

This Day in History... November 18, 1883

America's First National Time Zones

On November 18, 1883, US and Canadian railroad companies jointly adopted five standard continental time zones.

Before the invention of clock, communities marked the time of day with apparent solar time, usually with a sundial. This meant the time could be slightly different in each settlement. With the advent of mechanical clocks, people still used the sun, but times could still differ by around 15 minutes.



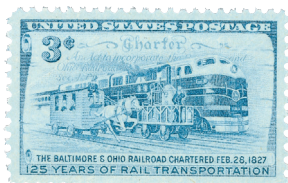
Locomotive stamp from the Pictorial Series.

Greenwich Mean Time (GMT) was established when the Royal Observatory was built in 1675, giving the people of England a standard reference time. Great Britain railway companies using GMT on portable chronometers adopted the first standard time on December 1, 1847. Even still, it was a difficult transition for people used to using solar time. But it became a necessity for countries to establish time zones domestically as well as for dealings with other countries.

In America, timekeeping was confusing. Railroads had made it possible to journey long distances in a short amount of time. But each railroad used its own standard time, often based on the local time of their headquarters or largest station. Cities that had several railroads passing through would have clocks for each railroad, each with a different time.

Charles F. Dowd was one of the first Americans to propose a system of one-hour standard time zones for use by American railroads as early as 1863. He'd shared the idea with a class he was teaching at the time, but didn't address railroad officials until 1869. Dowd's suggested time zones weren't adopted.

Instead, American and Canadian railroad officials chose time zones suggested by William F. Allen, editor of the *Traveler's Official Railway Guide*. Allen presented his idea at the General Time Convention of 1883. On October 11 of that year, they officially adopted the current Standard Time System. The new proposed time zones had borders running through railroad stations in major cities such as Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Atlanta, and Charleston.



Stamp commemorating the 125th anniversary of granting of the charter to the B&O Railroad.

Once the railroad companies agreed on the new time zones, they selected a date to institute them and informed the public. Louisville, Kentucky's *The Courier-Journal* ran a lengthy article concerning the time zones a few days beforehand.

According to that article, "the new system of uniform time will be put into effect by the leading railroad companies; and, instead of fifty different standards, there will be four corresponding to the four meridians adopted by the Chicago convention of railroad men. There is, indeed, a fifth standard meridian adopted, but, as it passes near St. Johns, New Brunswick, we are not concerned with it in the United States."

The designated day was November 18, 1883, also known as The Day of Two Noons. On that day, the Allegheny Observatory in Pittsburgh sent out a telegraph signal at exactly 12:00 noon on the 90th meridian. Then all the railroad clocks around the country reset their clocks to standard-time noon within their designated time zones. The time zones were named Intercolonial, Eastern, Central, Mountain, and Pacific.

Though it was a big change for many Americans, within a year, about 85% of all US cities with a population of over 10,000 (about 200 cities) had adopted the standard times. One city in particular had issues. Detroit (about halfway between the eastern and central time meridians) first decided to stick with local time. Then in 1900 they adopted Central Standard Time before trying local mean time and finally Eastern Standard Time in 1916.

Detroit wasn't the only city in America to struggle with the new time zones. So to put an end to the confusion, Congress and President Woodrow Wilson passed the Standard Time Act in March 1918. This law authorized the Interstate Commerce Commission to establish America's time zones and instituted Daylight Saving Time. (Daylight Saving Time was later repealed and then re-instituted during World War II).



From the American Design Series



Issued to honor the role of railroad engineers in building America.



This stamp pictures Wilson's favorite photo of himself.

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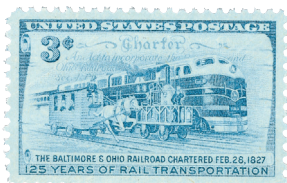
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