

John Day Smith

John Day Smith was born on a farm in Litchfield on February 25, 1845. His family, on both sides, had a long tradition of service to church and government. His grandfather, John Smith, as a boy had come to Litchfield in 1776. John Smith would go on to serve both as a Litchfield selectman and a legislator from Massachusetts and Maine. John Day Smith's great grandfather, Lt. James Lord, served in both the French and Indian Wars and the American Revolution. His wounds, suffered at Bunker Hill, would leave him lame for the duration of his life.

With such a background, it is little wonder that John Day Smith, at the age of seventeen, enlisted in Company F of the 19th Regiment of Maine Volunteers. The fact that he survived his service in the Union Army defies all logic. In just over a year he fought in three of the wars bloodiest battles: Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, and Gettysburg. At the latter, he was in a skirmish line that faced Picket's famous charge. After Gettysburg, Smith saw action in ten more savage battles: Bristoe Station, Mine Run, the Wilderness, the "bloody angle" at Spottsylvania, The Po River, North Anna, Totopotomoy, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, and the Jerusalem Plank Road. It is impossible to understand how any frontline soldier could have avoided the thousands of rounds of shot and shell expended. Equally incredible was his ability to bear the psychological stress of constant combat and the death and maiming of thousands of fellow human beings. It must also be remembered that John Day Smith was still in his teens.

His luck ran out at the Jerusalem Plank Road. He was shot through the face and left for dead on the battlefield. Found the next morning,

weak from the loss of blood and in agony from smashed jaws and teeth, he was loaded on a cart and driven fifteen miles to a hospital at City Point. For many, such an experience would have left a man shattered in mind and body. John Day Smith was made of sterner stuff. He returned to Maine and prepared for college at the Waterville Classical Institute. He was admitted to Brown University in 1868, and despite having to leave to earn tuition money, was graduated a member of Phi Beta Kappa in 1872 .

Life continued to present devastating challenges. In 1874 his young wife, Mary Chadbourn, died leaving an infant daughter. In typical fashion, he carried on, graduated from Columbia Law School, removed to Minneapolis, Minnesota, and became a prominent attorney. In later years he would serve as a judge, law professor and state legislator.

Throughout his amazing life, he never forgot the town where he and his ancestors had been born. On March 3, 1924, The Litchfield Town Meeting passed the following warrant article: “Art. 29. To see if the town will approve and receive from John Day Smith, a native of Litchfield, the sum of one thousand dollars to be safely invested... the income thereof to be used in maintaining the fence around the Old Grant Cemetery...and caring for the grounds therein...” The town has recently restored the fence at the Grant Cemetery, which like all cemeteries in Litchfield, is now well-maintained. The next time that you drive down the Pine Tree Road, pause at the cemetery to remember this extraordinary man.