

THE FAMOUS HOTELS – WITH ONLY ONE SURVIVING – THE TIVOLI AND THE WASHINGTON

There were two famous hotels in wartime Panama, one at either side of the isthmus – the Tivoli in Ancon and the Washington in Colón. They became symbols of the Canal Zone era, and the centre of society and community, at least the upper levels, and were where prominent visitors to see the Canal would stay. Now replaced by newer, more modern hotels, only the Washington remains standing, a shadow of its former self, but a reminder of better days.

THE TIVOLI



The Tivoli Hotel opened in 1906 in Ancon in the Canal Zone. It was built of wood with a brick centre section, three stories high, with a tiled roof and 156 rooms. It was designed by Parker O Wright,

and built by the Isthmian Canal Commission (the body overseeing construction of the Canal 1904-14). Construction began in 1905 on the lower slopes of Ancon Hill, in a place known as Tivoli Hill and on the side that faced Panama City (which meant across



what became 4th of July Avenue – later the “Avenue of the Martyrs” after the events of 1964).

By its original design, and the orders of Canal Chief Engineer John F Stevens, the “*Wooden Palace*”, as it was known at the time, was intended to be a “*no-frills boarding house for canal laborers*”, hence the employment of a cheap mainly wooden structure.¹ It was

¹ CZD Magazine, 2 July 2026.

It was apparently originally designed as a plaster and metal structure, but the plans ended up being changed to a wooden building (whose central section would be brick) on the orders of John Stevens (who also apparently gave orders “not to spend money on frivolities”).

https://www.tvn-2.com/entretenimiento/hotel-tivoli-panama-ayer-domingo_1_1433282.html

essentially the lobby which was made of brick, and there was a tile roof. It comprised two side towers joined by central tower, and each room had large windows to increase air circulation. The building was on concrete stilts raised from the ground that allowed air to circulate and so keep it cool.



The Tivoli Hotel in 1912

The hotel was said to be the most elegant building in Panama, built in the tropical colonial style, and offering a panoramic view of Panama City. It soon became a point of reference. It was located on the hill known as "Tivoli Hill", in front of the current *Avenida de los Mártires*, in an environment of groves and palm trees, overlooking the city and the Bay of Panama.²

Despite the original intention, matters changed in November 1906 with the unexpected visit of President Theodore Roosevelt to view the canal project. This was a historic occasion, being the first foreign trip to be made by a serving US President.³ Work to complete and furnish a wing of the building to accommodate the President saw it ready when Roosevelt and his wife became the hotel's inaugural official guests on 15 November 1906, staying in what became the "Roosevelt Suite". It was after this, on 1 January 1907, that the hotel officially opened to the public. However, its primary mission then remained providing quarters for Canal employees.⁴ The hotel would have a Roosevelt Bar in its Empire Lounge.

The hotel was managed by the Panama Railroad Company, which maintained 18 other hotels along the route in order to provide food and accommodation for Canal employees. It had 120 single rooms and 100 double rooms, all with private bathrooms, in addition to the Roosevelt suite. It also boasted a spacious ballroom, billiards room, a

<https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/gran-hotel-tivoli-magnifico-simbolo-APLE423726>

² <https://www.prensa.com/opinion/el-hotel-tivoli/>

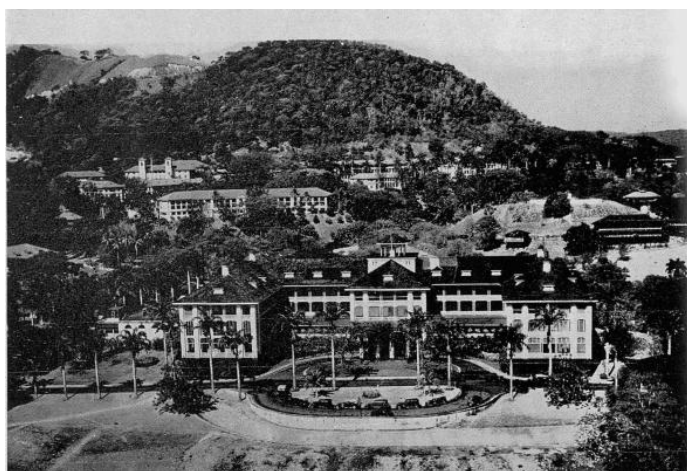
³ <https://elfarodelcanal.com/la-historia-del-gran-hotel-tivoli/>

⁴ CZD Magazine, 2 July 20262026.

large swimming pool, and luggage storage. The complex included the main building, a kitchen pavilion connected by a gallery, warehouses, workshops, employee dormitories, and the administrator's house.⁵

In 1911, it received the first electronic elevator (lift to us Brits) in the country. A sprinkler system was installed after the hotel was condemned as a potential firetrap in 1922 by the Canal Zone Fire Division. From 1912, hot water was available in all baths.

Construction of the Canal generated great interest, and between approximately 1906 and 15 August 1914, when the Canal was officially inaugurated, thousands of visitors came to Panama. Between 1911 and 1912, there were almost 20,000 visiting, and many of these stayed at the Tivoli, as the Central Hotel, located in Panama City, could not meet the demand, and the Tivoli was located very close to the border between the Canal Zone and Panama City.⁶ The fact that Roosevelt had stayed at the hotel only added to its allure.



The Hotel Tivoli in 1939

Over the years, the Tivoli witnessed celebrations, commemorations, school graduations, and dances, having as guests such personalities such as Charles Lindbergh,⁷ the Duke of Windsor, and astronauts

Neil Armstrong, John Glenn and Alan Shepard (these last-named having been in Panama to undergo survival training in the jungle). It acquired fame for its gastronomy. Others famous guests included the Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova, who in 1918

⁵ <https://www.prensa.com/opinion/el-hotel-tivoli/>

⁶ <https://www.prensa.com/opinion/el-hotel-tivoli/>

⁷ Lindbergh first visited Panama, with his father, at the age of 11, and returned in 1929, visiting both Panama and the Canal Zone as part of his tour of 16 Latin American states with his *Spirit of St Louis* aircraft with which he had crossed the Atlantic in 1927. His ties with Panama were to continue as a consultant for Pan American Airways.

appeared in the great hall at a charity ball, as well as politicians and ousted presidents from different countries in Central and South America seeking safety and comfort.⁸



Aerial view showing location via a vis Panama City

The Hotel Tivoli also became the “crown jewel” of the large-scale tourism industry that saw visitors arriving to see the Canal or to transit through it. One travel writer in the 1920s claimed that “every tourist stops at the Tivoli at least for dinner, which consists usually of about twelve courses of chinaware and cutlery,

wiped, flourished, and served with much ceremony by a score of negro waiters”. As elsewhere in the Canal Zone, a form of segregation akin to the *Jim Crow* system in the southern US applied and discrimination was common, so that most of any guests would be white. Indeed, the hotel would remain effectively an exclusive white establishment, probably almost until it ceased to be called a hotel in the 1950s.⁹

The historian Patricia Pizzurno in her book, *The Emblematic Hotels of Panama*, had this to say about entertainment at the Tivoli -

"Saturday night evenings at the Tivoli were very famous until the late 1940s. After dinner at the Dos Océanos restaurant, the couples danced to the sound of trendy songs performed by well-known orchestras. The celebrations throughout the year followed one another without pause: New Year's balls, marines, teas, entertainment, weddings, mobilized the more than one hundred employees. The Sunday night buffets were a must for Panamanians and Zoneites. Everything

⁸ https://www.tvn-2.com/contenido-exclusivo/esplendor-caida-hotel-tivoli_1_2146402.html

⁹ *Revolution at the hotel: Panama and luxury travel in the age of decolonisation* by Blake C Scott (Journal of Tourism Today, June 2018).

For more on the discrimination and segregation, and how it applied in the Canal Zone, see <https://raytodd.blog/2026/08/07/panama-war-discrimination-and-segregation-updated/>

*was of excellent quality and everything came from abroad through the commissaries."*¹⁰

There was opposition to the hotel from Panamanian businessmen, who saw the Tivoli as unwanted competition.¹¹ Until the late 1940s, international visitors arriving by sea had to pass through the Canal Zone before venturing into Panamanian territory and, until the late 1940s, those arriving by air at Panama City (even on flights from elsewhere in Panama) also arrived at an airport that was a US Army airfield within the Canal Zone. Hence, the Canal Zone had first call on tourists arriving and Panamanian businesses were prohibited from owning shops, restaurants, etc in the Canal Zone. Negotiations over changes to the 1903 Treaty that resulted in some amendments in a new treaty in 1936 touched upon the existence and operation of the Tivoli (and its counterpart in Colón, the Hotel Washington). However, despite promise, the hotels continued as profit-making businesses.¹²



The hotel would also see use as a sanctuary for political figures from the Republic of Panama, once housing no less than four former presidents of Panama as refugees. For example, in 1931, President Florencio Harmodio Arosemena took refuge there with his family, after being overthrown in Panama's first coup.

In 1944, 17 deputies of the National Assembly who supported the candidacy of Jephtha B Duncan for the Presidency, took refuge in the

¹⁰ https://www.tvn-2.com/contenido-exclusivo/esplendor-caida-hotel-tivoli_1_2146402.html

¹¹ An oddity of the Tivoli (and Washington) was that it was effectively the US Government and its Secretary of War (Secretary of Defense from the late 1940s) which was in in the hotel and liquor sales business.

¹² *Revolution at the hotel: Panama and luxury travel in the age of decolonisation* by Blake C Scott (Journal of Tourism Today, June 2018).

Tivoli, where they continued to meet for more than two months, as they attempted to overthrow President de la Guardia.¹³

In 1948, during a period of great political turmoil in Panama, three former Presidents (Enrique Jiménez, Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia, and Daniel Chánis) and 43 senior representatives of their respective administrations were seeking safety in the hotel at the same time.

Arnulfo Arias Madrid, who would be President on several occasions, but ousted each time, would be a guest of the hotel on several occasions, such as on the three occasions in which he was deposed (1941, 1951 and 1968), in addition to the others in which he was accused of plotting against a lawful government.¹⁴



Bus stop in the Canal Zone, in the vicinity of the Hotel Tivoli, c. 1950 (Source: National Assembly)¹⁵

As mentioned, over the years, Panamanian businessmen and governments complained

that the Tivoli constituted unfair competition for hotels in Panama, but the US authorities said they would close it as soon as Panama had accommodation of the same standard. This was not until 1951, when the El Panama hotel on Via España of Panama City opened.¹⁶

While the brick and concrete Hotel Washington would survive to this day, as the 20th century progressed, the high cost of maintaining the aging wooden structure of the Tivoli, combined with the advent modern hotels in Panama City led to the Tivoli's decline.

¹³ https://www.tvn-2.com/contenido-exclusivo/esplendor-caida-hotel-tivoli_1_2146402.html

¹⁴ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/200403/gran-hotel-tivoli-magnifico-simbolo>

¹⁵ <https://www.prensa.com/vivir/de-lesseps-a-la-asamblea-la-transformacion-de-un-rincon-de-la-ciudad/>

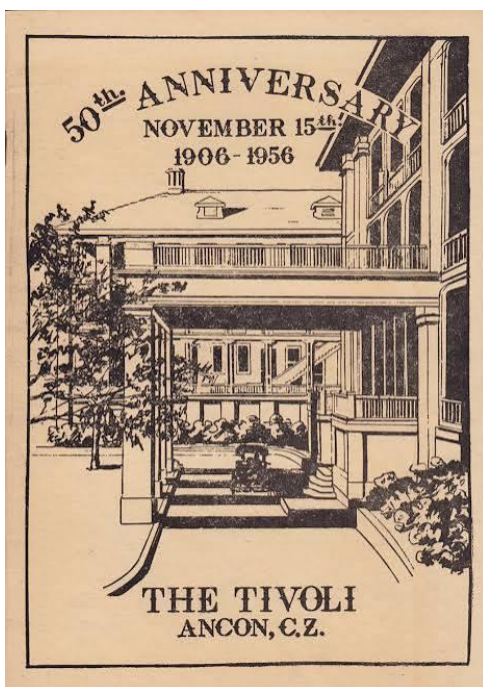
¹⁶ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/200403/gran-hotel-tivoli-magnifico-simbolo>



Hotel El Panama in the 1950s – the hotel is just as nice, but the surroundings are not as attractive(!)

With the large Hotel El Panama now open in the city centre, in February 1951, the Tivoli stopped accepting commercial guests and was redesignated as the “Tivoli Guest House”, from then on catering primarily to visitors on official Canal

business and relatives of employees.¹⁷ However, it also remained the social centre for the Canal Zone elite, and it hosted the most elegant weddings, proms, and parties for the Canal Commission.



In November 1956, the hotel marked its 50th anniversary with a pageant in its large ballroom, with scenes of events in the building’s history.¹⁸

During the anti-American riots of January 1964, the hotel was surrounded by protestors¹⁹ and attacked with Molotov cocktails, but sustained only minimal structural damage, while US soldiers used the building for shelter during the violence. Guests

¹⁷ CZD Magazine, 2 July 2026.

https://www.tvn-2.com/contenido-exclusivo/esplendor-caida-hotel-tivoli_1_2146402.html

¹⁸ *Panama Canal Review*, 2 November 1956.

¹⁹ Estimates put the numbers at between 2,000 and 5,000.

could also see overturned cars ‘*burning fiercely*’ on Fourth of July Avenue. The Canal Zone Police could not control the situation, and soon US troops were on the ground, followed by tanks and armoured cars, and one of their tasks was defence of the hotel. After three days of rioting, it was claimed that the hotel was found to have suffered some 400 bullet holes.²⁰ In one incident, six US soldiers near the hotel were seriously wounded (and even one civilian in the hotel lobby) before sharpshooters were able to silence the snipers firing from the apartment blocks across the road.²¹ The gunfight continued through the 10 January and, whilst subsiding the next two days remained tense. On the morning of 13 January, the Panamanian *Guardia Nacional* arrived to provide protection.²²



A US soldier defending the hotel from inside



US troops arrive

The hotel perhaps escaped greater damage when a light aircraft crashed into the Bay of Panama. The two men aboard had hijacked the aircraft at Paitilla Airport in the city and had planned to drop home-made bombs on the Tivoli. They survived the crash, and were arrested by the *Guardia Nacional*. It seems the hotel had become a symbol of the Canal Zone as a whole, and the US “occupation”, as the would-be terrorists would have seen it.²³

At first –

“Tivoli’s management and staff attempted, initially, to ignore the protest and go about business as usual. Full-course meals were served to guests on both

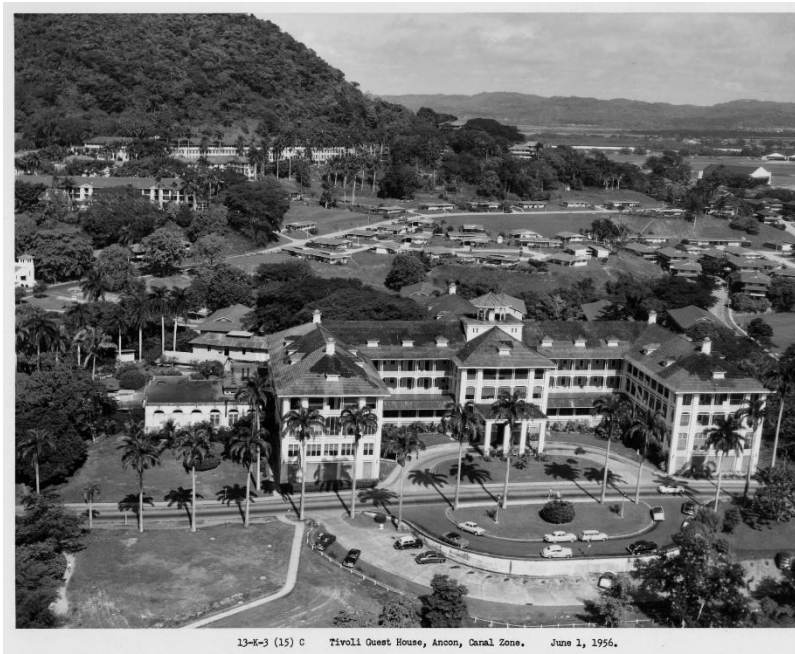
²⁰ CZD Magazine, 2 July 2026.

²¹ Time Magazine, 17 January 1964.

²² *US-Panamanian Relations Since 1941* by Lester D Langley (Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs, July 1970).

²³ *Revolution at the hotel: Panama and luxury travel in the age of decolonisation* by Blake C Scott (Journal of Tourism Today, June 2018).

Thursday and Friday, January 9 and 10. A few precautions, though, were taken. 'All the Louvre doors were closed and the lights were [made] very dim in the Pergola Bar, the only protected area in the hotel's public rooms'".²⁴



The Tivoli in 1956

In any case, during the 1960s, the deterioration of its facilities began to be noticed, and the authorities lost all interest in the building. To cut costs, the board of directors ordered its

closure as a guest house and on 1 April 1971, the restaurant, bar and other facilities ceased to operate, and silverware and furniture were offered for sale.²⁵

It finally closed after 75 years on 15 April 1971, being finally demolished in 1986.²⁶

Following its demolition the site was repurposed by the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute for scientific facilities, currently part of the grounds houses the Earl S Tupper Center of the Institute.^{27 28}

²⁴ *Revolution at the hotel: Panama and luxury travel in the age of decolonisation* by Blake C Scott (Journal of Tourism Today, June 2018).

²⁵ https://www.tvn-2.com/contenido-exclusivo/esplendor-caida-hotel-tivoli_1_2146402.html

²⁶ Some quote 1982 as the date of demolition. According to at least commentator, the wooden structure was full of termites (which are a real problem in Panama), although parts of the demolished hotel were apparently used to build temporary homes for the destitute.

<https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/gran-hotel-tivoli-magnifico-simbolo-APPLE423726>

²⁷ <https://www.prensa.com/opinion/el-hotel-tivoli/>

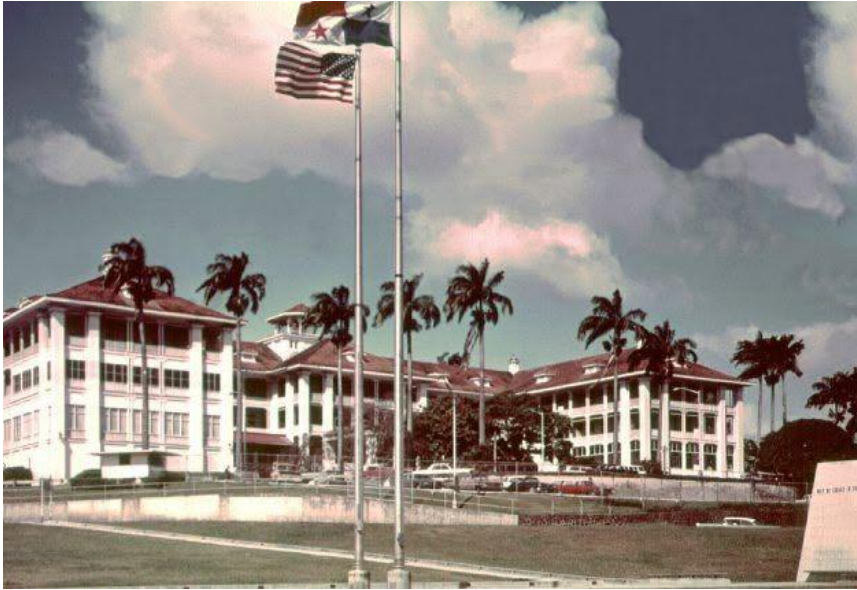
²⁸ CZD Review, 2 July 2026.



Shaler Esplanade, where the flags of Panama and the US flew together between 1960 and 1977 in c. 1960. Hotel Tivoli forming the backdrop (Source: National Assembly)

The space located in front of the Tivoli Hotel ended up acquiring a characteristic triangular shape and began to be known as the Shaler Triangle, in honour of James Shaler, a figure linked to the Panama Railroad Company and the separatist events of 1903. In the mid-20th century, the Shaler Triangle was part of the surroundings of the Hotel Tivoli. The Tivoli Clubhouse of the United Service Organizations (USO) operated there for decades, intended for US military personnel. Its parking lots also served the Canal Zone bus terminal. It would be 1971 before the hotel was demolished. During 1960, an esplanade was prepared for the joint raising of the flags of both countries. This happened for the first time on 21 September 1960, and the place quickly became a symbol of the complex relations between the two countries. However, on 9 January 1964, the Shaler Triangle became a focus in the flag riots and a scene of one of the series of clashes along the boundary of the Canal Zone. During that day, the flagpole used to raise the US flag was torn down and had to be replaced later. The site was later renamed Plaza Ascanio Arosemena, named after the first Panamanian to die that day, although the historical name of Shaler continued to be used to identify the place.²⁹

²⁹ <https://www.prensa.com/vivir/de-lesseps-a-la-asamblea-la-transformacion-de-un-rincon-de-la-ciudad/>



A photo showing the two flags flying alongside one another outside the Tivoli

THE WASHINGTON

While the Tivoli was eventually demolished, its equivalent on the Caribbean coast survives to this day, albeit in reduced status and somewhat dilapidated in comparison to its heyday.³⁰



The Hotel Washington lies on the waterfront in the city of Colón, having been constructed alongside Fort deLessups,³¹ and close to Battery Morgan – which also survives, in an even sadder state. The hotel opened in 1913. A suitable, modern hotel was felt to be needed at the Atlantic end of the Canal, particularly in light of the success of the Tivoli. Hence, the Secretary of War decided that the

³⁰ <https://www.encirclephotos.com/image/hotel-washington-in-colon-panama/>

³¹ Operational from 1916, and the smallest of all the forts built to protect the Canal, it was on land acquired by the US Army from the Panama Railroad, although jurisdiction was never officially ceded to the US. The guns from its small battery were removed in 1944, even before the end of World War 2 and, as 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. For more on the Fort, see <https://raytodd.blog/2025/10/11/panama-in-world-war-2-fort-de-lessups-the-smallest-and-the-first-to-go/>

Panama Railroad Company should build the hotel, and manage it on behalf of the Canal Zone government.

It succeeded the original Washington House which had been built in 1870 as a response to a growing demand for accommodation and offices (Colón itself having only been established in 1852). This had been a two-storey wooden-frame building (with a third floor added in 1905 as construction of the Canal led to greater numbers seeking a place to stay). It had balconies protected against insects and boasted such amenities as a restaurant, reading room, bar, and billiards room. In 1908, Washington House was taken over by the Isthmian Canal Commission, and in 1910 the adjoining Bennington House had also been acquired to provide further accommodation.



The view from the hotel across Limón Bay in 1930

The new hotel was constructed using concrete and cement blocks, in a modified Spanish Mission style, Spanish

neocolonial with some facades in Spanish baroque,³² and designed to keep its clientele cool and comfortable at all times. It would have 88 rooms in its original form, later being extended to 124.

Construction was authorised by President Taft in 1910. He also decided on its architecture, selected the architects – Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson³³ - and set a limit of \$500,000 as the maximum cost. The old buildings were demolished and the seawall reinforced (the hotel looks out directly into Limón Bay, at the tip of the promontory

³² Known as “Spanish Colonial Revival Architecture” style.

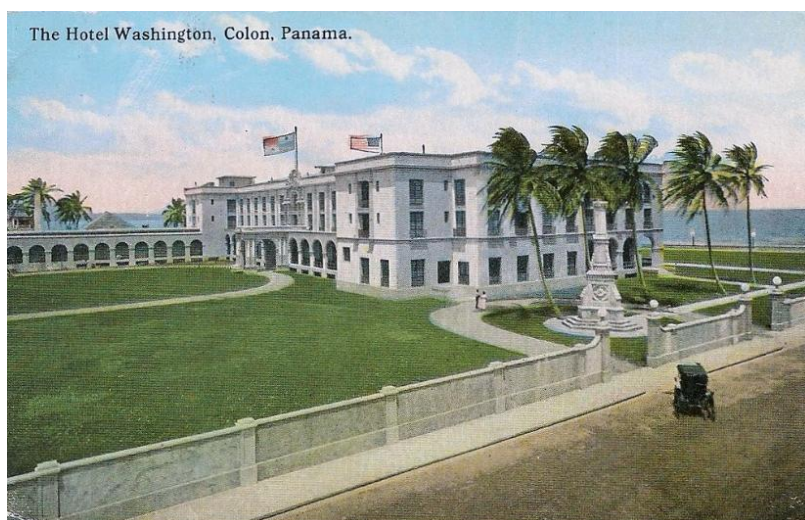
³³ Founded in 1889 and still in existence in Massachusetts, as Cram and Ferguson

upon which the city of Colón lies). The new hotel was described as embracing neoclassical elements with a colonial tendency.³⁴



On 13 March 1913, the new Washington Hotel welcomed its first guest, opening officially to the public 10 days later, its tableware, furniture and decoration having been brought by sea from New York on a Panama Railroad steamer.

As the Tivoli had done at the Pacific end of the Canal, the new hotel quickly became the centre of society at the Atlantic end. It also played host to an array of famous people, starting with its first guest, who was Vincent Astor of the Astor hotel chain.³⁵ Others who enjoyed some of its 124 bedrooms included Albert Einstein, former US Presidents Taft and Harding, David Lloyd George, Juan Perón, as well as such celebrities as Bob Hope, Babe Ruth and Tom Mix.³⁶



During World War 2, blacked out, it still had guests staying in its rooms, but the roof – popular prewar with sightseers – was off-limits, and there was an anti-aircraft battery

next door, alongside the swimming pool (fed with seawater from Limón Bay). Guests included visitors on war business, as well as the occasional survivor of a sinking during the U-boat campaign in the Caribbean in 1942-43.

³⁴ <https://detallesdepanama.com/2023/08/13/historia-y-evolucion-del-hotel-washington/>

³⁵ Who had inherited a vast fortune after his father died on the *Titanic* in 1912.

³⁶ <https://detallesdepanama.com/2023/08/13/historia-y-evolucion-del-hotel-washington/>

Postwar, whereas the Tivoli ceased to be called a hotel in 1951, in 1950 the Washington underwent a facelift. Between 1953 and 1954 it was leased to a local investment company.³⁷ Then, in 1957, under the terms of the 1955 Remón-Eisenhower Treaty that modified some aspects of the US presence in Panama, it passed out of the control of the Panama Canal Company³⁸ and the US Government.³⁹



A hotel room in 1949



Aerial view in 1950



A view from the hotel in 1979

In 1960, the building was declared as a site of National Tourism Promotion Heritage, but despite this it almost met the same fate of the Tivoli when, between 1966 and 1968, closure and demolition was considered by the Robles administration. However, it was reprieved with a comprehensive remodelling and a Hyatt hotel chain concession in 1971.⁴⁰ However, the oil crisis of the 1970s soon prompted Hyatt to withdraw from the arrangement.

³⁷ *Hermanos Motta SA.*

³⁸ The former Panama Railroad Company had been reorganised and renamed using this new title in 1951, handling most of the business enterprises related to the Canal, as well as operation of the waterway.

³⁹ <https://www.scribd.com/document/864951267/Tesis-Restauracion-Del-Hotel-Washington>

⁴⁰ <https://www.estudio3.com.pa/en/project/hotel-washington-colon/>



The footpath on the seawall in front of the hotel

The condition of the hotel was matched by the decline of the city itself, as government, business and investment increasingly centred on Panama City.



Following the US invasion to oust Manuel Noriega in 1989 it was occupied by US troops, being returned to the Panamanian Government in 1991. The chief focus of the invasion had been in Panama City, but troops had also sealed off Colón for three days,⁴¹ while armed looters had taken to the streets (it was estimated that as many as 90% of the shops in the Colón Free Zone had been attacked, along with at least 15 warehouses, and at least three looters were killed by business owners). It was 22 December before US troops took over control of the city, for the loss of one man.⁴²

⁴¹ Although the harbour at Colón was the target of an operation, to secure it and prevent the escape of Noriega

https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Monographs/Just_Cause.pdf

⁴² <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1989-12-31-mn-298-story.html>

The hotel having been returned to the government, the land and buildings were then sold to the Flamingo Hotel Company for \$1.9 million in 1992. At the time there were plans for promotion of the hotel for tourism.⁴³

In 2014, a leading local newspaper described the hotel as *“the best example of the building standards used by the Americans, during the time of the construction of the Panama Canal, to adapt the architecture to the tropical climate”*.⁴⁴

In 2022, there was a thesis published containing a proposal for an “intervention”, asking for the government and private sector to recognise the historic and architectural value of the hotel, saying that a restored building could serve as a gateway and symbol of the heritage of Colón and be used to stimulate tourism and the local economy.⁴⁵

However, in the past, Panama did not have a particularly good record of preserving historic buildings from the Canal Zone period (there might be reasons for this linked to resentment against the “occupation”) unlike, say, those in *Casco Viejo*, the UNESCO World Heritage Site old town in Panama City.⁴⁶ Happily, in recent years this situation appears to have changed (perhaps linked to an increased emphasis on tourism). Nevertheless, the Hotel Washington, and Colón as a whole, do not seem to have greatly benefited from this change – so far.

When I visited the hotel in February 2025, I found it still open, albeit with parts sublet to a gym and other activities. Despite it and its surrounding being somewhat shabby, one could still see that the establishment had been a grand one.

⁴³ <https://www.scribd.com/document/864951267/Tesis-Restauracion-Del-Hotel-Washington>

⁴⁴ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/historia-recordando-MMLE279476>

⁴⁵ <https://www.scribd.com/document/864951267/Tesis-Restauracion-Del-Hotel-Washington>

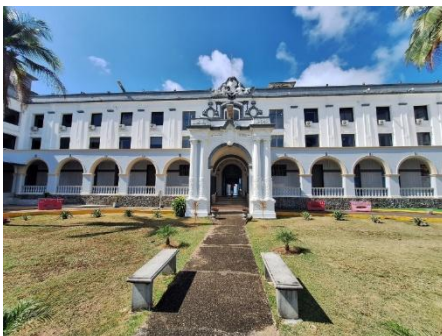
⁴⁶ There are exceptions, of course, such as the City of Knowledge on the site of the former Fort Clayton. There have also been moves to restore some historic buildings in Colón.



*The Hotel
Washington
façade*



My photos from 2025



How the city of Colón had declined in the modern era from its heyday might be gauged by the comment of a visitor from the US in 1979, who said that *“when you left the hotel grounds you were back in the third world”*. Personally, I find this a little unfair. While the city appears not to have enjoyed the growth and success of Panama City, the area immediately around the hotel, and the waterfront area, is nowhere near as bad as that visitor in 1979 appears to have found it, and I know my wife and I felt quite comfortable and safe wandering around.

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

22 September 2026

