

History of Smithville Missouri -- 1885

Source: History of Clay and Platte Counties, Missouri,
National Historical Company, St. Louis, MO. 1885.

The town of Smithville stands on section 23, township 53, range 33, or one mile from the Platte county line and about five miles from the Clinton county. It is a small village, but a trading point of already great advantage to the people of surrounding county, and it promises now, with railroad in quite reasonable prospect, to become at no very distant date a town of no small importance and consequence.

Additional Reading

As other comprehensive reviews on the history of Smithville are made available they will be added to the site and will be linked to this directory. In the meantime, additional information may be found at the [Image Archive](#) and the [Document Archive](#) on this web.

The first settler on the present site of Smithville was Humphrey Smith, who came in the spring of 1822, and two years later, or in 1824, built a mill on the fork of the Platte river, which still bears his name. He was born in New Jersey in 1774, lived in Pennsylvania from 1784 to 1800, in Erie county, N.Y., from 1800 to 1816, and then removed to Howard county, Mo., where he resided three years and a half; then he removed to what is now Carroll county-then Chariton- where he remained until 1822, when he came to Clay. He was universally known as "Yankee" Smith.

With something of Yankee enterprise and shrewdness Smith located where he did and built his mill in order to catch the patronage of the government Indian agencies in the Platte county, and also the custom of the settlers who, he rightly conjectured, would push out in considerable numbers to the extreme frontier. The mill at first was but a "corn-cracker," but in a few years, when wheat was first raised in the country, Smith added a bolting apparatus, and it is said that this was the first flouring mill in Clay county. It stood near the site of the present mill, and Smith's dwelling-house, a log cabin, was built on the south side of Main street where Liberty road turns south, and east of the road. The mill was operated by Smith and his sons for thirty consecutive years, and then purchased by Col. Lewis Wood. It was washed away by a flood in 1853. (1)

"Yankee" Smith was all his life an avowed Abolitionist. He declaimed against what he considered the sin of human slavery at all times and under all circumstances. For his principles he was mobbed in Howard county and driven away. His family fled to what is now Carroll, and he joined them as soon as it was safe to do so. But no sort of persecution, blows, mobbings, threats, denunciation, or raillery moved him or deterred him from speaking his mind. Frequently some bully would approach him and call out: "Smith, are you an Abolitionist?" "I am," was always the reply. The next instant he would be knocked down; but he would rise and calmly say: "O, that's no argument. You are stronger than I, but that don't prove you are right." Finally his soft answers turned away the wrath of those opposed to him, and he was allowed to hold and express his opinions in peace.

Smith always declared that slavery would be abolished in the United States, but he did not live until his eyes had seen "the glory." In June, 1857, he died of small-pox. It has always been supposed that he caught the disease from an infected Abolition paper, called the Herald of Freedom, published at Lawrence, Kas., and to which his son, Calvin, was a subscriber. The postmaster, James Brasfield, who handed Smith the paper, took varioloid, and Smith himself had small-pox in a violent and fatal form. At first his disease was not known, and persons who called to see him were infected, and spread the contagion through the neighborhood. Many died therefrom, and the incident was one long and sadly remembered.(2)

Humphrey Smith had a store at his mill before 1828, and soon after a little village sprang up. Calvin Smith, a son Humphrey, managed the store at first. Next to him were Henry Owens and John Lerty, both of whom were small merchants here before 1840. James Walker was another early merchant. Dr. Alex M. Robinson, afterward a prominent Democratic politician of Platte, Dr. J.B. Snaille and Dr.S.S. Ligon were the first physicians in the community.

Old settlers assert that as early as 1845 Smithville was a place of as much importance as at present, with nearly the same number of houses, and a great deal more whisky! The failure of the Parkville Railroad prevented the full development of the place, and entailed considerable loss on many of the citizens who were subscribers to the stock.

Although always without railroad facilities the town has ever had a good trade. At present-April, 1885-there is good prospect for securing to the town the St. Joseph and Southeastern Railroad within a year.

Smithville has been several times incorporated. The first incorporation was by the county court, August 7, 1867; this was amended April 8, 1868, but the trustees appointed never qualified, and July 6, following, the county court appointed Erastus Smith, Jacob Kraus, Otis Guernsey, Theodoric Fitzgerald and Matthew MaGregory in their stead. February 4, 1878, there was another incorporation, the territory incorporated being described as "all that portion of the southwest quarter of section 23, township 53, range 33, lying south of Smith's fork of Platte river." October 8, following, there was a reincorporation as "a town," with J.D. DeBerry, J.C. Brasfield, William Clardy, W.H. Rhoads and John Swartz as trustees. The town is now running under this corporation. The population of Smithville is at present about 250.

Reminder from the Smithville Historical Society -- the references below are from the 1885 story.

(1) The first mention of Smith's mill in the county records appears in the proceedings of the county court in the summer of 1826, in connection with the reviewing of a road from Liberty thereto.

(2) As stated, Humphrey Smith died in June, 1857. He was buried in a small graveyard in Platte county, four miles northwest of Smithville. The following inscription appears upon his tombstone:-

"IN MEMORY OF HUMPHREY SMITH,"
BORN IN 1774, DIED JUNE, 1857.

"Like leaves on trees the race of man is found, Now green in youth, now withering on the ground; So generations in their course decay, So perish these when those have passed away."

" This patriot came to Missouri in 1816, from the State of New York; labored to make the territory into a Free State, for which he was mobbed by armed slaveholder, scourged, bruised and dragged at midnight from his house. His ever faithful wife, coming to his assistance, received injuries at the hands of the mob which caused her years of affliction. He was compelled to leave the State. His wife and family fled from Howard county to Carroll county; there joining his family, he moved to Clay county, where for many years he kept up the struggle against the 'negro thieves or man stealers.' They denounced him as an Abolitionist, because he was in favor of human liberty for all men. His request was, 'Never let men stealers know where I am buried until my State is free, then write my epitaph.' " Here lies Humphrey Smith, who was in favor of human rights, universal liberty, equal and exact justice, no union with slaveholders, free States, free people, union of States and one and universal republic."