

SCIENCE

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THE SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION, ITS FUNCTION AND ITS FUTURE¹

ORIGIN AND PRINCIPLES OF THE SMITHSONIAN

WHAT is the Smithsonian Institution? What is its relation to the government? How was it founded and for what purpose? Above all, what does it do and what may be its significance to human welfare in the future? Is it capable of meeting the wholly different needs of science to-day with the same success which attended its earlier years? These are the questions which I propose to answer.

The institution is the interpretation of the broad interests of James Smithson, an English scientific man who, though he never saw this country, had such confidence in our then young republic that he made it the trustee of his entire fortune to be used for "the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men." His interests are most tangibly brought out by his published writings. Smithson's publications number twenty-seven and include contributions to a wide range of subjects, from the origin of the earth, the nature of the colors of vegetables and of insects, the analyses of minerals and of chemicals, to improved methods of constructing lamps and of making coffee.

Certain fundamental facts necessary to a proper understanding of the Smithsonian's past and its potentialities can be deduced from the strange story of its origin. In the first place the institution is not of national origin, as is frequently supposed, but was the establishment of an individual. In the second place it is privately endowed and privately financed. The government of the United States is merely the trustee to carry out the design of the testator, and to put this into effect has transferred the responsibilities to a board of regents or trustees. In the third place the organization has the maximum of flexibility; a minimum of individuals are permanently supported; at any time it may be so remodeled as to meet existing circumstances, permanent or temporary.

As to the institution's achievements, whatever it accomplishes must result from its adherence to the basic principles deduced from the will of its founder by its first secretary, Joseph Henry.

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¹ American Association for the Advancement of Science, General Session, Friday, January 1, 1926.

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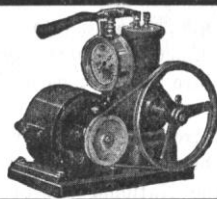
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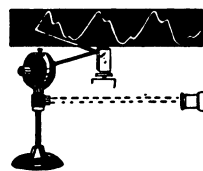
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