



**U.S. Army Corps  
of Engineers**  
Mississippi River  
Commission

# History

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Floods of 1849 and 1850, which caused widespread damage in the Mississippi River Valley, revealed the national interest in controlling the mighty river.

Between 1851 and 1874, celebrated authorities made reports advancing various plans for improving the Mississippi River, and semiaccurate maps were compiled. The most comprehensive report was filed on August 5, 1861, with the Bureau of Topographical Engineers of the U.S. Army by Capt. A.A. Humphreys and Lt. H.L. Abbot. This "classic of engineering literature" provided the basis for the development plan for the river and is still used more than 100 years later. To give an idea of the breadth of the report, its title is: "Report Upon the Physics and Hydraulics of the Mississippi River; Protection of the Alluvial Region Against Overflow; and Upon the Deepening of the Mouths: Based upon Surveys and Investigations." Later, more accurate maps of the river were prepared by the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey and by the U.S. Lake Survey.

However, the lack of coordination in surveys and in the construction of embankments by local levee districts showed the need for centralized control for stabilizing the river and developing navigation channels. What was needed was one agency to coordinate the planning and engineering operations and to be responsible to Congress for the expenditure of Federal funds. Such an organization was recommended in 1875 by a Commission of Engineers' report on the "Reclamation of the Alluvial Basin of the Mississippi River."

Congressional action to establish the Mississippi River Commission began in 1879 with the introduction of bills by Senator L.Q.C. Lamar (D-Miss.) and Representative Randall S. Gibson (D-La.). The consensus of Congress was probably best summed up by Representative (later president) James A. Garfield (R-Ohio) who described the Mississippi River as "one of the grandest of our material national interests in the largest sense of that word and too vast for any authority less than the Nation's to handle." Representative Garfield also believed that the "time has come when either ocean slope would properly value this great bond of national union between North and South."

As created by Act of Congress on June 28, 1879, the Mississippi River Commission (MRC) was to consist of three officers of the Corps of Engineers, one of whom would be President; one member from the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey; and three civilians, two of whom would be civil engineers. All appointments would be nominated by the President of the United States, subject to confirmation by the Senate.

Members of the first MRC were Col. (Bvt. Maj. Gen.) Quincy A. Gillmore - President, Col. (Bvt. Maj. Gen.) Cyrus B. Comstock, and Col. Charles R. Suter, all from the Corps of Engineers; Henry B. Mitchell of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey; civil engineers James B. Eads of Lawrenceburgh, Ind., B.M. Harrod of New Orleans, and Benjamin Harrison of North Bend, Ohio, who 10 years later would become President of the United States. The Secretary of the original MRC was Captain Smith S. Leach, USA.

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This seven-man executive body, reporting directly to the Secretary of War, had a many-fold mission. Among its tasks were:

- ★ To direct and complete surveys then underway of the river between Head of Passes near its mouth to its headwaters.
- ★ To make additional surveys, examinations, and investigations (topographical, hydrographical, and hydrometrical) of the river and its tributaries.
- ★ To correct, permanently locate, and deepen the channel and protect the banks.
- ★ To improve and give safety and ease to navigation.
- ★ To prevent destructive floods.
- ★ To promote and facilitate commerce, trade, and the postal service.
- ★ To submit completed plans together with cost estimates to the Secretary of War for transmittal to Congress.
- ★ To report in full upon the practicability, feasibility and probable cost of the various plans known as the jetty system, the levee system, and the outlet system, as well as on other plans deemed necessary.

To enable the MRC to complete these duties, the Secretary of War was authorized to detail to it necessary officers, men, vessels, and instruments from both the Corps of Engineers and the Coast and Geodetic Survey.

The first meeting of the MRC was held in Washington on August 19, 1879, and the headquarters office was established in St. Louis. For administrative purposes, the MRC created the First and Second Districts at Memphis, Tenn.; the Third District at Vicksburg, Miss.; the Fourth District at New Orleans, La.; and the Fifth (dredging) District at Memphis. The headquarters remained in St. Louis until December 1929 when it moved to its current location in Vicksburg.

### **Changes in Jurisdiction and Responsibility**

Congress several times modified the Act of 1879, which created the MRC, expanding its jurisdiction prior to revamping the concept with the Flood Control Act of 1928. Among the substantial changes were:

- ★ The Act of June 4, 1906, extended the limits of levee construction from the mouth of the Ohio River north to Cape Girardeau, Mo.
- ★ The Act of July 27, 1916, extended the limits of levee construction from Cape Girardeau north to Rock Island, Ill.; extended the limits of both levee and revetment construction up the Arkansas River to the Jefferson Lincoln County line; and provided for improvement of the Ohio River from its mouth of the Cache River.
- ★ The Act of March 1, 1917, provided for the construction of levees needed for flood control in addition to those needed for navigation.
- ★ The Act of September 22, 1922, provided for levee protection and bank protection of the tributaries and outlets of the Mississippi River between Cairo, Ill., and Head of Passes, insofar as these tributaries and outlets are affected by the floodwaters of the Mississippi.

Under the early policy of the MRC, provisional grade levees were set in accordance with the availability of funds. After the 1912 flood, elevations were determined for a confined flood of this magnitude, and a new provisional levee height was fixed at three feet above the new elevations. After levees constructed to this height were overrun by the disastrous 1927 flood, new levee grades were established.

A new policy for flood control in the Lower Mississippi River Valley was established in 1928, based on special reports on the 1927 flood rendered by the MRC and Maj. Gen. Edgar Jadwin, Chief of Engineers. The approved program, generally known as the "Jadwin plan," was adopted by Congress on May 15, 1928, for improvement of the river and its tributaries between the Head of Passes and Cape Girardeau. The 1928 Act also established the MRC as an advisory body responsible for prosecuting the plan, now called the "Mississippi River and Tributaries Project," and reporting to the Chief of Engineers.

### **Today**

Despite its changing mission over the years, the MRC today still retains the original mixture of Army Engineers, Coast and Geodetic Survey (now the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration) representatives, and civilian members prescribed by the founding Act of 1879. Its current members are:

- \* President-designee - Brig. Gen. Edwin J. Arnold, Jr., U.S. Army, Vicksburg, Miss.  
Mr. Sam E. Angel, Lake Village, Ark.  
Mr. R.D. James, Civil Engineer, New Madrid, Mo.  
Mr. William Clifford Smith, Civil Engineer, Houma, La.
- \* Brig. Gen. Steven R. Hawkins, Corps of Engineers, Cincinnati, OH
- \* Col. (P) David A. Fastabend, Corps of Engineers, Portland, OR
- \* Rear Adm. Nicholas A. Prahl, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, Norfolk, Va.

Secretary (nonvoting) - Col. Thomas A. Holden Jr., U.S. Army, Vicksburg, Miss.

\* Designated members (not yet confirmed).

The general duties of the MRC include the recommendation of policy and work programs, the study of and reporting upon the necessity for modifications or additions to the flood control and navigation project, recommendation upon any matters authorized by law, conducting inspection trips, and holding public hearings. The work of the MRC is directed by its President and carried out by the four Army Engineer Districts at St. Louis, Memphis, Vicksburg, and New Orleans.

### **Present Program**

Current activities of the MRC are in three broad categories: general investigations to determine needed improvements, construction of new facilities, and maintenance and operation of existing systems.

Included in its responsibilities are the main river from Cairo, Ill., to Head of Passes, and the basins of the St. Francis, Tensas, Yazoo, Atchafalaya, lower Red, lower Arkansas, lower White, and West Tennessee rivers.

Authorizations for the projects have been established by the various Congresses upon the recommendations of the MRC and the Chief of Engineers as changes to the basic policies of the Flood Control Act of 1928.

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(A listing of MRC Presidents from 1879 until the present is attached.)

COL Quincy A. Gillmore (Bvt. Maj. Gen.) ..... June 30, 1879 to November 25, 1882  
 COL Cyrus B. Comstock (Bvt. Brig. Gen.)... November 25, 1882 to November 25, 1884  
 COL Quincy A. Gillmore (Bvt. Maj. Gen.) .... November 25, 1884 to April 7, 1888  
 COL Cyrus B. Comstock (Bvt. Brig. Gen.)... April 10, 1888 to February 3, 1895  
 COL George L. Gillespie ..... February 3, 1895 to May 12, 1901  
 LTC Amos Stickney ..... May 13, 1901 to February 25, 1903  
 LTC Oswald H. Ernst..... February 25, 1903 to June 26, 1906  
 COL Clinton B. Sears ..... June 26, 1906 to March 14, 1908  
 COL William H. Bixby ..... March 14, 1908 to July 1, 1910  
 COL W. L. Fisk..... July 1, 1910 to March 10, 1911  
 COL C. McD. Townsend..... February 6, 1912 to June 8, 1917  
 BG Charles L. Potter ..... March 2, 1920 to June 10, 1928  
 BG Thomas H. Jackson ..... June 10, 1928 to June 14, 1932  
 BG Harley B. Ferguson ..... June 15, 1932 to August 31, 1939  
 BG Max C. Tyler..... September 1, 1939 to December 31, 1945  
 MG Robert W. Crawford..... January 1, 1946 to December 31, 1948  
 BG Peter A. Feringa ..... January 1, 1949 to May 31, 1953  
 MG John R. Hardin..... June 1, 1953 to June 30, 1957  
 MG William A. Carter..... August 15, 1957 to June 26, 1960  
 MG Thomas A. Lane ..... June 27, 1960 to June 30, 1962  
 MG Ellsworth I. Davis ..... July 1, 1962 to September 30, 1966  
 MG Robert G. MacDonnell ..... December 12, 1966 to July 31, 1969  
 MG A. P. Rollins, Jr. .... August 11, 1969 to August 5, 1971  
 MG Charles C. Noble ..... September 3, 1971 to August 31, 1974  
 MG Francis P. Koisch..... December 16, 1974 to June 30, 1977  
 MG Robert C. Marshall..... September 26, 1977 to July 31, 1980  
 MG William E. Read ..... December 1, 1981 to September 30, 1984  
 MG Thomas A. Sands ..... May 10, 1985 to August 30, 1989  
 MG Arthur E. Williams ..... April 27, 1990 to October 8, 1992  
 MG Pat M. Stevens IV ..... October 9, 1992 to February 10, 1994  
 BG Eugene S. Witherspoon ..... February 11, 1994 to June 3, 1995  
 MG Robert B. Flowers ..... June 16, 1997 to November 14, 1999  
 MG Phillip R. Anderson ..... November 15, 1999 to present  
 BG Edwin J. Arnold, Jr. .... Designee

\* Dates shown are actual appointment dates by the President of the United States and are not necessarily the dates of service in the Commission Headquarters office.