Panama: Isthmian Crossroads

1821-1898

W. Frank Robinson
Department of History
Vanderbilt University
Gran Colombia 1819-1831
Gran Colombia, 1820-1830

- Bolivar’s vision of a united South America.
- Present-day Colombia, Ecuador, Venezuela and Panama.
- Short-lived due to dissension amongst various factions.
- Bolivar resigned in 1828.
- In 1830, Bolivar’s Gran Colombia divided into Colombia, Ecuador and Venezuela.
Panama Congress:
Chapter House of the Convent of the Franciscans
Plaza Bolívar, Casco Viejo
Gold Rush

San Francisco
United States

New York City

North Atlantic Ocean

Panama Canal

5,200 Miles
8,370 Km

Equator

South Pacific Ocean

South America

13,000 Miles
20,900 Km
Forty-Ninners
Bond of the Accessory Transit Company (of Nicaragua), issued 30. November 1855

THE ACCESSORY TRANSIT CO.
(OF NICARAGUA)

No. 1

$1,000.

Aknowledge themselves to owe to CHARLES MORGAN and GEORGE A. HOYT, in Breach, ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS, which sum said Company promise to pay to the said Charles Morgan and George A. Hoyt, or to the holder hereof, at the Office of the Company in the City of New-York, on the thirty-first day of May, 1856, and also interest at the rate of 7 per cent. per annum.

And said Company further agree that this obligation and all rights and benefits arising therefrom, may be transferred by delivery, as if the same were a Note of hand payable to bearer.

In Testimony whereof, and in pursuance of a Resolution of the Board of Directors, passed on the tenth day of November, 1855, the Corporate Seal of the Accessory Transit Company (of Nicaragua) is hereto affixed, and these presents duly signed by the President and Secretary of said Company, at the City of New-York, the thirteenth day of November, 1855.

[Signatures]

We hereby certify, that the ACCESSORY TRANSIT COMPANY (of Nicaragua) have caused to be issued to it,viz., the seven Ships: "Northern Leone" and "Star of the West," and we hold policies of insurance upon the said ships for the amount specified in the said instrument, to secure, for the benefit of the holder of the said Bonds, of claims arising out of the foregoing. Such Bonds are to be issued in such amount as will secure the claims, and we have caused to sell one lot of said ships, after a default in paying the principal or interest of said Bonds, or any of them, and that the foregoing is true of the several Bonds required by said bill of sale.

[Signatures]
Rails Across the Isthmus

Train Loading at Aspinwall for Panama
Panama Railroad 1855
Panama Railroad

Front St. Colon before the fire of 1885.
Watermelon Riot April 15, 1856
Vanderbilt Shipping through Nicaragua

Vapor de rueda “Hollembeck”, de 115 pies de largo y 45 toneladas. Un vapor parecido a este, “El San Francisco”, abordó Mark Twain en La Virgen durante su “divertido resbalón a través de Nicaragua.”
“We are, gentlemen, soldiers under fire; let us salute the comrade who falls in the battle, but let us think only of the fight of tomorrow and of victory.”

French engineer and lobbyist
Philippe Bunau-Varilla
1. French company granted exclusive rights
2. Ferdinand de Lesseps: driving force
   a. promoter and financier of Suez Canal
   b. sea-level canal
3. yellow fever and malaria - “white man’s graveyard”
4. blasting and excavating
   Afro-West Indian workers
5. bankruptcy, corruption, disillusion
   “Panama affair’ = scandal
   22,000 lives 800,000 investors
6. completion of 40% of excavation
1. French spirit of *revanche*: aftermath of Franco-Prussian War of 1870

2. *Le Grand Français* – Ferdinand de Lesseps
   overcame technical, political, and financial problems
   Suez Canal - November 17, 1869
   reputation, energy, and charisma – bond issues

3. sea-level canal despite misgivings

4. works begins on February 1, 1881

5. work force: Afro-West Indians from Jamaica and St. Lucia

6. rainy season 1881 – first deaths from yellow fever
7. Company hemorrhages money: mismanagement, extravagance, and corruption
8. engineering problems – landslides, spoil, Chagres
9. wet seasons of 1882 and 1883 - desertions
    “burials averaged 30 to 40 per day”
10. tragedy of Jules Dingler
    died exhausted and heartbroken in 1885
    “Is Monsieur de Lesseps a Canal Digger, or a Grave Digger?”
Ferdinand de Lesseps
La Folie Dingler, built for M. Julius Dingler in the first French Company's days, but never occupied by him. The experience of M. Dingler on the Isthmus constitutes one of the saddest incidents in French canal history. His son, daughter and wife all contracted the dreaded yellow fever and died.
Collapse and Scandal

1. crash of Compagnie Universelle
2. bondholders seek redress
3. “Panama Affair” – trial of de Lesseps father and son
4. scandal and national humiliation
French Liquidation Bond