

# Gerrit Smith

## - Biographical Information



There are three full [biographies](#) of Gerrit Smith published to date. There is also a brief self portrait, which appears to have been drafted as a campaign biography during Smith's 1856 run for the Presidency. There are also a number of books in which elements of Smith's story are told.

To facilitate inquiry into Gerrit Smith, this page provides links to summaries of the biographies, and to other books that give significant attention to Smith and related subjects. It also presents a brief Web version of Smith's biography, illustrated with contemporary images, documents and portraits of the major players in Smith's life. Users wishing to furnish copies or reviews of other materials related to Gerrit Smith are invited to contact the [website editor](#).

Gerrit Smith was a widely known philanthropist and social reformer of the mid-nineteenth century. He was born in Utica, NY, in 1797 and made his [home](#) in nearby Peterboro until his death in 1874.



Smith's father, **Peter Smith**, was among the early white settlers of Madison County. He originally moved to Utica to establish a land business after some years of trading with the local native inhabitants. During his years as a fur trader (and partner of John Jacob Astor) he learned the language of the Oneida people and formed a close relationship with the Oneida Chief Skenandoah, after whom he named his first son. Smith made use of this relationship in negotiating a lease for a large tract of Oneida land. The lease was invalidated by the State of New York, which subsequently purchased the land from the Oneida, and re-sold most of it to Smith. The State's action has been ruled invalid, and remains the the subject of an unsettled dispute with the Oneida people. Traditional among the Oneida opposed the original transaction, and attacked the surveyors when they began laying out the plan for Peterboro.

Peter Smith grew wealthy as a land speculator, and attained local prominence as the first judge in Madison County. Among the Oneida he was called 'Saw Mill', an apparent reference to his strong and energetic character. Little has been written about Peter Smith's wife, **Elizabeth Livingston**, (at right) save that she was the daughter of Colonel James Livingston, who served in the Revolutionary War. Elizabeth's sister, Mary Livingston and her husband, Daniel Cady, were the parents of Gerrit Smith's first cousin, Elizabeth Cady (Stanton).



The remoteness of Peter Smith's relationship with his own father, Garret Smith, was reflected in a letter dated 1825, in which the older Smith inquired if his son had a wife 'living or dead'. It was on Garret Smith's farm near Tappan, NY, that British Major John Andre (Benedict Arnold's contact) was hanged as a spy.

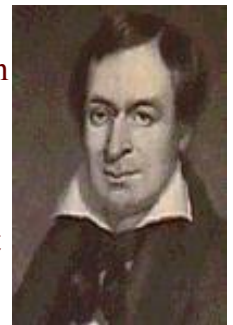
After the death of his first wife, Peter Smith remarried (apparently not very happily), and moved to Schenectady. There were no children from his marriage to Sarah Pogson. Throughout his life he referred to himself as 'Peter Smith of Peterboro' (which is located in the Town of Smithfield). The letter informing Gerrit Smith of his father's death is in the collection of Smith Family Papers in the NY Public Library.

Gerrit Smith had one sister, and two brothers who lived to adulthood. His sister **Cornelia Smith Cochrane** (1825-1890) was the mother of General John Cochrane, at whose home Smith died. His brother **Adolphus Lent Smith** (1800-1844) appears to have suffered from a mental or developmental disorder, and was reportedly unable to care for himself throughout his life. Virtually nothing is written about him. **Peter Skenandoah Smith** (1795-1858), his older brother, also suffered from mental disorders, apparently secondary to alcoholism. Peter Sken (as he was called) was married twice, and had two sons by his (first) marriage. He was a general in the State Militia, and for a time managed his brother's business affairs in Oswego. There were two other siblings who died young, one a brother named James.

As a young man Gerrit Smith worked alongside persons held in slavery on his father's estate (slavery was abolished in New York State in 1827). He traced his lifelong effort to better the condition of African Americans to his sympathy with the miserable lives of those he met in his youth. He and his brother Peter Sken were sent to an academy in Clinton, New York. The academy evolved into Hamilton College, and Gerrit entered as a freshman in 1814. His brother returned home.

During his college years Smith was reportedly quite gregarious, and made references to smoking and drinking at school. He was also evidently quite fond of playing cards. In the Letter of 1868 published in the *Hamilton Alumni Quarterly*, Gerrit Smith wrote of his college experiences a half-century before. He included stories of the College President, Dr. Azel Backus, and told of the day "on this farm, and by Kirkland's grave that we (mostly College students) buried Skenandoah, the great Oneida chief." Skenandoah's grave now lies within the bounds of the campus, near that of the missionary whom Skenandoah had accepted as his teacher (and after whom the surrounding Town of Kirkland is named).

His correspondence with his parents during his college years reflected a strained relationship with his father, whom he considered stingy. Smith gave the valedictory for his graduating class in 1818, and married the College President's daughter, Wealtha Backus. Shortly thereafter his mother died, and after seven months of marriage his wife, age 19, died of "dropsy of the brain." A letter in the collection at Hamilton College transmits a deed for property, apparently to a member of the faculty, as an expression of thanks for care provided to Smith's wife during what he described as "her severe and lingering illness."



Devastated by the loss of his own wife, Peter Smith turned over the family land business to his son Gerrit, and placed half of his land in trust with his brother-in-law, **Daniel Cady**. The terms of the transfer left Gerrit responsible for the property, and for an equal division among Peter Smith's four children of the net proceeds, after payment of debts and deduction of income for himself. At the age of 21, Gerrit Smith became one of the largest, if not the largest, land owners in New York State. He spent most of the subsequent forty years disposing of his vast properties.

## Family Life

In 1822 Smith married **Ann Carroll Fitzhugh**, whose father was one of the founders of the City of Rochester. She was called Nancy by family members. Their marriage lasted till their deaths, which followed in rapid succession. Gerrit Smith died on December 28, 1874. Ann Carroll Fitzhugh Smith died on March 6, 1875, which would have been Gerrit's 78th birthday.

Ann C. Smith bore eight children, a fact that has not been correctly reported by any published source. The



correct number was identified by Peterboro Historian Donna Burdick, from tombstone rubbings that identified a previously unreported set of twins who "died too young to have names in this world." Only two of the Smith's children lived to adulthood, the more prominent being their daughter, **Elizabeth Smith Miller**. Of those who died in their youth, their son Fitzhugh was the oldest when he died in 1836 at the age of 12.

Ann Smith's relationship with her husband appears to have been loving, and their correspondence suggests her willingness to advocate on behalf of their children. A letter in the NY State Archives in Albany urges Gerrit's tolerance of their son Greene, whom she reported struggling through a serious case of withdrawal in his attempt at abstinence from cigars.

Smith's love of his son, evident in his laboriously printed letters to the young Greene, was apparently tempered by his disapproval of Greene's later alcohol and tobacco use. Apparently for this reason, he refused to attend his son's wedding. Greene later served in the Civil War, and was apparently wounded in battle. A post-war letter from General Burnside to Gerrit Smith expresses his admiration for the son, and hopes for his recovery.

Their daughter Elizabeth would likely have been favored child. As a girl she wrote home during a visit to an aunt in Rochester that while baking she had unthinkingly licked from her finger some sugar that had been produced with slave labor. She reported that she promptly spat it out. As a woman, Elizabeth Smith (Miller) was herself distinguished as a writer and advocate for women's rights. Her papers are found in the collection at the NY Public Library.



## Social Reform

Gerrit Smith's interest in social reform was wide ranging. He was a major participant in various anti-slavery and temperance societies. Disgusted with secularism and the forgiving posture of contemporary churches toward slavery, Smith founded his own church at Peterboro, where he professed what he called the Religion of Reason.

He gave away an average of forty acres of Adirondack land in Northern New York to each of more than 2000 poor (and "temperate") black men, to permit them to meet the requirements for voting, and in hopes of promoting self-sufficiency. He made similar gifts to poor whites, though for women he decided the gifts impractical and substituted \$50 in cash. He sold **John Brown** and his family land at North Elba, NY (near Lake Placid) where Brown is buried. The plan was for Brown's family to help the new settlers to become productive farmers. Though much of the land was clearly unsuitable for farming, some lasting settlements were formed.



Smith was a candidate for President in 1848, 1856 and 1860. In 1852 his nomination was considered by the Liberty Party, but he chose not to campaign. Instead, he served in the Congress, representing Madison and Oswego counties during 1853 and '54. He resigned at the close of his first session. A thank you letter to his constituents outlines his political philosophy at the time of his election. In Congress he advocated an agenda consistent with that described in his letter, and as noted in the draft of his 1856 campaign biography, his speeches there fill a book of nearly 400 pages. His Final Letter to His Constituents provides a defense of his Congressional service and illustrates the self-sustaining quality of Smith's reasoning.

Smith's close relationship with **Frederick Douglass** spanned many years. Smith helped to convert Douglass away from the 'moral suasion' approach of the Garrisonians, and to a belief in political action. He lent financial

support to the publication of *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, and persuaded Douglass of his strongly held view of the US Constitution as a pro-liberty document, a view that also conflicted with that of the Garrisonians. It is to this belief that Douglass refers in his dedication to Smith of his second autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom*.

Douglass frequently traveled to Peterboro. [Adaguerreotype](#) of an 1850 anti-slavery convention in Cazenovia, NY pictures the young Frederick Douglass in front of the older Smith. The dramatic story behind this picture has been extensively researched, and is described in a publication by the Madison County (NY) Historical Society.

An even more dramatic story surrounds the arrest of a fugitive from slavery in Missouri, called William "Jerry" Henry, and his subsequent liberation from custody by an angry mob. The event was foretold in a speech in Syracuse, and apparently set up, by then Secretary of State **Daniel Webster**. The [Jerry Rescue](#) is memorialized by a monument in Downtown Syracuse.

A less well known story is that of Harriet Powell, who was liberated from slavery during an 1839 visit to Syracuse. During the three weeks she stayed at Smith's home, before making her way to Canada, Powell was introduced to Smith's daughter Elizabeth Smith (Miller) and his young cousin, [Elizabeth Cady \(Stanton\)](#). It was in Peterboro that Cady met Henry Stanton, also a leading Abolitionist, whom she married shortly thereafter. On her "honeymoon" at the World Anti-Slavery Society meeting in London, Stanton met Lucretia Mott, with whom she planned the first Women's Rights Convention, held eight years later in Seneca Falls.

Smith was highly regarded by Stanton and others in the early years of the women's rights movement, and was mentioned in [Stanton's address](#) to the Seneca Falls Convention. A letter expressing his support was read at the opening of the August 1848 Convention in Rochester, immediately following Seneca Falls. Though a strong public advocate of equality, Smith gave very little money directly to the women's rights movement. He also exchanged public correspondence with his cousin and with **Susan B. Anthony** that was critical of the movement's leadership. Though this is not addressed directly in their correspondence, Smith held very conservative views on the subject of marriage (he opposed divorce under any conditions) that strongly diverged from those of Stanton, and other radicals in the women's rights movement.

Smith's strong advocacy for women's dress reform was likely related to his daughter's innovation in that area. An active supporter of women's rights, Elizabeth Smith Miller is probably best known for the development of the costume popularized by [Amelia Bloomer](#). Miller's husband **Charles Dudley Miller** worked with Smith in his land office in Peterboro, and also helped in the destruction of records after John Brown's capture at Harper's Ferry. Their son, Gerrit Smith Miller placed the papers of Peter and Gerrit Smith in the care of Syracuse University in 1928, twelve years before the family mansion and its contents were destroyed in a fire.

Smith was a financial supporter of John Brown's military activity in Kansas, and was implicated in his raid on [Harper's Ferry](#). He denied that he knew of Brown's plan to raid the federal arsenal, believing he intended to create a haven for fugitive slaves, to arm for self defense those who would escape, and thereby inspire others to do so. Though Smith and several of Brown's other co-conspirators ([The Secret Six](#)) reportedly avoided knowledge of the specifics, there is little doubt that he was generally aware of, and helped to finance, Brown's plans for anti-slavery action in Virginia. The Harper's Ferry [raid, and its aftermath](#), make up an important part of Smith' life story.

Having played a significant role in starting the Civil War, Smith was a strong advocate and fundraiser for Union causes. After the war was over, he called for reconciliation, and was one of three prominent Americans who,

along with ten Richmond business owners, signed the bail bond for Jefferson Davis.

Following the War, Smith remained active in reform efforts. He split with Stanton and Anthony over the precedence he believed should be given to black suffrage over that for women, siding with their rival, the American Woman Suffrage Association. Stanton's subsequent characterization of her cousin in letters to Anthony was quite bitter. He nonetheless continued his advocacy for women, publishing his supportive letters to Anthony after her arrest in 1872 for the crime of illegal voting.



Smith remained a staunch advocate of Temperance, and in 1869 published his address to a Temperance convention in Chicago as well as a letter to **John Stuart Mill**, who unlike Smith, was not supportive of Prohibition.

Gerrit Smith died on December 28, 1874 at the home of his nephew, Gen. John Cochrane. Among the many printed memorials was a lengthy article published by Henry Wilson, then Vice-President of the United States, titled: *The Dying Legacy of Gerrit Smith to His Countrymen*. The article commended to readers the last of Smith's printed circulars, written just two weeks before his voice was silenced. Its title was *Will the American People Never Cease to Oppress and Torture the Helpless poor?*

A letter from Frederick Douglass, Jr., thanking Smith for writing the piece, is part of the collection at Syracuse University. The letter was written Christmas Day, 1874, the day before Smith's death.

