

## 1846. Gerrit Smith - Plan to Secure the Vote Through Land Ownership

<http://www.nps.gov/wori/gsmith.htm>

Gerrit Smith was born in Utica, New York in 1797 and lived in nearby Peterboro. A well known philanthropist and social reformer, he was a first cousin of the noted abolitionist and crusader for women's rights, Elizabeth Cady Stanton. In 1835 Smith joined the American Anti-Slavery Society after witnessing its speakers being attacked by a wild mob in Utica. Five years later he played a leading role in the formation of the anti-slavery Liberty Party which was based in New York State. He was the Liberty Party candidate for president of the United States in 1848 and 1852. Smith was from a wealthy family and used his family's fortune to establish communities for formerly enslaved Africans, including one in North Elba, New York. He was a financial supporter of John Brown's campaign against the extension of slavery into Kansas and was implicated in the raid on Harpers Ferry. However, he denied knowledge of the attack or that his intent was to promote insurrection among Southern slaves. Gerrit Smith died on December 28, 1874.

Gerrit Smith to Rev. Theodore S. Wright, Rev. Charles B. Ray, and Dr. J. McCune Smith, August 1, 1846 (Source: Octavius Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith: A Biography* (New York, 1878), 102-105.

*Dear Friends,*—For years, I have indulged the thought that, when I had sold enough land to pay my debts, I would give away the remainder to the poor.

I am an Agrarian. I would that every man who desires a farm, might have one; and I would, that no man were so regardless of the needs and desires of his brother men, as to covet the possession of more farms than one. Do not understand that I sympathize with lawless, violent and bloody Agrarianism. "My soul, come not into their secret; unto their assembly mine honor, be not thou united."

I have, with the Divine blessing, been able to make sales of land the present year, so extensive, as to inspire me with confidence, that my debts, very great as their sum still is, will be paid, in a few years. It is true, that, to make this event more certain, I must sell more land. Nevertheless, I feel it safe to make a beginning *now*, in the work of distributing land. I have, indeed, heretofore given tracts of land to public institutions, and a few small parcels to individuals: but I have now to enter upon the greater and better .work of making large donations of land to the poor.

I will, at the present time give away but a part of the land, which I intend to give away. It will, perhaps, be better not to give away the remainder, until my debts are wholly paid. This land was accumulated principally by my father, the late Peter Smith.

I hope to be able to make, in all, some three thousand deeds—most of them now, and the remainder within two or three years. The deeds will generally convey from forty to sixty acres of land each.

To whom among the poor I shall make these deeds is a question I did not solve hastily. I needed no time to conclude, that, inasmuch as my home and the land are both in this State, it would be very suitable to select my beneficiaries from among the people of this State. But, for a long time, I was at a loss to decide, whether to take my beneficiaries from the meritorious poor generally, or from the meritorious colored poor only.

I could not put a bounty on color. I shrank from the least appearance of doing so: and if I know my heart, it was equally compassionate toward such white and black men as are equal sufferers. In the end, however, I concluded to confine my gifts to colored people. I had not come to this conclusion had the land I have to give away been several times as much as it is. I had not come to it, were not the colored people the poorest of the poor, and the most deeply wronged class of our citizens. That they are so, is evident, if only from the fact, that the cruel, killing. Heaven-defying prejudice of which they are the victims, has closed against them the avenues to riches and respectability—to happiness and usefulness. That they are so, is also evident from the fact, that, whilst white men in this State, however destitute of property, are allowed to vote for Civil Rulers, every colored man in it, who does not own landed estate to the value of two hundred and fifty dollars, is excluded from the exercise of this natural and indispensably protective right. I confess, that this mean and wicked exclusion has had no little effect in producing my preference, in this case. I confess, too, that I was influenced by the consideration, that there is great encouragement to improve the condition of our free colored brethren, because that every improvement in it contributes to loosen the bands of the enslaved portion of their outraged and afflicted race.

And, now, will you permit me to tax you with no little labor—the labor of making out a list of the colored men in certain counties, who shall receive a deed of land from me? My only restrictions upon you in making out this list, is,

1st. That upon it there be the name of no person younger than twenty-one and no person older than sixty.

2d. That there be upon it the name of no person who is in easy circumstance as to property; and no person, who is already the owner of land.

3d. That there be upon it the name of no drunkard—and I had almost added of no person who drinks intoxicating liquor—since to drink it, though ever so moderately, is to be in the way to drunkenness.

4th. That the total number of names in the list be one thousand nine hundred and eighty-five; that 127 thereof be the names of the persons residing in the county of Suffolk. 215 Queens. 197 Kings. 861 New York. 32 Richmond. 31 Rockland. 115 Westchester. 150 Dutchess. 5 Sullivan. 106 Ulster. 136 Orange. 10 Putnam.

I take the liberty to suggest, that the true course, in the case of each of the aforesaid counties, will be to have the names of the persons who are qualified to share in my lands, or rather to share in the chance of getting them, written on slips of paper—these slips put in a vessel—and as many drawn therefrom as there are persons in the county to receive deeds.

Could I receive this list by the first day of the next month (and I most earnestly hope that I can), I should be able to put a considerable share of the deeds into your hands by the first day of the following month; and, in that case, the grantees might be put in possession of them by the middle of October. It may be a year or more, ere I can supply all with deeds—and it is possible that some may be finally unsupplied. A part of the names—that is, an incomplete list, you might be able to send me in a week or two.

Do not fail to have the names and places of residence written very legibly. Should it be so, that, from the death of some of the grantees, or from other cause or causes, you cannot deliver all the deeds, you will, in that case, promptly return me such as are undelivered, and recommend other persons as worthy of the land described in them. The deeds will come to the grantees clear of all fees for drawing them, and taking the acknowledgement of their execution.

For all this service which I ask at your hands, I can make you no other compensation than that of thanking you for helping me promote a scheme of justice and benevolence.

There is still a balance of purchase money and interest due to the State of New York, on a large proportion of the parcels of land. The aggregate is a very large sum. But I propose to begin paying it within six months, and I hope to have it all paid within two years.

There is also a great amount of taxes due on them—for which they will be sold next year, or the year after, if not previously paid. I will pay the taxes so far as to prevent such sale—and this will be in full of all taxes up to 1844 or 1845 exclusive. I should be grieved, and have abundant reason to be, should any of the grantees suffer their parcels of land to be sold for the non-payment of taxes.

Among the parcels which I give away, will doubtless be found some that are unfit for cultivation. Most of these, however, will be more or less valuable for timber. I hope that the grantees will prize their lands sufficiently to guard them against trespassers.

I have a few large tracts of land, which, because they are either very remote from settlements, or very mountainous and sterile, I prefer selling for what they will bring, to giving them away to those who need lands for agriculture.

I write to gentlemen in other parts of the State, asking of them service in respect to other counties similar to those which I ask of you.

Very respectfully,

Your Friend

Gerrit Smith