

**Notes or Script for**  
“A History of Panama and Its Canal  
in Forty-Two Postage Stamps and Seven Picture Postcards”

The presentation takes about one-half hour. It is intended to be a light overview of the history of the Panama Canal, as told through philately (stamps) and deltiology (postcards). It covers the years 1902–1999, when there was the highest United States involvement in Panama.

**Slide 1:** This is the title slide.

**Slide 2:** The slide gives the purpose of the presentation. The two books listed inspired the title and style of this presentation.

**Slide 3:** The postcard’s map is used to show Columbia’s former state of Panama, the use of the path across Panama by Spain to transport gold, and the three best routes for a canal in Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama, especially with respect to the continental divide. Note that there is a huge lake in Nicaragua, which would be important for a potential canal. The lake is labeled but is not a different color from the land on this postcard. The Republic of Panama has three distinct regions: the strip in the middle with the canal and principal cities such as Panama City on the Pacific Ocean and Cristóbal on the Atlantic Ocean, the region to the east that is almost-impenetrable jungle, and the west that is farmland. The Canal Zone was an area 10 miles wide and 50 miles long centered on the canal. The Canal Zone was administered by the US for about 100 years.

**Slide 4:** This is a broadly rendered timeline of the history of Panama. Most items are revisited in later slides. “1671 Morgan, the pirate” is included because in that year Morgan destroyed the city of Panama, while intercepting Spain’s route for transporting Inca gold across the Isthmus of Panama.

**Slide 5:** The case can be made that this stamp and others in the set with various denominations had an effect on history as much as any other stamp. It was given to US Senators who were about to vote to dig the canal in Nicaragua. It shows Mt. Momotombo, which was an active volcano along the proposed route. There had been some recent disastrous volcanic activity in the Caribbean, which was pointed out to the Senators. They selected the Panama route.

**Slides 6–14:** A theme or thread, which is not written on any slide, is the four main reasons that de Lesseps failed to build the canal.

1. He attempted to make it sea level, like the Suez Canal, for which he was responsible.
2. He neither had sufficiently large equipment nor made good use of what he had.
3. Tropical diseases, especially yellow fever and malaria, were not controlled.
4. He allowed much corruption.

**Slide 6:** This shows the huge scale of cutting a channel through the continental divide and disposing of the dirt and rocks. Railcars on railroad tracks were used to move the dirt.

**Slide 7:** Each evening, dynamite was used to loosen the soil and rock to be moved the next day. This was the most dangerous job at the site.

**Slide 8:** The Americans found and fixed much abandoned French equipment.

**Slides 9–10:** Gravity was used to allow railcars full of waste from the digging to roll to areas where the soil was needed to create dams to hold water in huge reservoirs for eventual running the canal. The laden cars were either dumped or scraped with a snow-plow-like blade. At the time of this postcard, handwritten messages were not allowed on the address side.

**Slides 11–13:** Cuban Carlos Juan Finlay (Slide 11) figured out that a certain mosquito carried yellow fever and was recognized for that at the time (in 1881–1882). Walter Reed, an American doctor (Slide 12), went to Cuba in 1900 after the Spanish-American War and confirmed that a certain mosquito is the only vector for yellow fever. The Republic of Panama honored Finlay's contribution (Slide 13).

**Slides 14–15:** These show the scale of the work that had to be done.

**Slides 16–30:** We can distinguish among stamps from each of five eras of issuing stamps for the Canal Zone. Starting in 1904, the Canal Zone was a US-administered strip of land that was centered on the canal and was about 50 miles long between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans and approximately ten miles wide. The canal was completed in 1914. The five eras, which are periods of different production for stamps, are introduced to add structure to the presentation. The eras provide a way to talk in broad terms about the different kinds of stamps that were issued and the history of Panama and the canal.

**Slides 16–17:** *Era 1* was less than a month in 1904. Columbian stamps, which were overprinted for Republic of Panama postage and subsequently primitively hand stamped "Canal Zone," were used.

The pair of stamps in Slide 16 was initially issued by Columbia. The stamp shows its state of Panama. It was then overprinted Panama for the new country of the Republic of Panama to use. It was overprinted again to be used by the US's Canal Zone postal system.

On the left of Slide 17 is an example of a Panamanian stamp, which is a Columbian stamp that has been overprinted for use in the new country of the Republic of Panama. On the right is an example of a Columbian stamp for use in Columbia.

**Slide 18:** *Era 2* was the next few months in 1904, when US regular issue stamps were overprinted "Canal Zone, Panama" on two lines in Washington for the Canal Zone post office.

**Slides 19–21:** In *Era 3* from 1904 to 1924, the US purchased sheets of Panamanian stamps that were overprinted "Canal Zone." One reason for the change to these Panamanian stamps was that Panama felt that it was being short changed by the US mail system taking business that was rightfully its, so the US agreed to purchase Panamanian stamps at a discount to be used in the Canal Zone after being overprinted. This is called the (US Secretary of War) Taft Agreement.

**Slides 20 and 21:** Balboa first saw the Pacific Ocean on land that would become part of the Republic of Panama and claimed the ocean for Spain. Balboa appears on many Panamanian stamps and coins.

**Slides 22–23:** In *Era 4* from 1924 to 1939, US postage stamps, including the sesquicentennial commemorative in Slide 23, were overprinted "Canal Zone" in Washington and shipped to the Canal Zone postal system.

**Slides 24–29:** In *Era 5* from 1928 to 1979, special stamps were designed and produced by the US solely for the Canal Zone post offices. There was an overlap period between Eras 4 and 5 in which both types of stamps were introduced and used.

**Slide 24:** This is an airmail stamp for use in the Canal Zone.

**Slide 25:** From a “great-persons” point of view, these four would be candidates for the building of the canal. The decisiveness of these four individuals was extremely important to the success of the project.

Dr. William Gorgas eliminated or minimized the diseases. He had been with Walter Reed in Cuba and eradicated yellow fever in the Canal Zone by 1906.

President Theodore Roosevelt sent gunships to secure the state of Panama from Columbia, assuring that Panama would be free to sign a treaty with the US for its building the canal and made many other important decisions, such as the use of military personnel in order to avoid corruption and delays.

General George Goethals and John Stevens were chief engineers who decided that the canal should have locks instead of being sea level and invented creative ways to apply railroads in the construction.

**Slide 26:** In the 1800s, the land route across Panama was used between ships in the two oceans by people wanting to go to California from the east coast of the US.

**Slide 27:** The transcontinental railroad across Panama predates the US Transcontinental Railroad and the Panama Canal. It was difficult to build through the jungle, but made money immediately as each mile was completed.

**Slide 28:** This stamp shows a dredger that was used to maintain the canal.

**Slide 29:** Although the US did not completely hand over control of the canal and the Canal Zone to the Republic of Panama until 1999, the Canal Zone postal system was closed in September 1979.

**Slide 30:** The Leader of the Republic of Panama at the time signing in 1977 of the treaty to end US control of the canal and the Canal Zone was Omar Torrijos, who is the person on the far right. The man in dark glasses behind Torrijos is Manuel Noriega (fourth from the right), who became dictator of Panama in 1983, which led to the US invasion of Panama in 1989 and Noriega’s serving prison time in the US.

**Slide 31:** These are four excellent sources of information about Panama and the Panama Canal.

**Slide 32:** END

David Farnsworth  
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