Benjamin Smith: The General and the Governor

Alan D. Watson

As a prominent political figure, a man of considerable vanity and sometimes ungovernable temper, and one possessed of immense wealth that in turn excited envy, Smith proved a subject of controversy. The General’s pretensions, particularly combined with his abiding interest in the military, made him the subject of a recriminatory newspaper debate in 1799. The affair originated in the undeclared war between the United States and France, engendered by French depredations of American shipping and an attempt by France to bribe American diplomats. The war began in 1798, ended in 1800, and was fought altogether on the seas. Although the chances of a military confrontation on land were remote, the Congress provided for the expansion of the American army by means of volunteers.

Smith took advantage of the wartime hysteria, which was especially prominent along the exposed coast of the Lower Cape Fear. In the summer of 1798 he raised a brigade of volunteers from the Brunswick County militia who called themselves a Legionary, The General, at the behest of the grand jury of Brunswick County, tendered the Legionary’s services to John Adams, President of the United States. Nine months later, after receiving no answer, Smith wrote the Secretary of War. The Secretary responded apologetically that the original correspondence must have been lost or inadvertently mislaid, but expressed appreciation for Smith’s endeavors. He also included a short missive from President Adams expressing appreciation for the efforts of Brunswick County. Smith proceeded to send the President’s message, extracts of the Secretary’s letter, the grand jury pronouncement, and the Legionary’s proffer of support, all of which reflected well upon the General, to the Wilmington Gazette for publication in April 1799.

Whatever the motive, Smith’s action precipitated a newspaper debate that examined his character and career. A writer who signed himself “Whirligig” in the issue of April 19, focused on the letter from the Secretary of War, pointedly waiving “all surmises respecting the probability of any additions or interlineations being foisted into the letter.” It was harmless enough, he wrote, except for the paragraph that complimented and praised Smith. That prompted “Whirligig” to ask, “why is the public eye to be perpetually dazzled with glittering extracts in commendation of that piece of morality, called General Smith?” Had the field of literature or politics been so sterile for six months past that the editor was “compelled to hunt through files of old newspapers for encomiastic spirits on General Smith, dressed off in all the gaudy pageantry of South Carolina pomp and vanity in order to fill up the chasms” of the Gazette?

The editor of the Wilmington Gazette, Alexander Hall, responded in the same issue to defend his actions. He contended that he merely emulated printers in the northern states by mentioning those persons whose public spirit and patriotism merited commendation in a time of crisis. To buttress his case Hall included extracts from Charleston, South Carolina newspapers, dated February 10, 1794 and November 8, 1798. The former contained a welcome notice for Smith as he arrived in the capital of South Carolina, recognizing his Revolutionary action at Long Island and at Beaufort where he “behaved with the calm intrepidity, and exemplary spirit of a veteran soldier.” The 1798 article lauded Smith for his endeavors to raise the Legionary Corps in Brunswick.

Finally, Smith replied to “Whirligig.” He opened with the lamentation that to the disgrace of the country there was “scarce a distinguished character in it, on which the vilest slanders have not been poured with diabolical venom, through the medium of the press.” If such luminaries as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and John Adams could not escape, how could any public character, who attempted “to exceed a more ordinary and cold performance of his duty in the service of his country,” hope to avoid “the gauntlet of newspaper remarks.” Smith brushed aside the intimation that he had altered the letter from the Secretary of War and contended that he had been forced to write the Secretary because about 1,800 militia had authorized him to do so in order to volunteer their services to the country. Rather than satisfy his vanity, Smith said that “extracts were published instead,” which omitted the most complimentary remarks about him. Moreover, as a brigadier

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PRESIDENT’S MESSAGE

At the Annual Meeting of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society on May 16th the new officers and directors for the year 1982-83 will be elected. Also at that time the Clarendon Cup will be awarded, and the speaker for the occasion will be Mr. William Reaves of the Museum. This year closes on a positive note, with major accomplishments having been done, and with the anticipation of a vigorous Society continuing into the future. Last year began with the Latimer House blackened and desolate from the March Fire; the year now ends with restoration completed. A dream has become a reality with the history book Cape Fear Adventure by Diane Cashman now in the publisher’s hands with Fall 1982 the expected date for delivery. The Candlelight Tours were again successful; the Long Range Planning Committee will print a new By-laws book, last published in 1970. Historic Wilmington Tours continue with the Latimer House a popular attraction. Gifts to the Society have provided the additional necessary revenue to carry out the Society’s program. The Silver Anniversary of the incorporation of the Society has been celebrated. The continued faithful leadership of the Board of Directors has made this year significant in the history of the Society. My best wishes go to each of you who have helped to make this year the interesting, meaningful, forward-looking year that it has been. Thank you for the honor you have given me of being President of the Lower Cape Fear Historical Society 1981-1982.

Betty H. Boney, President
(Mrs. Charles H. Boney)

ARCHIVES NOTICE

The Archives will be closed 1 June-15 September 1982. They will then re-open with longer hours available. The Ida Brooks Kellam Collection has now been incorporated into the collection and provides valuable aid to the genealogist and researcher. Special thanks to Mr. and Mrs. James O. Carr, Mrs. E. M. McEachern, Ms. Janet Seapker, and Mrs. Robert Walker who have worked to make the transfer of the collection orderly.
BENJAMIN SMITH
Continued from Page 1

general in an exposed area such as the Lower Cape Fear. Smith concluded that he was obligated to rouse a martial spirit among the people. On the whole, Whirligig's letter excited only contempt on the part of Smith.

Unfortunately for Smith, the war of words continued. "Examiner," "A Planter," and "Bagatelle" attacked the General in subsequent issues of the Gazette. Only "Benevolus" appeared to support him, and that from "the purest motives," because he had always viewed Smith as one "against whom nothing but the most insufferable vanity could be fairly charged," and felt that the General needed a defense against those who as writers were "far superior" to Smith. "Examiner" was the most telling critic of the General, declaring that a newspaper, which was a prime source of information, ought not to be "the trumpeter of unmerited panegyric." He cast doubt upon the efficacy of Smith's exhortation to the Brunswick militia, for that body stood organized and ready to suppress insurrection and protect the country. The men were hardly a "dull mass of stupidity which without his assistance would not have had the sense to perceive or spirit to resent, the gross insults and injuries, and threatened violence offered to the country." The regiment deserved better treatment.

Regarding Smith's Revolutionary service, "Examiner" was equally critical. There were doubts about Smith's actual presence at Long Island. When George Washington, stopping at Wilmington in 1791 on his famous Southern tour, met Smith, he allegedly did not know his former aide and seemed never to have heard of him. Smith's other claim to military fame was the "GREAT BATTLE OF BEAUFORT," as "Examiner" rather sarcastically termed it, which hardly deserved serious consideration as a major conflict. Moreover, Smith's role in the battles seemed to have been greatly magnified. According to "Examiner," "Distinction implies some difference." Mere participation in battle when so many had fought during the course of the war denoted little. What did Smith plan and how did he execute? Actually, Smith's career exhibited "an uninteresting pattern for our imitation, and thus vanishes this gaudy vapour that has been held up as an example for emulation." "The General would present us with himself...distinguished by his fancied achievements at Beaufort, and Long Island," but "the dull fable could excite nothing but disgust." He seemed to be "courting in very strange ways, some place of distinction, and solicits benefaction instead of bestowing it."

Whether uninterested, unbelieving, illiterate, or non-subscribers to the Gazette, the Brunswick voters were not deterred in their support for Smith. They returned him as usual to the state senate in 1799 where he was again chosen speaker. Smith undoubtedly took pride in reelection and probably in the fact that he was among the select political company previously mentioned—Washington, Adams, and Franklin—who had been denounced in the press. Additionally, the General could take some perverse comfort in knowing that Thomas Jefferson, leader and obvious presidential nominee of the Republican party in 1800, was already being vilified in the newspapers. Writers castigated Jefferson for his atheism, idealism, disrespect to Washington, Francophilism, cowardice, dishonesty, immorality, and political inefficiency.

Despite the criticism the public was not convinced of Jefferson's baseness or depravity. The Virginian won the Presidency in the election of 1800. The Jeffersonian Republicans also swept the congressional and most state elections throughout the nation in what has been called the "Revolution of 1800." The Federalists thereafter fought a rear-guard action, eventually disappearing as a national party after the War of 1812. Meanwhile, the party proved stronger in North Carolina than in any other Southern state, and Smith's popularity brought him reelection to the senate in 1800. By arriving late he claimed that he escaped the "mortification of witnessing political violence and passion" in that legislative session. It was Smith's last appearance in the legislative until 1804, and his return in that year was probably premised upon his conversion from Federalism to Republicanism.

Timothy Bloodworth, Republican, United States Senator from North Carolina, resident of Wilmington, and frequent correspondent of Thomas Jefferson, described the means by which Smith's political affections were secured. Writing from Wilmington in January 1804, Bloodworth informed President Jefferson that a number of the Federalists in the area seemed willing to support the Republican Party and the President's reelection in that year. Among those "candid proselites" was Smith, who was preparing to visit Washington, D.C. According to Bloodworth, if Jefferson would "favor him with Marks of attention," he was sure that it would "confirm his Attachment to Your Person, & Administration," and so it will be a Means of deviding the opposition which has been formidable in this place...render the conquest of Republicanism More Complete...for it will have a powerful Influence on all his Adherents." The General was a popular political leader, for Bloodworth was certain that Smith's conversion would add "no small Number" to the Republican Party in the district which had "laboured against the weight of Character, & the Influence of the Long robe, both from the Barr, & the Pulpit."

Whether Jefferson heeded Bloodworth's advice or Smith switched parties on his own volition, the General won election to the state senate in 1804. Subsequently he retained his seat until 1810 when the legislature elected him governor of the state. In the meantime Smith once more revealed his penchant for the military by serving briefly as Adjutant General of North Carolina, a position to which he was elected by the legislature in February 1807.

Coincidental with his service was the Chesaapeake Affair which almost brought the United States and England to war. In June 1807, a British man-of-war, the Leopard, fired upon an American naval frigate, the Chesapeake, sent a boarding party to the ship, and impressed four American sailors. North Carolinians, like Americans generally, denounced the British. Spontaneous meetings of the citizenry in the towns and counties expressed outrage at the violation of an American naval vessel. A gathering at Wilmington selected a committee of seven, including Benjamin Smith, to correspond with the governor of the state and the President of the country about the defense of the town and the Lower Cape Fear. By means of resolutions published in the Wilmington Gazette the committee also manifested the indignation of those living in the Wilmington environs as well as their intention to support punitive measures against the British.

As Adjutant General of the state Smith found himself at the center of military preparations deemed necessary in case war ensued with England. He obviously relished his position. The United States War Department, acting upon a congressional statute of 1806, called upon the states to prepare their militia for national service. North Carolina's quota of the nation's total was 7,003 men. Accordingly, the governor of North Carolina, Nathaniel Alexander, directed
Smith to order the major generals of the state militia to organize, arm, and prepare their troops to march. The governor suggested that the militia be raised by seeking volunteers rather than resorting to the draft. "The fervor that is evident in the public mind over this crisis flatters such an expectation," he said.

Smith, summering in Smithville, responded eloquently. He told the governor that he hoped that the North Carolina militia "will evince the same glorious ardor in the cause of their country that distinguished true Americans in Seventy Six and that Should it become Necessary they will give George the third an other proof that the U.S. will be... Truly free Sovereign & Independent." When Smith called upon the major generals with the governor's orders, he expostulated, "The breast of every patriotic American must swell with indignation at the late degrading and cruel insult offered to his Country. Great Britain has been so long in the steady habit of committing insulting & rapacious aggression & depredation upon the persons & Property of the Citizens of the United States that she will not willingly desist from the practice. We must therefore be prepared to curb her Insolence & Punish her Injustice by a glorious resort to Arms."

Despite the minatory atmosphere, the crisis passed without armed conflict, and Smith rather abruptly terminated his tenure as Adjutant General, resigning on December 17, 1807. Perhaps he was affronted by the pacific course of action followed by the national government when Jefferson chose economic sanctions in preference to war to deal with the British. More probably Smith was disgruntled with the failure of North Carolina's legislature to arm the militia satisfactorily, print the state's militia laws, and provide additional clerical assistance to the Adjutant General. According to his letter of resignation, Smith complained that the militia law imposed "incessant labour" upon the Adjutant General "without allowing any assistance to work through the drudgery of the office."

Nonetheless, Smith remained in Raleigh as state senator from Brunswick. He also retained his interest in the military and demonstrated his continuous desire to protect the coast of North Carolina. In the summer of 1810, the General was in Georgetown, South Carolina, negotiating with the United States Secretary of War for the exchange of two old North Carolina iron cannons for two brass field pieces belonging to the national government. Though the Secretary did not feel authorized to make the transfer, he agreed to loan Smith the desired ordnance from the federal arsenal in Charleston. Smith sent the cannon to New Bern and Wilmington "in hopes of introducing the French tactics applicable to flying artillery which will be of immense consequence in case of invasion or insurrection." The General bore the expense of transporting the artillery, because he supposed that the Assembly would refuse to pay the cost and he felt securing the field pieces so vitally important that he would have ridden "throughout the United States rather than not effect it."

In December 1810, Smith reached the pinnacle of his political career when the legislature elected him governor of North Carolina. To attain the office he had to defeat the popular David Stone of Bertie County who had served the two previous years as the chief executive of the state. The General led on all four ballots necessary for his election, though the final outcome was close: 97 votes for Smith and 84 for Stone. Upon qualifying for the office on December 5, Smith appeared before the house and senate "dressed in a suit of American cloth," an indication of his desire to promote United States manufactures to the exclusion of foreign, particularly British, imports. But Smith's simplicity ended at that point. A few days after his election he invited all the members of the General Assembly to have a glass of wine with him after an evening meal.

The exuberance of office dissipated quickly for Smith. Accustomed to a lavish lifestyle which embraced several excellent town and country homes, he discovered that the Republican legislatures, incorrigibly stingy, had denied the governor a suitable residence in Raleigh. According to Smith it is agreed by all who view the house, that it is "not fit for the family of a decent Tradesman..." "A recent storm had destroyed most of one chimney, the plaster frequently fell, and the roof was so leaky that during a rain one experienced "a wetting" in moving from room to room. The governor declared that he was not one "to stand on trifles," but he could not keep his family in the house "with any degree of comfort, reason or prospect of satisfaction."

In light of his undesirable public residence in Raleigh and the need to attend his business affairs in the Lower Cape Fear, Smith spent much of his time outside Raleigh. His absence provoked criticism from the Federalist newspaper, the Raleigh Minerva, but the Republican organ, the Raleigh Register, countered with a defense of the governor. Still, Smith left the capital in January 1811, and did not return until the first week in March, when he was met a few miles from the city by a group of calvary, escorted to the governor's house, and dined at Scott's Tavern. He shortly departed, however, and did not reappear until the conclusion of the Brunswick superior and county court sessions in early May. Other than the recriminations that derived from his inconstant attendance in Raleigh, Smith enjoyed a rather tranquil gubernatorial tenure.

While deteriorating relations between the United States and England occupied the minds of many in 1811, Governor Smith seemed more concerned about conditions within the state. His message to the General Assembly in November 1811, the annual gubernatorial address delivered by an incumbent before the election of a new governor, not only reflected his interest in domestic matters but also gained Smith the reputation as a progressive governor. He called for the reform of the penal code, the adoption of a penitentiary system, the promotion of domestic manufactures, and the establishment of public schools.

A penitentiary bill had been rejected during the previous legislature but Smith revived the issue. Having sought information about Virginia's state penitentiary system during the interim, he informed the legislature that their northern neighbor had earned net profits of $43,000 from its penitentiary over the past two and a half years and that the keeper of the Virginia institution was willing to come to North Carolina to assist in erecting a penitentiary. Although a small tax would be necessary to support the system until it became self-sufficient, it would be a "trifling sum" compared to an effort "of such vast importance in the cause of Humanity" which would help to reform "the too sanguinary Criminal Code" of the state that had derived from Great Britain during the colonial era.

The governor waxed as eloquently when considering education. "Too much attention cannot be paid to the all-important subject of Education," he said. In despotic governments the ignorance of the people was a boon to the rulers, but in a free government an informed populace was needed for the preservation of the government and the liberty of the people. Thus, "A certain degree of Education should be placed within the reach of every Child within the
State." A plan for that purpose, "formed upon economical principles," and reaching the poor of every neighborhood, could be effected at a small expense compared with "the incalculable benefits derived from such a philanthropic and political system." In a revealing commentary on the nature of North Carolina society, Smith concluded that schools would instruct future generations in the true principles of Christian Religion and thereby "prevent the multiplicity of crime now too frequently perpetrated in the country."

Many other matters occupied Smith's attention, including the need for a chancery court in the state's judicial system, the boundary dispute with South Carolina and Georgia, and the improvement of manufacturing within North Carolina. Finally, there were the "Portentous and threatening clouds" which darkened the political horizon. The nation had too long borne the indignities heaped upon it by the belligerents of Europe, Britain and France. The time had come to make a determined stand, free of "all foreign partialities or prejudices," against nations that treated the United States so unjustly. Support the government and President, discard party bickering, and promote harmony and good, counseled Smith.

The need to protect the nation's honor and to prepare for the eventuality of war provided the governor with an excellent entree into his admittedly favorite subject—the militia. It was the strongest pillar of national liberty and security. While the use and necessity of national troops were undeniable, a properly trained militia could achieve brilliant victories as had occurred at King's Mountain and in many other confrontations during the American Revolution. Give the militia arms and good leadership, and they would demonstrate the "bravery and zeal...necessary to achieve great and glorious actions." On "this favorite object of improving the Militia," the "rock of defense," Smith promised further remarks in a separate communication to the legislature.

The governor must have been disappointed at the results of the 1811 legislative session. Of twenty-three statutes dealing with public affairs, including one that deemed stills personal rather than real estate, none dealt with education, a penitentiary, domestic manufactures, or a chancery court. An inauspicious law relating to the militia only permitted the officers of the respective county units to alter the places for holding regimental and battalion musters. Smith's proposed reforms, while commendable, were premature, as witnessed by the institution of a public school system only in 1839 and the appearance of a penitentiary during the Reconstruction years that followed the Civil War. After Smith left office he closed his political career by acting as a justice of the peace of Brunswick County and as a state senator from the county for a last term in 1816. However, his last years were clouded by financial troubles. During the newspaper war in 1799, one of Smith's critics had alluded to his entanglement "in a labyrinth of perplexing embarrassments from which all his adroitness and cunning [could] scarcely extricate him." Perhaps that was a reference to the General's assumption of a debt for a Colonel Reed, collector of the port of Wilmington and a friend who owed money to the United States government. Smith, a surety for Reed, became responsible for the obligation when Reed defaulted.

The General attempted to meet the demands of the government by agreeing to rebuild Fort Johnston as well as by assisting in the formulation of plans for a more appropriate defense of the Lower Cape Fear. After going to Charleston in 1802 to gain a better understanding of the tapia work needed to refurbish the fort, Smith went to Washington, D.C. in 1804 to outline his defense proposals to the national authorities. He suggested the erection of a small fort on the east end of Oak Island to defend the entrance to the Cape Fear River, the construction of a battery on Federal Point to protect New Inlet, and the completion of the work already begun on Fort Johnston.

Although the War Department directed Smith to confine his endeavors to Fort Johnston, the General subsequently proved unable to meet the terms of his contract. By 1806, Joseph G. Swift, commander of Fort Johnston and supervisor of its reconstruction, realized that Smith would never complete the fort, and the government shortly relieved Smith of his task. However, in a revealing commentary upon the General, those who assumed his contract rather quickly completed the renovation project. Although Smith made other arrangements with the government, including the mortgaging of his rice lands along the Cape Fear, to secure the Reed bond, the combination of his indebtedness, sumptuous living, and speculation overreached even his bountiful financial resources. Most secondary accounts commonly attribute Smith's downfall to his surety status on the defaulted Reed bond, but a contemporary, Mrs. George [Eliza] Clitherall, stated that it was "The spirit of speculation...which entirely impoverished this once wealthy owner of vast territory and wealth."

By the turn of the nineteenth century the General began to plead with creditors to postpone their demands to allow him more time to settle his accounts, and after 1806, he started to alienate his assets, selling slaves, plantation lands, and property in Wilmington. Eventually Smith lost almost all, including Belvedere, Blue Banks, Orton, and Bald Head Island. When Joseph G. Swift, a long-time friend of the General, visited Smith and his wife in 1818, he recorded in his diary, "The pleasure of our reminiscences were clouded by the failing fortunes of the General." They had a "bottle of the nearly consumed stock of old sherry, with which, and blue perch...they used to regale in more prosperous days."

Eight years later, in 1826, the General died. He was a virtual pauper, dependent upon the compassion and care of Dr. and Mrs. Clitherall in Smithville. Few lamented his financial reverses and sad passing. Eliza Clitherall reported that he "was hated all around." The General helped but little. He bore his losses stoically, and to the end "indomitable Pride" characterized his reaction to his ultimate fate.

Yet, Smith was a highly patriotic Carolinian whose civic spirit and honorable intentions were undeniable. While political and military office satisfied inner, personal needs for recognition, such service also reflected Smith's perceived obligation to promote the common weal. He was a man of vision, ahead of his times in his support for education, particularly public education, and a state penitentiary. He served far longer than any other early trustee of the University of North Carolina, never wavering in his support of the institution despite its political turmoil and sometimes uncharitable attitude toward himself. His interest in advanced farming techniques placed him in the vanguard of the agricultural progressives of the state. Altogether, Smith reflected the best and to some extent the less admirable characteristics of the Southern gentleman in the early days of the national Republic.
FOOTNOTES

1. This and the following paragraph are based upon the Wilmington Gazette, April 4, 1799.
2. This and the following two paragraphs are based upon the Wilmington Gazette, April 12, 1799.
3. This and the following paragraph are based upon the Wilmington Gazette, June 13, Aug. 8, 1799.

7. Wilmington Gazette, July 14, 1807.
10. Smith to the Major Generals, July 25, 1807, Governors Papers, XXXI, 418.
15. Raleigh Register, Jan. 31, Feb. 14, Mar. 7, 1811. It was noteworthy that William Hawkins, upon his election as governor to succeed Smith, informed the legislature that "he meant to make his residence at the Seat of Government, so that all who had business with the Governor might know where he might be met with." Ibid., Dec. 13, 1811.
16. This and the following four paragraphs are based upon the governors address to the legislature, House of Commons Journal, 1811, 4-6. Smith has been viewed as one of the early "progressive" governors of North Carolina, anticipating social reform programs that materialized a quarter century or more in the future. See Samuel A. Ashe, History of North Carolina (Raleigh, 2 Vols., 1908, 1925), II, 212.
17. Raleigh Register, Dec. 27, 1811. Perhaps assessing his feelings was Smith's selection as a trustee of the Raleigh Academy and, as governor, his presiding over the meetings of the Board of Trustees of the University of North Carolina. Ibid., Jan. 3, 1811.
23. Diary of Eliza Clitherrall, VI, 6; Raleigh Register, Feb. 17, 1826.

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