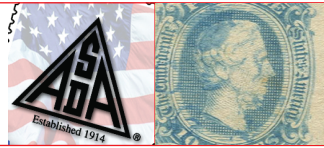


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# The Confederate Post

By Patricia A. Kaufmann

## A Blue Umbrella and a Tall Beaver Hat – Major General “Extra Billy” Smith

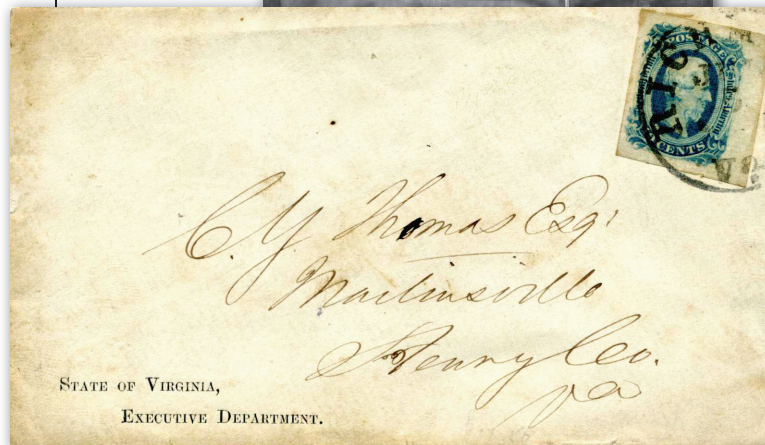
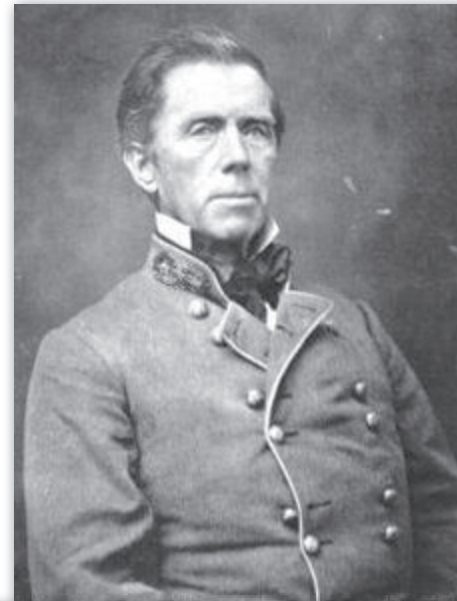
The illustrated cover bears a 10¢ blue type II steel-engraved print tied by a Richmond, Virginia July 5 [1864] circular date stamp on a State of Virginia Executive Department imprinted envelope. It is addressed to “C.Y. Thomas, Esq, Martinsville, Henry Co., Va.”

C.Y. Thomas was a man of more than ordinary distinction in Virginia, an attorney of ability who served in the Virginia senate before the War and struggled in vain against secession. Despite this, he held the office of commonwealth attorney during the War and was appointed by the Confederacy to distribute supplies to the needy families of Confederate soldiers. After the war he was appointed Military Governor of Virginia.

Virginia Governor (and CSA Major General) William Smith (1797–1887) was well-known by the nickname “Extra Billy.” He was a lawyer, congressman, two-time Governor of Virginia and one of the oldest Confederate generals. Smith established a line of United States mail and passenger post coaches through Virginia, the Carolinas and Georgia in 1831. It was in this role that he received his nickname. Given a contract by the administration of President Andrew Jackson to deliver mail between Washington, D.C. and Milledgeville, Georgia, Smith extended it with numerous spur routes, all generating extra fees and questionable perks. During an investigation of the Post Office department, Smith’s extra fees were well publicized and he became popularly known as “Extra Billy.”

At sixty-six years of age, William Smith was old enough to be a father to most Civil War generals and grandfather to most men. Born in the 1700s, Smith was a career politician and one of the most magnetic leaders in the South. A practicing lawyer since 1818, he had been Governor of Virginia during the Mexican War. When the Civil War began, he was serving out his fourth term in Congress. At the beginning of the war, Smith declined to accept a commission as brigadier general because he rightly admitted he was “wholly ignorant of drill and tactics.”

However, when the war was only weeks old, he happened to be at Fairfax Court House when a detachment of Union cavalry charged through the town, killing the Confederate commander on the scene. Smith directed the defense of the town in the ensuing skirmish. Despite his complete lack of military experience, he asked for and received a commission as colonel of the 49th Virginia volunteer regiment, organized just three days before the Battle of First Manassas in July 1861. Smith led the regiment in that battle, then in November was elected to the Confederate Congress. Returning to the 49th Virginia when McClellan’s army started up



the Peninsula in April 1862, Smith fought with it at Williamsburg, then received a severe contusion on the thigh by a spent bullet at the battle of Seven Pines on May 31st. There, half the regiment went down as casualties, and Smith was reported by his superior to be “conspicuous . . . for coolness and courage. His exposure of his person was perhaps almost a fault.” Smith returned to fight for the Seven Days at the end of June, where the 49th was only lightly engaged, but where again his brigadier mentioned Smith’s “characteristic coolness” and “fearlessness.”

“Extra Billy” was known for his contempt of “West P’inters,” believing a military education to be next to worthless in battle. Neither he nor his men understood West Point tactics, he argued; it was plain common sense that was needed. In one battle where his men were held up by obstructions, they were suffering heavily from Federal sharpshooters while they had been instructed to hold their fire. “Colonel,” they cried, “we can’t stand this! These Yankees will kill us before we get in a shot!” Smith exploded, “Of course you can’t stand it boys; it’s all this infernal tactics and West P’int tomfoolery. Damn it, fire, and flush the game!” ✉

“Extra Billy” also displayed contempt for military dress. At Chantilly, he brought his blue cotton umbrella with him onto the field and chose to top his uniform with a tall beaver hat. When a thunderstorm came, Smith calmly raised his umbrella and, so protected, moved nonchalantly through the brigade. The men, who already had the habit of teasing dignified visitors to the camps for having the nerve to open umbrellas while they, the men, were vulnerable to the elements, used the same jibes on Smith, “Come out of that umbrel’,” they would cry. “I see your legs; come out of that hat, I want it to boil the beans in!”

At Sharpsburg later that month, Smith took command of the brigade while Brig. Gen. Jubal Early commanded the division. There, “Extra Billy” suffered three wounds, still in control of his men. Maj. Gen. J.E.B. Stuart observed the old colonel—with blood streaming from his left shoulder, his leg, and his arm, but still fighting valiantly—and he went beyond the limits of report to say that Smith was “conspicuously brave and self-possessed.” When the action was over, Smith was unable to move, and had to be carried off the field. Recovering over the next few months, Smith was promoted to brigadier general in April 1863. He resigned his congressional seat and returned to the army, where he was put back in charge of Early’s brigade in time for the Battle of Chancellorsville.

The general could always be counted on to enliven the drudgery of his brigade’s marches with his colorful personality and gift for speech. On the march toward Gettysburg, Smith’s brigade was at the head of the column when Early’s division entered York, Pennsylvania. He rode into town with his hat off, bowing right and left to the amused crowds, saluting the girls “with that manly, hearty smile which no man or woman ever doubted or resisted.” When the head of the column reached the town square, the men stopped

to deliver a hearty cheer for the old Governor. The townspeople crowded forward, and the Confederate column, thus surrounded, could go no further. Smith, who never met an audience he didn’t like, couldn’t resist an opportunity for some silver-tongued oratory. He cleared enough room for his men to stack arms, and launched into “a rattling, humorous speech” from his saddle, applauded wildly by Pennsylvanians and Confederates alike.

The cantankerous Gen. Jubal Early soon arrived from the rear, however, and barged impatiently toward the center of the crowd. Smith, in mid-eloquence, was unaware that his short-tempered superior had joined the crowd until Early caught his blouse, jerked him around and screamed, “General Smith, what in the devil are you about, stopping the head of this column in this cursed town!” “Having a little fun, General,” Smith replied good-naturedly, “which is good for all of us.” At that, Early regained his composure. This was, after all, the former governor of the state of Virginia and would probably be so again.

“Extra Billy” resigned in July 1863, within a week of the Battle of Gettysburg, where he did not particularly distinguish himself and his superiors commanded around him. He received an honorary promotion to Major General in August, not so recommended by any of his superiors at Gettysburg, and returned to Virginia to help with recruiting. He served as Governor for the second time from January 1, 1864 until the end of the war when he was removed from office and arrested on May 9, 1865; he paroled on June 8th. He returned to his estate, Monterosa near Warrenton, Virginia where he engaged in agricultural pursuits.

“Extra Billy” Smith died at age ninety after a long flamboyant public life – without a doubt, one of the South’s most colorful general officers. ☒

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