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The Feminist Movement As Reflected in the Gerrit Smith Papers

Judith Mesinger

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DEAR PAUL:

I am glad your resignation, effective at the close of business Monday, January thirty-first, tendered in your letter of January twenty-first does not entail your retirement from the public service. I accept it, therefore, effective as of the date indicated.

You have done such good work as Under Secretary of Agriculture that I have the fullest confidence you will meet every requirement of your new responsibilities as Assistant Director of the Bureau of the Budget.

Very sincerely yours,

HONORABLE PAUL H. APPLEBY,
UNDER SECRETARY OF AGRICULTURE,
WASHINGTON, D. C.
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The Feminist Movement
As Reflected in the Gerrit Smith Papers

by Judith Mesinger

The history of many nineteenth and twentieth century reforms in America is well documented in the papers of Gerrit Smith and his family, residents of Peterboro in Madison County, New York, during the nineteenth century. The Gerrit Smith Collection in the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University is rich in materials related to several of these reform trends and activities, among them the feminist movement.

Smith, well known among his contemporaries as a reformer and a philanthropist, said of himself:

Mr. Smith is generally known as an abolitionist. . . . Since 1824 a large amount of his time and money has been spent in advocating many civil and social changes: in behalf of temperance; of the abolition of Slavery; of the abolishment of imprisonment for debt; of land-reform against land-monopoly; of securing the rights of suffrage to free blacks; of giving to women social and civil rights equal to those of men; of the abrogation of sects in religion; and above all, in making practical in thousands of instances, the theories he has advanced, and to which he has made his life a harmonious and beautiful testimony!¹

Looking back, historians consider certain causes to have been closer to Smith’s heart and purse than others. “With feminism he seems to have relatively little to do, in spite of the fact that his cousin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was one of the most active workers for women’s rights.”² This statement seems plausible, however, only in a relative sense, i.e., when Smith’s participation in the feminist movement is contrasted with his participation in others. For in absolute terms, as attested to by the information in his correspondence, he was quite active in this cause.

Mrs. Mesinger, who is currently abroad, is a 1972 graduate of Syracuse University, and was a graduate student at the University during the first semester of the 1972-73 academic year.

¹Gerrit Smith, “Autobiographical Sketch,” n.d. From the George Arents Research Library. All subsequent footnote references to documents in the Arents Library will identify the source by the initials GARL.

Gerrit Smith was born to Elizabeth and Peter Smith on March 6, 1867, in Utica, New York, graduated from Hamilton College in 1818, and married Wealtha Ann Backus, daughter of Hamilton’s president. Following her death within a year of the wedding, Gerrit devoted most of his time to managing his father’s vast estate. His second marriage in 1822 to Ann Carol Fitzhugh produced four children: Elizabeth, born 1822; Fitzhugh, born 1824; Ann, born 1839; and Greene, born 1842. Elizabeth married Charles D. Miller in 1843, outlived her siblings by twenty-five years, and was an active force in the feminist movement.

For several possible reasons, the overwhelming proportion of the feminist correspondence in the Smith papers was addressed to Gerrit Smith himself. For one thing, the most outstanding gap in the Gerrit Smith collection is in Elizabeth Smith Miller’s letters from 1847 to 1851. These years include the time when she first began to wear bloomers, yet references to this fact, as well as any possible correspondence from Amelia Bloomer, are conspicuously missing from this collection. Also, Gerrit was the true head of the Smith family, the Sage of Peterboro, and it was to him that most of the correspondence would naturally flow. But despite the fact that most of the letters were addressed to Gerrit Smith alone, other evidence of the parts played especially by his daughter and wife in the women’s rights movement preclude a paper focused only on the patriarch. Not only was Elizabeth Smith Miller a communicating link between other feminists and her father; many of her letters to him mention her correspondence with other prominent feminists, and her work at the offices of the Revolution, the American Equal Rights Association, and the American Suffrage Committee.

A significant portion of the correspondence deals with Gerrit Smith’s role as a philanthropist in the cause of women’s rights. Though many acknowledged that his pocket book must have been taxed, they nevertheless thought their cause worthy of a contribution. Possibly the most eloquent plea came from Susan B. Anthony, who wrote to Gerrit Smith, “to whom shall our Equal Rights work look if not to you at this hour of its great need.... You will hear my appeals to you, Mr. Smith, I know – for your love for the principles of equal rights to all is never failing.” Family ties must have eased any discomfort in asking for funds, as Elizabeth Cady Stanton requested money in her letters more frequently than others. Like her co-workers, she was not shy in making her wishes known. But by 1867 she could make the unusual claim that if Gerrit Smith would help her and Susan Anthony now, they would never trouble him again, and evidently they did

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3Inventory of the Gerrit Smith Papers, GARL.

4Elizabeth Smith Miller to Gerrit Smith, New York, January 14, 1869; March 28, 1869; and November 1970. GARL.

5Susan B. Anthony to Gerrit Smith, New York, March 3, 1867. GARL.

6Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Gerrit Smith, New York, August 6, 1867. GARL.
not. Instead, Paulina Wright Davis solicited on their behalf in 1869, saying that Elizabeth and Susan were too proud and determined.\footnote{Paulina Wright Davis to Gerrit Smith, Providence, November 4, 1869. GARL.} Probably the bluntest acknowledgement of a contribution came from Lucy Stone who wrote to Smith, “thank you for it ($30), and the good will which came along with it, all the same as though it had been the larger sum we had suggested.”\footnote{Lucy Stone to Gerrit Smith, Boston, January 25, 1873. GARL.} Other beneficiaries, however, were more grateful upon receipt of their sums. In fact, every feminist of any prominence who corresponded with Smith asked for money at one time or another, specifying the purposes for which they wanted it. Included in this category were Elizabeth Oakes Smith, Antoinette Brown, and Victoria Woodhull.

When the feminists were not asking Smith for money, they were asking for his presence at a convention or at least his signature on a petition. Many of these requests for appearances and speeches were made at second hand through his daughter, Elizabeth. Apparently some thought she would be more successful at persuading her father to attend than if he had been asked directly. Difficulties arose when Smith allowed his name to be used for the American Woman Suffrage Association upon Lucy Stone's request.\footnote{Lucy Stone to Gerrit Smith, New York, September 30, 1869. GARL.} Angered by this, Paulina Wright Davis, a leader in the National Woman Suffrage Association (which advocated female suffrage by a constitutional amendment rather than by the American Woman Suffrage Association's method of suffrage through state actions), responded, “It seems to me that you could not be aware of all that giving your name involves. . . . By giving your name and influence to that convention you give it to a party whose purpose aim and object is to destroy Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony.”\footnote{Paulina Wright Davis to Gerrit Smith, New York, November 4, 1869. GARL.} Smith's stance with the American Association was not so steadfast, and he was considered prominent enough to be asked by Theodore Tilton in 1870 to help unite the two factions.\footnote{Theodore Tilton to Gerrit Smith, New York, March 1870. GARL.} Similar appeals to Smith for appearances, speeches, and signatures did not really stop until his death.

Gerrit Smith certainly did not generally wait to be asked to participate in the women's rights struggle. He was quick to volunteer his opinions and money when he saw suitable opportunities. He considered that “the object of the 'Woman's rights movement' is nothing less than to recover the rights of woman — nothing less than to achieve her independence. She is now the dependent of man: and, instead of rights, she has but privileges — the mere concessions (always revocable and always uncertain) of the other sex to her sex.” Stating his case for the oneness of the sexes, he continued
I would have no characteristic delicacy of woman, and no characteristic coarseness of man. On the contrary, believing man and woman to have the same nature, and to be therefore under obligation to have the same character, I would subject them to a common standard of morals and manners. The delicacy of man should be no less shrinking than that of woman, and the bravery of woman should be one with the bravery of man.\footnote{Gerrit Smith to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Peterboro, December 1, 1855. Printed copy, GARL.}

Except for the physical differences necessary for the perpetuation of the race, man and woman are equal in their rights, responsibilities, duties, dignity and destiny. Agreeing with her father, Elizabeth Miller wrote him that any person physically fit should be able through head or hands to support himself.\footnote{Elizabeth Smith Miller to Gerrit Smith, New York, May 3, 1868. GARL.}

Smith saw a direct relationship between a woman's dress and the evils she was trying to abolish. Though he did not believe dress to be the cause of woman's abasement, costume was its outgrowth and symbol. "Were woman to throw off the dress, which, in the eye of chivalry and gallantry, is so well adapted to womanly gracefulness and womanly helplessness, and to put on a dress, that would leave her free to work her way through the world, I see that chivalry and gallantry would nearly or quite die out."\footnote{Gerrit Smith to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Peterboro, December 1, 1855. Printed copy, GARL.} For Smith this was the most efficacious way for woman to become man's equal instead of remaining a bewitching character, plaything, doll or idol. The contemporary dress style was simply unsuited for most human pursuit. And as far as he was concerned, for women in the women's rights movement to remain unaware of this fact was folly.

Thus it was not surprising that Elizabeth Smith Miller, influenced by her father, was the first to adopt such dress. The costume, immortalized with the last name of Amelia Bloomer, was comprised of a short skirt over loose fitting pants. When Mrs. Miller wore it to Seneca Falls, it so impressed her cousin, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, that the latter soon wore a similar costume. While many feminists wore bloomers for two or three years, they soon lost the conviction of its effectiveness, because of general hostility to the fashion.\footnote{Elizabeth Cady Stanton, \textit{Eighty Years and More}, London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898, pp. 201, 203.} Many women praised Mrs. Miller in public or private correspondence for her courage, as Lucy Stone did in a letter to Gerrit Smith.\footnote{Lucy Stone to Gerrit Smith, Pittsburgh, January 8, 1854. GARL.} Susan B. Anthony agreed with Smith on the principle of dress. She wrote him, "I can see no business association, in which woman, in her present dress can possibly earn \textit{equal wages} with man — & feel that it is folly for us to make the demand until we adopt our dress to our work — I every day feel more keenly the terrible bondage of these long skirts. . . ." Nevertheless, Miss Anthony

12Gerrit Smith to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Peterboro, December 1, 1855. Printed copy, GARL.
13Elizabeth Smith Miller to Gerrit Smith, New York, May 3, 1868. GARL.
14Gerrit Smith to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Peterboro, December 1, 1855. Printed copy, GARL.
16Lucy Stone to Gerrit Smith, Pittsburgh, January 8, 1854. GARL.
The Smith mansion in Peterboro in 1927. Built by Peter Smith in the first quarter of the nineteenth century, it was destroyed by fire in 1936.
When you write to me again please let by name be recognized in the Christian
Thus

Elizabeth Stanton

I am not suspended among the Mrs.
Mr. E.C. is my name anywhere I should write to you

Mr. G.T. Fitzhugh

I am my dear cousin upon these and taken in the whole idea

Portion of a letter from Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Gerrit Smith, December 16, 1861. From the Gerrit Smith Collection in the George Arents Research Library.
also reverted to long skirts, for “want of moral courage.” Escorted bravely by her husband, Elizabeth Smith Miller persevered in spite of the stares and gossip, though, in the end, she too gave up.

Though Lucy Stone won fame for being the first woman to retain her maiden name upon marriage, others also were troubled by this issue. Most eminent among them was Elizabeth Cady Stanton, who admonished her cousin Gerrit not to address letters to her with “E. C. Stanton,” but rather “E. Cady Stanton.” She continued, “I am not tenacious about the Mrs. but E. C. is no name. Suppose I should write to you Mr: G. S. Fitzhugh. You see my dear cousin you have not taken in the whole idea.”

Many women active in religious reform causes were also active in the cause of women’s rights. Often they were Quakers who were accustomed to having a position of responsibility within their church, or they were women trying to carve out a more prominent place in their faith. The ministry was a well guarded male bastion, and it was not surprising that as women became increasingly concerned with their status, some would try to raise their position within the church. One such woman was Antoinette L. Brown, who, after much pleading with the authorities, was finally admitted to Oberlin Theological Seminary. She graduated in 1850, but it was not until 1853 that she was permitted to receive ordination and to serve a congregation. A year after graduation she wrote to Smith, explaining her thoughts on the “Bible Position of Woman,” a study begun while at Oberlin and later expanded into a book. She believed that there were no scriptural privileges accorded to sex. “Man and woman were created equals. Joint possession & dominion was given them in the earth & over the irrational creation. Neither had any superiority over the other one. The unjust subjection of woman grew out of sin.” She continued elaborating on the subjection of woman in the New Testament which she considered to be comparable to the subjection of all people to one another. That man was called the head of a woman did not connote power and authority but rather a symbol of preeminence. “Man is head of woman as Christ is head of the Church. . . . But the figure of mystical head and body is not complete when we speak of Christ’s relation to people without talking of their relation to him.”

Smith agreed with Brown at least in principle. Though he was somewhat uncertain as to whether the Bible actually downgraded woman’s status, he rebelled against people using the Book to sanctify their sins against women. While many of his contemporaries stated definitively that the Bible taught woman’s inferiority, Smith argued that it did not teach us what to do, but urged us to do what we already knew should be done. The Bible should not be used to testify against one’s conscience in favor of one’s sins.
As the crusade for women’s rights focused more and more on securing the ballot, the correspondence of the times contained increasing numbers of references to suffrage. Elizabeth Smith Miller wrote a letter, later published in many papers, commenting on “...not only the unreasonableness, but the absurdity of depriving woman of the right to self representation on the ground that male suffrage is sufficient for her need. Is not this anomalous condition as perilous as it is false to the spirit of justice which is the basis of a true Republic?” She documented her claims with statistics of her village, certifying the high degree of qualifications of women residing there as opposed to men.²¹ Furthermore, many reformers came to agree with Elizabeth Oakes Smith, a feminist prominent after the Civil War, who said, “... I make the right of Suffrage, the basis of all reforms to my sex.”²²

Naturally, the issue of woman suffrage turned to the Constitution — did it contain the right of ballot for women? Elizabeth Cady Stanton firmly argued that “as our Constitution now exists, there is nothing to prevent women or negroes from holding the ballot, but state legislation.” If, however, the word “male” was to be inserted in the resolution as proposed to Congress, she felt it would take at least a century to get it out.²³

While Gerrit Smith had apparently considered female suffrage important for many years, in 1855 he had questioned the value of giving women this right. “Of what comparative avail would be her exercise of the right of suffrage, if she is still to remain the victim of her present false notions of herself and of her relations to the other sex?”²⁴ However, in 1873 he wrote to Susan B. Anthony that “man’s claim to this right of suffrage was prior to and far above all Constitutions; and the like claim to this right he should have been prompt to recognize in woman. But alas, Constitutions, being man-made, are made almost universally, in the interest of defeating and ignoring this claim on the part of woman!” In his mind, the Constitution could not settle who has the ballot, and it definitely did not contain any hindrances to woman suffrage. Though he conceded that the first section of the Fifteenth Amendment did not refer to women, this fact was no indication of their exclusion from suffrage. Instead, Smith believed it unnecessary for women to be mentioned in that section since there existed support for their voting rights in other parts of the document.²⁵

By 1873 Smith was answering requests made by the National Woman Suffrage Association for donations and speeches. Susan B. Anthony wanted “...his influence to the side of the broad construction of law on women

²¹ Elizabeth Smith Miller, n.d. GARL.
²² Elizabeth Oakes Smith to Gerrit Smith, Patchogue, Long Island, June 28, 1867. GARL.
²³ Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Gerrit Smith, January 1, 1866. GARL.
²⁴ Gerrit Smith to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Peterboro, December 1, 1855. Printed copy, GARL.
²⁵ Gerrit Smith to Susan B. Anthony, Peterboro, February 5, 1873. GARL.
First page of the letter of Susan B. Anthony to Gerrit Smith in which she reports her refusal to pay a fine with the money Smith had sent her for the purpose. From the Gerrit Smith Collection in the George Arents Research Library.
When she was fined and threatened with a prison term for voting, Gerrit Smith was ready to support her with ideas and finances. She gratefully accepted the money Smith sent her to pay her fine but refused to employ it for that purpose and instead used it to print the judge’s valuable argument for female suffrage. With temerity, she told the marshall who came to collect the fine that she saw no way for Uncle Sam to get his claim but to imprison her.

Some of the staunchest opponents of women’s voting were also opponents of prohibition who believed that if women got the ballot, they would surely institute laws against drinking—a well-founded fear. Many women active in feminist reform, including Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Antoinette Brown, Ann Fitzhugh Smith and Susan B. Anthony, were concurrently leaders in the temperance movement. In addition, a plank of the Prohibition Party called for woman suffrage. Gerrit Smith eloquently added his voice, saying, “The enlightened and loving mothers of this land long to vote for the blotting out of the dram-shop, the brothel and the gambling hell:—but the fathers will not let them.” If women could vote, they could save their sons from ruin. Furthermore, Smith felt that the most effective way for women to gain this right was for them to throng to the polls every election until men could no longer stand it. In this way, they would convince themselves, and consequently the men, of their faith in their right to vote.

There should be no hesitation in concluding from the evidence in the Gerrit Smith Papers that Smith was indeed one of the leaders in the feminist movement. And yet, Smith experienced a time when he found it necessary to question the crusade. Explaining to Elizabeth Cady Stanton why he had so little faith in the movement, he remarked that it was not in the proper hands, but these hands could not be found at that time. What was needed, he felt, was an age of common sense and reason. Nevertheless, he urged all feminists not to stop promoting their cause until their rights were won. Doubts such as these were not unusual, and it is apparent that they did not show up in Smith’s actions; indeed he was the man whom many feminists, in addition to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, admired more than any other living man.

26 Susan B. Anthony to Gerrit Smith, Rochester, January 2, 1873. GARL.
27 Susan B. Anthony to Gerrit Smith, Rochester, August 5, 1873. GARL.
30 Gerrit Smith, “For the Anti-Dram Shop,” March 25, 1872. GARL.
31 Gerrit Smith to Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Peterboro, December 1, 1855. Printed copy, GARL.
32 Elizabeth Cady Stanton to Gerrit Smith, New York, January 29, 1865 or 1868. GARL.