

This Day in History... July 10, 1856

Birth of Nikola Tesla

Nikola Tesla was born on July 10, 1856, in Smiljan, Austrian Empire (present-day Croatia).

The fourth of five children, Tesla discovered as he attended school that he had an eidetic memory – meaning he was able to retain more information and for longer than his fellow students. This sometimes got young Tesla in trouble as his teachers thought him to be cheating.

In 1875, Tesla attended Austrian Polytechnic, a higher-education school in Graz, Austria. Tesla did well in his first year, but later became addicted to gambling and his success faltered. He left the school in 1878. In 1880, Tesla went to several lectures at Charles-Ferdinand University in Prague – he had been too late to formally enroll in the college.

After leaving Prague, Tesla worked at a telegraph company in Budapest before moving to France in 1882 where he worked for the Continental Edison Company. In June 1884, he immigrated to the United States, thanks to a letter Edison received from respected inventor Charles Batchelor. Batchelor wrote, “I know two great men; one is you (Edison) and the other is this young man.” Edison hired Tesla to work for him in New York City. The two worked well together for about a year, but broke ties when Edison refused to pay Tesla a promised amount after he improved several of Edison’s motors and generators.



The rivalry between Edison and Tesla was called “War of the Currents” over their competing visions for the future of electricity.

Tesla then partnered with two businessmen to create Tesla Electric Light and Manufacturing. He filed several patents, all of which he gave to the company. However, his partners then decided they wanted to focus on just supplying electricity. They established a new company, leaving Tesla with nothing. To pay the bills, he reportedly worked as a ditch digger for \$2 a day, though he was distraught that his talent was going to waste.

Then in 1887, Tesla met two investors who gave him the funding to create the Tesla Electric Company in Manhattan. While working there, he developed the groundbreaking alternating current induction motor. He so impressed the Westinghouse Company, they agreed to license the technology and pay him up front. However, Westinghouse later convinced Tesla to sell them the patents for a single sum, which likely prevented Tesla from making a fortune.

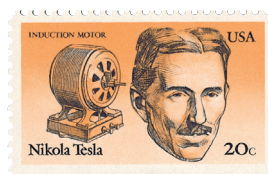
In 1893, Tesla helped supply the power to the World’s Columbian Exposition in Chicago. He illuminated more light bulbs than could be found in all of Chicago. He also entertained audiences with several spectacles, including an electric light with no wires. Tesla would later help Westinghouse win a contract to generate electrical power at Niagara Falls, creating the first large-scale AC power plant in the world.



Niagara Falls stamp from the Scenic American Landscapes Series

Despite his brilliance, Tesla endured hardships. A fire destroyed his Manhattan lab in 1895, taking with it his notes and prototypes. And when he demonstrated wireless control of a boat, many claimed it was a hoax. Tesla then explored the wireless transmission of electric power. He believed he could provide wireless electricity and communication around the world. Tesla also claimed to have plans to create a motor that ran on cosmic rays, had discovered a technique for photographing thoughts and invented peace and death rays.

Tesla made poor financial decisions most of his life, so he spent his final years with little money. He died on January 7, 1943, in New York City. Tesla was a brilliant inventor, engineer, and physicist. His experiments and research changed the world. He developed what became our modern alternating current (AC) electricity, experimented with x-rays and radio waves, and improved many pre-existing technologies. He held 300 patents and could speak eight languages. Tesla developed so many important theories and advances that he is called the “Father of Physics.”



From the American Inventors Series (In 1891, Tesla became an American citizen.)



One of America’s first commemorative stamps issued for the World’s Columbian Exposition.

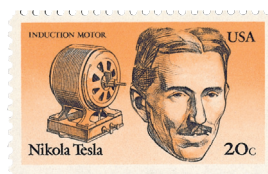
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