

---

# Smith, Amanda Berry

(23 Jan. 1837–24 Feb. 1915),

Mary De Jong

<https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.013.34717>

**Published in print:** 15 March 2013

**Published online:** 31 May 2013

A version of this article originally appeared in *African American National Biography*.

evangelist, missionary, and reformer, was born in Long Green, Maryland, the daughter of Samuel Berry and Mariam Matthews, slaves on neighboring farms. By laboring day and night, Samuel Berry earned enough to buy his freedom and that of his wife and children, including Amanda. By 1850 the family had moved to a farm in York County, Pennsylvania. Their home was a station on the Underground Railroad.

Samuel and Mariam Berry stressed the value of education and hard work. Taught at home, Amanda learned to read by age eight; later she briefly attended a local school in which white students were given priority. At age thirteen she entered household service, living with a series of white employers in Maryland and Pennsylvania. She married Calvin M. Devine in 1854 but soon regretted his lack of piety and his indulgence in alcohol. After a period of fasting and earnest prayer, she experienced conversion in 1856 and envisioned a life devoted to evangelism. Devine enlisted in the Union army in 1862 and died fighting in the Civil War. The couple had two children, but only one reached adulthood.

Amanda moved to Philadelphia and by 1864 had married James Henry Smith, a coachman who was an ordained deacon in the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. He later reneged on his prenuptial promise that he would undertake active ministry, and his unkindness and religious skepticism seemed to hinder her spiritual growth. She continued working as a domestic and taking in laundry. Their three children died young.

Close but not always harmonious ties with other devout women introduced Amanda Smith to the Holiness movement that swept nineteenth-century Protestantism. Advocates of Holiness urged believers, regardless of sex, race, social status, or church affiliation, to testify publicly about their spiritual experience. Irresistibly drawn to the movement's controversial tenet that entire sanctification—purification from intentional sin—was attainable by faith, she fervently sought this transformative blessing. In 1865 the Smiths moved to New York City, where James found work, but three years later Amanda declined to accompany him when he relocated again to take a well-paid position. During a Methodist church service in September 1868, she “felt the touch of God from the crown of my head to the soles of my feet.” Walking home, she shouted praises and sang with joy at being sanctified, “married to Jesus” (Smith, 77, 81).

Smith expanded her religious activities after James died in 1869, supporting herself and her surviving child during midnight hours at the washtub and ironing table. By her own testimony she wrestled with fears and temptations presented by Satan; she constantly prayed to learn God's will for her by interpreting randomly chosen Bible verses, dreams, and internal voices. In 1870 she determined to trust providence and went to work full-time organizing groups for testimony and spiritual nurturance, praying with the sick, and singing and preaching at camp meetings and urban revivals. Participating in

---

national Holiness camp meetings enlarged her network of friends. Although she periodically encountered resistance to female preachers, clergymen of various denominations invited her to address large racially mixed and all-white audiences. Her own AME Church, like most denominations, withheld ordination from women, and Smith did not press for institutional authorization or financial support. Confident that God had ordained her, she accepted individuals' donations and hospitality. She was the most widely known of the nineteenth century's black women itinerant preachers.

In 1878 Smith felt called to England, Ireland, and Scotland to participate in temperance revivals and Holiness conventions. After traveling on the European continent in 1879, she proceeded overland to India. There she worked with James M. Thoburn, Methodist Episcopal bishop of India, who had previously observed her in the United States. Thoburn affirmed, "I have never known anyone who could draw and hold so large an audience as Mrs. Smith" (Smith, vi). In 1882 she went to West Africa to help "civilize" the natives and to cultivate mainstream Protestant values among black Americans who had immigrated to Liberia. Cooperating with Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians in potentially competitive situations, she proselytized, promoted temperance and Western-style education, and started a Christian school for boys.

Returning to the United States in 1890, Smith resumed preaching and activism despite her failing health. With her own savings and supporters' contributions, she founded a home for black orphans in Harvey, Illinois. It opened in 1899 and was later named the Amanda Smith Industrial School for Girls, operating until it burned in 1918. Exhausted by years of fund-raising, Smith retired in 1912 to Sebring, Florida, where she died in a home a donor had built for her.

Through her evangelical work, Amanda Smith gained an international reputation and rose to be one of the most famous African American women of the late nineteenth century. The careers of Smith and contemporary women evangelicals and reformers reinforced the proposition, unwelcome in some quarters, that females could function without male control. The black Methodist Episcopal clergyman Marshall W. Taylor portrayed Smith as an exemplar of their race's progress and "a Christian of the highest type," unmatched by any living person, black or white (Taylor, 57-58).

Smith's *Autobiography* is valuable to scholars of black women's writing and to historians of the Holiness, temperance, and foreign missions movements; the roles of women in the Methodist Episcopal and AME churches; and blacks' experiences and perspectives during the Reconstruction era and ensuing decades of heightened interracial tension. Smith's description and interpretation of conditions in Liberia and Sierra Leone reflect certain Anglo-American views of "heathen darkness" and "superstitions" (Smith, 346, 451), but she firmly rejected the assumption that black people were inferior. General readers will find this book a circumstantial, often engaging account of the joys and rigors of a life committed to improvement.

## Further Reading

Smith, Amanda. *An Autobiography: The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Colored Evangelist* (1893; repr. 1988).

Cadbury, M. H. *The Life of Amanda Smith* (1916).

---

Humez, Jean M. “‘My Spirit Eye’: Some Functions of Spiritual and Visionary Experience in the Lives of Five Black Women Preachers, 1810-1880” in *Women and the Structure of Society*, eds. Barbara J. Harris and JoAnn K. McNamara (1984).

Taylor, Marshall W. *The Life, Travels, Labors, and Helpers of Mrs. Amanda Smith, the Famous Negro Missionary Evangelist* (1886)

### **See also**

Observations of White Missionaries in Africa (1893) <<https://oxfordaasc.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195301731.001.0001/acref-9780195301731-e-33920>>