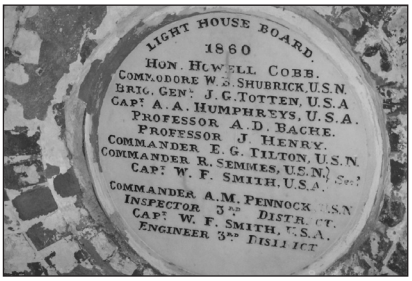
THE UNITED STATES LIGHT-HOUSE BOARD - 1860

Sixth in a Series

(William Farrar Smith)

By John T. Graham

Preface: *This is the sixth in a series of articles that examine the lives of the men who served on the Light-House Board in the year 1860. This moment in time was selected because of a seal installed at the Montauk Point, New York, lighthouse at the time of its 1860 renovation, which lists the then-current members of the board.*



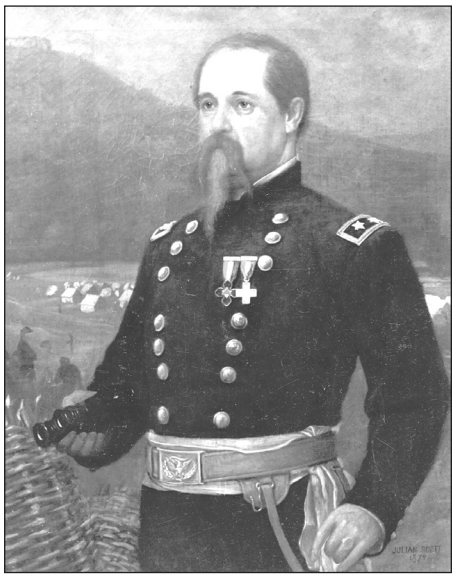
William Farrar Smith was first and foremost an Army engineer. His military career spanned the years of the American Civil War, and he saw duty in that conflict as both a battlefield commander and as a construction engineer. Prior to the war, he served as a lieutenant and the district engineer of the 11th Light-House District (Great Lakes). With the rank of captain, still a junior officer, he was appointed as engineering secretary to the Light-House Board in 1859 and served until reassigned to wartime duties in April of 1861.

Smith was born in St. Albans, Vermont, on February 17, 1824, the son of Ashbel and Sarah Butler Smith. His ancestors had moved there from Massachusetts in the early 1700s. Military service was well established in the family; his ancestors had served in both the French and Indian War and in the Revolution. Little is known of his early life. His parents died when he was quite young, and he was raised by his uncle. This uncle, John Smith, a lawyer and local judge, was elected to Congress in 1838 and was the one who obtained an appointment to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point for his nephew William.

Entering the academy at age 17, Smith graduated fourth of the 41 members in the class of 1845 and was commissioned a second lieutenant in the Corps of Topographical Engineers, which would be merged into the Corps of Engineers in 1863. He acquired the nickname "Baldy" while a cadet at West Point, and this sobriquet followed him throughout his Army career, helping to distinguish him not only from the two other Smith's in his USMA class, but from the innumerable others throughout the Army.

His first assignments following commissioning were to do topographical survey work of the Northern Lakes (the Great Lakes). Later, he did survey work in the Rio Grande Valley of the boundary between the United States and Mexico, as well as laying out a stage and wagon route between San Antonio and El Paso, Texas. The early 1850s found him doing yet more survey work for a proposed canal route across the Florida peninsula.

In addition to these tasks, he also served at two different times as assistant professor of mathematics at the West Point academy. His 1846 to 1848 assignment covered the years of the war with Mexico; therefore, Smith did not participate in that conflict. Following his second tour as a mathematics professor, he was appointed in December 1856 as the 11th Light-House District engineer in Detroit, a position he would hold until November 1859.



Portrait of W.F. Smith by Julian Scott. The painting hangs in the Vermont State Capitol. Courtesy of Vermont State Curator's Office.

William married 20-year-old Sarah Ward Lyon, from New York City, on April 24, 1861. Her father, Samuel Lyon, was a prominent attorney there. William and Sarah became the parents of five children, of whom only two survived them. They were Stuart Farrar Smith, who became a captain in the Navy, and a daughter, Clara Farrar Smith.

Smith contracted malaria during his service in the Texas and Mexico regions, and complications from this lingering disease, especially debilitating headaches and depression issues, troubled him throughout his life. These may have played a role in his later removal from

command during the war, an act that damaged his reputation and led to his need to vindicate himself in later years.

Following his service as district engineer, Smith was appointed on November 3, 1859, to the position of engineering secretary to the Light-House Board. He had just been promoted to captain, but was still a junior officer, to whom the positions of both engineering and naval secretaries to the board were typically assigned. In his autobiography, Smith recalled this service: "The beginning of the war found me in Washington in the position of Engineer Secretary to the Light House Board. Lieutenant [Raphael] Semmes of the Navy, afterwards the Confederate Admiral, was the Naval Secretary and occupied the same office with me and the winter of 1860-61 was filled with exciting discussions with him frequently carried to the threshold of a quarrel."

Smith's biographer, James H. Wilson, states that while on the board, Smith "planned and supervised construction of four first-class lighthouses—at Montauk, Navesink, Sandy Hook and Cape Canaveral." Research into the history of these lighthouses reveals no clear evidence of his involvement with them. Montauk underwent a major renovation in 1860 and he could have had a role in the planning. The current Cape Canaveral Lighthouse was not built until after the Civil War, but Smith may have had a hand in the planning. He may also have had a role in the design of the current Navesink twin towers, although staff there today claims no knowledge of his involvement. Sandy Hook had a brick lining and new iron staircase installed in 1857. It is unlikely that Smith was involved with a New Jersey lighthouse while still assigned on the Great Lakes.

By the waning years of the Buchanan administration, Georgian Howell Cobb had been replaced as secretary of the treasury by staunch Unionist General John A. Dix. The treasury secretary was the ex-officio president of the Light-House Board. Smith states in his autobiography that he approached General Dix and asked to be sent south with arms and ammunition to dismiss lightkeepers suspected of Southern sympathies and were likely to damage or destroy lighthouses on the coasts of the soon-to-be Confederate states. Smith felt that "those lights were of the utmost importance to our Navy in the operation I saw in the future." He was particularly concerned about the lighthouses in the Florida Keys. Smith's editor, Herbert Shiller, comments in footnotes that "General Dix granted Smith authority to sail on the 'Daniel Webster' to Texas, where U.S. troops who had surrendered with Brigadier General David Twigg in January 1861 had been paroled. Smith was authorized to arm the paroled men and appoint them as lighthouse keepers." He visited several of the major southern-coast lighthouses, including that at Key West, but specifics of his accomplishments there are unclear. Damage and outright destruction to lighting apparatus as well as to lighthouses themselves by Southern troops subsequently did occur across the coasts of the Confederate States. Perhaps damage to some individual lights was mitigated by Smith's actions.



Sketch of General William F. Smith by Alden Finney Brooks between 1862-1865. Library of Congress collection.

General Dix is well remembered for his order in regard to southern lighthouses in the immediate pre-war period. "If any man attempts to haul down the American flag, shoot him on the spot." Biographer Wilson credits Smith with being the incentive for this statement, if not the actual author of the specific wording.

Smith's earliest Civil War service was as a staff officer to General Benjamin Butler and subsequently to General Irvin McDowell. Promoted to the rank of colonel by his native state, Smith took command of the 3rd Vermont Volunteer Infantry, which was assigned to defensive positions around the nation's capital. He and his unit participated in the first Manassas (Bull Run) battle and in General George McClellan's Peninsular Campaign of 1862. Rising steadily in rank, often for recognized meritorious service, Smith commanded a division at the Battle of Antietam, Maryland, and the 6th Corps of the Army of the Potomac at the Battle of Fredericksburg, Virginia.

"Baldy" Smith was always a favorite with his soldiers, but he was often unable or unwilling to get along so harmoniously with his superiors. His career was marked by frequent conflict with, as well as outright criticism of, other officers. Smith's lifelong friend and associate, Major General James Wilson, said of him: "Direct and vigorous in his methods, and confident of the rectitude of his purposes, he never hesitated to give his views to such as he believed entitled to them, without reference to whether they would be well received or not." Wilson also referred to Smith as "a man of great talents and conspicuous service, with unusual powers of caustic criticism." General Ulysses Grant, overall commander of the Union armies, called Smith "obstinate" and said that he was "likely to condemn whatever is not suggested by himself."

By 1864, having risen through commands of brigades, divisions, and corps, Smith was to be assigned to replace General Benjamin Butler in command of the Army of the James. Although some sources say that it was his medical issues that resulted in the countermanding of that appointment, it appears more likely that it was Smith's outspoken criticisms of General Butler. Butler's talents as a tactician have always been debated by military historians. Butler was



Bronze plaque in Vermont State Capitol honors William F. Smith. Courtesy Vermont State Curator's Office.

well connected and owed his military rank and position more to his contacts than to his credentials, and even if Smith's criticism of him was warranted, Smith was not going to win a war of words. Smith also chose to openly criticize General George Meade for his actions at Cold Harbor. These comments put him in even less favor with his superiors. He held no more combat unit commands during the war.

Although removed from direct command of fighting units, Smith's talents as an engineer were too valuable not to utilize. He served as the chief engineer of the Department of the Cumberland and later of the Department of the Mississippi. Much of this work included constructing river bridges to facilitate troop movement. During fighting around Chattanooga, Tennessee, Smith lead troops that captured Brown's Ferry and then constructed a bridge there. This drove back Confederate besiegers and allowed forces under Generals William Sherman and Joseph Hooker to come to the relief of General George Thomas' threatened Army. These accomplishments brought praise from Generals Sherman and Thomas. General Thomas wrote that "Brigadier General William Smith should be accorded great praise for the ingenuity which conceived, and the ability which executed, the movement at Brown's Ferry." Smith was ultimately promoted to the brevet rank of major general in March of 1864, for "gallant and meritorious service in the field during the rebellion."

Military rank, especially during wartime, could be confusing; an individual officer could hold one rank in the regular Army and a different rank as an officer of volunteers. Officers were often temporarily promoted or "brevetted" to a higher rank, usually for conspicuous service, but these appointments required congressional approval and often expired, reverting the holder to his previous lower rank. Smith resigned his commission as a volunteer officer in 1865 and his regular Army commission in March 1867.

Editor Shiller stated, "Smith ended his career bitter and disappointed." In 1889, along with many other officers, he was reappointed to the Army's "retired list," with the rank of major, an action that provided him a military pension for his remaining years.

Following the war, Smith became a principal with the International Ocean Telegraph Company, soon becoming the president of this company, which laid the first underwater telegraph cable from Jacksonville, Florida, to Havana, Cuba. In 1873 he benefited financially from the sale of the company, and he and his family moved to England. Having lost or spent his resources, he returned to the U.S. in 1875 seeking employment. Through connections in New York, he became the police commissioner for New York City, and soon the president of the Board of Police Commissioners. His inability to get along with others, in this case entrenched New York politicians, led to his resignation as a commissioner in 1881.

In that same year, Horatio Wright, then chief engineer of the Army, who was also a member of the Light-House Board and a friend, appointed Smith as a civilian engineer to supervise river and harbor improvement projects on the Chesapeake and Delaware Bays. Headquartered for a while in Wilmington, Delaware, Smith soon established a home in Philadelphia where he would reside for his remaining years. He worked on these projects on and off until 1901.



Horatio Wright, chief engineer of the Army, June 1879-March 1884. From the collection of Thomas A. Tag.

In his later years, Smith authored books and articles about his Civil War years. Many of them were attempts to justify what he felt were unwarranted criticisms of his actions by the superiors with whom he had often had differences of opinion. Some of these are: *Military Operations Around Chattanooga* (1886), *The Relief of the Army of the Cumberland and the Opening of the Short Line of Communication Between Chattanooga, Tennessee, and Bridgeport, Alabama* (1891), *From Chattanooga To Petersburg Under General Grants and Butler, A Contribution to the History of the War and a Personal Vindication* (1893).

During these last years, Smith also wrote an autobiography that was apparently intended only for his daughter Clara, and was not to be provided to her until after his death. This article was found in the archives of the State of Vermont and published in 1990. It contains many critical comments about Generals Hooker, Ambrose Burnside, Butler, and even Grant, as well as Smith's counters to their published criticisms of him. It is not known if this document was ever read by Clara Smith.

Smith's wife, Sarah, preceded him in death by four years, passing-on in January 1899. On February 28, 1903, Smith died at his residence on Clinton Street in Philadelphia, where he and Sarah had made their home for the last decade of his life. He had been ill most of the winter. He is buried in the Arlington National Cemetery, where his funeral was conducted with military honors, but without "military pomp" as he had requested. His son Stuart (1874-1951) and daughter Clara (1868-1926) are buried there with him.

Biographer Wilson described Smith as "a singularly virile and independent character who exerted great influence over all with whom he came in contact. He was strong, self-contained, and deliberate in speech, and having been an industrious student and an acute thinker all his life, his opinions always commanded respect." Such was the caliber of the men who served as members of the Light-House Board.

Sources cited:

Cullum, Bvt. Maj-Gen. George W., B*iographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point New York, Vol. II*. Houghton, Mifflin & Co., New York, N.Y., 1891.

Shiller, Herbert M., Editor, *Autobiography of Maj. General William F. Smith, 1861-1864*. Morningside Press, Dayton, Ohio, 1990.

Spencer, James, *Civil War Generals*. Greenwood Press, New York, N.Y., 1986.

Warner, Ezra J., *Generals in Blue*. Louisiana State University Press, 1964.

Wilson, James Harrison, *The Life and Services of William Farrar Smith in the Civil War*. John Rogers Press, Wilmington, Del., 1904.

Arlington National Cemetery website: http://www.arlingtoncemetery.net/wfsmith.htm

Famous Americans website: http://www.famousamericans.net/williamfarrarsmith/

New York Times obituary, March 2, 1903.