



James Smithson

THE REMOVAL OF THE REMAINS OF
JAMES SMITHSON

By S. P. LANGLEY

The remains of James Smithson, founder of the Smithsonian Institution, who died June 27, 1829, at Genoa, Italy, were deposited in the little cemetery belonging to the English Church, on the Heights of San Benigno, a solitary spot planted with cypress trees, and looking down upon the Gulf of Genoa. In 1891 the Secretary of the Institution visited the grave, and, with the approval of the Regents, deposited with the Secretary of the English Church Fund a small sum to invest in Italian five-percent rentes, for its perpetual care. It was visited on two later occasions by the Secretary, who placed a bronze tablet containing a bas-relief of Smithson, in the English Church, and one also at the tomb, whence it was subsequently stolen.

At this time it was understood that there was a probability that before many years the site of the cemetery might be required by the Italian authorities, and the following communication to this effect was made to the Secretary on the 24th of November, 1900, by the Committee of the British Burial Ground:

7 VIA GARIBALDI, GENOA,

24 November, 1900.

SAMUEL PIERPONT LANGLEY, Esq., LL.D., D.C.L.,
Smithsonian Institution, Washington.

Dear Sir:

The Committee of the British Burial Ground of Genoa (of which you are aware Her Majesty's Consul is Chairman), fully realizing how keenly you are interested in all that concerns the resting place of the respected Founder of your Institution, has deputed me to write to you and lay before you the present position of our Cemetery.

It will lie in your recollection that when I accompanied you some years ago up to the heights of San Benigno, you were struck by the enormous quarry which was slowly but surely eating its way towards us from the sea through the rocky side of the hill on which we stand, and excavation has lately come so close to us that the intervention of the Consul became necessary to arrest further advance on the plea that our property would be endangered if the quarrying were carried on.

Actual blasting has in fact been put an end to for the present, and the Cemetery (although the boundary wall is now on the very edge of the excavation) remains untouched; but the local authorities who are the owners of the quarry have given us to understand that they need more stone for their harbor works, and are therefore anxious to see our graves transferred from the position they now occupy, for which purpose they would give us a suitable piece of ground in another part of the town and would also undertake the due and fitting transport of the remains. Should our answer be in the negative, it is intimated to us that in five years' time, in 1905, the term for applying the Law for Public Utility (twenty years after the date of the last burial) will have been reached, and we shall then have to give up of necessity what we are now asked to yield as a concession.

Under the circumstances, the Committee have decided that it is their best policy, in the interest of all concerned, to begin to negotiate at once for the transfer on a decorous footing of the British Cemetery and all its tombs, and although some considerable time may elapse before this transfer is accomplished, yet it is evident that the time has now come for us to ask you to prepare your decision as to what is to be done with regard to the James Smithson remains. Are they to be laid with all possible care and reverence in new ground here, or are they to be conveyed to the United States?

Awaiting the pleasure of your reply, I beg to remain,

Very faithfully yours,

E. A. LE MESURIER.

This communication was laid before the Regents, who, at their meeting of January 23, 1901, adopted the following resolution:

RESOLVED: In view of the proposed abolition of the English Cemetery at Genoa which contains the remains of James Smithson,

that the Secretary be requested to arrange either with the English Church or with the authorities of the National Burying Ground at Genoa for the re-interment of Smithson's remains, and the transfer of the original monument.

At a meeting of the Regents held on the 22d of January, 1902, the Secretary recalled to the Board the resolution adopted at its previous meeting, and stated that the wishes of the Board with regard to the removal of the remains of Smithson had been communicated to Mr. E. A. Le Mesurier, one of the officers of the English Church at Genoa, who, under date of December 23, 1901, had replied in part as follows:

You are aware that our hope is eventually to obtain for our countrymen a separate burying-place which by an easy, and I may say obvious, arrangement might be made to give shelter not merely to British subjects but to American also. I regret to say, however, that I see no chance for the present of this most desirable consummation, as the authorities (apparently in consequence of the difficulty of finding an alternative site) have withdrawn their offer of providing us with a fresh cemetery if we allowed them to transfer at once all remains from San Benigno, where your Founder rests. The present policy of the authorities is presumably to let things remain as they are until the time comes (three years or so hence) when the Law of Public Utility will strengthen their hands as to taking possession of the San Benigno ground, of course under the obligation of transporting the remains elsewhere, which would in all probability mean a portion of the general Protestant cemetery and not a separate place of interment. When the time for the transfer approaches, it will be obviously expedient to apply to the British Ambassador at Rome (backed up, as we are confident will be the case, by the friendly offices of the Representative of the United States) to put the case before the Italian Government, so that the local authorities may be enjoined to carry out the process with all due reverence, and if possible (as it ought to be possible) to a especially reserved new Cemetery. Our Consul is most fully alive to the importance of diplomatic support and will take the initiative in due course.

Doctor A. Graham Bell, a member of the Board, took occasion to reiterate the strong feeling expressed by him at the preceding meeting of the Regents, that the remains of Smithson should be brought to this country.

At the regular meeting of the Regents held on December 8, 1903, the Secretary read the following letter from the United States Consul at Genoa, and that from the Committee of the British Burial Ground Fund in Genoa:

CONSULAR SERVICE, U. S. A.

GENOA, ITALY, November 24th, 1903.

DR. S. P. LANGLEY,
Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution,
Washington, D. C.

Dear Sir:

Referring to my letter of June 30th last, I now forward enclosed circular letter just received, which shows that the final step in the demolition of the old British Cemetery is about to be taken. If you have any desires to express as to the disposition of the remains of James Smithson, and instructions to give, these should be made known with as little delay as possible.

You will see by my letter above mentioned that there is a tradition here of some opposition to the removal of James Smithson's body to America on the part of relatives in Europe. I was informed at the British Consulate that the source and character of this opposition has been made known at some time to the Smithsonian Institution. I can learn nothing further of it here. You are therefore in possession of such information as can be had for your guidance in adopting a course of action as to the disposition of the remains. You will notice that instructions are requested by the Cemetery Committee before January 1st, 1904.

I am quite at your service in the matter of any assistance that may be needed here.

I am informed by the Agent of the American Express Company here, he would transport the body to Washington for \$203. This would not include taking up the body nor the coffin, the boxing, etc. A Government tax of 360 lire (approximately \$72.00) has also to be paid on every body taken out of the country. The total expense at a rough estimate might come to \$400.00 or to \$500.00 if something unusually handsome in the way of a casket were called for. All due economy would be used.

Believe me

Very truly yours,

WILLIAM HENRY BISHOP,
U. S. Consul.

(*Enclosure*)

GENOA, November 23, 1903.

Sir,

We have the honor to inform you that the old British Cemetery, on the heights of San Benigno in this city, has been expropriated by the Italian authorities, and will shortly be demolished.

The remains of all persons buried there will be removed to the new British Cemetery at public expense, and the tombstones will also be removed, and re-erected over the new graves, by the undersigned Committee, unless otherwise desired by the representatives of the deceased.

It has been impossible to ascertain the addresses of these representatives in every case, and this letter is sent to you with reference to the grave of James Smithson.

Kindly address any communication you may wish to make on this matter to

NOEL LEES Esq.,

Care of H. B. M.'s Consul-General—Genoa

before January 1st, 1904.

And believe us,

Yours faithfully

THE COMMITTEE
BRITISH BURIAL GROUND FUND
Genoa.

Doctor Bell renewed the proposal made by him at the previous meeting of the Regents, that the remains of Smithson be brought to this country at his expense, and after some remarks the following resolutions were adopted:

RESOLVED: That Doctor A. Graham Bell be appointed as a committee to take charge of the matter of the removal of the remains of James Smithson from Genoa to Washington, with the request that the negotiations and removal be conducted quietly and privately.

RESOLVED: That upon the conclusion of this duty, all expenses involved by it be reimbursed to Doctor Bell from the funds of the Institution.

Doctor Bell, accompanied by Mrs. Bell, sailed on the 15th of December for the port of Cherbourg in France, and going thence to Genoa, commenced at once the arrangements for the transfer of the remains, arrangements which would have occupied a quite indefinite time and incurred a corresponding delay, except for the aid given by the United States Consul, Mr. William Henry Bishop, which Doctor Bell gladly acknowledges.

On opening the tomb in the presence of Mr. Bell, the United States Consul, Noel Lees, Esq. (official representative of the British Burial Ground Fund Association), and other witnesses, it was found that the remains of Smithson, represented by the skeleton, were in fair preservation, although the wooden coffin in which they had been enclosed had molded away. The remains were placed in a metal casket and deposited in the mortuary chapel of the cemetery, where they rested until January 2, when the casket was enclosed in a coffin of strong wood and covered with the American flag by Consul Bishop. On this occasion Doctor Bell, Mr. Bishop, and the other witnesses again assembled, and the following remarks were made:

Remarks by William Henry Bishop, Esq., United States Consul.

DOCTOR ALEXANDER GRAHAM BELL: You arrived here, my dear Dr. Graham Bell, charged by the Smithsonian Institution with the

mission of removing to Washington the remains of the Founder of that Institution, James Smithson, who has been buried till now in the cemetery where we stand, since his death, at Genoa, in the year 1829. Having been invited by you and by the Smithsonian Institution to aid you, to what extent I might be able, in this object, it has been a matter of great pride and pleasure to me that I have been allowed to do so.

All the steps necessary to such removal have now been taken. We have received the authorization of the governmental heads of the Province, the City, and the British Burial Ground Fund, in which latter the title to the cemetery and the custody of the grave of James Smithson are vested, and all of these have kindly coöperated with us in the work.

The body of James Smithson has now been reverently raised from the earth; it has been placed in a case securely sealed, and this case stands ready to pass into the charge of the Steamship Company which will convey it to New York.

I assure you that it is with a feeling of real emotion that I have just now cast the American flag over the body of this illustrious man, this noble but as yet little known benefactor, as it is on the verge of beginning its journey to the United States. The flag adopts him already, as it were, in the substance, for our country, to which he has so long belonged in the spirit. He is now about to receive there a portion of the outward veneration and homage he so supremely merits, and which, owing to the modest circumstances of his life, and his interment here in some sense almost forgotten, he has never had.

Shall I admit that on taking possession of my post as Consul at Genoa, I did not even know who James Smithson was? I may say that I was surprised to learn that he was buried at Genoa; more surprised still that he was an Englishman, who had never even set foot in America. He left his great bequest to the United States, then in its infancy, through admiring confidence in our future. It is likely that many, or even most, Americans are in the same condition as was I myself; for occasion has rarely arisen for taking thought as to the personality of the man. Happily this unenlightened condition of mind is about to cease.

Dr. Graham Bell, I wish you a hearty God-speed across the ocean, with your precious freight. The American people will receive it with general gratification, and, through the Smithsonian Institution, will soon delight to pay it great honor.

Response by Doctor Alexander Graham Bell.

MR. CONSUL: It is with feelings of deep emotion that I undertake the transportation of the remains of James Smithson from the cemetery where they have so long reposed, to their last resting place in the United States.

On behalf of the Smithsonian Institution allow me to thank you, Mr. Consul, for the unwearied zeal and care with which you have given me your assistance. Without your active coöperation—and

without your personal sympathy—it would have been difficult indeed for me to have accomplished the object of my mission here.

On behalf of the Smithsonian Institution, I beg to thank you too—Mr. Noel Lees—for your courtesy and attention; and trust that you will convey to His British Majesty's Consul General, and to the Committee of the British Church Burial Ground Fund, my thanks, and the thanks of the Institution I represent, for their ready assistance in furthering my mission.

The United States of America will provide in Washington, D. C., a suitable and permanent resting place for the remains of her great benefactor, James Smithson, through the instrumentality of the Smithsonian Institution—the Establishment created by the Government to perpetuate his name.

Remarks by Noel Lees, Esq.

DOCTOR GRAHAM BELL: I beg to thank you heartily for the words you have said with regard to the aid you have received from the Burial Board and myself. Although we regret to lose the remains of James Smithson, we at the same time feel that in the country to which he left his money, with such charitable intent, his remains will receive the honor and glory which have so long been due to them, and we must understand that our loss is America's gain. To us it will always remain a pleasant memory that, from the date of his burial to the present day, we have had in our custody in this picturesque little church-yard, the remains of a man whose foresight and kindness have enabled so many in the New World to benefit.

On the conclusion of these remarks the remains were placed on board the steamer *Princess Irene* of the North German Lloyd line, which brought them to New York, where they arrived on the night of January 19, in the continued charge of Doctor Bell, the vessel reaching her dock at Hoboken early on the morning of the 20th. By direction of the President of the United States, the U. S. steamer *Dolphin* had been detached to meet the *Princess Irene* in the lower bay and to accompany her up the harbor, while a tug belonging to the Navy Yard attended at the dock to receive the remains and transport them to the *Dolphin*. They were received by Mr. Bell and the Secretary of the Institution, Mr. Bell accompanying the remains to the *Dolphin* and taking passage on her himself for Washington, where she arrived at the Navy Yard on Saturday the 23d.

On Monday the 25th the remains were transported by the Naval authorities, with suitable ceremonies, to the Navy Yard gate, where they were taken in charge by a cavalry escort furnished by the War Department, and, accompanied by Assistant Secretary of State Loomis, representing the President, by the British Ambassador, the Regents and the Secretary of the Institution, and the

President of the Board of Commissioners of the District of Columbia, they were conveyed to the Smithsonian Institution, where the coffin, draped in the American and British flags, was deposited in the center of the Main Hall of the building.

Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, addressing Senator Frye in behalf of the Regents, said:

MR. SENATOR: I have the honor to hand over to the Smithsonian Institution the mortal remains of its founder, James Smithson, a Fellow of the Royal Society of London, England, who died in Genoa, Italy, on the 27th of June, 1829.

For nearly seventy-five years the body of Smithson has reposed in an almost forgotten grave in the picturesque little British cemetery on the heights of San Beningo in Genoa. City improvements have led to the expropriation of this cemetery and the removal of the remains, and at the last meeting of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution I was appointed a committee to arrange for the transfer of the remains of Smithson to this country. On my arrival in Genoa, every facility was afforded me for the accomplishment of my mission by the provincial and municipal authorities, by His British Majesty's Consul-General, Mr. Keene; by the Committee of the British Burial Fund Association, in which is vested the ownership of the cemetery, as well as by our own Consul, Mr. William Henry Bishop, to whom I am much indebted for his valued services.

On the 31st of December, 1903, the tomb of Smithson was opened in my presence, as the representative of the Smithsonian Institution, and in the presence of the American Consul and six other witnesses. The remains of Smithson were reverently raised from the grave and placed in a metallic casket, over which the Consul of the United States cast the American flag while the witnesses stood around with uncovered heads. The casket was then left in the mortuary chapel of the cemetery, securely sealed and under guard, until the 2d of January, when it was placed in a coffin of strong wood, as demanded by Italian law, and was then transported to the North German Lloyd steamship *Princess Irene*, accompanied by the American Consul and myself.

The steamer sailed from Genoa on the 7th of January, and upon arrival in the United States, the remains of Smithson were received with national honors by direction of the President, and of the Secretary of the Navy and the Secretary of War.

The remains were brought to Washington on board the United States dispatch boat *Dolphin*, and have been escorted to the Smithsonian Institution by United States cavalry.

And now, Mr. Senator, my mission is ended, and I deliver into your hands, as the representative of the Board of Regents of the Smithsonian Institution, the remains of this great benefactor of the United States.

Senator Frye replied :

SIR, the Smithsonian Institution receives with profound gratitude the remains of its distinguished founder. Providence, every now and then, seems to place in the world a man and inspires him with a purpose to elevate his fellow men. Such a man was Mr. Smithson, the founder of this Institution. The spirit, Sir, which prompted you to such earnest endeavor, resulting as it did in taking these remains from their resting place in a country foreign to him and foreign to us, and bringing them here where for so many years we have enjoyed the rich fruits of his splendid benefaction, your countrymen will appreciate. His grave here will be an incentive to earnest, faithful, wise, and discreet endeavor to carry out his lofty purposes, and, Sir, it will be to our people a sacred spot while the Republic endures.

The brief but impressive ceremonies of the occasion concluded with the following prayer, offered by the Reverend Doctor Randolph H. McKim :

Almighty God, eternal source of light and truth, by whose wise providence all things in heaven and earth are governed, we give Thee thanks that Thou didst put into the heart of Thy servant whose dust we receive with reverence here to-day, to lay the foundation of this school of science, and we pray Thee that it may more and more be instrumental in the true interpretation of the laws of nature, and in unveiling to the mind of man the glory of God in the work of His hands, to the end that for all the generations to come, this Institution may be a beacon light of truth and of progress, to the glory of God and to the good of mankind. All this we beg through Him by whom all things were made, Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

The remains rest temporarily in a room which contains the few personal relics of Smithson, until their final disposal by the Regents.