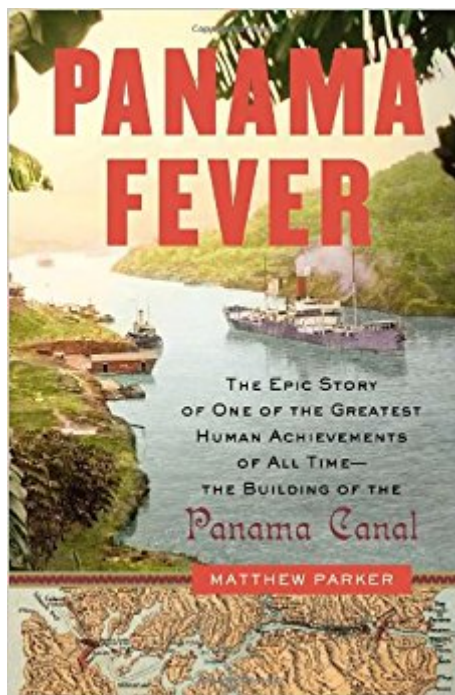




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# Panama Fever: The Epic Story Of One Of The Greatest Human Achievements Of All Time-- The Building Of The Panama Canal



## Synopsis

A thrilling tale of exploration, conquest, money, politics, and medicineThe Panama Canal was the costliest undertaking in human history. It literally required moving mountains, breaking the back of the great range that connects North and South America. Begun by the French in 1880, its successful completion in 1914 by the Americans marked the end of the Victorian Age and the beginning of the “American Century.” The building of the Panama Canal was a project whose gestation spanned hundreds of years. Columbus himself searched for a way to get to the Pacific across the narrow isthmus of Central America. For centuries, monarchs, presidents, businessmen, and explorers all struggled to find such a passage, knowing that whoever controlled it would exert unsurpassed control over global trade, and therefore the fate of nations. The first history of this mighty achievement in nearly thirty years, *Panama Fever* draws on diaries, memoirs, letters, and other contemporary accounts, bringing the experience of those who built the canal vividly to life. The massive project riveted public attention: “Panama Fever” spread throughout the Western world. Politicians and businessmen engaged in high-stakes international diplomacy in order to influence its location, path, ownership, and construction. Meanwhile, ditch-diggers, machinists, drivers, engineers, and foremen from all over the world rushed to take advantage of high wages and the chance to be a part of history. But the grim reality of Panama — searing heat, torrential rains, fatal mud slides, and malarial mosquitoes — soon caught up with them. More than 25,000 of those who enthusiastically signed on as workers succumbed to dysentery, yellow fever, and malaria, giving a fatal twist to the meaning of “Panama Fever.” The truly horrific toll unleashed a second race to find a cure so the canal could be completed. The discoveries of the heroic doctors who battled these diseases would lead to a sea change in the way infectious diseases were treated, thus paving the way for the tremendous medical advances of the twentieth century. Filled with remarkable characters, including Teddy Roosevelt, Ulysses S. Grant, and Ferdinand de Lesseps, the French genius who built the Suez Canal and almost snatched Panama out from under American control, *Panama Fever* is an epic historical adventure that shows how a small but fiercely contested strip of land in a largely unknown Central American nation suddenly made the world a smaller place and launched the era of American global dominance.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Starred Review. Parker (Monte Cassino: The Hardest Fought Battle of World War II) begins this engrossing narrative of the construction of what Theodore Roosevelt called one of the great works of the world well before the 20th century: everyone from Benjamin Franklin to Goethe was interested in a trans-isthmus canal, and one of the most arresting sections of the book chronicles the failed French efforts, in the late 1800s, to build one. Roosevelt then called for the building of a canal in his first address to Congress. The project faced countless challenges, but Parker is especially deft when addressing the racism that magnified already appalling working conditions. Those in charge didn't want to hire white American workers, who were too expensive and too unionized (though later, whites were hired), and the discussions about workers became racialized. The native Isthmian was too indolent, but black workers from the British West Indies were viewed as cheap and expendable. U.S. authorities discriminated racially, paying workers unequally and trying, in general, to prevent the intermingling of the races. This is not a narrow history of mechanical engineering but a well-researched and satisfying account of imperial vision and social inequity. Illus., maps. (Mar. 1) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

This history of the Panama Canal describes the scheming, the speculating, and the backbreaking labor performed mostly by West Indians, who bore the brunt of the estimated twenty-five thousand fatalities that went into "the costliest project ever yet attempted." Construction began in 1880, as a privately financed French enterprise, and was completed by the United States, in 1914. (Theodore Roosevelt called in the Army to finish the job.) Parker offers a detailed study of

the myriad personalities and design plans associated with the work, but his limpid prose is best suited to accounts of the dangers the laborers faced: frequent mechanical accidents, landslides spanning fifty acres and ten days, and bouts of typhoid, dysentery, malaria, and yellow fever. As mountains were moved and raging rivers rerouted, one American diplomat observed, "Human life is about the cheapest article to be purchased." Copyright © 2008 [Click here to subscribe to The New Yorker](#)

To see the Panama Canal has been a wish of mine for years and I finally got the opportunity to fulfill my wish in 2006. It was by way of a cruise ship so I must confess that I did not experience any of the hardships and difficulties of those who were a part of its' construction. Still, I got to travel just about the whole distance. The cruise ship moored in Lake Gatun and I and my family took a smaller boat to travel the rest of the way. We stopped at the last lock from which we could see the Pacific Ocean. All along the way I was able to listen to the history and the particular noteworthy sites we passed. After reading Matthew Parker's "Panama Fever", I'm ready to go back and take an even closer look. The author spend a short amount of time covering the prior plans of creating a shortcut from the lengthy travels around the South America and back up the other side. Of note, as I recall, was the impact that the Gold Rush in 1849 had on the isthmus of Panama. However, after all the formalities, the book focuses on the two great attempts at creating the canal. I had heard of the French efforts prior to the American's eventual success. I was impressed that the French attempts were so extensive and lengthy. Indeed, the efforts of the French and the American seem to take equal space in "Panama Fever" although, looking back it's more 1/3 French and 2/3 American. Maybe it seemed so equal in scope because the French were the ones who broke the ground (as well as their investors). They discovered all the myriad of challenges which eventually left them going home in patriotic and financial defeat. However, the American initiative found its way some years later meeting up with most of the same challenges yet perservering and, generally conquering the many impediments. Perhaps the most fascinating aspect to the story of the Panama Canal was the diseases, borne by mosquitos, that ravaged the many thousands who succumbed to the Yellow Fever and Malaria. The concept that those pesky little mites could be the cause of all the illness and death was contiually dismissed until President Roosevelt himself took a stand on the issue. There are plenty of other side stories to go along with the construction itself. I note some of the reviewers found that aspect to be too much detail. Personally, I was fascinated by the way author Parker brought in so many aspects of the life and struggles of the people involved. Many came from far and wide but the work horses seem to generally come from Jamaica and Barbados. Their lives were

depicted as well as those of American (and, earlier, French) workers. With so much going on, the actual conclusion of the canal almost caught me off guard. I thoroughly enjoyed "Panama Fever". I rated it with four stars because it is a very good book. I try to hold back on the 5 stars unless I am completely overwhelmed. For the authors very readable prose, the variety of fascinating sub-topics, and gigantic subject itself, I'd give "Panama Fever" a 4.5.

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I'm not a history buff, BUT this book is a wonderful history of how the Panama Canal came to be going back to the 1500's. We are taking a cruise through the canal, the history of it's construction will give me a very different view of it's development. Also visited the Roosevelt Dam in AZ this week, so interesting to see these massive engineering projects similarity. The disease issues were particularly surprising to me.

A very well written book! Packs so much information in but never gets dry or boring. Highly recommended for those interested in learning about the Panama Canal or Panamanian history.

Hardships, disease, daily deaths, politics; it's got it all.

The book is fascinating, but bogs down in minutiae too much. The last 2-3 chapters gives a good synopsis of the entire book. I enjoyed it and recommend it is good reading about this important event in our history,

As with all of Matthew Parker's work, this is a well-researched and well-written history of an outstanding, heroic historical achievement. While the French shined valiantly, the mechanical and engineering technology needed to be matched with American wealth and tenacity for it to finally be achieved. The amazing medical improvements are a story unto themselves. It is interesting to see how far we have really come in less than 100 years since the completion of the canal. The account is a real tribute to the human spirit.

I recently took a cruise through the Panama Canal, and they ran out of books about the Panama Canal when I went to the gift shop. I went on Amazon.com and found this fantastic book that tells the trials and tribulations of building the canal, as well as some great historical information. Also has some

very nice illustrations. If you are a Panama Canal fan, this is a great book to read.

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