

Jay County, Coffin Accounts from Edmund Smith's Ledger, 1841–1853

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Edmund Smith was born on November 4, 1814, in Beaver County, Pennsylvania, and later moved to Jay County, Indiana, via Columbiana County, Ohio. He married Eliza Dutton on October 1, 1834, and together they had three sons and three daughters. Only one child, Dillwyn, survived to age eighteen and beyond.¹

Through his life Smith was primarily a farmer, carpenter, and cabinet maker.² Like many other carpenters of his day, he also built coffins for families in his community. It was not unusual for furniture builders to create coffins as a side business since they had the tools and equipment required.³ “In the colonial period, cabinetmaking was often found with upholstering, and to this combination undertaking was occasionally added . . . [however] it was more frequently the case that cabinetmakers, chairmakers and the like first supplied coffins only.”⁴ Smith's ledger is an important record that not only reveals the names of people in his community, but also provides records of deaths in the area in an early period before county and state officials kept such records.

The following table is copied from a transcript of Smith's coffin ledger, typed by his great-grandson, Dwight F. Smith. It is alphabetized by the last name of the account holder—the person who ordered the coffin(s). The order date was recorded along with information about the deceased person's relationship to the account holder. Likely these were people who lived in the same area as Edmund Smith. The table starts in February 1841 and runs to March 1853, four months before Smith himself died on July 11, 1853.⁵

Notes

1. Edmund Smith, U.S. Quaker Cemetery Records, 1800–1990, West Grove Cemetery Records, 18, Ancestry; Edmund Smith Coffin Accounts, ca 1841–1853, SC 3423, Indiana Historical Society, <https://indianahistory.org/wp-content/uploads/edmund-smith-coffin-accounts.pdf>.
2. Aly Caviness, collection guide, April 2018, Edmund Smith Coffin Accounts, ca. 1841–1853, SC 3423.

3. Don Rickers, “History: Cabinets to Caskets,” The Voice of Pelham and Central Niagara, October 25, 2020, <https://thevoiceofpelham.ca/2020/10/25/history-cabinets-to-caskets/>.
4. Robert W. Habenstein and William M. Lamers, *The History of American Funeral Directing*, rev. ed. (Milwaukee, WI: Bulfin Printers, 1968), 209, 227.
5. Edmund Smith, U.S. Quaker Cemetery Records, 1800–1990; Caviness, collection guide, Edmund Smith Coffin Accounts, ca. 1841–1853, SC 3423.

Data from Edmund Smith’s Coffin Account Ledger

In Account with	Date	For
Bond, Joshua	11/1847	Wife
Butcher, Jeffrey	3/1849	Adult
	9/1850	Child
Dugdale, William R.	11/1850	Wife & dt. Rebecca
Farrington, William	7/1842	Self
Frazier, Ezekiel	10/1851	Wife & Child
Gordon, James H.	8/1852	Wife
Gove, Jonathan	7/1851	Self
Gove, William	1/1845	Child
Griest, John	9/1852	Son
Harris, Jonathan	3/1843	Child
	8/1845	Wife
	4/1850	Self
Hilles, Elihu	11/1843	Child
Hilles, Hugh	11/1843	Wife
	6/1847	Self
Horn, Edward	5/1844	Self
Horn, Samuel	3/1845	Child
Irey, Aaron	8/1841	Child
Irey, Jonah	8/1846	Child
Johnson, Levi	8/1849	Child
Keese, Stephen	1846	Child
Lewis, Enos	9/1852	Emery Lewis
McKinney, Patrick	2/1844	Adult
Mendenhall, William	11/1842	Wife
Miller, Milton	5/1850	Wife
Paxson, Cyrus	4/1852	Adult
Paxson, Joseph	12/1848	Child
Paxson, Joseph J.	12/1847	Child
Reed, John R.	9/1848	Child

Regester, Robert	10/1848	Wife
Regester, Thomas	7/1851	Child
Regester, William	11/1846	Son
Rife, [---]	12/1851	Child
Rigby, Seth	8 & 9/1848 3/1851	5 members of family Self
Sawyer, James	8/1848	Adult & Child
Silliven, James	n.d.	2 children
Slack, George	4/1850	Self
Slack, Malinda	12/1850	Self
Smith, George	4/1850	Child
Sumption, John	2/1851	Self
Thompson, James	10/1851	Child
Whitacre, John	3/1853	Adult
Whitacre, Joseph	4/1848 5/1850	Child [---]
Whitacre, Stephen	1847	2 children
Williams, John	10/1851	Child
Wood, Willis	2/1842 7/1842 10/1846	Child Child Son
Wright, Elijah	10/1849	Wife