

# Build. Hold. Give.

A tribute to Robert H. Smith

By Christopher Levenick

**A**CROSS THE MUDDY RIVER, OVER BY THE airport, he saw what everyone else saw. “It really was a wasteland then,” Robert H. Smith explained to *Washingtonian* in 1987. “There was nothing in this area but junkyards, cheap warehouses, a bowling alley, and a drive-in theater.”

But Smith saw something else, something that nobody else seemed to see. He saw something special amid the scrapyards and the low-rent motels, between the train tracks and the brickyards. What he saw was possibility.

Northern Virginia wasn’t much to look at when Smith started out. On the outskirts of the District of Columbia—a city that President Kennedy had then described as having “South-

ern efficiency and Northern charm”—the region consisted largely of tract housing, some light industry, and miles and miles of farmland. Today, it is one of the wealthiest and most economically vibrant regions in the country. Much of that transformation came from the vision, leadership, and generosity of Robert Smith, who passed away on December 29, 2009.

## Building a Family Business

ROBERT HILTON SMITH WAS BORN INTO A FAMILY of recently immigrated Russian Jews. His grandfather, Reuven Schmidoff, farmed corn and potatoes near the Russian village of Lipnik. (The family’s story is best told by Robert’s son, David Bruce Smith, in his memoir, *Conversations with*

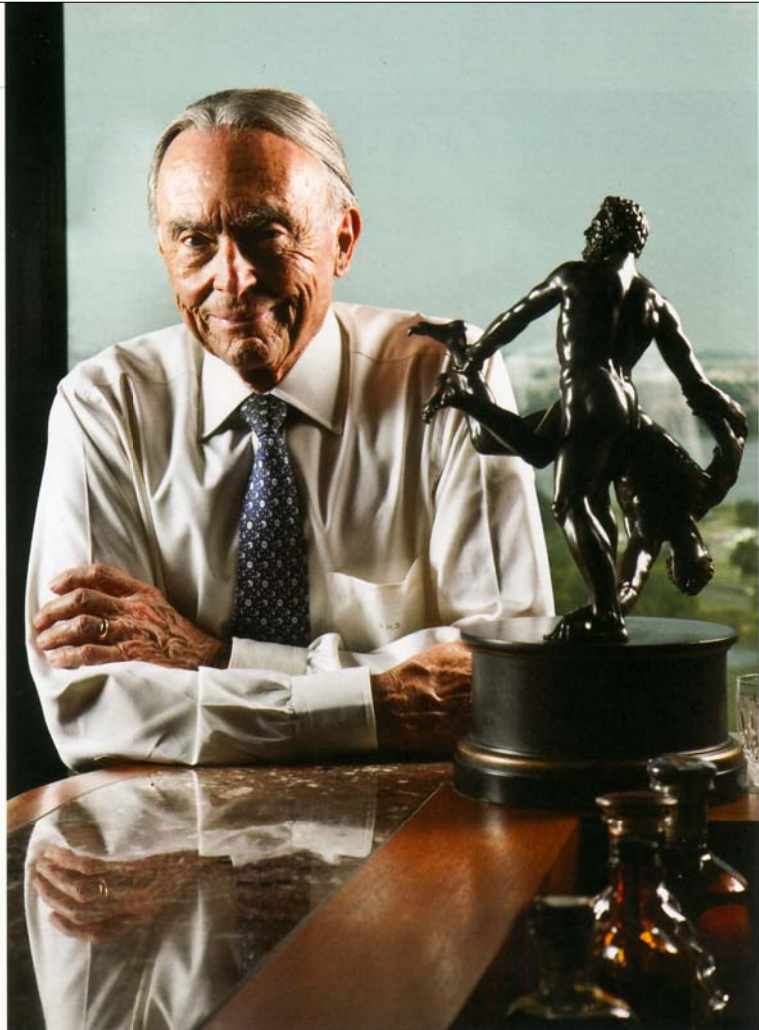
*Papa Charlie.*) Reuven consulted the town's *Guten Yid* (or "wise Jew"), who convinced him to "pack up and go to America." Once settled in the States, Reuven replaced his thick, almost rabbinical, beard with a thin, stylish Vandyck. The family would now work on Saturdays, he decided, and they would take the name Smith. "My grandfather came to America in 1908," Robert Smith once explained. "He didn't speak the language; he just knew that he wanted to learn English, to be an American, and to succeed."

Reuven Smith took up homebuilding and property management. It would become a family business. At Reuven's insistence, his son, Charles E. Smith, earned an accounting degree from the City College of New York, but the young man quickly decided that he did not care to spend his days "pushing a pencil." Soon, Charles was also scurrying around Brooklyn, closing deals, renting properties, and building homes. Success followed success. On July 21, 1928, he and his wife, Leah, had a son, Robert.

The Depression wiped them out. Charles worked odd jobs to make ends meet and would not return to the building trade until 1939. In 1942, he took advantage of an opportunity to put up a tract of 56 homes for defense contractors in Maryland's District Heights, just outside D.C. Although the project turned a net loss, it introduced him to the opportunity of a lifetime: a booming city with a chronic shortage of housing stock. Charles moved his family to Washington and soon started his own building and property management business, frequently partnering with local Jewish businessmen with relatively modest sums of capital to invest.

Like father, like son. From 16 years of age, Robert Smith knew he wanted to follow his father and build properties. After graduating from Anacostia High School in 1946, he enrolled in the University of Maryland's school of engineering, believing that it would serve him well in the construction trades. "One of my courses as a freshman was mechanical drawing," he explained, "which required neatness and the ability to visualize isometric drawings and spatial relationships. I didn't get it."

"I really wanted to be the first engineer in our family," said Smith at the 2008 commencement exercises of the University of Maryland's business school, "but it was not meant to be. I switched to business and accounting [and] my grades improved dramatically." When he graduated in



Robert H. Smith, pictured here in his Crystal City penthouse with Hercules and Lichas (17th c., after a model by Giambologna), was an avid collector of Italian Renaissance bronzes. (Photo by Brian Smale)

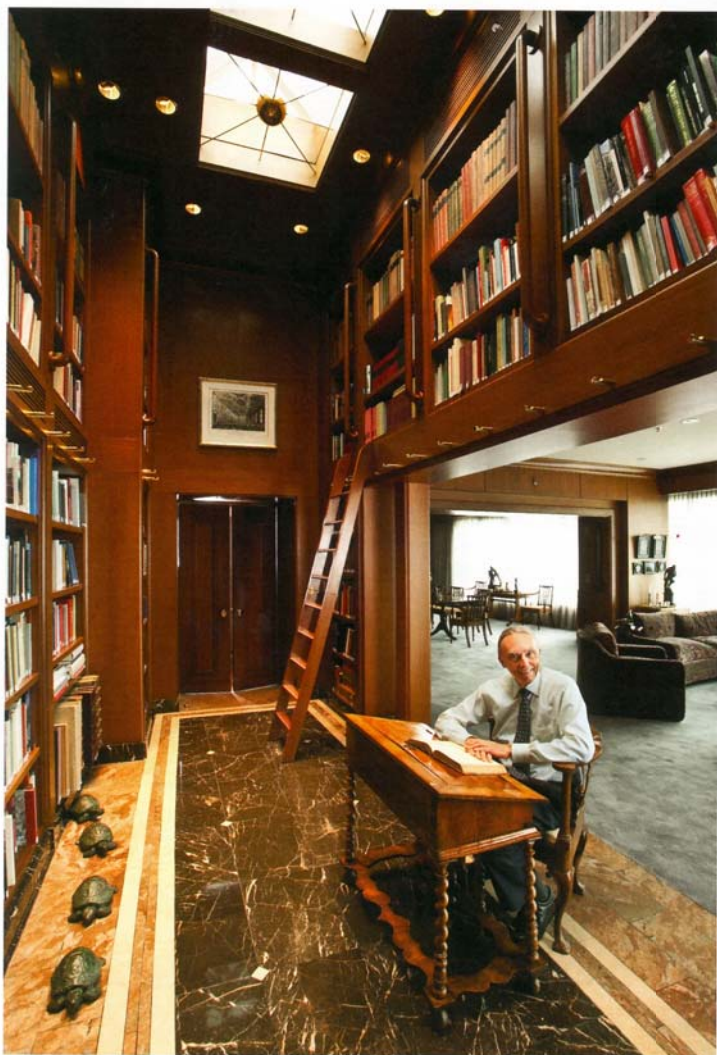
1950, he had a degree to match his father's: accounting. Years later, Smith would marvel at how well the disappointment served him in life.

Smith graduated on a Thursday. On Monday, went to work for his father. The Charles E. Smith Company initially focused on residential properties, but entered the commercial market with an office building near the White House. In 1956, Robert Smith's sister, Arlene, married Robert Kogod; he joined the growing family business three years later.

In 1961, Robert Smith came upon what would be known as his signature project. He was approached by Cyrus Katzen, a dentist who dabbled in real estate. Katzen told him about a 20-acre parcel of land in a shabby, rundown part of Arlington near National Airport. The property was owned by Washington Brick and

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*“Like the Rothschilds, who lived with everything they collected, I like living with the things,” says Smith of his art collection (which includes, at bottom left, Four Tortoises by Zanobi Lastricati). In 2008, Smith and his wife, Clarice, announced their plans to give their collection to the National Gallery of Art. (Photo by Brian Smale)*

Terra Cotta Company, which used it as a source of clay. The owners were not interested in selling, but Smith persuaded them to lease the land. In exchange for 3 percent of gross revenues, the company agreed to a 99-year deal.

“A couple of weeks later,” Smith told *Washingtonian*, “I drove Dad out here. He was used to building apartment buildings in upper Northwest, and he was shocked at how bad the area was. He said, ‘I don’t care how much the deposit was, you’d better just forget it. Walk away, and cut your losses now.’”

The county was eager to re-zone the land, and Smith immediately got to work on a two-tower apartment complex. As he tried to come up with a

marketing angle for the new properties, he traveled to Miami Beach, where he was impressed by a new development that used crystal as its central design motif. With that, Smith had his brand. When Crystal House opened in 1963, its lobby, lighting fixtures, and décor all played on a crystal theme. Smith intended to offer modern construction at an affordable price: rent for a one-bedroom apartment was \$145 per month, and the complex soon filled to capacity.

The area soon came to be known as Crystal City. In 1964, Smith opened Crystal Plaza 6, a 12-story office building that would house the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office until 2006. Dozens more buildings—office, retail, and residential—would follow. Smith had no real master plan; his goal instead was to create a moderate-density, mixed-use development, with above-ground buildings connected by extensive underground tunnels.

In 1967, Charles Smith retired from the company to devote himself full-time to philanthropy. (He went on to become a major patron of Jewish causes, as well as the driving force behind the creation of the George Washington University Medical School.) The two Roberts—Smith and Kogod—took over the family business. Kogod would focus on leasing and management; Smith, on construction, financing, and long-term corporate strategy. In addition to their continued work in Crystal City, they built a number of other major projects, including Skyline City near Bailey’s Crossroads, Arlington Courthouse Plaza, Democracy Plaza in Bethesda, and Fairfax Square at Tysons Corner. Shortly before its 2002 merger with Vornado Realty Trust, the Charles E. Smith Company managed over 15 million square feet of office space and more than 30,000 residential units in Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia, Florida, Chicago, and Boston.

But it was not the scale of the family’s company that really set it apart. It was how the company conducted its affairs. In 1948, Leah Smith prevailed upon her husband to manage the properties they developed, rather than contract with external management teams. She argued that the relative stability of property management would round out the cyclical ups and downs of the construction business. It would also allow them greater quality control over their buildings. Perhaps most importantly, it would compel the company to take a long view, to see its efforts as the work not of weeks and months, but of decades.

That long-term perspective would characterize the Smith family's business—and its philanthropy.

### Generosity as Art and Science

ROBERT SMITH'S LIFELONG INTEREST IN THE ARTS was kindled when he married a painter named Clarice Chasen in 1952. To decorate their first home in Bethesda, Maryland, they would visit the world's finest museums, looking for inspiration. What inspired them varied, and their collection ranged from 17th-century Dutch portraits to 18th-century English silver and 19th-century Venetian school paintings. But the Smiths found their niche in 1978, when they acquired a pair of extraordinary Renaissance bronze sculptures: the *Rape of the Sabine* (based on a model by Giambologna) and Susini's cast of Giambologna's *Nessus and Deianira*.

"I knew it was too late to make a great, top-quality collection of Old Master paintings," Smith told the fine-arts magazine *Apollo* in a 2009 profile. But Italian Renaissance bronzes were another matter. Collectors had generally avoided them because of the technical difficulties with determining quality. The Smiths were intrigued. Over the years, they built a collection of 72 bronzes, along with 8 boxwood and ivory pieces. It is now generally recognized as the finest private collection of bronzes in the world.

As they built their collection, the Smiths started to think seriously about its ultimate destination. Increasingly, they looked to the National Gallery of Art, whose dome is visible from their penthouse in Crystal City. They made their first gift of art to the National Gallery in 1972; in 1983, they befriended Paul Mellon, son of Andrew Mellon, the great benefactor of the gallery. Two years later, when Paul Mellon retired from the board, Smith replaced him as a trustee. He went on to chair a \$123 million fundraising campaign and, from 1993 to 2003, served as president of the National Gallery of Art.

Although the Smiths supported a number of cultural institutions, their central commitment was always clear. In 2008, they announced their decision to dedicate their entire collection to the National Gallery. "I had achieved my dream, to be associated with a world-class institution," said Smith. "I knew then I wanted to give my collection back to the American people."

That pattern—finding one organization, demanding excellence, and backing it fully—would play out again in the Smiths' support of higher education. Smith started with his alma



*"I've taken the opportunity to be involved with this school," Smith said at the 2008 commencement of the business school that bears his name, "because it is my dream that each student who graduates from it will be an ambitious dreamer, a courageous risk-taker, and a principled, ethical leader who will work to make the world a better place."*

*(Photo courtesy of the University of Maryland)*

mater: the University of Maryland. After requesting—and receiving—a multi-year strategy for raising its stature, Smith gave the business school a \$15 million gift in 1997. The Robert H. Smith School of Business has since shot up in the rankings, reaching the top 20 nationwide (and the top 5 among public business schools). "I've taken the opportunity to be involved with this school," he explained, "because it is my dream that each student who graduates from it will be an ambitious dreamer, a courageous risk-taker, and a principled, ethical leader who will work to make the world a better place."

It was only the beginning. The Smiths then gave the university \$15 million to complete the 318,000-square-foot Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center. Smith donated \$30 million more to the university in 2005—the largest gift in the school's history. But their patronage of higher education extended beyond College Park: the Smiths were the lead donors to the Wilmer Institute at Johns Hopkins University, which is intended to become the nation's leading treatment and research center for the prevention of blindness and other eye diseases. At Hebrew University in Jerusalem, whose board Smith chaired from 1981 to 1985, they made major gifts for plant science and agricultural genetics research, as well as expanding interdisciplinary research among those disciplines and animal sciences, biochemistry, nutrition, and environmental studies.

Nevertheless, it was to the University of Maryland that the Smiths were most generous. They are the largest benefactors of public education in Maryland's history.



*Smith was one of the leading funders of the restoration of Montpelier, the home of James Madison. (Photos by Kenneth M. Wyner; courtesy of the Montpelier Foundation)*

That commitment was of a piece with the basic Smith business model. Just as he managed the properties he built, so too did Smith sustain the charitable institutions he created. His method was to build and hold. Create and commit. Look to the future. Think long term.

#### "A Grateful American"

"I CONSIDER MYSELF A GRATEFUL AMERICAN," Smith was fond of telling people. The statement and the sentiment came easily and often to him. "In my opinion," he once observed, "living under our Constitution is perhaps the greatest political privilege ever accorded to the human race."

As Smith wound down his involvement in day-to-day business, he began reading American history extensively. "I'm very interested in the Founding Fathers and the period between 1770 and 1790," Smith said. "They created a country that has given people more opportunity and hope in the past 230 years than any other type of government in the history of man." That interest manifested itself in a long-term commitment to commemorating American history.

Smith was approached by several friends in the mid-1990s. Would he be interested, they asked, in helping fund an archeological survey at Montpelier? While George Washington's

Mount Vernon and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello had remained relatively well-known, James Madison's Montpelier in Virginia's bucolic Piedmont had been largely forgotten. Smith thought that Madison—co-author of the *Federalist Papers*, driving intellect behind the Constitution, and fourth president of the United States—deserved better. So Smith contributed to the archeological dig, and later helped frame a plan to conserve over 200 acres of old-growth forest on the property. He went on to offer a \$10 million challenge grant to help expand the Constitutional Village, a residential village at Montpelier that runs seminars and workshops on the Constitution.

The experience at Montpelier got Smith thinking more seriously about historic preservation. In 2000, the Smiths began working with Mount Vernon to honor the man Smith considered the "most important of the Founding Fathers." Their contributions helped build a series of theaters and auditoriums—in the expanded Mount Vernon Inn complex, in the Ford Orientation Center, and in the Donald W. Reynolds Museum and Education Center. They likewise endowed a senior curator position, created a book-publishing fund, and made possible a total redesign of Mount Vernon's website.



*Smith (right) joined Lincoln Cottage director Frank Milligan and landscape architect Andrew Balderson in February 2009 for the dedication of a bronze of Lincoln and his horse. (During his presidency, Lincoln frequently rode alone the three and a half miles from the White House to his summer cottage.) Smith would often donate an original bronze statue to a historic site he helped restore. (Photo courtesy of the Lincoln Cottage)*

It was the Smiths' idea to create and fund what is now known as Mount Vernon's "big tree program," wherein some 65 mature trees—some over 40 feet tall and weighing over 4 tons—were planted to create a natural barrier between newly constructed facilities and the historic grounds. (The trees—elm, maple, tulip poplar, oak, beech, and American holly—are all from species that are known to have existed in 18th-century northern Virginia.) Most recently, the Smiths played an instrumental role in preparing for the construction of a presidential library for George Washington.

Less well known than Mount Vernon is the Benjamin Franklin House, which opened on January 17, 2006—Ben Franklin's 300th birthday. Again, Smith was indispensable in the effort to restore the London townhouse where Franklin lived from 1757 to 1775. It was at 36 Craven Street—steps from what later came to be known as Trafalgar Square—that Franklin served as deputy postmaster for the colonies, published the *Craven Street Gazette*, and, in his leisure time, invented bifocals, the Franklin Stove, and the glass armonica. In addition to helping restore the townhouse, Smith underwrote its Robert H. Smith Scholarship Centre, which hosts symposia on Franklin, as well as the topics that most interested him.

The list goes on. When Abraham Lincoln's summer cottage in northern Washington, D.C., was re-opened to the public in February 2008, the Smiths had paid for more than \$7 million of

the \$15 million restoration. At Monticello, they permanently endowed the Robert H. Smith International Center for Jefferson Studies with \$15 million. Smith was a benefactor of Gettysburg National Military Park and he helped fund renovations at the New-York Historical Society. He supported a wide variety of museums and historically significant sites, but his underlying motivations—born of his business philosophy—were always the same. Build and hold. Insist on excellence. Look to the long term.

In gratitude for his patriotic efforts, Smith received a National Humanities Medal from President George W. Bush in 2008. "My family has had tremendous opportunities because we live in this free, democratic society, for which I am thankful," Smith said at the time. "One who has forgotten to be thankful has fallen asleep in the midst of life."

### Built to Last

"I LOVE TAKING A RAW PIECE OF LAND," SMITH once said, "and coming up with a vision and a project that is beneficial for the developer and the consumer." It was that vision, that sense of imagination, that led him across the muddy river, over by the airport, to build where others saw only a wasteland. It was that vision that led him to collecting art, to supporting higher education, and to commemorating America's history. And it is that vision—and the immense generosity that inspired it—for which he will be remembered, long into the future that he always seemed able to see.