Revealing the Right Route: Cartographic Evidence of Early Canal Plans

August 11, 2014 – November 14, 2014
Map & Imagery Library
George A. Smathers Libraries, University of Florida
Curated by Carol McAuliffe and Jennifer Farrington

Part of the University of Florida Panama Canal Centennial Celebration

Why did the need for a route grow in the mid-19th century?

- Territorial wars between U.S. and Britain over the West
- Territorial wars between U.S. and Mexico
- Gold rush in western United States
- Military installations in Asia
- Need to establish government infrastructure for new territories, such as Hawaiian Islands

The Caledonia Route

The Caledonia Route is where the Isthmus was first crossed by Europeans. In 1513, Balboa went from Caledonia Bay to San Miguel Bay. Nearly two hundred years later, in 1698, William Paterson chose this location for his Scotch colony of New Edinburgh, which by occupying the line of transit across the Isthmus was to control the trade of the Pacific and the East. The bay, which would be the northern terminus of the Canal, is still known as Caledonia Bay and is where this route gets its name.

The route was advocated as early as 1850 by Dr. Edward Cullen of Dublin. It was explored in 1852 by an English engineer, Lionel Gisborne whose signature can be seen on the map. The claims by Cullen and Gisborne, which made it a promising prospect, were not substantiated by future examinations. The 1901 Report of the Isthmian Canal Commission concluded that any canal terminating in either Caledonia Bay or San Blas would involve the need to construct a tunnel. It was seen as both a positive and negative that the region was entirely wild. Reports indicated that the area was difficult to survey because of hostile indigenous peoples. However, this also provided an advantage because no country had yet completely settled the area.

Isthmus of Panama
From *Illustrated London News*
July 29, 1843
G4872.P2 1843.I8 CARTA
Map & Imagery Library, George A. Smathers Libraries

On July 29, 1843, the *Illustrated London News* reported that progress had been made “towards the great work of cutting through the Isthmus of Panama, which has been so long talked of, but

which many persons have regarded as chimerical." For centuries, the search for an interoceanic line of transit drove many of the great explorations of the past. From Christopher Columbus, who was searching for shorter route to Asia, to Balboa, Magellan, Cortes, and Sir Francis Drake. It sparked the imagination rulers and moved nations to action. There were many failures along the way, and everything was gambled time and again on finding the right route.

J. Rapkin
Isthmus of Panama
From *Tallis' The Illustrated Atlas, and Modern History of the World*
1854
G4872.P2 1854.R3 CARTA
Map & Imagery Library, George A. Smathers Libraries
Gift of the Panama Canal Museum
http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00081222

The importance of a maritime connection and the discouraging results of the efforts to discover a natural channel between the two oceans suggested to many minds the idea of a ship canal. Nicaragua, Panama, and Darien were regarded as early favorable locations for canal routes because of relatively short distances across the isthmus and good harbors. The Government and people of the United States, Great Britain, and France were the most active in these explorations.

Lionel Gisborne
Topographical map of a portion of the Isthmus of Darien: in site of proposed inter-oceanic navigation, August 1852
From *Author Message from the president of the United States to the two houses of Congress at the commencement of the 2nd session of the 33rd Congress*
1854
G4872.P2 1854.G5 CARTA
http://ufdc.ufl.edu/UF00065552

The Nicaragua Route

In 1779, Spain first investigated the possibility of the Nicaragua route as a possible canal route. At that time it was determined to be impracticable because the lake was 134 feet higher than the Pacific and high mountains lay between the lake and the ocean. However, the investigation sparked the interest of Britain who invaded the country in 1780 after Spain had declared war against Great Britain.

In 1825, the Republic of Central America approached the United States and asked for the "cooperation of the American people in the construction of a canal of communication through Nicaragua." Long considered a highly favorable route, the United States put considerable energy into surveying the region.

In 1876, the report of the U.S appointed Interoceanic Canal Commission unanimously conveyed that the Nicaragua route "possesses... greater advantages and offers fewer difficulties from engineering, commercial, and economic points of view than any one of the other routes shown to be practicable." Extensive study and evaluation of the area went on for twenty-five years.

Isthmian Canal Commission
Nicaragua Route, Parts of Nicaragua and Costa Rica Showing the Line of the Proposed Nicaragua Canal
From *Report of the Isthmian Canal Commission, 1899-1901*
1901
Map & Imagery Library, George A. Smathers Libraries
Gift of the Panama Canal Museum
http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00000269/00002/28

Lake Nicaragua is the main advantage of the Nicaragua route, as is the close proximity of the Pacific Ocean. However, there were difficulties securing an agreement with the political powers of the region and extensive work had to be done to create a canal from the Atlantic to the Pacific.

The Panama Route

Charles V of Spain directed that the Isthmus of Panama be surveyed with this purpose in view as early as 1520. The project was determined to be "impracticable" and that "no king, however powerful he might be, was capable of forming a junction of the two seas or of furnishing the means of carrying out such an undertaking."

Over 300 years later, a new plan for the Canal hand emerged. It followed the path of the railroad which was built in the early 1850s. The Panama route was surveyed by Commander E.P. Lull, United States Navy in 1875. He recommended a canal with locks and with a location generally above the overflow bottom of the Chagres.

One of the greatest natural difficulties in the construction of a ship canal on the Panama route lies in the control of the Chagres River. The excessive rainfall and the precipitous slopes of the valley give to the river a torrential character. Lake Bohio and dam were designed to help alleviate some of the concerns. Colon Harbor was also seen as a disadvantage of the route because it was exposed to "northers" and ships must be sent out to sea once or more a year.

Isthmian Canal Commission
Panama Route, Map Showing Location of Proposed Canal
From *Report of the Isthmian Canal Commission, 1899-1901*
1901
Map & Imagery Library, George A. Smathers Libraries
Gift of the Panama Canal Museum
http://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00000269/00002/21

The natural attractions of the Panama route lie in the combination of a very narrow isthmus with a low summit. The high portion of the isthmus is a width of about six miles near the Pacific side. The Chagres River affords access by canoe from the Atlantic to within sixteen miles of the Pacific.

Conclusion of the Report of the Isthmian Canal Commission, 1899-1901

The Isthmian Canal Commission was appointed, June 10, 1899, to investigate the most practical route for an interoceanic canal under U.S. ownership and control. They surveyed routes through Nicaragua, Panama, and the Isthmus of Darien. Initially (Nov. 1901) the Commission recommended the Nicaraguan route. In December 1901, after the Compagnie Nouvelle du Canal de Panama offered to sell its assets and rights to the United States for $40 million, they issued a supplemental report recommending the adoption of the Panama route.