



Lincoln and the Smithsonian

In 1846, Congress passed the act organizing the Smithsonian Institution. The Regents invited Professor Joseph Henry, of Princeton University, to be the first Secretary of the Smithsonian. When Henry left Princeton to become the Secretary, he brought with him the outlook of a dedicated research scientist.

The following year, in 1847, the cornerstone of the Smithsonian Building, now popularly known as “The Castle” was laid. For years, the North Tower of the Castle was the tallest structure in the District of Columbia, and came to figure prominently in stories of the Civil War, frequently invoking the image of Abraham Lincoln reviewing military operations.

Not only were grand views possible from the tower, but it could also have provided an ideal communications post. One citizen, concerned that the tower was being used to signal to the Confederate troops in Virginia, urgently sought an interview with President Lincoln, who at the time was meeting with his friend, Smithsonian Secretary Henry. The concerned citizen announced that for several evenings past he had observed a light exhibited on the

highest of the Smithsonian towers, for a few minutes about nine o’clock, with mysterious movements, which he felt satisfied were designed as signals to the rebels encamped on Munson’s Hill in Virginia. The President listened gravely to this information with raised eyebrows, but a subdued twinkle in his eye. He turned to Secretary Henry and said, “What do you think of that Professor Henry?” With a smile, Joseph Henry replied that from the time mentioned, he presumed that the mysterious light shone from the lantern of an attendant who was required at nine o’clock each evening to observe and record the indications of the meteorological instruments placed on the tower.

Secretary Henry had made metrology one of the most important activities of the fledgling Institution, creating a network of observers throughout the country. The records were maintained by W. Q. Force who lived in the building and was on hand to take the evening readings.

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