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Play tells the story of W.Va. statehood

By [Rick Steelhammer](#)

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- A new play that tells the story of West Virginia's statehood from the perspectives of two historic characters -- one black and one white -- opens Oct. 18 in the Charleston Civic Center's Little Theater.

"A New Home for Liberty -- Human Rights, Slavery and the Creation of West Virginia," written by Charleston lawyer Thomas Rodd, focuses on the early lives of [J.R. Clifford](#), West Virginia's first black attorney, and Granville Hall, the state's second secretary of state.

The play makes use of a cast that includes a former congressman, three circuit court judges, a retired state Supreme Court justice, a legislator, magistrate and a deputy state attorney general, in addition to veteran community theater actors Reggie Parks and Ricklin Brown, who portray Clifford and Hall.

Clifford grew up in the Moorefield area, where his "free black" parents helped escaped slaves make their way northward to Pennsylvania and freedom. During the Civil War, he served as a corporal in an all-black Union artillery regiment, and after the war, following his graduation from Storer College in Harpers Ferry, he helped found the Niagara Movement -- the forerunner to the NAACP.

He later won a landmark civil rights case with national implications regarding "separate but equal" funding of public schools for blacks and whites, and founded a nationally distributed newspaper focusing on African American issues.

Hall was raised in Shinnston, where his father, a tanner, was once indicted by a Harrison County grand jury for subscribing to "subversive" newspapers that advocated the abolition of slavery. Hall worked as a clerk in the U.S. Senate before returning to what is now West Virginia to record the proceedings of the First and Second Wheeling Conventions, from which the concept of West Virginia statehood took shape. He later became editor of the Wheeling Intelligencer and served as West Virginia's second secretary of state.

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Rodd said he became acquainted with Clifford's work in 2003, when the Friends of Blackwater (his wife, Judy, is the group's director) staged a history program that focused on Clifford and his role in an 1898 state Supreme Court case involving a Tucker County public school for black students.

Clifford was the attorney for Carrie Williams, a teacher at Coketon, who took to court the county's policy of a five-month school term for blacks, while white students went to school eight months a year.

The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Williams and Clifford, concluding that discrimination due to color alone "is contrary to public policy and the law of the land. If any discrimination as to education should be made, it should be favorable to, and not against, the colored people," who had been "held in the bondage of slavery ... for a long period of years."

"I was blown away by how relatively advanced West Virginia was, in terms of race relations, in the late 1800s," said Rodd, who wrote a play based on the court transcripts of the Carrie Williams case. The play was staged in 14 West Virginia cities in 2003 and 2004

Rodd's introduction to Granville Hall came while he was preparing a paper on the West Virginia Constitution while in law school.

"Hall was the guy who transcribed all of the debates that took place in Wheeling, when the statehood conventions were held," Rodd said. "He learned the Pittman system of shorthand as a teenager, and during his late teens, he went to Washington, D.C., to work as a court reporter and ended up working in the U.S. Senate."

Hall, who had returned to West Virginia by the outbreak of the Civil War, kept what turned out to be the only written record of the proceedings of the Wheeling Convention sessions.

"The notes were stored in a tin box, which he supposedly kept under his bed," Rodd said. They emerged in the 1930s, when a legal suit to resolve West Virginia's Civil War debt to Virginia was being heard. Hall compiled the statehood chronicles into a book, "The Rending of Virginia." The West Virginia Encyclopedia describe's Hall's book as "perhaps the most significant and insightful memoir and history of the West Virginia statehood movement by an observer."

Hall became West Virginia's first House of Delegates clerk in 1863, and in 1865 was elected Secretary of State. After serving as reporter and later editor of the Wheeling Intelligencer, he moved to Illinois, where he worked for, and eventually became president of, the Louisville & Nashville Railroad.

"One hundred and fifty years ago, brave Mountaineers, black and white, risked lives and fortunes to create the state of West Virginia," Rodd said. "A New Home for Liberty," he said, "tells the exciting story of how they added the West Virginia star to Old Glory, as the Civil war raged around them."

According to Rodd, "West Virginia ducked a bullet by becoming a separate state. While we had social segregation after the war, blacks in West Virginia always had the right to vote, and were able to make a difference in elections, while in the former Confederate states, they were completely disenfranchised well into the 20th Century. To get out from under that 'slaveocracy' is something we should be proud of. We had quite a few idealistic people here at the time of the state's creation."

In the Charleston production of "A New Home for Liberty," cast members will include former U.S. Rep. Alan Mollohan, D-W.Va.; circuit judges Tod Kaufman of Kanawha County, Jay Hoke of Boone and Lincoln counties, and Gary Johnson of Nicholas County; Delegate Clif Moore, D-McDowell; Kanawha County Magistrate Kim Aaron; state Supreme Court clerk Rory Perry and former clerk Ancil Ramey; former state Supreme Court Justice Larry Starcher and Deputy Attorney General Paul Sheridan.

Members of the Kanawha Kordsmen and Almost Heaven Chorus will portray the Hutchinson Family, a 19th-century abolitionist singing group.

The production, presented by the J.R. Clifford Project, will be preceded by a 6 p.m. discussion panel featuring historians John Alexander Williams, John Stealey and Cicero Fain. The play will begin at 7 p.m. and be followed by a public reception.

Admission is free to all events and tickets are not required.

A related free lecture and panel discussion will take place on Oct. 19 at 11 a.m., when the J.R. Clifford Project and the Mountain State Bar will present "Race, Law and Voting: Was Creating West Virginia Worth It?" featuring WVU College of Law professor Atiba Ellis. An optional box lunch will follow. The public is invited, but reservations are required for the lecture and lunch. To register, visit www.jrclifford.org or call 304-345-7663.

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