Who was Hiram M. Chittenden?

Major Hiram Martin Chittenden was the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Seattle district engineer from April 1906 to September 1908. He retired as a brigadier general in 1910. Hiram was responsible for the locks being constructed of concrete instead of wood; for a dual lock design instead of a single lock; and for eliminating the proposed lock at the eastern end of the canal, consequently lowering the level of Lake Washington and preventing flooding.

When Hiram M. Chittenden arrived in 1906 as district engineer for the Corps' Seattle District, he was alarmed to find a canal scheme underway that called for a wooden lock. He was sure a wooden lock would eventually collapse, causing a disaster. And so he began what he considered his greatest service to the canal--shifting public support to a plan calling for a canal with twin concrete locks. He succeeded.

By the time work began on the locks project in 1911, ill health had already forced Chittenden to retire from the Corps. As an accomplished writer, Chittenden's literary works pioneered the recording of western history. Many of his books, including *American Fur Trade of the Far West* and *Yellowstone National Park*, have yet to be surpassed. General Chittenden died in 1917 at the age of 59. His work in Seattle was only a part of his long list of accomplishments. He was well known throughout the

west for his engineering achievements, including surveying in Yellowstone National Park, preparing the way for flood control in the Missouri Valley, and serving as one of the first Port of Seattle commissioners.

A recorded speech by "Hiram"

Hiram Chittenden speaking as district engineer for the Seattle District U.S. Army Corps of Engineers: "I knew this would be my last assignment with the Corps, and I knew the lock and canal was the most important project at hand, so I was determined to complete it as my final achievement. But it turned out to be more difficult than I had imagined. The plan that was being acted upon when I arrived called for a wooden lock, which could never have been built on the basis of safety. Sooner or later it would have collapsed, draining Lake Washington into Puget Sound. So I labored to turn public opinion and was finally rewarded with acceptance of my plan, which called for concrete to be used instead of wood. And two locks would be built--one for small boats and one for larger vessels. The smallest boat that may pass through the locks requires nearly as much time and just as much power and water to pass as the largest vessel that the lock will take. To use a great lock for such small craft must necessarily be a large source of waste. I also eliminated the lock on the east end of the canal, thus lowering Lake Washington and reducing the chance of flooding in the valleys to the south. Besides, the cost of constructing the canal would be largely reduced by the elimination of that lock.

elimination of that work.

"But that's just part of my story. My first assignment after graduating from engineering school was preparing the way for flood control in the Missouri Valley. Looking around my office you can tell that I was involved in many other projects for the Corps over my years of service. I supervised the building of the 14-mile tourist road up to Mt. Rainier, and served on the commission that drew up boundaries for Yosemite National Park. Above my desk there's a set of pictures, Roosevelt Arch, Chittenden Bridge, Golden Gate Viaduct, and other reminders of the years I spent designing and building roads and bridges at Yellowstone National Park. Among the books on my desk are three that I authored, including a copy of the *American Fur Trade of the Far West*, which I believe will be in use for a long time.

"I would have liked to have overseen construction of my final project, the canal and locks to benefit the city of Seattle, but ill health caused me to give up my command in 1908 and to retire from the Corps in 1910. I continued to pursue my interest in the canal and port and became the first director of the Port of Seattle."

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