

This Day in History... August 21, 1770

James Cook Establishes New South Wales

On August 21, 1770, James Cook landed on the eastern coast of Australia and named the land New South Wales.

In 1766, then Lieutenant James Cook was hired by the Royal Society to embark on a trip to the South Pacific to study the transit of Venus across the Sun. Years earlier, in 1761, scientists in Britain, Austria, and France witnessed the transit, leaving members of the Royal Society wondering if Edmond Halley's earlier calculations concerning the transit of Venus were correct. Based on his findings, scientists could then use the information to determine the distance between Earth and Venus.

Cook left Plymouth, England, aboard the HMS Endeavor on August 26, 1768. He sailed across the Atlantic, down the coast of South America, and around Cape Horn to Tahiti. In June 1769, he made observations of Venus's transit. Though the Royal Society was ultimately disappointed in the data they later received, the calculations it provided for the distance between the Earth and the Sun were only eight-tenths of one percent off of what modern astronomers have found, which is astounding considering the tools of the time.

With his primary mission complete, Cook had a second task. He was ordered by the British Admiralty to find Terra Australis, a then-fabled continent south of Asia, and claim it for Great Britain.

Cook embarked on his new mission and within a few weeks approached the coast of New Zealand. He created a detailed map of the coastline as he traveled. Eventually, he was convinced that Terra Australis didn't exist and turned toward New Holland (present-day Australia) to find his way back toward Southeast Asia and eventually Britain.

Then, on the morning of April 19, 1770, Cook and his men became the first Europeans to record seeing the coastline of what would become Australia. That month they landed in Botany Bay where they encountered the Aborigines. Cook's men camped for eight days while botanist Sir Joseph Banks collected plant and animal specimens. Banks believed the land couldn't be cultivated and had little to offer potential settlers and named the place terra nullius (nobody's land).

Over the next four months, Cook followed the coastline and named landmarks along the way. In mid-June they had to stop for about seven weeks to repair the ship after it suffered heavy damage in the Great Barrier Reef.

Then on August 21, Cook and his crew landed at Possession Island and held a brief ceremony, hoisted the colors, and he claimed all the "bays, harbours, rivers and islands [that] situate upon the said coast" for the crown. There is some dispute as to whether Cook named the area New South Wales at the time, or if it was named later (some accounts claim he named it New Wales at first and changed it to New South Wales when he submitted his journals to the Admiralty. Cook's men on land then fired three volleys of small arms, followed by three volleys from the ship.

Eight years later, Captain Arthur Philip created the first British settlement in New South Wales.

Stamps of New South Wales

Philip's settlement was the first in Australia by Europeans. By 1803, it became the first to run a postal service, delivering letters to Sydney and Parramatta. The postal system evolved in the coming decades, offering mail coach service and setting rates based on weight and distance. By 1848, an act was introduced authorizing the use of postage stamps. The first stamps, issued on January 1, 1850, pictured the harbor of Sydney. The engravings were retouched several times, creating a number of varieties. The following year New South Wales adopted a more traditional design, picturing Queen Victoria.

In 1888, New South Wales celebrated its 100th anniversary and issued a set of eight stamps that are often considered to be some of the world's first commemoratives. These stamps pictured Sydney, Captain Cook, Captain Phillip, Governor Lord Carrington, and wildlife. New South Wales continued to issue stamps until 1913, when they began using the stamps of Australia.



Stamp issued for the 200th anniversary of Cook's visits to Hawaii and Alaska in 1778.



New South Wales stamp picturing a young Queen Victoria.



New South Wales stamp pictures a map of Australia.



Semi postal whose proceeds went to Consumptive Homes, aiding tuberculosis patients.

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Mystic Stamp Company • Camden, NY 13316



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