



NEWS AND NOTES

from

The Fauquier Historical Society

Vol. 8, No. 4

WARRENTON, VIRGINIA

Fall 1986

Profile: Governor William "Extra Billy" Smith

In the museum in Warrenton is a bust of William Smith, twice governor of Virginia, lawyer, active politician during the years preceding and following the Civil War, *entrepreneur-extraordinaire* in his business dealings, and for many years a resident of Fauquier County.

William Smith was born September 6, 1797, at *Marengo*, the family homestead in King George's County. The Smith family had been in the Northern Neck for some time. His father and grandfather were born there, his paternal ancestors having come from England in the early 18th century.

His mother, Mary Waugh Smith, a first cousin of her husband, was descended from the distinguished Doniphan family who had settled in the Northern Neck in 1663.

William's grandfather and great-grandfather had served in the Virginia militia during the American Revolution and his father was colonel in the militia during the War of 1812. A man of considerable wealth and influence, he was held in high esteem by his neighbors, who repeatedly elected him to the General Assembly.

His mother's brother, Col. William Rowley Smith of Fauquier, was a Commander of Cavalry in the War of 1812 and a Justice of Peace from 1821 to 1852. He also served several terms in the General Assembly.

William grew up under the shadow of the Revolutionary giants; Washington's home was nearby at *Mount Vernon* and, in the early 19th century, Jefferson, Madison, Monroe and Marshall were at the height of



This Portrait of me was taken in 1883, in my 86th Year.

Ex. Gov. *Wm. Smith* of Va.

C. M. Bee

WASHINGTON, D. C.

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University of Virginia Library Photo

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Gov. William Smith

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their careers. A devotion to his country was kindled in William's heart, and by both precept and example, he was prepared for politics.

The Early Years

William was the oldest of seven children who reached maturity. His education was varied. At age seven he began his formal schooling at an old-field school in the neighborhood. At age ten he was placed with the family of Judge John Williams Green of Fredericksburg, to determine his aptitude for a classical education.

After several years, Judge Green expressed his approval of the boy's ability and, in September 1811 following the death of his mother, he was enrolled at the Academy in Plainfield, Connecticut.

When the War of 1812 began, William wanted to become a midshipman, but his father brought him back to Virginia and for the next year he studied under a tutor at home. He was then sent to *Wingfield*, a classical school in Hanover County, but his stay there was cut short by the death of his father in 1815.

He returned to Fredericksburg to study law under the firm of Green and Williams. He read law with J. L.

Moore of Warrenton and with one of the outstanding lawyers of the time, General William H. Winder of Baltimore. After passing an examination by the local judges, William was licensed to practice in Culpeper County in August 1819.

William married Elizabeth Bell, daughter of James and Amelia Bell of *Belle Park*, near Culpeper, in 1821. The marriage lasted 59 years and was blessed with eleven children.

Conflict in Virginia

In the early 19th century, economic conditions in Virginia caused conflicts between the eastern and western parts of the state: the Tidewater slave owners versus the small farmers who owned few or no slaves at all. There were few opportunities for employment in the eastern area, resulting in mass migrations to other states. Nearly 3,000 left the state annually for some years.

Norfolk and Richmond had a monopoly on the banking interests of the state.

Smith's sympathy was with those who were trying to exert their economic and political rights. There was great need for internal improvements, more roads and better communication.

Caught in the spirit of economic expansion, Smith established a mail-coach service from Fairfax to Cul-

peper in 1827. Aggressively extending this system from Washington, D. C., to Milledgeville, Georgia, he soon obtained so many extra payments under postal contracts that he became known as "Extra Billy" Smith. His political opponents seized upon this term gleefully, hoping to discredit him, but his friends rallied to his defense, saying that he was "extra" in every aspect of his life — as a lawyer, politician, businessman and as a warrior in his later years.

Not content with the stagecoach line between Washington and Georgia, he started a steamboat line between Richmond and Washington in 1835. Another was established between Norfolk and Baltimore, and a third, sailing semi-weekly between Pensacola, Florida, and Galveston, Texas.

His first appearance in the political arena occurred in 1836 when he was elected to the Virginia Senate. He did not seek election, but was nominated by the Culpeper Democrats. He would remain in politics, off and on, for the next 36 years.

Smith was reluctant to enter politics at this time, since he was deeply in debt and felt that time away from his business interests would be detrimental to his financial standing. He had been a supporter of President Andrew Jackson and was an advocate for Martin Van Buren.

A pro-slavery Democrat, he was criticized by some people in Virginia for supporting a Northern statesman who refused to comment on abolition. Up to this time Virginia had kept the issue of slavery out of politics, but it was firmly in the national eye by 1835 with the abolition movement in the District of Columbia.

In the state Senate both parties wanted to make Smith their presiding officer, but he chose to become the leader of the Democrats.

New Banking System

Smith opposed the state system of banking, which he called inefficient and corrupt. He advocated the idea of an independent Treasury system, even before it was advanced by the Van Buren administration which had been embarrassed by the panic of 1837.

Overbanking, with speculation and unwise use of Federal money, had contributed to the panic. Plans were suggested to separate Federal funds

from the banks by a system of Federal depositories, two or more to each state, under Federal management.

There was great opposition to this proposal from many Virginians, but as a leader of the administration party, Smith supported it, risking defeat in the election of 1840 to stand by his principles.

However, he was unanimously nominated and re-elected to the state Senate without opposition. The campaign of 1840 firmly established him as a power in Virginia politics.

At Home in Warrenton

In the early 1840s the Smith family moved to Warrenton, buying about 200 acres on Culpeper Street, along the Springs Road. They built the house we now know as *Neptune Lodge* which they called *Monte Rosa* as long as it remained in the family. His daughter Mary Amelia, who inherited the property, sold it in 1890.

The house was very different in appearance from what it is now; the main entrance was at the top of a long flight of stairs with a small porch in front of the door. The brick stables in the adjoining paddock were built at the same time as the house, and were used as a relay station for the stage-coach line.

William resigned from the Senate in 1841 and campaigned for a seat in Congress from the Culpeper District. Upon his election, he took his place in the U.S. House of Representatives and became involved in some of the controversial issues of the day.

Banking and tariff were personal concerns to the new congressman. One of his speeches on the tariff was considered a masterpiece by the free traders, and was frequently referred to in the presidential campaign of 1844.

While in Congress, a predominantly Whig legislature in Virginia passed a congressional redistricting act which left Smith's district largely Whig in sentiment. Thus, in his campaign for re-election he was defeated by a small majority.

In the campaign of 1844 Smith was an enthusiastic supporter of James K. Polk, meeting many of the Whig leaders in heated debate. His style of speaking was colorful, emotional and appealing to the masses. His pleas were successful and Virginia gave Polk a majority of the popular vote, and the entire slate of



Photo by Anne Brooke Smith

Stable at Monte Rosa in 1929

electoral votes.

The leaders of the Democratic Party in Virginia realized that Smith's efforts were largely responsible for the party's victory in 1844. The Democratic caucus nominated him and the predominantly Democratic Assembly elected him governor in December 1845 as a reward for his efforts on behalf of the party.

The Mexican War

As governor, his administration was preoccupied with the problems of the Mexican War.

President Polk asked Congress to recognize that a state of war existed between the United States and Mexico. On May 19, Secretary of War William Marcy sent a request to Governor Smith for three regiments of volunteers from Virginia, to be held in readiness for mustering into the Federal service.

Although there was some initial opposition in Virginia to the war, the governor complied with Marcy's request on May 23 and issued a proclamation to receive thirty companies of volunteers to be formed into regiments.

Companies began to organize in accordance with the governor's instructions, but a new problem arose in regard to clothing and supplies for the volunteers. Governor Smith directed the Captain of the Public Guard to furnish the necessary accommodations, provisions and uniforms and in December, 1846 he requested an appropriation from the Assembly for equipping and supply-

ing the Virginia regiments. The Assembly responded with the necessary legislation.

In early 1847 the volunteers were mustered into Federal service and in February embarked from Old Point Comfort for the war in Mexico. The Virginia regiments never participated in combat, and the war came to an end with their honorable discharge.

Governor Smith lauded the regiments for their "superior discipline and good conduct." The experience which Smith gained in recruiting and equipping more than 1,300 men would help in his later term as governor.

Internal Affairs

Not all Smith's energy and time were directed to military matters. His messages to the General Assembly outlined an ambitious program of internal improvements, education and reform. He proposed two great railroads, one to go through Southwestern Virginia to the Tennessee line, the other would run to the Ohio River, now the Chesapeake and Ohio Railroad.

The governor hoped that by connecting Richmond with the Deep South and the Midwest, produce then being shipped to Baltimore would travel instead to Virginia ports; he also hoped that these railroads would help unify Virginia. By increasing its commercial activity, Virginia could challenge New York and its Erie Canal as a conduit of trade between the

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Gov. William Smith

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Eastern Seaboard and Midland America. Although these enterprises were not undertaken during his first administration, he lived to see them materialize.

Governor Smith favored the establishment of a uniform free school district system, supported by county taxes and the *Literary Fund*, which had been set up during John Tyler's administration and which provided funds for the counties in the area of primary education.

Certain measures of reform, such as revision of the state constitution correcting the abuses of the right of suffrage and the regulation of the powers of the county courts, prompted the calling of a constitutional convention.

Other measures advocated by Governor Smith included reform of the militia system and the Public Guard, reform of the penitentiary accounting system to place it on a rational basis, repeal of the usury laws, and updating of the quarantine laws.

He also recommended a bounty to Virginia shipping interests to encourage that industry to carry more of the nation's foreign trade, and also proposed that *Mount Vernon* be purchased as a state memorial.

One of his recommendations was that the Commonwealth purchase the vacant ground available on Governor Street in Richmond. The purchase was made, and the present beautiful appearance of Capitol Square is due to his efforts for that purpose. He had trees planted, walks laid out and landscape work done.

On to California!

William Smith again became a private citizen on January 1, 1849, and to retrieve his fortune became his first consideration.

Gold had been discovered in California in January 1848. His second son, James Caleb, was already practicing law there, so Extra Billy decided to go west, sailing in April and arriving in San Francisco one month later. He immediately began a legal practice which brought him considerable success.

His departure for California prevented him from participating in Virginia's constitutional convention, for



Virginia State Library Photo

Elizabeth Bell Smith, wife of Governor Smith

which he had worked so hard as governor. But soon after his arrival in San Francisco, he again became involved in politics.

California was admitted to the Union in September 1850 and when the first state Democratic convention met in May 1851, William was a delegate from San Francisco. He was unanimously elected president of the convention.

After a three-year residence in California, Smith felt he had accumulated enough money to pay his debts; his investments in San Francisco real estate would yield him an annual income of approximately \$18,000.

Virginia and Politics

Upon his return home in 1852, his son, William Henry, built *California House* at the corner of Hotel and Court Streets in Warrenton. The house was built with the proceeds of the fortune Smith had accumulated in the West. For many years this house was painted yellow as a tribute to the source of wealth which helped the family regain financial stability.

His friends and constituents urged him to run for Congress, and although Smith preferred to return to the state Senate, he won the Congressional election and returned to the House of Representatives. He won each successive election to Congress until 1861.

The political situation, both nationally and on the state level during the 1850s, was a complicated one. The annexation of great amounts of west-

ern territory following the Mexican War had ignited the question of extension of slavery into the new states coming into the Union.

William Smith was a vigorous champion of Southern ideas in the bitter debates that raged during that decade. He remained a loyal member of the Democratic party, even campaigning in Northern Pennsylvania for the election of James Buchanan for president. He once averaged two speeches a day in a five-day speaking engagement.

Everywhere, he emphasized that he supported Buchanan not because he was antislavery, but in the name of Democracy of the Old Dominion, which asked only for the preservation of the Constitution and the Union.

Virginia history showed her a loyal daughter of the Union. She had voted in the Federal Convention to abolish the slave trade; she had supported the partition of the Northwest Territory into five free states; and, while yet a colony, she had petitioned Parliament to abolish slavery.

In the last months of Buchanan's administration Smith was very unwell, but he supported those who were making every effort to prevent secession. A moderate, he felt that the Union could be preserved and, even if the Deep South did secede, Virginia and other border states could act as mediators in the dispute.

After Lincoln became President, both houses in Congress passed a resolution sustaining the President in the use of force against seceding states. Smith packed his bags and left Washington, a very sorrowful man.

Service in the War

After Virginia left the Union, Smith applied to Governor John Letcher for a colonelcy in the 49th Virginia Volunteers. The governor protested that he was too old but, seeing his determination, gave him an order to General Lee, then Adjutant General, to prepare his commission. Lee granted it. "In my sixty-fourth year," Smith wrote, "and wholly unacquainted with drill or tactics, my military prospects were anything but flattering, yet I thought I knew how to manage men."

Colonel Smith was at Fairfax Court House when Captain John Marr of Warrenton was killed. He rallied the fleeing recruits to hold their line until reinforcements could be brought up.

At the *First Battle of Bull Run* in July, 1861, Smith's regiment was only up to half strength, but he was allowed to lead them in an attack. He had no uniform but as it was a very hot day, he held a large blue umbrella over his head as he rode at the head of his troops.

Word was sent to lower the umbrella as he made a wonderful target. He did so under protest, saying that he couldn't see anything because the sun was so strong.

While the Confederates were stationed at Manassas, Colonel Smith was elected to the Congress of the Confederacy. When it adjourned in April 1861 he rejoined his regiment.

However, the Virginia Assembly had passed an act, effective May 1, turning over her volunteers to the Confederate government. He had to decide whether to remain in Congress or to stay with his troops.

His regiment re-elected him Colonel so he resigned his position in Congress.

Smith Returns Wounded

At the Battle of Sharpsburg in October, 1862, Smith was severely wounded in the left shoulder and leg. At first it was feared that his wounds were mortal, but careful nursing by his wife and his servant, George Hunter, and his own strong constitution pulled him through. He returned to his home in Warrenton to convalesce.

Sometime previously, his house had served as headquarters for the Union General, James McDowell, whose clerks used the library as their workroom and sleeping quarters. The family was allowed to remain in the rest of the home.

When one of the men became ill Mrs. Smith insisted he be moved into a bedroom where he could receive proper care. The patient recovered and, when the Union troops left, Mrs. Smith bid "the boys" good-bye and asked them to call on her if they were again in Warrenton.

Many months passed and, during the Colonel's recuperation at home, the troops were again in the area and "the boys" came to call. As a favor to her, Mrs. Smith asked them to make no mention of her husband being at home, lest he be taken prisoner and his chances of recovery be jeopardized.

Out of their gratitude to Mrs. Smith for her previous kindness they



Virginia State Library Photo

Governor William Smith during the Civil War

left the Colonel to recuperate in peace.

Smith at Gettysburg

Eight months after Sharpsburg Smith rejoined his troops at Winchester. He was now Brigadier General Smith, having been promoted in February 1863.

It was summer again and the weather was very hot. The famous blue umbrella was once more shading his eyes and his attire was still more civilian than military. However, his men followed him with enthusiasm. By then he was a candidate for the office of Governor of Virginia.

By the time of the Gettysburg campaign it was almost certain that Extra Billy would be the next governor. He rode with the army into the north and when they reached York, Pennsylvania, the citizens were lining the streets to watch the invading army ride into town.

Smith thought that a little fraternizing would help. He had the company band play *Yankee Doodle* instead of *Dixie* as he rode at the head of his staff, smiling and bowing to the people on each side of the road.

By the time the column reached the public square, the people began cheering and brought them to a halt.

General Early rode up at this point, very annoyed at the delay and demanded to know what was going on. To which Smith replied, "Having a little fun, General, which is good for them and for us, and, at the same time, teaching these people something that will be good for them and won't do us any harm."

In the battle of Gettysburg, Smith distinguished himself leading his men in an attack when most of the Confederate forces were falling back. Bareheaded and with sword in hand, he took the highest position he could find and harangued each regiment as it marched into battle.

All the troops in that area raised a shout, "Hurrah for Governor Smith!" However, the battle ended with the Confederate forces withdrawing back to Virginia.

After Gettysburg, Extra Billy took ninety days' leave of absence from the army. He went at once to Richmond where he learned of his election as governor and his promotion to the rank of Major-General.

Between August and January, when he took office, he toured the state, speaking in support of the recruiting service.

—Anne Brooke Smith

1. News and Notes, Vol. 5, No. 3.

To be continued

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Can You Help?

News and Notes will contain in each issue a list of as many persons as possible who are conducting genealogical or historical research on persons or places related to Fauquier County. To be included in this column write The Fauquier Historical Society, P.O. Box 675, Warrenton, VA 22186. Please enclose a stamped self-addressed envelope.

BOURNE, HAWKINS. Society member Col. Joel A. Hawkins, PSC Box 5892, APO San Francisco 96366, seeks info re Hawkins family lines in Fauquier during the late 1700s-early 1800s. William Hawkins, ca. 1740-1836 may have m. Elizabeth Bourne. Info on Va. and W. Va. lines to share.

BROCK. Mrs. Treva Mears, 1524 N. 10th, Independence KS 67301, seeks info on Benjamin Brock or members of his family. Children: Thomas, William Benjamin, Jesse, George, Sarah, Mary and Nancy.

BYRD, FIELD, PEARL. Michael R. Darnel, 2903 Southbridge Dr., South Bend, IN 46614, seeks info on the ancestors of John Field and wife Margaret Pearl. Children: Mary, Elinor, Martha, William, b. 1777, Sarah, John Catherine, Penelope, Charles. Sold family farm in Fauquier Apr 1803 and moved to Kentucky. Parents of Margaret are William, d. 1785 and Martha Pearl. Eleanor Byrd, mother of William Pearl.

CORDER. Dr. Clinton N. Corder, P.O. Box 205, Oklahoma City, OK 73101, wants to identify father of William Franklin Corder, m. Susan E. Herrington, 5 Feb 1851. Father's name may have been Elisha. Also, where was oldest dau. Lucy, b. 1852.

HELMS. Marjory Allen Perez, Wayne County Historian, 21 Butter-nut Street, Lyons, NY 14489 seeks info on William and Thomas Helms and family. Moved to Wayne Co. ca. 1790-1810 from Fauquier. Served in Revolutionary War. Wants 1790 census listings and number of slaves. Also archival material to provide documentation of emigration to NY.

HUME. C.F. Smith, 1152 Laurel St., Berkeley CA 94708 is researching Alexander Hume b. Scotland 1704 d. Fauquier 1760, wife: Mary. William Hume ca. 1720-1780, came to Va. before 1745 m. Frances Patteshall ca. 1720-1802. William Hume, Jr. ca. 1734-1795 son of William and Frances. Also Ann Hume, wife of William Jr., d. Fauquier ca. 1794.

RAMEY. Mrs. Lois Ramey Logan, 23355 Gondor Dr., El Toro, CA 92630 is interested in tracing her Ramey lineage who lived in or near Paris, Fauquier Co. Daniel Ramey, b. ca. 1800; m. Catherine Graves, b. Paris 3 Jun 1801. Children b. Paris: Sanford b. 16 May 1825, Margaret b. 1827. Daniel d. 1828 location unknown.

RINGO. Mrs. Shirley A. Binkowski, P.O. Box 8417, Hot Springs Village, AR 71909 requests info on Brutis Ringo b. Va. 1762. m. Hannah Rector 22 Feb 1790, Fauquier. Sally Ringo b. Fauquier (?) 28 Feb 1800, dau. of Brutis.

ROBINSON. Mrs. Mabel E. R. Baker, 1901 Rollins Drive, Alexandria, VA 22307 seeks info on Benjamin Robinson, m. Catherine d. 1744, Stafford Co., m. Sarah Stacy 1750, d. 1785, Fauquier, Son Dixon m. Anna Pinkstone, d. 1816, Fauquier. Dixons's son Jakin/Jachin b. ca. 1799, m. Elizabeth Anderson, d. Prince William Co. (?). Where was the family property located in the early 1800s?

SIMPSON. Theodore R. Simpson, 11713 Indian Ridge Rd., Reston Va 22091, needs info on Samuel Simpson. Granted license to keep an ordinary at his home in Fauquier in 1761. Involved in lawsuits in Fauquier. Where did he live in Fauquier? Also, were Fauquier troops involved in any battles during the French and Indian Wars?

SMITH. Albert Belanger, Little River Farm, R7D1, Brentwood, N.H. 03833, requests info on William Smith of Hamilton Parish whose will of 1789 lists sons William and Andrew, daughter Mary D. Soddust and cousin James Withers.

WEATHERS, WITHERS. Mrs. T. W. Weathers, P.O. Box 426, Yuma, CO 80759 requests info on William Weathers, b. 1800-1803 Va. Also info on Thomas Withers/Wathers.

The Fauquier Historical Society

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Address Correction Requested

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