

This Day in History... November 1, 1957

Opening of Mackinac Bridge

On November 1, 1957, the Mackinac Bridge opened, giving Michigan's Upper and Lower Peninsulas a direct road connection. It was then the world's longest suspension bridge between cable anchorages, replacing a busy ferry route with a five-mile crossing.

For centuries, people traveled and traded around the Straits of Mackinac, the waterway linking Lakes Michigan and Huron. The name Michilimackinac is often translated as "Great Turtle," a possible reference to the shape of Mackinac Island. The region became an important meeting and trading place for Indigenous peoples. Later, European settlement and the growth of mining, timber, railroads and tourism increased traffic through the straits.

By 1881, three railroads had joined to operate car ferries across the water. After the Brooklyn Bridge opened in 1883, some people wondered whether a bridge could span the straits, too. The idea gained support as more travelers visited the area, but decades passed before plans moved forward.



Issued for the 100th anniversary of the Brooklyn Bridge.

In 1923, Michigan's State Highway Department began operating automobile ferries between Mackinaw City and St. Ignace. The fleet eventually grew to nine boats and could carry as many as 9,000 vehicles a day. Demand still outpaced capacity. Lines of waiting cars could stretch for miles, while driving around the straits added a long detour. In the ferries' final year, they carried about 900,000 vehicles.

Michigan studied the bridge proposal in the late 1920s and found it feasible, with an estimated cost of about \$30 million. In 1934, the state created the Mackinac Straits Bridge Authority to develop plans and find funding. The authority sought federal support, including New Deal funds, but Congress did not provide the money. World War II further delayed the project.

The state created a new Mackinac Bridge Authority in 1950 to study the project's feasibility. Its 1951 report said the bridge could be financed with revenue bonds. In 1952, the legislature authorized construction and the sale of bonds. Financing proved difficult at first, but investors eventually bought \$99.8 million in bonds. The tolls would help pay them back.

Construction began on May 7, 1954. Engineer David B. Steinman designed the bridge, and work was carried out by two main contractors: Merritt-Chapman & Scott built the foundations, while the American Bridge Division of US Steel built the steel structure. The project took more than three years. Its construction cost was about \$100 million.

The bridge opened to traffic on schedule on November 1, 1957, and the state ferry service ended that day. Cold weather postponed the formal dedication until June 1958. At nearly five miles long, including its approaches, the bridge connected the peninsulas with a crossing that usually took about ten minutes. Its roadway sits about 200 feet above the water at the center span.

The bridge's design addressed the strong winds common over the straits. An open steel-grid roadway allows wind to pass through, reducing pressure on the structure. In severe winds, the center span can shift as much as 35 feet east or west. The movement is gradual and helps the bridge respond to wind and temperature changes.

The bridge became known as the "Mighty Mac." Some drivers who are uneasy about crossing can request driver assistance, in which a bridge employee drives their vehicle across. On September 6, 2009, the 150 millionth vehicle crossed the bridge. It remains a major Michigan crossing and the longest suspension bridge between anchorages in the Western Hemisphere.



Stamp issued on the day of the bridge's dedication ceremony.



2010 Mackinac Bridge Express Mail Stamp

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