

LINCOLN LORE

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LINCOLN AND THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Abraham Lincoln's earliest interest in the Smithsonian Institution is registered during his congressional term beginning in 1847, and throughout his presidential years he was in constant touch with its director, Joseph Henry. Probably the most important function, in this connection, Mr. Lincoln performed was the signing in 1862 of a formal acceptance of a \$480,000 bequest for the Smithsonian from the estate of James Smithson. The document of acceptance with Lincoln's signature was on July 29 sold by a London auction house, which calls to mind some incidents relating to the Institution.

James Smithson was born in England about 1754 and died in Genoa, Italy, June 27, 1829. He left his estate to a nephew with the provision that if he should die without offspring the entire property was to be "left to the United States for the purpose of founding an institution at Washington to be called the Smithsonian institution for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men." The nephew passed away without heirs in 1835.

The Smithsonian was founded in August, 1846, after much discussion in Congress, Andrew Johnson being the leader of the small group opposing its establishment. No sooner than the 1847 session of the House opened than Lincoln, a new member, witnessed a further harangue by Johnson against the project. On January 17, 1848, Johnson introduced a bill to change the name and purpose of the institution to that of the "Washington University for the benefit of the indigent children of the District of Columbia in memory of and out of respect to George Washington the father of his country."

Joseph Henry, who became the first director or curator of the Smithsonian, immediately upon its establishment in 1846, was still serving as the head of the institution when Lincoln came to the Presidency and continued through Lincoln's administrations. Henry was born in Albany, New York, and as a young man determined to devote his life to the study of science. As professor of mathematics at Albany Academy he began his experiments in electricity which has allowed his name to be associated with Franklin's as one of the two outstanding original investigators in that branch of science. In 1830 he developed the "intensity" magnet which made the telegraph possible. One cannot overemphasize Henry's contribution to the war by his inventions associated with the telegraph, and there are those who still believe that he, rather than Morse, should be recognized as the father of our communication system. Mr. Lincoln became a great admirer of Henry, and we can anticipate no greater pleasure could have come to Mr. Lincoln, with respect to the institution, than the formal acceptance of additional funds which would contribute to the success of the enterprise.

A very interesting incident is related associated with some of Henry's experiments during the war. Mr. Henry was brought before the President by an officer charging him with being a rebel spy, observed signalling messages from the tower of the institute to confederate authorities. Mr. Lincoln humorously said to Mr. Henry, "Now you're caught! What have you to say, Professor Henry, why sentence of death should not immediately be pronounced upon you?" Lincoln then advised the officer in charge that he and other government officials were with Henry on the occasion testing some new army signals.

The national lighthouse system is largely the result of Henry's planning, and throughout his long association with the Smithsonian Institution he acted as "confidential advisor on scientific matters to the government."

L. E. Chittenden in his *Recollections of President Lincoln and his Administration* gives some interesting details of a meeting of Lincoln and Henry in the spring of 1862 in the office of the register. A conversation between Chittenden and Henry drifted to the President when Henry remarked:

"I have only recently come to know the President, except from a passing introduction, I have lately met him five or six times. He is producing a powerful impression upon me, more powerful than any one I can now recall. It increases with every interview. I think it my duty to take philosophic views of men and things, but the President upsets me. If I did not resist the inclination, I might even fall in love with him . . .

"I have not yet arranged my thoughts about him in a form to warrant their expression. But I can say so much as this: President Lincoln impresses me as a man whose honesty of purpose is transparent, who has no mental reservations, who may be said to wear his heart upon his sleeve. He has been called coarse. In my interviews with him he converses with apparent freedom, and without a trace of coarseness. He has been called ignorant. He has shown a comprehensive grasp of every subject on which he has conversed with me. His views of the present situation are somewhat novel, but seem to me unanswerable. He has read many books and remembers their contents better than I do. He is associated with men who I know are great. He impresses me as their equal, if not their superior."

At this point in the conversation Lincoln entered the room, and Chittenden remarked he had interrupted "an interesting commentary." After Dr. Henry had gone, Chittenden was able to get Lincoln's reaction to Henry and the Smithsonian in these words:

"I had an impression that the Smithsonian was printing a great amount of useless information. Professor Henry had convinced me of my error. It must be a grand school if it produces such thinkers as he is. He is one of the pleasantest men I have ever met; so unassuming, simple, and sincere. I wish we had a few more such men."