Las Cruces road to march on. As they progressed, they were ambushes several times, but suffered only light casualties. Most of their attackers were arrow-wielding Indians who were loyal to the Spanish. Fortunately, the arrows were not tipped with the potent poison commonly used in the area.

On the fifth day of their march without food, the privateers caught their first sight of the Pacific Ocean and entered a field of cattle and horses that they immediately proceeded to butcher and eat only half cooked. The Spaniards' careless oversight of this food source greatly contributed to their eventual downfall, as the abundant meat soon restored the privateers' energy and resolve.

Panama's secret defense

Meanwhile in the city, Governor Guzman's health had deteriorated, but he continued to rally the 800 or so remaining defenses. The Spanish pitched camp

at Guayabal, about 16 miles from Panama City. But when news arrived that over 1,000 hungry, bloodthirsty pirates were on their way, two-thirds of the men deserted. Guzman was forced to retreat to the city, and he set his forces up on a cleared area just outside of town.

Desperate, Guzman devised a secret weapon – a herd of 2,000 wild bulls held in a corral. The plan was to stampede them toward the enemy. As the attack began, the Spanish infantry horses bogged down in the mud and Morgan's men decimated their riders. The wild bulls were released and began running toward the attackers. Morgan's trumpeters turned and commenced blasting on their horns, and the racket frightened the animals into turning in another direction.

Seeing that the enemy was gaining the upper hand, the Spanish retreated. As the privateers advanced on the city, the citizens and clergy gathered up many of their valuables and sailed away in several ships. Those left behind felt the wrath of the attackers.

Control of the city

Earle reports that the Spanish themselves set fire to the city before leaving, but Esquemeling (208) reports that Morgan ordered the fires set. At any rate, most of the city burned, destroying much of the remaining valuables and food. Instead of commandeering a ship and following the escapees, Morgan's men began to open the wine stores and revel in their victory. They had finally sacked Panama City!

When they did come to their senses, they sailed about looking for the escaped ships, but were never able to locate the one that held the king's treasure and gold ornaments from the church. As a result, the booty collected from the city was small in comparison with the great effort and sacrifice made to obtain it. Morgan and his men remained in Panama City for a month, torturing citizens to extract every last hiding place for their valuables.

Return to San Lorenzo

Meanwhile at San Lorenzo, the privateers patrolled nearby waters looking for ships carrying supplies. They chased a Spanish ship into the Chagres harbor and happily unloaded its food supply. On February 24, Morgan's group left Panama with 275 mules and about 600 prisoners. They followed the trail back to Cruces and sailed down the Chagres to San Lorenzo. But before reaching the fort, Morgan had every privateer, including himself, searched for hidden valuables. None were found, but his privateers were offended by the show of mistrust.

Morgan's fate

Back at the fort, Morgan sent the prisoners to Portobelo with a ransom note for 100,000 pieces of eight, which the governor refused to pay. Morgan let the prisoners free anyway and prepared to leave. However, since his men were unhappy about the small amount of loot taken, Morgan secretly loaded up his

own ships with all the food and the best of the valuables and sailed away, leaving most of his followers behind. (Esquemeling, Minter) Although their ships were intact, those remaining at San Lorenzo could not leave for quite a while before they could amass enough food to sustain them on a long journey.

Morgan returned to Jamaica, only to be sent to England in chains. However, when he sent King Charles II a large amount of treasure taken from Panama, Morgan recovered his good standing. The king knighted Morgan and appointed him lieutenant governor of Jamaica, where Morgan returned to live out his final days in luxury. He died in 1688.

England pressures Spain

Despite Spain's monopoly on ships allowed to trade in Panama, English and French smugglers established a black market cleverly timed to coincide with the Portobelo fair. The smuggler ships would anchor in hidden coves between San Lorenzo and San Felipe and sell slaves and goods without charging Spanish taxes. Generous gifts to local officials ensured they reported that the coast remained smuggler-free. However, when illicit trade outstripped Portobelo fair revenue by an estimated five to one in 1624, Spain finally reacted by adding smuggling and accepting smuggler's bribes to the list of Spanish Inquisition sins. By 1700, English frustration contributed to the War of the Spanish Succession, which ended in 1713 with a treaty giving the English an exclusive contract for slave trade to the Spanish colonies.

The treaty also permitted just one 500-ton British ship to attend the annual Portobelo fair. The enterprising Brits sent a convoy escort with the fully loaded *navio de permiso* (authorized ship). Just outside the harbor, the smaller ships transferred even more goods onto the mother ship, which in turn unloaded all unessential cargo, including most of its sails, crew and its heavy anchor. A skeleton crew sailed the mother ship under one sail to the Portobelo pier. But English patience with this token bit of commerce soon wore thin and ended in outright attack.

Edward Vernon

In November 1739, British Admiral Edward Vernon attacked Portobelo with six ships, taking Fort San Felipe. Vernon then loaded the best of Portobelo's cannons onto his ships and proceeded to destroy the rest of the fort. The walls of the fort were so thick (nine feet) that it took 16 to 18 days of blasting to destroy the fort.

Britain reacted to the success that it proclaimed Vernon's birthday a holiday. One of Vernon's aides was Lawrence Washington, from Virginia in the English colonies and brother of George Washington, the future first president of the United States. The Washington family honored their son's participation in the destruction of Portobelo by naming their Virginia estate Mount Vernon.

Spurred on by success, Vernon returned to attack the San Lorenzo castle again in March 1740, using the very same cannons he had taken from Portobelo.

For two days and nights he bombarded the fort, but the Spanish refused to surrender. In the end, Vernon completely decimated the fortress and all defending it.

These two victories broke the Spanish trade monopoly. Thereafter the merchant mariners of England could acquire licenses to trade in Spanish American ports. The fair at Portobelo was discontinued, but San Lorenzo was rebuilt stronger than ever to become the new clearing point for ship traffic. The Chagres River - Las Cruces Trail became the preferred route across the isthmus, and the harbor at San Lorenzo became the Atlantic terminus for trade goods.

Gregor MacGregor

A full 300 years after Spaniards laid claim to Panama, the British were still trying to grab some of its riches. In 1819, the British filibuster Gregor MacGregor led 500 mercenaries on a successful attack of Portobelo. London investors backed MacGregor's expedition, and his plan was to also take Panama City and sell control over the trans-isthmian route to the British government. But MacGregor was defenseless against Panama's deadly but invisible ally – mosquito-born fevers that laid the group flat on their backs before they could march out of Portobelo. While the mercenaries were recovering, Spanish troops arrived from Panama City and literally chased them back onto their ships. (Minter, 189) Just two years later, Panama gained its independence and Spain lost control over the isthmus.

Fort San Lorenzo

However, Fort San Lorenzo lingered as a Spanish stronghold and may have been occupied by the Spanish until 1840. (Minter, 193) The San Lorenzo ruins that visitors see today are the remains of the fortress that was rebuilt after Vernon's attack in 1740.

The search for a water route

King Charles of Spain

A 300-year precedent

As early as 1532, the Spanish began thinking of digging an all-water route across the Americas. King Charles (Carlos V) ordered the first survey of the best route across Panama isthmus. A royal *cedula* signed on March 12, 1532, ordered the governor to clear the Chagres River to its last navigable point and open a road from there to Panama City. Another *cedula* signed on February 20, 1534, commanded the governor to send surveyors to study the land between the Chagres River and the Pacific for the possibility of making an all-water route.

The resulting report called such an undertaking impossible and recommended improving the existing Chagres route instead. Perhaps more importantly, King Charles recognized the value of maintaining the Spanish monopoly on South American trade and access to the Pacific by *not* opening a canal. Subsequent monarchs followed the same line of thinking, and no further surveys for building a water route were made until the early part of the nineteenth century.

Dreamers

But the king's will did not keep others from speculating. In his memoirs in 1555, Antonio Galvao, a Portuguese governor in the Moluccas (South Pacific islands) writes of meeting Alvaro de Saavedra, a cousin of Hernan Cortez (the conqueror of Mexico). Saavedra was in the Moluccas searching for cloves and spoke of four possible routes for a canal connecting the Atlantic and Pacific oceans.

Two of his proposed routes crossed Panama, one in the Darien between the gulfs of San Miguel and Urabá and the other on a route between Nombre de Dios and Panama City. The other two possibilities were across Lake Nicaragua in Nicaragua and across the isthmus of Teohuantapec in Mexico. (Howarth, 57) Less than 50 years after the European discovery of the Pacific Ocean, the Spanish had mapped the New World accurately enough to identify four best choices for building a canal across it. Later surveys would confirm the viability of these four routes.

Humbolt explorations

Alexander Humbolt explored Central America in the early nineteenth century and enthusiastically spoke of the potential for building a canal across Mexico, Nicaragua or Panama. Inspired, the Spanish monarch passed a decree in 1814 authorizing the construction of a canal across Panama.

End of Spanish rule

Despite this optimism, no action was taken except for a growing resistance to Spain's dominance. By 1819, Latin America was rebelling against Spain; by 1823, all of the Spanish colonies had established their independence. On November 28, 1821, Panama became part of New Granada, which encompassed modern-day Colombia and Ecuador as well.

Further explorations

Several canal route surveys were conducted between 1824 and 1840, but nothing came of them. In 1838, New Granada granted a concession to a French company to construct a railway or canal with the Pacific terminus at Panama City. But the wary French forfeited the concession when detailed surveys revealed the magnitude of the job. In 1848, New Granada signed a treaty for the United States to provide transport across the isthmus under the condition of neutrality for all wishing to use it. Instead of a water route, the project took the form of railroad tracks that roughly followed the route of historical trails across the isthmus and robbed the Chagres River – Las Cruces Trail route of its importance.

Panama Railroad Heyday, 1848 - 1869

Gold Rush across Panama

A new discovery in 1848 sparked a renaissance for the gold route across the isthmus. On January 24, a man named James Marshall discovered gold at Sutter's mill in northern California. The area was a territory of the United States, having been acquired by treaty from Mexico. There were only three ways to get to California from the eastern United States: by horse across 3,000 miles of wilderness inhabited by hostile Indians; by sea, over 12,000 miles around Cape Horn; or by sea some 5,000 nautical miles that included a 50-mile shortcut across the Isthmus of Panama. The Panama route went up the Chagres River from Fort San Lorenzo and then down the Las Cruces Trail to Panama City. Ships arriving from New Orleans, a southern U.S. port, or from the east coast sailed into the Fort San Lorenzo harbor where passengers disembarked at the town of Chagres.

The "forty-niners"

The first gold-hungry passengers to hurry off the ship in late 1848 and all during 1849 were nicknamed "forty-niners", and gold fever swept the United States. They desperately competed for the few boats that could take them up the river and for the few bewildered guides who could lead them from Cruces across to Panama City. Not only did hundreds of fortune seekers cross the isthmus in this fashion, but also the tons of food provisions and mining equipment that they carried with them. One dedicated newspaperman even took a 1,200-pound printing press over the route.

Printing press follows the Spanish trail

In early 1850, Judson Ames of Louisiana arrived at Chagres with the largest and heaviest single piece of freight yet to be transported across the isthmus. It was a 1,200-pound hand-printing press built in New York. Ames hired a flat-bottomed barge to take the press up the Chagres River, but after leaving the dock, the barge promptly tilted to one side and dumped the press into the river. The determined Ames was able to drag the press onto the riverbank using ropes and a team of men and set it on the barge again. The boatmen poled the barge upstream for an entire week before they finally arrived in Cruces, where Ames paid $200 to hire a team of mules to carry the press on their backs to Panama City. They arrived, exhausted, three days later.

Ames found that the earliest available space on a ship going north was three months away, so he set up the press to pass the time. He began publishing the Panama *Herald,* the second English-language newspaper to be published in Panama City. When he finally arranged for passage to California, Ames sold his accounts to the other English-language newspaper, the *Star*. Thereafter, the *Star* was known as the *Star & Herald* and continued to be published for more than a century.

New treasure and nineteenth century pirates

During the Gold Rush, the route from the town of Chagres to Cruces soon became a boondoggle for any local resident with a boat. Each time a ship arrived; hundreds of passengers disembarked and began clamoring for transport up the river. Boatmen quickly learned they could charge exorbitant prices for any sort of transportation that would deliver a passenger to Cruces. A collection of mules was worth its weight in gold, for they provided the only transportation from Cruces to Panama City, down the Las Cruces Trail, besides walking. By 1851, there were five U.S. Mail Steam Line vessels running from New Orleans to Chagres, each one delivering up to 400 passengers at a time. Eight additional steamers operated from New York to Chagres.

Soon traffic began to flow in the return direction. Miners and businessmen arrived from San Francisco and carried their wealth across the isthmus for the return trip east. All this wealth passing back and forth attracted a cutthroat collection of thieves – both local and foreign – to the jungle along the trail. It was as if the time of the pirates and privateers had returned. The situation might have been ignored if it had not been for the ongoing construction of the Panama Railroad.

Panama Railroad

Mail service ignites trans-isthmian transport

A treaty between the United States and New Granada on December 12, 1846, guaranteed a right-of-way across Panama for whichever company won the bid for providing transportation and mail service between the U.S. east coast and

the new territories of Oregon and, later on, California. Two wealthy businessmen, George Law and William H. Aspinwall, won the contract in 1848 and began setting up separate shipping lines that connected in Panama. Aspinwall took responsibility for the Atlantic route, and Law established ship transportation on the Pacific coast. They had no choice but to provide mule-train transportation across the Las Cruces Trail in order to link the two shipping lines. Work began immediately to improve the long-neglected Spanish trail. The lucky timing of the Gold Rush to California brought an immediate avalanche of paying customers to their road and reinforced the notion that a railroad should replace the mule trains.

Railroad stock issued

Knowing that a railroad would reduce the trek across the isthmus from four days to about four hours, Aspinwall looked for investors to help realize his dream. He recruited Henry Chauncey, a wealthy New York capitalist, and John L. Stephens, a writer and adventurer, and signed a contract with New Granada stipulating that the railroad must be completed within eight years.

The partners incorporated the Panama Railroad Company and sold stock to raise $1 million. The route would start at Manzanillo Island in Limón Bay and terminate at Panama City. The town established at Manzanillo was optimistically named Aspinwall by the newcomers, but the locals and New Granada insisted on calling it Colón after its first European visitor, Cristobal Colón.

The railroad paralleled the Chagres-Las Cruces route. The difficult terrain and disease slowed construction, and at the end of just 20 months they had progressed only seven miles and run out of money. Fortune smiled on Aspinwall when the forty-niners discovered the existence of the tracks and began paying $25, and enormous sum in those days, to ride seven miles and $10 just to walk along the tracks. This new influx of money and proof that passengers would pay boosted investors' confidence and enabled construction to continue. But the railroad also took passengers away from San Lorenzo and the Chagres route, causing resentment among the locals who had been earning a good living.

It was not until January 27, 1855, that the rails reached the Continental Divide and were connected to 11 miles of rails coming from Panama City. Construction of just 47 miles of railroad had cost the investors $7.5 million and taken 12,000 lives from disease. But, thanks to the Gold Rush, by 1859 the railroad had earned more than half the cost of construction and, by 1862, made a net profit of almost $6 million.

For the first 15 years of operation, the Panama Railroad was the most important link between the U.S. and California. In the five years ending in 1859, it transported more than $300 million worth of California gold and 100,000 bags of US mail. (Minter 286). By January, 1865, its total profits were over $11 million. Between 1856 and 1866, the train transported over 400,000 passengers across the isthmus. (Schott, Howarth)

Sold to France, the United States

But the Panama Railroad lost its California passengers in 1869 with the completion of the Union Pacific Railroad across the United States. The company's stock value was depressed until 1879, when the French company that planned to build a canal across the isthmus paid $20 million for it. Later, ownership of the railroad passed into the hands of the United States government with the purchase of the remains of the French construction equipment for $40 million, including only $7 million for the railroad.

The train played a major role in the success of the U.S. construction effort. When John F. Stevens, a veteran railroad man, served as chief engineer in charge of Canal construction, he modified the railroad route to haul millions of cubic yards of rock and dirt out of excavation sites and move tons of equipment from place to place. Passengers also used the train to go to their work sites and neighboring towns along the construction route. Before water filled the Canal, the railroad tracks were moved to higher elevation at a cost of $9 million. The Panama Railroad continued to provide inexpensive as well as scenic transportation across the isthmus for over six decades.

In 1979, the railroad was handed over to Panama as part of the treaty agreements between the United States and Panama. It fell into disuse until the end of the century, when it was sold to the Kansas City Southern Railway company. The company invested millions of dollars to replace the entire train infrastructure, including all rails, ties, locomotives and trailers, and made plans to begin offering shipping container transportation service as well as limited passenger tours during 2001.

Adventure along the Panama Railroad - Las Cruces Trail route

A Texas Ranger in Panama

During the first years of Panama Railroad construction, Aspinwall's efforts were plagued by Panama's remoteness and tropical climate, diseases that decimated the work crews and highway robbers who preyed on his passengers. Aspinwall realized his success depended on establishing law and order. He sought advice from the sheriff of San Francisco, California, Colonel Jack Hayes, who recommended the services of Randolph "Ran" Runnels to deal with the highwaymen.

Recruiting a retired Ranger

Runnels had been a Texas Ranger, the Texan roughrider group famous for establishing law and order over the Indians and outlaws who controlled that part of the U.S. Wild West. He had a reputation as one of the toughest of the Rangers and had served under Colonel Hays as the head of a pack train, using horses and mules to haul supplies during the war with Mexico.

In 1850, one of Aspinwall's men, wearing a black overcoat and a stovepipe top hat, road a mule out to Runnels's family ranch near San Antonio, Texas. He found that Runnels had retired from the Rangers and made his peace with God. Who knows what motive caused Runnels to go with the man, leaving the arid, open plains of Texas for the humid jungle of Panama, but he did, never to return. His sister, Octavia Charity Marsden, claimed that Runnels had seen the request for help as a calling from the Lord. (Schott)

The Isthmus Guard

Runnels arrived in Panama in 1851 and set about his mission working undercover as a mule-train packer. Each of the legitimate mule-train owners donated a few of their animals to Runnels, as they were desperate for him to establish safe passage for their customers and cargo. Runnels frequented the bars and cafés, getting to know the locals. He began identifying the outlaws and secretly recruiting "employees" whom he organized as a vigilante group called the Isthmus Guard. Some 40 men were sworn into the secret organization. Runnels composed a list of known highwaymen, referred to as the Derienni, from the information they gathered.

In early 1852, the Guard struck suddenly one night. Masked vigilantes entered Panama City's saloons, gambling halls and brothels and rounded up 37 men. The next morning the prisoners were found hanging along the seawall. In addition to the bodies of several known highwaymen, those of several wealthy and prominent businessmen who had been profiting from illegitimate business dangled as a lifeless lesson to all.

For a few months, the Las Cruces Trail was safe, even for lone travelers on foot. A cholera epidemic struck during the rainy season (May through November), its toll taking the place of the damage formerly done by highwaymen. The thieves' memories were apparently short however, and a few new unsavory characters arrived from abroad. Banditry started up again with the dry-season traffic in December. Seven miners returning home from California were brutally murdered and robbed on the trail between Panama City and Cruces. The Isthmus Guard struck again, and at dawn citizens found 41 more bodies hanging from the seawall timbers, five of them named as the murderers of the seven miners. Runnel's nickname became "El Verdugo", The Hangman.

Labor dispute in Cruces

Railroad construction and the arrival of Gold Rush travelers launched the town of Cruces into a center of activity again. The builders recognized that they needed the Las Cruces Trail for access during railway work and began building an improved the road. George Totten, the engineer in charge of construction, paid laborers 80 cents a day with a backpay promise of and additional 40 cents a day to each who stayed on to work on the railroad.

Observing all the new activity around him, the mayor at Cruces sought an opportunity to enrich himself. He decided he could use his official authority to force the railroad company to pay the workers the full $1.20 a day from the very

beginning. He would make a profit by receiving an “honorarium” from the workers. He collected one dollar from 150 workmen based in Cruces and waited for Totten to arrive on one of his regular inspections. When Totten showed up, the mayor threw him in jail and sent word to railroad headquarters on Manzanillo Island that he would release Totten when the pay raise was announced.

Two days later, Runnels and his armed riders galloped into town to take control of the situation. As he reigned in his horse at the construction foreman’s shack, Runnels shouted out that the workers had 60 seconds to get back to work. As the men scrambled for their picks and shovels, Runnels grabbed a sledgehammer and headed for the jail. While his men held the soldier guards at gunpoint, Runnels smashed the lock and released Totten. They proceeded to the mayor’s house, found him cowering under a bed and dragged him to the main square, where Runnels publicly flogged him and left him tied there with a note in both English and Spanish saying: “This man was punished for interference in the peaceful and legal business of road building. Next time, he and anyone who helps him will get killed.” That ended the labor dispute at Cruces. (Schott)

Future U.S. president confronts cholera epidemic

On July 16, 1852, Ulysses S. Grant arrived on the isthmus from New York. Grant would later serve as the commanding general for the Union (northern) Army during the American Civil War (1861-1865) and then become president of the United States from 1869 to 1877, But in 1852 he was a young lieutenant in the U.S. Army and the quartermaster in charge of logistics for moving the 4th Infantry regiment to California and setting up a military garrison. That July, the 29-year-old lieutenant disembarked at Aspinwall leading a group of 550 souls that included both the soldiers and their families.

Optimistic beginnings

They had been informed that a cholera epidemic was raging in Panama, but the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Bonneville, haughtily assumed that they could cross the isthmus in a matter of days and be on their way before anyone was exposed. They found that railroad tracks extended from Aspinwall to just one mile short of Barbacoas, on the west bank of the Chagres River. The last mile was cleared and level enough for the troops to walk the rest of the way.

Even the women and children volunteered to walk the last mile, happy to stretch their legs after eight days at sea despite the humid and rainy weather. From Barbacoas, they set out for to Cruces by dugout canoes large enough to hold 30 passengers or more, stopping overnight at a village where a drunken wedding party was going on. The next morning, July 18, they roused the hung-over boatmen and pushed on to Cruces.

Cholera strikes

They were making fast headway, but at Cruces the Gold Rush phenomenon stopped them short. The Army had contracted to pay for mule transport to Panama City along the Las Cruces Trail, but at a government rate of just $16 a person. Gold Rush passengers who arrived on the same boat with the regiment were willing to pay between $20 and $40, and of course they got first pick of the scarce mules. Consequently, Grant's group became stranded in Cruces. On the second day of waiting, a soldier succumbed to cholera. Soon more soldiers and their wives and children fell ill. After five days, Grant threw his budget out the window and began hiring mules at any price to get them out of the town. He also rescued six nuns who were stranded, paying native bearers to carry them to Panama City slung in hammocks. Many of the group ended up walking the trail, where at least three died and one man fell into a sinkhole and disappeared before he could be rescued.

Escape to the sea

On July 23, the passengers were shuttled out to the *Golden Gate*, a steamer anchored at Taboga Island off of Panama City. Cholera had already broken out on the ship. Eventually, the sick were segregated onto a hospital ship, where two or three died each day. Passengers on the *Golden Gate* heard the bugle blowing "taps" several times a day from across the water as the dead were buried at sea in a burlap shroud weighted with a cannon ball. Then the bugle blower himself succumbed. The *Golden Gate* finally sailed on August 4, after undergoing a thorough fumigation with poisonous chlorine. In just 19 days, 150 of the group had died. Grant, who escaped with his health, was profoundly impressed by the hellish experience and spoke of it frequently for the rest of his life.

Canal expeditions

During Grant's presidency, he authorized seven expeditions to Central America, including to Nicaragua and Panama, between 1870 and 1875. The purpose was to find the best route for building a canal to connect the Atlantic and Pacific oceans. Grant's Interoceanic Canal Commission evaluated the findings and favored a route across Nicaragua. Shortly after, the French Société de Géographic announced it would sponsor an international congress to discuss the scientific considerations for choosing a route. It seems the French, led by Ferdinand de Lesseps, the builder of the Suez Canal, mistrusted Grant's commission findings. (Schott, McCullough)

French canal – 1879 to 1898

Ferdinand de Lesseps

Count Ferdinand de Lesseps was a hero in France, having overcome almost insurmountable obstacles to build the Suez Canal between 1854 and 1869,

almost the very same time span of the Panama Railroad heyday. He was not an engineer, but a diplomat and dealmaker.

Choosing a route

In 1879, de Lesseps was the president of the Geographical Society (Société de Géographie) of Paris and almost 75 years old. The Society organized an international congress to study the accumulated knowledge of possible routes for an inter-oceanic canal and make a definitive recommendation for the best one. The American delegates favored a Nicaraguan route that included a locks-type canal design and the use of Lake Nicaragua for ship navigation. But de Lesseps favored the findings of a Frenchman named Lucien Napoleon Bonaparte Wyse, who recommended building a sea-level canal across Panama. Coincidentally, the rights for building a canal in Panama belonged to Wyse and a group of French investors, while rights for Nicaragua belonged to the Americans.

Visit to Panama

Raising capital

The promoters founded a public company, the Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interocéanique. However, the new company had difficulty raising funds through stock sales. De Lesseps reasoned that sales would improve if he personally inspected and approved the project, so he sailed for Panama, taking his young wife and three children to show that he was not afraid of the fevers that gave Panama such a dangerous reputation. They arrived on December 30, 1879.

During the train ride from Colon to Panama City, the passengers had to leave the train at Barbacoas and walk over a damaged bridge that spanned the Chagres River in order to board another train waiting on the other side. As they walked across 600-foot-long bridge, they looked 40 feet down to the sedate river below, hardly believing that it could rise to cover the tracks, as it had in November. The tropical rains had been so intense that the mighty Chagres had risen 46 feet, covering the tracks with six feet of water and damaging the bridge. The incident should have sounded a clear warning to de Lesseps about the forces of nature at work in Panama; but he arrived at the end of December, dry season had already begun, and the sunny days painted a misleading rosy picture.

Lighthearted inauguration

On January 1, New Year's Day, 1880, de Lesseps's young daughter, Ferdinande, officially inaugurated the start of construction of the inter-oceanic canal during a formal ceremony. Unfortunately, she was not able to dig the first dirt from the banks of the Rio Grande River – the Pacific terminus of the new canal – as had been planned. Delays had caused the steamboat full of celebrities to leave the dock very late and miss the high tide, making it impossible to reach the spot chosen for the ceremony. In order to save the day's festivities, the ceremony took place on board the boat, and the child ended up swinging a

shiny ornamental pickax brought over from France into a champagne crate filled with sand. Conveniently, enough champagne had been consumed to provide the empty crate, and the formally dressed ladies and gentlemen were spared from disembarking onto the muddy riverbank.

The trumped-up inauguration was an ironic foreboding of events to come. Deception, lack of solid engineering and a taste for expensive trappings would eventually result in failure for de Lesseps and his company.

Engineers finalize their plans

While in Panama, De Lesseps met with his engineers and worked out a final route that would begin at Gatun on the Chagres River and roughly follow the same route as the railroad to Cruces, crossing the Continental Divide through a seven-kilometer-long tunnel at Culebra. They also definitively decided on building a sea-level canal. De Lesseps' public relations journey worked, for upon returning to France and declaring the project feasible, stock sales skyrocketed and financing was ensured. Thus began the project, with two major flaws from the very start: the choice of building a sea-level canal instead of a locks-type canal, and deception of the public through the press. A third flaw was their inability to control deadly fevers on the isthmus.

Construction and disease

Construction began, and in 1881 the French company purchased the Panama Railroad for more than $20 million to support the excavation effort. By 1883, some 10,000 men were employed, and the next year brought an all-time high of 19,000 workers, mostly from Jamaica and the West Indies.

Almost right away, in June 1881, the first worker succumbed to yellow fever. The idea that a mosquito, the *Aedes aegypti*, spread the yellow fever parasite would not be proven until 1901 (by Dr. Walter Reed working in Cuba). While working in India in 1897, another doctor, Ronald Ross, discovered that the *Anopheles* mosquito carried malaria, but it took a long time to convince the general public that mosquitoes and not "tropical vapors" triggered these diseases.

Malaria quickly became the main killer of French canal laborers and engineers alike, with the death toll from both malaria and yellow fever peaking in 1885. The French hospitals in Colon and Ancon unknowingly contributed to their spread. To keep ants and other bugs from crawling into the beds, the staff placed the four bed posts in bowls of water. The stagnant water provided a mosquito-breeding environment right next to the already infected patients. Upon hatching, the mosquitoes had only to bite the nearest patient to become infected with yellow fever or malaria parasites and begin spreading them.

The true number of dead during this time will never be known, but an estimated 1,300 died in 1883. By 1884, forty-eight officers of the company had died of yellow fever, and laborers were dying at a rate of perhaps 200 a month.

Later, Dr. William Crawford Gorgas would review the French hospital records and estimate that perhaps as many as 22,000 died.

Meanwhile, work in the most problematic area, Culebra at the Continental Divide, did not progress well because of repeated landslides. By 1887, it was apparent to the engineers that a sea-level canal was not feasible or affordable, and the company began to suffer economically. Engineers began designing a new canal that would use a series of 10 locks to lift ships over the Divide. Gustave Eiffel, builder of the Eiffel Tower in Paris, won the contract to construct the locks.

Funds run out

In 1889, the French canal company ran out of money before it could make progress with the locks scheme. Shareholders voted to dissolve the Compagnie Universelle. The failure caused a major scandal in France, with hundreds of middle-class families who had invested in canal stock losing their entire savings. It came to light that the French promoters of the effort had been paying the media to write favorable articles designed to increase stock sales. This revelation opened a court case in which de Lesseps and his son, Charles, were accused of misleading the public and bribing the press. They were tried and convicted of fraud and breach of trust.

Further attempts to continue the work under a new company founded by Charles de Lesseps, the Compagnie Nouvelle de Canal de Panama, ended in failure in 1894. Negotiations with U.S. President William McKinley for the Americans to buy the rights and equipment from the French began in 1898. But the U.S. Isthmian Canal Commission was wary about Panama and still favored a Nicaraguan route.

Engineering dream solidifies, 1903 – 1914

Presidents and treaties

Theodore Roosevelt

The assassination of U.S. President William McKinley in 1901 catapulted his vice president, Theodore Roosevelt, into the presidency. Roosevelt strongly supported the construction of a canal to strengthen U.S. dominance of the oceans, and thought the Panama route was viable. But the U.S. Congress was leaning toward choosing a route across Nicaragua. To make a point that Panama was geologically more stable, supporters of the Panama route sent each senator a letter with a postage stamp depicting Nicaragua's active Momotombo volcano to remind them of earthquake dangers in Nicaragua. The message struck a nerve, for the senators chose the Panama route by an eight-vote margin. When Colombia balked at signing a favorable treaty, U.S. diplomats began courting a faction that supported Panama's independence from Colombia.

Independence and a treaty

On November 3, 1903, Panama declared independence from Colombia and, with the help of the United States, won it without bloodshed. Just one month later, on December 2, Panama ratified the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty granting the United States the rights to build a canal and also a concession in perpetuity for control of both the canal and a "Canal Zone." The Zone included a 10-mile-wide strip of land across the isthmus, the centerline of which would be the canal itself.

Canal Zone protects Spanish trail

The Zone included a large portion of the almost forgotten Las Cruces Trail stretching from the Chagres River at Gorgona through Cruces toward Panama City. When the Chagres River was dammed at Gatún in 1912, the resulting reservoir would flood Gorgona, but the trail from Cruces toward Panama City lay on higher land and was preserved. Because of the Zone's policy to leave the 10-mile-wide strip largely undeveloped in order to protect the Canal watershed, remaining traces of the trail stayed undisturbed in the park-like preserve. Portions of the cobblestones are still visible to hardy hikers who enter the forest from the Forest Preserve Road for the long trek toward the Chagres River.

Eradicating the fevers

When the U.S. canal construction effort began on May 4, 1904, one of the first great challenges was to rid the isthmus of yellow fever and malaria. Sick men could not work, and few would willingly sign on to work in a death trap. Fortunately, Roosevelt sent Colonel William Crawford Gorgas to organize health care for the project. Doctor Gorgas arrived from Havana, Cuba, where he had worked with Dr. Walter Reed in stopping yellow fever and malaria epidemics by cleaning up garbage and other mosquito-breeding areas. Working in Panama City, Colón and all the construction work sites, Dr. Gorgas set about installing drainage ditches, eliminating standing water and fumigating to kill the mosquitoes. By 1905, yellow fever was completely wiped out and malaria was under better control.

Canal design and construction

In 1906, President Roosevelt visited Panama to see "his" canal. The trip was historical because he was the first president to leave the continental United States while in office. He made a point of visiting the excavation sites, and took advantage of a photo opportunity when, wearing his white suit, he sat at the controls of a huge excavator and operated the controls.

Roosevelt's first choices for chief engineer of the construction, William Wallace and then John L. Stevens, both civilians, resigned before the first three years of construction had passed. Exasperated, Roosevelt appointed an army colonel, George W. Goethals, to the post. Goethals vowed to stay with the project until it was done, and he was successful. One of his major changes in the original design was to widen the size of the locks chambers from 95 to 110 feet. He did so at the recommendation of the U.S. Navy to accommodate the

USS New Jersey, a new Navy ship that was still under design but would have a beam of 108.1 feet.

Towns disappear under rising waters

The American locks design called for the damming of the Chagres River to create a freshwater lake 80 feet above sea level. Ships would be lifted by locks at the Atlantic entrance, cross the lake and go through a narrow, 8.5-mile-long channel cut through the Continental Divide before being lowered to sea level again. The dam was placed at Gatún, one of the settlements along the river portion that connected with the Las Cruces Trail. As the water rose, it covered the original town of Gatún as well as other towns along the way: Lion Hill, Ahorca Lagarto, Bohío Soldado, Frijoes, Tabernilla, Barbacoas, Gorgona and Matachin. Today, the relatively new town of Gamboa sits at the confluence of the Chagres River and the Panama Canal right in the middle of the isthmus, and is located quite close to the original town of Cruces, which escaped inundation.

Service to the world

Canal opens new "gold route"

The Panama Canal officially opened for business on August 15, 1914. The date coincided with the 395th anniversary of the founding of Panama City by Pedrarias, the Spaniard who had ordered the building of the first Camino de Cruces trail between Portobello and the shores of the Pacific. Almost four centuries had passed, and the Canal symbolized a new kind of gold route for Panama – one that would attract international commerce to its shores and renew its importance as a link between two oceans. Unfortunately, the outbreak of World War I eclipsed the happy news and disrupted normal peacetime shipping traffic.

86 years

The new all-water route was a success despite these quiet beginnings. The United States continued to operate the Canal for 86 years, following a policy of complete neutrality toward all ships arriving for transit.

More treaties

But Panamanians resented having their country split in two, with the Canal Zone serving as barrier to both local residents and commercial port development along the waterway. After years of resentment and conflict, Panama convinced the United States that it could and would run the Canal. U.S. President Jimmy Carter and Panama General Omar Torrijos signed a treaty in 1977 in which the United States vowed to turn over operation and ownership of the Panama Canal to the Panama government at noon on December 31, 1999. After 22 years of preparation, the event was carried out, with Carter returning to the isthmus and symbolically signing the final transfer papers with Panama's first woman president, Mireya Moscoso.

Parks preserve historic trail

Although the Canal Zone ceased to exist, Panama established three parks that help protect the forest and the Las Cruces Trail on the eastern side of the Panama Canal. On May 27, 1980, the Panama government established the 22,104-hectare Soberanía National Park that stretches from the center of the isthmus toward Colon. Five years later, it protected 265 hectares of forest adjacent to Panama City and named it the Metropolitan Nature Park Trail. The 4,000-hectare Las Cruces Trail National Park was created on December 30, 1992, and provides a vital forested link between the Metropolitan and Soberanía parks. It also contains and protects a large portion of the original Las Cruces Trail.

Visitors to the trail fill their senses with all the sights, smells and sounds that Spanish conquistadors and other gold seekers experienced. The trail and the Panama Canal that parallels its course remain historical and modern symbols of the 400-year spanning horse- and sail-power to computers and space-age technology. Four centuries ago, explorers sought the link between the oceans; today, perhaps they seek the link between worlds.

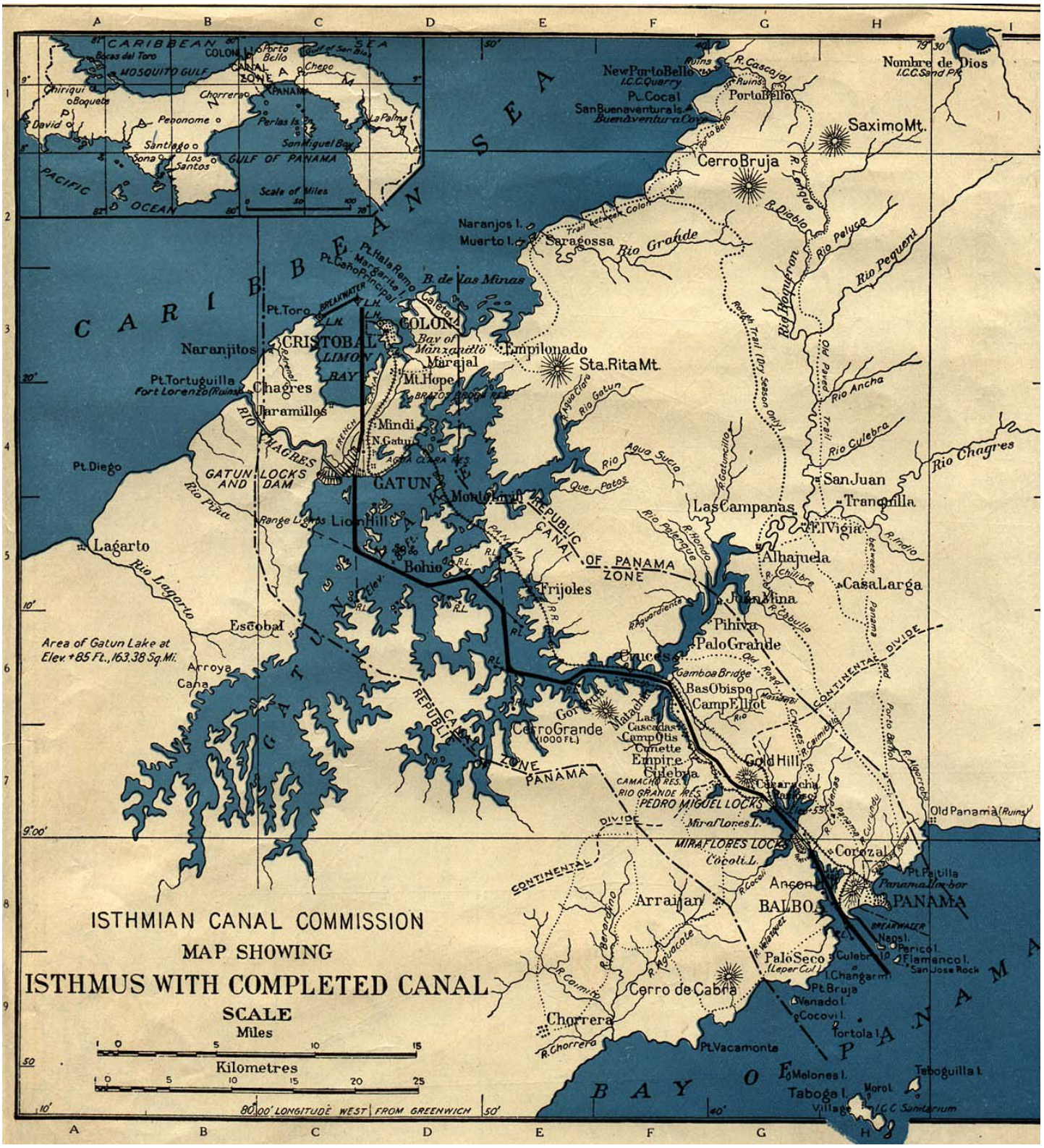

Figure 1 This is a map published in 1917, the drawing was done by L.L. Poates Engr'g Co., N.Y. This is an Isthmian Canal Commission map showing the Isthmus of Panama with the completed Canal.

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