

In 1826, an English chemist, James Smithson FRS, made a will leaving a residual bequest of £ 104960 8s 7d “to found at Washington under the name of Smithsonian Institution an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men”. After Smithson’s death at Genoa in 1829 and some legal arguments in English courts, the principal of the bequest was converted into English gold Sovereign coins, and as ship’s ballast, forwarded to Philadelphia where it arrived in 1838. As at the time the local Mint was short of gold metal, the first use of the bequest was to convert it immediately into American Gold coinage.

To this day it is quite unknown why Smithson desired the then ‘small wooden-hutted village in a swamp’, now the Capital of the United States of America, to benefit in his will. I tried in vain to solve this mystery, but my researches only reached a certain point when I discovered that the Swiss-born great American naturalist of Harvard University, Louis Agassiz (1807-1873) stated in evidence to Congress that he knew the reasons for Smithson’s bequest. May a future enthusiastic researcher be more fortunate and follow up this clue.

The ISR article was published in June 1978 and contributed by S. Dillon Ripley, a Member of my Editorial Board, in fact the eighth Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. In his article he traced the Institution’s history and described the difficulties which Congress had in the 1830s to decide how best to use the money with only the cryptic instructions from the benefactor. It was Joseph Henry, the eminent physicist, who in 1846 became the first Secretary and who defined for all times the future function of the Institution.

Ripley reviewed his seven predecessors and their work and concluded with a statement of his own philosophy. An appendix listed the Bureaux of the Smithsonian; their names alone are full testimony of how magnificently the instructions of Smithson “the increase and diffusion of knowledge” had been fulfilled, during the century and a half since his death.

The Bureaux are: National Museum of Natural History; National Museum of History and Technology; Smithsonian Astrophysical Observatory; National Zoological Park; National Collection of Fine Arts; Renwick Gallery; Freer Gallery of Art; Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute; National Air and Space Museum; National Portrait Gallery; Radiation Biology Laboratory; Anacosta Neighbourhood Museum; Cooper-Hewitt Museum of Decorative Arts and Design; Joseph H. Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden; Archives of American Art. The Appendix was contributed by J.A. Steed, Archivist of the Smithsonian Institution.