The Castle at the Smithsonian

LET’S EXPLORE

The Smithsonian Institution Building, otherwise known as the Castle, was constructed in 1847. Amid pomp and ceremony, President James K. Polk laid the cornerstone of the Smithsonian Institution Building, otherwise known as the Castle. By 1855, it was completed and opened to the public. The Castle is now home to the Visitor Center for the entire Smithsonian. Over the years it has been many things (and always more than one thing at a time).

Here you can learn about Smithsonian history and the Castle itself. What started as just one building has now grown to 19 museums, 9 research centers, 13 gardens, and the National Zoo. Information about all of these can be found on display here at the Castle.

For more stories about the Castle, visit: The Castle of Curiosities
http://m.si.edu/highlights/15

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Smithsonian
James Smithson (1765-1829)

James Smithson was born in Paris, the illegitimate child of Hugh Smithson, the first Duke of Northumberland, and Elizabeth Hungerford Keate Macie, a wealthy window.

In 1786, Smithson graduated from Pembroke College, Oxford, and soon became a member of the Royal Society. As a “natural philosopher” (as scientists were then called), he was most known for his work in the field of geology; Smithsonite, which he first identified in 1802, was named for him after his death. His research ranged from coffee making to the chemistry of a woman’s tear. Smithson died in Genoa, Italy.

In 1826, he wrote his will, leaving his estate to his nephew, Henry James Hungerford. Although Smithson never traveled outside Europe, his will stated that if his nephew died without heir, the money would go to “...the United States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge...”

The Henry Family

Joseph Henry served as the first Secretary of the Smithsonian from 1846 to 1878. He was a professor of natural philosophy at what is now Princeton University, where he conducted pioneering research in electromagnetism and invented the electromagnetic relay that led to the telegraph, as well as the precursor to the electric doorbell.

His achievements as both an educator and as a scientist made him ideal for the Smithsonian. The Henrys were the only family to live in the Castle. Mary Henry, his oldest daughter, kept a diary during that period, covering such events as the Castle fire of 1865; the Civil War; and the death of Henry’s only son, William.

Joseph Henry was an advisor and friend of Abraham Lincoln; both men lost sons the same year. During the Civil War, Henry convinced Lincoln to experiment with hot air balloons for communication and surveillance.

On May 13, 1878, Joseph Henry died in his quarters at the Smithsonian Castle. Today, Joseph Henry’s legacy lives on in the research of present-day Smithsonian scientists.

Fun Facts

- There are eleven fireplaces in the building.
- Iron in the sandstone gives the Castle its distinctive color.
- The building has 503 windows.
- The National Zoo was started behind the Castle by William Temple Hornaday.
- The statue of Joseph Henry in front of the building originally faced the Castle, but was turned around in 1965.
- Between 7,000 and 8,000 people attended the ceremony to lay the building’s cornerstone on May 1, 1847.
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