

John F. Stevens

Of all the “giants” who strode Skykomish Valley few left a greater footprint on the nation or the world than John Frank Stevens. Born and raised in Maine, in 1873 he left Maine State Normal (now U. of M. at Farmington) after two years to make his way in “the west,” where he found work at the city engineer’s office in Minneapolis. Despite a lack of engineering schooling, he quickly became a self-taught star in the field, and within a decade he was in charge of building a railroad line from Duluth, MN to Sault Ste Marie, MI.

Numerous accounts incorrectly state he was “hired” by Empire Builder James J. Hill in 1889 as a locating engineer for Great Northern Railway. SHS research establishes the two did not meet until a year after Stevens located the much-acclaimed route across the Rocky Mountains at Marias Pass in Montana. Hill came west to view the switchback system Stevens had designed to traverse the Cascade Mountains through the pass that would ultimately bear his name.



With a visage resembling a mature Paul Newman and the air of an extremely accomplished man, John F. Stevens strikes a handsome pose. Most likely this photo was done when he was in his 70s, after his return from six years in China and Manchuria. Throughout his later years Stevens maintained an active correspondence with John Maloney, founder of Skykomish.

Hill was displeased Stevens’ route violated his established requirements for both curvature and grade, but in the end agreed it was the only way a railroad could be built quickly and begin creating revenue. It took a crew of 3000 men working 12 hours a day for two years to complete the route from Wenatchee to Seattle including those eight switchbacks, sharp curves, and grades up to four percent in places near the summit.

At the same time he was planning the complicated switchback route required to complete the line within the timeframe Hill demanded, Stevens identified the precise route of the original Cascade Tunnel, the building of which began just a few years after the line to Seattle opened in 1893.

When one considers how primitive camping equipment was in 1890, the idea of a lone hiker clambering up and down the largely uncharted Cascade Range to find the best route for a railroad, one can only imagine the kind of man who relished such a challenge. One account talks of his standing under a tree stamping his feet all night in a snowstorm awaiting dawn, knowing that if he went to sleep he’d likely freeze to death. An ally and comrade in those “Stevens Pass years” was John Maloney, founder of

Skykomish, who had been hired by Stevens as a packer in 1890 from his homestead at Lake Chelan. Stevens encouraged Maloney to claim the flat section of river bottom where Skykomish is today.

Hill promoted Stevens to chief engineer in 1895 and later to general manager. All in all he built more than 1000 miles of railroad for GNRy in the eight years he worked in that position, in addition to being a business partner with Maloney and others in mines and mills in Skykomish Valley

Because Washington's first territorial governor was Isaac Stevens, several places in the state such as Stevens County are named for the governor, whereas Stevens Pass is named for John F.

In 1903 he left GNRy and soon became vice-president of the Chicago, Rock Island, and Pacific Railroad, but in 1905, supposedly at the recommendation of J. J. Hill, President Teddy Roosevelt appointed Stevens chief engineer on the Panama Canal.

The French had begun a concerted effort to construct a canal in 1881, and eight years of various failures during which they spent a quarter of a billion US\$ and lost an estimated 22,000 lives to disease and accidents followed. A subsequent French endeavor spent an additional futile decade failing to build a canal. After negotiations, machinations, and significant wheeling and dealing (Google "building Panama Canal," it's a remarkable tale) the US bought out the French and essentially created the nation of Panama.

The original chief engineer assigned to the task lasted 13 months before resigning abruptly, having been overwhelmed by enormity of it all. When Stevens arrived he found a project in disarray, plans that weren't feasible, morale at rock bottom, and a workforce riddled by disease. His first steps were to stop digging, to bring in a new food wagon and create better working and living conditions for the crew, and give maximum support to his sanitation officer who was trying to eradicate the yellow fever and malaria that were decimating the men.

Next Stevens did his own surveys and concluded the "sea level canal" idea could never be made to work. It took him less than a year to convince Theodore Roosevelt of the necessity of a locks system that included creating at the time both the largest dam and the largest man-made lake in the world.

Early on he recognized the canal was a major railroad project as well, with massive amounts of goods (earth) to be moved, at which point he hired former colleague 27-yr-old Ralph Budd to re-engineer and build up the existing railroad system to be able to function as a giant conveyor belt for excavated dirt. Budd went on to be the youngest RR president at age 40 when he was named president of GNRy in 1919.



Stevens in Panama, where he is said to have been popular with the men because he improved their food and living conditions and got his hands dirty.

Stevens took the canal job with the proviso he would stay with it until he could reliably predict either success or failure according to his own judgment. After just 20 months in Panama, a time during which he entirely reorganized both the project and the process, earned the loyalty and respect of the workforce, convinced the President and lobbied Congress to take the totally new "lock" system approach, and put everything in motion so it was clear the canal could and would be built, he resigned. It would be another seven years before the canal would open and be named one of the seven wonders of the modern world by the American Society of Civil Engineers, but the person who made it happen was John F. Stevens

He returned to the US and to railroading. In 1917 he was selected to chair of a board of prominent US rail experts sent to Russia, then under a post-czarist provisional government, to bring order to a rail system in total chaos. When the Soviets overthrew the provisional government the board's work ceased, but Stevens remained in Allied-occupied Manchuria in various capacities with both the Chinese Eastern and Siberian railways until 1923. Although he was 70 when he returned and largely retired, he continued to consult on rail and other engineering projects for the next 20 years.

Throughout his life he maintained a friendship and correspondence with John Maloney. SHS has copies of numerous hand-written letters from Stevens to Maloney written in the '30s being sad that they'd likely never again hike those hills or battle the elements the way they once had.

This article by Warren Carlson was originally written for and appeared in *The Index Wall*