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Medical Miracle in Panama - II

Lead: Before they could build the Panama Canal, American engineers had to eradicate malaria and yellow fever.

Tag: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts.

Content: Attempting to duplicate their triumph in the construction of the Suez Canal, French engineers were defeated in great measure by two deadly diseases. Malaria and yellow fever had for time immemorial been the curse of the tropics.

Thousands died before the French gave up the quest in the 1880s.

When the Americans took over the construction of the Canal in 1904, the Isthmus was still an unhealthy place to live and work. Most medical authorities still believed the two diseases came from "bad air." The Isthmian Canal Commission's sanitary officer was Colonel William Crawford Gorgas, son of Josiah Gorgas, Ordinance Chief of the Confederacy and President of the University of Alabama. William Gorgas, according to historian David McCullough, was forty-nine years old, a courtly, white-haired man whose humorous eyes and "sunny" Alabama

manner concealed a marvelous tenacity." That was good. He would need every bit of determination at his disposal if he was to make the canal zone safe for construction.

Following the methods of Dr. Walter Reed, who had banished malaria from Havana, Cuba, Gorgas went after the mosquito which he believed was the source of the disease. He discovered that no serious effort was in place to prevent the insects from breeding. Even the hospitals had no window screens and placed bed legs in dishes of water to deter ants from spreading. Indeed, pools of stagnant water were everywhere. In them, millions of mosquito eggs

matured, ready to hatch and spread infection. After one particularly severe outbreak of yellow fever in 1905 Commission leaders finally gave Gorgas the go-ahead. Next time: the medical miracle of Panama.

**At the University of Richmond,
this is Dan Roberts.**

Resources

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