

**DISCOURSE, ON THE OBJECTS AND
IMPORTANCE OF THE NATIONAL
INSTITUTION FOR THE
PROMOTION OF SCIENCE, ESTABLISHED
AT WASHINGTON, 1840, DELIVERED AT
THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY**

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Discourse, on the objects and importance of the National Institution for the Promotion of Science, established at Washington, 1840, delivered at the first anniversary by Joel R. Poinsett

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JOEL R. POINSETT

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ON
THE OBJECTS AND IMPORTANCE
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THE NATIONAL INSTITUTION
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PROMOTION OF SCIENCE,

ESTABLISHED AT WASHINGTON, 1840,

DELIVERED AT THE FIRST ANNIVERSARY.

BY JOEL R. POINSETT,

SECRETARY OF WAR AND SENIOR DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTION.

Washington:
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CORRESPONDENCE.

Washington, January 5, 1841.

Sir: The undersigned Committee, appointed to make arrangements for the Annual Meeting of the National Institution for the Promotion of Science, and the delivery of an Address upon the occasion, in common with the large and highly respectable auditory who attended the delivery of your Discourse, on the 4th instant, have received the highest gratification from the able manner in which the duty assigned to you by the Society was performed.

Believing that no better mode of making known the objects of this Institution can be adopted than by the publication of your excellent Discourse, we pray that you will yield to our wish, by placing it at the disposal of the Institution for that purpose.

In expressing to you the highly intellectual gratification we derived from the delivery of your Address, we take the occasion to offer to you, in behalf of the Society and for ourselves, our warmest thanks for the service which, on this occasion, you have so ably rendered to the interests of the Institution.

We are, Sir, with great respect, your obedient servants,

ALEX. MACOMB,	ROBT LAWRENCE,
N. TOWSON,	JNO. M. WYSE,
W. W. SEATON,	JNO. T. COCHRANE.
PETER FORCE,	

To Hon. JOEL R. POINSETT.

Washington, January 6, 1841.

GENTLEMEN: I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your communication of the 5th instant, requesting a copy of the Discourse delivered before the National Institution for the Promotion of Science, on its annual meeting.

In acceding to your request, which I do very cheerfully, I beg leave to express my grateful acknowledgments for the indulgent and very flattering terms in which it is conveyed, and to assure you, that it will be a source of great gratification to me to have, in any manner, contributed to the success of the National Institution for the Promotion of Science.

I have the honor to be, Gentlemen, respectfully, your obedient servant,

J. R. POINSETT.

Gen. A. MACOMB,	ROBERT LAWRENCE,
Gen. N. TOWSON,	JOHN M. WYSE,
W. W. SEATON,	JOHN T. COCHRANE, Esq.,
PETER FORCE,	Committee.

DISCOURSE.

THE duty assigned me on this occasion is of such a character that I regret it has not devolved on some one more capable of performing it. To do justice to the subject requires more knowledge than I possess, and more leisure than I now enjoy; and I feel constrained to solicit your indulgence, while I explain the origin of the Institution for the Promotion of Science and the Useful Arts, and attempt to describe, as plainly and briefly as the subject will permit, its objects and importance.

The lovers of science, literature, and the fine arts, residing in this District, felt sensibly the absence of those resources which are found elsewhere, and are necessary for the attainment of knowledge. They were mortified to perceive that the great advantages possessed by the public authorities at Washington were neglected, and that, at the seat of Government of this great nation, there existed fewer means than in any other city of the Union of prosecuting those studies, which, while they impart dignity and enjoyment to existence, lead to the most useful practical results. They believed it to be their duty to arouse the attention of Government to these deficiencies, and, at all events, to address them-

selves to the task of supplying them, as far as could be done by their individual and combined exertions. For these purposes they have formed an association, and applied themselves to collect specimens of geology and mineralogy, and other objects of natural history, and, for the short period of its existence, the efforts of the Institution have been eminently successful. They have entered into correspondence with other learned societies, and have been encouraged to proceed by their approbation, and have profited by their generous coöperation. They have invited the assistance of their fellow-citizens in the most distant States and Territories, and hope, by their aid, to collect documents and facts illustrative of the early history of our country, specimens of its geology and of its mineral and vegetable productions, and, if not to preserve the animals and plants themselves, which are passing away before the progress of settlement and cultivation, at least to perpetuate their forms, and the memory of their existence. They hope to be able to illustrate these subjects and others connected with them by a series of gratuitous lectures, and entertain a confident expectation that numbers, whose duties compel them annually to assemble here, will view with interest collections of the natural productions of America, drawn from every State and Territory in the Union, and, becoming sensible of their utility, will contribute on their return to swell their amount, and to spread throughout the country a taste for literary and scientific pursuits.

The Institution for the Promotion of Science and the Useful Arts, will, as its name indicates, embrace every branch of knowledge; and its members, believing such

a combination essential to its success, have divided themselves into eight scientific classes, namely: Astronomy, Geography, and Natural Philosophy; Natural History; Geology and Mineralogy; Chemistry; the application of Science to the useful Arts; Agriculture; American History and Antiquities; and Literature and the Fine Arts. It is of these branches of science, and of some of their most important divisions, that it is my intention to treat, and to endeavor to explain their effect upon the physical, moral, and social condition of mankind.

During a long period the sciences were independent of each other in their progress. It was essential that facts should be discovered, carefully studied, well considered, analyzed, and classed, in order to obtain a knowledge of their causes and first principles, and, by that means, advance each science to a certain degree before their points of contact, the mutual assistance they afford, and the influence they exercise upon each other, could be fully understood. It is especially since the end of the last century that the progress of the human mind, in the study of the sciences, has so wonderfully developed their reciprocal relations—advantages due altogether to the alliance of the synthetic and analytic methods followed by Gallileo and his disciples, and systematized by Bacon. Thus it is that chemistry and natural philosophy have made such rapid progress. They cannot move forward one without the other; and they shed their light on physiology, on the arts and manufactures, and on every branch of natural history.

Not only do the sciences mutually aid each other, but the arts and sciences do so likewise. Some of the arts depend for their execution upon an intimate ac-

quaintance with the higher branches of science, if not in the workman, at least in the person who directs his operations ; and there are important branches of science which could make no progress, if the philosopher who studies them had not found the arts sufficiently advanced to supply him with the instruments and apparatus of which he stands in need. It is especially to those arts which are susceptible of great perfection and exactness in their execution, that the sciences are most indebted. The brilliant discoveries in modern times in electricity, magnetism, optics and astronomy, and in chemistry, physiology, and natural history, would still have been in their infancy, if the arts had not provided the necessary astronomical and mathematical instruments, and the thousand ingenious inventions which furnish the philosophical apparatus of the scientific investigator.

The rapid and extraordinary improvements which the world has experienced, during the last half century, in commercial intercourse, in manufactures, and in all that contributes to civilization and to the comforts and conveniences of life, are due altogether to the application of science to useful purposes, and of the useful arts to the progress of science. In this march of intellect, so far as it leads to practical results, our country has kept pace with the most enlightened nations of the world, and, in many instances, the application of scientific principles to the most beneficial uses, has been effected by the ingenuity and great powers of combination of our own fellow-citizens. Every river valley, the shores of every inland sea, and the coasts of every ocean, are largely indebted for the advantages they now enjoy, to

the success of Fulton, in applying a well-known principle to the great purposes of navigation. Whatever may be the advantages which other nations have derived from this use of steam, (and they are doubtless great,) our own vast territories, watered as they are by noble rivers and extensive inland seas, received from it an impulse which advanced them centuries on their road to wealth and power. Labor-saving machinery, invented by our countrymen, is not only profitably employed at home, but is to be found in almost all the manufactories in Europe. But while the merit of fertile invention is accorded to us by all, we are reproached for not cultivating the principles on which these inventions themselves are based, and for neglecting some of the most important branches of science. M. De Tocqueville, who has so ably depicted our institutions, affects to consider America as being still a province of England, in this particular; and the absence of original efforts in literature, philosophy, and the fine arts, in our country, has led to the assertion, by others, that democracy is fatal to them; and that where its spirit spreads, they will take flight. Although these charges and assertions are much exaggerated, they cannot be altogether denied. It is, however, incorrect to attribute this to democracy, which, so far from being inimical to science, renders the mind independent in thought and action—invigorating and fitting it for any pursuit. The causes are to be found in the circumstances of the country, which compel men to enter early on the theatre of life: there is little leisure in youth for the acquisition of the exact sciences, and for men of more advanced age, the opportunities and means are too rarely