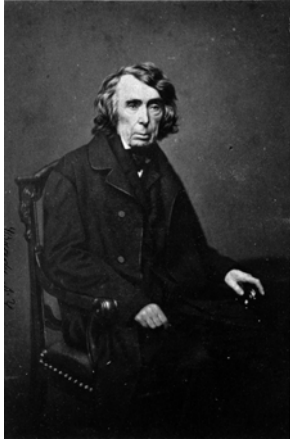


SEASONS OF CHANGE: THE SMITHSONIAN IN 1861 AND 1961

The Smithsonian in 1861



Chief Justice Taney

In 1861, some 150 years ago, Abraham Lincoln had just been inaugurated as President of the United States, Hannibal Hamlin was Vice President, Roger Taney was Chief Justice, and Joseph Henry was the first Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution.

Secretary Joseph Henry had set the Institution on its course—or so he thought. In the Institution's first 15 years, the Smithsonian Castle had been completed, although Henry despised the building designed by the Regents and hoped to sell it to the government or perhaps the Catholic Church. Basic programs had been established and were running well. The Smithsonian's publication program, notably the series *Smithsonian Contributions to Knowledge*, was already one of the premier vehicles for publishing research in the United States.

The Meteorological Project, which had been established in 1855, used volunteer observers from across the country to compile daily weather observations. (Henry later transferred the program to the U.S. Army Signal Corps, where it eventually became the National Weather Service.) Weather patterns were beginning to be recognized, such as the frequent storms that traveled from west to east, following what we now know to be the jet stream. Henry's weather map in the Castle was a popular spot to visit in the city, and a massive amount of meteorological data was being acquired. Through an agreement with the U.S. Patent Office,



View of Washington, D.C., including the Smithsonian Castle, in 1860

Henry used monies appropriated to that agency to fund the reduction of the data. This agreement, however, had strings attached.

Although Henry had strong reservations about accepting federal funds with their attendant political influence, in 1858 he accepted responsibility for the national collections then stored at the Patent Office Building—on the condition that the government provide funding to care for them. The collections were transferred in 1858, but federal funding for their care was soon placed in jeopardy by the war. For the next 20 years, Henry sought to have the National Museum spun off as an independent government bureau. Despite Henry’s concerns, quiet efforts to build both the museum and federal funding were conducted by Assistant Secretary Spencer Fullerton Baird, a naturalist hired and supported by the Regents in 1850. (In the 1860s, young explorer/naturalists dubbed the “Megatherium Club” lived in the towers of the Castle during the winters and, after meetings enhanced with beer, serenaded the Henry daughters who lived in the East Wing.) The National Museum would not be on firm footing until Baird was appointed the second Secretary in 1878.

In 1860, Henry also was working to get rid of the National Library, which was provided for in the Institution’s enabling act. He had fired Librarian Charles Coffin Jewett in 1855 and survived a national controversy and congressional investigation of that event. By 1865, after a devastating fire in the Castle, he succeeded in having the books transferred to the Library of Congress and having the copyright depository provision removed from the Smithsonian’s enabling act. The Smithsonian’s International Exchange Service, which was established in 1849 to support the increase of knowledge through scientific and literary publication exchanges, became the official distributor of U.S. government publications to foreign countries in 1867. With the Institution receiving 1,000 shipments of publications and distributing 888 shipments, Henry noted that it was “now the principal medium of literary and scientific communication between the American continent and foreign countries.” The Civil War would soon disrupt this communication.

Storm clouds were forming on the nation’s horizon in November 1860, when Abraham Lincoln was elected President of a deeply divided country. Henry believed the South should be allowed to secede from the United States, rather than go to war. Soon the nation would be torn asunder and battles visible from the Castle towers. With public buildings barricaded and sandbagged, and volunteer militia on guard duty, the Secretary of War issued the following order: “The Colonel of Ordnance will cause to be issued to Professor J. Henry of the Smithsonian Institute twelve muskets and 240 rounds of ammunition, for the protection of the Institute against lawless attacks.” Secretary Henry made a controversial decision not to fly the Union flag atop the Castle and was criticized for having some sympathy with the Southern



The Megatherium Club

cause. When asked to use the Smithsonian Building to house Union soldiers, Henry said he would do so, but did not view it as a proper use and noted his concern about possible damage to the Institution's property. He suggested that, should the building be repurposed, the most appropriate use would be as an infirmary. The building was never actually requisitioned.

When the war erupted in 1861, the Board of Regents experienced a major upheaval, as nine members left the Board in one year. Several members were expelled for their loyalty to the Confederacy, including Jefferson Davis, Lucius Jeremiah Gartrell, and James Murray Mason. Departing Vice President John Cabell Breckinridge also was loyal to the Confederacy and was expelled from Congress that year. James Gabriel Berret, mayor of Washington, D.C., and a Regent ex officio, resigned after he refused to take the loyalty oath. Several other Regents departed that year: Stephen A. Douglas died; Gideon Hawley, a citizen Regent from New York who had served since 1846, chose not to continue; and two members left the Congress, Representatives Benjamin Stanton of Ohio and William Hayden



The Smithsonian Castle in 1860

English of Indiana. Later, George E. Badger, a citizen Regent from North Carolina, was expelled at a Regents' meeting in February 1863 for "giving aid and comfort to the enemies of the Government." Another Regent, Senator Garrett Davis of Kentucky, was accused by the Senate of treason in January 1864 but was not expelled from that chamber; he remained on the Board of Regents until his death eight years later.

Despite his reservations about the war, Joseph Henry came to know and respect the new President. He soon served as Lincoln's science advisor and, among other things, introduced the President to Thaddeus Lowe and his experiments with balloons, after which a balloon reconnaissance program was established for the Union Army. Henry, however, was not entirely satisfied with his contributions, little of which advanced scientific knowledge in support of the war effort. Instead, his energies were directed largely towards weeding out the hundreds of bad proposals for government funding that were submitted to the War Department during the turmoil. After the war, Henry wrote former President Millard Fillmore that his work had saved the "government from rushing into many schemes which, under the guise of patriotism, were intended to advance individual interests."

The Civil War also affected the Smithsonian's pocketbook. The Institution had three main sources of income. The first was derived from the principal of Smithson's bequest, which was deposited in the U.S. Treasury and yielded about \$31,000 a year. Henry worried as early as January 1861 that the U.S. government might not pay interest on the bequest, although the government did pay the interest during the war. Payments, however, were sometimes late and

those made after January 1862 were in devaluated currency, which drastically reduced the Smithsonian's purchasing power. Henry's response to the diminished funding was that "all superfluous expenditures were to be lopped off, and the most rigid economy exercised."

The second source of income was from the interest the Smithson bequest had earned in the eight years after the money arrived in the U.S. in 1838 and before Congress established the Smithsonian in 1846. Although some of the \$242,000 had been spent on the construction of the Castle, a remaining balance of \$141,000 had been invested in state bonds for the District of Columbia, Indiana, Virginia, Tennessee, and Georgia. When the latter three states joined the Confederacy, the Smithsonian lost the interest on those bonds, a loss of about \$4,000 a year.

The third source of funds was the \$4,000 annual appropriation by Congress for the care of the national collections transferred from the Patent Office Building in 1858. These funds were the first to be affected, even before the war started. In December 1860, Henry wrote a friend that the Smithsonian was unable to draw the semiannual sum of \$2,000 as the government had stopped payment. In a statement that resonates to this day, Henry warned that if Congress failed to appropriate money for the museum, "we shall be obliged to close the doors or charge an admittance to visitors." Thankfully, the Institution survived the tumultuous 1860s. As the decade drew to a close, the Smithsonian was rebuilding programs and collections that support "the increase and diffusion of knowledge."

The Smithsonian in 1961



Secretary Carmichael

Although the Great Depression and World War II brought decades of stagnation to the Smithsonian, the Institution again began to expand its programs, buildings, and new intellectual initiatives in the 1950s. Enjoying strong support from the Congress, the Institution entered a decade of unprecedented growth beginning in 1960. Incoming President John F. Kennedy found Washington to be a sleepy southern city and launched initiatives to make it a cultural center worthy of the nation's capital. At the same time, the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and growing unrest over the military's role in Vietnam hinted at the tremendous social upheaval and change that the decade would see.

The international space race was triggered by the International Geophysical Year in 1957–58 and the Soviets' launch of *Sputnik* in 1957. At the same time, strong federal funding for Smithsonian science initiatives was enhanced by Secretary Leonard Carmichael's careful cultivation of good congressional relations. New research positions were secured, and new scholars were expected to meet higher research standards. Carmichael personally interviewed all candidates for research positions and rejected those he found lacking, an experience many Smithsonian staff would later recall as equivalent to that of taking their Ph.D. orals. If selected, some of these bright young scholars found the Smithsonian to be a refuge from the McCarthy-era loyalty oath controversies on college campuses.

The 1955 move of the Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory (SAO) to Cambridge, Massachusetts, led to the expansion of SAO programs and the development of a new generation of astrophysicists who would make significant contributions to our knowledge of the universe. By the time *Sputnik* was launched, the SAO already had established a network of cameras to track satellites. As even the military was incapable of spotting the satellite, SAO was singular in its ability to track *Sputnik*, and it quickly became the center for satellite tracking in the U.S. A citizen science satellite observation program, Moonwatch, also was launched.



Filipino boy scouts participating in Operation Moonwatch

In 1960, the construction of wings for the Natural History Building was approved to provide significantly more space for research, ever-expanding collections, and staff. A capital campaign was launched to improve facilities for the National Zoo after a lion killed a young girl there. The new Zoo director, Ted Reed, took seriously the Zoo's mandate to conduct research and began to hire a cadre of scientists.

The Smithsonian's arts and history programs also benefitted from new initiatives around 1960. Congress approved funds for a new Museum of History and Technology in 1955, and



The National Mall in 1960

construction began on its Mall site in 1959. In 1960, planning began for the recently legislated National Portrait Gallery; soon it would open in the historic Patent Office Building alongside the National Collection of Fine Arts (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum). By 1967, the Institution's museums had grown so large that the single entity, the United States National Museum, was abolished.

And the Institution was attracting new audiences. Since the late 1940s, Congress had provided a substantial annual appropriation for the "Exhibits Modernization Program." Exciting new displays in art, culture, history, and science captivated growing numbers of visitors to the National Museum.

Thus a solid platform had been built for S. Dillon Ripley when he was appointed the eighth Secretary in 1964. Over the next decade he developed new science programs, notably the Conservation and Research Center, the Smithsonian Marine Station at Fort Pierce, the Smithsonian Environmental Research Center, and the Museum Conservation Institute. Staffing, infrastructure, and programs were significantly expanded at the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute, the National Museum of Natural History, and SAO. Internal grant programs were created to encourage and support research. A fellowship program began to attract young scholars to work at the Institution.



*Exhibits Modernization: The Hall of Health
in the Arts and Industries Building*

In the arts, Ripley attracted the Hirshhorn collection, secured the Renwick Museum, and facilitated the acquisition of The Cooper Union's museum. He created a storefront museum in Anacostia to reach out to the local African American community. Ripley also focused on outreach to the American public, creating the Smithsonian Associates and *Smithsonian* magazine, establishing the annual Folklife Festival on the Mall, and forming units devoted to television and radio programming, and K-12 education.

During the 1960s, the Institution also responded slowly but steadily to the social upheaval in the nation. During the 1968 March on Washington, Ripley insisted that the museums stay open, welcome the visitors, and demonstrate that the Smithsonian and its resources are free and available to all. New exhibits addressed social issues, diversity, environmental concerns, and evolution. In addition, the staff of the Institution would become more diverse with the 1967 appointment of the first African American museum director, John Kinard of the Anacostia



Anacostia Neighborhood Museum Director John Kinard, welcoming the public to the new museum in 1987

Neighborhood Museum. The Board of Regents selected its first African American member in 1972 when Leon A. Higginbotham was appointed a citizen member from Pennsylvania. Two years later, Julian Euell was appointed Assistant Secretary for Public Service, the first African American to serve the Institution at that level. Women also began to assume more responsible positions, with Lisa Taylor appointed director of Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum in 1969.

Despite the turmoil of the 1960s, it was a decade of opportunity and creativity at

the Institution. Secretary Ripley embraced social change, and the Smithsonian attracted new audiences and supported new views of American society. New facilities and outreach programs were launched. President Kennedy's call for a new focus on science supported the development of new research opportunities at the Smithsonian and, soon after the 1962 release of Rachel Carson's seminal book *Silent Spring*, the Institution was at the forefront of new ecological and environmental approaches to the study of the natural world. Thus the Institution of 1970 was substantially different in size, quality of research and outreach, and diversity of its staff and programs, than the Smithsonian of the 1960s.