

The Gift of Knowledge



James Lewis Macie was born in 1765. His father was a British nobleman, Hugh Smithson, the 1st Duke of Northumberland. His mother was Elizabeth Hungerford Keats Macie, a wealthy heiress.

Because his parents were not married, Macie's standing in society was non-existent.

It wasn't until after the duke's death that Macie adopted the surname of his father, Smithson. Because of his illegitimate status, however, Smithson could never inherit any of his father's estate, title or lands. He also could not hold public office or join the church.

As a young man, Smithson enrolled in Pembroke College, Oxford, and graduated in 1786 with a Masters of Arts degree. He embarked upon a career in science, and achieved great fame during his lifetime as a well-respected scientist. He studied subjects ranging from coffee making to the use of calamine in making brass, which eventually would be called smithsonite. He also studied the chemistry of human tears, snake venom, and other natural occurrences, eventually publishing 27 papers.

Smithson never married and had no children. Some speculated that he did not want to pass along the illegitimate status and the legal and social limitations it had placed on his life.

Smithson maintained an inheritance he acquired from his mother and other relatives. In his will, Smithson left his fortune to his nephew, Henry James Hungerford. In the will, he stated that Hungerford or Hungerford's children would receive the inheritance, and if Hungerford did not live, and had no children to receive the fortune, he would donate it to the United States to have an educational institution. Its mission would be to increase knowledge.

It is believed that his love of democracy and the ideals upon which the country was founded were behind this action. Hungerford died in 1835, unmarried and leaving no children behind, and the U.S. was the recipient of the fortune.

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Smithson's gift resulted in a group of museums recognized today as the Smithsonian Institution.

It is fair to say that his gift truly serves the purpose of an establishment for the "increase and diffusion of knowledge among men," as requested by Smithson.

And so, a life that began under difficult and trying circumstances, because of education, determination, hard work and perseverance, made a substantial contribution to the good of mankind.



Each of us, too, has the opportunity to make a positive difference on our life's journey – one person at a time.

– Beecher Hunter