

ANNEX 21

PANAMA IN WORLD WAR 2 – ROADS AND HIGHWAYS

At the start of World War 2, outside the Canal Zone, Panama had a generally inadequate roads system – with few in jungle areas. From the perspective of the defending US forces, there had been little need for a road system outside of the Canal Zone – but this was to change as the US acquired the defence sites in the Republic. Having recognised that satisfactory defence of the Canal would rely on airfields, searchlight and warning sites, and training areas throughout Panama, it became clear that roads linking them would be necessary for their construction, supply and communications.

During the first years of the new Republic, transportation between the capital and the interior depended heavily on coastal shipping, horseback travel and primitive roads. Until internal flights became available in the 1930s,¹ the only real option was to travel by boat toward places such as David, a “city” 300 miles (482 km) from Panama City. Gradually a basic road system began to develop, and by 1931 a gravel road extended from the Chepo area, east of the Canal, towards David, far west of the Canal, but traveling long distances remained difficult, particularly during the rainy season (which is majority of the year).²

In the early days, even locations within the Canal Zone could be difficult to reach. Fort Sherman, on the Caribbean coast near Colón, was considered one of the most isolated of the military posts in the Zone when first established during World War 1. Before improved roads were built, the base, bounded by Limón Bay, could be accessed only by water, and subsequently by railway or aircraft (using a small grass airstrip) – it only being much later in its use that access by road was possible.

¹ The first commercial aviation company began regular services throughout Panama in 1933.

² <https://www.thelostandfoundhostel.com/blog/2026/8/30/the-interamericana-in-panama-the-road-that-changed-the-country>

A common practice was imported from the US into the Canal Zone, and then through Panama – the use of prisoners as forced labour in road-building (the so-called “chain gangs”). This began in 1908, authorised by a Governor (J C S Blackburn, who had been a senator, and a plantation owner, in Kentucky).³ A misdemeanour conviction was enough to see a prisoner assigned to road construction. Portions of the Pan-American Highway would be built in this way.⁴ It is unsurprising, given the numbers of workers brought from the Caribbean to build the Canal and the racial attitudes of the time, that the vast majority of those on the prison labour gangs would be black men. It has been said that –

“The imagined relation between slavery, blackness, and criminality became a linchpin of the prison labor program in the Panamá Canal Zone, as it did in the United States”.⁵



Canal Zone convicts at Gorgona

The use of prison labour would continue for decades. For example, a novel famous in Panama was based on the true story of a young black man sentenced to 50 years hard labour by a Canal Zone

court in 1946.⁶ Consigned to the Gamboa penitentiary, he literally travelled out of the prison in a chain gang, linked to others by an eight-feet (2.4 metres) long chain.⁷

³ The application of US federal law to the Canal Zone included giving effect to the 13th Amendment and its “convict clause”, which authorised use of prison labour.

⁴ <https://daily.jstor.org/exporting-the-convict-clause-slaves-of-the-state-in-the-canal-zone/>

⁵ *The Strange Career of the Convict Clause: US Prison Imperialism in the Panamá Canal Zone* by Benjamin D Weber (Journal of International Labor and Working-Class History, Fall 2019) <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26857885?mag=exporting-the-convict-clause-slaves-of-the-state-in-the-canal-zone&seq=1>

⁶ *Gamboa Road Gang* by Joaquín Boleño.

⁷ After over 15 years in prison, in 1962, the Canal Zone Governor commuted the sentence following a public campaign which had highlights shortcomings in the conviction (such as the apparent lack of any real evidence, the conviction seemingly influenced by racist belief in “hot blooded” black males).

Prior to the road construction seen before and during World War 2, the US Army had made extensive use of mules. Indeed, the lack of good roads, especially at the Caribbean/Atlantic end of the Canal, was seen as an advantage that would hamper any attacker. Mules remained in use until at least 1941, with the stables at Fort Clayton becoming instead a motor transport depot.

Given that much of the area along the Canal, and indeed much of the interior of Panama, was still rainforest, with few roads and poor tracks, the mule proved invaluable. The Army's Mobile Force (and the Panama Canal Division before it), which would have countered any enemy landings, used them to transport pack howitzers, as well as ammunition and other supplies. Contemporary prewar newsreel shows troops travelling with mules and pack howitzers during exercises

By 1916, it was said that the "*main area for automobile traffic was on the Pacific side where there were some 83.3 miles of roads in good condition*". Panama City and Colón would then see adaptation in the 1920s to better suit automobiles as they became more numerous. For example, in 1927 laws were passed that provided for licensing of vehicles and rivers, the regulation of public transport, and the speed and driving of vehicles. Under these laws, one could drive in the interior on the strength of a licence issued by the mayor of Panama City, provided you were at least 18 years old.⁸ However, in Panama, funds for road construction and maintenance remained very limited, or not available, prewar.

During negotiations over an amending treaty in 1926, a treaty that would be rejected by the Panamanian National Assembly and so never ratified,⁹ a bone of contention was a planned road between Alhajuela (later known as Madden, where a new dam would be built in the 1930s) and Colón. This project was postponed until Panama could find a way to match the contribution to the cost being proposed by the US.

⁸ <https://www.laestrella.com.pa/panama/nacional/automovil-transformaciones-llegada-panama-siglo-BJLE441356>

⁹ The Kellogg-Alfaro Treaty of 1926 was intended to settle at least some of the disputes between the US and Panama that arose from the original 1903 Treaty. For more on this, and other treaties, see <https://raytodd.blog/2026/07/04/panama-and-the-treaties/>

This requirement for matching funds was said by Panama to violate the spirit of a 1917 memorandum, in which the US had agreed to construct several roads and provide all necessary funding. The US position was that the 1917 memo related only to roads which were vital for military purposes, and the Alhajuela-Colón road was no longer one of military significance. It also offered Panama the choice of two different roads – that between Alhajuela and Colón, or one between Colón and Portobelo. The construction cost was estimated at \$2.6 million, and the US proposed that the funds could be deposited in a US or Canal Zone bank, and drawn upon as the project progressed. Panama then objected that this proposal, arguing that it violated the terms of the 1926 Treaty, which stipulated that all expenses in excess of \$125,000 would be met by the US.

Whilst the 1926 Treaty proved abortive, a new one in 1936 proved acceptable to both sides (albeit that it took 1939 for the US Senate to ratify it) – and importantly, this would change the status of Panama from that of a US protectorate, and would abolish the US preemptory right to acquire any new land required for the operation or security of the Canal.¹⁰ In addition, the two countries also signed a transisthmian highway convention, which ended the Panama Railroad Company's monopoly on trans-isthmus transportation,¹¹ and provided for the financing of the construction of a Panama City-Colón highway (though this would not open until World War 2, and not for non-military traffic until much later).

The push for an agreement regulating the construction of stemmed from the Panamanian grievance that US Canal strategy prevented Panama from integrating the population of its interior by means of road communication. However, the US Army had always contended that a highway crossing the isthmus parallel to the Canal would endanger the waterway's security. It was thought that the jungle alongside the Canal was an impenetrable barrier to any attacker, and that it was most likely that any attack

¹⁰ The Hull-Alfaro Treaty of 1936.

¹¹ Article V of the original 1903 Treaty imposed in perpetuity a monopoly of the communication routes in the Canal Zone, which prevented Panama from building a highway to connect the cities of Panama City and Colón.

on the locks would be launched from both sea and land. The highway project could be viewed as an asset to an attacker, who would probably land from the sea, move his forces into the interior, and strike at the locks along the Canal boundary. In such a situation, the War Department argued, the planned highway would merely help the attacker to move men and supplies.

However, the Roosevelt administration accepted the Panamanian argument that the Republic deserved a transisthmian highway to connect its two principal cities, and offered to extend financial aid. Nevertheless, the delay in US ratification of the Treaty was, in part, due to warnings from the War Department that the concessions made to Panama would undermine Canal defence.

The Army's Construction Quartermaster and the engineers of the Army's Panama Canal Department (often using troops as labour) would be responsible for building roads. In the Canal Zone, roads for use by the general public were built by the Municipal Engineering Division of the Panama Canal – and it would also later take over construction of the highway to Rio Hato airbase from the American Bridge Company and the Public Roads Administration, this involving building 14 steel and concrete bridges of varying dimensions. The Division also handled municipal utilities, water, sewers and roads needed to meet the expanded requirements following the expansion of the defences which continued to around 1943.



At Rio Madronal - looking toward David. The road having a badly worn gravel surface. 17 March 1942

In 1939, the US Congress had approved a total of \$50 million in funding for improving Canal defences in 1939, leading to an expansion of housing at existing bases to

cope with the increased manpower required in the construction effort. The new construction also led to a need for roads to facilitate it

The 1942 Bases Agreement, which would allow for an eventual 134 wartime defence sites be established in Panama outside the Canal Zone, included commitment for the US to build two highways: one that would run from Puerto Piñas on the Atlantic side of the Darién region (close to the border with Colombia) of the country to the border with the Canal Zone on the Providencia River, the other would extend the trans-isthmus highway, passing through the Madden Dam and Pueblo Nuevo, to Panama City.

When these two roads were completed, the US Government would assume responsibility for any work that would later be necessary for defence purposes, while the Panamanian Government guaranteed their maintenance (with cooperation of the US in cases of emergency) – and with the US to assume a third of all costs to improve and maintain all roads and highways used by its military in Panama - to compensate for its use of them. However, while roads built by the US in the Republic would nominally be under the jurisdiction of the Panamanian Government, the US military could restrict or prohibit use and access to secondary roads connected to the defence sites.

250 miles (402 km) of new highway were to be built in Panama during the war (and a total of 670 miles or 1,078 km of Panama roads were used), at a cost of \$9 million, with maintenance costs of \$1 million by September 1946.



Hato River, 18 March 1942

By September 1946, only 114 miles (183.5 km) of highway were being maintained by the Army, with 25 miles (40 km) being off-Post.¹² Secondary roads, even when tarmacked, tended to be narrow and winding.¹³ It was said that continued

¹² *Security and Defense of the Panama Canal, 1903-2000* by Charles Morris (Panama Canal Commission).

¹³ *Ibid.*

maintenance of the roads was required, especially during the rainy season, "to preserve even a semblance of a road in the mountainous areas".



Looking west from Penonomé (a town in the centre of Panama and on the Inter-American Highway), 18 March 1942

Major road projects included the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway (the Trans-Isthmian Highway) – see below, the road to Rio Hato, and parts of what became the Inter-American Highway (aka Pan-American Highway).

Meanwhile, the Panamanian Government granted –

"the right of transit for the routine movement of members of the United States armed forces, civilian personnel of said forces and their families, as well as animals, motor vehicles or drawn by animals, employees of the armed forces or by contractors employed by them, for construction work or anyone else whose activities are related, in any way, to the defence program".

The behaviour of US forces sometimes gave rise to complaints from Panamanian authorities and citizens. For example, complaints about the arrests made by US soldiers involving vehicles traveling on roads under the jurisdiction of Panama became frequent. On one occasion, the official vehicle of the Panamanian President, near the Puente del Rey, on the road to the ruins of Old Panama (*Panama Vieja*), had to use a siren to avoid being stopped by the Army checkpoints.



Finished paved road, Rio Hato. 21 May 1942

During 1942, most of the necessary major roads had been completed, including the Fort Sherman road from the Gatún Locks, with a timber bridge over the old French canal cutting being completed in July 1943.

THE TRANS-ISTHMIAN HIGHWAY (AKA THE BOYD-ROOSEVELT HIGHWAY)

The first 7-mile-long (11.3 km) stretch of the Trans-Isthmian Highway (aka the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway) opened, for military traffic, in January 1942. Until the Highway was built, aside from the Canal itself, only the Panama Railroad had provided transportation between the two coasts.



Transistmica Highway, Canal Zone 8 April 1950(photo by TW Chinese)

This was a development promised in the 1936 *Arias-Roosevelt* Treaty that had made significant amendments to the original 1903 Treaty. It had been agreed to build a highway

between 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 the Governor of the Canal Zone, Colonel Glen E Edgerton.

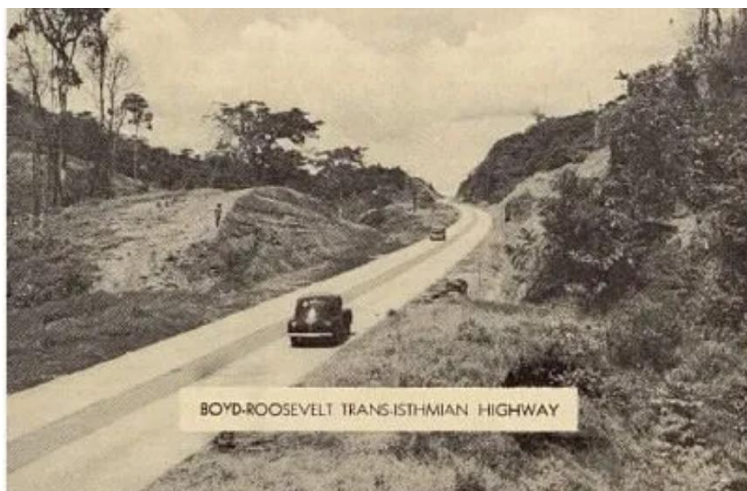
President Boyd had signed the agreement for construction of the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway, which was so named by Law No. 116 of 1943.



Photograph from 1942 showing the progress of the civil works for Transisthmian Highway

It was begun by the US Public Roads Administration (PRA), and the PRA continued to work on it for 18 months until the Army became involved.

Recognising the importance of the link, the Commanding General of the Panama Canal Department (the Army command in the Canal Zone) assigned Army forces and equipment to complete the final stretch. Construction became the responsibility of the US Army Corps of Engineers. There were to be two lanes, surfaced with reinforced concrete, separated by a central island. For security reasons, no lighting was provided. The usual problems with such construction projects in Panama were encountered – landslides, floods, as well as the effects of the heat and humidity on the workers.



Transisthmian Highway, newly established in 1943. Note the characteristics of the natural landscape and the absence of population settlements¹⁴

The new highway was paid for out of the US General War Fund, as it was considered essential in case of war. For

example, as movement through the Canal Zone became easier, it was possible to reorganise and reassign troops used to guard vital facilities of the Canal, as it was now possible for these to be reached, and reinforced, by truck. Infantry units would be become fully motorised – although priority was given to units in active combat theatres.

¹⁴ <https://detallesdepanama.com/2021/04/10/la-carretera-boyd-roosevelt-o-via-transistmica/>



The highway was officially opened on 15 April 1943 by President Ricardo Adolfo del Guardia. At the opening ceremony he was accompanied by both former President Boyd and Colonel Edgerton. It took the

entourage an hour and 15 minutes to reach Colón from Panama City.¹⁵ Final completion was in December 1944, but with traffic remaining limited only to authorised military traffic.¹⁶

Due to military requirements, the road it would not be available for public use until 1947, and it would not be until the 1950s that the Panama-Colón Bus Company would be formed as a wholly Panamanian public transport system between the cities¹⁷.



A lack of buildings, cars etc in 1950 on the Transisthmian Highway

Today, the *Avenida Boyd-Roosevelt*, more usually known as the *Carretera Transístmica* (or Highway 3) remains in heavy use. In the

1990s another parallel highway was added

¹⁵ Unfortunately, the plaque unveiled in Colón was subsequently stolen.

<https://www.elistmopty.com/2021/04/la-carretera-boyd-roosevelt-o-via.html>

¹⁶ This was the first transcontinental highway in the Americas, albeit that Panama is only around 40 miles across at its narrowest point. In the modern form of the *Transisthmica*, it continues in use today. President Boyd had signed the agreement for construction of the Boyd-Roosevelt Highway, which was so named by Law No. 116 of 1943.

¹⁷ <https://www.elistmopty.com/2021/05/la-compania-de-autobuses-panama-colon.html#more>



The Trans-Isthmian Road in 1943

THE CANAL REMAINED A BARRIER

The country, and indeed the Canal Zone itself, was divided in two by the waterway. In the 1930s a ferry service was begun by the Canal Zone authorities. Until then, the only methods of crossing from one side of the Canal to the other had been by boat or by walking across the tops of the lock gates. Pack mules were also walked across the lock gates to haul supplies.¹⁸



The President Roosevelt. These 155-foot (47.2 metre) ferries could carry 500 passengers and 50 cars, and were free¹⁹

The Thatcher Ferry service across the Pacific entrance to the Canal, originally

¹⁸ *Guarding the Gates: The Story of Fort Clayton - Its Setting, Its Architecture, and Its Role in the History of the Panama Canal* by Susan I Enscoe, Suzanne P Johnson, Julie L Webster, and Gordon L Cohen (ERDC/CERL Monograph 00-01, Construction Engineering Research Laboratory, US Army Engineer Research and Development Center, September 2000): <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/tr/pdf/ADA388262.pdf>

¹⁹ The two ferries, the first of which began service in 1931, cost \$127,930 each and were named after the two Presidents in office when the Canal Treaty was signed – *Belisario Porras* and *Theodore Roosevelt*. The service was originally in the vicinity of the Pedro Miguel Locks, but moved in 1932 to

operated near the Pedro Miguel Locks, but it soon moved to a route close to both Panama City and Balboa (the “capital” of the Canal Zone). It began services in 1932, the Panama Canal Mechanical Division having been built two ferries in 1931 – with a third following later in 1942.²⁰ The service operated for 24-hours from 1935, with ferries that were 155-feet long and could carry up to 500 passengers and 50 cars.



In August 1940, the US Army added another ferry service using petrol-powered barges to meet military needs and to serve the new townships and Army and Naval installations being developed in the lead-up to the war²¹. These services were aided by the Miraflores swing bridge built in June 1942, and intended to alleviate pressure on

the ferries.²²

This swingbridge was built over the southern end of the Miraflores Locks. At first use was limited to official transportation but, when work on the Third Locks Project was suspended in early 1942, it was opened to the public. This bridge continued in use until the Bridge of the Americas opened in the 1960s, being finally removed some years later.

WHICH SIDE OF THE ROAD TO USE?

It is said that, before the arrival of large numbers of motor cars, horse-drawn carriages tended to drive on the left, allegedly being due to many drivers having come from British colonies in the Caribbean, and so were used to driving on that side. When cars

near Balboa (where the Bridge of the Americas now stands) and known as the Thatcher Ferry. Originally offering a 0600-2100 service, in 1935 it became a 24-hour service, the crossing taking around an hour:

<https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/historia-ferry-canal-panama/?fbclid=IwAR04s6OZtyBJXrJ4ragxogAB6VSFmyJ5QZS8glSXHx1LeYciLHe2PRvvEMc>

²⁰ *Presidente Amador and Presidente Washington.*

²¹ <http://www.alonso-roy.com/cp/cp-07-eng.html>

²² *Ibid.*

began to appear, driving on the left continued, although nearly all cars at the time came from the US – and so had the steering wheel on the wrong side.²³

While cars (and roads) were relatively few, deciding which side of the road one should use seemed of less importance. However, during the 1930s there were many accidents, some of which said to have been caused by buses having an exit on the right side, risking the lives of the passengers, who therefore had to get off in the middle of the road.²⁴

According to Ángel Rubio in his book, *Panama City*, by 1929 there were 6,886 motor vehicles registered in Panama, by 1935 there were 9,212, and by 1940 15,381 were registered. The increase continued, reaching 19,909 in 1949.²⁵

By 1936, an effort was being made to force traffic to drive on the right, and such attempts continued into the war period – but then the greatly increased traffic, especially US military, with drivers used to driving on the right, and with major roads being built to facilitate the expanding defences, all served to force the issue.²⁶

The planned Pan-American Highway was another factor. In 1931, an article in the *Panama American* said that a change was important –

“before the Pan American Highway is opened if vehicle confusion, approximating the linguistic tangle encountered by the builders of the Tower of Babel, was to be avoided”.

Not changing would mean drivers crossing the Panamanian border having to switch to the other side of the road, with *“dozens of daily wrecks”*.²⁷

²³ Ironically, in the 1950s and 1960s there were substantial numbers of British-built cars in Panama, which had to be adapted to left-hand drive.

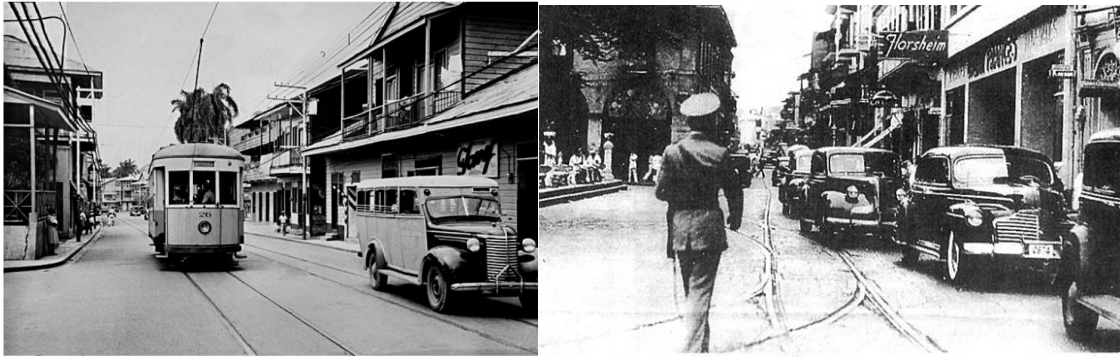
²⁴ Owners of local buses had gone to considerable expense to modify US-built buses to suit local traffic patterns.

<https://www.laestrella.com.pa/nacional/210123/automovil-transformaciones-llegada-panama-siglo>
<https://www.czbrats.com/Articles/left.htm>

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ This has echoes of the situation in Czechoslovakia, where they drove on the left until the Nazi invasion, when a change was forced (as you cannot argue with a panzer...).

²⁷ <https://www.czbrats.com/Articles/left.htm>



Street scene of the 1930s showing traffic on the left, and a tram.

After some false starts, zero day was set to be 15 April 1943, with the change heavily trailed beforehand in the newspapers. The police were given special training in preparation. Some ministers argued that the change was somehow illegal. Traffic regulations also changed, including a temporary 12 mph (19 kmh) speed limit for private automobiles and 10 mph (16 kmh) for other vehicles. Of course, wartime petrol rationing meant that non-military traffic continued to be relatively light.

Official guidance included what to do if one met a car heading towards you on the wrong side of the road –

“Stop the car. If possible, drive off the road. Blow the horn. Under no circumstances attempt to pass the other car on the wrong side”.²⁸

There were also instructions for pedestrians, including to watch for traffic approaching on the wrong side of the road before crossing.



At 0457 on zero day, sirens and fire whistles sounded for three minutes, and everything changed

²⁸ Ibid.

from 0500.²⁹ The press reported that the only ones that experienced any difficulty were the draft horses pulling wagons, and the animals used for the two-passenger horse-drawn *carrametta* carriages that remained common in Panama City and Colón. These refused to change to the other side of the streets. Apparently, the animals could not understand why they were not permitted to continue walking on the side they had always used.³⁰



Another pre-switch photograph showing traffic parked on the left.

One place was not affected by the change. At the site of the Third Locks Project at Gatun traffic had driven on the right-hand side of the road since 1941. When work had begun in 1940 it had been decided

that the change would result in fewer accidents, as nearly all the truck drivers employed in the project came from the US.³¹

Today, there remains one street in Panama City, a very short but busy one known locally as “English Street”, where the flow of traffic means that that vehicles actually drive on the wrong side of the road in both directions.

²⁹ <https://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/panama-manejo-izquierda/>

³⁰ <http://www.panamahistorybits.com/article.asp?id=2011-07-22>

³¹ <https://www.czbrats.com/Articles/left.htm>



*Paving on Rio Hato Project, 21
May 1942 (John L Humbard)*

THE PAN-AMERICAN HIGHWAY

Aka *Carretera Interamericana* or Inter-American Highway (IAH).

Aside from the trans-isthmus highway, one of the major roadbuilding projects undertaken during the war was the 61-mile (98.2 km) Rio Hato link of the Pan-American Highway route (described as a “defense highway” in US documents) - from La Chorrera (which lay outside the Canal Zone, but where US forces had established an airfield and training area) to Rio Hato (closer to the Costa Rican border, and which was home to a major air base),³² completed in July 1942.³³

In 1937, the US, Canada and 12 Latin American states had signed the Convention on the Pan American Highway, intended to have a road to run from Alaska to the bottom of Argentina (and called the Inter-American Highway in Central America and Mexico).

³² The US reimbursed to Panama the principal and interest paid by it on a loan from the Export-Import Bank for Panama’s share of the construction cost, and liquidate remaining obligations under that credit.

³³ Although the Public Roads Administration was responsible for these projects, the Army was affected because of the drain upon manpower and matériel, and the added transportation load.

It would be 1950 before the first portion of the highway was actually completed, in Mexico.³⁴



Pan-American Highway under construction in 1942

Surveying of a route in Panama had begun during the 1930s, aided by aerial photography undertaken by US Army Air Corps aircraft based in the Canal Zone. While the US Army resisted a highway across the isthmus, a reliable route through

which supplies and reinforcements could be sent to Panama was seen as a strategic asset. Obviously, Panama had its own reasons for improving communications within the country.³⁵

³⁴ http://www.panamaviejaescuela.com/ciudad-panama-decada-1940/?fbclid=IwAR2aeEVgA4OtSMRQ9Kuo02IzoApYnU1h2V7_rkOmYm_HMC_hVAXJdI9xrQ8

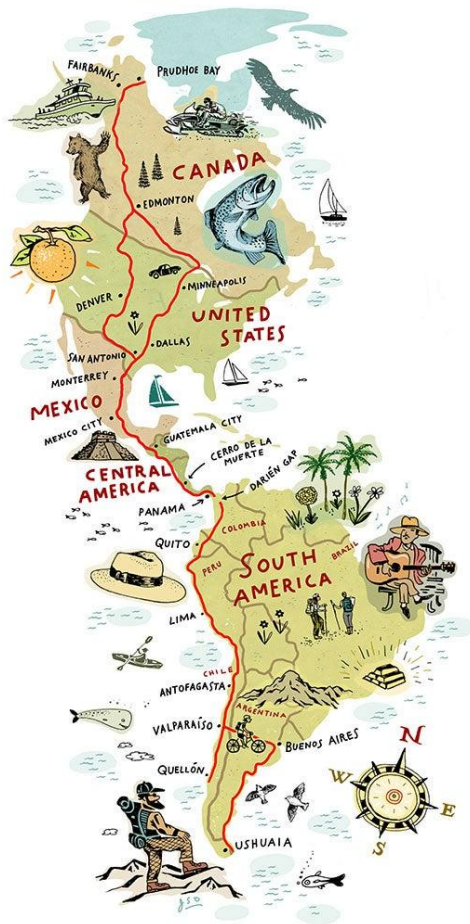
The concept had previously been envisioned at the Fifth International Conference of American States in 1923, and at the first Pan American Highway Congress in Buenos Aires in 1925 as a highway system connecting North, Central and South America.

³⁵ <https://www.thelostandfoundhostel.com/blog/2026/8/30/the-interamericana-in-panama-the-road-that-changed-the-country>

In 1940, an exchange of notes between Panama and the US provided for Panama to undertake the responsibility for the construction of the La Chorrera – Rio Hato road, with the advice of US engineers. However, in December 1941, by agreement and in view of the urgency of the situation, the US took over responsibility for the construction. Subsequently, in 1943, the US reimbursed to Panama the principal and interest paid by it on a loan from the Export-Import Bank for Panama's share of the

construction cost of the road, and liquidated remaining obligations under that credit.

PAN-AMERICAN HIGHWAY



Work on the Inter-American was also underway on the other side of the border in Costa Rica in 1940, with some of the survey personnel reassigned from Panama, all working for the Inter-American Highway Office in Washington DC.³⁶ At the time, while there were narrow-gauge railways (built for, and used by, the United Fruit Company for its bananas), and about 90 km of paved highway extending out north and south from the capital, there was no land transportation whatever except ox-cart trails, either to the sea ports or to Panama.³⁷

As a part of the US "war effort", the Army Corps of Engineers launched a project to open a "Military Road" along the general route of the IAH through Costa Rica on a war emergency

basis. However, the reduction of the U-boat threat during 1943 led to this project being dropped.³⁸

³⁶ There was an IAH Panama District office.

³⁷ <https://highways.dot.gov/highway-history/history-fhwa/trail-blazers/inter-american-highway-1940-1957>

³⁸ <https://highways.dot.gov/highway-history/history-fhwa/trail-blazers/inter-american-highway-1940-1957>

Meanwhile, from 1942, work began on a plan for providing an uninterrupted road route to Panama from the US, in much the same way as was planned to facilitate defence supplies to Alaska using the Alaska Highway (or Alcan – begun in 1942 and completed in 1943).³⁹ Aside from limited supplies by air (limited due to the aircraft types then available), Panama and the Canal Zone relied on sea transport, with New Orleans being the main US port involved. The attack on Pearl Harbor, and a consequential potential threat in the Pacific, was followed by a U-boat campaign in the Caribbean in 1942 that threatened communications with Panama.



The Inter-American Highway in the 1940s

At the peak of the effort, 25,000 men (including 1,500 from the US) were involved in the project. By the time the War Department cancelled the project in October 1943, the US authorities not now regarding the route towards to Costa Rica border being of military necessity (as the tide of war reduced the potential threat to the Canal, and efforts were better employed elsewhere).⁴⁰ The Corps of Engineers therefore phased out its efforts and turned the work over to the US Public Roads Administration and, in Costa Rica, the Costa Rican Ministry of Public Works and Transport.⁴¹ By then, US contractors had cleared a right of way for 758 miles of highway, surfacing 331 miles of the length.⁴²

³⁹ <https://www.jalopnik.com/2226980/highways-alaska-highway-alcan-1942-8-months-army-corps/>

⁴⁰ *Latin America and the Second World War: Volume 2: 1942–1945* by RA Humphreys (Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 1982): <https://dokumen.pub/latin-america-and-the-second-world-war-volume-2-19421945-9781474288248-9781474288262-9781474288255.html>

⁴¹ <https://ticotimes.net/2021/11/19/tbt-the-birth-of-the-pan-american-highway>

⁴² *The Big L: American Logistics in World War II* edited by Alan Gropman (National Defense University Institute for National Strategic Studies Fort McNair Washington, DC 20319), 1997 <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a421840.pdf>

It would not be until after the war that work would resume to finalise the highway connection to Panama – although, to this day, the road stops in the Darién region, only to continue from the other side of the border with Colombia.

The Pan-American Highway, some 19,000 miles (33,000 km) long, stretches from Alaska to southern Argentina – with a 66-mile (106 km) gap in the Darien Province in Panama, there being no road link through the jungle and mountains between Panama and Colombia. The Inter-American Highway is the name for the 3,400 mile (5,472 km) stretch between Mexico and Panama and was completed in the 1950s. The Pan-American Highway was completed in 1963.⁴³

In 1945, Panama was visited by a group of officials, as inspection trip by the House Roads Subcommittee of Congress. These travelled via Panama City to David, nearer to the Costa Rican border and where IAH construction work was underway, before travelling on by air to Costa Rica (which illustrates that road communications were still lacking).⁴⁴

In 1948, the State Department said that Panamanian complaints about Army interruption of traffic on the Inter-American Highway at the Rio Hato Air Base was



justified. The Army was requested to take steps to re-route the Highway in such a way as to bypass the airfield so that there would no longer be a problem. However, before this could happen, public protests over the defence sites outside the Canal Zone led to all US defence sites outside the Canal

⁴³ https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/entry/Pan_American_Highway

⁴⁴ <https://highways.dot.gov/highway-history/history-fhwa/trail-blazers/inter-american-highway-1940-1957>

Zone, including Rio Hato, being abandoned.⁴⁵ Today one drives through a tunnel, with the runway of what is now a major airport passing overhead.⁴⁶

At Rio Hato, from about November 1943, roadblocks placed on an asphalt taxiway connection across the National (by then the InterAmerican) Highway, were manned by members of the *Policia Nacional*. It is said that this was one of the few Panamanian contributions of armed personnel to the war effort, although the US Army Air Force paid their \$60 per month salaries.⁴⁷

THE PIPELINE ROAD



This rough, single lane, gravel-covered road was built across the isthmus to service a sunken oil pipeline that was intended to provide a back-up should the Canal be closed. Up to 24 km (15 miles) long, today

17.5 km (11 miles) remains accessible – starting near the town of Gamboa on the banks of the Canal, and it is a popular birdwatching route in the Soberania National Park.⁴⁸ During the war it saw little or no operational use in its intended role.

⁴⁵ *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>

⁴⁶ <https://meaderingthroughtheprologue.com/tunnels-under-the-pan-american-highway-stories-from-rio-hato>

⁴⁷ American Aviation Historical Society Journal, Winter 2016.

⁴⁸ <http://www.birdingpipelinepanama.com/>



The Pan-American highway in Chorrera in 1950



Avenida 4 July in the 1930s

Ray Todd

Panama City

Republic of Panama

7 October 2026