

This Day in History... December 4, 1918

President Wilson Sails to Europe

On December 4, 1918, President Woodrow Wilson boarded a boat to Paris, becoming the first sitting president to travel to Europe. He spent six months in France for the World War I peace talks in Paris.

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, President Wilson declared neutrality and aimed to keep America out of the conflict. However, Germany began a program of unlimited submarine warfare, threatening US commercial shipping. Furthermore, in 1917 the British intercepted a telegram sent to the German ambassador in Mexico City promoting a Mexican attack on America. According to Wilson, the German government “means to stir up enemies against us at our very doors.”



Red violet and black color variation of US #832

On April 2, 1917, President Wilson addressed Congress with a declaration of war, stating that the war overseas had become a threat to humanity. He believed that unless the US entered the war, Western civilization could be destroyed. He referred to it as a “war to end all wars” hoping it would result in lasting peace.

The following January, Wilson again addressed Congress, delivering his now-famous 14 Points speech, outlining America’s war goals. This speech marked the first clear intention of any of the warring nations. Its goals included self-determination, open agreements, international cooperation, resolving territorial disputes, creating lasting free trade and commerce, outlawing secret treaties, and establishing an independent Poland with sea access. It also suggested the creation of a peacemaking organization, which would eventually become the League of Nations.

By November 1918, all of Germany’s allies had agreed to armistices, and German commanders realized that defeat was imminent. So on November 11, they agreed to an armistice as well, bringing an end to the fighting.



From the Celebrate the Century: 1910s sheet

On December 4, 1918, President Wilson departed America aboard the George Washington to attend the peace talks in Paris. He became the first sitting US president to travel to Europe while in office. Wilson arrived in Brest, France, on December 13 and the Paris Peace Conference officially began on January 18, 1919. Wilson promoted his 14 Points, and while some saw his proposals as an outline for peace, he also faced opposition on some points.

Over the first four weeks of the conference, Wilson managed to get support for several major issues and laid the groundwork for the League of Nations. He returned to the US for three weeks, during which time the conference struggled. In his absence, many of the agreements he secured were compromised and there were several amendments made to his League of Nations proposal.

Eventually, the Treaty of Versailles was signed, on June 28, 1919, ending the state of war between Germany and the Allies. Wilson received the Nobel Peace Prize for his work at the conference and returned home to get Senate approval. However, Americans and the Senate were divided on the treaty and the idea of the League of Nations. With the Senate split on the issue, Wilson set out on a cross-country speaking tour to get national support.



This stamp image was based on a sketch by Captain Harvey Dunn of US troops at the Second Battle of the Marne.

However, mere weeks into his journey, Wilson suffered a debilitating stroke that paralyzed his left side. No one aside from his wife and doctor knew the full extent of his condition for several years. By November 1919, the Senate was close to passing a compromised treaty, but Wilson rejected the compromise, and the treaty was defeated. After Wilson left office, Warren G. Harding opposed the League of Nations and Congress passed the Knox-Porter Resolution, which officially ended American involvement in World War I.



Stamp features one of Wilson’s favorite pictures of himself.



Wilson stamp from the Liberty Series



Issued for the 100th anniversary of the end of fighting in World War I.

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