



Smithsonian Institution Archives

Records, 1839-1863 and undated

Finding aid prepared by Smithsonian Institution Archives

Smithsonian Institution Archives
Washington, D.C.
Contact us at osiaref@si.edu

Table of Contents

Collection Overview	1
Administrative Information	1
Historical Note.....	1
Descriptive Entry.....	2
Names and Subjects	2
Container Listing	4
Series 1: INCOMING CORRESPONDENCE.....	4
Series 2: OUTGOING CORRESPONDENCE.....	6
Series 3: MINUTES AND REPORTS.....	7
Series 4: RECORDS OF THE UNITED STATES EXPLORING EXPEDITION.....	8
Series 5: LEDGERS AND ACCOUNT BOOKS.....	9
Series 6: ACCESSIONS.....	10
Series 7: BILLS.....	11
Series 8: MISCELLANY.....	12
Series 9: PUBLICATIONS.....	13
Series 10: LARGE FORMAT MATERIALS.....	15

Collection Overview

Repository:	Smithsonian Institution Archives, Washington, D.C., osiaref@si.edu
Title:	Records
Identifier:	Record Unit 7058
Date:	1839-1863 and undated
Extent:	11.43 cu. ft. (21 document boxes) (2 half document boxes) (1 12 x 17 box)
Creator::	National Institute
Language:	English

Administrative Information

Preferred Citation

Smithsonian Institution Archives, Record Unit 7058, National Institute, Records

Historical Note

The National Institute (1840-1862) was first organized as the National Institution for the Promotion of Science at Washington, D.C., in 1840 as a voluntary society interested in promoting study of diverse subjects, particularly natural history and the physical sciences. In 1842 Congress granted the body a federal charter, and it was known as the National Institute for the Promotion of Science thereafter until its dissolution in 1862. In fact, the National Institute could trace its origins to two earlier organizations. The Columbian Institute, founded in 1816, lost its federal charter in 1838 and joined the Institute in 1841, and the American Historical Society, created in 1835, attached itself to the Institute in 1840.

The National Institute was probably formed with a view to gaining control of the bequest of James Smithson, and it certainly pursued that goal until the Smithsonian Institution was created in 1846. However, despite its chronic lack of funds, the Institute did not wait for the Smithson legacy before pursuing its interest in science and the arts. An active program of collecting specimens of natural history and of corresponding with scholars and societies at home and abroad was begun immediately and soon created problems.

Joel Poinsett, the Institute's first president, arranged in 1841 for his organization to act as custodian for the advance collections of the Wilkes Expedition, and many other items were also received. To deal with this flood of specimens, the Institute had only a small space--in the Patent Office--and even less money for preservation, since it could not obtain government appropriations. The government's lack of interest in the Institute was further displayed when, in 1842, custody of the collections of the Wilkes Expedition was transferred from the Navy Department to the Joint Library Committee, which had no sympathy for the Institute's ambitions.

The Institute tried to improve its deteriorating position in 1844 by promoting a gathering of the country's leading men of science at Washington. From the gathering the Institute hoped to obtain resolutions of support which would influence the government to offer it financial aid. The meeting was held and a memorial adopted urging the Institute's claims upon Congress. The Congress remained unmoved and the Institute continued its decline, hastened in good part by the indifference of prominent scientists like Joseph Henry. Even though the Institute was responsible for organizing the American contribution to the Great Exhibition of 1851, its revival was short-lived. Finally, in 1862 the Institute transferred its remaining collections to the Smithsonian Institution and quietly expired.

Descriptive Entry

This collection consists of records, mostly 1840-1844, concerning the founding and operation of the National Institute by Joel Roberts Poinsett, Peter Force, John James Abert, Francis Markoe, Jr., and others, particularly efforts to obtain federal subsidies, to collect specimens of natural history and manufactures, to provide space for housing its collections, and to gather support for its programs from the general scientific community at a special meeting in 1844; correspondence among officers of the Institute about administration of its affairs; much incoming correspondence from members; minutes of meetings and committee reports; records dealing with a part of the collections of the U. S. Exploring Expedition; bills and accounts; and publications of the Institute.

These records display some operational confusion, due in part to John Varden, who worked, often simultaneously, for the National Institute, for Captain Charles Wilkes in the Exploring Expedition collections, and for Henry Leavitt Ellsworth in the National Gallery of the Patent Office, often keeping his records on these different jobs together.

Researchers should consult the Peter Force Papers in the Library of Congress, especially for information on the Institute's share in the Executive Committee, which organized American participation in the Great Exhibition of 1851 in London.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Natural history
Science -- Societies, etc.

Types of Materials:

Manuscripts

Names:

Abert, John James, 1788-1863
Force, Peter, 1790-1868
Great Exhibition (1851 : London, England)
Markoe, Francis, Jr.
National Institute
National Institution for the Promotion of Science (U.S.)
Poinsett, Joel Roberts, 1779-1851
Smithsonian Institution

United States Exploring Expedition (1838-1842)

Container Listing

Series 1: INCOMING CORRESPONDENCE.

Box 1

- Box 1 of 17 "Letters to the National Institute, June 1, 1839, to December 17, 1843," bound volume; incoming correspondence, arranged chronologically; primarily relating to organization of the National Institute and to its efforts to write a chain of correspondents and collectors; a very few outgoing letters by Francis Markoe, Jr., mostly referring to his interest in minerals, before organization of the Institute.

Boxes 2-2A

- Boxes 2-2A of 17 ["Letters to the National Institute, June 27, 1840, to May 26, 1842"], 2 bound volumes (Box 2: June 27, 1840-April 21, 1841; Box 2A: April 22, 1841-May 26, 1842). Incoming correspondence, arranged chronologically; including a letter from Peter S. Du Ponceau, May 6, 1841, on the Institute's prospects and another, March 4, 1842, from Richard Rush agreeing that the National Institute may rightly believe itself a fit recipient for the Smithson bequest.

Boxes 3-3A

- Boxes 3-3A of 17 "Letters to the National Institute, April 22, 1841 to December 31, 1842," 2 bound volumes (Box 3: April 22, 1841-July 31, 1842; Box 3A: August 1842-December 31, 1842). Incoming correspondence, arranged chronologically; consisting chiefly of acknowledgments of appointment to membership in the Institute and of letters accompanying natural history specimens; including a letter from Peter S. Du Ponceau to John Canfield Spencer, November 5, 1842, in which Du Ponceau gives his thoughts on the formation of an association of the friends of science and another from Du Ponceau in which he warns that the Institute may stir up resentment against itself among other bodies if it gives an impression of wishing to dominate scientific permits.

Box 4

- Box 4 of 17 "Letters to the National Institute, January 6 to June 30, 1843," 1 bound volume; incoming correspondence, arranged chronologically; consisting of general correspondence and, particularly, remarks by Lewis Caleb Beck, June 5, 1843, on the Institute's plan to hold a general scientific meeting at Washington in 1843 in competition with planned meetings of other societies.

Box 5

- Box 5 of 17 "Letters to the National Institute, July 1 to December 30, 1843," 1 bound volume; incoming correspondence, arranged chronologically; consisting of general correspondence; a paper on preparing nautical charts, July 4, 1843, by Matthew Fontaine Maury is of interest.

Box 6

Box 6 of 17 "Letters to the National Institute, January 1 to April 30, 1844," 1 bound volume; incoming correspondence, arranged chronologically; primarily concerned with arrangements for the April 1844 meeting, with copies of some papers delivered there.

Box 7

Box 7 of 17 "Letters to the National Institute, May 1 to December 30, 1844," 1 bound volume; incoming correspondence, arranged chronologically; contains a letter from Nicolas Marie Alexandre Vattemare, November 12, 1844, promoting his plan of scientific exchanges.

Box 8

Box 8 of 17 "Letters to the National Institute, January 6 to December 31, 1845," 1 bound volume; incoming correspondence, arranged chronologically; consisting mostly of letters accompanying specimens, relating curious natural events, or acknowledging membership.

Box 9

Box 9 of 17 Letters to the National Institute, 1840-1849, 1852-1857, 1863, and undated, loose; incoming correspondence, arranged chronologically, largely routine correspondence, with a few interesting items, e.g. a letter of May 18, 1843, on the Joint Library Committee's reaction to the Abert-Markoe pamphlet urging that custody of the Exploring Expedition collections be vested in the National Institute; most of the letters fall into the period 1840-1845.

[Image\(s\): Letter to F. Markor, Esq, from A. Goldsborough Bruff dated August 14, 1843 containing Rebus characters. \(Image nos. SIA2012-1138 and SIA2012-1139\)](#)

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 2: OUTGOING CORRESPONDENCE.

Box 10

Box 10 of 17

Correspondence, 1840-1855, 1857, and undated, arranged chronologically, loose; mostly routine matters; includes a letter from Markoe to Lewis Caleb Beck, January 7, 1843, defending the Institute's efforts to summon a general conference of scientists to Washington in 1844; also a letter from Markoe and John James Abert to Senator Robert John Walker, March 10, 1843, defending themselves against Senator Benjamin Tappan's strictures on their earlier pamphlet advocating the Institute's control of the United States Exploring Expedition Collections.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 3: MINUTES AND REPORTS.

Box 11

Box 11 of 17 Journal of meetings of the National Institute, 1840-1856, arranged chronologically; bound; consisting of minutes of meetings.

Box 11 of 17 Vol. I: May 7, 1840-September 12, 1842

Box 11 of 17 Vol. II: October 10, 1842-December 17, 1849

Box 11A

Box 11A of 17 Vol. III: May 21, 1849-March 17, 1856

Box 12

Box 12 of 17 Minutes and committee reports, 1840-1842, arranged chronologically; loose; consisting of copies of minutes, usually drafts, and reports of various committees to the Institute.

Box 12 of 17 Proceedings of the Medical Department of the National Institute, 1842-1845, arranged chronologically; bound; consisting of minutes of meetings of the Medical Department held separately from those of the whole Institute.

Box 13

Box 13 of 17 Minutes and committee reports, 1843-1853, and undated, arranged chronologically; loose; consisting of copies of minutes, usually drafts, and reports of various committees to the Institute.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 4: RECORDS OF THE UNITED STATES EXPLORING EXPEDITION.

Box 14

Box 14 of 17

Records of the United States Exploring Expedition, 1839-1854, and undated, arranged chronologically; bound and loose; consisting of lists of boxes received, bills and accounts, and invoices for upkeep of collections.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 5: LEDGERS AND ACCOUNT BOOKS.

Box 15

- Box 15 of 17 "Catalogue of the Library [of the] National Institute," 1848, bound; consisting of a list of books in the Institute library, arranged by a topical scheme.
- Box 15 of 17 Lists of the members of the National Institute, 1840-1842, and undated, bound and loose; consisting of a bound volume listing members during 1840-1842 and one folder of undated rough lists of members.

Box 16

- Accounts and receipts of John Varden [and others?] with the United States Exploring Expedition, the National Institute, and the Smithsonian Institution, 1842-1858, bound, consisting of:
- Box 16 of 17 Ledger of accounts of John Varden [and others?] 1842-1856, with the United States Exploring Expedition and the National Institute; Ledger of receipts and accounts of John Varden, 1847-1858, with the United States Exploring Expedition, National Institute, and Smithsonian Institution; Three notebooks recording miscellaneous transactions by John Varden in behalf of the United States Exploring Expedition, the National Institute, and the Smithsonian Institution, 1845-1854; "List of . . . Duplicate Shells of the Ex-Exp. . . . August 1845."

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 6: ACCESSIONS.

Box 17

Box 17 of 17

Accessions, 1840-1848, 1853-1854, 1857, and undated, arranged chronologically; loose in two folders; consisting of letters and lists of specimens and objects received by the Institute.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 7: BILLS.

Box 17

Box 17 of 17

Bills, 1841, 1843-1845, 1851-1853, 1857, chronologically arranged; loose; consisting of bills and invoices submitted for payment.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 8: MISCELLANY.

Box 17

Box 17 of 17

Miscellany, 2 folders and one bound copy of John Cussin's "Birds and Animals of the U.S. Exploring Expedition," by an unknown copyist.

[Image\(s\): Includes document titled the "Prophecy of Benjamin the Anti-Christ". \(Image nos. SIA2012-9666 to SIA2012-9672\)](#)

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 9: PUBLICATIONS.

Box 18

Publications relating to the National Institute, 1840-1859, 35 items, consisting of:

Box 18 of 17

"Constitution and By-Laws of the National Institution for the Promotion of Science, Established at Washington, May, 1840." Washington: Gales & Seaton, 1840; 3 copies; "Constitution and By-Laws of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science. Printed by Order of the Institute." Washington: J. and G. S. Gideon, 1849, 2 copies; Bulletin of the Proceedings of the National Institution for the Promotion of Science. Washington: various printers, 1840-1846; "Report of the Recording Secretary of the National Institute for the Year 1850...". Washington: Robert A. Waters, 1850; Proceedings of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science, New Series, Volume I, Numbers 1-3, 1855-1857; "Constitution and By-Laws of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science...." Washington, J. and G. S. Gideon, 1849; "Constitution of the National Institution for the Promotion of Science...." Washington: Peter Force, 1841." Joel R. Poinsett, "Discourse, on the Objects and Importance of the National Institution for the Promotion of Science, Established at Washington, 1840, Delivered at the First Anniversary." Washington: P. Force, 1841; "Reply of Col. Abert and Mr. Markoe to the Hon. Mr. Tappan, of the United States Senate. Washington: William Q. Force, 1843. All the above are bound in a single volume; Index to first and second bulletins; Second Bulletin of the Proceedings of the National Institution for the Promotion of Science.... Washington: Peter Force, 1842; Third Bulletin of the Proceedings of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science... Also, Proceedings of the Meeting of April, 1844. Washington: William Q. Force [1842, 1844], bound as one volume.

Box 18A

Box 18A of 17

Second and third bulletins (bound together).

Box 18A of 17

Fourth Bulletin of the National Institute for the Promotion of Science . . . Washington: William Q. Force, 1846; Proceedings of the National Institute, New Series, Volume I, Number 1, 1855; Proceedings of the National Institute, New Series, Volume I, Number 2, 1856; Proceedings of the National Institute, New Series, Volume I, Number 3, 1857, 3 copies; "Report of the Recording Secretary of the National Institute for the Year 1850...." Washington: Robert A. Waters, 1850; Memorial of Walter R. Johnson, "Establishment of an Institution for Experiments in Physical Sciences, House Doc. 396, 25 Cong., 2 sess., 1838; Henry King, "Directions for Making Collections in Natural History.. . ." Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1840, 4 copies; Joel R. Poinsett, "Discourse, on the Objects and Importance of the National Institution for the Promotion of Science...." Washington: P. Force, 1841, 3 copies; John Wilkes, Esq., Synopsis of the Cruise of the U. S. Exploring Expedition, During the Years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1841, & 1842; Delivered Before the National Institute.... Washington: Peter Force, 1842;

Box 18B

- Box 18B of 17 John Carroll Brent, "Letters on the National Institute, Smithsonian Legacy, the Fine Arts, and Other Matters Connected with the Interests of the District of Columbia." Washington: J. and G. S. Gideon, 1844, 2 copies; "Introductory Address of the Hon. R. J. Walker, of Mississippi, Delivered Before the National Institute at its April Meeting, 1844." Washington: William Q. Force, 1845, 3 copies; Levi Woodbury, "The Annual Address Delivered Before the National Institute in the Hall of the House of Representatives...." Washington: J. and S. Gideon, 1845; Peter Force, "Grinnell Land: Remarks on the English Maps of Arctic Discoveries in 1850 and 1851." Washington: R. A. Waters [1852]; Alfred Hunter, "A Popular Catalogue of the Extraordinary Curiosities in the National Institute, Arranged in the Building Belonging to the Patent Office...." Washington: Alfred Hunter, 1859.
- [Digital Content: Title Page of the National Institute's Catalogue of "Extraordinary Curiosities," Published by Alfred Hunter, 1859. \(Image no. 2005-414\)](#)
- Box 18B of 17 Address on Gov. William Henry Harrison. . . 1841 (2 copies)
- Box 18B of 17 Publications - Mss. of articles printed in the Bulletin.

[Return to Table of Contents](#)

Series 10: LARGE FORMAT MATERIALS.

Box 19

Box 19 of 17 Ledgers of expenses incurred by the United States Exploring Expedition, 1843-1853; 1 item.

Oversize

Oversize Plan of the National Gallery containing the collections of the Exploring Expedition, undated, 1 item.

Oversize Watercolor of the Smithsonian Institution Building attributed to Robert Mills, undated. (SI negative number 85-797)

[Return to Table of Contents](#)