

## This Day in History... April 5, 1916

# Birth of Gregory Peck

Eldred Gregory Peck was born on April 5, 1916, in San Diego, California. Appearing in over 60 films and numerous stage productions, he became one of Hollywood's most beloved and respected actors, voted the 12th-greatest male star of Classic Hollywood.

Peck's parents divorced when he was five and spent much of his childhood with his grandmother, who took him to the movies every week. He went to a Catholic military school when he was 10 and returned to his father's care at 14, following his grandmother's death. Peck spent a year at the San Diego State Teacher's College where he was on the track team and took courses in theater and public speaking.

Initially, Peck planned to become a doctor, and enrolled in the University of California, Berkeley to study English and medicine. He was on the school's rowing team and worked in a kitchen to help pay his bills. Peck took a public speaking course and his 6'3" tall, thin frame and deep voice caught the attention of the theater professor. He asked Peck to play Starbuck in *Moby Dick* opposite the short, stocky actor who had been cast as the lead. Peck appeared in four more plays while in college. He left the school one course short of graduating, saying "I have all I need from the university."



Peck played Starbuck in *Moby Dick* in College and Ahab in the 1956 film.

Peck appeared in over 60 films.

Peck was also involved in the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, serving as president from 1967 to 1970. His accomplishments were acknowledged in 1969 when President Lyndon Johnson awarded Peck the Presidential Medal of Freedom. The next year, he was given the Screen Actors Guild award for "outstanding achievement in fostering the ideals of the acting profession."



In 1947, Peck co-founded the La Jolla Playhouse in his hometown. Putting on summer plays, it's still in operation today at the University of California, San Diego.



From the *Legends of Hollywood Series*, this stamp pictures Peck in his acclaimed role of Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

Peck moved to New York City to study at the Neighborhood Playhouse, and occasionally slept in Central Park while waiting for his big break. He was exempted from World War II service due to a back injury and appeared in about 50 plays between 1941 and 1943.

Peck's first film, *Days of Glory*, was released in 1944. His second film, *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1944), earned Peck his first Academy Award nomination. Peck's fame rose quickly in the years that followed, starring opposite Ingrid Bergman in Alfred Hitchcock's *Spellbound* (1945), in the beloved family film *The Yearling* (1946), and in *Gentleman's Agreement* (1947).

Peck appeared in dozens of films over the next few years, but it was his performance as Atticus Finch in *To Kill a Mockingbird* that earned him the Academy Award for Best Actor. Released at the height of the Civil Rights Movement in 1962, the film's theme of justice and tolerance was popular with theatergoers. The movie was Peck's favorite and Atticus was named the top film hero of the past 100 years by the American Film Institute. In the following decades,



Peck earned a Golden Globe for his performance in *The Yearling* (1946) based on Rawlings's book.

In addition to being involved in the acting profession, Peck was also a social activist. In 1947, he risked being blacklisted by criticizing the House Un-American Activities Committee for investigating communists in the film industry. Peck criticized the Vietnam War, earning him a spot on President Richard Nixon's "enemies" list. Peck supported his son, who served in Vietnam, while objecting to the war.

After Peck retired from acting, his achievements were still honored. In 1989, the American Film Institute gave him a Lifetime Achievement Award. Two years later, he received a Kennedy Center Honor and was also awarded the National Medal of Arts in 1998. Peck died on June 12, 2003 from bronchopneumonia. Five years after his death, his family created the Gregory Peck Award for Cinematic Excellence, given annually to a director, producer, or actor.

Mystic Stamp Company • Camden, NY 13316

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