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*A GLIMPSE
OF
F.O.J. SMITH,
POLITICIAN*

by
Thomas L. Gaffney

Although little remembered today, Francis Ormond Jonathan Smith was one of Maine's most prominent nineteenth century figures and perhaps her most magnificent failure. He exemplifies the multi-faceted nineteenth century men who significantly shaped the course and destiny of American history.

"Fog" Smith, as he was commonly known to contemporaries, was a person of brilliant parts but often lacking in that dedication, patience, fidelity, and attention to detail required for true greatness and real success. He was a product of the Protestant ethic which drove men to ceaseless activity in an endless search for wealth, but, unfortunately, was untempered by deep spiritual faith, giving a higher social value to that quest.

Smith was an orator of demagogic powers and a lawyer of keen ability. Possessed by great ambition, vanity, and will-to-power, he was driven to lead rather than to follow; and he often destroyed, or attempted to destroy, those who got in his way. Having said this, however, it must be noted that

among friends he was known as a man of warmth, generosity, and charm. His impact was felt not only in politics but also in a multiplicity of business ventures and enterprises. Some, like his promotion of Morse's electric telegraph proved revolutionary in their utility; others, such as a scheme to link Sebago Lake via canal to the Androscoggin river and his project to construct a great manufacturing center on the banks of the Presumpscot proved but idle visions of an expansive mind.

He was born of relatively humble parentage on November 23, 1806 in the little New Hampshire village of Brentwood. The only son of Jonathan and Elizabeth Smith, he was denied the advantages of a formal institutional education; but being gifted with uncommon intellectual abilities and a patient and devoted father, he suffered none by his deprivation. In 1817, at the age of ten, he was found qualified and entered the neighboring Phillips Exeter Academy, which was to be his only alma mater.

Upon leaving Phillips Exeter, the precocious, blue-eyed young man joined the family at Portsmouth, New Hampshire, where Jonathan Smith had taken his wife and daughters and re-established himself as an innkeeper in that bustling seaport town, located on the banks overlooking the waters of the swiftly moving and historic Piscataqua. At Portsmouth, Smith began the study of law under the supervision of Ichabod Bartlett, one of New Hampshire's ablest attorneys and a person of influential and prestigious family background. The Bartlett connection was an enduring one. In 1828 Smith was to marry Junia L. Bartlett of Kingston, New Hampshire, Ichabod's niece. The lovely and charming Junia was but three years his junior, having been born June 1, 1810, the second daughter of Dr. Levi and Abigail Bartlett of Kingston.

The marriage connection was very advantageous to the politically ambitious young Smith. Junia's grandfather, Josiah Bartlett, had been not only a signer of the Declaration of Independence but was also the last President of revolutionary New Hampshire and that state's first governor. (1) More immediately, Junia's father Dr. Levi Bartlett was a noted physician and surgeon who had been variously honored as legislator, executive councilor, postmaster, and Chief Justice of the Court of Common Pleas. (2) The important political acquaintances and contacts which Smith made as a result of this marriage were undoubtedly extensive and advantageous.

In 1823 Fog's legal studies were temporarily interrupted when his father Jonathan moved the family to the Woodford's Corner section of Westbrook on the outskirts of the thriving

peninsula that constituted early Portland, Maine. (3) The young scholar was not seriously injured by this move. He quickly renewed his legal studies in the Portland law office of General Samuel Fessenden, father of William Pitt Fessenden and an early abolitionist. He completed his studies in March, 1826 and was admitted to the bar at the early age of nineteen. Establishing practice in Portland, Smith soon demonstrated that penchant for controversy that characterized his long and stormy career.

His first taste of the notoriety on which he apparently thrived came in 1827. Under the pseudonym *Civis* he published a pamphlet, dedicated to the Governor and Legislature of Maine, attacking the lottery system as "one of the most expensive, intricate, and iniquitous species of speculation and speculation" designed "to defraud honest industry...and to take from the poor the pittance of poverty itself." (4)

The public debut of *Civis* caused great excitement in Portland where many of the leading citizens were deeply involved in promoting the construction of the Cumberland and Oxford Canal connecting Portland's Fore River with Sebago Lake in the interior. Since the canal was to be partially financed through a lottery, *Civis'* characterization of them as extravagant and potentially corrupt and his recommendation that projects of such nature be financed by means of taxation was seen as both an imputation of dishonor and as a threat to private business enterprise. As a result of his audacity, *Civis* was repeatedly attacked throughout 1827 in the columns of the *Eastern Argus*, Maine's leading Democratic newspaper.

Apparently young Fog's mastery of polemic and scurrility impressed certain of his opponents at the *Argus'* office; and by September, 1827, he was no longer the target of its invective; indeed, quite the contrary. Thomas Todd, the apparent owner of the *Argus*, hired the young combatant as editor and thus raised him to near Olympian heights as the dispenser of Democratic thunderbolts and the proclaimer of political excommunication--functions which Smith executed with great delight and enthusiasm.

Smith settled in easily at the *Argus*; he was not without journalistic experience. Allegedly he had written for the *Portsmouth Journal* while studying law in that city and later for Portland's *American Patriot*. As both papers proclaimed doctrine of a federalist or National Republican character, these early connections aroused suspicions that initially, at least, Smith leaned towards National Republicanism. The suspicion was further strengthened by the fact that both Ichabod Bartlett and Samuel Fessenden, his legal mentors, were leading

figures of that party in their respective states. Whatever his true inclinations, however, Fog Smith seldom showed a disposition to allow abstract principles to interfere with material opportunity. Undoubtedly realizing that the Democratic party in Maine afforded more opportunity for political advancement and preferment than did the opposition, he decided to devote his indefatigable energies and efforts to the promotion of Maine Democracy.

No sooner had he assumed his editorial duties than he exhibited another pronounced personal characteristic. He was not suited to follow but, rather, must lead. His leadership quickly manifested itself when, with Todd's consent but with considerable opposition from other leading party men, he caused the *Argus* to declare decidedly its support of Andrew Jackson's presidential candidacy over that of New England's native son, John Quincy Adams.

Smith labored ceaselessly in Jackson's behalf. Appearing in the *Argus* of October 23, 1827 was the first of a series of over thirty lengthy pro-Jackson articles written by Smith under the pseudonym *Leonidas* and entitled "Hickory." The influence of "Hickory" was felt far beyond the borders of Portland or even the State of Maine. The series was picked up by organs of the Democratic press in far distant states and received national distribution and attention.

The results of the presidential election of 1828 demonstrated the wisdom of Fog Smith's decision to support Andrew Jackson since the *Argus* thus obtained a strong influence in the distribution of federal patronage. The ascendant position of the *Argus* and the Democracy of Cumberland county was further increased because Cumberland was the only county in New England that cast an electoral ballot for Andrew Jackson, thus earning the appellation "Star of the East." The honors which thus accrued to Maine were largely the fruit of the efforts and talents of F.O.J. Smith.

Although Fog Smith might be declared "a silly, talkative, unprincipled, presumptuous boy" by John Neal of the *Yankee*, his skill as a political editor and tactician were duly noted by friend and foe alike; and his desire for political office could not long be denied. (5)

Smith's claims against his party for preferment were greatly enhanced by his leading role in the bitterly controversial gubernatorial election of 1829. In that contest he demonstrated his utter disregard for decency, honor, and principle in political contests. Although Jonathan G. Hunton, the National Republican candidate, was eventually declared the victor, he won at the sacrifice of his reputation which had been dragged

through the gutters by Fog Smith and the *Argus*. Writing under the pseudonym *Expositor*, Smith charged Hunton with marital infidelity. This assertion was neither admitted nor denied, and after serving his term of office, Hunton sank into political oblivion.

When the Legislature convened in 1830, the two parties immediately locked in a death struggle for control. Here, too, the National Republicans won the battle but lost the war. In the pages of the *Argus* Smith effectively characterized the Legislature as the "Second Edition of the Hartford Convention." He also wrote a lengthy pamphlet which was given wide circulation throughout the State attacking the illegality of the legislative proceedings. (6) The Democratic party now took unquestionable control of Maine politics. The importance of Smith's efforts were later acknowledged by the *Kennebec Journal*, a National Republican paper, which maintained that the Democratic party owed its ascendancy to the editorial skills of F.O.J. Smith, as manifested in the controversies of 1829-30. (7)

In the September canvass of 1830 Smith was elected as a Representative to the State Legislature which was the first to hold its sessions in Augusta, the state's new capital city. Sensing both profit and an opportunity to raise his own political stock, Smith decided to establish a Democratic newspaper in Augusta. The first edition of the new sheet appeared on December 23, 1831 and was entitled the *Age*. Bearing the motto, "You must pardon something to the spirit of Liberty," the new paper was edited by Smith and published by his copartner and friend, Ira Berry.

Smith had no sooner set aside the editorial quill at the *Argus* than a series of editorials appeared in that paper which threatened to disrupt the harmony of the Democratic party. The attacks, penned by Judge William Pitt Preble, were patently aimed at Smith. In one instance, Preble wrote:

A gentleman having been admitted to the bar, declares his adhesion to the democratic party. Instead of endeavoring to gain the confidence of his fellow citizens by a course of unpretending, manly, upright conduct, and a steady adherence to his professed political principles, he is found immediately pushing himself forward as a candidate for office, and in order to build himself up, sets himself to sow the seeds of disaffection, to create divisions and by innuendoes and secret attacks, and giving currency to slanders of political opponents, seeks to injure the character and standing of leading men of the party, in whom

The people had every right to place confidence. (8)

The Preble editorials were the initial volleys in a long, continuing struggle with Smith for control of the Democratic party in Cumberland county. This conflict, lasting until 1838 when Smith's influence was effectively reduced, had long simmered beneath the surface. In 1829 Preble, then the United States Minister to the Netherlands, had secured the appointment of Charles S. Davies, a National Republican, to act as his diplomatic despatch courier. (9) Preble's actions in this affair so angered Smith, perhaps interested in the appointment for himself, that he wrote an enraged letter to Duff Green in which he stated that the Davies appointment "has excited among the republicans one common feeling of poignant dissatisfaction and horror" and that if Preble's responsibility for the appointment were generally known among republicans, then they would probably disgrace themselves "by a public bonfire of his effigy." (10)

The anti-Smithites enjoyed a brief victory in the summer of 1832 when they prevented Smith from obtaining appointment as Maine's Attorney-General; but Smith sold his interest in the *Age* and entered the September elections of 1832. He was elected to the State Senate and was chosen President of that body at only twenty-six years of age. In the meantime, he maneuvered himself back into the editorial chair of the *Argus* and commenced a reign of terror against his political enemies. According to the *Portland Daily Evening Advertiser*, the *Argus* became "a perfect spit fire" which dispensed "a lot of fire and brimstone." (11) Or, as in the words of Seba Smith's immortal *Jack Downing*, "the *Argus* took and clapt 'em [Smith's enemies] right over to the federal side." (12) *Downing* also noticed that Smith was "putting of 'em over considerable younger on the federal side" and included in that number were Judge Preble, Judge Ware, Postmaster Nathaniel Mitchell and State Senator John L. Megquier. (13)

To protect themselves from total political destruction and annihilation, these "clapt over" Democrats, or the Preble "Junto" as Smith liked to call them, secured control of the *Jeffersonian* which was a Democratic press published in Oxford county by Horatio King, a future Postmaster General of the United States. The *Jeffersonian* was quickly and quietly moved to Portland in the Spring of 1833 and thereafter spoke for the Junto.

Although Preble's editorial quill dripped no small amount of political venom and bile, the good judge was decidedly out-classed by F.O.J. Smith who was a master of polemic and an

expert in character assassination. Despite Preble's best efforts Smith was successful in breaking the Junto's power in the elections of 1833. Much to Preble's chagrin Fog Smith secured election as Cumberland's Representative to the 23rd Congress of the United States; and, in addition, enjoyed the satisfaction of seeing Robert P. Dunlap of Brunswick snatch the gubernatorial chair from beneath Governor Samuel Smith, who had committed the unpardonable sins of having rejected Fog Smith for the Attorney-Generalship and then rerunning for governor as the Junto's nominee.

Despite the Junto's unquestionable defeat, they, temporarily, bid defiance of "His Majesty, King Jock" and refused to recant "before the Right Reverend Jeremy Diddle." Such bravado may have increased the Junto's ego but it did little to increase its power. "King Jock" and his minions reigned supreme over the Democratic-Republican party for the next few years; and when no longer able to rule, they came close to causing its absolute destruction.

Smith's six consecutive years of service in the United States Congress were not distinguished. They do, however, mark a period of significant rise in his fortune, if not in his fame. Through wise speculations in timberlands in Maine and the West Smith soon grew to be a man of considerable wealth; and not being given to modesty, he unabashedly transformed himself into a "mushroom aristocrat" complete with carriage, blood greys, and a Negro body servant whom he introduced to his Portland constituency as having served as valet of John Q. Adams when that gentleman was United States Minister to the Court of St. James. More awe inspiring yet was the impressive country house which he built on a seventy-acre tract of land in Westbrook, which was quickly dubbed "the Westbrook Palace." (15)

A turn in political fortunes came after 1836 when Smith sold his interest in the *Argus* to H. W. Greene, whom he thought to be his friend and ally. Greene supported Smith's bid for reelection in 1836 but proved to be a reluctant participant in Fog's active campaign to defeat the election of Bangor's Gorham Parks, the Democratic party's regularly nominated gubernatorial candidate.

Parks was an old and bitter enemy of F.O.J. Smith and also a Locofoco Democrat. He had severely chastised Smith at a Democrat caucus in the State Legislature of 1831, and Smith was not likely to forget those who had inflicted past humiliations. (16) Regardless of all else, Parks' opposition to the distribution of the federal surplus and his support of President Van Buren's Independent Sub-Treasury system would have been sufficient to incur Smith's opposition to his candidacy. Parks was



Smith's Forest Home

defeated and Bangor's "Rag Baby" Edward Kent, a Whig, ascended the gubernatorial chair by grace of Fog Smith's treachery and vindictiveness.

By 1838 Smith had decidedly drifted away from his Democratic moorings because of Van Buren's determination to eliminate the pet banks by establishing his Sub-Treasury system. Smith preferred either a continuation of the pet banks or the resurrection of a national bank. His final break with the party was, in fact, effected without his knowledge on July 19, 1838. (17) The previous Spring he had obtained a leave of absence from Congress in order to accompany Samuel F.B. Morse to Europe in an attempt to secure patent rights on the Morse telegraph in which he was a quarter-owner. He had no sooner embarked upon his distant voyage when a group of Conservative Democrats, headed by John Hodgdon and General Samuel Veazie and centered primarily in Penobscot county, called a separate convention and nominated him as their candidate for governor. (18)

The Conservatives, primarily opposed to the Sub-Treasury scheme, knew that they could not win the governorship. They had, however, thought themselves sufficiently strong to prevent the popular election of governor and to gain the balance of legislative power between the Locofoco Democrats and the Whigs. The price of legislative cooperation with the

Whigs in electing their candidate, Edward Kent, to the governorship was to be the elevation of Smith to the United States Senate where he could work to defeat the Sub-Treasury. (19) The election results, however, proved the Conservatives overly sanguine. As the Bangor *Democrat* had noted, "There are about enough of them [Conservative Democrats] to fill a decent sized stage coach, or demolish a ten pound salmon." (20) This estimate was substantially correct as Smith polled a paltry vote of about 300 ballots and the Democrats solidly controlled the Legislature.

The immediate significance of the election was that Smith's bridges with the Democratic party appeared to be in an irreparable state of disintegration as he had been denounced as a man with "no fixed principles, political or moral--and like the *revelations* of Mohammed, his movements have been ever directed by his interests or his passions!" (21)

Not one to admit defeat, Smith, on his return from Europe, set about building the Conservative Democratic faction into an effective political force in Maine politics. Indeed, along with William Rives of Virginia and Nathaniel Tallmadge of New York, he was one of the principle architects of a national Conservative Democratic movement. (22)

To accomplish his aims in Maine, however, he established the *Eastern Argus Revived* in Portland in the summer of 1839. Like the *Age*, the *Argus Revived* was edited by himself and printed by Ira Berry, and it gave him a weapon with which to bludgeon the old *Argus*. It also gave him an effective means by which to voice the views of the Conservative Democrats of Maine.

The possession of this paper allowed the Conservatives to maintain their integrity as a separate party. They were thus not dependent upon the Whigs for a propaganda medium. In fact, the very success of the movement was thought to hinge upon preserving an identity apart from that of the Whigs with whom the Conservatives shared a common outlook concerning banks and banking.

The Conservatives cooperated with the Whigs throughout 1839 and 1840 but did not fuse or merge with them. As in the gubernatorial election of 1838, they hoped to hold the balance of power. In return for helping to elect a Whig governor, they, again, desired a seat in the United States Senate for Smith. (23) In this they were to be disappointed once more although their efforts were acknowledged to be largely responsible for the fact that Maine went hell bent for Governor Kent, the Whig. (24)

When it became apparent that the Whig legislature was not

about to award the United States Senatorship to a man whom past, close political associates had noted "was not at all scrupulous as to the means he employed-- [and who] had as lief cut the throat of a friend as an enemy, if he saw him occupying a situation or position, which did not exactly tally or accord with his selfish schemes and dark political plots and wicked machinations," Smith soon shifted ground. (25) He had played a crucial role in effecting Kent's September victory which was hailed by Whigs nationally as constituting a great political revolution in normally Democratic Maine. Harrison Whigs attempted to represent the September Maine returns as indicative of the national trend and thus create a band wagon effect designed to assist Harrison in November.

Throughout the short reign of "Old Tip" and the unsettled administration of his successor, John Tyler, Smith was variously rumored as being under consideration for high level governmental positions, including those of Postmaster General, Secretary of the Navy, First and Second Comptroller of the Treasury, and Clerk of the House of Representatives. He obtained nothing but satisfaction in assisting James K. Polk and the Democrats turn out the ingrates in 1844.

The remainder of Smith's political life was spent playing a game of leapfrog in which he supported one party and then another: the Whigs in 1848; the Democrats in 1852; the Republicans in 1856; the Independents in 1860; and the Democrats in 1864. His last significant role in Maine's political history came during the Civil War. At the onset of the conflict he supported both the Lincoln administration and the war; but the Emancipation Proclamation of 1862, freeing the Negro from his bondage, was too much for Smith to bear. He became, perhaps, Maine's most noted and most detested Copperhead.

To him the Proclamation was a positive evil since its tendency was to equate the Negro with the white. To Smith, this was an absurdity in that he held the Negro naturally inferior. Then, too, the Proclamation was seen as an unconstitutional attack upon private property, states' rights, and the Constitution itself. (26)

Using the *Portland Daily Advertiser* as his weapon, he devoted his great talents and abilities to battle for a cause in which there could be no victory. Having been a supreme opportunist most of his political life, it is ironic that Maine's F. O. J. Smith crashed upon the shoals of moral and constitutional questions which could have been avoided and from which he, obviously, could derive but small advantage.

The memory of F. O. J. Smith, who was described by a friendly contemporary as being a man "as brilliant in the bad

as he was in the good" and "like a great ship at sea freighted with costly parcels that had lost her steering," faded into historical oblivion with the passing of generations. (27)

-----NOTES-----

- (1) *Portland Daily Advertiser*, August 18, 1849.
- (2) Levi Bartlett, *Genealogical and Biographical Sketches of the Bartlett Family in England and America*. Lawrence: George S. Merrill & Crocker, Printers, 1876, pp. 56-57.
- (3) Unidentified Newspaper Clipping, Westbrook Scrapbooks, Vol. I, Part 2, Maine Historical Society.
- (4) Civis [Francis O.J. Smith], *A Dissertation on the Nature and Effects of the Lottery Systems and Principles of Public Policy Relating to Them*. N.p., [1828], p. 4.
- (5) *Yankee*. September 17, 1828.
- (6) [Francis O.J. Smith], *A History of the Proceedings and Extraordinary Measures of the Legislature of Maine, For the Year 1830. With the Several Opinions of the Justices of the Supreme Court on the Questions Submitted to their Decision by the Senate and the Governor*. Portland, 1830.
- (7) *Kennebec Journal*. January 29, 1839.
- (8) *Eastern Argus*. January 6, 1832.
- (9) Letter, William Pitt Preble to Martin Van Buren, November 30, 1829, Maine Historical Society, Charles S. Davies Papers.
- (10) Letter, Francis O.J. Smith to Duff Green, December 4, 1829, Maine Historical Society, F.O.J. Smith Papers.
- (11) *Portland Daily Evening Advertiser*, October 5, 1832.
- (12) [Seba Smith], *The Life & Writings of Major Jack Downing of Downingville Away Down East in the State of Maine*. Boston: Lilly, Wait, Colman, & Holden, 1833, pp. 222.
- (13) *Ibid.*, pp. 222-23.
- (14) *Jeffersonian*, September 16, 1833. James F. Dunlap, the Governor-elect was intended by the reference to the Right Reverend Jeremy Diddle.
- (15) H. W. Greene, *Letters Addressed to Francis O.J. Smith, Representative in Congress From Cumberland District, (Me.). Being a Defence of the Writer Against the Attacks Made on Him by That Individual--And a Sketch of Mr. Smith's Political Life*. N.p., [1839], p. 6; Unidentified Newspaper Clipping, Westbrook Scrapbooks, *op. cit.*
- (16) *Democrat* (Bangor), August 23, 1838.
- (17) Letter, John Hodgdon to F.O.J. Smith, January 20, 1839, Maine Historical Society, F.O.J. Smith Papers.

- (18) *Bangor Whig & Courier*, July 20, 1838.
- (19) Letter, Hodgdon to Smith, *op. cit.*
- (20) *Democrat* (Bangor), July 4, 1838.
- (21) *Ibid.*, August 23, 1838.
- (22) Letter, W.H.Y. Hackett to F.O.J. Smith, August 4, 1840, Maine Historical Society, F.O.J. Smith Papers.
- (23) Letter, Allen Haines to F.O.J. Smith, December 28, 1840, Maine Historical Society, F.O.J. Smith Papers.
- (24) Letter, William Pitt Fessenden to F.O.J. Smith, July 7, 1841, Maine Historical Society, F.O.J. Smith Papers.
- (25) *Democrat* (Bangor), June 25, 1839.
- (26) *Speech of Hon. Francis O. J. Smith, of Westbrook. In House of Representatives, February 18th, 19th and 20th, on the "Emancipation Resolves." Reported From the Committee on Federal Relations,--The Question Being on the Substitution of the Resolves Offered by Himself.* N.p., n.d., pp. 13-22.
- (27) Unidentified Newspaper Clipping, Westbrook Scrapbooks, *op. cit.*

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