

THE TOWNSITE OF COCOLI

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By the time the Panama Canal was 25 years old, its interoceanic commerce capacity was becoming outgrown. Additionally, the U.S. Navy was concerned about two issues: (1) the inability of the locks to handle the super battleships on the drawing boards and the possibility of the canal being put out of service should a set of locks be destroyed in case of war.

In 1936, the Governor of the Panama Canal Zone was authorized by Congress to investigate a plan to modernize and increase the capacity of the canal. After cost estimates and plans were drawn, a report was submitted to Congress in 1939 and the Third Locks Project was approved. While the Navy got its wish for the new locks to be larger than the original ones, 1200 feet long by 135 or 140 feet wide and 45 feet deep, to accommodate its projected Montana-class battleships, it failed to have the new locks located from 1/4 mile to 1/2 mile away from the original locks.

At Gatun, the new locks would be located on the east side of the original locks making the town a virtual island connected to the mainland by a moveable bridge. The Railroad would also have to be relocated in order to avoid the new bypass into the locks. At Pedro Miguel and Miraflores, the new locks would be located west of the original locks. A similar swing bridge as at Gatun, would be built at Miraflores to cross the original and new locks at Miraflores to connect the railroad and the highway with the west bank of the Canal.

On July 1, 1940, the dipper dredge "*Cascadas*" started to scoop on the Pacific end of the canal bypass leading to the new Miraflores locks. On October 1, the first dredge went to work on the Gatun bypass. The Third Locks Project was abandoned in 1942 (after spending some \$75 million) due to the more pressing demands on manpower and materials associated with World War Two.



Partial view of the town of Cocoli and a street with multiple-family apartments. Circa 1948.



On the left is a typical 4-family unit. On the right is the Clubhouse. Circa 1948



The Cocoli Post Office, Circa 1948.

The 1939 approval for the Third Locks Project also included the construction of three new townsites for housing the additional personnel that would be brought to the Canal Zone in support of the project. These were Cocoli on the west Bank of the Canal at the Pacific entrance and Margarita on the East Bank of the Canal on the Atlantic side. The third one was Diablo Heights, which would serve as the headquarters for the Special Engineering Division in charge of the Third Locks Project. A Special Improvements Project (SIP), a part of this Special Engineering Division, was also headquartered in Diablo Heights. The SIP had to do with the installation of protective devices on the Locks.

The construction of the townsites took place in, or about, 1941. Incidentally, it was because the new influx of civilian personnel for this project and military personnel due to the war that brought the change in the driving of autos in Panama and the Canal Zone. On April 15, 1943, after much study and promotion, driving on the left lane was changed to driving on the right. No problems were reported with automobiles, but the horses had to be forced to walk on the right hand.

The community of Cocoli consisted of 356 family apartments, 24 bachelor apartments and 160 bachelor rooms. The townsite was self-sufficient with its own commissary, clubhouse, theater, dispensary, gas station, post office, fire station, elementary school and churches. The

buildings were wooden with corrugated metal roofing providing residence in the form of single family, duplexes, 4-family units and bachelor quarters for the workers.

The clubhouse, as in other Canal Zone townsites, was the hub of most social activities of the town. It had a cafeteria, billiard parlor, movie theater, barber shop, shoe repair shop, beauty parlor, and bowling alley. Bingo and dance lessons were a few of the other activities provided at the clubhouse. The commissary served as the town's grocery and general store while at the elementary school facilities Little Leaguers played their games. A Chinese Garden provided fresh vegetables and fruit.

Cocoli was turned over to the U.S. Navy on January 1, 1952 and used for housing for Navy personnel and civilians working for the Navy. The Panama Canal personnel was relocated to Balboa, Diablo and Ancon. On July 1, 1964, the control of the townsite was once again changed and the Army took over. Today, only a handful of duplex and single family units remain in use. The rest of the town has disappeared.

SOURCES

1. *"Panama Canal Townsites", Panama Canal Museum, 2011.*
2. *"The Cocoli Housing Community and the Third Set of Locks", The Panama Digest, September 15, 2012.*
3. *"THIRD LOCKS PROJECT", <http://www.czimages.com>*
4. *"Panama Canal Third Locks 1939-1942", GlobalSecurity.org*
5. *"Cocoli", www.angelfire.com*