

Sectional Library,  
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SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION.

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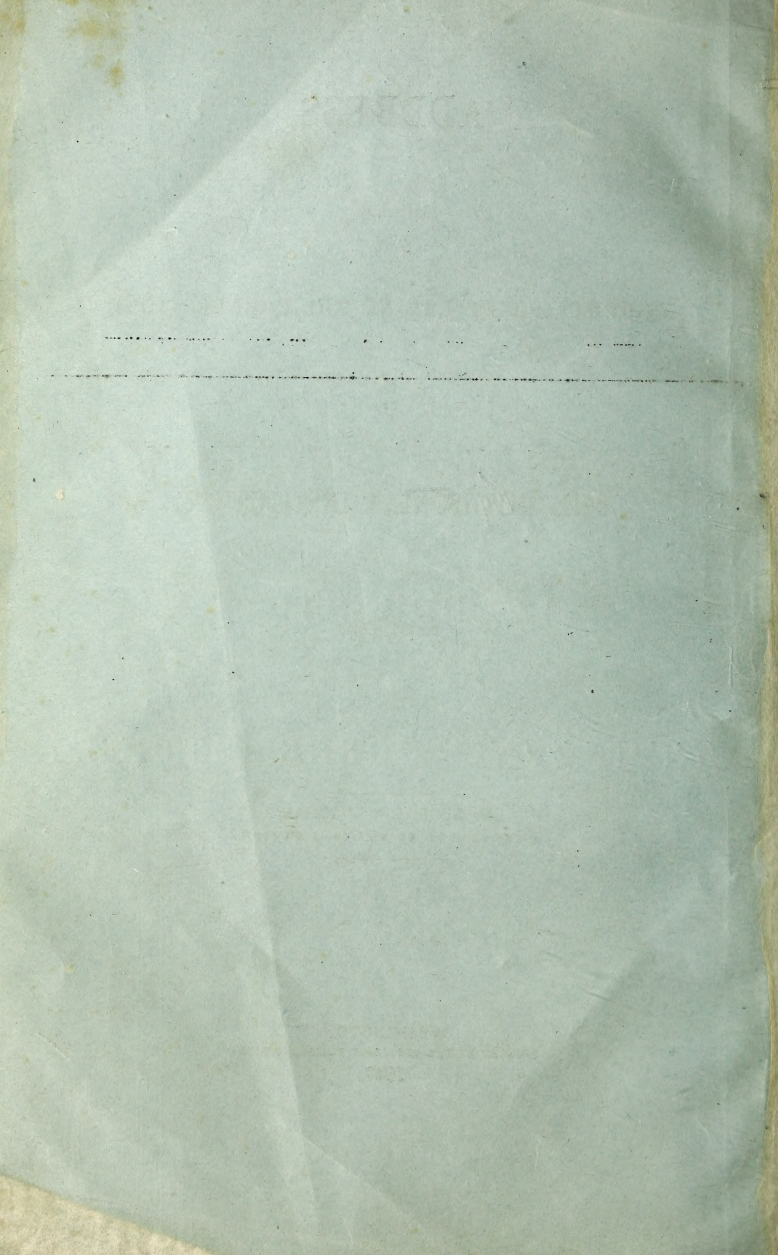
ADDRESS

ON

LAYING THE CORNER STONE.

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Printed at the Congressional Globe Office, Jackson Hall, Washington, D. C.



// ADDRESS

DELIVERED

ON OCCASION OF LAYING THE CORNER STONE

OF

THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION; //

MAY 1, 1847.

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By GEORGE M. DALLAS,  
CHANCELLOR OF THE INSTITUTION.

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WASHINGTON:  
PRINTED AT THE OFFICE OF BLAIR AND RIVES.  
1847.

Smithsonian Institution  
Library, Washington, D.C.

ADDRESS

PRINTED

ON OCCASION OF LAYING THE CORNER STONE

THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

MAY 1, 1847

BY GEORGE M. DALLAS,  
CHAIRMAN OF THE BOARD.

WASHINGTON:

PRINTED AT THE OFFICE OF DEAR AND RILEY.

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### FRIENDS AND FELLOW-CITIZENS:

It has been deemed proper that, at a ceremony so interesting as the present to the SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, its chief officer should make to you a few general remarks explanatory of its origin, its purposes, its plans, and its prospects. Let me, therefore, ask your attention while I undertake that duty.

The Congress of the United States, by an act passed on the 10th of August last, organized "*an establishment*," through the instrumentality of which to apply faithfully to its directed objects a legacy of five hundred thousand dollars, received by our Government under the will of a philosophic and benevolent Englishman. This "*establishment*" is composed of our highest public functionaries for the time being—the President, the Vice President, the Chief Justice, and the Heads of the six Executive Departments, with the Commissioner of the Patent Office, and the Mayor of Washington; and, as the active council of management, a board is created of fifteen, known in the act by the scholastic name of "*Regents*," one-fifth of them chosen by the Senate, another fifth by the House of Representatives, and of the remainder, two-fifths by the joint action of both legislative chambers. It is to accommodate this imposing agency, to give it permanent and suitable means with which to effectuate its important and various purposes, and to shelter as well as exhibit its collections and property, that Congress enjoined to be erected, "of plain and durable materials and structure, without unnecessary ornament," the edifice whose corner-stone you have seen deposited.

JAMES SMITHSON, a Londoner born, and claiming to be the son of a distinguished nobleman, gave his life exclusively to intellectual pursuits, and especially to researches in physical and experimental science. Supplied with larger means than his wants

required, and steadily practising a strict scheme of personal economy, he amassed considerable fortune. He died at Genoa in 1829, and, by his will, bequeathed his accumulated property to this Union; a country that, notwithstanding his frequent change of abode, he had never visited, whose citizens he had never associated with, but in whose inevitable future he saw the most solid ground on which to cast the anchor of his fame. This legacy, for some time the subject of litigation in the British Court of Chancery, was finally secured, brought over, and received into the treasury of the United States on the 1st of September, 1838. Its exact amount, when deposited, was five hundred and fifteen thousand one hundred and sixty-nine dollars.

The legacy was accompanied by a declaration of its design, and the execution of that design has been assumed, as well by an acceptance of the money as by several open and formal avowals by our Government. It was "*to found an Institution at Washington for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men;*" to found, not an academy, not a college, not a university, but something less technical and precise, something whose import and circuit should be bolder and more comprehensive: an institution not merely for disseminating, spreading, teaching knowledge, but also, and foremost, for creating, originating, increasing it. Where at? In the city whose name recalls the wisest, purest, and noblest spirit of the freest, newest, and broadest land. And among whom? Not a chosen or designated class—not the followers of a particular sage or sect—not the favorites of fortune, nor the lifted of rank—but among MEN—men of every condition, of every school, of every faith, of every nativity! *Men!* It was with a purpose thus elevated and expansive, thus as well distinct as indiscriminating, that JAMES SMITHSON committed his wealth to the guardianship of the American Republic. Whatever may be the difference of opinion as to the comparative merits of the many modes of practically realizing this purpose, it is quite certain, that the good faith and best exertions of our country are solemnly pledged to its fulfilment. We must try it—try it sincerely, indefatigably, trustworthily—try it through all the diversified and promising channels—try it with no narrow exclusiveness of choice or prejudice as to systems, sciences, or arts. The intention of the benefactor was to make his endowment a perennial fountain of wisdom, as well practical as theoretic or imaginative, whose living waters should be unceasingly distributed to advance the intelligence, comfort, and happiness of human beings.

When, at no distant day, I trust, it shall be seen, that within

the walls of this building the truths of nature are forced, by persevering researches, from their hidden recesses, mingled with the stock already hoarded by genius and industry, and thence profusely scattered by gratuitous lectures or publications for the benefit of all; when it shall be seen that here universal science finds food, implements, and a tribune—art, her spring to invention, her studio, and her models; and both shall have throngs of disciples from the ranks of our people, emulous for enlightenment or eager to assist—then the condition of our legacy will have been performed, and the wide philanthropy of SMITHSON have achieved its aim!

As a beginning to the plan for effecting a result so interesting, Congress have deemed and declared the erection of a large and commodious edifice indispensable. The Board of Regents were, by the legislative charter, instructed to select, as soon as they were organized, a site, and to cause a structure to be reared, and that structure to make “of sufficient size, and with suitable rooms or halls, for the reception and arrangement, upon a liberal scale,” *first*, of objects of natural history, including a geological and mineralogical cabinet; *second*, of a chemical laboratory; *third*, of a library; *fourth*, of a gallery of art; *fifth*, of the necessary lecture rooms; and *sixth*, of the national cabinet of curiosities and relics now poorly and partially accommodated in the upper story of the Patent Office. It is the first duty of the Regents to obey the unequivocal behests of Congress—to carry them out faithfully, on the scale and in the spirit they obviously import; and to let their measures flow, not from their own discretion, but from the provisions of the law which they are empowered to execute. I say this in explanation of the dimensions which the building must necessarily take. It is consecrated to the various and boundless objects that tend to “increase and diffuse knowledge.” It is designed to participate, as a satellite, in the duration and march of our glorious Union—to be the depository of all the rare productions of nature and art which centuries may gather, and to throw open halls sufficiently ample to contain the knowledge-seeking masses of our countrymen. Congress have stamped this character upon it, by prescribing and appropriating its vast interior compartments, and by other positive expressions of their will.

To conform strictly to instructions, and yet keep within the pecuniary limits assigned to them; to provide the space called for, and yet avoid even the appearance of unnecessary expansion; to combine solidity with architectural beauty and wholesome ventilation, and to satisfy at once true taste and stern

economy by banishing useless embellishment, were aims always controlling and uppermost with the Regents. How far they have succeeded time will show, and must be left to the candor of public opinion. Not doubting that the experienced and reliable contractors for the work will accomplish their undertaking, in all its details, with exactitude and fidelity, I may venture to give you an anticipation in brief of the building whose first stone is now laid.

Its exterior will present a specimen of the style of architecture that prevailed some seven centuries ago, chiefly in Germany, Normandy, and southern Europe, which preceded the Gothic, and continues to recommend itself, for structures like this, to the most enlightened judgment. It is known as the Norman, or, more strictly speaking, the Lombard style. It harmonizes alike with the extent, the grave uses, and the massive strength of the edifice; it exacts a certain variety in the forms of its parts; and it authorizes any additions that convenience may require, no matter how seemingly irregular they may be.

It will extend, east and west, an entire front of four hundred and twenty-six feet, having a central building of fifty by two hundred feet in the clear, inside, with two towers; two wings of unequal fronts; the east one forty-five by seventy-five feet in the clear, inside, with a vestibule and porch attached to it; the west one thirty-four by sixty-five feet in the clear, inside, with a northern semicircular projection. These wings will be connected with the central building by two ranges sixty feet in length in the clear, inside. It will have a central rear tower, and other towers of different heights, sizes, and characters, two of them placed in the wings. All these numerous towers are essential to arrangements within—as flues, stairways, ventilators, and detached rooms—and are of different heights, varying from sixty to one hundred and fifty feet.

The first story of the central building will be occupied by the library, the chief lecture room, and the principal hall; the second story by the museum. The laboratory and chemical lecture room will occupy the east wing; the gallery of art the western wing and western connecting range. The chosen material is a freestone of a lilac grey color, drawn from a quarry on the banks of the Chesapeake and Ohio canal, near Seneca Creek, and but twenty-three miles from this spot.

It is gratifying to me to be able to accompany this imperfect sketch with the statement, that the entire pile is to be finished and furnished, and fitted up, for a sum less, by many thousand dollars, than the one set apart by Congress as applicable to the building alone.



How best to put this SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION in progress; to give it definite character and views; to shape its line of march as Congress has either ordered or intimated that it should be, and to let the testamentary purpose be apparent in all its operations, was a task on which ability and much consultation have been expended. There were—I may almost say, necessarily, and of course there were—on this cardinal point, great diversities of sentiment and construction, as there had been during the masterly debates which prefaced the passage of the law. What constituted “*knowledge*” in the sense of SMITHSON’S bequest? In what manner shall its “*increase*” be provided for? By what methods shall its “*diffusion*” be sought? Should the developments of the laboratory be more engrossing than the stored resources of the library? Will oral expositions, or printed treatises be preferable? Are permanent professorships to be systematized, or temporary teachers to be enlisted? In fine, what should be the instruments and the orbit of an establishment whence the light of knowledge was required constantly to radiate among men?

They to whom was confided the resolution of these problems into practical measures, have felt the weight and delicacy of their mission. They began by profoundly studying the subject in its several aspects. They cherished with ardor, and discussed with freedom, their respective projects. The conflicts of upright minds, however, rarely fail to end in mutual concession and compromise; and thus scarcely a single measure was adopted except by unanimous concurrence. The Regents have submitted their labors and conclusions to the country—the report of their proceedings was duly made for legislative supervision; and may they not confidently hope for (what they know nothing of theirs can succeed without) the coöperation and sympathy of the American people?

There are some results to be anticipated from the success of the Institution, which, though not as obvious as others, are nevertheless such as no sound American heart can wholly disregard, and which it may not be misplaced to glance at. That we shall fulfil, in the presence of watchful civilization, an admitted obligation, and that the common mind of our country, on which the permanency of its liberties so closely depends, will be exalted and invigorated, are considerations abundantly strong to rally us all to the manly effort. No greater shame, and no greater loss can readily be incurred, than would be consequent on ignoble failure. But may it not be justly said that the mild and genial influence of this establishment will strengthen and tighten the

cords of our Union, and give to the capital of that Union a new charm, with greater stability?

The Smithsonian design is, as I have already suggested, a peculiar one. It cannot, as a scene of educational training, have any pretensions or provoke any jealousies. It is no rival of the many admirable schools which adorn the respective States, and can in no manner intrude upon their spheres of action. Yet it will be a factory and a store-house of knowledge accessible to all the agents of this vast Confederacy—its executive, legislative, judicial, civil, military, foreign, and domestic agents. It will be the recipient, too, of such fruits of the labors and such acquisitions of the enterprise and travels of these agents as may contribute to illustrate, and explain, and facilitate the public service, or to give precision and vigor to its operations of every kind. As a resource and a sanctuary for intellect, the Institution can hardly fail to become an object of patriotic pride and attachment, and must be felt as a persuasive inducement to preserve inviolate the Constitution, with whose fate its own is identified.

I will not dwell upon its special claim to the fostering kindness and hospitality of this Metropolis. Her citizens doubtless appreciate that justly. By designating Washington for its local habitation, the generous testator has summoned the intelligence, the courtesy, and the philanthropy of her inhabitants as auxiliaries to his beneficent project. Already it has added to her social scene a fixed star whose beams pervade the scientific world; and ere long this rising temple, consecrated to the highest of human pursuits, **KNOWLEDGE**, will give fresh attraction and firmness to her destiny.



