

December 2, 1850

76. TO BENJAMIN SILLIMAN, SR.

Confidential

Smithsonian Institution
Dec 2nd 1850

My Dear Sir

Your letter¹ of the 29th has just been received and I write to say that we gladly accept your offer to lecture between the 15th and the last of Feby. We would prefer at least four lectures. The time above mentioned will be better for producing a good effect than that at the Holidays.

Prof. H. D. Rogers has concluded to begin the course for the present season with the conclusion of his Lectures on Geology. His lectures will however not interfere with those you will give.

I will give you an account of the state of affairs when you come on. They are much better than I had any reason to expect they would be at the begining but not what they ought to have been had the framers of the Law of Congress and others not trammelled the Institution with enactments which in my opinion are adverse to the spirit of the bequest.

The act of Congress made provision definitely for a Library a museum & a building on a liberal scale to contain them. After making provisions for these objects which though important in themselves are of a local character the Regents were at liberty to expend the remainder of the fund in any way which might in their opinion be compatible with the will of Smithson.

One part of the Regents were in favour of expending the whole income on a Library^A & a museum— Another part were in favour of the plans advocated by myself namely those of active operations. Of course the principal inhabitants of the city of Washington—all the contractors for building—the owners of quarries the Literary men of the country and even a number of naturalists were in favour of the Library & museum plan. The law of congress could not be altered at that time many members of congress were opposed to the Institution and to ask congress at that time to make changes in the law would have been to destroy the whole.

With this state of things I was obliged either to abandon the Institution (which I would gladly have done could I have done so with honor) or to make a compromise with the advocates of the different opinons. The result was as follows

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1. One half of all the income to be devoted to the building until it is finished.
2. The remainder to be divided into two equal parts—one half to be expended on the Library & museum the other on the active operations including the lectures.

For the present year the whole sum which can be devoted to publications meteorology other researches & Lectures does not exceed five thousand dolls. With this small sum it is expected that every thing is to be done— A naturalist in one part of the country calls for 1000 dolls to make geological surveys an astronomer for 1000 dolls for a catalogue of the stars—from all parts of the country requests are made for barometers & thermometers and from every public Institution for the volumes of our Contributions.

I am frequently vexed to learn that I am accused of meanness in the administration of the affairs of the Institution and in some cases by those who were active in tying up the funds by restrictions or in putting them in brick and mortar. I am frequently asked why do you not have more lectures. My indignant answer is—why did you demand such high towers.

All the plans I advocated have succeeded entirely to my satisfaction and all the difficulties have resulted from my being obliged to include in the programme the requirements of congress and the compromise of the Board of Regents.

The present building will cost before it is finished 300,000 dolls one of 50,000 would have sufficed.

Congress will probably increase indefinitely its Library and therefore a large one is not absolutely necessary for the Smithsonian Institution. I could expend with the most important results to Science the whole of the income in active operations and thus erect to the memory of Smithsonian a monument more enduring and more widely known than any collection of objects of nature and art or any building which could possibly be made from the Income of the Institution.

The funds ought to be expended in doing ~~not~~ those things which cannot be done either at all or not as well by other Institutions.

I have learned to know by experience in Washington that there is a wide difference between what ought to be done and what can be done.

My whole course has been one of antagonism to the tendency of an institution of this kind. Had I given it up as I would gladly have done when I was unanimously offered the chair of Dr Hare it would have

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become a mere curiosity shop with a number of retired politicians as its keepers— I am anxious now to give it such a direction in the beginning that it cannot lapse into such a state without the contrast being obvious to the world and for this purpose I am pleased that you have concluded to give me your aid.

Our affairs are now in a much better condition than I had any reason to expect they would be when we commenced—

The finishing of the building is to be postponed. The accrued interest ↑previous to 1846↓ has not all been spent on the building and after finishing the whole of the exterior and all the rooms of the towers and the wings we shall have on hand 150000 dolls. This sum the Regents have directed me with the consent of Congress to place to the credit of the Institution in the Treasury of the U.S. so as to increase the original principal and give us an annual income of 40,000 instead of 30,000 dolls.

I have also some hope, if the usefulness of the Institution becomes apparent to the world, that congress will be induced to finish the building.

I send you a copy of the programme^B on the 1st page of which you will find a synopsis of my views of what ought ↑to have↓ to governed in the establishment of the Institution. I remain very truly

Your friend & servt
Joseph Henry

Prof. Silliman

Daniel Coit Gilman Papers, Ms. 1, Special Collections, Milton S. Eisenhower Library, The Johns Hopkins University.
Reply not found, but dated December 7, 1850, according to Henry to Silliman, December 12, 1850, same location as this letter.

1. Not found.

77. TO EPHRAIM GEORGE SQUIER

Smithsonian Inst
Dec. 5th 1850

My Dear Sir

Your two letters have just been received.¹ You will oblige me very much by attending to the matter of the charge for the Idols.² The charge cannot be paid until the matter is investigated.