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## The "Black Dream" of Gerrit Smith, New York Abolitionist

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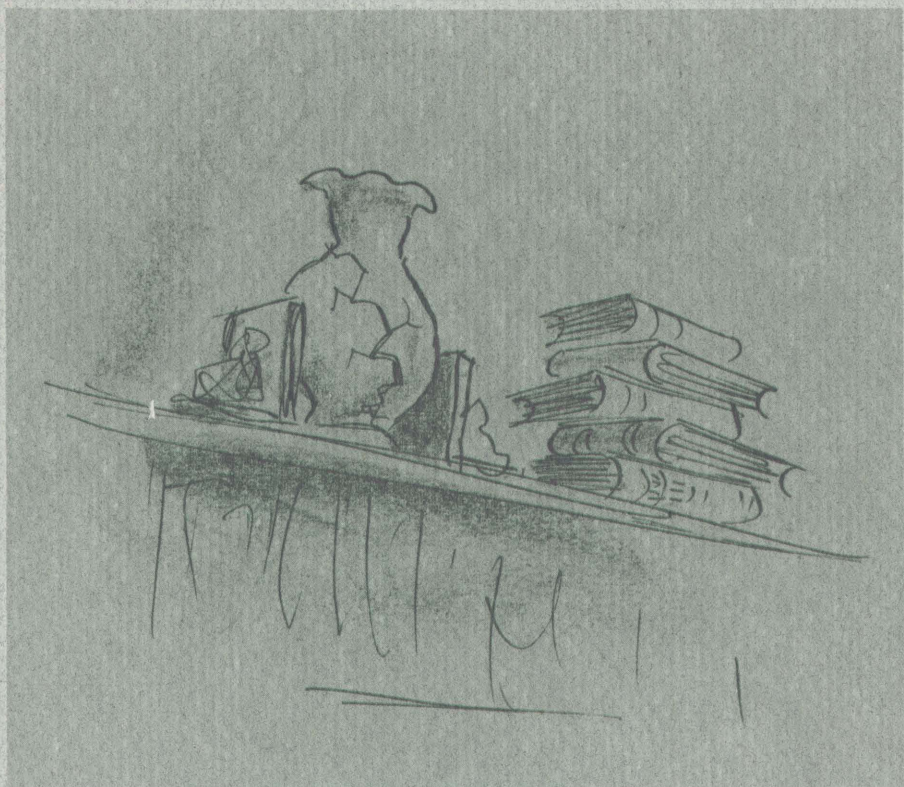
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VOLUME XX

NUMBER TWO

FALL 1985

---

- The Drawings and Papers of Alan Dunn and Mary Petty at  
Syracuse University  
by Elisabeth Kaltenbrunner Melczer, Research Assistant,  
Syracuse University Art Collections 3
- Delmore Schwartz: Two Lost Poems  
by Robert Phillips, Literary Executor of the Estate  
of Delmore Schwartz 43
- The "Black Dream" of Gerrit Smith, New York Abolitionist  
by John R. McKivigan, Lecturer in History at  
Yale University; and Madeleine Leveille, Greater  
New Haven State Technical College 51
- French Literary Manuscripts at Syracuse University  
by Edward Lyon, George Arents Research Library  
for Special Collections 77
- "Une Amazone", a Manuscript of Alexandre Dumas père  
by Paul J. Archambault, Professor of French,  
Syracuse University 91
- Granville Hicks and the Small Town  
by Leah Levenson; and Jerry Natterstad,  
Professor of English, Framingham State College,  
Massachusetts 95
- News of the Syracuse University Libraries and  
the Library Associates 113

# The "Black Dream" of Gerrit Smith, New York Abolitionist

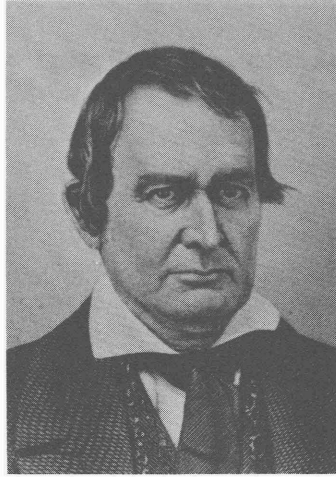
BY JOHN R. MCKIVIGAN AND MADELEINE LEVEILLE\*

In October 1859, John Brown and twenty-one followers undertook a daring raid on the United States arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Virginia (now West Virginia). Brown later claimed that he had planned to capture weapons at the arsenal to establish a base in the southern Appalachian Mountains in the southern states from which slaves could be assisted to escape to freedom. Within two days, Brown was captured and most members of his small band were either killed or had fled. Virginia authorities discovered among Brown's possessions documents revealing that a small group of northern abolitionists had financed his raid.

One of the northerners implicated was Gerrit Smith, a wealthy landholder from Peterboro, New York. When the demand for a thorough investigation into the conspiracy behind the Harpers Ferry incident rapidly swelled, Smith was committed by his family to the New York State Insane Asylum at Utica. Only eight weeks later, after Brown was executed by Virginia authorities and the public outcry for revenge diminished, Smith was released and allowed to return to his home and business. Until his death in 1874, Smith steadfastly refused to admit any intimate connection with the planning of the Harpers Ferry raid.

Both contemporaries and historians have commented on Smith's behavior in this affair, but no consensus exists regarding whether the

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Gerrit Smith.

abolitionist truly suffered a psychological breakdown or feigned one in an attempt to escape prosecution as an accomplice of Brown. Research in the vast collection of Smith's correspondence at the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University and in surviving case notes in the Utica asylum archives sheds considerable light on this issue and offers a tentative answer to an intriguing historical question.

Gerrit Smith was born in Utica, New York, in March 1797, but resided for practically his entire life in the small community of Peterboro in Madison County, New York. Gerrit's father, Peter Smith, was a partner of John Jacob Astor in the fur trade and land speculation ventures and eventually acquired nearly a quarter-million acres of undeveloped land scattered across the states of New York, Vermont, Michigan, and Virginia. The younger Smith graduated from Hamilton College in 1818 and soon thereafter received responsibility for the management of much of his father's landholdings. In the late 1830s, the Smith fortune was endangered by a nationwide financial depression, but Gerrit ultimately survived the crisis richer than ever. In the 1840s and 1850s, Smith's annual income from his landholdings typically exceeded \$60,000.<sup>1</sup>

1. Ralph Volney Harlow, *Gerrit Smith: Philanthropist and Reformer* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1939), 1–45; L. M. Hammond, *History of Madison County, State of New York* (Syracuse: n.p., 1872), 717–26; Stephen B. Oates, *To Purge This Land With Blood: A Biography of John Brown* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970), 193.

Smith's great fortune allowed him to become one of the leading philanthropists of the early nineteenth century. Although he was antisectionarian in his personal religious beliefs, Smith gave generously to the American Bible Society, the American Tract Society, and the American Sunday School Society. He also devoted much of his time and fortune to assisting numerous reform movements popular in up-state New York's famous "Burned-Over District" during the 1830s, 1840s, and 1850s. Smith became a leader and major financial sponsor of state and national organizations promoting temperance, prison reform, women's rights, international peace, and land reform.

The cause that captured the greatest portion of Smith's attention was the campaign to end slavery. At first Smith had been a supporter of efforts to colonize slaves in Africa, but in 1835 he joined the more militant abolitionist movement that demanded the immediate, complete, and uncompensated emancipation of the slaves. He also supported self-improvement efforts of northern free blacks as a means of combatting the pervasive racial prejudice. Following a series of fissures in the antislavery movement in the 1840s, Smith became the leader of a small faction of uncompromising political abolitionists who nominated him for President of the United States in 1848, 1856, and 1860. In 1852, a coalition of abolitionists and more moderate anti-slavery voters elected Smith to Congress. Smith experienced considerable frustration in promoting his abolitionist program in Washington and eventually resigned his congressional seat before his term expired. Smith's growing despair concerning the failure of political antislavery tactics made him more inclined in the 1850s to consider other approaches to free the slaves.<sup>2</sup>

Events during the 1850s helped convert Smith into a proponent of violent abolitionist tactics. Smith strongly detested the Fugitive Slave Bill of 1850, which required northern citizens under penalty of law to assist public officials in the recapture of runaway slaves. In September 1851, he joined a mob in Syracuse, New York, that stormed a police station and freed an escaped slave, Jerry McHenry, who was awaiting rendition to the South. Smith and twenty-five others were indicted for their role in the "Jerry Rescue", but only one was convicted; and the other cases, including Smith's, were later dismissed.

2. Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, 46–192; Jeffery Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators: John Brown, the Secret Six, and a Theory of Slave Violence* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 96–100, 208–09; Merton L Dillon, *The Abolitionists: Growth of a Dissenting Minority* (1974; New York: W. W. Norton, 1979), 228–32.

For the remainder of the decade, New York State abolitionists gathered annually to celebrate this bold action and Smith was prominent among them.<sup>3</sup>

Sectional turmoil in the Kansas territory following passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Bill in 1854 also helped persuade Smith of the need to use force to combat slavery. Settlers entering that territory who opposed the admission of slavery into Kansas encountered violent harassment from armed proslavery “Border Ruffians” from neighboring Missouri. Smith joined many other northerners in forming “emigrant-aid” societies to settle antislavery families in the Kansas Territory and to provide them with sufficient arms to defend their homesteads against proslavery forces. In 1856, Smith wrote a letter to the *Syracuse Journal*, proclaiming, “Hitherto, I have opposed the bloody abolition of slavery. But now, when it begins to march its conquering bands into the Free states, I and ten thousand other peace men are not only ready to have it repulsed with violence, but pursued even unto death, with violence.”<sup>4</sup> Smith eventually contributed an estimated \$16,000 to various free-state groups in Kansas and let it be known that he had no objection to the money being used to purchase weapons for self-defense.<sup>5</sup>

The most important influence on Smith’s conversion to the use of violent antislavery tactics was his friendship with John Brown. On 1 August 1846 Smith advertised that he would divide 120,000 acres of undeveloped land in the Adirondack Mountains of northern New York into lots for blacks to farm. A year and a half later, John Brown approached Smith and requested permission to settle among these blacks “to aid them by example and precept.”<sup>6</sup> Smith was immediately impressed by Brown’s self-reliance, religious nature, and commitment to aiding the blacks and sold him a 244-acre tract at North Elba, Essex County, New York, for a bargain price of \$1 an acre. Brown lived on that farm from 1849 to 1851 and settled his wife and

3. Richard O. Boyer, *John Brown: A Biography and a History* (New York: Knopf, 1973), 37; Stanley W. Campbell, *The Slave Catchers: Enforcement of the Fugitive Slave Law, 1850–1860* (1968; New York: W. W. Norton, 1972), 27, 155–57.

4. *Syracuse Journal*, 31 May 1856; Oates, *To Purge This Land*, 231; Boyer, *John Brown*, 8.

5. Boyer, *John Brown*, 111; Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators*, 96.

6. Louis Ruchames, ed., *John Brown: The Making of a Revolutionary* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1969), 27.

daughters there in 1855 before he moved to Kansas to join the free-staters' struggle. Although Smith originally advised Brown to remain at North Elba, he presented his friend's cause to a Syracuse political abolitionist convention in 1855 and collected \$60 to assist him in migrating to Kansas. In June 1857, Brown met Smith in Chicago where Smith gave him \$350 and loaned him another \$110 to help finance the campaigns of a small band of free-state guerillas that Brown had recruited.<sup>7</sup>

On a visit to Smith's home in February 1858, Brown revealed the general outlines of an even bolder plan to combat slavery than the skirmishing with Border Ruffians in Kansas. As described to Smith and a few other trusted abolitionists, including Franklin B. Sanborn of Massachusetts, Brown's rough plan involved seizing a federal arsenal in the South (Harpers Ferry was only one of several named as possibilities) and using the weapons captured there to establish a stronghold deep in the Appalachian Mountains from which to strike at nearby plantations and liberate their slaves. Those slaves who did not wish to remain in the mountain fortress to help rescue additional slaves would be assisted to escape to the North, and ultimately, Canada.<sup>8</sup> Smith's somewhat reluctant acquiescence to this visionary project was revealed in his statement to Sanborn:

You see how it is; our dear old friend has made up his mind to this course, and cannot be turned from it. We cannot give him up to die alone; we must support him. I will raise so many hundred dollars for him; you must lay the case before your friends in Massachusetts, and ask them to do as much. I can see no other way.<sup>9</sup>

7. Hill Peebles Wilson, *John Brown, Soldier of Fortune: A Critique* (Lawrence, Kansas: Hill P. Wilson, 1913), 38–39, 75, 181, 215–16; James C. Malin, *John Brown and the Legend of Fifty-Six* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1942), 5; Oates, *To Purge This Land*, 65–67, 85, 90–91 207; Boyer, *John Brown*, 392–93, 460, 526; Ruchames, *John Brown*, 94.

8. Gerald Sorin, *Abolitionism: A New Perspective* (New York: Praeger, 1972), 96; Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators*, 139–45.

9. Franklin Benjamin Sanborn, *Life and Letters of John Brown: Liberator of Kansas, and Martyr of Virginia* (Boston: Roberts Brothers, 1891), 458–59; William Elsey Connelley, *John Brown* (Topeka, Kansas: Crane & Co., 1900), 318–19; Oswald Garrison Villard, *John Brown, 1800–1859: A Biography Fifty Years After* (1909; New York: Knopf, 1943), 321–22; Oates, *To Purge This Land*, 227, 231.



Sanborn, in fact, returned to Massachusetts and recruited a few collaborators from among previous contributors to the Kansas free-state campaign. Organized in great secrecy, this small group included physician Samuel Gridley Howe, industrialist George Luther Stearns, and two Unitarian ministers, Theodore Parker and Thomas Wentworth Higginson, in addition to Smith and Sanborn. Of this group dubbed the “Secret Six”, Stearns and Smith were by far the largest financial backers of Brown’s plan.<sup>10</sup>

Smith’s contributions to Brown, however, should not be regarded as evidence that Smith had resolved all doubts about the propriety of violent antislavery tactics. Like the other early abolitionists, Smith originally had hoped that “moral suasion” would influence the southern slaveholders to emancipate their slaves. However, what he perceived as aggression by the South in the Fugitive Slave Law and in the Kansas territorial controversy convinced Smith that violent means would be required if slavery were ever to be ended. Nonetheless, Smith’s pacifistic religious values remained at odds with the concept of inciting a slave insurrection. One way Smith dealt with his ambivalence regarding violence was to insist that he not be informed by Brown of the specific details regarding how his contributions would be spent. On several occasions, Smith even considered disassociating himself entirely from Brown’s plot. Ambivalence as well as erratic and impulsive behavior, such as his resignation from Congress, was noticed repeatedly during Smith’s public life to the delight of his enemies and the exasperation of his friends.<sup>11</sup>

The first indication of Smith’s unsteady commitment to Brown’s violent methods occurred when the conspiracy almost became exposed more than a year before Harpers Ferry. In June 1857, Smith gave \$150 to Hugh Forbes, a British mercenary, who was engaged to train Brown’s Kansas followers in military tactics. Brown and Forbes soon fell to quarreling over money and over the best tactics to be used in the contemplated invasion of the South. Forbes parted from Brown and traveled to Washington, where he revealed to a number of Republican politicians what he knew of Brown’s plot and its back-

10. Richard J. Hinton, *John Brown and His Men* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1894), 130–31; Oates, *To Purge This Land*, 238; Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators*, 146, 205–07, 210, 214.

11. Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators*, 128–29, 139–45; Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, 399–403.

ing by wealthy abolitionists. In the spring of 1858, Smith and most of the conspirators persuaded Brown to delay the attack and temporarily return to Kansas to create doubts about the British mercenary's revelations. Smith's panic at that time was acute, and he wrote Sanborn that he "was never convinced of the wisdom of this scheme" and that to continue under the circumstances would be madness.<sup>12</sup> In July 1858, Smith even told Sanborn that he wanted no more information about Brown's activities. That fall, Smith's faith in political means to end slavery revived somewhat during his campaign for the office of governor of New York. Despite delivering more than fifty speeches and spending over \$5,000 in the campaign, however, he received only a few thousand votes.<sup>13</sup>

Smith's anger at his poor showing in the fall 1858 election helped to rekindle his interest in Brown's plot. At roughly the same time, members of the Secret Six recovered their confidence in Brown following his daring raid into Missouri in December 1858, which liberated eleven slaves. Smith restated his support for Brown during the latter's final visit to Peterboro in April 1859. At a public meeting in the village during that visit, Smith pledged another \$400 to aid Brown and declared to the audience: "If I were asked to point out—I will say it in his presence—to point out the man in all this world I think most truly a Christian, I would point out John Brown. I was once doubtful in my own mind as to Captain Brown's course. I now approve of it heartily, having given my mind to it more of late."<sup>14</sup> After this April meeting, Smith continued to forward to Brown additional large sums of money.

As Brown proceeded during the summer and fall of 1859 with the final preparations for his attack on Harpers Ferry, Smith's public statements showed little evidence of any remaining ambivalence toward the use of violence. In August 1859, he declined to take his usual place as principal speaker in the annual celebration of the Jerry

12. Oates, *To Purge This Land*, 249–50; Villard, *John Brown*, 287, 298, 340; Connelley, *John Brown*, 321.

13. Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators*, 179–80; Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, 377–82.

14. Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith: A Biography* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1878), 237–38; G. Murlin Welch, *Border Warfare in Southeastern Kansas, 1856–1859* (Pleasanton, Kansas: Linn County Historical Society, 1977), 191–99, 208, 219–21; Villard, *John Brown*, 395; Wilson, *John Brown*, 248; Connelley, *John Brown*, 320; Oates, *To Purge This Land*, 261–65, 269, 282.

McHenry rescue in Syracuse. Smith addressed a letter to the event's organizers to persuade them that more militant tactics were needed if slavery was ever to be overthrown. Smith's letter revealed that he had lost faith in the abolitionist movement and believed that the slaves must act to free themselves. Bloody slave insurrections would soon break out in the South, Smith predicted: "It is, perhaps, too late to bring slavery to an end by peaceable means, —too late to vote it down. For many years I have feared, and published my fears, that it would go out in blood. These fears have grown into a belief."<sup>15</sup>

On the evening of Sunday, 16 October 1859, John Brown and twenty-one followers, including three of his sons and five black men, launched their attack on the Harpers Ferry arsenal and armory. Both sites and the principal transportation lines in and out of the small valley community were in the raiders' hands by the following dawn. Brown sent a small party into the countryside to liberate slaves, but only twelve were brought back and none voluntarily joined the insurrection. By the following evening, local militia units and armed townsmen had cut off Brown's party from all potential escape routes to the surrounding mountains. A detachment of United States Marines arrived by train from Washington, and by noon on Tuesday Brown and six surviving raiders were captured. In the two days of fighting, Brown's insurgents killed five men, including one marine, and lost ten of their own numbers. Brown was quickly brought to trial for treason and sentenced to death on 2 November. Virginia Governor Henry A. Wise rejected all pleas for clemency, and Brown was executed on 2 December. The other captured raiders were also speedily tried and executed.<sup>16</sup>

Within a few days of the raid the nation's press carried descriptions of documents found among Brown's possessions, which implicated various members of the Secret Six and other supporters of the plot, such as the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass. Among those items were a letter from Smith to Brown written on 4 June 1859 and a canceled bank draft from Smith to Brown for \$100, dated 22 August 1859. In addition, a letter from Brown to one of his sons de-

15. *Utica Daily Observer*, 2 November 1859; Wilson, *John Brown*, 353–54; Oates, *To Purge This Land*, 285; Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators*, 208–09; Dillon, *Dis-senting Minority*, 228–231.

16. Oates, *To Purge This Land*, 274–80, 290–302; Boyer, *John Brown*, 8–9, 16–18.

scribing some of Smith's past financial contributions stated that "G.S." would be good for one-fifth the costs of the planned slave insurrection to be incited by the raid on Harpers Ferry.<sup>17</sup>

While in captivity awaiting trial, Brown refused to name any individual who had assisted in his scheme. Very damning evidence against Smith, however, came from John E. Cook, one of the captured Harpers Ferry raiders, who revealed many of the details of the conspiracy in the vain hope that he might be spared the death sentence. Cook gave the names of Smith and three Massachusetts abolitionists, Sanborn, Howe, and Thaddeus Hyatt, as the principal financial backers of Brown's plot.<sup>18</sup> *The New York Times*, the *New York Herald*, and other newspapers published accounts by Hugh Forbes, the British mercenary who had deserted Brown's company more than a year earlier, charging that Smith had been a principal financial backer of the conspiracy and had personally paid Forbes to travel to Kansas to train Brown's men. The press also remembered Smith's earlier prediction of slave revolts and deemed it further evidence that Smith had prior knowledge of Brown's intentions.<sup>19</sup>

Northern newspapers carried stories contending that Governor Wise was actively seeking the extradition of Smith, Sanborn, Howe, and Douglass. Rumors spread that southern agents, aided by sympathetic federal authorities, were seeking to capture anyone guilty of assisting Brown. The *New York Herald*, the state's leading Democratic newspaper and a longtime virulent critic of Smith and all abolitionists, even editorialized in favor of Smith's extradition to Virginia.<sup>20</sup> Another Democratic newspaper, the *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, branded Smith guilty of treason and called on the governor of Virginia to move more aggressively to arrest and punish all of Brown's

17. *New York Tribune*, 20, 21 October 1859; *Philadelphia Public Ledger*, 21 October 1859; *Utica Daily Observer*, 27, 28 October 1859; *New York Herald*, 20, 21 October 1859; Otto J. Scott, *The Secret Six: John Brown and the Abolitionist Movement* (New York: Times Books, 1979), 292–93; Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, 407–08.

18. *New York Tribune*, 10 November 1859; *The New York Times*, 10 November 1859; Richard Webb, *The Lives and Letters of Captain John Brown* (London: n.p., 1961), 371–72; Hinton, *John Brown*, 329; *To Purge This Land*, 306.

19. *The New York Times*, 20, 28, 31 October 1859; *New York Herald*, 20, 29 October and 1 December 1859; *Utica Daily Observer*, 2 November 1859; Wilson, *John Brown*, 245.

20. *New York Herald*, 21, 24, 26 October 1859, 11 November 1859.

accomplices.<sup>21</sup> Such threats unnerved practically all of Brown's backers. Of the five Massachusetts members of the Secret Six, Parker was already traveling in Europe for health reasons, and Sanborn, Howe, and Stearns all felt sufficiently in danger to flee to Canada for a time. Only Thomas Wentworth Higginson remained immune to the growing panic among the conspirators.<sup>22</sup>

In late October the upstate New York press carried stories contending that Smith had been advised to flee the country rather than risk extradition to Virginia. According to the *Hamilton Union*: "On the reception of the news from Harper's Ferry, reports say that this gentleman conferred with Hon. Timothy Jenkins [Smith's attorney] about what he had better do, who advised him to leave the country. RUMOR says GERRIT is about to start for Canada."<sup>23</sup> Other newspaper accounts claimed that armed guards had been stationed around Smith's Peterboro mansion for his protection. Not only Peterboro, but most towns in Madison County were reported to be in a highly agitated state, and preparations were made to resist any attempt by authorities to arrest Smith.<sup>24</sup>

The best indication of Smith's panicked state of mind following news of Harpers Ferry was his action to destroy all evidence connecting himself to Brown. Smith burned all letters in his possession that bore on the plot. Charles D. Miller, Smith's son-in-law, also traveled to Massachusetts and Ohio to find and destroy letters from Smith to the Secret Six and members of Brown's family. Smith was also reported as having privately denied involvement in the Harpers Ferry conspiracy. The *Syracuse Journal* carried a story credited to one of Smith's business associates who visited with him at Peterboro after the Harpers Ferry incident and was told that the \$100 draft to Brown was intended to be used for "Kansas work" alone. This individual claimed that "Mr. Smith says distinctly that he had no knowledge or the least suspicion that Brown was engaged in planning an insurrection."<sup>25</sup>

21. *Rochester Union and Advertiser*, 25 October 1859.

22. Oates, *To Purge This Land*, 312–15.

23. *Hamilton Union*, as quoted in the *Utica Daily Observer*, 27 October 1859.

24. *Utica Daily Observer*, 15 November 1859; *New York Tribune*, 17 November 1859; *Douglass' Monthly* 2 (December 1859): 185; Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, 408–11.

25. *Syracuse Journal*, n.d., quoted in *New York Tribune*, 28 October 1859; *New York Herald*, 29 October 1859; *The New York Times*, 31 October 1859; Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, 407; Oates, *To Purge This Land*, 313.

The *New York Herald* dispatched a special reporter to visit Smith at Peterboro in late October to obtain more information concerning the abolitionist's ties to Brown and the Harpers Ferry raid. The only statement the reporter could get from Smith was this remark: "I am going to be indicted, sir, indicted! You must not talk to me about it. . . . If any man in the Union is taken, it will be me." This reporter had covered Smith's gubernatorial campaign the previous fall and made some very interesting comments upon the changes in Smith since that time. Concerning the controversy which followed the raid, the reporter observed:

[It] has not only impaired his health, but is likely to seriously affect his excitable and illy-balanced mind. . . . His calm, dignified, impressive bearing has given place to a hasty, nervous agitation, as though some great fear was constantly before his imagination.

The *Herald* reporter concluded from his visit with Smith:

He is in evident alarm and agitation, inconsistent with the idea that his complicity with the plot is simply to the extent already made public. *I believe that Brown's visit to his house last spring was immediately connected with the insurrection*, and that it is the knowledge that at any moment, either by the discovery of papers or the confession of accomplices, his connection with the affair may become exposed, that keeps Mr. Smith in constant excitement and fear."<sup>26</sup>

The *Herald* account was only one of several reports of Smith's increasing state of agitation in late October and early November. The *Rochester Daily Express* reported that Smith had been "constantly wringing his hands and bemoaning the fate of poor Brown" and that the abolitionist's friends were "apprehensive that his reason would give way under the load of grief and anxiety. . . ."<sup>27</sup> The *Albany Argus* related that a visitor to Smith's home shortly after the time of the raid reported that "his eye was wild and his appearance haggard, and

26. *New York Herald*, 2 November 1859.

27. *Rochester Daily Express*, n.d., quoted in *The New York Times*, 11 November 1859.



New York State Lunatic Asylum, Utica, New York, from *History of Oneida County, New York* (Philadelphia, 1878).

his motion spasmodic and uncertain, but unceasingly restless”.<sup>28</sup> Smith’s sleep and eating habits became increasingly erratic. He was despondent and his family feared he might attempt suicide. He even talked of going to Virginia to share John Brown’s fate. Finally, on 7 November, friends and family members were able to persuade Smith to accompany them to the state asylum at Utica by assuring him that he was on his way to Virginia.<sup>29</sup>

The public reactions of contemporaries to news of Smith’s hospitalization came swiftly. What is most striking about those statements is how little skepticism was voiced at that time regarding the timing of Smith’s mental collapse. Both friends and enemies pointed to long-existing traits in Smith’s personality that they felt had brought on the breakdown.

Several newspapers published reports that Smith’s insanity might have been hereditary. The *New York Evening Post* wrote: “Mr. Smith

28. *Albany Argus*, n.d., quoted in *New York Herald*, 12 November 1859; *Utica Daily Observer*, 9, 19 November 1859.

29. *Utica Daily Observer*, 9, 19 November 1859; *New York Tribune*, 17 November 1859; Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators*, 227; Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith*, 245; Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, 411.

is said to have an hereditary disposition to insanity. His father, Peter Smith, though the possessor of an immense estate, and surrounded by every circumstance of property, was subject to fits of profound despondency, during which he was under the impression that he would die a beggar. . . . The late Peter Sken. Smith, the brother of Gerrit, was for some time an inmate of a lunatic asylum though when he died he was generally regarded as in possession of his reason. . . .”<sup>30</sup>

Other newspapers commented on other evidence of Smith’s long-standing instability. The Republican *New York Tribune* praised Smith’s benevolence and intellect but then declared that “he lacked practical commonsense, was credulous to the last degree, and wholly devoid of that robust personal courage and strength of character essential to useful action or even successful endurance”.<sup>31</sup> A columnist of Smith’s longtime foe, the *New York Herald*, commented that the abolitionist’s mind was “never exempt from a tendency to be unhinged”.<sup>32</sup>

The Democratic party press led by the *New York Herald* attempted to use Smith to tie the Republican party to the Harpers Ferry plot, but Republican editors responded that Smith was an abolitionist, not a Republican.<sup>33</sup> Most Republicans were eager to dissociate themselves from the violence of Brown’s actions and so were quite willing to dismiss him and his supporters as mad. For example, the *Utica Herald* observed:

Never was an enterprise more rashly undertaken—never was an essay at once more wild and hopeless. It had not the method of the madness of Hamlet. It had no consistency of plot or purpose. It was simply the rushing upon destruction of men whose passion had completely swamped their reason. . . . Granted that Gerrit Smith and others are implicated, what does it prove? Simply that there are madmen North as well as South.<sup>34</sup>

Thurlow Weed, one of the more conservative New York State Republican leaders, was inclined to believe Smith had gone insane due

30. *New York Evening Post*, 11 November 1859; also *New York Evangelist*, as quoted in *Utica Daily Observer*, 12 November 1859.

31. *New York Tribune*, 11 November 1859.

32. *New York Herald*, 10, 11 November 1859.

33. *New York Herald*, 10 November 1859; *Utica Morning Herald*, 22 October 1859; *Albany Argus*, 11 November 1859.

34. *Utica Morning Herald*, 24 October 1859.



to his excessive zeal for reforms such as abolitionism. Weed editorialized in his *Albany Evening Journal* that:

With those who have known Gerrit Smith longest and most intimately, his present melancholy condition is more a matter of regret than of surprise. His mind has hovered upon the borders of insanity for more than a quarter of a century. His physical health was destroyed, many years ago, by his peculiar habits in regard to temperance and diet. . . . His giant mind, ever too active, wildly possessed by ONE IDEA, has finally, by various “declensions,” fallen.<sup>35</sup>

Joshua Giddings, a Republican congressman from Ohio, who was more sympathetic to the abolitionists than most in his party, visited Smith’s family in mid-November and publicly reported that friends of the Peterboro abolitionist had been alarmed at his “monomania” and acute dyspepsia several months prior to the time of the Harpers Ferry raid. Giddings also related that:

Everybody now speaks well—indeed, they speak in the highest terms—of Gerrit Smith. I have not heard an individual express any other than profound respect for him, for his manly virtues, for his pure religious life, his nobleness of character. All men throughout the State mourn over this sad affliction which now rests upon the community.<sup>36</sup>

Another individual with some prior knowledge of the Harpers Ferry raid, the black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, expressed sorrow rather than surprise at the reports that his longtime friend and financial benefactor had gone insane. After having himself fled the United States to Canada to avoid possible arrest, Douglass wrote back to his own newspaper in Rochester:

I have learned from the New York papers that my great hearted friend Gerrit Smith’s health has broken down, and that his mind has become deranged. The thought that “oppression

35. *Albany Evening Journal*, quoted in *The New York Times*, 15 November 1859.

36. *Ashtabula Sentinel*, 14 November 1859, quoted in *Douglass’ Monthly* 2 (December 1859): 192.

maketh a wise man mad” came home to me with tenfold force when I saw this sad telegraphic announcement. I cannot but think that the good man has been under far too great restraint about this Harpers Ferry insurrection. He should have been allowed to pour out his whole mind concerning it. His is a mind that has never known the fetter, and those who have fettered him must take the responsibility for the present—God grant that it may have ere this passed away—affliction and disturbance of mind. Mr. Smith has done nothing in his relation to dear old Ossawatomie Brown for which posterity will not bless his name and memory.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps the most immediately significant reaction to Smith’s hospitalization came from Virginia Governor Henry A. Wise. In a letter to Andrew Hunter, the state’s special prosecutor at the trials of the Harpers Ferry prisoners, Wise declared: “Gerrit Smith is a stark madman, no doubt! Gods, what a moral, what a lesson. Whom the gods wish to make mad they first set to setting others to destroying.”<sup>38</sup> Wise’s belief in Smith’s insanity probably explains why Virginia did not push harder for his arrest.

Scholars have disagreed considerably regarding whether Gerrit Smith’s insanity was genuine and, if so, what had provoked it. Octavius B. Frothingham, who wrote a biography of Smith only four years after his subject’s death in 1874, was extremely solicitous toward the family’s desire to preserve Smith’s reputation. After praising Smith’s many philanthropies, Frothingham conceded that the abolitionist had been an “enthusiast”, subject to frequent “oscillations” of mood, and uncritically accepted the diagnosis of the abolitionist’s psychological breakdown following Harpers Ferry.<sup>39</sup>

Writing in the 1930s, Ralph V. Harlow, Smith’s only modern biographer, concluded that the abolitionist was “temporarily insane”, but admitted that “while the fact of the illness is easy to establish, the cause or causes are not so clear”. Denying that Smith’s physical health had been exceptionally poor in the years or months immediately before Harpers Ferry, Harlow would not credit the “organic”

37. *Frederick Douglass’ Paper*, 16 December 1859.

38. Villard, *John Brown*, 521–22; Jules Abels, *Man on Fire: John Brown and the Cause of Liberty* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 340.

39. Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith*, 245–51.

explanation of the abolitionist's insanity provided by the Utica asylum. Harlow instead believed that the breakdown was a consequence of "what moralists would call a guilty conscience and . . . a terrific nervous strain resulting therefrom".<sup>40</sup>

Later commentators relied heavily on Harlow for factual information concerning Smith's illness, but most were less charitable concerning the causes of his hospitalization. One John Brown biographer, for example, accused Smith of "willing himself into insanity as a means of escaping the responsibility that was his".<sup>41</sup> Another Brown biographer accused Smith of seeking a "safe haven" in the Utica asylum.<sup>42</sup> Many historians noted Smith's sufficient presence of mind to attempt to destroy all evidence linking him with Brown and expressed skepticism regarding the speed of his recovery once the danger of arrest had passed.<sup>43</sup>

The most recent student of the activities of the Secret Six, Jeffery Rossbach, was one of the few historians to disagree with Harlow's contention that Smith was suffering from "temporary insanity" while at the Utica hospital. Rossbach conceded that Smith might have experienced a "breakdown under pressure" but doubted that actual insanity occurred. Rossbach gives equal weight to the possibility that Smith and his family decided that the "asylum was the perfect sanctuary in which to avoid any proslavery retribution and to await the conclusions of those who were investigating the possibility of conspiracy".<sup>44</sup>

The considerable disagreement between nineteenth- and twentieth-century assessments of Smith's behavior following Harpers Ferry

40. Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, 411–13.

41. Boyer, *John Brown*, 17, 160; also see Alice Felt Tyler, *Freedom's Ferment: Phases of American Social History from the Colonial Period to the Outbreak of the Civil War* (1944; New York, Harper & Row, 1962), 541; Allan Nevins, *The Emergence of Lincoln*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1950), 93–95; Louis Filler, *The Crusade Against Slavery, 1830–1860* (New York: Harper & Row, 1960), 269.

42. Abel, *Man on Fire*, 340.

43. Oates, *To Purge This Land*, 65, 313; Scott, *Secret Six*, 299–300, 312–13, 315–16.

44. Rossbach, *Ambivalent Conspirators*, 227–28. Several recent historians have represented highly complimentary accounts of Smith's character. Their research, however, skirted the specific question of Smith's collapse after Harpers Ferry. Lawrence J. Friedman, *Gregarious Saints: Self and Community in American Abolitionism, 1830–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 98–102; Gerald Sorin, *The New York Abolitionists: A Case Study of Radicalism* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1970), 26–38.

presents a difficult problem to those seeking a better understanding of this abolitionist's character. Fortunately, a large body of materials has survived from the time of Smith's hospitalization at Utica that makes it possible to offer some informed speculations upon his psychological state at the time.

The New York State Lunatic Asylum at Utica, today known as the Utica-Marcy Psychiatric Centers, was created by an act of the state legislature in 1836. Its main building was a massive Greek Revival structure of grey limestone, which cost what was then considered an astounding sum of \$285,000 to construct. The asylum received its first patients in 1843. By the late 1850s, the average number of patients on the grounds reached over 500, about one-third of them private admissions. The main building had been severely damaged by a fire in 1857 but was completely restored by 1859. The hospital conditions by decade's end were reported to be crowded.<sup>45</sup>

John Perdue Gray, M.D., the medical superintendent of the asylum, was one of the most prominent psychiatrists of the day, and he personally oversaw the treatment of Gerrit Smith, a private patient. Born 6 August 1825 in Half Moon, Pennsylvania, Gray received his medical degree from the University of Pennsylvania in 1845. In 1850, he was made assistant superintendent at the Utica asylum, and in 1854, at the age of twenty-nine, he was appointed superintendent, a position he held until his death in 1886. At first he continued the "moral treatment" of patients as established by his predecessors, in which patients were treated kindly, with respect, and without undue restraint. Gray instituted the systematic recording of case notes, postmortem examinations, and other scientific research at the asylum. In his later years, Gray's contributions to medicine and psychiatry were acknowledged by his colleagues, who elected him to the presidency of many professional organizations.<sup>46</sup>

During the time of Smith's hospitalization, Gray's ideas regarding

45. Henry J. Cookinham, *History of Oneida County, New York, From 1700 to the Present Time*, 2 vols. (Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Co., 1912), vol. 1, 401–06; Managers of the State Lunatic Asylum, *Eighteenth Annual Report* (Albany, New York: n.p., 1860), 16, 46–48; *History of Oneida County, New York* (Philadelphia: Everts & Fariss, 1878), 234–237.

46. Cookinham, *History of Oneida County*, vol. 1, 403–04; T. Wood Clarke, *Utica for a Century and a Half* (Utica: The Widtman Press, 1952), 201; J. B. Andrews, Eugene Grisson, and J. H. Callender, *In Memoriam: John P. Gray, M.D., LL.D.* (n.p., 1887); M. M. Bagg, ed., *Memorial History of Utica, N. Y. From Its Settlement to the Present Time* (Syracuse: D. Mason & Co., 1892), 20–25.



John P. Gray, from M. M. Bagg, *Memorial History of Utica, N.Y.* (Syracuse, 1892).

the causes of mental illness were shifting from the position that mental disturbances were caused by a combination of moral weakness and physical illness to one in which insanity was regarded as springing primarily from physical disturbances that might be exacerbated by inherited predispositions to disease and by environmental stresses.<sup>47</sup> According to Gray, emotional disturbances could aggravate mental illness, but they alone could not induce insanity. At an annual meeting of the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane, Gray noted that mania and melancholia are two of the most common disorders that develop over time.<sup>48</sup>

Smith's case certainly fit Gray's views. He had suffered from typhoid in 1857 and continued to suffer from chronic alimentary-tract disturbances. The onset of his illness and his recovery were not immediate. Although Smith was admitted to the asylum on 7 November 1859, three weeks after John Brown's raid, Gray's case notes indicate that Smith began to show serious manic symptoms during the spring of 1859, and was hypomanic for some time before that. As reported in the case notes, Smith on arrival was agitated, unable to

47. John P. Gray, *Insanity: Its Dependence on Physical Disease* (Utica, New York: Roberts, 1871); John P. Gray, *Thoughts on the Causation of Insanity* (n.p., n.d.).

48. Anon., "Annual Meeting of the Association of Medical Superintendents of American Institutions for the Insane", *American Journal of Insanity* 20 (July 1863): 72.

sleep, delusional, and experiencing hallucinations.<sup>49</sup>

In a letter to Smith's nephew dated 16 December 1859, Gray wrote about Smith:

The fact is the cause or causes of his present attack go back beyond the Harpers Ferry affair. That shock was but "the last straw". He never fully recovered from the attack of fever in New York. Following convalescence there he had dropsical limb and other indications of impaired Constitution—The swelling of his limbs subsided and in a few months returned and gave him trouble. The part he took in the last gubernatorial contest imposed upon him for months excessive labor, and immediately afterward he was attacked with serious indigestion and sympathethic disturbances of the action of the heart. He, however, rather increased than diminished his labors, both physical and mental, and aggravated dyspepsia and greater impairment of health was the consequence. He realized his depreciating strength but not the probable end. For months before he came here he had periods of depression and intellectual exaltation only to be accounted for on the theory of then existing cerebral disturbance and the approach of serious brain trouble. Indeed in carefully reviewing his case and condition I am inclined to think the Harpers Ferry shock only hastened the development of a disease which at no very remote period would have appeared in a more unfavorable form.<sup>50</sup>

Smith's treatment at the hospital included rest, isolation from stimulation, special diet, and restricted visitation by his family, whose presence contemporary theory suggested would lead to associations that would propel regression.<sup>51</sup> Smith was cared for by his own personal attendant, who had been one of his servants at Peterboro. Although the psychological theory of the day called for isolation, Smith was permitted visitors. It is reported in the case notes that he failed to

49. Utica-Marcy Psychiatric Centers, "Case Notes of Gerrit Smith" (7 November 1859). (Hereinafter cited as Case Notes).

50. John P. Gray to John Cochrane, 16 December 1859, Gerrit Smith Papers, George Arents Research Library, Syracuse University. Unless otherwise noted, all letters cited in this article are from the Smith Papers.

51. *Eighteenth Annual Report of the Superintendent of the New York State Lunatic Asylum, for the Year Ending November 30th, 1860* (Utica, New York: n.p., 1860), 17.

recognize one visitor, E. A. Wetmore, one of his business agents.<sup>52</sup> Smith's wife visited him and had Thanksgiving dinner with him.<sup>53</sup> As Smith's health improved, Gray took the highly unusual move of bringing the patient to live in the superintendent's own home on the asylum grounds.<sup>54</sup>

Gray's case notes indicate that as Smith's mania was subsiding and the depression becoming more pronounced he was afraid to mix with the other patients.<sup>55</sup> Reports in *The Opal*, the magazine edited by the patients of the asylum, however, indicate that at least some patients were aware of Smith's institutionalization and the raid on Harpers Ferry.<sup>56</sup> A column entitled "The Editor's Table" remarked that "facts elicit the unquestioned complicity of numerous leaders of the Anti-Slavery party". The next paragraph identified Smith as a member of this party.<sup>57</sup>

An unsigned article in the *American Journal of Insanity* written near the time of Smith's hospitalization prescribes cod liver oil, brandy, essence of beef, and mechanical restraint as part of the "moral treatment" in the case of a patient suffering mania with spiritual delusions. Although it is not known if Gray wrote that article, as editor of the journal he had the reputation of seldom giving "a hearing to those who disagreed with him".<sup>58</sup> The case notes on Smith indicate that his treatment was similar to that described in this article. Patients today experiencing a manic episode initially would be given an antipsychotic medication such as chlorpromazine followed by extended administration of the chemical lithium as well as psychother-

52. Case Notes (7, 13 November 1859).

53. Gray to Mrs. Smith, 19 December 1859.

54. Conversation with Lyle Engell, Utica-Marcy Psychiatric Centers archivist, 26 August 1985.

55. Case Notes (25 November 1859).

56. Anon., "Editor's Table", *The Opal* 9 (December 1859): 277-279; Anon., "Dissolution of the Union", *The Opal* 10 (January 1860): 25-28; Anon., "Dissolution of the Union: Number Two", *The Opal* 10 (June 1860): 41-49; Anon., "Dissolution of the Union: Number Three", *The Opal* 10 (November 1860): 61-64.

57. Anon., "Editor's Table", *The Opal* 9 (December 1859): 278.

58. Anon., "Case of Mania with Spiritual Delusions", *The American Journal of Insanity* 16 (January 1860): 321-40; Norman Dain, *Concepts of Insanity in the United States, 1789-1865* (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1964), 56-57.

apy and environmental support;<sup>59</sup> Smith was given cannabis, which is commonly referred to today as marijuana, apparently to calm him. Later he was given morphine.<sup>60</sup>

The diagnosis Smith was given by the hospital was acute mania. During the nineteenth century the term mania frequently referred to a patient who was wild and out of control.<sup>61</sup> Such violent behavior today would most likely be identified as some form of psychosis. Psychosis involves a mental disorder that is sufficiently severe as to result in personality disorganization and loss of contact with reality.<sup>62</sup> According to the case notes, when Smith was brought to the institution he was loud, histrionic, agitated, incoherent, and charging conspiracy against his person by the hospital staff. Clearly his behavior had crossed the bounds of normality.

Smith's behavior shortly before his admission and during his hospital stay is suggestive of a bipolar disorder, more commonly referred to as manic-depression. Smith's increased loquacity, sleeplessness, and grandiosity, while in the asylum, are typical symptoms of this mood disorder. Furthermore, as indicated in correspondence between his family and Gray, Smith wanted to attend John Brown's trial.<sup>63</sup> Preoccupation with activities that have a high potential for painful consequences, which are not recognized by the patient, also is diagnostic of a bipolar disorder.<sup>64</sup>

Smith's own description of his illness highlights his depression as well as his manic behavior. In a letter to Charles Sumner, Smith portrays this period as a "black dream".<sup>65</sup> Five months after his release from the asylum, he wrote to William Goodell, the editor of the New York *Principia*, a monthly antislavery magazine, that "his

59. Arthur Rifkin and Samuel G. Siris, "Drug Treatment of Mania" in *Schizophrenia and Affective Disorders: Biology and Drug Treatment*, ed. Arthur Rifkin (Boston: John Wright-PSG Inc., 1983), 79–94.

60. Case Notes (7, 11 November 1859).

61. Dain, *Concepts of Insanity*, 6–7.

62. Robert G. Meyer and Paul Salmon, *Abnormal Psychology* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1984), 519.

63. Gray to Charles D. Miller, 9 April 1860.

64. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, 3rd ed. (Washington, D.C.: American Psychiatric Association, 1980), 208–210.

65. Smith to Sumner, 7 June 1860.



wildness was gone” and that during the hospitalization he “sank so low as not to know one of the persons around me”. He reported having felt utterly unworthy of others’ kindnesses.<sup>66</sup>

Smith further reported to Goodell that for years before the hospitalization he experienced physical and neurotic complaints such as dyspepsia, vertigo, and heart palpitations despite a robust and healthy appearance.<sup>67</sup> In a short autobiography penned in the mid-1850s, Smith described himself during his congressional term as “drivingly busy” and as plagued by anxieties such as fear of “falling in the streets”.<sup>68</sup>

While it is possible that Smith was malingering merely to avoid prosecution for his complicity in the John Brown affair, as some historians have insinuated, the consistency of his symptoms, his long-standing preoccupation with bodily functions, and his periods of enormous activity alternating with periods of dormancy and bed rest give credence to a psychiatric disability.<sup>69</sup>

Also to be considered is the fact that psychological research has shown bipolar disturbances to be familial.<sup>70</sup> Smith’s father, Peter, had the reputation of being “queer” or peculiar in his later years and was said to have suffered periods of despondency. He relinquished the management of his vast land to Gerrit when he (the father) was only fifty-one and the son was twenty-one; this was shortly after the death of Gerrit’s mother to whom both he and his father were extremely attached. Alcoholism, often a reaction against depression, plagued Smith’s brother Peter Skenandoah Smith, who had been treated earlier at the Utica asylum. A younger brother, Adolphus Lent Smith, manifested serious, chronic psychological problems that made him unable to care for himself.<sup>71</sup> There is some argument that bipolar disorders are more common in people from the upper socio-economic classes, with the hypothesis that the energy associated with mania

66. Smith to William Goodell, 1 May 1860, reprinted in *Douglass’ Monthly* 3 (June 1860): 280.

67. Smith to Goodell, 1 May 1860, reprinted in *Douglass’ Monthly* 3 (June 1860): 280.

68. John R. McKivigan and Madeleine L. McKivigan, “‘He Stands Like Jupiter’: The Autobiography of Gerrit Smith”, *New York History* 65 (April 1984): 188–200.

69. Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, 35–36, 37, 308, 318–19, 376–77, 409–13, 423, 425, 438, 448.

70. J. H. Boyd and M. M. Weissman, “Genetics” in *Handbook of Affective Disorders*, ed. E. S. Paykel (New York: Guilford Press, 1982), 122.

71. Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, 3.

drives people to succeed financially.<sup>72</sup> Psychoanalytic theory suggests that manic individuals have strong narcissistic needs which they attempt to fulfill by amassing power, money, and recognition.<sup>73</sup> Smith certainly drove himself to attain financial success and fretted that his family would become penurious whenever he experienced financial setbacks. He became the most successful member of his family, surpassing even his father in wealth and fame. He apparently set higher standards for himself and his family, and complained to John Gray when his son Green was not living up to the ideals that he had established.<sup>74</sup>

Other facets of the Smith case are consistent with current research on the bipolar disorders. For example, the peak age of admission for persons suffering from manic-depressive episodes is between forty-five and sixty-four.<sup>75</sup> Gerrit Smith was sixty-two at the time of his admission to Utica. The average duration of a manic episode is between 53.7 days and four months, and Smith spent 52 days at Utica.<sup>76</sup> Environmental stress often precedes a manic attack,<sup>77</sup> and mood and energy changes in bipolar patients precede the development of the first definite affective illness by some years.<sup>78</sup> The Harpers Ferry incident was a definite source of stress for Smith, who was displaying mood and energy changes for several years before this affair, in fact at least as early as his days as a congressman in Washington.

Smith resided at the asylum and Gray's home for approximately eight weeks. He was released and allowed to return to Peterboro on 29 December 1859. Gray apparently had misgivings about letting Smith return to Peterboro so soon. In letters to Smith and his family after

72. Boyd and Weissman, "Genetics", 122.

73. Dov R. Aleksandrowicz, "Psychoanalytic Studies of Mania" in *Mania: An Evolving Concept*, eds. Robert H. Belmaker and H. M. van Praag (Jamaica, New York: SP Medical & Scientific Books, 1980), 317; Dinshah D. Gagrat and Herzl R. Spiro, "Social, Cultural, and Epidemiologic Aspects of Mania" in *Mania: An Evolving Concept*, eds. Robert H. Belmaker and H. M. van Praag (Jamaica, New York: SP Medical & Scientific Books, 1980), 291-308.

74. Gray to Smith, 6 May 1860.

75. Gagrat and Spiro, "Social, Cultural, and Epidemiologic Aspects of Mania", 296.

76. W. Coryell and G. Winokur, "Course and Outcome", in *Handbook of Affective Disorders*, ed. E. S. Paykel (New York: Guilford Press, 1982), 94.

77. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 216.

78. S. Tryer and B. Shopsin, "Symptoms and Assessment of Mania" in *Handbook of Affective Disorders*, ed. E. S. Paykel (New York: Guilford Press, 1982), 14.

Smith's return to Peterboro, Gray repeatedly cautioned against overexertion and warned of the dangers of a relapse. As he noted in a letter to Elizabeth Miller, Smith's daughter, "I cannot conceal the fact that this *staying* at home greatly reconciles me to his being at home."<sup>79</sup> In fact, he advised Charles Miller, Smith's son-in-law, that Smith not be permitted to go to Washington to appear before a congressional committee investigating Harpers Ferry.<sup>80</sup>

For the remainder of his life, Smith adamantly denied any foreknowledge of John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry and twice brought suits against individuals who publicly accused him of having been a conspirator along with John Brown. In October 1859, an ad hoc group of Democrats, calling themselves the New York Vigilant Association, accused Smith of being part of a secret band that had planned the Harpers Ferry raid. These Democrats had no solid evidence regarding the conspiracy, however, and recanted their claim rather than engage in an expensive legal battle with Smith, who threatened them with a libel suit after he was released from the Utica asylum. In 1865, the *Chicago Tribune* published articles insinuating that Smith had actively aided Brown in the Harpers Ferry raid and had feigned insanity in order to avoid prosecution as an accomplice of John Brown. Smith issued a denial of any specific knowledge of Brown's attack and sued the newspaper.<sup>81</sup>

John Gray served as an important ally of Smith's in the long court battle with the *Tribune*. After Smith's discharge from the asylum, he and Gray maintained a correspondence that extended through the remainder of Smith's life. These letters indicate that Smith continued to turn to Gray for medical advice, and that Gray prescribed medications and regimens to aid Smith's digestion and cautioned Smith against overexertion.<sup>82</sup> Letters from Gray and his wife to Smith show that they benefited from Smith's generosity, and called upon Smith to use his influence to counter a negative editorial regarding psychiatric treatment.<sup>83</sup>

79. Gray to Elizabeth Miller, 13 January 1860.

80. Gray to Charles Miller, 9 April 1860.

81. Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, 414–21, 450–54; Scott, *Secret Six*, 315–16.

82. Gray to Smith, 6 May 1860, 6 May 1864, 27 August 1866, 20 March 1869, 29 March 1870, 27 November 1873, 1 February 1874, 18 February 1874, 3 April 1874, 24 May 1874, 27 November 1874.

83. Mrs. Gray to Smith, 13 April 1860, 18 April 1860; Gray to Smith, 16 April 1860, 29 November 1868, 1 February 1874.

When asked, Gray indicated his willingness to testify regarding Smith's mental state after the Harpers Ferry incident as part of the libel suit against the *Chicago Tribune*. During the Civil War, Gray had gained a reputation as a medical expert at trials. For example, testifying at the trial of Dr. David M. Wright, who had killed a Lieutenant Sanborn in Norfolk, Virginia, he concluded that Wright was not insane.<sup>84</sup> He argued that insanity does not instantly manifest itself nor instantly disappear. In a later trial Gray testified that the defendant Lorenzo C. Stewart was eccentric, not insane. He noted that "insanity cannot be predicated on any manifestations of moral depravity or intellectual peculiarity, not the offspring of disease. Insanity is a changed state, an abnormal condition, caused by disease alone."<sup>85</sup> In these and other cases, Gray expressed serious reservation about using the insanity defense to absolve people of responsibility for their actions. He wrote, "the excuse of moral insanity could be used in court only if the defendant were shown to be suffering from impaired reason."<sup>86</sup> Otherwise, a person should be punished for his actions.

After more than two years of legal maneuvering, the *Tribune* finally published a retraction. The newspaper acknowledged that competent medical evidence existed proving that Smith had gone insane following Harpers Ferry.<sup>87</sup> Gray wrote Smith congratulating him on the agreeable outcome of the suit.

The honorable and satisfactory settlement of the suit has given me great relief—I did not dread a journey to Chicago, in fact it would have been a pleasure & I have become, in a measure accustomed to appearing in court but I did feel unhappy

84. Anon., "The Case of David M. Wright: For the Murder of Lieutenant Sanborn—Plea, Insanity", *The American Journal of Insanity* 20 (July 1863): 284–300.

85. Anon., "Homicide: Plea, Insanity: Case of Lorenzo C. Stewart", *The American Journal of Insanity* 21 (January 1865): 385–386.

86. Anon., "Annual Meeting of the Association of Medical Superintendents for the Insane", *The American Journal of Insanity* 20 (July 1863): 63–106. Two decades later Gray became a national celebrity when he testified at the trial of Charles Guiteau, who had assassinated President James A. Garfield. In retaliation for his testimony that the defendant was sane, Gray was shot by a friend of Guiteau. This injury so weakened Gray that it led to his eventual demise in 1886 at the age of sixty-one. *Memorial History of Utica*, 20.

87. Harlow, *Gerrit Smith*, 450–54; Villard, *John Brown*, 46; Scott, *Secret Six*, 315–16.

at the thought of detailing the symptoms of insanity of a friend in open court to be published in newspapers and talked over. All the more too, knowing how you would feel it.<sup>88</sup>

The fact that Gray was willing to testify publicly on Smith's behalf in the suit against the *Chicago Tribune* is one final piece of evidence that he truly believed that Smith had been insane.

Historians and Smith's contemporaries have been amazed at Smith's persistent denial of his involvement with John Brown. Unkind critics have recalled Brown's remark to Higginson that he believed that Smith was a "timid man".<sup>89</sup> Frothingham speculates that Smith maintained his innocence regarding Harpers Ferry because he was afraid that dwelling on his behavior at the time of the incident would lead to a recurrence of his insanity.<sup>90</sup> This interpretation agrees with the psychoanalytic view of bipolar disorders.<sup>91</sup> Finally, it agrees with Smith's own views of his behavior. Writing to an abolitionist friend, he stated, "What is unhappiest in my case is, that I have to avoid looking back upon the year 1859, not only because a part of it is full of darkness to my eye and of anguish to my heart, but because of the painful uncertainty and confusion which overhang other and larger parts of it."<sup>92</sup>

Although a conclusive diagnosis is impossible without the opportunity for personal observation of the patient, surviving evidence contradicts charges that Smith had feigned a breakdown to prevent his arrest and punishment as an accomplice of John Brown. Instead, the greatest part of this material supports the conclusion that the stress which Smith felt following Harpers Ferry had triggered a psychological episode that required hospitalization for what today would be called a bipolar disorder.<sup>93</sup>

88. Gray to Smith, 13 July 1867.

89. Robert Penn Warren, *John Brown: The Making of a Martyr* (New York: Payson and Clarke, 1929), 286.

90. Frothingham, *Gerrit Smith*, 246–66.

91. Aleksandrowicz, "Psychoanalytic Studies of Mania", 309–22.

92. Smith to Goodell, 1 May 1860, reprinted in *Douglass' Monthly* 3 (June 1860): 280.

93. The authors thank the following individuals for their assistance: Lyle Engell, archivist of the Utica-Marcy Psychiatric Centers, the staff of the George Arents Research Library at Syracuse University, and Gwen G. Robinson of the *Courier*.