



FROM SMITHSON TO SMITHSONIAN
THE BIRTH OF AN INSTITUTION
CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES
FOR GRADES 9-12

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LESSON PLAN TWO

WHO WAS JAMES SMITHSON?

OBJECTIVES

- ❖ Examine a variety of primary source materials from the life of James Smithson
- ❖ Evaluate primary source materials for clues to the identity of James Smithson
- ❖ Interpret primary source materials and draft a basic thesis statement

MATERIALS

- ❖ Copies of Activity Pages 2A–2E
- ❖ Pens, pencils
- ❖ Teacher Resource pages

SUBJECT

Social studies

PROCEDURE

1. Divide your class into groups of equal size. Tell your students that they will now use their knowledge of primary source materials to play a historical “detective game.” Ask your students to imagine that they are historians who have been called together to interpret a series of primary source materials. Tell them that their task is to examine the evidence and reach some general conclusions about an historical figure who

played an important role in American history. (*You may wish to motivate students further by offering extra credit or bonus points to the group that arrives at the most detailed and accurate conclusions.*)

2. Give each group copies of Activity Pages 2A–2E. Ask your students to carefully examine the images and documents on each Activity Page before answering the associated questions. What does the evidence tell us about this person? What time period might he have lived in? What were his interests? Is there any indication of his social status? What country might he have been from? Emphasize that students are to record a possible interpretation from each primary source on Activity Page 2E. (*Some students may remark that the manuscript samples were difficult to read—you may wish to use this opportunity to emphasize that historians are often confronted with handwritten documents that are difficult to read.*)

3. When the groups have finished, lead the class in a discussion of their conclusions.

Answers will vary, but students should conclude that the historical figure in question was an educated, wealthy man who was keenly interested in scientific endeavors—especially mineralogy. Some students may also conclude that the man was not American, but European.

4. Tell your students that they have discovered almost as much as the experts know about this man. Reveal that the “mystery man” was James Smithson, an English scientist who left his fortune to the people of the United States in 1829 to found an institution for the “increase and diffusion of knowledge.” Smithson’s bequest led to the foundation of the Smithsonian Institution, the world’s largest museum and research complex. Conclude the activity by telling your students that in the next activity they will learn how Smithson’s gift became America’s Smithsonian.

JAMES SMITHSON: THE MAN BEHIND THE INSTITUTION

While the institution named after James Smithson enjoys worldwide renown, we know little about the man who left \$508,318 to the people of the United States to found such an institution.

An English scientist who conducted research in chemistry, mineralogy, and geology, Smithson lived and traveled in several European countries. His schooling and interests afforded him the opportunity to mix with many noted scientists.

Smithson was born in France in 1765. Named James Lewis Macie, he was the illegitimate son of Hugh Smithson, who later became the first Duke of Northumberland, and Elizabeth Keate Hungerford Macie, a widow of royal blood. Smithson and his half brother Henry Louis Dickinson inherited a considerable estate from their mother’s family. Why Smithson chose to leave his fortune to the United States remains a mystery to this day.

ACTIVITY PAGE 2A

PIECING IT TOGETHER—SEARCHING FOR HISTORICAL CLUES



Figure 1

What can this image tell us about the subject? What time period might he have lived in? What were his interests? Is there any indication of his social status? What country might he have been from?

ACTIVITY PAGE 2B

PIECING IT TOGETHER—SEARCHING FOR HISTORICAL CLUES



Figure 2

Every man is a valuable member of society who by his observations necessities & experiments procures knowledge for men.

Figure 3

What can these images tell us about the subject? What time period might he have lived in? What were his interests? Is there any indication of his social status? What country might he have been from?

ACTIVITY PAGE 2C

PIECING IT TOGETHER—SEARCHING FOR HISTORICAL CLUES

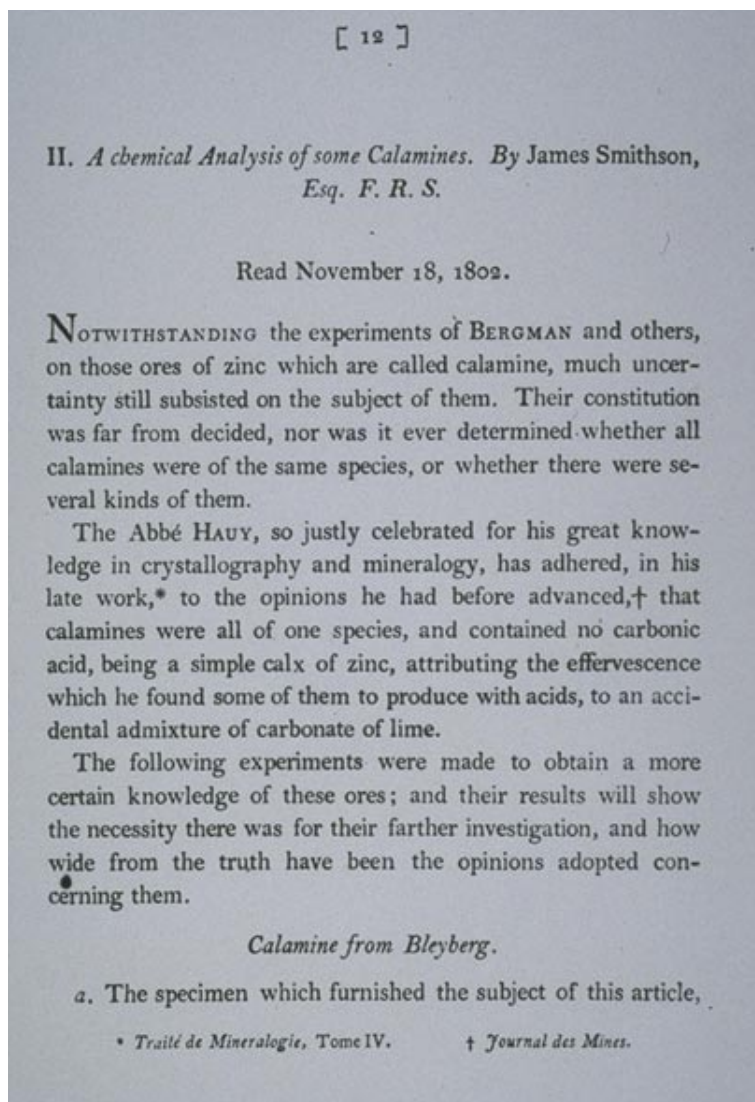
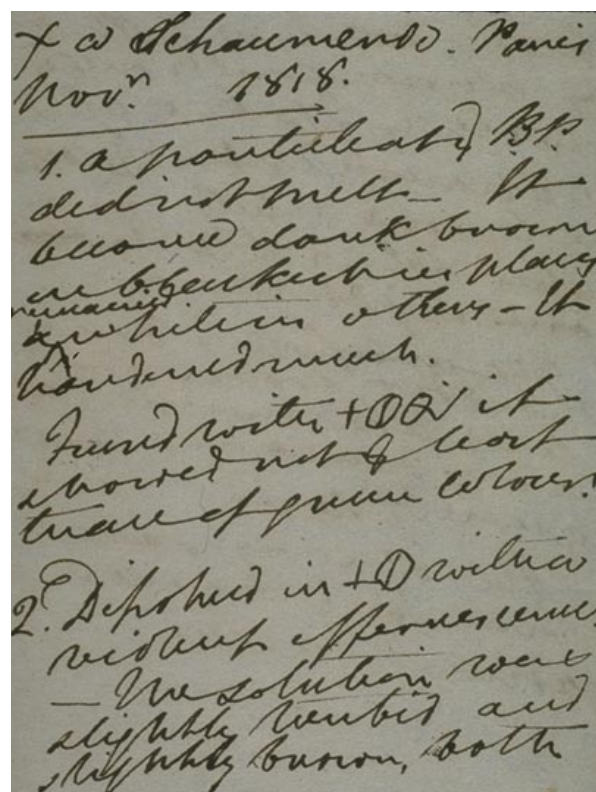


Figure 4

Figure 5



What can these images tell us about the subject? What time period might he have lived in? What were his interests? Is there any indication of his social status? What country might he have been from?

ACTIVITY PAGE 2D

PIECING IT TOGETHER—SEARCHING FOR HISTORICAL CLUES

LIST OF JAMES SMITHSON'S PERSONAL PROPERTY, COMPILED IN 1838.

Large trunk.
Box containing sundry specimens of minerals, marked E.
Brass instrument.
Box of minerals, marked F.
Box of chemical glasses, marked G.
Packet of minerals, marked H.
Glass vinegar cruet.
Stone mortar.
Pair of silver-plated candlesticks and branches.
Pair of silver-plated candlesticks, no branches.
Hone in a mahogany case.
Plated wire flower basket.
Plated coffeepot.
Plated small one.
Pair of wine coolers.
Pair small candlesticks.
Two pairs of saltcellars.
Breadbasket.
Two pair of vegetable dishes and covers.
Large round waiter.
Large oval waiter; two small waiters.
Two plate warmers.
Reading shade.

Sundry articles in packet and in trunk.

- (a) Gun.
- (a) Mahogany cabinet.
- (a) Two portraits, in oval frames.

China tea service.

- (a) Twelve cups and saucers.
- (a) Six coffee cups.
- (a) Teapot.
- (a) Slop basin.
- (a) Sugar basin and lid.
- (a) Two plates.
- (a) Milk jug.
- (a) tea canister.
- (a) Two dishes.
- (a) Landscape in a gilt frame.
- (a) Derby spa vase.
- (a) China tub.
- (a) Piece of fluor.
- (a) Pair of glass candlesticks.
Marble bust.

Books.

Sundry pamphlets on philosophical subjects, in packet marked A.
The like, marked B.
Struggles Through Life.
Bibliotheca Parisiana.
La Platina d'Or Blanc.
Contorides des Indiens.
Sundry pamphlets on philosophical subjects, marked C.
Weld's Travels in North America, 2 volumes.
Bray's Derbyshire.
Twenty-three numbers of *Nicholson's Journal of Natural Philosophy*, in a case (D).
Memoire d'un Voyageur qui le répose.
Hamilton in Antrim.
Londres et de ses Environs.
Stew on Solids.
Essais de Jean Key.
Mon Bonnet de Nuit.
Domestic Cookery.
Catalogue de Fossils des Roches.
The Monthly Review, 78 numbers.
The Monthly Review, 26 volumes.
Philosophical Transactions for the year 1826.
Anthologies et Fragments Philosophiques, 4 volumes.

Two large boxes filled with specimens of minerals and manuscript treatises, apparently in the testator's handwriting, on various philosophical subjects, particularly chemistry and mineralogy. Eight cases and one trunk filled with the like.

Those articles to which this mark (a) is prefixed were not in the trunk No. 13 when it was first opened in the consulate of the United States in our presence.

All the linen in trunk No. 13 was transferred from case 7, and sundry articles of plated ware and philosophical instruments, etc., were transferred from case 12. Sundry books, which were tied together, were also put in this case.

ACTIVITY PAGE 2E

PIECING IT TOGETHER—SEARCHING FOR HISTORICAL CLUES

Directions: *Examine each of the primary source “clues” on Activity Pages 2A–2D. What does each primary source suggest about the “mystery man?” Write your evaluations in the column labeled “Interpretations.” Write your overall conclusions about the mystery man in the area labeled “Conclusions.”*

PRIMARY SOURCES	INTERPRETATIONS
FIGURE 1	
FIGURE 2	
FIGURE 3	
FIGURE 4	
FIGURE 5	
TRANSCRIPTION 1	
CONCLUSIONS	