

At 69, Smith isn't ready to hang up fun working on Charleston Harbor

For Capt. Whit S. Smith III, Charleston Harbor has been the favored "playground" since growing up sailing boats on its waters in the 1950s, and, with his 70th birthday approaching in February, he has no plans to stop having fun in his roles as president of the Charleston

to these fancy camps in Europe and out West. It was either just go to the playground, or, in my case, go to the yacht club and go sailing. That was a start of a lifelong passion for the sport that took me on to winning national and international championships.

And that eventually led you to becoming a pilot...

I grew up sailing at a young age and crewing for my

father. A next-door neighbor was a harbor pilot, so I learned what that was all about also at an early age and decided that, if the stars lined up and it worked out, that'd be a fun thing to go into. I either raced with or against harbor pilots in my earlier years when I was really competitively racing, so I knew a lot about the

Charleston pilots even before I enrolled at the Citadel.

It's not easy to get on as a harbor pilot unless it's a family legacy thing, is it?

That was truly the situation back when I was coming along. We only had 12 pilots - we've got 20 now - and there was a lot of father-to-son-to-cousin-brother-next-door-neighbor kind of thing going on. I was really sort of at the right place at the right time. They needed some apprentices, and I was fortunate enough to get selected in 1969. There was one son and two of us who came in without any family relationships.

Since then, I'd say in the last 15 years, we've only taken on one family member, because we've really gone and tried to get the best and the brightest
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Industry Profile

By Paul Scott Abbott, AJOT

Branch Pilots' Association and as a board member of the South Carolina State Ports Authority.

In an exclusive interview with the *American Journal of Transportation*, Smith reflected upon a life spent on the waterfront, touching on everything from the importance of the Port of Charleston in the South Carolina economy to being surrounded by a family of females to how to properly pronounce his name.

With a full name like Whitemarsh Seabrook Smith III, do you feel you were destined to a career on the waterfront?

Obviously, it's a family name, and we've been here for a long time, and we have ties to the Lowcountry [area of South Carolina]. and those were just



Capt. Whit S. Smith III, longtime president of the Charleston Branch Pilots' Association, gets a great view of Charleston Harbor from the bridge wing of a pilot boat. (Photo courtesy of Jeremy Aaron)

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family names of people who had been here before us.

(Laughing) No, I've sort of thought about that in my mind as well, but, it just happened to work out that way. A lot of people really either don't pronounce or spell Whitmarsh correctly, because the "e" throws them. They love to call you "white-marsh" instead of "whit-marsh." I mean, the "e" is silent.

So that's how you know who truly knows you...

Correct. I'm not all that hung up with it. My wife is Anne, with an "e," and she'll correct you in a heartbeat that you need to put the "e" on her name.

You pretty much grew up on the Ashley and Cooper rivers. Could you share a bit about what that was like, and how it led you to become a pilot, joining the Charleston Branch Pilots' Association in 1969 as an apprentice pilot and becoming state-licensed as a pilot in 1972, then first being elected the association's president in 1980?

We grew up in downtown Charleston, five minutes from the water in almost any direction, and my father was very active on the water, as far as hunting and fishing and sailing and things like that. I was the only son – I have three sisters – and so he probably spent a lot more time with me than with the three girls.

Quickly, he got me into all the things that he liked to do. My grandmother gave me a sailboat when I was 10 years old for Christmas, and my father taught me and my friends to sail, and I just sort of lived in it year-round in Charleston Harbor. I mean, Charleston Harbor was like a playground for me.

That was in the time period when kids didn't have all the opportunities they have now to go

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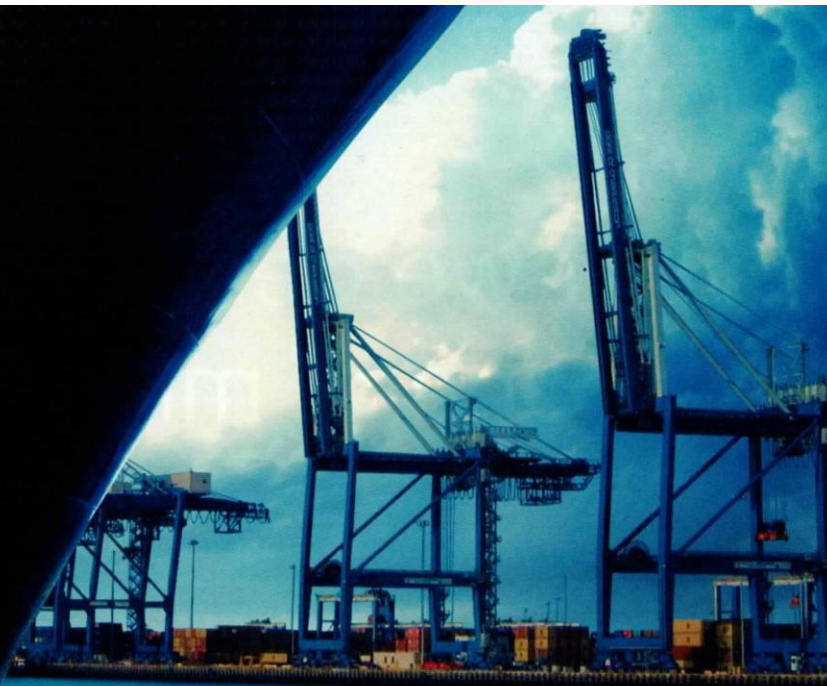
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from all over the country.

What makes Charleston so special as a port city?

Charleston's been a port city for more than 300 years. It was one of the major ports if not the major port back in the 1700s, and it's a natural harbor, so it kind of reminds you of New York almost, in that you've got a peninsula that comes down that sort of looks like Manhattan. It's a natural inside place for ships to seek shelter and there was commerce here all during the 1700s and 1800s and right on up until today.

A lot of places around us are river ports, where there are long, winding rivers, whereas we have a river system here that flows into a natural deep harbor. Because of that, it's really the economic engine for South Carolina.

You not only have been around for – but, moreover, have played an integral role in – the advancement of the Port of Charleston, not only through decades at the helm of the pilots' association but also through leadership of numerous

organizations, including on the board of the South Carolina State Ports Authority since 1999, being chairman from 2001 through 2004. What have been the most significant developments over these years, and, specifically, how important are the harbor deepening and new container terminal projects?

Those projects are crucial for the development of South Carolina. I was fortunate enough to get elected to the port authority back in '99. I think I was the first person ever from the waterfront to get put on there, and I'm probably one of the longest-serving board members at the present time.

It's been fun being part of the economic engine on that end, as well as from the pilot standpoint, but I probably split my time 50-50 between running the pilots and helping with the port authority. It was more intense the years I was chairman, living and breathing that entity.

As far as the harbor deepening, I think you either keep growing or you're going backwards. It's a vision that the board had a few years ago to get in the

process of deepening. I started out here when Charleston Harbor was 35 feet. Then it went to 40, to 45, and now we're pushing for a 50-foot channel, and I really think that's where it's going to level out. If you're not willing to spend the money and to move forward, you're really not going to stay in the game.

So, all that's been fun to be part of. There's been some great leadership and vision at the port authority, and the political climate is such that they are very supportive in [state capital] Columbia of what we're doing. The governor and legislature have come together with the upstate manufacturing region to form a strong team working on behalf of the entire state's international commerce assets.

Your commitment to the Port of Charleston has certainly been steadfast, but, hopefully, you do get to enjoy a little time away from the waterfront. What occupies your time away from Charleston Harbor?

We have a wonderful home down south of here at Rockville on Wadmalaw [Island], and I'm about 10 feet from the

water there. So my wife and three girls enjoy spending a lot of time outdoors on the water as well.

I'm an avid golfer. I've had fun raising the three daughters and now four grandchildren, with another one on the way. We spend a lot of time outdoors and at family events. Like I said, I had three sisters and now I've got three daughters and three granddaughters and one grandson, so I guess you could say it's raising and working with females.

We've had three weddings now, and all the girls are college graduates. One's an attorney. The fun thing we did was we had a double wedding. We had two daughters get married in one ceremony. That was in 2002. That was fun, because we had Anne's father and Anne's brother [both Presbyterian ministers] and another minister, so it was sort of like bringing the circus to town.

Were you able to save money by just having one reception?

People spin it that way, but it was two for the price of two, I can assure you. We **(PROFILE – continued on page 24)**

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had one cake, but it seemed like it was about 5 feet high.

So no plans to retire anytime soon, huh?

Our association is set up so that 70 is mandatory [retirement age], and my state licenses, as far as getting on ships, I have to give up at 70. The group came to me at the start of this year – I'll turn 70 this coming February – and wanted to know if there's anything we could work out.

What we've come up with is almost like a one-time situation that they want me to stay on and be president for as long as I want to do it. They said, "You tell us when you want to hang it up."

But I work with so many great people down here employee-wise with the pilots and am still working actively with the port authority, so I look forward to coming to work every day and the challenge of running the business. I mean, yeah, I'd have more time to do more things with the family and play golf, but I think I'd really miss it.

So I'm going to hang in there for a few more years. I don't have any magic timeframe. I'm in great shape physically and don't have any ailments or problems or knee replacements or all these things I see affecting a lot of my friends. So, no, I'm going to hang in there for a while.