

JAMES SMITH'S POEM, "THE WISH REALIZED"

James Smith (1757-1800) was a brother-in-law of Rev. Philip Gatch. Before moving to the Northwest Territory with the Gatch family and others in 1798, he made three journeys to the West: the first to Kentucky and two others across the Ohio River into the Territory. During these trips, he kept journals that were published over a century later.¹

Smith also composed a poem or hymn extolling the new slave-free, beautiful land that he had discovered. Philip Gatch quoted the first stanza of the hymn in his autobiography, changing the first person pronoun ("I") of the original to plural ("we").²

The entire nine-stanza poem was copied out "by Jas M. and John C. Smith from the original manuscript Journals in the handwriting of the Author. Apr. 1851." Sometime in the early twentieth century, a copy of this transcript of the verse was typed into a book containing (among other Smith-related papers) a copy of the third of Smith's journals (1797).³ This edition is from that copy. There is a second surviving copy of the poem, with a few minor variations, at the end of a manuscript copy of the Journals. It once owned by the Louisville collector and historian, Reuben T. Durrett, and is said to have been consulted by Theodore Roosevelt.⁴

Shortly after the families migrated westward, James Smith died suddenly in 1800 at Newtown, Ohio. He was buried in the Gatch family cemetery in Milford. His family soon thereafter settled near Waynesville in Warren County, where James had been preparing a home for them. It is said that in later years the verse was regularly sung as a hymn by the Smith family.

"The Wish Realized" would certainly work as a hymn: the lines of each verse follow the syllabic pattern 886.886, which is known in hymnody as Proper Common Meter (PCM). It could be sung to a number of

¹ Printed as "Tours into Kentucky and the Northwest Territory: Three Journals by the Rev. James Smith of Powhatan County, Va., 1783-1795-1797, edited by Josiah Morrow," *Ohio Archaeological and*

² Philip Gatch, Ms. Autobiography: now Archives of Ohio United Methodism, Gatch Papers I.A, 44; printed in John McLean, *Sketch of the Rev. Philip Gatch* (Cincinnati, 1854), 96.

³ Now Gatch Papers XXI.

⁴ University of Chicago Library, Durrett Codex 171, ff. 115-17. On Roosevelt, see Smith, "Tours," 352.

frequently used PCM tunes, such as "Hereford" by Dr. William Boyce (1765) or "Meribah" by Lowell Mason (1839). A number of the hymns in the Wesleys' *Hymns on the Lord's Super* are in this meter: 2, 3, 10, 47, 56, 66, 67, 135, 143. The rhyme scheme varies somewhat, but it is essentially aabccb.

The poem is primarily a hymn of thanksgiving for the new, free land to which the family had come. But the sixth and seventh verses turn dark and portend civil unrest in America. They reflect the strong anti-slavery convictions of the Smith and Gatch families, who moved to the West to put the slave economy behind them. Slave-holding extended westward from Virginia into Kentucky, just across the Ohio River ("the bordering flood") from the new, free land. Slavery had to be removed from American society, for "None but the freeborn heirs of grace/ Can find in Paradise a place."

The Wish Realized. Deut 3, 25⁵

1. For fertile fields and pleasant plains,
Where Liberty and Freedom reign
I left my native land;
Oer rivers deep and mountains high
Far to the west I bent my way
And left my friends behind.
2. At length by Providential aid
A lovely country I surveyed,
All clad in living green,
But like the promised land of old,
A stream its swelling current rolled-
Me and this land between.
3. To Heaven I made my firm request,
Let me my God, let me be blest
And oer this Jordon go;
That goodly land O let me see-
Where tyrants bow to liberty
And bliss succeeds to woe.

⁵ "I pray thee, let me go over, and see the good land that *is* beyond Jordan, that goodly mountain, and Lebanon."

4. This rolling current now I viewed,
and thro the yielding water flood
A passage safe I found.
With pleasing rapture now I spied
A landscape fair on every side
And Heaven had blessed the ground.
5. This charming landscape now I found
With rivers through and all around
As Eden had of old;
The fields were fair, the meadows green,
The fountains clear, the waters clean,
And milk and honey flowed.
6. Here Freedom and her sons rejoice
They raise to Heaven their tuneful voice
In sacred songs of praise;
But lo! beyond the bordering flood
The grim oppressor stained with blood
Envies, but can't enjoy.
7. But soon this earth shall see decay
Nature herself grow sick and die
And vengence [sic] shall be hurled;
These fertile fields their end shall know,
These noble rivers clean to flow,
And ruin seize the world!
8. Come now my soul thy faith expand-
View the fair fields at God's right hand,
Decked in eternal bloom.
See the pure streams of life arise,
Which water that blest Paradise
Like crystal from the throne.
9. None but the freeborn heirs of grace
Can find in Paradise a place,
All others must retire;
The slaves of sin, the heirs of hell,
Beyond the gulf must ever dwell
And sink in endless fire.