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JOHN BLAIR SMITH

BY CHARLES GRIER SELLERS, JR.

Although John Blair Smith may not have been a great man, either as preacher, theologian, or educator, yet more than any other man's, his brief career encompassed the major developments in American Presbyterianism during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. Born into a leading New Light family and educated at Princeton under John Witherspoon, he exemplified Witherspoon's ardent American Whiggism in the Revolutionary years. Having helped found the first of that numerous progeny of colleges spawned by Old Nassau, he led Virginia Presbyterians in the crucial struggle that crystallized the emerging American pattern of religious freedom. He initiated the post-Revolutionary revival of Presbyterian evangelicalism and preached for some years in that holy city of early American Presbyterianism, Philadelphia. Before his premature death at the age of forty-three, he had time to provide some of the initial impetus for the interdenominational missionary movement and the Plan of Union. Thus John Smith's biography is also the story of Presbyterianism in the years of its greatest impact on American life. At the same time his biography is a human story, compounded of faithful service and solid achievement, of creaturely frailties and unrealized ambitions, and finally of a measure of tragedy.

John Blair Smith was born at Pequea, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, on June 12, 1756. His father, the Reverend Robert Smith, and his mother's brothers, the Reverends Samuel and John Blair, had been leaders of the revivalistic New Light party in the great Presby-

terian schism of the 1740's. Many of the New Light evangelists who carried Presbyterianism southward and westward had learned their Hebrew, Greek, and Latin in the Blairs' celebrated academy at Fagg's Manor, while at nearby Pequea, Robert Smith maintained the classical rigor of his scarcely less distinguished academy by allowing only Latin to be spoken. Thus Robert Smith's five sons received an excellent preparatory education at home. Two of them were to become physicians and the other three, Samuel Stanhope, William Richmond, and John Blair, Presbyterian ministers.

The most gifted of the Smith boys was the versatile, imaginative Samuel, but his younger brother John also showed great promise, especially in his dogged conscientiousness and unusual capacity to absorb and retain information. On these two the father lavished special care, but not for their intellectual growth alone. A Whitefield convert and a leading evangelist in the heyday of the Great Awakening, Robert Smith grieved over the decline of the revival spirit and labored to blow the dying embers into new life among his sons and students. The result was a small-scale revival at Pequea, which seems to have had a lasting effect on fourteen-year-old John.¹

By the time John was sixteen, in the fall of 1771, he and William were prepared to enter the junior class at the College of New Jersey, of which their father was a trustee. Their brother Samuel had preceded them at Princeton, graduating brilliantly in 1769 and returning in 1770 to serve as tutor while pursuing his studies for the ministry with the recently arrived Scotsman, John Witherspoon. Under Witherspoon's vigorous leadership the college had quickly entered the golden age of its early history. Though it retained its traditional appeal for sons of Presbyterian families and still served as the only recognized training ground for Presbyterian ministers, Witherspoon's catholic educational ideals and his zeal to train young men for public service were attracting students of every religious persuasion from

¹ The fullest account of John Blair Smith's life is William Henry Foote, *Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical* (Philadelphia, 1850), 408-437. A somewhat franker evaluation with additional information is found in the manuscript volume, "Notices of Distinguished Graduates of the College of New Jersey" (Princeton University Library), 46-50. The "Notices" are erroneously attributed to James A. Alexander and James Carnahan; actually the sketch of Smith and most of the others were written about 1835 by Archibald Alexander, who knew Smith personally; a few sketches at the end of the volume were contributed by Carnahan.

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every part of the continent. Witherspoon's policies were to be amply vindicated by such products as James Madison, Philip Freneau, and Hugh Henry Brackenridge, who graduated just before John Smith matriculated. John's own class included that dashing young Virginian, Henry Lee, the later "Light Horse Harry."

John was soon thrown into close association with Madison and Brackenridge, who had stayed in Princeton for a year of postgraduate study, for they were all active in the American Whig Society; which was just clinching its victory over the rival Cliosophic Society in the celebrated Paper War of 1770-1771. Gregarious and pugnacious by nature, John Smith was warmly engaged, and the barbed literary ammunition left lasting resentments. Many years later he had to acknowledge that the leading Cliosophic gladiator had become "a very useful and respectable minister of the gospel," and yet, he said, "he never could feel towards him as he wished to do, in consequence of what he did and suffered in the war."² When John Smith graduated, political topics were conspicuously absent from the senoir orations.

Other distractions were normal. Philip Vickers Fithian, of the class ahead of John Smith, carried with him from college pleasant recollections of "the Foibles which often prevail there." One item in Fithian's catalogue of pleasures—"Pricking from the neighbourhood now & then a plump fat Hen or Turkey"—led to the expulsion of two students shortly after John Smith's arrival and another a year later.³ John's brother William was a crony of Fithian's and presumably a member of the aforementioned club, but John, if we are to believe his pious eulogist, "was seldom or never known, though of a disposition remarkably cheerful, and prone to social enjoyment, to be drawn into any form of frivolity or dissipation, incompatible with the strictest christian integrity."⁴

This was certainly the ideal that the college's rigorous schedule of work and religious exercises was designed to realize. The boys were wakened at five in the morning; summoned to chapel for morning prayers at five-thirty and back again for evening prayers at five; and

² Jacob N. Beam, *The American Whig Society of Princeton University* (Princeton, 1933), 64. See also *ibid.*, 59-61, 112.

³ John Rogers Williams, ed., *Philip Vickers Fithian, Journal and Letters, 1767-1774* . . . (Princeton, 1900), 256-257. See also *ibid.*, 18, 30.

⁴ Samuel Blair, *A Funeral Discourse, Delivered . . . on Occasion of the Death of the Rev. Dr. John B. Smith* . . . (Philadelphia, 1799), 18.

required to be at recitation or in their rooms studying from nine in the morning until one, from three until five in the afternoon, and after nine at night. On Sundays they were required to attend morning worship at the village church, an afternoon sermon by Doctor Witherspoon in the college, and a prayer service after supper.⁵

Though the basic Princeton curriculum was conventional enough, Witherspoon's zeal to train statesmen brought a fresh spirit to Nassau Hall. He was plainly dissatisfied with the traditional emphasis on the classics, but he was a reformer, not a revolutionary. Devoting most of his attention to the two upper classes, he left the freshmen and sophomores, taught mainly by the tutors, to the traditional diet of Greek and Latin, lightened only by an unusual emphasis on geography and English composition. John Smith began his college studies with the junior work in "the practical parts of the Mathematics and Natural Philosophy [the natural sciences]," which Witherspoon had greatly strengthened. Through a limited program in French at Princeton and through his students who founded other colleges, Witherspoon became the father of French instruction in American higher education.⁶

The chief instructional responsibility of the clergyman-president in the early American college was the all-important senior work in moral philosophy, which included metaphysics, ethics, and religion. Witherspoon's primary ideological task in his early years at Princeton was to extirpate idealism in both its philosophical and theological forms. Just as the more speculative Samuel Smith had been attracted by philosophical idealism, so his brother John seems to have been drawn into the revival wrought by the New Divinity, and Bellamy would remain one of his favorite authors.⁷

John Smith was an intensely serious young man. The real key to his nature seems to have been the shadow of his more gifted brother. At home John had often been mustered with the other children to furnish a congregation as young Samuel, early aspiring to the ministry, went through the motions of conducting public worship. At

⁵ *Fithian Journal*, 7-9.

⁶ *New Jersey Documents*, XXIX, 60-61; Maclean, *College of New Jersey*, I, 362.

⁷ "Notices of the College of New Jersey, in the Bellamy Manuscripts," *New Jersey Historical Society, Proceedings*, First Series, VI (January, 1853), 175-177; Maclean, *College of New Jersey*, I, 390; Woodbridge Riley, *American Thought from Puritanism to Pragmatism and Beyond* (2nd edn., New York, 1915), 127, 130.

studying from nine in the afternoon, and after school to attend morning sessions by Doctor Witherspoon.⁵

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Manuscripts," New (January, 1853), 175-177; Riley, *American Thought* (New York, 1915), 127, 130.

college John could hear only praise and envy for the learned and polished Tutor Smith, the favorite of Doctor Witherspoon and of the doctor's daughter Anne. Then as later John aspired to be what Samuel was, and drove himself to the limit of his physical endurance to overcome the disparity in their natural abilities.

John had solid abilities in his own right, but they were not the showy ones. He could place no better than third in the public competitions in reading English, Greek, and Latin, at the end of his first year in college. But at graduation a year later, in September, 1773, he stood first in the class, delivering an orthodox Latin salutatory oration on "The Excellence and Benefit of the Laws." This was the largest and, from a clerical point of view, the most eminent class Princeton had ever graduated, twenty-three of its twenty-nine members becoming ministers and four of them college presidents. The commencement exercises, attracting a distinguished audience from far and near, must have been a proud vindication for John.⁸

For two years following his graduation, John Smith marked time. He apparently returned to Pequea, and probably taught in his father's school. Both he and Samuel suffered from hereditary consumptive tendencies, and his strenuous exertions at college may have brought on one of those physical declines that were to recur throughout his life. Meanwhile Samuel sought to recoup his health by resigning his tutorship and going as a missionary evangelist to the Scotch-Irish Presbyterian settlements in Virginia. Possibly Samuel had already resolved to become not only Doctor Witherspoon's son-in-law, but his successor at Princeton as well. At any rate, he was determined to launch his career as an educator, and when his preaching made a great sensation among Presbyterians and non-Presbyterians alike in Virginia, he was able to launch a movement for a college to rival the Anglican College of William and Mary. Most of Virginia's Presbyterians were concentrated in the Shenandoah Valley, but Samuel was much more impressed by his cordial reception among the wealthy and nominally Anglican planters in Prince Edward County, east of the mountains. The upshot was that in 1774 he persuaded the Presbytery of Hanover to give its blessing to two educational institutions, one to be located in the Valley and one in Prince Edward. For the former Samuel secured the services of John's Princeton classmate, William Graham, while he agreed to take charge of the other himself, pro-

⁸ *Fithian Journal*, 42; *New Jersey Documents*, XXIX, 50-57.

vided the gentlemen of Prince Edward raised a sufficient endowment to guarantee its success. The necessary sum was subscribed quickly, buildings were begun in February, 1775, and Samuel departed northward to marry Anne Witherspoon, employ tutors, and purchase books and philosophical apparatus.⁹

As one of the two original tutors, Samuel selected his brother John, and the infant college (for a time it was content to call itself an academy) got under way in the winter of 1775-1776. The Revolutionary War was also just getting under way, and Samuel honored the Witherspoon spirit by naming his little school Hampden-Sidney, for the two great heroes of the English Whig tradition. Despite wartime confusion, it was swamped with students, and two additional tutors had to be engaged, one of them being President Witherspoon's son David. Hampden-Sidney was modelled as closely as possible on the College of New Jersey, except that here some of Witherspoon's ideas could be given freer rein than was possible at Nassau Hall.¹⁰ Witherspoon continued to take a warm fatherly interest in John, who was having some difficulty deciding what to do with himself. The doctor demanded that David speak to John "& write to me what he proposes to follow," and when John travelled north soon afterwards, his old teacher had many long talks with him. Finally he was "glad to hear that John Smith is studying divinity."¹¹

Under his brother Samuel's direction, John now spent three years completing his preparation in languages and theology and going through the rather elaborate process by which Presbyterians sought to maintain their strict qualifications for the ministry. In June, 1777, he was taken under the care of Hanover Presbytery as a ministerial candidate and passed his first test by reading an exegesis of an assigned text. At the fall meeting of presbytery, he successfully delivered a homily, a sermon, and a lecture, and the following spring, before the same critical audience, he passed the crucial test, a "popular

⁹ [Alexander and Carnahan,] "Notices of Distinguished Graduates," 29-30; Alfred J. Morrison, ed., *The College of Hampden-Sidney: Calendar of Board Minutes, 1776-1786* (Richmond, 1912), 7-12.

¹⁰ *Hampden-Sidney Board Minutes*, 12, 14, 33, 35.

¹¹ [Ashbel Green, ed.,] "Letters from Dr. Witherspoon to His Youngest Son," *Christian Advocate*, II (September, October, 1824), 398-399, 443-444; Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon, a Biography* (2 vols., Princeton, 1925), I, 195.

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i., Princeton, 1925),

sermon." "Having now taken a full view of his whole performance, and being well satisfied therewith," the presbytery agreed "to license the said John B. Smith to preach the gospel as a probationer." For the next year and a half John preached whenever and wherever he could find hearers, probably most often to the students at Hampden-Sidney and to Samuel's nearby congregations of Briery and Cumberland. In October, 1779, after a final trial sermon, he was admitted as a full member of presbytery.¹²

Meanwhile the war had been going on, but Hampden-Sidney's sponsors argued that maintaining the flow of trained public leaders was just as important as the actual fighting. Though the Virginia legislature rejected their plea for direct aid in constructing buildings to house the flood of students that poured into the flourishing college during the early war years, the lawmakers did authorize a lottery for this purpose. It may be assumed that John Smith worked hard at his teaching duties, and also that he avoided any such "indiscretion at a tavern in New London" as brought grief to one of his fellow tutors.¹³ Yet for all their protestations about the importance of continued education in wartime, the men of Hampden-Sidney were too much under the Witherspoon influence to resist more immediate involvement in the cause of liberty. In the fall of 1777 the students formed a volunteer company with John Smith as their captain and marched to Williamsburg, only to be mustered out after six weeks of inaction. A year later the same company marched to Petersburg, but again did only garrison duty.¹⁴

John Smith might have grown impatient under his long apprenticeship had not the Hampden-Sidney enterprise promised him a much more important role than that of rural educator and minister. The imaginative Samuel was developing around his college a church-school-state relationship that might provide a postwar pattern for the

¹² Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 410.

¹³ *Hampden-Sidney Board Minutes*, 20-24; William H. Whitsitt, *Life and Times of Judge Caleb Wallace* . . . (Louisville, 1888), 40.

¹⁴ Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 411; "Virginia Militia in the Revolution," *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, XIV (July, 1906), 80-81; "Pension Declaration of Wade Mosby," *ibid.*, XVII (October, 1909), 441-442; Herbert Clarence Bradshaw, *History of Prince Edward County, Virginia, from Its Earliest Settlements through Its Establishment in 1754 to Its Bicentennial Year* (Richmond, 1955), 114-115.

whole state.¹⁵ But despite his bold ideas, Samuel was already looking to greener pastures, and his successor at Hampden-Sidney might well become one of Virginia's most important men.

In 1776 Prince Edward was the first county to petition the Virginia legislature for disestablishment of the Anglican church. It is not unlikely that Samuel Stanhope Smith drafted this plea to "make Virginia an Asylum for free enquiry, knowledge, and the virtuous of every Denomination," and he may also have composed the similar petition presented by the Hanover Presbytery. This legislature repealed the compulsory church attendance law and agreed to suspend the taxes by which the established church had been supported; but the lawmakers reserved for future consideration a strongly backed proposal for public taxation in support of all denominations. Samuel Smith helped draft Hanover Presbytery's protest against this general assessment proposal in 1777, and it was blocked for the time being.¹⁶

But Samuel had no intention of staying in Virginia. Almost every spring he had journeyed back to Philadelphia for the meetings of the Synod of New York and Philadelphia, and here Witherspoon had kept him posted on the prospects at Princeton. His correspondence with Jefferson early in 1779 came just as he was about to set out once more for Philadelphia. This time the conversations with Witherspoon were highly satisfactory, and on returning he wrote to his father-in-law that he had never seen his wife "express so much impatience to hear from you as since I let her know the subject upon which you design to write to me in August."¹⁷ Witherspoon's August letter was all that Samuel had hoped for, and at the fall meeting of Hanover Presbytery he resigned the presidency of Hampden-Sidney to go to Princeton as professor of moral philosophy. This was the same meeting at which John Smith was admitted to presbytery, and he was promptly chosen as his brother's successor. Six months later he also succeeded Samuel as pastor of the Presbyterian congregations of Briery and Cumberland. With his patience at last rewarded and his professional and

¹⁵ *Hampden-Sidney Board Minutes*, 14-15.

¹⁶ H. J. Eckenrode, *Separation of Church and State in Virginia: a Study in the Development of the Revolution* (Richmond, 1910), 46; *ibid.*, 50-64; Robert Davidson, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the State of Kentucky; with a Preliminary Sketch of the Churches in the Valley of Virginia* (New York, 1847), 37.

¹⁷ S. S. Smith to John Witherspoon, July 10, 1779, Samuel Stanhope Smith Collection, Princeton University Library.

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Samuel Stanhope Smith

financial standing assured, John married Elizabeth Nash, a daughter
of Prince Edward's most prominent family.¹⁸

John Smith took charge of Hampden-Sidney just as the full brunt
of war for the first time descended on Virginia. Benedict Arnold's
invasion late in 1780 and the arrival of Britain's main southern army
under Lord Cornwallis a few months later loosed enemy raiding
parties through the whole lower section of the state. When a com-
pany of Prince Edward militia started for the scene of action, Presi-
dent Smith, feeling it "his duty to offer his services, by way of en-
couragement to his parishoners," hastened off and overtook them,
"exhausted in body and with blistered feet." Taking one look at the
dishevelled cleric, the captain, his friend and an elder in his church,
insisted that he "refrain from the fatigues of the camp, and return
to cheer the families of his charge with his presence and counsels."
During the following months, as students and grown men alike flocked
into the militia, college classes and church services had to be suspended.
Still no one would accept the frail but bellicose President Smith as a
soldier.¹⁹

This darkest hour of the war was quickly followed by the great
victory at Yorktown in October, 1781, but it was not until a year later
that John Smith was able to get Hampden-Sidney back into operation.
His newspaper announcement indicated an even more pronounced
departure in the direction of Witherspoon's educational ideas than had
prevailed during Samuel's presidency. "The cultivation of the Eng-
lish language, Geography, Mathematics, and Philosophy, shall be the
principal objects of instruction," the public was told, and "a very ac-
curate acquaintance with the Latin and Greek languages" would be

¹⁸ Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 410-411. Elizabeth Nash was the daughter of
Colonel John Nash of Templeton. The original John Nash, Sr., had been one of
two magistrates on the Amelia County court from the area later to be Prince
Edward County, an original justice of the Prince Edward court, highest officer in
the county militia, a vestryman, perennial burgess, chairman of the county safety
committee in the early days of the Revolution, and holder of other offices. He
died in 1776, and his son, John Nash, Jr., was apparently the man listed as John
Nash, Esqr., in the state census of 1785. The same census listed a John Nash, Jr.,
who was apparently a son of the second John Nash. Elizabeth was probably a
daughter of the second John Nash. See Bradshaw, *Prince Edward County*, 1-112
passim; Bureau of the Census, *Heads of Families at the First Census of the United*
States Taken in the Year 1790: Virginia (Washington, 1908), 101.

¹⁹ Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 412.

added only "where it is desired." Moreover Smith promised to "engage a native of France, who is a man of learning, to teach the pronunciation, etc., of that tongue, where the number should be considerable enough to enable me to do it."²⁰

Hampden-Sidney seems to have revived rapidly, for by 1783 it had spurned the academy designation and secured incorporation as a college. The curriculum laid down by the trustees again featured the conventional classical languages in the first two years, but fell short of the Witherspoon standard mainly by its lack of any work in natural philosophy. A faculty of four was authorized—the president, a tutor for the freshmen and sophomores, an English master, and a French master—though the French master seems never to have been appointed. An emphasis on oratory was indicated by Smith's petition to the governor and council in 1784 for aid in building a Common Hall "to promote the useful and ornamental practice of speaking with ease in public." The state responded by granting the college a valuable tract of land confiscated from a loyalist, and the income it provided encouraged the trustees to begin construction.

During the 1780's Smith was beset by all the common problems of college presidents. The contractor's negligence delayed completion of the Common Hall year after year; the tutor was repeatedly embroiled with the students and finally had to be dismissed; there were constant difficulties with the steward who furnished meals; and, of course, money always had to be sought.²¹ But within a few years Hampden-Sidney's reputation had been reestablished, it had as many students as it could house, and it was attracting the sons of Virginia's best families. Young William Henry Harrison attended for a time. Thomas Jefferson's nephew, Dabney Carr, enrolled on James Madison's advice that he "could hear of none preferable to the Academy in Prince Edward." Madison himself had served as a trustee from the beginning, and his nephew too became a student.²²

While overseeing the revival of Hampden-Sidney, John Smith was also succeeding to his brother's place as the intellectual leader of Virginia Presbyterianism. In the process he became a central figure

²⁰ *William and Mary College Quarterly*, 2nd Series, II (July, 1922), 211.

²¹ *Hampden-Sidney Board Minutes*, 29-36.

²² *Jefferson Papers*, VII, 598; Freeman Cleaves, *Old Tippecanoe: William Henry Harrison and His Time* (New York, 1939), 6; John B. Smith to James Madison, December, 1786, Madison Papers.

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in the momentous final debate over church-state relations. Late in 1783 the movement for a general religious assessment was renewed by Patrick Henry and the former Anglicans, who had now severed their ties with the English church and taken the name Episcopalians. But the assessment movement was not just an Episcopalian affair. James Madison, who led the opposition in the legislature, reported that the Presbyterian clergy "seem as ready to set up an establishm[en]t which is to take them in as they were to pull down that which shut them out." Madison believed that a coalition between the Episcopalians and Presbyterians "could alone endanger our religious rights," and he detected "a tendency to such an event."²³

Now Samuel Smith, who had first proposed such a coalition, was still bewailing the state's failure to support religion,²⁴ and John Smith apparently shared his views. Patrick Henry had long been associated with the Smiths as a trustee of Hampden-Sidney, and he had recently moved to Prince Edward County, where he attended John Smith's church. Whatever explicit understanding the two men had, Henry enlisted his traditional foes, the conservative Episcopalian legislators, in the fight for a general assessment, while John Smith undertook to enlist the Presbyterians.

In the spring of 1784, just as the assessment movement was gaining headway, John Smith drew up for the Presbyterian clergy an ambiguous memorial to the legislature. He called for "an entire and everlasting freedom from every species of ecclesiastical domination" and "a full and permanent security of the inalienable rights of conscience and private judgment," but these demands were coupled with one for "an equal share of the protection and favor of government to all denominations of Christians." The bearing of this last clause became apparent only when the assessment question was agitated in the legislature shortly afterward and postponed to the fall session for final decision.²⁵

When Hanover Presbytery convened at Timber Ridge in October, just before the meeting of the legislature, the general assessment idea

²³ Gaillard Hunt, ed., *The Writings of James Madison* . . . (9 vols., New York, 1900-1910), II, 131, 163.

²⁴ Michael Kraus, "Charles Nisbet and Samuel Stanhope Smith—Two Eighteenth Century Educators," *Princeton University Library Chronicle*, VI (November, 1944), 25, 33.

²⁵ Eckenrode, *Church and State in Virginia*, 72-80.

was attacked by William Graham, John Smith's Princeton classmate whom Samuel Smith had brought to Virginia to superintend the Valley Presbyterians' Liberty Hall Academy. Graham was a radical democrat and a born agitator, rendered somewhat choleric by an unfortunate marriage, while John Smith's "passions were very quick and sometimes betrayed him into acts of imprudence." The two men were natural rivals as the heads of competing schools, and during the coming months their conflict over assessment would become increasingly heated, leaving them estranged for several years.²⁶

In the opening round, however, the Valley ministers were dissuaded from a flat anti-assessment declaration "by the assertion of an individual possessed of information on the subject that some kind of assessment would be established, and he could only choose what kind he would have."²⁷ This "individual possessed of information" could only have been Patrick Henry's neighbor and friend, John Smith. His argument convinced Graham for the moment that the only way to avoid a dangerous legislative interference with the spiritual concerns of the churches was to petition for the right kind of assessment system; and the presbytery appointed the two antagonists to embody such a request in a memorial to the legislature.²⁸

Though Smith and some of the other ministers were really more favorable to assessment than he indicated,²⁹ his argument was not wholly disingenuous, for his suspicions had already been aroused by a proposal for legislative incorporation of the Episcopal Church. He objected to incorporation partly because it would remove the Episcopal clergy from lay control and strengthen Episcopal claims to the property of the old establishment, but mainly because it specifically conferred on the Episcopal Church the right to regulate its own spiritual concerns. This, he complained to James Madison, "would be to give leave to do what every class of Citizens has a natural unalienable right to do without any such laws; for surely every religious society in the State possesses full power to regulate their internal police, without depending upon the assembly for leave to do so."³⁰

²⁶ [Alexander and Carnahan,] "Notices of Distinguished Graduates," 29-34, 50.

²⁷ Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 557.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 455; Eckenrode, *Church and State in Virginia*, 88.

²⁹ Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 338.

³⁰ J. B. Smith to James Madison, June 21, 1784, Madison Papers.

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Thus, when Smith drafted the presbytery's memorial in October, 1784, he emphatically denounced the incorporation proposal. "The real ministers of true religion," he wrote, "derive their authority to act in the duties of their profession from a higher source than any legislature on earth, however respectable." He endorsed assessment on the ground that the state needed the support of religion, not the reverse. Legislative interference ought to be limited to "supporting of institutions for inculcating the great fundamental principles of all religion, without which society could not easily exist." In no case should the legislature concern itself with the spiritual affairs or internal government of the churches, or the selection of ministers.³¹

As soon as the presbytery adopted his memorial, John Smith and one of the other ministers departed to present it to the legislature. He had no sooner reached Richmond, however, than he was overtaken by anti-assessment petitions from large numbers of Presbyterian laymen in the Valley counties of Rockingham and Rockbridge, where William Graham's influence was strong. Assessment was "much more dangerous than the establishment of any one Sect," these men told the legislature. While the old establishment had corrupted only one denomination, a general assessment would corrupt all, and "we shall be more likely to have the State swarming with Fools, Sots and Gamblers than with a Sober Sensible and Exemplary Clergy."³²

Though the assessment movement seemed assured of success at first, dissenter resistance to any legislation on religion was greatly stiffened by adoption of the Episcopal incorporation bill. This development and the anti-assessment backfire that William Graham had lit in the Valley were too much for Smith's hot temper, and his fulminations provoked an equally irascible Episcopalian legislator to retort that "The greatest curse which heaven sent at any time into this Country was sending Dissenters into it." Smith was so enraged by this remark that James Madison barely prevented him from seeking redress in a manner that might have led to a duel.³³

The final blow to assessment was the loss of its strongest legislative champion through Patrick Henry's election as governor. As a result, the anti-assessment forces were able to get the matter postponed

³¹ Eckenrode, *Church and State in Virginia*, 89.

³² *Ibid.*, 97.

³³ J. B. Smith to James Madison, May, 1785, and Madison to Smith, May 27, 1785, copy, Madison Papers.

until the 1785 session of the legislature. The Prince Edward representatives reflected John Smith's views in voting against Episcopal incorporation and for assessment, while the legislators from the Presbyterian counties in the western part of the state opposed both almost unanimously.³⁴

The spring of 1785 produced a violent public reaction against assessment, especially in the Valley, where the Presbyterian laity rose in rebellion against the position into which John Smith had maneuvered Hanover Presbytery the preceding autumn. "The Presbyterian Clergy too, who were in general friends to the scheme, are already in another tone," Madison reported in April, "either compelled by the laity of that séct, or alarmed at the probability of further interferences of the Legislature, if they once begin to dictate in matters of Religion."³⁵ Hanover Presbytery voted unanimously against assessment at its May meeting and called a great convention of Presbyterian ministers and laymen to memorialize the legislature against it.

Smith's defeat was a triumph for William Graham, who drafted the convention's vehement denunciation of any legislation on religion. But when the legislature met in October, Smith swallowed his pride and again went dutifully off to Richmond to represent the new Presbyterian position. A deluge of anti-assessment petitions from all over the state, including one from Prince Edward, buried the assessment bill in committee and sent Jefferson's long deferred bill "for establishing religious freedom" racing through both houses. Thus John Smith's defeat helped pave the way for the classic statement of the emerging American doctrine of separation of church and state.³⁶

³⁴ Eckenrode, *Church and State in Virginia*, 99-103.

³⁵ *Madison Writings*, II, 145.

³⁶ Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 341-342, 430-431; Eckenrode, *Church and State in Virginia*, 109-115. The foregoing account differs materially from previous authors, who have generally explained away the Presbyterian endorsement of assessment in 1784. The conventional interpretation was established in the early nineteenth century by Presbyterian historians, who naturally desired to place their predecessors among the stoutest champions of what was by then the national dogma of church-state separation. Over against this interpretation stands the explicit and repeated testimony of James Madison, who surely knew the truth; the evidence of the theocratic tendencies of the Smiths; revealing hints by the Presbyterian historians themselves; and, above all, Hanover Presbytery's memorial of October, 1784, which simply cannot be explained away. As for John Smith, it is only fair to assume that he was honestly disillusioned with assessment by the Episcopal incorporation act in the fall of 1784. His lobbying against assessment

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Despite the unhappy role he had played in the assessment con-
troversy, Smith soon regained his preeminence among Virginia Presby-
terians, this time as a preacher. Up to 1786 he had been so preoc-
cupied with the college and public affairs that "he was not particularly
distinguished for zeal and active exertion in the ministry," and his
two congregations "were not so well satisfied with his ministry as with
his brother's." But during the winter of 1786-1787 the evangelical
Methodists and Baptists began making a stir in the neighborhood, and
Smith, instead of opposing them, "determined to adopt the plan rec-
ommended by an English bishop to out-preach, out-pray, and out-live
them."³⁷ In the process, as Archibald Alexander recalled, "he
underwent a remarkable change in his own feelings and in the
fervency of his preaching, so that he became one of the most powerful
preachers I ever heard."³⁸ Suddenly a religious revival broke out
among his previously irreverent students, spreading quickly to his
congregations and then through all the surrounding counties. Thus
began the Presbyterian phase of the Great Revival, which was to
sweep over the whole country during the next few decades and stamp
nineteenth century Presbyterianism with a peculiar brand of romantic,
evangelical Calvinism.

Once his New Light inheritance asserted itself, John Smith threw
himself into the work of spreading the revival with a vehemence that
brought his frail, consumptive constitution to the verge of collapse.
For months he forgot his other duties to exhort, organize prayer meet-
ings, and counsel those experiencing conversion. He insisted on
preaching when his friends thought he ought to be in bed, and twice
he suffered hemorrhages in the pulpit. On the second occasion his
physicians urged him to stop preaching if he valued his life, but after
a few weeks in bed he resumed the campaign as zealously as if nothing
had happened.³⁹

That Smith himself was deeply affected religiously is evident from
a letter he wrote to a friend in Philadelphia. "I find my heart en-
larged," he reported, "and my soul engaged in God's service; but
I have often reason to be astonished at my wretched unfruitfulness in my
ministry. What I said at the 1785 session would then have been sincere, as well as important to the
final result.

³⁷ [Alexander and Carnahan,] "Notices of Distinguished Graduates," 47.

³⁸ James W. Alexander, *The Life of Archibald Alexander, D.D.* . . . (New
York, 1854), 53.

³⁹ Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 426.

own exercises."⁴⁰ He even tried his hand at verse, which despite its technical clumsiness conveyed the author's ecstatic sense of God's love.⁴¹ Most remarkably of all, he extended William Graham a warm invitation to come over and preach during a communion season. Deeply moved by this friendly overture and by what he saw in Prince Edward, Graham buried the animosities of the past and took the lead in spreading the revival through the Valley.

Old Robert Smith was equally impressed. Coming down to assist John in the revival campaign, he "felt richer in my mind than if I had seen my son mounted upon a throne." "The half was not told me of the display of God's power and grace among them; no, not the tenth part," he reported, for he had seen "nothing equal to it for extensive spread, power, and spiritual glory" since the peak of the Great Awakening half a century before.⁴²

John Smith was now at the high point of his career. As "the father of the revival," he was constantly responding to urgent requests to preach all over interior Virginia. "An angel could not have been received with more joy and cordiality," for "the very sound of his voice thrilled every nerve of those who had heard him before."⁴³ Smith's preaching was essentially extemporaneous, though he did carefully work out a grandiloquent introduction and the main points he intended to cover, holding his brief notes in a small open Bible as he spoke. His remarkable power in the pulpit arose mainly from his ability to transmit his own passionate feelings to his audience.⁴⁴

John Smith was clearly a positive and impressive individual. He was rather on the small side and far from handsome, with straight black hair falling from a center part around each side of a long, angular face, marked by prominent cheekbones, nose, and chin. But his confident bearing, his solemn, authoritative voice, and the bold stare of his large, blue eyes, which "when aroused in speaking . . . appeared dark and piercing" and seemed to "look you through and through," made him a rather awesome figure to his congregation and fellow

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 421-422. For a detailed account of the revival, see *ibid.*, 412-430 and *passim*.

⁴¹ "Verses by the Rev. Mr. John B. Smith," MS. in the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.

⁴² Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 422-423.

⁴³ Alexander, *Archibald Alexander*, 468.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 55; [Alexander and Carnahan,] "Notices of Distinguished Graduates," 50.

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ministers. "His quickness of temper sometimes led him to act rashly, and incur enmity which might have been avoided," and few people ever approached any kind of relaxed intimacy with him. Ordinarily, however, he was an entertaining, considerate, even witty companion. His memory was remarkable, both for facts and faces, but intellectually "quickness rather than profundity was his characteristic talent."⁴⁴ Such a man naturally thought well of himself, and the highest tribute he could pay to a brilliant young Philadelphia minister was to say that he "is as far superior to me as I am to ——— (naming a very feeble man in the Hanover Presbytery)."⁴⁵

Smith early became so engrossed in the revival that Hampden-Sidney began to suffer and its friends to complain. About the same time he "incurred . . . some popular odium" by expressing his "contempt and indignation" at the "gross & scandalous misrepresentations" being hurled at the proposed federal constitution by the college's most illustrious trustee, Patrick Henry. A complete rupture between the two men came when the president enlisted two of the students to humiliate the great orator to his face at a public exhibition of the college. The first student recited verbatim one of Henry's recent anti-Constitution speeches, while the second presented a triumphant rebuttal composed by President Smith.⁴⁶

It was shortly after this episode, in July, 1788, that Smith, who was anxious to devote full time to his preaching anyhow, withdrew from active supervision of the college. Though retaining the title of president, he moved to a nearby plantation and visited the college only three times a week to instruct the seniors. This arrangement proved unsatisfactory, and after a year he withdrew completely. By this time, according to Thomas Jefferson, the college was "going to nothing owing to the religious phrenzy they have inspired into the boys young and old which the parents have no taste for." With Smith out of the way, Patrick Henry undertook to get the state's grants to William and Mary divided with Hampden-Sidney, and Henry's crony and fellow opponent of the Constitution, William Graham, was offered the

⁴⁴ On Smith's personal qualities, see *ibid.*, 54; Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 426; [Alexander and Carnahan,] "Notices of Distinguished Graduates," 50.

⁴⁵ Joseph H. Jones, ed., *The Life of Ashbel Green, V.D.M.* . . . (New York, 1849), 502.

⁴⁶ J. B. Smith to James Madison, June 12, 1788, Madison Papers; Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 430-432.

presidency. Smith took what consolation he could from the trustees' investigation exonerating him from the charge of "using unfair-methods to influence the students in their religious principles."⁴⁷

With the loss of his income from the college, Smith was soon in serious financial straits. His wife had been accustomed to the free and easy ways of the Virginia gentry, and neither she nor he "appear to have had the least thought of economy." They had counted on the plantation to sustain them, but Smith had neglected it for his preaching, and within a few years it was in danger of being lost to satisfy the debt contracted in its purchase. Without the plantation, his family could not be maintained on his salary as minister, and the only recourse was removal to a more remunerative post.⁴⁸

Smith's prominent role in the revival had won him a reputation with Presbyterians everywhere, and his work in the synod had convinced some of its leaders that despite Samuel Smith's eminence, John was the "man of the first genius in the family." He rarely missed this annual convocation of ministers and elders in Philadelphia, and in the late 1780's he had served on the important committee that divided the church into several synods in preparation for the reorganization of 1789.⁴⁹ So when he rode into Philadelphia in the spring of 1791 to attend the third general assembly, he was already a well known figure and a logical choice for the most desirable pulpit then vacant, that of Philadelphia's Third (Pine Street) Presbyterian Church. Smith preached at Pine Street before the assembly adjourned, and shortly afterward the congregation dispatched a unanimous call to Virginia.

Smith's ministerial brethren in Hanover Presbytery did their best to dissuade him from leaving, and his Virginia congregations offered to liquidate his debts and increase his salary. But his difficulties with the college and his creditors had been galling, the revival was dying down, and a Philadelphia pulpit carried great prestige among Presbyterians. In October he was reluctantly dismissed by Hanover

⁴⁷ Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (12 vols., New York, 1904-1905), VI, 23; *Hampden-Sidney Board Minutes*, 36-38.

⁴⁸ [Alexander and Carnahan,] "Notices of Distinguished Graduates," 48; Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 436-437.

⁴⁹ Lyman H. Butterfield, ed., *Letters of Benjamin Rush* (2 vols., Princeton, 1951), I, 376; [William M. Engles, ed.,] *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia, 1841), 489, 495, 514, 516, 528, 539.

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Presbytery, and three days before Christmas he was installed as pastor of Pine Street.⁵⁰

Smith faced an uphill task. Pine Street Church "was not distinguished in any worldly sense," the congregation being "with few exceptions, of the middling class." These mechanics, shipmasters, and pilots, most of them living around the nearby navy yard on the southern edge of the city, did "not affect the modes of high life, but glory in being plain and uncerimonious." The church had been in decline since the Revolution, for the building had suffered severe damage during the British occupation, and the members, with "their means of living almost exhausted . . . could not bear additional burdens for the repairs & support of their Church."⁵¹

One contemporary commented that though he had known greater preachers and pastors superior to Smith in any particular qualification, yet "Mr. Smith was extraordinary in possessing all ministerial qualifications in a happy medium, and no one qualification in an absorbing degree."⁵² He devoted much of his time to pastoral calling, and in this sophisticated urban environment, with members of Congress and such dignitaries as Vice President John Adams in his audience, he prepared his sermons more carefully than he had in Virginia. Though in the process he necessarily "lost much of that impressive manner, which carried away and captivated his hearers during the revival," his preaching still retained enough emotional spontaneity to delight a congregation so "friendly to warm evangelical preaching" that they insisted on extemporaneous delivery.⁵³

Smith also joined his fellow Presbyterian ministers in a campaign against the "infidel and atheistical" tendencies that seemed to be running rampant through the country in the 1790's, and nowhere more than in the capital city. Federalism and sound religion were synonymous to these churchmen, for the newspaper organ of Thomas Jefferson's emerging Republican party was the principal channel through which "infidel publications" were reaching the public. The

⁵⁰ Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 435-436; Hughes Oliphant Gibbons, *A History of Old Pine Street . . .* (Philadelphia, 1905), 102-103.

⁵¹ Alexander, *Archibald Alexander*, 280, 287; John Blair Smith, "The History of the Third Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia," MS. in the Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia.

⁵² Foote, *Sketches of Virginia*, 425.

⁵³ Alexander, *Archibald Alexander*, 56, 280; Blair, *Funeral Discourse on John B. Smith*, 23.

main effort of Smith and his colleagues was writing newspaper essays in reply, but they also campaigned for reenactment of a recently repealed law banning the theater. Smith's principal ally in these activities was the rising young Presbyterian luminary, Ashbel Green, who as associate pastor at Second Church was beginning to close the gap between the Old Light and New Light men. Green seems, indeed, to have been Smith's closest friend in Philadelphia.⁵⁴

Pine Street had had only about a hundred members when John Smith arrived, but during his short pastorate the communicants' roll more than tripled. Within a year and a half, a gallery had to be built to accommodate the greater numbers, and the congregation began to take hesitant steps toward fashionableness. A proposal to have the minister wear a gown was narrowly defeated in 1793, but the next year the church acquired "a proud eminence above all the other churches of the city" by installing an elaborate chandelier bought in London for over three hundred dollars. Not for several years more, however, would Pine Street pass the crucial rung on the ladder of social prestige by procuring "a neat, snug, comfortable wig" for its sexton.⁵⁵

Smith's pastorate at Pine Street was just beginning to show results when Philadelphia was struck by the most terrible civic disaster of its entire history, the yellow fever epidemic of 1793. John Smith did not, like Ashbel Green and several other pastors, actually leave the city upon the plague's appearance, for, as he later explained, he was already away "on appointments which had been made many months before." To have returned immediately to his afflicted congregation would have been an act of heroism, for ten of the ministers who stayed by their people fell victims and seven others were desperately ill. Such heroism was not for the infirm, and Smith remained away by his

⁵⁴ *Life of Ashbel Green*, 261, 276, 319-320. It is interesting to note that both of the leaders in taking the training of ministers away from the College of New Jersey and ousting Samuel Smith as its president in 1812 were men who had been closely associated with John Smith: Archibald Alexander as a convert in his revival and Ashbel Green as his close friend in Philadelphia. In a sense it was the evangelical orthodoxy loosed by John Smith's revival that finally tripped up the brother he had so long envied.

⁵⁵ Richard H. Allen, ed., *Leaves from a Century Plant: Report of the Centennial Celebration of Old Pine Street Church . . .* (Philadelphia, 1870), 117, 120, 122; Smith, "Third Presbyterian Church"; Gibbons, *Old Pine Street*, 105, 119-120.

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own admission "for some time," completing his appointments and re-
turning after the epidemic began to subside. Even then he continued
worship services only at his congregation's insistence.⁵⁶

Smith was probably shielded from criticism to some extent by his
frail health, which from this time on grew steadily worse. For a year
Pine Street and Second Church, whose senior minister had fallen at
his post during the epidemic, jointly employed an assistant to both
Smith and Green. When this arrangement failed to work, Smith felt
increasingly incapable of carrying the pastoral burdens of a large city
church. Money problems again rose to plague him, for he "never
knew how to exercise parsimony or even to cultivate and economize."
Pine Street's offer of fifteen hundred dollars a year had seemed ample
from the perspective of Virginia, but he had found his house at the
northwest corner of Second and Spruce streets dismayingly expensive;
and even after the congregation added \$375 to his salary, it still did
not give his large family the "genteel living" they expected. Smith
seems to have neglected his children as well as his finances, for none of
his four sons were to turn out well; and now they added to his financial
worries by approaching the age for entering college. Once more the
only solution appeared to be a change, and Smith began negotiating
for a return to Virginia.⁵⁷

The Virginia negotiations had just collapsed in the summer of 1795
when a prominent citizen of Schenectady, New York, arrived with
word that Smith had been elected first president of the newly or-
ganized Union College. This providential offer Smith promptly ac-
cepted, and by December he was in Schenectady. Princeton had just
certified his academic repute by making him a Doctor of Divinity, and
Doctor Smith lived up to his new title by delivering a Latin oration at
his inauguration as president.

⁵⁶ *Federal Gazette and Philadelphia Daily Advertiser*, October 5, 7, 1793;
Powell, *Bring Out Your Dead*, 231-232, 236, 239.

⁵⁷ [Alexander and Carnahan,] "Notices of Distinguished Graduates," 49-50;
Life of Ashbel Green, 276-277; James Hardie, *The Philadelphia Directory and*
Register . . . (Philadelphia, 1793), 134; Gibbons, *Old Pine Street*, 103-106.
Alexander says that John Smith's sons "were well educated, and possessed more
than common talents, but none of them possessed steadiness and consistency of
character." Two became physicians and one a minister, while the oldest, a bank
cashier, "by his imprudence and speculation on the funds of the Bank, lost his
situation and fell into discredit, and his family into abject poverty." There was
also one daughter.

Schenectady was a rude, unpretentious country town of some four thousand souls, its steeply gabled houses bespeaking its largely Dutch character. The infant college had less than twenty students and but a single tutor to assist the president. A former academy building provided not only dormitories and class rooms, but a residence for the president's family as well. Yet Smith had good reason to be excited about Union's prospects. Schenectady was the natural cultural capital for the booming Mohawk Valley to the west, and the interdenominational cooperation that had produced the college augured well for its future.⁵⁸

Challenged once again to distinguish himself as an educator, President Smith laid out what was probably the most progressive college curriculum in the country. Freshmen were still confined to the traditional English grammar, Greek, and Latin, and increasingly advanced reading in the classics was required each year. But French could be substituted for Greek throughout, and the upperclass work had a distinctly modern look. The sophomores studied geography, antiquities, Roman and American history, and criticism. The junior year was devoted mainly to mathematics, including arithmetic, algebra, geometry, trigonometry, and navigation. The senior or "Philosophical Class" applied itself to natural philosophy (especially astronomy), moral philosophy, logic, metaphysics, and the federal and state constitutions.

Enrollment nearly doubled the second year, at the end of which three students received degrees in the college's first commencement. By the third year, with four tutors and fifty students on hand, President Smith's curriculum at last began to have some meaning. Meanwhile the state had given Union \$10,000, the president's family had been moved from the college to an appropriate residence, three hundred pounds had been spent for philosophical apparatus, and a massive three-story building was well on its way to completion. Union was becoming a college in fact as well as name.⁵⁹

Despite the college's increasing prosperity and the parallel improvement of his own health, Smith was still dissatisfied. He had

⁵⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all information about Union is drawn from Andrew Van Vranken Raymond's exhaustive *Union University: Its History, Influence, Characteristics and Equipment* . . . (3 vols., New York, 1907), I, 44-57.

⁵⁹ Timothy Dwight, *Travels; in New-England and New-York* (4 vols., New Haven, 1821-1822), IV, 485-486.

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been happier in pastoral work, and the college presidency, whatever its other advantages, had not solved his financial problems. The trustees provided his house and allowed his sons to attend Union without charge, but they paid him less than he had received in Philadelphia, and he was soon forced to call on his wife's family in Virginia to help him out of debt.⁶⁰

Smith had continued active in Presbyterian affairs, helping to put the floundering little church in Schenectady on its feet and preaching the first sermon in a new edifice erected by the Presbyterians of nearby Albany.⁶¹ He probably exerted his greatest influence of the subsequent history of Presbyterianism through the young man he secured as pastor for the Albany church, Eliphalet Nott. Smith had met his distinguished successor in the presidency of Union when Nott first came to upstate New York as a Congregationalist missionary. Greatly impressed with this able young man, Smith had persuaded him that since the Congregationalists and Presbyterians held the same theology, they should "effect a common organization on an accommodation plan," and so speed the organization of churches among "the sparse population holding the same faith, already scattered, and to be hereafter scattered, over this vast new territory." This was the germ of the Plan of Union, which Nott was instrumental in effecting shortly afterward, and under which the two denominations united in spreading churches all over upstate New York and the Old Northwest.⁶²

About the same time, President Smith had helped form the New York Missionary Society, the first of many interdenominational agencies whose organized efforts were to be a major factor in evangelizing the West. The sermon he preached on this occasion was, with the exception of his inaugural address as president of Union, Smith's

⁶⁰ Receipt by John B. Smith, September 14, 1797, in Vol. V of the Moore Collection, Princeton University Library; [Alexander and Carnahan,] "Notices of Distinguished Graduates," 49.

⁶¹ Jonathan Pearson *et al.*, *A History of the Schenectady Patent in the Dutch and English Times . . .* (Albany, 1883), 402-403; Ezra H. Gillett, *History of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Rev. edn., 2 vols., Philadelphia, 1864), I, 388. John Smith helped secure as pastor for the Schenectady church a young man from Pennsylvania, said to be a graduate of Princeton, the Rev. Robert Smith, who may have been related to the president.

⁶² William B. Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit . . .* (9 vols., New York, 1857-1869), III, 403; C. Van Santvoort and Taylor Lewis, *Memoirs of Eliphalet Nott . . .* (New York, 1876), 54-57.

only published work; for his extemporaneous sermons did not lend themselves to publication, and this one cost him considerable effort before it reached the press. Smith's prose seems wooden when reduced to print, but his zeal for spreading Christianity and routing "infidelity" and "superstition" is fully evident.⁶³

Only once during his stay in Schenectady did Smith miss his annual trip to Philadelphia for the May meeting of the Presbyterian general assembly, and in 1798 the assembly elected him moderator. Old Robert Smith had moderated the second assembly in 1790, and John must have taken peculiar satisfaction in succeeding his father in the church's highest office ahead of his brother Samuel, who would be moderator in 1799. John's moderatorship took on added significance from the fact that the assembly met in his old church on Pine Street, which had been without a minister ever since he left it.

The members were anxious to have him back, and a few weeks after the assembly adjourned the congregation issued him a call to return at the handsome salary of \$2750. Smith was still fearful of Philadelphia's epidemics, but having "regained that health and strength, the want of which only prevented me from staying in Philadelphia when I was there," he now informed the Union trustees that pastoral duties were "more congenial with my habits, as well as more suitable to my disposition and qualifications" than a college presidency. He stayed in Schenectady long enough to graduate another class in the spring of 1799, and in June he again took up his duties at Pine Street.⁶⁴

At last, after years of controversy, struggle, and worry, John Smith was firmly established in a post that promised increasing honor, comfort, and usefulness. Philadelphians generally gave him a warm welcome. "John Smith is again settled in Pine Street," rejoiced that gifted, difficult quasi-Presbyterian, Doctor Benjamin Rush. "He is as apostolic as ever in his preaching and living. Such men are a blessing to a city. God grant they may, by the efficacy of their prayers and sermons, keep war and yellow fever from our doors!"⁶⁵

⁶³ John Blair Smith, *The Enlargement of Christ's Kingdom, the Object of a Christian's Prayers and Exertions* (Schenectady, 1797). Cf. *Life of Ashbel Green*, 322.

⁶⁴ Sprague, *Annals of the American Pulpit*, 399; Raymond, *Union University*, I, 69; Gibbons, *Old Pine Street*, 115-117.

⁶⁵ *Letters of Benjamin Rush*, II, 813.

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But the doctor's prayer was to be denied. Without warning, two months after Smith's installation, the yellow fever struck again, claiming Pine Street's forty-three-year-old minister as one of its first victims.⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Smith died on August 22 and was buried under a handsome tombstone in the Pine Street graveyard. He died as poor as he had lived, with only a thousand dollar contribution from the Pine Street congregation standing between his widow and destitution. Mrs. Smith lived for a time in Germantown, perhaps with her relatives, the Samuel Blairs, and later in Illinois with her only daughter, who had married a Doctor Todd. [Alexander and Carnahan,] "Notices of Distinguished Graduates," 49-50; Gibbons, *Old Pine Street*, 117; *Life of Ashbel Green*, 282.