
RESEARCH REPORTS AND NOTES

PANAMANIAN HISTORICAL SOURCES*

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Considered a part of neither Central America nor the Gran Colombian area, and too small to claim a loyal following among scholars, Panama remains virtually unstudied by contemporary historians. Consequently, sources for the study of Panamanian history have been neglected, a situation this research note seeks to correct in part by identifying the principal holdings in Panamanian archives and libraries.

In addition to Panama's modern significance as one of the emerging leaders of the Central American region, the country also boasts a rich colonial past, ranking below only Mexico and Peru in imperial significance. Continuous struggle against the "colonial" policies of New Granada during the nineteenth century and U.S. economic domination in the twentieth century also pose unsolved historical questions, all of which highlight the need for further historical study of the isthmus. Panama's continuing importance is undeniable: more than five thousand U.S. troops remain based there, the Panama Canal is critical to international trade, and Panama has become the banker for multinationals and various drug mafias.

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Several centuries of Panamanian history remain to be written, on topics ranging from the indigenous cultures through the role of Panama City and Portobelo in the Carrera de Indias, to colonialism and dependency under Spain and Colombia, and eventually the United States. Panama's past is well documented. Archives in Spain, Colombia, and Peru—particularly the Archivo General de Indias in Sevilla and the national archives in Bogotá and Lima—contain abundant material. Panama itself contains vast quantities of documents, unpublished works, periodicals, and published sources for the study of regional history, especially for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This short survey will describe the most useful and important research centers in Panama.

The Biblioteca Nacional

The Biblioteca Nacional de Panamá was founded in 1942 during the presidency of Ricardo Adolfo de la Guardia. The present structure was dedicated 11 July 1942, under the directorship of Ernesto J. Castillero R. His account, *La Biblioteca Nacional de Panamá* (Panama, 1942), highlights the spirit of scholarship and striving for academic excellence behind the first attempt to assemble a collection of materials relating to Panamanian history. Unfortunately, the past decades have witnessed a steady decline in the level of support to maintain this facility, and today the Biblioteca Nacional has been supplanted by other collections, most notably those of the Universidad de Panamá and the Archivo Nacional.

The original collection of ten thousand volumes from the abandoned Colón library was augmented by a flurry of additional acquisitions, resulting in an impressive assortment of manuscripts, published works, and periodicals totaling more than one hundred thousand items by the early 1950s. Among the official publications available on microfilm are the *Gaceta Oficial* for 1855 and 1857–1860, and its successor, the *Gaceta de Panamá*. These provide notarial records from Panama, Colón, Veraguas, and other regions for 1880, 1883, and 1887–1899. As the official publication of government actions, the *Gaceta* contains such critical information as names of office holders, promulgation of legislation and presidential edicts, and tax rates.

Many of the materials available at the Biblioteca Nacional are currently available elsewhere. Today the aging multistory structure on the plaza of the Palacio Nacional is shared with a public grammar school. As a result, the tables in the small ground floor reading room are continuously occupied by boisterous youngsters and an assortment of colorful local citizens. Many of those in attendance when we visited the facilities on a muggy June afternoon appeared to be awaiting the opening of nearby "servicemens' clubs" located in the same historic

neighborhood. Among the unfortunate aspects of the Biblioteca Nacional is the run-down condition of the building and its facilities. The card catalog's 350 entries for Panamanian history are out of order, often upside-down, and occasionally illegible.

But researchers should not be unduly discouraged by these findings about the Biblioteca. The Panamanian government decided to allow the library to die a lingering death of natural causes, choosing instead to emphasize the facilities at the Universidad de Panamá, and to a lesser extent, those of the Archivo Nacional. Funding for libraries continues in Panama, but not for the Biblioteca Nacional's old, outdated structure.

Ecclesiastical Archives

Ecclesiastical archives in Panama provide an abundant selection of materials for the researcher. Although most documents prior to 1870 are located in either Cartagena or Lima, archives on the isthmus are strong for the last half of the nineteenth and all of the twentieth centuries. Access to church archives in Panama, as in other Latin American countries, is limited. While letters of recommendation and proper institutional identification are usually sufficient to gain access, researchers ideally should obtain permission to use the archives before traveling to the country.

The most important church archive is the document repository of the cathedral in Panama City. This archive is divided into twenty-four sections, the first eight of which represent the administrations of the archbishops from 1871 to 1969. While information is sparse for the period 1871–1885, much documentation exists for the ensuing periods: twelve *legajos* for the administration of José Alejandro Peralta (1886–1899); ten *legajos* for Francisco Javier Junguits (1901–1911); seventeen *legajos* for Guillermo Rojas y Arrieta (1912–1933); twenty-four *legajos* for Juan José Maiztegui (1933–1943); thirty-six *legajos* for Francisco Beckmann (1943–1963); and twenty-three *legajos* for Tomás Alberto Clavel M. (1964–1969). Under each of these eight divisions are *legajos* on government-church relations, municipal parish records, and correspondence of the archbishops.

A section entitled *Inventorios Parroquiales* contains parish registries from 1876 to 1962 and is especially strong for the years 1876–1897, 1913–1915, and 1962. Forty-eight *legajos* deal with *dispensas de impedimentos y proclamas* covering the years 1877–1969. Another section is devoted to biographies of priests who served on the isthmus from 1831 to 1859 and in 1898.

Archives also exist in some of the parishes of the interior. The following parochial archives have whole or partial indexes in the library

of the Universidad de Panamá: El Archivo Parroquial de la Iglesia San Francisco de Paula de la Chorrera (indexed for baptisms between 1884 and 1888, for marriages between 1821 and 1903, and for deaths between 1884 and 1903); El Archivo de la Sagrada Familia de David (indexed for 1914–1918); El Archivo de la Iglesia de San José de David (indexed for 1876–1880); Archivos de la Parroquia de la Asunción del Distrito de Santa María, Provincia de Herrera (indexed for marriages and baptisms between 1883 and 1905); the Archivos de la Parroquia de San Francisco de la Montaña, Veragua (indexed for 1884–1898); Archivo Parroquial de la Iglesia San José Bautista de Anton (indexed for 1890–1899).

The Academia Panameña de la Historia

The small public library of the Academia Panameña de la Historia is located in the same building as the Museo de Historia de Panamá, on the main plaza of the Casco Viejo area of Panama City, southeast of the cathedral. The limited collection consists of published works of Panamanian history, copies of modern periodicals published in Panama and Latin America, and back issues of the excellent and now-defunct journal of the academy, the *Boletín de la Academia Panameña de la Historia*. All material must be read on the premises, which have no photocopying facilities. The collection has limited value for U.S. researchers already familiar with Panama's history because its principal asset, the *Boletín*, is available at most major institutions in the United States. In the museum on the upper floors of the building is the original copy of Bautista Antonelli's first plans for the layout of the city of Portobelo, which contains information not available in the Archivo General de Indias.

The Panama Collection of the Canal Zone Library-Museum

One of the major Panamanian resources for the researcher is the Panama Collection of the former Canal Zone Library-Museum. Founded in 1914 by General George Goethals, the library has gathered many volumes on Panama and the canal. Indeed, the latter topic accounts for the main part of the collection, with books, pamphlets, and documents from the canal construction era (1903–1914) representing half of the ten thousand volumes listed in the excellent card catalog. The library's classification system follows the Library of Congress format with a few local adjustments. The subject headings Descriptions and Travels are divided into the following periods: 1503–1849 (seventeen entries); 1849–1869 (thirty-eight entries); 1869–1903 (fifteen entries); 1904–1915 (seventy-two entries); and 1915 to the present (over one hundred entries).

Although the Canal Zone library is not an official depository of

Canal Zone government documents, it nonetheless holds significant records. Annual reports of Canal Zone hospitals, schools, canal operations, and executive department actions are found in almost complete series from 1914 to 1979. Many volumes deal with U.S. House and Senate appropriations for the survey, construction, and operation of the canal and its support facilities. Most if not all of these government documents are also held by the National Archives in Washington.

Complete house-to-house census reports exist for 1920–1927, 1941–1949, and 1950–1953. The library also contains the most complete collection of Panamanian and Canal Zone newspapers in the world, including: the *Aspinwall Courier* (scattered issues); the *Colón Telegraph* (1902, Feb. 1904–Dec. 1907, May 1908–Dec. 1909, 1910, May–Dec. 1911); the *Colón Starlet* (1904, 1905, 1907–1908); the *Star and Herald* (Sept. 1850–Dec. 1903, Jan. 1904 to date); the *Panama Journal* (1906–1912, 1915, 1917–1919); *La Prensa* (incomplete from 1908 to 1916). Two additional journals in the collection are the *Bulletin du Canal Interocéanique* (1879–1889) and the *Gaceta Oficial de Panamá* (1915–1950 on microfilm and 1950 to date in original form). The *Star and Herald* is the most useful to researchers because of its coverage of Panamanian political events and its availability in complete series.

Other strengths of the collection are a large section of secondary works on Panamanian history, sections on commerce, canal traffic, and military affairs, and over one hundred books on U.S.–Panamanian relations. The library has photocopying facilities.

The card catalog has been published under the title *Subject Catalog of the Special Panama Collection of the Canal Zone Library-Museum* (Boston, 1964) and is available at major research libraries in the United States. At present the library is closed, a casualty of the 1979 Panama Canal Treaties. It is still available to researchers, however, through special permission that can be obtained from the Panama Canal Commission. Indications are that the collection will be turned over to Panama's Archivo Nacional in the very near future, a step that will facilitate ready access.

The Archivo Nacional

The structure presently housing the Archivo Nacional was dedicated on 15 August 1926. The original conception of the archive called for the construction of three sections to house material scattered in a variety of repositories. The original three sections—Histórica, Administrativa, and Jurídica—were later subdivided into Dirección General, Sección Jurídica, Sección Administrativa, and Sección de Canje de Publicaciones y de Encuadración. The latter two sections contain the greatest amount of material for historians of the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries, although within the Sección Jurídica are found more than thirty-five hundred volumes of notarial protocols dating from as early as 1776 to the present. These documents are classified by province under the headings of Panama, Bocas del Toro, Chiriquí, Coclé, Colón, Veraguas, Los Santos, and Otros (lesser entities, including Herrera).

The notarial records of the first notary of Panama have been microfilmed for the period 1825–1885 and include *testimonios*, *testamentos*, *codicilos de poderes*, *compras*, *ventas*, *fianzas*, *contratos*, and other materials. Each volume has two indexes: the first, an alphabetized listing of the parties referred to in the volume, and the second, a chronological index showing each item. Index cards on each volume contain a summary of the contents and the folio number and numbered *expediente* for each case.

Various interesting records exist for early American business concerns in Panama, including the Camors-McConnell Company and the ever-present United Fruit Company. The Jurídica section also contains civil and criminal actions, as well as land titles dating from Panamanian independence in 1903 to the present.

The Sección Administrativa contains documents relating to the Colombian administration of Panama during the period of Colombian dominance between 1827 and 1903 (an era some would consider a colonial period, especially after 1886). Also found in this section are a very limited collection of the *Gaceta de Panamá* from the nineteenth century and other documents of government administration during the independence period. Many documents of twentieth-century ministerial activities are not found in the archive but may exist within the repositories of individual ministries, some of which (such as the foreign ministry archive) are quite extensive and accessible. Books, pamphlets, plans, maps, and manuscripts from the former Sección Histórica are contained within the administrative section. These items have not been indexed save for the valiant efforts of the Universidad de Panamá to accumulate such a guide. At present indexes exist for 1899–1910, 1912–1915, 1917–1921, and 1923–1929.

The Archivo Nacional recently received thousands of documents from the Colombian government covering the period from 1824 to 1903. This collection is the most important source for information on nineteenth-century Panama outside of Bogotá. The documents are in very poor condition, however. Funding for the Archive is so limited that these materials will probably not be microfilmed in the near future, by which time they will have deteriorated further. Fortunately, however, most of the nineteenth-century documents held in the Archivo Nacional are available on microfilm in Colombia.

Documentation for the colonial era is essentially nonexistent on the isthmus. A fifteen-volume set of documents copied from the Ar-

chivo General de Indias in Sevilla in the 1920s is useful, although very limited. Most of these documents describe the political and military history of the isthmus in the seventeenth century, an orientation reflecting the focus of historical research in the first part of the twentieth century. Virtually no financial records were copied, although some records of *gastos de guerra* can be found for 1607 and the period 1672–1700. Extant is a small collection of *cédulas reales* relating to Panama with an emphasis on the capital city and Portobelo. Also available are the six volumes of Juan Antonio Susto's catalog of documents relating to Panamanian history from the Archivo General de Indias as well as the index to Susto's work, compiled by Rita Carrillo and Isaura Chang Hernández in 1951–1952.

Housed in the same structure as the Archivo Nacional, but reached through a separate ground-level entrance, is the library of the archive. The facility suffers from the same economic problems as the Archivo Nacional and has few recent acquisitions. *Memorias* of government ministries are available on a haphazard basis, although the collection of Latin American periodicals is somewhat more complete. Recent additions include major Eastern European and Latin American popular and technical periodical literature. In the small reading area, indexes are available listing the periodical and documentary holdings of the collection.

Among the materials indexed are most of the government documents held in the library, including papers from the ministries of Fomento, Obras Públicas, Gobierno y Justicia, Hacienda y Tesoro, Higiene, Beneficiencia y Fomento, Instrucción Pública, Relaciones Exteriores, Trabajo y Bienestar Social, Viviencia y Urbanismo, and others in lesser quantities. The individual ministries are listed with the available years of documents. Periodicals indexed include the important *Boletín* of the Colombian archives, which deals with the period when Panama was dominated by Colombian hegemony, as well as some Panamanian periodicals unavailable elsewhere.

The Universidad de Panamá

The modern, well-staffed, and well-equipped library of the Universidad de Panamá in Paitilla largely eclipses the other archival and library collections in the country. Supported by a dedicated liberal arts faculty that includes historian Alfredo Castellero Calvo, the collection of the university boasts indexes compiled by undergraduates of the documents contained in the Archivo Nacional. Separate indexes to the numerous document collections on Panamanian national history held by the library and other facilities are contained in files 215, 216, and 217 of the general index to the library. The library contains most of the major

Panamanian journals and newspapers of recent vintage. Although numerous rolls of microfilmed documents from Sevilla are held, the researcher must go to Spain for a complete selection of these materials. The director of circulation, Máximo Icaza, proved once again to these researchers the capability of Panamanian archivists and their dedication to providing assistance to historical researchers. The library of the Universidad de Panamá is therefore an excellent place to begin research.

The repositories mentioned above are not the only ones available, but they are the most important. Researchers with specialized topics will find additional materials in the libraries of individual government ministries, which contain documents not yet placed in the care of the Archivo Nacional. The offices of Panama's daily newspapers offer clipping files and back issues, as do the American military publicity offices where life in the canal area is chronicled. Other potential repositories of historical information include the records of Panamanian and American companies that have Panamanian offices as well as the personal papers of leading scholars and political and military figures.