

Solomon Porter Hood, 1853-1943
Black Missionary, Educator
and Minister to Liberia

By David McBride

When President Warren G. Harding took office in January of 1921, the nation was in the grips of a general crisis in race relations and social order. Attendant with the domestic upheaval of the war years was the resetting of over one million Southern black migrants who had crowded into Northern tenements seeking social and economic opportunities. This mass migration had been triggered not only by the economic depression ravaging the Southern states, but also the anti-black lynching campaigns rampant in this region at this time.¹ In the heat of intense national debate over anti-lynching legislation and equal rights for blacks, Harding avowed a commitment to appoint more blacks to government service. Among the small number of blacks selected for federal positions were five for duty with the State Department. The highest appointment went to the Rev. Dr. Solomon Porter Hood, then one of the country's leading black ministers and educators, as well as a long time Republican loyalist.²

Evidently, few Pennsylvanians today know of Rev. Hood or that he was a product of antebellum nineteenth century Lancaster County. His name is absent from both the authoritative histories of the state or more specialized histories on the Pennsylvania blacks. Rev. Hood's life, in fact, spanned nearly a century and was as filled with travel and social accomplishment as it was with efforts to overcome racial inequality and hardship. In this brief biographical sketch, it is hoped that interest will be stimulated on this remarkable black Pennsylvanian.

Solomon P. Hood was born in Lancaster City on July 30, 1853. He was the third child of Rev. Lewis Price Hood and Matilda Catherine Hood. His family lived in the southeastern section of Lancaster where apparently the city's black residents were traditionally concentrated. Both Solomon's father and mother were originally from the South, the former Maryland and the latter, Delaware. Rev. Lewis Hood was one of the early pastors of the African Union Church on Charlotte and Lemon.³ As a young boy Solomon apparently attended the sole school for blacks in the area which was located in the rear of the African Methodist Episcopal Church on East Strawberry.⁴

Solomon lived in Lancaster until he was eleven at which time he and his parents moved to a small farm in Oxford, Chester County. With no school in the area, for five years hence the only education Solomon received was tutoring by his father and mother. At the age of sixteen he enrolled at nearby Lincoln University, the small Presbyterian-sponsored college for black youths.⁵

The strong character and drive of young Solomon was evident in his family relations as well as college work. While attending Lincoln he served as a minister of a small church three miles from the college. Walking the six miles roundtrip daily, Hood used the earnings from his pastorate to support his widowed mother and an invalid sister.⁶ Hood became one of Lincoln's top students and in 1873 was the senior selected to deliver the oration on classics at the commencement.⁷ Graduation exercises at Lincoln during the Civil War and Reconstruction decades were no ordinary affairs. An interracial audience of as many as 2,000 and from all over the nation usually attended anxious to see the products of America's oldest and most academically prestigious black college — a college popularly deemed the "black Princeton."⁸ In his address Hood made a strong plea for the study of classics. One local newspaperman found it particularly impressive. "While so many white youths decry Latin and Greek, (and) Harvard is . . . placing the classics on the list of elective studies," he commented, ". . . it is quite refreshing to hear a colored youth advocate their study."⁹

After graduating from Lincoln, Hood taught school in Middletown, Pennsylvania for four years. He then returned to Lincoln to attend the Theological Seminary and in 1880 graduated.¹⁰ Rev. Hood's inclination toward clerical work and the classics as a youth was an early sign of the moderate and highly moralistic approach to social and educational affairs which characterized his young adult and later life. For instance, at the time of his graduation from the Seminary program, Lincoln's administration and alumni were embroiled over the issue of admitting blacks to the school's trustees, administration and faculty. The alumni divided into "immediatists" and "gradualists" on this issue. While many prominent Lincoln alumni condemned all-white control of the University and desired immediate black appointments, Rev. Hood and certain other alumni chose to remain loyal to the institution's current administration believing that gradually the problem would be resolved. Among these loyalists, most of whom were teachers and ministers in mission schools of North and South Carolina,

Rev. Hood voluntarily functioned as somewhat of an alumni secretary and attempted to raise funds for the school.¹¹

During the Reconstruction period and the 1880's it was common for young educated blacks of the North to journey great distances to serve as teachers and ministers among the impoverished freedmen communities of the South, or even to the West Indies or Africa.¹² After serving for a short time in New York as an assistant to Dr. Henry Highland Garnet, Rev. Hood too traveled to the deep South to aid in educational work among blacks. In 1884 he took over the principalship of a black secondary school located in Beaufort, South Carolina. Under Rev. Hood's direction the school prospered and he organized the Beaufort Normal Academy under the auspices of the Freedmen's Board of the Presbyterian Church.¹³

Rev. Hood's educational work in South Carolina not only won him respect back in Pennsylvania throughout the Lincoln University community, but also among Northern whites concerned with the social elevation of Southern blacks. During the spring of 1887, a Northern newspaper, for instance, published a story about the superlative cultural activities at the Beaufort Academy. It pointed out that Rev. Hood was leading this institution which now had over 600 pupils attending daily.¹⁴

During his work at Beaufort, Rev. Hood also spent time attempting to sway the public to accept racial equality as a matter of Christian righteousness. In early June of 1887 the liberal Northern newspaper, the *Cleveland Gazette* reported that black Presbyterians were disgruntled with the General Assembly's statement that blacks could not be received into white churches. This policy would, the editors predicted, cause many through the country ". . . to leave a denomination in which the color prejudice is so marked as to eclipse Christianity."¹⁵ Rev. Hood responded in a letter to the editors that while he was glad the *Gazette* was alert to racial prejudice and allowed "no indignity to be offered the (black) race without an immediate rebuke," the issue was more complex than the newspaper had represented.¹⁶

Rev. Hood pointed out that the Presbyterian Church was not on the whole segregated. It had, in fact, divided on the slavery issue during the antebellum period into two distinct assemblies, one known as the "Northern" and the other the pro-slavery "Southern Assembly." It was the Northern branch, he emphasized, that had over the decades avowed equal rights for blacks. Rev. Hood revealed that blacks were admitted into Northern Presbyterian churches as were black Presbyterian ministers into Northern Church jurisdictions. Moreover, he mentioned that all of the Presbyterian-sponsored education efforts throughout needy black communities were conducted by the Northern Assembly, with \$118,000 applied for such projects in 1886 alone. Since the Southern Assembly was adamant about its segregationist policy, Rev. Hood predicted that the Presbyterian Church was destined to remain divided. At the same time, blacks of the South would continue to be barred from what he described as "a

Christian church founded by Him who is no respecter of persons, and hath made of one blood all nations who dwell upon the face of the earth.”¹⁷

Rev. Hood remained in Beaufort until 1888 when he became an official missionary for the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The following year he pressed on with his evangelical work, this time to foreign shores. During May of 1889 Rev. Hood sailed to Haiti.¹⁸ One of his letters to his cousin Sara Hood, daughter of Capt. Levi Hood of West Chester, was published by a West Chester newspaper. Rev. Hood expressed both his awe at the physical beauty of the island and the people as well as his despair over the nation’s social problems. “The country abounds in the most beautiful flowers and fruits,” he stated, “grass grows three and four feet high and in my yard are bananas and cocoanut trees and a cactus five feet high.”¹⁹

Rev. Hood found the nation intriguing because it was governed by blacks “from President down.” The island was ruled by a well-educated and refined elite of French training, but at the same time he observed a large “class of poor, half-naked” people. This impoverished sector, he discovered, even performed the real “African dances their fathers brought from the jungles.”²⁰ Each day held unpredictable events for Hood and his colleagues since during their stay they found the nation was in grips of a civil war.²¹

The A.M.E. Church was not able to sustain Rev. Hood’s mission in Haiti. He managed to become a clerk in the American Legation in Port-au-Prince and extended his stay on the island until 1893.²² During his residence in this area, Rev. Hood also traveled to the British West Indies. Upon his return Rev. Hood pursued studies at Princeton University, the Union Theological Seminary and New York University. Finally, in the late 1890’s Hood resettled in the Pennsylvania and New Jersey region. From 1896 to 1900 Hood pastored the Reading A.M.E. Church and was responsible for its prosperity during these years.^{23/24}

*I*n June of 1905 Rev. Hood returned to Lancaster (city) to participate in the eleventh annual convention of the Afro-American Republican League of Pennsylvania. This was an organization of black political leaders who sought to improve the political leverage of the state’s black Republican voters. This convention in which Rev. Hood served as minister and a keynote speaker was no unimportant affair for the local and statewide black community. It began with a ball held at the Maennercher Hall on the evening of June 13th. This social program had been sponsored by the Iona Whist Club, a group of leading blacks of Lancaster (city). The League members and the black social elite of Lancaster mingled in what local reporters described as a grand gathering. “The costumes of the ladies were very handsome,” one reviewer wrote, “and the majority of men were in full dress.”²⁵ Fifty couples joined in the promenade as a local orchestra furnished the music.²⁶

The following day formal convention business commenced. Fifty delegates

attended the morning sessions where they heard addresses on the "Plight Ahead for the Negro," delivered by Rev. Dr. W. R. Gullins and the "The Negro's Task" by P. S. Blackwell, both of Steelton. After the services adjourned at noon, the members proceeded to the gravesite of Thaddeus Stevens in the Shreiner's Cemetery. There a memorial service was held and a wreath laid upon the tomb. After the procession Rev. Hood opened the afternoon sessions with a special address on Thaddeus Stevens.²⁷

During the 1900's Rev. Hood's permanent residence was the Trenton and Atlantic City, New Jersey area. While in this state, Rev. Hood was active both in the A.M.E. ministry and teaching. He published a book on Christian clerical practices and also played a key role in the establishment of the Manuel Training and Industrial School for Colored Youth in Bordentown. Popularly known as the "Tuskegee of the North," this institution emphasized a vocational and socially conservative education as opposed to a liberal arts and progressively oriented one.²⁸ Rev. Hood's high standing in the black community as a religious leader and his conciliatory or "accommodationist" racial philosophy made him an attractive source of support sought by the predominantly white political establishment. In 1912 the New Jersey legislature appropriated \$20,000 to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation. Rev. Hood was selected director of this exhibition which was later held in Atlantic City.²⁹

The greatest political accomplishment of Rev. Hood came when he received the appointment as Minister Resident and Consul General to Liberia in 1921. While the national political climate we described earlier predisposed Harding to bring more blacks into executive government, it was the practical support of two powerful Republican senators from New Jersey, Walter E. Edge and Joseph Frelinghuser, that expedited Rev. Hood's appointment.³⁰ At the time of his appointment Rev. Hood was serving as a field representative of the Organization of Teachers of Colored Children in New Jersey.³¹

When Rev. Hood arrived at the American Legation in Monrovia, Liberia, this country was in the throes of a severe financial crisis. Not only was it overburdened by debt, but also both internal and European military threats, and shifts in the international market which deflated the demand for its exports. Rev. Hood nonetheless was pivotal in arranging a huge contract between the Firestone Rubber Company of America and the Liberian government which would stabilize this country.

Historic meetings took place in Liberia during the winter of 1923-1924. At that time W. E. B. DuBois, the prominent black scholar and social activist, was sent to Liberia in the capacity of Minister Plenipotentiary and Envoy Extraordinary, and personal representative of President Coolidge.³² Also, the Firestone Company sent a representative. These two men met with Rev. Hood to probe financial and industrial alternatives for the ailing nation. DuBois described the encounter as follows:

I stood in an Enchanted Forest at Christmas, 1923. On one side was a black man, United States Minister to Liberia. On the other hand was a white man representing the Firestone Tire and Rubber Company . . . We all saw (rubber) trees stretching endlessly about us and we all saw more than this. Minister Hood saw industry and revenue for Liberia for which he had worked faithfully for years (while) the expert saw a . . . challenge (to) the rubber monopoly of England.³³

After these and other delicate negotiations took place, Firestone eventually obtained a concession of 5,000,000 acres of land in Liberia. Moreover, the United States government provided a large loan to Liberia that had been previously refused by the Senate, and which enabled the weak country to consolidate its debts to a more manageable level.³⁴

In addition to contributing to the new economic stability of Liberia, Rev. Hood was also involved in improving higher education in this nation. During his diplomatic administration he served as a trustee at Monrovia College, Liberia's leading educational center.³⁵ After his return to America Rev. Hood's advice on the Liberian question still carried influence. Years before the outbreak of World War II, he warned the United States that Germany might try to seize Liberia and the nearby base of Dakar. Subsequently, it was publicized that black American troops had been transported to Liberia.³⁶

Although advanced in years, Rev. Hood maintained an alert mind and active involvement in scholarly and clerical life. After his service in Liberia, Rev. Hood took positions at small, deep South black colleges. First he served as the president of Campbell College in Mississippi. He held this post for four years. Then Rev. Hood moved on to Waco, Texas, where he became the Dean of Theology at Paul Quinn College.³⁷ For thirty years until his passing, Rev. Hood also was an editor of Sunday school publications for the A.M.E. Church. At the time of his death in New Jersey where he resided permanently for some years, he was the director of religious education for the A.M.E. Church in the New Jersey Conference.³⁸

Rev. Hood returned to Lincoln University for the commencement exercises of 1943 to mark the seventieth anniversary of his graduation. His wit delighted the audience and the President invited him to one day return.³⁹ But about five months later, on October 12th, he died at the age of ninety in the Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey home of his daughter, Mrs. Alice H. Phillips.⁴⁰ His passing drew national attention as both the black and white press recounted his past contributions to church, government and education.⁴¹

Even though college education was rarely available for black youths during the Reconstruction period, Rev. Hood had the intelligence and determination to obtain the highest level of classical and theological training. On the whole his racial politics were accommodative and conservative. He either lacked knowledge of or commitment to radical economic theories. Modern socialists would argue

that Hood erred in helping to tie Liberia's rich rubber resources to one large foreign firm rather than agitating to have the Liberian government, companies or unions control these resources.

Nonetheless, although Rev. Hood could have succeeded as a business professional or politician within the black community, he instead pursued a life of devotion to his church and the education of common black folk. Never in the limelight like his other contemporary black scholars and social protest leaders such as Henry M. Turner, DuBois, Garvey, Randolph or Francis Grinke, Rev. Hood still earned widespread veneration for the longevity of his service among the black American and Liberian communities. □

Notes

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2. Robert K. Murray, *The Harding Era: Warren G. Harding and His Administration* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1969), pp. 398-403.

3. *United States Federal Census Returns, 1850: Pennsylvania, Lancaster County*, Part 2, p. 361.

4. Franklin Ellis and Samuel Evans, *History of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania with Biographical Sketches of Many of its Pioneers and Prominent Men* (Philadelphia: Everts and Peck, 1883), p. 478; *Directory of Lancaster County Embracing A Full List of All The Adult Males and Heads of Families, 1869-1870* (Lancaster: Barnes and Pearsal, 1869), p. 464; *New York Times*, October 14, 1943.

5. *New York Times*, Ibid.

6. Ibid.

7. Horace Mann Bond, *Education For Freedom – A History of Lincoln University* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press for Lincoln University, 1976), p. 289.

8. Ibid, pp. 418-28, David McBride, "Africa's Elevation and Changing Racial Thought at Lincoln University; 1854-1886," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. LXII, No. 4 (October, 1977), pp. 363-76, passim.

9. *Oxford Press*, Chester County, Pennsylvania, June 26, 1873.

10. *New York Times*, October 14, 1943; Bond, *Education For Freedom*, p. 289.

11. Bond, *Education for Freedom*, pp. 331-38.

12. See for instance, Earle H. West, "The Harris Brothers: Black Northern Teachers in the Reconstruction South," *Journal of Negro History*, Vol. XLVIII No. 2 (Spring 1979), pp. 126-138; Benjamin Brawley; *A Social History of the American Negro*, (London: Collier-MacMillan, 1921), p. 267; Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma – The Negro Problem and Modern Democracy, Volume II* (1944-republished: New York: Pantheon Books, 1962), p. 887; McBride, "Africa's Elevation and Changing Racial Thought," passim.

13. *Cleveland (Ohio) Gazette*, April 23, 1887; *New York Times* October 14, 1943.

14. *Cleveland Gazette*, April 23, 1887.

15. Ibid., June 25, 1887.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.

18. West Chester (Pa.) *Daily Local News*, June 12, 1889; Charles S. Smith, *A History of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern 1922—reprinted Johnson Reprint Corp., N.Y., 1968), p. 339.

19. S. P. Hood to Sara Hood, Port-au-Prince, Haiti, West Indies, May 28, 1889; reprinted in *West Chester Daily Local News*, June 12, 1889.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Bond, *Education for Freedom*, p. 476. *New York Times*, October 14, 1943.

23. Joseph J. Boris (ed.) *A Biographical Dictionary of Notable Living Persons of Negro Descent In Who's Who In Colored America, Vol. 1, 1927* (New York: W. W. C. A. Corp, 1927), p. 95. *New York Times*, October 14, 1943. I am indebted to Reading local historian Richard G. Johnson for the A.M.E. Church information.

24. *The Lancaster Examiner*, June 17, 1905; *The Lancaster Daily Intelligencer*, June 15, 1905.

25. *The Lancaster Daily Intelligencer*, June 14, 1905.

26. Ibid.

27. Ibid.

28. Rev. Hood's book was entitled *Sanctified Dollars; How We Get Them, and Use Them* (Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern, 1908); *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 23, 1943; *New York Times*, October 14, 1943; *The Negro In New Jersey: Report of a Survey by the Interracial Committee of the New Jersey Conference of Social Work In Cooperation with the State Department of Institutions and Agencies* (Newark, 1932), p. 40; *Who's Who In Colored America, 1927*, p. 95.

29. *New York Times*, October 14, 1943.

30. Ibid.

31. *Crisis*, Vol. 23, No. 3 (January, 1922), p. 118.

32. W. E. B. DuBois, "Liberia and Rubber," *New Republic*, Vol. 44 (November 18, 1925), pp. 326-29; p. 326. Robert W. Joly, *A History of the African People* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1970), pp. 461-62.

33. DuBois, "Liberia and Rubber." p. 326.

34. Ibid., p. 329. W. E. B. DuBois, Editorial — "Africa" *Crisis*, Vol. 27, No. 6 (April, 1924); W. E. B. DuBois to Harvey S. Firestone, October 26, 1925, (Akron, Ohio), *The Correspondence of W. E. B. DuBois: Volume I Selection 1877-1934*, Herbert Aptheker, editor, (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1973), pp. 320-23.

35. *Who's Who In Colored America, 1927*, p. 95.

36. *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 23, 1943.

37. Ibid. *New York Times*, October 14, 1943.

38. Ibid.

39. Bond, *Education for Freedom*, p. 428.

40. *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 23, 1943; *New York Times*, October 14, 1943.

41. For instance, see footnote above. Also, the October 23rd, 1943 issue of the *Philadelphia Tribune* carried a front page article that memorialized Rev. Hood.

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