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By Lorene Lambert

VOLUME 2

World History 1850–2025

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Our Neighbors: Their Stories

Volume 2
World History from 1850–2025

By Lorene M. Lambert

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Contents

Chapter 1

Sailing through the Sand

Have any of you ever wished that you could ride a camel? Imagine clambering aboard one of those grumpy beasts and setting off across the sands of the Sinai Peninsula, that great triangle of desert that stretches from the Mediterranean Sea down to the Red Sea. You might be gently humping along, seeing nothing for miles around but rocky outcrops and sandy dunes, pretending to be Moses leading the Israelites out of Egypt, when suddenly, you pull your camel to a stop and rub your eyes disbelievingly. What is it that you are seeing? For there ahead of you is a giant ship, an oil tanker, gliding serenely through the desert dunes! How can this be? Quickly you send your camel shambling forward again, and, as you climb the last dune, you see the answer to this riddle: the ship is sailing in a huge canal, which stretches to the north and south as far as you can see. Beyond the far bank, the land of Egypt spreads in all its ancient glory, and you can see settlements and the green of palm trees along the canal's Egyptian shore. The huge oil tanker sails on, and, as you look to the south, you can see another coming, and another behind that one, a line of ships moving ever northward to the Mediterranean.

The dream of ships sailing through the desert is not a new one. In ancient times, the pharaohs of Egypt looked thoughtfully

at the narrow neck of land that separated the Nile River from the Red Sea. It was only 60 miles, and there were several lakes along the way. What if the river could be connected to the lakes, and the lakes to the Sea? First one pharaoh and then another, over the course of hundreds of years, sent slaves and workers to dig. Sometimes they were successful, and the resulting canal would be used for many years, but always, in the end, the desert would overcome the will of man, filling the canal with its shifting sands and making travel through it impossible again. Men continued to try, though. When the Persian emperor Darius conquered Egypt, one of the first things he did was order his workmen to dig out the canal. When Rome ruled Egypt, her warships sailed the canal. And 1,000 years later, when the French conqueror Napoleon gained control of Egypt, can you guess what one of his purposes there might be? Oh yes, the canal! In 1799, he sent his surveyors out to determine the exact site of the ancient waterway. He dreamed of ships sailing easily from Europe to Asia through a French canal, and of all the money he would collect from them in payment for such passage! But his scientists told him that the project was impossible, and so, reluctantly, he did not pursue it.

Still the dream did not die. In 1832, it captured the imagination of a young Frenchman named Ferdinand de Lesseps.

Ferdinand managed *engineers*, which are a special kind of builder who figures out how to construct something so that it works for a certain purpose. In 1832, he was living in Cairo, Egypt, working as a representative of the French government. One day, idly searching for something to read, he opened up a package of books that had been sent to him by a friend. Inside he found a report written by one of Napoleon's surveyors, telling the story of the ancient canal and the traces of it that the surveyors had found.

Ferdinand was transfixed by this idea. A canal through the desert! He grew more excited as he thought about it. What if this canal could connect the Red Sea, not with the Nile River,

but with the Mediterranean? Quickly, he checked his maps and performed some calculations. Yes, the distance was only 100 miles. Surely it could be done! Such a canal would save immense amounts of time and cost, because ships would no longer have to sail all the way around the tip of Africa to go back and forth between Europe and Asia. A trip through the canal would spare them almost 6,000 miles of sailing!

A great desire filled the heart of Ferdinand de Lesseps: he wanted to build this canal. But life's demands and the requirements of his job with the French government filled his time. For the next 20 years, however much the canal may have occupied his thoughts, Ferdinand was obliged to keep his plans to himself. He was posted to different spots all across the globe and did not return to Egypt until 1854.

In that year, the land of the pharaohs was under the rule of the Ottoman Turks, about whom you have, no doubt, read. But the Turks had little interest in truly ruling there and had instead appointed a viceroy, or substitute ruler, named Mohammed Said. Now, this Said happened to be a very old friend of Ferdinand de Lesseps. When Ferdinand heard that Said was now ruler of Egypt, he traveled there immediately and presented his friend with his plan for a canal. Said approved of it at once, but he told Ferdinand that he could not begin to build until he also received permission from the Ottoman Sultan. And, he said, you will have to find a way to pay for it!

These were both rather difficult problems for Ferdinand to solve. The Ottoman Sultan was not disposed to look upon the canal with a friendly eye. And building the canal would be very expensive indeed.

Reasoning that he could do nothing to influence the mind of a Sultan so far away, Ferdinand concentrated on the money problem. He decided to sell shares in the canal; this means that, for a certain amount of money, any person could buy a tiny portion of the canal. Then, from the profits that the canal would

make by charging a toll for every ship that passed through it, the people who had bought shares would be paid back both what they had spent and a little extra. Ferdinand went throughout France selling shares, persuading his countrymen that building this canal would only increase the glory of France. It was the patriotic duty of every Frenchman to support it, he cried. Many of them agreed, and about half of the shares in the canal were bought by the people of France.

At this point, Ferdinand had $20 million. I know that that sounds like a great deal of money, but it was actually only half of what he needed. Nevertheless, and without waiting any longer to get permission from the Sultan, Ferdinand began to dig. Like the ancient pharaohs and King Darius, Ferdinand went to battle against the desert sand.

A strip of land separating two bodies of water is called an *isthmus*, and the particular strip of land that Ferdinand was attacking is called the Isthmus of Suez. If you look for it on a globe, you will see it, with Egypt on one side and the Sinai desert on the other, a tiny sliver of land, a fragile splinter between the huge Mediterranean and the questing finger of the Red Sea. It does not look like much of anything at all, compared to the immensity of the globe: a mere 100 miles of sand. But now you must imagine 100 miles of sand, where each bucketful must be moved by hand and a huge trench dug, big enough to float an ocean-going ship. That was the challenge that Ferdinand was facing.

He saw at once that he must find every possible shortcut. Like the pharaohs before him, he planned to take advantage of the lakes along the way; there are five of them, in a rough line north to south. Ferdinand decided that he would connect those five lakes to each other, and then dig the canal outwards both ways to join with the Seas on either end. The lakes would also provide a place for ships to pass each other, so that traffic on the canal could go both ways, but the canal itself would only have

to be wide enough for one ship at a time. Still, even using the lakes, the workers would have to move 100 million tons of sand.

Wielding his own pickaxe, on a hot spring morning in 1859, Ferdinand led a small crowd of 150 workers to the edge of the first lake, Lake Manzala. A ragged cheer went up as Ferdinand swung his axe and dug the first bucketful of sand from the damp lake shore. Then he turned to the workmen, and they too began to dig. It was very slow at first. The workmen had to scoop mud up from the bottom of the lake and pile it along the edges of the trench that they were building. The mud dried as hard as cement in the fierce desert sun and made the edges of the canal sturdy enough to use as roads. Throughout the next few years, the laborers continued to dig the canal by hand, as Ferdinand traveled throughout Europe, trying to sell more shares. Finally, by 1864, he had enough money to buy machinery to help with the digging, and the work began to go more quickly. The giant digging machines helped Ferdinand to finally defeat the desert's shifting sands.

Up at the northern end of the canal, on the Mediterranean Sea, a town was springing up. It was named Port Said, after the viceroy of Egypt. Workers there were building a harbor, making the sea floor deeper so that ships could dock before beginning their journey down the canal. As the canal grew, other towns and settlements began to blossom along its banks, and gardens and orchards were planted. Animals began to arrive, making their homes along the water where before only barren sand had whispered.

After 10 years, the Suez Canal was complete. It opened in November 1869: 100 miles long, 175 feet wide, and 26 feet deep, big enough for a large ship. By using the canal, and the Transcontinental Railroad that had been completed in the United States six months earlier, a traveler could circle the entire world faster than had ever before been possible. Ships of all nations began to use the canal at once, and world travel has been

forever changed by its construction. Today it is even bigger: it is 1,026 feet wide, and more than 75 feet deep.

In Port Said, for many years after the canal was opened, a granite statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps stood near its northern mouth. The stony eyes looked ever onward as the ships sailed through the sand and out into the Mediterranean. At the statue's base were carved these words: "To open the world to all people." That was Ferdinand de Lessep's dream, and it was fulfilled.

Chapter 2

A Tower of Air and Iron

In 1864, when the Suez Canal was under construction, a young Frenchman named Gustave journeyed all the way from Paris to study it. Gustave, you see, was a builder, an engineer just like Ferdinand de Lesseps. An engineer must think of all the different ways that his creation could be used, all the different problems that it might encounter, and then build it so that it meets every challenge. Being an engineer is like being a solver of puzzles.

As Gustave studied the canal that day, he was especially interested in its metalwork, for he loved to build with metal. He had only recently built an iron railway bridge over the Garonne, one of France's most turbulent rivers. Building bridges was a dangerous occupation, and building with iron was even more so, because, in 1864, iron was still a fairly new material to work with. While building his giant bridge, Gustave had needed to invent new ways to curve and brace the iron, so that it would support the heavy burden of the bridge's weight. Gustave had planned every aspect of his bridge, making many drawings and plans. In fact, Gustave had planned the bridge so carefully that the only problem that arose during the whole time he was building it was that one worker became careless, and slipped and fell into the wild Garonne River. Gustave himself had been

obliged to carefully remove his coat and shoes, and then dive in to rescue his man!

The placid surface of the Suez Canal was nothing like the crashing waves of the river. But both the canal and the river had been conquered by metal, and Gustave knew that iron would be able to conquer even greater challenges!

So he left Egypt and returned to his office in Paris. He thought about iron all the time—new ways to make arches and supports, and girders and columns, so that his iron structures could be taller and broader and bigger. As Gustave's skill with iron grew, he was hired for larger, more complicated projects: huge railway bridges, giant iron skeletons for train stations and churches. Soon Gustave and his iron beams could be found in almost any corner of the world, solving construction problems that had never been tackled before.

For instance, in 1879, a French railroad company asked Gustave to build a huge, arched bridge over a canyon 400 feet deep. The finished bridge would be almost 2,000 feet long: one of the highest and longest bridges in the world! Gustave accepted this challenge, and he sat in his office for many days, thinking about iron and also thinking about wind. Gustave had good reason to be concerned about wind. Let me tell you why.

Just a year before, in 1878, a great iron bridge had been built in Scotland, not by Gustave but by an Englishman named Thomas Bouch. It was called the Tay Bridge, and the newspapers called it "a marvel of the ages." But Mr. Bouch had not properly considered the wind. I wonder if you have ever thought about it. I am sure that you have stood outside on a blustery day and felt the force of the wind in a particularly strong gust. You can understand, then, that the bigger a thing may be, the stronger the wind will push against it. Can you imagine the force of the wind pushing against a giant iron bridge? But Mr. Bouch had not imagined it, not correctly. And so, one night, a mighty storm

blew up, and the Tay Bridge collapsed, just when a train was crossing it, and everyone on board that train was killed.

Gustave was determined never to make such a mistake. For the rest of his life, he thought about wind almost as much as he thought about iron.

And so he planned most carefully for his giant canyon bridge. He tested the iron to see how it would act both in the hot summer sun and the freezing gales of winter. He visited the foundry, which is the place where iron is created from melted ore, and inspected each piece of the bridge as it was made. Again he made hundreds of drawings and planned the arch so that it would be as sturdy as possible. Because the canyon was so deep, he had to build the arch in two parts, one from each side. Gustave's plans were so precise that the two sides of the arch met in the middle perfectly, without even an inch of error.

It took Gustave five years to build the canyon bridge. When it was done, other engineers went to admire it, just as Gustave had done that day long ago along the Suez Canal, and they said to one another, "Surely this is Gustave's finest work."

But was it? You must be the judge, for I will tell you what Gustave did next.

One day, when Gustave was back in his office in Paris, he received a letter from one of France's best-known artists, a sculptor named Frédéric-Auguste Bartholdi. Bartholdi had a problem: he had been hired by the government of France to create a beautiful and noble statue of a woman standing tall, with a crown upon her head and a torch in her raised hand. She was to be called Lady Liberty, and she was to be sent to the United States of America as a gift from the people of France.

Bartholdi had no difficulty in planning just how she should look, but how was he to construct this giant lady so that she could be taken apart, put aboard a ship, sent across the ocean, and put back together again in New York City? "I have heard

you are a good solver of problems," he wrote to Gustave. "Can you help?"

As he sat holding the letter, Gustave thought of another problem too. Can you think what it might be? Wind, of course! The statue was meant to stand in New York Harbor, and so she must withstand the fierce winds that might blow in off the Atlantic Ocean.

As always, Gustave accepted the challenge. He decided that the solution to all of the problems facing Lady Liberty would be to build for her an enormous iron skeleton and attach giant sheets of copper for her skin. The skeleton's beams would then be sunk deep into the statue's stone base. That should make her sturdy enough to weather anything, even an Atlantic hurricane, Gustave reasoned. And she would also be light enough to travel by ship to her new home.

In 1883, hundreds of Parisians gathered to watch as Gustave's workmen hammered 300 sheets of copper to the statue's iron bones. When they were done, gasps of admiration filled the street. There stood Bartholdi's graceful Lady, proudly lifting her torch. Gustave's idea had worked perfectly. The statue was taken apart in Paris, with all her pieces numbered; placed aboard a ship for her ride to her new home; and put back together again atop Liberty Island in New York Harbor. I wonder how many of my readers have been there to visit her? Now you know the man who made it possible for you to do so!

Again the engineers of France shook their heads in wonder: "You are amazing, Gustave!" they exclaimed. "This is your most impressive work!"

But was it? You shall judge!

In 1887, just a few years later, Gustave received another letter in the mail. This time, it was an invitation to join a competition: a Committee would choose a builder to construct a tower 1,000 feet high, taller than any tower the world had ever seen.

Who would want such a tower? Why, it was the city of Paris itself, and they wanted it for the glory of France. You see, in just two years, in 1889, Paris was to be the host city for a World's Fair, which is a great gathering of representatives from all nations to show examples of each nation's industry and greatness. The city of Paris was determined that all the nations who came to the Fair must be in awe of the magnificence of France.

But how to do this? Why, what could be more grand than a tower 1,000 feet tall!

What a challenge! No one had ever built a tower so high. The tallest structure in the world at that time was the Washington Memorial in the United States, and it was only 550 feet tall. But Gustave was certain he could do it. And, he said, he would build it out of iron! Not stone or wood; men had been building with those things for thousands of years. Iron was new and wonderful; what better way to show the world the future of France than with a tower of iron! Gustave displayed his plans to the Committee: an iron tower with gracefully arched legs built in a lacy, latticework pattern.

It looks like it is floating! one of the men exclaimed, looking at the drawings. Gustave smiled. His tower did look light and airy, but he did not take the trouble to explain to the committee that the reason for this was . . . wind! Gustave's lacy design would allow the wind to blow right through the tower.

Out of the hundreds of ideas that they received, the Committee chose Gustave's. But, they said to him, there is just one little problem. We do not actually have the money to build this tower. You must come up with that yourself.

Gustave agreed. He would build the great tower with his own money, but he made the city of Paris promise that the tower would belong to him alone for the next 20 years.

I wish to have it to myself, he said. I wish to conduct experiments upon the wind from the tower's top!

Gustave began to build. He sunk huge blocks of stone into the ground and angled them to anchor the gracefully arching legs of the tower. Then piece by piece, Gustave's workmen began to bolt the iron beams together. They matched each piece to one of the 1,800 diagrams that Gustave and his artists had drawn for this project, to be certain that every bolt and every beam was perfectly in line with all the rest. Slowly, slowly the tower rose, higher and higher, until it began to be visible from rooftops all across Paris.

Suddenly, an outcry arose. A group of artists and writers sent an angry letter to the Committee: What is this monstrosity? This ugly chimney of iron! Why, it looks like the skeleton of something else—it is a disgrace!

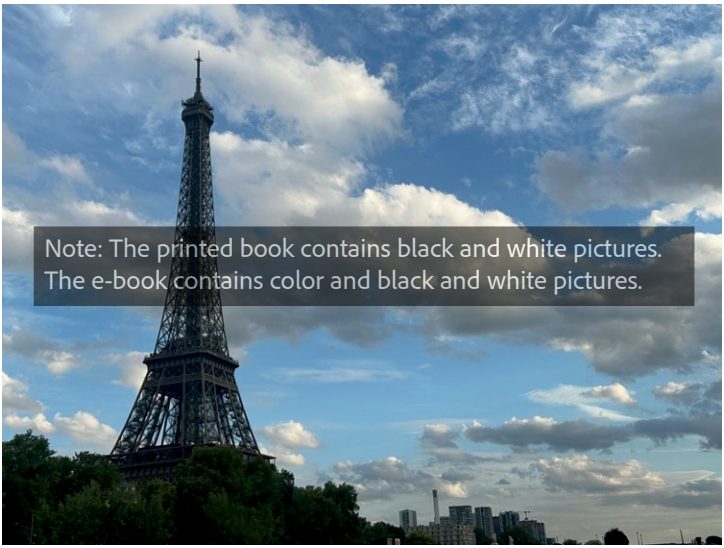
He is already building it, and he will own it for the next 20 years, the Committee replied stiffly. You must either learn to like it, or leave Paris!

Gustave didn't think his tower was a monster. He thought it beautiful, and, in its way, a giant exclamation point of triumph—the triumph of iron.

When the World's Fair opened in 1889, Gustave's creation towered over the entranceway to the exhibition grounds. People clamored to ascend into it: the tower had three platforms, each higher than the next, all connected with a new and wonderful invention, the elevator. For a small price, a visitor could visit the first platform, with its cafés and shops; for a larger price, the second platform; and for a still larger price, the third platform, with its amazing view of Paris, a view that until then had only been seen by birds.

Visitors to the third platform noticed a small spiral staircase, leading upward to yet a fourth platform, high above. "Can we ascend there as well?" they asked eagerly. "Oh no," they were told. "That leads to the private apartment of Monsieur Eiffel. He lives up there and conducts experiments upon the wind."

Monsieur Eiffel? Who might that be? I am sure that you have guessed that the builder of this great tower was our friend Gustave Eiffel, and now you know that he should be acclaimed for far greater deeds than merely building the tower that bears his name!



The Eiffel Tower