

Edmund Kirby Smith

Edmund Kirby Smith (May 16, 1824 – March 28, 1893) was a career United States Army officer before serving the Confederacy during the American Civil War, and educator in the postwar years. He served as a general in the Confederate States Army, notable for his command of the Trans-Mississippi Department after the fall of Vicksburg to the Union Army.

After the conflict ended, Smith worked in both the telegraph and railway industries. He next served as a college professor at the University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee until his death.

1 Early life and the U.S. Army

Smith was born in 1824 in St. Augustine, Florida, as the youngest child to Joseph Lee Smith and Frances Kirby Smith. Both his parents were natives of Litchfield, Connecticut, where their older children were born. The family moved to Florida in 1821, shortly before the elder Smith was named a Superior Court judge in the new Florida Territory, acquired by the US from Spain.^{[1][2]} Older siblings included Ephraim, born in 1807; sister Frances, born in 1809;^[1] and Josephine, who died in 1835, likely of tuberculosis.^{[3][4]} In 1836, his parents sent him to a military boarding school in Virginia, which he attended until his enrollment in the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York.^[5]

On July 1, 1841, Smith entered West Point and graduated four years later, standing 25th out of 41 cadets. While there he was nicknamed “Seminole” after the Native Americans of his state, and brevetted a second lieutenant in the 5th U.S. Infantry on July 1, 1845. He was promoted to second lieutenant on August 22, 1846, now serving in the 7th U.S. Infantry.^[6]

In the Mexican–American War, he served under General Zachary Taylor at the Battle of Palo Alto and the Battle of Resaca de la Palma.^[2] He served under General Winfield Scott later, and received brevet promotions to first lieutenant for Cerro Gordo and to captain for Contreras and Churubusco. His older brother, Ephraim Kirby Smith (1807-1847), who graduated from West Point in 1826 and was a captain in the regular army, served with him in the 5th U.S. Infantry in the campaigns with both Taylor and Scott. Ephraim died in 1847 from wounds suffered at the Battle of Molino del Rey.^[5]

After that war, Kirby Smith served as a captain (from 1855) in the 2nd U.S. Cavalry, primarily in Texas. (From



Edmund Kirby Smith as a U.S. Army officer

that year on through the war, Smith was accompanied by Alexander Darnes, then 15, a mixed-race slave of his family who served as a valet until emancipation.) (See photo of Darnes.)^[7] Kirby Smith collected and studied materials as a botanist; like many other military officers, he was also a scientist. Some of the items from his collecting at West Point, he donated to the Smithsonian Institution.

Kirby Smith was assigned to teaching mathematics at West Point, from 1849-1852. According to his letters to his mother, he was happy with this environment.^[8] On May 13, 1859, he was wounded in his thigh fighting Indians in the Nescutungua Valley of Texas.^[2] When Texas seceded, Smith, now a major, refused to surrender his command at Camp Colorado in what is now Coleman, Texas, to the Texas State forces under Col. Benjamin McCulloch; he expressed his willingness to fight to hold it.^[5] On January 31, 1861, Smith was promoted to major, but on April 6, he resigned his commission in the U.S. Army to join the Confederacy.^[6] His sister Frances (Smith) Webster remained loyal to the Union although married to Lucien Bonaparte Webster, a Confederate officer, who died during the war.

3 Marriage and family life

In August 1861, Kirby Smith met Cassie Selden (1836–1905), the daughter of Samuel S. Selden of Lynchburg. Kirby Smith was recovering from being wounded at the **First Battle of Manassas**, but still found time for wooing – they were married on September 24. Cassie wrote on October 10, 1862 from Lynchburg, asking what to name their first child. Cassie suggested “something uncommon as I consider her an *uncommon* baby.” The new baby was later named Caroline.^[19]

The couple briefly reunited when Cassie followed her husband to **Shreveport** in February 1863. In the spring of 1864, she moved to **Hempstead, Texas**, where she was to remain for the duration of the war. After the war’s end, Cassie traveled to Washington to negotiate for her husband’s return to the United States.

In 1875 Kirby Smith accepted an appointment as a professor at the University of the South in **Sewanee, Tennessee**. There the Kirby Smiths lived happily until the end of his life. They had a total of five sons and six daughters, Caroline (1862–1941), Frances (1864–1930), Edmund (1866–1938), Lydia (1868–1962), Nina (1870–1965), Elizabeth (1872–1937), Reynold (1874–1962), William (1876–1967), Josephine (1878–1961), Joseph Lee (1882–1939), and Ephraim (1884–1938). Reynold, William, Joseph, and Ephraim all played for the **Sewanee Tigers** football team. Joseph and Ephraim were both **All-Southern**. Joseph was a member of the famed 1899 “**Iron Men**” and Ephraim was selected for **Sewanee’s All-time** football team.

4 Postwar career

After the war, Kirby Smith was active in the telegraph business and higher education. From 1866 to 1868, he was president of the **Atlantic and Pacific Telegraph Company**. When that effort ended in failure, he started a preparatory school, in **New Castle, Kentucky**, which he directed until it burned in 1870.^[5] In 1870, he combined efforts with former Confederate general officer **Bushrod Johnson** and became president of the **University of Nashville**.

In 1875, Kirby Smith left that post to become professor of mathematics and botany at the **University of the South at Sewanee, Tennessee**. Part of his collection from those years was donated to the **University of North Carolina**, **Harvard**, the **Smithsonian Institution**. He kept up a correspondence with botanists at other institutions. He taught there until 1893, when he died of pneumonia. At the time of his death in Sewanee, he was the last surviving man who had been a full general in the Civil War. He is buried in the **University Cemetery at Sewanee**.^[5]

5 Legacy and honors

- His papers have been collected at the University of North Carolina, in *Edmund Kirby-Smith Papers, 1776-1906 (bulk 1840-1866)*.^[4]
- A dormitory building on the campus of **LSU in Baton Rouge** is named **Edmund Kirby Smith Hall**.
- The state of Florida erected a statue honoring General Smith in the **National Statuary Hall Collection** of the **United States Capitol** in Washington, D.C.^[20]
- At the university, he is commemorated by the **Kirby-Smith Memorial** on University Avenue, by **Kirby-Smith Point** on University Domain lands.
- The **Kirby-Smith Chapter of the United Daughters of the Confederacy** at **Sewanee**, and the **Kirby-Smith Camp 1209, Sons of Confederate Veterans** in **Jacksonville, Florida**, were named for him.
- **Kirby Smith Middle School** in **Jacksonville** and the **Alachua County Public Schools** administrative building, built in 1903, were named for him.
- During World War II the 422-foot (129 m) liberty ship *SS E. Kirby Smith* was built in **Panama City, Florida**, in 1943 and named in his honor.^[21]
- 2004, a life-sized statue of Kirby Smith and **Alexander Darnes** (see below) was made by a granddaughter of Smith. It is installed in the courtyard of their childhood home, the **Segui-Kirby Smith House** in **St. Augustine, Florida**, the first public sculpture in the city to commemorate a black man.^[7]

6 Alexander Darnes

Main article: **Alexander Darnes**

Alexander H. Darnes (1840 - February 11, 1894) was an **African American** born into slavery in the same household as Smith in **St. Augustine, Florida**. Darnes was the mixed-race son of **Violet Pinkney**, an African-American slave who served in the household of Smith’s parents. (Darnes bears an eerie resemblance to Kirby Smith, according to photos of the two men held by the **St. Augustine Historical Society**).^[7]

Darnes served as Smith’s personal valet starting from 1855 and continuing throughout the Civil War. After emancipation and preparatory work, Darnes graduated from **Lincoln University** and earned his medical degree at **Howard University**. He settled in **Jacksonville, Florida** as its first black physician and the second in the state.^[7]

7 See also

- List of American Civil War generals

8 Notes

- [1] "... for the signal victory achieved by him in the battle of Richmond, Kentucky, on the thirtieth of August, and to all officers and soldiers of his command engaged in that battle" (Eicher 2001, p. 494).
- [1] Webster & Webster 2000, p. .
- [2] Chisholm 1911, p. 260.
- [3] Webster & Webster 2000, p. 14.
- [4] *Edmund Kirby-Smith Papers, 1776-1906 (bulk 1840-1866)*, The Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, accessed 25 November 2013
- [5] Nofi 1995, pp. 347–48.
- [6] Eicher 2001, pp. 493–94.
- [7] "Alexander Darnes and Kirby Smith Share Rare History", Jacksonville Historical Society
- [8] "Letter from Edmund K. Smith to Frances K. Smith, February 14, 1849", *Edmund Kirby-Smith Papers, Record Group #404 Southern Historical Collection*, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina
- [9] Lossing 1881, p. 1306.
- [10] Wagner, Gallagher & Finkelman 2002, p. 422.
- [11] Cunningham 1992, p. 166.
- [12] Davis 1999, p. 94.
- [13] Maritime Activity Reports 1942, pp. 101–2.
- [14] Sheehan-Dean 2007, pp. 145–47.
- [15] Mechem & Malin 1964, p. 281.
- [16] accessed 2 June 2011
- [17] Townsend 2006, pp. 136–37.
- [18] *AMERICA: ARRIVAL OF THE CUBA*, The Manchester Guardian, 4 September 1865
- [19] Jones 1955, pp. 177–79.
- [20] Architect of the Capitol website
- [21] Maritime Activity Reports 1942, p. 135.

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10 Further reading

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11 External links

- Edmund Kirby-Smith Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
- Architect of the Capitol description and photo of Smith's statue
- Kirby-Smith Middle School website in Jacksonville, Florida
- Memorials at Sewanee

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