

March 29, 1850

15. TO JOHN TORREY

Smithsonian Institu[tion]^A

March 29th 1850

My Dear Dr,

Your letter of the 29th has just been received¹ and I hasten to answer it immediately lest by delay it may be passed by. I am rejoiced to learn that the state of the college you mention still continues and hope those most dear to me may feel its influence.² What a shadow is life—I have just come over to the Institution and learn that one of the workmen has fallen in an adjoining room and is now a corpse. I have not yet learned the particulars of the accident all the men have gone out with the body and I have seen nothing but the blood on the timbers. My duties in connection with the Smithsonian are very arduous and in some cases very disagreeable—they require caution inflexible justice and in some instances moral courage. Still I do not think I did wrong to accept the position and I know that I am in the way of doing good. The lectures have been well attended and have all been of a highly intellectuall and ↑in some degree of a↓ rereligious character.³ Before the lectures commenced I was not certain that lectures could be obtained at the price we offered⁴ but in this I was in error; we find no lack of lecturers and are almost every day requested to invite some one or receive intimations that certain persons would lecture were they asked; any remarks you may see in the papers not complimentary to the lectures, you may put down to disappointed applications.

The accident to the building in itself is a small matter but it has lead to an investigation of the plans of the structure which will lead to an entire^B change in the manner of finishing the interior of the main edifice. The Regents^C will be obliged to make the building more substantial and to fire proof the parts intended for the collections. The great error consisted in adopting a style of architecture so highly ornamental in attempting to finish the interior in so cheap a manner. The estimated additional expense on account of the change will be 44,000 dolls. The whole matter is still under investigation by a committee of the Regents—the report has not yet been submitted to the Board.

We have concluded to print each memoir of the Institution separately with seperate paging. Some of the memoirs will be printed in Cambridge and others in Washington. Your paper may be put to press as soon as it is ready.

Margaret cannot be spared she spoke of going home yesterday but

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the remark was received with so much disapprobation by the whole household that she has not dared to mention the thought again.

Johnston did not make a very favourable impression on the Washington audience and was far from being a favourite with the ladies of our house.

Professor Harvey is another sort of a man he won the kind feelings of all— His lectures were well received though some of them were “dreadful^D badly” delivered.

With reference to the appointment of a commissioner mentioned in your last letter but one I have heard nothing of late. The most prominent candidate a few weeks ago was Mr Bartlett⁵ of the late firm of Bartlett and Welford.

This letter was written several days ago—your very satisfactory letter relative to Frost has been received⁶— We cannot spare Margaret yet. This letter would have been sent before but when I had written the forgoing paragraph I was interrupted by a summon to give my deposition in the House telegraph case.⁷ This occupied all my spare time^E until yesterday. I remain as ever yours

Joseph Henry

Dr Torrey

Torrey Papers, Library, New York Botanical Garden.
Reply: Doc. 21.

1. Probably Torrey's letter of March 27, 1850, Henry Papers, Smithsonian Archives.

2. Torrey had written of a “delightful revival” in Princeton with daily religious services. By the end of the revival, forty students had made professions of faith and twenty-five had joined churches in Princeton. John Maclean, *History of the College of New Jersey, 1746-1854*, 2 vols. in 1 vol. (1877; New York, 1969), 2:326-329.

3. An article in the *Scientific American*, March 2, 1850, 5:186, noted “a good deal of dissatisfaction” with the religious nature of recent Smithsonian lectures: “Instead of scientific discourses, we have had regular sermons on Divinity, from a learned bishop and other Reverend gentlemen.”

4. The Smithsonian paid modest honoraria that in many cases barely met expenses.

5. John Russell Bartlett (*Henry Papers*, 7:124n) was named commissioner of the Mexican Boundary Survey in May 1850.

6. Letter not found but presumably in response to Henry's letter of March 30 (Torrey Papers, Library, New York Botanical Garden), in which he described the application of a James Frost of Brooklyn for Smithsonian aid in researches on steam and requested that Torrey evaluate Frost's discoveries. Henry also consulted Robert Hare and Benjamin Silliman, Sr.

7. Henry's deposition in *Smith v. Downing* supported the defendant's position that Royal E. House's printing telegraph did not infringe Morse's patent. Henry had evaluated House's invention for a railroad company in November 1845. *Henry Papers*, 6:325n-326n.