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Panama Canal Photograph Collection

Collection Summary

Title:	Panama Canal Photograph Collection
Call Number:	MS 95-19
Size:	2.0 linear feet
Acquisition:	Purchased by Special Collections
Processed by:	JEO, 4-13-1995; JEF, 12-18-1998; MN, 10-2008; MN, 7-2012
Restrictions:	None

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Content Note

The Panama Canal Photograph Collection contains images documenting the efforts of the French Universal Oceanic Canal Company to construct a canal across the Panamanian isthmus in the 1880s. The photographs depict the latter stages, when Ferdinand de Lesseps, president of the company and builder of the Suez Canal, quit the 168 million dollar contract only one-third completed. The photographs in this collection illustrate the enormity of the task encountered by the French canal company in their seven-year stint constructing the canal. Included are photographs of excavations, railroads for hauling off debris, laborers at work, and houses and bridges in Panama..

Administrative History

The French Universal Oceanic Canal Company (Compagnie universelle du canal interoceanique de Panama) endeavored to construct a canal across the Panamanian isthmus in the 1880s. Work began in 1881 but the canal proved much more complicated to build than the Suez Canal. Particularly disastrous were recurrent landslides into the excavations from the bordering water-saturated hills,

and the death toll from tropical diseases. In the end, insufficient capital and financial corruption ended the project. The company declared itself bankrupt in December 1888 and entered liquidation in February 1889. The American government became authorized to transfer the property rights from the French Canal Company to the United States in 1903. A revolution later in 1903 caused Panama to split from Columbia and the new nation of Panama swiftly allied itself with the United States, relinquishing a ten mile swath across the Panamanian Isthmus for the construction and operation of a canal. After years of construction, hardship, and disease the Panama Canal was opened on January 7, 1914. The canal saved transportation costs and cut over 7873 miles of travel on the New York to San Francisco route.

Box and Folder Listing

Box 1	FF 1	Several workmen around a steam-powered crane excavating rubble from a deep ditch in the canal route at San Pablo. Photograph taken November 29, 1888, and attributed to Blanc, photographer for the French canal company. Caption: Ecluse No. 2 29 Nov 1888, San Pablo
Box 1	FF 2	Canal excavation site at Matachin looking upstream. View shows supports on unexcavated sections, rail tracks to haul rubble away and several workmen. Photograph taken November 27, 1888, and attributed to Blanc, photographer for the French canal company. Caption: Ecluse No. 5 27 Nov 1888. Matachin am
Box 1	FF 3	View of excavation of canal lock at Paraiso showing railroad tracks and a gang of workmen. Photograph taken June 5, 1888. On manuscript list of photographs by Blanc. Caption: Ecluse No. 7 5 Juin 1888. Paraiso. (c)
Box 1	FF 4	Several groups of workmen laboring along canal excavation. Photograph taken June 5, 1888(?). Caption: Ecluse No. 7 5 Juin
Box 1	FF 5	Workmen in canal rut at Bohio Soldado that is deep enough to expose the underlying broken-up rock. Photograph taken November 22, 1888. Caption: Ecluse No. [illegible] Bohio Soldado. 22 Nov 1888
Box 1	FF 6	Workers hauling rubble and dirt out of a wide canal route at Miraflores, Lock 10. Photograph taken November 27, 1888. Caption: Ecluse No. 10 27 Nov 1888. Miraflores
Box 1	FF 7	Floor of the canal at Miroflores looking upstream. Workmen and equipment stand in the rubble and mud. Photograph taken June 9, 1888. Caption: Ecluse No. 10 9 Juin 1888. Miraflores (c) Tête Amont
Box 1	FF 8	Excavation procedures in the canal route at Miraflores. Photograph taken November 25, 1888. Caption: Ecluse No. 10 25 Nov 1888. Miraflores
Box 1	FF 9	Panoramic view of Culebra showing buildings and equipment, presumably a work station or residence for laborers. Labeled on back: Panorama de la Culebra. Caption: 34[followed by additional numerical references]

Box 1	FF 10	Excavation procedures in the Panamanian jungle. Photo is not posed as workers are in movement. Caption: Preparation d'une attaque
Box 1	FF 11	Raised bunk houses for the workers at Culebra. Labeled on back: Culebra Maisons d'ouvriers.
Box 1	FF 12	Rolling cranes excavating stones blasted from the canal's side. Floor of canal overgrown with foliage. Labeled on back: Las Cascadas. Caption: 50
Box 1	FF 13	Panoramic view of Culebra Cut showing workers' bunk houses, excavation equipment in the canal and the opposite side of canal. Labeled on back: Panorama Culebra 34. Caption: 35
Box 1	FF 14	Panama City, spread out along ocean shoreline. Labeled on back: Panama. [Illegible] de l'Hopital.
Box 1	FF 15	Panoramic view of Panama City scene along ocean shore. Labeled on back: Panama. [Illegible] de l'Hopital.
Box 1	FF 16	Panoramic view of Culebra Cut showing workers' bunk houses, excavation equipment and the canal route. Labeled on back: Panorama Culebra 36. Caption: 36
Box 1	FF 17	Metropolitan Cathedral in Panama City. Labeled on back: Panama Cathedral.
Box 1	FF 18	Workers posed in encampment at Taverville along canal route. Caption: Campement de Taverville
Box 1	FF 19	Railcars and rail mounted cranes excavating rubble from the canal route. Labeled on back: Bas Obispo, la Butte Iona [illegible]. Caption: 65
Box 1	FF 20	Railcars and tracks leading into the canal excavation with housing and warehouse structures in background. Labeled on back: Kilometer [illegible] 120. Caption: 28
Box 1	FF 21	Canal excavation with railroad tracks, workers, railcars and housing in view. Labeled on back: Emperador. Caption: 43
Box 1	FF 22	Several groups of canal route excavation workers engaged in various aspects of project. Structures, including one under construction, are made of tree branches and leaves. Labeled on back: Mindy
Box 1	FF 23	Railroad track at base of hill topped by several wooden structures. Off the tracks are railcar 55 and several workers. Labeled on back: San Pablo. Butte avant de la Stati[on].
Box 1	FF 24	Track-mounted crane with a long boom excavating soil from one side of canal.
Box 1	FF 25	View of cleared path of the canal showing railcars, a ravine and a cow. Native grass huts at right contrast with wooden structures above them. Labeled on front: Tavermillla (a fairé).

Box 1	FF 26	Vegetated area along river bank with several wooden structures on opposite bank.
Box 1	FF 27	View of canal company headquarters located in Panama City. Sign on building reads: Compagnie Universelle Du Canal Interoceanique. Building constructed in 1875 and houses Panama Canal Museum in 2012.
Box 1	FF 28	View of construction of rail trestle bridge over excavated area and wooden bridge skimming excavation floor. Labeled on back: Obispo L'accident.
Box 1	FF 29	Two-story house above railroad tracks surrounded by smaller structures of varying styles. Two have thatched roofs.
Box 1	FF 30	View of railroad engine 156 and workers next to attached railcars on left bank of canal with settlement of varied houses and structures in background.
Box 1	FF 31	Small raised workers' quarters adjacent to rail yard with larger maintenance structures, cranes and railcars. Labeled on back: Matachin-[illegible].
Box 1	FF 32	Several tiers of railcars on railroad tracks illustrate depth of canal route excavation. Caption: 58
Box 1	FF 33	Several workers pose in front of engine 44 hauling railcars full of excavated rubble from the canal route followed by similar operation. Labeled on back: Matachin.
Box 1	FF 34	Workmen pose while loading rubble from excavation into railcars on one of several railroad tracks in the canal route. Caption: 14
Box 1	FF 35	Railroad station at Paraiso settlement along canal route. Caption: Paraiso.
Box 1	FF 36	Excavation at Matachin showing pooled water in excavated area and wooden supports on some areas where the soil has been removed. Workmen in background moving rubble from route onto railcars. Labeled on front: (a fairé). Caption: Matachin
Box 1	FF 37	Reconfiguration in progress of second floor balcony of municipal building in Panama City, next door to the headquarters of the French canal company, Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interoceanique. Labeled on back: Panama Le Palacio après le [illegible].
Box 1	FF 38	Construction of rail station at Paraiso. Labeled on back: Paraiso le Gare.
Box 1	FF 39	Manuscript list of photograph locations and scenes along the canal route. Quantities are indicated. Document in French.

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| Box 1 | FF 40 | Manuscript list of locations, subjects and dates of photographs taken along the canal route by photographer Blanc. Three page document in French. |
| Box 1 | FF 41 | Manuscript list of locations, subjects and dates of photographs taken along the canal route. Document in French. |
| Box 1 | FF 42 | Clipping from French publication of photograph of Colon headquarters of the French canal company, Compagnie Universelle du Canal Interoceanique. Statue of Christopher Columbus at front left. Caption: Colon. -- Hotel de la Compagnie, n.d. |
| Box 1 | FF 43 | Clipping from French publication showing photograph of jail in Colon. Caption: Colon. -- Calabousse |
| Box 1 | FF 44 | Clipping from Illustrated London News, June 16, 1888, showing lithograph of excavating machine at Tavernilla on the canal route. Melton Prior is the artist and Tilby is the lithographer. Caption: Excavator at Work at Tabemilla (Tavernilla). Across Two Oceans: The Panama Ship Canal. -- Sketches by our special artist, Mr. Melton Prior. Tilby is the lithographer. |
| Box 1 | FF 45 | Clipping from Illustrated London News, June 16, 1888, showing lithograph of dredge at work at Bohio Soldado along the canal route. Caption refers to "Slaven" dredge of American contractors Henry B. and M. A. Slaven whose company was contracted to construct a portion of the canal and to divert the Chagres River. Melton Prior is the artist and Tilby is the lithographer. Caption: A "Slaven" Dredge at Work at Buhio: View Sketched From on Board. |
| Box 1 | FF 46 | Clipping from Illustrated London News, June 16, 1888, showing lithograph of workers digging channel to divert Chagres River. Melton Prior is the artist and Tilby is the lithographer. Caption: Cutting a Channel to Divert the Course of the River Chagres. |

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Wichita State University Libraries

1845 Fairmount, Wichita, KS 67260-0068

E-mail: specialcollections@wichita.edu

Telephone: 316-978-3590