

Did you hear about Abigail Adams's scandalous brother?



KIERAN KESNER FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Colonial reenactor Donald Hafner has written a new book about Captain William Smith, the leader of Lincoln's Minutemen.

By Nancy Shohet West

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As a Colonial reenactor, Donald Hafner has heard plenty of tales about William Smith, the captain of the town of Lincoln's Minutemen battalion when the American Revolution began.

None are particularly flattering.

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History has painted Smith as a volatile, heavy-drinking, unreliable thug who ran up debts that his sister Abigail Adams had to pay off.

“Let all remembrance of his connection with this family cease, by a total silence upon the subject,” wrote the wife of the second president, John Adams, in a letter dated 1786. “My friends will do me a kindness by strictly adhering to this request.”

And yet, Hafner contends, the evidence simply doesn’t exist that Smith’s dastardly reputation was well-earned.

Why would such a man be elected as captain of Lincoln’s Minutemen, made an officer in the Continental Army — or later, in a second career as a marine privateer, entrusted to safeguard a prize ship worth a fortune?

“Every town has its own local heroes, but I don’t know that most other towns perpetuate such a derogatory image of their local hero,” mused Hafner, a Belmont resident who gives tours at the Captain William Smith House in Lincoln. “I was curious how that happened, what was the basis.”

It’s the kind of question that leads historians to do further research. And it’s the kind of question that led Hafner, who taught political science at Boston College for more than four

decades, to write a book, “William Smith, Captain: Life and Death of a Soldier of the American Revolution,” published last month by the Lincoln Historical Society.

Hafner was particularly suited to the task. As a historical interpreter, he dresses up in Colonial garb, with tricorne hat and artillery, to participate in the yearly Patriots Day observances in Concord and Lincoln.

Captain Smith was no minor player when the revolution began on April 19, 1775.

Before dawn that day, he received the alert that British soldiers were on the march, and hurried to Lincoln Center to muster his fellow Minutemen, who were among the first units to come to Concord’s defense.

Debate ensued among the soldiers about where to position themselves and whether to advance all the way to Concord Center, where they mistakenly believed the British were torching buildings.

Captain Smith was one of the few urging decisive action, and so the Minutemen finally moved as a column toward the North Bridge.

In the day-long battle that followed, as the British retreated toward Boston, Captain Smith and his men continued in pursuit and then joined the vast colonial army encamped in Cambridge, beginning the long siege of Boston.

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The impetus for Hafner’s book project came nearly two years ago, when he was called upon to draft a few pages of information for fellow historical interpreters at the Captain William Smith House, which is part of Minute Man National Historical Park.

As with most biographical research, “You start with where and when he was born,” Hafner said. “But as I got further into it, I began to see it as a much more interesting story.”

History has shaped a vague picture of “a mythical William Smith,” Hafner said, “a petulant adolescent who despised his father, began heavy drinking and gambling at age 15, proved unable to get into Harvard, bungled into bankruptcy as a merchant, physically abused his wife, ran up gambling debts with thuggish debt collectors that Abigail Adams had to buy off, and finally died as a drunkard at the age of 40.”

Proving a negative is never easy, Hafner concedes. But tracking down the truth was made more difficult by the fact that a grandson of Adams, Charles Francis Adams Sr., heeded her request to destroy all existing correspondence between William Smith and his family.

Hafner thinks the allegations have as much to do with Adams’s rigorous standards of comportment as with Smith’s actions. And he does suspect that Smith was a heavy drinker — but probably not until near the end of his life.

Hafner, who estimates he spends “half [his] life in 18th-century garb,” first caught the reenacting bug in 1986, when he met the late Wayne Mount, a longtime captain of the modern-day Lincoln Minute Men.

“You could hardly be in Wayne Mount’s presence more than five minutes before — if he noticed that you had the capacity to put your right foot in front of your left — he’d be telling you about the great fun of it all,” Hafner recalled. “I thought it sounded interesting.”

Hafner discovered he liked reenacting history as much as he liked studying it.

“I started off as a soldier carrying a musket,” he recalled. “I did that for 15 years. Then it dawned on me that the musicians seemed to be having more fun than the soldiers were, and that a musket weighed about 10 pounds whereas a fife weighed about half a pound.”

Hafner taught himself to play the fife by laying the instrument on his kitchen counter and practicing it every time he was waiting for water to boil for a cup of tea. Now he marches every year in Concord’s and Lincoln’s Patriots Day festivities.

Over the 30-plus years he’s worked as a historical interpreter, Hafner has watched the public grow steadily more enlightened about history.

“The public’s knowledge has improved as a result of the excellent popular literary works, beginning with David McCullough writing about John Adams and continuing with Ron Chernow’s books on Alexander Hamilton and George Washington,” Hafner said.

“Professional historians tend to smile a bit about this newfound interest on the part of the public, calling it ‘founders chic,’ but even they understand that these available and easily readable histories are positive for promoting wider understanding.”

Yet with this wider appeal comes more room for misinterpretation, he said.

“I still find much of it tends to get boiled down to popular phrases,” he said. “Ask people about the American Revolution and they’ll say it was a rebellion against taxes. I don’t think the founders of our country would necessary agree that taxes were the provocation. The real issues are fundamental and often much deeper.”



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Donald Hafner appeared at the Lincoln Public Library to discuss his new book about Captain William Smith.

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