

This Day in History... March 21, 1826

Rensselaer Polytechnic Incorporated

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The school's founder and namesake, Stephen Van Rensselaer, briefly served in the War of 1812, commanding troops at the Battle of Queenston Heights. Elected to the House of Representatives, he famously cast the 1824 vote that placed John Quincy Adams in the White House.

That same year, on November 5, 1824, Van Rensselaer took the first steps to establish the school, when he sent a letter to Reverend Dr. Samuel Blatchford, asking him to serve as the school's first president. In his letter, he also selected Amos Eaton, whom he'd previously tasked with surveying the Erie Canal, as the college's first senior professor. Van Rensselaer also established a board of trustees and stated that the school was "for the purpose of instructing persons, who may choose to apply themselves, in the application of science to the common purposes of life".

Blatchford and the board met for the first time on December 29 to establish the teaching methods, which were different from other schools at the time. At Rensselaer, the students would perform their own experiments for six hours each day and then give lectures based on their research. Initially, the school's purpose was to train students "to qualify [as] teachers for instructing the sons and daughters of farmers and mechanics, by lectures or other-wise, in the application of experimental chemistry, philosophy, and natural history, to agriculture, domestic economy, the arts, and manufactures." The school would even offer free tuition to those students who pledged to teach locally for at least one year after graduation.

The Rensselaer School opened on an experimental basis on January 3, 1852, operating out of the Old Bank Place in Troy, New York. Students came from New York, Massachusetts, Vermont, Ohio, and Pennsylvania to study at Rensselaer. The school operated on a trial basis for 14 months. When the experimental teaching method proved successful, the state granted the school articles of incorporation on March 21, 1826.

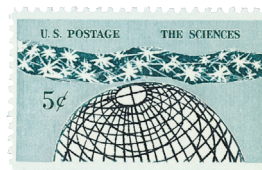
In the early years after its founding, many of Rensselaer's students were graduates from other colleges. Renamed the Rensselaer Institute in 1832, it granted the first civil engineering degree in the country in 1835. Former student Benjamin Franklin Greene was appointed senior professor in 1847. Having spent time in Europe studying technical schools, Greene reorganized the school in 1850, making it a three-year polytechnic institute with six schools. The school's name was changed to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in 1861.

In 1862, a massive fire started by sparks from a passing train destroyed more than 500 buildings in Troy, including Rensselaer's small campus. Rensselaer's leadership turned down an offer to merge with Columbia University in New York City, and opted instead to move to a spot further from the town center that would allow for expansion.

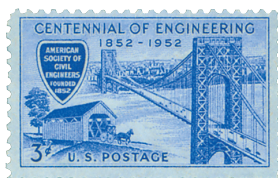
Alumni Palmer Ricketts became the school's president in 1901 and took major steps to establish Rensselaer as a top polytechnic institute. He expanded the number of degrees from two to twelve, to include electrical engineering, mechanical engineering, biology, chemistry, and physics. He also added a graduate school and a Department of Arts, Science, and Business Administration.

The school expanded significantly over the course of the 20th century. In 1980, researchers and graduate students wanting to form their own businesses approached the school's leadership asking for space for a small lab. The school made an old building used for storage available. This marked the start of their incubator program, the first of its kind in the country. Over time, this grew into the Rensselaer Technology Park, where companies worked with students and researchers. It was so successful the state government granted \$30 million to build the George M. Low Center for Industrial Innovation.

Today, the school has 37 departments and is regarded as one of the nation's top engineering programs. Its faculty and alumni include six members of the National Inventors Hall of Fame, eight Fulbright Scholarship winners, and one Nobel Prize winner, among many other honors. Rensselaer alumni have gone on to make major contributions in all areas of study. Former students invented the an improved cathode ray tube for commercial televisions, the microprocessor, email, digital cameras, and more. Several graduates were also part of the US space program, have founded notable companies (such as Texas Instruments), and served as politicians, athletes, and more.



The school's motto is "Knowledge and Thoroughness."



Rensselaer awarded the first civil engineering degree in the country in 1835.



Washington Roebling, engineer of the Brooklyn Bridge, graduated from Rensselaer in 1857.



During World War II, Rensselaer participated in the V-12 Navy College Training Program, which helped students become commissioned officers.



Theodore Judah, promoter and designer of the First Transcontinental Railroad, attended Rensselaer.



George Washington Gale Ferris Jr., inventor of the Ferris Wheel, graduated from Rensselaer in 1881.



Rensselaer offered the first environmental engineering degree in the US in 1961.

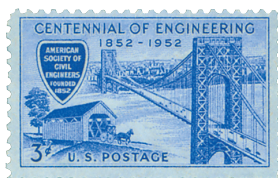
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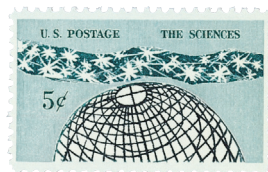
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