

GEORGE SMITH, MD PHYSICIAN FARMER LEGISLATOR
HISTORIAN and NATURAL SCIENTIST

Prepared by his great great grandson Lewis
Cheyney Smith, Jr. for delivery before the
Delaware County Institute of Science on
Monday October 14, 1985.

I consider it a great honor that you have asked me to be your speaker this evening, to talk about my great great grandfather who was one of the five co-founders of your organization in September 1833, 152 years ago last month.

I regret now that I was not more closely associated with the Institute during the years that I lived in Media, but I only attended an occasional meeting up until the time that I moved away upon graduating from college.

Dr. Smith was born in Haverford Township on February 12, 1804 the son of Benjamin Hayes Smith and Margaretta Dunn in the Hayes homestead situated near the intersection of West Chester Pike and Manoa Road a little west of Naylor's Run. This was a farm bought by Richard Hayes who emigrated from Wales in 1687. Years ago the house was easily visible from Manoa Road and I recall its being in very bad repair when I was young. Today it sits in little oasis surrounded by development housing and has been beautifully restored by owners who are interested in history and have carefully researched its past.

For the three years prior to George's birth his father represented Delaware County in the Legislature in Harrisburg, thus setting the stage for what his son would do later. Benjamin Hayes Smith died in 1806, however, when George was only two; so there was no opportunity for any relationship between the two. It was supposed at the time that Benjamin's death was hastened by a wound he had received from a vicious boy in his father's school where he was employed as an assistant teacher.

Dr. Smith received his early education in the neighborhood schools and afterward attended the Academy of Johnathan Gause in West Chester, a boarding school for boys. It is said that he was

a great favorite with his classmates who even at that early age forecast a distinguished future for him. Always interested in science and natural history he decided on a career in medicine and entered the Medical Department of the University of Pennsylvania. He received his degree as Doctor of Medicine on April 7, 1826 and went into practice in Darby and its vicinity.

In 1829 George Smith took the step that enabled him to devote full time to the many pursuits for which we remember him today - he married a rich wife. On February 26 of that year he and Mary Lewis were united in marriage in Philadelphia before George M. Dallas, the mayor.

Mary was the daughter and only child of Abraham Lewis and Rebecca Lawrence of Upper Darby Township. The Lewis family had extensive land holdings dating back to 1692 in the western parts of Upper Darby and Haverford Townships, bordering on Darby Creek. The homestead, known as Collen Brook Farm, dates back to the late 1600's and is located on Collen Brook in Upper Darby. Mary's father died in 1825 and her mother in 1829 exactly eight months after her marriage. Since Mary was the sole heir to the estate she and her new husband moved to the homestead to operate the farm and manage its extensive holdings. He gave up his medical practice and devoted the rest of his life to farming and the many scientific, cultural, literary and political activities which he enjoyed and in which he excelled.

From 1832 to 1836 Dr. Smith was State Senator for the district composed of Delaware and Chester Counties. Here is one of his letters home written from Harrisburg during that period. It was dated February 23, 1833 which was eleven days after his 29th birthday and three days before his 4th wedding anniversary. His first child Abraham Lewis was thirteen months old.

My dear wife:

Thy favour of the 19th inst. came to hand the evening before last. In consequence of Wm. Amies intending to return home today I did not write immediately by mail because I thought a letter would reach thee as early if sent by him. Thee will receive this by him perhaps on first-day evening.

The resolution for adjournment was called up yesterday but the time was changed to the 2nd of April which passed the Senate. Perhaps the House will act on it today, but they talk of changing

it to the 9th. We cannot adjourn without the consent of the House. I will write and let thee know as soon as the time is agreed on by both houses.

I went to the party at Weith's which I spoke of in my last, but did not stay long - there was more affectation there than suited my fancy. Thee knows I hate affectation in every shape.

Yesterday being Washington's Birthday we adjourned without doing much business, and today the weather is so fine that I expect the members will become very uneasy in their seats before the usual time of adjournment. I yesterday took a walk of about three miles up the river bank. I found petrified shells and some other minerals.

I am glad to hear that thee and little Lewis have been out riding. Now that the weather has got fine I hope he will get clear of his cough, and that you will be able to ride out frequently. I am exceedingly anxious that the time for adjournment should be finally fixed, in order that I might be able to calculate the weeks and days which must elapse before I can again clasp to my bosom my dear wife and my darling boy. When I know the whole length of time which must elapse before so desirable an event takes place, every day makes it shorter, and every hour brings it nearer to an end. There is a consolation in this which does not exist when one is liable to disappointment.

I remain as ever thy affectionate husband.

George Smith

I think he waxed quite romantic in the last paragraph for an age when "my dear wife" or "thy affectionate husband" was about as amorous as even spouses would get in their letters.

His connection with the establishment of the public, or common school system as it was then called, in Pennsylvania was probably the most noteworthy of Dr. Smith's actions in the Senate. At the time of his election efforts to introduce the system were receiving little support from supposed advocates and violent opposition from many others. Having long been an earnest proponent of the measure he was able to pull together the forces favoring it and as Chairman of the Senate Committee on Education drew up a bill embracing the entire subject. Supported by the powerful advocacy of Thaddeus Stevens, later a very vocal anti-slavery Member of Congress, and the wide

influence of Governor Wolfe, this bill was passed substantially as reported by him. This was the first practical and efficient Act on the subject of general education in Pennsylvania.

His advocacy of this measure was extremely unpopular, particularly among the well-to-do; and brought upon him and his associates bitter reproaches and considerable social obloquy. It is not now easy to realize the courage and foresight needed by a pioneer in common school education. He continued to show his deep interest in the cause of free education, however, and was the first Superintendent of Common Schools for Delaware County and for twenty-five years held the position of President of the School Board of Upper Darby School District.

The Delaware County Institute of Science was formed on September 21, 1833 by Dr. Smith and four associates, and he was President from its beginning until his death, a period of forty-nine years.

On December 8, 1836 he was appointed by Governor Joseph Ritner as an Associate Judge of the Court of Common Pleas of Delaware County, an office which he held by appointment for six years and thereafter by election for the five succeeding years. Since he was not a trained lawyer his position was that of lay-judge.

Dr. Smith was a prolific writer, and contributed many articles and papers to the local press. One of his favorite subjects at the time it was under consideration was the removal of the County Seat from Chester to Media. I'm sure that the distance from his home in Upper Darby to the old court house in Chester at the time he was a judge had considerable influence on his being very much in favor of the move. In 1862 he published the History of Delaware County, a work which at once placed its author in the front rank of careful, painstaking and accurate historians. The book was written, to quote the title page, "under the direction and appointment of the Delaware County Institute of Science". I was very pleased to learn that your organization undertook the publication of another edition of the History, thus making it available to more of today's population of the County. An early reviewer of the History stated that "it is minute and thorough, yet not dry and tiresome". One of Dr. Smith's great grandsons took exception to this and told the family that it was the best cure for insomnia he had ever found!

A life-long member of the Society of Friends, Dr. Smith worshipped at the Old Haverford Meeting House on Eagle Road just west of Cobbs Creek, and he and his wife lie in the burial ground there. This is the oldest house of worship in Delaware County and William Penn attended meeting there at least once. It is said that since he spoke in English many of the Welsh members could not understand his language, but they certainly understood his spirit.

George and Mary Smith had eight children, five of whom survived to mature adulthood. The eldest, Abraham Lewis born in 1831, graduated from the Law School of the University of Pennsylvania and was identified with the legal profession of Philadelphia and Delaware Counties for nearly sixty years. He had gone to boarding school in Burlington, New Jersey; and the following is a letter written to him there by his father on February 1, 1846 when the boy was fourteen.

Dear Son:

It will be a week tomorrow since thy letter dated on the 25th ult. was received. I delayed writing thinking that by this time I would be able to say when I would be up to see thee. I am, however, still unable to do this, in consequence of one engagement after another pressing upon me. It is probable now, that when I do come it will be unawares to thee, as it seems impossible for me to fix on any day certain.

Elizabeth Clement is very ill - worse, I think than I ever saw her before. Her situation is very critical. Saml. Davis' wife is also extremely ill. Her life is despaired of.

John Hayes is here, he came a few days since, but how long he will remain I am unable to say. Old Philip is also here.

Harris Morris intends to leave George Esry in the spring, and Chalkley would like to take his place. Although he had agreed to stay with me a year, I have given my consent for him to go, as I can readily get a hand to suit me, whereas it is difficult to get a good team driver.

There is ^{very} considerable excitement in this county at this time in regard to removing the Court House from Chester. It will probably be put to vote at the next election. In justice I think it ought to be removed to a more central situation, at all events the question ought to be definitely settled, and it seems that this can only be done at the ballot box.

I am glad to hear of thy progress in thy studies - particularly the languages. It is quite a misfortune that they could not retain the services of the drawing teacher. Part of what thee has learned will be forgotten.

We are all in the enjoyment of good health, and that this may find thee so is the sincere wish of thy affectionate

father

George Smith

The second son was Benjamin Hayes, born in 1841. He graduated from Haverford College and then enlisted in the Army, the only member of the family to serve in the Civil War. He engaged in engineering and surveying and was an excellent cartographer. He published an atlas of Delaware County and prepared the first official street map of the Borough of Media. Some of the illustrations in his father's History were done by him. He was the surveyor for the commission established to arbitrate the boundary dispute between Pennsylvania, Delaware and Maryland where the Newcastle Circle failed exactly to meet Nason and Dixon's line.

Clement Lawrence was born in 1844 and also attended Haverford College. He did graduate work there and at Harvard, where he taught for most of his career, holding various professorships and three deanships. He was active in the organization which established Radcliffe College.

We know little about the first two daughters of George and Mary Smith. Margaretta, the third, born in 1838 and always known as Maggie, was destined to be the unmarried child who stayed home and cared for her parents in their old age. Apparently she was not known for promptness, and sometimes was not ready when it was time for the family to leave for meeting. Her father would not tolerate such behavior and would announce that they were going and poor Maggie would be left home in tears. Perhaps not getting to meeting regularly prevented her from meeting eligible young men and finding a husband.

Mary survived her husband by ten years and lived with Maggie until her death in 1892. At that time she had one great grandchild, who was my father. Maggie lived another 23 years. Both these women were born, lived their entire lives and died in the Homestead at Collen Brook Farm; Mary for 83 years and Maggie for 77.

Dr. Smith was an early owner of one of the houses now known as Brooke Row Historic District on West State Street in Media. His was number 410, which is probably why his son Abraham Lewis bought number 412 when he moved to Media from Philadelphia in the 1860's.

The Homestead at Collen Brook Farm was complete and in the form in which it exists today when Dr. Smith settled there in 1829. It had reached this configuration in several stages during its occupation by the Lewis family. The first was a modest two story cottage with a large fireplace for heating and cooking in the first floor room. The first addition provided another room on the first floor and several upstairs. In 1792 an extensive addition was made to the east end of the house transforming it into what I consider a typical old farmhouse of this part of Pennsylvania. It is longer than it is deep and has a veranda across the entire front.

The first barn on the farm was frame and known to us in later years as the Little Barn because it was not as large as a huge stone structure erected in 1819. The springhouse, built over a copious water supply that flowed into Collen Brook, was also of stone and contained a second story chamber under the roof. There was a below-ground ice house for storing ice cut from a small pond formed by damming Collen Brook.

I was fortunate to be able to live in the Homestead for a year in the 1920's following a period of several years after the death of Dr. Smith's daughter Maggie during which for the first time ever the house was not occupied by family. Inside plumbing had been installed by this time but there was no electricity. Things were kept cold in the springhouse, which was a walk of a hundred feet or so down in the brook valley. Water from the spring was pumped by a hydraulic ram to a wooden tank in the attic of the house. Since the ram was at the same elevation as the spring the head of water required to actuate it was obtained with water from the ice pond. This flowed through a race several hundred feet long and provided a head of six or seven feet.

At the time I was there only 300 acres of the original 1000 plus were left. The first break-up of this occurred when the Route 1 by-pass extended Township Line right through the property to State Road at Darby Creek. Now all that remains in the family is the Homestead and a few acres surrounding it, and we

are presently hard pressed to know what to do with it. It has been rented for the past thirty years, but the income received is not really adequate to properly maintain so venerable an edifice. Efforts to have it taken over by a historical or similar organization have not been successful.

The closest village to the farm was Garrettford, one and a half miles east on Burmont Road. In Dr. Smith's day there was a post office here which was the one they used. Public transportation was a mile farther east at Burmont station, later Gladstone, on the Philadelphia & Baltimore Central Railroad. In the 1920's we received mail on a rural route from Upper Darby post office which was then located in the 69th Terminal Building. Good transportation to Media and the city was provided at the Aronimink station on the trolley line. This section of Drexel Hill developed rapidly and most services needed were soon much closer to the farm. Dr. Smith's granddaughter, Rebecca Smith Easby, who moved to the Homestead in 1924 continued to patronize Scott's market in Garrettford, however, as long as she lived.

Dr. Smith was active right up to the end of his life pursuing the various cultural, historical and scientific subjects that he enjoyed and on which he was so knowledgeable. On the 12th of February 1882 he was seventy-eight years old, and on that day he wrote several letters to friends, each of them marked by the vigor of thought and gentle courtesy which were so characteristic of him. Twelve days later he arose, as was his custom, early in the morning; but feeling faint returned to his bed, and in a few minutes, apparently without pain, passed into a state of unconsciousness which soon deepened into that of death.

He was eulogized by two of the organizations to which he belonged: The Numismatic and Antiquarian Society of Philadelphia and The Historical Society of Pennsylvania. I should like to read the one prepared by James J. Levick, M.D. of the latter organization.

As we pass in rapid review the incidents of such a useful life we find in them much to excite admiration for the dead, and much to comfort and instruct the living.

Born among a people of his own race if not altogether of

his own blood, he is a favorite with them from his early boyhood, and they look forward with pride to a useful future for him.

In his early manhood he cares for their sick, and when called to other duties never neglects their interests and welfare.

Their children need to be educated and he prepares and passes the public school law for them. Difficult questions are to be decided, or a difference of sentiment occurs among them, and he becomes their judge as, in the best sense of the word he had long been, their counsellor, and like his ancestor, Henry Lewis, their peacemaker.

With an ardent love for science himself he infuses into his neighbors some of this same love, and the Delaware County Institute of Science is established, and its results are seen in the increased mental culture and intelligence of the people. For them, now, the grass in their fields, the rocks by the roadside, and the very soil itself have a new significance and value.

Having cared for the living he turns his attention to their dead, and from out of musty closets, old desks, older Bibles, and meeting-house records, come ancient documents, time-eaten manuscripts, and faded writings, which, like the dry bones in the prophet's vision, are now fitted rightly together, and, under his care, have breathed into them an intelligent existence.

He has now reached his seventy-eighth year, a period of life which though has its privations has also its privileges. Without those infirmities of extreme age which make the grasshopper a burden, it is yet a time when ambition is satisfied, asperities are smoothed, and when the love of friends is given with a freeness and fulness which are elsewhere accorded only to childhood; a time of life when the object of this love may look peacefully on the past and hopefully to the future.

Happy in his useful life Dr. Smith is happy in his painless death. A day of his usual activity is passed - a night of calm repose - and, with the dawn of the morning, a mist comes before his eyes and they close to this life forever.

This has been a very brief presentation, but it has provided no one with an opportunity for a nap; and I, like Lincoln at Gettysburg, prefer brevity to long-windedness.

Thank you very much.