

## Working my Smith Line at the 2008 AFAOA Convention

by Bill Minnick

John Smith (b.1756, parents, place unknown; m. Lucy Rowe, 1778, Suffield, CT; d.1833, Halifax, VT). This man was my 4<sup>th</sup> great grandfather on my mother's side. For many generations our John Smith has eluded linkage to his ancestors. The story of my on-going research saga has a place in this AFAOA newsletter for several reasons. First reason: John Smith and his family were neighbors of Daniel Austin and family in Wilmington, Marlboro, and Halifax: adjacent towns in Windham County Vermont. It seems after the Revolutionary War, the Daniel Austins, John Smiths, and several other families decided to move from Suffield Connecticut to virgin lands on the then U.S. northern frontier. Second reason: one of my Austin cousins who reads this article may know of an old family bible or other document which lists the parents of my illusive John Smith - - solving my problem with John Smith, once and for all. Third reason: it was the occasion of the AFAOA 2008 Convention in Salt Lake City that prompted me to mount a major research effort at the LDS Library in hopes of discovering a document among their vast holdings that defined John Smith's ancestry.

In the 1990s, I proved my ancestral link between John Smith's son and Daniel Austin's granddaughter. Daniel Austin (Nathaniel, Anthony, Richard, 1638, Charlestown, MA) was a Captain in the Revolutionary War. Descendent families of Daniel Austin intermarried with several Smith families that successfully cleared, cultivated and populated the southwestern Vermont wilderness. Births of Smith children with the middle name "Austin" were common. The birth and land records in southern Vermont after 1780 helped me find and prove my Smith-Austin family links - - but the one link which continues to defy connection is my elusive John Smith's link to his parents. One research tool I had not used in my John Smith research was an onsite session at the LDS Library at Salt Lake City. Now let's fast-forward to our AFAOA Convention, Salt Lake City: July 2008.

Each year, our AFAOA convention offers us a multitude of opportunities. First, we always have an opportunity to visit with a gregarious, friendly group of our Austin cousins. Second, we're annually offered a series of informative lectures on effective research methods along with the status of Austin research efforts (with highlights of AFAOA's Web site offerings). Third, AFAOA convention cities are chosen because they offer a genealogy research library.

The 2008 AFAOA convention (July 26/27/28) rewarded me in all three of the above areas. It's always a pleasure to work, play and dine with the many wonderful people in attendance. The 2008 Convention's Saturday schedule included a presentation by George Ott on the merits of researching *probate packets* to make new research breakthroughs. George is a principal in a local family history research firm. During his presentation at the AFAOA Convention, he certainly sold me on his skills as a researcher at the nearby LDS Library; so I decided to enlist his services in my John Smith research battle plan that included my spending two days at the LDS Library. I believe at least one other AFAOA couple also decided to hire George to help in their research efforts.

I began by having George act as a step-by-step consultant on how to use LDS Library facilities efficiently. His coaching put me rapidly into the mode of pulling and visually scanning dozens of microfilm reels of various Connecticut probate and land records which might have documented my John Smith (and/or his parents) prior to, during and just after his Dec 1778 marriage in Suffield CT. These grueling hours taught me several things: 1) manually scanning hundreds of blurry, original-document images made the "needle in a haystack" metaphor seem trivial; 2) I am not good at the scanning process because I am to some degree dyslexic (did this cause me to miss any John Smith document in the blur of film images)?? Beyond my self-doubt,

I succeeded in developing tendonitis in an old right-shoulder injury after spinning the film crank for hours. As I slaved away in the LDS Library staring at microfilm, I dreamed of the day when all the filmed documents and books are digitized with name and place indexes, and are accessible from home on the Web.

Suddenly my plane reservation beckoned, so I decided to go for broke - - I made the rash decision to purchase a "Ten Hour Research Project" from George, enlisting his unique talents to go after John Smith with a final blast of research momentum. By the way, I was now also learning just how expensive genealogy research could get. But I felt that, no matter the outcome, my efforts and expense would increase my chances of a John Smith break through.

Well, the bottom line is that George worked through several of my promising research leads and prove them to be solid Dead-Ends (i.e., leads going nowhere or based on erroneous assumptions). Unfortunately in the 10 hours I purchased, he was unable to find any solid link or promising lead. John Smith had eluded one of the best researchers in the business. All I can say is that when we do finally solve the John Smith ancestral link, the magnitude of the effort so far will make finding the solution that much sweeter.

In conclusion, many of you doing family history research probably share my frustration with at least one dead-end ancestor like my John Smith. We each press on applying new ideas and tools as they come along, hoping to facilitate and complete our family history research. And where can we get new genealogy research ideas?: - - I have often found them at the annual Austin Conventions and in the AFAOA Newsletters. So I've decided to document some of my research successes and failures in this article in hopes that others doing research get some fresh ideas about the direction their own research should take.