GEOGRAPHY SPOTLIGHT

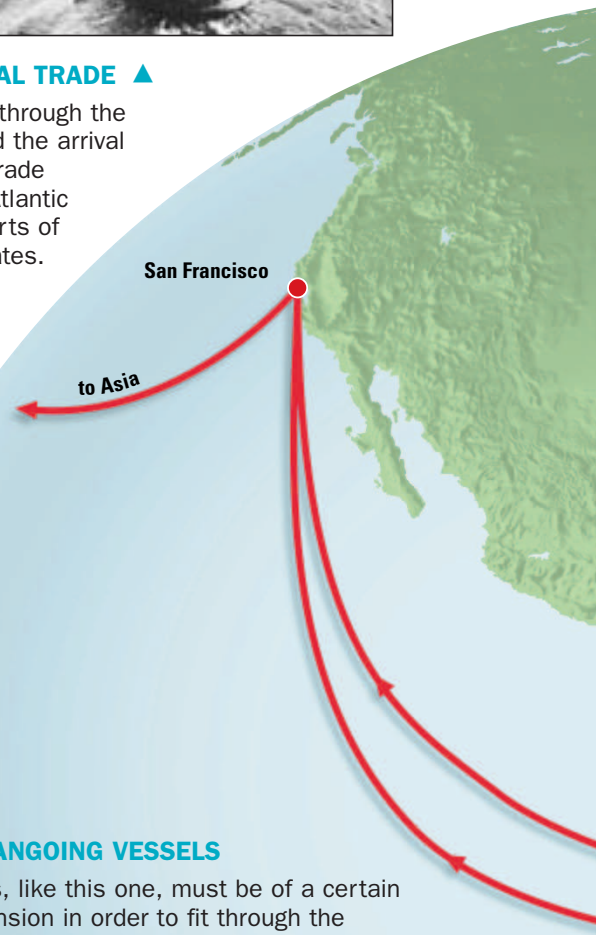
The Panama Canal: Funnel for Trade

By the late 19th century, the U.S. position in global trade was firmly established. A glance at a world map during that time revealed the trade advantages of cutting through the world's great landmasses at two strategic points. The first cut, through the Isthmus of Suez in Egypt, was completed in 1869 and was a spectacular success. A second cut, this one through Panama, in Central America, would be especially advantageous to the United States. Such a cut, or canal, would substantially reduce the sailing time between the nation's Atlantic and Pacific ports.

It took the United States ten years, from 1904 to 1914, to build the Panama Canal. By 1999, more than 700,000 vessels, flying the flags of about 70 nations, had passed through its locks. In the year 2000, Panama assumed full control of the canal.

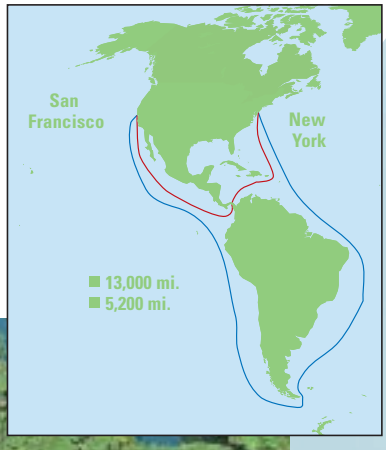
INTERCOASTAL TRADE ▲

The first boat through the canal heralded the arrival of increased trade between the Atlantic and Pacific ports of the United States.



NUMBERS TELL THE STORY ▶

A ship sailing from New York to San Francisco by going around South America travels 13,000 miles; the canal shortens the journey to 5,200 miles.



◀ OCEANGOING VESSELS

Ships, like this one, must be of a certain dimension in order to fit through the canal's locks. These container ships must be no more than 106 feet across and 965 feet in length, with a draft (the depth of the vessel below the water line when fully loaded) of no more than 39.5 feet. Each ship pays a toll based on its size, its cargo, and the number of passengers it carries.

◀ NEW YORK CITY

New York City and other U.S. Atlantic ports accounted for about 60 percent of the traffic using the Panama Canal in the early decades of its existence.

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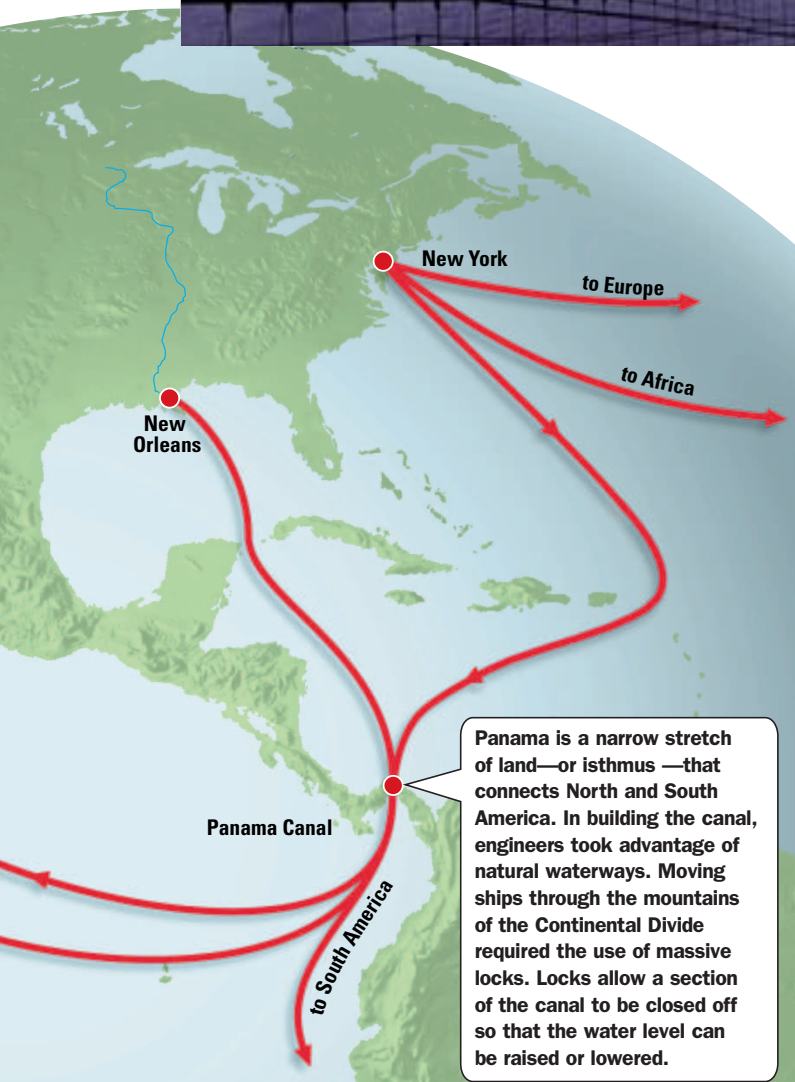

Panama is a narrow stretch of land—or isthmus —that connects North and South America. In building the canal, engineers took advantage of natural waterways. Moving ships through the mountains of the Continental Divide required the use of massive locks. Locks allow a section of the canal to be closed off so that the water level can be raised or lowered.

THINKING CRITICALLY

1. **Analyzing Patterns** On a world map, identify the route that ships took to get from New York City to San Francisco before the Panama Canal opened. How did this route change after the opening of the canal?
2. **Creating a Model** Use clay to shape a model of a cross-section of the Panama Canal as shown in the Science and Technology feature on page 567. For the locks, use styrofoam blocks or pieces of wood which you have glued together. Paint the model, and then label each part of the canal.

SEE SKILLBUILDER HANDBOOK, PAGE R31.

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