

ISNU's Natural History Museum

By Dave Watt

1858 - ISNU's Natural History Museum

"...to the Normal University will belong the credit of having been among the first to explore in the interest of science, a region supposed to be very rich in the means of guiding the thoughts of scientific men."-President Edwards

The society's museum was located on the third floor of ISNU's main building. The museum, featuring one of the finest natural history collections outside the eastern seaboard, covered 3,300 square feet in two spacious halls. Stuffed birds, fossils, and minerals were displayed in cases of French glass, and museum visitors could inspect plants and insects in drawers. Shelves held crystals, ores, and more minerals and fossils, and preserved in alcohol were various species of fish and reptiles. An entire section was devoted to "economical geology" showcasing Illinois' mineral wealth. After the departure of curator Charles Wilbur, the museum underwent a period of mismanagement and neglect. Distressed at the deteriorating condition of the museum, Powell seized a chance to greatly improve his professional standing. He successfully lobbied for an annual state appropriation for the museum, including a modest stipend for a curator position. The politically savvy Powell, surprising few observers, received the coveted curator position.

1860 - Charles Wilbur, the original curator, leaves his post indefinitely

1861 - Illinois Natural History Society is in disarray due to the outbreak of the civil war and throughout its duration

George Vasey, a physician and amateur botanist from the McHenry County community of Ringwood, was an active member of the society and served as interim museum curator after Powell's departure. Vasey then left for Washington, D.C., becoming the longtime chief botanist of the U. S. Department of Agriculture. There he became the nation's foremost authority on prairie grasses, and was instrumental in the establishment of the U.S. Herbarium. By the 1880s, three of the federal government's leading scientists, Powell, Thomas, and Vasey were former members of the Illinois Natural History Society.

1866 - Joseph Addison Sewall becomes temporary curator of collections with John Wesley Powell becoming a major advocate for the museum's further advancement for Illinois Normal University.

Powell requested a full-time curator and funds, a sum of \$1,000 to improve and enhance the collection.

1867 - Governor Oglesby and the General Assembly of the University passed the appropriation unanimously, selecting Powell as curator and appropriating \$500 to finance Powell's first

expedition into the Rockies to expand the museum collection

1868 - Powell makes his private collection available to the University, receiving a stipend for his trouble as well as a bonus \$600 in order to continue his expeditions in the Rockies

In the summer of 1868 Powell convinced the University Board Members, through a private tour, to award him \$400 for equipment for his continued Western explorations (the sum now totaling \$2500 including museum enhancements, factoring in for inflation a sum that today would equal roughly \$20,000)

1869 - Powell embarked on a second expedition to the Grand Canyon boosted him to national fame. He sent back an immense amount of artifacts (some parcels weighing more than half a ton)

1870 - Powell remained as active curator despite concerns that he was not intent on remaining with the University or studying within Illinois.

In December, the collection was valued at \$95,000 with over 100,000 botanical specimens, 15,000 fossils, 15,000 shells, and 1000 books. With limited space to store and display the collection, and later deemed a fire hazard, a committee was brought up consisting of Powell, George Vasey (Powell's botanist), and Professor Joseph Addison Sewall for improvements to the museum. Notably among the improvements were a fireproof building, exhibition halls, a library, and laboratories for the hefty sum of \$75,000.

The committee ran into issues as the General Assembly of the University did not wish to allocate so much of their funds to a collection owned by Powell himself, legally they did not own the objects in the collection at all.

1871 - Illinois Natural History Society disbands officially

Appropriation Act passed, handing over the collections within Old Main to the State

Powell embarks on his famed Colorado River expedition to which the government of the U.S. granted him \$10,000.

1872 - Powell resigns as curator and Stephen A. Forbes is appointed as his successor

Forbes, a former student of the Normal University, focused on collecting specimens from Illinois (some 12,000 each year) and shifted the museum's focus to scientific research and education

Much of Powell's specimens and artifacts are brought with him the Smithsonian following his resignation as professor and acting curator

1876 - Museum renamed, "Illinois State Laboratory of Natural History"

1877 - State Museum built in the capital (Springfield) where any duplicates from the Normal Universities collection were sent