Joseph R. Henry. *Courtesy of the Smithsonian Institution*
CONTRIBUTORS TO THIS ISSUE

James L. Huston is professor of history at the Oklahoma State University.

Michael F. Conlin is assistant professor of history at Eastern Washington University. He is the author of several articles on the history of science and political history in the United States, which have appeared in Ambix, Isis, and Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography.

Edward Steers Jr. is an acknowledged expert on Lincoln’s assassination. His most recent work is His Name Is Still Mudd (1997).

J. Mills Thornton III is professor of history at the University of Michigan and a former student of C. Vann Woodward.

Nancy Birk is University Archivist and Curator of Special Collections and Archives at Kent State University.
THE SMITHSONIAN ABOLITION LECTURE CONTROVERSY: THE CLASH OF ANTISLAVERY POLITICS WITH AMERICAN SCIENCE IN WARTIME WASHINGTON

Michael F. Conlin

The abolition lectures given at the Smithsonian Institution by the Washington Lecture Association (WLA) from December 1861 to April 1862 offer a case study of radical antislavery Christian political activity in wartime Washington and its clash with American science. Abolitionists appropriated the annual lecture course of the Smithsonian Institution, the leading lectern in the city of Washington, to push the president to issue the Emancipation Proclamation and to conduct a vigorous war against the Southern people. The spectacle of Horace Greeley, Wendell Phillips, George B. Cheever, and other abolitionists delivering antislavery lectures critical of the Lincoln administration's prosecution of the war sparked controversy in Washington and across the Union. The lectures aroused fears of mob violence and distracted the Institution from its scientific mission by roiling it in political disputes. At the same time, the WLA shaped popular opinion and mustered political votes, helping to pave the way for the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia. No less important than the radical antislavery Christians' political activities were the reactions they provoked from District conservatives. The most important opponent of the WLA was Joseph Henry, secretary of the Smithsonian Institution, who closed the course by asserting the existing Smithsonian policy that forbade lectures on partisan topics. Henry believed that this controversy distracted the Institution, the leading patron of American science, from its mission of research and publication.¹

I would like to thank Bryon Andreasen, James Cornelius, John Hoffmann, Robert Johannsen, Colin McCoy, Dan Monroe, Matt Norman, David Raney, and the editor and referees of Civil War History for their comments and suggestions.


Civil War History, Vol. XLVI No. 4 © 2000 by The Kent State University Press
Although several historians have identified the importance of the WLA in shaping popular opinion and prompting political action, no sustained account of its activities exists. In his classic study of abolitionists during the Civil War, James McPherson ranks the WLA as "one of the most effective emancipation organizations." In a recent work on the Radical Republicans, Victor Howard agrees, asserting that the WLA "influenced the civil government considerably." But both McPherson and Howard devote less than five pages to the WLA. The only other scholarly treatment of the WLA is an anecdote in Robert Bruce's sweeping survey of American science in the Civil War era. All three of these scholars neglect important sources and, consequently, give incomplete accounts or make errors—the most egregious being Bruce's charge that Henry ended the WLA's course because of his "racism." A detailed examination of the Smithsonian abolition lecture controversy would remedy these deficiencies and would contribute to Stanley Harrold's assessment of abolitionists' "interaction with proslavery forces on slavery's home ground."2

To determine the full extent of the WLA's lecture course and its resultant controversy first requires a consideration of the Smithsonian's history, the Institution's lecture policy, and Henry's political beliefs. Although the abolition lecture controversy was the most serious dispute that faced the Smithsonian, the Institution had been embroiled in political battles ever since James Smithson, an eccentric English chemist, had bequeathed a handsome fortune to the United States to establish an institution in Washington for the "increase & diffusion of knowledge among men."3 In 1846, Joseph Henry, the leading American physicist of his generation, was selected to lead the Smithsonian Institution. While Henry and many other American scientists viewed Smithson's legacy as a unique opportunity to support scientific research in the United States, others advocated founding a library or a national museum. Instead of resolving the dispute in the bill that established the Smithsonian, Congress had offered a compromise, providing for a library, a museum, and a research center. Henry moved to upset the congressional compromise in favor of a research program of investigation and publication, but factions on the board of regents, which was charged by Congress to administer the Smithsonian, resisted his efforts. The board, which consisted of the vice president, the chief justice of the Supreme Court, the mayor of Washington, three representatives, three senators, and six private citizens (the last twelve regents to be chosen by Congress), approved expenditures and prepared an annual report to Congress. With so many politicians on the board and so strong a role of Congress in the establishment of the Institution, Henry's

---


efforts to transform the Smithsonian into a center for scientific research became immersed in politics. After a series of public disputes in the 1850s, Henry defeated the library faction on the board by making an alliance with the regents who supported a museum. As a result of this arrangement, Henry fired the Smithsonian librarian and welcomed the collections of the National Museum into the Institution. Without the distraction of the library, the Smithsonian concentrated on the support and publication of scientific research.4

As a part of his research program, Henry had adopted an annual course of lectures under Institution auspices, but he did so as much for its public relations value as for the diffusion of knowledge. Henry regarded the Smithsonian lectures as "the least important feature" of the Institution's research program because they only diffused existing knowledge (rather than increasing new knowledge) and did so only to a local audience (rather than to the international readership of the Smithsonian journals), but he knew that they were the most visible and, thus, the most significant aspect of the Institution to most Washingtonians. Perhaps Henry's reservations about public lectures were mitigated by the fact that such lectures were considered by nineteenth-century Americans to be original and unique syntheses of already established material. Moreover, he was comforted by newspaper coverage of the lectures, which gave them a wider audience than the auditors in the Smithsonian lecture hall. Washingtonians embraced the lyceum movement, as the system of public lectures came to be known, and joined hundreds of thousands of their fellow Americans in attending lectures in the 1840s and the 1850s. From their beginning in 1849, the Smithsonian lectures attracted "large and apparently interested crowds," convincing Henry that "much good may be affected in Washington by this means of communicating knowledge."5

The Smithsonian course quickly became the leading lecture series in Washington and an important social event, attended by ranking members of the Federal government and the local literati as well as by Washingtonians from many walks of life. With the prestige of a national organization, free admission, and some of the leading lecturers of the day on its podium, the Smithsonian lectures were the best attended course in the national metropolis. The lectures were so


popular that would-be auditors regularly could not find an empty seat. In response to complaints that the Smithsonian lecture room’s capacity of five hundred was too small, the board of regents expanded it several times between 1849 and 1854. Ultimately, the board moved the lecture hall to the second story of the Smithsonian castle, where it accommodated two thousand persons and provided every “facility for hearing and seeing.”

Perhaps to temper the initial popular success of the Smithsonian lectures, Henry cautioned that the Institution would not seek “mere popular lecturers” but leading authorities in literature and science, “who are entitled, from their standing and acquirements to speak with authority on the subjects of their discourse.” He insisted that the Institution “maintain a dignified character” to be respected and “seek rather to direct public opinion than to obtain popularity by an opposite course.” Henry determined that extended lecture courses on particular scientific subjects, interspersed occasionally with single lectures on literary or historical subjects, most effectively served the Smithsonian Institution’s purposes. Repetition and illustration, he believed, were the best means of impressing a “general truth upon the mind.” Henry observed that the lecturer who appeared but once “too often attempts to interest his audience by the enunciation of vague generalizations by mere rhetorical display.”

Henry scheduled the Smithsonian lectures to coincide with the beginning of the winter session of Congress to ensure that Washington’s political elite personally could enjoy the Institution’s offerings. While the annual course of lectures created publicity for the Smithsonian, they also opened the Institution to criticism. In the 1850s, Henry was admonished for hosting lectures that were too religious, too dull, or too partisan; however, the most common complaint was that they were too technical or too abstract for many Washingtonians. He ignored most criticisms, but in an anonymous editorial in the National Intelligencer he explained that the Smithsonian lectures were “intended to throw open to the public a source of real, substantial, valuable acquisitions in knowledge; knowledge in all of its dignity, and . . . in all its inherent difficulty too. Science is not to be reduced and diluted . . . till the sublimest and most intricate truths are levelled to the comprehension of the humblest capacity.”

To avoid disputes arising from the sectional conflict that increasingly divided Washington and the nation, Henry excluded from the Smithsonian lecture hall “any subject connected with sectarianism, discussions in Congress and the po-

---

7 Board of Regents, 471: Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1855, 33–35; National Intelligencer, Jan. 21, 1852.
8 Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1850, 21, 26–27; National Intelligencer, Jan. 26, 1850.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner. Further reproduction prohibited without permission.
litical questions of the day." He claimed that this rule had been "strictly ob-
served," but he did not always follow his own policy. To be sure, it was no easy
task to avoid politics in the 1850s, as political issues were ubiquitous, passions
violent, and stakes great. Henry's political beliefs were difficult to pin down
because he maintained a scholarly air of being above politics, but his actions
identified him as a conservative with Southern sympathies who advocated main-
tenance of the Union above all else. Although Henry—born in Albany, New
York—was a Northerner who had been a professor at Princeton College, once
in Washington he developed Southern interests and befriended several promi-
nent Southern politicians, including Jefferson Davis. At the same time, he pro-
vided forums for groups attempting to enlist support for symbols of national
unity, such as the home of George Washington and the celebration of Henry Clay's
birthday. On March 14, 1858, the Smithsonian lecture hall hosted Edward
Everett's lecture on "The Character of Washington" for the benefit of the Mount
Vernon Ladies Association. On April 12, 1860, patriots honored the eighty-fifth
anniversary of the Great Compromiser's birthday at the Smithsonian lecture hall.9

On occasion, Henry sanctioned lectures on controversial political issues as
long as they conformed to his views. In a course of lectures on the "Social
Destiny of Man" delivered in February 1860, Albert T. Bledsoe, professor of
mathematics at the University of Virginia and a published proslavery ideologue,
criticized the excessive individualism of abolitionists as a threat to the Union
and reasoned that secession was the logical end of their efforts. Like many in
conservative Virginia, Henry shared Bledsoe's disdain for abolitionists, but he
rejected secession. A month later, William Gilpin, a Republican lawyer from St.
Louis, advocated the Pacific Railroad in a lecture on the physical geography of
the Mississippi River Valley. As the Pacific Railroad became linked to the ex-
tension of slavery into the territories, Congress declined to take up the matter,
but by hosting Gilpin's lecture the Institution effectively supported the Pacific
Railroad.10

Because the Smithsonian lecture hall was the largest room in the District for
public meetings, Henry received an "almost constant" stream of applications
for its use. These requests annoyed the Smithsonian secretary, who saw them at
best as charitable distractions and at worst as needless opportunities to make
enemies. Henry felt no obligation to open the lecture hall to every lecturer who
came to Washington. The Institution was a private organization and lecturers
were accepted by invitation only. Four months after Gilpin's lecture, Henry
rejected the application of the Reverend Daniel W. Cahill, editor of the Dublin
Telegraph and advocate of Irish independence, to lecture at the Smithsonian

9 Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1857, 36; Bruce, Launching of American Science,
272–76; National Intelligencer, Mar. 15, 1858, Mar. 22, Apr. 14, 18, 24, 1860.
10 National Intelligencer, Feb. 15, 20, 29, Mar. 19, 1860. For more on Bledsoe, see his A Theodicy;
Or, Vindication of the Divine Glory as Manifested in the Constitution and Government of the Moral
because of the polemical nature of the program. Cahill spoke at a smaller lecture hall in Washington instead. Cahill did not protest the rebuff by the Institution, but several Catholic newspapers fulminated against Henry’s apparent religious bias. In private, Henry noted that the charges were unfounded—one third of the lectures from the previous season had been delivered by Catholics. In public, he maintained a dignified silence.\textsuperscript{11}

Although Henry initially limited use of the Smithsonian lecture hall to the Institution’s annual course, he eventually allowed Columbia College, the Metropolitan Mechanics’ Institute, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, the United States Agricultural Society, the American Association for the Advancement of Education, the National Medical Association, the Washington Art Association, and the American Colonization Society to hold meetings in the lecture room because their educational purposes were “consistent with the character of the Institution.” However, he insisted that these organizations pay the expense of lighting and heating the lecture hall to prevent Smithsonian income from being dissipated on extraneous projects.\textsuperscript{12}

As the Civil War neared, Henry regarded secession with fear, but not surprise. Convinced of the corruption of politicians and the excesses of popular democracy, he believed that the failure of the American experiment in republicanism was as inevitable as it was regrettable. He blamed both fire-eaters and abolitionists for the secession crisis. Although Henry opposed coercive reunion as futile, he conducted scientific research on behalf of the Union war effort once hostilities began. Like most American scientists, including his assistant secretary, Spencer F. Baird, Henry was more interested in science than in politics. He viewed the Civil War as yet another obstacle to his mission to support American scientific research. The Civil War created additional difficulties for Henry by exposing him to new political attacks, by diverting resources away from basic research and toward applied science, and by disrupting the conditions necessary for science: the free flow of ideas, people, and money.\textsuperscript{13}

Trying to remain above politics in a partisan time, Henry did not openly endorse a party or advocate principles. Maintaining good relations with Whigs and Democrats, Henry had placed the Smithsonian Institution on the neutral ground of science in the 1850s. Henry viewed the rise of the Republican party with trepidation as it upset the sectional balance in Congress and strained his

\textsuperscript{11} National Intelligencer, May 28, June 1, 1860; Henry to Hall, June 6, 1860, State Geologists’ and Paleontologists’ Correspondence File, New York State Archives; Richmond Enquirer reprinted in Boston Pilot, June 2, 16, 1860; Dublin Telegraph reprinted in Boston Pilot, June 23, 1860.

\textsuperscript{12} Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1851, 26–27; Hafertepe, America’s Castle, 116–17; Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1854, 77–82; Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1857, 36; Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1858, 16, 42.

alliances on the board of regents. Staying as Henry's guest during Abraham Lincoln's inauguration, John Torrey, a New York botanist, found Henry "bitterly opposed" to the new president because of the Smithsonian secretary's "strong attachment" to the Constitutional Union party. Despite their political differences, however, Henry and Lincoln developed a mutual respect after several meetings. Although never adopting Republican principles, Henry was pleased that Lincoln supported the Smithsonian and would leave its administration to him. Lincoln was impressed by Henry's knowledge and regarded him as a valuable technical resource for the federal government.14

Henry's enthusiasm for the war was as tepid as his endorsement of the president. In private, he wondered whether there were "any proper grounds for a civil war?" Believing that black people could live with white people only in a state of servitude, he predicted that civil war and the abolition of slavery would lead to further discord. Fearing the exigencies of war, he worried that the Smithsonian Institution would not be able to "conduct its affairs with the same persistence and success" as it had before the bombardment of Fort Sumter. As Washingtonians braced for the expected Confederate invasion in the first few days of the war, Secretary of War Simon Cameron issued muskets and ammunition to the Institution for defense, and Henry planned diplomacy in the event of a Confederate occupation of Washington. Seeking to wrap the Smithsonian in the cloak of scientific neutrality, he determined that the Institution would not fly the American flag and would rely on the "sense of propriety of the besiegers" to respect the sanctity of Smithson's bequest. The threat passed without incident, but Henry continued this unpopular policy for the duration of the war.15

Although Henry quickly began scientific work on behalf of the Federal government, his refusal to fly the American flag, his friendship with Jefferson Davis, and his reluctance to quarter Federal troops in the Smithsonian led to rumors of his disloyalty. Rather than express shock that Davis had accepted the presidency of the Confederate States of America, Henry thought that his friend's "talents and integrity" would acquit the office well. As tens of thousands of militiamen poured into Washington during the spring and summer of 1861, the secretary of war housed them in the Capitol, the Patent Office, the Navy Yard, and the Interior Department. When government facilities were full, Cameron pressed Georgetown College, Trinity Church, the American Colonization Society, and other private organizations to accommodate troops. Henry agreed to

---


15 Bruce, Launching of American Science, 275–76, 290–300; Jahns, Maury & Henry, 4–5, 255; Henry to Alexander, Apr. 26, 1861, Joseph Henry Collection, RU 7001, Smithsonian Institution Archives (hereafter cited as JHC); Rivinus and Yousef, Spencer Baird of the Smithsonian, 65; Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1861, 13.
accept soldiers, but observed that use of the building as an infirmary would be "more in accordance with the spirit of the Institution." Sensing Henry's hesitance, Cameron made other arrangements for the soldiers. In May 1861, a correspondent of the National Republican charged that "several secessionists are in office at the Smithsonian Institution." The Lazzaroni, an influential clique of scientists who wanted to improve American science, feared for Henry's reputation. Wolcott Gibbs, professor at the Free Academy of New York, reported the "extraordinary stories in circulation" about Henry's disloyalty to Alexander Dallas Bache, superintendent of the United States Coast Survey and leader of the Lazzaroni. Gibbs knew the charges were groundless, but concluded that they were the result of Henry's "timidity and want of tact." These rumors dogged Henry throughout the war.16

As questions about Henry's loyalty circulated, abolitionists dragged the Smithsonian Institution into their campaign for the emancipation of slaves and a vigorous prosecution of the war against the Southern people. Impatient with the disappointing defeats of the Union army, the apparent lethargy of the Lincoln administration, and the manifest failure of the Union to adopt a progressive policy regarding slaves employed by Confederates, some Republicans in the 37th Congress pressed Lincoln to adopt an aggressive stance. Lincoln shied away from pursuing these policies for fear of pushing any waverers among Unionists into the Confederacy. Due to the "distraction of the public mind in regard to the war," Henry had decided to cancel the Smithsonian lectures given for the 1861-62 course, but in the summer of 1861, several abolitionists offered to sponsor a series of lectures. Repelled by the "peculiar doctrines" of "an avalanche of strong minded women and weak minded men . . . from the north," Henry declined their offer. Styling themselves the Washington Lecture Association, the abolitionists renewed their application in December 1861. They wanted to secure the Smithsonian lecture hall to force Henry to support their principles and to command a national forum.17

Realizing that Washington was essentially a Southern city that would not warmly receive a course of abolition lectures, the leaders of the WLA promised to invite lecturers who would place the national metropolis on a "higher plane in regard to Literature, Loyalty, and Liberty." Although the WLA did not mention abolition in its advertisements, Henry was suspicious. Worrying that the WLA planned an abolition course, Henry rejected its application on the ground that the lectures would address political subjects. The WLA enlisted Republi-
cans in Congress and in the Executive to intervene on its behalf. William A. Crofut, secretary of the WLA, informed Rep. Owen Lovejoy, Republican from Illinois, of Henry’s objections. Lovejoy exclaimed that Henry was “an old traitor” and promised to “bring him to terms.” Lovejoy and two Smithsonian regents—Rep. Schuyler Colfax and Vice President Hannibal Hamlin—pressed Henry to open the Institution to the WLA.  

Henry was vulnerable to such pressure because of the absence of many of his allies on the board from retirements and from the ascendency of the Republican party. With the deaths of Senators Stephen A. Douglas and James A. Pearce, as well as the removal of Washington mayor James Berret for refusing to take the Federal loyalty oath, Henry lost three allies on the board. Exacerbating these difficulties, Congress loaded the board with Republicans, including Senators William Fessenden and Lyman Trumbull, Hamlin, and Colfax, many of whom doubted Henry’s loyalty. In response to earlier Republican pressure on behalf of the abolitionists’ initial application to use the Smithsonian lecture room, Henry had complained to a friend that the Republican party threatened to compromise “the manly independence and that love of truth” necessary for the practice of science. Henry still counted Bache and Chief Justice Roger B. Taney as supporters, but he felt the strain. For two weeks, the WLA and its political allies conducted a “siege of the Smithsonian” until Henry relented. Henry reported to the board of regents that he accepted an application to use the lecture room from “an association consisting principally of persons connected with the several departments of [the] government to give a course of lectures in aid of a benevolent object.”

From the beginning, Henry suspected the WLA’s course would be controversial and consequently took measures to insulate the Smithsonian from damage caused by the lectures. Not convinced by the WLA’s pledge to invite only orators “who have earned a reputation for the highest culture and the most earnest patriotism,” he demanded that the Institution be absolved of any connection with these lectures. Henry had good reason to be wary. Despite its innocuous name, the WLA was indeed an abolitionist group. As Crofut, a clerk in the Treasury Department, explained to a lecturer he was recruiting for the course, “the Radicals among the new-made clerks have formed a Lecture Association, and propose to poke up the sluggards of this slaveholding city by a course of the first men of the Day.” As president, the WLA selected John Pierpont, a Unitarian clergyman, Liberty party activist, and abolition poet. Pierpont practiced what he called “Antislavery reform through political action,” which had cost him several pulpits. After his most recent ouster in the summer of 1861, the

sixty-seven-year-old reformer solicited Sen. Charles Sumner and Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase for an office as reward for his service to the antislavery cause; Pierpont received a clerkship in the Treasury Department.20

Pierpont had eased Henry’s concerns that the WLA might try to foist a series of abolition lectures on the Smithsonian by limiting the course to twelve lectures and by inviting scholars such as Edward Everett, a former Whig politician and ex-president of Harvard College; Orestes A. Brownson, editor of *Brownson’s Quarterly Review*; Oliver Wendell Holmes, a poet and professor at Harvard College; James Russell Lowell, professor of modern literature at Harvard College; Ralph Waldo Emerson, a transcendentalist essayist; and Cornelius C. Felton, president of Harvard College, to counterbalance abolitionists such as Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune*; Henry Ward Beecher, minister at Plymouth Church in Brooklyn, New York; Galusha Anderson, pastor at the Second Baptist Church of St. Louis; Wendell Phillips, an immediate abolitionist from Boston; and George B. Cheever, a Congregational minister from New York City. The WLA, however, could not secure many of the lecturers Pierpont had promised Henry and it invited Radical replacements for them. Moreover, the WLA doubled the course from twelve to twenty-four lectures to accommodate the great interest in abolition circles to speak in Washington. Of those with a literary reputation, only Brownson and Emerson accepted Pierpont’s invitation. They were instructed to lecture on politics rather than literature. The WLA had hoped to have Everett, the leading American orator, open the course, but he was unavailable. Everett’s absence was particularly disappointing not only to the WLA, but also, no doubt, to Henry, who had opened the Smithsonian lecture hall to him three years earlier.21

Twenty of the twenty-two orators who spoke in the WLA course were abolitionists who supported emancipation and vigorous prosecution of the war—political subjects that aroused violent opinions in the national metropolis and across the Union. The WLA’s course was part of the Republican campaign to pressure Lincoln into conducting the Civil War on abolitionist principles. Lectures were a prominent feature of this campaign. In almost every Northern city—Boston, Albany, New York, Philadelphia, and Chicago—abolitionists took to the lectern to demand total war against the Confederacy, prompting the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* to observe that “we have fairly got to the millennium of lectures.” As the seat of the Federal government, the center of the eastern theater of the war, and the leading slave city remaining in the Union, Washing-


21 *Evening Star*, Jan. 9, 1861; *National Intelligencer*, Jan. 16, 1861; Bruce, *Launching of Modern American Science*, 275; Jahns, Maury and Henry, 174–75; *Board of Regents*, 172–73; *National Republican*, Dec. 9, 17, 1861; Crofut to Brownson, Nov. 30, 1861, Orestes A. Brownson Papers, The Archives of the University of Notre Dame (hereafter cited as OABP); *Smithsonian Annual Report for 1861*, 47.
ton was a natural target for the Republicans. Prominent Republicans, including Vice President Hamlin and Senators Trumbull, Sumner, Preston King, Henry Wilson, Samuel Pomeroy, and James Lane, Speaker of the House Galusha Grow, and Representatives Colfax, Lovejoy, John Hutchins, Thaddeus Stevens, and Thomas Edwards, made a point of attending lectures. More than thirty Republican congressmen encouraged leading abolitionists Cheever and Phillips to participate in the WLA course by promising to treat them with “all possible welcome” in the Capitol. Phillips was feted on the floor of the Senate chamber and Cheever gave several sermons to the House. The Liberator noted with satisfaction that battles in the Senate chamber, the concert hall, the streets, the army camps, and the Smithsonian lecture hall were part of a war waged between freedom and slavery in the national metropolis. At the same time that the WLA lecturers supported the suspension of the privilege of the writ of habeas corpus in Maryland, advocated the confiscation of Southern slaves by generals on the battlefield, and chastised the incompetence of Democratic generals, the Republican Congress passed a Confiscation Act, which forfeited the claim of ownership to all slaves employed in a manner hostile to the United States, tried to repeal the Fugitive Slave Act, attempted to abolish slavery in the District of Columbia, and established the Joint Committee for the Conduct of the War to demonstrate the damage done to the Union army by limited war aims.22

The WLA’s first lecture set the tone. On December 13, 1861, Pierpont introduced Orestes A. Brownson to inaugurate the WLA course at the Smithsonian lecture hall. Pierpont turned Henry’s stipulation that the Institution be cleared of any connection with the WLA into a joke at the Smithsonian secretary’s expense at the beginning of this and every subsequent lecture. “Ladies and Gentlemen,” Pierpont exclaimed, “I am requested by Professor Henry to announce that the Smithsonian Institution is not in any way responsible for this course of lectures. I do so with pleasure and desire to add that the Washington Lecture Association is in no way responsible for the Smithsonian Institution.”23

Brownson, a leading New York Catholic writer, was delighted to open the WLA course with his lecture on “The National Crisis.” In private, Brownson had assured Sumner, one of the leaders of the WLA, that slavery was the “Main-spring of the Rebellion” and that Congress must be pressed to target the South’s peculiar institution to end the war. In a show of support, Sumner sat on the platform next to Brownson. Although claiming not to be an abolitionist,


Brownson blamed slavery for the rebellion and rejected a war prosecuted on compromise principles. He attacked states rights theorists in the South and the Young America literary movement in the North for starting the war. Although Brownson regarded war as a misfortune, he noted that war was better than the last few years when the “slave interest” and its “combinations . . . ruled the nation.” After applauding Brownson, the audience called for remarks by Sumner, a celebrity in antislavery circles after he was assaulted five years earlier in the Senate chamber by a Southern congressman who took exception to his vocal opposition to slavery. Apparently not wanting to steal Brownson’s limelight, Sumner declined.24

Demonstrating significant local support for abolition lectures in the District, more than a thousand Washingtonians crowded the Smithsonian lecture hall for almost every lecture. To keep out troublemakers, the WLA set high ticket prices and required that tickets be purchased several hours in advance of the lecture. A ticket for the entire course of lectures cost three dollars for a lady and a gentleman, two dollars for a gentleman, and a dollar and a half for a lady. A ticket for a single lecture cost twenty-five cents. The brightest of the luminaries assembled by the WLA were Horace Greeley, Cheever, Ralph Waldo Emerson, and Phillips. On January 3, 1862, Greeley—the editor of the most widely circulated American newspaper—delivered a lecture, “The Nation,” before a full house. In a dramatic prelude to his “Prayer of Twenty Millions” editorial in which he urged the president to issue the Emancipation Proclamation in August 1862, Greeley lectured to the president, who had been invited by Croffut. Before introducing Greeley, Pierpont absolved the Smithsonian of any connection to the lecture, provoking raucous laughter. Accustomed to the joke after several lectures, the course subscribers laughed heartily in anticipation of the punch line. So great was their merriment that Lincoln had to have it repeated.25

With the president, Secretary of the Treasury Chase, and ten Republican congressmen flanking him on the platform, Greeley denounced concession and compromise with the secessionists, advocating aggressive prosecution of the war. Endorsing Maj. Gen. John C. Frémont’s plan to grant freedom to all slaves belonging to rebels who lived in Missouri, Greeley wondered why the president had overruled the policy and removed Frémont from command. Although sympathizing with Frémont’s goals, Lincoln had feared that the general’s rash actions would drive Missouri into the Confederacy. Frémont partisans hectored Lincoln every time Greeley alluded to “the Pathfinder.” Turning to face Lincoln, Greeley concluded that the destruction of slavery must be the “sole purpose of the war.” As applause erupted from the hall, Lincoln sat on his hands. Greeley’s lecture was the most widely reported installment of the WLA course. Almost every Northern newspaper had at least a summary of Greeley’s lecture

24 Brownson to Sumner, Dec. 2, 1861, CSP; Croffut to Brownson, Dec. 9, 1861, OABP; Evening Star, Dec. 14, 1861; National Republican, Dec. 16, 1861.
and noted that Lincoln and Chase appeared on the platform with him. Smar
ting from the treatment he received at Greeley’s lecture, Lincoln did not attend
the remainder of the WLA’s course, preferring instead to meet the speakers in
private.
On January 10, 1862, Cheever spoke on the “Justice and Necessity of Im
mediate Military Emancipation.” Complaining that the “crushing of the rebel
lion has been promised, but is not yet seriously undertaken,” he asserted, “It
will never be accomplished till we strike Slavery to the heart.” As the act of
secession had annulled slavery and the rebellion relied on the coerced sup
port of slaves, he demanded immediate emancipation of all slaves and their
enrollment in the army. Dismissing objections that emancipation and arming of
slaves might alienate the border states, Cheever held that the loyal slave states
hurt the Union cause more by their lukewarm friendship than by open rebellion.
Two days later, he delivered a sermon to the House of Representatives comparing
Lincoln’s reluctance to emancipate the slaves to the Pharaoh’s obstinacy to
release the Hebrews from bondage despite God’s wrath. On February 14, 1862,
Cheever lectured again at the Smithsonian; this time his title was “The Battle
for Freedom.” He admonished the Republican Congress for passing legislation
on muddy roads when it should have been repealing the Fugitive Slave Act,
denouncing the Dred Scott decision, and abolishing slavery in the District of
Columbia.

On January 31, 1862, Emerson, the leading American philosopher, chastised
the Lincoln administration for its half-hearted prosecution of the war. He as
serted that emancipation was the demand of civilization and that objections to
this principle were nothing but intrigue. As Lincoln groped for principles to
unite the nation, Emerson noted, the Union war effort limped along. He stated
that emancipation with compensation to loyal citizens would revitalize Ameri
can patriotism. Emerson reasoned that the relentless logic of war would compel
emancipation despite the efforts of generals and politicians to prevent it. If fought
on high moral principles, he believed that war would heal a deeper wound than
it made.

26 National Republican, Jan. 4, 1862; Evening Star, Jan. 4, 11, 1862; Independent 14 (Jan. 9,
1862); 5; Crockett, “Lincoln’s Washington,” 59; Don C. Seitz, Horace Greeley, Founder of the New
York Tribune (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1926), 238. For a sampling of the newspaper coverage
of Greeley’s Smithsonian lecture, see Boston Post, Jan. 4, 1862; Boston Herald, Jan. 4, 1862;
Boston Transcript, Jan. 4, 1862; Providence Journal, Jan. 4, 1862; New York Times, Jan. 4, 1862;
New York Journal of Commerce, Jan. 4, 1862; New York Herald, Jan. 5, 1862; Albany Argus and
Atlas, Jan. 4, 1862; Philadelphia North American, Jan. 4, 1862; Philadelphia Press, Jan. 4, 1862;
Baltimore American, Jan. 4, 1862; Baltimore Sun, Jan. 6, 1862; Cincinnati Gazette, Jan. 4, 1862;
Chicago Tribune, Jan. 4, 1862; Chicago Times, Jan. 7, 1862; (St. Louis) Missouri Democrat, Jan. 5,
1862.

27 New York Herald, Mar. 23, 1862; National Republican, Jan. 11, 1862; Evening Star, Jan. 11,
1862. For the complete text of Cheever’s first lecture, see the Chicago Tribune, Jan. 18, 1862.

28 National Republican, Feb. 1, 1862; Evening Star, Feb. 1, 1862; Len Gougeon, Virtue’s Hero:
Emerson, Antislavery, and Reform (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1990), 281. For the com
plete text of Emerson’s Smithsonian lecture, see The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, ed.
The most anticipated lecture of the course was delivered on March 14, 1862, by Phillips, a Boston lawyer whose lectures aroused such controversy that he was forced to carry a revolver for protection. The promise of seeing such an infamous orator attracted hundreds more auditors than the Smithsonian lecture hall could accommodate. Among those two thousand or so Washingtonians who were fortunate enough to find a seat were several free black persons—apparently the first time that African Americans were admitted to the Institution. Phillips praised John Brown as a martyr and Frémont as the best general in the Union army. He challenged Lincoln to abolish slavery and to fight the war with every means at his disposal. After the lecture, Phillips toured army camps, attended senatorial debates on the bill for the abolition of slavery in the District, and met prominent Republicans at the Capitol. Two days later, Phillips lectured on "Toussaint L'Ouverture, the statesman and patriot of St. Domingo." Recounting L'Ouverture's courage and persistence, Phillips asserted that the Haitian republican was the greatest hero for liberty, greater even than George Washington, who owned slaves. That Phillips placed a black man who led a bloody slave revolution on a higher level than the *Pater Patriae* outraged many citizens of Washington, a slave city on the border of the Confederacy. To appreciate the volatility of these lectures, consider the response to the same lectures several days later in Cincinnati—a free city separated from a slave state by the Ohio River—where a mob pelted Phillips with rotten eggs and charged the podium.  

No such violence attended Phillips's lectures or those of any other of the WLA's speakers because the audience was composed of course subscribers sympathetic to the speakers' sentiments.

Beyond the District of Columbia, abolitionists were delighted by the WLA course, believing that it revealed a new antislavery sentiment in Washington. Unaware of the Smithsonian annual course of lectures, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Liberator*, the *New York Times*, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, and the *Independent Democrat* incorrectly reported that the WLA inaugurated "the first course of popular lectures delivered in Washington." The *Chicago Tribune* observed that the presence of "slave drivers" kept Washington from having regular courses of lectures on literary, political, and philosophical topics because "knowledge occupied only the ground whence slavery is excluded." The *New York Times* reported that "the lecture system" and the Union army "invaded" Washington, transforming it into a Northern city. The Washington correspondents of the *Independent*, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, and the *Liberator* marvelled that abolitionists could speak at the national metropolis, where Sumner had been assaulted and the slave power conspiracy had trampled free speech for forty years. The *National Republican*, the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Cincinnati Gazette*, and other Republican newspapers asserted that the ability of abolitionists

---

to lecture safely at Washington was evidence that "the National Capitol is Yankeeized." In response to the "deep interest" that many Washingtonians manifested in its "popular course of Anti-Slavery Lectures at the Smithsonian Institute," the WLA planned to publish the "most suggestive and valuable" of the lectures in "a convenient book," but it apparently abandoned the project after Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation.30

The reaction of District conservatives to the WLA course revealed that the Federal metropolis still had Southern vestiges. Washingtonians complained about the lectures in newspaper letters, threatened violence against the lecturers, and mutilated the posted notices of the lectures. The New York Evening Post and the Boston Post reported that Washingtonians threatened to put an end to the WLA course by "mob-law." Even before the course began it outraged some Washingtonians. One correspondent complained to the editor of the Evening Star that an "abolition storm" was "brewing" on the Washington horizon. Fearing that the course of abolition lectures at the Smithsonian would explode Lincoln's cabinet and drive the border states into the Confederacy, he demanded a boycott by all patriotic citizens of the District. The stolid National Intelligencer refused to take notice of the WLA course, hoping it would go away. After George W. Curtis, a columnist for Harper's Weekly, advocated emancipation in a lecture, "The National Honor," an editorial in the Evening Star wished that some of the speakers would choose "some topic not political. Cannot the Lecture Association manage it? We have had now eight abolition lectures in succession; a 'popular course' ought to show a little more variety."31

Washingtonians complained to the Evening Star that the secrecy of the WLA membership—only President Pierpont and Secretary Croffut were publicly known as members—kept the WLA from being accountable for its lectures. A WLA member agreed, noting that he was unable to communicate with the organization's officers. Although of "anti-slavery feeling," he complained to the Evening Star that the course was "perverted to the promulgation of that doctrine to the almost entire exclusion of all other subjects." Why, he wondered, did the WLA engage Cheever—the most objectionable speaker of the course—for a second lecture "without first consulting the association?" The Washington correspondent of the Boston Herald reported that the WLA lectures "raised the dormant pro-slavery feeling" in the District "until it vents itself in the churches, on the street, and in private circles. People who are strongly Union are so incensed that they freely admit that they are rebels, if worshipping Wendell Phillips be loyalty."32


The WLA course aroused controversy far beyond the District of Columbia. The Washington correspondent of the *Baltimore Sun* regretted that “colored people are now admitted to the abolition lectures at the Smithsonian.” The *New York Herald* was so outraged by Cheever’s “abolition harangues” that it demanded that “all public halls should be closed against this villainous agitator, and the newspapers should refuse to publish a word of his disunion orations.” The *Boston Post* reprinted a letter from Washington that claimed that Cheever’s lecture at the Capitol was “so full of treason” that several local lawyers were preparing an application to have him arrested for treason. The *Illinois State Register* questioned the patriotism of the members of Lincoln’s cabinet because they listened to Phillips’s traitorous lecture without making any effort to secure his arrest.33

Congressmen from the border states joined in denouncing the WLA. Rep. James A. Cravens, a Democrat from Indiana, complained to Lincoln of the use of the Smithsonian Institution “for the purpose of advancing political sentiments of any party.” Cravens found Greeley’s lecture “highly objectionable” and demanded that the abolition lectures at the Institution be “immediately stopped.” Such lectures, he thought, threatened to undermine the war effort by transforming a war to restore the Union into a war to end slavery. Several Democratic newspapers approvingly reprinted Cravens’s letter. Sen. Garrett Davis, a Democrat from Kentucky and a Smithsonian regent, attacked the WLA in the Senate chamber. He complained that these abolitionists, “these political and social demons … come here breathing pestilence from Pandemonium, trying to destroy the Union, so as to secure over its broken fragments the emancipation of slaves.” He recommended that the WLA lecturers be hung along with the leading secessionists as traitors. Expressing a popular Union sentiment, Davis believed that extremists in the North and in the South, i.e., abolitionists and fire-eaters, were responsible for the war. The *New York Journal of Commerce*, the *Louisville Courier*, the *Chicago Times*, and the *Boston Post* applauded Davis’s speech attacking the “abolition harangues” at the Smithsonian Institution. The *Boston Post* conceded that Davis used immoderate language, but asserted that the impudence of the abolitionists and the tenor of their “miserable lectures” justified such intertemperance.34

These outraged congressmen and agitated editors also charged that the WLA had violated the sanctity of the Smithsonian Institution. Cravens objected to Lincoln that “the Institution was not endowed for partizan purposes.” Davis contended that the WLA “desecrated the Smithsonian Institution.” After


Greeley’s lecture, the New York Herald and the New York Journal of Commerce declared that the WLA was a “treasonable” organization that had “prostituted” the Smithsonian to its fanatical program. The Albany Atlas and Argus agreed, observing that the WLA defiled the Institution by making it “a hall for brawling politicians.” After Phillips’s second lecture, the New York Herald wondered if the WLA course was “in accordance with the plans and intentions of the benevolent Smithson?” Adverting to Smithson’s directive to increase and diffuse knowledge, the New York Herald observed that Greeley, Cheever, and Phillips expounded “only the science of rebellion, and disseminate only the knowledge of their treason.”

The New York Journal of Commerce noted that Henry allowed the WLA to give lectures at the Smithsonian Institution on the condition that it avoid party politics. As the WLA paraded abolitionist after abolitionist to the Smithsonian lecture hall, the newspaper observed that Henry had been “deceived, imposed upon, [and] badly treated” by the WLA. Indeed, he had been misled. From the beginning, the WLA publicly denied that it put on an abolitionist course, while it privately recruited abolitionists to speak on emancipation. In his introduction for Brownson, Pierpont claimed that the WLA wanted to remedy the injustice that the “highest minds in the country” lectured in all of the Northern cities except Washington. The WLA, he explained, decided to conduct an experiment to see if Washingtonians would attend a “popular course of lectures” in which lecturers expressed freely their opinions on any subject. Pierpont assured Henry and the public that the WLA did “not previously drill” its lecturers as to their subjects. Of course, the members of the WLA were elated by the widespread press coverage and the discomfort they caused District conservatives. Pleased by the success and controversy of the initial lectures, the WLA doubled the course without Henry’s permission. Only three lectures into the course, the WLA invited Daniel S. Dickinson, attorney general of New York, to give “an extra lecture.” The WLA also accepted applications of lecturers who had not been invited but who wanted to participate in the course. Moncure D. Conway, who had been driven from the pulpit of the Unitarian Church in Washington six years earlier for his abolitionist principles, thought it would be “poetic justice” for him to return as a lecturer. The WLA agreed. On January 17, 1862, Conway spoke at the Institution, giving a talk entitled “The Golden Hour”—the seventh lecture of the course.

Radical antislavery Christians took special pleasure in making the Institution the focus of their controversial campaign in Washington, especially after their first application to use the Smithsonian lecture room was rebuffed. The Washington correspondent of the Independent Democrat was pleased that the lecture


36 New York Journal of Commerce, Jan. 25, Mar. 25, 1862; National Republican, Dec. 16, 30, 1861, Jan. 17, 1862; Conway to Sumner, Dec. 12, 1861, CSP.
room of the Smithsonian Institution, "that of all places, should be the one" where the WLA course was given. Abolitionists knew of the conservative political views of Henry and many of the regents, and delighted in the irritation their lectures caused these "old-fogies." The New York Evening Post indicated the WLA lectures were apropos because "scientific lectures have frequently been delivered at the Smithsonian Institute, but the lecturer could never allude to political or moral subjects, unless it was to extol slavery as a grand civilizing institution, and indulge in sneers at anti-slavery people." Mindful of the Dred Scott decision, the National Anti-Slavery Standard exulted that Cheever gave a lecture on emancipation "at the Institute of which Chief Justice Taney is a Regent!"37

Not content to lecture abstractly on the merits of emancipation, the WLA participated directly in the debates of Congress. On March 1, 1862, Gerrit Smith, a New York abolitionist and a sponsor of John Brown's raid on the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, dismissed Senator Davis's recommendation to hang the WLA lecturers as revealing the half-hearted support that the border states gave to the Union. Two weeks later, the WLA joined with Radical Republicans in the effort to emancipate the three thousand slaves in the District of Columbia. Phillip's lectures, the climax of the WLA course, dovetailed with the congressional debate on the abolition of slavery in the District. Emboldened by the success of the WLA and frustrated by the delaying tactics of conservatives in the Senate, Republicans renewed their effort to use Congress's jurisdiction over the District to abolish slavery in the national metropolis. While Radical Republicans and border state conservatives debated the merits of the bill for the abolition of slavery in the District, Phillips sat in the Senate chamber—a mute testimony to the change of local popular sentiment in favor of Northern principles. That evening Phillips delivered his second lecture at the Smithsonian before Sen. Lazarus Powell, a Democrat from Kentucky, and "many other Southern men of note" fresh from the debate in the Senate. Several days later, Senator Davis, mindful of the effect of the WLA in shaping popular opinion and in mustering political votes, excommunicated Greeley, Phillips, Cheever, and the other members of the WLA during a plea against the bill for the abolition of slavery in the District. After almost a month of debate, the bill passed on the strength of the Republican majority and was signed into law by the president on April 16, 1862.38

At first, Henry tolerated the WLA, but he became increasingly dismayed by its controversial topics, its expanded course, and its political activities. In the beginning, he employed subtle means to moderate the course. During Brownson's lecture, he closed all of the windows in the lecture room, making at least one


auditor complain of being “roasted.” Privately, Henry urged that the lectures be toned down or that some of the most controversial speakers be dropped from the course, but the WLA refused. After Cheever’s first lecture, the *National Anti-Slavery Standard* observed that some of the Smithsonian “fossils began to tremble, and that some effort to expurgate the list of lecturers to be invited was made.” In response to Henry’s complaints, the WLA requested that George Bancroft, the leading American historian, give a lecture on George Washington to celebrate the birthday of the father of the country, but he was already engaged to speak on that topic in New York. To discourage Henry from making any more complaints, the WLA leaked the incident to the press. Aware that some were pleased that abolitionists could speak in Washington, the *New York Evening Post* took little solace that “free speech is ‘tolerated’ in the capital city of the United States,” observing that Henry’s “solemn protest” against the lecturers revealed that only the presence of a large army and the temporary preponderance of Union sentiment allowed them to lecture in safety in the District.39

Desperate to show the public what were proper Smithsonian lectures, Henry hastily began a course of his own. From January to April 1862, eight speakers—five of them clergymen lest anyone think that Henry objected to the abolitionists’ religiosity—gave official Smithsonian lectures. To differentiate his course from that of the WLA, Henry illuminated the red light on the Institution’s high tower “whenever the building is open for a Smithsonian free lecture.” Unlike the WLA’s political course, the Smithsonian lectures ranged from science to travel and from history to philology. In late February, Henry invited A. Cleveland Coxe, an Episcopal priest from Baltimore, to lecture. The WLA tried to co-opt Coxe, who had expelled secessionists from his church, into their course, but Henry made sure that the newspapers knew that the Baltimore priest had been invited by the Smithsonian Institution. Henry’s course was highlighted by four lectures on “Arctic Exploration” by Isaac I. Hayes, who had just returned from a fifteen-month Arctic expedition. Reflecting the interest Americans had shown in the Arctic throughout the 1850s and perhaps pleased to hear a new subject, Washingtonians thronged the Smithsonian lecture hall to hear Hayes. At the beginning of each of the Smithsonian lectures, Henry disclaimed the responsibility of the Institution for lectures on partisan issues that were beyond its control.40

The *National Republican* sympathized with Henry’s dismay at being held responsible for the controversial political opinions expressed by the WLA lecturers, but noted that the speakers alone were accountable for what was said. The WLA refused to censor lectures that had been given in other Northern cities, believing that such a request would be asking the speakers to accept a “deliberate

---


surrender of manhood.” Despite Pierpont’s repeated disavowals of any connection between the sentiments expressed by the lecturers and the Smithsonian Institution, Henry chafed at the notoriety the lectures brought. Although endeavoring to “keep out of a quarrel” with the WLA, Henry lost his patience when he learned of the proposal to invite Frederick Douglass, the leading African American abolitionist, to finish the course. In early April 1862, Henry informed Sumner and other WLA members that he “would not permit the lecture of a coloured man to be given in the room of the Institution.” Henry also rejected the WLA’s proposal to invite William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the Liberator and a leading immediate abolitionist, to be the last lecturer, but allowed Francis Vinton, Rector of Trinity Church of New York, to close the WLA course. On April 10, 1862, the WLA course ended anticlimactically: as the bill for the abolition of slavery in the District passed both houses of Congress, Vinton delivered a sedate lecture, “The Philosophy of the War,” demanding that abolition be extended from the District of Columbia to the states in rebellion.41

At the conclusion of Vinton’s talk, Henry restricted use of the lecture room to the lectures given under Smithsonian auspices because of the “impossibility of preventing the name of the Institution from being associated in the mind of the public with topics foreign to its peaceful character and scientific reputation.” In his annual report to Congress, Henry explained that the WLA “could not, or at least did not, observe the restriction” against political lectures. Instead, Henry observed, the WLA sponsored a course that was an “exposition of political principles” that opened the Institution to “acrimonious attacks” by “members of Congress and editors of papers holding different political opinions.” It was impossible to “neutralize the effects of these attacks” by disclaimer, he noted, because the public could not distinguish between “the lectures given under the immediate sanction of the Institution and those that were permitted to be delivered in the lecture-room under the direction of other parties.” If the Smithsonian were to survive the political vagaries of Washington, Henry believed that “men of the most extreme political views” must continue to meet in the castle “as on a common ground of friendly sympathy” with no motivation other than sustaining “the Institution in its mission of advancing and diffusing knowledge.”42

Henry strictly enforced the rule to limit use of the Smithsonian lecture room to “the lectures given under the immediate auspices of the Institution.” He had hoped to remedy any “dissatisfaction” resulting from this restriction by giving an “extended series of lectures” during the following winter, but the new policy caused controversy before the summer was half over. On June 10, 1862, the WLA held its first annual meeting at Temperance Hall in the District. It re-elected Pierpont as president and decided to expand its program to include agi-

41 National Republican, Jan. 17, Apr. 14, 1862; Evening Star, Jan. 25, 1862; New York Evening Post, Mar. 22, 1862; Henry to Bache, Apr. 4, 1862, WJRC.
42 Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1862, 43–44; Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1864, 15.
tating for the abrogation of the Fugitive Slave Act. The WLA made another application to hold a course of lectures at the Institution. Henry rejected it. "The rule at first gave offence to some of the friends of the Institution," he observed, but no exceptions were made.\textsuperscript{43}

At the same time that Henry offended the WLA, he upset "another association which desired to give a course of political lectures in opposition" to the WLA course. Several Washingtonians and Rep. Horace Maynard, a Democrat from Tennessee, made arrangements for Parson William G. Brownlow, a Unionist newspaper editor from Tennessee and an itinerant lecturer, to speak at the Smithsonian Institution for the benefit of wounded soldiers in the District. Assuming that since the Smithsonian castle was "a public building of the United States" it could be used for "public purposes," they did not inform Henry of the lecture until announcements had been made in local newspapers. Although sympathetic, Henry informed Brownlow and his supporters that the Smithsonian was a private body that no longer hosted political lectures. Brownlow was angry that Henry allowed abolitionists to give an extended course of lectures at the Institution, but refused him the opportunity to rebut. The Washington correspondent of the \textit{New York Evening Post} reported that Brownlow "declared very quickly that he would not go where he was not wanted." On June 30, 1862, he lectured in Washington at Ford's Athenaeum, a smaller venue than the Smithsonian, which was widely reported by Northern newspapers. After dismissing abolitionists as fanatics and criticizing Henry for barring him from the Institution, Brownlow championed vigorous prosecution of the war and criticized Confederate sympathizers who still held posts in the Federal government.\textsuperscript{44}

At the same time that Brownlow denounced the Smithsonian Institution on the other stops of his lecture tour, his supporters criticized Henry in the District. One Washingtonian complained to the \textit{National Intelligencer} that Henry unfairly closed the Smithsonian to Brownlow but observed that "Fanueil Hall was once closed against Daniel Webster," so that the "Fighting Parson" was "not the first martyr" for the cause of the freedom of speech. The \textit{New York Evening Post} condemned "the conduct of Professor Henry" with regard to Brownlow. Henry believed that these public attacks had hurt the reputation of the Smithsonian. Indeed they had. Two weeks after the WLA course had ended and the bill for the abolition of slavery in the District was passed, a conservative senator ridiculed the Institution as one of "the most gigantic humbugs of the age." As late as March 1863, friends of spurned lecturers circulated rumors that Henry was to be removed from the Smithsonian, presumably because of disloyalty. Observing

\textsuperscript{43} Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1862, 44–45; \textit{Evening Star}, June 11, 1862. Apparently unaware of the WLA's first course, Bruce unfairly charged Henry with dragging the Smithsonian into partisan politics for rejecting the WLA's second application to use the Institution. See his \textit{Launching of American Science}, 275.

\textsuperscript{44} Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1862, 44–45; \textit{Evening Star}, June 11, 1862. Apparently unaware of the WLA's first course, Bruce unfairly charged Henry with dragging the Smithsonian into partisan politics for rejecting the WLA's second application to use the Institution. See his \textit{Launching of American Science}, 275.
that "the existence of the Lecture Room" was the "source of much trouble," Henry hinted that the board might cancel the Smithsonian lecture course.\textsuperscript{45}

Henry did not cancel the Smithsonian lectures, but limited them "to courses on science and other subjects, which might be of service to those who desired actual instruction rather than mere amusement." To insure that no controversy arose from the Institution's official course, Henry invited Arnold Guyot, professor of geophysics from Princeton College, Eben N. Horsford, director of the Lawrence Scientific School of Harvard College, and several other of his scientific friends to give lectures. Henry conceded that these scientific lectures did not attract as large an audience as the WLA lectures on "the more exciting topics of the day," but he considered the course to be a success because the auditors were "attentive and decorous."\textsuperscript{46}

After a fire razed the second floor of the Smithsonian castle in January 1865, Henry did not lament the loss of the lecture room, which had caused him so much trouble three years earlier. "Our system of public lectures will, of course, be discontinued with the destruction of the lecture room," Henry informed Asa Gray, Fisher professor of natural history at Harvard College, who had been scheduled to lecture. He hoped that Gray would furnish a synopsis of the lectures to be printed in the next annual report, where they would be "more valuable" than spoken lectures because they would reach a far wider audience than if only delivered from the Smithsonian lectern. Virtually every American newspaper followed the tone of the National Intelligencer, which deemed the fire to be a national calamity. This outpouring of sympathy for the Institution heartened Henry, but he noted that Greeley's New York Tribune did not regret the disaster. Perhaps Greeley remained disgruntled by the abolition lecture controversy.\textsuperscript{47}

The abolition lectures given at the Smithsonian Institution by the Washington Lecture Association (WLA) from December 1861 to April 1862 form an important case study of Radical antislavery political activity in wartime Washington. These lectures were a key component of the abolition campaign to pressure President Abraham Lincoln to issue the Emancipation Proclamation and to fight a vigorous war against the Southern people as well as the Confederate army. Exerting political pressure from the Republican Congress and the Lincoln administration, Washington abolitionists forced Henry to open the Smithsonian

\textsuperscript{45} National Intelligencer, June 30, 1862; New York Evening Post, July 2, 1862; Henry to Woolsey, Aug. 8, 1862, Sterling Library, Yale University; Henry to Whitney, Dec. 16, 1862, Sterling Library, Yale University; Congressional Globe, 37th Cong., 2d ses., Apr. 21, 1862, 1732; Henry to Hall, Mar. 13, 1863, George P. Merrill Collection, RU 7177, Smithsonian Institution Archives.

\textsuperscript{46} Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1862, 44–45; Henry to Bache, Feb. 14, 1863, Alexander Dallas Bache Papers, RU 17053, Smithsonian Institution Archives (hereafter cited as ADBP).

\textsuperscript{47} Hafertepe, America's Castle, 132–40; Henry Desk Diary, Jan. 24, 25, 26, 1865, JHC; Journals of the Board of Regents, 234–39; Smithsonian Institution Annual Report for 1864, 29; Henry to [Gray], Feb. 13, 1865, Henry to Leidy, Feb. 4, 1865, JHC; National Intelligencer, Jan. 25, 1865; Henry to Mrs. Bache, Feb. 25, 1865, ADBP.
lecture hall to a course of patriotic lectures. Although the course was ostensibly devoted to literature and loyalty, virtually all of the lecturers demanded emancipation. That such extreme antislavery sentiments could be safely expressed in the District of Columbia for the first time was proof of the change the Civil War and the influx of Northerners had on the national metropolis. However, the spectacle of Greeley, Phillips, Cheever, and other abolitionists delivering antislavery lectures critical of the Lincoln administration's prosecution of the war at the Smithsonian sparked threats of violence in Washington and complaints across the Union. In addition, the WLA course distracted the Smithsonian from its mission to support American science and roiled the Institution in the congressional debate over the abolition of slavery in the District. Hoping to keep American science above political disputes, the secretary of the Smithsonian closed the WLA course by asserting the existing Institution policy against lectures on partisan topics. After the Smithsonian lecture controversy, Henry rejected all applications to use the Institution lecture hall for political lectures, in an attempt to keep American science above politics.