

Paris during the international exhibition in 1878 for the purpose of getting together comparative collections, maps and sections, and for the settling of obscure points relating to geological classification and nomenclature.”

Having engaged with the French and found them receptive to the idea, the Americans established such a committee under the chairpersonship of renowned geologist and paleontologist **James Hall**, who would later become the first president of the Geological Society of America in 1888.

The committee started working immediately by printing a circular in English, French and German that urged the convening of a meeting during the ‘Exposition Universelle’, which would not only encourage dialogue and debate on the issues of standardising geological terminology but also bring together rock collections, fossils and maps of the participating countries.

The notice was distributed worldwide and favourable responses were received from Britain, Russia, Sweden, Norway, Austria, Spain and Italy. Interestingly, Germany declined to participate in the event, no doubt owing to lingering tensions following the Franco-Prussian war of 1870–1871.

Given such wide support, the event was assured and the Geological Society of France offered its full support in organising the first congress. It formed its own committee,

separate from the Americans, who subsequently became known as the Founding Committee of Philadelphia’, under the chairpersonship of eminent geologist and Sorbonne professor **Eduard Hébert**, to organise conference proceedings.

More than 4 000 circulars were distributed around the world by the French and a total of 312 people, representing 22 countries, registered for the event. The conference fee was set at 12 francs, which equates to roughly R1 900 today.

Inevitably, given the difficulty and expense of travelling, as well as the language barrier, with French being almost the sole language of the congress, two-thirds of the attendees were French.

During that first congress, which was held in the conference wing of the Trocadéro Palace at the Universal International Exhibition between August 29 and September 2, a total of 41 papers were presented (mostly in French). The themes included boundaries and characteristics of rock systems, representation and coordination of linear features, tectonics, fauna and flora in the delineation of rock systems, the mineralogical and textual nature of rocks and, most importantly, the standardisation of geological symbols and nomenclature.

Unfortunately, considering it was the first conference of its kind and that only 15 minutes

was allocated for each presentation, it was said that the papers and debates lacked depth and were uneven in value. While the contribution of the papers to the general advancement of geological understanding may be debatable, the first congress did play a significant role in promoting the standardisation of classification schemes, nomenclature and symbolism. In fact, the most important result of the congress was, undoubtedly, the establishment of a commission to discuss the international definition and usage of most stratigraphic items. (That commission ruled, for the first time, on international definitions of words such as series, stage, rocks and formations; placed stratigraphic divisions in order of hierarchy and made a distinction between stratigraphic and chronologic divisions; and decided that the duration of time corresponding to a group was an era, to a system a period, to a series an epoch, and to a stage an age.)

So, this is a brief history of the origins and proceedings of the first International Geological Congress, the first in a long series of gatherings that not even economic recessions, wars or the division of the world into rival political blocs for a time has been able to interrupt to any notable degree.

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