

CANAL Panama Canal, French (The French Canal)		STATUS Abandoned unfinished		ACS
STATE/PROVINCE Canal Zone, Panama				IAER
COUNTIES:				
LOCATION (Endpoints of Canal): Existing section in use, from Gatun Locks to Colon.		ENLARGEMENTS		
TOPOGRAPHIC MAPS:		DATES IN USE	LENGTH CANAL SLACKWATER TOTAL	LIFT LOCKS No. / SIZE
		1 begun 1881:	50	1 Tide Lock
		2 1887:	50	10/59x590'
		3 Now in use:	3.3 mi., E of Gatun	None
		4 Also remnant left between Gatun		Locks & dam
HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE: This might have been "The Spanish Canal" had the religious and technological climate been different a few centuries ago; Antonio Galvao published a book in 1550 showing how it could be built, but the Church told Philip II that "if the Almighty had intended there should be a waterway across the isthmus, one would have existed naturally." ¹ It could have been "The American Canal" because the Panama Railroad (1855) was an American project, but the Americans began building a canal across Nicaragua instead. So the French first began the Panama Canal in 1881, under the leadership of Ferdinand de Lesseps, who had finished the Suez Canal in 1869 (which some experts had said was an impossible project), and who planned to build a Kra canal next, across the Maylay Peninsula. The canal was to be a sea-level cut generally along the present route, with a dam across the Chagres at Gamboa to control floods, and a tide lock at the Pacific end. The railroad was purchased, towns grew up (such as Lesseppe City at Gatun) and millions were spent on hospital facilities including "L'Hopital Notre Dame du Canal" on Ancon Hill, and the equipment was the best available. Bunau-Varilla PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION:- devised a method of dredging dry land by flooding canal sections and bringing in dredges, and in 1887 suggested a series of temporary locks to facilitate this and allow through navigation. De Lesseps, finally realizing the immensity of the excavation problem, agreed to this and a lock pit was dug in rock at Bohia, at the end of the 11-mile navigable section from Colon; locks were designed by Eiffel, then building his tower. There were to be 5 at each end, 59x590' in the chamber. But all this was too late, the whole enterprise collapsing in 1889 in a maze of scandal. The Americans found about 1/3 of the French excavation of use to them, and much of the equipment, at least at first. One section of the original canal, now known as the French Canal, was bypassed so can still be seen between Gatun Dam and Colon, 6 miles long; on it are the French drydock (1886, enlarged 1933), the Yacht Club, and rusting debris from past eras. Just east is the East Diversion, confused with the navigation canal but built by the French to divert water flow east of the Chagres into Manzanillo Bay; there is also a West Diversion. Also of interest: Stone bridge on the original Los Cruces				
NAMES & ADDRESSES OF GROUPS CONCERNED WITH CANALS PRESERVATION INFORMATION: trail (rebuilt, perhaps, about 1853) outside Ft. Clayton's Gurundu Gate #2 beside Frangipani Ave.; and stone bridge from original Panama Railroad, abandoned, near Miraflores Locks.				
BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SUMMARY: The Path Between the Seas, by David McCullough (Simon & Schuster, 1977) "The French Canal," by Robert L. Austin, PANAMA CANAL REVIEW, Fall 1971, pp.16-18 "The Panama Railroad," by Pandora Aleman, PANAMA CANAL REVIEW, Bicentennial Edition, 1976. 1 "Mingling the Two Oceans," by David Ortman, NOT MAN APART, Nov.1977, p.2; McCullough, p.27, mentions a 1552 book by Francisco Lopez de Gomara. The French Canal is shown on McCullough's map, p.465f, and Bohio, site of the lock pit, p.131f "Panama Canal Sweepstakes," by Ernest H. Schell, AMERICAN CANALS 32:7 and 33:4-5(1980)				
UNPUBLISHED RECORDS, PHOTOS, DRAWINGS (CEHR, IAER, HABS, Local or Regional Historical Societies, Libraries, etc.): Much material should be available in the Canal Zone Library-Museum. We would appreciate any additional information on remnants of the French effort, including the location of Eiffel's canal lock gates if they were constructed and still exist.				
EXISTING OR RECOMMENDED LANDMARK STATUS (CEHR, National Register, etc.): Subscription to the twice-yearly PANAMA CANAL REVIEW is \$1.50, from Panama Canal Review, Box M, Balboa Heights, C.Z.				
REPORTER'S NAME & ADDRESS: W.E. Trout, III, 1932 Cinco Robles Drive, Duarte CA 91010				DATE: 21 Sept '81
RETURN TO: CANAL INDEX COMMITTEE, c/o P.H. STOTT, HAINES ROAD, MOUNT KISCO, NY 10549				