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OTHELLO RICHARDS IN ROCKBRIDGE: LIBERIAN PATRIARCH'S EARLY YEARS

By Neely Young

Adapted from *Trans-Atlantic Sojourners*

PROLOGUE

THE FAMILIES of Othello Richards of Rockbridge County, Virginia, and William Coleman, of Fayette and Woodford Counties, Kentucky, arrived in Liberia within three years of each other in the 1850s and settled in the town of Clay-Ashland, founded in 1846, on the Saint Paul River. Othello Richards had six children and Coleman had ten, and the families became interconnected through numerous marriages. The two families — one family, really — soon established themselves among the leading Americo-Liberians, not only in their town but throughout the new republic.

The descendants of Othello Richards and William Coleman became part of an ascendant minority that held political, economic and cultural power in Liberia until the late twentieth century. In 1980, however, everything suddenly changed. The long-suppressed indigenous

people turned against the Americo-Liberian elite and established their own government. Members of the Richards and Coleman family, like others of their class, were arrested, imprisoned, executed or exiled. Many returned to the United States, where their ancestors had been held in slavery, and most remain here today — although more recently, a small number of them have returned to Liberia.

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Above: Departure from Savannah of black Americans on board the *Laurada*, bound for Liberia, 1896

OTHELLO RICHARDS IN ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY

Othello Richards was born into slavery but died a citizen of the Republic of Liberia. He was a man small in stature, but large in faith and courage.

We know little about Othello Richards' family and childhood. But we do know that during his more than fifty years in slavery, several qualities characterized him: loyalty, perseverance, love of learning, an abiding Christian faith. He learned to read and write and was trained to become a Methodist minister. He attained high rank and respect in his master's household, and after he obtained his freedom, he managed the purchase of his family's freedom. At an advanced age, he embarked on a dangerous voyage to his ancestral homeland with a sense of mission and purpose.

Othello Richards was born in 1797, probably in eastern Virginia. There was no prominent Richards family in Rockbridge County before the Civil War, but there were slaveholders with the name Richards in the eastern part of the state. Virginia had outlawed the importation of African slaves in 1778, and Othello was likely the child or grandchild of an African and a European. It is probable that his family arrived in the Caribbean or America by 1750; the likelihood is that his family came from West or Central Africa.¹

Census records show that Colonel James McDowell acquired Othello Richards at some point between 1810 and 1820. Only one physical description of Othello Richards exists, and that is from 1848 when he was liberated by his mistress and became a part of the free black population of Rockbridge. In the *Free Black Register* he is described as "5' 6 and ½, dark mulatto color, short curly hair, his nose very flat and disfigured by cancer when a child."²

1 This observation is supported by a DNA test given in 2016 to a descendant, Othello Richard Sr., which showed a strong western African heritage.

2 *Rockbridge County Free Black Register, 1831–1860*, Library of Virginia.

Mulattoes often occupied a higher social position within slave society and among whites, and Othello's mixed-race identity may have been a factor in establishing his position as a house servant to the McDowell family rather than a field hand. Later, it also may have been important in establishing his status in Liberia, where lighter-skinned American emigrants predominated politically, economically and culturally.

There is poignancy in his having been named after the Moor of Venice. Our Othello, like the Shakespearean character, was a cross-cultural figure. Unlike most slaves, he would become educated and would come to see himself as a transmitter of western culture and values to Africa. He and his family would have a foot in each of two cultures and two countries. Like the Moor, Othello Richards would be neither alienated nor assimilated, but a figure defined by two worlds.

More information is available about Othello Richards after he was acquired by the McDowell family.³ This is partly because the McDowells were among

3 The McDowells were surely the most prominent family in Rockbridge County's early history, owning vast amounts of land and dominating local politics. The family also produced a Virginia governor, a world-renowned surgeon, any number of prominent educators and even an alleged witch. See Oren Morton, *History of Rockbridge County, Virginia*, 1920, pp. 263–66.



Cherry Grove, near Fairfield, home of the McDowell family and first Rockbridge home of Othello Richards.

the most influential families in the county and in the state, and they kept extensive records.¹ By around 1790, Colonel James McDowell II had built the family home, Cherry Grove, south of Fairfield on part of the tract obtained by the McDowell family from Benjamin Borden in 1737. Here Colonel McDowell would raise his family of a boy and two girls, and here he would die in 1835. Here too Othello Richards would live and serve for approximately twenty years.

The colonel was a justice of the peace, state assembly delegate from Rockbridge, captain in the Rockbridge militia, trustee of Washington Academy (later Washington College and then Washington and Lee University), sheriff of the county and, during the War of 1812, commander of the 8th Regiment of the Virginia militia, serving also in the 4th and 5th regiments. Colonel McDowell continued to acquire land and slaves throughout Rockbridge County, elsewhere in Virginia, and in the new state of Kentucky.² McDowell, like his ancestors, was a staunch Presbyterian, a member of the Timber Ridge Presbyterian Church. It was a practice at this time for a master to take some or all of his slaves to church with him, and it is likely that Othello attended church at Timber Ridge — at least until a Methodist church was established in the area.

It is possible that Colonel McDowell purchased Othello during the two years (1813–14) when he commanded troops in eastern Virginia. The slave population was dense in these eastern areas. Yet at the same time, Rockbridge and the Shenandoah had few slaves. Large slave markets existed in the Richmond area, as well as in eastern cities such as Hampton, Norfolk and Fredericksburg. Another possibility, however, is that McDowell purchased Othello and other slaves from the itinerant slave traders who began to roam the Shenandoah Valley in the early nineteenth century.

1 See the McDowell Family Records, chiefly the James McDowell Papers, 1770–1915, microfilm reels 1633–41, Library of Virginia.

2 Sally Campbell Preston Miller, *Memoir of James McDowell, LL.D., Governor of Virginia* (Baltimore: Historical Series of Washington and Lee University, 1895), in Special Collections, WLU.

In any event, Richards was in Rockbridge County by 1819–20 and had converted to the Methodist faith. Writing from Liberia in 1870, he indicated that a traveling Methodist preacher, James Sewell, had passed through the "Lexington Circuit" some fifty years earlier and on hearing Sewell's second sermon, Richards joined the denomination.³ Richards thus became one of the earliest Rockbridge Methodists.

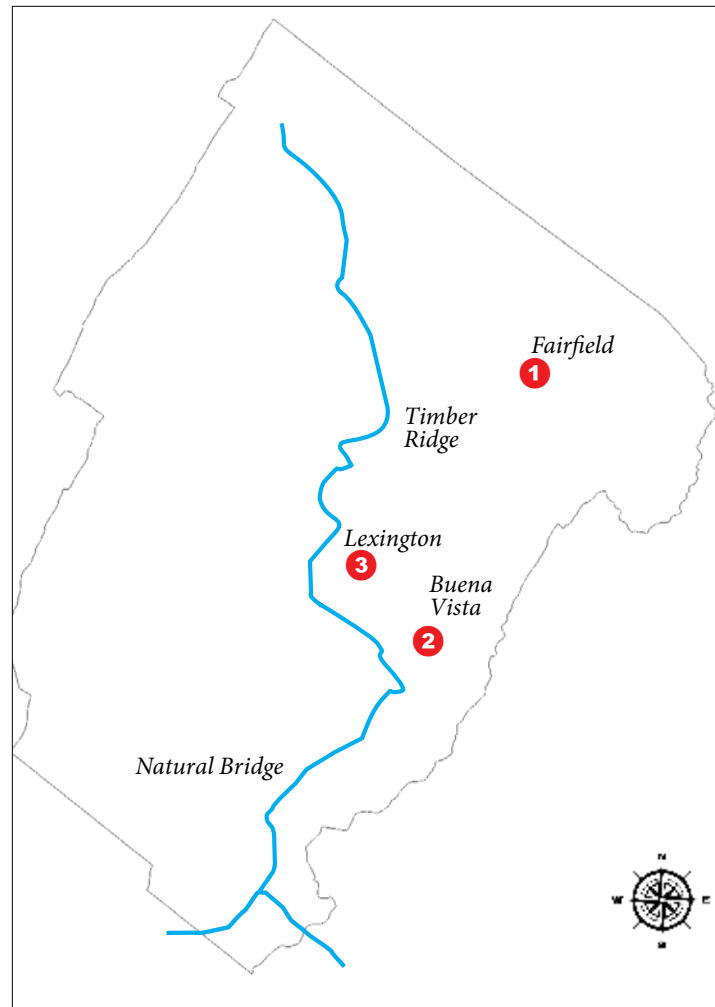
We turn now to Mary, the wife of Othello Richards. When Richards sailed from Baltimore for Liberia in July 1850, he listed his wife, Mary, as forty-two years old and as a former slave whose freedom he had purchased. He listed his children as Caroline, twenty-three; Nancy, nine; Eugenia, eight; Wesley Morgan, six; Francis Asbury, three, and Samuel, two. He stated that he had bought the freedom of all of them.⁴ A year earlier, Richards had begun the process of purchasing Mary's freedom and that of their five youngest children from the family of John

3 Letter, Othello Richards to Dr. Durbin, June 7, 1870, Svend E. Holsoe Collection (hereafter cited as SHC), Indiana University Archives, Bloomington, Indiana (hereafter cited as IU). J. P. Durbin was the corresponding secretary of the Methodist Missionary Society. James Sewell entered the Methodist ministry in 1814 and from then until 1818 served in Maryland and Pennsylvania. Sewell is not named in records for 1819 and 1820, but in 1821–22, he is listed in the Staunton, Virginia, circuit in the Winchester District of the Baltimore Conference. *Minutes of the Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1773–1828* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), v. I, pp. 235, 284, 300, 315, 370, 389.

4 *The African Repository*, v. 50, no. 8, August 1874, p. 240. *The African Repository*, hereafter cited as A.R., was the organ of the American Colonization Society.



Montillico, home of the McNutt family and of Mary, who married Othello Richards.



McNutt Sr. On June 22, 1850, Richards made the final payment.¹

The McNutts were early Rockbridge settlers and landowners related by marriage to the Edmondson family, which owned Montillico, southwest of what today is Buena Vista. When John McNutt, the family patriarch, died in 1821, his widow, Mary, apparently moved into Montillico to be with her niece, Elizabeth McNutt Edmondson. Mary McNutt brought the family's slaves and their families with her. These included Mary, then thirteen years old, and she remained at Montillico until she gained her freedom in 1850. It thus seems that she was enslaved there when Othello Richards married her and when she gave birth to Caroline in 1827.

1 Unaddressed letter from the "Heirs of John McNutt," March 31, 1849, and attached notes of April 7, 1849, and June 22, 1850. In the Othello Richards file, Manuscript Division, Library of Virginia. Caroline Richards must have been purchased at an earlier date and perhaps from another family.

Othello Richards was enslaved at Cherry Grove, 1 on the map, while Mary, who became his wife, lived similarly at Montillico, 2. Later, Othello lived at the Taylor farm on the outskirts of Lexington, 3.

It is unclear how Othello and Mary established their relationship. The McDowell estate, Cherry Grove, where Othello lived, was in northern Rockbridge ("1" on the adjacent map), while Montillico was in the south of the county, some fifteen miles away ("2"). The degree of separation between them may explain the fact that they had no more children after Caroline until 1841, when they were closer in proximity.

In all the years that Othello Richards resided at Cherry Grove, there is only one mention of him in the McDowell family correspondence, an oblique reference in 1831 by a visitor who had left her keys behind and hoped they might be sent to Lexington "by Othello."²

The year 1835 was important for Othello Richards. In that year Colonel James McDowell died, and his heirs agreed that Cherry Grove would be kept for one year and then sold. Sarah McDowell, his widow, would retain a few slaves, and their children, Elizabeth McDowell Benton, James McDowell Jr., the only son, and Susan McDowell Taylor, received the rest. We know that it was Susan Taylor who received Othello because it was she who freed him on October 2, 1848.³

Elizabeth McDowell was born at Cherry Grove in 1794 and in 1821 she married Thomas Hart Benton, after his election to the Senate from the new state of Missouri. Benton served in the Senate from 1821 to 1851, and Elizabeth spent most of her married life in Washington, making frequent visits to Rockbridge.⁴ Her brother, James McDowell Jr., was born at Cherry Grove in 1795 and became prominent in local,

2 McDowell family papers, Library of Virginia.

3 Deed Book AA, 162, *Rockbridge County Deed Books*, Rockbridge County Courthouse.

4 "Biography of Mrs. Benton," *St. Louis Intelligencer*, quoted in Rev. N. L. Rice, D.D., *A Funeral Discourse of Mrs. Elizabeth Benton: Wife of Hon. Thomas H. Benton*, 1855.



The American Colonization Society, founded in 1816 to encourage the emigration of free people of color to Africa, had a strong presence in Rockbridge, and counted James McDowell as one of its leaders.

state and national politics. He advocated for gradual emancipation of slaves and their colonization in Africa.

The American Colonization Society, established in Washington, D.C., in 1816, attracted some of the most prominent men in the nation. The general belief among these men was that slavery was an evil institution and a blight on American society. On the other hand, they could not conceive of a nation in which white and black men had equal rights and representation. Therefore, it was better to emancipate the slaves gradually and re-settle them in their perceived ancestral homeland. Perhaps it was reasoned that the former slaves, having received a modicum of education and cultural refinement from their years in America, could even help civilize and Christianize the benighted natives of the "dark continent."

In 1820, the first colonists sailed for Africa, and the Colonization Society drew up a constitution for the settlement. In 1824, their first colony there was named Liberia and its first settlement named Monrovia, to honor James Monroe, then president of the United States. In 1847, Liberia became an independent nation, and the following year Joseph J. Roberts, formerly of Petersburg, Virginia, was elected the first president of the republic.

Virginia was perhaps the key state in the colonization experiment. The Commonwealth sent more settlers to Liberia before the Civil War than did any other state, and many of them became leaders.

The Rockbridge Colonization Society was founded in 1826, and James McDowell Jr. was a charter member. Between 1832 and 1860, it sponsored nine voyages to Liberia and sent more than 100 former slaves and free

blacks to Liberia. McDowell opposed immediate emancipation as cruel and "worse to its subjects even than to ourselves." He proposed a plan for gradual emancipation based on a "post nati" plan: Slaves born after a certain date would be freed on their twenty-first birthday and would be settled on "another continent." In these sentiments McDowell had the support of many citizens of Rockbridge, even fellow slaveholders.¹ Slavery was a less prevalent institution west of the Blue Ridge than in the eastern parts of the state, and a moderate anti-slavery attitude continued in Rockbridge until about 1850.

The eldest child of Colonel McDowell was Susan, born in 1793 at Cherry Grove. In 1813 she married William Taylor, a progressive Democrat who became a mentor to his brother-in-law, James McDowell Jr. The Taylors had a farm on the outskirts of Lexington,² and following Colonel McDowell's death in 1835, Othello Richards moved to the Taylor farm and remained there until he was freed in 1848. He became the Taylors' trusted house servant, just as he had been for the colonel.

Between 1841 and 1848, Othello and Mary Richards had five children. These were their first children since their daughter Caroline was born in 1827. The fact that they had so many children in such a short period suggests that they were in closer contact than they had been previously, when they lived at almost opposite ends of Rockbridge County. We know that Othello Richards moved to Lexington about 1836, and that Lexington ("3" on the map) was only five miles from the Edmondson home of Montillico ("2"), where Mary Richards resided. It is also possible that Mary Richards was leased or lent to the Taylors or some other family in Lexington after 1836.³

1 Neely Young, *Ripe for Emancipation: Rockbridge and Southern Antislavery from Revolution to Civil War*, Lexington, Virginia, 2011, pp. 66–68, 186.

2 A fine grove of oaks on the property had been used as a meeting-place by Lexington's Presbyterians ever since they organized in 1799, and apparently the Taylors gave the church permanent use of the land. It became the Lexington Cemetery, then Stonewall Jackson Cemetery, and today is Oak Grove Cemetery.

3 In Virginia and other parts of the Upper South, some masters allowed their slaves to live in town and "hire their own time," that is, find their own work, paying the master a portion of



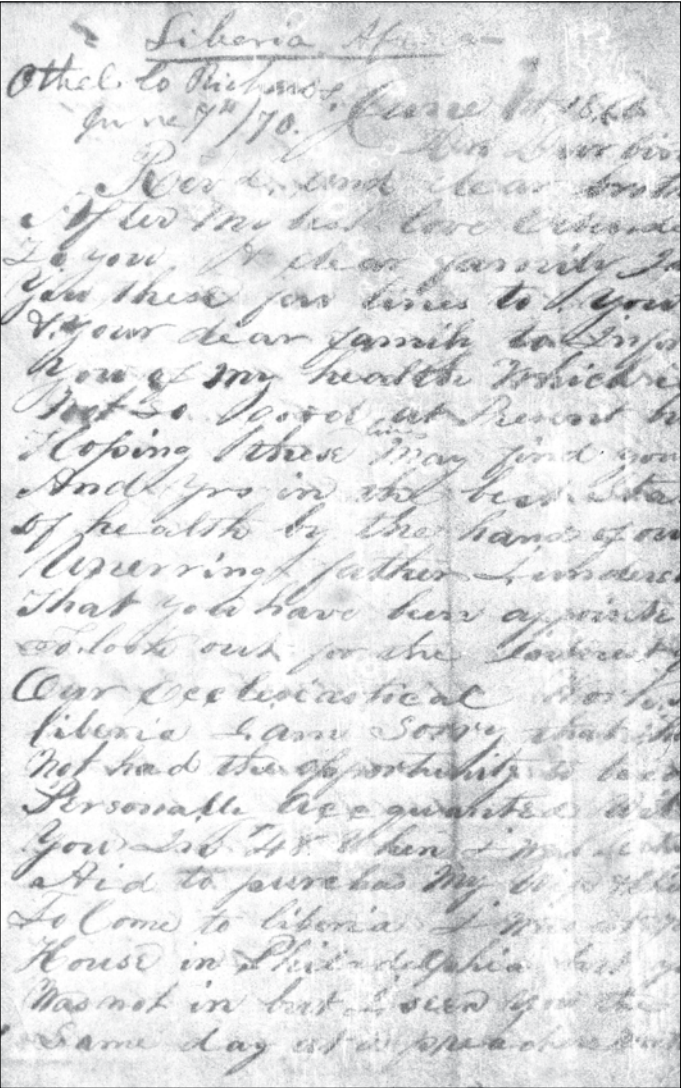
Grave in Oak Grove cemetery of Susan McDowell Taylor, who freed Othello Richards in 1848.

On April 16, 1849, Susan McDowell Taylor died, not long after her emancipation of Othello Richards on October 2, 1848.

It was in 1849 that Richards began redeeming his wife and children from slavery, How he got a large-

enough sum was not known until recently. Although

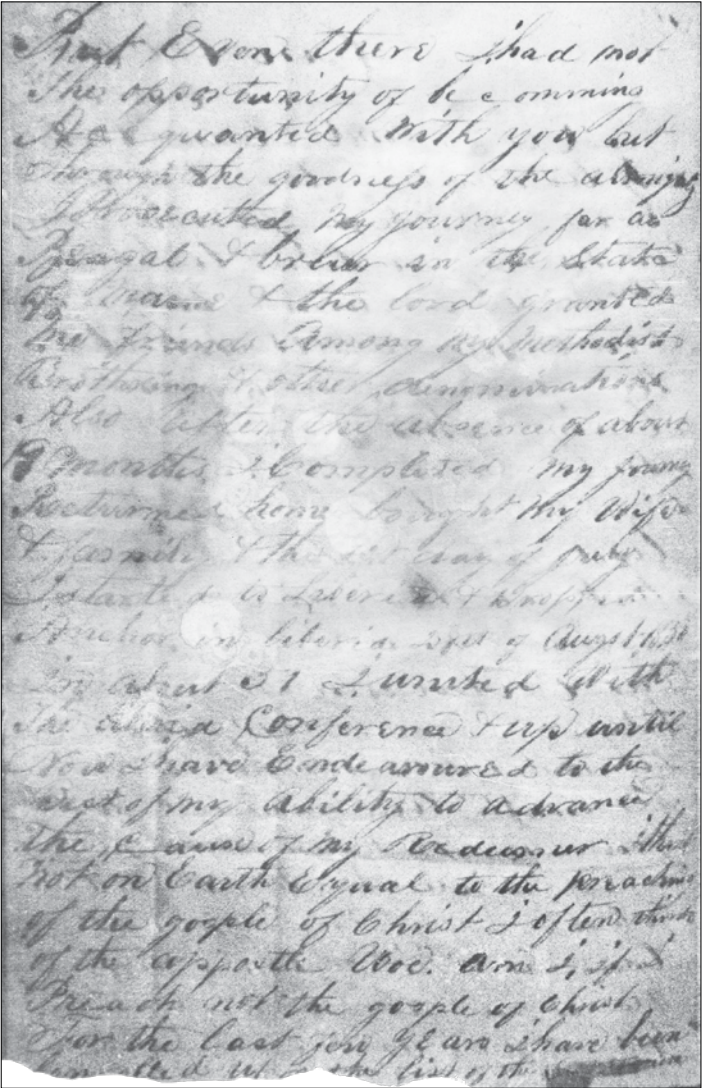
their wages, usually two-thirds to three-fourths. Many slaves hoped to buy their freedom in this way.



Susan Taylor may have settled a small amount of money upon him at or just before her death, allowing him to make the first “down payment” on his family, most of the money was raised by Othello Richards himself.

In his 1870 letter, Richards said that following his emancipation, he embarked on a nineteen-month trip through the northeastern U.S. “seeking aid to purchase my wife and children to come to Liberia.” In his travels from 1848 to 1850, he visited Baltimore, home to the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, and met with James Sewell, who had brought him to Methodism around 1819. He then traveled to Philadelphia, home

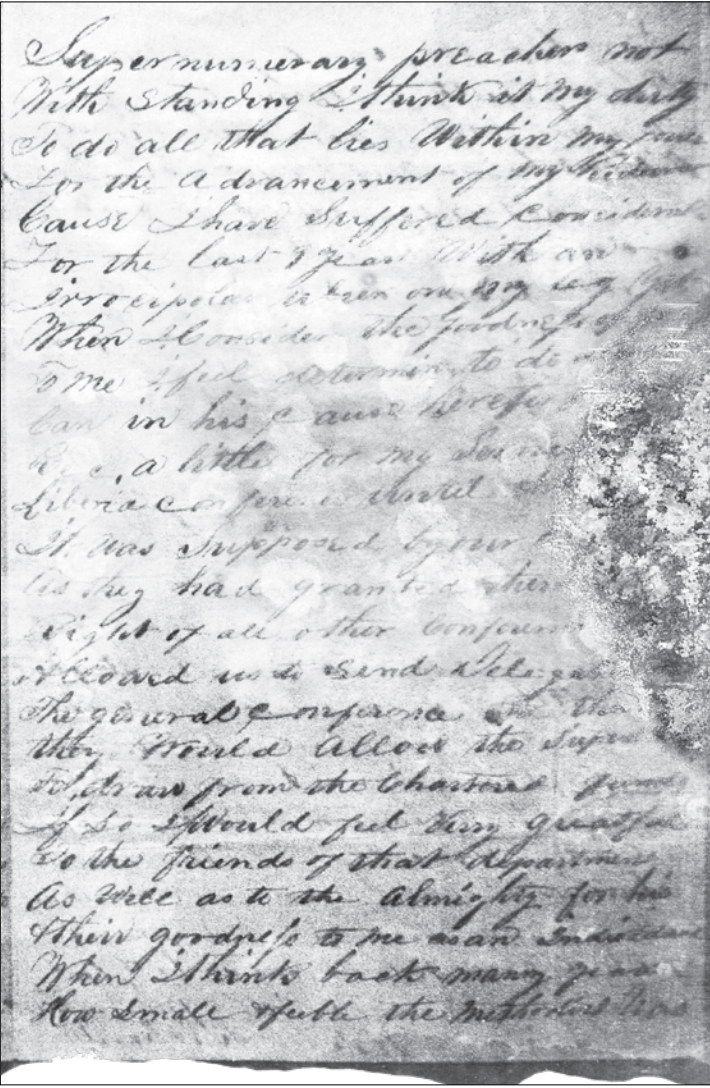
Below and next page: Letter written in June 1870 by Othello Richards to J. P. Durbin, secretary of the Methodist Missionary Society. It provides much of what we know today of Richards’ life. The author of the present article discovered the letter in the archives of Indiana University.



to the Missionary Society, and attempted to meet J. P. Durbin, the corresponding secretary and effective head of the society. He spent time among black and white Methodists in Montgomery County outside Philadelphia and went as far as Bangor (Bangor) in Maine.

He addressed not only Methodists but members of other denominations to make his plea and tell his story.¹ One can see him standing in a pulpit, sharing his witness and seeking support — born a slave, purchased by Colonel McDowell and brought to Rockbridge, where he converted to Methodism, serving the McDowell and Taylor families faithfully for more than thirty years; preparing for the day when he and his family would be free and could spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to his

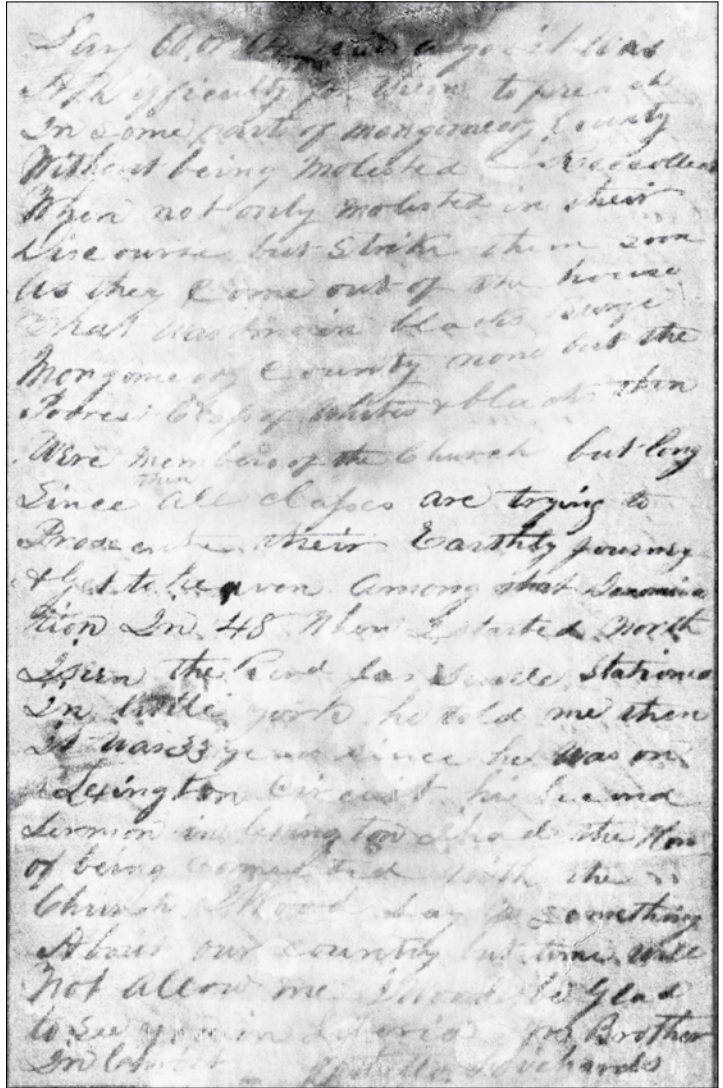
1 Letter of June 7, 1870, from Othello Richards to Dr. Durbin. SHC, IU.



brothers and sisters in Africa. The story of this black Moses returning to the “promised land” must have been appealing to donors because shortly after his return to Lexington he paid out the enormous sum of \$1,000 to the Edmondsons to complete the purchase of his family.

Othello Richards began his training to become a Methodist minister and missionary in the mid-1830s, when he had a greater opportunity to participate in regular Methodist worship and training. He was taught to read and write in this period, as indicated in ship records. His education may have taken place in the Methodist church, but it could not have occurred without the approval of the Taylor family.²

2 The training of a slave for Christian ministry and mission was an exception to the Virginia laws forbidding the education of slaves.





Randolph Street Methodist Church, Lexington. A previous Methodist church located on this site commissioned Othello Richards as a minister and missionary to Liberia.

The colonization excitement in Rockbridge from the mid-1840s, combined with his training for ministry, made Othello Richards a supporter of the Liberian cause. Unlike many former slaves who were freed on the condition that they migrate to Liberia, he was emancipated unconditionally and freely made the decision to migrate. The story of black Methodist missionaries to Liberia has yet to be told, but we know they played a prominent role. For example, by 1847, thirteen white Methodist missionaries had been sent to Liberia, but only one was still in place. By contrast, thirty-one “colored” missionaries had been sent, and fourteen were still active.¹ The success of black Methodist missionaries may help to explain why Methodism became and remains the largest Christian denomination in Liberia. The Richards family, for example, has produced at least one Methodist minister in every generation since the original immigrant.

A group of twenty-five free blacks and former slaves left Rockbridge for Liberia in January 1850 — all Methodists, according to the ship’s records. That turned out to be the greatest year for Rockbridge settlement in Liberia. Altogether there were three voyages, and a total of forty-nine blacks sailed. The number sailing in 1850 constituted almost half of all those who made the journey from 1832 through 1860.

Othello Richards and his family left Lexington in late June 1850, boarding the Liberia Packet in Baltimore on July 4, 1850. The departure of the vessel certainly signified a new “Declaration of Independence” for them. The ship carrying the Richardses arrived in Monrovia in August. Thus began a new life for the Richards family.

1 Young, *Ripe for Emancipation*, pp. 63, 108, 181.

CODA: FAR FROM ROCKBRIDGE COUNTY

AROUND THE SAME TIME and in similar circumstances, William Coleman and his relatives from Kentucky, also reached Liberia. From their arrival in the new African republic in the 1850s until the overthrow of Americo-Liberian rule in 1980, the descendants of Othello Richards and William Coleman became a part of an elite that dominated Liberian politics, economics and culture for 130 years. The family played a key role in the nation’s economic and political affairs, representing the interests of the interior agriculturalists against the merchant elites of Monrovia, and was prominent as well in Liberia’s political and cultural arenas.



Clay-Ashland in Liberia (red), on St. Paul's River, about ten miles from the capital of Monrovia (blue). The map is from 1870.

The family never represented more than a small fraction of the population, but through strategic marriages and alliances, superior education, a certain panache derived from their American experience, and colonial exploitation of the native people of the interior, the Richards-Coleman members came to see themselves as essential to the welfare and future of Liberia. On the one hand, this led them to a sense of noblesse oblige, and they held themselves responsible for those less privileged. On the other hand, they did not extend the same rights and privileges to the general population, an irony in light of the fact that most of these members of the elite had once been slaves in America.



Clay-Ashland today.

When native Africans successfully revolted against the rule of the Americo-Liberian elite beginning with the coup of Samuel Doe in 1980, the new rulers did not make nice distinctions among their former overseers, and the Richards-Coleman family suffered along with others. Over a span of more than twenty years, Liberia

Descendants of Othello Richards gathered in Lexington for a reunion in 2014 and posed in the Randolph Street United Methodist Church. At the far left is Othello Richards Sr., born in Monrovia, the great-great grandson of Othello Richards “the immigrant.”



descended into anarchy, civil war and an almost total destruction of the political and economic order established by the elite over the previous century and a half. By the early twenty-first century, Liberia was a failed state, with massive corruption, little remaining infrastructure, huge debt, and no discernible path to recovery.

In 2005, after a transitional government was installed, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, born in Monrovia of African and European heritage, was elected president of Liberia, holding that office until 2018. She attempted to bind the wounds of the two-decade civil war by reducing corruption and restoring the republic’s infrastructure.

Despite her mixed success, many Americo-Liberians began returning to Liberia — including members of the Richards-Coleman family. Their motives were born of both generosity and self-interest. Many of them still held land and property in Liberia or saw an opportunity to start up new businesses there. They had suitable educational and technical training for these enterprises, and some still had connections in Liberia. But beyond self-interest they seem to feel a responsibility to their homeland, and hope to create, at last, a society that fully embraces Africans and African-Americans.

