

Cavalry Charges Through The Shenandoah

William Smyth
1820 - 1891

Eliza Logan
1825 - 1857

In the relatively short history of the United States certainly no single event has had more of an impact on the conscience and development of our nation than the Civil War did. Not only did it extinguish the better part of a generation of America's young men, it also changed the way of life in the southern part of the United States. Slavery, which had been a thorn in the side of the country for over two hundred years, had finally been eradicated; although it would be another hundred years before African Americans would even begin to start to enjoy the freedoms that Americans of European descent did.

Slavery had come to the shores of North America as early as 1619¹ and expanded quickly as planters in the southern colonies began to need more workers to assist with the production of tobacco. Not only was tobacco a labor intensive crop, the south also had much larger farms than the northern colonies did, due in part to the headright system that rewarded planters with fifty acres of free land for every immigrant they brought to America. The result was that some of the more wealthy colonists quickly amassed such large plantations that they could no longer maintain them through the usual method of apprenticeships. Unfortunately, the method turned to was slavery, which quickly became accepted as the way of life in the southern colonies.

The need for slavery was soon compounded by the introduction of another labor intensive crop, cotton, which was to become the staple cash crop throughout the south. Following the invention of the cotton gin in the 1790's the production of cotton grew even faster, so much so that by the start of the Civil War cotton was king and nearly four million people were enslaved.

Although the issue of slavery was the impetus for the start of the Civil War, it was certainly not the only difference between the north and the south. As the north grew in population and prospered through the advances in industry and manufacturing, the south seemed to be caught in time, relying almost solely on the agricultural roots it had put down some two hundred years previously. This gradual shift in population and wealth certainly affected the political strength of the south, particularly over the issue of slavery.

As with many southern families, the Smyth family of southwestern Virginia led a fairly comfortable existence prior to the Civil War. Originally Swedish colonists on the Delaware River, the Smyth family had made the move south into Virginia in about 1749 and settled initially in Augusta County.² Shortly before the Revolutionary War the family moved on into Washington County, Virginia where they established a farm

¹ Ward, Burns, & Burns; *The Civil War*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Publisher, 1995), p. 6. [Ward notes that a Dutch frigate sold twenty black slaves at Jamestown, Virginia in 1619.]

² Dorothy G. Tuttle, *Smidt/Smith/Smyth*; (Murray, Utah: PrivatePrinting, 1991, updated 2000), p.18. [Tuttle said the first record of Tobias Smyth in Augusta County was February 20, 1749 when he witnessed a land sale on the South Branch of the Roanoke River. She speculates he may have been in Virginia even earlier, as his marriage to Mary McDonald is believed to have occurred in Virginia in 1748.]

immediately to the north of the present day Emory and Henry College. They also operated a tanning yard for the processing of leather and played an active role in the founding of Emory and Henry, donating the land for the college and participating in its early development.³

William “Buck” Smyth, who was born in Washington County on December 20, 1820, was the youngest of nine children born to John Smyth and Nancy Stuart.⁴ There are few records from William’s early life, but it is known that he was raised on a small farm that had been deeded to his father by his grandfather, Jonas Smyth. Likely this was part of the Smyth family’s original land purchase in the region some fifty years prior to William’s birth.

It wasn’t until the age of 32 that William took a wife, marrying a local girl by the name of Eliza Logan on December 23, 1852.⁵ Eliza was the daughter of Caleb Logan and Mary Dunn; and like the Smyth family, the Logans and Dunns had been early settlers to Washington County, Virginia. There were a number of marriages between these three families, an indication that they probably lived in close proximity to one another.

Eliza was born in Washington County, Virginia on December 27, 1825,⁶ making her some five years younger than her husband. Still, their ages at the time of marriage (32 and 27) are somewhat unusual given the time period and no record of any previous marriages. As with William Smyth, not much is know about Eliza’s childhood other than that her father was a farmer. Her ethnic heritage is believed to have been Irish and Scotch, or perhaps even a combination known as Scotch-Irish, a term used to describe Scottish families who had settled in Northern Ireland for several generations prior to immigration to America.

William and Eliza settled down to farm following their marriage, and some researchers believe they lived for a period of time in the Limestone, Tennessee area. Although located in a different state, Limestone is only some sixty miles south from where the Smyth and Logan families were located in southwest Virginia. According to family tradition William and Eliza were in Tennessee at the time of her death, at which point William moved back to Washington County, Virginia.⁷ However, since no records are known to exist from the family’s stay in Tennessee, their actual dates of residing there are not known.

Three children were born between the years of 1853 and 1857, two sons and a daughter, Mary Josephine Smyth (1853-1928), Wallace Smyth (1854-ukn.), and Lycenius Logan

³ Aleta Spicer; *Smyth*, (Virginia: Private Printing, Virginia, 1976).

⁴ Dorothy G. Tuttle; *Smidt/Smith/Smyth*, (Murray, Utah: Private Printing, 1991, updated 2000). p. 25.

⁵ Dorothy G. Tuttle; *Smidt/Smith/Smyth*, (Murray, Utah: Private Printing, 1991, updated 2000). p 25. [Tuttle gives her source for William and Eliza’s marriage date as the Washington County, Virginia Marriage Register I, page 426.]

⁶ Aleta Spicer; *Smyth*, (Virginia: Private Printing, 1976). p. 92.

⁷ Aleta Spicer; *Smyth*, (Virginia: Private Printing, 1976). p. 23. [This narrative on the Smyth family says that, “Eliza died and his farm in Tennessee was over-run by the Yankees, leaving his three children both motherless and homeless. Discouraged at the condition of his farm and the prospect of beginning there with no wife to help him, he left the land to revert to the state and returned to the place he know best – the Big Hill.” This statement seems somewhat suspect for several reasons. Eliza’s died in 1857, some three years prior to the beginning of the war and perhaps even four years before the war reached Limestone, Tennessee. Additionally, William enlisted in the Confederate Army in Virginia in May of 1861, also prior to hostilities reaching the Limestone area. It seems more likely that William and his three small children would have moved back to Virginia shortly after his wife’s death in May of 1857.]

Smyth (1856-1937).⁸ Unfortunately, some six months following the birth of their third child, Eliza died at the age of thirty-two. Since her grave has not been found, several researchers believe this supports the theory that she died in Tennessee; however there are also indications that her youngest child may have been born in Virginia. Until further information is unearthed, the location of Eliza Logan Smyth's death on May 11, 1857⁹ remains a mystery.

Following Eliza's death William faced quite a dilemma – he was now a single father with three children under the age of four; and unless he remarried immediately it would have been nearly impossible for him to continue to farm and care for his three small children at the same time. The solution William chose was one that was used frequently during the nineteenth century, he would allow other family members to care for his children until such time that he could once again provide them with a stable home. At least initially, it is believed the children were placed with Eliza's parents, Caleb and Mary Logan. This turned out to be critical in his decision to join the Confederate Army at the start of the Civil War.

While the Smyth family did not depend upon slavery for their livelihood, they were supportive of the southern cause and came quickly to the defense of the Confederacy. William and three of his brothers joined the Confederate Army, even though all were over the age of forty at the start of the war. His brother Tobias was a captain with the Virginia Infantry, and brothers Jonas and John were among those who fought at the Battle of Saltville. John was killed during the defense of Saltville, and is buried in the Smyth Family Cemetery in Washington County.¹⁰

William served with the Washington Mounted Rifles in the 1st Virginia Cavalry of the Army of Northern Virginia, enlisting on May 14, 1861 at Abington, Virginia.¹¹ Led by the illustrious James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart, the 1st Virginia Cavalry gained in reputation during their pursuit of the Union Army following the Battle of Manassas in 1861. Manassas, which was also known as Bull Run, was the first big battle of the war and served notice to Abraham Lincoln that the South was going to be a formidable opponent. A letter that William wrote home to his brother John during this battle is still in possession of the family, and indicates that his company was among those who pursued the Union Army following their defeat at Manassas.¹²

As with other companies of the 1st Virginia Cavalry, the Washington Mounted Rifles organized as a militia unit in Washington County prior to the war and were ready to serve when the call came. Led by Captain William Edmondson "Grumble" Jones, the Washington Mounted Rifles joined Jeb Stuart in the Shenandoah Valley where they

⁸ Aleta Spicer; *Smyth*; (Virginia: Private Printing, 1976), p.92.

⁹ Dorothy G. Tuttle; *Smidt/Smith/Smyth*, (Murray, Utah: Private Printing, 1991, updated 2000). p. 25. [Tuttle states that Eliza died in Limestone, but does not site her source.]

¹⁰ Aleta Spicer; *Smyth*, (Virginia: Private Printing, 1976). p. 22.

¹¹ Robert J. Driver, Jr.; "1st Virginia Cavalry", *The Virginia Regimental Histories Series*, 2nd Edition; (publisher unknown). [This historical series details the military record of William Smyth. Care needs to be taken in reviewing these records as there apparently were two William Smyths who enlisted at the same time from Abington, Virginia. The "other" William Smyth was identified by nickname as Buck, perhaps erroneously as that was also the nickname of the William Smyth of this narrative.]

¹² William Smyth letter to John Smyth; Fairfax Courthouse; July 23, 1861. [William notes in his letter that his company pursued the enemy until dark, and that the captain of his Company, Grumble Jones, turned down a promotion following the battle. He also notes that Jeff Davis (president of the Confederacy) was there and said they were going to take Alexandria and Washington in a few days.]

quickly distinguished themselves in battle and earned accolades from General Johnston as the strongest company in the 1st Virginia Cavalry.¹³ This was quite a statement given that the 1st Virginia Cavalry was to become the most famous of all Confederate cavalry brigades. Grumble Jones, a West Point graduate with a number of years of military experience behind him, was promoted to colonel of the 1st Virginia Cavalry following his company's accomplishments at the Battle of Bull Run.¹⁴

As well as their friendship and service together, there were familial ties between William Smyth and William "Grumble" Jones that extended back several generations. Their wives, both of whom were named Eliza and died young, were first cousins and granddaughters of William Dunn and his wife Lydia Musgrave, early settlers to southwest Virginia. But as tragic as the death of William Smyth's wife had been at the age of 32, the death of Grumble Jones' wife was perhaps even more tragic. Only a few months following their marriage she was swept from his arms during a shipwreck off the coast of Texas.¹⁵ From all accounts, Jones was never to recover from her loss, retiring from a promising army career to live the life of a reclusive farmer in Washington County, Virginia. In a twist of fate, however, as tensions between the north and south grew, he soon answered the call to return to duty, this time with the rebel Confederacy.

Although not a dashing officer, Grumble Jones rose quickly through the ranks of the Confederate Army, reaching the rank of Brigadier General. He was not well liked due to his temperament, but he was fierce in battle and respected by his men and fellow officers alike. By the fall of 1863, however, his temper had led to his court martial for insulting his senior officer Jeb Stuart, and only the intervention by General Robert E. Lee prevented his removal from service. Some nine months later, while in command of forces in the upper Shenandoah Valley, he was killed while personally leading a charge at the Battle of Piedmont. Some believe his aggressive nature in battle and sour disposition was due to a general disregard of life, prompted by the loss of his young wife some years earlier. Jones was just a month past his fortieth birthday when he died, and is remembered as one of the Confederacy's more illustrious military leaders.

Unlike his friend Grumble Jones, William Smyth survived the Civil War. Records from the 1st Virginia Cavalry indicate that William served nearly continuously from May of 1861 until his discharge in February of 1864.¹⁶ He fought in many of the major battles of northern Virginia; and by the end of the war the 1st Virginia Cavalry had served in over two hundred battles, masterminding a final escape following the defeat and surrender of the Confederate Army at Appomattox.

On August 9, 1864, several months following his discharge, William married Elizabeth McClelland Huttson, who at only twenty-one had already been left a widow by the war. Elizabeth had been a newlywed when her first husband, a school teacher, had joined the

¹³ "Brigadier General William Edmondson Jones", *Virginia Civil War Biographies Page*; <www.members.aol.com/jweaver300/grayson/joneswe.htm> [This webpage cites its source as the Confederate Military History, Volume III, pages 616-18. In part, the article states that General J.E. Johnston, "declared that his company was the strongest in the First Virginia cavalry regiment".]

¹⁴ "Brigadier General William Edmondson Jones", *Virginia Civil War Biographies Page*; <www.members.aol.com/jweaver300/grayso/joneswe.htm>.

¹⁵ James Buchanan Ballard, "The Death of Eliza Dunn Jones", *The Historical Society of Washington County, Virginia, Bulletin*, Series II, No. 34, (Virginia: publisher unknown, 1997).

¹⁶ Robert J. Driver, Jr., "1st Virginia Cavalry, *The Virginia Regimental Histories Series*, (publisher unknown).

Civil War as a chaplain; and although Elizabeth was to receive word of his death in 1862 at the Battle of Seven Pines, she was never to know of his burial near the battlefield at Richmond.¹⁷ Although more than twice her age, William Smyth must have been one of the few options left for Elizabeth in war ravaged Virginia.

Little of the South that William Smyth knew remained by the end of the Civil War. He was middle aged and appears to have had little interest in returning to farming. Additionally, his three children, all of whom had been placed with relatives over the previous eight years, were now brought into a family with a new mother and a father they had rarely seen. It must have been a difficult adjustment for everyone.

William decided to make a clean break from his previous life, cutting cordwood for the Norfolk and Western Railroad so he could attend Emory and Henry College and become a doctor. According to Smyth family lore, as a doctor he would travel that area of the Appalachian Mountains by horseback, attending to those who were ill. His youngest daughter, Molly, recalled in later years her fond memories of sitting for hours on a fence, watching for his return so she could put his horse in the barn for him.¹⁸

Money was extremely tight in the South following the Civil War, with William often not paid for the medical services he provided. His younger children remembered that he never sent a bill for the services he performed, accepting graciously whatever the families could offer in payment. This meant that Elizabeth and the children often had to keep the family going through their work on the farm; and since Elizabeth was often kept busy with her own frequent pregnancies (eleven), this meant that much of the farm work fell to William's older two sons by his first marriage. As soon as the two boys were old enough they left Virginia and never returned, certainly an indication they did not feel a part of their father's new family.

William Smyth made good on his plan to start anew following the Civil War. As he built a new life with Elizabeth, their marriage produced eleven children, the last child born when he was sixty-four years of age. Those children were Jonas Smyth (1866-1883), Margaret Lorena Smyth (1868-1901), Hugh Lee Smyth (1870-1937), Nancy E. Smyth (1871-1901), Sara Catherine Smyth (1873-1953), William Samuel Smyth (1875-1955), Gertrude Isabel Smyth (1876-1963), Elizabeth Smyth (1877-1956), Charles Willot Smyth (1880-1961), Anderson McClelland Smyth (1881-1916), and Mollie May Smyth (1884-1977).¹⁹

Perhaps the best description of the Civil War veteran turned country doctor was made by a daughter some years following his death. She remembered her father as a man who, "...wore a Civil War hat...had curly hair. He was very reserved... and everyone liked him."²⁰ William's medicinal vials and the saddlebags the old country doctor carried them in are still in the possession of the Smyth family in Virginia.

William "Buck" Smyth died on August 15, 1891 and is buried in the Smyth Family Cemetery in Washington County, Virginia.²¹ Although he survived the war and made a new life for himself in the new South, it seems unlikely that he ever forgot the terror of

¹⁷ Aleta Spicer; *Smyth*, (Virginia: Private Printing, 1976). p. 23.

¹⁸ Aleta Spicer; *Smyth*, (Virginia: Private Printing, 1976). p. 23-24.

¹⁹ Dorothy G. Tuttle; *Smidi/Smith/Smyth*; (Murray, Utah: Private Printing, 1991, updated 2000). p. 26.

²⁰ Aleta Spicer; *Smyth*; (Virginia: Private Printing, 1976). p. 25.

²¹ Aleta Spicer; *Smyth*; (Virginia: Private Printing, 1976). p. 92.

battle, the smell of gunpowder and death, and the cavalry charges through the Shenandoah Valley with Jeb Stuart and Grumble Jones.

Line of Descent

William Smyth, 1820-1891 & Elizabeth Logan, 1825-1857
Lycenius Logan Smyth, 1856-1937
Lenis Margaret Smith, 1891-1977
Ruby Marie Sinnock, 1918-1980
Sherman S. Weimer, 1953-