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Common Cause: The Antislavery Alliance of Gerrit Smith and Beriah Green

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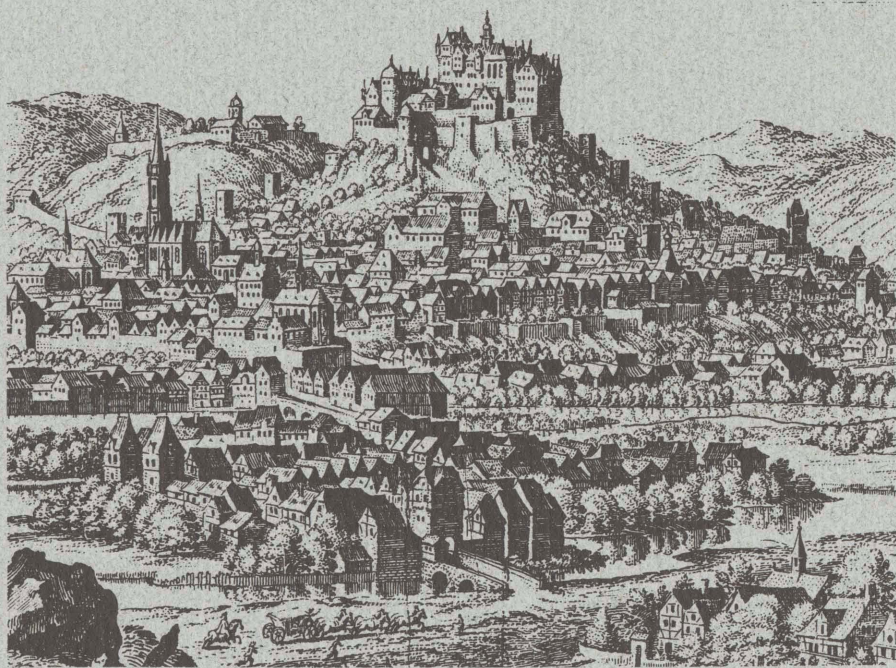
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Common Cause: The Antislavery Alliance of Gerrit Smith and Beriah Green

BY MILTON C. SERNETT *

The Gerrit Smith Papers in the manuscript collections of the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University are an indispensable resource for scholars interested in American social reform. Given to the University in 1928 by Gerrit Smith Miller, a grandson, the collection reveals that the abolition of slavery dominated the Madison County philanthropist's reform interests from the mid-1830s to the Civil War. Of Gerrit Smith's numerous antislavery correspondents, including such prominent reformers as William Lloyd Garrison, Wendell Phillips, and Theodore Dwight Weld, none maintained a more regular and extensive epistolary relationship than Beriah Green, upstate New York's most radical and complex abolitionist. The Syracuse University collection contains 206 letters from Green to Smith, dated from 1834 through 1872. Smith's outgoing correspondence, partially recorded in two letter copybooks, is less extensive and therefore less helpful in revealing the dynamics of the Smith-Green relationship. Fortunately, Green's letters to Smith frequently make reference to Smith's missing correspondence. An examination of these letters, supplemented by other primary sources, makes possible an interesting case study of the partnership formed by two of upstate New York's most important antislavery crusaders.

They were an ill-matched pair. Contemporaries knew Gerrit Smith as majestic in personal appearance. "Tall, magnificently built and proportioned, his large head [was] superbly set upon his shoulders [so that] he might have served as a model for a Greek God in the days

* Professor Sernett is the author of the recently published *Abolition's Axe: Beriah Green, Oneida Institute and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Syracuse: Syracuse Univ. Press, 1986).

when men deified beauty and worshipped it.”¹ By contrast, Beriah Green was a “man of not more than middling stature, earnestly stooping forward [with] a strongly marked, nervous, decided face”.² Smith was widely respected for his disarmingly gracious temperament and affectionate disposition, the epitome of the earnest Christian. Green, who had been born in Connecticut in 1795 and trained at Andover Seminary, struck some as severe and craggy, like the rocks of his native New England. A New England abolitionist visiting her aunt in Oneida County reported that she found the president of Oneida Institute “ugly and clerical”.³ Smith had inherited his father’s business empire, possessed enough land to be embarrassed by it, and had the wherewithal to be the benefactor to a host of charitable causes, including Green’s school and family. As to mental powers, Green was an academic, a scholar of sacred literature and moral philosophy. Smith admitted to being a reader of newspapers and tracts, more adept as a publicist of reform causes than as a reader of books or an original thinker.⁴

Though oddly matched in these and other ways, Gerrit Smith and Beriah Green were yoked in common cause for over four decades. Their relationship, intimate yet stormy, throws light upon the inner workings of the abolitionist enterprise in central and western New York. Historian Lawrence J. Friedman has called the circle of abolitionists led by Smith “voluntarists”, for these immediatists of the Burned-over District (a section in upstate New York of intensive religious revivals) predicated reform upon the notion that democratic change could only come through the binding together of free individuals who were on intimate terms and shared common values.⁵ This ideological approach brought Green and Smith into a friendship

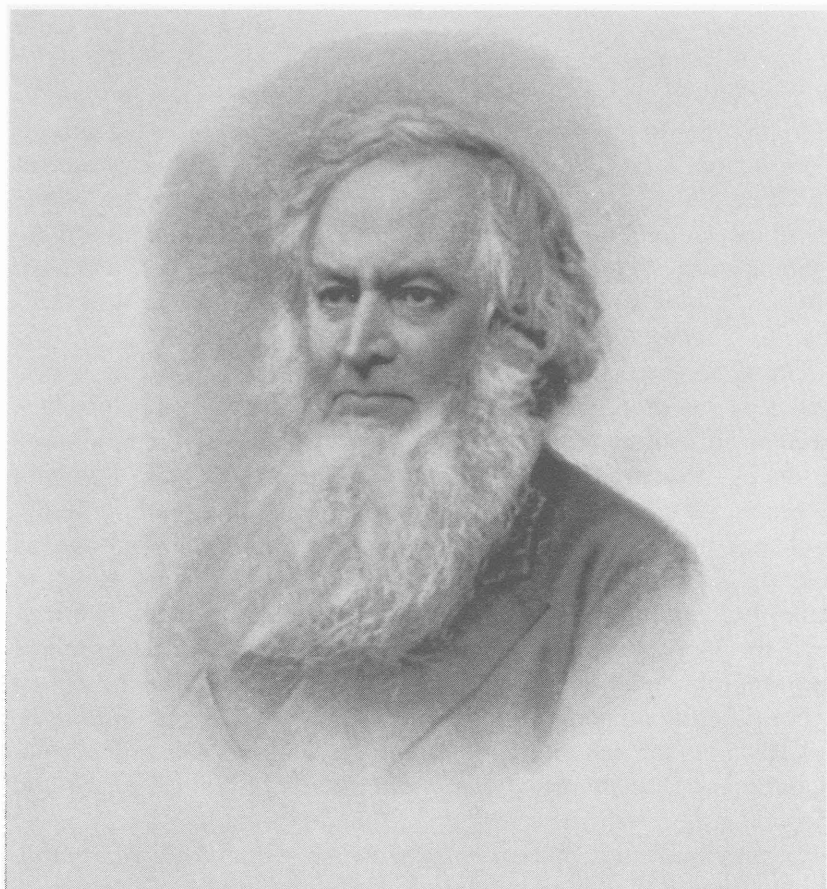
1. Mary S. Bull, “Gerrit Smith”, *Good Company* 6 (November 1880): 241.

2. [Elizur Wright, Jr.], “Finding a Man”, *Model Worker*, 11 August 1848.

3. Ann W. Weston to M. Weston, 16 May 1839, Anti-Slavery Papers, Boston Public Library.

4. Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1878), 362–65. This highly sympathetic biography by a contemporary admirer received the approval of the Smith family. Frothingham had access to Smith’s private journals, which unfortunately have been lost. Smith’s Peterboro mansion was destroyed by fire in 1930.

5. Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1982), Chapter 4.



Gerrit Smith, from Charles A. Hammond, *Gerrit Smith: The Story of a Noble Man's Life* (Geneva, N.Y.: W. F. Humphrey, 1908).

that surpassed mere conventionality but eventually put severe pressures on the ties of brotherhood each freely expressed. We can best see this by examining several circles of intimacy shared by Green and Smith.

“GIVE US YOUR HEART AND YOUR HAND”

In 1834 Green began corresponding with the “patron” of the village of Peterboro, Madison County, on the subject of black educa-

tion. Green was then president of Oneida Institute, a manual labor and literary school located just east of Whitesboro, about four miles from Utica. It had been founded by the Reverend George Gale in 1827 in order to prepare recruits from the Finney revivals for mission work in the West. When Green was selected as Gale's successor in 1833, he already had a reputation as an uncompromising foe of the American Colonization Society and an ardent advocate of immediate emancipation. While on the faculty of Western Reserve College, Hudson, Ohio, he had created a firestorm with four sermons attacking the scheme to export blacks to Liberia.

Green accepted the presidency of Oneida Institute on the condition that he would be allowed to do more for the cause of black freedom in central New York than he had previously been allowed to do by Western Reserve's conservative trustees. "I am assured", Green wrote Elizur Wright, Jr., "that *Africa* shall lose nothing in the exchange of stations I am urged to venture on. I am even assured that the Trustees [of Oneida Institute] will help me in my efforts to strike the chains from colored limbs, etc."⁶ Green aimed to transform the Institute from a Presbyterian-dominated manual labor school into an interracial abolitionist training ground. For the benefit of "poor suffering humanity", his young enthusiasts were to unite manual labor on the school's farm and in its workshops with a revolutionary practical education that stressed study of biblical Greek and Hebrew rather than the Greek and Roman classics.

Gerrit Smith also had an interest in educating "colored youth". As early as 1827, he proposed to establish a school in Peterboro to prepare blacks to exercise the Gospel ministry under the auspices of the American Colonization Society. He seems to have abandoned the plan without public explanation, but tried again in early 1834.⁷ Green protested the concept of a separate manual labor school for blacks. Thus, addressing Smith as "My Dear Sir", Oneida Institute's president began four decades of correspondence on a note of discord. "For one I am from principle opposed to charity which excludes either

6. Green to Elizur Wright, Jr., 25 April/3 May 1833, Wright Papers, Library of Congress.

7. Smith to editors of *Freedom's Journal*, 31 March 1827, Letter Book 1, Gerrit Smith Papers, Syracuse University. Smith's proposal for the Peterboro Manual Labor School appeared in *The African Repository and Colonial Journal* 10 (December 1834): 312–13.

color; I am opposed to the cord of caste wherever it may appear. Away with caste! It has strangled its thousands. . . . Till we have white and black together in our schools, the cord of caste will remain.”⁸

Smith proceeded over Green’s objections and brought a handful of Afro-American youth to Peterboro for the rudiments of a classical education in a manual labor setting. “I hope my first class . . . will have members who will go to Africa with a sound education of head and heart”, Smith wrote colonizationist leader Leonard Bacon.⁹ The Peterboro Manual Labor School had but one instructor, was solely dependent upon Smith’s charity, and lasted only until late summer 1836. Six students petitioned their benefactor to keep the school open, pleading “we have just begun to drink fully of the fountain of knowledge”.¹⁰ Land rich but cash poor, as the country headed for the fiscal Panic of 1837, Smith had to abandon his school. Green unsuccessfully urged him to merge it with the preparatory department of Oneida Institute. Only one of Smith’s students, Elymas P. Rogers, transferred to the Institute, which is now known to have enrolled more Afro-Americans than any other American college in the 1830s and 1840s.¹¹

Green and Smith differed over the necessity for integrated higher education in the early 1830s because Smith still maintained cordial relationships with the leaders of the American Colonization Society and gave generously to its support. As late as March 1834, he complained of the “violent, bitter and fanatical” denunciations of the colonizationists by the immediatists. He confided in his journal a few months later, “I think I cannot join the Antislavery Society as long as the War is kept up between it and the American Colonization Society—a war, however, for which the Colonization Society is as much to blame as the other Society”.¹² Did this portend a change of

8. Green to Smith, 25 March 1834. Unless otherwise noted, all future citations of the Green-Smith correspondence draw upon the Gerrit Smith Papers at Syracuse University.

9. Smith to Leonard Bacon, 31 March 1834, Smith Papers.

10. “Petition”, 1836, Smith Papers.

11. See Milton C. Sernett, “First Honor: Oneida Institute’s Role in the Fight Against Racism and Slavery”, *New York History* 66 (April 1985): 101–22.

12. Smith to Leonard Bacon, 31 March 1834, Smith Papers. Smith, Journal, 12 July 1834, quoted in Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith*, 163–64.

heart? Elizur Wright, Jr., thought so, for he wrote Green that the Peterboro philanthropist was “about making his last effort to reform the poor old colonization hobby. It is the creation of his imagination he clings to—not the odious reality.”¹³

Green needed coadjutors in order to transform Oneida Institute into a model biracial community where young men could work on the farm and in the shops while being schooled in the principles of practical reform. The school’s debts were heavier than Gale had led Green to believe. Some of the trustees were balking at Green’s plans to enroll pious youth without regard to color or family background. Because of his philanthropic reputation and proximity to the Institute, Gerrit Smith was an obvious potential supporter. Green knew, however, that Smith was a trustee of Hamilton College, the Institute’s conservative rival, and was giving liberally to the American Colonization Society. He attempted to win Smith over to immediatism by speaking of the plight of the slaves in Peterboro and through private appeals on behalf of the victims of the “peculiar institution”, a contemporary circumlocution for chattel slavery. Smith sent the Institute small donations, but as of spring 1835 he had not yet broken with the colonizationists.

External events often bring individuals to make ideological commitments when personal persuasion fails. Such was the case with Smith in October 1835. Green had urged him to attend the organizational meeting in Utica of a proposed state antislavery society. Addressing Smith as “My Dear Brother”, Green wrote in September, “I feel a confidence, which my heart refuses to let go, that you will, sometime or other, give us your heart and your hand”.¹⁴ Smith made no commitment at the time. However, he happened to be in Utica in October. He and his wife were passing through en route to Schenectady for a visit with Peter Smith, Gerrit’s father, who had started the family fortune in the fur trade with John Jacob Astor. More out of curiosity than conviction, Gerrit was present at the opening session of the New York Anti-Slavery Convention, held at the Bleecker Street Presbyterian Church. He had barely taken his seat when a mob of about eighty commercial and professional men disrupted the

13. Wright to Amos G. Phelps, 27 October 1834, Wright Papers.

14. Green to Smith, 24 September 1835.

meeting with cries of “Open the way! Break down the doors! Damn the fanatics! Stop your damn stuff!” As the assembly scattered in confusion, so an observer recalled, Smith’s “resonant and persuasive voice” could be heard above the uproar. Smith appealed for fairness and free speech, though he declared himself “no abolitionist”. Some four hundred delegates accepted his offer to reconvene in the safety of his Peterboro mansion house, some fourteen miles southwest of Utica.¹⁵

Smith assumed a prominent role in the deliberations of the reassembled state society on the day following the Utica riot. He declared himself in opposition to all those who would muzzle the moral reformer.

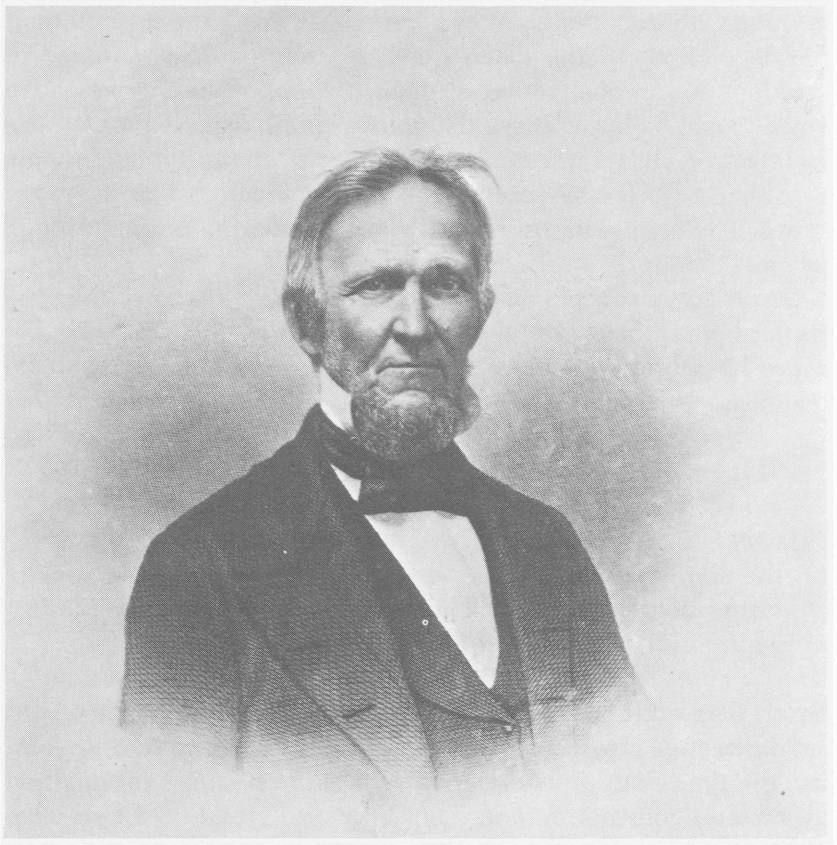
The enormous and insolent demands of the South, sustained, I am deeply ashamed to say, by craven and mercenary spirits at the North, manifest beyond all dispute, that the question now is not merely, nor mainly, whether the blacks of the South shall remain slaves—but whether the whites at the North shall become slaves also.¹⁶

Smith later wrote in his journal that the mobbing in Utica had been an “instructive providence”.¹⁷ Nevertheless, he demurred from joining the American Anti-Slavery Society, the national organization over whose constituting assembly Green had presided in December 1833. Smith’s eventual conversion to this society was motivated by concern for free speech rather than heartfelt antagonism to the American Colonization Society. Green, elected as corresponding secretary of the New York Anti-Slavery Society, continued to pressure Smith to make a clean break. The philanthropist did so in a letter, dated 24 November 1835, in which he informed Ralph Gurley, secretary of the American Colonization Society:

15. Howard Alexander Morrison, “Gentlemen of Proper Understanding: A Closer Look at Utica’s Anti-Abolitionist Mob”, *New York History* 62 (January 1981): 61. Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith*, 165.

16. “Speech of Mr. Gerrit Smith”, in *Proceedings of the New York Anti-Slavery Convention, Held at Utica, October 21, and the New York Anti-Slavery Society, Held at Peterboro, October 22, 1835* (Utica: Standard and Democrat, 1835), 21.

17. Smith, *Journal*, 25 October 1835, quoted in Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith*, 166.



Beriah Green, ca. 1860, from Beriah Green, *Sermons and Other Discourses with Brief Biographical Hints* (New York: S. W. Green, 1860).

It is proper for me to say that I am brought to this determination, earlier than I expected to be, by the recent increase of my interest in the American Anti-Slavery Society. Since the late alarming attacks in the persons of its [the Colonization Society] members on the right of discussion, I have looked to it [the Anti-Slavery Society], as being the rallying point of the friends of this right.¹⁸

18. Letter, Smith to R. R. Gutley, 24 November 1835, *African Repository and Colonial Journal* 12 (January 1836): 36.

Shortly after Smith converted, Green wrote him, “I rejoice to know that your thoughts and heart are so much with the oppressed”.¹⁹

Now that this unlikely pair was fully yoked in common cause, Green pressed the needs of Oneida Institute upon his friend. He argued that the Institute should be “a special object of solicitude and of patronage”, because the abolitionist cause would itself be embarrassed should the school fail. President Green wanted water power for the Institute’s workshops, new equipment for chemistry and physics, and an endowment so that the manual labor experiment might receive a fair trial. Green told Smith that his school deserved more patronage than Hamilton because it alone was dedicated to “subserve the glory of our Savior and the interests of His Kingdom”.²⁰ Smith gave generously until the Panic of 1837 caused him to plead an “extreme scarcity of money”. Even then he borrowed funds and proposed to give three thousand dollars to Green’s school and family. “Because of the simple, straight-forward honesty inculcated in it”, Smith declared, “it [Oneida Institute] is dearer to my heart than any School with which I am acquainted”.²¹

“REMEMBER ME TO YOUR DEAR CIRCLE”

In addition to Green, the circle of voluntarists in the Burned-over District that gathered around Smith included such abolitionists as William Chapin, William Goodell, Alvan Stewart, and Myron Holley. But the Green-Smith relationship was the most intense. Had it not been for Smith’s magnanimity and personal affection for Oneida Institute’s president, Green would have broken with the others sooner than he did. As it was, the two maintained a strong but stormy friendship that survived the break-up of the Smith reform circle in the late 1840s in part because of another area of intimacy. From about 1838 onwards, Green customarily concluded his letters to Smith with “Remember Me to Your Dear Circle”—a sign that their friendship extended beyond their abolition interests to their respective households.

There were many domestic connections between the two men.

19. Green to Smith, 11 December 1835.

20. Green to Smith, 24 December 1835.

21. Smith to Green, 14 August 1837, Letter Book 1.

Green and his family frequently visited Peterboro, and the Green children, notably Samuel, often spent long vacations at the Smith estate. Smith's business obligations rarely afforded him opportunity to lodge at the "Old Hive", as Green affectionately called his Whitesboro home, noteworthy as the first frame house in Oneida County. Ann Green and Elizabeth Smith were kindred spirits, sharing the joys and trials of growing up. Smith honored his friend by naming a newborn son after him. "Green Smith was born 1/2 past 2 p. m. this day [14 April 1842]. Who is Green Smith?, you will ask. He is my only son, named after my beloved brother Beriah Green."²² Immensely pleased, Beriah took special interest over the years in the welfare, both physical and spiritual, of his namesake. Even while caught in the confusion of abolitionist schisms and ideological debates, Green and Smith counseled and consoled each other on personal and family matters. As with Timothy Dwight Weld and Angelina Grimké, concern for the plight of the slave had brought these two disparate personalities together and set the orbits of their lives into intersecting and dependent patterns.

In 1837 Smith consented to serve on Oneida Institute's board of trustees, thereby further drawing himself into Green's life. When Green reported that his own salary had gone unpaid due to the school's debts, Smith forwarded money for Green's family and offered to employ some of the children on his Peterboro estate. Green expressed irritation that Smith should miss so many board meetings and jealousy that the philanthropist opened his purse to other petitioners. Indeed, there is a didactic tone to much of Green's correspondence with Smith. He lectured his friend not only on Smith's responsibilities as a trustee but also about abolition politics, family matters, diet, the proper ritual for taking a bath, the dangers of utopianism and spiritualism, and the need for regular physical exercise.

Green's need for support from Smith increased after the Panic of 1837 brought cries of alarm from Oneida Institute's long-suffering treasurer, Reuben Hough. Smith donated 3,800 acres of new land in Vermont to the school, but even at two dollars an acre few buyers came forward. Short of cash himself, Smith moved out of his mansion and resorted to employing his wife and daughter in his land office. Oneida Institute struggled along until February 1844 when its

22. Smith to Green, 14 April 1842, Letter Book 1.

buildings and grounds were sold to a group of Free Will Baptists. In September 1843 a fire had destroyed many of Green's personal effects and much of his library. The Green family was forced to take up residence in one of the Institute's dormitories. Thus, Green was on campus when the end came.

His anger and despair at being unable to forestall the inevitable fill his letters to Smith during the last years of the Institute. Green felt "odious in the eyes of the religionists" and betrayed by the education societies that had withdrawn support from his students.²³ He also complained to Smith that the Institute had never had the wholehearted support of some in Smith's reform circle, especially Alvan Stewart, the Utica lawyer, whose growing influence in the New York Anti-Slavery Society Green resented.²⁴ Oneida Institute's financial collapse was partly due to the failure of the Society to pay the school for printing the *Friend of Man* and other abolitionist literature. Because Green eventually severed ties with Stewart and others in Smith's reform circle, his relationship with Smith himself had to bear an intensified emotional and ideological load.

ENGAGEMENT WITH THE POWERS

From the beginning of their alliance as co-workers for black freedom, Smith and Green had shared a remarkably similar vision of an America transformed into a Christian republic with liberty and justice for all. Smith had far greater means at his disposal for influencing fellow citizens toward this end. His wealth enabled him to publish and disseminate more than fifty circular letters on slavery alone. He was widely noted as an excellent public speaker, gifted with a melodious voice and an attractive presence. A "devil of uneasiness", to use his biographer's description, drew Smith into so many good causes, so many entangling business and personal relationships that he risked weakening the impress of his abolitionism.²⁵

23. Green to Smith, 25 September 1843. Green to Amos Phelps, 3 November 1843, Phelps Papers.

24. Green to Smith, 15 September 1842; 24 February 1843.

25. Ralph V. Harlow, *Gerrit Smith* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1939), 17. Harlow's biography of Smith is rich in detail and thoroughly grounded in the valuable Smith Papers at Syracuse University. Unfortunately, it is marred by an

Green also supported many reform efforts, such as temperance, land reform, the redemption of prostitutes, and Christian missions. But he viewed the fight against slavery as the archetype of the whole Christian enterprise to remake America. A man of small means, Green's weapons were his voice and pen. Smith boasted that his friend's "intellect is not surpassed in the whole range of my acquaintance".²⁶ Green's natural disposition inclined more to the scholar's study than the public platform. He drew strength from manual labor in the solitude of the woodpile and field. In technical matters of theology and moral philosophy, Smith deferred to Green and took to calling him "the superior Metaphysician".²⁷

Despite contrasting habits of the mind, this pair shared a common religious disposition. Their commitment to immediate emancipation was grounded on an awakening to the evils of colonization akin to the experience of conversion common to American evangelicals. Slavery was a sin to be immediately repented of. It was, as Smith wrote, "an audacious usurpation of the divine prerogative . . . a presumptuous transgression of all the holy commandments".²⁸ Once converted to abolition at Western Reserve, Green made the cause of the slave his sacred vocation. He initially shared Smith's optimism that moral suasion would convert the American public. They both held steadfastly to a genuinely radical vision of a purified nation, albeit a Protestant one, in which white and black supped together at the table of peace and prosperity.

excessively negative bias toward Gerrit Smith's religious sentiments and reform enthusiasms. Historical scholarship badly needs a more sympathetic biography of Smith, whose stature among important figures in American reform is now being acknowledged.

26. Smith to Judge Jones, 27 February 1843, Letter Book 1. James Birney shared Smith's admiration for the president of Oneida Institute, recording in his diary, ". . . of all my friends in the abolition ranks—and they certainly contain a great deal of talent—Beriah Green's arguments strike me as most forcible and convincing". *Letters of James Gillespie Birney*, ed. Dwight L. Dumond, 2 vols. (New York: Appleton-Century, 1938), 1:252.

27. Smith, circular letter addressed to "President Green, Whitesboro", 4 April 1849, Smith Papers.

28. Smith to Rev. Charles Stuart, 10 April 1835, Smith Papers. For Green's antislavery views, see *The Chattel Principle, the Abhorrence of Jesus Christ and the Apostles; or, No Refuge for American Slavery in the New Testament* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839).

As organized abolitionism spread throughout the Burned-over District, Smith and Green found themselves agreeing on the need to convert the white, northern religious establishment. Both accepted the principle that moral reform must begin in those circles of intimacy to which they belonged. Green attempted to radicalize the churches in Oneida County, especially Whitesboro's prestigious First Presbyterian, which many of Oneida Institute's faculty and students attended. Rebuffed by David Ogden, First Presbyterian's conservative pastor, Green departed with approximately seventy members in 1838 to form an abolitionist-minded Congregational society. The Oneida Presbytery eventually refused to recognize Green's ministerial credentials, denied the legitimacy of his abolitionist church, and regarded him as a "troubler of Israel". Green then became active in the Union Church movement, a loose confederation of Christian abolitionists in central and western New York who insisted that Christians should separate from all those blind to the sin of slavery.²⁹

Embittered by the ecclesiastical establishment's lackluster antislavery stance and consequent refusal to support Oneida Institute, Green began to question orthodox theology itself. He warred with his New England theological mentors and the "sober and scholarly" northern churchmen who hid behind the skirts of traditional doctrine when confronted by abolitionist demands. Though much less disenchanted with the organized church than the New England abolitionist, William Lloyd Garrison, whose anti-clericalism rankled him, Green broke rank with the orthodox on such doctrines as the atonement of Christ. His radical abolitionist convictions eventually brought him perilously close to the notion that true Christianity was to be demonstrated not by adherence to orthodox doctrine but by participation with "poor, suffering humanity", according to the model provided by Jesus. Indeed, one can find in Green's sermons and essays, from about 1840 on, themes similar to those of the liberation theologians of the contemporary period.³⁰

29. The controversy within First Presbyterian can be followed in the *Records of the Session of the Presbyterian Church in Whitesborough (New York)*, Vol. III, November 10–December 28, 1837, in possession of the congregation. Green defended the "come-outers" in his *Reply of the Congregational Church in Whitesboro to a Question of the Oneida Presbytery* (Whitesboro: Oneida Institute Press, 1839).

30. For an example of Green's unorthodox views, see his *Thoughts on the Atonement* (Whitesboro: Oneida Institute Press, 1842).

Gerrit Smith's break with orthodoxy also followed upon the heels of his abolitionism. Having joined the Presbyterian Church in 1826, Smith attended services and revivals regularly. He was by temperament more broad-minded than many of his co-religionists and had an abiding dislike for the sectarians who claimed to have a monopoly on divine truth. Yet Smith's abolitionism eventually led him to separate from the church of his youth as well as from all those connections that were silent on the sin of slavery. In 1842 Smith wrote William Goodell, "I speak against Presbyterian General Assemblies and Methodist conferences, as I do against National Whig and Democratic Conventions—as I do against Masonic fraternities. They are all unfit for Christians to belong to—and no one of them is any more a church than the others."³¹ Smith had been sympathetic and supportive in Green's struggle with the Reverend David Ogden of Whitesboro and the other conservative clergy of Oneida County, for he was himself in ill-repute with the cautious clergy of Madison County after having called them "proslavery ministers".³² In 1843 he withdrew from the Presbyterians in Peterboro and organized his own Church of Peterboro on abolitionist principles. Like Green, Smith became active in the "come-outer" movement, wherein Christian abolitionists in central and western New York organized their own congregations. Smith also found solace in the religion of reason, a blend of evangelical piety, humanism, and rationalism.³³

As in ecclesiastical affairs, Smith and Green followed a common path in abolition politics. They moved in tandem from the Garrison-dominated American Anti-Slavery Society to the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society after the split in 1840 over, in part, the question of political means. Following the division, they devoted most of their time and energies to reform circles in upstate New York, where they initially urged voters to support only candidates whose abolitionism could be authenticated. Except for local offices, this tactic failed. Whigs by convention more than conviction, Smith and Green, like Garrison, had never placed much confidence in the major polit-

31. Smith to Goodell, 22 January 1842, Letter Book 1.

32. Smith, circular letter "To the Proslavery Ministers of the County of Madison", 1843, Smith Papers.

33. On Smith's "Religion of Reason" see his *Sermons and Speeches* (New York: Ross and Tousey, 1861), 1–80 and 121–42.

ical parties. Smith feared that “political instrumentalities” would taint an essentially moral crusade. Green expressed like sentiments, writing Smith in early 1840: “How to maintain in the common a Human Rights party without involving ourselves in the same evils as now stare so frightfully upon us from the ranks of the existing parties—that is the problem which demands for its solution more wisdom than most men are gifted for”.³⁴

Several members of Smith’s circle of voluntary immediatists, notably Alvan Stewart and Myron Holley, a Rochester abolitionist, called for united political action in the late 1830s. Stewart argued that an independent party was “the only hope for the redemption of the slave”.³⁵ Holley urged fellow abolitionists to “purify political life” as it was the nation’s “most potent source of social control”.³⁶ Gerrit Smith’s reservations about the dangers of “political instrumentalities” withered away in the face of repeated failure to work within the established political parties. Green, too, set aside his almost congenital disgust and joined the Liberty Party, the upstate New York venture into Bible politics. Both reformers supported the candidacy of James G. Birney for president on the Liberty Party ticket in 1840 and were principals in the post-election debate on whether to expand the Liberty Party’s objectives beyond the immediate end of slavery. Green wrote a campaign biography of Birney for the 1844 presidential election.³⁷ A staunch admirer of the ex-slaveholder from Kentucky, Green much preferred Birney to William H. Seward, the Auburn resident and ex-New York governor, whose candidacy Smith sought for 1848 in the wake of the Liberty Party’s dismal showing at the polls in 1840 and 1844.³⁸

Smith and Green did see eye-to-eye on the need to rethink the tactics of political abolitionism and the wisdom of a single-issue party.

34. Green to Smith, 26 March 1840.

35. *Emancipator*, 6 February 1840.

36. “Speech of Myron Holley at Perry [New York], July 4, 1839”, *Friend of Man*, 14 August 1839.

37. Beriah Green, *Sketch of the Life and Writings of James Gillespie Birney* (Utica: Jackson and Chaplin, 1844).

38. For a concise analysis of the Liberty Party’s rise and fall, see Alan M. Kraut, “The Forgotten Reformers: A Profile of Third Party Abolitionists in Antebellum New York”, in *Anti-slavery Reconsidered: New Perspectives on the Abolitionists*, edited by Lewis Perry (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1979), 119–45.



Gerrit Smith (arms outstretched) and Frederick Douglass (seated to his left) at an antislavery meeting, ca. 1849, from a largely unknown daguerreotype. Courtesy of the Madison County Historical Society.

Both helped to organize the Liberty League in 1847 as a pressure group to expand the platform of the Liberty Party, but the Liberty Leaguers failed to convince most members of the Liberty Party of the need for abandoning “One-Ideatism” in favor of universal reform. Green

was particularly adamant that abolitionists should prepare themselves to assume the obligations of government rather than serve merely as a goad to the Whigs and Democrats on the single issue of slavery. In 1848 Smith led a rump faction out of the Liberty Party under the banner of the National Liberty Party, while other Libertymen allied themselves with the Free Soilers. Green shared Smith's abhorrence of the defection of Libertymen to the Free Soil Party and initially supported Smith's endeavors to construct a political coalition of reformers pledged to all the obligations of civil government. But, by 1850, these two incompatible friends had parted company.

OLD FRIENDS AT ODDS

The Green-Smith reform partnership dissolved in the early 1850s principally because of fundamental disagreements over the nature of civil government and the goals of political abolitionism. Their friendship had been severely tested by Beriah's depression and bitterness over the closing of Oneida Institute in 1844. His letters to Smith contain accusations that the Peterboro philanthropist might have done more to save the school from financial ruin, that he should have opposed Alvan Stewart's efforts to gain control of the state society, and that he could do more to assist in relocating Green and his family to a more congenial environment than Whitesboro.³⁹ Smith tolerated all of this with remarkable patience and understanding, for he knew how much Green had suffered on behalf of his abolitionist principles. With the possible exceptions of James Birney and Elizur Wright, Jr., a colleague during the Western Reserve controversy, Green had no more supportive friends than Smith during his last troubled years at Oneida Institute. But the venture into Bible politics beginning with the Liberty Party gradually drew Smith and Green into conflict. While Smith placed more and more confidence in the democratic process, Green had less and less respect for the ability of the American electorate to vote into office candidates committed to the principles of righteous government.

Since first discovering the anti-democratic writings of Thomas Carlyle in 1838, Green had tried to persuade his abolitionist col-

39. Green to Smith, 23 April 1844.

leagues that the Scottish essayist's views on civil government and human nature squared with experience. He told Smith that Carlyle had exerted a "powerful influence" on him with the proposition that since character is everything, the wise should rule the masses.⁴⁰ Some of Carlyle's ideas must have struck a resonant chord in Smith—the falseness of materialism, the reality of spirit, the need for leaders to live by spiritual values, the importance of duty, and the sacredness of work. But Carlyle's philosophy of government and authority ran counter to Smith's democratic nature and Jeffersonian faith in the rights of the individual as opposed to governmental authority. Smith abhorred all aristocracies, whether they were composed of fools or the wise. He still believed in the potential of a voluntaristic democracy to conform to Christian principles. He even stood for elective office and served in Congress from 1852 to 1854 as the representative of Madison and Oswego counties.

By contrast, Green's overriding concern with the evils of Jacksonian America, notably slavery, led him to conclude that democracy was itself at fault. To James Birney, he wrote, "Alas, to a frightful extent, our poor countrymen cannot—at any rate *do not*,—distinguish between a *conspiracy* and a *government*".⁴¹ With obvious allusion to Carlyle's views, Green grumbled:

A greater delusion was never hatched from any cockatrice's egg, than what is commonly boasted of as the Democratic principle. The thing has neither Truth nor Decency. We must insist upon the control of Wisdom. The wisest and the strongest we must seek out and welcome to their proper places.⁴²

Green's preference for "heaven-anointed rulers"—that is, individuals distinguished not by popular election but by their character, integrity, wisdom, and magnanimity—entailed contempt for universal suffrage, indeed for the democratic political process itself. Green admitted to Smith that his "God-the-only Potentate" theory of civil government had made him appear "an amazing novelty" and "radi-

40. Green to Smith, 2 August 1838.

41. Green to Birney, 23 September 1846, *Letters of Birney*, 2:1028.

42. Green to Birney, 23 April/5 May 1847, *Letters of Birney*, 2:1067.

cally unlike” those with whom he had worked in the abolitionist enterprise. He hoped, however, that Smith would understand that all genuine friendships had their basis in agreement on principles.⁴³

Green seems to have been genuinely surprised and shocked when Smith went public in 1849 over their differences on civil government. In a printed circular addressed to “President Green, Whitesboro”, Smith summarized his own views along the following lines. Just as impiety did not cancel the right or obligation of a man to pray, so a man’s injustice could not deny him the right or obligation to vote. Green’s theory that God-appointed rulers were somehow to be innately recognized and then obeyed by the general populace was “impracticable” [sic] and “perilous”. Green, Smith contended, would have government present in all departments of conduct rather than merely protecting individual rights. “You have none”, Smith told his friend, “while I have the utmost confidence in the masses to care for themselves”.⁴⁴ Smith had actually voiced his concerns earlier in letters printed in the *Model Worker*, a newspaper published by Samuel Green as a vehicle for his father’s views on the evils of democracy.⁴⁵ But the circular letter of 1849 was the unbearable insult, in part because Smith had it disseminated among the membership of Green’s “come-outer” congregation in Whitesboro.

Green now concluded that cooperation with Smith was no longer possible. He retreated further into isolation, even describing himself as a “misanthrope”. His misanthropy was, Green claimed, born of an intense hatred of all who in the least way supported slavery or gave credence to a political system which tolerated it.⁴⁶ Smith attempted to mollify Green and keep him from abandoning all ties to abolitionist circles. “You may cast me off, but I shall never cast you off”, he wrote in February 1850.⁴⁷ Green did not reply. Smith reluctantly acknowledged the painful separation. But he continued to care about Beriah and even tried to mediate a dispute between Green and his missionary brother Jonathan. Writing from the Sandwich Islands, Jonathan, an abolitionist in his own right, had inquired concerning

43. Green to Smith, 26 December 1849.

44. Smith, circular letter to “President Green”.

45. Smith to Green, 1 August 1848, *Model Worker*, 11 August 1848.

46. Beriah Green, “A Voice in the Wilderness”, *Model Worker*, 21 July 1848.

47. Smith to Green, 23 February 1850, Letter Book 2.

his elder brother's "strange state of mind". Jonathan wondered whether Beriah's drift toward becoming a faction of one was not due to some kind of nervous breakdown. Smith confessed to be equally concerned, but he could only report on his own difficulty in trying to comprehend Beriah's habit of cutting ties of intimacy over real or imagined differences in ideological views.⁴⁸

By 1854 Green appeared ready to renew the bonds of intimacy with Smith. He applauded Smith's resignation from Congress and once again asked him for financial assistance in relocating, this time to a small farm on the outskirts of Whitesboro.⁴⁹ Smith welcomed the renewal of contact, though he described Green's love for him as a kind of "meat-axe affection".⁵⁰ Smith was now involved in the Radical Abolition Party and tried to persuade Green to stand for elective office under its banner. Though he had lost confidence in Carlyle because of Carlyle's refusal to condemn British oppression in India, Green still viewed human government as "a stupid, grim, malignant conspiracy".⁵¹ He shared Smith's outrage following the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act and looked with an approving eye upon John Brown's raid upon Harpers Ferry. Smith's involvement with Brown caused him such nervous prostration that he had to be placed in the Utica mental asylum for eight weeks following Brown's capture. Green does not seem to have had prior knowledge of Brown's intentions, but, after the tragic climax of the events of 1859, he praised Brown as a true hero and martyr for righteousness, despite his violent means.⁵²

When the Civil War started, Smith quickly sided with the Federal government. He saw the war question as the slave question. He hoped that abolitionists and anti-abolitionists would join hands to put down the rebellion and petition President Lincoln to proclaim the liberty

48. Smith to Jonathan S. Green, 5 March 1853, Smith Papers.

49. Green to Smith, 30 March 1854.

50. Green wrote Smith, "Remember me affectionately—I can't help it if you call it a kind of meat-axe affection. I think it is a genial tender affection—to your cherished circle." Green to Smith, 30 September 1857.

51. Green to Smith, 2 February 1858.

52. Beriah Green, "Thoughts on Treason", *Liberator*, 19 April 1861. Letter, Green to Wendell Phillips, 29 December 1859, Emerson Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

of the slaves.⁵³ By contrast, Green's displeasure with the Republicans waxed ever more vehement as the war progressed. He called them a set of "sworn kidnapers" and wished the Lincoln government "bad luck" in its efforts to preserve the Union at the expense of black freedom. Green described Lincoln as "the presiding bloodhound of the nation".⁵⁴ Smith hoped that black freedom could be won on the battlefield. Green's despair was such that he could only hope that a political phoenix would rise from the ashes of a bloody Armageddon to usher in the millennial age.

By the end of the Civil War, Green and Smith were both in poor health due to the effects of old age and were more absorbed in personal rather than public affairs. Green characteristically had less confidence in Reconstruction politics than Smith did, but he did not press his differences. After nearly four decades of stormy intimacy, the Green-Smith relationship mellowed. Both reformers realized that their course had been run. Another generation would have to struggle with the demands of righteousness. Green's last letters to Smith are filled with musings about youth, old age, various health regimes, and family matters. "I feel a special interest in hoary heads", Green told Smith. "We are nearing the goal."⁵⁵ Beriah Green reached his on 5 May 1874, nine months prior to Smith. He collapsed while delivering a temperance lecture in Whitesboro's town hall and died almost immediately. Smith passed away in more peaceful circumstances during the Christmas holidays while visiting a nephew in New York City.

For nearly half a century, these oddly matched friends wrestled with the demands of their consciences within a world they deemed worth saving. One saw shadows everywhere, even in the countenances of compatriots. The other preferred to walk in the light, confident that those yoked in common cause could remain congenial even when disagreeing over questions of ends and means. Abolitionism brought Beriah Green and Gerrit Smith together. It also drove them apart as the abolitionist campaign moved from moral suasion

53. Smith to Hon. Owen Lovejoy, M. C., 12 July 1861, *Miscellaneous Abolitionist Autographs*, New-York Historical Society.

54. Green to Smith, 21 August 1862.

55. Green to Smith, 23 May 1872.

to political means. In retrospect, Green had good cause to despair of democracy's ability to solve the problem of slavery. As Frederick Douglass once put it, "Liberty came to the freedmen . . . not in mercy, but in wrath, not by moral choice, but by military necessity, not by the generous action of the people among whom they were to live, . . . but by strangers, foreigners, invaders, trespassers, aliens and enemies".⁵⁶ Thus, Smith's pragmatic optimism balanced Green's absolutism and pessimism. Green's understanding of the need for institutionalizing abolitionism in Oneida Institute provided the crusaders against slavery with a model of what the country might look like were their principles put into practice. Despite differences in personality, social status, intellectual interests, and views about the validity of civil or human government, these two antebellum reformers complemented one another. Had they been identical in temperament and character, the history of American abolitionism would be far less interesting and less revealing of the interplay of the personal, domestic, and public lives of the individuals who joined the crusade for black freedom.

56. *Frederick Douglass' Paper*, 16 November 1855.