

**Trans-Atlantic Sojourners:
The Othello Richards Family of Africa and America**

Neely Young

Introduction

Othello Richards was born a slave in Virginia and died a free man and citizen of the Republic of Liberia. He was a man small in stature, but large in faith and courage. (1) After he was freed from slavery, he purchased the freedom of his wife and six children and transported them across the Atlantic Ocean to a country which he believed offered them a better life of freedom and opportunity. Even in slavery, he had been trained as a Methodist minister, and he continued in this capacity until his death. He became one of the leading citizens of the town of Clay-Ashland, Liberia, and raised his children to embrace their civic responsibilities. He performed military service for the new Republic, and was a significant land owner and entrepreneur. When he passed away in 1874, a Methodist Conference noted that he was “greatly honored and beloved” by all. (2)

The descendants of Othello Richards became a part of the “Americo-Liberian” elite who dominated Liberian politics, economics, and culture over 130 years. These families never represented more than a small percentage of the overall Liberian population, but through strategic marriages and alliances, superior education, a certain panache associated with their American experience, and colonial exploitation of the native people of the interior, they came to see themselves as essential to the welfare and future of Liberia. On the one hand, this led to a sense of noblesse oblige among many of the families, who held themselves responsible for service to the state and to those less fortunate than themselves. On the other hand, it did not occur to many of them that the native people should enjoy the same rights and privileges which they themselves had. This is ironic in light of the fact that most members of the elite had once been slaves in America.

The Richards were among the more enlightened of Americo-Liberian families. There is only one incident of a family member participating in repression of native people, while many of the family engaged with the natives in a variety of positive ways- church missions, attempts to develop the

interior in co-operation with native people, opposition to the extreme anti-native policies of some Liberian administrations, even living among and marrying some of the native Africans. There may have been more than a touch of paternalism in their attitudes and behaviors, but they were not benighted or oppressive. Still, the Richards, like others of the elite, benefited from their protected status. When native Africans revolted against the rule of the elite beginning with the coup of Samuel Doe in 1980, the new masters did not make nice distinctions among these families, and the Richards family suffered along with others. They became the victims of discrimination, persecution, exile, imprisonment, and even death. Beginning in 1980 and continuing for 20 plus years, Liberia descended into anarchy, civil war, and an almost total destruction of the political and economic order which the elite had established and maintained over the previous century and a half. First, Samuel Doe and even more his successor, Charles Taylor, followed policies which not only undermined the elite but the very structure of the Liberian state and economy. By the early 21st century, Liberia was a failed state with massive corruption, little infrastructure, huge debt, and no discernible path to recovery.

During that same 20 year period, members of the Richards clan had either gone underground, maintaining a low profile in Liberia, or had gone into exile in various places around the world. The most popular asylum was the United States. After all, Liberia had been created through the efforts of many Americans, particularly members of the American Colonization Society, which sent thousands of free blacks and former slaves to Liberia between the A.C.S. founding in 1816 and the American Civil War. Even after the war, American blacks continued to come to Liberia either through the efforts of the Colonization Society or on their own. Further, the American government offered financial and diplomatic support for Liberia well into the 20th century, and many Americo-Liberians were educated in and spent time in the United States, where they had an historical connections. By one estimate, as many as 100,000 Liberians entered the United States between 1980 and 2003. (3) Numerous members of the Richards family were among these immigrants. Some became United States citizens, others

maintained dual citizenship, while still others kept only their Liberian citizenship. They settled in various parts of the United States, but they attempted to live in places where other family members were established. There is a large contingent of the family in the Washington D.C. area, but others live in the Philadelphia area, Raleigh, North Carolina, and elsewhere.

In 2005, Ellen Sirleaf Johnson, a woman of mixed African and European heritage, became President of Liberia. She attempted to bind up some of the wounds caused by the 20 plus years of civil strife and to reduce corruption and restore the Republic's infrastructure . She was the first woman to head an African nation and inaugurated an era of greater stability, but so far she has had mixed success in dealing with the country's myriad problems. Nevertheless, in the last 8-10 years many Americo-Liberians have returned to Liberia including members of the Richards family. They and other returning exiles have acted out of motives of generosity and self-interest. On the one hand, many of them still held land and property in Liberia or saw an opportunity to start up new businesses in the struggling Republic. They had both the educational and technical background for these enterprises and had connections from the time when their families were paramount in Liberia. On the other hand, members of the Richards family also feel a responsibility to their homeland and wish to create a truly integrated state which recognizes the rights of all - Africans and African-Americans.

The title of this work, **Trans-Atlantic Sojourners**, reflects the experience of the Richards. Having been originally brought to America from their homeland in Africa, they eventually returned to that land and prospered there for almost a century and a half. Exiled again in the 1980's, many of them returned to the United States where they had been held as slaves but where they also had historical, educational, and cultural connections. Beginning in the early 21st century, many members of the family have again returned to Liberia, but many others have remained in America where they intend to make a new life. What does the future hold for this truly “African-American” family? We cannot know for

sure, but in examining the history, resilience, faith, behavior, and beliefs of the Richards we may find clues to that answer.

Notes to Introduction

1. The only known description of Othello Richards comes from *Rockbridge County Free Black Register, 1831-1860*, Library of Virginia, Richmond, Virginia, County Clerk Record, October, 1848, wherein Othello Richards is described as “5 foot 6 and ½ inches, dark mulatto color, short curly hair, his nose very flat and disfigured by cancer when a child”.
2. “Liberian Annual Conference”, *The African Repository*, v. 50, no. 8 (August, 1874), 240. *The African Repository* was the organ of the American Colonization Society and reported on developments in Liberia. In this case, they reported on the conference of the Methodist church held in Clay-Ashland, Liberia on January 27, 1874.
3. “Immigration”, *TLC Africa Magazine*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (March, 2005). *TLC Africa Magazine* is an on-line publication from Monrovia, Liberia. The publisher and editor is Ciata Richards Victor, daughter of Vryle Richards of Silver Springs, Maryland. She is one of the Richards who has returned to Liberia since 2003. I have met and interviewed both Vryle Richards and Ciata Richards Victor.

Chapter One

Othello Richards in Rockbridge County, Virginia

The birth of Othello Richards most likely occurred in Eastern Virginia. We do not have exact information on his birth, other than the fact that it took place in 1797. (1) There are several reasons, however, to draw this conclusion. First, there were few slaves in Virginia west of the Blue Ridge mountains in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. In 1790 the slave population for the Shenandoah Valley was 12,780 out of a total population for the area of 101,610 or about 12.7%. Shenandoah slaves made up just 4.4% of Virginia's slave population. In that same year, there were only 682 slaves in all of Rockbridge county out of a total population of 8,848 or 10.4%. (2) By 1800 the slave population in the Valley had increased, but it still made up only a little over 5% of all Virginia slaves, and in Rockbridge the total slave population of 1,070 was still just a little over 12% of the total population. (3). The greatest concentration of slaves was in the Tidewater and Piedmont regions of the state which had been settled first, and where slavery had gained a foothold early in the 17th century. In contrast, European settlers did not even begin their migration into the area west of the Blue Ridge until the early 18th century. For example, the area of Rockbridge was first settled in the 1730's, and the county was not established until 1777. Second, by the late 18th century, the importation of slaves into Virginia from Africa and the Caribbean had ceased. In 1775, Virginians began the practice of non-importation of enslaved Africans as a protest against British policies, and in 1778 they outlawed the policy altogether. By this point there was no practical need to import slaves as approximately 100,000 had been brought into the state between 1698 and 1774, and the slave population was now reproducing itself.

Third, we know that the first owner of Othello Richards in Rockbridge, Col. James McDowell, did not acquire him until sometime between 1810 and 1820. The 1810 census for Rockbridge indicates

that in that year Col. McDowell held 3 slaves, but none in the proper age range for Othello, who would have been 13 at the time. (4) Normally, a slave owner would not purchase a male slave until he had reached an age where he could work in the fields. By 1820, Col. McDowell had 36 slaves, 6 of whom were males in the age range of 14-25, and Othello was 23 in that year. (5) Finally, the name “Othello” gives us a clue as to his original owner. Only an educated man would have been familiar enough with the works of William Shakespeare to give a slave such a name, and a slave would not take such a name on his own. Surely, this man was a slaveholder of British descent probably in Eastern Virginia. The last name which Othello chose might also be revealing. There was no prominent Richards family in Rockbridge County prior to the Civil War, but there were prominent slaveholders with the name “Richards” in the eastern part of the state. The 1810 census shows slaveholding Richards in King and Queen, Spotsylvania, and Stafford counties, in Norfolk in the Tidewater region, and in Goochland and Culpepper counties in the Piedmont region.(6) According to Richards family tradition, there is a connection between the Richards of King and Queen, Stafford, and Culpepper counties, and these counties are close to each other geographically as is Spotsylvania. However, all of these connections cannot be verified. The name “Richards” does appear to be of English or Welsh derivation. This is significant in that the Eastern part of Virginia was first settled by the English. On the other hand, Rockbridge County was first settled by Scots-Irish folk, and up into the early 19th century there were practically no English settlers in the county.

Only one physical description of Othello Richards exists, and that is from 1848 when he was freed by his mistress and became, briefly, a part of the Free Black population of Rockbridge. There 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”. (7) The last part of this description must have come from Othello himself and shows that Othello was aware of his childhood and knew what cancer was. Second, it reveals that Othello was a mulatto. This is important because mulattoes had at least some European blood, and

often occupied a higher social position within slave society and among whites. It also reveals that somewhere in the generations prior to his birth, there was a relationship between a member of his family and a white person. This most likely occurred either in the West Indies, which was part of the triangular trade route in slaves, or in America. His mulatto identity may have been a factor in Othello's later position as a house servant for the McDowell family; it also may have been important for his status within the state of Liberia, where lighter skinned individuals from America predominated politically, economically, and culturally. We do not know where Othello Richards' family originally came from, but there is a high likelihood that it was from West Africa. Of the approximately 10 million slaves who arrived in America prior to the Civil War, about 56% were originally from West Africa, and the remainder were from central and southeast Africa. The earlier arrivals were largely from the West Coast, where slaves were more easily obtained, but as time went on more and more came from the interior of Africa or even from the continent's East Coast. (8). As Virginia outlawed the importation of African slaves in 1778, and Othello was the child or grandchild of an African and a European, it is probable that his family arrived in the Caribbean or America by 1750 or even earlier, and thus the likelihood increases that his family originally came from West Africa. (9)

Although little is known about Othello Richards' family or childhood, there is much more information once he was acquired by the McDowell family. This is partly because the McDowells were among the most influential families in the county and in the state, and they kept extensive records. (10) In the fall of 1737, Ephraim McDowell, his son, John, and others were moving from Pennsylvania south through the Shenandoah Valley. They, like many other Scots-Irish, were in search of land to settle and develop. One night in September, a man named Benjamin Borden entered their camp along Linville Creek in what is now Rockingham County. He told them that he had recently received a land grant of 100,000 acres from King George II. This came to be known as "Borden's Grant" located in what is now Rockbridge County. As a condition of this grant, Borden had to locate 100 settlers on

the grant. Further, Borden was not exactly sure where the grant was, and asked the McDowells if they could help him find it. He told John McDowell that he would give him 1000 acres in return for his services as a surveyor. He also promised 600 acres each to the other members of the group who would comprise a total of four settlements. The next year (1738) the Borden Grant became a part of the newly formed county of Augusta, and in 1777 this land incorporated into the new county of Rockbridge. Thus, the McDowells were the “First Family” of the county. (11) In 1742, John McDowell was killed by Indians in Rockbridge. His home, “The Red House”, still stands in the Timber Ridge area of Rockbridge south of the village of Fairfield, although it has been extensively remodeled over the years. John had two sons, Samuel and James. James McDowell I (c. 1737-1778) had one son, James II, known eventually as Col. James McDowell (1770-1835). It is this James McDowell, great grandson of Ephraim and grandson of John, who purchased Othello Richards in the early 19th century.

By c. 1790, James McDowell 2 had built the family home of “Cherry Grove” on part of the tract obtained by the McDowell family from Benjamin Borden in 1737. The home had begun modestly, probably as a log house like many others in the area, but was expanded and remodeled over the years so that by the late 18th or early 19th century it was one of the finest homes in the county. Here Col. McDowell would raise his family of one boy and two girls, and here he would die in 1835. Here also, Othello Richards would live and serve for approximately 20 years. As a leader in the county, McDowell fulfilled many roles. On October 20, 1791 he was appointed a Justice of the Peace and served in this capacity for many years. He represented Rockbridge in the Virginia House of Delegates in 1795, and on June 2, 1795 he was appointed a Captain in the Rockbridge militia and promoted to Colonel on June 28, 1796. Also in 1796 he was appointed a Trustee of Washington Academy, later Washington College and Washington and Lee University. He served as Sheriff of the County from 1812-1814, and during the War of 1812 he raised troops from the area, and as a Lt. Colonel, commanded the 8th regiment of Virginia militia, which served in the Richmond area, the Middle Peninsula including Hampton and

Norfolk, the Northern Neck and Fredericksburg. He also served with the 4th and 5th Virginia militia regiments. (12) Col. McDowell also continued to acquire land and slaves. He held land throughout Rockbridge county, the state of Virginia, and in the new state of Kentucky. (13) As mentioned, in 1810 he had only 3 slaves; there were 5 white members of his household in that year. In 1820, he had 36 slaves, 2 free persons of color, and 7 white family members. By 1830, there were only two whites residing at his home, he and his wife, but he had 42 slaves serving them. In 1830, Col. McDowell held 4 male slaves in the age range of Othello Richards. McDowell, like his ancestors, was a staunch Presbyterian and 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 Col. McDowell purchased Othello during the two years (1813-1814) when he commanded troops in Eastern Virginia. He traveled first to Richmond in June, 1813, but then was diverted to Fredericksburg, where he formed a “flying camp” of cavalry, mounted infantry, and some light artillery to defend the Northern Neck counties of Stafford and King George, then to Richmond in early July, and back to the Northern Neck and Westmoreland County in late July. In late summer and fall, 1813 he was stationed sometime just below Richmond on the James and sometime between the York and James Rivers near Hampton and occasionally in Norfolk. His first tour of duty extended from June, 1813 to January, 1814. By September, 1814 he was again in military service serving in the Richmond area . Beginning in late October, Col. McDowell and his troops participated in a march toward Baltimore to relieve the American troops from British attack. They marched through Tappahannock, Virginia, crossed the Potomac, and finally arrived in Ellicott Mills (now Ellicott City) Maryland just southwest of Baltimore. They did not engage directly in battle, and were finally discharged on November 30, 1814 (14) The slave population was dense in these eastern areas at a time

when Rockbridge and the Shenandoah had few slaves . Members of the slaveholding Richards family were also found in many of these areas in Eastern Virginia. Finally, large slave markets existed in the Richmond area by this time, and other towns like Hampton, Norfolk, and Fredericksburg had them. He could have purchased a slave or slaves directly from a master, or through one of the slave markets in the towns he visited. He could also have purchased Othello and other slaves from the itinerant slave traders who began to roam the Shenandoah Valley in the early 19th century. A recently discovered letter indicates that Othello was in Rockbridge County by 1819-20 and converted to the Methodist faith at that time. Writing in 1870, Richards indicates that an itinerant Methodist preacher, James Sewell was passing through the “Lexington Circuit” some 50 years earlier and upon the occasion of his second sermon, he (Othello) joined the denomination. (15) Othello was, thus, one of the early Methodists in the county, there being no established Methodist churches at the time. A note from Col. James McDowell to his son, James III (also known as James McDowell Jr., later Governor of Virginia), of March 2, 1817 provides possible evidence that Othello was living in Rockbridge even earlier and states that “the black family have been complaining considerably this winter. They have the measles among them at this time.”(16)

We turn now to Mary, the wife of Othello. When Othello Richards sailed from Baltimore for Liberia in July, 1850, he listed his wife, Mary, as 42 years old and as a former slave whose freedom he had purchased. He listed his children as Caroline, 23, Nancy, 9, Eugenia, 8, Wesley Morgan, 6, Francis Asbury, 3, and Samuel, 2, and stated that he had purchased the freedom of all of them. (17) In the previous year, the heirs of John McNutt, i.e. Mary McNutt, former wife of John, Elizabeth McNutt Edmondson, John's niece, Thomas Edmondson, Elizabeth's husband, and their children, wrote a letter certifying that Othello was in the process of purchasing the freedom of Mary and their five youngest children. This process was completed on June 22, 1850 when Othello made the final payment of \$1000. (18) Caroline Richards must have been purchased at an earlier date and perhaps from another family.

So, who was John McNutt, the original owner of Mary (Richards)? He was the son of John McNutt Sr., one of the original settlers of what became Rockbridge County. He was born c. 1763 and lived near the North (now Maury) River in the vicinity of the modern town of Buena Vista (19) He died in 1818 and is buried in the Stonewall Jackson Cemetery in Lexington, Virginia. In his will of November 29, 1817 he left his land and slaves to his wife, Mary, and then to his heirs. He lists 8 slaves in all, one of whom is named Mary. One of the heirs, as mentioned, was Elizabeth McNutt Edmondson. (20) Elizabeth had married Thomas Edmondson in 1814. Thomas was the son of David Edmondson, who resided in east Rockbridge not far from the McNutts. David built a home in the area in c. 1803 and named it “Montillico” (little hill). This home still stands in Rockbridge. In his will of February 3, 1821, David left to his son, Thomas, “ that part of my plantation on which I now live lying near the lands of James Templeton, David Templeton, and the heirs of Alexander McNutt constituting about 100 acres and including the use of the mill.” (21) Mary McNutt apparently moved in with her niece and her niece's husband since in the 1850 census she is listed as 80 years old and residing in the Edmondson household. Thus, Mary (Richards) the slave also resided in the Edmondson estate of Montillico from 1821 forward. Both the 1820 and 1830 censuses show Thomas P. Edmondson possessing female slaves in the proper age range for Mary (Richards), and the 1821 personal property tax roles for Rockbridge show Thomas Edmondson holding a slave between the ages of 12 and 16, which was the proper age for Mary (Richards). (22) According to the 1850 ship record, Caroline Richards, child of Othello and Mary, was born in 1827. This means that Othello was in the county at that time, as Mary Richards was a Rockbridge native. This also means that Caroline was born on the Montillico estate as that is where Mary was a slave. The census of 1830 also indicates that a female slave of Caroline's age was on the Edmondson estate. It is unclear how Othello and Mary established their relationship. The McDowell estate of Cherry Grove was in northern Rockbridge, while Montillico was in the southeastern part of

the county some 15 miles away. The degree of separation between them may explain the fact that they had no more children until 1841, at which time they were in closer proximity.

In all of the years that Othello Richards resided at Cherry Grove, there is only one mention of him in the McDowell correspondence. This occurred in 1831 following a visit which Elizabeth McDowell Benton had made to Col. and Mrs. McDowell at Cherry Grove. In an undated letter Mrs. Benton informs her mother that she left her keys at the McDowell's and "was afraid you might not see them and might not send them by Othello" (to her sister, Susan Taylor's home in Lexington). (23) This note is short but revealing. It shows that Othello was not a field hand, but a house servant, a critical distinction at the time. House servants were entrusted with tasks (such as the return of keys unaccompanied by a master) not allowed to field hands. Such servants also occupied a higher status in slave society, and were more likely to be treated like family members by masters than ordinary slaves.

1835 was an important year for the McDowells and for Othello Richards. In that year, Col. James McDowell died. The following year an agreement was made among the heirs of the Colonel's estate. Cherry Grove was to be kept up for one year, but then was to be sold. Sarah McDowell, his widow, was to retain a few slaves. These are named, but Othello is not among them. Elizabeth McDowell Benton, the middle child, received slaves valued at \$3,720, James McDowell Jr., the only son, obtained slaves worth \$3,670, and Susan McDowell Taylor of Lexington got slaves valued at \$3,965. (24) We know that it was Susan M. Taylor who received Othello, because it was she who freed him on October 2, 1848. (25) Further, the 1830 Census shows William Taylor, her husband, as holding 3 slaves with one male slave in the age range of 10-23. In the 1840 census, William Taylor owned 10 slaves with one male slave in the age range of 36-54. The 1835 Rockbridge Personal Property Tax Records show William Taylor as owning no slaves in the 12-16 age range and 10 slaves in the 16 and above range. 1836 records show him as holding 12 slaves in the 16 and above range indicating that he

acquired 2 slaves in that year. Thus, the Taylors acquired a male slave in Othello's age range between 1830 and 1840, probably in 1835-36.

The three children of Col. and Mrs. James McDowell, particularly Susan and James, are significant in the story of Othello Richards. The middle child, Elizabeth McDowell, was born at Cherry Grove in 1794. In 1821 she married Thomas Hart Benton, after his election to the Senate from the newly created state of Missouri. Benton served in the Senate from 1821-1851, and Mrs. Benton spent most of her married life in Washington, allowing her to make frequent visits to Rockbridge. (26) James McDowell Jr. was born at Cherry Grove in 1795, and became prominent in local, state, and national politics. Having graduated from Princeton in 1817, he married Susan Preston the next year and shortly thereafter removed briefly to Kentucky, where he and his father held land. He returned to Rockbridge in the 1820's and, on land deeded to him by his father, constructed the "Col Alto" estate near Lexington in 1827. This gracious home is still standing and is now in the city limits of Lexington. Here he raised his children, and here he remained until his death in 1851. He is buried in the Stonewall Jackson cemetery in Lexington, next to his older sister, Susan McDowell Taylor. (27) After his early attempts at agriculture and law, James found his true calling in politics. He served in the Virginia House of Delegates from 1831-35 and again from 1837-38, was Governor of Virginia from 1842-46, and a member of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1846-1851. A progressive Democrat, McDowell early on favored internal improvements, a balance between national and states rights, gradual emancipation of slaves, and colonization of the former slaves in Africa.

The American Colonization Society was established in Washington D.C. in 1816 and was composed of some of the most prominent men in the Republic. 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 gradually emancipate the slaves and re-settle them in their ancestral homeland.

Perhaps the former slaves, having received a modicum of education and cultural refinement from their years in America, could even lead a mission to 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 the colony was named Liberia and the first settlement named Monrovia in honor of James Monroe, then President of the United States. In 1847, Liberia became an independent state, and the following year elected Joseph J. Roberts, formerly of Petersburg, Virginia, the first President of the republic.

The Rockbridge Colonization Society was founded in 1826, and James McDowell Jr., along with other prominent citizens, was a charter member and remained a member the rest of his life. The R.C.S. favored both gradual emancipation and colonization, and several members freed slaves for colonization and helped to defray the costs of those going to Africa. Between 1832 and 1860 the society sponsored 9 voyages to Liberia and sent over 100 former slaves and free blacks to Liberia. More than 80% of those going were former slaves. (28) In 1832, following the Nat Turner slave revolt of 1831, a Convention met in Richmond to discuss and hopefully find a solution to the “slavery question”. James McDowell Jr., as a member of the Virginia House of Delegates, was one of the representatives from Rockbridge, and one of the most eloquent and outspoken critics of the current system. He stated that slavery was a threat to the peace and power of Virginia and of the Union itself. It was a “curse” to both the slave and slaveholder. He opposed immediate emancipation as cruel and “worse to its subjects even than to ourselves”, and instead proposed a plan for education, gradual emancipation based on the “post nati” plan, and for the settlement of the ex-slaves on “another continent”. In making these statements McDowell had the support of many educated citizens of Rockbridge, even fellow slaveholders. (29) Slavery was still a less prominent institution west of the Blue Ridge than in the Eastern parts of the state, and a moderate anti-slavery attitude continued in Rockbridge until c. 1850. Indeed, in 1847, Henry Ruffner, then President of Washington College, wrote

the last anti-slavery tract published in the South. Unfortunately, a pro-slavery attitude was becoming predominate in the eastern part of Virginia by 1832, and representatives from that area repressed any anti-slavery message or policy coming out of the Convention. But for many years afterward, James McDowell Jr. continued to support an anti-slavery, pro-colonization message within his state, community, and family.

The oldest child of Col. James McDowell was Susan Preston McDowell, born in 1793 at Cherry Grove. Apparently she lived there until marrying William Taylor in 1813. (30) William Taylor (1788-1846) was born and raised in Alexandria, Virginia, admitted to the bar in Staunton, and practiced law in Lexington. Following their marriage, William and Susan Taylor moved to Lexington. He had a distinguished career as a lawyer and politician. He was Commonwealth Attorney for Rockbridge from 1817 to 1843, member of the Virginia House of Delegates in 1821, and of the U.S. House of Representatives from 1843 until his death in 1846. He is buried in the Congressional Cemetery in Washington, D.C. William Taylor was a progressive Democrat as was his brother-in-law, James McDowell Jr. He was a mentor to McDowell, and a political ally on issues like internal improvements and opposition to the nullification/secession doctrine propounded by Deep South radicals. Another progressive Democrat, John Letcher, later the Civil War Governor of Virginia, studied in Taylor's law office in the 1830's. (31) Although William Taylor's stand on slavery is not clear, we know that both James McDowell and John Letcher took anti-slavery stances at various times in their careers. Upon Taylor's death, James McDowell succeeded him in the House of Representatives and served there until his own death in 1851.

In 1815 Col. James McDowell deeded to Susan Taylor and her husband three tracts of land in the Lexington area totaling 326 acres. One of these was to the south of the current Stonewall Jackson Cemetery and west of Main Street consisting of 198 acres and called Taylor's farm. (32) This area was then outside the city limits, but is now in the city in the vicinity of Taylor Street. (33) Eventually, the

Taylor family moved permanently from their previous town home in Lexington to a house which they built on their farm. Following the death of Col. James McDowell in 1835, Othello Richards moved to Taylor's farm and remained there until he was freed in 1848. As he had for Col. McDowell, he served the Taylors as a trusted house servant. (34) We know little about Othello's life and service in this period, but he must have had his hands full as between 1813 and 1835, the Taylors had 6 children. He also must have frequently visited the home of Gov. James McDowell, Col Alto, which was only about a mile from the Taylor home.

The Taylor tract just south of Lexington included a fine grove of Oaks, "Taylors' Grove", which had been the meeting place of the Lexington Presbyterian Church since its founding in 1799. (35) Apparently, following their purchase of this land, the Taylors allowed the church to retain this portion of land, which is now located in the Stonewall Jackson Cemetery. The church building was expanded in 1819 and again in 1821, and included its own cemetery. Susan Taylor is listed as a member of the church for 1821-22, and her brother, James McDowell, became a member in 1831. All of her children were baptized in the church, and most became members. (36) Interestingly, her husband, William Taylor is not listed as a member. In 1845, the "new" Lexington Presbyterian church was constructed at the corner of Main and Nelson Streets, where it remains today. The church deeded the land where it had been previously located to the city of Lexington for use as a cemetery. Susan Taylor and her children continued as members of the new church, and she and several members of her family are buried in what is now Stonewall Jackson Cemetery. It is entirely possible that Othello Richards also attended this church, at least occasionally.

Between 1841 and 1848, Othello and Mary Richards had five children. These were the first children born to them since their daughter, Caroline, born in 1827. The fact that they had so many children in such a short period of time indicates that they were in closer contact than they had been previously. We know that Othello Richards moved to Lexington c. 1836, and that Lexington was only

five miles from the Edmondson home of Montillico, where Mary Richards had been residing. It is also possible that Mary Richards was “leased” to the Taylors or some other family in Lexington after 1836. In Virginia and other parts of the Upper South, a number of masters allowed their slaves to live in town and “hire their own time” (find their own work) paying their master a portion of their wages, usually two-thirds to three-fourths. Many slaves hoped, in this way, to buy their freedom from their masters. We also know that, although Mary Richards was owned by the Edmondson family until her freedom was purchased by Othello in 1849, the 1840 census does not show a female slave in Mary's age range residing at the Edmondson estate.

Following her emancipation of Othello Richards on October 2, 1848, Susan P. Taylor died on April 16, 1849. In March of 1849, an agreement was reached among the heirs of John McNutt which allowed Othello Richards to purchase the freedom of his wife and children over a period of time. On April 7th of that same year, Othello paid the Edmondson family \$100 toward the freedom of his wife, Mary, and their infant son, Samuel and \$14.97 toward the freedom of his other four young children, Nancy, Eugenia, Wesley Morgan, and Francis Asbury. On June 22nd, 1850, he paid \$1000 to complete the transaction. (37) Apparently, he or someone else had arranged for the freedom of his daughter, Caroline, at an earlier date. How Othello got this large amount of money was not known until recently. Although Susan Taylor may have settled a small amount of money upon him at or just prior to her death, which allowed him to make the first “down payment” on his family, the majority of the money was raised by Othello himself..

In his letter of 1870 to the head of the Methodist Missionary Society, Othello indicates that following his emancipation, he immediately embarked on a 19 month journey through the northeast “seeking aid to purchase my wife and children to come to Liberia”. Thus, he had already determined to go to Africa by that time, and had the approval of the Methodist church to do so. In his travels from 1848-1850, Othello visited Baltimore, home of the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Church and

met with James Sewell, who had converted him to Methodism c. 1819, traveled to Philadelphia, home of the Missionary Society and attempted to meet J.P. Durbin, the corresponding secretary and effective head, spent time among black and white Methodists in Montgomery County outside Philadelphia, and went as far as “Bengar” (Bangor) in Maine. He addressed not only Methodists but members of other denominations to make his plea and tell his story. (38) One can see him standing in a pulpit, sharing his story and making a plea for support. How he was born a slave, purchased by Col. McDowell and brought to Rockbridge, where he converted to Methodism, continuing to serve the McDowell and Taylor families faithfully for over 30 years, while preparing for the day when he and his family would be free and could spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ to his brothers and sisters in Africa. The story of this black Moses returning to the “promised land” must have been successful because shortly after his return to Lexington he paid out the enormous sum of \$1000 to the Edmonsons to complete the purchase of his family.

In the ship record of 1850, he listed his occupation as Methodist minister, and in 1844 he had named his first born son, Wesley, after the founder of Methodism. He also named his second son, born in 1847, Francis Asbury, after the most famous early leader of Methodism in America. (39). As noted, Othello's introduction to Methodism occurred in c. 1819. In the late 18th and early 19th century, Rockbridge was dominated by Presbyterians and, to a lesser extent, denominations associated with German settlers, Lutherans, Church of Brethren, etc. However, by the early 19th century, Methodists had gained a foothold in Rockbridge. The first prominent Methodist preacher in Rockbridge was William “Billy” Cravens who came to the area from Rockingham in 1793 to preach and to carry out the construction of Liberty Hall Academy. He was a stonemason, and like other early Methodist preachers had to earn his living by other means. In 1794 he established a Methodist Class meeting in Lexington, which was the precursor of the Lexington Methodist Church. Craven was an outspoken critic of slavery and often confronted slaveholders in Rockbridge on this subject. This made him unpopular with some,

and may partly explain why he left the area in 1819 to move to the free state of Indiana. (40) Cravens' preaching was especially effective among the slaves, several of whom converted to Methodism, and he may have influenced Othello Richard's decision. James Sewell, who converted Othello, arrived in Rockbridge just before Cravens departed and apparently knew him. (41) Sewell probably replaced Cravens in the area.

In 1816 the Methodists, under Cravens' leadership, had purchased a piece of land on the east side of Randolph Street, where the African-American Methodist Church now stands, and had begun construction.. The church remained on that site until 1853, when another site was purchased between Jefferson and Main Streets, where the current Trinity Methodist Church stands. In 1864, the white members of the Randolph Street Church joined with their white Brethren at the Jefferson St. Church to turn over the Randolph property to the blacks.(42) An African-American church has continued on that site ever since. When the Presbyterians moved their church “to town” in 1845, the Methodist and Presbyterian churches were back to back on Main and Randolph streets. Many prominent members of the community were members of the Methodist Church, including John Letcher, who worked in the law office of William Taylor. It is possible that William Taylor may have attended service there, although we do not have membership roles from this period. By the 1820's Methodism was also establishing itself in other parts of the county. In 1825, John Hamilton built his home of Locust Grove, 5 miles southeast of Lexington and used it as a meeting house. In 1835, he helped to build a church near his home and called it Wesley Chapel. This church is in existence today and is very near Montillico, where Mary Richards lived. (43) Perhaps Mary was also introduced to Methodism during this era.

Methodism was attractive to blacks and slaves in America in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. John Wesley was a strong opponent of slavery as was Francis Asbury, who lived and practiced his faith in the Delmarva peninsula for many years until his death in 1816. Delmarva became the center for the strongest sectional opposition to slavery in the early Methodist church, and the area

churches attracted numerous black members. In 1800 African-Americans made up 45% of Maryland Methodists, and in 1817, around the time Othello Richards was converted, blacks made up about 24% of the members of the Virginia Methodist Conference. African-Americans were attracted to Methodism for several reasons:

- ⑩ The revival style of Methodists allowed for free expression and resembled African religious traditions
- ⑩ The message was simple and clear, emphasizing love and hope
- ⑩ Methodism had an egalitarian impulse and was accessible even to those in slavery
- ⑩ Methodist preachers actively evangelized among African-Americans
- ⑩ Blacks were a “dynamic force” in attracting others to the faith (44)

As time passed, Southern Methodists became less confrontational on the subject of slavery, but they continued to try to appeal to blacks. Blacks were allowed to serve as deacons and elders, and some were licensed as preachers. The church also became increasingly supportive of the colonization effort, and of commissioning black and white missionaries for Liberia. In 1824, David Payne of Richmond, a free man of color, was the first of his race to be elected to orders as a Deacon in the Virginia Methodist Church. In 1829 he headed a large group from Richmond sailing to Liberia; unfortunately he died en route. (45) The Lexington Methodist Church commissioned a former slave, Isaac Liggons, for this purpose in 1832. Liggons was in the first group of migrants from Rockbridge to Liberia in that year. (46) He also was among the first group of Methodist missionaries of any color in Liberia. He, as many others, died shortly after his arrival. Deaths in Liberia from illness and disease were common in this early period and were a factor in discouraging other free blacks and slaves from migrating. This may help to explain why, after the initial group departed to Liberia from Rockbridge in 1832, there was not another group until 1846. Despite these problems, Othello Richards began his

training to become a Methodist minister and missionary sometime after his arrival in Lexington in the

late 1830's 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 is 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. The education of a slave for Christian ministry and mission was an exception to the Virginia laws forbidding the education of slaves. It may have been that Othello Richards was being trained to replace Isaac Liggons who died in Liberia sometime in 1833-34. 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 missionaries had been sent to Liberia, but only one was still in place. On the other hand, thirty-one "colored" missionaries had served there, and fourteen were still active. (47)

In January 1850, a large group of 25 free blacks and former slaves left Rockbridge for Liberia. According to ship's records, all of them were Methodists. (48) . Accompanying Othello and his family on the voyage of July, 1850 were Fanny Alexander and her two children freed by William Hamilton, brother of John Hamilton, and in November, 1850, Henry Alexander, free man, and his wife and daughter freed by John Hamilton, sailed. (49) The Hamiltons were Methodists as well as supporters of the Rockbridge Colonization Society. It is possible that Othello Richards went to Liberia partly to replace Isaac Liggons and shore up the Methodist mission there. We know that Richards and many members of his family served as Methodist ministers in Liberia.

The voyage of 25 blacks to Liberia in January, 1850 may have had an impact on Othello Richards. This was the largest number of African-Americans departing from Rockbridge in a single voyage during the pre-war period and included many prominent free blacks and former slaves. Othello may have been encouraged by this, knowing that when he arrived in Liberia he would have friends and former neighbors to greet him and assist in the settlement of his family. Still, his letter of 1870 to the head of the Methodist Missionary Society indicates that by 1848 he was already prepared to

go on mission to Liberia. 1850 turned out to be the greatest year for Rockbridge settlement in Liberia.

Altogether there were three voyages, and a total of 49 blacks sailed, almost half of all those making the journey from 1832 through 1860.

The 1850's were a period of colonization "fever" at both the national and local level. Nationally, a number of factors contributed to the colonization cause. Since the early 1800's many laws in both north and south systematically discriminated against blacks. In the south, including Virginia, these laws caused many blacks to try to leave, and masters often freed slaves with the explicit or implicit understanding that they should migrate elsewhere. Unfortunately, many northern states also had severe laws which were intended to maintain white supremacy and discourage black migration into those states. This was particularly true in the newer states of the Midwest like Indiana, Illinois, and Michigan. The 1851 Indiana State Constitution flatly stated that "No Negro or mulatto shall come into or settle in the state after the adoption of this Constitution." The Illinois Black Code of 1853 prohibited any black persons from outside the state to stay in the state for more than ten days. Maryland prohibited black immigration into the state until 1865. Further, in many of the new territories, such as Kansas, there were massive struggles over the issue of slavery, and free blacks often did not feel welcome or inclined to migrate there. The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was also a factor which discouraged slaves to remain in the United States. It declared that all runaway slaves were, upon capture, to be returned to their masters, no matter where they might be at the time. Finally, the Dred Scott decision of 1857 said that African-Americans, whether slave or free, could not be American citizens and therefore could not sue in federal courts, and that the federal government had no power to legislate slavery in the federal territories. Taken altogether, these developments led some blacks to feel that they were not welcome in the United States and should go elsewhere. But where?

At the same time, Liberia was becoming more attractive to some blacks. Despite the health problems of the early years of the colony, improvements in health care had taken place and the

mortality rate had declined by 1850. Further, Liberia had become an independent country in 1847 with

its own President, Joseph J. Roberts, formerly of Petersburg, Virginia. Liberia was a representative Republic just like the United States, but there American blacks and mulattos would have equal rights and the opportunity to make something of their lives without facing racial discrimination.

In Virginia, the colonization societies were very active during this period and even persuaded the Virginia legislature to pass an Act in 1850 making appropriations for free people of color to migrate to Liberia and setting aside \$30,000 annually for five years for that purpose. Beginning in the late 1840's, Rufus Bailey, acting as an agent for the American Colonization Society in the Shenandoah Valley, attempted to colonize more blacks from the area in Liberia. The three voyages from Rockbridge in 1850 are related to his efforts in the area. (50)

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. Shortly after departure, there was an outbreak of smallpox on board, and the ship landed in Norfolk, sailing from there on July 24th and arriving in Monrovia in August. (51) Thus began a new life for the Richards family. There would be challenges ahead, but at least they had their freedom and the opportunity to help in the creation of a new country in the homeland of their forefathers.

Notes for Chapter One

1. *African Repository*, v. 26, no. 8 (August, 1850), 247-8 gives the "List of Emigrants" sailing from Baltimore on July 4, 1850. This list includes Othello Richards and his family and states that Othello's age is 53.
2. United States Census Office (Washington D.C.), *The First Census of the United States: 1790*
3. Ibid, *The Second Census of the United States: 1800*.
4. Ibid, *The Third Census of the United States: 1810*
5. Ibid, *The Fourth Census of the United States: 1820*

6. Ibid, *The Third Census of the United States:1810*
7. *Rockbridge County Free Black Register, 1831-1860.*
8. Philip J. Schwartz, *Chronology of the Slave Trade in Richmond and Virginia* (Virginia Commonwealth University on-line Library, April, 2009).
9. At the beginning of 2014, it is hoped that a direct descendent of Othello Richards will provide a DNA test to establish a more specific African origin of the Richards family.
10. See the McDowell Family Records, chiefly the James McDowell Papers, 1770-1915, microfilm reels 1633-41, Library of Virginia, Richmond, VA.
11. All of above from Oren B. Morton, *A History of Rockbridge County, Virginia* (Staunton, VA: McClure and Co., 1920), 21-23.
12. James McDowell Papers, Special Collections, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, VA. These papers contain material on Col. James McDowell of Rockbridge and his son, Governor James McDowell, and are not to be confused with the papers of Governor James McDowell at the Library of Virginia mentioned previously.
13. Sally Campbell Preston Miller, *Memoir of James McDowell, LL.D, Governor of Virginia* (Baltimore: Historical Series of Washington and Lee University, John Murphy and Co., 1895), Special Collections, Washington and Lee.
14. Stuart Lee Butler, *Guide to Virginia Militia Units in the War of 1812* (Athens, GA: Iberian Publishing, 1988), 25,231,255. *Virginia Militia: Lt. Col. James McDowell's Flying Camp Records, 1813*, Manuscript Division, Library of Virginia. *Book of General, Division, Brigade, and Regimental Orders of James McDowell*, Special Collections, W and L.
15. "Othello Richards to Dr. Durbin", June 7,1870, Svend E. Holsoe Collection, Indiana University Archives, Bloomington, Indiana. This letter was among loose papers not yet classified in April, 2014. J.P

Durbin was the first Corresponding Secretary of the Methodist Missionary Society. James Sewell entered

the Methodist ministry in 1814 and from that date until 1818 served in Maryland and Pennsylvania. Sewell is not listed at a station in the records of the Baltimore Conference of the Methodist Episcopal for 1819 and 1820. In 1821-22, he appears in the Staunton, Virginia circuit in the Winchester District of the Baltimore Conference. *Minutes of the Annual Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, 1773-1828* (New York: T. Mason and G. Lane, 1840), v. I, 235,284, 300, 315, 370, 389.

16. James McDowell Papers, microfilm roll 1633, Library of Virginia.

17. *African Repository*, v. 26, no. 8 (August, 1850), 247-8

18. Letter of March 31, 1849 and attached notes of April 7, 1849 and June 22, 1850, Manuscript Division, Library of Virginia.

19. Deed of John McNutt Sr. to John McNutt Jr., March 13, 1805, 350 acres bounded by the land of James Templeton and the heirs of William Paxton, Deed Book E, 390, *Rockbridge County Deed Books*, Rockbridge County Courthouse, Lexington, VA; Deed of Reuben Grigsby, Executor of estate of John McNutt, to Adolph Eckart, June 20, 1858, 390 acres along the North River and bounded by the land of James H. Paxton, John Hamilton, Thomas Hide, and the "Old Valley Road" (now Forge Road), Deed Book GG, 210; William Gilham, *Map of Rockbridge County* (Baltimore: A. Hoen and Co., 1859), Special Collections, Washington and Lee University, shows the Eckart land located on the west side of the Old Valley (Forge) Road at its intersection with the Paxton House Road, which descends to the Maury River; John Carmichael, *Map of Rockbridge County* (Baltimore: lithograph by A.Hoen and Co., 1883), Special Collections, W and L, shows the land of "Hamilton", the Ben Salem Presbyterian Church, and the land of Col. J.H. Paxton on the west side of the North River, opposite Hart's Bottom (now Buena Vista) and near the Forge Road; There is also a plat from October, 1952 showing the Eckart/McNutt land and later owners in the possession of the author.

20. Will Book 4, 358-59. *Rockbridge County Will Books*, Rockbridge County Courthouse, Lexington, VA.

21. Will Book 5, 96.

22. *Rockbridge County Personal Property Tax Records, 1821*, Rockbridge County Courthouse.
23. James McDowell Papers, microfilm roll 1634, Library of Virginia.
24. Ibid, microfilm roll 1637.
25. Deed Book AA, 162, *Rockbridge County Deed Books*, Rockbridge County Courthouse
26. “Biography of Mrs. Benton”, *St. Louis Intelligence* in Rev. N.L. Rice, D.D., *A Funeral Discourse of Mrs. Elizabeth Benton: Wife of Hon. Thomas H. Benton*, (St. Louis: Keith Woods and Co., 1855), 8, Special Collections, W and L.
27. On the life and career of Gov. James McDowell see Miller, *Memoir of James McDowell* and Young, *Ripe for Emancipation*.
28. For information on the Rockbridge Colonization Society see Young, *Ripe for Emancipation*, 66-68; for emigrant departures from Rockbridge to Liberia see Ibid, 186.
29. For McDowell's comments on slavery, emancipation, and colonization from 1826-1832, especially his statements at the Virginia Slavery Convention see Ibid, 84-89.
30. Dorothe and Edwin S. Kirkpatrick, *Rockbridge County Marriages, 1778-1850* (Athens, GA: Iberian Publishing Co., 1985), 207, records this marriage on October 20, 1813.
31. Winifred Hadsel, *The Streets of Lexington, Virginia* (Lexington: Rockbridge Historical Society, 1985), p.75.
32. Rockbridge County Deed Book J, 34, and Deed Book AA, 84.
33. Hadsel, *The Streets of Lexington*, 136-37.
34. In her deed of October 2, 1848 Susan Preston McDowell Taylor “of the town of Lexington” set free “my negro man, Othello”. Deed Book AA, 162. This type of language was usually reserved for house servants and also indicates that it was Mrs. Taylor who owned Othello rather than her husband. 7
35. Hadsel, *The Streets of Lexington*, 152.
36. *Session Records*, Lexington Presbyterian Church, 25, 44, 216, 220, 300, 306, 310, 348-9.

37. Letter of March 31, 1849 from heirs of John McNutt, viz., Mary McNutt, Elizabeth (McNutt) Edmondson, James L. Edmondson, David Edmondson, Mary L. Edmondson, William Edmondson, and John M. Edmondson in Othello Richards file, Manuscript Division, Library of Virginia.
38. Letter of June 7, 1870 from Othello Richards to Dr. Durbin, Indiana University Archives. James Sewell was serving the Methodist church in Little York in 1848-49 when Othello Richards visited him there.
39. List of Emigrants”, *African Repository*, v. 26, no. 8 (August, 1850), 247-8.
40. Morton, *History of Rockbridge County*, 177; *History of Trinity United Methodist Church*, on-line resource; J. B. Wakeley, *The Bold Frontier Preacher: A Portraiture of William Cravens of Virginia* (Cincinnati: Hitchcock and Walden, 1869), 23, 58-62, 67-8, 82-86, 88-91 demonstrate his two “hatreds”, slavery and rum. *Ibid*, 93 states that Cravens removed from Rockbridge to Indiana in 1819.
41. Wakeley, *The Bold Frontier Preacher*, 54-5 relates tales of slaves converting to Methodism. *Ibid*, 8 mentions James Sewell as someone who offered reminiscences of Cravens. This could only have occurred in 1819 as the two men lived far apart thereafter.
42. Albert M. Cupp, *History of Methodism in Rockbridge County* (Lexington VA: self-published, 1955), 11-19.
43. *Ibid*, 76-717.
44. Elliott Wright, *Recovering the African American Heritage of the United Methodist Church* (on line publication of the Methodist General Board of Global Ministries, March 2, 2010). See also Grant S. Shockley et. al., general editors, *Heritage and Hope: The African American Presence in United Methodism* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1991) and William Henry Williams, *The Garden of American Methodism: The Delmarva Peninsula, 1769-1820* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1984).
45. William W. Bennett, *Memorials of Methodism in Virginia* (Richmond: self-published, 1871), 705.
- Marie Tyler-McGraw, *An African Republic: Black and White Virginians in the Making of Liberia* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 135.

46. Young, *Ripe for Emancipation*, 63, 108, 181.
47. John Morrison Reid and John Talbot Gracey, *Missions and Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church*, v. 1 (New York: Eaton and Mains, 1896), 231.
48. “The Late Expedition for Liberia”, *African Repository*, v. 26, no. 4 (April, 1850), 110-11.
49. “List of Emigrants, *African Repository*, v. 27, no. 12 (December, 1851), 377.
50. Young, *Ripe for Emancipation*, 179, 186, 195, 201: Ellen Eslinger, “The Brief Career of Rufus W. Bailey, American Colonization Society Agent in Virginia”, *Journal of Southern History*, v. 71 (February, 2005).
51. “Sailing on the Liberian Packet”, *African Repository*, v. 26, no. 8 (August, 1850), 246-47.