

“...the Italian Navigator has just landed in the New World . . .”

(coded telephone message confirming first self-sustaining nuclear chain reaction)

At 3:25 P.M. on December 2, 1942, the Atomic Age began inside an enormous tent on a squash court under the stands of the University of Chicago's Stagg Field. There, scientists headed by Enrico Fermi engineered the first controlled nuclear fission chain reaction. The result, sustainable nuclear energy, led to creation of the atomic bomb and nuclear power plants.

Fermi, an Italian scientist who received the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1938, and exiled Hungarian physicist Leo Szilard, realized the first split or fission could cause a second, and so on in a series of chain reactions expanding in geometric progression. They agreed not to publish their findings, lest Germany use them to produce a super weapon. Instead, Szilard and émigré Eugene Wigner persuaded Albert Einstein to write President Franklin D. Roosevelt and request atomic research receives high priority. Preparing the nation for war, Roosevelt agreed. In December 1941, as the U.S. entered World War II, the project moved to Chicago where Fermi, Walter Zinn, Herbert Anderson, Arthur Compton, and Leo Szilard were the principal team members. Within four years, the Manhattan Project, supervised by J. Robert Oppenheimer, Compton, and Fermi, developed the atomic bomb.

“The Love of Wisdom is the Guide of Life”

(Phi Beta Kappa motto)

On December 5, 1776, Phi Beta Kappa, America's most prestigious undergraduate honor society, was founded at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. Membership in the organization is based on outstanding achievement in the liberal arts and sciences and typically limited to students in the upper tenth of their graduating class.

Organized by a group of enterprising undergraduates, Phi Beta Kappa was the nation's first Greek letter society. From 1776 to 1780, members met regularly at William and Mary to write, debate, and socialize. They also planned the organization's expansion and established the characteristics typical of American fraternities and sororities: an oath of secrecy, a code of laws, mottoes in Greek and Latin, and an elaborate initiation ritual.

When the Revolutionary War forced William and Mary close in 1780, newly formed chapters at Harvard and Yale directed Phi Beta Kappa's growth and development. By the time the William and Mary chapter reopened in 1851, Phi Beta Kappa was represented at colleges throughout New England. By the end of the nineteenth century, the once secretive, exclusively male social group had dropped its oath of secrecy, opened its doors to women, and transformed itself into a national honor society.

Today, Phi Beta Kappa has over 250 chapters and over half a million living members, including six of the current Supreme Court justices and presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton.

John Jay

Considered a founder of the United States, John Jay was a patriot and one of the most accomplished diplomats of the Revolutionary War period.

Born on December 12, 1745 to a prominent family in the Province of New York, Jay is best remembered for The Federalist Essays, written to promote the adoption of the U.S. Constitution, and for helping negotiate the 1873 treaty that guaranteed America's independence from Great Britain.

He attended King's College, later renamed Columbia University, and then practiced law with Robert Livingston. Having established a reputation in New York, Jay was elected to serve as delegate to the First and Second Continental Congresses, which debated whether the colonies should declare independence from Britain.

Jay held numerous posts of public importance throughout the Revolutionary crisis, including president of the Continental Congress, minister plenipotentiary to Spain,

peace commissioner (in which he negotiated treaties with Spain and France), and Secretary of Foreign Affairs.



John Jay

In the post-war era, Jay joined Alexander Hamilton and James Madison in attacking the Articles of Confederation and Perpetual Union, the post-Revolutionary War governing political structure. Jay argued in his Address to the People of the State of New-York, on the Subject of the Federal Constitution that the Articles of Confederation were too weak and ineffective a form of government.

In 1794, Jay served as a special envoy to Great Britain and averted war by negotiating the Jay Treaty in which Britain agreed to evacuate the Northwest Territory. Unfavorable reaction to the treaty ruined Jay's chances for the presidency. He resigned as Chief Justice in 1794 to run and win election as governor of New York. Despite winning a second term in 1802, Jay declined and took retirement. He died on May 15, 1829.

The Washington Monument

On December 6, 1884, workers placed the 3,300-pound marble capstone on the Washington Monument, and topped it with a 9-inch pyramid of cast aluminum, completing construction of the 555-foot Egyptian obelisk. Fifty years earlier, the Washington National Monument Society choose Robert Mills's design to honor first American president and founding father George Washington. For 20 years, lack of funds left the obelisk incomplete at a height of about 156 feet. Finally, in 1876, President Ulysses Grant authorized the federal government to finish construction.

Day and night, spring through winter, the Washington Monument is a focal point of the National Mall and a center of celebrations including concerts and the annual Independence Day fireworks display. The observation deck affords spectacular panoramic views of the nation's capital. When fully constructed, the Washington Monument was the world's tallest structure. Today, the approx. 36,000-stacked blocks of granite and marble compose the world's tallest freestanding masonry structure.

Air Raid on Pearl Harbor

On December 7, 1941 Japanese planes attacked the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, killing more than 2,300 Americans.



Winter Anniversaries

The U.S.S. Arizona was completely destroyed and the U.S.S. Oklahoma capsized. The attack sank three other ships and damaged many additional vessels. More than 180 aircraft were destroyed. A hurried dispatch from the ranking U.S. naval officer in Pearl Harbor, Commander in Chief Pacific, to all major navy commands and fleet units provided the first official word of the attack at the Pearl Harbor base.

The following day President Franklin Roosevelt, addressing a joint session of Congress, called December 7 “a date which will live in infamy.” Declaring war against Japan, Congress ushered the United States into World War II and forced a nation, already close to war, to abandon isolationism. Within days, Japan's allies, Germany and Italy, declared war on the United States, and the country began a rapid transition to a wartime economy in building up armaments in support of military campaigns in the Pacific, North Africa, and Europe.

The Bill of Rights

On December 15, 1791, the new United States of America adopted the Bill of Rights, the first ten amendments to the U.S. Constitution, confirming the fundamental rights of its citizens. The First Amendment guarantees freedom of religion, speech, and the press, and the rights of peaceful assembly and petition. Other amendments guarantee the rights of the people to form a “well-regulated militia,” to keep and bear arms, the rights to private property, fair treatment for accused criminals, protection from unreasonable search and seizure, freedom from self-incrimination, a speedy and impartial jury trial, and representation by counsel.

The Bill of Rights draws influence and inspiration from the Magna Carta (1215), the English Bill of Rights (1689), and various later efforts in England and America to expand fundamental rights. George Mason's Virginia Declaration of Rights formed the basis of the amendments that comprise the bill. During the First Federal Congress, the Senate passed 12 amendments to the Constitution through Congress. By 1791 three-fourths of the states had ratified the ten amendments that constitute the Bill of Rights.

The application of the rights enumerated in the first ten amendments to the Constitution frequently fosters contention. The U.S. Supreme Court is entrusted with the power to void acts of Congress that it finds to be in conflict with the Constitution or specifically with the Bill of Rights when the constitutionality of the acts arises in litigation.

First Flight

On the morning of December 17, 1903, Wilbur and Orville Wright took turns piloting and monitoring their flying machine in Kill Devil Hills, North Carolina. Orville piloted the first flight that lasted just 12 seconds. On the fourth and final flight of the day, Wilbur traveled 852 feet, remaining airborne for 57 seconds. That morning the brothers became the first people to demonstrate sustained flight of a heavier-than-air machine under the control of the pilot.

They had built the 1903 Flyer in sections in the back room of their Dayton, Ohio, bicycle shop. Through their own research and experimentation, and by studying the attempts of other would-be pilots, the Wright brothers knew that heavier-than-air flight was possible. They corresponded frequently with engineer Octave Chanute, a friend and supporter of their work.

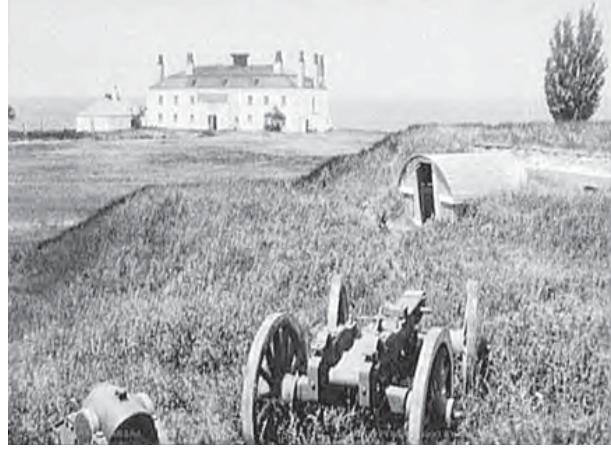
The announcement of the Wright brothers' successful flight ignited the world's passion for flying. Engineers designed their own flying machines, people of all ages wanted to witness the flights, and others wanted to sit behind the controls and fly. The U.S. Army, seeing potential in the new technology, signed a contract with the Wright brothers in 1908 for purchase of a machine that could travel with a passenger at a speed of 40 miles per hour.

Fort Niagara Captured

In the final hours of December 18, 1813, approximately midway through the War of 1812, some 550 British soldiers crossed the Niagara River from Canada determined to seize Fort Niagara on the opposite shore in New York. By sunrise, December 19, the British had their prize and America's Niagara Frontier lay open to attack. From Fort Niagara, the British marched on to destroy Youngstown, Lewiston, Manchester, Fort Schlosser, Black Rock, and Buffalo. While America countered these losses on other fronts, denying the British a sizable lead in the war, control of Fort Niagara allowed the British to dominate the Niagara River and regulate access to the Great Lakes where fighting continued.

The British launched their Niagara assault to retaliate against the destruction of Newark, Canada on December 10. American troops destroyed the Canadian city to deny shelter to advancing British forces, and left 400 city residents homeless, outraging both the British and Canadians.

Fort Niagara expected a British strike following the Newark incident but was caught unprepared on the night of the attack. Fort commander Nathaniel Leonard was miles away and the garrison's picket soldiers had retreated indoors to escape the cold. After disarming the Youngstown pickets without a shot, the British found the majority of the fort's 433 soldiers asleep. With little opportunity to resist, the sleeping fort soon fell.



The Old Fort Niagara in Youngstown, NY

Fort Niagara stayed in British hands throughout the remainder of the War of 1812. In accordance with the 1814 Treaty of Ghent, which restored the prewar status quo, Britain returned the post to the U.S. in 1815.

The Gadsden Purchase

James Gadsden, U.S. Minister to Mexico, and General Antonio López de Santa Anna, President of Mexico, signed the Gadsden Purchase in Mexico City on December 30, 1853. The treaty settled the dispute over the exact location of the Mexican border west of El Paso, Texas, giving the U.S. claim to approximately 29,000 square miles of land in what is now southern New Mexico and Arizona, for the price of \$10,000,000.



U.S. Secretary of War Jefferson Davis had sent Gadsden to negotiate with Santa Anna for this tract of land, which many people, including Davis, believed to be strategic for the construction of the southern transcontinental railroad. Many supporters of a southern Pacific railroad route came to believe that a transcontinental route that stretched through the Gadsden Purchase territory would greatly advantage southern states.

The first transcontinental railroad was constructed along a more northerly route by the “big four” of western railroad construction - Collis Huntington, Leland Stanford, Mark Hopkins, and Charles Crocker. A southern transcontinental route through territory acquired by the Gadsden Purchase was not a reality until 1881 when the tracks of the “big four’s” Southern Pacific met those of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe in the Territory of New Mexico.