

This Day in History... May 7, 1861

Lincoln Made Honorary Citizen of San Marino

On May 7, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln accepted the "honor of citizenship" from San Marino. It was one of the earliest instances of US and San Marino relations, which wouldn't be formally established for decades.

San Marino in northeastern Italy is the world's smallest republic. It covers an area of just 24 square miles. Founded in 301 AD as a refuge for Christians during the Diocletian Persecution, San Marino is thought to be the oldest state in Europe. It became a republic in the 1300s and for the next 200 years defended itself against frequent attacks. In 1600, San Marino created its written constitution, which remains law today. The pope formally recognized San Marino's independence in 1631.

Over a century later, the United States would become the second-oldest constitutional republic in the world. America's "republican experiment" became a working model to the world of how free people could be self-governed. Following Abraham Lincoln's election in 1860, that republic was in danger of crumbling when the Civil War broke out. Lincoln declared that the secession of the Southern states was a threat to America's self-governance, and that to accept such a succession would be "the essence of anarchy."



Lincoln was the first ever honorary citizen of San Marino.

Lincoln received letters of congratulations from around the world celebrating his presidential election. Among the letters that Secretary of State William Henry Seward found most interesting, was one from the Most Serene Republic of San Marino. The letter from San Marino's regent captains was written in both Italian and English. It read, "It is a some while since the Republic of San Marino wishes to make alliance with the United States of America in that manner as it is possible between a great Potency and a very small country.

"As we think not extension of territories but conformity of opinions to procure friendly relations, so we are sure you will be glad to shake hands with a people who in its smallness and poverty can exhibit to you an antiquity from fourteen centuries of its free government.

"Now we must inform you, that to give to the United States of America a mark of high consideration and sincere fraternity ... the citizenship of the Republic of San Marino was conferred for ever to the President ... of the United States of America and we are very happy to send you the diploma of it.

"We are acquainted from newspapers with political griefs, which you are now suffering therefore we pray to God to grant you a peaceful solution of your questions. Nevertheless we hope our letter will not reach you disagreeable, and we shall expect anxiously an answer which proves us your kind acceptance."

During this time, San Marino was facing its own troubles. The Wars for Italian Independence were being fought, and following the fall of the short lived Roman Republic in 1849, Giuseppe Garibaldi took refuge in San Marino. By the beginning of 1861, the Austrians still controlled Venice to the north, and the Papal States controlled a significantly reduced area around Rome. Garibaldi was in the process of conquering the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies in the south of Italy on behalf of the Kingdom of Sardinia, which controlled the remainder of Italy, including all of the land around San Marino. Despite San Marino's earlier protection of Garibaldi, it was unclear if the country would be allowed to remain independent in the face of those seeking Italian unification.

It was some time before Lincoln receive the letter. It had been addressed to him in New York City and had to be sent to Washington, DC. By the time he read the letter, the war had begun, but he took time to respond:

"Great and Good Friends

I have received and read with great sensibility the letter which as Regent Captains of the Republic of San Marino you addressed to me on the 29th of March last. I thank the Council of San Marino for the honor of citizenship they have conferred upon me.

"Although your dominion is small, your State is nevertheless one of the most honored, in all history. It has by its experience demonstrated the truth, so full of encouragement to the friends of Humanity, that Government founded on Republican principles is capable of being so administered as to be secure and enduring.

"You have kindly adverted to the trial through which this Republic is now passing. It is one of deep import. It involves the question whether a Representative republic, extended and aggrandized so much as to be safe against foreign enemies can save itself from the dangers of

Seward also signed the letter Lincoln sent back to the regent captains of San Marino.

domestic faction. I have faith in a good result.

"Wishing that your interesting State may endure and flourish forever, and that you may live long and enjoy the confidence and secure the gratitude of your fellow citizens, I pray God to have you in his holy keeping."

Both Lincoln and Seward signed the letter. It would be several decades before the US established official relations with San Marino. The two nations signed a Treaty of Extradition in 1906 and the first US consulate in San Marino opened on April 9, 1925. It wasn't until 2006 that the US appointed its first diplomatic ambassador to San Marino.



Lincoln later called America the "last best hope of earth."



Giuseppe Garibaldi took refuge in San Marino from the French and Austrians following the fall of the Roman Republic.



San Marino stamp depicts the country's coat of arms, showing the three peaks of Mount Titano on which the nation is built.

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