

Joseph Henry Biography

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Biography

Joseph Henry (1797-1878), American physicist and electrical experimenter, was primarily important for his role in the institutional development of science in America.

Joseph Henry was born December 17, 1797, in Albany, N. Y. He attended the common school until the age of 14, when he was apprenticed to a jeweler. He later studied at the Albany Academy and in 1826 became professor of mathematics there. He immediately began researching a comparatively new field--the relation of electric currents to magnetism. The important result of this work was Henry's discovery of induced currents. In 1832 he was appointed professor of natural philosophy (chemistry and physics) in the College of New Jersey at Princeton.

In 1846 Henry became the first secretary and director of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., a position he held for the rest of his life. Under his direction the institution encouraged and supported original research. Although a large portion of the income settled on the institution by Congress was for the support of the museum, art gallery, laboratory, and library, Henry took every opportunity to divest the institution of such burdens.

As the Smithsonian's director, Henry acted as one of the major coordinators of government science. Among the projects he originated was the system of receiving simultaneous weather reports by telegraph and basing weather predictions on them. From these beginnings came the U.S. Weather Bureau. During the Civil War he served on the Navy's permanent commission to evaluate inventions and on the Lighthouse Board.

Henry was elected to the American Philosophical Society in 1835. He helped organize the American Association for the Advancement of Science in 1847 and was an original member of the National Academy of Sciences, chartered by Congress in 1863. He became vice president of the National Academy in 1866 and was president from 1868 until his death. He was responsible for reorganizing the academy and transforming it from a society that emphasized governmental service to an honorary organization which recognized "original research."

Henry died on May 13, 1878. By concurrent resolution a memorial service was held in his honor on the evening of January 16, 1879, in the hall of the House of Representatives, and by act of Congress a bronze statue was erected at Washington in his memory.