

FORT DE LESSUPS – THE SMALLEST AND THE FIRST TO GO

Fort DeLesseps in Colón, on Panama's Caribbean coast, was the smallest of the several forts built for the US Army to guard the Panama Canal, and became the first to be handed over to the Panamanian state. There follows a brief introduction the story of the fort, and the neighbouring Hotel Washington – once the epitome of style and sophistication in Panama. Fort DeLesseps was a small installation, named in honour of Ferdinand de Lesseps, builder of the Suez Canal and behind the first, failed attempt to construct a trans-isthmus canal in Panama. It was built on property acquired by the US Army from the Panama Railroad, although jurisdiction was never officially ceded to the US. Home to a Coast Artillery Corps battery, it was the smallest of the forts built to protect the entrances and approaches to the Canal, covering around four acres (1.6 hectares). It occupied the advanced point of a peninsula, facing the mouth of the breakwater.¹

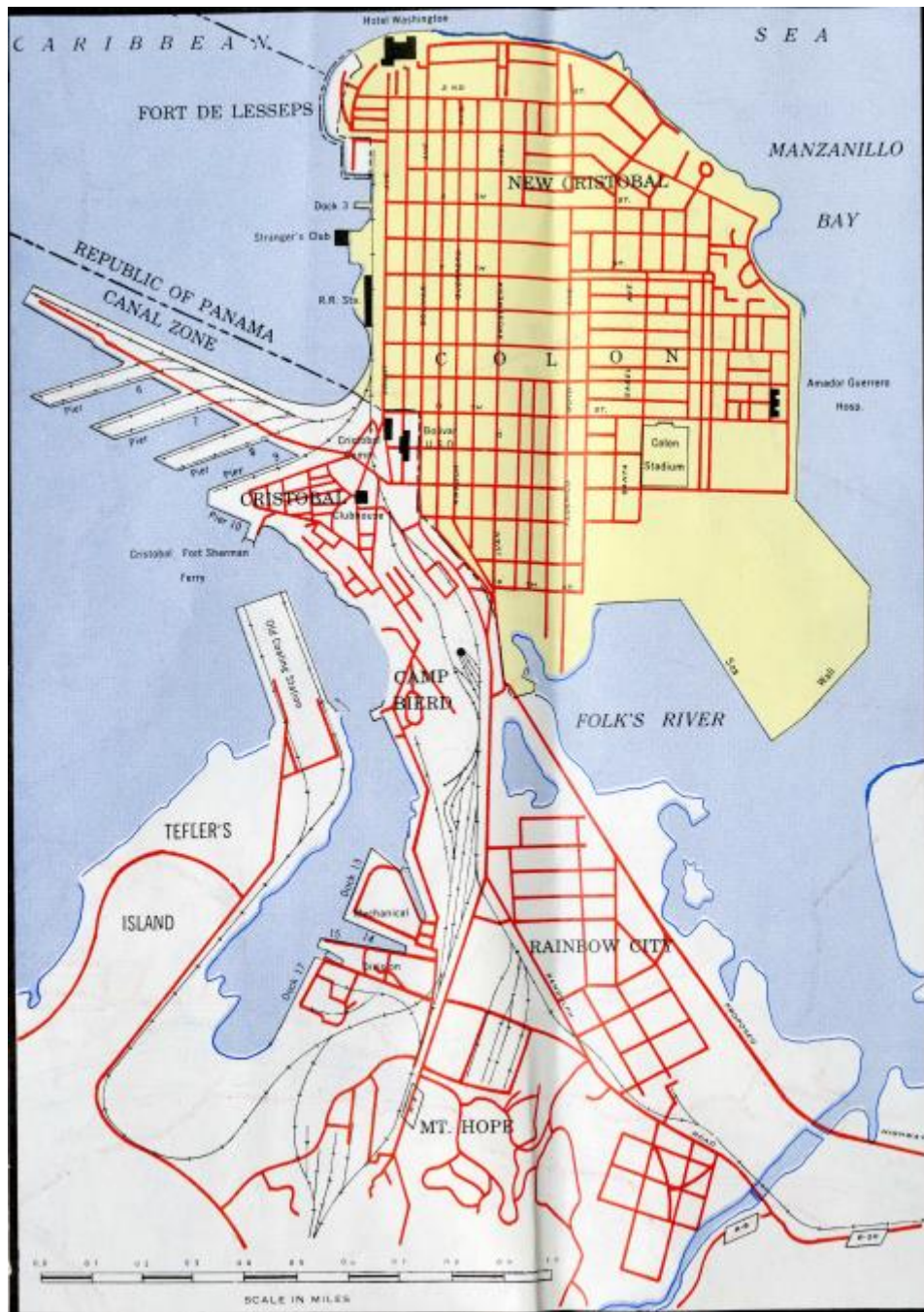
Sitting at what is now the northern end of the city of Colón, next to the Hotel Washington, it was named in 1911, but was not operational until 1916. Its small battery saw its guns removed in 1944, even before World War 2 had ended.

Because it was officially outside the boundaries of the Canal Zone it became one of the first of the major defence sites turned over to the Panamanian Government, in 1955, whereas others had to wait until the implementation of the Torrijos-Carter Treaties 1977,² with some not being handed over until the end of 1999. This early handover followed the Remón-Eisenhower Treaty of 1955.³

¹ <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA500098.pdf>

² <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1977-1980/panama-canal>

³ <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/eisenhower-remon-treaty-1955>



Early days

The site on *Isla Manzanillo*, on Limón Bay, became home to a Coast Artillery Corps post, including a gun battery - with artillery that were not fired after 1942, even for practice (the guns had been fired regularly for practice in 1916, 1917 and 1918, then being placed in caretaker status), until 17 March 1944, when they were fired for the last time. They were then left unmanned before being dismantled and scrapped.⁴ It also had a spur from the

⁴ http://william_h_ormsbee.tripod.com/bases_summ_p09.htm

railyards to its dock, with a line that then ran to Mount Hope, and thence north to connect to Army and Navy installations at France Field, Coco Solo, and Fort Randolph.⁵

There was an administration building and barracks. Being beside the sea there was a dock, and around the corner from the dock were five officers' houses and a theatre. In addition, between the gun batteries and the neighbouring Hotel Washington there was a sea-level swimming pool.

While the site was taken over by the US Army in 1911, being transferred from the Panama Railroad Company, legally the location was never ceded to the US, and was technically outside the boundaries of the US-controlled Canal Zone territory.⁶



*Fort DeLesseps
and the Hotel
Washington Pool*

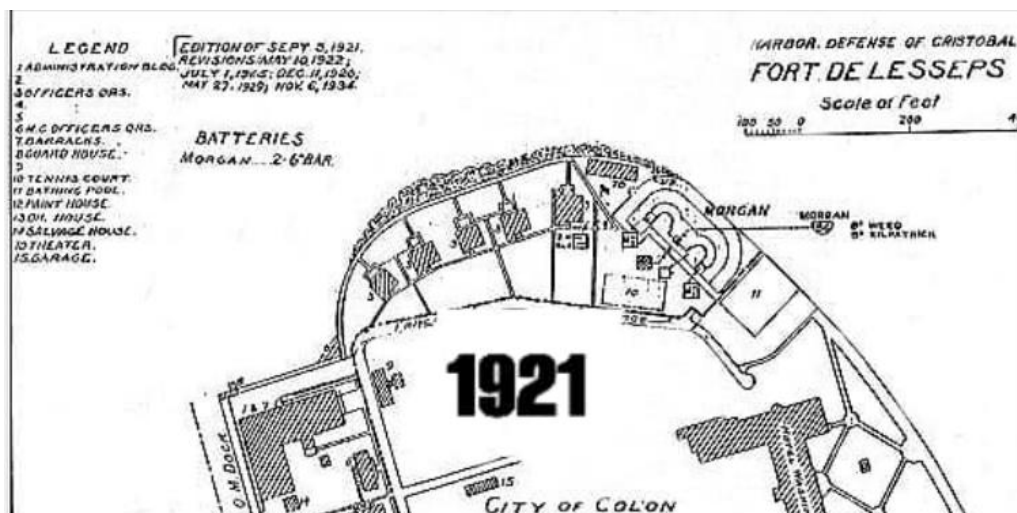
It was named for Count Ferdinand de Lesseps, the French engineer, who had overseen the construction of the Suez Canal and, in 1881-89 unsuccessfully undertook to construct a Panama Canal.

⁵ <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA500098.pdf>

⁶ *Old North American military bunkers located in the corners of the Panama Canal for tourist purposes* by Eva Lisary González Pinilla (Universidad de Panamá, Departamento de Historia, Panamá): <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1437-106X>

The Coast Artillery Corps units headquartered at the fort were the 1st, the 4th, and the 6th Coast Defense Companies; the 1st and 6th being organised at Fort DeLesseps in 1917.⁷ Their quarters included officers' sets, and double apartment houses; all built from concrete. These quarters were described as cool and airy, and were said to be among the most attractive quarters in the Army at the time.⁸

The fort became operational in 1916, helping to defend the Atlantic entrance to the Canal and Cristobal harbour. It had several gun batteries (see below), anti-aircraft and searchlight positions and, in World War 2, it had a building at the end of the pier which was the control building for degaussing ships.⁹



By 1922, the coastal defences of the port of Cristobal and the Canal entrance comprised three forts: Fort Sherman on the western side of the breakwater enclosing Limon Bay;¹⁰ Fort Randolph at the eastern extremity of the breakwater;¹¹ and Fort de Lesseps situated on a central point of land inside the breakwater.¹² By then, the Colón Hospital, and the Quarantine and Naval Radio Stations extended north along the shore from Fort de Lesseps in the direction of Fort Randolph, which was separated from Colón by the broad inlet. South

⁷ <https://freepages.rootsweb.com/~cacunithistories/military/Fort%20De%20Lessops.html>

⁸ <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA500098.pdf>

⁹ This process demagnetised ships' hulls as they passed over a large magnetic coil. This was introduced during World War 2 to counter the risk from magnetic mines fielded by Germany.

¹⁰ See <https://raytodd.blog/2024/10/23/panama-in-world-war-2-and-after-fort-sherman-and-the-green-hell/>

¹¹ See <https://raytodd.blog/2024/11/02/panama-in-world-war-2-fort-randolph-and-camp-randolph/>

¹² <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA500098.pdf>

from Fort de Lesseps, docks extended for about a half mile (0.8 km) to the "mole" or pier, in the direction of the Canal entrance, and parallel to the waterfront and business section of the city of Colón.¹³



By 1936, the manning of Coast Artillery at the fort numbered 190, with a headquarters barracks for 84 men, eight sets of officers' quarters, three quadruplexes for NCOs, a "recreation pavilion" with 200 seats, and a small, three-bed medical station.¹⁴



Fort DeLessups in 1930s¹⁵

¹³ <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA500098.pdf>

¹⁴ https://www.czimages.com/CZMemories/VAP/Delesseps/dl_index.htm

¹⁵ <http://www.i-kirk.info/14thInfantry/7-Panama/p08257.jpg>

World War 2

What nearby enemy activity that Panama saw during the war too place in the Caribbean, with convoys being necessary, and sea and air patrols to combat the presence of U-boats. However, it was only during 1942 that the U-boats were a serious, ongoing menace.¹⁶ There was nevertheless a concern over a possible attack, by air, sea, submarine, or sabotage, even before the US finally entered the war in 1941.

As mentioned above, the big guns of Fort DeLesseps only saw practice firing in 1942 and 1944, then being put on stand-by caretaker basis. Apart from the gun batteries, searchlight positions and anti-aircraft weapons, the fort also had an air raid shelter, ammunition rooms, an armoury, a radar control office, and the office of the Commander in charge of air and naval defence. It was a restricted area under the supervision of the US Military Police, a unit of which was based at the fort.



90 mm batteries, with the degaussing control room building in the background

¹⁶ For more on the U-boat threat, see <https://raytodd.blog/2024/06/30/panama-in-world-war-2-panama-and-the-u-boats/>

There was never a genuine danger from Japanese surface or submarine vessels – the vast distances of the Pacific mitigating against such a threat, despite Japan producing some large, and long-range submarines.

The batteries

Despite being the smallest of the coastal forts, it still boasted a significant gun armament.

Including those associated batteries some distance from the fort itself. There was –

- Battery Morgan¹⁷, with two 6-inch (152 mm) guns with a range of around 15,000 yards (13.7 km), on barbette mounts, constructed 1913-16¹⁸;
- Battery 3B, equipped from 1942 with 90 mm guns intended to combat motor torpedo boats and other small craft – this was established where there had been an anti-aircraft battery of two 3-inch (76 mm) guns from the 1930s;
- Battery U with four 155 mm guns on Panama mounts;¹⁹
- Battery AR on Tortuguilla Point, south of Fort Sherman, with two mobile 75 mm guns – the site also had a searchlight position with railbed, shelter, powerhouse, and a wooden control tower;
- Battery V on Naranjitos Point, also the other side of Fort Sherman, with four 155 mm guns on Panama mounts;
- Battery Y with four 155 mm guns on Panama mounts;
- Battery AX on the *Isla Palma Media* peninsula, to the north and outside the breakwater protecting Limón Bay, originally with two 4.7-inch (119 mm) guns, replaced by 75 mm guns in 1919;
- Battery Z (aka 1A) with four 155 mm guns on Panama mounts;
- Batteries 1B and AY on *Isla Galeta*, outside the bay and the north-east,²⁰ both originally with 4.7-inch guns, which were replaced by 75 mm ones in 1919; and

¹⁷ Named in honour of General Charles H Morgan, a Civil War general who, after that war, had served in the artillery, including at the artillery school at Fortress Monroe in Virginia.

¹⁸ This Battery, together with Battery Kilpatrick at Fort Sherman, and Battery Weed at Fort Randolph, were intended to protect the approaches from attacks by light naval vessels, including minesweepers and submarines. By 1944, the two guns had only ever fired 256 rounds in practice (112 by one, 144 by the other). https://www.czimages.com/CZMemories/VAP/Delesseps/dl_index.htm

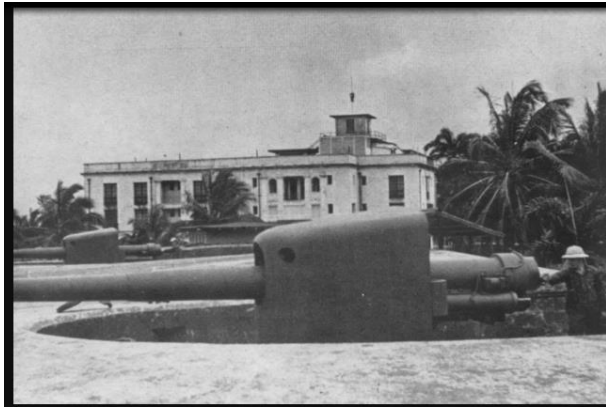
The barbette was a protected concrete base for the gun, though those at the fort (as elsewhere in the Canal Zone) at the time lacked adequate protection from air attack.

¹⁹ A form of gun mount for fixed coastal artillery developed in Panama during the 1920s, with the gun mounted on a central concrete pier surrounded by a full or partial concrete-embedded steel rail, thus allowing easy wide traverse.

²⁰ Galeta was also was the site of a US military communications facility from the 1930s until 2002, when it was turned over to the Panamanian Government. There was also later a research establishment of the Smithsonian Tropical research Institute (STRI), which maintained the research facility after US military activity had ceased, in a separate facility located just east of the former communications facility.

- Battery AZ on *Isla Largo Remo*, further along the coast from Galeta, which also had 4.7-inch guns replaced in 1919 by 75mm ones.

There was also a total of 10 searchlight positions.



Battery Morgan in 1939 at Fort DeLessups, Colon, looking north-east – No.2 gun in the foreground and Hotel Washington in the background

Transfer to Panama

Under the terms of 1955 Treaty of Mutual Understanding and Cooperation (aka the Eisenhower-Rémon Treaty),²¹ which revised the original 1903 Treaty,²² the fort was the first of the fixed defences of the Canal Zone to be dismantled.



The barracks and quartermaster dock viewed from the sea in the 1930s

Under the Treaty, five tracts of land in Colón covering a total area of about 48.5 acres (19.6 hectares), together with buildings and other improvements, are scheduled for early

²¹ The 1955 Treaty and Memorandum of Understandings between the United States and the Republic of Panama.

²² Which had previously been modified from 1939 by the 1936 Hull-Alfaro Treaty.
<https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00022175/00001/pageturner#page/63>

transfer to the Republic of Panama. Some of this property had been occupied and used by the Panama Canal Company or its predecessor, the Panama Railroad Company, for more than 100 years; including the Hotel Washington, and among the most valuable of the land to be transferred. The total value of all properties involved was said to be approximately \$25 million. The residential area of Fort DeLesseps was included in the transfers.²³

The official language was the Fort DeLesseps was no longer consider “required for canal purposes”.²⁴

Hotel Washington

Alongside the fort, this hotel could have its windows shattered when the 6-inch guns of Battery Morgan fired (so perhaps it was as well that firings were so infrequent).²⁵ It was located facing south onto Limón Bay, and 2nd Street (to the south-east), being adjacent to Bolivar Avenue to the east. Fort DeLesseps was its western neighbour.



Fort DeLesseps and the Hotel Washington Pool²⁶

The Panama Railway Company had opened a hotel on this site in 1870 for its workers. As the Canal started to attract attention from tourists, hotel beds became scarce in Colón, and so

the company moved the first hotel and opened a more upmarket alongside what was to be Fort DeLesseps on 23 March 1913, although it opened its doors to the public the following March, and it was on 29 March 1914 that the official inauguration of the new hotel took place. At the time it was said to rival any hotel in the New World.

²³ <https://www.czbrats.com/Articles/treatpro.htm>

²⁴ https://www.czimages.com/CZMemories/VAP/Delesseps/dl_index.htm

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ <http://www.czimages.com/CZMemories/VAP/Delesseps/dl42.htm>



The first building, known as "Washington House", had been a wooden building built by the American Isthmian Panama Canal Company in 1904. It was designed for the Caribbean climate, with balconies protected against insects with netting. It boasted a restaurant, reading room, bar, and billiards room. In 1905, as construction of the Canal was well underway, and the numbers of US forces in the Canal Zone grew, a third floor was added to the hotel, and in 1908 it was taken over by the Isthmian Canal Commission (the predecessor of the later Canal Zone Government, and responsible for overseeing construction of the Canal and its associated facilities). In 1910, the adjacent Bennington House was also turned into an inn for overnight guests, or those staying longer.

In 1906, US President Taft stayed at the hotel during his inspection of the Canal construction.

In 1910, an ambitious remodelling produced a new structure at an approximate cost of \$500,000, the project being improved by President Taft. It was also the President who decided on its architecture, selected the architects, and set the sum of \$500,000 as the top limit for its cost. The old hotel was moved, and the seawall reinforced. The architectural design, by graduates of the West Point Military Academy, embraced neoclassical elements with a colonial tendency, a modified Spanish Mission style (with helped always make the interior cool and comfortable), with all the necessary materials shipped from New York. It reopened in 1913. The hotel's swimming pool, fed by

seawater drawn from Limón Bay, became a hallmark and a recreation point for guests – and survives to this day.²⁷



The hotel and gardens in 1950

It became the epicentre of society on the Caribbean side of the Canal Zone, and it continued as a high-class establishment until and after World War 2. All the crockery, kitchen utensils, furniture of the rooms, dining rooms and games, kitchen equipment, cutlery and pots, and other details of the decoration were shipped in New York following the quality standards of a 3-star hotel on the steamship *Cristobal* of the Panama Railroad Company, the freight being paid and the items transported to the hotel by means of the railway.

However, during the war the hotel was described as an eerie place. There were signs in the corridors and the elevator pointing out the whereabouts of air raid shelters -

The roof, formerly a vantage spot for sightseers, was off-limits. An anti-aircraft battery was located next door, on the swimming pool side, and from time-to-time guests were notified, in advance, that there would be firing practice. They could then find urgent business elsewhere or stuff their ears with cotton. None of the halls were lighted, except by low-burning lanterns set on the floor, and blackout restrictions were stringently enforced.

²⁷ <https://detallesdepanama.com/2023/08/13/historia-y-evolucion-del-hotel-washington/>

The wartime hotel was said to be full of strangers on important war business and an occasional survivor from a ship sunk by a U-boat in the Caribbean.

In 1950, the hotel underwent a minor facelift.²⁸ However, it would pass into the hands of the Panamanian Government at the same time as Fort DeLesseps, the handover taking place in 1957.



The new washing Hotel and condominium

Between 1966-68, closure and demolition was proposed, but it was reprieved with a comprehensive remodelling and a Hyatt hotel chain concession in 1971. After the US invasion in December 1989, it was occupied by US troops until returned to Panamanian Government again in 1991, which then sold the land and infrastructure to the Flamingo Hotel Company.

The New Washington Hotel²⁹ is the latest, restored version of the hotel. To one side of the hotel is the oldest Episcopal Church in Central America, the Christ Episcopa Church, having been built by the Panama Railroad Company in 1864.

²⁸ <https://www.angelfire.com/tx/CZAngelsSpace/HoWashington.html>

²⁹ <https://newwashingtonhotel.com/#>

Fort DeLessups today

By 2018, it was said that the old fort was “falling apart with each wave that hits its flanks”.

The owners of the neighbouring New Washington Hotel have had a condominium built on the site of the former fort.

In 2022, the Panama Tourism Authority (ATP) and the management of the Colon Free Zone signed a cooperation agreement which allowed the ATP to locate its regional office and a visitor centre in the former Battery Morgan.³⁰



The Morgan Battery facilities remain and can be visited and, despite their poor condition, are regarded as a building that is part of the history of the city of Colón, there is small museum containing rescued relics and others temporarily loaned for exhibition.³¹

³⁰ <https://www.thevisitorpanama.info/esp/2022/05/30/nuevo-centro-de-visitantes-de-colon-estara-en-el-historico-fuerte-de-battery-morgan/>

³¹ *Old North American military bunkers located in the corners of the Panama Canal for tourist purposes* by Eva Lisary González Pinilla (Universidad de Panamá, Departamento de Historia, Panamá): <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1437-106X>



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