

THE WARTIME GOVERNORS

The Panama Canal Zone had an unusual status and governance. Though primarily intended to facilitate use of the Canal, the need for adequate defence also made it appear at times as an armed camp, and the overwhelmingly US influence, plus the attitude and behaviour of the residents, had the effect of turning it quickly into a sort of “Little America” – including the racial views of the time. Virtually everyone within the Zone worked for the military, the Navy, or the Canal authorities (and owned their housing, well-being, and livelihood to the same). It was classified as one of the “insular possessions” of the US, which were defined as territories outside the customs territory of the US, and included the US Virgin Islands, Guam, American Samoa, Wake Island, Midway Islands, and Johnston Atoll. As with its other insular possessions, following a period of military government, in 1912, the US Congress passed an Act for the Canal Zone.

This Panama Canal Act of 24 August 1912 (incorporated into the Canal Zone Code¹, with effect from 19 June 1934, authorised by an Act of Congress in 1928) abolished the Isthmian Canal Commission - established in 1904 to *"make all the rules and regulations necessary for the government of the Zone and for the proper administration of the military, civil, and judicial affairs of its possessions"*, to make way for an organisation that would include in its structure the Panama Canal Company and the Panama Railroad Company. It provided for the Canal Zone Government² to be an independent agency of the US, established by Congress, and administered under the supervision of the US President by a designated Governor.³

¹ The Code established the law of the Canal Zone, which applied in addition to the general laws of the US which also relate to or apply in the Canal Zone. The original version referred to the 1903 Treaty.

² By World War 2, it had become customary to refer to the collection of authorities governing and administering the Canal and the Canal Zone as simply “The Panama Canal”. This did not rest on any treaty or law, but rather on usage and terminology employed in Executive Orders. Treaties and Acts of Congress referred to *“operation and control of the Panama Canal”* and to *“the government of the Canal Zone”*.

³ Under the 1912 Act, it was the US President who was made responsible for the operation, maintenance, and defence of the Canal. The President delegated many of his responsibilities to the Secretary of the Army. This first Governor would be George W Goethals, who had formerly been the chief engineer for the canal from 1907, and responsible for the successful construction. He would only serve until 1916, when he resigned.

By tradition, the Governor would be an officer (latterly a Major General) of the US Army Corps of Engineers, with a Lieutenant Governor a Colonel of the Corps of Engineers, added in the years after World War 2.⁴

An Executive Order, which took effect on 1 April 1914, charged the Governor with "*completion⁵, maintenance, operation, government and sanitation of the Panama Canal and its adjuncts and the government of the Canal Zone*". The same Executive Order provided that the defence of the Canal was the responsibility of the Secretary of War, with provisions for Presidential appointment of an Army officer who, in wartime, who would have "*exclusive authority over the operation of the Panama Canal and the Government of the Canal Zone*".⁶

The Canal Zone was not regarded as being what was termed an "incorporated territory" of the US (Alaska and Hawaii, before they became states in 1960, were incorporated territories), nor was it an "unincorporated territory", like the Philippines and Puerto Rico. The Canal Zone was defined as certain "*territory under the control and jurisdiction of the United States*", but which had not been brought within the customs and immigration barriers of the US, and not all US laws applied there. For example, it had its own customs regulations, applicable to goods and persons arriving into the Zone from the US or any other country.⁷

The Canal Zone was separated and distinct from the rest of the country - the Republic of Panama, which, ostensibly for reasons of security of the Canal and maintaining the country's independence, had a *de facto* status as a protectorate of the US. The US retained the right under the original 1903 Treaty to intervene in the country to maintain order and protect the Canal. Only with the subsequent 1936 Treaty would Panama's "protectorate" status end,

⁴ The CIA later noted that there was no statutory requirement for the Governor to be a military officer:

<https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00803R000400030040-8.pdf>

It also noted that having a military officer exercising absolute authority had become increasingly objectionable to Panamanians, with its suggestion of military occupation and colonialism. In the 1970s, it observed, the Torrijos administration in Panama had either refused to deal with the Governor officially, or to formally recognise the existence of the Canal Zone Government.

⁵ The Canal officially opened on 15 August 1914.

⁶ Executive Order 1885 of 27 January 1914.

⁷ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/rdd/historicoview.php?ID=178321>

with the new Treaty abrogating the 1903 Treaty provisions relating to the US guarantee of the Republic's independence and the US right of intervention to maintain order.⁸

The Governor would have formal control and jurisdiction over the Canal Zone and operate it as a civil state.⁹ Congress further enacted a statutory Bill of Rights for the Canal Zone, as it also did in its insular possessions.¹⁰ The situation was the Canal Zone would be administered by the US, with its civilian administration headed by a Governor, who had extensive powers (but who could and would hand over effective control to the Commanding General of the US Army Panama Canal Department in times of emergency¹¹). He was appointed by, and was under the supervision of, the War Department, while the State Department also had a role in running the Zone, for example in formal diplomatic relations with the Republic of Panama. These relations might be through the State Department, the War Department, or through the US Minister in Panama (or, from June 1939, the US Ambassador¹²).¹³ Funding for the administration of the Canal Zone came from the US Army Appropriation Bill.¹⁴

The Canal Government operated through six major departments¹⁵ –

- Executive Department;

⁸ The US military intervened in Panama twice during the period between the wars. In 1921, naval squadrons demonstrated in April on both sides of the Isthmus to prevent war between the countries over a boundary dispute (the Coto War of 21 February to 5 March). In October 1925, strikes and rent riots led to the landing of about 600 US troops to keep order and protect US interests:

https://www.marines.mil/Portals/1/Publications/Panama%20Study_2.pdf

⁹ He was to have had “official control and jurisdiction over the Canal Zone” and should “perform all duties in connection with the civil government of the Canal Zone which is to be held, treated and governed as an adjunct of the Panama Canal”: <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/rdd/historicoview.php?ID=178321>

¹⁰ <https://www.fedbar.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Panama-Canal-Zone-pdf-1.pdf>

¹¹ As was to happen in both 1917 and 1939.

¹² Originally, Panama did not merit an ambassador, its diplomatic status only being upgraded after the 1936 Treaty took effect in 1939.

¹³ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/rdd/historicoview.php?ID=178321>

In 1932, a dispute arose which illustrated how a more assertive Panamanian administration could be tricky to work with. This came from Panamanian opposition to the sale of 3.2% strength beer in the Canal Zone, which was competing with Panamanian beers. Tension rose when the Governor insisted on formally replying to the protests, despite the Panamanian Government's view that proper diplomatic relations should involve only the local US Minister. The US Legation in Panama was not upgraded to an Embassy until March 1939.

¹⁴ <https://www.laahs.com/isthmian-airways/>

¹⁵ For more detail on wartime operations, see <https://raytodd.blog/2024/06/30/panama-in-world-war-2-the-canal-authorities-during-the-war/>

- Department of Operation and Maintenance – comprising the Marine, Mechanical, Dredging, Electrical, Municipal Engineering and Locks Divisions, as well as the Sections of the Office Engineer, Survey and Plans;
- The Accounting Department;
- The Health Department (which also includes supervision of immigration, and hence any quarantine issues);
- The Supply Department; and
- The Purchasing Department.

The Governor acted as chief executive of the Canal Zone, and supervised all the Departments and divisions, as well being president of the Panama Railroad Company which ran along the eastern side of the waterway to connect the terminal ports of Cristobal and Balboa (as well as operating a shipping line, hotels, and other interests). He was responsible for the operation and maintenance of the Canal itself, as well as the administration, sanitation, and government of the Canal Zone.¹⁶ Under the terms of the 1903 Treaty, until after World War 2, he also had responsibility for water and sanitation in Panama City and Colón, at either end of the Canal. Not the least of the Governor's roles is to conduct day to day relations with the Panamanian Government. – which, as mentioned, might have to involve the State Department, the War Department, or by means of the US Minister (or from March 1939, the US Ambassador).¹⁷

Reporting directly to the Secretary for War (and through him to the President)¹⁸, by custom the Governor was a retired US Army Engineers officer.

Some US Government bodies also had some responsibilities in the Canal Zone. The Department of Justice administered the courts (the Canal Zone had its own Canal Zone Police, alongside the Military Police and US Marshals – but not the FBI)¹⁹, and, as

¹⁶ <https://media.defense.gov/2013/Sep/16/2001329866/-1/-1/0/AFD-130916-006.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/rdd/historicoview.php?ID=178321>

¹⁸ From 1947, and changes resulting from the National Security Act 1947, the Secretary for the Army replaced the Secretary for War in the command chain.

¹⁹ The Police and Fire Department were combined in 1940 under the Chief of the Police and Fire Division. It would be finally disbanded in 1982.

mentioned, the State Department handled foreign relationships requiring diplomatic arrangements, and dealt with negotiations with the Panamanian Government. Revenues collected by the Canal were sent to the US Treasury, and Canal accounts were audited annually by officers under direction of the Comptroller General. While commerce was, of course, central to the role of the Canal, the Commerce Department had no involvement in the operations of the Canal. The Canal Zone had its own postal system, and the US Post Office was not responsible for it. Other US Government Departments had little contact with the Canal authorities. Reports, requests, and communications to and from them passed through the Governor and the Secretary of War.²⁰

The plan to transfer control to the US Army in times of emergency was first triggered on 10 April 1917, with the US entering World War 1, overall control of the Canal Zone being transferred to the Commanding General of US troops in the Zone.²¹ The Canal had only opened in 1914, just as the war had broken out in Europe (although it closed for a lengthy period in 1916 after a landslide). Administration and jurisdiction over the Canal and Canal Zone reverted to the Governor on 25 January 1919.²²

The responsibilities of the Governor related to the efficient and effective operation of the Canal and associated services, including the railway and harbours.²³ They were not overly concerned with the situation in Panama as a whole, except where this impacted on the work of the Canal Zone.

²⁰ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/rdd/historicoview.php?ID=178321>

²¹ The Panama Canal Department, the Army command, was not established until 1 July 1917: *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal, 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission).

²² Executive Order No.3032 of 25 January 1919 refers. As in the later war, as World War 1 progressed it became clear that US forces in Panama were not going to be actively involved in combat, and the region remained secure and peaceful for the duration of the conflict: *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission): <https://original-ufdc.uflib.ufl.edu/AA00047733/00001/1>

²³ The Panama Railroad Company was made an adjunct of the Canal administration by President Theodore Roosevelt at the beginning of the construction of the Canal and that status was then prescribed by law. The Governor, who was also President of the Panama Railroad Company, which was a New York State registered company until 1951 (when its operations were merged with the business operations of the Canal enterprise and a new Company was formed) was the administrative head of the company: <http://www.panamahistorybits.com/htmlfiles/2014-08-14P.pdf>

It also seemed that Governors felt that the terms of the 1903 Treaty were largely satisfactory. For example, in June 1934, the then Governor of the Canal Zone, in a conference with State Department officials, had confirmed plans for a further expansion of the Canal. However, he also refuted any requirement or justification for a new treaty to replace the original 1903 one, despite increasing calls from parties in Panama (a coup in 1931 had overthrown the ruling elite that had run the country since independence, with increased nationalist sentiments, exacerbated by the effects of the Depression). He contended that the Canal had not in fact been “completed” as Presidents Roosevelt and Arias had appeared to presume in their discussions. Construction was already being undertaken, he pointed out, and future Canal enlargement would be best facilitated if the old legal safeguards and privileges in the 1903 Treaty were retained.²⁴

The Governors of the prewar years did not help inter-community relations in Panama either by seeming to discriminate against Panamanians over employment in the Canal Zone. In 1932, for example, of 17,407 workers on the so-called “Silver Roll”²⁵ just 4,474 were Panamanian. Despite the US attitudes on race at the time, the Canal Zone authorities were seen, rightly, as favouring West Indian workers over Panamanians. The Governor at the time (Ridley – 1936-40) was even quoted as saying that “*we have very few Panamanians of the lower classes who measure up to the average West Indian*”.²⁶

However, Governor Ridley attitude to his black employees only went so far. Despite the need for additional labour, before the war he had ruled out bringing US blacks into the Canal Zone, for fear of introducing “*subversive and troublesome elements*”, given the increased political activities in the US at the time. Puerto Ricans were not desirable either,

²⁴ Despite the Roosevelt administration agreeing a new treaty in 1936, one which was more acceptable to Panama, it would be held up in Congress, with opposition largely informed by concerns expressed by the Army, and only be implemented from mid-1939.

²⁵ The system of lower wage rates for non-US, non-white employees, with other discrimination and segregation attached to it, such as separate waiting rooms at railway stations and separate dining

²⁶ *Race and Ethnicity in the formation of Panamanian National Identity: Panamanian Discrimination Against Chinese and West Indians in the Thirties* by Marixa Lasso De Paulis (*Revista Panameña de Política* - N° 4, July-December 2007): https://www.cidempanama.org/files/2011/04/4-06-Race-Ethnicity_Marixa_Lasso.pdf
It must be added that in Panama itself, and especially following the election of President Arias Madrid in 1940, there was considerable discrimination against black West Indians, and even the Panamanian children of such people; see <https://raytodd.blog/2024/06/30/panama-in-world-war-2-war-discrimination-and-segregation/>

because they could not be easily categorised as either black or white. Governor Ridley preferred the “*generally quiet and docile*” West Indians.²⁷

In 1936, in discussions with the Panamanian President, President Roosevelt had said he would do away with the discriminatory Gold and Silver Roll practices in the Canal Zone but nothing had happened. An exchange of notes attached to the 1936 Treaty had confirmed as US policy “*the principle of equal opportunity and treatment*”, but little was done to put the principle into practice.²⁸

During the war, Governor Mehauffey (1944-48) identified the problems of the Silver Roll employees as being in relation to housing, schools, and recreational facilities. He said that he could “*fix up a good deal of the housing and. other arrangements for the comfort and convenience of the Panamanian laborers there [i.e. in the Zone], which would help tone down the trouble*”, and President Roosevelt gave him the appropriation to do so. However, this did not address the basis of the discrimination, in pay and treatment, between the Gold and Silver Roll employees.

The attitudes thus persisted into the war (and, in many ways, long after the war).²⁹ When the US Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) received complaints about segregation from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1942, the Governor stonewalled. To avoid unnecessary publicity (through public hearings), he instead appointed a small commission to quietly investigate the claims. It was

²⁷ *The Role of North American Women in US Cultural Chauvinism in the Panama Canal Zone 1904-1945* by Paul W Morgan Jr (Dissertation submitted to Department of History, Florida State University, College of Arts and Sciences, 2000): <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00013679/00001/images/10>

²⁸ ‘*Pro mundi beneficio*’? *The Panama Canal as an international issue, 1943-48* by John Major (Review of International Studies, 1983).

²⁹ For more on discrimination in the Canal Zone, see

When a labour relations adviser was finally assigned to the Governor in 1947 (with pressure from the State, War, Navy, and Labor Departments), his lengthy report in June of that year on labour relations offered evidence of both official and unofficial discrimination against Panamanians in the Canal Zone and made definite recommendations for reforms. It said that, despite some changes in the previous two years, the racial/labour policy of the Canal Zone needed thorough revision: *Memorandum by the Assistant Chief of the Division of Central America and Panama Affairs* (711.19/1-2048), 20 January 1948. Subject: General Relations Between the United States and Panama: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1948v09/d467>

not until 1945, for example, that Silver Roll workers in the Canal Zone were able to organise in a single union across racial and national lines for the first time.³⁰

In early postwar years, the US would argue that the Canal Zone contained no “native people” or “dependent peoples”, and Governor Mehauffey would make a lengthy defence of policies in the Canal Zone, making it plain his view that there was little room (or, one presumes, need) for improvement. The Governor argued that his administration had no mandate to raise the standard of living in Panama or elsewhere, nor any money to indulge in “*socialistic experiments*”. Its job, he said, was to get ships through the Canal economically and efficiently, and to maintain the civil government of the Canal Zone.

However, Silver Roll wage rates were increased on 1 July 1946, but Governor Mehauffey was not prepared to do more. He was convinced that the Silver Roll workforce would not be satisfied with anything less than wage equality and total desegregation. The first would add \$30 million to the Silver Roll payroll, while the second would wreck the social structure of the Canal Zone. While orders were given for Gold and Silver signs to be taken down from all Canal Zone buildings (such as directing people to respective waiting or dining rooms), the move was made with the maximum discretion and given no publicity.

On 21 November 1948, the then Governor, Francis K Newcomer, abolished the system, but it was said that not until the passage of the 1964 Civil Rights Act in the US that the general pattern of discriminatory behaviour in the Canal Zone ended – although the experience of a US lawmaker from the south of the US on a much later visit belied this assertion, at least to an extent, with her commenting on how the atmosphere reminded her of that in the Deep South in the 1950s.³¹ However, it was the 1955 Treaty which formally ended the Gold and Silver payrolls.

On 5 September 1939, an Executive Order from President Roosevelt placed the Canal Zone, and “all its adjuncts and appurtenances, including the government of the Canal Zone”,

³⁰ *Black Labor on a White Island: Panama, 1904-1981* by Michael Coniff (University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985).

³¹ <https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/gold-roll-silver-roll/>
<https://raytodd.blog/2024/06/30/panama-in-world-war-2-war-discrimination-and-segregation/>

under the jurisdiction of the Commanding General, Panama Canal Department.³² However, the general's authority over operation of the Canal and governmental functions continued to be exercised through the Governor, who retained responsibility for their management.³³

There would be disagreement and confusion from time to time regarding respective roles of the civil and military administrations. The Governor, for instance, though still nominally in charge of the entire Canal Zone in wartime, he was effectively subverted in his authority by the Commanding General, who was also the Commander of the newly-created theatre-wide Caribbean Defense Command during the war.

The Governor was responsible for training civilian personnel before and during World War 2, and a director of Civil Defense was appointed. Alerts were practised from 1939, but no firm plans had been made by the time of the Pearl Harbor attack, and the lack of air raid shelters was seen as a serious problem.

As mentioned in the potted biography of Governor Meahaffey below, in 1945, he was authorised by the US Congress to report on how best the Canal could be adapted to meet the needs of merchant shipping and national defence, and to report his conclusions by December 1947.³⁴ However, whereas Meahaffey's eventual report recommended construction of a sea-level canal, at around the same time, a separate study initiated by the US Navy opposed the idea of a sea-level canal and its author clashed with Meahaffey, who was committed to the idea, despite it being the most expensive option.³⁵

In September 1947, when changes took place to the organisation of the US armed forces, with the US Army Air Forces (USAAF) separated from the Army and becoming the newly

³² Executive Order 8232 of 5 September 1939.

³³ <https://media.defense.gov/2013/Sep/16/2001329866/-1/-1/0/AFD-130916-006.pdf>

³⁴ *Wasting Asset: The U.S. Re-Assessment of the Panama Canal, 1945-1949* by John Major (Journal of Strategic Studies), 2008

³⁵ In 1943, the author of the US Navy study, Captain Miles P DuVal, had proposed a major improvement in facilities by the creation of a summit-level anchorage in Miraflores Lake close to the Pacific terminal, in order to remove the bottleneck of the Pedro Miguel locks. The cost of a sea-level canal was estimated at \$2.483 billion – compared to \$2.308 for a modernised lock canal and \$1.632 billion for DuVal's Pacific lake concept: *Wasting Asset: The U.S. Re-Assessment of the Panama Canal, 1945-1949* by John Major (Journal of Strategic Studies), 2008.

independent United States Air Force (USAF), the ground and service organisation in the Caribbean, headquartered in the Canal Zone, was renamed the US Army, Caribbean. The War Department made it clear that an Army officer would remain in charge of Panama Canal operations and Canal Zone, while the Canal Zone Governor would continue to be subject to this Army officer, the wartime emergency status not yet having been restored to that for peacetime.

In February 1950, President Truman signed an Executive Order which revoked that of September 1939, which had transferred control of the Canal and Canal Zone from the Governor to the Commanding General.³⁶ The transfer of the Canal back to the Governor took effect on 1 July 1951.³⁷

From 1 July 1951, changes were made by means of a 1950 Act of Congress, with governance of the Canal Zone vested in the Canal Zone Government, with the Canal itself being operated by the Panama Canal Company³⁸ (in 1979 the Panama Canal Commission took over, and the Canal Zone and its Government formally abolished, as the provisions of the Torrijos-Carter Treaties of 1977 began to be implemented, with a view to the eventual handover of the Canal to the Panamanians on 31 December 1999). However, the structure remained under the control of the US Government and the Secretary of the Army. The Governor was president of the new Panama Canal Company, which entirely financed the Canal Zone Government, which was required to have a balanced budget.

Clarence S Ridley (1936-40)³⁹

Prior to becoming Governor, Ridley had been notable for having supervised the construction of the Lincoln Memorial in Washington DC.

³⁶ <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/executive-order-10107-revocation-executive-order-no-8232-september-5-1939-relating-the>

³⁷ <https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/district-courts/FSupp/143/539/1417672/>

³⁸ The Secretary for the Army being the sole stockholder, who then appointed a board of directors: <https://www.cia.gov/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP82-00803R000400030040-8.pdf>

³⁹ *Governors of the Panama Canal: a Biography* compiled by Rolando Cochez (Panama Canal Commission, 1997)

He was born in Indiana in 1883. He entered West Point in 1901 and graduated with high honours, and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the US Army Corps of Engineers in 1905. After initial tours of duty, he graduated from the Engineer School at Washington Barracks. His subsequent work included the construction of locks and dams in North Carolina.

In October 1917, as a newly promoted Colonel, he was appointed as Senior Military Aide to President Wilson, and his duties included construction of the Arlington Memorial in Arlington Cemetery and the Lincoln Memorial.

In 1921, he made his first visit to the isthmus of Panama, as Assistant Maintenance Engineer, at a time when the Canal organisation was entering a period of settled operation and maintenance.



CLARENCE S. RIDLEY

On 27 August 1936, he was appointed Governor. During his time as Governor, he oversaw a change in the method of measurement for determining the tonnage of vessels liable to tolls. In addition, the deepening of the Pacific entrance channel, including the Balboa inner harbour, was completed.

A more significant change, although one that would eventually come to naught, were planned expansion of the Canal's capacity by means of what become known as the Third Locks Project.⁴⁰

In 1936, Governor Ridley had been authorised and directed by the US Congress to investigate the means of increasing the capacity of the Canal for the future needs of

⁴⁰ For more on the Project, see:

interoceanic shipping. A Special Engineering Section was created by the Governor on 1 July 1937 to make the necessary investigations. It made a careful study of topography, hydrography, and other matters⁴¹. The Governor submitted a report on 24 February 1939, saying that construction should start within 10-12 years and, for defence security considerations, the new locks should be placed some distance from existing ones. The cost was estimated at \$277 million⁴².

Having been endorsed by the Governor, by the Secretary of War, and by the President, on 11 August 1939, the US Congress authorised the “Third Locks Project”, also known as the “bypass project”⁴³, to provide new, larger locks near existing ones at Gatun, Pedro Miguel and Miraflores in order to increase the Canal’s capacity. Congress allocated \$15 million the following Spring to begin work and authorised the signing of contracts before July 1940 year for \$99 million. Excavation began near Miraflores on 1 July 1940, a few days before Ridley was replaced by his successor.

As international tensions rose, in 1938, Ridley had proposed deterrents to possible sabotage – nets and fenders to prevent the use of submarine mines, single lane operation for ships carrying explosives⁴⁴ and ship examinations and transit guards aboard vessels passing through the Canal. In June 1938, the War Department authorised use of these countermeasures when deemed necessary and, on 29 August 1939, it instructed the Governor to activate transit countermeasures with a transit guard system.⁴⁵ Another measure was that a destroyer was stationed in Gatun Lake was also intended to prevent any transiting vessel ramming the Gatun Dam-Spillway.⁴⁶ Controls were tightened further after the 1939 Executive Order declaring a state of emergency.⁴⁷

⁴¹ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/rdd/historicoview.php?ID=178321>

⁴² <https://ufdc.ufl.edu/AA00019286/00001/pdf>

⁴³ <http://bdigital.binal.ac.pa/rdd/historicoview.php?ID=178321>

⁴⁴ This would mean the use of just one lane in the locks (normally both lanes were used). The procedure applied for all ships carrying explosives, other than US ones.

⁴⁵ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal, 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission).

⁴⁶ It was to fire two blank warning shots at any ship that failed to start, and then any means necessary to stop it. The destroyer would be withdrawn on 2 September 1939.

⁴⁷ *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal, 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission).

The tightening of controls and restrictions went alongside a commitment in 1939 to rapidly complete planned defensive installations, as well as improving security of the Canal and the locks expansion project.

An Executive Order of 5 September 1939 placed the Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department in charge of all civilian and military activities in the Canal Zone, including the Canal.

Promoted to Major General in January 1941, he went on to be appointed Assistant Commanding General, 3rd Infantry Division, and Commanding General, 6th Infantry Division, before becoming Chief of the US Military Mission to the Iranian Army until November 1946.⁴⁸

Ridley retired from the Army in 1947, and died in 1969.

Glen E Edgerton (1940-44)⁴⁹

Edgerton was the Governor for most of the war and had previously served as Panama Canal maintenance engineer 1936-40 – and his eventual successor as Governor had also succeeded him in this post.

⁴⁸ https://generals.dk/general/Ridley/Clarence_Self/USA.html

⁴⁹ *Governors of the Panama Canal: a Biography* compiled by Rolando Cochez (Panama Canal Commission, 1997)



Glen E Edgerton in 1939

He had been born in Kansas in 1887, and graduated from West Point in 1908, and the Engineer School in 1910.

In 1908-09, he had been Assistant Engineer of the Canal, during its construction phase, before going on to become Chief Engineer of the Alaska Road from 1910 to 1915.

After various other roles, including a spell as a professor at the Engineering School of the US Military Academy in 1930, he returned to the isthmus as Maintenance

Engineer of the Canal from 1936 to 1940.

He was appointed Governor on 11 July 1940, succeeding Ridley, and remaining in the post until 1944. He was promoted to Major General on 9 March 1942.

By the time of his appointment, the Executive Order of September 1939 had already transferred primary responsibility for the Canal and Canal Zone to the Commanding General. Nevertheless, the normal functions of the Canal and the Canal Zone Government, and associated enterprises, continued to be administered through the Governor.

Edgerton oversaw the massive expansion in facilities and defences in the Canal Zone, with organisations under his control being heavily involved. The peak of construction activity on was reached in Summer 1943, ironically when it could be said that any real threat to the Canal had ended. In his annual report for that year, the Governor said that the large program of defence construction which had been initiated several years before neared

completion during the year, with a consequent gradual decrease in the demands on his organisations resulting from those construction activities.⁵⁰



A 1942 press photo purports to show Governor Glen Edgerton planning Civil Defense for the Canal Zone

The Trans-Isthmian Highway arose from the agreement that led to the 1936 Treaty (aka the Arias-Roosevelt Treaty). It had been agreed that a highway should be built linking Panama City on the Pacific and Colón on the Caribbean. Construction began in 1939, and the road was named the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway, although the actual agreement had been signed by Acting President Dr Augusto Samuel Boyd and Edgerton as Governor.

Among other achievements was the road and railway bridge across the Miraflores Locks (providing the first permanent bridge connection between the two sides of the Canal since 1914). This opened in 1942 to vehicular traffic.⁵¹ In addition, the eventually aborted Third Locks Project got fully underway shortly after he took up his appointment in 1940. He was replaced as Governor by John C Mehaffey on 15 May 1944.

After leaving the Canal Zone, Edgerton took up a number of posts with the Army Service Forces, before becoming Associated Director of War Assets Administration in 1946, and

⁵⁰ *Annual Report of the Governor of the Panama Canal for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30 1944* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, 1946).

⁵¹ The Thatcher Ferry would also continue in use for crossings, until the opening of the Bridge of the Americas in 1962.

Director of China Office, United Nations Relief & Rehabilitation Administration, followed by a year as a member of the Officers' Promotion Selection Boards, War Department.⁵²

Edgerton retired from the Army in 1949, and he died in 1956.

John C Mehaffey (1944-48)⁵³

He was born in Ohio in 1889. He graduated from West Point in 1911, and had already served in the Canal Zone as an Army officer in 1911-12.

After World War 1, he became a professor of practical military engineering at West Point in 1922, returning to the Canal Zone in 1929 as Assistant Maintenance Engineer, but had returned to the US by 1935, where he graduated from the Command and General Staff School at Fort Leavenworth in Kansas.

He was assigned to the Canal Zone again in September 1941 as Maintenance Engineer, succeeding Edgerton in that role. He was promoted to Brigadier General in June 1942, and was appointed Governor on 15 May 1944.

In 1945, the US Congress appropriated \$1.5 million for Mehaffey to report on what changes would be necessary to modernise Canal operations. In 1947, his report recommended that a sea-level canal be built, to run roughly along the same route as the existing one.⁵⁴

Mehaffey argued that two atomic bombs or even conventional weapons could render the existing lock-based Canal useless for up to four years while a new sea-level canal would suffer only one month of disruption.⁵⁵ However, no decision had been made before Mahaffey completed his term as Governor in May 1948.⁵⁶

⁵² https://generals.dk/general/Edgerton/Glen_Edgar/USA.html

⁵³ *Governors of the Panama Canal: a Biography* compiled by Rolando Cochez (Panama Canal Commission, 1997).

⁵⁴ It was thought that a sea-level canal with no locks would be less vulnerable to attack using the new nuclear weapons, Secretary of War Henry Stimson was sympathetic to the view:

<https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1173484.pdf>

⁵⁵ <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/trecms/pdf/AD1173484.pdf>

⁵⁶ Having been promoted to the rank of Major General in May 1944, he reverted to be a Brigadier general in June 1946, but had been restored to a Major General for retirement.



From July 1948 to the end of November 1949 he served as Division Engineer, Ohio River Division. He retired from the US Army on leaving that last post on 30 November 1949 and died in 1963.⁵⁷



Mehaffey, centre, at the dedication of the Morgantown Lock and Dam on the Monongahela River in West Virginia in 1948⁵⁸

⁵⁷ https://generals.dk/general/Mehaffey/Joseph_Cowles/USA.html

⁵⁸ <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015032299342&seq=236&view=1up&num=220>

He was succeeded by Francis K Newcomer, who had been Maintenance Engineer since May 1944, and as chief assistant to Mehaffey, having been promoted to Brigadier General before being appointed Governor in May 1948.

He would oversee the establishment of the new structure with the Panama Canal Company in 1951, and was the Governor to end use of the terms “Gold” and “Silver” to designate wage standards on 21 November 1948.

He actually retired from the US Army in October 1949, but continued to serve as Governor.

He died in 1967.



FRANCIS K. NEWCOMER



The Governor's House was (and is) at Balboa Heights, on the slopes of Ancon Hill and close to the Canal Administration Building, which overlooks the "capital" of the Canal Zone, Balboa, now a precinct of Sprawling Panama City.

The first Governor's House was built to house the Chief Engineer of the Isthmian Canal Commission during the construction period, located in the workers' town of Culebra, overlooking the Culebra Cut (originally the Gaillard Cut), the 7.8-mile (12.6 km) long cut and artificial valley through the Continental Divide. This was the reason for the 85-foot (26 metres) rise and fall of the locks systems above sea-level (the Canal Administration Building is built atop an artificial hill the same height as the rise/fall). This house was occupied from 1907.

A new Governor's House was planned in Ancon, designed as a three-storey building with 15 bedrooms, roof garden and huge drawing room. Before completion, in 1906, it was decided instead that it be converted into an administration building, later to be occupied by the District Court and other offices.

In 1914, the original Governor's House was dismantled and the sections moved by railway flatcars to its present location. It was reported that the move cost \$16,300, almost as much as the original \$19,773 construction cost.

A short film (undated, but likely to be from the 1970s or after) is available providing a tour of the inside of the house.⁵⁹

It continued to be used by Governors and their families until 1979, and from then by the Canal Administrator.



The house being dismantled in 1914, and as rebuilt in Balboa Heights in 1918

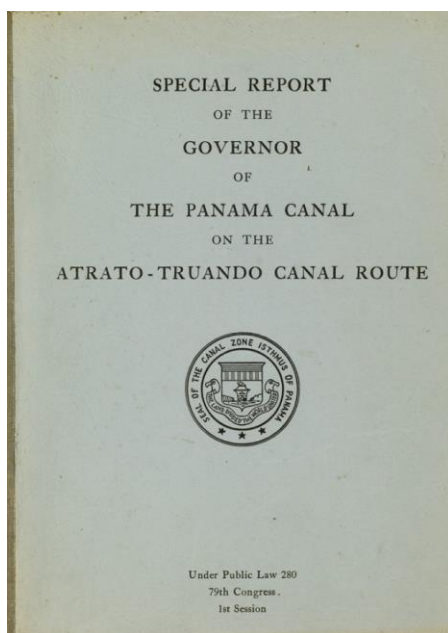


Governor's House in 2001

⁵⁹ <https://original-ufdc.ufliib.ufl.edu/AA00067221/00001>

Postscript

In 1947, Mehaffey had submitted a report (dated 21 November 1947) on options for increasing capacity and security of the Panama Canal. In 1949, Congress published a further report, which supplemented the Mehaffey one, and concerned with a potential canal along the Atrato-Truando route in northern Colombia.⁶⁰ This report concluded that the plan was practicable, as either a sea-level canal (for an estimated \$5.2 billion) or a canal with locks (for \$4.1 billion), and would take between 17 and 20 years to complete.⁶¹



Ray Todd
Panama City
Republic of Panama
15 August 2024

⁶⁰ Incidentally, a fellow-countryman (and possible distant relation, as he shares the surname of my paternal grandfather) of mine tried to sell the idea of a canal in the same general region during the 19th Century, to no avail. He claimed to have discovered in 1854 a route linking the Atlantic and Pacific, and requiring no locks. The Canal Museum has a copy of the book (which I presented it with): <https://www.william-kennish.com/>

⁶¹ <https://original-ufdc.ufliib.ufl.edu/AA00029643/00001/40j>

In 2024, it was reported that Colombia was, once more, considering such a canal route.

