Name: Date:

The Suez Canal

The Suez Canal, located in Egypt, is a 101 mile (163 km) long canal that connects the Mediterranean Sea with the Gulf of Suez, a northern branch of the Red Sea. It officially opened in November 1869.

**Suez Canal Construction History**

Although the Suez Canal wasn't officially completed until 1869, there is a long history of interest in connecting both the Nile River in Egypt and the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea. It is believed that the first canal in the area was constructed between the Nile River delta and the Red Sea in the 13th Century B.C.E. During the 1,000 years following its construction, the original canal was neglected and its use finally stopped in the 8th Century.

The first modern attempts to build a canal came in the late 1700s when Napoleon Bonaparte conducted an expedition to Egypt. He believed that building a French controlled canal on the Isthmus of Suez would cause trade problems for the British as they would either have to pay dues to France or continue sending goods over land or around the southern part of Africa. Studies for Napoleon's canal plan began in 1799 but a miscalculation in measurement showed the sea levels between the Mediterranean and the Red Seas as being too different for a canal to be feasible and construction immediately stopped.

The next attempt to build a canal in the area occurred in the mid-1800s when a French diplomat and engineer, Ferdinand de Lesseps, convinced the Egyptian viceroy Said Pasha to support the building of a canal. In 1858, the Universal Suez Ship Canal Company was formed and given the right to begin construction of the canal and operate it for 99 years, after which time, the Egyptian government would take over control of the canal. At its founding, the Universal Suez Ship Canal Company was owned by French and Egyptian interests.

Construction of the Suez Canal officially began on April 25, 1859. It opened ten years later on November 17, 1869 at a cost of $100 million.

**Suez Canal Use and Control**

Almost immediately after its opening, the Suez Canal had a significant impact on world trade as goods were moved around the world in record time. In 1875, debt forced Egypt to sell its shares in ownership of the Suez Canal to the United Kingdom. However, an international convention in 1888 made the canal available for all ships from any nation to use.

Shortly thereafter, conflicts began to arise over use and control of the Suez Canal. In 1936 for example, the U.K. was given the right to maintain military forces in the Suez Canal Zone and control entry points. In 1954, Egypt and the U.K. signed a seven year contract that resulted in the withdrawal of British forces from the canal area and allowed Egypt to take control of the former British installations. In addition, with the creation of Israel in 1948, the Egyptian government prohibited the use of the canal by ships coming and going from the country.

Also in the 1950s, the Egyptian government was working on a way to finance the Aswan High Dam. Initially it had support from the United States and the U.K. but in July 1956, both nations withdrew their support and the Egyptian government seized and nationalized the canal so passage fees could be used to pay for the dam. On October 29 of that same year, Israel invaded Egypt and two days later Britain and France followed on grounds that passage through the canal was to be free. In retaliation, Egypt blocked the canal by intentionally sinking 40 ships. These events were known as the Suez Crisis.

In November 1956, the Suez Crisis ended when the United Nations arranged a truce between the four nations. The Suez Canal then reopened in March 1957 when the sunken ships were removed. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Suez Canal was closed several more times because of conflicts between Egypt and Israel.

In 1962, Egypt made its final payments for the canal to its original owners (the Universal Suez Ship Canal Company) and the nation took full control of the Suez Canal.

**The Suez Canal Today**

Today, the Suez Canal is operated by the Suez Canal Authority. The canal itself is 101 miles (163 km) long and 984 feet (300 m) wide. It begins at the Mediterranean Sea at Point Said flows through Ismailia in Egypt, and ends at Suez on the Gulf of Suez. It also has a railroad running its entire length parallel to its west bank.

The Suez Canal can accommodate ships with a vertical height (draft) of 62 feet (19 m) or 210,000 deadweight tons. Most of the Suez Canal is not wide enough for two ships to pass side by side. To accommodate this, there is one shipping lane and several passing bays where ships can wait for others to pass.

The Suez Canal has no locks because Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea's Gulf of Suez have approximately the same water level. It takes around 11 to 16 hours to pass through the canal and ships must travel at a low speed to prevent erosion of the canal's banks by the ships' waves.

**Significance of the Suez Canal**

In addition to dramatically reducing transit time for trade worldwide, the Suez Canal is one of the world's most significant waterways as it supports 8% of the world's shipping traffic and almost 50 ships pass through the canal daily.

*Source: http://geography.about.com/od/specificplacesofinterest/a/suezcanal.htm*

**Reading Questions**

1. When was the first canal constructed between the Red Sea and the Mediterranean Sea?
2. Why didn’t Napoleon construct his planned canal through the Isthmus of Suez?
3. When did the Suez Canal officially open?
4. Describe the events of the Suez Crisis of 1956.
5. How did Egypt finally gain control of the Suez Canal? When did this happen?
6. What questions do you still have about the Suez Canal and its history?