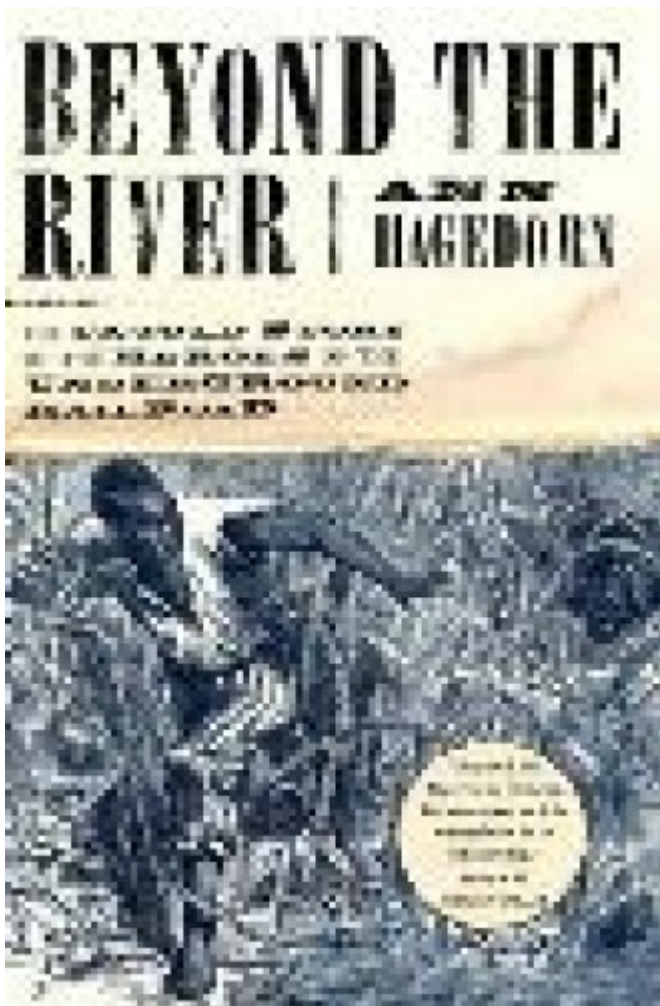


Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad

reviewed by [Valerie Ziegler](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

In Review



Beyond the River: The Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad

Ann Hagedorn

What was life like for Kentucky slaves who lived so close to the Ohio River that they could see freedom's shore? What distinctive anxieties plagued their masters? What special opportunities existed for local abolitionists?

Journalist Ann Hagedorn offers an engaging narrative of the life of John Rankin (1793-1886), a Presbyterian minister who lived high atop a hill in Ripley, Ohio, directly across the river from Maysville, Kentucky. Every night, Rankin hung a lantern outside his home so that escaped slaves could find their first stop on the underground railroad to Canada. Rankin adopted abolitionism for theological reasons and is a textbook model of courageous Christian social activism.

Hagedorn, who moved to Ripley to research and write this book, demonstrates that American slavery not only demeaned the slaves, it also assailed the liberties of free Americans. Slavery criminalized abolitionists and forced free states not simply to accede to slavery's existence and expansion but to collaborate with slave owners in returning escaped slaves to the South.

Though southern Presbyterians would in time defend slavery vigorously, antislavery sentiment was strong in the early 19th century. Rankin came to Ripley in 1821, fresh from a Kentucky pastorate in which he had routinely denounced slavery from the pulpit. Ripley was an important port city 50 miles southeast of Cincinnati, and Rankin not only pastored a Presbyterian church but also ran a biracial school, wrote frequent antislavery articles and pamphlets, worked a farm and fathered a large family. He enlisted the aid of family members and citizens in offering safe passage to escaped slaves. Rankin worked with many famous antislavery figures, such as William Lloyd Garrison, Theodore Dwight Weld and Harriet Beecher Stowe, and he offered refuge to a slave woman who crossed the river on ice floes—the model for the character Eliza in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

The price that Rankin and his friends paid for this work was high. Vigilantes from Kentucky raided Rankin's house; slaveholders set a price on his head so that he and his family lived in constant fear; pitched gun battles broke out more than once; and proslavery men kidnapped one of Rankin's co-workers and held him in a dank Maysville jail for months, ultimately ruining both his health and his finances. Everyone who aided escaped slaves was in violation of fugitive-slave laws and was subject to prosecution. In border hot spots like Ripley, abolitionists might well be

felled or kidnapped by self-appointed proslavery posses.

Rankin also endured religious disappointments. He had hoped to persuade Presbyterians to adopt abolitionism as a theological commitment, but even after the 1837 Old School–New School schism split the church nationally, abolitionists were never able to persuade New School Presbyterians to endorse abolitionism or to leave Presbyterianism to form an abolitionist church.

Nevertheless, Rankin and his family prevailed. They lived with their shotguns at hand—theirs was decidedly not a nonviolent form of abolitionism—and sent five sons and one grandson into the Union Army when the war came. All survived in good health. The family regarded that as a sign of God’s favor and did not complain when Rankin’s name faded into obscurity after the war.

As Americans face another war and Christians continue to struggle to live their faith in ways that bring justice to the oppressed, Hagedorn’s account of Christian abolitionism is timely reading indeed.