

HISTORIC RED HOOK

Robert “Theis Siefke” Smith

20 Mar 1841 – 11 Jul 1928

Saint John the Evangelist Cemetery, Barrytown

Two-sided marble tombstone on the hill in back of the church, has son Albert and his wife on one side.

Robert Smith changed his name after he arrived in this country in 1861 from Europe. He was born Theis Siefke, supposedly a descendant of nobility. His obituary says that he was born in “Crempe, Denmark,” but there is no such place. There is a Krempe in Northern Germany, but even in the 1840s this town was not over the Danish border. When he was a teenager, he went whale hunting around Greenland and Iceland with an uncle who owned whaling ships. Later, he went to Hamburg (just south of Krempe) to visit an uncle who had returned home from the California gold rush. There he befriended another noble and they sailed around the world together for a while.

After this, Theis came to the U.S., changed his name to Robert Smith and in 1865 in Kingston, Ulster County, NY, he married a German girl named Sophie Johanna Frederica Wilhelmina Helm. They had seven children: William (1867–a.1880), Lewis (1868–), Elizabeth (May 1870–a.1875), Robert Jr, (1872–a.1880), Albert L. (Jan 1879–1922) Martha E. (Aug 1879–, married William Plass), and Rebecca C. (Feb 1883–, married Charles Miller). The family moved around a bit as Robert was a boatman by trade, working for various entities. He and Sophie were naturalized in 1870 in Poughkeepsie, and the family lived in Kingston that year, in Brooklyn five years later, then in 1880 they lived in Manhattan and the census taker noted that those he listed on this page were “people living on Canal Boats and Lee Barkes on North River between 14th and 16th Streets.” This area is now home to Pier 57 at Hudson River Park. The family called Red Hook home by at least 1900, but possibly in the late 1880s as Robert worked for the Mutual Benefit Ice Company which had a business address in Barrytown.

Robert Smith was 88 years old when he died on a Wednesday morning, July 11, 1928, at his daughter Martha Plass’s house in Barrytown. His wife Sophia passed away almost a decade later at age 93.