

Smylie, James ^[1]

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by Larry E. Tise, 1994

ca. 1780–1853

James Smylie, clergyman, church organizer, and controversialist, was born in the [Guilford County](#) ^[2] area of Scots-Irish parentage. Little is known about his early life other than the fact that he attended [David Caldwell](#) ^[3]'s [Log College](#) ^[4]. In 1804 he was licensed for the ministry by the Orange Presbytery. Ordained by that presbytery two years later, he was promptly sent, probably at his own request, as a missionary from the Synod of North Carolina to the Mississippi Territory.

Upon his arrival, Smylie organized in the town of Washington, Adams County, the first Presbyterian church in what later became the state of Mississippi. At the same time he opened a classical school, modeled on that of David Caldwell, which was said to be the first institution of learning in Mississippi. In 1811 Smylie took up permanent residence in Amite County, Miss., and there established another church called Pine Ridge from which he operated for the remainder of his career. At the time of his move to Amite, Smylie also became a land-holding planter and began developing a plantation that would make him modestly wealthy. Although he continued to preach at neighboring churches until his death, he apparently did not continue long in the active pastoral ministry after moving to Amite. In his later years he spent increasingly large portions of his time instructing his and his neighbors' slaves both in Scriptures and in the Westminster catechism. He was married three times and had one child in each marriage. Although he is known to have maintained a detailed diary throughout his career, the document has not yet become available in a public repository.

Smylie is known chiefly for two major contributions, both accomplished after his removal to Mississippi. The first was to establish Presbyterianism formally in Mississippi. In addition to forming the first church in the territory, Smylie, operating from Pine Ridge, initiated steps to organize the first presbytery for Mississippi. In 1814 he personally persuaded the membership of the West Tennessee Presbytery to petition the Synod of Kentucky to create a presbytery in Mississippi. The following year the Synod of Kentucky meeting at Danville acted affirmatively, enabling Smylie to call the first meeting of the Mississippi Presbytery on 15 Mar. 1816. Smylie was promptly elected state clerk of the presbytery, a post that he held for much of the remainder of his life.

In his post as stated clerk, Smylie was the recipient of a celebrated letter in the early history of attempts to abolish slavery. On 28 Nov. 1835 the Presbytery of Chillicothe, Ohio, adopted a set of resolutions condemning slavery as "a heinous sin and scandal" and demanding that all churches find slaveholders "guilty of a great sin . . . to be dealt with, as for other scandalous crimes." The resolutions were sent to Smylie with the request that the Presbytery of Mississippi endorse them and adopt them as basic tenets of the church in Mississippi. Smylie, already a slaveholder himself and ever eager to uphold the rights of slaveholders, responded to the letter with a scathing condemnation of the clergy and members of the Chillicothe Presbytery. He then proceeded to expand his views in a lengthy document that was published in 1836 under the title *A Review of a Letter from the Presbytery of Chillicothe, to the Presbytery of Mississippi on the Subject of Slavery* ^[5]. Although the small volume was not, as some have claimed, the first defense of slavery written by a southerner, it was among the first to respond formally to the appearance of radical abolitionism and was, at the time, the most extended defense of slavery prepared by a southerner. Because Smylie's defense rested largely on scriptural and religious arguments, its publication and wide distribution throughout America made it a crucial document in the development of proslavery attitudes in the South.

References:

Biographical Files, Historical Foundation of the Presbyterian and Reformed Churches (Montreat, N.C.).

Montgomery Family Papers (Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson).

[Alfred Nevin, *Encyclopedia of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* \(1884\).](#) ^[6]

The Presbyterian, 18 Feb. 1854.

Southwestern Presbyterian, 23 Feb. 1871.

Additional Resources:

Smylie, James H. (James Hutchinson). *A review of a letter, from the Presbytery of Chillicothe, to the Presbytery of Mississippi, on the subject of slavery*. Woodville, Mi.: Printed by Wm. A. Norris and Co. 1836.

<https://archive.org/details/reviewofletterfr00smyl> ^[5] (accessed April 21, 2014).

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Authors:

Tise, Larry E. ^[10]

Origin - location:

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Orange County ^[12]

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