

# Famous New Yorker Gerrit Smith

As the wealthy heir of a slaveholder, Gerrit Smith may have been an unlikely leader of the anti-slavery movement. But his strong belief in freedom for everyone made Smith an influential champion of the oppressed.

Gerrit Smith was born in Utica on March 6, 1797. His father, Peter Smith, acquired vast tracts of land from the Oneida Indians. Raised in Peterboro, a town named after his father, Gerrit got a gentleman's education at the Hamilton-Oneida Academy and Hamilton College. He emerged with a strong commitment to reforming society. He believed in abstaining from alcohol, equality for all people and the end of slavery in America.

Opponents of slavery disagreed over how to end it. The most radical abolitionists wanted the government to abolish it without compensating slave owners, and demanded immediate equality for former slaves. Because Gerrit Smith worried that whites wouldn't accept blacks as equals, he joined the American Colonization Society, which supported sending freed slaves to Africa. As abolitionists were attacked by racist mobs in the 1830s, he began to suspect that colonizationists were stalling abolition. On October 17, 1835, he saw a mob attack an abolitionist convention in Utica. He invited the abolitionists to meet in Peterboro the next day. He joined the American Anti-Slavery Society one month later and became one of the biggest financial backers of the abolitionist movement.

Smith used his wealth to create alternatives to colonization. He helped blacks free themselves by making Peterboro a station on the "Underground Railroad" for escapees from slavery. He set an example by granting 50-acre tracts of land inherited from his father in the town of North Elba to black farmers. When skeptics asked abolitionists what would happen to freed slaves, Smith had a practical answer. Giving them land would make them productive citizens.

Abolitionists disagreed over political tactics. Some considered politics immoral so long as slavery was constitutional. Others believed that slavery could not be constitutional if it was immoral and could be abolished by the federal government. Gerrit Smith agreed with the abolitionists who formed the Liberty Party in 1840. Because the party called for immediate abolition and racial equality, it was never popular. Smith himself was elected to the House of Representatives as an independent in 1852. He was frustrated by both major political parties' support for slavery and refused to run for a second term.

As slaveholders grew more aggressive in the 1850s, Smith began to consider more forceful measures against them. He supported efforts to keep slavery out of the Kansas Territory and contributed to John Brown's antislavery forces. Smith was one of the "Secret Six" accused of backing Brown's 1859 attack on the federal arsenal in Harpers Ferry, Virginia. He denied knowing Brown's plans and began to back off from some of his most radical positions.

After the Civil War, Gerrit Smith surprised many people by urging reconciliation between North and South. He signed a bail bond to have captured Confederate President Jefferson Davis released from prison and reminded northerners that they shared the blame for slavery. He had become a more conservative figure by his death on December 28, 1874 but was remembered for his forceful sponsorship of radical resistance to evil.



Library of Congress, Prints and  
Photographs Division [reproduction  
number LC-USZ62-02631]



**Utica** is located in Oneida County in the Mohawk Valley region of New York State. It is approximately 90 miles northwest of the state capital of Albany.

---

For more about Gerrit Smith & his home go to [www.gerritsmith.org](http://www.gerritsmith.org) or to the National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum at [www.nationalabolitionhalloffameandmuseum.org](http://www.nationalabolitionhalloffameandmuseum.org). This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA-Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2013.