

AMERICA'S ATIC

By Charles Apple | THE SPOKESMAN-REVIEW

The Smithsonian Institution was founded on Aug. 10, 1846 — 180 years ago — thanks to a British scientist who gifted his estate to the United States — a country he had never visited — to establish “an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge.”

Today, the Smithsonian Institution consists of 21 museums, 21 libraries, 14 education and research centers, a zoo, holds more than 157 million artifacts, specimens and pieces of art and is visited by more than 30 million guests each year.

FOUNDED WITH A GIFT FROM A BRITISH SCIENTIST

When British scientist James Smithson died in 1829, he left his wealth to his nephew, Henry James Hungerford.

However, the will specified that if Hungerford died childless: “I then bequeath the whole of my property ... to the United States of America, to found at Washington, under the name of the Smithsonian Institution, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.”

Sure enough, Hungerford died childless in 1835. Congress accepted the gift on July 1, 1836. President Andrew Jackson dispatched a diplomat to England who returned with 105 sacks containing 104,960 gold sovereigns worth \$508,318.46 at the time — or more than \$18 million today.



James Smithson

This was followed by eight years of inaction while Congress haggled and argued of how best to use the grant.

At one point, the money was used to buy treasury bonds in Arkansas — but the new state then defaulted on the bonds. Former president and then Congressman John Quincy Adams convinced Congress to restore the lost funds with interest.

On Aug. 10, 1846, President James K. Polk signed legislation to establish the Smithsonian Institution, a board of regents and a secretary. Architect James Renwick — who had designed St. Patrick’s Cathedral in New York City — was hired to design a home for the Smithsonian on the National Mall. The red sandstone building, now known as the Smithsonian “castle,” opened in 1855.

For its first few years, the Smithsonian was primarily a research center and a depository for government-sponsored collections and meteorological study.

For the nation’s centennial in 1876, a number of historical artifacts involving the founding of the United States were put on display for the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. When that exhibit closed, Congress appropriated money to house the exhibits in a new “national museum” that would be run by the Smithsonian.

A second building, the Arts and Industries building, opened in 1881 to house these items. The institution opened a national zoo in 1889.

Since then, the Smithsonian has grown to house 157 million exhibits. At any given time, less than 1% of the Smithsonian’s inventory is on display in the more than two dozen facilities around the country.



The entry rotunda of the Smithsonian’s National Museum of Natural History.

SMITHSONIAN MUSEUMS ON THE NATIONAL MALL ...

National Museum of African American History & Culture
OPENED: 2016

National Museum of American History
OPENED: 1964

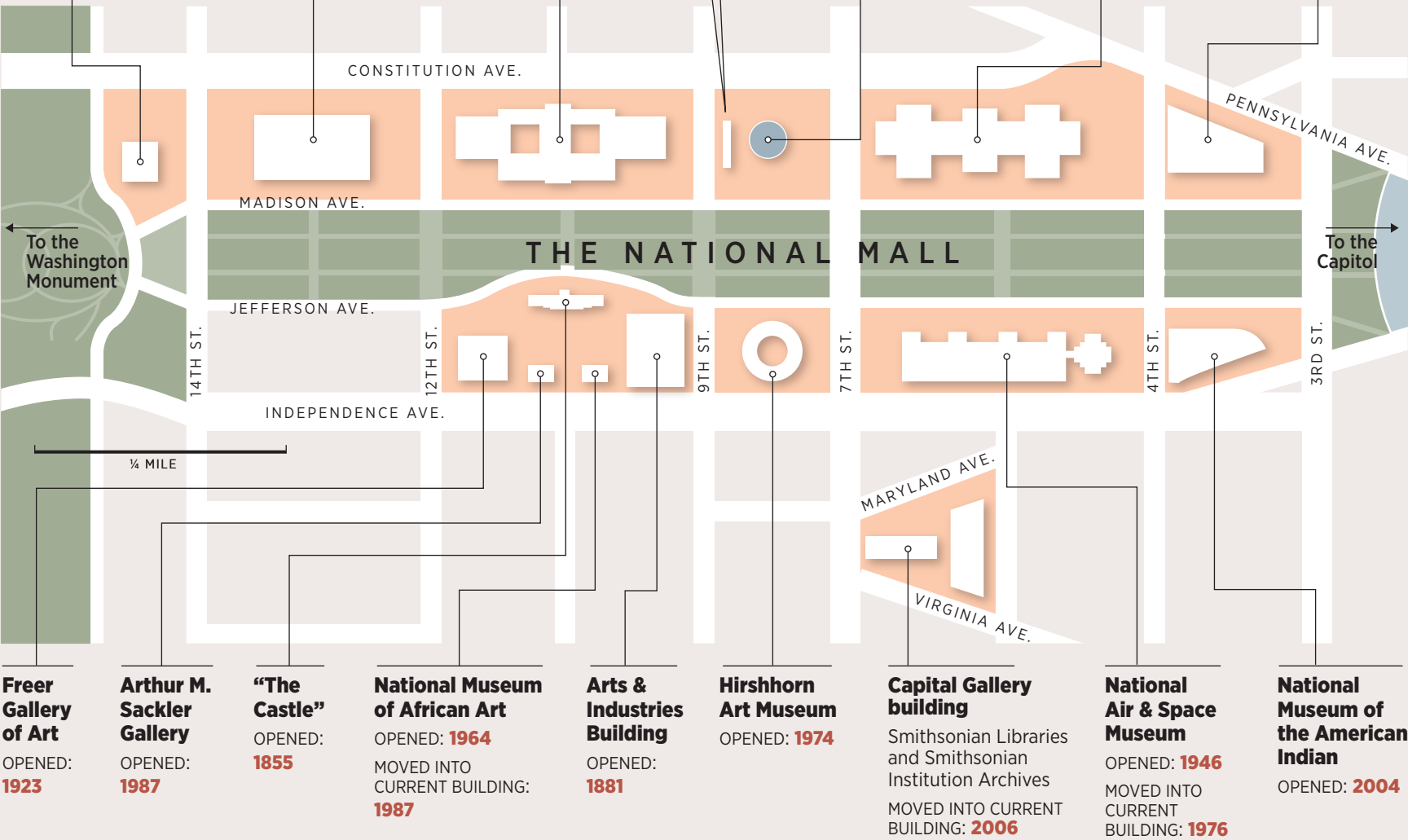
National Museum of Natural History
OPENED: 1858
MOVED INTO CURRENT BUILDING: 1911

Pavilion Café

National Gallery of Art’s Sculpture Garden
OPENED: 1974

National Gallery of Art West Building
OPENED: 1941

National Gallery of Art East Building
OPENED: 1978



... AND MAJOR SMITHSONIAN MUSEUMS ELSEWHERE

National Zoological Park
Rock Creek, Washington, D.C.
OPENED: 1889

Cooper Hewitt, Smithsonian Design Museum
Museum Mile, New York City
OPENED: 1897

Anacostia Community Museum
Anacostia, Washington, D.C.
OPENED: 1967

National Portrait Gallery
Penn Quarter, Washington, D.C.
OPENED: 1968

African Art Museum
Penn Quarter, Washington, D.C.
OPENED: 1968

Renwick Gallery
Lafayette Square, Washington, D.C.
OPENED: 1972

National Postal Museum
NOMA, Washington, D.C.
OPENED: 1993

National Museum of the American Indian’s George Gustav Heye Center
Bowling Green, New York City
OPENED: 1994

National Air and Space Museum’s Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center
Chantilly, Virginia
OPENED: 2003

Sources: “City in Time: Washington, D.C.” by Samuel M. Caggiula with Beverly Brackett, “Washington in Focus” by Philip Bigler, “Washington Past and Present” by the U.S. Capitol Historical Society, the Smithsonian Institution, Library of Congress, HistoryHit.com, History.com

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