

## This Day in History... November 21, 1848

# Founding of the American Turners

On November 21, 1848, the first American Turners gymnastic union was established in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The first Turner organizations were formed in Germany in the early 1810s. In 1811, Berlin teacher Friedrich Ludwig Jahn began staging outdoor physical education classes to strengthen his students and give them a sense of national pride in preparation for a war of liberation against France. Two years later, Jahn and his students participated in the war that he had prepared them for.

In the coming years, similar gymnastic organizations were founded throughout Germany. These groups focused on physical education, particularly that which used gymnastic apparatus such as parallel bars, the rings, the balance beam, the horse, and the horizontal bar. But they also promoted democratic reforms in the government, which the leaders of the German states opposed. Between 1819 and 1842, the government imposed extensive restrictions on these groups, greatly limiting what they could do. When these restrictions were lifted in 1842, the Turner movement rebounded and its membership and political work increased a great deal.

Then in 1848, a revolution broke out in Germany and many of the Turners joined to fight for their beliefs, though some preferred to make change without violence. After the revolution failed, those Turners that joined in the fight fled to America. Those that didn't, remained in Germany and their Turner societies became less about politics and more about gymnastics.

Shortly after arriving in the US, the Turners quickly began forming their new gymnastic societies, also known as *Turnverein* or *Turngemeinde*. The first one is generally believed to be the Cincinnati Turngemeinde, which was founded on November 21, 1848.

The Turner movement in America spread quickly to other major cities by 1850 – Baltimore, Boston, Louisville, New York City, Pittsburgh, Richmond, and St. Louis. In October of that same year, American Turners from around the country met at a convention in Philadelphia to establish a national organization.

The Turners became very invested in American politics, fighting the “Know-Nothings” that had called for immigration restrictions. The organization itself was also split on the issue of slavery, though they reconciled before the Civil War began. Generally, the Turners were strong supporters of Lincoln's first campaign and served as the president's bodyguards at his inauguration. Many Turners fought for the Union during the Civil War. They also served as guards at Lincoln's funeral.

The American Turners grew after the Civil War, reaching its peak in 1893 with nearly 42,000 members in 316 local societies. The Turners also opened a teacher's seminary to train gymnastics teachers and introduced physical education classes to public schools in many cities.

The Turners were targeted during World War I and World War II and had to prove their loyalty to the US. They changed their name to the American Gymnastic Union and later the American Turners. They reached another peak in membership in 1950 with 25,000 members, though their numbers have decreased since then.

### The Story Behind the Stamp

US #979 was issued for the 100th anniversary of the American Turners Society and sparked a controversy. The stamp was proposed by a resolution of the US House of Representatives, who authorized a “special series” of stamps honoring the Turners.

Acting Postmaster General Joseph Lawler responded that the Post Office Department was not in the practice of issuing stamps “commemorating fraternal, religious, educational, charitable, or sectional organizations or groups.” He added that the Post Office had recently chosen not to issue stamps for groups like the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and YMCA.

Lawler also reminded Congress that special legislation was not needed to issue commemorative stamps. He feared that to do so would hint at favoritism or discrimination. Congress responded to Lawler's protest with an even stronger resolution – this time supported by the Senate. Lawler gave in, and passed to the Bureau of Engraving and Printing a suggested design approved by the American Turners Society. By the end of November 1948, the stamp was issued in Cincinnati, Ohio, where the headquarters of the society was located.

The stamp drew criticism. By 1961, *Life* magazine mocked the cluttered design of the stamp: “Upon this stamp appear a torch, a pair of hanging rings, the dates 1848 and 1948, the words ‘One hundredth anniversary of the’...American Turners’ emblem with its motto, ‘Sound mind sound body,’ an athlete about to throw a discus, a wreath, two oak branches and a profusion of ribbon-work, shields and other ornaments. Now, to get all that on one stamp...was a great accomplishment; it must have destroyed the retinas of a dozen steel engravers. But were the people who mailed letters impressed? They were not. They complained that the stamp looked crowded.”



*Issued for the 100th anniversary of the American Turners.*



*This was America's first mourning stamp.*

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