

The “Hook”

By Steven W. Hooper

“Hook—A high Police Department official with power to help his lower-ranking friends”
- *New York Times* article titled “Police (Cops?) Have Slangage of Own”

When building a career, it is often said that it is important to have a “hook”. A “hook” is a high-level person in an organization that can pull you along as they move up the career ladder. Not everyone has a “hook” and those that do not often resent the person in power and the person they are pulling along on their coattails. Others would say that a “hook” is not necessarily a bad thing and that senior managers should mentor junior employees.

No matter how you feel about “hooks,” they have been around for a long time and are as much a part of our history as tariff schedules and customhouses. For more than one hundred years, U.S. Customs appointments and promotions were all made based on patronage which made it difficult to advance in the service without a “hook”. There was no civil service system or merit promotions to protect employees without a “hook”.

Two examples of major “hooks” were President Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) and his Secretary of the Treasury Salmon P. Chase (1808-1873). President Lincoln’s protégé was Doctor Anson G. Henry (1804-1865) while Secretary Chase had his own protégé in newspaperman Victor Smith (1809-1865).

President Lincoln and Henry became acquainted in Springfield, Illinois in the 1830s. Henry was a medical doctor interested in politics and soon became Lincoln’s personal doctor. The two became lifelong friends and when Lincoln became President, he became involved in helping Henry secure an appointment to a federal position. This relationship led to Henry’s appointment as Surveyor General (Governor) of the Washington Territory.

Secretary Chase was a lawyer in Cincinnati when he met Smith who was working as a journalist. Both were anti-slavery activists and worked for the election of President Abraham Lincoln in 1860. When Lincoln was elected, he asked Chase to be the Secretary of Treasury and Chase then used his influence to have Smith appointed Collector of Customs in the Washington Territory at Port Townsend.

You might remember from some of our previous posts that when Smith arrived in Port Townsend, Washington, he took an immediate dislike to the rough and rowdy port city and its inhabitants. Almost immediately, he began action to move the port of entry to what he insisted was a better location forty-five miles west at Port Angeles. Since all ships entering the Puget Sound had to stop at U.S. Customs in Port Townsend, the town fathers knew this move would doom the future of their city which they envisioned as someday growing as large as San Francisco.

As the battle between Collector Smith and the town heated up, tempers began to flare. Smith's initial efforts to have the port of entry moved were rebuffed. Not deterred, Smith traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet with Secretary Chase, the President and influential congressmen. President Lincoln soon signed an executive order moving the port of entry to Port Angeles. But Port Townsend residents were not about to go down without a fight.

When Collector Smith returned from Washington, D.C., he was met by a hostile crowd that refused to let him enter the Customhouse and retrieve the books for the district. While he was gone, the citizens of Port Townsend had Collector Smith charged with various crimes including theft of funds from the Customhouse.

As the disagreement grew, Collector Smith retreated to the district revenue cutter and threatened to fire on the town with the ship's cannon. The city leaders met and wisely decided that this was not the time to make their stand. Collector Smith was allowed to retrieve the books and depart for Port Angeles on the revenue cutter.

The rough and tumble citizens of Port Townsend were not about to give up. They pursued Collector Smith to Port Angeles where they tried again to arrest Smith. The Collector again used the revenue cutter to drive off his pursuers and send them fleeing back to Port Townsend.

The citizens of Port Townsend regrouped and decided that political action might be more effective than the justice system for accomplishing their goals. They soon found that President Lincoln's friend Anson Henry, the Surveyor General of the territory also disliked Collector Smith's brash moves and was willing to support Smith's removal.

Henry's efforts were rewarded when on May 8, 1863, President Lincoln sent a letter to Secretary Chase directing him to remove Collector Smith from his position. Secretary Chase was so upset with this order that he threatened to resign. But President Lincoln had left open the opportunity to appoint Smith to another federal position. That is how Smith became a Special Agent of the Treasury Department. Agent Smith's "hook" could not prevent him from getting the "hook" from the President.

In an interesting coincidence, both Special Agent Smith and Surveyor General Henry died in the shipwreck of the *SS Brother Jonathan* on a reef near Crescent City, California while returning to Washington on July 30, 1865. After their deaths, the port of entry was moved back to Port Townsend. But the town was never to achieve the dreams of its founding fathers as Seattle emerged as the major port city for the Pacific Northwest.

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