

**THE FOUNDERS OF THE INSTITUTE, AND  
ITS FIRST PRESIDENT: AN ADDRESS  
DELIVERED BEFORE THE  
AMERICAN INSTITUTE OF INSTRUCTION,  
AT ITS ANNUAL MEETING, IN TREMONT  
TEMPLE, BOSTON, AUGUST 1ST, 1867**

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The Founders of the Institute, and Its First President: An Address Delivered Before the American Institute of Instruction, at Its Annual Meeting, in Tremont Temple, Boston, August 1st, 1867 by Elbridge Smith

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**ELBRIDGE SMITH**

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*Smith, Elbridge.*

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## ADDRESS.

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### THE FOUNDERS OF THE INSTITUTE, AND ITS FIRST PRESIDENT.

BY ELBRIDGE SMITH, ESQ.

MR. PRESIDENT, LADIES, AND GENTLEMEN, —

IN the moral and in the material world, in the progress of society, and in the course of nature, there are times when the great forces which move mind and matter seem to take on an unwonted activity, and give rise to unusual phenomena. These periods we call ages or eras. They give rise to new forms of life; they turn thought into new channels; they become the great landmarks in the history of the earth and its inhabitants; they mark, by well-defined limits, the bounds which separate the new from the old; the obsolete organizations and forms, which have done their work, from the higher activities and agencies which have become necessary in the development of the great plan of the Creator. Hence, we have, in geology,

our Silurian and Devonian periods, the reigns of fishes, reptiles, and mammals. And in the historic period, in the reign of man, we find, marked by equally sharp outlines, the great phases of our moral and intellectual progress. Such were the ages of Pericles and Augustus, of Bacon and Newton. In all these climacteric epochs, it is interesting to notice how closely the germs of new life seem to be infolded in the organizations that have reached their limits. The antagonism which often appears to exist between the new and the old is only apparent, not real. The true relation is rather of cause and effect. The teachings of Socrates were the necessary result of the barren philosophies and worthless wisdom of his fellow-sophists. The new method of Bacon came not as the creation of a single mind, but rather as the demand of mankind, wearied by the fruitless rounds of Aristotelian and scholastic logic. The great generalization of Newton was reached, not because the fall of an apple was a new phenomenon, but because a generation had arisen which demanded a better explanation than the Cartesian *vortices* could give. And so in the greatest of all eras, when Rome had trodden the nations into hopeless submission beneath the march of her legions, in one of the remotest provinces of the empire, unheard and unheeded in the palace of the Cæsars, the voice of one crying in the wilder-

ness was heard not so much as a result of the oppression of Rome, as from the desire of all nations for a reign of righteousness and truth. The old civilization was hastening to decay; the fulness of time had come; existing forms of political and religious life had reached their growth; and, without the parade or the alarms of war, a new force was quietly introduced, by which the prejudices of the synagogue and the doubts of the academy, the pride of the portico, the fasces of the lictor, and the swords of thirty legions were humbled in the dust.

I have been led to these remarks, because you have made it my duty at this hour to speak of an era in American history, and of the men who marked it. I need not say to this audience, that the first quarter of the present century, and more especially the second and third decades, form an era in the history of New England and America, and, indeed, of the world as well. It was not until after the peace of Paris, in 1815, that our national life fairly and distinctively began. It is not without reason that the war of 1812 has been styled "the second war of independence." The war of the Revolution, the formation and adoption of the Constitution, almost a war with France, two domestic insurrections, the constantly threatening aspect of European politics, a war with Algiers,



and, at last, a second conflict with the mother country, were sufficient to fix the attention and tax the energies of the nation for forty years. Its history, during this period, was rather that of the infant Hercules struggling with the serpents in his cradle, than what we now see,—the youthful giant going forth to perform upon the broad continent greater labors than those imposed by Eurystheus. The period of which I am speaking was, then, the time to which we are to look for the rise of those institutions which have become distinctively American. The nation was now to set up for itself; its internal life and its external relations were to be shaped and adjusted. With the natural resources of a continent as yet scarcely touched; with a spirit of self-control and self-reliance, which the civilized world had been compelled to admire; with no constraint from the spiritual and temporal bonds which long centuries of civil and ecclesiastical misrule had imposed upon Europe; no feudal forms or vested rights; with no Bourbons nor Hapsburgs, no Guelfs nor Ghibellines, no Stuarts nor Tudors; no privileged church to check the free religious growth of the people; no haughty prelates to frown upon every fresh manifestation of Christian life and principle; no iron creed to mould into tame conformity the thoughts which the human soul may cherish of its Maker; no cloistered halls nor chartered uni-

versities, no endowed schools nor monastic retreats, where exploded theories, absurd customs, and false philosophies, are guarded from the influence of progressive thought — those intellectual catacombs, where the dead are kept with pensioned guardians to protect them, and affirm that they are still alive — with the garnered wisdom of all preceding generations to guide

“The heir of all ages in the foremost files of time;”

these were the auspices under which the national life was to begin, and the foundations of the new world's civilization to be laid. It was, in fact, a realization of the bright vision which George Berkeley saw a hundred years before, when he visited New England, foretold what it was to become, and bore an honorable part in hastening its accomplishment: —

“In happy climes, the seat of innocence,  
Where nature guides, and virtue rules, —  
Where men shall not impose for truth and sense,  
The pedantry of courts and schools, —  
There shall be sung another golden age,  
The rise of empire and of arts;  
The great and good inspiring epic rage,  
The wisest heads and noblest hearts;  
Not such as Europe breeds in her decay, —  
Such as she bred when fresh and young,  
When heavenly flame did animate her clay,  
By future poets shall be sung.”

But the condition of the country, at the period of which I am speaking, was not merely negative ; it was not simply free from the great barriers which checked human progress in Europe. There were positive influences at work which were destined to give rise to institutions and organizations which were to direct the American mind through centuries and round the globe.

The eighteenth century, more perhaps than any one of the preceding seventeen, had tended to enlarge and liberalize human thought. It produced, indeed, no Shakspeare, no Milton, no Bacon ; but it gave birth to Voltaire, Rousseau, and the Encyclopedists. There was no Reformation like that of the sixteenth, no Thirty Years' War, and, until its very close, no Great Rebellion or Revolution like those of the seventeenth century. The thoughts which occupied the foremost minds concerned not so much the government and faith of the Church as its very existence ; not so much the forms of Christian faith as its very essence. The political strife, earnest as it was ; the wars of succession, though they shook every throne in Europe, were far less fatal in their consequences than the subtle theories of human rights and human obligation, which were clothed with all the fascinations of genius and scattered broadcast through the world.

Whatever line of thought or action we may follow