

This Day in History... December 28, 1856

Birth of Woodrow Wilson

Thomas Woodrow Wilson was born on December 28, 1856, in Staunton, Virginia, the third of four children.

Wilson's family fiercely defended the Confederate cause. Reportedly, one of Wilson's earliest memories was hearing Robert E. Lee say that Abraham Lincoln had been elected and that war was coming.

Wilson attended Davidson College in North Carolina and then Princeton, where took great interest in studying political philosophy and history. As a student at Princeton, Wilson served as speaker of the Whig Party, wrote for the Nassau Literary Review, organized the Liberal Debating Society, and coached another debating group.



Stamp image based on a photo from Wilson's wife, likely taken during his second term.



Many expected the Wilson stamp to have a 13¢ denomination, as he considered 13 to be his "lucky number." However, the 17¢ denomination filled a more immediate need.

In 1882, Wilson passed the Georgia bar and opened his own law practice with a former classmate. He soon found the law practice was too competitive in the city and felt it was holding him back from his real aspirations to join politics. So in 1883, he entered Johns Hopkins University to study political science.

By 1886, Wilson had earned his PhD and briefly worked as a visiting lecturer at Cornell University. He went on to teach at Bryn Mawr College and Wesleyan University, where he coached football and started a debate team. In 1890, Wilson began teaching at Princeton. At that time, he also became the first lecturer of Constitutional Law at New York Law School. His stirring speech at Princeton's 1896 sesquicentennial celebration was titled "Princeton in the Nation's Service," which became the university's motto (and was later changed to "Princeton in the Nation's Service and in the Service of All Nations"). In 1902, Wilson was promoted from professor to president of Princeton University. He took great joy in this role and made major reforms to the school

With the support of the state's Democratic Party, Wilson was elected governor of New Jersey in 1910, winning with almost 54% of the vote. Within six months of taking office, he established state primaries, essentially removing party bosses from the presidential election process in the state. He also reformed the public utility commission and created workers' compensation in the state.

Quickly gaining national fame for his work as governor, Wilson sought the presidency in the election of 1912. He received his party's nomination and campaigned promoting "New Freedom," which promised to limit the federal government and fight monopolies. Wilson won the election with 41.8% of the popular vote and 435 electoral votes, beating Progressive Theodore Roosevelt (27.4%), incumbent Republican William H. Taft (23.2%), and Socialist Eugene Debs (6.0%).



Wilson stamp from the Prexie Series



One of a very few US postage stamps printed on Internal Revenue Service paper.

Wilson wasted no time instituting his "New Freedom" promises, addressing antitrusts, tariff reforms, and changes to banking and currency issues. President Wilson held the first modern press conference on March 15, 1913, and that year gave the first State of the Union address in person since 1801.

One of the first major issues Wilson tackled was the Federal Reserve. The resulting Federal Reserve Act of 1913 gave private banks control of the 12 regional Federal Reserve Banks but placed controlling interest in a central board selected by the president, with Senate approval. The plan was passed that December and went into effect in 1915.

This Day in History... December 28, 1856 continued

Tariff reform came with the Underwood Tariff in 1913. Wilson raised public support for the tariff by denouncing corporate lobbyists, addressing Congress in person, and putting on a large ceremony when he signed the bill. The reduced revenue that resulted from the lower tariff was made up through a new federal income tax created by the 16th Amendment.

Wilson also managed to end the long-time battle over trusts. Wilson encouraged competition through the Federal Trade Commission, which mostly put an end to unfair trade practices. He also pushed for the passage of the Clayton Antitrust Act of 1914. That act made certain business practices illegal, including price discrimination and agreements that allowed retailers to handle products of other companies.

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, President Wilson declared neutrality and aimed to keep America out of the conflict. He offered his services as a mediator, but the Allies and Central Powers never responded. On the home front, he faced criticism from Republicans, who thought he should begin building up the US Army. But Wilson believed that such actions would only provoke war.

During the election of 1916, Wilson ran with the campaign slogan, "He kept us out of war."

But after winning his party's nomination, he warned that German submarine warfare taking American lives would not be tolerated. In November, Wilson narrowly won reelection.

President Wilson soon found it difficult to maintain America's neutrality, especially after a British passenger liner had been sunk with Americans on board. The tide turned, however, when the British intercepted a telegram sent to the German ambassador in Mexico City promoting a Mexican attack on America.

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 referred to it as a "war to end all wars" hoping it would result in lasting peace.

The US soon raised a large army, due in part to the draft.

The following January, Wilson again addressed Congress, delivering his now-famous "Fourteen Points" speech, outlining America's war goals. It also suggested the creation of a peacemaking organization, which would eventually become the League of Nations.

When the Great War ended, President Wilson attended the Paris Peace Conference, making him the first president to visit Europe while in office. He pushed for many of the ideas in his "Fourteen Points" speech and supported the League of Nations at the Treaty of Versailles. He then had to return to America to get Senate approval on the treaty. With the Senate split on the issue, Wilson set out on a cross-country speaking tour to get national support. However, mere weeks into his journey he 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. Wilson's second wife, Edith, served as his steward, deciding which issues to bring to his attention and which ones to pass on to other members of the cabinet. Over time, Wilson was able to attend cabinet meetings but was never able to perform as he had done prior to the stroke.

Wilson and his wife left the White House in 1921, retiring to an elegant house in the Embassy Row of Washington, DC. He attended just two state occasions during his retirement and gave his last national address the day before Armistice Day in 1923. The following day he delivered a brief speech before 20,000 people gathered outside his home. After suffering another stroke, he died on February 3, 1924. Wilson is the only president buried in the nation's capital, laid to rest in Washington National Cathedral.



Prexie color variety printed in red violet and black



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