

Smith, James Strudwick ^[1]

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A Virtual Museum of University History," University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

^[2]

James Strudwick Smith, physician and politician, was born in Orange County ^[3] of unknown parentage; he may have been the illegitimate son of William F. Strudwick ^[4], for whom the court issued bastardy charges in 1788, omitting the name of the female involved. The Strudwicks were near neighbors of the Reuben Smith family of the Hawfields. James Strudwick Smith's many-faceted career brought him both fortune and misfortune. He studied medicine with Dr. James Webb ^[5] of Hillsborough in 1810 and then, with the help of friends, completed two courses of study at the University of Pennsylvania ^[6] in the winters of 1810–11 and 1811–12 but left without pursuing a degree because of insufficient funds.

In addition to his profession as a doctor, Smith engaged in a variety of business partnerships and public service positions.

Smith entered public service as a town trustee and justice of the peace in 1811. In 1815, with a relation of his wife, he established the firm of James S. Smith and Company, a short-lived merchandising business. Smith won election as a Democratic Republican ^[7] to represent the Hillsborough district in both the Fifteenth and Sixteenth congresses (4 Mar. 1817–3 Mar. 1821). During his congressional terms he advocated for the repeal of various internal duties and opposed the tax on bar iron and distilleries. Smith tried to reform the presidential electoral procedure by giving the common man a larger share in the process. Despite his effectiveness as a worker and speaker, he was defeated in his bid for a third term.

His next business venture was with Dr. Thomas Jefferson Faddis. They started a general store in Hillsborough in 1819, but by 1824 the partnership was entirely medical and consisted of medical services and drugs. This same year Smith joined the Eagle Lodge of the Masonic order ^[8]. He was appointed to a committee to plan a building for his lodge in 1821 and laid the cornerstone of the new building as grand master of the order in North Carolina in 1822. The only known portrait of Smith hangs in this building in Hillsborough; a copy hangs in the grand lodge.

When the state of North Carolina contemplated reestablishing a medical society ^[9], Smith, hoping to be made president, applied for his diploma and paid the necessary fee. His degree was granted on 26 June 1821, and his diploma was dated 1822. In 1821 and 1822, he was elected to Hillsborough's seat in the state legislature ^[10]. Smith was elected a trustee of The University of North Carolina ^[11] in 1821 and a member of its board of visitors in 1827. As a trustee he suggested that a physician be employed and paid for by fees collected from the students; he offered himself for this post.

Smith was also a partner of Josiah Turner in a copper shop, before he sold his share of the business. Smith was chosen as a delegate to the 1835 constitutional convention ^[12] and successfully advocated to end borough representation in the state legislature. His largest venture was with Thomas D. Crain in the operation of mills, distilleries, and tanyards, of which Smith became sole owner in 1836.

During these years Smith was investing heavily in land. He had received from his father-in-law large tracts in Chatham County ^[13], but he also bought land in Orange County, lots and houses in Hillsborough for his dwelling, office, and business operations, and over 7,000 acres in Illinois that had been granted to soldiers as bounty land. Smith ran on the Whig ticket for the Senate in 1832 and the House of Representatives in 1841. He was defeated both times.

Ill health interrupted his medical career in the late 1830s, for the newspaper in 1840 stated that he was resuming his practice but could not take night calls because of failing eyesight. His son Francis had joined him in medical practice and would take the calls that came in at night or in inclement weather.

Cultural and social organizations also interested Smith. In 1839 Smith was listed as a trustee of the Female Academy ^[14] run by the Reverend William M. Green ^[15]. In 1842 he was a co-vice-president of the Hillsborough Literary Association to promote "social intercourse and mutual improvement," the first of its kind in the state.

In 1844 Smith sat on a committee that determined the location and plan of the new Orange County Courthouse ^[16] in Hillsborough. John Berry ^[17]'s famous building was the result, and Smith was deputy grand master for its dedication ceremonies.

By 1845, Smith went bankrupt and was divested of all his property except what he had been able to transfer to his wife and children. In the same year, he announced that he was going to devote himself entirely to his practice. It was probably at this time, too, that he moved from Hillsborough to the Smith Level Road house outside Chapel Hill (still standing in 1978) where all his family members were to live out their lives. Records from this period also denote that Smith was an enslaver. According to the 1850 census, there were 30 people enslaved by Smith.

References from his peers at the time indicate that Smith was not well-liked. Willie P. Mangum ^[18] referred to him as the "puffing" doctor. Dr. Webb, when asked to give a deposition in a lawsuit involving Smith, was forced to admit that he would not trust him when Smith's interest was at stake. Another of his contemporaries wrote, "Can't we keep the man of many pursuits at home? . . . He is a perfect Proteus, always varying."

Smith married Delia Jones 18, the daughter of Francis and Mary Page Jones of Chatham County, 18 Oct. 1813. Smith and Jones had three children: Mary Ruffin (1814–85), Francis Jones (1816–77), and James Sidney (1819–67). All were unmarried, but both Francis Jones Smith and James Sidney Smith had children with a woman enslaved by the Smith family named Harriet. Harriet's children by the Smith brothers -- Cornelia, Emma, Annette, and Laura -- lived with their paternal aunt, Mary Ruffin Smith. Harriet and James Sidney's daughter, Cornelia, was the grandmother of Dr. Pauli Murray ^[19], a lawyer, activist, priest, and author.

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