

This Day in History... May 22, 1849

Abraham Lincoln is Awarded Patent

On May 22, 1849, Abraham Lincoln became the only future US president to receive a patent.

When Lincoln was a teenager, he took a flatboat down the Ohio and Mississippi River to New Orleans while working as a hired hand. In the coming years he grew accustomed to traveling the rivers for similar work. In the 1830s he and some fellow workers were traveling the river when their flatboat got stuck on a milldam.

The quick-thinking Lincoln immediately began unloading cargo and then drilled a hole in the boat's bow to drain water that had entered the boat, before filling it back in. He and a group of locals then brought the boat to shore and carried it past the dam, where they filled it back up and continued on to New Orleans.



1868 Lincoln "E" Grill



1869 Lincoln Pictorial

Lincoln went on to become a lawyer and politician, though he never forgot that experience. In fact, in his first political announcement of 1832 he stressed the importance of improving navigation along the Sangamon River.

Years later, Lincoln was once again in a boat that was stranded on a sandbar. This time, the ship's captain ordered the crew to gather all the loose planks, empty barrels, and boxes and put them under the sides of the boat. Eventually they had enough empty containers under the boat to buoy it up and over the sandbar.

Lincoln gave this experience considerable thought, and it likely inspired his invention. Though he was a lawyer and politician, he had always had an interest in mechanics. As his law partner William Herndon recounted, "he evinced a decided bent toward machinery or mechanical appliances, a trait he doubtless inherited from his father who was himself something of a mechanic and therefore skilled in the use of tools."

Lincoln's resulting idea was called "Buoying Vessels Over Shoals." His idea was to create a system of waterproof fabric compartments that could be inflated when needed to help ships easily move over difficult obstacles. As he saw it, when a ship got stuck, the crew could inflate these chambers at the bottom of the boat that would then lift it over top of the water, away from potential damage. During his research, Lincoln built a scale model boat with his device attached that was later placed on display at the Smithsonian.



1870 Lincoln Banknote stamp

In 1847, Lincoln traveled to Washington to begin a two-year term in Congress. There he met patent attorney Zenas C. Robbins who submitted his application on March 10, 1849. Then on May 22, 1849, Lincoln was awarded patent number 6,469.

The patent begins:

"Be it known that I, Abraham Lincoln, of Springfield, in the county of Sangamon, in the state of Illinois, have invented a new and improved manner of combining adjustable buoyant air chambers with a steam boat or other vessel for the purpose of enabling their draught of water to be readily lessened to enable them to pass over bars, or through shallow water, without discharging their cargoes."

In spite of this, Lincoln's invention was never produced or put into use. Some doubt if it would have been practical. However, his experience in securing a patent, as well as his previous experience as a patent lawyer, left an impression on Lincoln. In the coming years he twice delivered lectures on the patent system, which he saw as an important aspect of economic development. In fact, he once said that the creation of patent laws was the third most important development in world history behind the discovery of America and the creation of the printing press.



Issued for Lincoln's 100th birthday.



Lincoln stamp from the Liberty Series



This stamp image was based on a photo taken of Lincoln just before his 55th birthday.

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