

RECREATING JAMES SMITH AT THE PENNSYLVANIA STATE  
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James Smith lived a remarkable life, or so we are told. In 1799, he published an autobiography titled *An Account of the Remarkable Occurrences in the Life and Travels of Colonel James Smith*. Smith's autobiography begins in 1755, when as a teenager he enlisted in a militia to help ward off the attacks of French-allied Indians during the Seven Years' War. Captured while working on a road in the Pennsylvania backcountry, he was adopted by an Indian family and traveled throughout Indian Country. Upon his return, he led an extralegal band of frontier settlers called the Black Boys who harassed Indian traders traveling west and laid siege to Fort Loudon in 1765. During the American Revolution, Smith served as a delegate to Pennsylvania's Constitutional Convention and a member of the Assembly. Preferring to serve in the military rather than the legislature, he joined the Continental Army, served under Washington, and, later, led militia units in western Pennsylvania. After the war, he traveled to Kentucky where he served once again in the legislature.<sup>1</sup>

Smith's autobiography has served as the basis for a historical novel, a John Wayne movie, and a museum at Fort Loudon in western Pennsylvania. Historians, for the most part, have ignored Smith's life until recently. Within the past decade or so, Smith's exploits have begun to play an integral role in historians' interpretations of western Pennsylvania. James Merrell mentions Smith in *Into the American Woods* as an example of "former prisoners [who] used what they had learned from Indians against those Indians." In *Taming Democracy*, Terry Bouton sees "Black Boy Jimmy" (a nickname I have not located in the historical record) as a part of a broader popular mobilization that shaped the American Revolution within Pennsylvania. Gregory Evans Dowd chronicles his exploits as leader of the Black Boys and a popular figure within Pennsylvania's society in *War Under Heaven*. The Black Boys also appear in Patrick Griffin's *American Leviathan* and Peter Silver's *Our Savage Neighbor*.<sup>2</sup>

To varying degree, most of these historians rely on Smith's personal narrative for information about his life. But what if Smith was a fabulist and his

autobiography a work of historical fiction rather than reality? Luckily for historians, much of Smith's life can be confirmed in other sources, many of which are available at the State Archives in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The following account of Smith's life is based largely upon sources from this archive and is by no means exhaustive, as it excludes other relevant documents available at the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Clements Library, and David Library of the American Revolution. Nonetheless, the documents available at the State Archives provide a clear picture of Smith's life in Pennsylvania and help to either confirm or revise his own account. The research that led to this article was made possible by the Scholars-in-Residence program funded by the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. Both Jonathan Stayer and Linda Ries provided much-needed advice and support in finding many of the documents and collections cited in this article.<sup>3</sup>

On July 5, 1755, James Burd, commissioner of Pennsylvania roads during the Seven Years' War, dashed off a letter to Pennsylvania's lieutenant governor, Robert Hunter Morris. Burd was overseeing the construction of a new road that would serve as an important part of Pennsylvania's defense against French and Indian raids. Burd had pushed the road to the Allegheny Mountains, where he encountered "a very great dilemma." The French and their Indian allies had realized the roads were a key part of Great Britain's strategy of defense and for reclaiming lost ground, and they had begun to harass the builders.<sup>4</sup>

There were numerous provisions depots along this road, and James Smith served at one of these in July 1755 under the command of Robert McCay. Seven Pennsylvanians manned the outpost, which was nothing more than an abandoned house. One day, low on provisions, McCay sent teenaged James Smith down the road "to hurry up the cattle and wagons" rumored to be en route. On his way to the wagons, Smith encountered Arnold Vigorous, an employee of Adam Hoops, one of the main suppliers of goods to the military. Both Smith and Vigorous traveled to the wagons, told them to hurry along, and then departed to report back to McCay.<sup>5</sup>

When the wagons arrived at McCay's outpost, no one had heard from Smith and Vigorous. McCay quickly dispatched scouting parties. They eventually found Vigorous shot twice and scalped, but the only sign of Smith was his hat. Scouting parties continued to search for Smith, but to no avail. Smith's brother-in-law and justice of the peace for Cumberland County, William Smith, was at the fort and helped in the search. When it was determined Smith had been captured, William had to deliver the troubling news to Smith's family and friends in Cumberland County. Smith's *Remarkable*

*Account* described the circumstances of his capture similarly, although he did not know of the subsequent search. Smith even recounted the name of the man killed. The only discrepancy was in his age: Smith claimed to be eighteen, but his superior thought he was sixteen.<sup>6</sup>

According to his memoirs, Smith was released sometime in 1760 in an exchange. Various sources list his length of captivity as four and a half to five years, which largely confirms the timeline of his own account. Smith made his way back to western Pennsylvania. He wrote that during Pontiac's War he headed a local militia supported by community subscriptions. There are numerous accounts of localities raising money to pay local men to provide additional protection, just as how Smith described. These ad hoc militias left few records, so it is difficult to verify Smith's claims, although they seem very possible. He claimed to have received a lieutenant's commission in Henry Bouquet's British forces in 1764 and served in the offensive against Indians. There is no record of Smith as a lieutenant, but a James Smith appeared as an ensign in Pennsylvania's Second Battalion stationed in western Pennsylvania that served under Bouquet.<sup>7</sup>

Smith also appears in the midst of Pontiac's Rebellion in a form historians have largely overlooked. In the winter of 1763, a group calling themselves the Paxton Boys launched a series of raids on the Conestoga Indians living near Lancaster, killing everyone. Shortly after the massacre, hundreds of settlers from Cumberland and Lancaster Counties marched to Philadelphia to protest the government's Indian policies, which they deemed too lax. There is no evidence Smith participated in these events, nor did he claim to have done so.

But he did play a tangential role. In the months that followed, dozens of pamphlets were published either supporting the marchers or castigating the Paxton Boys. One of the main arguments that defenders of the Paxton Boys marshaled was that the Conestogas were not Pennsylvania's allies but had been secretly aiding enemy Indians during the Seven Years' War and Pontiac's Rebellion. One of these pamphlets, *The Conduct of the Paxton Men Impartially Represented*, was written by Thomas Barton, a prominent Anglican minister in Lancaster. Barton, who defended the Paxton Boys, mentioned Smith as evidence of Indian depravity. According to Barton, James Smith had often recounted his years in captivity, describing the "mangled bodies" of white settlers at Indian hands and how he witnessed "even the gentlest of the savages" performing these "horrid cruelties." The pamphlet also mentions that Smith's parents were from Chester, a bit of context that casts his trek west as

part of a larger flow of young men who sought greater landed opportunity and economic independence through expansion. The inclusion of Smith's captivity story in Barton's pamphlet suggests that Smith's exploits were already widely known in Pennsylvania society well before the publication of his memoirs in 1799, and his tales fit within a burgeoning narrative on the Pennsylvania frontier of Indian wartime depravity.<sup>8</sup>

Smith next appears in the historical record in March 1765, as the leader of the Black Boys. Printed accounts of this group and its activities are extensive. The published *Pennsylvania Archives* and *Minutes of the Provincial Council* contain letters, affidavits, and other documents relating to this uprising. Smith's own account and those contained in these printed sources have served as the basis for much of the historical interpretation of this event. To briefly summarize, from about March 1765 until December 1765 a group of settlers banded together to obstruct trade with Indians, harass British military officials they viewed as supporting this trade, and implement their own extralegal customs regime for all goods heading west. The initial episode, in which Smith and his followers painted themselves black, held up a wagon train and destroyed goods intended for Indian treaties. In the following months, numerous groups stopped goods traveling west and set up an ad hoc inspections regime. The episode culminated in a two-day siege of Fort Loudon that ended with the British military giving up guns that they had seized from the Black Boys.<sup>9</sup>

The Pennsylvania State Archives in Harrisburg holds a variety of sources that provide additional details on the events surrounding the Black Boys. The Papers of Thomas Gage, available on microfilm at the Archives, include reports from subordinates of Gage, traders, prominent settlers, and other imperial officials in the area. Many of these documents are not in the published records. There are also a number of unprinted affidavits, alluded to in printed sources, that expose the course of criminal proceedings against the Black Boys.<sup>10</sup>

Soon after the Black Boys formed, lieutenant governor John Penn traveled to Carlisle to meet with settlers and hold an inquiry into the matter. He convened a grand jury to indict the Black Boys for destruction of property. Almost no record of these proceedings exists in the published archives. The affidavits and letters in Gage's Papers provide insight on the proceedings and testimony of witnesses. Among those testifying was William Smith, Smith's brother-in-law and local justice of the peace, whose testimony in the Gage Papers provides some of the only contemporary statements from participants

in the Black Boys' actions. Smith explained how the Black Boys mobilized to stop "warlike stores" from going to Indians. The *Papers of Henry Bouquet* contains a petition that makes a similar argument. For the most part, James Smith's brother-in-law William has been seen as a minor character in the uprising, but based on documents at the Archives, William Smith played a much larger role. For instance, he called his house Fort Smith because of its centrality as a meeting place for the Black Boys. The affidavits not only elucidate the court proceedings, they also allow historians to piece together a better timeline of events and identify members of the Black Boys. For instance, an affidavit from William Maxwell identified a group of German-speakers who raided a secret stash of ammunition, demonstrating how the action transcended ethnic boundaries.<sup>11</sup>

The Pennsylvania State Archives also hold an intriguing land survey for a James Smith drawn in 1766 near where the Black Boys operated and very close to where the first Black Boys action happened. The survey identifies a plot of land laid out for Robert McRea, who could be the same person as the Robert McCay, under whom Smith served in the Seven Years' War. According to this draft, Smith's land abutted Licking Creek, which today is in Fulton County, and appears to have been on the west side of Sideling Hill, which is where the Black Boys first attacked the traders' wagons. Smith's autobiography recounts marrying in 1764. Although there is no hint as to where he lived at that time other than around Fort Loudon, the circumstantial evidence surrounding this survey suggests that this property may have been where he and his family lived.<sup>12</sup>

Smith's autobiography recounts two events in 1769, one of which is not only verified by the records at the State Archives in Harrisburg but also clarified by the sources available there. The other has yet to be verified by historians. The unverifiable event is a supposed raid on Fort Bedford that Smith led to rescue men that had been, in his view, unjustifiably arrested. The account that is further illuminated is Smith's trial for murdering a man near Bedford in September 1769. The details on the murder trial that emerge from these sources also provide some extremely circumstantial evidence that Smith's Fort Bedford raid may also have happened.

This is what we know about the murder trial. On September 20, 1769, James Smith was traveling west towards Fort Pitt. His route took him past Fort Bedford. While on the road, a group of men acting on the orders of Captain Robert Callender tried to arrest him. Callender, perhaps not coincidentally, had been a target of the Black Boys in 1765. Although the

precise reasons for the arrest are unclear, a raid on Fort Bedford earlier in the year might well have been among them, perhaps even providing a pretext for Callender to act according to personal inclination. One of the undisputed facts about the encounter is that Smith took a side road to avoid traveling through Bedford, which his captors claimed was evidence of his guilt. If Smith had led a raid on Fort Bedford earlier that year, his avoidance of the town would certainly make sense. Smith, for his part, claimed that he chose his route simply out of convenience.<sup>13</sup>

In any case, there was a confrontation when the men attempted to arrest Smith. Shots were fired, and John Johnston, an innocent bystander, was killed. Smith's captors accused him of the murder, and he was brought to the prison in Carlisle. Smith admitted to discharging his weapon but claimed that the shot that hit Johnston came from one of his captors. In his autobiography, Smith reported that former Black Boys banded together to spring him from jail, an account that is verified by letters published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. The arrest and trial of Smith captured the attention of the colony, as numerous letters were published in Pennsylvania newspapers either accusing Smith of murder or advocating his innocence. Smith was eventually acquitted by a jury.

In Smith's autobiography, he alludes to "corroborating circumstances" that helped lead to his acquittal but gives little evidence about the trial itself. The details of the trial can be found in the Cumberland County Court Records available at the Pennsylvania State Archives, however, and in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*. These records not only shed light on the "corroborating circumstances" but also the nature of evidence and trials in the 1760s. What becomes apparent through an examination of the sources is that even though Cumberland County was considered a "frontier county," its justice system operated with sophistication and relied heavily on evidentiary rules.

The records at the State Archives include a list of the jurors who acquitted Smith, as well as the evidence entered that led to his acquittal. Witnesses testified that they heard two shots go off from different weapons, thus bolstering Smith's case that one of his assailants fired the gun that killed Johnston. A key piece of evidence came from someone who viewed the body afterwards and claimed that the shirt had gunpowder residue on it. This evidence could be used to show that the shot came from close range, which according to other testimony meant it could not have come from Smith, who stood about twenty-three feet away from Johnston during the confrontation. The jury even recreated the scene and fired weapons to see if gunpowder resi-

due would be left from that distance and determined it could not be. Finally, according to George Woods, who was one of Smith's captors, the dying man accused Woods and his party—not Smith—of shooting him.

Smith was acquitted in November 1769. He continued to live in Pennsylvania and appears to have moved further west in the 1770s, as he was elected from Westmoreland County to the convention that framed a new state Constitution in 1776. He left politics to serve in the Continental Army. After joining the army, Smith petitioned George Washington for release so he could serve at Fort Pitt as a militia leader to fight Indians. Smith exerted his influence amongst Pennsylvania officials to back his request, which appears to have been granted sometime in the winter of 1777. Smith's petitions cite his "five years among the Indians" to show that he was "many years acquainted with their Method of fighting which he was engag'd in repelling their Invasions on our Frontiers in the late War" as evidence for why he should be allowed to "raise a Battalion" of men to fight Indians in the west using the "Indian Method of fighting."<sup>14</sup>

Smith appears to have led a company of men near Fort Pitt throughout the early years of the Revolution. Various references to him can be found in scattered collections at the Pennsylvania State Archives. For instance, the Bedford County Militia Records, which hold an enormous amount of revolutionary war-related documents, including committee minutes, contain letters that refer to Smith. The Revolutionary Government Records also contain letters to and from Smith, as well as letters that reference Smith. What becomes clear is that Smith was an active figure in western militia operations for a number of years, much as he claims in his autobiography.<sup>15</sup>

There seems to be little mention of James Smith after the war in Pennsylvania records, however, perhaps because he moved to Kentucky. An account of his life in Kentucky has yet to be pieced together by historians, but by his own account he established himself there after the war, serving in the legislature and becoming so well-known that people asked that he publish his memoirs.

The above accounting of Smith's life largely confirms his own story. In many cases, the primary sources accessible at the State Archives in Harrisburg provide important additional context and sometimes even add new information on Smith and the events in which he participated. I did not intend to excavate Smith's life during my time at the State Archives, but I was drawn to him as I began to notice how often he appeared in a variety of documents and realized his relevance to my dissertation project. It is



likely that if someone searched for Smith even more pointedly, they would find even more information at the State Archives. This recreation of Smith's life, pulled from land records, county court records, official government correspondence, private letters, and printed sources, all of which are available at the State Archives, is but a sample—admittedly incomplete—of the type of research made possible by the rich and extensive resources in Harrisburg. Such a range of sources available in a single location allows researchers a rare opportunity to use a single repository to recreate the varied experiences of Pennsylvanians in the colonial, revolutionary, and early national eras.

These primary sources also make Smith's life more emblematic than remarkable. Smith's experiences reflect broader social changes in Pennsylvania's west after the Seven Years' War. During the war, Pennsylvania mobilized militarily for the first time. Many in western areas came to know the fear of Indian war acutely and began to view Indians with a deep hostility. Even after peace was established, western Pennsylvanians saw Native Americans as perpetual enemies and came to see their government as disconnected from their needs. As Smith recounted in his autobiography, Pennsylvania being "a Quaker government . . . the frontiers received no assistance." As an enlisted teenager in the Seven Years' War to an adopted captive among Indians to participating in extralegal ranging companies to launching raids into Indian Country during the Revolutionary War, Smith was one actor amongst many. Even the Black Boys appear to be less about James Smith than about a larger political movement. The tradition of ad hoc, local militias begun in the Seven Years' War made mobilizations like the Black Boys possible. The records suggest that his brother-in-law played a central—and often-overlooked—role in the movement. The depositions also suggest that German settlers also took part, making the movement a broad social one rather than the product of an individual leader. Moreover, letters from traders and British Army officers suggest that there were numerous ad hoc bands operating throughout western Pennsylvania. Thus, Smith's life appears to be more illustrative than extraordinary. But the representative nature of Smith's life, and its subsequent utility to students of history, is made possible only by having access to archives like those in Harrisburg that can help illuminate the society in which Smith lived and the events in which he participated. If we had only Smith's printed autobiography, not only would the truthfulness of his account be suspect but these larger stories would be impossible to tell.



## NOTES

1. James Smith, *An Account of the Remarkable Occurrences in the Life and Travels of Colonel James Smith* (Lexington, Ky.: John Bradford, 1799).
2. James Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York: Norton, 1999), 94; Terry Bouton, *Taming Democracy: "The People," the Founders, and the Troubled Ending of the American Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42–45, 133; Gregory Evans Dowd, *War Under Heaven: Pontiac, the Indian Nations and the British Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 204–11; Patrick Griffin, *American Leviathan: Empire, Nation, and Revolutionary Frontier* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2007), 74–80; Peter Silver, *Our Savage Neighbors: How Indian War Transformed Early America* (New York: Norton, 2008) 158–59.
3. Of those cited above, only Patrick Griffin does not cite James Smith's Remarkable Account. Terry Bouton cites only two secondary sources for his information on Smith, and these two sources did rely on the autobiography. To an extent, Smith's Remarkable Account has been treated as a primary source without much scrutiny. The purpose of this essay is to try to validate and contextualize Smith's autobiography by checking some of Smith's claims with the historical record. It hopes to provide a fuller and perhaps more accurate account of Smith's life. There are examples of similar types of works by historians, see for instance Natalie Davis, *The Return of Martin Guerre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1983), which uses historical evidence to provide a fuller account of the circumstances of a famous trial in medieval France. Another example is Alfred Young, *The Shoemaker and the Tea Party: Memory and the American Revolution* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999). This essay is neither as ambitious nor as exhaustive as either of these works.
4. "A Letter from Mr. James Burd," July 5, 1755, *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania* (Harrisburg: Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1852–1853, 16 vols.), vol. 6: 466–67.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., Smith, *Remarkable Account*.
7. "Lieutenant Lyttle's Regiment," *Pennsylvania Archives*, (Philadelphia: Joseph Severns; Harrisburg: Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 1852–1949, 9 series, 138 volumes), Ser. 5, 1: 336.
8. Thomas Barton, "Conduct of the Paxton Men Impartially Represented," in *The Paxton Papers*, ed. John Dunbar (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1957), 295.
9. The best accounts are Dowd, *War Under Heaven*, 204–11 and Griffin, *American Leviathan*, 74–80. The records of the Black Boys can be found scattered in the *Pennsylvania Archives*, Ser. 1, vol. 4 and *Colonial Records of Pennsylvania*, vol. 9.
10. Records of the proceedings in Carlisle can be found in the Papers of Thomas Gage, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, Pa., originals in the Clements Library, University of Michigan. The first mention of the conference came in a letter by John Penn to Thomas Gage dated March 22, 1765. Subsequent letters and depositions suggest he arrived on or about March 27 and stayed through the first week of April. The depositions taken, which may give the fullest accounting of the initial attack, can be found following a letter lieutenant governor John Penn wrote Gage dated June 28, 1765. See especially the Deposition of William Smith for the defense of the Black Boys in the Papers of Thomas Gage, Pennsylvania State Archives, Harrisburg, Pa.

## ROUNDTABLE ASSESSMENT

11. Deposition of William Smith, April 3, 1765, Papers of Thomas Gage; William Smith to Charles Grant, November 14, 1765, Fort Smith, Thomas Gage Papers, Pennsylvania State Archives; Petition from Cumberland County, [March 1765], *The Papers of Henry Bouquet*, ed. Louis Waddell (Harrisburg: The Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission, 1951–1994, 6 volumes), 6: 777–79. There is no record of the destruction of the powder in the PA Archives, but information can be found in William Trent to Joseph Shippen, March 13, 1765, Shippen Papers, HSP. For the proceedings of the Governor's Conference, see Deposition of Robert Callender, March 28, 1765, Deposition of Robert Allison, April 1, 1765, Deposition of Robert Brownson, April 3, 1765, Deposition of James Maxwell, April 13, 1765 in the Papers of Thomas Gage, Pennsylvania State Archives; John Reid to Thomas Gage, Carlisle, June 1, 1765, Gage Papers, Pennsylvania State Archives.
12. Land Papers, John Anderson Collection, MG-147, Box 8, Pennsylvania State Archives.
13. A full account of the episode can be found in the Pennsylvania Gazette, October 5, 1769 and November 2, 1769; and the records, including depositions, found in the Records of Oyer and Terminer Papers, Cumberland County, Supreme Court Papers, Pennsylvania State Archives. The paragraphs that follow are based upon these records.
14. "Proceedings of the Provincial Conference," *The Proceedings Relative to Calling the Conventions of 1776 and 1790* (Harrisburg, Pa.: John Wiestling, 1825), 35–45; "Memorial of James Smith," "In Council for General Washington," Records of Pennsylvania's Revolutionary Government, RG-27, Reel 10, Pennsylvania State Archives.
15. John Moore to Smith and Proctor, March 22, 1777, Loyalhanna, Records of Pennsylvania's Revolutionary Government, RG-27, Reel 10, Pennsylvania State Archives; Robert Cluggage to George Woods and David Espy, August 11, 1768, Bedford County Militia Records, MG-147, Box 28, Pennsylvania State Archives. Notably, it is likely that this George Woods was the same one who testified against Smith in 1769. Additional information on Smith during the war can be found in the Draper Manuscripts, David Library of the American Revolution, Washington Crossing, Pa., originals in the Wisconsin Historical Society.