

Governor Benjamin Smith

A Patriot And A Statesman

By EUGENE FALLON

Were it not for Benjamin Smith the town now known as Southport might have withered on the vine and gone down to extinction, unnamed and unsung.

For a man who once counted his wealth in many thousand acres of farmland, and who was the grandson of Thomas Smith, landgrave (king's grantowner); who once owned Orton Plantation, who served a two-year term as governor of his native state, and who was elected no less than 15 times to the state legislature, there is surprisingly little documented history concerning him to be found. Thus, the researcher is forced to patch and mend and gather a wool long unraveled by the careless winds of antiquity.

For example, the dozen reference works examined by this writer and treating on Benjamin Smith, give no birthdate, nor do any of the volumes furnish the reader with the given name of his father.

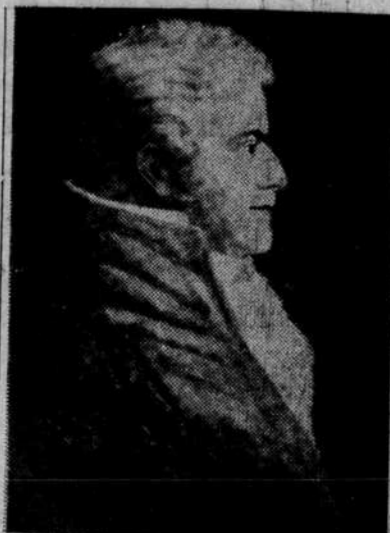
For a record of his birth date, it was necessary to visit his grave close by old St. Phillips Church, where a marker erected by the Masons shows that he was born December 10, 1756, and died December 10, 1826.

Incidentally, this marker erected by the Masons probably was placed out of consideration for the man who once was Grand Master for North Carolina.

From one source it was learned that Smith was married to Sarah, daughter of William Dry, first collector of customs for the port at Brunswick Town. There is no record of any children born to this union.

There is a great possibility that he was raised as a young boy fairly close to the ruins of Brunswick Town. In his declining years, Smith evidenced a desire to be buried in St. Phillips churchyard, thereby evidencing a familiarity with that locality.

The earliest record of the Smith family to which Benjamin belonged is found in the following quotation, taken from James Sprunt's inexhaustible "Cape Fear Chronicles": "About 1692 Landgrave (Thomas) Smith located a grant



BENJAMIN SMITH

of 48,000 acres on the Cape Fear River; but there was no permanent settlement made at that time . . .

This was the grandfather of Benjamin Smith. How many children that venerable figure sired, and the name of that son who in turn became the father of Benjamin, was not known.

As to the year of Benjamin Smith's advent into the world, here again we run into a brick wall. Since he was old enough in 1777 to serve as aide de camp to General George Washington,

commander-in-chief of the Continental Army of the United States, it would appear that Benjamin was born sometime about 1752, making him around 25 during his service under Washington in the Revolutionary War. When he died under peculiar circumstances in Smithville in the month of January in the year 1826, his age was approximately 74. A fairly lengthy life, to be sure, and certainly one in which was packed every emotion known to mankind: the highest honors; a stirring military and political career, and misfortunes so swift and merciless as to have broken the spirit of any man not endowed with the forefearful attributes of Benjamin Smith.

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a brief sketch of the careers of those men whom held the highest office in the Tar Heel state from 1585 to 1958, compiled and printed by the N. C. State Department of Archives and History, we are indebted for a picture (probably from a painting) of Smith. The likeness is in profile and shows a strong face, with massive chin and a Roman nose decidedly aquiline, almost hawklike. The picture depicts the governor wearing stock and periwig. Beneath the latter the eyes and brows are dark. Surely the likeness of a man of temper and soaring spirit, is this.

And the bits of impassioned history attached to this man, coming down to us from well beyond a hundred years ago, prove that Benjamin Smith was, indeed, a man given to impulse and direct action. In several reference works he is described as "given to sudden bursts of temper terrible to behold." And he bore, with in his body and to the day of his death, at least one bullet, the result of duels he fought on the field of honor.

For a further look at our subject's honored career as a patriot and soldier during the raging "War of Rebellion" as the British termed it, we turn to more familiar ground, to the Carolinas in fact, and the town of Port Royal, S. C.

Here, as the very name points out, was a plum richly prized by King George's dragoons. From this port was sent, to England, the cotton, rice, indigo, lumber so much in demand in the mills of Albion. It was a seaway; and as such, was covered in fact to Birmingham, Liverpool and London than many American settlements only a hundred or two miles distant from its wharves. The British thought enough of the little port to keep a substantial garrison of scarlet-coats and Hessian mercenaries ensconced therein. And when the port was threatened by the Americans, several troopships left England with heavy reinforcements to bolster it and to "keep it safe from those infernal rebels".

This was the situation during the middle years of the war when Benjamin Smith, hardened by the

on Long Island and then as a "General" in his own right, hastened to join the 8000th Army of General William Mifflin, then encamped south of Charleston and licking the heels of an abortive attempt to penetrate into the bustling, strongly-held bastion of Port Royal.

Smith's Army was a large one, consisting of Continental soldiers; but composed of many green troops inured to the woods and farming of both Carolinas. Smith held the men into fighting, before the ragtag camped on Port Royal, through the King's soldiers and their reeling in disorder to the sanctuary of armed sloops which had captured reinforcements only a few miles away. It was a glorious victory, and one of the few engagements to take place in South Carolina which resulted in a Continental victory. A swinge for every American farmer-soldier and doubly enjoyed that the land wrested from the British was home soil to the Carolina-bred rebels.

It is not known exactly when Smith's fortunes went into decline. Upon the conclusion of his gubernatorial term in the early spring of 1812, he retired from the political field. He was 60, with 14 years left him. Long before this, he had received 20,000 acres located in the state of Tennessee, in partial payment for his fine war services. The earl-like squire from the banks of the Cape Fear, literally rolling in wealth at the time of the bequest, magnanimously handed over the great grant of land to the University of North Carolina; suggesting that if so desired, it could be sold and turned into cash for the university. Figuring that the land was worth say, five dollars an acre, here was an outright

gift of some \$100,000, a tremendous chunk of cash in that distant day.

Among Benjamin Smith's best work as representative and governor of North Carolina was his interest in education. He was the first governor of Tarheelia to advocate the building of a state penitentiary, where "the wretched souls might get a chance at rehabilitation, working a state farm and other public works, instead of coughing out their lungs in some damp dungeon-cell in the town of their imprisonment." As governor, Smith spent much time studying how those "physically unable and unfit to till the soil" might be gainfully employed and make their own living, "instead of being public charges in poor-houses."

By this it is quite apparent that Gov. Benjamin Smith was years ahead in his thinking than the governors of more populated states to the north. It wasn't all moonlight and wisteria; fast horses and quick duels . . . not by a long shot.

That sandy island off the point of Cape Fear, that spit of subtropical terrain upon which flourished the royal palm and the wild orange tree, became Smith Island, and so remains to this day. I quote now the terrible and revealing words written by James Sprunt, in 1914, and in the evening of that eminent historian's life:

"Aide-de-camp to Washington, a general of the State Militia, a governor of the State, a benefactor of the University, Benjamin Smith became a melancholy example of public ingratitude. He lived to see, through repressed teams, his castles tumbled down in mud and slime . . ."

We come now to that downfall. It began with ordinary business reverses. If Benjamin Smith were a patriot, a solon, a wealthy planter, he was no businessman at all. Here, his very tenacity worked against him. He was used to winning; could not countenance losing. It was gall and wormwood to him.

Instead of writing off his losses, he tried to redeem his reputation. He was used to winning; could not countenance losing. It was gall and wormwood to him.

Continued On Page 4



Water

One thing we found out this year—it's a lot easier, and perhaps even more economical, to buy your Christmas tree instead of roaming about in the woods in quest of holiday greenery.

The way we found it out was by going out Sunday in search of a cedar suitable for use as a home tree. We confess that in recent years we have been working the banks of Davis Creek over at Long Beach. We have a lot on the third row where cedars seem to thrive, and we had been making an annual harvest. Then along came the town edict which forbade the cutting and removal of trees, and even though the ordinance made an exception of landowners, we thought that we might be a bad example, and possibly might lead someone else to get into trouble. (And we confess, too, that we were not entirely unmindful of the fact that we just might have to go through an embarrassing explanation to Officer Clay Jordan).

So we went Christmas tree hunting in the woods up toward the Robbins Nest. We thought we knew an area which would afford a multiple choice, but we actually scoured the woods for a couple of hours without seeing a tree that came close to being acceptable.

Finally we went down on the point near the old Price Creek Lighthouse where cedars grow large and tall. And that's the

way they do grow, and too tall for home use. Finally we located a tree of mature years in the marsh, and a furlong after we had set forours simple search we had this with a makeshift cedar.

As much as we hate to see a year we think we will next commercial.

When we do another of the Christmas customs will have to go down the drain, for to be able to go out into the woods and select and cut your own Christmas tree is one of the freedoms peculiar to small Southern towns. Through the years it has been one of the most enjoyable rituals of the holiday season. "It's the prettiest tree I ever saw" or "I think it is even prettier than the tree we had last year" are pardonable exaggerations made in the true spirit of the season, in much the same manner that Christmas cooking draws lavish praise.

That reminds us of the most memorable Christmas tree expeditions we ever went on. That year we needed two trees, rather large ones. We decided that over toward Dutchman's Creek should be a good territory, and sure enough, it was. In fact, trees were so plentiful and so beautiful that we moved from one to another, rejecting some beauties in the process. Finally we selected

(Continued On Page 4)

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