

The Smithsonian Institution

A Reading A-Z Level W Leveled Book
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LEVELED BOOK • W

The Smithsonian Institution

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Written by Stephanie Pretzer

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Front and back cover: The Castle is the main administration building for the Smithsonian Institution.

Title page: Judy Garland wore these ruby slippers in the 1938 movie *The Wizard of Oz*.

Page 3: Charles Lindbergh, the first person to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean, named his plane *Spirit of St. Louis* in honor of his supporters in St. Louis, Missouri.

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Correlation

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Introduction

Your parents are parking the car, and you can hardly contain your excitement. Today, you're going to explore the "Nation's Attic"—the Smithsonian **Institution**. Your best friend visited Washington, D.C., last year and told you how amazing it was.

Your family wants to see so many sites in Washington, D.C., that there isn't much time for the Smithsonian. So you'll make the best of it and see as much as possible. The car is parked. Time to go.

The Smithsonian Castle

You walk across the National Mall, where some of the nation's most famous **monuments** sit alongside several of the Smithsonian's **museums**, to the Castle, which is the original museum. The red brick building holds the remains of James Smithson, the British scientist, chemist, and mineralogist for whom the institution is named.

Once inside, a friendly volunteer explains more of the story. When Smithson died in 1829, he left his fortune to his nephew, Henry James Hungerford, with strict instructions that in the event that he died without children, his entire **collection** would be given to the United States to **establish** the Smithsonian Institution. Smithson wanted to create a place where knowledge of all kinds could be collected for everyone to experience. The Smithsonian Institution was founded in 1846.



Alexander Graham Bell, inventor of the telephone, brought Smithson's remains to the United States in 1904.

Smithson never told anyone why he chose to create an institution in a country he had never visited. Most of his personal papers were destroyed in a fire at the institution in 1865. The volunteer says that Smithson's fortune of \$500,000, equivalent to more than \$8 million in today's dollars, was a great gift to the American people and the world.



The volunteer goes on to explain how Smithson's money established what has become the largest research and museum **complex** in the world. The Smithsonian Institution has nineteen museums and **galleries** and more than 138 million **artifacts** in its collections.

As a scientist, Smithson collected samples of many different items to share with the world.

You try to wrap your head around those amazing numbers on the short walk to the Museum of Natural History.

The National Museum of Natural History

The green dome and decorative columns outside of the Museum of Natural History make it look more like a government building than a museum. You read earlier that it opened in 1910.

You climb the stairs and open the doors, entering the huge **rotunda**. In the center is Henry, an 8-ton (7,257 kg), 14-foot-tall (4.2 m) elephant native to Angola, in southern Africa. The sign in front of the display says that the centerpiece shows how scientists from different scientific fields of study, such as botany, biology, and zoology, collaborate to study animals and their habitats.



Henry was made from the skin of a real elephant that was almost one hundred years old.

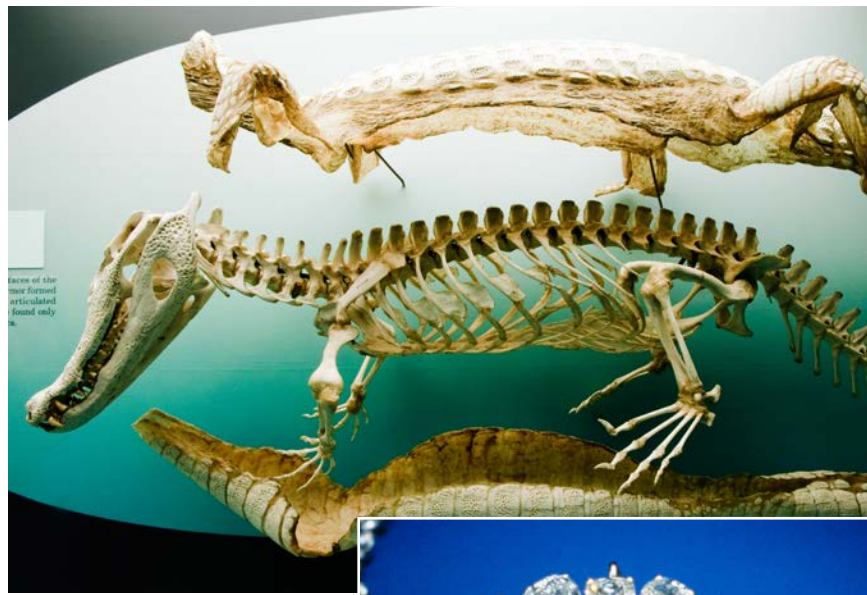
Looking at a map, you realize that you have many choices. You could learn about mammals, trace the origins of humanity, or explore geology. It would take days to look at everything, but the Sant Ocean Hall catches your attention first.

You walk past Henry into the hall and look up. Floating overhead, as if swimming in the air, is a replica of Phoenix, a North Atlantic right whale. It's amazing that something bigger than a school bus—45 feet (13.7 m) long and weighing 2,300 pounds (1,043 kg)—can look so graceful. A sign explains that right whales were hunted nearly to extinction for their oil and are now the rarest of all the large whales. Scientists estimate that fewer than five hundred of these whales live in the North Atlantic.



Scientists have tracked the real Phoenix ever since she was born off the coast of Georgia in 1987.

As you wander through the **exhibits**, you learn about coral reefs, examine the skeletons of other ocean creatures, and explore ancient ocean life. You even see a preserved giant squid!



(Top) In the Hall of Bones, visitors can see skeletons of many creatures, including this crocodile. (Bottom) The Hope Diamond has always been famous. It was once worn by a French king and is rumored to be cursed.



Next is the Hall of Bones. Skeletons from hundreds of creatures fill the displays. You see different species of monkeys, cats (big and small), deer, and other mammals; snakes, turtles, crocodiles, and other reptiles; and even birds and fish. Each skeleton is different, and the **diversity** is astounding. Before you know it, you have to move on to the next museum—but not without a stop to see the Hope Diamond first. Mom insists.

National Museum of American History

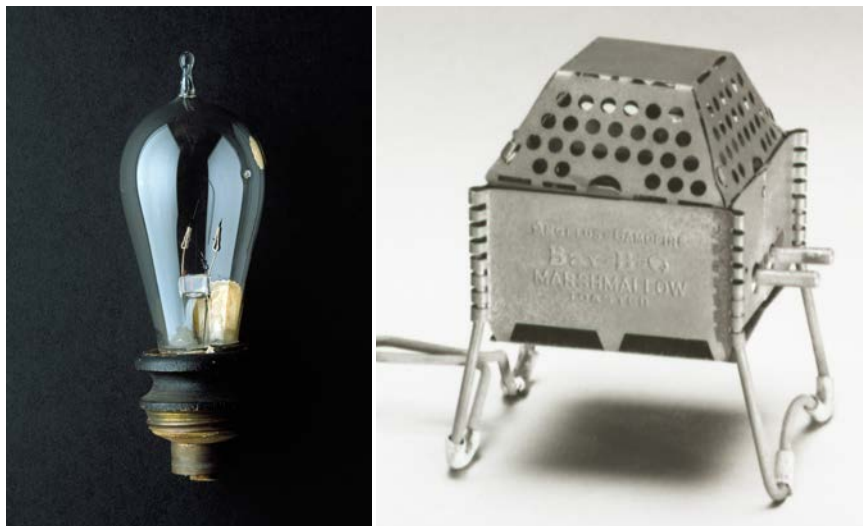
A short walk down the Mall takes you to the National Museum of American History.

The building's **facade** looks like gigantic boxes stacked side by side. Out front, a cool, squiggly sculpture moves slowly, seeming to change shape. Once inside, you're faced with the same decision as in the last museum—where to begin?

The Star-Spangled Banner exhibit is right at the entrance. Walking into the dark room, you see a huge, tattered flag on display. It's amazing to think this flag was the inspiration for Francis Scott Key to write the poem that became the U.S. national anthem. It's more than two hundred years old!



Because certain types of light can harm the fabric, the Star-Spangled Banner is kept in a special room.



(Left) This lightbulb is from Thomas Edison's workshop in Menlo Park, New Jersey. (Right) The ability to use electricity for more than just light sparked the invention of small appliances such as this marshmallow toaster.

Next, Dad wants to see the Lighting a Revolution exhibit, so you head over there. The place is packed with lightbulbs, gadgets, and old appliances. You see one of Thomas Edison's first lightbulbs, from 1879. Dad is fascinated by the evolution of lightbulbs, but you love the failed inventions—especially the electric marshmallow toaster.

Smithsonian by the Numbers		
Name of Museum	Year Opened	Average Visitors Each Year
National Museum of Natural History	1910	8 million
National Museum of American History	1964	4.9 million
National Air and Space Museum	1976	8 million
Total for all 19 museums: 30 million visitors each year		

You pull Dad away to look at the Americans on the Move section. On display is a Winton, the first car to drive from San Francisco to New York City and back in 1903—when there were few roads.

Nelson Jackson and Sewall Crocker made the trip and picked up a dog, Bud, along the way.



The Winton had no top or doors, no radio, and no air-conditioning.

After that, you move on to the American Presidency exhibits. You stop at the uniform of George Washington, the first U.S. president, and the lap desk where Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence.

Time is running out, so you quickly go to see Dorothy's ruby slippers from Mom's favorite movie, *The Wizard of Oz*.

There's so much more to see, but you want to make it to the next museum. A volunteer says you can never see it all because the museum is always changing to display its millions of artifacts. Come next year and it might look completely different!



The wingspan of the Wright Flyer—40 feet, 4 inches (12.2 m)—is a little wider than the length of a school bus.

The National Air and Space Museum

You make your way to the National Air and Space Museum. It's huge and packed full of all sorts of aircraft and spacecraft—and then you learn there's another complete museum in Virginia.

This time you decide to start at the beginning and head over to the Wright Flyer—the first powered airplane to fly with a pilot. It looks tiny compared to modern airplanes, and the fabric-and-wood construction seems too flimsy for flight. You learn that in 1903, Orville and Wilbur Wright flew for an entire 12 seconds, going 120 feet (36 m) and reaching a height of 9 feet (2.7 m)—with an engine less powerful than most riding lawn mowers.

From the beginning of flight, you walk a short distance to the Milestones of Flight Hall. Mom points out the *Spirit of St. Louis*, the plane Charles Lindbergh flew on the first nonstop solo flight across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. Then you see the actual Apollo 11 command module, which carried astronauts to the Moon in 1969. Nearby, you touch an actual Moon rock. It's smooth and cool.



(Top) A clear plastic case protects *Columbia*, the Apollo 11 command module. (Bottom) The Moon rock is one of the most popular items in this museum.

Next is Amelia Earhart's bright red airplane. Mom explains that, in this airplane, Earhart became the first woman to fly solo across the Atlantic Ocean—five years to the day after Charles Lindbergh's famous trip.

In another area sits a real airplane engine you can explore—and you even get to use some airplane mechanic tools. You're just beginning to look into the engine when your dad calls. It's time to go.

The Gift That Keeps on Giving

On your long walk back to the car, you ask if you can all come back next year. Your parents say they'll think about it, but until then they'll explore the Smithsonian Institution's websites with you. The sites have tons of cool stuff to see and learn about—including things that aren't on display in the museums.

You can't wait to tell your friend about all the things you've seen as well as discover new things online.



The Castle is one of the first buildings to be built on the National Mall.

As you pass by the Castle again, you wave. Your parents give you a strange look, but you explain that you're just saying thank you to James Smithson for his wonderful gift.

Explore Online

Use the website below to connect to and learn about the museums, galleries, and zoo that are part of the Smithsonian Institution. Remember to ask a parent or teacher before going on the Internet.

www.si.edu/Museums

Glossary

artifacts (<i>n.</i>)	any objects made or used by humans long ago (p. 6)
collection (<i>n.</i>)	a group of similar items that belong together or that someone chooses to save (p. 5)
complex (<i>n.</i>)	a group of buildings close to one another, used for a common purpose (p. 6)
diversity (<i>n.</i>)	a wide variety of many things (p. 9)
establish (<i>v.</i>)	to set up or start something, such as a system, organization, or government (p. 5)
exhibits (<i>n.</i>)	public displays of one or more objects, such as at a museum (p. 8)
facade (<i>n.</i>)	the front, or face, of a building (p. 10)
galleries (<i>n.</i>)	rooms or buildings that house works of art for public display (p. 6)
institution (<i>n.</i>)	a large, organized group that has a special purpose in a society or culture (p. 4)
monuments (<i>n.</i>)	buildings, statues, or other structures built as memorials to a person or an event (p. 5)
museums (<i>n.</i>)	buildings used to store and show things that are important to history, science, or art (p. 5)
rotunda (<i>n.</i>)	a round room or building, often covered by a dome (p. 7)