

This Day in History... October 4, 1927

Work Begins on Mount Rushmore

On October 4, 1927, work officially began on one of America's most iconic monuments: the carving of Mount Rushmore in the Black Hills of South Dakota. The project was led by sculptor Gutzon Borglum, whose vision and persistence transformed a simple idea into a towering symbol of national pride and unity.

The concept for Mount Rushmore was first proposed in 1923 by Doane Robinson, a South Dakota historian. Robinson had noticed the enormous boost to local economies provided by places like Yellowstone and Yosemite National Parks, which drew visitors from across the country. Hoping to bring a similar wave of tourism to South Dakota, he devised a bold idea: carve enormous figures into one of the state's mountains. His original plan was to celebrate regional figures of the American frontier, such as George Armstrong Custer, the explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, and the Lakota leader Red Cloud. Robinson believed these figures embodied the adventurous spirit of the West and would attract visitors eager to learn about the region's past.

To bring the idea to life, Robinson needed a sculptor with both vision and skill. He turned to Gutzon Borglum, who was already well known for his involvement with the Stone Mountain project in Georgia. When Borglum visited South Dakota in 1924 and first gazed at Mount Rushmore, he declared, "America will march along that skyline." While he agreed to take on the project, Borglum felt it should go beyond celebrating western legends. Instead, he wanted the monument to capture the broader sweep of American history.

Borglum selected four presidents whose leadership had profoundly shaped the nation: George Washington, the founding father and first president; Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence and champion of democracy; Theodore Roosevelt, who expanded America's influence abroad and preserved vast areas of land for future generations; and Abraham Lincoln, who guided the country through the Civil War and fought to preserve the Union while promoting equality. Together, these four figures would symbolize the nation's birth, growth, development, and preservation.

Once Borglum joined the effort, Robinson and his allies had to secure government approval. Senator Peter Norbeck and Congressman William Williamson became the political champions of the project. Thanks to their lobbying, the Mount Rushmore National Memorial Commission was created on March 3, 1925. The monument was formally dedicated two years later, on August 10, 1927, at a ceremony attended by President Calvin Coolidge, who pledged federal support for the work.

Funding, however, was always a major challenge. Borglum met with Secretary of the Treasury Andrew Mellon to secure additional resources. Mellon promised federal funding, and in return Borglum pledged that private donations would cover at least half the cost. Congress passed a bill authorizing the government to match private funds up to \$250,000, a significant sum at the time.

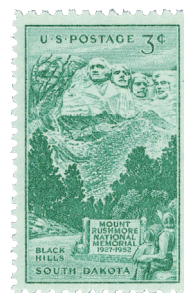
Actual construction began on October 4, 1927. Borglum led a team of more than 400 workers, who labored under difficult and often dangerous conditions to carve the granite faces. The figures each rose to 60 feet tall, perched high at 5,725 feet above sea level.

Workers used dynamite for most of the rough carving, followed by drills and smaller tools to refine the details. Sculpted with artful science, huge portions of rock were blown away with surprising accuracy to lay out the rough features of each face. Despite their lack of formal sculpting experience, the workers became highly skilled under Borglum's direction. Over time, the team faced numerous obstacles, from unstable rock to tight budgets. Yet progress continued, even after setbacks.

In 1939, Borglum's son Lincoln began assisting more directly with the project. When Gutzon Borglum died in March 1941, Lincoln took full responsibility

for completing the work. Later that year, on October 31, 1941, the project was officially declared finished. Although Borglum had originally envisioned carving the presidents down to their waists and including more details, funding shortages forced the project to end with the four heads alone. Even in its incomplete form, Mount Rushmore became a powerful emblem of American identity.

Since then, the site has grown into a major tourist destination, drawing more than two million visitors each year. Additions such as the Presidential Trail, visitor center, and museum have enhanced the experience, allowing visitors to learn about both the monument's history and the broader story of the United States.



Stamp issued for the 25th anniversary of the Mount Rushmore National Memorial.



Issued in response to calls for a new flag stamp following the Persian Gulf War.



A color error lacking the maroon tones of the original – described as "like a brown paper bag" by Linn's.



Issued in 1974 for the increase in the international rate for letters and letter packages.



The first US coil stamp not printed by the BEP.



Once the general shapes were formed, workers hung by cables to drill and chisel the smooth features. Despite the dangerous nature of the project, no one died in the 14 years it took to carve Mount Rushmore.

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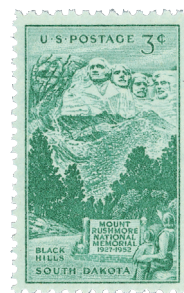
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