

America—August's Hymn of the Month 2021

By
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What do you think of when you hear the word, "America"? According to Webster, "America" is North and South America together, or the United States. I suppose that most think of the United States and so do I, but I also think of a hymn. This song has two titles; one being *My Country 'Tis of Thee* and the other, *America*, which is my favorite. Regardless of which you choose, "America" brings thoughts of "liberty, noble, free, and our fathers' God, to Thee." For within its four verses is found the true expression of what America is all about. Maybe that's why many have called it our "unofficial anthem."

It was Samuel Francis Smith who wrote the words for *America* while attending Andover Theological Seminary at Andover, Massachusetts. Born in Boston in 1808, he eventually became a graduate of both Harvard and Andover and would serve several large Baptist churches throughout the East. He compiled a hymnal, "The Psalmist" in 1843, edited a missionary magazine promoting missions, spoke fifteen different languages and composed 150 hymns during his lifetime. With all these accomplishments though, Samuel Francis Smith is best remembered as the author of *America*. He was 23 years old when he penned these great words.

Lowell Mason, the father of the singing school movement in America, had sent Samuel a book of German songs to translate for him. On that fateful afternoon of February 1832, while translating, Smith saw a patriotic hymn. Thoughts of his own country started to flood over him and in less than 30 minutes, the young seminary student had completed the great hymn, *America*. Five months later, on July 4, 1832, greatly to the surprise of young Smith, his patriotic hymn was first sung in public by a chorus of children under Mason's direction in the Park Street Church of Boston.

After graduation from Andover and serving as editor of the American Baptist Magazine for a time, Smith would respond to the call of ministry. First, he pastored the Baptist Church of Waterville, Maine; and then, he accepted the call to the First Baptist Church of Newton Centre, Massachusetts. He would pastor at Newton from 1842 to 1854. (See A 1,000 Words for pictures.)

During research on the life of Katharine Lee Bates, I discovered two interesting connections with Samuel Francis Smith—not including they both wrote two of our greatest patriotic songs. First, Smith and Katharine's father, William Bates, were both graduates of Andover Theological Seminary—Smith in 1832 and Bates four years later in 1836. Second, Smith owned a house on Centre Street in Newton, Massachusetts. The house is long gone, but a bronze plaque remains. Interestingly enough is the fact that Bates also lived on Centre Street, and a plaque marks the site too. I have yet to find out if they were neighbors.

Besides writing America, Samuel wrote many other poems and would edit two hymnals: The Psalmist (1843) and The Social Psalmist (1848). (See A 1,000 Words for a picture of the first hymnal.)

The words have remained the same since the hymn's inception, even though our country has not. A young Bible scholar wrote, "Our fathers' God to Thee, Author of Liberty, to Thee we sing." We would do well, as a nation, to think before we sing and be willing to return to our fathers' God first, if we expect our "land to be bright with freedom's holy light, Great our King."

My country 'tis of thee, Sweet land of liberty
Of thee I sing: Land where my fathers died, Land of the
Pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside Let freedom ring!

My native country thee, land of the noble free,
Thy name I love; I love the rocks and rills, Thy woods and
Templed hills; My heart with rapture thrills, Like that above.

Let music swell the breeze, And ring from all the trees
Sweet freedom's song: Let mortal tongues awake; Let all that
Breathe partake; Let rocks their silence break, The sound prolong.

Our fathers' God to Thee, Author of liberty,
To Thee we sing: long may our land be bright With freedom's
Holy light; Protect us by Thy might, Great God