

First floor corridor in what was then Library East and is now the Smathers Library, with tables, chairs, and newspapers, 1960; person accessing card catalog in background.

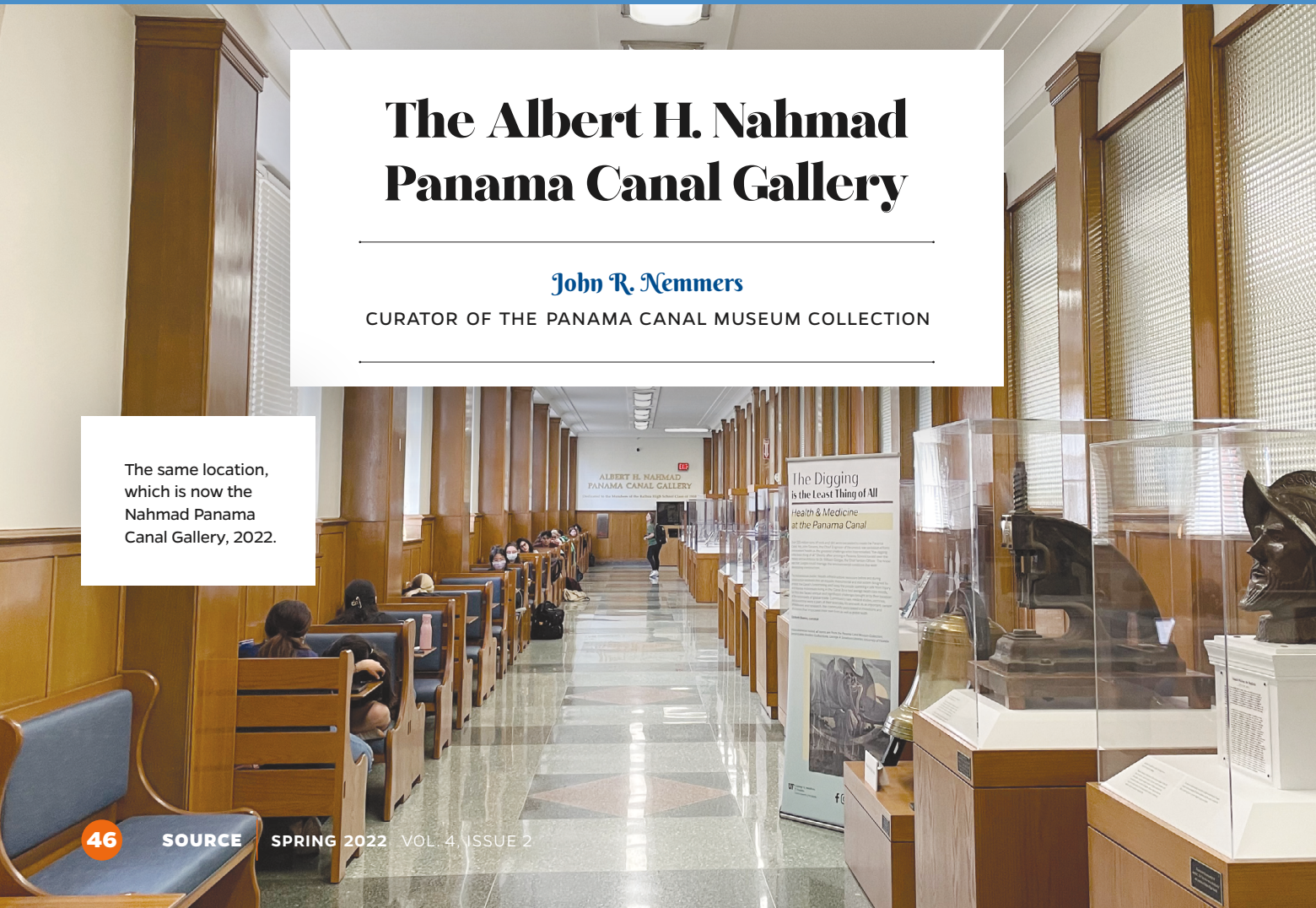
From a Place to Study, to Studies of a Place & Era.

# The Albert H. Nahmad Panama Canal Gallery

*John R. Nemmers*

CURATOR OF THE PANAMA CANAL MUSEUM COLLECTION

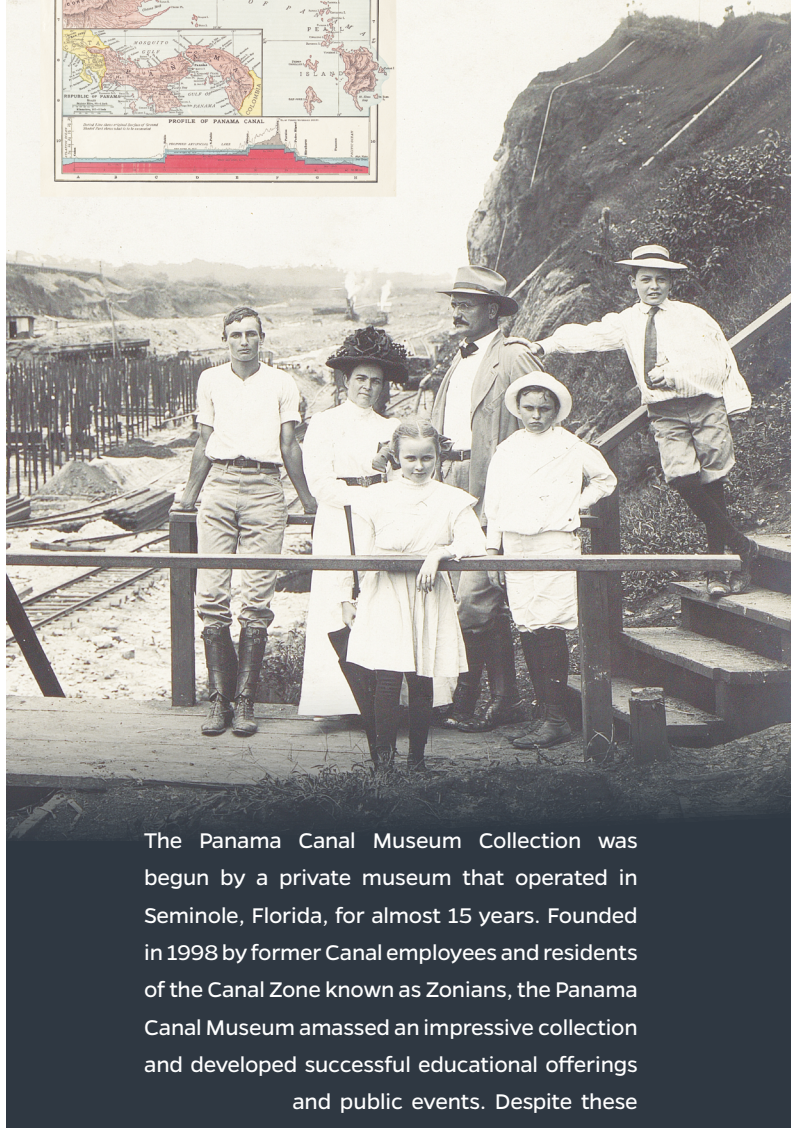
The same location,  
which is now the  
Nahmad Panama  
Canal Gallery, 2022.



The Albert H. Nahmad Panama Canal Gallery opened to the public in 2017 as a venue for exhibitions on the history of the Canal featuring objects from the Panama Canal Museum Collection (PCMC). The Gallery is located in a wide, prominent hallway on the first floor of the Smathers Library Building, which is the oldest library building on campus and current home of the PCMC and the Department of Special & Area Studies Collections (SASC). Originally allowing access to card catalog drawers for many years, this corridor was an attractive but underutilized space in a terrific location, stretching between the main entrance and the south entrance of the building. Although SASC had displayed exhibits in the hallway in previous years, these temporary exhibits were few and far between and the corridor was vacant for the most part.

In 2011, the Libraries created tables and seats in the hallway, which quickly became popular with students looking for a quiet place to study. A few years later in 2016, SASC began discussing the possibility of a gallery for the PCMC, and it quickly became obvious that the corridor was the ideal location. Not only would the corridor provide plenty of space for exhibits, it would have high visibility because of its location on the main floor and because of the popularity of the study seating. Besides, there is something fitting about creating a corridor gallery in a historic library building for exhibits about a historic transportation corridor. Once the corridor was selected as the location, it took less than a year to plan and implement the gallery, including fundraising and the design and installation of exhibit cases.

The Gallery was made possible with the generous support of several individuals and groups. Albert H. Nahmad, former member of the Panama Canal Commission and the Panama Canal



The Panama Canal Museum Collection was begun by a private museum that operated in Seminole, Florida, for almost 15 years. Founded in 1998 by former Canal employees and residents of the Canal Zone known as Zonians, the Panama Canal Museum amassed an impressive collection and developed successful educational offerings and public events. Despite these achievements, Museum leaders recognized the need to ensure the long-term sustainability of the collection and so in 2012 the Museum closed its doors and transferred its entire collection of approximately 15,000 objects to UF.



Right: Panama Canal Exhibition Displays.



Above: Tiffany & Co. press, Cristobal HS Victory Bell from exhibit.

Above: Isthmian Canal Commission seal created by Tiffany & Co.



Above: An American Canal in Panama exhibition.



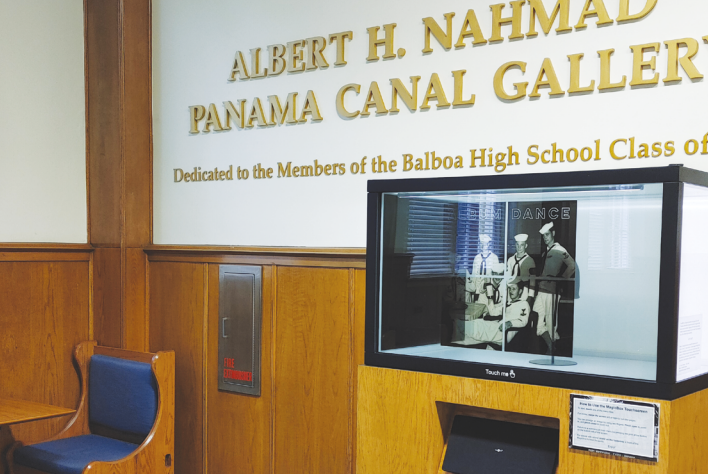
Above: *Between Two Oceans* exhibition case.



Above: *Are We Next? Fear and Social Roles in World War II* exhibition case.

Authority Advisory Board, endowed the Panama Canal Gallery Exhibit Fund and dedicated the Gallery to his classmates in the 1958 class of Balboa High School in the former Canal Zone. His generosity ensures that the Nahmad Gallery and its interpretive exhibition program will have funding far into the future. We also were overwhelmed with the support we received from the community of Zonians, those individuals who had lived and worked in the Canal Zone. A number of these individuals enthusiastically contributed funds to acquire an incredible eighteen exhibit cases. Many of these donations were made in memory or honor of family members and friends, and all donors and honorees are acknowledged with plaques on the cases and also on a digital monitor at the Gallery entrance.

The annual exhibitions are on display for approximately eleven months, with each new exhibition opening in March or April. The inaugural exhibition, *Between Two Oceans*, opened in April 2017 and featured hundreds of objects documenting the American Era of the Canal. Following that first exhibition, the Gallery has had exhibitions covering topics such as food and cuisine in the Canal Zone, World War II, and international relations between the U.S. and Panama, including the end of the Canal Zone and the transfer of the Canal from the U.S. to Panama. All of the exhibitions focus on people, and curators frequently use personal letters and excerpts from oral history interviews in order to tell stories using the words of the people who lived and worked on the Canal. The exhibits feature a wide variety of objects, including everything from books and photos to maps and clothing and even board games and dynamite blasting tubes.



Above: MagicBox exhibit case.




Above: Panama Canal Society and PCMC Friends visitors at the 2017 Opening of the Gallery.

One exhibit case is very different from the others because it uses touch-screen technology to allow visitors to interact with objects. Using the MagicBox, visitors can browse digital photo albums and school yearbooks, or view dozens of postcards or letters. This experience would not be possible in the traditional exhibit case where visitors viewing a photo album, for example, can only see the page currently on display. The MagicBox allows visitors to flip through pages and zoom in to see details of images while ensuring the security and preservation of the original object.

While most of the nineteen exhibit cases in the Gallery rotate annually with each new exhibition, there are a few special objects on display continually. One object that is popular with visitors is a press with the official seal of the Isthmian Canal Commission (ICC), which was designed by Tiffany & Company around 1905 when U.S. construction of the Canal was just starting. The two other objects on display regularly have ties to two former Canal Zone schools. The first is a bust of Vasco Núñez de Balboa created by artist Al Sprague for Balboa High School on the Pacific side of the Canal, and the second is the bell for Cristobal

High School on the Atlantic side.

The Gallery certainly has received a lot of visitors in the five years since it opened, averaging 68,000 visitors each calendar year. Of course, many visitors are students taking advantage of the study seating in the corridor, which includes tables and over 35 seats that are frequently fully occupied during the Fall and Spring semesters. PCMC curators and other librarians regularly provide tours to classes, donors, and international visitors, and the Gallery's proximity to the Map & Imagery Library and to Room 100, which is the major space in the Libraries for large group activities such as conferences and other events, ensures regular Gallery traffic. Additionally, the annual exhibition openings occur each Spring in conjunction with a Joint Meeting of the Panama Canal Society and the Friends of the PCMC, so the Gallery receives regular visits from an audience who are extremely passionate about Canal history.

The Nahmad Gallery has been very successful in the five years it has been open, and the exhibition program will continue to raise awareness about the history of the Canal and provide both education and entertainment for thousands of visitors. 



Above: Albert H. Nahmad and his family interact with the MagicBox exhibit case.



Above: An American Canal in Panama exhibition. Note: old lettering above door to, "Bibliography" depository.