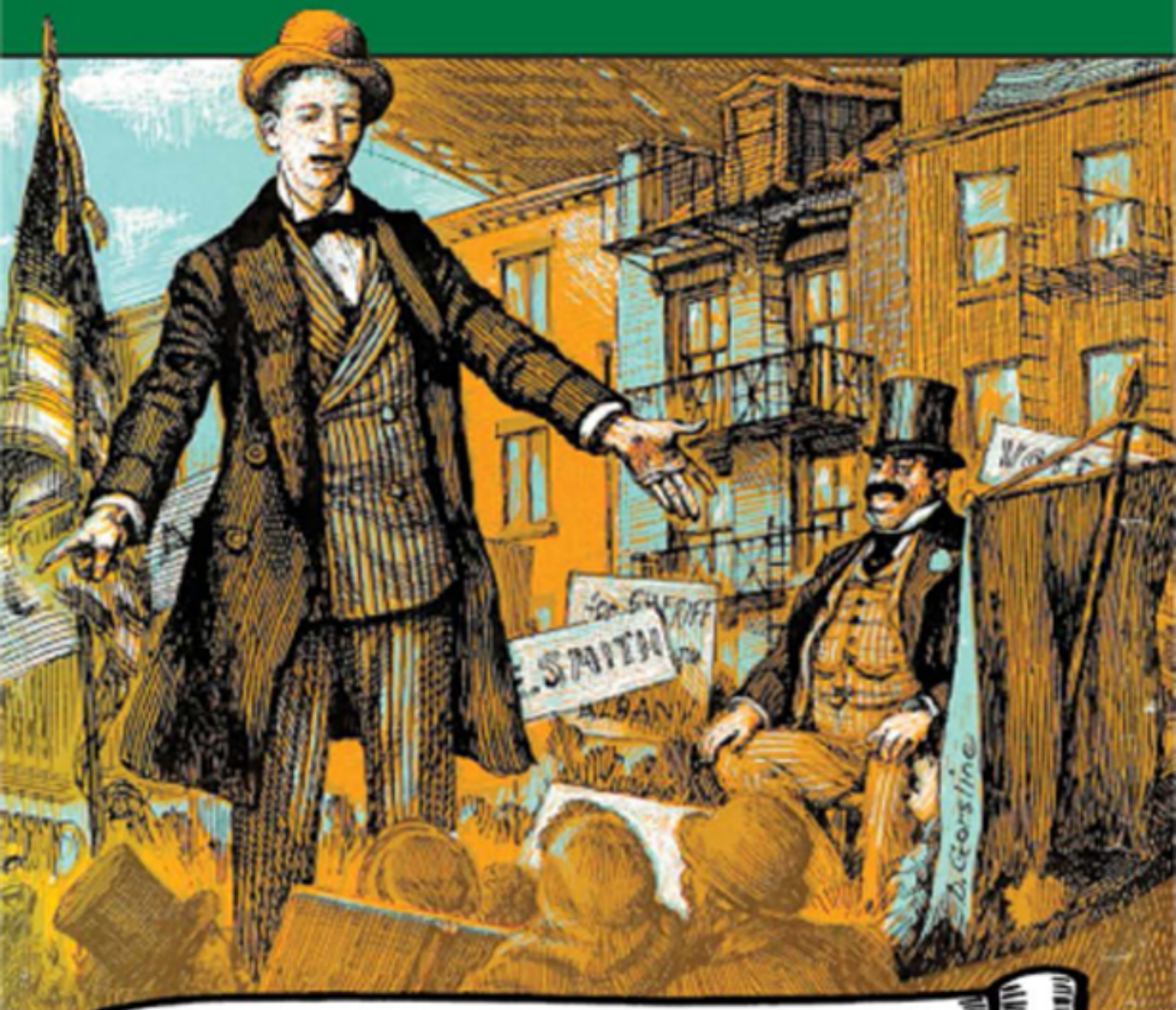


Alfred E. Smith

Sidewalk Statesman



Portraits in Faith and Freedom

William G. Schofield

Alfred E. Smith

Sidewalk Statesman

by William G. Schofield

Illustrated by Douglas Gorsline

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Portraits in Faith and Freedom

SET 6: NEW YORK AMBASSADORS OF BROTHERHOOD

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Alfred E. Smith: Sidewalk Statesman

Statement on Portraits in Faith and Freedom

Bethlehem Books is bringing back this series of biographies originally made available in the 1950s and 1960s by publishers who wished to introduce young people to a wide range of arresting and faithful Catholic lives. Slightly edited now for the modern reader, these biographies present key people and events from the past that help us reflect anew on the meaning of freedom. They depict how powerfully men and women of faith have formed and influenced the world in which they live.

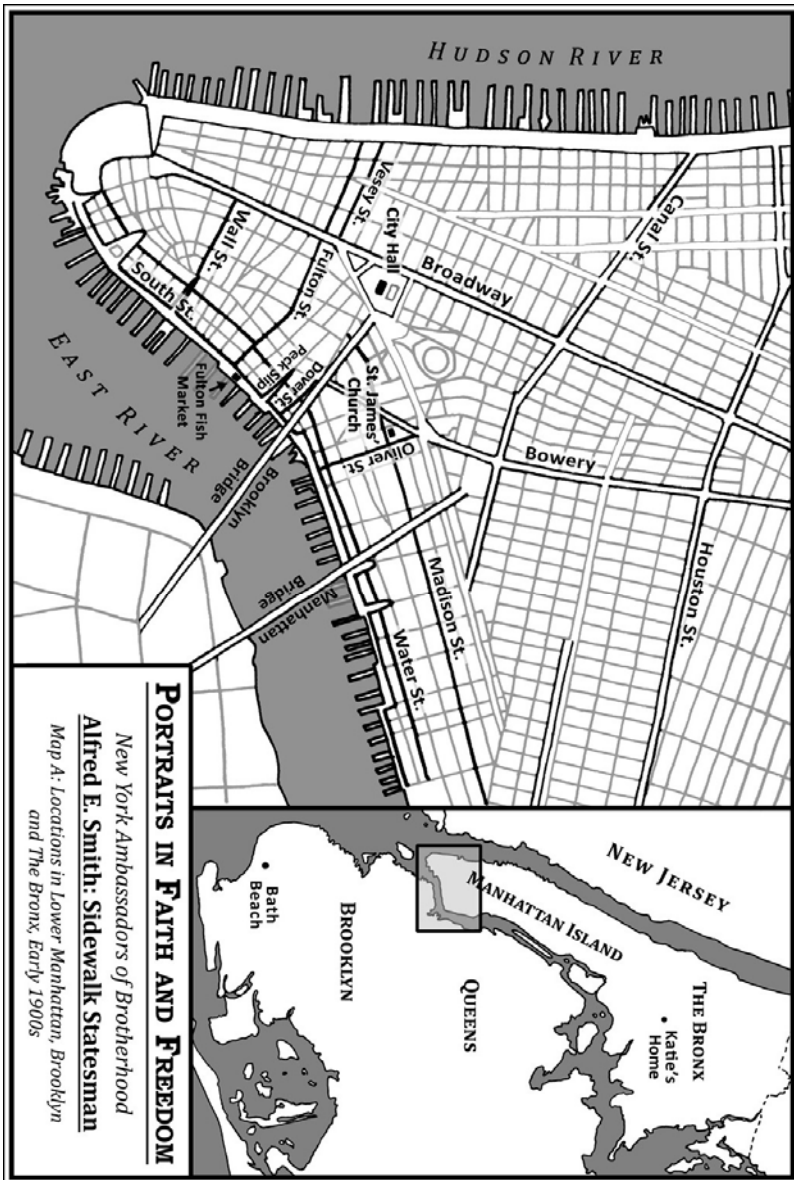
Web Resources

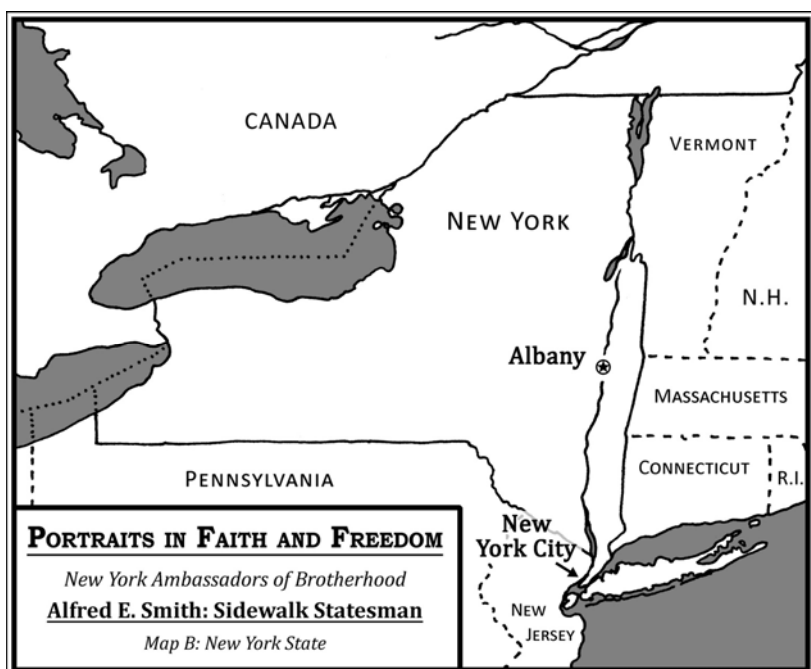
To access printable maps, a timeline, and other information, visit <https://www.bethlehembooks.com/alfred-e-smith-sidewalk-statesman-865>

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Maps





1. In the Shadow of Brooklyn Bridge

LATE IN THE SUMMER OF 1886, when Al Smith was twelve years old, he decided to work out a program that would give him as much fun in one day as any boy in New York could possibly have.

He lay in bed for several minutes that August morning, and planned exactly what he would do with every hour of his time. Summer was coming to an end, and he wanted to enjoy its last hours while he could.

He listened to the sounds and cries, almost like the endless sound of a rushing river, that drifted up from Dover Street and came pouring in through his open third-floor bedroom window.

He liked what he heard—the noise of carts and trucks on the cobblestones, the shouts of sailors and hawkers on the East River water front, the tooting of a fish peddler's horn, the drum-like rumble of horses' hoofs, and the thump of rolling casks and barrels.

The noises made him feel all the more eager to get outdoors while there was still a small portion of summer left to enjoy.

"School opens pretty soon," he said to his mother a few minutes later as he hurried to the kitchen breakfast table. He made a face at the thought of sitting in a stuffy classroom again and missing all the fun that was going on in the streets of New York.

"School, yes—I know." His mother, Catherine Smith, placed a fresh bottle of milk beside his cereal bowl. "Father Kean stopped in yesterday. He'll be looking for you at St. James' come Monday. And he wants you to help him with the new altar boys this year, too."

"Sure." Al began to eat his cereal. "I'll help. Where's Mamie?" he asked between mouthfuls.

"Your sister's out playing jump rope, like a ten-year-old girl should be at this time of day."

"It's only seven o'clock." Al shrugged. "Where's Father?"

"Gone to the stable to harness his horses." Mrs. Smith began to rinse the dishes that were standing in the sink. "He's not feeling well," she added, as though to herself. "I hope he takes time to go to the doctor's and not try to spend all day on the job." She sighed, but young Al never noticed it.

“Then I guess you’re the only one to hear what I’m planning to do all day,” he said, getting up from the table and smiling at his mother. “I’m going to have fun.”

Mrs. Smith kissed him affectionately and gave him a gentle push toward the door. “Just so long as you stay out of trouble,” she told him. “Do it and tell me about it later. Get along with you, now. I’ve two bedrooms and a kitchen and a front room to clean, and I’m an hour behind already. Get along outside, and be home before dark.”

“Good-by, then!” Young Al tossed a kiss at his mother and dashed out through the open kitchen door and started downstairs.

He hurried down the dark and narrow tenement stairs to the second-floor landing. He paused there just long enough to stick his head through the open doorway of the German barbershop that did business underneath the rooms where the Smith family lived.

“Good morning,” he called. “You’re open early.”

“Lots of ships at the piers, Alfred,” the German barber called back. “If you see any sailors that need haircuts, send them my way.”

Al waved good-naturedly and went on down the stairs. He hurried past the fruit store on the first floor and out onto the street.

Then he looked back and craned his neck upward, thinking he might see his mother at one of the windows. But there was nothing to see except the usual dull brick face of the building, with the ugly fire escape angling down toward the sidewalk. The dark shape of the Brooklyn Bridge with its nearby abutment cast a shadow of dinginess over the whole area, pierced only here and there by thin shafts of sunlight that somehow poked their way through to the walls and sidewalks that lay below.

Al turned away, and sauntered down the street. “Let’s see now,” he told himself. “First, the fire station.”

It was a pleasant walk to where the fire wagons were kept and the big horses were stabled. It was a roundabout walk that took him past the South Street water front with all its color and excitement and activity. Schooners and clipper ships from faraway ports were tied up at the piers. As Al moved along, his path took him underneath a long row of bowsprits that jutted out above the street and the moving traffic.

From time to time he could see smaller boats, plying back and forth on the river, carrying passengers and freight from lower New York up toward Harlem. And he could see the fishing boats coming and going, some of them sailing out to sea with their holds empty, and others coming in loaded with cargoes for the nearby Fulton Fish Market.

He came at last to the station house of Engine Company 32, and he waved a greeting to the firemen who were working outside, washing the windows. Al was popular with the fire fighters.

"Hurry up, there," they called to him as he approached. "Get yourself a bucket and brush and get to work."

He grinned, and ran across the street to join them.

Working with the firemen was one of his favorite ways of having fun. He liked to help them polish the brass on the fire wagons and clean the floor and feed the big, fast horses. And there was always the chance that the alarm bell might ring while he was there, sending the horses thundering into the street and sending Al dashing after the red engines as the firemen rushed off to battle a blaze. He had thought, lots of times, that he might decide to become a fireman himself when he became old enough.

On that summer day in late August, though, it was a dull morning at the firehouse. The alarm bell stayed silent; the horses were quiet in their stalls. So, after helping to clean the station, Al decided to move on and explore the rest of his special program. For a while he just walked idly up and down the streets, wondering what the neighborhood had looked like in other years.

He knew from the stories his father and mother had told him that this once had been a beautiful residential area for wealthy families. Many of the brownstone houses that he passed had formerly been the homes of rich merchants and shipowners. Tall shade trees had lined the streets and made the sidewalks cool in the summer. But now the trees were gone, and the wealthy families had moved to other parts of the city. And the old mansions had been made into three-family and four-family homes, like the one the Smiths lived in. The neighborhood had grown noisy and shabby, with crowded streets and a mixture of many kinds of people.



Al knew from his father's talk, especially at election time, that politically the neighborhood was the Fourth Ward in New York's old Second Assembly District, and that scarcely anybody ever thought of voting anything but a straight Democratic ticket. And he knew from his own experience that, whatever it might have been in other years, it now was a neighborhood that contained German-Americans, Irish-Americans, Italo-Americans, Russians, a few Chinese and some Jews.