

The Stamp That Built a Canal

By Stan Cronwall

After days of searching the web, using up the better part of a black ink cartridge, and half a ream of copy paper, I decided to scrap a piece being written about the Panama Canal. It just became too involved and bound up in both political and business intrigues and corruption at the highest levels.

Instead, I started from scratch to pen a piece on some of the details surrounding the decision as to where to build an inter-ocean canal between the Atlantic and Pacific.

Let's start in 1850 with the country of Columbia which included the province of Panama (until 1903). Columbia gave France permission to build a canal through the isthmus in Panama.

Expeditions were sent in 1877 and 1878 to survey the route and plans were drawn for a sea-level canal with a tunnel of indefinite length. The canal was generally to follow the path of the Panama Railroad Company which actually held a monopoly concession for the isthmanian route.



The plan and costs were presented to an international engineering congress held in Paris May 14-29, 1879. There were 136 delegates from France, Germany, the U.S. and other countries. Only 42 were civil engineers, while the rest were promoters, politicians, speculators and personal friends of the man appointed President of the venture, Ferdinand Marie de Lesseps.

On the left is a Panama stamp Scott #401 commemorating de Lesseps' 150th anniversary of his birth.

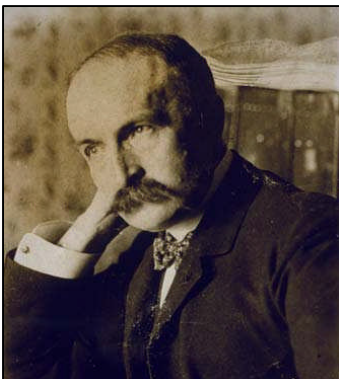
(We need to keep in mind that it was de Lesseps who gained the concession from the Egyptian Government and headed up the project to build the successful sea-level canal at Suez during a ten year period 1859-1869.)

There were two factions at the Paris Congress; one with an unconfirmed canal construction grant from the government of Nicaragua, and the other with the grant from Columbia. On May 29 1879, the Paris Congress by a vote of 98 to 8 adopted the Panama and Limon Bay route in preference to the Nicaraguan site.

Two years of survey work commenced. Funding for the project in Panama came from subscriptions to stock. These efforts fell short, but despite being underfunded, work on the canal started January 20, 1882.

The French soon came to understand that the project was in trouble. Rains caused landslides and there was no way of dealing with the medical problems from yellow fever and malaria.

Plans were then revised to make this a lock canal, but funding was discontinued in 1888, and de Lesseps company was liquidated to satisfy stockholders.



Philippe Jean-Varilla
George Grantham Bain
Collection, Library of Congress

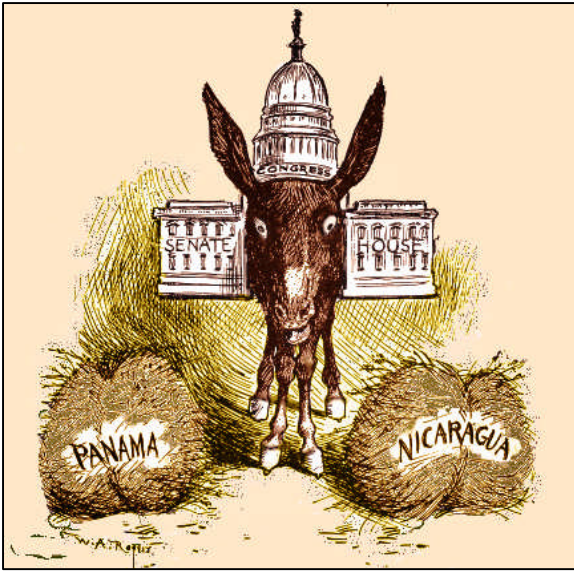
One of the engineers on both the Suez and Panama projects was Philippe Jean Bunau-Varilla. In France, interest in the canal continued with the New Panama Company. Bunau-Varilla purchased stock in the new company becoming its Chief Engineer, but the firm abandoned hopes of finishing the canal. Instead it tried to sell it to the U.S.

The New Panama Company had a New York lawyer and lobbyist, Nelson W. Cromwell. Working with Bunau-Varilla, the two primary stockholders began a campaign to persuade the U.S. Government to buy up the interests of The New Panama Company.

Bunau-Varilla made trips to the U.S. meeting with prominent people, lectured and published a booklet entitled *Panama or Nicaragua*. He attempted to convince his audiences that the combination of volcanoes and being prone to earthquakes made Nicaragua unsuitable for construction of a canal.

In 1897 and again in 1898, the U.S. Congress appointed Canal Commissions to research the issue of locating a site for an inter-ocean canal. Both came back with

recommendations that Nicaragua was the site to build the canal due primarily to costs. The U.S. Congress was leaning heavily toward building the canal in Nicaragua. The House of Representatives had already voted in favor of Nicaragua. It was thought that the Senate would agree.



Cartoon from the New York Herald on the congressional debate over whether to build a canal through Panama or Nicaragua, with an allusion to Buridan's ass). Date circa 1900. Source New York Herald (Credit: The Granger Collection, NY). Author W. A. Rogers

Enter Ma Nature. On May 2 1902 on the island of Martinique a volcano exploded killing 30,000 people.

In 1900, Nicaragua had issued a set of stamps Scott 121-133 featuring a smoldering and spewing Momotombo volcano:

In 1902, as the time for the critical vote drew near, Cromwell planted a story in the *New York Sun* about Nicaragua's Momotombo volcano erupting causing tremors.



The story goes that it was either Cromwell who had noted a previous piece of correspondence franked with the Nicaraguan 5 centavo dark blue Momotombo stamp or an associate of Bunau-Varilla showed him one of the stamps. In any case, it was Cromwell the lobbyist who went to various Washington, D.C. stamp dealers and acquired enough copies of the 1 centavo stamp to put on leaflets sent to each

undecided Senator. (Other sources say they were sent to all Senators and members of the House)

Whatever the reason, the Spooner Act was passed by Congress. The Act authorized the President to buy the rights and properties of the New French Canal Company and build the canal.

Debate had opened in the Senate on June 4 and came to a vote on June 19 passing by a vote of 67 to 6, and passed the House on June 25 by a 260 to 8 vote. The Act was signed into law by President Roosevelt three days later.

And, that is how a stamp changed the course of a canal and history.

Stan Cronwall is a member and his collecting interests include Germany: Third Reich 1933-45 and the areas it occupied (stamps covers & cards). He also collects U.S. World War II Patriotic Covers and Cards; Civil War Patriotic Covers (both U.S. and CSA); U.S Naval Covers; DDR stamps; and, Post WW II Soviet Zone Hitler Head Obliteration stamps, covers & cards.