

The Family Heritage Series

A weekly discussion of Americanist truths and traditions for those "heirs of all the ages" who will have to preserve that most important inheritance of all — freedom.
Produced by the Movement To Restore Decency.



Volume II

Lesson Fifty-Three

Stopping Yellow Fever

LESSON IDEA

To continue our study of the construction of the Panama Canal, showing that courage and determination were essential to success.

PREPARATION

Prepare a list of examples, showing where today's bureaucrats have slowed down progress on important projects — just as the Canal Commission did on the Canal's construction.

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JOHAN F. WALLACE and his wife arrived in Panama in June, 1904, bringing with them several trunks and suitcases, and two shiny metal caskets. Wallace had been appointed Chief of Engineers for the construction of the Panama Canal. He knew that the biggest dangers he would face were malaria and yellow fever, which had claimed the lives of some 20,000 laborers during the twenty years that the French spent working in Panama. So he decided that if the project did cost him and his wife their lives, at least they would have the coffins handy.

Little did Wallace realize that his biggest obstacle would not be the jungles or swamps of Panama, or the diseases that were bred there, but rather the bungling and nit-picking of bureaucrats in Washington, who thought they could direct the construction of the Panama Canal from the security of their offices over 2,000 miles away.

Soon after the Hay-Bunau-Varilla Treaty had been signed between the United States and the new Republic of Panama, President Theodore Roosevelt appointed an Isthmian Canal Commission to oversee construction of the canal. The commissioners promptly left for Panama on a "fact-finding" tour.

But after a quick trip across the Isthmus, just to see what they thought needed to be done, they immediately returned to Washington. The real work would be left to Wallace, as Chief of Engineers, and to Colonel William Gorgas, who was placed in charge of sanitation.

When Wallace arrived in Panama, the first task that faced him was providing accommodations for the thousands of laborers who would be working on the canal, and for the hundreds of clerks who would be needed to keep track of the supplies, requisitions, and paperwork for the mammoth project. There was no lack of buildings to house the men, for the French had left literally hundreds of empty offices, homes, warehouses, and hospitals stretching from one coast to the other. However, years of neglect, combined with the ravages of a hot, wet climate, had taken their toll. Even after they were cleaned and repaired, living quarters were far from luxurious.

TYPICAL OF THE facilities was the Ancon Hospital at the Pacific port of La Boca, which was converted into a barracks for office workers. There were thirty iron beds, left by the French, ranged along the walls; one straight-backed chair; one kerosene lamp; two washstands; and no mirrors. Combined with these primitive conditions were some primitive dangers, as one young clerk described in these words:

We lived in constant dread of the scorpion, who seems to have a penchant for buildings

long unused, and for going to sleep in our clothes or shoes. One morning, one of these fellows, which have a stinger where their tail ought to be, dropped from the ceiling to the wash basin, where I was performing my ablutions. On another occasion, I shook one out of the fold of my collar, where he had been enjoying a quiet snooze.

That clerk may not have realized how fortunate he was. For the men who were working in the jungles and swamps did not fare nearly as well. For example, the ditch diggers and steam shovel operators working near the Culebra Cut, a mountainous region marking the Continental Divide, stayed at something called the Culebra Hotel. It was a filthy barracks, swarming with flies and mosquitoes. The dining room was a smelly hall with littered tables; the "cook" was a former steam shovel operator who decided that he would be better off feeding hungry workmen than risking burial under one of the many landslides along the Culebra Cut. The sleeping quarters were just as depressing as the rest of the hotel. Each man had a dingy cot to sleep on; a few lucky men also had a box to sit on.

When Wallace arrived in Panama, he found that men who had been hired in New York as surveyors were supervising ditchdiggers. There were shortages of supplies, equipment, and personnel. And what they did have was not being used effectively. When lumber that had been ordered nine months earlier finally arrived, there was no place to store it. So it was simply stacked on shore without any semblance of order. Some of it, which had been loaded on rafts for the trip upriver, floated out to sea.

Another problem was providing fresh clean water for the workers. In Colon and Panama City, American engineers had cut ditches criss-crossing the muddy streets, fully expecting to receive the water pipes that had been on order for months. But no pipe had arrived, and after a torrential rain, all the ditches caved in. Wallace wired a rush order for the pipe to the Isthmian Canal Commission, but nothing happened. He wired two more times and still his request was ignored. Finally, he received a note from the commission telling him to stop spending so much money on telegrams.

Wallace's Sanitation Officer, Colonel Gorgas, also had problems with the members of the

Isthmian Canal Commission. He once sent in a routine request for porch screening for his hospital, but the commission refused to approve it saying it was too extravagant. Gorgas put in another requisition, explaining that the screen was needed to protect his patients from disease-carrying mosquitoes. The commissioners grudgingly gave him half of his order and told him to board up the rest of the windows.

Meanwhile, John Wallace was becoming more and more disturbed by the commissioners' action and attitude. He was a civilian engineer who had no time for politics. He'd been hired to build a canal and he was going to do the best he could – but not if his every move was blocked by political appointees sitting on a commission thousands of miles away. He could contend with the climate and conditions in Panama, but fighting the bureaucracy in Washington was too much for him. Finally, he resigned in disgust and returned to the United States with his wife – leaving the two caskets behind for others to use.

THE NEXT MAN to tackle the canal project was a cigar-smoking enthusiast named John Stevens, who had just resigned as vice president of the Rock Island Railroad. "I don't know why I'm accepting Panama," Stevens told one newsman, "unless it's because of the size of the job. Of course, it's a compliment. You never get too old to like them."

Stevens was no newcomer to tremendous engineering problems, for he had helped construct railroads from Canada to Mexico. Not only was he an expert in railroad construction, but he was a man who enjoyed and sought a challenge. Typical

FOR SERIOUS STUDENTS

The studies in Cuba by Walter Reed and other doctors, which proved that yellow fever is transmitted by mosquitoes, made possible the control of this terrible killer. During a series of heroic experiments, several doctors and soldiers volunteered to be injected with germs of yellow fever, so they could study the course of the disease. Look up the details of this medical milestone in an encyclopedia or at your library. How important was Dr. Reed's discovery?

