



An engraving of Amanda Berry Smith,
from her 1893 autobiography.

Amanda Berry Smith: The African Sibyl

by Randy Pletzer (2011)

Editor's Note: Randy Pletzer is a student at Evangelical Theological Seminary in Myerstown, Pennsylvania, and his home church, Grace UMC of Shrewsbury, Pennsylvania, is the descendant of the congregation in which Amanda Berry Smith was converted. The following sketch of Smith is based on a paper submitted at Evangelical Seminary for a course on Methodist history.

Amanda Berry was born at Long Green, Maryland on January 23, 1837, the first daughter of Samuel Berry and his wife Mariam.¹ She was born a woman – born black – born a slave. Some might say Amanda Berry arrived in this world having already “struck out.” Yet, “for God all things are possible” (Matthew 19:26); and he would use this woman to spread the gospel and touch the lives of thousands of people on four continents over the course of her sixty-five year career as an itinerant singer and evangelist. This article is but the briefest summary of the life and ministry of a remarkable woman.

Samuel and Mariam were owned by separate masters and lived apart on adjoining farms north of Baltimore. Samuel was trusted and respected by his owner and had been given permission to purchase his own freedom. Through his industriousness, single-mindedness, and relentless work ethic, he was able to obtain his freedom. His next objective was to secure liberty for his family, Mariam and their four children. In this endeavor, the young Amanda witnessed for the first

¹*Amanda Smith: An Autobiography. The Story of the Lord's Dealings with Mrs. Amanda Smith the Colored Evangelist; Containing an Account of Her Life Work of Faith, and Her Travels in America, England, Ireland, Scotland, India, and Africa, as an Independent Missionary* (Chicago: Meyer and Brother, 1893), 17.

time the efficacy and power of prayer and faith, and “how the Lord helped in this.”²

One of her mother’s responsibilities was to care for Miss Celie, the teenage daughter of her master. At a Methodist camp meeting, the young mistress was converted – “converted in the old-fashioned way; the shouting, hallelujah way,” much to the chagrin of her parents and friends, but to the delight of Amanda’s mother and grandmother who had been praying for the young girl to find the Lord. Shortly after this experience, Celie contracted typhoid fever, and on her deathbed she requested that Mariam and her children be given to Samuel. Mariam was sent from the room and ran quickly to tell her mother. Amanda relates that her “grandmother’s faith saw the door open for the freedom of her grandchildren; and she ran out into the bush and told Jesus.”³

The next day Celie repeated her request, Amanda’s mother was again sent out, again she ran to tell her mother, and again Amanda’s grandmother appealed to Jesus. On the third day, when the young mistress reiterated her plea, her family relented and promised to release Mariam and the children. Celie then asked Mariam to sing to her, and during the song she passed away. Recalling these events, Amanda says her mother claimed that it was to the prayers and the faith of her grandmother that they owed their freedom. Amanda herself often said, “I have a right to shout more than some folks; I have been bought twice, and set free twice.” As Amanda was quite young when she was freed, she allowed that she experienced little of the trials of slavery and that she “was a good deal spoiled for a little darkey.”⁴ When her mother attempted to discipline her, she would often run to the old mistress who would shield her; she remembered the old mistress with fondness, and that she dressed in the Friend’s style.

Though Samuel and his family were now free, Maryland laws pertaining to free blacks were severely restrictive. Shortly after obtaining the family’s freedom, Samuel visited his brother, who had run away to Pennsylvania. He was out of the state for more than ten days, which according to a Maryland statute prompted the forfeiture of his residency and made him liable to recapture and being re-sold. The family was thus forced to flee, and moved to Pennsylvania to work and live on a farm south of Shrewsbury owned by John Lowe.

²Smith, 19.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 22.-23.

John Lowe, like many farmers in Southern York County at that time, was antislavery. He allowed Samuel to assist runaway slaves in gaining their freedom. The Lowe farm was situated on the Baltimore and York Turnpike, a major route used by escaping slaves fleeing North, and the Berry house became “one of the main stations of the underground railroad.”⁵

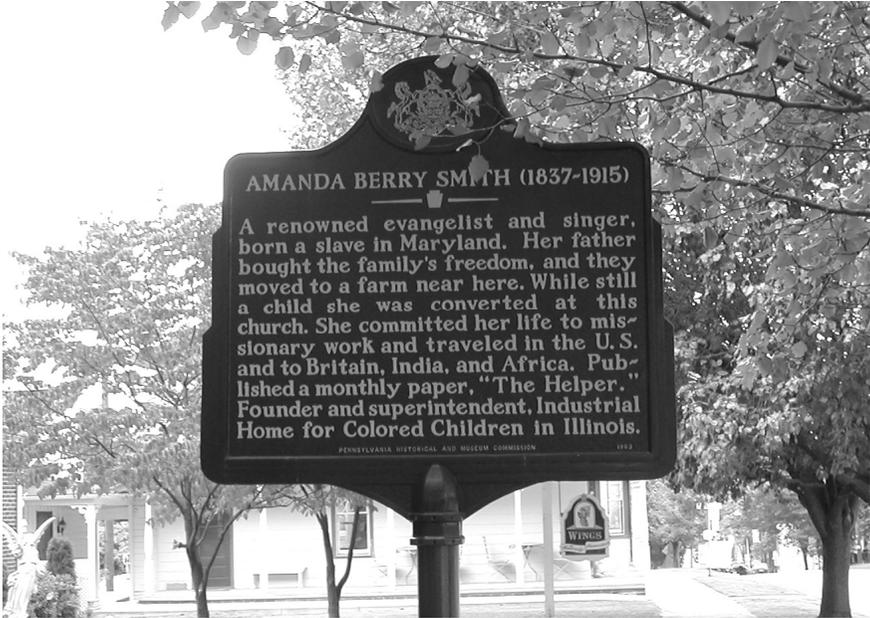
When Amanda was eight, she and her older brother had the chance to attend school. The school was held in the summer and run by a Methodist minister and taught by his wife. The couple had recently moved to Shrewsbury, and when they left a short time later, the school was forced to close. Amanda and her brother attended school for only six weeks. Five years later, they had another opportunity to go to school. This was a predominately white school five miles from their home. They quickly found that they received their lessons only if there was time after the white children had received all their lessons. They left after two weeks because it was winter and they had to walk five miles in the bitter cold to receive only meager teaching. Thus Amanda avowed she “received in all about three months’ schooling.” However, as both her parents could read and write, Amanda was taught at home.⁶

In the spring of 1850, Amanda moved to town as a live-in maid for Mrs. Latimer, a southern widow with five children. As there was only one other local black family, she felt isolated and sought consolation in the church. The next winter, she attended a revival at the Evangelical Church which lasted several weeks. She was captivated by the spirit of the meeting, and when it closed she attended another series of meetings that began in the local Methodist Episcopal Church. One night a woman named Mary Bloser, known for her deep piety and Christian character, was speaking to the congregation; she invited Amanda to come forward and prayed with her. The meeting closed and Amanda attempted to rise, but could not stand without help. Her strength had left her. She was frightened and seemed so light. She stated she had found peace in her heart and resolved that she “would be the Lord’s and live for him... but I did not know how to exercise faith as I should.”⁷ She joined the Shrewsbury ME Church, which later became Grace United Methodist Church; today a historical marker stands outside the old church building

⁵Smith, 31.

⁶Ibid., 26-27.

⁷Ibid., 28.



Historical marker in Shrewsbury, Pennsylvania, on the site of the Methodist Church where Amanda Berry Smith was converted.

at 108 Main Street, commemorating the place where Amanda found peace in Christ.⁸

For a time she was very happy and the days seemed bright. She sang and worked, attended church and began to attend class meetings. She felt this was all she needed to do. Because she was black, however, Amanda did not receive any attention from her class leader until he had first attended to all the white persons in the meeting. As a result, she was late in arriving back at Mrs. Latimer's to prepare the Sunday evening meal. After several scoldings for being late, Amanda quit her class meeting and attempted to continue her Christian development on her

⁸Methodism in Shrewsbury was planted about 1811, and shared a building with the Evangelical Church until 1849, when the Methodists built a new church home on Main Street; this is where Amanda was converted. A new building was erected on the same site in 1874, which was completed and dedicated in 1877. The congregation later moved out of town, and is today's Grace United Methodist Church. See John Gibson, ed., *History of York County, Pennsylvania* (Chicago: F. A. Battey Publishing Co., 1886), 700-714; and Bob Ketenheim, *Around Shrewsbury* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia, 2004), 38.

own. As a consequence, she later confessed, "I became careless and lost all the grace I had, if I really had any at all."⁹

At the age of seventeen, Amanda married Calvin Devine and moved to Columbia in Lancaster County. They had two children; the first died, and the second was a daughter named Mazie. With little in the way of a spiritual life, the young mother began to have doubts about the existence of God. In 1855, Amanda became ill and was not expected to live. Her father came to visit and, concerned for her soul, entreated her to pray. She fell asleep and dreamed that she was visited by an angel and then saw herself preaching at a large camp meeting. She awoke and began to recover, and after a few days she was able to get up. She recalled, "I made up my mind to pray and lead a Christian life. I thought God had spared me for a purpose, so I meant to be converted, but in my own way quietly."¹⁰

For a year Amanda prayed and struggled. Her own will kept getting in the way. She said, "God showed me I was a dreadful sinner, but still I wanted to have my own way about it." One night, during a revival at a Baptist Church in Columbia, she went forward to the altar, something she had been telling herself she would never do, and while on her knees, cried out, "O, Lord, save me!" She shouted until she was hoarse and a stillness came over her, yet she still did not have the peace she sought. She continued to search on her own, praying desperately – praying to God – praying to the sun – praying to the moon – praying to the stars. As she wrote later, "I was so ignorant. O, I wonder how God ever did save me."¹¹ And throughout this turmoil, she said she continually heard the devil whisper words of discouragement and futility. This relentless inner harassment would prove a cross that she would bear her entire life.

On Tuesday, March 17, 1856, Amanda was in her kitchen when a voice told her that although she was sincere in her desire for conversion, God had not done it so she might just as well give up. She was ready to agree when she heard another voice whisper, "Pray once more." She quickly said she would: "I will pray once more, and if there is any such thing as salvation, I am determined to have it this afternoon or die." She got up, went to the basement and on her knees, fully prepared to die, she prayed. Nothing. She prayed again. Again nothing. And the voice of the

⁹Smith, 29.

¹⁰Ibid., 42-43.

¹¹Ibid., 44-45.

devil encouraged her to stop and give it up. She prayed again and pleaded with the Lord, “O Lord, if Thou wilt help me I will believe Thee,” and in the act of telling God I would, I did... The burden rolled away... I felt it when it left me, and a flood of light and joy swept through my soul... I said, ‘Why, Lord, I do believe this is just what I have been asking for...’ I cried out, ‘Hallelujah, I have got religion; glory to God, I have got religion.’”¹²

A year or two later, Amanda moved to Lancaster to work for Colonel McGraw as a live-in maid. She was caring for the McGraw family when the Civil War began. Her husband enlisted and never came back from the war. She then moved to Philadelphia where she continued working for various white families, and joined Bethel AME Church, where she met James Smith, a teamster by trade and a local preacher and ordained deacon in the AME Church. He began to court her and declared he was seeking ordination and itinerancy in the conference. Amanda had discerned that she was called to be an evangelist, and became convinced that she could fulfill her call as a pastor’s wife and helpmate. She thus consented to marry James. After their marriage she discovered that he had no intention of becoming a pastor, and he confessed that he was afraid that she would not have married him if she had known the truth. This was just the beginning of what would be turn out to be a disappointing and turbulent marriage – a marriage during which they would have five children, all of whom would die in infancy.

Following the end of the Civil War, James and Amanda moved to New York where James hoped to cash in on the post-war boom. He took a job at a hotel until he could find a position as a coachman. Unable to afford quarters to house the entire family, he stayed at the hotel and Amanda took a job as a live-in cook uptown. About two months later, James was able to find her affordable housing, at which time she began taking on day-work, washing, ironing, and cleaning for white families in the area. She found the New York people aloof and unsocial, and confided to her husband that she did not like the city. As James was a Mason and an Odd Fellow, he convinced Amanda to join several affiliated societies in order to get better acquainted.¹³

Because of her continuing financial struggles, Amanda moved several times before finally settling at 135 Amity Street in Greenwich Village. Here she found a small group of blacks, and the location

¹²Smith, 46-47.

¹³Ibid., 60-61.

bordered two large black communities. It also provided easy access to white employers for her cleaning and laundry services. Although her living situation now had a measure of stability, her marriage was in trouble, and she was suffering a “deep discontent” of the sort that John Wesley believed earnest Christians experienced following conversion – a “time of agonizing soul searching leading to ‘entire consecration and complete trust.’”¹⁴ This experience Wesley called sanctification or “perfect love” which he maintained could occur instantaneously, though often experienced through a gradual process of Christian growth, and accomplished at the moment of death.

The Holiness movement that had begun in the 1830s had been interrupted by the Civil War, but was now experiencing a post-war resurgence. Adherents of this movement professed that sanctification was the crux of Christianity, calling it a “‘second blessing’ which the Christian instantaneously acquired sometime after conversion.” Many of the leaders of the movement were in New York, including Phoebe Palmer, who had been teaching instantaneous sanctification for over three decades, and John Inskip, the president of the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness.

One morning Amanda was depressed to tears when a neighbor, Mother Jones, dropped in on her and seeing Amanda’s distress, asked what was troubling her. Amanda poured out her heart about the state of her marriage and her spiritual anxiety, and Mother Jones responded, “That is just the way Jones used to do me, but when God sanctified my soul He gave me enduring grace.” Amanda realized that she had always been asking to “get out of trials, instead of asking God for grace to endure [them].” She at once began to seek this “enduring grace” – to seek the sanctification of her soul. To aid her quest, she formed a prayer group with three other ladies who met at her house on Monday afternoons.¹⁵

In September 1868, James found a position as a coachman in New Utrecht, in present-day Brooklyn. He received rent-free housing and asked Amanda to move there with him. She told him that she wanted to wait until spring as she was afraid to go, given the difficulties they were having with their marriage; plus she was just now settled in her current neighborhood and had a steady clientele for her laundry business. An angry James left for New Utrecht and only visited Amanda

¹⁴Adrienne M. Israel, *Amanda Berry Smith: From Washerwoman to Evangelist* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1998), 29.

¹⁵Smith, 62, 90.

every other week. Amanda used this time away from her husband to intensify her pursuit of sanctification.

While ironing one weekday, a voice prompted Amanda to go to the predominately white Green Street ME Church the following Sunday to hear Rev. Inskip. On Sunday morning she set out on the one mile journey to Green Street, and was hounded the entire way by the voice of the devil who tried his best to dissuade her. When she arrived at the church, she slipped in and sat near the door. As Brother Inskip preached on the doctrine of sanctification, Amanda recounted how a “wave came over me, and such a welling up in my heart... O, what glory filled my soul! ...I wanted to shout Glory to Jesus! but Satan said, ‘Now, if you make a noise they will put you out.’” Since Amanda was the only black person there she kept quiet. But during the closing hymn, Amanda could keep quiet no longer and shouted, “Glory to Jesus! Brother Inskip answered, ‘Amen, Glory to God.’”¹⁶

Throughout the following week, Amanda shared her experience with friends and associates. Expecting them to be overjoyed at her news, she was surprised at their coolness and incredulity. She then began to wonder if she really received the blessing, and the devil’s whispered words of doubt added to her anguish. She then asked the Lord for a direct sign and received it. She acknowledged that not everyone receives such a direct witness, but that “it is their privilege to have the clear, distinct witness of the Spirit to both justification and sanctification... Many times since then my faith has been tried sorely... and the fiery darts of Satan at times have been sore, but he has never, from that day, had the impudence to tell me God had not done this blessed work.”¹⁷

Subsequent to this experience, Amanda made two significant changes in her life. First, maintaining a lavish lifestyle, dressing in the requisite fashionable clothing, and keeping up the dues of the lodge societies was taking everything Amanda earned. She declared that, “the more I prayed about it the clearer God made it to me that all these secret societies are the mothers of selfishness, pride and worldliness.” Despite her husband’s pleas and the entreaties of the society ladies, she quit the

¹⁶Smith, 72-79; on John Inskip, see William McDonald and John Searles, *The Life of Rev. John S. Inskip, President of the National Association for the Promotion of Holiness* (Chicago: Christian Witness, 1885); and Kenneth O. Brown, *Inskip, McDonald, Fowler: “Wholly and Forever Thine;” Early Leadership in the National Camp Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness* (Hazelton, Pennsylvania: Holiness Archives, 1999).

¹⁷Smith, 80-84.



John S. Inskip (1816-1884) and Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874)

societies. She also abandoned fancy clothes and adopted the plain Quaker style of dress, which would become a trademark of Amanda Smith, the colored evangelist. Almost assuredly, she was influenced by her former mistress, but Pamela Klassen offers some additional possible factors and benefits:

The 'order' of plain dress, freely chosen, could at once commit a woman to God, act as a critique of white standards of fashion, provide a measure of security when traveling, reduce the expense of clothing, and serve as a tool to protest slavery. Plain dress may also have eased the minds of male ministers unsure of female preachers, or at least robbed them of the argument that such women were unfit to preach due to inappropriate dress or finery.¹⁸

The second major change she made was to begin attending the Tuesday Holiness meetings at the home of Phoebe and Walter Palmer, about two miles from her home. Through her attendance at these

¹⁸Pamela E. Klassen, "The Robes of Womanhood: Dress and Authenticity among African American Methodist Women in the Nineteenth Century," *Religion and American Culture: A Journal of Interpretation*, 14:1 (2004), 60.

meetings, she met some of the most influential members of the Holiness Movement.¹⁹

In the wake of her resignation from the lodge societies, her marriage continued to deteriorate, as did her financial state. Her family troubles reached a climax in the summer of 1869 when her infant son died. Her husband did not attend or help pay for the funeral or burial. Grief-stricken, Amanda felt abandoned and resentful. About five months later, James died of stomach cancer. A widow with a fourteen year-old daughter, Amanda was now free to pursue her spiritual calling.²⁰

She began to speak at several of the local black churches, class meetings, and prayer groups about holiness, and to testify to her own experience. She became well known among black Methodists, and started visiting local white churches as well. These initial outings served to confirm Amanda's calling as she spoke to packed audiences, and the "Lord convicted sinners and backsliders and believers for holiness, and when I asked for persons to come to the altar, it was filled... with seekers - old men, young men, old women, young women, boys and girls. Oh! Glory to God!"²¹

As she gained prominence among the white religious leaders, she began to receive invitations to speak at various churches, revivals, and holiness gatherings. One day she was doing some work for a local Methodist woman, who suggested that she should attend an upcoming camp meeting in Maryland. Amanda allowed that she surely would like to go, but could not afford to lose two weeks of work. The woman responded, "Sister Smith, why don't you trust the Lord? [Amanda] thought, 'What, trust the Lord about my rent?' I had not heard of such a thing, certainly I had never done it. I thought a moment and then said, 'I will.'" Thus Amanda attended her first National Holiness Camp Meeting. She found the meeting inspiring, Spirit-filled and contagious, and she made some significant contacts. But what may have been the most vital thing Amanda discovered at this meeting was to "trust the Lord for temporal things."²²

¹⁹Israel, 49. On Phoebe Palmer and her influence, see Charles E. White, "The Beauty of Holiness: the Career and Influence of Phoebe Palmer" in *Methodist History* 25:2 (January 1987), 67-75. See also George Hughes, *The Beloved Physician, Walter C. Palmer, Jr.* (New York: Palmer & Hughes, 1884).

²⁰Israel, 50-51.

²¹Smith, 158.

²²Ibid, 168.

This trust in God to provide was to become not only a common theme for Amanda, but also her means of livelihood as an itinerant evangelist. Almost as soon as one camp meeting was ending, she would begin to pray to find the means to attend the next one and in almost every instance, some way, somehow, she seemed to find the means. In October 1870, she gave up her laundry and cleaning service, left her home “at God’s command and began [her] evangelistic work”²³ relying on occasional domestic work and irregular, unexpected donations to fund her public ministry. She said, “O, how the Lord supplied my needs, one dollar, two dollars at a time.” Although she consistently praised God for providing for her needs, throughout the majority of her evangelistic career she typically received about one-fifth what other missionaries received.²⁴

She became a regular attendee at these camp meetings, where she continued to develop a network of influential and prominent contacts within the white religious and holiness establishment, and “built an enduring reputation as a powerful singer and speaker.”²⁵ This network of contacts continued to expand, as in 1875, when Amanda joined the Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and became a leader and prominent speaker on behalf of the temperance movement.

Although Amanda was becoming very popular and frequently was invited to sing and speak at both black and white churches, camp meetings, revivals, and other religious gatherings, there were those who were very much against her doing so. For one thing, she was a woman, and in the minds of many religious leaders of the late nineteenth century, women preachers were anathema and should not be tolerated. Second, she was black; racial tensions and prejudices were still very high following the Civil War. Once she was asked whether she wished she were white; she replied, “Thank God, I am satisfied with my color. I am glad I had no choice in it, for if I had, I am sure I would not have been satisfied; for when I was a young girl, I was passionately fond of pea-green, and if choice had been left to me I would have chosen to be green... I was bad enough, black as I am, and I would have been ten times worse if I had been white.”²⁶

²³Smith, 152.

²⁴Ibid., 223; and Israel, 74.

²⁵Israel, 51.

²⁶Smith, 118.

However, Amanda's growing involvement with predominately white organizations, and her frequent speaking engagements at white churches, disappointed and antagonized AME Church leaders, who maintained, "she belongs to us." Despite pleas for her to "return to the AME fold," she believed she had been called by God to preach, and that she would not have access to as many pulpits and stages if she restricted her evangelistic efforts to the AME Church and the black community.

In the meantime, ever since her daughter's conversion in 1869, Amanda dreamed of Mazie becoming a missionary in Africa. To help her train for that vocation, Amanda had sent Mazie to Oberlin College in Ohio in 1873 and 1874. However, the costs were more than she could afford on the meager income she received from her evangelistic activities. She tried to enroll her at Wilberforce, the AME College in Zenia, Ohio, but that also proved too expensive. Then in the summer of 1877, a white woman Amanda had met at a camp meeting offered to pay for Mazie to go to school in Baltimore. She did very well the first term and Amanda decided to allow her to stay in school another year. After a brief visit with Mazie in July 1878, Amanda left for England with the intention of getting back in three months. It would be twelve years before she returned to the United States.

When Amanda experienced the "second blessing" in 1868, on her way home from Rev. Inskip's church, she thought, "if there was a platform around the world I would be willing to get on it and walk and tell everybody of this sanctifying power of God!" Ten years later, she "stepped onto that symbolic platform" as she strode on board the steamship *Ohio*, bound for England.²⁷ On her first Sunday in London, Amanda attended worship at Wesley's City Road Chapel, and was amazed at the lack of life; "everything seemed so formal and dead." Mistaking the service for a funeral when the minister read the text for his message, "Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord," she concluded, "when he was through that there was nothing to do but to bury them, for they were all dead, and the funeral sermon was preached."²⁸

For the next year and a half, Amanda traveled throughout England singing, preaching, and testifying at churches, revivals, camp meetings and temperance conferences. At first she attracted attention as something of a novelty as a black woman preacher; but as her popularity grew, many more "wealthy holiness and temperance activists became her

²⁷Ibid., 79; and Israel, 69.

²⁸Smith, 271.

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An image from Amada's
autobiography of her
daughter, Mazie.

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eager hosts and patrons.”²⁹
Despite being exhausted from her crowded schedule, she accepted invitations to visit Scotland. Speaking to packed audiences, and much to the consternation of some of her listeners, she aimed her messages at believers whom she discerned “know their Bibles, but they need to know the Holy Ghost to quicken the Word into life and power.”³⁰

In the fall of 1879, Amanda accepted an invitation from holiness missionary William Osborn to go to India with him. Arriving in Bombay in November 1879, she traveled extensively with Osborn and James Thoburn, the pioneer Methodist missionary in India, conducting revivals in several major cities.³¹ Osborn reported that “thousands came to hear her ‘glowing experiences, thrilling songs, and clear teachings.’” Thoburn added that “her singing drew and held larger audiences” than any before her, because she had that “indefinable something we call power.”³² Despite



²⁹Israel, 70.

³⁰Smith, 267.

³¹Rev. William B. Osborn (1832-1902) entered the Methodist ministry with the New Jersey Conference in 1857. He served as a Presiding Elder in South Carolina, India and Australia, and was the primary founder of Ocean Grove, New Jersey. He died after being struck and dragged by a train in West Virginia. *New Jersey Conference Minutes* (1903), 134-136. James M. Thoburn (1836-1922) joined the Pittsburgh Conference in 1857 and went to India as a missionary in 1859; he served there for decades, before being elected Missionary Bishop of India and Malaysia in 1888. See Frederick Deland Leete, *Methodist Bishops: Personal Notes and Bibliography* (Nashville: the Parthenon Press, 1948), 177-178.

³¹Smith, 429-430.

³²Israel, 71.

her astounding success and immense popularity, she encountered fierce opposition to women preaching and to holiness doctrine.

In the summer of 1881, Amanda returned to Britain briefly, singing and preaching at various venues throughout England and Ireland. In late December, she sailed for West Africa, arriving in Monrovia, Liberia in January 1882. Liberia was settled by free blacks and former slaves sponsored by the American Colonization Society, an organization of influential whites, most of whom wanted to rid the United States of unwanted blacks. Three weeks after her arrival, she came down with malaria. During her recovery from the fever, she became homesick, wanting nothing but a “drink of cool water... [here] the water is always warm... I craved what I could not get.”³³

Following her recovery, she resumed her missionary work among the immigrants and also continued her temperance efforts. She decried the treatment of the natives by the colonists, citing neglect and the liquor trade as the area’s worst faults. She liked the people, but was severely critical of their customs and ignorance. She also continued to experience prejudice against women preaching, even though whenever she did manage to conduct services, there were always comments such as, “Great Lord, that woman can preach... [and] God is in that woman.”³⁴

Her labors among the West Africans met with mixed results. Her temperance work did not progress as well as she had hoped, and her attempts at spreading holiness doctrine among the settlers met with limited success. Her work among the native people, however, fared somewhat better. The most glaring need was for education. There were no native schools or standard texts; students used any books they could find. Amanda began to help found schools among the natives. She called 1886 “the best year of victory I ever had,” opening sixteen mission schools for Liberia’s indigenous people. Bishop Taylor credited Amanda with what limited success was achieved in temperance and holiness in Liberia, saying that she “brought about wonderful change, illustrating what can be done in that line by intelligent, earnest missionary effort.”³⁵

³³Smith, 429-430.

³⁴Ibid., 439.

³⁵Israel, 86-87. William Taylor (1821-1902) was a native of Virginia, and joined the Baltimore Conference in 1843. He traveled to California in 1849 and founded the first Methodist Church in San Francisco. He travelled around the world as an evangelist and missionary, and in 1884 was elected Missionary Bishop of Africa. He wrote a number of books, and Taylor University of Indiana is named for him. See Leete, 175-176.



An image from Amanda's autobiography, depicting her and Bishop William Taylor preaching to African tribesmen.

After eight long, arduous years in West Africa, Amanda, weakened from malaria, suffering from respiratory problems and arthritis, and exhausted from constant travel, returned to England. Wishing only to rest, she nonetheless spent a cold and miserable winter (which exacerbated her arthritic condition) preaching against "the liquor traffic." In late summer of 1890, she finally returned to the United States. After a brief rest at Mountain Lake Park in Maryland, she returned to her evangelistic work with speaking tours, camp meetings and revivals. She also visited several of the weekly holiness meetings in Philadelphia, Newark and New York, where she testified about her experiences in England, India and Africa. She also increased her temperance efforts, joining a delegation that testified before the House Committee on the Alcoholic Liquor Traffic. In 1892, she settled in Chicago and began to write her autobiography. She spent the next several months writing and doing housework during the day, while preaching at local churches at night.

In April 1893, her autobiography was finally in publication. She began to accept some of the many invitations and offers that had been pouring in while she was writing. She accepted an appointment as a national evangelist with the WCTU, and spent most of the summer in camp meetings. In the fall she was invited to a series of temperance

lectures in England and Ireland. She kept up a hectic pace of lectures, singing and preaching, and received more invitations than she could fill. Her reputation continued to grow, both abroad and at home, and for the first time in her life, she was not struggling financially. While in Scotland, Amanda had an opportunity to do more than speak; she helped establish a home for orphans. Upon her return to the United States, she announced that she intended to build an orphanage for black children; in December 1895, Amanda purchased two lots and a building in Harvey, Illinois, a planned temperance community south of Chicago.³⁶

She spent the next four years touring the country and raising money for the orphanage, and on June 28, 1899, the Amanda Smith Orphanage and Industrial Home for Abandoned and Destitute Colored Children was opened. The institution's objective was to provide the children with care, education and industrial training. Amanda provided most of the religious training herself. To accommodate growing numbers of children, Amanda purchased additional land and buildings. Despite the assistance of several Methodist congregations, and donations from her network of patrons (in addition to her own resources), the increasing costs proved staggering, and the orphanage was in constant financial difficulty.

The year 1906 was bittersweet for Amanda. She graduated from the Chicago Training School for Deaconesses at Grace ME Church, achieving a life-long dream of a formal education, but she also relinquished legal control of the orphanage. She continued to oversee daily operations at the home until 1912 when, having grown frail and exhausted from the pressures of running the home and recurring health problems, she left the home and moved to Sebring, Florida. There a wealthy benefactor, George Sebring, provided her a place to live in the new town he had developed. After suffering a stroke, Amanda Smith died on February 25, 1915. Sebring shipped her body to Chicago, where hundreds came to Quinn Chapel AME Church to attend her funeral. She was buried in Homewood, Illinois near Harvey.³⁷

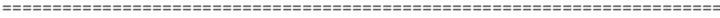
Following a series of financial investment blunders and a disastrous fire, the Amanda Smith Orphanage closed on November 21, 1918 and disappeared without a trace. Amanda Smith had been a legend in her own lifetime, but the institution she built collapsed under a mountain of debt and tragedy, "its memory fading into obscurity along

³⁶Israel, 100-110; Robert G. Tuttle, *The Story of Evangelism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2006), 323.

³⁷Israel, 134-142.

with that of its founder.” Like John Wesley, this “African sibyl,” was convinced that “Without holiness, no man shall see the Lord.”³⁸ This was the standard that she carried throughout her ministry, and which was deeply engraved on her heart and her life.

There is little left to remind us of Amanda Berry Smith, the ex-slave and “colored evangelist,” who incessantly battled racial and gender prejudice and persecution, and labored so tirelessly for over sixty-five years to enlighten those “separated from the life of God” – to help them overcome their ignorance by sharing the good news of the gospel – to soften their hardened hearts to receive the blessing of holiness. Almost all that remains of her legacy is her nearly forgotten autobiography, a relatively recent (and overdue) biography, a few references in some aged articles, and a historical marker standing outside an old church building (now a residence) in a small town in south-central Pennsylvania.



Amanda Berry Smith in Philadelphia

The following is an excerpt from Amanda’s autobiography, pages 225-227, describing services in a number of Methodist Churches in Philadelphia in 1878.

It was in '78, I was holding meeting, first at Manayunk, Brother Rakestraw’s; then at Holmesburg, Brother Gillingham’s; then at Camden, then at Norristown, Brother Day’s. We had a good work at all these places. Many souls were saved and believers built up. Then I was called to Horton Street. Brother Robinson was pastor. There the Lord blessed us mightily. There was a sweeping revival. Every night for more than two weeks the church was packed, altar and pulpit...

One dear woman that I met last fall at the Saturday night holiness meeting, told me she was converted at that meeting; also her husband and two children. She told me how she disliked me because I was a colored woman, how she went to church full of prejudice; but when God saved her, he took it all out, and now she loves me as a sister, and thinks I have a beautiful color! Of course, I call that a good con-

³⁸Israel, 61, 147. Sibyl means “prophetess,” from the Greek word *sybylla*, referring to women in antiquity who prophesied at Greek temples. In the medieval period, these ancient female prophets were regarded as precursors among the Greeks to Christ, much as were some of the Greek philosophers.