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ONE HUNDRED YEARS AGO:

The Opening of the Panama Canal: August 15, 1914

by THOMAS GOETHALS

The opening of the Panama Canal ... symbolized the completion of the greatest engineering work in the history of mankind.

— Miles P. DuVal, Jr.
(1947)

A RECENT GRADUATE of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Lt. George W. Goethals, Core of Engineers, U.S.A., married Miss Effie Rodman of New Bedford in 1884. She was a descendant of the mercantile whaling families of Rotches and Rodmans who had made New Bedford the whaling capital of the world during the first half of the nineteenth century; he was the son of immigrants from Flanders in northern Europe. Effie first introduced her new husband to Martha's Vineyard in 1889.

Instantly enamored of the Island, a quiet, obscure farming and fishing community, he, now a Captain, bought a lot on Crocker Terrace (later Crocker Avenue) in the summer of 1893 and built his first and only summer home (to be moved in 1923 to West Chop) in time for the family to occupy it in the summer of 1894. Thereafter, until his death in 1928, he made the Town of Tisbury his legal residence and never voted anywhere else, and during the ten years he supervised the construction of the Canal he spent as much of his annual leaves as he could on the Vineyard. West Point may have been his youthful mind's home, his creed West Point's "Duty, Honor, Country," but his heart's home was the Vineyard.

Thomas Goethals is a retired professor of English, and founder, former executive director and president of The Nathan Mayhew Seminars of Martha's Vineyard (1974-1992). He is working on a biography of his grandfather, George W. Goethals, who oversaw the building of the Panama Canal (1907-1914) and was its first governor (1914-1916). This excerpt ©Thomas Goethals, 2010, is printed with permission.

Preparations

On April 1, 1907, Lt. Col. George Goethals, U.S.A., succeeded John F. Stevens, Civil Engineer, as Chairman and Chief Engineer of the Isthmian Canal Commission of the Panama Canal amid a great deal of fanfare, of deep sorrow and loss by Canal workers for the departing railroad engineer. On April 1, 1914, seven years later, Col. Goethals succeeded — well, in a word, himself — as Chairman and Chief Engineer of the all-but completed Canal to become, by an “Executive Order of President Woodrow Wilson of January 27 last,” Governor of the Panama Canal — that is, to form a new government to be headed thereafter by a military engineer to serve as a civilian governor. This time, however, there was no fanfare, no expressions by workers of sorrow and loss, none whatsoever. It was to prove just another day of work in the rush to finish the constructive phase of the canal and to begin a permanent operational phase. And the year of 1914 was intended to become a year of joyful celebration for all nations of the world and, even more so by Col. George Goethals, to become, he hoped, after seven years of intensive labor, the year of his retirement and departure from the Canal Zone, at long last.

And to look ahead for a moment, once opened to the commercial maritime traffic of the world, the fifty-mile-long waterway, cut and dug through mountain and forest, to link two oceans and to divide two continents, would remain in American hands to operate and maintain not forever, as envisioned by its builders, but, as it turned out, only for the remainder of the twentieth century, a total of 86 years, before the United States transferred by treaty — and I believe my grandfather George Goethals would have approved such a treaty — signed in 1977 by Presidents Jimmy Carter and Omar Torrijos, transferring the Canal in the year 2000 from the United States to the Republic of Panama thereafter. One would have thought the creation and construction of a work of such quiet splendor, “the greatest liberty Man has taken with Nature,” would have earned the Chairman and Chief Engineer a seat among the immortals of the world.

The words: *The Land Divided — The World United*, are emblazoned on the great seal of the Canal Zone. Unfortunately, as historian Gerstle Mack noted as long ago as 1944, [the] “proud inscription on the great seal is still a dream of the future.” A dream delayed — World Wars I and II, Korea, Vietnam, Panama, Iraq, Afghanistan, and other conflicts have arisen over the past one hundred years.

For the Colonel, however, on the verge of success, April 1, 1914, was just another day, an important one, to be sure, from an historical perspective, because the Canal was so very close to completion — but, still, just another day of work. Consider what Goethals had accomplished with the aid of his

loyal assistants and workers during the first two months of 1914 after the President had appointed him Governor. Under his leadership, the first vessel, *Alexandre La Valley*, an old crane boat, had successfully made a trip through the Canal, from Colón to Balboa on January 7; the lock gates were completed, and the workers of the contracting firm of McClintic-Marshall were packing up for home at the end of January; Gatun Lake had reached its 85-foot height in early February; the huge dredges — the newest and largest of which could remove 10,000 tons a day — had opened a channel in May through the last of earlier slides¹; and work on the new, permanent Administration Building was proceeding satisfactorily, the projected date for occupancy planned for June 1914, and so too the progress of construction of the Toro Point, or west breakwater, at the rate of about 100 feet a day.

These had become, in Goethals' view, just irritatingly but highly necessary details in the course of his close supervision of the transition of the "big job," as it was frequently called, from a constructive force to an operating force, a process of laying off workers, mostly laborers — by December of 1914, a total of 17,879 since the exodus first began in July of 1913 — and retaining or recruiting new workers but in far fewer numbers from the other. No, at this last stage, Goethals' most pressing challenge as Governor was, significantly, the actual opening of the Canal to world-wide commerce. He had, as was his wont, never lost sight of a grand climax to ten years of hard labor; as early as the summer of 1911, he had confided to Major Frank Boggs, the Canal's purchasing agent now in Washington, some of his general ideas for that future triumphal celebration. He foresaw that there would have to be time enough set aside before

1 Landslides — commonly known as slides — are defined as the, usually, rapid downward movement of a mass of rock and earth, or, simply the mass that moves downward. There were 22 such slides during the construction of the Panama Canal in the nine-mile-long Culebra Cut (later renamed the Gaillard Cut) through the continental divide, the central range of mountains running like a giant spinal cord through Panama's Cordillera Mountains. The most dangerous and destructive of the several types of slides classified by geologists were those known as structural break or deformation slides. They were caused not by masses of mud sliding over slippery harder substances like rock, but by unstable formations of rock, the height and steepness of the banks, and the furious blasting to deepen the prism below.

"Hell's Gorge," the workers called it while they labored in heat as high as 120° in the prism to dig by brawn, steam shovel, and dredge the first man-made canyon or chasm, the banks of which rose in some sections of the Cut 300 to 450 feet above the prism. "Cutting the prism of the Canal through the continental divide," Goethals wrote in retrospect, "was the most formidable part of the Canal enterprise, due to its magnitude, the relatively contracted space within which the operation had to be conducted, the heavy rainfall, and the natural difficulties that were encountered and had to be overcome."

any official opening ceremonies for a new government (or the Panama Railroad Company) to inspect, and to try out, all machinery, all moving parts of whatever size; to repair all such defects uncovered during inspections and tests; and to train the operating force for their new duties. If such a program as this should be adopted by higher authority, he told Boggs, then the first merchant vessel through the Canal should be — he wanted it to be — a vessel from the Panama Railroad Steamship Company because that Company's fleet had done its share in the construction of the Canal, and he wanted one of its vessels to lead any parade of vessels from the U.S. Navy and from foreign nations, including a battleship, that might be selected to follow. He knew of course that such a general plan would not be his alone; it would necessarily include the ideas and plans of Secretary of War Garrison, Secretary of the Navy Josephus Daniels, and, obviously, President Wilson himself.

Two weeks later, August 15, 1911, Goethals wrote the then President, William Howard Taft, that the Canal would be ready for ships "early in the latter half of 1913" — "the little secret," which Taft, while campaigning for a second term on October 9, 1911, revealed to his audience: that they might see the first ship going through the Canal on July 1, 1913. Then, two days later, having learned that Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts had suggested a date of October 5, 1913, the 400th anniversary of Balboa's discovery of the Pacific Ocean, Goethals wrote to Woodrow Wilson, then governor of New Jersey, urging him, if elected, please not to be too optimistic about predicting when the Canal might be ready for opening. He thought it would be risky to set a fixed time in advance for any opening ceremonies because if it were set in advance, it might well backfire if not met. He urged caution, in a word, for he too had "cherished the hope" for the past year and a half that the date of October 5 might be met.

Another hope soon came to light: on July 22, 1913, when the Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, expressed the wish that he might stand on the bridge of the USS *Oregon*.² Just a couple of months later, Daniels told the Secretary of War of his plan for the official opening of the Canal: He wanted the State Department to invite foreign governments to send their naval vessels to Hampton Roads in Virginia early in 1915 and from that port to send a convoy through the Canal. When Goethals learned of that proposal from Garrison, he continued to insist that, though it was

2 The *Oregon* was the famous battleship which, during the Spanish-American War, by making her historic run from San Francisco, rounding Cape Horn through stormy seas, and reaching Cuba, after a long voyage of 13,000 miles in 68 days reached Cuba in time to participate in an important naval victory over a Spanish fleet in the Battle of Santiago — and thereby dramatized for the American people the urgent need for an interoceanic canal.

likely — even probable — that the Canal would be ready before that date, January 1, 1915, was the earliest date he believed he could have a thoroughly trained operating force ready for the opening. And he questioned the Secretary of the Navy's plan to send a large international fleet en masse through the Canal on the grounds that it would take a long time, be very hard on his operating crew, if he had enough pilots ready by then, and prove tedious for all dignitaries assembled for the occasion; moreover, it would be extremely hard for an operating force to carry out, interfere with other planned events for the triumphal ceremony of which the fleet's passage through the Canal was to be only a feature, not the dominant one — and he doubted he could have enough trained pilots ready for so large a number of ships as the Secretary of the Navy proposed. No, no, no, Goethals informed his superior, Secretary Garrison; let one vessel from the U.S. Navy be selected and let the foreign representatives be invited aboard that U.S. vessel for the ceremonial passage through the completed Canal.

The two secretaries of War and the Navy continued to differ in their views about the opening of the Panama Canal to commercial traffic: As late as October 31, 1913, Daniels formally announced that the *Oregon* would lead the international fleet when the Canal was formally opened in 1915; but the next month, Garrison predicted — shortly after he had returned from his illuminating and instructive inspection of the Canal on November 10 — that the waterway would be open to traffic in the spring of 1914, quite possibly as early as the month of February. And Goethals, still awaiting a final decision on the matter and still insisting that completing the construction should precede setting the date was dismayed by Garrison's announcement, which seemed to him to say that no ships would be allowed to transit the Canal until "the first official trip" by a Panama Railroad steamer stuffed with dignitaries, including President Wilson,



Col. George W. Goethals. Although depicted in uniform for this formal portrait, Goethals rarely wore anything but civilian dress.

had done so. It had been his understanding that as soon as ships could safely make the trip through the Canal it would be open for business and any "official celebration" postponed until the Canal was in perfect working order. Nothing, he told a correspondent, could be predicted about the passing through of foreign ships "until something has been definitely decided," for he was closer to the action and understood it better than any official or legislator. While the debate continued in Washington, he was supervising, as we noted above, the first self-propelled vessel through the Canal, the *Alexandre LaValley* — a feat that few on the Isthmus recognized for its significance and Washington simply ignored. Then, on May 19, 1914 — three months before the actual opening — the tugboat *Mariner* towing several empty barges successfully made the trip from Cristóbal to Balboa in twelve hours and then made it a round trip by returning several days later, again towing the barges, but this time the barges were no longer empty but laden with a cargo of sugar transferred from a ship of the American-Hawaiian line. But once again the transit evoked little interest from Washington authorities.

Finally, on June 13, 1914, Secretary Daniels announced the official plans for the opening of the Panama Canal. The foreign navies that had accepted the invitation to participate in the ceremonies were Argentina, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Japan, Portugal, and Russia, and these eight navies were to start gathering at Hampton Roads not in 1914 but on January 1, 1915, the "traditional" date for completion of the Canal since John Stevens' time. In the following March, President Wilson would lead the international fleet to Colón to take part in a formal ceremony opening the Canal; and Wilson and his cabinet would pass through the Canal in the *Oregon* along with retired Admiral Charles Clark who had captained the *Oregon* during its celebrated voyage in 1898. After its transit, the dignitaries on board, including President Wilson, would head north to San Francisco to take part in the Panama-Pacific Exposition.

Even though George Goethals had been granted most of his recommendations, he had long disliked ostentatious displays and celebrations of any kind, but, as he told a reporter, he hoped he wouldn't have to be there; and he told Boggs as well that such ornate preparations as Daniels had announced would be very hard on the operating workers, but he supposed that "there is nothing to do but attempt it...."

On July 23 — that is, after the dredges had, in the preceding month of May, finally opened a channel through the blockage left in the wake of the slides of January and February of 1913 and deep enough for ocean-going vessels safely to cross — Secretary Garrison announced that although the formal opening of the Panama Canal would still take place during March of 1915 as planned, the Canal would be opened on August 15, 1914, to the

commerce of the world and that the first official trip would be made by the steamship *Ancon* of the Panama Railroad line. To George Goethals, the Secretary's announcement meant that there would be no international gala of any kind, only the simple act of finally opening the waterway to the commerce of the world. He would not have to face, maybe, the pageantry and pomposity of a formal opening, maybe, because he would have retired by then. Maybe.

August 15, 1914

It is possible that the Secretary's announcement of July 23—less than a month before August 15—prompted Goethals, despite his exhausted state, and no matter how gratified he may have felt that so many of this recommendations had apparently been accepted by higher authority (he knew, of course, that Secretary Garrison was on his side), to redouble his efforts to make sure that everything would be ready for the 15th. He scheduled a final trial run through the Canal of the *Cristóbal*, sister ship of the *Ancon*, on August 3, and, in his letter to Boggs of August 7, he reported the results:

We passed the *Cristóbal* through the slide and without difficulty of any kind, and the vessel was through the Cut in a most masterful manner. An unexpected weakness developed in the lock-operating force. [I had been assured] at Gatun that two locomotives at either end [of the vessel, that is, four] would be sufficient to do the work. The whole strain of the ship moving into the lower lock burnt out a motor on one of the towing locomotives and caused considerable delay. At Pedro Miguel one of the cables of the towing locomotives parted, but another locomotive took its place. When the vessel was brought into the locks, things looked rather squally, and I feared damage to the gates, but they succeeded in stopping her in time. At the upper lock at Miraflores, a similar condition obtained, but I telephoned down and they were using three locomotives on either side and the ship was halted much more easily. It has made me rather skeptical on the towing proposition ... and I have directed that the pilots take charge of towing and handling ships, as they will be the best judges of the speed and the advisability of using the ships should the necessity therefore arise. I am having the pilots drill with the locomotives so as to develop team-work and in order that they have actual experience before the *Ancon* is put through....

Goethals, however, was not yet satisfied: On August 9th, he had the steamship *Advance* sent from Cristóbal to and through the Miraflores locks and returned the same day. Two days later, the *Panama* made the same round trip, and in both instances, at the Governor's invitation, as on the *Cristóbal*, old employees and their families were also on board. And the two "successive voyages ... resulted in greater smoothness of handling through the locks and a reduced time of transit."

"By an extraordinary coincidence ..." Philippe Bunau-Varilla wrote six

years later, "I was on that steamer, the *Cristóbal*, on the 3rd of August, 1914. The acclamations of those who saluted the conclusion of the greatest marvel of the Old and of the New World seemed to me as the distant echo of the roar of the guns defending the holy soil of France against her vile invader."

Goethals had invited the former chief engineer during Ferdinand de Lessep's failed attempts to build a canal across the Isthmus to join a selected group of civilians and engineers who had long worked on the Canal. One of them apparently handed him a newspaper announcing the outbreak of war in Europe — during which in August 1914 alone 14 sovereign nations declared war against one another. Whereupon, as the *Cristóbal* slowly gained speed, Bunau-Varilla read the headline on Germany's declaration of war on France, then told a group of his shipmates, "Gentlemen, the two great and consuming ambitions of my life are realized in the same day: the first, to sail through the Panama Canal on the first ocean liner; the second, to see France at war with Germany."

It was, once again, to become just another day of work, that day of August 15, 1914, for George Goethals, simply because he had devised a way for himself to avoid any ceremonious ballyhoo the powers-that-be might have planned for the occasion, for the conclusion of his years of hard work on the construction of the Panama Canal and his recent success in training a force — a permanent and responsible force — for operating and maintaining the completed Canal in the future. Of course the very recent outbreak of war in Europe had already begun to limit the grandiose plans for the opening by Washington officials. Yes, just one more day, because Col. Goethals was *not*, to his relief, one of the dignitaries aboard the *Ancon*; he was by choice ashore, watching the ship, moored at Corózal at the Atlantic end, pull out at 7 a.m. while the bands of the Panama National Band and the U.S. Tenth Infantry Regimental Band played "The Star Spangled Banner" and the flags of all nations fluttered above.

On board for the first transit were "about 200 people, as guests of the Secretary of War, President Porros of Panama, his cabinet and other government officials, the members of the diplomatic corps and resident consuls-general, officers of the Tenth Infantry and Coast Artillery, and officials of the Panama Canal, and a few others." Those "few others," many identified or added by later authors as a result of their research, included Dr. William J. Price, Minister of the United States to Panama and Dean of the Corps; John Barrett, Director General of the Pan American Union; and Claude Mallet, undoubtedly the only man who had been present at the de Lessep's inauguration of his new project [the Panama Canal] from a boat in the Bay of Panama 20 years before. George Goethals was not, however, on board; he remained on shore. It was to be just another day,



The steamer *Ancon* makes its historic transit through the Canal.

as I said; he was to do what he had always done for the past seven years, what he was about to do again, continuing his daily inspections of the work in progress — only this time, this special day of August 15, he was not inspecting various sectors of the 50-mile Canal without notice, but inspecting the progress of the S.S. *Ancon* of the Panama Railroad Line, the symbol of the completed Canal, as it made its transit of nine hours and 40 minutes from Cristóbal to “the end of the dredged channel in Panama Bay, five miles beyond the Pacific shore, then turned back and tied up at the Balboa pier.” In a sense, I should add, my grandfather also made the transit aboard the *Ancon* — although in actuality he followed the ship on the ground, traveling by railroad, most likely in his private railroad car, nicknamed Yellow Peril, from point to point: through the Gatun locks, across Gatun Lake, through the Culebra Cut (recently renamed the Gail-lard Cut) to the Pedro Miguel locks, then the Miraflores lock, to the Balboa docks and reach the end of the dredged channel at 4:30 p.m., thus completing the official trip. Whereupon the *Ancon* returned to Balboa, anchoring in the channel about 5:10 p.m., to be greeted by a crowd, including George Goethals, estimated at 2,000 people.

Thousands watched, generally in silence, as the *Ancon* passed quietly and without incident below those on the locks or those on the banks of the

waterway. Canal workers were among those who watched the *Ancon* pass by, for they had all been granted a day off, a holiday, to celebrate the completion of their years of hard labor, years and years, all embodied in that one ocean liner, the *Ancon*, steaming slowly from sea to shining sea for the very first time in 400 years. In its summary of this historic event, the *Canal Record* wrote, "There were no unscheduled delays and the handling of the vessel in the locks and through the channel sections characterized the whole operation as one of the smoothest up to that time." And one of the passengers, John Barrett, wrote Goethals:

Congratulations do not mean much to you, but if I were to make any particular comment upon what impressed me most about the opening of the Canal, it would be the ease and system with which everything worked — as if the Canal had been completed and in operation for many years.

True enough: Congratulations meant very little to my grandfather; he had not, for instance, travelled on the *Ancon* in the company of other dignitaries — a "local" group, to be sure, hardly the international group expected before the outbreak of war in Europe — because his mind, his critical eye, was fixed on the Canal, on the Canal from idea to realization, on the Canal in the guise of a 700-ton ocean liner, the *Ancon*, proceeding slowly, calmly, steadily through a waterway of fifty miles, through locks and across lakes, to realize, to fulfill mankind's dream of 400 years.

Yes, George Goethals was there every step of the way, from beginning to end not only from 1907 to 1914, but from this climactic voyage of fifty miles, Cristóbal to Balboa, traveling slowly but steadily alongside the *Ancon*, just one man in his railroad car. Yes, he moved along with it from point to point in his railroad car, to stop and stand atop a moving lock gate as the ship was raised and lowered to the next level, or on a bank of the waterway below, as the ship resumed its calm, unhurried voyage across the Isthmus of Panama. So intense his concentration upon the *Ancon* that when other onlookers now and then recognized him by his usual attire of white shirt, dark pants, and straw hat, the invariable umbrella in his hand — and quite probably a lighted cigarette in the other — he responded to the small cheers they raised simply with a nod of his head.

If, however, this "man of iron," so described by one reporter, showed no emotion during his triumph of August 15, others did. Robert E. Wood, Goethals' former student at West Point and now his able Chief Quartermaster during construction, later wrote that "When we reached the Continental Divide in the cut ..." — he must have been aboard the *Ancon* — "most of the men — and a great many of them hard rock men were tough babies — were in tears....It was a great day."

The official commendation came from the Secretary of War:

On behalf of the government and the people of the United States I express to you and through you to all concerned in the achievement, the intense gratification and pride experienced today. By the successful passage of vessels through the Canal the dream of centuries has become a reality. Its stupendous undertaking has been finally accomplished and a perpetual memorial to the genius and enterprise of our people has been created. The fully earned and deserved congratulations of a grateful people go out to you and your collaborators.

It was one of many. *The New York Times*, for instance, was as matter-of-fact as the Secretary in its coverage of the opening: "The Panama Canal is open to the commerce of the world. Henceforth ships may pass to and fro through that great waterway." It did not mention that the opening would save coastwise shipping as many as 8,000 miles if it did not have to round Cape Horn, as the celebrated *Oregon* would have had to do in 1898; and the *Time's* story, moreover, was buried, because of the outbreak of world war in Europe, as far back as page 14 in its edition of August 16, the day after. Perhaps the description of the day's activities that would have most accurately reflected George Goethals' view of the proceedings appeared in the *Philadelphia Record*, the "Unostentatious dedicatory act [was] a more appropriate celebration of the triumphs of the arts of peace than if it had been associated with martial pomp and an army of destroyers and battle-ships." But the one letter Goethals undoubtedly valued the most, dated August 20, came from his younger son, my father finishing his junior year of medical school in Boston. It was, to me, surprisingly matter-of-fact too, and it ended with a reminder that another tuition payment was soon due.

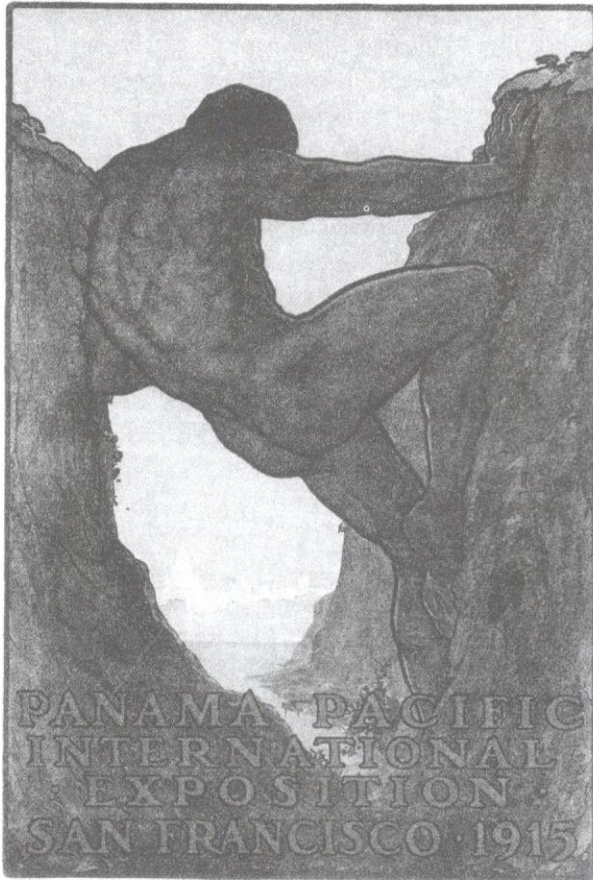
Dear Dad,

Your letter of the 8th enclosing the checks arrived here safely day before yesterday and for both letter and check I'm very much obliged. I was very glad to get your account of the trip of the "Cristóbal," as we had only seen the affair mentioned in the papers here. Last Sunday's papers spoke also of the trip of the "Ancon" through the Canal, and I'm glad to know that the unofficial opening has been so auspicious. We now hear that the total toll receipts in the first three days amounted to \$100,000; quite a good business...

How quickly the Panama Canal was put to use — as quickly as the day after its opening to commercial traffic — may be judged by the number of vessels all of American registry which passed through on Sunday, April 16: northward, three ships; southward, another three; and on August 17 and 18, two more — and due shortly at Balboa from the Pacific still another three. Six of those ships on August 16 must have anxiously been waiting for that day to come. As for the number of commercial ships and both tonnage and tolls, 1,258 passed through the Canal in the first 12 months, carrying 5,075,261 tons of cargo, the tolls for which

"The Greatest, Most Beautiful and Most Important in History"

February 20 to December 4



The Thirteenth Labor of Hercules

Perham W. Nash (1869-1935)

*Giftsman of The Coliseum Museum
City of Coliseum
City of Angeles, Nash*

*Giftsman of The Coliseum
City of Coliseum
City of Angeles, Nash*

Canal is hailed as an engineering Wonder of the World.

amounted to \$4,909,150.96. And by the time Goethals left the Canal in late 1916 traffic through the Canal had grown slowly, but it had not, because of frequent slides, reached its full potential: 357 in 1914, 1,170 in 1915, and 1,953 in 1916, carrying 11,652,405 tons of cargo — coal, crude oil, iron ore, lumber, manufactured goods from iron and steel, nitrates, railroad material, refined petroleum, as well as barley, canned goods, copper, and sugar, among other goods and products.

Aftermath

As for the formal official opening of the Panama Canal by the President of the United States, which had been scheduled for the following year, March of 1915 — well, it never took place, primarily because of the growing threat of American involvement in the world war in Europe and the recurrence of landslides in the Panama Canal. On November 15, 1914, three

months after the successful opening of the Canal, the President's plan for the formal ceremony, modifying the earlier plan of June 13, were announced by a spokesman: In February 1915, 27 foreign ships would arrive in Hampton Roads, Virginia, to join a U.S. fleet of 17 vessels. At the end of February, after a review of the 44 vessels, by the President as they left for Panama, he would board the U.S.S. *New York*, the largest and newest battleship, to sail for Colón. Upon arrival, the President would

transfer to the *Oregon* to lead the international fleet through the Canal, accompanied by Secretary Daniels and Admirals Clark and George Dewey, for the formal ceremony in Balboa opening the Panama Canal. But in a conference with Wilson in early January of 1915, Secretary Garrison insisted on additional modifications: Goethals warned the President that the slides that had again recurred in October 1914, only two months after the original opening, might well pose a serious problem (as they soon did), and Garrison thought it dangerous for the President and his Cabinet to be away from Washington for such a long period while world war in Europe threatened to involve the United States. Garrison even recommended that Wilson abandon any formal ceremony, but the President's plans for a gala naval display prevailed. For the President simply decided — even after another White House conference in which Goethals again argued that he could not guarantee his dredges could by March dig a channel through the slides blocking the passage of ships, much less a fleet, deep enough for warships — that he would postpone the formal opening until July. Finally, however — after Congressman William Adamson of Georgia had informed Wilson on February 27, 1915, that many of his colleagues in the House of Representatives favored, as did Col. Goethals, abandoning plans for a formal opening until the European war had ended, Wilson immediately responded:

My present judgment is that it would be better to abandon it [i.e. plans for a formal celebration] altogether on the ground that in the present state of war in Europe it is impossible for us to realize our one-time hope that it could be a general celebration of the nations of the world, for whose use the Canal is intended, than to postpone it to a time the circumstances of which we cannot foresee and when the whole celebration would seem belated and would have lost its point and zest.

It was, to his great relief, George Goethals' "present judgment" too.



The creation of the water passage across Panama was one of the supreme human achievements of all time, the culmination of a heroic dream of four hundred years and of more than twenty years of phenomenal effort and sacrifice. The fifty miles between oceans were among the hardest ever won by human effort and ingenuity, and no statistics on tonnage or tolls can begin to convey the grandeur of what was accomplished.... It is a work of civilization.

— David McCullough
(1977)

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