

## *TransAtlantic Sojourners: The Story of an Americo-Liberian Experience*

By Dr. M. Neely Young, II

Book Review by Richard Hubbard

In 1848, Othello Richards was 51 years old, married, the father of five children, and a Methodist minister. He was a small man, 5' 6 1/2," with a nose disfigured from childhood cancer. He was literate and of high character. And he was a slave.

House servant to the Col. James McDowell family of Rockbridge County, Virginia, Othello was freed by Susan Preston McDowell Taylor (Col. McDowell's daughter) in October 1848, before her death in April 1849. Upon obtaining his freedom, Othello set out to purchase the freedom of his wife Mary and his five children, who were owned by the Edmondson family of Rockbridge. He traveled up and down the mid-Atlantic coast and throughout the Northeast, as far as Bangor, Maine, preaching in Methodist churches and raising funds with which to purchase his family. In June 1850, he paid the Edmondsons \$1000 and obtained his family's freedom. One month later, in July 1850, Othello and Mary and the children sailed out of Baltimore for Liberia, arriving in Monrovia in August.

Thus began the story of the Richards-Coleman family, the subject of Neely Young's 'TransAtlantic Sojourners.' Neely first became aware of Othello Richards while researching his earlier book, 'Ripe For Emancipation,' which explored ante-bellum anti-slavery activity in Rockbridge County. In June 2015, he presented a portion of his study of Richards, and Rockbridge, for an RHS Program at First Baptist Church, entitled "Rockbridge in Liberia: The Colonization Movement in Nineteenth-Century, Virginia."

Central as Othello Richards is to the book, he is only one part of a much larger saga. The story of the Richards-Coleman family, founding fathers of the Americo-Liberian community that dominated Liberian politics for a century, is virtually the story of Liberia itself, a hybrid nation of American transplants and indigenous Africans. The story takes the reader from Othello Richards' early 1800s experiences as a slave and Methodist missionary, traveling on the sailing vessel *Liberia Packet* to Monrovia in 1850, carving a sugar and coffee plantation out of the wilderness while watching many of his neighbors die of disease, and raising his children who would become future leaders of Liberia (especially Wesley Richards and Samuel David Richards).

Young's study broadens into a history of the growth of the Americo-Liberian community in the nineteenth century, propelled primarily by surpluses from coffee production. It takes the reader into the twentieth century, as political control centralizes and narrows within the Americo-Liberian community, leading to the autocratic presidency of William Tubman and dominance by that community over indigenous Africans, which fosters widespread resentment. All this leads to the military coup of Samuel Doe, civil war (1989-1996), rule by Charles Taylor, a second civil war (1999-2003), and the diaspora of the Americo-Liberian community: resulting in the flight of many members of the Richards-Coleman family to America, with some returning years later to Liberia as it became more peaceful.

With extensive original research, including many recorded interviews with family members, Neely Young has written what may prove to be an important contribution to a largely unexplored but growing area of African-American scholarship.

- Richard Hubbard, RHS Treasurer