

Origin of Smithsonian

British scientist James Smithson never visited the United States, but in 1829 his will stated that if his nephew, his sole heir, died childless, his fortune would go to the United States to be used for “an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge.” Smithson’s motive for this bequest is not known. The Congress accepted the legacy, and two years later the gift of 11 boxes of gold coins was shipped from England.

After almost a decade of debate, Congress passed an act on this day (August 10) in 1846 creating the Smithsonian Institution as a trust to manage the bequest. Today, the Smithsonian is the largest museum complex in the world, with collections numbering more than 140 million items. It is also one of the world’s leading research institutions. James Smithson’s dream was realized.

As travelers on a journey through life, we, too, are responsible for leaving a legacy, and a worthy one is “the increase and diffusion of knowledge.” Most often, we can hear that objective repeated in a different way – that a person wishes “to make this world a better place” because of his or her experiences and contributions. Obviously, we all want our children and grandchildren to grow and benefit from our successes and failures. Hopefully, others outside our family circle will gain in some fashion from the lessons that we have learned as we share those insights. In Life Care, Century Park and Life Care at Home, our associates are making those contributions daily, and they are also receiving valuable information in return from our residents.

The responsibility for leaving a legacy applies to the spiritual realm, too. As the Apostle Paul’s ministry drew to an end, he urged Timothy, whom he had mentored, to teach what he had learned to trustworthy people who would then pass it on to others. Paul wanted to make sure that the ministry of the gospel for which he had labored so faithfully would continue after his death.

Some people are careful to manage their finances and arrange their wills so they have something to leave their children. What a shame it would be to focus on an earthly bequest and not leave behind what we learned on our faith journey. The most valuable gift we can present to others is the knowledge of God’s love through Jesus Christ and the riches available to those who believe in Him. There is no greater legacy.

--Beecher Hunter