

The subject of my paper is on the Abolitionist movement and Gerrit Smith's tireless philanthropic deeds to see that slavery was abolished. I am establishing the reason I believe Gerrit Smith did not lose his focus or his passion to help the cause because of his desire to help mankind. Some historians failed to identify with Smith's ambition and believed over a course of time that he lost his desire to see his dream of equality for all people to be realized.

Gerrit Smith was a known abolitionist and philanthropist. He was born on March 6, 1797 in Utica, New York. His parents were Peter Smith and Elizabeth Livingston. Smith's father worked as a fur trader alongside John Jacob Astor. They received their furs from the Native Americans from Oneida, Mohawk, and the Cayuga tribes in upstate New York.<sup>1</sup>

Smith and his family moved to Peterboro, New York (Madison County) in 1806 for business purposes. Gerrit was not happy with his new home in Peterboro.<sup>2</sup> Smith's feelings towards his father were undeniable in his letters which indicated harsh criticism. It is clear that Smith did not have a close bond with his father. This tense relationship with his father only made a closer one with his mother. Smith described him to be cold and distant. The only indication as to why Smith detested his father because he did not know how to bond with his children.

Smith studied at Hamilton College in 1814. This was an escape for Smith to not only to get away from Peterboro, but to escape from his father whom he did not like. At college, Smith thrived in all his studies and took interest in the classics. What Smith really wanted to do; however was to be a lawyer.

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<sup>1</sup> Octavious Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith: A Biography*, (New York: Negro Universities, 1878) p.1

<sup>2</sup> Norman K. Dann, *Practical Dreamer: Gerrit Smith and the Crusade for Social Reform*, (Hamilton, New York: Log Cabin Books, 2009) p.18

Smith graduated from Hamilton College on 26 August 1818. He was the valedictorian of his class and was offered a position with his uncle, Edward Livingston in Columbus, Ohio. His career was short-lived due to his mother's death the day after graduation. Smith returned home to care for his father throughout the remainder of the year because his father became ill.

Smith found happiness at home. He married Wealtha Ann Backus on 11 January 1819. Unfortunately, the marriage ended when Wealtha suddenly died seven months later. The death of his mother and his wife within a year took a toll on Smith and this was a reason as to why he never practiced law. Another reason was his father left him with the burden of his debts and his business. Because of this, their relationship only worsened.

Smith married for the second time, to Ann Carroll Fitzhugh on 3 January 1822. They started a family at the Peterboro mansion that originally belonged to his father. Gerrit's new business career was growing, but his practices and studying law never diminished. Even though he never became a lawyer, he used his knowledge to guide others who needed legal advice. Later on, Smith was admitted to the New York State Bar.

Smith has also widely known for his wealth. To emphasize how rich he was, Smith was the "Bill Gates" of the day. He did not like to flaunt his wealth. He lived very modestly because he felt it was not right to show off when others were destitute.

Smith felt guilty for being a rich man, but he saw it as an opportunity to help end human inequity. Smith became a philanthropist through the example of his church and his wife.

Smith's journey as an abolitionist began 21 October 1835.<sup>3</sup> He attended a meeting in at the Second Presbyterian Church on Bleecker Street. The church held six hundred abolitionists who were gathered to organize an anti-slavery society. Shortly after the meeting began, a dozen men broke into the church and demanded an end to the meeting. From that point onward, Smith was an abolitionist.

Dr. Norman K. Dann, author of *Practical Dreamer*, states why Smith became an abolitionist and I quote: "Smith's fundamental motivation for becoming involved in a reform movement was the breach of human rights, which he believed were grounded in natural law and could therefore not be legitimately violated by any individual or institution. Indeed he believed even the Constitution of the United States stood below human rights as a source of knowledge or right action," end quote.

Smith was determined to breakdown the social and racial barriers that existed in nineteenth century America. He believed that all persons, despite their race, gender or cultural background deserved the right to be treated as equals. Smith's goal was not only to end slavery, but to end any fears, prejudice, and stereotypes that stood in the way. He had what John Stauffer, historian, called a "black heart".<sup>4</sup>

Stauffer tells a story about four abolitionists: John Brown, James McCune Smith, Gerrit Smith and Frederick Douglass. They came together for a mission to change the attitudes of white people toward blacks. McCune Smith stated, "The hearts of whites must be changed,

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<sup>3</sup> National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum. [www.abolitionof.org/media-mobbed.html](http://www.abolitionof.org/media-mobbed.html)

<sup>4</sup> John Stauffer, *The Black Hearts of Men: Radical Abolitionists and Transformation of Race*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2002) p.1

thoroughly, entirely, permanently, changed.” Stauffer continued to explain what McCune Smith meant by his statement:

“He went on to suggest that whites had to understand what it was like to be black. They had to learn how to view the world as if they were black, shed their “whiteness” as a sign of superiority, and renounce their belief in skin color as a marker of aptitude and social status. They had to acquire, in effect, a black heart.”

Stauffer argues that Gerrit Smith was the thread that held all four men together. “He is the tragic figure who ultimately loses himself and his black heart.”<sup>5</sup>

I argue that Gerrit Smith did not lose his “black heart.” Stauffer states that Smith lost his “black heart” for two reasons. His switch from a peaceful abolitionist to a radical and the infamous Harper’s Ferry incident that took place in 1859. Gerrit Smith however was not always violent, but eventually viewed violence as the only option. Smith wanted an immediate end to slavery and feared that violence would accomplish this goal, but really preferred a peaceful end.<sup>6</sup> Smith and other abolitionists received little support for his abolitionist, especially when he was in congress from 1853 to 1854.

His main weapon was religion. He felt if people could see their faults through the word of God, then they would see that slavery was evil. He preached that no man had the right to imprison another. Freedom was a right that everyone possessed. He wanted others to recognize their sins, specifically those who were slaveholders.

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<sup>5</sup> Stauffer, p.1

<sup>6</sup> Stauffer, p.31

Smith also believed the use of politics to abolish slavery was essential. He did not like politics, but he felt there were flaws in the Constitution that needed to be realized and changed. Stauffer states, “The signers of the Declaration of Independence had no intention of keeping a portion of the population enslaved while declaring it “self-evident that all men are created equal.”<sup>7</sup> Stauffer continues to say that the Founders did not seek to preserve the “unparalleled wrongs” of slavery. In order for immediate action to take its course, Radical Abolitionists believed they had to “affirm the “righteous language” of the Constitution and the historical objectives of the nation’s Founders.”

The Radical Abolition party grew from the Liberty and National parties. The Liberty party was created in 1848 believing that political action was a valid way to abolish slavery, defected from Garrison’s Anti-Slavery Society where its policy was nonresistance.<sup>8</sup> The Liberty party split into two groups. One was a conservative wing seeking wide appeal, which evolved into Free-Soil party in 1848. Second was the National Liberty party, which was more radical and sought immediate abolition.

Smith was one of the main founders of the Radical Abolition party, which was founded in 1855, and also the National Liberty party and National Liberty League. In order for immediate action to take its course, Radical Abolitionists believed they had to “affirm the “righteous language” of the Constitution and the historical objectives of the nation’s Founders.” The Radical Abolitionists preferred peaceful means to end slavery, but they showed aggression against slave power being part of their belief that the Constitution should be an antislavery

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<sup>7</sup> Stauffer, p.22-23

<sup>8</sup> Stauffer, p.24

document. Smith ran for president under the National Liberty party in 1848. He also ran again in 1856 and 1860 under the Radical Abolitionist banner.

Smith lost his election, but continued to gain support from fellow politicians, such as John Quincy Adams. Smith campaigned for Adams presidency in 1824 -1828. John Quincy Adams was considered an important forerunner for the radicals to end slavery and Smith agreed. Adams, however did not quite see eye to eye with the radical's view of transform in America into a new nation of acceptance. Adam feared it.

Adams was against slavery, but he did not agree with the abolitionist's frustrations. He explains the "peace of the union would be greatly disturbed."<sup>9</sup> Adam hoped that public opinion would be enough to end slavery. Because of these frustrations, abolitionists were calling for bloodshed. In a response to Adams letter, Smith wrote:

"Though I do not, with yourself, despair of a peaceful and bloodless termination of American Slavery; yet my hopes of such an event are faint. Of the speedy overthrow of this measureless iniquity I am confident—but my prevailing apprehension is, that violence will accomplish the overthrow, I feel, nevertheless, that my duty to labor to arrest a vengeful, and to secure a merciful, removal of the great curse of my country is undiminished."<sup>10</sup>

Adams refused to accept immediate abolition, he stated, "You are aware how widespread and deep is the regret, that you cannot subscribe to the doctrine of 'immediate emancipation.' I

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<sup>9</sup> Stauffer, p.29

<sup>10</sup> Stauffer, p.29

am for 'immediate emancipation,' because I fully believe that God is for it. He is, and therefore we should be, for the immediate termination of every sin."<sup>11</sup>

Adam's responded that he knew he could not change Smith's mind because he felt it was a "religious duty". Adams did not agree that an immediate overthrow was God's will and this was something on which he nor Smith would agree.

Smith's hands were tied. He wanted peaceful action, but was very well aware that this would not be and therefore accepted that violence and bloodshed would make people listen.

In the Harper's Ferry incident of 1859, Smith met with John Brown about his intentions to attack the federal armory. After the attack took place and the Brown was captured, authorities came knocking at Smith's door. Smith was accused for knowing about the attack and financially supporting it. Authorities found an un-cashed check in Brown's possession.

Smith refused to admit having any association with Brown and of his knowledge of the attack. He also would admit to being part of the "Secret Six". Feeling overwhelmed with guilt, Smith wanted to go to trial alongside Brown in West Virginia. Smith's family was worried and sent him to the New York State Insane Asylum in Utica, where he supposedly had a mental relapse for a period of eight weeks, but he came back to reality.<sup>12</sup> Some would say that Harper's Ferry was a failure and others say it was a success. John Brown's goal in the attack was to scare the South and it worked. Brown was executed on 1859 December 2 on the grounds of murder, treason, and insurrection.

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<sup>11</sup> Stauffer, p.32

<sup>12</sup> John R. Mckivigan & Madeliene Leveille, *The "Black Dream" of Gerrit Smith, New York Abolitionist* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University, 1985) p.1

Smith was also known to maintain a close relationship with Frederick Douglass throughout his career. This is evident through Douglass's business and personal letters. Douglass and Smith mostly corresponded in the 1850s. This is significant because Smith and Douglass shared an interracial relationship that was uncommon at the time. Smith had a better understanding of the suffering of slaves through Douglass's personal experiences as an ex-slave himself.

In these letters, it is evident that Smith financially supported Douglass through his newspaper, The North Star, which was in financial trouble. The goal behind was a political goal for the Liberty party.

Douglass and Smith shared their frustrations with the Constitution and over slaveholders. They both felt that the Constitution itself should abolish slavery. This unique friendship lasted until the time of Smith's death. In the last letter that Douglass wrote to Smith, on 8 October 1874, it shows that Smith was the driving force in the movement. In this letter, Douglass thanks him for all his donations and states that he (Smith) was the reason for the cause to keep going.<sup>13</sup>

Gerrit Smith had a "black heart" because was willing to listen and learn how blacks were treated in a white world. This understanding came from the close relationship he had with Frederick Douglass. As many know, Douglass escaped from slavery in the late 1830's. With Douglass sharing his experiences and expertise, Smith developed and kept his "black heart" because he shared not only a business relationship, but friendship with Douglass.

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<sup>13</sup> Letter from Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, 8 October 1874. Courtesy of Syracuse University.

Smith funded every aspect of abolition and his views were anti-slavery.<sup>14</sup> To be clear, Smith's views were anti-slavery and he was an abolitionist because that is what he is historically known for. But he did more than just say he was against slavery. Smith worked to eliminate slavery with a political mind, a religious mind, with the mind of a lawyer, and an advocate for human rights. With every speech, letter, or donation Smith was giving a part of him to the cause.

He was not a man who took action. He was a quiet reformer who worked on the side lines. He was like this before the incident at Harper's Ferry. Smith avoided the limelight because he simply did not want the attention. But he did support those who were in the limelight such as Susan B. Anthony and other well-known activists.

Smith took on a daunting task and knew that he would not live to see the day where people would accept African-Americans. But this did not stop him. He kept going even if his goals were thought of as impossible. Just like any other person, Gerrit Smith made mistakes along the way such as making false statements against people he thought were his rivals and making promises he did not keep.

New York and the rest of the country were involved in the big debate over slavery. In the North, it was intolerable and in the South it was a way of life. Gerrit Smith and his fellow abolitionists were aware that this issue was not only personal, but also political. Slaveholders feared of losing their way of life, which was economic. The North felt that no person had the

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<sup>14</sup> Abolition- before the Civil war, Americans who were against slavery, wanted immediate abolition of slavery in the U.S. (See James M. McPherson, *The Struggle for Equality*, 1992).

Anti-Slavery- Dealing with the history of slavery in the state of New York, this was an ideology of removing slavery from the state. This ideology took place in the 18<sup>th</sup> to early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. (See David N. Gellman, *Emancipating New York*, 2006).

right to enslave a human being. It is not clear what sparked Smith's interest in human relations, especially slavery.

Smith stated up until the age of sixteen; he was subjected to manual labor on his father's land. This was not Smith's choice, but by paternal insistence.<sup>15</sup> This manual labor may have taken place with his father's slaves.<sup>16</sup> According to records, in 1801, Peter Smith may have had seven slaves.<sup>17</sup> This could be the reason Smith was against slavery.

It is true that abolitionists had split views about what direction they should go on the issue. Some said to go political and others said no because of the Constitution. The abolitionists who were against politics pointed out that the Constitution had no laws against slavery. The other half said that nothing was going to be done unless they acted politically.

The reason for opposing political action had to do with religion. They had what was called the Garrisonian theory which was anti-political and deeply religious. It applied to the principles of Christianity. Gerrit Smith was a religious man and he did not like politics. Because of this, it does not mean he did not take any political action.

Gerrit Smith was nominated and elected as Congressman in 1853 December. Smith was not particularly excited about his new position. Smith was a private man who preferred to take private action. In a letter he had wrote to his voters of Oswego and Madison counties Smith

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<sup>15</sup> Ralph Volney Harlow, *Gerrit Smith: Philanthropist and Reformer*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1939) p.4

<sup>16</sup> Dann, p.18

<sup>17</sup> Dann, Norman K. *Practical Dreamer*, p.18. *Bill of Sale of slaves, Peter Smith to Jesse Ives, 17 August 1801, SU.*

states<sup>18</sup>, “You nominated me for a seat in Congress, notwithstanding I besought you not to do so. In vain was my resistance to your preserving and unrelenting purpose.”

Smith continued that he had reached old age and had never held office. It was not his wish to have a political career, but he did not object to his new position. He accepted his place as Congressman to promote the idea that political rights are not conventional, but natural, meaning which that political rights were meant to be equal among all people, whites and blacks.

Smith felt he had a purpose for being in Congress. The most important was laying out the flaws of the Constitution. Smith stated, “ it acknowledges no law, and knows no law, for slavery:--that, not only, is slavery not in the federal Constitution, but that, by no possibility, could it be brought either into the Federal, or into a State, Constitution.”

Smith made it known while in office that he despised the Democratic Party, but was not always against them. In his early years, he supported the Democrat party, but as years went by, he opposed them. He was not alone given the fact that some abolitionists supported the Republican Party. His feelings are evident in a speech on 22 June 1872. “The Democratic party is my dread. The Republican party is my hope.”<sup>19</sup> Smith believed the Republican Party represented human equality and favored universal suffrage. He claimed the Democrats “sympathized with and served the slave power of our land.”

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<sup>18</sup> *Speeches of Gerrit Smith in Congress, 1855*; Letters to the Voters of the Counties of Oswego and Madison, 5 November 1852. Courtesy of Hamilton College, Clinton, New York. Due to Smith’s health, he did not take his seat until December, 1853.

<sup>19</sup> *Speech of Gerrit Smith, (To his Neighbors,) In Peterboro, N.Y., June 22, 1872*. Courtesy of Hamilton College Archives.

Throughout his short political career, Smith argued that many politicians did not get the full extent of slavery and how it went against everything that America represented. Of course, many disagreed with him and Smith found this frustrating. Smith was not a man who shied away from giving his opinion.

Smith made it known where he stood. For example, Smith voted against the Homestead Bill.<sup>20</sup> Smith was in favor its substance. "I am in favor of the bill, not for the reason that, by giving up a part of the public lands to be occupied, the remainder will be more valuable to the government than was the whole before such occupation," he stated. Smith explained that all people had equal rights for soil and there should be no restriction or limits for man to have land. Smith had mixed feelings based on how he was going to be criticized. In his resignation speech he explained that he made his final decision based on his beliefs. He agreed that white people deserved the right to have land. Therefore, this was justice for whites. But he re-examined his decision. Smith explained, "But what if they should come to believe, as, I hold, all persons should believe, that it is not the Government, but the people-and the people equally-that own the land?-then, they would promptly acquit me of all blame in the case." He felt that if the "light-eyed" man can have eight acres of land, why is it that the "dark-eyed" man can not? This was injustice, therefore Smith voted against the bill. This is important because even though Smith did not like politics, he was willing to do whatever it took to fight slavery and this is one of the reasons he had a "black heart."

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<sup>20</sup> Gerrit Smith, *Speeches of Gerrit Smith, 1855*. February 21, 1854.

Homestead Bill- This meant that any man who was willing to take up arms against the U.S. Government, including free slaves, could apply for a federal land grant. (Look up Homestead Act, 1862).

Smith did not serve as Congressman for long. He resigned on August 7, 1854 due to conflicts with other politicians. In a speech, addressed to his constituents, about his resignation many of his supporters were upset to hear the news. Smith stated his reasons for stepping down and one of them was his conflicts with other abolitionists. Smith referred to his first speech that he made in Congress:

“No sooner was the speech in print then many abolitionists complained of my courtesy to slaveholders; and insisted that I had been guilty of making light of the radical differences between slavery and abolition-between slaveholders and abolitionists.”<sup>21</sup>

The abolitionists accused Smith as being a “one-idea” abolitionist. The abolitionists criticized him based on his first speech as congressman.

Smith continued with an argument that the abolitionists had forgotten a few key elements while Smith was in office. He says he entered Congress with “peculiar theories of civil government –matured and cherished, however visionary and false...” Smith did not have the intention by accepting his place in Congress, to the views of the government. Even though Smith found faults with the Constitution, he did his job with respect. Smith continued to say that he was aware of the differences he would face with his associates, not only on slavery, but on other topics as well. It was by full intention Smith would let his views be known. Smith was also criticized over Nebraska Bill.<sup>22</sup> He refused to be part of the plan to prevent voting on the bill. There was grief among the abolitionists and Smith felt it. He was judged as being

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<sup>21</sup> Gerrit Smith, *Gerrit Smith to His Constituents*, 1854. Courtesy of Hamilton College Archives

<sup>22</sup> Nebraska Bill- Introduced in 1854 by Stephen A. Douglas, this bill was to open the territory “to organized migrations of pro-slave and anti-slave groups.”Southerners could enter the area with their slaves while members of the Anti-Slavery Society entered the territory as well (Spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk).

inconsistent in his convictions. Smith made it clear that he would only be rebellious if the situation called for it. It is clear that Smith was not a radical abolitionist.

Gerrit Smith resigned because he no longer wanted to be caught in the middle. He wanted to stay true to his beliefs and end whatever quarrels he had with the abolitionists. Smith left to maintain a positive relationship with them. His decisions may have been hesitant, but he made them with caution. Serving less than a year, Smith stood by his beliefs. He may have not been the greatest politician, but he was one with a clear conscience.

Smith felt most secure at home. Being in Washington was not his way of supporting the cause. Smith never gloated about his wealth, but it was evident that he did give his money to those in need and by this he was an outsider to the upper-class.<sup>23</sup>

He felt the role of the government was not to secure one's position, but to protect human rights by promising justice. Dann explains, "Smith was a romantic radical, believing that individuals could develop a just society if they could be helped to perceive the natural principles on which it was grounded."<sup>24</sup>

When Gerrit Smith joined forces with John Brown, James McCune Smith, and Frederick Douglass, there was no doubt in anyone's mind that he was a man with a "black heart." It was quoted by the black writer, Martin Delany saying, "Gerrit Smith is a colored man!"<sup>25</sup> Delany meant that Smith was one of the very few abolitionists who would consult with blacks and would listen to their opinions as well as sought them. Henry Highland Garnet, a black radical

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<sup>23</sup> Dann, p.39

<sup>24</sup> Dann, p.39

<sup>25</sup> Stauffer, p.15

and Smith's friend, lived with him for a short time in 1848, He stated, "There are yet two places where slaveholders cannot live—Heaven and Peterboro."<sup>26</sup>

His philanthropic work is what really defines Smith's character. He became a philanthropist when his second wife, Ann, influenced him to go to church.

Smith believed that his wealth was more than a opportunity rather than a fault. This opportunity was to give to others that were victimized because they were seen as unequals. He gave to the poor, the women's suffrage movement, and most of all, to end slavery.

Smith felt that all people had the right to have property. He had a great deal of land and he felt that there was no better way than to give his land to others who needed it. This was especially the case for ex-slaves. Smith gave away many acres of land to ex-slaves who were seeking a place where they could begin their new life and Smith was more than obliged to help.

In a letter that Smith wrote to five men by the names of Cochran, Hopper, Eaton, Evans, and Kemeys on 4 January 1850,<sup>27</sup> he showed of his support for giving land to the ex-slaves. In it, he states that he would give land to five hundred males and females that were inhabitants of the state of New York.

Smith donated money to universities that admitted blacks. If the universities did admit blacks, the more money he donated, such to Berea College in Kentucky where he gave them over \$3,000.<sup>28</sup> Smith was partial in supporting interracial education because he believed that

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<sup>26</sup> Stauffer, p.15

<sup>27</sup> Gerrit Smith, *Letter, 4 January 1850*. Courtesy of Hamilton College Archives.

<sup>28</sup> Dann, p.61

the black students could improve. It was mentioned that Smith could have been one of the first to suggest interracial education in America.

After slavery finally came to an end with the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, there were some, if not many abolitionists that left freed slaves to fend for themselves. This means that there were many that felt their work was done and the freed slaves no longer needed their help.

Smith was more focused on the moral aspect of slavery than the state's rights versus federal power. He looked as slavery was good versus evil. One of Smith's downfalls was that he believed that everyone could or should see things the same way as he did or agree with whatever he agreed with. Smith had to realize that not everyone was going to go along with his ideas and discovered that when he was office in congress. It is safe to say that this was something that he did not prepare himself for.

Smith had a reputation as being "crazy." It was not only because of the Harper's Ferry incident, but years before when he made his beliefs known that slavery should be eliminated. He had a dispute with Hamilton College on where it stood on slavery. He had asked the people of the college not to consider him slanderous but in his own words, "antislavery fanaticism...Say, if you please, 'Gerrit Smith is not an intentional wrong doer:--but on the subject of slavery, he is crazy:' Say so-- + I'll be content—for perhaps my intense and long continued interest in the cause of the slave has given a noise of insanity to my poor brain."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Dann, p.447  
Gerrit Smith to Professor Eaton, January 2, 1841, SU.

It was a little unfortunate that the public saw Smith as a mad man. A reporter from *The Chittenango Phenix* stated, "A business committee was appointed consisting of crazy Gerrit Smith, two males and two females."<sup>30</sup> The reporter found Smith so different that he could not tell him apart from a male to a female. Smith added to the paper, "Even in my own County I am regarded as crazy."

Smith's character was mainly criticized by newspapers and this agitated Smith because he was reported mostly on his endeavors. He also had a reputation for being empathic and he considered this to be his grandest compliments. William Lloyd Garrison, another abolitionist and friend, described him as, "the tried friend, generous and eloquent advocate, and...intrepid supporter of the colored race universally."<sup>31</sup>

To have it understood, Smith did not by any means have a great 'hate' for slaveholders. He only felt what they were doing was wrong, immoral, and a sin. He wanted to erase this sin from his country. Smith thought well of all people and this included the slaveholders. When people realized this about him, they started to listen to what he had to say. Smith's own empathy would be the example to teach others the value of good feelings rather than to possess vengeful ones.

One of his main sources of support, as mentioned before, was Frederick Douglass. Douglass loved Smith's ideas and did many times print him in his paper the *North Star*. "My readers love

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<sup>30</sup> Dann, p.447. *The Chittenango Phenix*, August 28, 1850.

<sup>31</sup> Dann, p.448

Letter to Gerrit Smith, September 1851, SU.

*the slave, love the truth, and love Gerrit Smith, the friend of both.*<sup>32</sup> Douglass even dedicated his book, *My Bondage, My Freedom* to Smith. Douglass did this because to couple his poor name with one that he loved.<sup>33</sup> Julia Griffiths may have best described Smith empathy. “He possesses all the virtue and high...principle of an uncompromising abolitionist...Every despised, oppressed and injured son of Africa finds Gerrit Smith a kind and sympathizing brother.”<sup>34</sup>

The only recorded time that Smith and Douglass were seen together was at the Cazenovia Convention in Cazenovia, New York in 1850. The convention was a protest against the Fugitive Slave Law.<sup>35</sup> This convention drew as many as 2,000 people. It was held at the Free Congregational Church. There, a photograph was taken where Douglass and Smith were together at the convention.<sup>36</sup>

Smith wrote to his fellow abolitionists to whom he supported stating his reasons of why he used his land, Peterboro as a safe haven for the escaped slaves:

“The large landed estate which my father left me, it has never been my purpose to use in benefiting and blessing my fellow men... I recognize no stronger claim on the property in my stewardship than is theirs, who are seized, imprisoned, tortured...for the offense of endeavoring by peaceful means to deliver their fellow men from the horrors of slavery.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Frederick Douglass to Gerrit Smith, December 23, 1853, SU.

<sup>33</sup> Dann, p.450.

<sup>34</sup> Dann, p.450.

*North Star*, September 5, 1850.

<sup>35</sup> Digitalhistory.uh.edu: Fugitive Slave Law of 1850: This law required the return of runaway slaves. Any black, even free blacks, could be returned to the south on the affidavit of anyone claiming they are his or her owner.

<sup>36</sup> Dann, p.478

<sup>37</sup> Dann, p.457

Gerrit Smith to Joshua Giddings, March 21, 1852, SU.

Earlier on in the paper, it was mentioned that Smith helped blacks gain an education. This is another reason for his “black heart”. Smith operated a school in Peterboro during the mid-1830s, but did not stay open for long. Oberlin College was interracial in 1839 and was in financial trouble when Smith donated \$2,000 and over 20,000 acres of land.<sup>38</sup>

Smith’s support for black education became widely known. Many institutions came to him for help and he helped them. For example, he supported a school in New Jersey that was open to all. This school was under financial trouble and Smith helped pay their bills.<sup>39</sup>

In 1863, he was asked to support the establishment of a “seminary for educating Colored Teachers” in Peterboro. This was the same building that was used when Smith educated black men. Several months before his death in 1874, Smith supported two colleges for free blacks in Virginia.

Smith had a commitment to free blacks and their education because he believed they could not be accepted in American society without some training, especially education. Smith’s goal was to have free blacks accepted as a whole, not accepted by part with society.

During his career as an abolitionist and according to Dann, Smith’s most daring advice was to the black people themselves. *“Friendly whites,”* he said, *“may help diminish the obstacles in the way of the redemption of the colored people of this country; --but the colored people must themselves work out their own redemption... The free colored people of this country have lost*

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<sup>38</sup> Dann, p.451

<sup>39</sup> Dann, p.452

*their self-respect...The oppressors of my colored brethren...will never... relax their oppressions, and restore the rights they have plundered until they have come to respect those brethren...”<sup>40</sup>*

Smith may have been a person who did not want to be in the limelight, but enjoyed making speeches. The issues of slavery were held before the public and Smith issued it locally. He spoke in nearby places such as Clockville and places that were further such as Boston.

After the Civil War ended in 1865 Smith began to worry about the welfare of the free blacks. Smith worried that racial discrimination would destroy the future of America. Smith was one of the abolitionists who feared that the Civil War would only result in the emancipation of free blacks, not liberation. In this case, Smith was right because blacks suffered years of discrimination. They suffered the most in the South.

Smith felt that he failed his goal based on Post-war discrimination. The dream of equality that Smith had for his country did not happen through the use of politics, persuasion, or violence. Before he died, Smith wondered, “...how can a black man enjoy (the benefits of citizenship) if he (is) to walk and not ride, to carry bread and cheese in his pocket instead of sitting at the well- furnished table, and instead of a comfortable bed, to steal away like a fugitive slave into the woods?”<sup>41</sup>

Smith spent most of his life defending blacks. He defended them from politics, religion, and society’s ignorance. All he wanted was for them to be free, but what was bigger than that was for his country to be free from discrimination. Smith always had a black heart because he died

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<sup>40</sup> Dann, pp. 453-454.  
Gerrit Smith to Charles B. Ray, November 16, 1848, SU.

<sup>41</sup> Dann, p.533  
Gerrit Smith to George T. Downing, March 6, 1874, SLC.

with this legacy. Gerrit Smith was one of the greatest abolitionists to be known in American history. He was a man with passion, drive, and always had a “black heart.”

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# **Gerrit Smith and his “Black Heart”**

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