

This Day in History... May 1, 1893

World's Columbian Exposition



The 1¢ deep blue stamp pictures a painting by George William Henry Powell. The left panel shows an Indian squaw and the right panel illustrates and Indian brave.



The 2¢ brown violet stamp is based on a painting credited to John Vanderlyn that hangs in the Rotunda of the US Capitol Building.



The 3¢ green stamp is believed to be based on an old English Spanish engraving or a painting by Alfred Harrisse.



The 4¢ ultramarine is also based on an unconfirmed source.



The 5¢ chocolate stamp is a detail of an 1884 painting by Czech artist Vaclav Brozik called Columbus at the Court of Ferdinand and Isabella.



The 6¢ stamp was taken from the bronze doors in the Rotunda of the Capitol, designed by Randolph Rogers.



The 8¢ magenta stamp was based on a painting by Frabcisco Jover y Casanova.



The 10¢ black-brown stamp shows a detail from an 1882 mural by Italian artist Luigi Gregori.



The 15¢ dark green stamp is reportedly based on a painting by Ricardo Baloca y Cancico.

On May 1, 1893, the World's Columbian Exposition opened in Chicago, Illinois. For six months, it transformed the city into a global showcase of architecture, invention, culture, and ambition, drawing millions of visitors to one of the largest fairs ever held.

The fair was organized to mark the 400th anniversary of Christopher Columbus reaching the Americas in 1492. American leaders wanted a grand international exposition similar to those held in Europe. The 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia had celebrated the nation's 100th birthday, but it had struggled financially. Even so, many businessmen believed a larger and better-managed fair could succeed.

Several cities competed to host the event, including New York City, St. Louis, and Washington. Chicago won after local leaders pledged millions of dollars in financial backing. Banker Lyman J. Gage played a key role by rapidly raising subscriptions that helped convince Congress the city could handle the project. President Benjamin Harrison officially selected Chicago in 1890.

The chosen site was Jackson Park and Midway Plaisance along Lake Michigan. Work moved quickly, but the scale of the project caused delays. The fair had originally been expected to open in October 1892. That proved impossible, so Chicago instead held a lavish dedication celebration from October 20 to 22, 1892.

The opening parade on October 20 was enormous by the standards of the time. Estimates placed participation in the tens of thousands, with spectators reportedly exceeding one million. Military units, civic groups, trade organizations, and visiting dignitaries marched through the city. On October 21, dedication ceremonies featured President Harrison, his cabinet, music, speeches, and processions through the unfinished grounds.

Construction continued through the winter. When the gates finally opened on May 1, 1893, visitors entered a spectacle unlike anything most Americans had seen. The exposition covered more than 600 acres and included over 200 major buildings, along with lagoons, bridges, gardens, fountains, and monuments. During its run from May to October, nearly 27.5 million visits were recorded—an astonishing figure in a nation with a population of about 63 million.

This Day in History... May 1, 1893 continued



The 30¢ orange-brown stamp was adapted from Felipe Maso's Columbus before the Franciscans at La Rábida.



The 50¢ slate blue stamp image was taken from A.G. Heaton's famous painting The Recall of Columbus.



The \$1 salmon design was taken from a painting by Antonio Munoz Degrain



The \$2 brown-red design was taken from a painting by Emanuel Leutze and is one of just two stamps in the series picturing Columbus in the New World.



The \$3 yellow-green stamp is based on a painting by Francisco Jover Casanova. There is also color variety of this stamp in olive green.



The \$4 crimson lake stamp features a portrait of Columbus by the Italian artist Lorenzo Lotto.



The \$5 black stamp was almost the same design featured on the Columbian Exposition half dollar. Columbus is flanked by Liberty on the left and America on the right.



This "Broken Hat" variety occurred when a break developed in the transfer roll. The flaw caused a piece to be missing from the hat of the figure to the left of Columbus.



The orange Special Delivery stamp that's considered part of the Columbians.

The fair's central court became known as the "White City." Many of the grand Beaux-Arts style buildings were coated in a white finish that gleamed in the sunlight. At night, electric lights illuminated the grounds, creating a dramatic modern scene for visitors accustomed to gas lamps or dim streets. Architect Daniel Burnham oversaw construction, while landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted helped shape the grounds.

The fair displayed new technology on a vast scale. Visitors saw electric lighting systems, machinery, transportation exhibits, and industrial tools. The giant Ferris Wheel, designed by George Washington Gale Ferris Jr., debuted as Chicago's answer to the Eiffel Tower. Rising about 264 feet, it carried thousands of riders each day and became one of the fair's most talked-about attractions.

The Midway Plaisance offered entertainment and cultural exhibits from around the world. Visitors encountered music, dance, food, crafts, and reconstructed villages. Though some exhibits reflected the stereotypes of the era, the Midway also exposed many Americans to cultures they had never experienced firsthand.

The exposition hosted major congresses on labor, medicine, literature, science, commerce, and social issues. The most famous was the World's Parliament of Religions, held in September 1893. It brought together representatives of many faiths. Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda became one of the event's most remembered speakers after addressing the audience as "Sisters and Brothers of America."

The fair also left a mark on collectors and consumers. The United States Post Office Department released its first US commemorative postage stamps, the famous Columbian Issue. The United States Mint struck the first modern US commemorative coins for the exposition. Popular foods associated with the fair included Cracker Jack, while products such as cereals and packaged foods gained wider attention.

The White City influenced future planning across the nation. Its orderly boulevards, monumental buildings, and landscaped public spaces helped inspire the City Beautiful movement, which encouraged cleaner, more attractive cities. Though most fair buildings were temporary, the exposition's impact lasted for decades in architecture, urban design, and American memory.

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