

Mary Henry

Eyewitness to the Civil War

"We went up into the high tower to see the troops pass over into Virginia." Mary Anna Henry (1834-1903) wrote this line in her diary on July 16, 1861. She was living with her family in the Smithsonian Institution Building, on the Mall in the City of Washington, in the United States of America, but from her home, she could see the Confederate States of America. This was the world Mary Henry lived in for much of the Civil War, on the border between two countries at war.

Born in Princeton in 1834, Mary Henry was the second child of Professor Joseph Henry, the first Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, and his wife, Harriet. She had one older brother, William Alexander, born in 1832, and two younger sisters, Helen Louisa, born in 1836, and Caroline, born in 1839. When Joseph Henry was appointed Secretary of the Institution in 1846, he was promised accommodations, so when the Smithsonian Institution Building was completed in 1855, a suite of eight rooms was constructed on the second floor of the East Wing, and the Henry family moved in. They remained in these apartments until Joseph Henry died in 1878.



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With the move to Washington, Mary Henry was surrounded by those at the top of the scientific community, the social elite, and the politics of the Capital city. She had an insiders view of the country as it headed towards war, and during the war. But Mary was also typical for a young woman of her upbringing. She worked with the News Boys Association, was an active member of the Presbyterian Church where she taught Sunday School for children, and did volunteer work and benefits for wounded soldiers during the Civil War. Mary and her sisters were also well educated. They were taught the domestic arts, as well as being tutored in the visual arts, language, and music. Mary even had an artist's studio in the East Range of the Smithsonian Institution Building, even though she confessed, "I had no talent."

When Joseph Henry died in 1878, the Henry family left the Smithsonian Institution Building. For the remainder of her life, Mary continued to be a prominent citizen of Washington, promoting the significance of her father's work as a scientist. While on an annual trip with her sister to Europe, Mary died in Seville, Spain, on April 10, 1903, at the age of 69.

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**

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. **Mary Henry: Journal 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 analyzing original documents, reading, and proofreading skills. They will also learn how to keep a journal/diary of their own.

3. **Lincoln's Death: Memories and Images Analysis Activity**

Students will learn the difference between primary and secondary sources, and the values and challenges of both. Students will evaluate the way news of important events reaches the public, comparing news sources of today to those of the mid-19th century.

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 Life in the Smithsonian Castle](#)

["Interruptions and Embarrassments": The Smithsonian Institution during the Civil War](#), by Kathleen W. Dorman, Associate Editor, Joseph Henry Papers

For a history of the Smithsonian Institution Building see: Field, Cynthia R., Richard E. Stamm, and Heather P. Ewing. *The Castle: An Illustrated History of the Smithsonian Building*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993.

For a closer look at Joseph Henry see the [Joseph Henry Papers Project](#).