

Smith, Isaac Hughes ^[1]

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by Stephen E. Massengill, 1994

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5 May 1852?–6 July 1915

Isaac Hughes Smith, black legislator, realtor, and philanthropist, was born in the Craven County area, the son of Thomas and Harriet Smith, both natives of North Carolina. Little is known about his early life, and whether or not he was born into slavery is an open question. It is known, however, that he was educated by a white family and later attended [St. Augustine's College](#) ^[3] in Raleigh.

Deed records indicate that Smith began buying and selling property in [Craven County](#) ^[4] in the early 1870s. As he grew older the volume of his [real estate](#) ^[5] business increased, and eventually he became a large property owner in New Bern. While acquiring his landholdings, Smith taught school in the Craven County area. In 1880 he was teaching and residing in New Bern with a black schoolteacher and former Episcopal clergyman named Alexander Bass.

When Smith became more prominent in his real estate venture, he quit teaching and entered the banking profession. He operated a money-lending and insurance agency located on Middle Street in New Bern to complement his growing realty and rental operation. A section of New Bern in which Smith owned many stores and homes was named Smithtown in his honor.

After achieving a high degree of success in business, Smith in the late 1890s decided to shift his efforts to politics. He became active in the Republican party and claimed to be one of the first men in the United States to propose William McKinley for president. Smith donated large sums of money to the Republican cause and supported [Daniel Russell](#) ^[6] for governor.

In 1898 he was elected to represent [Craven County](#) ^[4] in the state house of representatives. During the 1899–1900 session of the [General Assembly](#) ^[7], Smith was outspoken on many issues. Early in the session he denounced Republicans for expelling him from a caucus. Believing he deserved better treatment, he reminded his fellow legislators that Governor Russell owed his election to blacks. Smith introduced a resolution that would ask each congressman and senator from North Carolina to support the passage of a law that would restore to blacks funds they had lost about 1875 with the failure of the [Freedman's Saving and Trust Company](#) ^[8]. He also proposed bills to equalize the pay of state witnesses, sheriffs, and clerks and to establish compulsory education for children between six and eleven in [Craven County](#) ^[4]. Smith initiated several other resolutions, including a request that at least one black trustee be chosen for black institutions and a plea that the black race be heard by the Committee on Constitutional Amendments.

After serving one term in the General Assembly, Smith again turned his attention to business interests in Craven County. At the time of his death he had accumulated an estate purportedly worth about \$150,000 and was described as the wealthiest black man in eastern North Carolina.

Smith left a rather detailed will, which was probated on 9 July 1915. In this document he appointed an executor and trustee to continue to operate his business after his death. Smith provided well for his family and gave five hundred dollars to [Shaw University](#) ^[9] and to the National Religious Training Schools in [Durham](#) ^[10] and [Raleigh](#) ^[11]. He also donated one thousand dollars for black churches in New Bern and designated an identical amount for the [Masonic order](#) ^[12] and [Odd Fellows](#) ^[13] organizations.

Smith married Visey Dudley in Craven County on 24 Dec. 1875, and they had one son, Livingston. On 30 June 1898 he was married a second time, to Carrie Marie Rhone (1872–1962). They had five children: Isaac Hughes, Jr. (1899–1953), Harriet, Henrietta (b. 2 Jan. 1904), and two who died in infancy. Isaac married Annie Day Shepard, the daughter of [James E. Shepard](#) ^[14], founder of the [National Religious Training School and Chataqua](#) ^[11], the forerunner of [North Carolina Central University](#) ^[15].

Smith held membership in the [Knights of Pythias](#) ^[16], served as grand orator of the Negro Masons of North Carolina, and was an active member of the Episcopal church. He died of diabetes at his home on Johnson Street in New Bern and was buried at [Greenwood Cemetery](#) ^[17].

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