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Science, Signals, and Service: The Smithsonian Institution's Role During the Civil War

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Abstract

Today, the Smithsonian is known for its world-famous exhibits, massive collections of American and natural history artifacts, and its contributions to research around the world. But many people don't know the role the Smithsonian played during the Civil War. The Smithsonian Castle was finished in 1855 and would become the first home of the research center, the library, and the US Museum. The government recognized the importance of the Institution and, after war was declared, the US Secretary of War ordered Joseph Henry, the Smithsonian Secretary, be issued twelve muskets and 240 rounds of ammunition "for the protection of the Institute against lawless attacks." The building was in a vulnerable position because it was [situated in between the Capitol Building and the White House, and cut off from the rest of the city by the Washington Canal](#) . The Institution was witness to soldiers on parade, as well as to the thousands of wounded soldiers sent back to the city after the First Battle of Bull Run. It suffered no war damage, but suffered from financial woes because Congress was more focused on paying for the war than paying the interest on the Smithson bequest. The inflation and currency devaluation of the era also affected finances.

Keywords

Civilians, Danielle Jones, Smithsonian Institution, Technology, Washington DC

Disciplines

History | Military History | Public History | United States History

Comments

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

Science, Signals, and Service: The Smithsonian Institution's Role During the Civil War

By [Danielle Jones '18](#)

Today, the Smithsonian is known for its world-famous exhibits, massive collections of American and natural history artifacts, and its contributions to research around the world. But many people don't know the role the Smithsonian played during the Civil War. The Smithsonian Castle was finished in 1855 and would become the first home of the research center, the library, and the US Museum. The government recognized the importance of the Institution and, after war was declared, the US Secretary of War ordered Joseph Henry, the Smithsonian Secretary, be issued twelve muskets and 240 rounds of ammunition "for the protection of the Institute against lawless attacks." The building was in a vulnerable position because it was [situated in between the Capitol Building and the White House, and cut off from the rest of the city by the Washington Canal](#). The Institution was witness to soldiers on parade, as well as to the thousands of wounded soldiers sent back to the city after the First Battle of Bull Run. It suffered no war damage, but suffered from financial woes because Congress was more focused on paying for the war than paying the interest on the Smithson bequest. The inflation and currency devaluation of the era also affected finances.



Image of the Smithsonian Castle in Washington DC, with the unfinished Capital Building in the Background. The hand-written caption, "Washington, D.C. April 1865" is incorrect because the castle was terribly damaged in a fire in January of 1865. Image courtesy of [Smithsonian Institution Archives](#).

Not only was the Castle home to the Institution, it was also home to Henry and his family. Because the family was in DC, they had an inside view of the proceedings in Congress leading up to the Civil War and the political atmosphere of the capital during the war. The Henrys entertained generals and their wives and were privy to discussions about troop movements and preparations. The oldest daughter, Mary Henry, was good friends with Dorthea Dix and worked in the make-shift hospitals that had been set up in the city. On July 10-14th, 1864, Mary wrote in her diary about the Confederate march on Washington, stating that “the city is in a state of intense excitement and the Southerners are said to be at Rockville and skirmishing with our pickets.” On July 11th, Mary and a few others went up to the top of the tower at the castle and observed boats full of Union troops, a Union signal marker, and a unit of United States Colored Troops moving into the city. By July 13th, she wrote of the rebel retreat, her witnessing a group of prisoners of war being escorted by mounted Union officers, as well as her and her father’s discussion with a soldier about the nature of the skirmish. Mary and her family remained in the Castle for the rest of the war, bearing witness to the end of the Civil War as well as the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, and her diary gives historians a glimpse into the life of Americans in the capital during the conflict.

The Smithsonian also provides historians with a different perspective of the war: that of Solomon G. Brown, the first African American employee of the Smithsonian. The Smithsonian is fortunate to have extensive records into Brown’s life both before, during, and after his time at the Smithsonian. Brown was not formally educated, so he taught himself to read and write. His intelligence allowed him to get a job at the Smithsonian, as well as serve as the assistant to Spencer Fullerton Baird, the second Smithsonian Secretary and long-time confidant of Brown. This connection meant that when Baird was out of D.C during the Civil War, Brown wrote to him, reporting on the events around DC and the effects of the war felt by the Smithsonian. Brown wrote to Baird, fearing what might happen to collections and letters transported by railroad in 1862, as Confederate troops had crossed into Maryland and were marching on two important railroad junctions. He told Baird he would be hiding a box of items from Baird somewhere, although the contents of the box were not revealed. Brown also wrote to Baird immediately after the Confederate march on the capital, saying that many people were afraid but the worst effect of the skirmishes was the massive amounts of soldiers assembled in the capital who were then mustered out and flooded brothels and bars, becoming very drunk and harassing passersby. On September 20th, 1864, Brown received word that he had been drafted into the U.S. Army for a year, but that day he was exempted because of physical disability, although what the disability was is unclear.

The Smithsonian was also involved scientifically when it came to the Civil War. Joseph Henry was asked in 1861 to lend financial help to Thaddeus Lowe so he could develop [balloon technology](#). Lowe was invited by Henry to demonstrate the balloon’s ability to provide telegraphic messages to persons on the ground, and because Henry saw the balloon as possibly useful for the military, he introduced Lowe to Secretary of War Simon Cameron and President Lincoln, recommending to them that a balloon corps be created. In addition to working with the Balloon Corps, the Smithsonian also

prepared over a thousand bottles of disinfectant for the Army in 1862, and Henry served on the Permanent Commission of the Navy Department in 1863.

It wasn't all smooth sailing for the Smithsonian. Henry found himself in hot water when the Permanent Commission undertook an experiment involving the use of flashing signals for military communication. Henry was accused of treason by a man who believed he was signaling Confederate soldiers, even though President Lincoln attended the experiment. Henry also did not fly the US flag over the Smithsonian, choosing to leave the castle without any flags. Most of the contention, however, was focused on his friendly ties with Jefferson Davis, and his disassociation of the Institution's association from a lecture series on abolition.

All in all, the Smithsonian played an important but often unknown role in the Civil War, and the experiences of the workers and families at the Institution give historians vital insights into what it was like in Washington, D.C. during the Civil War.

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