

## Reverend Cotton Mather Smith of Sharon

The direct ancestor of Helen Evertson Smith, the author of Colonial Days and Ways, written in 1900, the source of the articles on the Thanksgiving dinner in 1779 and the account of the snowshoe trip from Sharon to New Haven, was the Reverend Cotton Mather Smith, pastor of the Congregational church in Sharon. He was a contemporary and friend of Norfolk's Rev. Ammi R. Robbins, whose account of his service in the Revolutionary War was reprinted in *Historic Bytes* a couple of years ago. In reading one of the chapters in Helen Smith's book in which she speaks of his actions during this same time period, the similarities between these two gentlemen became apparent, and she casts more light upon the motivations of the clergy during this great struggle. Read what she has to say:

“Mr. Smith's father, grandfather and great-grandfather of his own surname all fought in the numerous colonial wars. A colonial governor and a major-general were numbered among his ancestors, besides many magistrates and officers of lesser rank. Hence it is not wonderful that while Mr. Smith was a man of peace he was also in favor of fighting in a good cause.”

“The Rev. A. R. Robbins of Norfolk, Connecticut, who was for many years the beloved pastor of the Congregational church in that place, was a lifelong friend of Mr. Smith's, never allowing a year to pass without an exchange of visits, though this was not an easy matter with the twenty miles of steep hills intervening. Robbin's son, the Rev. Thomas Robbins, writing in 1850, left glowing accounts as to Smith's qualities as a man and as a leader of his flock. The author goes on to say the following:

“Though Mr. Smith's fame as an eloquent preacher was locally great, it was as a pastor that he was longest remembered.

In my girlhood there were still many old persons who had known him, and the mingled feelings of reverence and affection with which they mentioned his name was pleasant to know. The anecdotes were many, showing him in many lights. Some persons told how, ‘during the awful smallpox winter, when the weather was as cold as was ever known in New England, he and his heroic wife banished themselves for three months from their own house, taking refuge in an outbuilding, where their indispensable wants were supplied by an old slave who had had the dreaded disease, that they might be free to come and go while ministering to the sick and dying, without endangering the neighbors or their own household.’ This was related to me by a very old lady – Mrs. Deming, who went on to say ‘It was no wonder that all loved Parson Smith, he was the good shepard who was always ready to lay down his life for his flock.’

Another has recorded that ‘this visitation of the smallpox put all Mr. Smith's benevolence, contrivance, activity and fortitude in requisition, because for nineteen successive days and nights, he did not put off his clothes for rest.’ Mr. Smith was possessed of no little medical skill, and it was always freely at the service of any who required it.

In Mr. Smith's time all country ministers became, by force of circumstances rather than choice, both farmers and huntsmen; and sometimes they were carpenters and smiths as well, and saw nothing incongruous in their diverse employments. Certainly their congregations must have been the gainers by the exercise, which made their spiritual

head so physically robust, the health of the mind depending so much upon that of the body.”

“As an army chaplain Mr. Smith seems to have been very successful in a more than usually difficult situation. General Schuyler, one of our best officers and most honorable men of our Revolutionary War, highly esteemed by General Washington and other officers whose good opinions were medals of honor, was heartily disliked by the New England troops. The reason for this dislike is well explained by Mrs. Smith in her account of her journey to join her husband at Ticonderoga. She says:

‘My husband, as chaplain, had used his influence with the men to soften the bitterness of feeling which so many of them entertained toward the ‘Dutchman,’ as they were wont somewhat contemptuously to style General Schuyler. The latter is a man of the purest patriotism and of much ability, but he was then unused to the state of things in our colonies in New England, whereby a man of the best birth and breeding may yet be a mechanic or a tradesman by reason of the poverty of the land, and the fact that so many of our forefathers had been obliged to give up all their estates when for conscience sake they left the Mother Country. On the contrary such of the settlers from Holland as were of good family were able to bring their worldly goods with them to the new land and by reason of the fertility of the soil and their advantageous trade with the Indians were never obliged to resort to handicrafts for a livelihood.

‘My husband has many times told me of the surprise of General Schuyler to find that one of our Trained Band Men whom he knew to be but a carpenter, was at the same time a man of much influence and an office holder in his native town, being the son of a magistrate appointed by the Crown. He could never be brought to see that while we in Connecticut were all so much on a social equality, it was yet an equality on a high plane; while on the other hand it was difficult for our men (so many of whom, though poor, had received the best education the country afforded) not to feel themselves superior to ‘a parcel of stupid Dutchmen’, (thus discourteously, I grieve to say, were they often referred to), many of whom spoke but imperfect English and almost none of whom had received a college training. My husband had always been striving to bring about a better understanding between the troops of Connecticut and those of New York, and had thus gained and still retains the active friendship of General Schuyler, while he was always much liked as well as revered by all the soldiers in the command.’

The Congregational clergymen of New England were, and large, distinguished patriots in the struggle for independence. None of them in the incipient movements of the Revolution, or in providing for the hardships and conditions of the War, brought the people of their charges up to a higher tone of action than did the Pastor of Sharon. His sermons, his prayers, the hymns he gave to the choir, were impulsive to patriotism, but domestic action did not satisfy him. Into the momentous campaign of 1775 he entered as a chaplain to a regiment in the Northern Army. His influence in producing good order and cultivating morals in the camp, in consoling the sick (and it might be added, in taking care of them), and in inspiring the army with firmness and intrepidity attracted the admiration of all.”

**Historic Bytes**

Bob Grigg