

Topping off the Smithsonian

by Christopher L. Murphy

Before, during and after the creation and construction of the remarkable Smithsonian Institution, top-level problems were experienced in several senses of the word. Two United States stamps visually tell part of this unusual tale, making one stamp appear as though it has a design error.

The Smithsonian Institution was founded at the bequest of James Smithson (1765-1829), the British scientist for whom the mineral smithsonite is named. Upon his death in 1829, Smithson left his fortune to the United States to form the Smithsonian Institution. This immediately caused some problems. To begin with, the British Court of Chancery took possession of Smithson's estate, and this high court was not quick to part with its holdings. Some time later, President Andrew Jackson had to take the British to task in a high-profile "friendly" lawsuit.

After two years of wrangling with top British officials, the United States gained the upper hand.

Converted to American currency, the Smithson estate netted the United States \$508,318.46, which was turned over to the nation's highest governing body, Congress. Its job was to sort out what form the institution should take, and to determine specifically how the money should be used. Eight long years later, in 1846, President James K. Polk signed the act officially establishing the Smithsonian Institution. However, the terms of the act were so broad they allowed for almost any type of future development.

Remarkably, the institution evolved into precisely what Smithson had envisioned, "an Establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men." The castle-like building was completed in 1855.

Another problem occurred "at the top," however, in 1865, when workmen unknowingly inserted a stove pipe into the brick lining of the building, rather than

into a flue. A disastrous fire subsequently destroyed the second floor of the building and the upper floors of the towers.

In reconstructing the fire-damaged building, it appears money for renovations ran out, so the tower to the left (as you face the building) was not topped-up with its distinctive original pointed roof. For more than 100 years, the flat-topped tower waited to be restored to its former glory. Finally, in 1972 (107 years after the fire), the pointed roof was replaced.

Two U.S. postage stamps attest to the Smithsonian's building plight. Scott No. 943, issued in 1946, shows the building with a flat-roofed tower, which is as it still appeared in 1946. The other stamp, Scott 1838, was released in 1980. It shows the fully restored building. Thus the 1946 stamp appears to have a design error, but this is not the case.

There is no doubt the Smithsonian is a top-notch organization, so top-level, pointed issues certainly are not out of place for the venerable institution. ☒



In 1946, when this 3¢ stamp was released (Scott 943), the Smithsonian building was still missing the left tower top as you face the building. It had been destroyed in an 1865 fire.



By 1980, when Scott 1838, a 15¢ stamp honoring the building's architect, was released, the tower top had been restored to its former glory, making the building on the stamps differ in appearance.