

This Day in History... July 13, 1787

Northwest Ordinance Revolutionizes Addition of New States to the Union

The United States passed the Northwest Ordinance on July 13, 1787 to establish a set of steps all future states would have to follow. It was ground breaking at the time and led to the organized and rapid expansion of America.

As part of the United States' victory in the Revolutionary War, Great Britain ceded a 260,000 square mile territory to the young nation. As states filed competing claims for the same land, the government sought a way to bypass the confusion. Early attempts at such legislation failed to make it through Congress. Then in 1787 Manasseh Cutler (the man on the left side of US #795) and others drafted the Northwest Ordinance.



This stamp pictures two men who played large roles in the Northwest Territory – Manasseh Cutler and Rufus Putnam.

The ordinance established a government for the area north of the Ohio River, west of Pennsylvania, and east of the Mississippi, and illustrated the steps a territory would need to take to achieve statehood. It set ground rules for how states would be created out of the Northwest Territory, as well as any future states, with room for amendments. Under the terms of the Northwest Ordinance, a territory would be admitted as a state when its population reached 60,000 people.



Stamp pictures Gutzon Borglum's memorial statue, Colonization of the West, located in Marietta, Ohio.

The ordinance was passed on July 13, 1787, and made settling the Northwest Territory very attractive. It was quickly followed by an influx of settlers to the territory. Among these was Rufus Putnam (pictured on the right of US #795) who founded Marietta, Ohio, in the new territory and served as one of its first judges. The territory was quickly settled and eventually became five US states: Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, and Wisconsin. It also included part of Minnesota.

The Northwest Ordinance laid the foundation for democracy in the American West. The law prohibited slavery, and guaranteed freedom of religion and trial by jury. It also called for the fair treatment of Native Americans, though this portion was largely ignored.

In 1797, future president William Henry Harrison was appointed secretary of the Northwest Territory, also acting as governor when Governor Arthur St. Clair was unavailable. Two years later, Harrison became the Northwest Territory's first delegate to the Sixth United States Congress.



Harrison stamp from the 1938 Prexies.

As a territory delegate (as opposed to a state delegate), Harrison was not permitted to vote on bills, but he could serve on committees, submit legislation, and debate. While in this position, he created the Harrison Land Act, making it easier for settlers to purchase land in the Northwest Territory by selling it in small sections. The legislation also allowed working-class Americans to purchase government land on credit in the Northwest Territory. In 1800, Harrison served on the committee that decided how to divide the Northwest Territory, establishing the Ohio and Indiana Territories.

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