

Henry Namesakes

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Over the years, people have honored [Joseph Henry](#) by naming a variety of things after him, including a laboratory, a professorial chair, ships, and even a mountain range. Featured below is a selection of Henry namesakes, given in chronological order. Note that the naming began during Henry's own lifetime (1797-1878). (Please click on photographs for larger images.)

ca. 1854 **Schooner *Joseph Henry***

This U.S. Coast Survey schooner is the first item we have identified as a Henry namesake. The superintendent of the Coast Survey, Alexander Dallas Bache, was a close friend of Henry's and named the schooner after him. The ship was used in topographical work, as were the schooners [Louis] *Agassiz* and *Benjamin Peirce*, which Bache also named after prominent American scientists of the day. The crew of the *Joseph Henry* surveyed the coast of Key Largo during the 1850s. We have not been able to locate an image of the *Joseph Henry*; pictured at right is the Coast Survey schooner *Experiment*, ca. 1835 (courtesy of the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#), Department of Commerce).¹

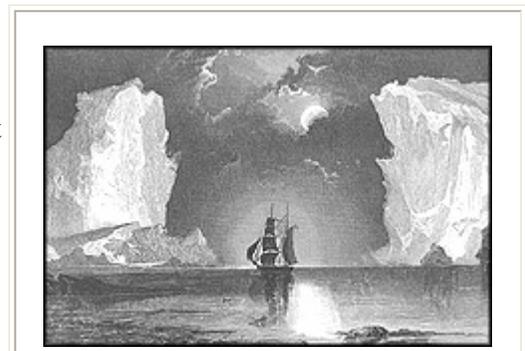


Early Coast Survey schooner.

ca. 1855 **Cape Henry**

Henry backed several expeditions to the North Pole from the 1850s to the 1870s. One of the most famous of these was the Second Grinnell Expedition (1853-1855), organized and led by surgeon/explorer Elisha Kent Kane. Although the expedition failed in its main mission--to locate the missing polar explorer Sir John Franklin--it did gather meteorological and other scientific data while penetrating previously unexplored regions. Kane named scores of coastal bays, inlets, and other geographical features. One of these, a small projection at 79° north latitude off the coast of Ellesmere Island, he named Cape Joseph Henry (now shortened to Cape Henry and not to be confused with the Cape Joseph Henry described below). Kane thereby acknowledged Henry for giving his endorsement to the expedition in an influential letter to the secretary of the navy and for providing Kane with scientific instructions and instruments.

In the course of his explorations, Kane sketched numerous arctic scenes, from which some three hundred engravings were made and published in his two-volume narrative of the expedition. Unfortunately, Kane does not provide a sketch of Cape Henry. The engraving at right is from Kane's depiction of icebergs near Life Boat Cove, south of Cape Henry. Here is Kane's evocative description: "A grander scene than our bay by moonlight can hardly be conceived.... It is a landscape such as Milton or Dante might imagine,--inorganic, desolate,



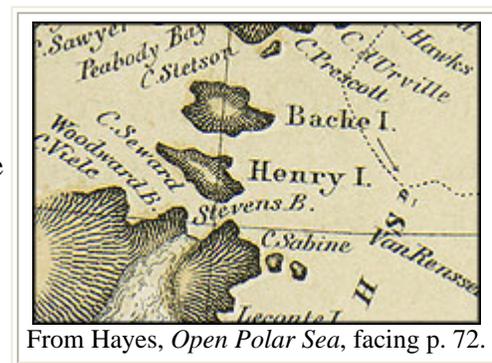
mysterious. I have come down from deck with the feelings of a man who has looked upon a world unfinished by the hand of its Creator."²

From Kane, *Arctic Explorations*, facing p. 57.

ca. 1860-61 **Henry Island**

Isaac I. Hayes, who had served as surgeon to Kane's Second Grinnell Expedition, commanded his own arctic expedition in 1860-1861. In a lecture given at the Smithsonian shortly after his return, he expressed gratitude "to the Smithsonian Institution for the liberal support which was rendered by it to the expedition, not only by its contribution of scientific apparatus, but through the encouragement which was given towards effecting its organization by the influence of the distinguished gentleman [Henry] who is the principle executive officer of the establishment." In his book, *The Open Polar Sea: A Narrative of a Voyage of Discovery Towards the North Pole*, Hayes noted, "The Smithsonian furnished a good supply of barometers and thermometers, besides other apparatus not less important, and also spirits, cans, and other materials for the collection and preservation of specimens of Natural History."

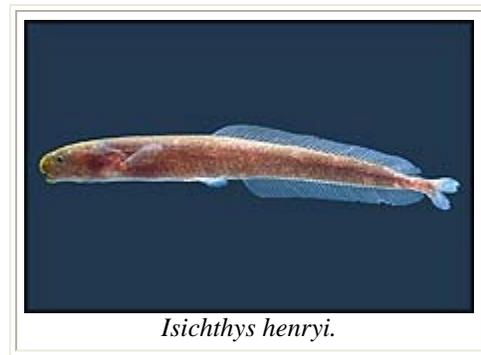
North of the cape Kane had named after Henry, Hayes discovered a sound separating Grinnell Land from Ellesmere Island. In the mouth of the sound there appeared to be two large islands; he named the southernmost one after Henry and the other one after Alexander Dallas Bache (now Bache Peninsula). Henry Island is located at 79° north latitude, and is not to be confused with the Henry Island located much further south near Cape Breton, Nova Scotia (which has no apparent connection to Joseph Henry).³



From Hayes, *Open Polar Sea*, facing p. 72.

1862 **Isichthys henryi**

This specimen of fish was in the Smithsonian collection when the aptly named Theodore Gill described it. Gill, librarian at the Smithsonian Institution and an avid ichthyologist since his youth, believed the specimen had been sent from Liberia. In his published description of the fish, Gill stated, "I dedicate the species to my friend Prof. Henry, of the Smithsonian Institution, to whom I have been so much indebted for the privileges of studying the rich collections of the Institution, and especially of investigating the class to which the present species belongs."

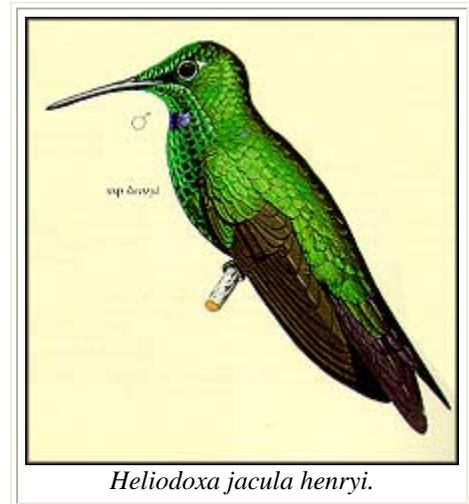


Isichthys henryi.

Isichthys henryi is one of the so-called electric fishes, which generate a weak electric field to detect objects in their environment. Gill probably relished the opportunity to name this particular fish after Henry, given Henry's pioneering work in electromagnetism. The holotype (the specimen from which the species was described) is preserved at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution. A modern entry on the species notes that it is a freshwater fish that inhabits the West African coastal plains of Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, and the coastal rivers of Nigeria.⁴

1866 **Heliodoxa jacula henryi**

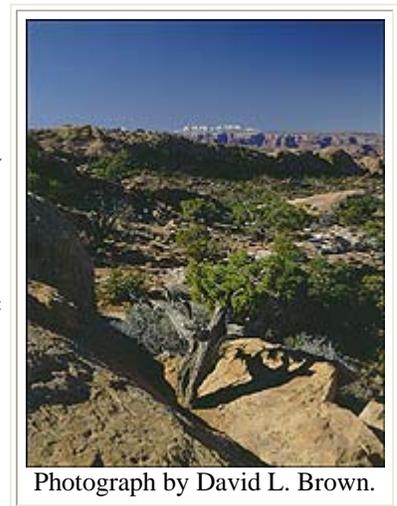
New York ornithologist George N. Lawrence first described this species of hummingbird (family Trochilidae) in 1866, naming it "in compliment to Prof. Joseph Henry." A female specimen from Costa Rica was collected in 1864 for the Smithsonian. The institution forwarded it to Lawrence in November 1864 for him to identify. Unable to make the identification, Lawrence requested a male specimen, and the Smithsonian sent one in 1866 that had recently been collected in Costa Rica. He described and named the birds *Heliodoxa jacula henryi* in 1866. In 1868, Lawrence published the "Catalogue of Birds of Costa Rica," the first comprehensive listing of birds from that country. The two specimens of *Heliodoxa jacula henryi* examined by Lawrence are preserved at the National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution.⁵



Heliodoxa jacula henryi.

ca. 1869 **Henry Mountains**

Located in southeastern Utah, the Henry Mountains was one of the last-named mountain ranges in the continental United States. In 1869, geologist John Wesley Powell led a 1000-mile expedition along the Green and Colorado Rivers and through the Grand Canyon in what was "the climactic event of late-nineteenth-century exploration," according to historian William Goetzmann. On this trip and subsequent ones, he encountered what few had seen before: the arid and isolated Henry Mountains, as he named them in gratitude to his friend and patron. Powell explained in his classic account, *Exploration of the Colorado River of the West*: "Professor Joseph Henry, the Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, under whose direction the work was performed...has contributed greatly to any success which we may have had, by his instructions and advice, and by his most earnest sympathy; and I have taken the liberty to express my gratitude for his kindness, and reverence for his profound attainments, by attaching his name to a group of lofty mountains."⁶



Photograph by David L. Brown.

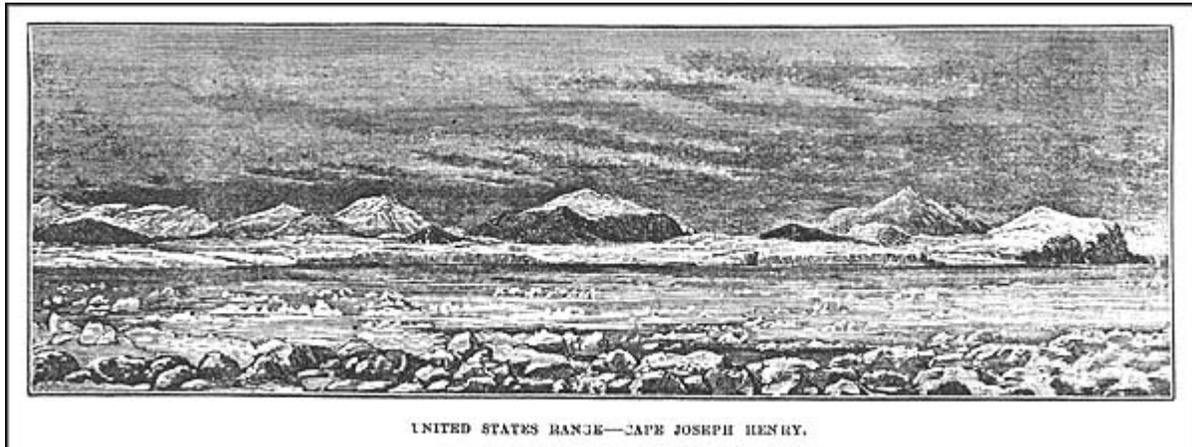
For more on the Henry Mountains, see footnote ⁶ and [The Henry Mountains](#) Web site.

ca. 1871 **Cape Joseph Henry**

Of the dozens of polar explorations between 1850 and 1880, Charles Francis Hall's 1871 expedition on the U.S. Navy ship *Polaris* has to be the one with the most movie potential. A screen version would undoubtedly portray Hall cruelly abandoning his family to pursue an obsessive quest for the North Pole, taking up with an Inuit couple to learn survival skills from arctic natives, and courageously leading a reconnoitering sledge party to the edge of the northernmost point ever seen by so-called civilized man, only to be murdered a few weeks later by a German doctor with Faustian ambitions.

The point sighted by Hall just before his death was Cape Joseph Henry, located at 82° north latitude. The cape, though well short of the North Pole, would become an important depot from

which subsequent expeditions would venture forth into the unknown region called "The Great Frozen Sea." The commander of a British ship attempting to explore this region in 1875 wrote: "Beyond Cape Joseph Henry all was conjecture.... No land of any description could be seen to the northward--nothing but the rugged pack. So formidable and compact appeared this icy barrier that it seemed to stand out bold and resolute in its strength, effectually setting at defiance the puny efforts of man to penetrate its solidity, saying, as it were, "Thus far shalt thou go, and no farther."



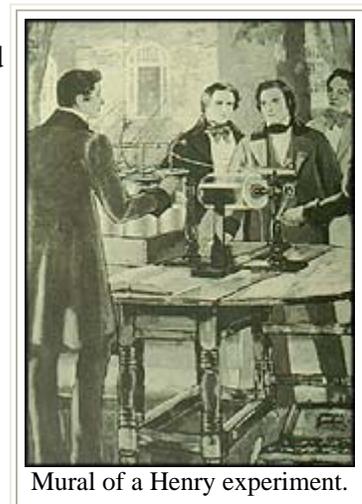
From G. S. Nares, *Narrative of a Voyage to the Polar Sea* (London, 1878), p. 131.

Hall's premature death has left us with little evidence about his naming of the cape. Presumably he was grateful for Henry's critical support of the expedition, particularly for the letter of endorsement he wrote, at Hall's request, on March 12, 1870, to the chairman of the U.S. House appropriation committee. Henry also, in his capacity as president of the National Academy of Sciences, chaired the committee that devised the expedition's scientific program. One possibly fateful decision Henry made was to choose as chief scientist for the expedition the German physicist, naturalist, and physician Emil Bessels. Although a contemporary investigation ruled that Hall died of natural causes, in 1968 Hall's biographer journeyed to the grave site to exhume Hall's body from the frozen ground. An autopsy confirmed arsenic poisoning. While the poisoning may have been unintentional, murder was a strong possibility. Hall's biographer considered Bessels a prime suspect.⁷

1872 **Joseph Henry Chair of Physics**

John C. Green, benefactor of the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University, honored Princeton's most renowned teacher and physicist by endowing this chair in 1872. Henry had been a professor of natural philosophy (physics) at Princeton from 1832 to 1848. In 1873, Princeton selected Cyrus Fogg Brackett to be the first Joseph Henry Professor of Physics. The chair has since been held by many distinguished physicists, including 1977 Nobel Prize winner Philip W. Anderson.

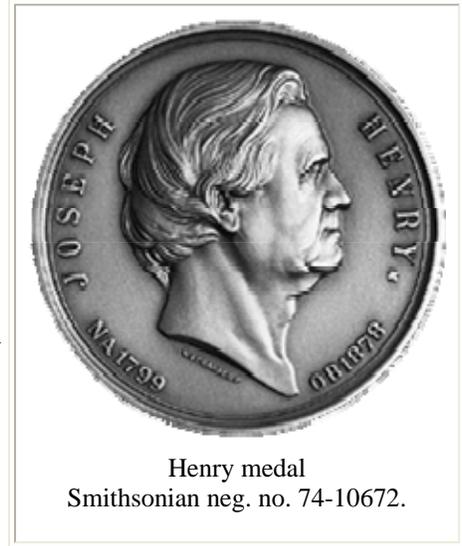
The scene at right is from a mural painted by Gifford Beal (Princeton class of 1900) in 1946, for the bicentennial of Princeton's founding. The mural, located in the lobby of the John C. Green School of Engineering, depicts Henry demonstrating electrical phenomena. The backdrop is Princeton's Philosophical Hall, where Henry taught and



performed many electrical experiments, including telegraphic ones.[8](#)

1879 **Henry medal**

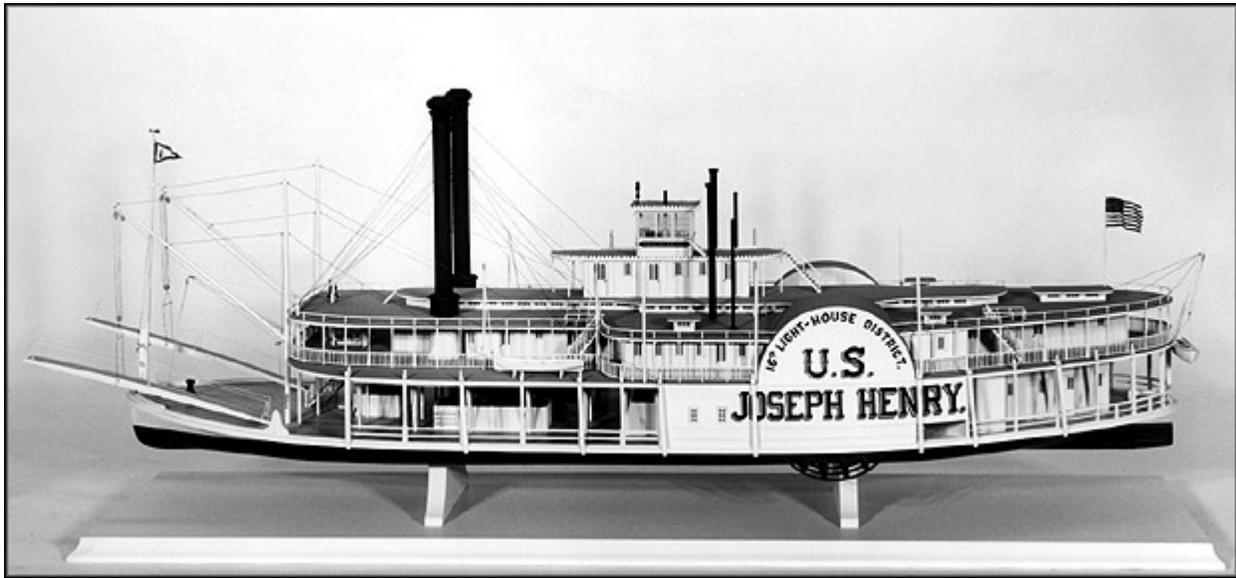
After hearing of Henry's death in May 1878, William Barber, engraver of the U.S. mint, offered to design this medal in honor of Henry. He and his son Charles completed the design the following year and donated the medal to the Smithsonian Institution for "any application that might...be afterwards suggested." Henry's birth date is mistakenly given as 1799, rather than 1797, due to confusion over Henry's age. On the back of the medal is a Latin inscription taken from the Odes of Horace, Book 1, Ode 24: "Incorrupta Fides Nudaque Veritas Quando Ullum Inveniet Parem." The lines from which this inscription is excerpted read, according to one modern translation, "Where then will Justice, and Faith, the sister of Justice, and Decency, and Truth that needs no ornament, find his equal?"



In January 1967, the Smithsonian's Board of Regents proposed to use the Henry medal to recognize distinguished service to the institution. Since that time, recipients of the medal have included a Smithsonian secretary, Charles Abbot, an astrophysicist, Fred Whipple, an anthropologist, T. Dale Stewart, and a U.S. vice-president and Smithsonian regent, Hubert H. Humphrey. In 1997, on the occasion of the bicentennial of Henry's birth, the medal was awarded to physicist Frederick [Seitz](#), a long-time supporter of the Henry Papers Project and chair of its advisory committee.[9](#)

1880 **Tender *Joseph Henry***

This sidewheel lighthouse tender was named after Henry in honor of his years of service on the U.S. Light-House Board. Henry served on the board, without compensation, from 1852 until his death in 1878 and was chairman of its committee on experiments during these years. From 1871 to 1878, he was also chairman of the board. Henry helped introduce numerous improvements in methods of illumination and signalling, and under his leadership the Light-House Board undertook both basic and applied research in optics, thermodynamics, and acoustics. Shortly after his death, the federal government appropriated \$11,000 to provide his widow with compensation for the "inestimable" value of his contribution to the nation's lighthouse system.



Model of sidewheel lighthouse tender *Joseph Henry*. Smithsonian neg. no. 50,852.

Lighthouse tenders were ships that serviced and maintained lighthouses. They were needed because lighthouses were often situated in isolated areas, where access to supplies was limited for keepers and their families. Some tenders were also used to maintain the coastal buoy system. "Through storm, darkness, and sunshine," a government official once said, lighthouse tenders "do their work for humanity without any boasting, without any advertising, with none to trumpet their praises, and with only their own sense of duty to guide them."

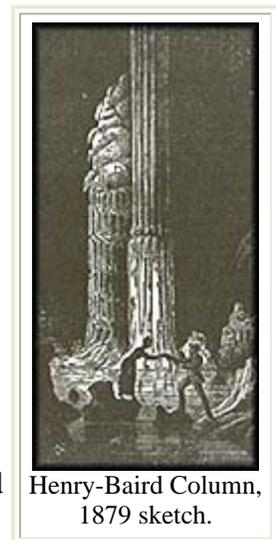
The *Joseph Henry* was one of only a few lighthouse tenders used along western rivers. It plied a 2,500-mile stretch along the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers for more than forty years. The model pictured here mistakenly indicated the ship belonged to the sixteenth lighthouse district; it actually served the fifteenth district.[10](#)

ca. 1881 **Henry-Baird Column**

The Henry-Baird Column, also known as the Double Column, is a pair of towering stalagmites in the Giant's Hall of Luray Caverns. The caverns were discovered in Luray, Virginia, on August 13, 1878, three months after Henry's death, by locals Andrew J. Campbell and his nephew William B. Campbell, along with travelling photographer B. P. Stebbins. The discovery of one of the most interesting caves in America caused something of a sensation. It generated coverage in the major publications of the day, including *Harper's Weekly*, *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper*, the *New York Herald*, *Century Magazine*, and *Scientific American*. Illustrators published sketches of prominent features, and illuminated tours of the caves (lit by as many as 10,000 candles) were given on special occasions.

In July 1880, a party of Smithsonian officials toured the caverns at the invitation of the discoverers and proprietors. The Smithsonian party included chief clerk William J. Rhees, geologist Charles A. White, photographer T. W. Smillie, as well as two ethnologists, an archaeologist, and a chemist.

Their tour lasted for two days and resulted in a twelve-page report in the *Annual Report of the Smithsonian Institution for the Year 1880*. Subsequently a 1,000-pound stalactite was removed



Henry-Baird Column,
1879 sketch.

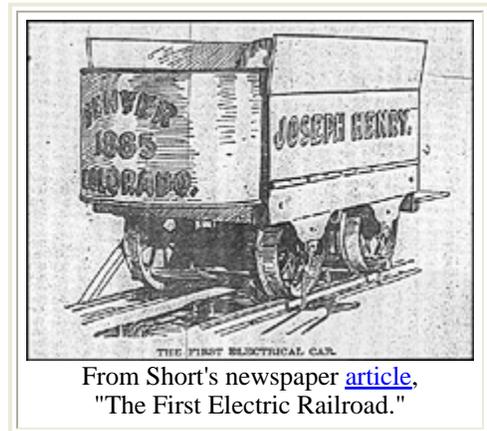
and transported to the Smithsonian.

In 1882, Horace Hovey, considered an authority on caves, published a map of Luray Caverns in his *Celebrated American Caverns*. Hovey himself named most of its halls, rooms, and objects ("Christening is my business," he reportedly said). An exception was the Henry-Baird Column, which is the name used on Hovey's map. It was given this name by a small natural history society from Reading, Pennsylvania. A somewhat cryptic explanation appeared in the 1882 edition of S. Z. Ammen's *History and Description of the Luray Cave*, in which Ammen discusses the "Double Column" and appends this note: "Recently dedicated by the Reading Society of Natural Sciences, under the name 'Henry-Baird Column,' to the late Prof. Joseph Henry, the first Secretary, and Prof. Spencer F. Baird, the present Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution at Washington."

The Henry-Baird Column, as described by Hovey in an *Encyclopedia Britannica* entry in 1911, "is made of two fluted pillars side by side, the one 25 and the other 60 ft. high, a mass of snowy alabaster." As characterized by Ammen, they are "both of immense size and symmetrical in shape." A promotional article in *Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper* in 1879 claimed that they dwarfed other columns in Giant's Hall and "will rivet the attention of tourists for hours." Today the stalagmites are known simply as the Double Column.¹¹

1885 Joseph Henry trolley

Sidney Howe Short (1858-1902) was a professor of physics and chemistry at the University of Denver in the 1880s when he laid an experimental rail line in the basement of the university building. In 1885, he constructed the Joseph Henry trolley, which he described as "a double trolley car, with five horse-power motors." His invention attracted investment capital, resulting in the organization of the Denver Tramway Company and the building of an underground conduit system designed by Short. He claimed his system was "the first electric railway commercially operated" in the United States. Although historians generally credit Frank J. Sprague with inaugurating the era of electric street cars, Short was certainly a pioneer in the field. Before he died at age 44, his work in electrical machinery had earned him more than 500 patents and a reputation as an authority in electric railways. We do not know specifically why Short chose to honor Henry, but it was not an uncommon practice to name trolley cars (such as the Faraday and the Ampère) after scientists who discovered the principles of electromagnetism.¹²



1893 The "henry"

In August 1893, an International Congress of Electricians met in Chicago during the World's Columbian Exposition. Scientists and engineers at the congress adopted names and agreed on definitions for eight units of electrical measure: the ohm, the ampere, the volt, the coulomb, the farad, the joule, the watt, and the henry. The motion to adopt the henry, the only unit named after an American, came from the leader of the French delegation, physicist

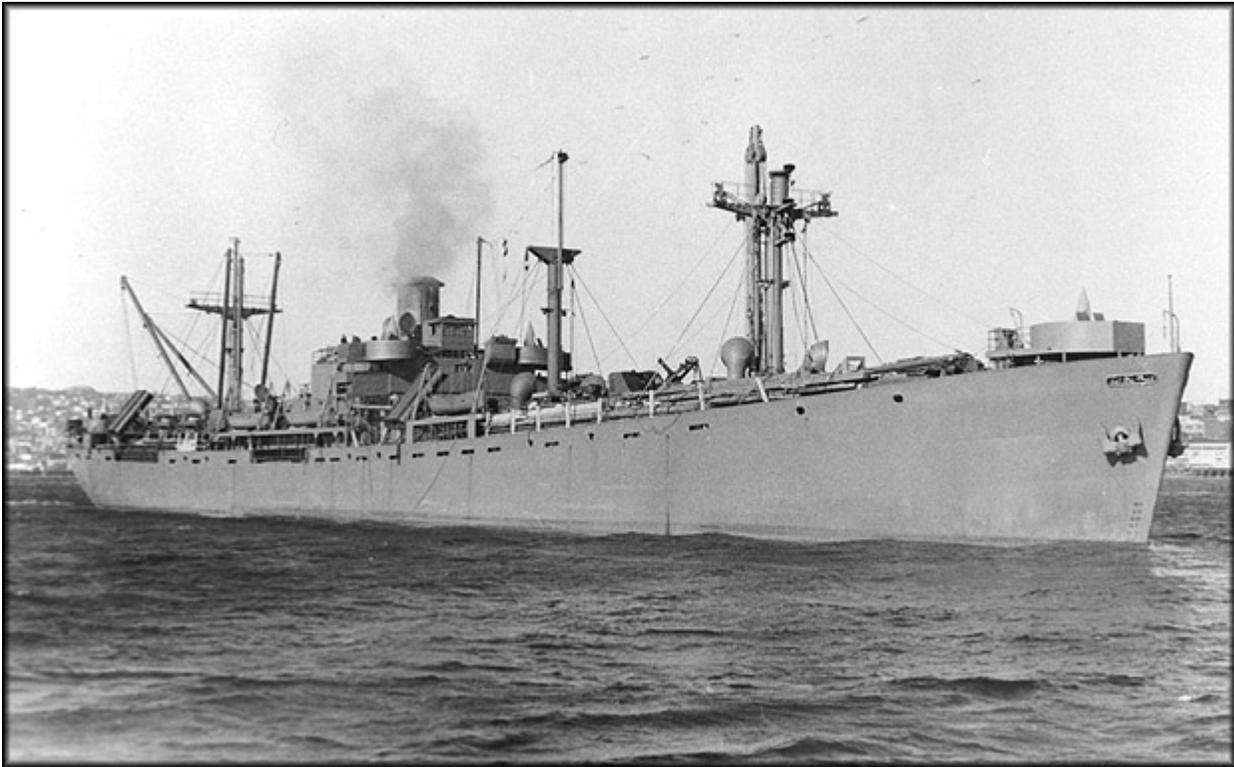


Éleuthère Élie Nicolas Mascart. The henry was defined as "the induction in a circuit when the electro-motive force induced in this circuit is one international volt, while the inducing current varies at the rate of one ampère per second."[13](#)

Delegates to the congress; Mascart, at center in light colors, proposed the "henry."

1943 *SS Joseph Henry*

The *SS Joseph Henry* was a Liberty ship built in 1942-1943 by the Kaiser Company in Vancouver, Washington, and completed by the Oregon Ship-Building Corporation of Portland. The launch date was January 23, 1943. A total of 2,710 Liberty ships were constructed during World War II in response to the urgent need for mass-produced cargo ships to supply troops with food and war materials. According to one study of the Liberty ship program, "The original style of nomenclature adopted for the emergency vessels was the bestowing upon them the names of persons notable in the history and culture of America."[14](#)



Liberty ship *Joseph Henry*.

1958 **Joseph Henry Elementary School**

The school is located just outside the village of Galway, New York, where Henry lived for part of his childhood and adolescence. The school opened in 1958 and was named in honor of the village's most illustrious denizen. A roadside plaque by Henry's childhood home states, "Joseph Henry: Lived Here 1806-1813, Physicist noted for work on Electromagnet, First Superintendent of Smithsonian Institution." In point of fact, the exact years Henry lived in Galway cannot be confirmed. A surviving letter to his parents places him

there at least by 1808 and evidence suggests he remained there until 1814 or 1815.[15](#)

ca. 1966 **Joseph Henry Laboratories of Physics**

The physics department of Princeton University gave this name to its laboratory facilities, which by 1970 would include those located in the newly built Jadwin Hall as well as in Palmer Hall and the Elementary Particles Laboratory. Henry had been professor of natural philosophy at Princeton from 1832 to 1848. Although his tenure as Secretary of the Smithsonian began in 1846, he retained his position at Princeton until June 1848. For many years thereafter his former colleagues tried to convince him to return to the school.



Statue by Daniel Chester French.
Art Museum, Princeton University.

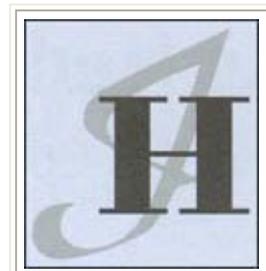


Galway plaque.

Statues by Daniel Chester French of Henry and Benjamin Franklin are fittingly paired at the front entrance of Palmer Laboratory (only the Henry statue is shown here). Henry was often compared to Franklin because of their pioneering experiments with electricity.[16](#)

1993 **Joseph Henry Press**

An imprint of the National Academy of Sciences, the Joseph Henry [Press](#) was created to improve public understanding of science by making books on science, technology, and health more widely available. Henry was one of the original members of the academy and its second president. The academy chose to name the press after him because of his "renaissance spirit" and his impact on American science.[17](#)



Press icon.

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Correction: An earlier version of "Henry Namesakes" listed an entry for 1873, the schooner *Joseph Henry*. The entry read in part: "In 1873, an official of the U.S. Pilot & Coast Wrecker of Harlem, New York, informed Henry that a clipper schooner under construction in Maine would bear his name: 'Your long and tried devotion to our beloved country and its scientific advancement, as well as your Patriotism, christian virtues and benevolence has endeared you to the American people and rendered your name a Household theme throughout our land.' We have recently identified Henry's letter of reply, however, which indicates that this action was never taken. The official had informed Henry that it was customary for the honoree to furnish, at a cost of \$100, flags for the vessel bearing his name. Henry replied, "I must decline the honor proposed, not that I hold it cheaply or that I am actuated by any narrow feeling in regard to the expenditure

of money, but in justice to my family and the position I hold as the Director of this Institution."[18](#)

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