

**Isaac Williams Smith:
Surveyor of the Puget Sound Guide Meridian.
By Denny DeMeyer, President
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My interest in Mr. Smith began before I became a licensed surveyor. I was raised on a farm on the east side of Elder Road, said road being built on the section line between Sections 34 and 35, Township 39 North, Range 1 East of the Willamette Meridian in the State of Washington. After learning that U.S. deputy surveyor Isaac W. Smith had been the surveyor of "my" township, I wondered what the man was like, who, in 1859, ran a compass and 33 foot Gunter's chain past my boyhood home. My research revealed an incredibly multi-talented individual whose career as a surveyor, soldier and engineer took him over much of North America and parts of Central and South America.

Isaac Williams Smith was born 1826 in Fredericksburg, Spottsylvania County, Virginia, the son of Reverend George A. Smith an Episcopalian preacher and his wife, Ophelia (Williams) Smith. He was educated at the Fairfax Institute at Claires and at the Virginia Military Institute at Lexington, VA., graduating in 1846 (one of his professors was Andrew "Stonewall" Jackson). He immediately began his interesting career. What follows is a time line of his life.

1846-47: after graduation he served as assistant surveyor under Capt. Emory on the survey of the Northeast Boundary between the United States and Britain (Canada).

1847-1848: appointed second lieutenant in Company K, U.S. Voltigeurs in war with Mexico at Vera Cruz.

1849-50: assistant surveyor and astronomer on the survey of the parallel between the Creek and Cherokee Indians reservations under Lieutenants Sitgreaves and Woodruff.

1851: assistant astronomer and first assistant surveyor of the parallel between the states of Iowa and Minnesota.

1852: resident surveyor and engineer for the construction of the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, Virginia.

1853-54: assistant engineer on the Pacific Railroad surveys and explorations along the southern route under Lieutenants Williamson and John G. Parke, Army Corps of Engineers.

1855: moved to Washington Territory where he superintended the building of various lighthouses along the Pacific Ocean and Straits of Juan de Fuca. This work was accomplished "with considerably difficulty and peril, journeys to and from the works being made either in small rowboats or Indian canoes through water that were of a very treacherous character and often with only Indians for crew".

1855-56: long time friend and first surveyor general of Washington Territory James Tilton awarded Smith contracts to survey several townships and standard parallels as a U.S. deputy surveyor for Washington Territory. During this time he also served as aide-de-camp of Governor Isaac Stevens during the Pacific Northwest Indian Wars. (Isaac Stevens was chief surveyor and engineer of the northern route for the Pacific Railroad surveys in the early 1850s, Washington Territory's first governor and was killed in the Civil War).

1859: surveyed the Puget Sound Guide Meridian from the area just north of Seattle to within feet of the International Boundary. His long time friend, John G. Parke, chief astronomer and surveyor for the U.S. Boundary Commission, had not determined the final location of the border in time for Smith's survey. It was at this time that deputy surveyor Smith also surveyed some townships in the county in which I was born and raised, including the section line that later became Elder Road.

1860: appointed chief registrar of the General Land Office in Seattle.

1862: catching "gold fever" he joined the Cariboo Gold Rush in central British Columbia, where he remained but a short time.

1862: returning to his native state, he enlisted in the Confederate Army, and served as Captain (later Colonel) of the Engineer Corps of the Confederacy in the defense of Petersburg and Richmond. After the surrender at Appomattox, he returned home the possessor in his own words "of an old gray uniform, much tattered and worn, a good horse and a large amount of experience."

1866-68: went to Mexico where he served as district engineer on the Imperial Mexican Railroad from Vera Cruz to Mexico City.

1869-73: returning to the Pacific Coast, he served as surveyor and engineer on various railroad surveys in California, Oregon and the Northern Pacific Railroad in Washington. He built the canals and locks around Willamette Falls in 1871-72 and in December of 1873 he began platting the city of Tacoma, western terminus of the Northern Pacific Railroad.

1874: returning to British Columbia and in the employ of the Dominion Government he made an examination of the Fraser River from Soda Creek to Lytton (over 150 miles) reporting upon the feasibility of removing obstructions to navigation for steamship travel.

1875: visited Peru to pursue employment in one of the "trans-Andean" railroads then under construction. Finding the country in a civil war and all railroad construction interrupted, he immediately returned to California.

1876-78: served on the Board of Railroad Commissioners for the State of California.

1878: appointed chief engineer of the Sacramento River Drainage Commission.

1880: served as chief engineer of the Board of State Harbor Commissioners of California.

1880: returning to Washington Territory and again in the employ of the Northern Pacific Railroad, he was put in charge of Cascade Mountain surveys, which included finding the most practical route across those mountains to the railroad's terminus in Tacoma. The route finally adopted was through "Stampede Pass", one of the new lines surveyed and mapped under his direction.

(An interesting note I discovered was that Stampede Pass was originally called "Garfield Pass" and was renamed from "Stampede Camp", located near the divide. This camp was so named because of the sudden departure of several men employed in the survey, when Isaac W. Smith was sent there to rush the lagging survey).

From 1881 through 1896 Mr. Smith was employed in various positions including chief engineer for the following: Oregon Pacific Railroad, Tacoma Light and Water Company, designing the gas and water plants for Tacoma, the Tacoma Land Company and the city of Portland, Oregon Water Works.

Isaac Williams Smith never married and died of pneumonia in Portland on January 1, 1897. His obituary, published in the "Morning Oregonian" called "Colonel" Smith "one of nature's noblemen, a man of lofty nature, who could not stoop to give place in his large and generous heart to anything that partook of the small and petty in act or sentiment. His life was colored strongly by his sense of duty, his sterling and unapproachable integrity..."

How many of us will ever be involved in the survey of an international boundary, a state boundary or railroads in the United States, Mexico and Peru? Plat a city, serve in two wars, explore mountain passes, pan for gold during the Cariboo Gold Rush, survey a river in British Columbia or become a U.S. deputy surveyor, all in one lifetime? Isaac W. Smith did all of the above and still found time to survey the section line where I used to wait for the school bus.

Denny DeMeyer, PLS

Colonel T. M. R. TALCOTT, First Engineer Regiment:

COLONEL: I am directed by Colonel Rives to suggest to you the propriety of ordering a company of pontoniers to the James River to take charge of the boats now being collected near Drewry's Bluff. I have already a bridge across the river at Drewry's Bluff, and will have within two days over forty boats in the river.

General Ransom is anxious that sufficient boats should be in readiness to bridge the James at any point should the necessity arise. In such a case the only troops available for such duty are about 30 men, under Lieutenant Sully. This, of course, will be too small a company to handle fifty boats. A telegram was sent you at headquarters asking that your pontoon train be ordered to Richmond. The answer came from General Lee authorizing Colonel Rives to order them down. Eight boats are expected to-night, but the reserve is still at Gordonsville, and Lieutenant Smith writes that he has no transportation to bring them down. We will have with the eight boats from Goochland Court-House forty-two boats in hand, and will be able to make two boats per day. If you could get the ten from Gordonsville we would have sufficient to throw a bridge across at almost any point. We had to pile about half the bridge at Drewry's Bluff. Colonel Rives has been sick and confined to his bed for several days.

I have requested Mr. Herbert to forward the maps for which you write. They were put up yesterday, but by some accident were not delivered to Lieutenant Meade.

Respectfully, & c.,

ISAAC W. SMITH,

Captain, Engineers, & c.

RICHMOND, May 31, 1864.