

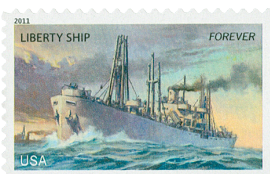
This Day in History... September 27, 1941

Liberty Fleet Day

On September 27, 1941, the first 14 “Emergency” Liberty Ships were launched in what was dubbed Liberty Fleet Day.

The American Merchant Marine Act was passed in 1936, granting funding for 50 commercial merchant vessels that could be used by the US Navy in the event of a war. That number doubled in 1939 and again in 1940.

In late 1940, the British Merchant Navy was suffering from the Battle of the Atlantic, in which German U-Boats were sinking their ships faster than they could be built. The British then requested aid from the US, to build 60 Ocean-class freighters to replace the lost ships and help their merchant fleet. Following the creation of the Lend-Lease program, the number of ships requested was raised to 306 in April 1941.



Stamp from the 2011 Merchant Marine issue

The ships were plain and unattractive, which made them unpopular with the public. When he first announced the emergency shipbuilding program, President Franklin Roosevelt called the ship “a dreadful looking object,” and *Time* magazine called it an “Ugly Duckling.” To help gain greater support for the ships, the Maritime Commission organized Liberty Fleet Day for September 27, 1941.

On that day, the first 14 Liberty Ships were launched from shipyards around the country. The first ship, the SS *Patrick Henry*, was launched from the Bethlehem Steel Yard, in Baltimore, Maryland. President Franklin Roosevelt delivered a speech at the launch that stated, in part:

“The ship workers of America are doing a great job. They have made a commendable record for efficiency and speed. With every new ship, they are striking a telling blow at the menace to our nation and the liberty of the free peoples of the world. They struck fourteen such blows today. They have caught the true spirit with which all this nation must be imbued if Hitler and other aggressors of his ilk are to be prevented from crushing us.”



1955 stamp from the Liberty Series

“The *Patrick Henry*, as one of the Liberty ships launched today renews that great patriot’s stirring demand: ‘Give me liberty or give me death.’ There shall be no death for America, for democracy, for freedom! There must be liberty, worldwide and eternal. That is our prayer—our pledge to all mankind.”

The ships generally had five cargo holds, which could carry 10,200 tons. Each ship had a crew of about 40 sailors and a 4-inch deck gun. Later ships had additional anti-aircraft defenses added.

Initially, these Liberty Ships were built to replace British transports and cargo ships. A total of 18 American shipyards helped built 2,710 Liberty Ships between 1941 and 1945. Altogether, they averaged three ships every two days, though each ship averaged 42 days to build.

Liberty ships served with distinction throughout the war. Many were manned by the US Merchant Marine and claimed several victories against German U-Boats. Though the ships were only intended to last five years, some remained in use into the 1970s. And many of the techniques used to build these ships are still used today.



This 1946 stamp pictures a Liberty Ship unloading cargo.



The *Patrick Henry* was launched on September 27, though the ship’s fitting wasn’t completed until December 30.