

A reflection of America herself

As a history nerd without apology, I was reading about the time leading up to the shots fired at Fort Sumter preceding the Civil War.

Out of the chaos and deep-seated acrimony of that time, English philanthropist Joseph Smithson provided a gift to the country — a gift to “establish increased and diffusion of knowledge amongst men.”

You may know it as the Smithsonian Institution.

The story of the Smithsonian is, in many ways, the story of America itself — ambitious, imperfect, curious, inventive, and constantly evolving. For more than 175 years, the Smithsonian has served as the nation's attic, laboratory, library, classroom, and memory bank. It preserves the treasures of the past, while helping Americans understand the present and imagine the future.

Founded in 1846 by an act of Congress, the Smithsonian began modestly in Washington with the construction of the iconic “castle,” a red sandstone building that still serves as one of the institution's symbols today. Over time, the Smithsonian expanded far beyond a single museum. It evolved into a network of museums, research centers, libraries, archives, zoological facilities, and educational programs that collectively attract tens of millions of visitors every year.

Today, the Smithsonian oversees 21 museums, the National Zoo, and numerous research facilities across the globe. Its collections include more than 150 million objects, specimens, and artifacts. Those holdings range from dinosaur fossils and moon rocks to presidential memorabilia, jazz recordings, Native American art, and historic aircraft.

The importance of the Smithsonian lies not merely in the size of its collections, but in what those collections represent. The institution preserves the shared story of the American people. It allows citizens to encounter their history in tangible ways — not as abstract concepts in textbooks, but as real objects connected to real lives.

A jewel of Washington, D.C.

I cannot express how this gift is something that reveals something new every time one visits one of the museums. The great puzzle of American history is one that invites intellectual exploration and more so, a recognition that our imperfect union has so much more to offer than the strife it was born into.

Visitors to the National Museum of American History can stand before the original Star-Spangled Banner that inspired the national anthem. At the National Air and Space Museum, they can see the Wright brothers' airplane, Charles Lindbergh's Spirit of St. Louis, and artifacts from the Apollo missions that carried humans to the moon.

Education has been central to the Smithsonian mission. Millions of students, teachers, and researchers rely on Smithsonian resources each year. The institution has embraced digital technology to make its collections accessible worldwide, allowing people far from Washington to explore exhibits online, access historical documents, and engage with educational programming free of charge.

That accessibility matters, because the Smithsonian belongs to the public. Unlike many similar institutions around the world, most Smithsonian museums offer free admission.

Of course, like any major institution, the Smithsonian has faced criticism and controversy. Debates have recently reemerged over exhibit content, historical interpretation, funding priorities, and political influence. Yet those debates themselves reflect the institution's importance.

Americans care deeply about how their history is preserved and presented because history shapes national identity. Cultural touchpoints that demonstrate a truth of hardship can be found in the National Museum of African American History, and the National Museum of the American Indian. Not everything that this country has done is something we can be proud of — but it is a greater sin to sanitize history.

In many ways, the Smithsonian represents a uniquely American idea: that a nation can invest in knowledge, culture, and discovery not simply for profit, but for the public good. Its museums remind



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visitors that innovation, creativity, sacrifice, and curiosity are part of the national character. They also remind Americans that history is not always comfortable.

D.C. is a treasure trove for history nerds

While both the National Archives and the Smithsonian Institution play vital roles in preserving American history and culture, they operate independently of each other. The National Archives focus on government records and historical documents, while the Smithsonian is the curator of our beautiful nation's history.

Every trip to our nation's capital, we visit a few Smithsonian museums, but selfishly, I need to visit the National Archives. I admit when I cast my eyes on the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights, I tear up.

At a moment when society often feels divided by politics, technology, and rapid social change, institutions like the Smithsonian provide something increasingly rare. A place where the bridge between the past and present is open to everyone.

James Smithson could scarcely have imagined the scale of the institution his gift would create. Yet his vision endures in every museum hall, research laboratory, archive box, and educational program associated with the Smithsonian. More than a collection of buildings and artifacts, the Smithsonian is a living record of humanity's desire to learn, preserve, and understand. ©