

John Smith T.

John Smith was born around 1771 in Essex County, Virginia and moved with his family about 1782 to Wilkes County, Georgia. In late 1789 he purchased land in Tennessee and subsequently set up residence there. Having a common name like "Smith" he devised a way to differentiate his name from all other Smiths. He added the "T" to his name. "T" which reportedly stood for Tennessee, indicating that he was John Smith "T" from Tennessee.

John Smith "T" had numerous land dealings in present day Alabama, Tennessee and Missouri. He settled in Missouri about 1800. He was a wealthy, well educated and prominent Missouri businessman. Smith "T"'s principal business was lead mining but he also manufactured guns and ammunition. His weapons were considered the finest in the country. Smith "T" kept a number of slaves who were expert at making weapons. His slave gunsmith, Dave, had five mechanics working for him in a shop built expressly for his use. The slave's only duty was to keep the rifles, guns, and pistols in order. A dueling pistol made by one of Smith "T"'s slave gunsmiths is on display at the Ste. Genevieve, Missouri Museum.



John Smith "T" had a notorious reputation as a duelist and carried out a long career of violence and intimidation. It was rumored that during his lifetime he had killed as many as 15 men. He was tall and slender with courteous manners and did not give the impression of being at all dangerous. He was described as "as mild a mannered man as ever put a bullet into the human body". He had a quick temper and when aroused he was considered one of the most dangerous men in the state of Missouri. John Smith "T" was a skilled weapons-maker and an excellent marksman. Rumor had it that he traveled, ate and slept with his rifle beside him which he called "Hark from the Tombs". He also carried two pistols in a belt around his body, two pocket pistols in a side coat pocket, and a Bowie knife.

In 1804 Smith "T" was made a justice of the Ste. Genevieve district (which included Washington County). He was also Lt. Col. of Militia and Commissioner of Weights and Levies. In 1806 Smith "T" was appointed as one of the Territorial Judges of the court of General Quarter Sessions. In 1806 Smith "T" attempted to join Aaron Burr's scheme for invading Mexico but

upon learning it was illegal he returned to Missouri. Upon his return he was presented with a warrant issued against him for treason. Smith "T" drew his pistol, defying lawmen to place him under arrest and he was not arrested. However, for being implicated in the Burr conspiracy, preventing the execution of a warrant and resisting a public officer he was removed from all public offices in 1807.

The custom of dueling, which began in Europe then carried over to America, became more frequent after the Revolutionary War. It was usually confined to the aristocracy - men of honor or "gentlemen" as they were usually called. It was a confrontation between two persons with deadly weapons to secure satisfaction for personal grievances. According to the code, the challenged party chose the weapons and the location where the duel would be fought. The formal arrangements were then conducted through their seconds. The seconds were also present at the duel to act as witnesses and see that it was fairly fought. In 1819, John Smith "T" evidently made some sort of derogatory remark about Aaron Burr and Lionel Browne, former sheriff of Washington County and a nephew of Aaron Burr, apparently took offense and challenged Smith "T" to a duel. It was the custom of the time and area that duels were fought on an island in the Mississippi River. This duel took place on an island opposite Herculaneum (Jefferson County) Missouri and on September 20th Lionel Browne was shot through the head in the first fire and fell dead on the ground. Smith "T" was unharmed.

In July, 1821 the first person indicted for murder in the Washington County Circuit Court was none other than John Smith "T". He had killed a gentleman by the name of Richard Rose. He claimed that Rose had tried to persuade some of his slaves to leave him. When Smith "T" and Rose happened to meet at an area stillhouse, Smith "T" shot and killed Richard Rose. John Smith "T" was never punished for the murder. Additionally, in September of 1830 John Smith "T" while drinking at the bar of William McArthur's tavern in Ste. Genevieve became involved in a quarrel with a stranger named Samuel Ball. Smith shot Ball, killing him instantly. Smith "T" was acquitted of the murder and was not punished.

Despite his turbulent life-style, in 1836 John Smith "T" died a quiet, non-violent death while on a trip to Tennessee due to a fever he had contracted. His body was returned to Missouri and is believed to be buried at his Missouri home site, "The White Cliffs" of Selma, on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River.