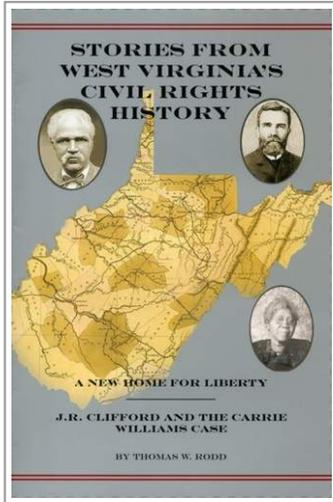


WV Book Team: A piece of W.Va. history

By Bill Clements
WV Book Team



A new book by former Charleston attorney Tom Rodd, “Stories from West Virginia’s Civil Rights History,” features events from the life of John Robert “J.R.” Clifford (1848-1933), the Mountain State’s first African-American attorney. On Monday, at 7 p.m., Rodd will give a talk at a book-signing reception at Taylor Books in Charleston on Capitol Street.

The first of the two extended stories in the book, titled “A New Home for Liberty,” begins in 1913 — the 50th anniversary of West Virginia’s creation.

At a train station in Parkersburg, J.R. Clifford, then 65, meets the abolitionist and statehood leader Granville Davisson Hall (1837-1934), age 76. Clifford is accompanied by his adult daughter, Mary, a schoolteacher and Storer College graduate. Granville Hall is traveling with his early-teenaged grandchildren, Deborah and Joshua.

As the two men (and their children and grandchildren) talk about their lives, Granville Hall tells about his rural childhood in the Harrison County Town of Shinnston, then a part of Virginia. Young Granville’s innocence was tried in the fire of racial hatred when his father, a tanner, was indicted for the crime of distributing anti-slavery literature.

Hall also tells about the death of his friend and mentor, Captain Gordon Battelle, of Clarksburg. Battelle was an eloquent anti-slavery statehood leader who died in a Union Army field hospital before his dream of banning slavery would come true.

J.R. Clifford tells his own boyhood stories — including how Clifford’s father Isaac, a free black farmer living near Moorefield, risked his life to help escaping slaves. Clifford also tells how as a teenager inspired by Frederick Douglass, Clifford left the safety of school in Chicago to fight for liberty as a Corporal in the United States Colored Troops.

Other historical characters including Abraham Lincoln appear in “New Home for Liberty’s” exciting excerpts from the 1861-63 debates and speeches about slavery and statehood at Independence Hall in Wheeling.

In 2011-13, as part of West Virginia’s Sesquicentennial, community dramatic versions of “A New Home for Liberty” were put on in Charleston, Shepherdstown and Morgantown — and two performances at Wheeling’s Independence Hall.

The book’s second story, “J.R. Clifford and the Carrie Williams Case,” tells about Carrie Williams, an African-American teacher in the 1890s in a segregated Tucker County school in the Town of Coketon, at the head of the Blackwater Canyon.

With Clifford as her lawyer and strategist, Williams went before an all-white jury and then before the highest court in the State. In both forums she won a landmark equal rights case to secure wages and

school terms equivalent to those at white schools.

The Williams case is regarded as one of the most progressive state court civil rights decisions of its era, laying the groundwork for national cases like *Brown vs. Board of Education*.

The courtroom scenes in the Carrie Williams story are taken from legal transcripts and lawyers' briefs discovered in old court records. The back-and-forth of exciting cross-examination and argument reads like a modern "Law and Order."

"J.R. Clifford and the Carrie Williams Case" has also been presented as a dramatic program in more than 20 venues since 2004, when it premiered at the historic county courthouse in Martinsburg.

"The dialogue has been polished a lot," said Rodd.

A unique and appealing feature of both stories is that Clifford and Hall appear not just as "old men reminiscing," but also as sensitive and brave young people coping with tough issues like slavery and war. For example, in one scene young Granville Hall is taunted by other children in his Shinnston schoolyard for being a "blishonist" — a word he does not even understand!

These younger characters, including Granville Hall's appealing grandchildren and Clifford's personable daughter, make the book relatable and exciting for a young adult audience, which is Rodd's goal. There are also classroom-friendly questions at the end of the book for discussion, a vocabulary section, and historical documents and timelines.

"These stories combine real historical events and solid research with imaginative, multi-generational, and personal portraits of heroic West Virginians," Rodd said.

"West Virginia has a unique civil rights history," Rodd continued. "There is much to be ashamed of, like lynchings and segregated schools. But there is also much to be proud of. Most importantly, the power to vote was never stripped from black citizens in West Virginia, as it was for almost one hundred years next door in Virginia. That fact alone is reason to be grateful that West Virginia was created."

"When we learn about the lives of West Virginians who have worked for liberty and justice for all, it can inspire us to continue that effort today," Rodd said.

"Thanks to support from the West Virginia Legislature, we are going to distribute free copies to all West Virginia history classes, schools and public libraries, and museums."

Rodd co-directs the J.R. Clifford Project with Charleston attorney Kitty Dooley and Senior Supreme Court Justice Larry Starcher. They are also expected to speak with Rodd at the Taylor Books event tomorrow.

Rodd gives ample credit to the many historical researchers like WVU Professor Connie Rice who have preserved and unearthed the stories of Clifford and Granville Hall's rich and long lives, and to all of the participants in Clifford Project events.

"We've had thousands of great people be part of our dramatic programs," said Rodd, "including in the Charleston area, and I hope to see many of them at our book-signing. All profits go to the Project."

"Stories from West Virginia's Civil Rights History" is published with funding assistance from the Legislature's Community Partnership Grant Program and the West Virginia Humanities Council.

Stories from West Virginia's Civil Rights History is available locally at Taylor Books and the WV Marketplace at Capitol Market, and online from the West Virginia Book Company at www.wvbookco.com or 304-342-1848.

Bill Clements is the owner and operator of the West Virginia Book Company.