

A Guide to the Columbian Institute in the Special Collections Research Center

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COLUMBIAN INSTITUTE FOR THE PROMOTION OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

Holdings: 1817

Call Number: Special Collections Microfilm 506

This roll of microfilm includes the Columbian Institute's Constitution, Standing Orders, and a Constitutional Ordinance which increased its scope of activities. For a good synopsis of the history and mission of the Institute, consult Richard Rathbun's *The Columbian Institute for the Promotion of Arts and Sciences* (Washington, DC, 1917) which is also in Special Collections. Call Number: Q 11.U6 no. 101.

In many ways, the origin of the Smithsonian Institution can be traced to a group of Washington citizens who, being "impressed with the importance of forming an association for promoting useful knowledge," met on June 28, 1816 to establish the Columbian Institute for the Promotion of Arts and Sciences.

Officers were elected in October, 1816, and the organization was granted a charter by Congress on April 20, 1818 (this charter expired in 1838). Benjamin Latrobe, who was architect for the US Capitol after the War of 1812, and William Thornton, the architect who designed the Octagon House and Tudor Place, would serve as officers. Other prominent members, who numbered from 30-70 during the Institute's existence, included John Quincy Adams, Andrew Jackson, Henry Clay, Judge William Cranch, and James Hoban. Honorary members included James Madison, James Monroe, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and the Marquis Lafayette. Operating expenses were covered from the \$5 yearly dues collected from each member.

The Institute proposed a number of undertakings. These included the study of plant life and the creation of a botanic garden on the capitol Mall, an examination of the country's mineral production, improvement in the management and care of livestock, and the writing of a topographical and statistical history of the United States. Reports were to be published periodically to share this knowledge with the greater public, but this did not occur due to a lack of funds.

The Institute first met in Blodget's Hotel, later in the Treasury Department and City Hall, before being assigned a permanent home in 1824 in the Capitol building. Beginning in 1825, weekly sittings were arranged during sessions of Congress for the reading of scientific and literary productions, but this was continued for only a short time, as the number attending declined rapidly. Eighty-five communications by 26 people were made to Congress during the entire life of the society, with more than a half relating to astronomy or mathematics.

Among all the activities planned by the Institute, only a few were actually implemented. Two were the establishment of a botanical garden, and a museum which was designed to have a national and permanent status. The former occupied

space where the present Botanic Garden sits. The museum contained specimens of zoology, botany, archeology, fossils, etc., some of which were passed on to the Smithsonian Institution after its formation.

The Institute's charter expired in 1838, but its spirit lived on in the National Institution, founded in 1840. With the mission to "promote science and the useful arts, and to establish a national museum of natural history," this organization continued to press Congress to establish a museum which would be structured in terms that were very similar to those finally incorporated into the founding of the Smithsonian Institution. Its work helped to develop an underlying philosophy which pushed for the pursuit and development of scientific knowledge that would benefit the nation, and edify its citizens at the same time.

OTHER RESOURCES

Columbian Institute. *A Constitutional Ordinance for the Government of the Columbian Institute: Passed on the Eleventh of October, 1820*. Washington: S.A. Elliot, 1820.

Call Number: Special Collections Q 11.C65 1820b

Law, Thomas. *An Address Delivered before the Columbian Institute, December 17, 1825*. Washington: Gales and Seaton, 1825.

Call Number: Special Collections HG 521.L229 1825

Law, Thomas. *An Address to the Columbian Institute, on a Moneyed System*. Washington: Gales & Seaton, 1828.

Call Number: Special Collections HG 521.L23

Law, Thomas. *An Address to the Columbian Institute, on the Question: "What Ought to be the Circulating Medium of a Nation?"*. Washington: Gales & Seaton, 1830.

Call Number: Special Collections HG 521.L24 1830

Rathbun, Richard. *The Columbian Institute for the Promotion of Arts and Sciences: A Washington Society of 1816-1838, which Established a Museum and Botanic Garden under Government Patronage*. Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1917.

Call Number: Special Collections Q 11.U6 no. 101

Watkins, Tobias. *Anniversary Discourse Delivered before the Columbian Institute on the 7th January, 1826*. Washington: Davis and Force, 1826.

Call Number: Special Collections Q 171.W28 1826