

1967

## Cross-Florida Barge Canal, 1927-1968

J. Richard Sewell



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), and the [United States History Commons](#)

Find similar works at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq>

University of Central Florida Libraries <http://library.ucf.edu>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by STARS. It has been accepted for inclusion in Florida Historical Quarterly by an authorized editor of STARS. For more information, please contact [STARS@ucf.edu](mailto:STARS@ucf.edu).

---

### Recommended Citation

Sewell, J. Richard (1967) "Cross-Florida Barge Canal, 1927-1968," *Florida Historical Quarterly*. Vol. 46 : No. 4 , Article 8.

Available at: <https://stars.library.ucf.edu/fhq/vol46/iss4/8>

## CROSS-FLORIDA BARGE CANAL, 1927-1968

by J. RICHARD SEWELL

THE EARLY AND LATER history of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal is said to be divided by the enactment of the River and Harbor Act, signed into law January 21, 1927 by President Calvin Coolidge. This act authorized the secretary of war to make a preliminary examination and survey of the "Waterway from Cumberland Sound, Georgia and Florida, to the Mississippi River," and it had had the full support of President Harding, Coolidge's predecessor, who declared himself in favor of the broadest development of the country's inland waterways.<sup>1</sup> Henry Holland Buckman, who has been called the "father confessor" of the present canal project, described this legislation as "the movement which finally resulted in beginning construction of the canal."<sup>2</sup>

Engineering surveys for both a ship and barge canal were conducted in the early 1930s. A special board of engineers estimated the cost of a lock ship canal, thirty-five feet deep, at \$223,400,000, and the cost of a lock barge canal, nine feet deep, at \$32,535,000. This board did not recommend immediate construction, although it pointed out that, "A ship canal would result in large . . . benefits to waterborne commerce and to the commerce of the nation, particularly to . . . the states bordering the Atlantic and Gulf coasts, and the Mississippi Valley." After considering various routes the board selected Route 13B as the most feasible and practicable. It followed the St. Johns River from its mouth to Palatka, then generally along the Oklawaha River to a point near its junction with Silver Springs Run, across high ground to the Withlacoochee River near Dunnellon, and finally along the course of the With-

1. U. S., *Statutes at Large*, XLIV, Part 1, 1019.

2. Henry Holland Buckman, "Documentary History of the Florida Canal, 1927-1936," *Senate Documents*, 74th Cong., 2nd Sess., No. 275, p. 1. Buckman, who developed most of the engineering data to support the construction of the canal, beginning in the 1920s and up to the beginning construction of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal in 1964, was engineering counsel for the Florida Canal Authority. He died in Jacksonville in March 1968.

Iacoochee River until it enters the Gulf of Mexico near Port Inglis.<sup>3</sup>

While this report was being prepared, local interests applied to the Federal Public Works Administration under the National Industrial Relations Act of 1933 for a loan and grant to construct a ship canal. The P. W. A. felt that the project constituted "a public necessity" and was of "real social value"; it estimated the construction cost at \$115,000,000 with a lower depth than the proposed thirty-live feet.<sup>4</sup> An Interdepartmental Board of Review was appointed by President Roosevelt in April 1934 to examine the widely divergent cost estimates of the canal. The board approved Route 13B and recommended construction of a thirty foot sea-level canal, costing \$143,000,000. On August 30, 1935, the President authorized \$5,000,000 for construction of the canal as a means of providing relief to Florida citizens and to increase employment in the state. Additional work-relief funds amounting to \$400,000 were subsequently made available for this work. While the United States Corps of Engineers apparently could not recommend construction on the usual economic return basis, the President was willing to start work since it would create jobs.<sup>5</sup>

There was a strong push for construction of the canal during this period. Typical of the articles appearing in many Florida and national magazines and journals was the one which asked, "Why delay the building of the Gulf-Atlantic ship canal across the state of Florida? If there is a single project that fits all of these requirements in the President's public-works program it is this Florida ship canal. It will put 30,000 men to work. . . ." <sup>6</sup> The Florida legislature had established a Ship Canal Authority on May 12, 1933, and urged an early start of construction. In 1932 a National Gulf-Atlantic Ship Canal Association had been formed in New Orleans by H. H. Buckman and Mayor John T. Alsop of Jacksonville. Senator Huey P. Long of Louisiana endorsed the canal project, as did Arthur

---

3. "Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal," 75th Cong., 1st Sess., *House Document* 194, p. 41.

4. *Ibid.*, 42.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Sumter L. Lowry, Jr., "A Canal Across Florida," *Review of Reviews and World's Work*, May 3, 1934.

Brisbane, who in 1932 wrote: "What the American shipping interests need is a canal across Florida. . . ." <sup>7</sup>

Construction of the canal symbolically began on September 19, 1935 when President Roosevelt pressed a telegraph key mounted on a gold nugget in the study of his Hyde Park home. By this action the *Jacksonville Journal* exclaimed, Mr. Roosevelt had "blasted his name into Florida history." <sup>8</sup>

When the President announced in December 1935 that he would not continue to authorize grants for projects like the Florida canal, and that congress should appropriate the funds needed, he touched off a gigantic struggle of men and politics. <sup>9</sup> There was already a lot of Florida opposition to the canal. The *Tampa Tribune* called it "a colossal waste of money." Opponents in South Florida claimed that their part of the state would become a desert if the canal was built; salt water, they said, would creep into "the big ditch" and pollute Florida's underground water supply. The railroads were the most vocal adversaries of construction, and they were joined by South Florida shipping and agricultural interests, and by some biologists, ecologists, botanists, and geologists who felt the canal would hurt crops, outdoor recreation, and Florida wildlife. United States Senator Duncan U. Fletcher discussed these opposition questions with the corps of engineers, and was assured that "with a sea-level canal any possible damage to agriculture beyond the right-of-way would be negligible, and that any damage to the water supply would be small and would consist only in lowering the levels of nearby wells." <sup>10</sup>

By the summer of 1936 all funds for the project were exhausted, although 13,000,000 cubic yards of material had been excavated, 4,700 acres of right-of-way had been cleared, and a few miles south of Ocala four huge bridge piers had been set in place. <sup>11</sup> On June 1, 1935, the Florida legislature created the Ship Canal Navigation District with power to issue bonds in the amount of \$1,500,000 and to levy taxes for the purpose of

7. Buckman, "Documentary History," 28.

8. *Jacksonville Journal*, September 19, 1935.

9. Benjamin F. Rogers, "The Florida Ship Canal," *Florida Historical Quarterly*, XXXVI (July 1957), 14.

10. Buckman, "Documentary History," 142.

11. "Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal," 75th Cong., 1st Sess., *House Report* 950; Rogers, "The Florida Ship Canal," 14.

acquiring rights-of-way. Most of the bonds were sold and several thousand acres of right-of-way were conveyed to the federal government.<sup>12</sup>

On April 16, 1936 the special board that had been set up to review all previous canal reports, reported: "The benefits to the general public that may be expected from the construction of a sea-level ship canal across Florida, with adequate dimensions and facilities, are fully commensurate with the expenditures involved, and that material collateral damages to agriculture, forestry, and water supply will not result from its construction." The board recommended the completion of the project, with a minimum depth of thirty-three feet and a minimum width of 250 feet. The following year, April 3, 1937, the chief of engineers recommended construction of a thirty-three foot ship canal but asked that the width be set at 400 feet. The total cost was estimated a \$184,471,000.<sup>13</sup>

In early 1936, Michigan Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg, a leading contender for the Republican presidential nomination and an opponent of the canal, called for an investigation of initial construction. The canal had never received an authorization from congress, and Vandenberg began a fight against the project which lasted for several years.<sup>14</sup> Fighting Vandenberg in committee and on the senate floor was Senator Fletcher. He pointed out that the benefit-cost ratio for the canal was 1 to 1.6, which justified the cost: "All things considered, the ratio of cost to benefits of this project will be higher than that of any other project now in existence that I know of or of which we have any record."<sup>15</sup>

Senator Harry S. Truman of Missouri was a staunch supporter of the canal at the time. During the debate on the war department's appropriation bill, which included canal appropriations, he emphasized his longtime interest in the project.<sup>16</sup>

12. *Congressional Record*, 74th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1936, LXXX, Part 4, 3834-35.

13. "Preliminary Study, Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal, 1938," 75th Cong., 1st Sess., *House Document* 194, pp. 38, 40.

14. Senate Subcommittee of the Committee On Commerce, "Hearings On the Florida Ship Canal," 74th Cong., 2nd Sess., on Senate Resolution 210, *passim*.

15. Buckman, "Documentary History," 337.

16. *Ibid.*, 362.

In a film produced by the Florida canal authority he pointed to its value to the Mississippi Valley and Atlantic seaboard states: "I think the canal should be built, and I hope that Congress makes the necessary appropriation for its construction."<sup>17</sup> Congress for the next several years considered completion of the ship canal, and it continued to receive President Roosevelt's endorsement. In a letter to Congressman Joseph J. Mansfield, chairman of the committee on rivers and harbors, January 16, 1939, he wrote: "It has long been my belief that a Florida ship canal will be built one of these days and that the building of it is justified today by commercial and military needs."<sup>18</sup>

With active support from Florida Senators Claude Pepper and Charles O. Andrews, and Congressmen Lex Green, Millard Caldwell, and Joe Hendricks, sentiment for a Florida canal increased. World War II heightened the interest, and congress in early 1942 requested a review by the United States Corps of Engineers on the "advisability of constructing a waterway across northern Florida, of suitable dimensions for barge traffic. . . ." The engineers, in its report of June 12, 1942, recommended construction of a twelve-foot deep canal, having a width of 150 feet, and costing approximately \$44,000,000. It would follow the previously proposed Route 13B. "The value of the barge canal in time of war, together with the prospective benefits to be anticipated in normal times," according to the engineers, "is sufficient to warrant its construction."<sup>19</sup> Five days later, the house began discussions of the bill to construct "a pipe line and a navigable barge channel across Florida," and it passed on a voice vote. A recommittal motion offered by Congressman Pat Cannon of Miami failed by a vote of 205 to 134.<sup>20</sup> The senate took up the bill on July 16, 1942, and although Senator Vandenberg dominated the opposition debate,

17. *Straits of Destiny* was a film produced by canal authority of Florida, 1937. It is filed at the authority's Jacksonville office.

18. House Committee on Rivers and Harbors "Authorizing the Completion of the Construction of the Atlantic-Gulf Ship Canal Across Florida," 76th Cong., 1st Sess., *House Report* 509, p. 1.

19. House Committee on Rivers and Harbors, "Waterway Across Northern Florida for Barge Traffic," 79th Cong., 1st Sess., *House Document* 109.

20. *Congressional Record*, 77th Cong., 2nd Sess., 1942, LXXX, Part 4, 5277, 5306-07.

the measure, under the leadership of Senators Pepper and Andrews, passed the next day.<sup>21</sup> The President signed it into law on July 23, 1942 thus authorizing a barge canal across Florida.

No money was appropriated to begin construction, although Andrews and Pepper had managed to amend the Supplemental National Defense Appropriation legislation so that the President could use any unexpended money in his emergency fund to start the project. This provision was not included in the bill as it passed the house and the conferees failed to allow it.<sup>22</sup> "As it now stands," the *Tampa Tribune* noted some weeks later, "the canal boondoggle is again 'dead'! Whether this 'death' is permanent, or just another case of suspended animation remains to be seen."<sup>23</sup>

John H. Perry, the Florida newspaper publisher and then president of the Western Newspaper Union and American Press Association, strongly supported the construction of the canal as a military necessity. He ran advertisements stressing the need of transporting oil in a protected waterway route.<sup>24</sup> During the war the need of the canal was made more apparent by presence of German submarines off the Gulf and South Atlantic coasts. By January 1943, their activities had seriously reduced the Gulf-Atlantic tanker and dry cargo vessel movements. Some 165 tankers and dry cargo ships - 1,065,000 gross tons of shipping - were lost. Replacement value of these vessels was more than \$965,000,000, in addition to the monetary and strategic value of the lost cargoes. The shortage of America's internal transport capability brought about by the consequent overloading of rail and pipelines and highway transport threatened to assume disaster proportions. The inadequate expedients adopted to remedy this situation amounted to more than \$423,000,000 by the end of 1944.<sup>25</sup> Most important, of course, was the tragic loss of lives as a result of enemy action.

While the economic justification of the canal at times was questionable, the defense value was consistently recognized by the

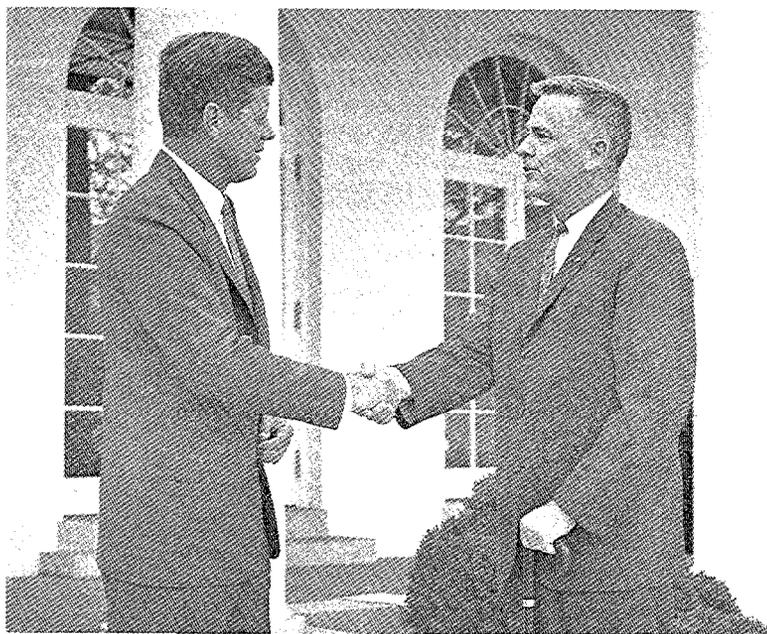
21. *Ibid.*, Part 5, 6229-47, 6285.

22. *Ibid.*, Part 7, 8505.

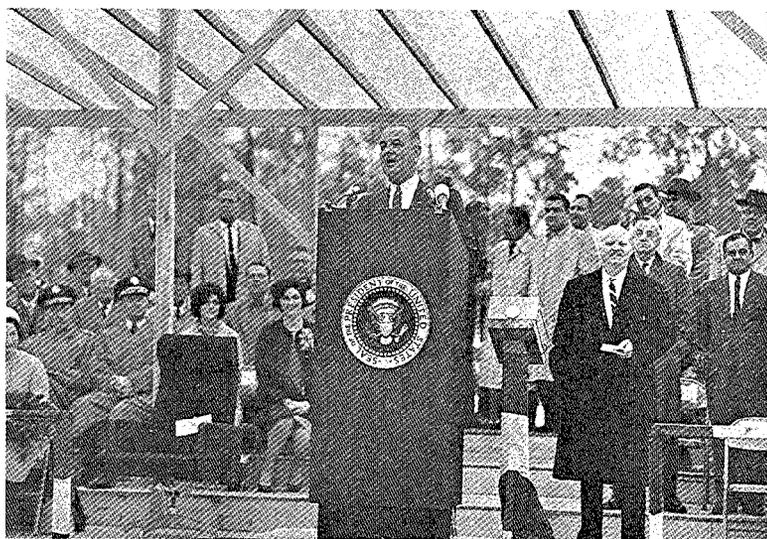
23. *Tampa Tribune*, October 23, 1942.

24. "Here Is How We Can Get Out," advertisement in *Washington Post*, February 24, 1943.

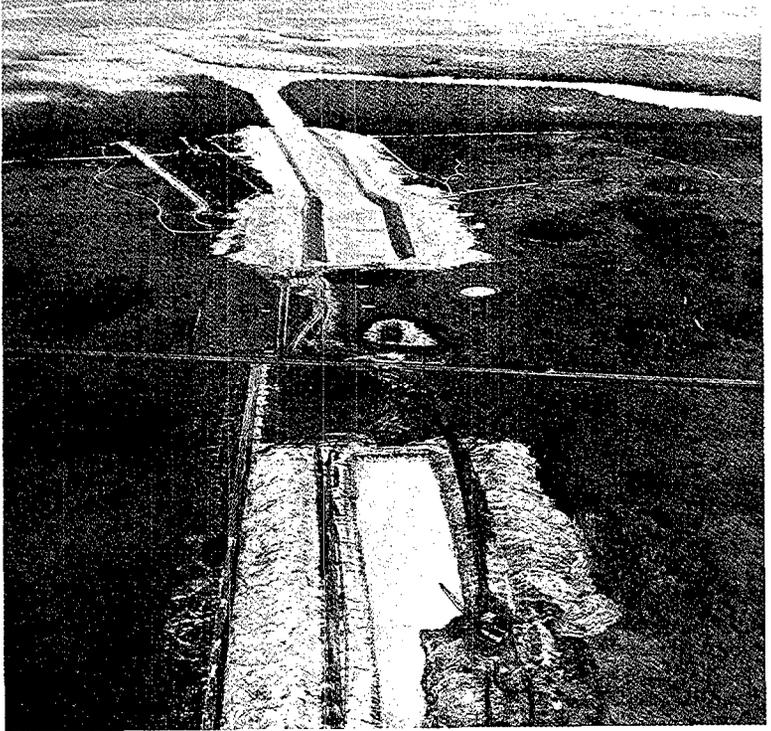
25. Memorandum by Henry H. Buckman, July 7, 1960, Bennett's files, Washington.



*President Kennedy and Congressman Charles E. Bennett,  
White House, 1961*



*President Johnson at Cross-Florida Barge Canal groundbreaking  
ceremonies, February 27, 1964*



*First two miles of Cross-Florida Barge Canal. St. Johns Lock site in center. August 1964*



*Congressman Charles E. Bennett, Governor Farris Bryant, Congressman D. R. Billy Matthews, and Henry H. Buckman at the Eureka Lock (1966)*

military establishment. United States Chief of Engineers, in a hearing before the house subcommittee on appropriations for public works on January 9, 1946, said: "If this canal had been finished during the war time it would have paid for itself several times over."<sup>26</sup> Brigadier General J. L. Person, assistant chief of engineers, wrote: "During World War II, many cargo ships and tankers were lost off the coast of Florida due to enemy action. Many of the cargoes that were lost would and could have been moved by barge or small freighter had the barge canal been in existence at the time. The savings in lives, ships, and valuable and critical cargoes would have been great."<sup>27</sup>

Congress appropriated \$1,400,000 for planning and specifications in the late 1940s and early 1950s, but no actual construction funds were allotted.<sup>28</sup> During the war there had been considerable interest in beginning construction of the canal, but as the engineers pointed out, "it would take three-and-a-half years to construct the waterway," and by that time the war would likely be over. President Roosevelt, in a communication to the house committee on rivers and harbors, stated that detailed construction plans would be prepared "as soon as manpower, material, and equipment shortages are overcome."<sup>29</sup> On March 29, 1945, the secretary of war was informed by the chief of engineers that plans for "the early postwar construction" of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal had been completed, but a request for \$20,000,000 to begin construction was denied by a house committee in 1946, and it never even reached the floor for a vote.<sup>30</sup>

South Florida opposition to the canal continued, but proponents picked up help where they needed it most-in con-

26. House Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, "Hearings on the War Department Civil Functions Appropriation Bill for 1947," 79th Cong., 2nd Sess., 142.

27. J. L. Person to Bennett, July 23, 1958, Bennett's files, Washington.

28. House Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, "Hearings on Cross-Florida Barge Canal," 86th Cong., 1st Sess., Part 3, 169-238.

29. "President Says Work on Florida Canal Depends on End of Shortages," *The Commercial and Financial Chronicle*, July 8, 1943, 194.

30. E. Reybold to Henry L. Stimson, March 29, 1945, corps of engineers, National Records Center, Suitland, Md.; House Subcommittee of the Committee on Appropriations, "Hearings on War Department Civil Functions Appropriation Bill for 1947," 79th Cong., 2nd Sess., 190.

gress, where appropriations are voted. New York Congressman Emanuel Celler, chairman of the house judiciary committee, visited Florida in 1950 and declared that he would do everything he could to help get construction started. He reported that he had discussed the canal project with President Truman and he "wholeheartedly" supported it.<sup>31</sup> A Jacksonville Chamber of Commerce committee, formed to push the canal at the grass roots level, included Admiral Malcolm Fortson, who became managing director of the Florida Ship Canal Authority in 1952. Representative C. Farris Bryant of Ocala, later governor of Florida, and R. N. (Bert) Dosh, editor of the *Ocala Star-Banner*, were among the prominent Floridians, supporting the canal. From the beginning of his service in the House of Representatives in January 1949, Congressman Charles E. Bennett of Jacksonville acted as an effective leader in securing funds and in pushing construction of the canal. On May 16, 1951, he conferred with President Truman about the canal, and following this meeting, the President sent a memorandum to the Department of Defense, in which he affirmed his opinion that "this canal is essential to the welfare of the country."<sup>32</sup> On May 29, 1951, the corps of engineers informed the defense department: "Completion of the canal would . . . permit quick, safe and economical transfer between the east and west coasts of Florida, of floating plant and construction equipment now required to move via the circuitous and dangerous Florida Keys route." The joint chiefs of staff also supported the canal as "an additional and shorter line of communication between the Gulf Coast and the East Coast" that would "reduce exposure of shipping to submarine attack," but they did not want "the military aspects of the proposed problem to . . . be used as the primary basis for decision on this matter."<sup>33</sup> Obviously the canal would need both economic and defense justification to get the necessary appropriations from congress.

By 1954 it was obvious that what was needed was a concentrated campaign of education and public relations throughout Florida in order to gain support for the canal from the

31. *Jacksonville Journal*, February 2, 1950.

32. Memorandum from Truman to department of defense, May 18, 1951. Copy of this memorandum is in Bennett's files, Washington.

33. Robert A. Lovett to Truman, May 29, 1951, *ibid*.

state's full congressional delegation. The threat that building the canal would harm the fresh water table of the state, and that the harbor areas throughout Florida would suffer if the canal was constructed were the two opposition points that needed clarifying. As Admiral Fortson pointed out, "Since approximately 1936, this project has been in a state of suspended animation." It was time for positive action, including the hiring of H. H. Buckman as consultant to the canal authority. No new economic data on the canal had been developed since 1946, and up-to-date information was needed for a renewed canal effort. When Brigadier General E. C. Itschner, assistant chief of engineers, announced in 1954 that "further study of the economic merits of the barge canal is planned," and the chief of engineers, in his annual report that year, removed the project from the "active backlog of authorized projects" and placed it in the category of "deferred for restudy," Congressman Bennett tried to secure funds for an economic restudy. Congress approved the engineers 1956 request for study funds which included an \$11,000 item to reexamine the feasibility of a Florida canal. Since the economics of the Florida project had not been reviewed for ten years, up-to-date information was needed in order to determine its classification as "inactive" or "active."<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, the canal was securing new support in and out of Florida. Florida Senators Holland and Smathers, Governor LeRoy Collins, the Florida State Federated Labor Council, the national AFL-CIO, the National Rivers and Harbors Congress, the Mississippi Valley Association, the Texas and Louisiana Intercoastal Canal Association, and the Florida Waterways Committee were persuasive influences in pushing the project. President Truman restated his support in a letter to Congressman Bennett on July 21, 1958: "I always have been interested in a Cross-Florida Barge Canal. . . . I think this canal should be constructed."<sup>35</sup>

In March 1958, having completed the restudy, the chief of engineers reported that the corps was ready to place the canal on its active projects list, although economic justification was

34. E. C. Itschner to Bennett, May 7, 1954, *ibid.*, Senate, "Hearings on Public Works Appropriation Bill," 89th Cong., 1st Sess., Part 2, 2190; Chief of Engineers *Annual Report, 1954*, 401.

35. Truman to Bennett, July 21, 1958, Bennett's files, Washington.

marginal and final work had not been completed on the economic restudy authorized two years earlier.<sup>36</sup> In May 1958, Florida congressmen and a delegation from the state and supporting waterways associations appeared before the house subcommittee on appropriations for civil works to request an appropriation of \$500,000 to \$1,000,000 to begin construction. No money was made available, but proponents were encouraged when the corps of engineers reported on July 23, 1958, that the project was economically justified with a ratio of benefits to costs of 1.05 to one. The project provided for a channel 107 miles long, twelve feet deep, and at least 150 feet wide with five locks. The cost was estimated to be \$164,600,000, with the non-federal cost estimated at \$5,500,000. The active status of the canal now made it eligible for additional planning and construction funds.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, the railroads, representing almost the last of the organized opposition to the canal, presented an economic restudy of their own which asserted the canal would cost \$552,000,000 over a fifty-year period. The railroads claimed that government estimates were far too low, "that the justification claimed for the Cross-Florida Barge Canal rests upon wholly untenable premises; and the findings and recommendation made by the Corps in its restudy report of January 10, 1958, should be de-authorized and abandoned as warranting no further consideration."<sup>38</sup>

The efforts to get \$160,000 in planning money and \$1,000,000 to start construction in 1960 failed. During the 1960 presidential campaign, John F. Kennedy, the democratic nominee, was urged to personally endorse construction. Shortly before his election, he informed Congressman Bennett that he would be glad to cooperate . . . in making this project a reality. I regard it not only as important to Florida, but to the economy of our entire country, which must fully utilize all of our national resources if we are to achieve necessary economic expansion."<sup>39</sup> President Kennedy was true to his word and requested \$195,000

36. Meeting between Itschner and Bennett, March 17, 1958.

37. Person to Bennett, July 23, 1958, Bennett's files, Washington.

38. Preliminary Analysis of the Restudy Report of the Corps of Engineers, U. S. Army, on the Cross-Florida Barge Canal Project, January 10, 1958, 1 and 23, *ibid.*

39. Kennedy to Bennett, October 1960, *ibid.*

in the 1962 budget to fund the engineering and design work that was needed.<sup>40</sup>

Not only was Florida's congressional delegation now unitedly supporting the canal program, but at least one Florida railroad was pushing construction. Edward Ball, trustee of the Florida East Coast Railway, noted: "In my own contacts in South Florida, I no longer find the opposition that existed a few years ago. The only people I know of today who are not heartily in favor of the Cross-Florida Barge Canal are those who remember the misleading propaganda put out a number of years ago; and some of the railroads, who are opposed to any and all canals."<sup>41</sup> The Florida State Chamber of Commerce, however, kept a hands-off policy; its executive vice-president opposed the organization being "led into the middle of such a red hot dispute."<sup>42</sup>

Congressman Carl Vinson of Georgia, chairman of the house armed services committee, went on record for the appropriation and called for immediate construction of this "very essential element of our national defense."<sup>43</sup> The house appropriations committee, however, reduced the amount to \$50,000 and earmarked it for another economic study. The senate voted \$495,000, and in the conference this amount was kept, but for the economic restudy rather than for preconstruction planning.<sup>44</sup> The engineers' survey showed a revised cost of construction of \$134,500,000. In addition to their own study, the engineers retained the Cambridge, Massachusetts firm, Arthur D. Little Company, to evaluate the transportation benefits of the canal. On the basis of the firm's findings and their own survey the engineers recommended that the canal be built.<sup>45</sup> In January 1962, President Kennedy included an item of \$205,000 for final planning funds for the canal in his 1963 budget. However, the house appropriations committee not only voted against the President's request, but asked that the legislative committees and

40. Corps of Engineers, *Civil Works, Budget for Fiscal Year 1962*, March 1961, 3.

41. Ed Ball to Bennett, February 22, 1961, Bennett's files, Washington.

42. Harold Colee to Bennett, January 23, 1961, *ibid.*

43. Carl Vinson to Bennett, June 20, 1961, *ibid.*

44. *Congressional Record*, 87th Cong., 1st Sess., CVII, Part 16, 21270. 21270.

45. House Appropriations Subcommittee on Public Works, "Hearings on Public Works Appropriations Bill," 87th Cong., 1st Sess., Part 4, 534; Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, June 20, 1962.

congress "reaffirm its authorization before it is again presented."<sup>46</sup> The engineers corps insisted that the canal had been economically justified in 1958, and again in 1962, and that no further authorization was needed. Senator Holland, a member of the senate committee on appropriations, was able to keep the planning money in the senate appropriations bill.<sup>47</sup> After a discussion with Congressman Bennett on October 3, 1962, President Kennedy telephoned congressional leaders, including Speaker John W. McCormack and Majority Leader Carl Albert and urged their active support for this measure as its defeat would mean that the canal might be indefinitely postponed.<sup>48</sup>

The vote by the house was the deciding action on the beginning construction of the canal; no controversy occurred in the eighty-eighth congress when construction money was first voted. In the closing days of the eighty-seventh congress, in October 1962, house and senate conferees had met on the public works appropriations bill, but had failed to come to an agreement. The senate conferees insisted on the Florida canal item, while the house conferees opposed it since it was not included in the house bill. By a voice vote, the house agreed to the conference report. On an amendment, which included the canal item, the house overrode its conferees by a voice vote. Appropriations Chairman Clarence Cannon demanded a quorum call on October 12, 1962. Many congressmen, anticipating adjournment, already had departed from Washington and a quorum was not present; they had to return for a final session next day. When the house assembled at noon, Congressman Robert L. F. Sikes of Crestview, a member of the appropriations committee, introduced an amendment to the public works appropriations bill which contained something for Oregon, Texas, Washington, Illinois, in addition to the canal funds for Florida. The house voted on the items and overrode Cannon—one of the few times this had happened to him in his many years in congress.<sup>49</sup>

---

46. House, "Public Works Appropriations Bill, 1963," 87th Cong., 2nd Sess., *House Report* 2223, p. 39.

47. *Congressional Record*, 87th Cong., 2nd Sess., 21409.

48. Bennett to Farris Bryant, April 28, 1964, Presidential Papers, National Archives, 1962.

49. *Congressional Record*, 87th Cong., 2nd Sess., CVIII, Part 17, 22155, and CVIII, Part 6, 22195.

The next step in building the canal was securing initial construction funds. There were two conferences with President Kennedy in 1963, dealing with the matter of placing construction funds in the budget. At a White House meeting on May 22, 1963, the President assured Congressman Bennett that "the canal will be built; and when it is built, I will be a spender, and you and Senator Holland and Senator Smathers will be heroes."<sup>50</sup>

Again, on June 20, 1963, he explained to a Florida delegation that he wanted the canal constructed, but that he had not yet been able to get Bureau of the Budget approval. When Congressman Bennett reminded the President that he controlled the Bureau of the Budget, he laughingly agreed, and according to Bennett, he "picked up the telephone and called someone in the Bureau of the Budget and asked if he could expect a letter to come to him stating approval by the bureau of the item for beginning construction funds for the canal. Apparently the answer was in the negative, whereupon the President said in a nice but firm tone that, under the circumstances, he wanted them to send him a letter that night approving the beginning construction money for the canal. He was not unpleasant about it, but there was no doubt that he was telling them what to do, and this was his prerogative."<sup>51</sup> Perhaps this action by President Kennedy was one of the most effective turning points for the success of the canal. While Kennedy was on a visit to West Germany, June 24, 1963, he sent a budget amendment to congress, requesting \$1,000,000 to initiate construction of the canal, pointing out that, "the Cross-Florida project will provide a major link interconnecting the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Intracoastal Waterways, thereby affording a more direct and protected route for waterborne bulk cargoes. The project will provide an impetus to the economy of the Southeastern United States and augment strategic materials transport capability in the event of a national emergency."<sup>52</sup>

50. Kennedy to Bennett, quoted in "Congressman Charles E. Bennett Newsletter," May 30, 1963.

51. Bennett to Bryant, April 28, 1964; "Canal Fate in House," *Orlando Sentinel*, June 22, 1963.

52. House, "Amendment to Budget for Corps of Engineers, Civil, Department of Army," 88th Cong., 1st Sess., *House Document* 128, 2.

The initial construction request passed congress, although Kennedy, the man most responsible for its approval, was not alive to dig the first spade of earth at the groundbreaking ceremonies in 1964. After his tragic death, a resolution was introduced in congress naming the Cross-Florida Barge Canal the John F. Kennedy Canal.<sup>53</sup> During the last week of 1963, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the measure appropriating the funds to begin canal construction. Two months later, on February 27, 1964, he pressed a button exploding a dynamite charge to mark the ceremonial start of construction of the 107-mile long waterway. On that occasion President Johnson said: "Today, we accept another challenge - we make use of another natural resource. We will construct this canal across Northern Florida to shorten navigation distances between our Atlantic and Gulf coasts. When this canal is completed, it will spark new and permanent economic growth. It will accelerate business and industry to locate along its banks. It will open up new recreation areas. I wish all of you - and the canal - Godspeed."<sup>54</sup>

Congress authorized \$4,000,000 for continuing construction in 1965, \$10,000,000 in 1966, \$16,000,000 in 1967, and \$11,400,000 in 1968. In the budget for the fiscal year 1969, President Johnson, faced with the ballooning cost of the Vietnam war and domestic programs, only recommended \$4,600,000 for continued canal construction. This caused a lot of consternation in Florida. State Conservation Director Randolph Hodges claimed that the reduction of funds would push completion of the waterway into the 1980s, and L. C. Ringhaver, chairman of the State Canal Authority, insisted that "further delays are Particularly adverse to the overall economy of the entire state of Florida."<sup>55</sup> The canal authority had already run into some financial difficulties in 1967, and was forced to borrow \$1,600,000 through the Florida Inland Navigation District on a short-term basis to tide the canal work over until more federal funds became available.

53. Bennett memorandum to Florida congressional delegation, November 26, 1963, Bennett's files, Washington.

54. Jacksonville *Florida Times-Union*, February 29, 1964.

55. *Ibid.*, January 31, 1968, February 2, 1968.

As of January 1968, three of the canal's five navigation locks were completed, and another was under construction. Sixty-eight per cent of the overall right of way for the entire project had been purchased, although a majority of the digging remained to be done. It is obvious that while construction was not moving along as rapidly as first projected by the engineers and designers, the Cross-Florida Barge Canal was underway! Draglines and dredges had replaced paper sketches, and federal funds had replaced futile forays to the appropriations committees of congress. A dream that began more than 400 years ago was finally becoming a Florida reality.