



Solomon G. Brown

First African American Employee at the Smithsonian Institution

Solomon G. Brown (c. 1829-1906) was the first African American employee at the Smithsonian Institution. He joined the staff of the Smithsonian in 1852 and remained in continuous service to the Institution until he retired in 1906, after 54 years. Brown had many positions while at the Smithsonian, including working as a general laborer building exhibit cases and moving and cleaning furniture, assisting in preparing maps and drawings for Smithsonian lectures, and working in the International Exchange Service. Brown was also listed in Smithsonian Annual Reports with the title, "Clerk, In charge of Transportation."

Brown served under the first three Secretaries of the Institution, Joseph Henry, Spencer Fullerton Baird, and Samuel P. Langley. Brown was by far the closest with Spencer Baird, who was Assistant Secretary 1850-1878 and Secretary 1878-1887. Much is known about their close relationship because of the many letters that we have that Brown sent to Baird while he and his family were away from Washington for the summers. Brown would report to Baird on not just the goings-on at the Smithsonian, but also of events happening in the city itself.



Solomon G. Brown,
1891

There was much more to Solomon Brown's life than the Smithsonian. He was born around 1829 as a free man in Washington City to Isaac and Rachel Brown, and was one of six children. Because his father died at an early age in 1833, Solomon was not able to attend school, but instead went to work for Lambert Tree, assistant postmaster in the city post office. In 1844 Brown, with the help of Tree, secured a position in the city post office. He was then detailed to assist Joseph Henry, Samuel F. B. Morse, and Alfred Vail with the first magnetic telegraph system between Washington and Baltimore, Maryland.

Brown was a self-educated man and while at the Smithsonian obtained a considerable knowledge in the field of natural history. He became well known for his illustrated lectures on natural history. He lectured frequently at scientific societies in Washington; Alexandria, Virginia; and Baltimore, Maryland. Brown was also an avid poet. He had poetry readings and his poetry was published in one of the leading African American newspapers of the day, the *Washington Bee*.

Solomon Brown was also an activist committed to advancing his race, and in the African American community he was a man of prominence. He lived with his wife, Lucinda, on Elvans Road in a section of Anacostia later called East Hillside. He founded the Pioneer Sabbath School, was superintendent of the North Washington Mission Sunday School, a member of the Freedman's Relief Association, and a trustee of Wilberforce University and the 15th Street Presbyterian Church. Brown was also elected to three consecutive one-year terms, 1871-1874, as a member of the House of Delegates under the Territorial Government of the District of Columbia.

Solomon Brown retired from working at the Smithsonian on February 14, 1906 at the age of 77. He died in his home just a few months later on June 24, 1906.



Lesson Plans and Classroom Activities

Explore the four lesson plans and classroom activities below to see how you can utilize them in your classroom:

1. The Confederate March on Washington, 1864: Comparing Perspectives Activity

Students will learn what a primary source is, how to find information in primary sources, and why primary sources are valuable in the study of history. Students will learn what life was like in Washington, DC, during the Civil War, and analyze and compare the perspectives of two individuals who differ in age, gender, race, and class.

2. Solomon Brown's Letters: Life in Washington during the Civil War Activity

Students will learn what a primary source is, how to find information in primary sources, and why primary sources are valuable in the study of history. Students will learn what life was like in Washington, DC, during the Civil War.

3. Solomon Brown Letter Writing Activity

Students will learn what a primary source is, how to find information in primary sources, and why primary sources are valuable in the study of history. They will practice reading and proofreading skills. They will also learn the format for a personal letter, and write one themselves.

4. Smithsonian Castle Coloring Book Activity

Students will learn about the Smithsonian Institution Building, also known as the "Castle," while coloring images which show what the building looked like in the 19th century.



Other Resources

[Photographs of the Smithsonian Institution During the Civil War](#)

[Photographs of Solomon Brown's Smithsonian](#)

[Photographs of Life in the Smithsonian Castle](#)

Hutchinson, Louise Daniel and Gail Sylvia Lowe, compilers, *"Kind Regards of S.G. Brown": Selected Poems of Solomon G. Brown*, City of Washington: Published for the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum of the Smithsonian Institution by the Smithsonian Institution Press, 1983.