

## THE SMITHSONIAN 100 YEARS AGO

1910 was a significant year in the history of the Institution. On March 17, 1910, the new United States National Museum, now known as the National Museum of Natural History, opened its doors to the public. Former President Theodore Roosevelt was in East Africa on the Smithsonian Roosevelt African Expedition, collecting animals for display in the new museum. And in December of that year, the Smithsonian Biological Survey of Panama was launched to conduct an assessment of the flora and fauna of the isthmus prior to the construction of the Panama Canal.

### The Natural History Building

The road to the opening of the Natural History Building was a long one. In 1881, the first U.S. National Museum, now known as the Arts and Industries Building, opened to house the Smithsonian's growing collections. Within a year, however, the building was full and Secretary Spencer F. Baird requested another building for the national collections. The request was modest—\$200,000 for a two-story brick and terra cotta building, similar in style to the Arts and Industries Building—and was introduced by the Regents to Congress as H.R. 5781 in April of 1882. The bill did not pass. The following year, the Board of Regents increased the amount of the request to \$300,000 but that too failed. In 1888, Senator Justin S. Morrill, a Regent, submitted S. 3134 for \$500,000 for a two-story building and basement; again, the bill did not pass. And so it went through the 1880s and 1890s,



**Construction of the U. S. National Museum, 1909.**

with Senator Morrill consistently pushing the bills, sometimes getting it passed in one house but not the other.

In 1902, the Board of Regents created a special committee of the Board of Regents to lobby the Congress for the new building. Senators Francis M. Cockrell, Shelby M. Cullom, and Orville H. Platt, and Representatives Robert Adams Jr., Hugh A. Dinsmore, and Robert R. Hitt succeeded in having a bill passed for \$1.5 million for a brick and terra cotta building, with \$5,000 appropriated for planning. President Theodore Roosevelt, a naturalist and donor

to the National Museum since he was a boy, signed the legislation. At this time, however, the McMillan Commission had just completed an urban plan to create a monumental Washington and National Mall; this modest building did not fit their vision. In 1903 architects Hornblower and Marshall submitted a plan to build one half of a building for the \$1.5 million. The House Committee on Appropriations then held hearings on whether to change the authorization to a granite monumental building for a total of \$3.5 million. In March of 1903, 32 Stat. 1083 was passed by Congress and signed by President Roosevelt as an amendment to the Sundry Civil Act for 1904, providing \$3.5 million for a granite building. Ground was broken on June 15, 1904, staff began moving collections into the new

building in 1909, it opened to the public in March of 1910, and construction was completed in June 1911, seven years and five days after construction was initiated. A deficiency act in 1910 provided another \$77,000 for construction expenses. When the Museum opened, it displayed innovative new exhibits in the arts, culture, history, and natural history. The National Gallery of Art (now the Smithsonian American Art Museum) opened the first exhibit hall in March of 1910. To learn more about the history of the Museum, see [http://www.mnh.si.edu/onehundredyears/explore\\_our\\_history.html](http://www.mnh.si.edu/onehundredyears/explore_our_history.html).

### **The Smithsonian Roosevelt African Expedition of 1909–1910**

President Roosevelt was keenly interested in the progress of the new building. When he decided not to seek reelection in 1908, he wanted to remove himself from the public eye and have a major change in his life as he left office. Thus, he organized the Smithsonian Roosevelt East African Expedition and departed for Africa in early 1909, just after he left office. He had a “bully” time out in the field, accompanied by three Smithsonian naturalists who ensured that the specimens collected were properly documented and prepared as museum specimens. *Harper’s Magazine* published Roosevelt’s very popular monthly travelogue, keeping him in the public eye but out of politics. By the end of the expedition, Roosevelt had collected 5,000 plants, a small collection of ethnological artifacts, and 11,400 zoological specimens, including 5,000 mammals; 4,000 birds; 2,000 reptiles, frogs, and toads; and 2,000 fish, miscellaneous insects, crabs, myriapods, and mollusks. In 1912, the Roosevelt specimens were placed on display—including an East African lion



**Taxidermist at work on Roosevelt Safari Specimens, c. 1911.**

group that became the iconic exhibit in the Museum, giraffes, hippopotami, rhinoceros, and other exotic species. To see more on Roosevelt, including photos and video, see [http://www.mnh.si.edu/onehundredyears/expeditions/SI-Roosevelt\\_Expedition.html](http://www.mnh.si.edu/onehundredyears/expeditions/SI-Roosevelt_Expedition.html).

### **The Smithsonian Biological Survey of Panama, 1910–1912**

The other major collection to arrive at the National Museum during this period was from the 1910–1912 Smithsonian Biological Survey of Panama. As plans for the Panama Canal progressed, naturalists across the United States worried about the effects of the construction of the Canal on this biologically important location. Scientists knew that the isthmus, which served as a land bridge between North and South America but also separated the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans when it arose, was a very important region for understanding the evolution and distribution of organisms in the Americas. They were concerned about the environmental disruption of the region and the mixing of Atlantic and Pacific faunas. The Smithsonian took the lead in responding to these concerns, writing to then-President Roosevelt seeking support for a biological survey of Panama. The President



**Cana Creek, Panama, 1912. Courtesy The Field Museum**

supported the project in theory but, knowing that he would no longer be in office in 1910, requested cooperation from a variety of government agencies, including the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Isthmian Canal Commission, for the survey. It was then approved by President William H. Taft. The Smithsonian coordinated this multi-year biological survey to document the basic flora and fauna of the region. Other museums, including the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago, participated in the survey. In addition to the large collections amassed by this survey project, the Smithsonian Biological Survey of Panama established the Institution's

interest in this region, leading to the development of the Canal Zone Biological Area (now the Smithsonian Tropical Research Institute) 13 years later and the Smithsonian's continued presence in Panama over the last century. To learn more about the 1910–1912 Smithsonian Biological Survey of Panama, see

<http://www.mnh.si.edu/onehundredyears/expeditions/Panama.html>.