

Smith & Butterfield

Founded: 1866

Location: 8 South Second Street, Evansville (1866–68); 10 South Second Street (1868–72); 51 Main Street (1872–84); 129 Main Street (1884–87); 125 Main Street (1887–93); 120 Main Street (1893–94); 202–204 Main Street (1894–1906); 310 Main Street (1906–41); 305–307 Main Street (1941–67, 1968–77); 108 Northwest First Street (1967–68); 2800 Lynch Road (1977–)

In 1866 George C. Smith founded the Young American News Depot in Evansville. The first advertisement for the venture, published in the *Evansville Journal*, proclaimed that the new business dealt in “all the papers and magazines of the day,” as well as stationery, schoolbooks, wallpaper, and window shades. Smith set up shop in his father Jonas’s men’s furnishings store on Second Street. When Jonas Smith’s firm moved in 1868, so did the book and newspaper stand. Four years later George moved out of his father’s shop and into a Main Street location, running the business alone until 1884 when A. S. Butterfield, an employee for several years, became a partner. Growth proved slow for the company; it did not hire its first full-time employee until 1910. The firm, however, experienced steady growth throughout the 1960s.

The name of the company was changed to Smith & Butterfield in 1884. Although printed material did not totally disappear from the store’s shelves, between the end of the Civil War and turn of the century, the nature of the business drifted away from newspapers and books and toward office and home supplies. A fire forced the firm to move to 202–204 Main Street. Smith retired from the company, selling his interest in the enterprise to A. S. and Sidney Butterfield.

A. S. Butterfield quietly prepared the company for further growth. By 1924 he had a force of twenty employees, made possible by the company’s first acquisition, the

Camera Shop in Evansville. After the sale, and into the 1980s, the business began to specialize not only in camera equipment but also in photofinishing and processing. The diversification of their product line allowed for greater profits and an expanded sales area.

Sidney Butterfield started to work at his father's concern as a stock boy in 1920. He learned every aspect of the business, and when his father died in 1930 was ready to take charge of the business supply operation. Sidney led the company to new heights. Under his leadership the firm expanded into three states. Following the example set by his father of diversifying the company's product line, he purchased a large bookstore in Owensboro, Kentucky, in 1950 and a photofinishing plant in Terre Haute seven years later, and created Snap Photo Service. Snap Photo was a subsidiary of Smith & Butterfield that had more than a thousand dealers in a radius of 150 miles of Evansville that processed approximately eight million photographs a year and employed 100 people by 1966. In 1962, to augment the work of Snap Photo, Smith & Butterfield acquired another photofinishing plant in Miami, Florida. By the mid-1960s the company employed more than 220 people.

William "Bill" S. Butterfield succeeded to the president's chair when his father, Sidney, retired in 1966. Sidney became the company's first chairman of the board and actively supervised the commercial sales force for a time, continuing to help direct the company into the 1980s. Bill had been on Evansville Bosse's state championship basketball teams in 1944 and 1945 and graduated from Purdue University and the Harvard School of Business before joining the company and quickly rising to the office of vice president. During the early 1960s he immersed himself in the community, serving

as a trustee for the Christian Home, the chairman of the United Fund Campaign of 1964, and an officer on the March of Dimes board. After ascending to the top job at Smith & Butterfield he continued the expansion of the company, buying a photofinishing plant in Atlanta, Georgia, acquiring land on Lynch Road for a large office and storage complex, and preparing to open a new downtown location. A fire in 1967 destroyed a large amount of stock in the downtown office, altered a number of plans, and affected the company's bottom line. Two years later the company was split into two divisions. One division, headed by Earl H. Seibert, dealt with office supplies and furniture, while the other handled photofinishing. Bill acted as the chief executive officer, rising to the post of chairman of the board in 1987.

During the 1970s and early 1980s the worsening local economic conditions, new technology, and increasing competition in all of Smith & Butterfield's primary markets forced the Evansville company to retreat from its expansionary path. In the late 1960s the company served more than forty counties in three states, but by 1987 the firm could only boast of four retail stores, including its Lynch Road facility. The company sold its photofinishing division in 1982. After ascending to the presidency, Seibert endeavored to keep the company competitive during the late 1970s and 1980s. He opened the Lynch Road location to retail sales so that customers could see the full line of Smith & Butterfield desks, shelving, and appliances. Seibert retired in 1987, and James D. Butterfield became the company's president. Butterfield received his business degree from Stetson University in 1979 and worked for K-Mart before returning to Smith & Butterfield in 1981.

Butterfield was committed to giving customers the lowest price possible and the best service. While the firm could not be price competitive on its own, through the National Purchasing Association, of which Butterfield was a board member in 1991, the company was part of the largest office supply purchasing group in the nation. He led the company to acquire its chief Evansville rival, Guthries Office Equipment, in 1989, bringing the total number of stores in the region to five. On its 125th anniversary Smith & Butterfield invited the city to its Lynch Road store where staff dressed in 1860s-era clothing and guided customers through special exhibition areas.

Officers at Smith & Butterfield found their market increasingly competitive. By the mid-1990s, when more than one-third of all independent office supply stores failed or were merged with their national and regional office supply rivals, Butterfield realized his company would no longer be able to compete effectively with the larger office suppliers. Rather than selling the firm to more widely known national chains, however, he reached an agreement with Champion Industries, based in West Virginia. Champion specialized in commercial printing, with smaller interests in office supplies and furniture. Butterfield accepted a bid by Champion because the company's officers seemed to be more concerned with the local community than their competitors. In the deal, Smith & Butterfield became a wholly owned subsidiary of Champion, and Butterfield retained his position of president.

Since the merger, Smith & Butterfield has added printing services and printing products to its inventory. In 1999 the company remained a subsidiary of Champion and aggressively sought to capture more of the printing services market, acquiring

Independent Printing Services of Evansville on 1 June 1999. James D. Butterfield continued to head the company that bares his family's name.