

## This Day in History... October 19, 1929

# Ohio River Canalization Stamp

On October 19, 1929, the US Post Office issued a 2¢ commemorative honoring the canalization of the Ohio River. It came as the culmination of over 50 years of work on the project, which was a major engineering feat.

The 981-mile long Ohio River stretches from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania to Cairo, Illinois, where it empties into the Mississippi River. It carries the most water by volume of all the Mississippi River tributaries. However, areas of the river became too shallow during the dry parts of the year, preventing steamboats from traveling the entire length.

So in 1825, the US Army Corps of Engineers was tasked with removing obstructions from the river to help improve its flow. They also created the Louisville and Portland Canal, to bypass the Falls of the Ohio near Louisville, Kentucky. Up until that point, the falls were often impassible unless there was high water.

By the end of the Civil War, the amount of coal being sent down the Ohio from Pittsburgh greatly increased. The Corps of Engineers then set out on an international study to explore how other countries had solved their navigation issues. In the end, they decided that a system of locks and dams to create pools would be the best option to improve navigation on the Ohio River.



*One of the early canalization attempts began in 1825.*

The US government first appropriated funds for the project in 1875 and work began in 1878. The first lock and dam at Davis Island was completed and opened to traffic in 1885. As the project proved successful, Congress later passed the Rivers and Harbors Act in 1910, authorizing the construction of a full system of locks and dams with a nine-foot navigation depth. By the time the project was completed in 1929, the Ohio River had 51 wooden dams and 600-foot by 110-foot lock chambers along the river.

### The Story Behind the Stamp

In January 1929, a weekly trade magazine, *Waterways Journal*, suggested that two or three stamps be issued to honor the completion of the Ohio River project. They stated, "This is an engineer work which is by far the most important ever undertaken by the Government within the United States, and will directly and indirectly affect more individuals as a whole than anything our Government has ever done." The magazine went on to urge its readers to press the idea with the Post Office Department and government officials. They did, and the idea gained traction, eventually becoming the first stamp approved by the new postmaster general, Walter F. Brown.

The final design of the stamp was based on a photograph of Lock No. 5 on the Monongahela River with the steamer *H.D. Williams* passing through. The stamp was then issued on October 19, 1929, to coincide with the start of a six-day celebration honoring the project's completion. The stamp was released in seven first-day cities, so that all of the states along the Ohio River were represented (two of the cities were in Pennsylvania).



*Stamp pictures Lock No. 5 on the Monongahela River with the steamer H.D. Williams passing through.*



*An increase in demand for coal led engineers to search for ways to improve river transportation.*

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