

CAPTAIN ALEXANDER EDWARD SMITH

By Paul Gettys

Captain Smith, who was almost always referred to as A. E. Smith, was born on June 7, 1844 in Richmond County, North Carolina, the third son of John Calvin Smith and Miriam McNair Smith. He served as a young man in the Confederate Army. He was an officer in the 18th North Carolina Infantry, serving under Maj. Thomas J. Wooten.

In *The City Without Cobwebs*, author Douglas Summers Brown has an extended description of Captain Smith's service in the war and his subsequent activities:

“Of Captain A. E. Smith, of Scotch descent, we know that he was one of the early merchants of Rock Hill. In the early years he served as Intendant – or Mayor – without pay, and for several terms he was secretary and treasurer of the city schools. During the war, Captain Smith served as one of Stonewall Jackson's scouts and was one of the group of soldiers who shot Jackson by mistake when the General had ridden down the road in the gathering darkness on the day of one of the greatest Confederate victories – Chancellorsville. Smith never ceased to grieve about his part in the great tragedy, for he, like all of Jackson's men, idolized him.

Captain Smith was also present at the fatal shooting of General A. P. Hill near Petersburg, and often related his experience at that time. General Hill, he said, came down the public road and stopped and inquired of him as to the movements of the enemy. The young scout informed him that the Federals had broken the line and were pushing on toward the Appomattox River. Upon hearing this disastrous news, General Hill plunged forward to join the main body of his corps, when the enemy fired and killed him instantly. Captain Smith always believed that he was the last man to hear the voice of General Hill, who fell only a few yards from where he was stationed. These and other experiences in battle left a deep mark upon Captain Smith. In fact, shortly before he died, he seemed to have his thoughts upon those days, for once he exclaimed, ‘I must get on to the front!’

His fearlessness was renowned. Once in the troubled years of the Reconstruction period a crowd gathered on Main Street to witness an exciting scene. A desperado who was armed was resisting arrest. The arresting officer hesitated, not wanting to

use extreme measures, so at last someone asked the trouble-maker if he would allow anyone in the crowd to arrest him. He answered, 'I will let Captain Smith, if he comes unarmed.' Without a moment's wavering, Smith stepped forward and accepted the challenge and by his bravery probably averted a tragedy."¹

After his service in the war, we have no information on his life until he moved to Rock Hill in 1879 to enter the mercantile business. Shortly before, he was married in Bennettsville in 1877 to Janie Robeson Dudley. She was born May 23, 1847 in Marlboro County and was the daughter of Christopher William Dudley and Rebecca Powe Robeson.² For the next 30 years, Captain and Mrs. Smith were important leaders in the development of the commercial, cultural, religious, and educational life of Rock Hill.

In 1880, a commercial lot was purchased on Main Street in the name of Mrs. A. E. Smith. A new building was constructed in 1881 for the A. E. Smith mercantile company. It is believed that this first building for Smith's store was located near the corner of Main and Caldwell Streets.³ On November 24 of that year, it was stated that "The new brick buildings recently erected on East Main Street by A. E. Smith, B. N. Craig & Co., and Frew Brothers are now completed and occupied by the respective proprietors."⁴ In that same year, an ad appeared in the *Rock Hill Herald* for his mercantile company, which is described as a successor to Smith & McLauren. It described the business as a dealer in general merchandise and groceries and stated, "Thanking the public for their generous and liberal patronage in the past. I hope by offering good value, fair dealing, prompt attention to detail to their wants to merit a continuation of the same. A. E. Smith."⁵ Evidently, A. E. Smith had partnered with a Mr. McLauren in his early commercial efforts in Rock Hill. In 1885, a new firm was organized with partners A. E. Smith, T. P. Roddey, and Frel Mobley. This firm was called A. E. Smith & Company, indicating that Captain Smith was the lead partner, and it occupied the same building as the old business. The business grew, and was described in 1890 as "general merchants who do a very large and lucrative business and occupy a handsome and roomy store. Mr. Smith is the state agent for the Catawba Indians, whose reservation is about seven miles from the City."⁶ The goods offered by the company were described by many advertisements in the local newspapers. For example, in August 1897, the A. E. Smith & Company advertised "Have you bought your mid-summer

¹ Douglas Summers Brown, *A City Without Cobwebs: A History of Rock Hill, South Carolina*. Columbia: USC Press, 1953, pages 131-132.

² William B. White, Jr., *Along the Land's Ford Road: A History of the Ante-Bellum Village of Rock Hill, South Carolina, 1850-1860*, Volume II. Rock Hill: Published by Historic Rock Hill, 2008, page 230.

³ Brown, page 134.

⁴ *Rock Hill Herald*, November 24, 1881.

⁵ *Rock Hill Herald*, November 17, 1881.

⁶ *Charleston News and Courier*, June 7, 1890.

dress? Have you bought your summer parasol? The Old Reliable, A. E. Smith & Co.”⁷ At some point, Smith’s business relocated farther west on Main Street.

This firm continued until 1898, when the Smith-Fewell Company was organized. Partners in this firm included A. E. Smith, J. W. O’Neal, B. M. Fewell, and J. B. Sykes. The new partnership was capitalized at \$35,000. An article stated, “All these gentlemen are well-known to the trading public, and for years the three named first [Smith, O’Neal, and Fewell] have been engaged as heads of successful [business] houses in our city. They will make a strong firm...”⁸ The stores of Smith and O’Neal were merged, and a new store building at 117 East Main Street was being built. This building was necessitated by a great fire which swept through the downtown area of Rock Hill on April 3, 1898. It destroyed a number of buildings from Trade Street east to the A. E. Smith Building.⁹ The firm was a general merchandise company, offering dry goods, groceries, and home supplies. On October 29, 1898, the Smith-Fewell Company advertised that they had completed their building and were ready to open with a complete fall stock of merchandise.¹⁰ In 1907, the Smith-Fewell Company sold the dry goods part of its business to E. E. Cloud but continued to operate in the grocery and supply business.¹¹ The next year, the Smith-Fewell Company was listed in the City Directory under the ownership of W. B. Dunlap, I. B. Dunlap, and H. M. Dunlap, so it had evidently been sold by the partners. This ended a period of about thirty years during which A. E. Smith had been involved in the mercantile business on Main Street in Rock Hill. Several years later the Smith Building was leased by the Efirds Department Store chain.¹²

Smith was also involved in a number of other investments during his career. In 1888, he became a director of the new Standard Cotton Mill.¹³ This was the second mill opened in Rock Hill, and later became the Highland Park Mill. The next year, Smith was a director of the newly created Globe Mill.¹⁴ This mill operated for several years until it was reorganized as the Victoria Cotton Mill. In 1898, A. E. Smith was an investor in the new Commercial and Farmers Bank and was listed as Vice-President and a member of the Board. This bank was being capitalized with \$80,000 in stock. In addition to Smith, other officers included A. H. White, President, R. Lee Kerr, Cashier, and George D. White, Assistant Cashier.¹⁵ In 1900, Smith became an investor in

⁷ *Rock Hill Herald*, August 21, 1897.

⁸ *Rock Hill Herald*, August 27, 1898.

⁹ Louise Pettus, “Rock Hill’s Fire of 1898.” Published in the *Quarterly* of the York County genealogical and Historical Society.

¹⁰ *Rock Hill Herald*, October 29, 1898.

¹¹ *Rock Hill Record*, July 254, 1907.

¹² *Rock Hill Record*, March 26, 1913.

¹³ Lynn Willoughby, *The Good Town Does Well: Rock Hill, S. C., 1852-2002*. Published by the Rock Hill Sesquicentennial Committee, 2002, page 75.

¹⁴ Willoughby, page 75.

¹⁵ *Rock Hill Herald*, November 23, 1898.

the Crescent Cotton Mill. This was a reorganization of the Rock Hill Cotton Factory, the first textile mill in town. In all of these ventures, Captain Smith would have been an investor to earn a seat on the board of directors. In 1908, Smith was involved in another enterprise after having left the mercantile business. He was the owner of the Rock Hill Broom Works, located at 911 East White Street. The *Rock Hill Record* reported that the “Editor visited the Rock Hill Broom Works. Their capacity is 100 dozen brooms per day, including regular brooms, whist brooms, and hearth brooms. The plant is in a three-story building. There is a basement for storing broom corn and a brick warehouse where the finished stock is kept, including a shipping department. Captain Smith says business is good and includes some mail orders. Most brooms are sold to customers in South Carolina.”¹⁶ The City Directory for 1908 lists the Rock Hill Broom Works with Alex. E. Smith as Proprietor. The company is no longer listed in the 1913 City Directory.

It has not been determined where the Smiths lived when they first moved to Rock Hill. In July, 1895, the *Rock Hill Herald* reported that “Captain A. E. Smith has let a contract to William Mitchell to build a dwelling on the east side of Main Street on the corner lot, southeast of the residence of Mr. A. F. Ruff. The house will be of modern design of eleven rooms.”¹⁷ From another report, we can learn that the Smiths previously lived on East White Street. The *Rock Hill Herald* reported in January 1896 that Dr. W. A. Pressly secured the Captain A. E. Smith’s former home on East White Street.¹⁸ The Smith’s new home was located at 503 East Main Street, on the corner of Spruce Street. Shortly after moving in, the Smiths had a well dug to a depth of 125 feet.¹⁹ There was no city water service available at this point. The family is listed at 503 East Main Street in the City Directories for 1908, 1913, and 1920. After Captain Smith’s death in 1917, Mrs. Smith offered the house for sale in 1919 for a price of \$10,000.²⁰ By 1922, she had moved to 126 Spruce Street to live with her son Walter and his wife. This house was located just behind the Main Street home.

Both Captain and Mrs. Smith were deeply involved in the cultural life of Rock Hill. They were active members of First Presbyterian Church, where Captain Smith served as Superintendent of the Sunday School for a number of years and as an elder. He commanded the Catawba Rifles, the local militia company, for nearly twenty years. He worked closely with Rev. James Spratt White in the efforts to organize a public library and public school for Rock Hill. They raised funds and opened the first library about 1887.²¹ The Rock Hill Graded School was initiated in 1887 and opened in 1888. This was the first publicly supported school in Rock Hill. Captain Smith worked tirelessly to make the school a reality, and served as Secretary to the school’s

¹⁶ *Rock Hill Record*, April 23, 1908.

¹⁷ *Rock Hill Herald*, July 20, 1895.

¹⁸ *Rock Hill Herald*, January 8, 1896.

¹⁹ *Rock Hill Herald*, February 1, 1896.

²⁰ *Rock Hill Herald*, July 18, 1919.

²¹ White, page 230.

Board of Trustees for 25 years.²² During this time, the school system evolved to become an extensive system of public schools. He also served as agent for the Catawba Indian Nation, in which position he was responsible for the relations between the tribe and the state and for distributing the funds made available to the Catawbas from the state. He was also involved for a number of years in the effort to create a new Catawba County with Rock Hill as the county seat. Captain Smith's political service included two terms as Intendant, or Mayor, of Rock Hill, serving from 1884 to 1880 and from 1888 to 1890.²³

Janie Smith was a cultural leader as well. She graduated from the Limestone Seminary in 1864 during a period when few young ladies had a formal education.²⁴ When she came to Rock Hill, she was described as "A young woman of strong intellectual power, she early gathered around her a circle of intimate friends, kindred spirits, who found pleasure and profit in working for the improvement of the social, intellectual, civic, and church life of the community."²⁵ She was known as the "Mother of Clubs" in Rock Hill. She led in the organization of the Perihelion Club, one of the oldest in the state. Other clubs she helped to found include the Keystone Club and the Castalion Study Club, which she sponsored in 1901 for Winthrop College girls. She helped to found the City Union, a coalition of the various women's clubs in Rock Hill, and served as Vice-President. Janie was also one of the leaders in the organization of the South Carolina Federation of Women's Clubs. In 1914, she founded and served as first president of the Juliette Symphony, which later became known as the Rock Hill Music Club. She was active in the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) and won the state prize for the best poem from the UDC in 1927.²⁶ Mrs. Smith was also involved in the welfare of young people, awarding prizes to students who excelled in study of local and national history. She had many positions of leadership in the First Presbyterian Church. Rev. Alexander Sprunt served as minister from 1892-1901 and was known for his scholarly sermons. Mrs. Smith was known to joke, "Dr. Sprunt can go down the deepest, stay down the longest, and come up the driest of any preacher I have ever heard."²⁷

Captain and Mrs. Smith had five sons. One son, Alexander, died in infancy. Dudley H. Smith was born in 1875, Walter Latta Smith in 1882, Raymond Smith in 1889, and Albion Smith in 1892. The two younger sons, Raymond and Albion, served in World War I, and Albion went on to a career in the Army, serving in various locations, including Hawaii for a number of years.

²² Brown, page 208.

²³ Brown, pages 157 and 158.

²⁴ The Seminary, founded in 1845, was the first women's college in South Carolina. It was the precursor to Limestone College, a Christian liberal arts college in Gaffney, S. C.

²⁵ White, page 230.

²⁶ Mrs. Smith's club activities are described in a number of sources, including White, Brown, and Willoughby.

²⁷ Willoughby, page 131, quoting Rosa Baskin Strait Guess.

The oldest, Dudley, became a physician and spent his career in Florence, S. C. Raymond became a mining engineer and worked in the American west as well as in South America.²⁸

Walter Latta Smith was the only son who remained in Rock Hill. When his father died in 1917, Walter was listed as living in Charlotte. He registered for the World War I draft in September 1918 in St. Louis and listed his employment with the U. S. Department of Labor as an Examiner in Richmond, Virginia. On the form, he listed his nearest relative as his mother at 503 East Main Street in Rock Hill, so he was evidently not yet married.²⁹ Soon after, he married Annie Whitmire of Greenville, and by 1920 they were living at 126 Spruce Street. This house may have been built on the rear section of the Smith family home lot that faced East Main Street. In 1920, Walter was the proprietor of the Peoples Tire and Rubber Company, which offered auto tires, tubes, and supplies and was located at 107 South Trade Street. In 1922, he was operating Smith Service Station, located at the corner of North Trade and White Streets.³⁰ In later City Directories, during the Depression, Walter Smith is listed as a farmer, but still lived at 126 Spruce Street. As far as can be determined, Walter and Annie did not have children. Their house on Spruce Street was known as “Blue Bird Cottage.” After Walter’s mother sold the Main Street home, she lived with Walter and Annie. In the obituary for Walter’s mother, it is stated that Walter and Annie devoted their lives to her care in her last years.³¹

As stated earlier, Captain A. E. Smith died on June 5, 1917 just a few days before his 73rd birthday. Janie Dudley Smith lived for another decade following her husband’s death. She was visiting her relatives in Bennettsville in March 1929 when she became ill and died within a few days at the age of 82. Her son Walter and his wife went to Bennettsville and brought her body back to Rock Hill.³² Funerals for both A. E. Smith and Janie were held at First Presbyterian Church and they are buried at Laurelwood Cemetery in Rock Hill. Walter L. Smith died in 1945 and is also buried at Laurelwood.

²⁸ Information on the sons from *Rock Hill Herald*, June 5, 1917, the *Rock Hill Record*, March 4, 1929 and from White, page 230.

²⁹ World War I registration card, September 16, 1918.

³⁰ Information from the *City Directory for Rock Hill*, 1920 and 1922.

³¹ *Rock Hill Record*, March 4, 1929.

³² *Rock Hill Record*, March 4, 1929.

