



*"Knowing our past. guides our future."*

### **Broadening the Definition of Democracy: The Smith Sisters**

*"Here began a peaceful resistance to the same kind of tyranny as that which caused the Revolution, and here, some day, as to Bunker Hill now, will come men and women who are reverent of the great principle of the consent of the governed, who respect courage and fidelity to principle, and who will hold at its true value the part which these sisters have taken in solving the meaning of a representative government."* — **Lucy Stone, suffragist leader**

The Smith sisters were not only ahead of their time but helped other people to move ahead with them. Born in the last two decades of the eighteenth century during a period when the young United States was struggling to understand what it meant to be a democracy, they spent their entire lives challenging narrow definitions of that term – definitions that excluded women, African-Americans, and immigrants from full citizenship. Beginning in the 1820's, the Smiths were ardent abolitionists at a time when most people felt that although slavery was wrong, it was none of their concern. The Smiths supported advanced education for women before there existed any colleges that would admit them. Following the Civil War, they became suffragists even though it meant financial loss and public ridicule. Yet all the battles they fought were eventually won: the slaves were freed, the education of women improved, and women won the right to vote.

Respected intellectuals, the five sisters had unusual names and skills. Hancy Zephina (1787-1871) was a musician; Cyinthia Sacretia (1788-1864) was a horticulturist; Laurilla Aleroyla (1789-1857) was an artist; Julia Evelina (1792-1886) was a scholar; and Abby Hadassah (1797–1878), who modestly maintained that as the youngest sister she had the least skills, became a courageous speaker on behalf of women's rights. Their father, Zephaniah Hollister Smith (1758-1836), was a minister, lawyer, and a state legislator. Their mother, Hannah Hadassah Hickok (1767-1850), was a poet, a linguist, and was fascinated with astronomy.

### **Early Education**

Because Zephaniah and Hannah considered the education of their daughters to be of great importance, they were dissatisfied with the quality of the private schools open to girls. These schools focused on teaching needlework and the cultivation of social graces. The curriculum included only a modicum of reading and arithmetic, just enough so the girls could eventually keep the household books but not enough to challenge men in the public forum. As one writer of the period stated, women were to be the "loveliest ornament" of society; too much education would only "make them regret the station which Providence has assigned them or have recourse to unjustifiable ways to get from it."

For a while, the sisters attended Sarah Pierce's Academy in Litchfield, which Zephaniah and Hannah considered the best school available. However, they supplemented their daughters' education by encouraging them to read extensively and by providing private tutors, who were often scholars from Yale University. To become fluent in French, Zephaniah and Hannah sent their daughters to spend summers with a French-speaking family in New Haven. Two excerpts from Julia Smith's diary written in 1812 when Julia was 20 years old and Abby 15 years old indicate the level of reading: "Abby commenced studying Erasmus with me." "Did nothing except read in Mr. Locke on the Intellect."

By the 1820's the sisters' reputation as scholars was sufficiently great that the pioneering educator Emma Willard asked them to teach at her newly established school in Troy, New York. Laurilla taught French and art while Julia taught French and Euclidean geometry. Julia was very homesick and although Emma Willard begged her to stay, she returned to Glastonbury after only a year; so also did Laurilla. From thereon, their lives were centered entirely in Glastonbury, a small rural town to the east of Hartford, the state capital of Connecticut. However, their interests were nationwide.

## The Issue of Equality

The death of Zephaniah in 1836, who was the only male in the family, was significant because it pushed the Smith sisters toward activism. One of the reasons that women were denied the vote, or even the right to speak at public gatherings, was that they were supposedly represented through their father, husband, brother or son. That meant that with the death of Zephaniah, the Smith women had no male at all to represent them and, therefore, no say in the government. In the 1870's, this would play a major role in their battle over taxation without representation and voting rights. However, in the 1830's, the lack of a public voice increased the importance of the only right women did possess which was the right to petition their government. In the 1830's so many petitions began rolling into Washington D.C. against slavery, that Southern Congressmen passed what was called the gag rule. It stated that petitions could be laid on the table but could not be considered or discussed. In essence the gag rule denied the right to petition on the issue of slavery. Undeterred, the Smiths collected about 400 signatures on a petition (one of several), going from house to house and to the textile mills in South Glastonbury. The following draft text is in the archives of the Historical Society of Glastonbury:

*We, the undersigned inhabitants of Glastonbury believe that the holding of persons in involuntary slavery and regarding them as property is a heinous sin in the sight of their creator. And that to compel them to labor without wages or to withhold from them the means of acquiring a knowledge of the scriptures is a gross violation of the principles of the gospel. And we believe that the selling of human beings as beasts of burden far from their friends and relatives is a cruel practice worthy of the barbarous ages whence it originated and deserves the reprehension of all civilized and enlightened people.*

## Translating the Bible

While the petition drive was going on, Julia undertook a far different challenge: the translation of the entire Bible from Hebrew, Greek and Latin. Highly critical of mainline Christian theology, Julia's primary purpose was to determine for herself whether doctrinal errors had occurred because of the bias of translators. William Miller was a Baptist preacher who predicted that the world would come to an end either in 1843 or 1844, basing his prediction on Bishop Usser's calculations about the age of the earth. People by the thousands believed him. When the world did not end as forecast, Julia surmised that perhaps Miller had been misled by the translation of the Bible on which he had relied. She determined to translate the Bible for herself. She already knew Greek and Latin, leaving only Hebrew to be learned, which she achieved in short order. Julia began to translate in 1847, finishing in 1855. Because her translation was for her own edification as well as that of her sisters, she did not make an effort to have it published until the 1870's. Her purpose then was not so much to introduce a new version of the Bible as it was to prove to the town fathers that women were the intellectual equals of men and deserved the right to vote. Regardless of her purpose, the publication of Julia's Bible by Mark Twain's publishing company made her the first woman in history to accomplish the feat. As she wrote in the introduction:

*I wrote it out word for word, giving no ideas of my own, but endeavoring to put the same English word for the same Hebrew or Greek word, everywhere, while King James translators have wholly differed from this rule; but it appeared to us to give a much clearer understanding of the text....It may be thought by the public in general, that I have great confidence in myself, in not conferring with the learned in so great a work, but as there is but one book in the Hebrew tongue, and I have defined it word for word, I do not see how anybody can know more about it than I do. It being a dead language no improvements can be made upon it.*

## Taxation Without Representation

By the end of the Civil War, the remaining Smith sisters were all elderly, but their greatest battle still lay ahead: taxation without representation and the right to vote. When in 1874, the town seized their Alderney cows for payment of back taxes, the last of the two sisters Julia and Abby, then 80 and 74 years old respectively, brought suit, fighting their case all the way up to the State Supreme Court, thereby drawing the attention of national suffragist leaders, including Susan B. Anthony, Lucy Stone, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Meanwhile the cows (Jessie, Daisy, Whitey, Minnie, Proxy, Bessie and Lily) came to the attention of newspaper editors all across the country who saw in them a symbol as potent as chests of tea floating in Boston Harbor.

Taxation without representation was the Smiths' last battle. Abby died in 1878 and Julia died in 1886. In the short-run they did not win, but they set an example that encouraged women to become involved in suffrage, culminating in the passage of the 19th Amendment. Nor did Julia receive much acclaim for her translation of the Bible. As for equality of education for men and women, much remained to be done. Yet taken as a whole the Smiths accomplished a great deal, goading people to consider the true meaning of the word democracy.

**Kathleen L. Housley, Author: *The Letter Kills But the Spirit Gives Life: The Smiths, Abolitionists, Suffragists, Bible Translators***