

April 22, 1870 (Doc. 141)

141. TO HANNIBAL HAMLIN<sup>1</sup>

Smithsonian Institution  
April 22<sup>nd</sup> 1870

My Dear Sir

I am much gratified to learn from your letter that the proposition to convert the Washington Canal into a closed sewer is now before Congress.<sup>2</sup> It has for several years past, or since the introduction of the Potomac water, been a disgrace to the intelligence, and the enterprise of the city; and is now a Stygian pool into which all the feculent matter of the city is poured, and from which a miasm is exhaled sufficient to produce disease and death in those who breathe it. The only plan in my opinion to remove the nuisance is the one proposed, and I most sincerely hope that this may be adopted and speedily carried into execution. I regret to inform you that ↑we↓ have no maps or charts relating to this matter, although we have published a report by the executive committee of the Institution giving a history of the legislation relative to the canal, which may be found in the Smithsonian Report for 1868, page 111.<sup>3</sup>

I have the Hon to remain very truly you  
Joseph Henry

Hon Hannibal Hamlin

Letterpress Copy, RU 33, Smithsonian Archives.

Printed, with minor variations in capitalization and punctuation, in U.S. Senate, 41st Congress, 2d Session, *Letters to the Chairman of the Committee on the District of Columbia of the Senate in Relation to the Improvement of the Washington Canal*, Senate Miscellaneous Documents, No. 142 (1870), p. 3.

1. Hamlin (*Henry Papers*, 8:371n) was a Democratic senator from Maine and a recently appointed regent of the Smithsonian.

2. Hamlin had sent Henry a copy of a Senate resolution that instructed the Committee on the District of Columbia "to inquire into the expediency of causing a main covered sewer to be constructed in the abandoned canal in Washington city for the drainage of said city, and filling up all of said canal that shall not be occupied by such sewer." The resolution was offered on April 12 by Allen G. Thurman, senator from Ohio. Hamlin asked Henry to supply the committee, which Hamlin chaired, "with such information, plans, charts or surveys" in his possession pertaining to the subject. Hamlin to Henry, April 15, 1870, RU 26, Smithsonian Archives; *Congressional Globe*, 41st Congress, 2d Session, April 12, 1870, p. 2603.

3. The regents had discussed the canal at the board meeting of April 22, 1868. Peter Parker,

a citizen regent from Washington, alerted the board to plans being considered by the city council to cede the canal to a private company. Since such a move could affect the interests of the Smithsonian, he recommended that the board take some action. The regents then passed a resolution that the executive committee "be instructed to ascertain what measures are proposed to be taken by the city authorities of Washington in regard to the canal, so far as concerns the Smithsonian Institution." The committee consisted of Parker, a physician, Richard Delafield, a military engineer, and Richard Wal-lach, the mayor of Washington. Rhees, *Journals*, p. 321.

The executive committee submitted a report, dated May 15, 1868, and written principally by Delafield, detailing legislation concerning the canal from 1802 through 1867; discussing the city's plans for the canal in 1868; evaluating the canal's health impact; and offering solu-

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tions for the problem. *Smithsonian Report for 1868*, pp. 111-118.

The committee opposed the city council's plan to support a bill that would transfer authority over the canal from the city to a private corporation. This was a reference to S. 310, introduced in the Senate on February 3, 1868, which proposed incorporating the Georgetown and Washington Canal and Sewerage Company. The company intended to deepen the canal, making possible navigation from the terminus of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal at Georgetown through the city to the Eastern Branch of the Potomac River. The executive committee was skeptical of this plan and argued that the bill did not provide protections against continued use of the canal as a sewer. The committee proposed that the canal "should at the earliest possible moment be filled up" (p. 116). *Congressional Globe*, 40th Congress, 2d Session, February 3, 1868, p. 921.

The regents' report was referred to the Senate Committee on the District of Columbia on June 16, 1868. Writing "in behalf of property-holders of the city of Washington," Benjamin Severson, the engineer of the canal, submitted a memorial that severely criticized the report and claimed that only one member of the executive committee actually approved it. Although Severson opposed transferring authority over the canal from the city to a private company, he favored dredging and straightening the canal to make it navigable as well as more sanitary by increasing the flow of water through it. (Severson backed the plan proposed by a commission of engineers in 1866, discussed in Doc. 11.) His memorial was referred to the Committee on the District of Columbia on July 2. The bill was reported without amendment later that month, but the Senate took no action on it. U.S. Senate, 40th Congress, 2d Session, *Report of the Executive Committee*, Senate Miscellaneous Documents,

No. 95 (1868), p. 1; U.S. Senate, 40th Congress, 2d Session, *Memorial of Benjamin Severson in Relation to the Washington City Canal*, Senate Miscellaneous Documents, No. 103 (1868), pp. 1-5; U.S. House of Representatives, 40th Congress, 3d Session, *Washington Canal*, House Miscellaneous Documents, No. 36 (1869), pp. 1, 6.

At the board meeting of February 3, 1870, Delafield stated that the executive committee was still collecting information on the city canal and would present another report. Subsequent proceedings of the board, however, do not mention any further report. In a letter to Hamlin of May 13, Delafield elaborated on his views that the canal could not be used for both navigation and sewage disposal. "The improvement of the canal," he asserted, "must be based upon the fundamental principle of using it *exclusively* for navigation, and paramount to all other considerations, cease to use it as a cess-pool, and the vain attempt to discharge sewage matter through it into the Potomac River by natural flow of water from ordinary rains, river freshets, or rise and fall of tides: none of which expedients can be made available in a canal with a horizontal bed, excavated as a pit, below the level of low water of the river" (p. 4). Rhees, *Journals*, p. 351; U.S. Senate, 41st Congress, 2d Session, *Letters . . . to the Chairman of the Committee of the District of Columbia of the Senate, in Relation to the Improvement of the Washington Canal*, Senate Miscellaneous Documents, No. 142 (1870), pp. 4-6.

In July 1870, Congress handed the issue over to a short-lived canal commission. In November, the commission authorized a contract with a company to dredge the canal. Alan Lessoff, *The Nation and Its City: Politics, "Corruption," and Progress in Washington, D.C., 1861-1902* (Baltimore, 1994), pp. 89-90; U.S. House, 42d Congress, 2d Session, *Investigation into the Affairs of the District of Columbia*, House Reports, No. 72 (1872), p. vi.

## 142. TO JAMES ABRAM GARFIELD

Smithsonian Institution, May 3, 1870

My dear Sir:

I beg leave to direct your attention to a petition to Congress by Major Powell for a small appropriation to assist him in completing the Survey of the region of the Colorado of the West and its branches.<sup>1</sup> In the exploration of this river Major Powell has evinced remarkable perseverance sagacity and intrepidity. The region through which the river and its