

This Day in History... January 5, 1972

Birth of the Space Shuttle Program

On January 5, 1972, President Richard Nixon signed legislation authorizing the creation of America's first space shuttle, the "world's first reusable spacecraft."

NASA began studying the possibility of space shuttles in the late 1960s. Then in 1969, President Nixon created the Space Task Group, led by Vice President Spiro Agnew. The group established a list of missions that included the creation of space vehicles, a space station, and eventually a manned mission to Mars.

Agnew presented the plans to the president, who said he wouldn't support a Mars mission and only wanted flights to low Earth orbit for the time being. Nixon then said to choose between the space station and the main reusable vehicle. He selected the vehicle because it could carry out

some of the missions that the station might have done. The shuttle would also provide for longer-duration missions and make an eventual space station less expensive.

President Nixon announced the new space shuttle program on January 5, 1972. In his statement, he said, "This system will center on a space vehicle that can shuttle repeatedly from Earth to orbit and back. It will revolutionize transportation into near space, by routinizing it. It will take the astronomical costs out of astronautics...

1998 Priority Mail stamp picturing the space shuttle touching down.



The new system will differ radically from all existing booster systems, in that most of this new system will be recovered and used again and again – up to 100 times. The resulting economies may bring operating costs down as low as one-tenth of those present launch vehicles... The general reliability and versatility which the Shuttle system offers seems likely to establish it quickly as

the workhorse of our whole space effort, taking the place of all present launch vehicles except the very smallest and very largest."

Work immediately began on the first space shuttle. Initially, it was to be named *Constitution*, but fans of the television show *Star Trek* launched a massive letter-writing campaign that convinced officials to name it *Enterprise*. The *Enterprise* was unveiled on September 17, 1976. It was never meant to fly in space, rather it was used for atmospheric flight, vibration, and launch tests.

1998 Express Mail Stamp picturing the space shuttle piggyback.



The first shuttle to launch into space was the *Columbia* on April 12, 1981. Apollo astronaut John Young was aboard for the 54.5 hour test mission. Over the next 30 years, the space shuttle program had 133 successful missions and two failures (the *Challenger* in 1986 and the *Columbia* in 2003). The space shuttle is the only winged, manned craft to achieve both orbit and landing, and the only reusable manned spaceship to make multiple flights into orbit.

Over the years, shuttle missions aided *Spacelab*, helped construct and repair the International Space Station, serviced the Hubble Telescope, and carried various satellites and observatories into Earth's orbit. Each mission's crew consisted of five to seven people – in all, over 600 people flew on shuttle missions.



From the Celebrate the Century – 1980s sheet



1995 Priority Mail Stamp picturing the Challenger.



1995 Express Mail Stamp picturing the Endeavor lifting off.

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