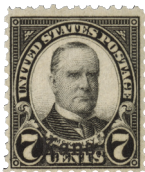


# This Day in History... August 22, 1902

## First Presidential Motorcade

Touring New England on August 22, 1902, Theodore Roosevelt became the first sitting president to publicly ride in an electric automobile accompanied by security. This was the first modern presidential motorcade.

The year before, William McKinley became the first US president to ride in an automobile on July 13, 1901, during a public demonstration in New Hampshire. Freelan Oscar Stanley, co-founder of the Stanley Motor Carriage Company, invited McKinley to experience his company's steam-powered "Stanley Steamer" while the president was visiting the Mount Washington Hotel.



*McKinley Stamp with Kansas Overprint*

The demonstration was meant to showcase the promise of the automobile, which was still a rare and exciting invention at the time. McKinley's ride was short, but it was a highly publicized event that drew attention to both the president's interest in new technology and the growing importance of automobiles in American life. For many Americans reading about the ride in newspapers, it was the first time they had considered the automobile as something more than a curiosity.

Only weeks later, McKinley rode in a car again, but under far more tragic circumstances. On September 6, 1901, he was shot twice while attending the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, New York. In the desperate rush to save his life, officials placed him in an electric-powered ambulance available on the fairgrounds, which sped him to the exposition hospital. This was the first time a US president had ever been transported in a motorized emergency vehicle. Unfortunately, despite the speed of the new invention, doctors were unable to save him, and McKinley died a few days later.

Following McKinley's assassination, his vice president, Theodore Roosevelt was sworn in, coming the nation's youngest president. Roosevelt quickly became a leader in the Progressive Era and set about fulfilling his own political agenda. He proved popular among the people and toured often. In August 1902, Roosevelt took a yacht to New Haven, Connecticut and then embarked on a state-wide tour in a Columbia Electric Victoria Phaeton automobile. An estimated 20,000 people lined the streets to catch a glimpse of the president and cheer him on as he passed by.



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President Roosevelt made several stops along the way, including a visit to New Haven Coliseum, where he spoke before a crowd of 5,000. He also visited Hartford's Pope Park, where he expressed his appreciation for the 10,000 workers there. Roosevelt noted, "I should, of course, be wholly unfit for the position I occupy if I did not give my best thoughts and best purpose to trying to serve the interests of the toiler of America – the man who works with his hands, and, of course, also the man who works with his head."

Because of the maximum speed of Roosevelt's car (13 miles per hour), his police guards couldn't keep up with him on foot. This outing helped establish the idea of a presidential motorcade—he was accompanied by an entourage including horseback riders, bicycles, and other automobiles.

While publicly Roosevelt appeared enthusiastic, privately he was more skeptical. In a 1905 letter he wrote, "Motor cars are a trial, aren't they? ... I regard them as distinct additions to the discomfort of living," signaling that despite the spectacle, he still saw automobiles more as inconveniences than conveniences.

Roosevelt's underlying commitment to tradition showed itself again when he opted for a carriage—not a car—for his 1905 inauguration, continuing to favor horses for official purposes. His cautious stance contrasted sharply with that of his successor, William Howard Taft, who enthusiastically transitioned into using official White House automobiles and spurred the transformation of the presidential motorcade into a modern symbol of progress.



*Taft fully embraced automobiles, while Roosevelt had been skeptical.*

Taft fully embraced the new technology and ushered cars into official White House life. He was fascinated by machinery and quickly replaced the presidential stables with a garage. In 1909, the White House purchased its first official automobiles, including a White Steamer, a Pierce-Arrow, and a Baker electric car for shorter city trips. Unlike Roosevelt, Taft saw cars not as nuisances but as practical tools for modern leadership, and his adoption of them set a new standard for presidential travel.

Over the following decades, automobiles became a fixture of American political life. By the 1920s, presidents like Warren Harding and Calvin Coolidge used open-top cars for public parades, allowing them to be seen more easily by large crowds. This visibility made the presidential motorcade a powerful symbol of both connection and authority. By Franklin D. Roosevelt's era, security concerns and the president's disability reshaped the motorcade: FDR often rode in heavily modified, enclosed cars, including the famous armored 1939 Lincoln known as the "Sunshine Special." What had begun as a novelty ride for McKinley and a skeptical experiment for Theodore Roosevelt had, within a few decades, evolved into an essential institution—one that blended technology, politics, and public image into a lasting presidential tradition.



*Issued in 1901 for the Pan-American Expo and World's Fair in Buffalo, New York. President McKinley was assassinated at the fair, leading Theodore Roosevelt to become president.*



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