

Rare Confederate Flag in Prowers County Museum

By Scott D. Myers

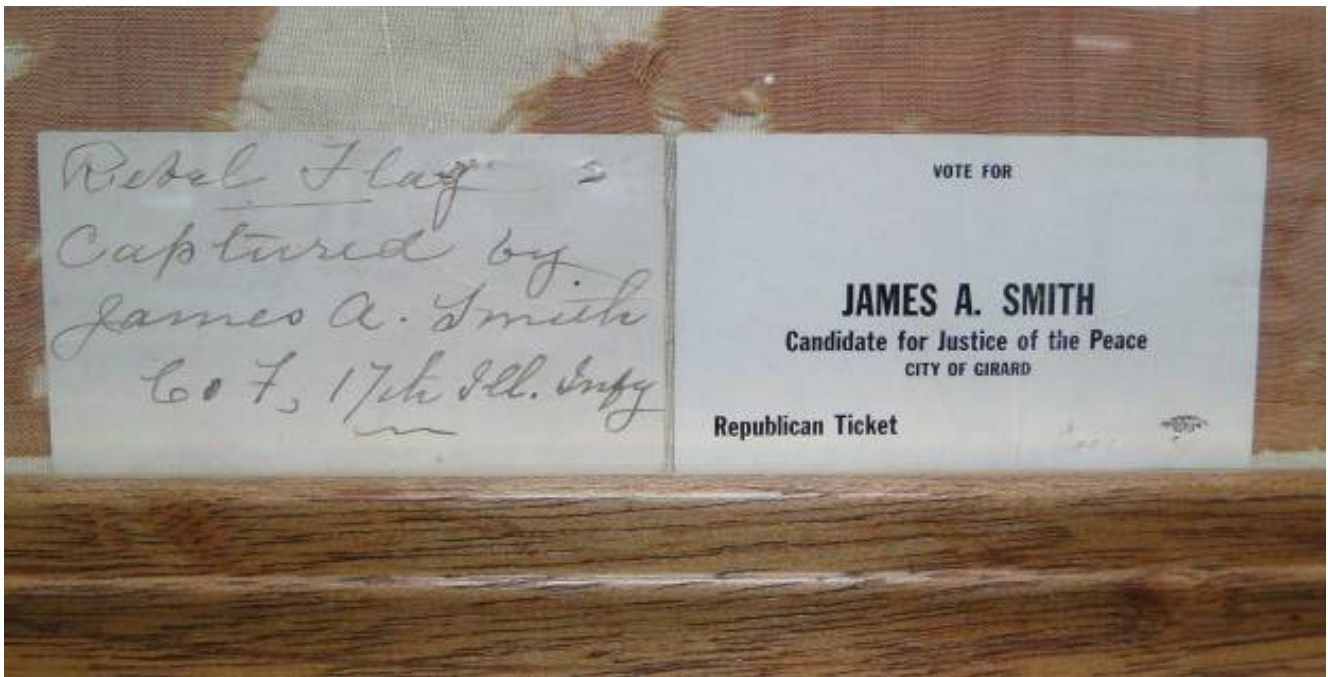
8/16/13

In early July 2013, Compatriot Roy Poole of the Sons of Confederate Veterans Sterling Price Camp 676 in Denver sent me a link to an article about the Big Timbers Museum in Prowers County, Colorado. The article stated that “The museum houses one of Colorado’s most extensive WWI poster collections and displays war memorabilia including an original 10 star Confederate Battle Flag from the Civil War captured on the battlefield.” This really piqued my curiosity as I had never seen or heard of an original Confederate Flag in the state of Colorado. I began my research by contacting the museum and asking about the flag. Kathleen Scranton, the museum’s curator was very helpful and sent me everything the museum had in their files. This included a picture of the flag, a notecard regarding the flag, a 5 August, 2006 article about the flag from the Pueblo Chieftain, and a biographical sketch of the man who “captured” the flag.



Rare 10-Star Confederate Flag in Big Timbers Museum in Lamar, Colorado
(Photo courtesy of Big Timbers Museum)

The flag, a 10-Star First National Confederate banner, was discovered in a box by a museum curator in 1997. Museum records indicate that the flag was captured by Corporal James A. Smith of Company F, 17th Illinois Infantry Regiment at Vicksburg, Mississippi during the war. A card displayed with the framed flag reads “Rebel Flag Captured by James A. Smith Co. F, 17th Ill. Infy” and is believed to be written by Smith. In the 2006 Pueblo Chieftain article, Jim Farmer, then President of the Prowers County Historical Society stated that “We are not completely sure of when the flag was captured or just picked up”. Farmer contacted Officials at Vicksburg to try to see if they knew anything about the flag, but they told him that the flag was probably not captured there.



Note card displayed with 10-Star Confederate Flag
(Photo courtesy of Big Timbers Museum)

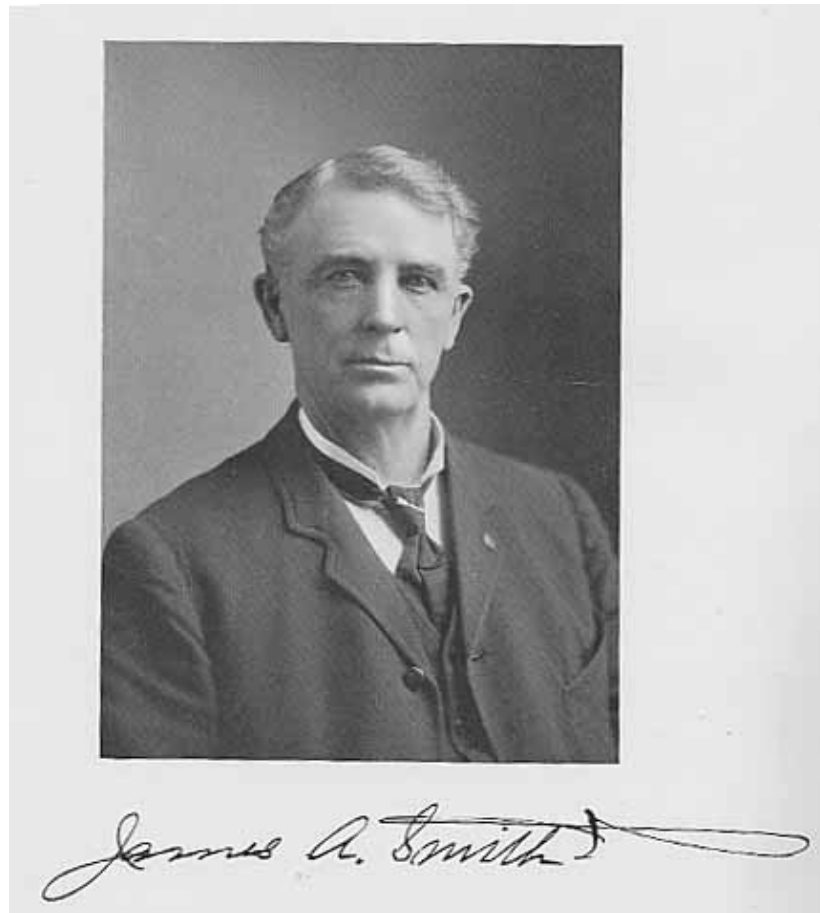
The museum staff knew that the flag was rare, but did not realize how rare it really was until a visitor pointed it out to them. The visitor told them that he had seen a lot of 9-Star Flags and a lot of 13-Star Flags, but never a 10-Star Flag, and that they may have something very unique. One Civil War group told Farmer that only eight to ten of the 10-star flags are known to exist. The 10-star flag would have been made from the time after North Carolina seceded on 20 May, 1861 (the tenth Southern State to secede from the Union) and before Tennessee seceded on 8 June, 1861 (the eleventh Southern State to secede from the Union). So there were only several weeks in which there were 10 states in the Confederacy and a very short timeframe in which the 10-star flags were made. The size of the flag also adds to its uniqueness. It measures approximately 4-feet by 8-feet, making it larger than most other flags of the time.

I contacted the Museum of the Confederacy in Richmond, Virginia to try to find out how rare the flag is. The museum has 78 First National Flags and only three of them have 10 stars, so this flag is indeed quite rare. They also have 41 Second National Flags and 3 Third National Flags in their collection.

James A. Smith was born on 5 May, 1840 in Warren County Illinois to Seth and Catherine P. (Tuttle) Smith. I have verified that he did serve in the Co. F of the 17th Illinois Infantry Regiment (he was a Corporal) with muster documents found on "fold3" and data from the National Parks Service Soldiers and Sailors database. He enlisted April 17th, 1861, in Company F, 17th Illinois Infantry and on May 25th was enrolled for three years' service. He fought in the battles of Fredericktown (October 21, 1861), Fort Donelson, Shiloh, Corinth, Iuka, and at the siege of Vicksburg until the Confederate

surrender on July 4, 1863, and was afterward detailed for duty in the commissary department until he mustered out on June 4, 1864.

When his enlistment was up, he took a position in the U.S. Commissary Department until the end of the war. He was initially posted to Cairo, Illinois and then to Columbus, Kentucky and finally to Fort Scott, Kansas. While at Fort Scott he began reading law with General C. W. Blair and later with Judge W. C. Webb, and was admitted to the bar in Fort Scott in the fall of 1866. He was elected county attorney and later served as a judge, justice of the peace, and on the city council of Girard (Crawford County, Kansas). James A. Smith, a very prominent citizen in Kansas, was known as the "father of the Crawford County Bar" and served as the Worshipful Master of the Masonic Lodge in Girard.



He married Carrie Stearns on 1 September 1869 and they had two daughters, Helen and Katherine, and a son, Grant. Grant Stearns-Smith (he used his mother's name to honor her family) married Nina Bernam in 1906 and they had one daughter, Nina Stearns-Smith. Nina Bernam Stearns-Smith died in 1910 and Grant moved to Lamar, Colorado with his daughter shortly thereafter. Grant brought the Confederate Flag to Lamar with him from Girard, Kansas. Grant Stearns-Smith married Evelyn Gilbert after moving to Lamar and they had two more children, Katherine Stearns-Smith and James Stearns-Smith. Evelyn (Gilbert) Stearns-Smith had a niece, Miriam Rachel "Sis" Gilbert, who was married to George W. Sprout. Evelyn gave the flag to Miriam (Gilbert) Sprout and she and her husband donated the flag to the Big Timbers Museum sometime around 1966. The flag remained in a box for over thirty years before being discovered by the museum in 1997.

I want to thank several people who helped me piece together this flag's journey from a battlefield to the Big Timbers Museum:

Kathleen Scranton of Lamar, Colorado: Curator of the Big Timbers Museum who provided me with so much information about the flag.

Sherry (Fisher) Sprout of Lamar, Colorado: Daughter-in-Law of Miriam (Gilbert) Sprout and George W. Sprout (the flag donators) who provided me with the lineage of the Gilbert Family.

Gary Parrot of Grand Junction, Colorado: Fellow Compatriot in the Sons of Confederate Veterans who provided me with the lineage of James A. Smith's family.

Sources:

1. "One of History's Mysteries" Pueblo Chieftain, 5 August 2006
2. <http://www.museumsusa.org/museums/info/9816>
3. 1905 History of Crawford County Kansas, from *A Twentieth Century History and Biographical Record of Crawford County, Kansas*, by Home Authors; Illustrated. Published by Lewis Publishing Company, Chicago, IL: 1905. 656 p. ill. Transcribed by staff and students at Baxter Springs Middle School, Baxter Springs, Kansas, August, 2002, through April, 2003. Additional transcriptions by Carolyn Ward, November 2003.
4. <http://www.fold3.com/browse.php#20|hQXZIWdvz>
5. <http://www.nps.gov/civilwar/soldiers-and-sailors-database.htm>