

Editor: Throughout these four articles, I used 'customs house' but 'custom house' unchanged in quoted matter.

The Strange Customs of Victor Smith

Chapter 1: Mr. Smith Comes to Washington (Territory)

By John Kendall

On July 30, 1861, Victor Smith, his family and friends arrived near Port Townsend. Their long journey from the East coast had ended.

For Port Townsend and Port Angeles, their fates tied to Smith had officially begun.

Called by some "the father of Port Angeles"; if so, then Smith almost killed the infant that was Port Townsend. His support of Port Angeles reaped unintended negative consequences.

Controversy followed Smith like a line of vehicles behind a poky RV along Highway 101. His nature, it seemed, was to alienate people

Writer Ruby El Hult wrote that he "probably caused more turmoil, dissension and hatred than any other figure in all of Pacific Northwest history." Others have called him a "lodestone for calamity," eccentric and vain. "Though possessing a high degree of idealism, he was too self-serving, ambitious, and unfortunately, arrogant," wrote one. "The combination was certain to cause trouble."

No picture is known to exist of him and his young family. Unlike his political contemporaries, he left no papers to explain or justify his actions, only some correspondence and letters to regional newspapers. One son, Norman, wrote a long manuscript at age 93 in 1950. In it were fawning words about his father and utter contempt for Smith's enemies. Throughout these articles, when "In Norman's telling . . ." appears, it presents his views.

Somehow, Smith decided not to settle in Port Townsend – in 1861 a hodgepodge of docks, warehouses, stores, offices, hotels and saloons, with government revenue the main source of income.

He, his family (pregnant wife, three children) and four men bought along for government work by Smith, settled in Fort Townsend, three miles down the bay from Port Townsend. The fort was established in 1856 to protect settlers from hostile Indians. The military abandoned the fort a month before the Smith party arrived.

Smith took over as customs collector from a Port Townsend resident. Smith was the fifth customs collector for the Puget Sound District, which was established in 1851 in Olympia. The port of entry – the place where vessels going in and out of U. S. waters would stop to declare their cargo, then pay duties on it – was moved to Port Townsend in 1854.

As customs collector in Port Townsend, Smith was the first outsider – way outside. He grew up in Rhode Island and New York State, moved to Chicago, then to Cincinnati, Ohio, where he worked on newspapers and befriended the state's governor, Salmon P. Chase. The governor wanted to be president.

By the election of 1860, the major political parties were in flux. At the new Republican party's national convention, Chase was among the front runners for president. He and others lost to Abraham Lincoln, who after winning the election, named his former rivals to his cabinet. Chase became secretary of the Treasury.

Presidents and cabinet members of that era had wide powers to appoint friends and relatives to positions, which today have long been governed by civil service rules or legislative oversight. Chase, as Treasury secretary, controlled the Customs Service, and appointed Smith, while Lincoln appointed two Illinois friends to be Washington territorial governor and surveyor general. So the governor, surveyor and others were part of "tribe of Abraham" in Olympia, while Smith was Chase's lone voice; that would be a constant dynamic in territorial politics between 1861 and 1865.

Both Smith and his enemies in Olympia sent correspondence to Lincoln and Chase. It took 16 days for Washington Territory to learn of Lincoln's victory in 1860. The Pony Express was eclipsed by the telegraph, first to San Francisco, then to Olympia on Sept. 8, 1864. Lincoln used the telegraph as his eyes and ears beyond the capital, especially to his Union generals. Lincoln did not discourage gossip about officials in the other Washington. These messages helped bring about Smith's downfall.

Before his downfall, there was the windfall – as customs collector, Smith had power, especially economically.

In 1879, President George Washington approved the Tariff Act, which set up the collection of duties on imported goods. From then until 1913, the enactment of the first permanent income tax, customs revenue funded much of the U. S. government. During the Civil War, tariffs were increased, which added to the importance of customs collections.

Smith's duties included control smuggling, a problem in the San Juan Islands and Victoria; supervise lighthouses, initially there were two in his district: Tatoosh Island, off Cape Flattery, and New Dungeness; supervise revenue cutters of Revenue Marine, which eventually became the U. S. Coast Guard; administer military hospitals, of which there was one in Port Townsend. Smith had a revenue cutter at his disposal, initially the *Jefferson Davis*.

He also controlled subordinate appointments, and for Smith it was family first. A brother was customs inspector. Father George was lighthouse keeper at Tatoosh in 1861. He then transferred to Ediz Hook when that lighthouse became operational in 1863. He was assisted by daughters Cynthia and Abby.

One of his first duties was to deal with a military deserter. In Norman's telling, "The arrest of Adair brought the mutterings of the secesh [Secessionists, those who backed the Confederate states] or copperhead [Northern Democrats who opposed Lincoln's war policies] element, to actual hostilities

against Victor Smith and his function of the federal government under Mr. Lincoln's administration. There was a determined effort to wreck the federal machine while the rebel leaders were concentrating their forces to capture Washington [apparently the territory] and gain the recognition of England. It was because of this disloyal nest of cowards out in the Pacific coast that Mr. Chase had sent a strong man in the person of Victor Smith with full power to act and to deal with the situation out of hand. "

Smith took Norman with him on a horse ride from fort to port. The horse was galloping along the beach, when, in Norman's telling, "I was on the saddle in front of him, when – ping-bang – a shot was fired at him from ambush. From the sound of the bullet, it came very close. He never took me with him on the horse again." Smith always carried a derringer pistol.

A non-drinker, Smith clamped down on the Hudson's Bay Co. importing whiskey without paying duty. He decided to move the marine hospital from port to fort. To Smith, the marine hospital in Port Townsend was a scandal. Most patients "had been used to drawing a subsistence from the [earlier] collector and living around the saloons while being carried on the hospital books." He fired the doctor who ran the hospital and replaced him with one Smith bought with him to Port Townsend – an indication of his plans before he arrived. Smith wrote Chase that the move saved \$23,358.58 a year.

Port Townsend was incorporated in 1860, and it was a major city in Washington Territory where crews spent time and money waiting for the next sail. It had been considered as a site for the capital and state prison. It also had a weekly newspaper, the *North-West*, with John Damon as editor. Perhaps Smith became nostalgic for his newspaper days in Cincinnati when he offered to take over the paper for a month, while Smith told Damon he could work for a judge in Olympia. This was news to the judge when Damon arrived in the capital. Damon had been a Lincoln supporter, but now Smith's editorials attacked the president. Apparently tiring of that, Smith then promoted spiritualism, a belief that the dead communicate with the living. When Damon returned, Smith had yet another enemy in Port Townsend

Then Smith set in motion plans to move the port of entry from Port Townsend to Port Angeles. There is some strategic sense to this move, and one that had been urged by other government officials over the years. Port Townsend was too far east – from Port Angeles, Smith could better police marine traffic going to Victoria and the smugglers' havens in the San Juans. In 1861, inner-Sound settlements to the east were too small to entice much commercial marine traffic; it would be years before the coal mines and lumber mills would create busy harbors there, so a Port Townsend location was not so important.

In Norman's telling, "the bright business minds of Port Townsend" told Smith about "the beautiful harbor of Port Angeles." Smith sailed to the harbor "and he found that the men of Port Townsend had told him the truth."

In letters to Chase, Smith wrote that he had purchased 25 acres in Port Angeles, where he planned to live permanently; that he is one of five Port Angeles property owners; that Port Angeles had fresh water, (which Port Townsend lacked), "a school" (which both lacked); "That I have already contracted for a controlling interest and sole Editorial Content of the only newspapers in the northern part of the Territory – to be called the '*Port Angeles Herald*,' devoted, of course, to the national recognition of

Salmon P. Chase" (either a dream or a lie); "All interest now accomdated [sic] at Port Townsend will be *better* accomdated [sic] at Port Angeles."

In their book "*Port Angeles, Washington: A History*," Paul Martin and Peggy (Brady) Norris wrote that too many "coincidences" led to them to speculate that Smith was part of a Washington, D. C.-Olympia clique that promoted, for whatever reasons, a port of entry in what would become Port Angeles. All of this, including land purchases, may have begun, the authors assert, well before Smith reached Washington Territory.

Port Townsend residents already knew of his plans; if they didn't, Damon reminded them. Smith denied such plans, writing in the *Washington Standard*, "I have no pecuniary interest in the town of Port Angeles and shall never acquire one, until in open market I can purchase on the same terms with any other man."

All this was too much for his enemies in Port Townsend and Olympia. On Dec. 23, 1861 – only five months since Smith arrived – the territorial House of Representatives introduced a joint resolution that the port of entry move was "not in accordance with the wishes of the people of the Territory." The resolution was postponed, but on Feb. 10, 1862, a grand jury in Port Townsend indicted Smith for an editorial he wrote in which he charged that a resident had influenced an earlier grand jury. A judge dismissed the charges, writing that the jury had no authority over political appointees.

Chase and Lincoln had received reports about Smith's behavior. Chase told him to come to the nation's capital.

On May 2, 1862, Smith appointed Lt. J. H. Merryman to temporarily assume his customs job in Port Townsend. That decision would seal Smith's ultimate political fate.