

JOSEPH HENRY

Who Was He?

By Marc Rothenberg
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How many visitors to the National Mall in Washington, D.C., pass the statue in front of the Smithsonian Castle without a second glance? How many of them simply assume they are looking at a monument to James Smithson? And of those who bother to note that the statue is of Joseph Henry, how many know who he is and why he is memorialized on the Mall?

The truth is that today, 200 years since his birth, Henry, the Smithsonian Institution's first Secretary, is largely unknown.

When the statue was unveiled late on the sunny afternoon of April 19, 1883, five years after Henry's death, it was a different story. Henry was well-known. He had been eulogized at his death by the press as the "Nestor of American science," a reference to the elderly Greek king who provided leadership and sage advice during the siege of Troy.

Henry was acknowledged as the inventor of the electric motor, the father of daily weather forecasts, and the preserver of the Smithsonian. The government closed for his funeral on May 16, 1878, a funeral attended by the President, Vice-President, the Cabinet, the members of the Supreme Court, Congress, and the senior officers of the Army and the Navy.

In 1880, Congress passed special legislation authorizing an appropriation of \$15,000 for a statue of Henry. The bill also named the sculptor: William Wetmore Story, the son of a former associate justice of the Supreme Court.

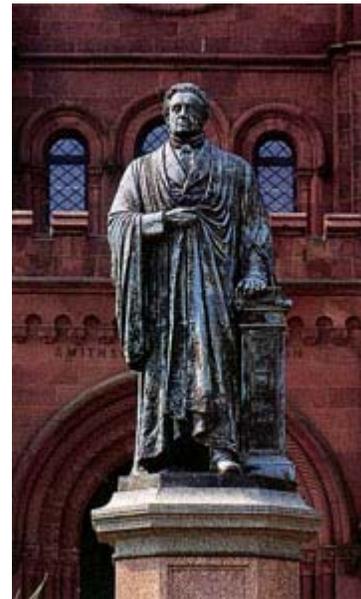


Photo by Rick Vargas, 1997.
Smithsonian neg. no. 97-4128.

In 1883, the government closed early again in honor of Henry, this time for the dedication of the statue, and a crowd of more than 5,000 gathered approximately 45 meters (150 feet) from the northwest corner of the Castle, where the statue was placed.

The Smithsonian Regents, members of the National Academy of Sciences, and Cabinet members were among the dignitaries in attendance. A chorus of 200 participated. In one of the highlights of the ceremony, John Philip Sousa led the Marine Band in the inaugural performance of "The Transit of Venus March," which he composed for the occasion.

Henry's memory was honored again in the 1890s with the opening of the new building of the Library of Congress (today's Jefferson Building). Sixteen bronze portrait statues, "representative of human development and civilization," were placed under the dome of the main reading room. Henry was chosen as one of the sixteen representatives, along with

Bacon, Beethoven, Columbus, Fulton, Gibbon, Herodotus, Homer, James Kent, Michelangelo, Moses, Newton, Plato, Saint Paul, Shakespeare, and Solon.

In *Joseph Henry: The Rise of an American Scientist* (1997), Albert Moyer comments on these nineteenth-century veneration of Henry: "Never before or since have Americans memorialized a scientist to the extent that they memorialized Joseph Henry."

One of the missions of the Joseph Henry Papers Project is to restore Henry's name to the prominence it once had. This section on Henry gives an introduction to some of the areas where he had a lasting impact.* A list of selected readings is included at the end.

*The articles in this section originally appeared in *The Torch*, the Smithsonian's staff newspaper.

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