

This Day in History... August 2, 1923

President Harding Dies Suddenly

Though he had been in poor health for some time, President Warren G. Harding's death on August 2, 1923, shocked a nation that had watched him greet cheering crowds only days earlier. The lack of an autopsy, combined with scandals emerging from his administration, soon encouraged rumors that lasted for decades.



Imperforate Stamp produced for Private Companies' Vending Machines



Plates from the 1923 Harding Memorial stamp were adjusted to meet an urgent need for 1 1/2¢ stamps for third class mail.



This stamp was never distributed to post offices. It was only available at the Philatelic Agency in Washington, DC.



The design of the Harding memorial stamps was changed because his widow, Florence, didn't like the profile view.

Harding entered the White House in March 1921 after promising a "return to normalcy" following World War I. He remained personally popular, but he made several damaging appointments. Some of the men he trusted used federal offices for private gain.

Charles R. Forbes, director of the Veterans' Bureau, was accused of wasting government property and profiting from contracts meant to build hospitals for disabled veterans. Secretary of the Interior Albert B. Fall secretly leased federal oil reserves at Teapot Dome, Wyoming, and Elk Hills, California, to private companies. Fall later became the first former Cabinet member imprisoned for crimes committed in office. There is no evidence that Harding accepted bribes or shared in these schemes. However, his poor judgment in choosing and supervising associates damaged his reputation. Much of the full story became public only after his death.

In the summer of 1923, Harding began a journey he called the "Voyage of Understanding." He hoped to explain his policies, promote US membership in the Permanent Court of International Justice, and learn more about conditions in the West. Despite warnings that the trip could strain his health, Warren and Florence Harding left Washington by train on June 20.

The party traveled through the Midwest and West. Harding delivered speeches and visited Yellowstone National Park. At Tacoma, Washington, the group boarded the USS *Henderson* for Alaska. On July 8, Harding became the first sitting president to visit the territory.

The Alaska trip included stops at Ketchikan, Juneau, Seward, Anchorage, and Fairbanks. Harding discussed transportation, natural resources, and economic development. On July 15, he drove a ceremonial golden spike at Nenana to mark the completion of the federally built Alaska Railroad. The nearly 470-mile line connected Seward with Fairbanks.

After leaving Alaska, Harding stopped in Vancouver, British Columbia, on July 26. He became the first sitting US president to visit Canada and spoke about peaceful relations between the neighboring countries. By then, Harding was exhausted. After returning to Seattle, he complained of abdominal pain and weakness. His doctors first blamed spoiled food. As the train continued south, he developed breathing problems and a fever. Scheduled appearances were canceled, and the party hurried to San Francisco. Harding was taken to a suite at the Palace Hotel.

His condition appeared to improve after several days of rest. On the evening of August 2, Florence sat beside his bed and read him a favorable magazine article. Harding reportedly said, "That's good. Go on—read some more." Moments later, he collapsed and died at age 57.

Doctors announced that Harding had died from apoplexy, then commonly understood as a stroke or cerebral hemorrhage. Later medical reviews have concluded that his symptoms more strongly suggest heart disease and a fatal heart attack. Harding had high blood pressure and an enlarged heart, but no autopsy was performed.

His coffin traveled east aboard the presidential train. At stations and along the tracks, crowds stood silently to pay their respects. His body rested in the East Room of the White House before a funeral service at the US Capitol. A final service was held in Marion, Ohio, on August 10.

Florence Harding's decision not to permit an autopsy fed suspicion. In 1930, a sensational book falsely claimed that she had poisoned her husband to protect him from scandal. No credible evidence supports that story. But the secrecy surrounding his death allowed rumor to become part of his troubled legacy.



The first fractional US postage stamp.



Rotary Press Sheet Stamp, Perforated 10



There was great demand for this stamp used by marketers sending advertising mail.



Rotary Press Stamp, Perforated 11 x 10 1/2



Rotary Press Stamp Perforated 10 Vertically

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