

Clements Library “Bookworm” talk, Friday, May 15, 2020, 10 a.m.

Panel: American Histories and the Struggle for Equality

Two or Three Books, and a Thomson Family History (Rex Hauser)

Most of us have romantic ideas about the underground railroad, and it has been fictionalized, I suppose, faced with a lack of eye-witness accounts, or written reports. There is the initial work by Siebert, of the late 1800s¹, and subsequent work that has added to it. Some people think that it was an actual network of trains. Some still don't know what a lot of motivation, hard work, strategy and brilliance that it required. Or, how much the desire for liberty affected huge swaths of the developing nation, in particular for those who were in bondage yet had built a lot of the country.

We as a nation are not enamored of causes with a ‘moral’ ring to them. Even in the academy, or as public intellectuals with little role in the public eye, for the most part it is traditional to avoid religion as a factor of history. Where are the public advocates to challenge pseudo-evangelical or internet revisions of our founding fathers’ and mothers’ beliefs? National advocates? But work on abolition

and antislavery in the 21c may help to rectify this situation.² Our history--- as much as possible--- must be told. See my footnotes and bibliography, where I mention the work of archaeologist Cheryl LaRoche. When we are able to include African America as part and parcel of American history, as a whole, then we have a good start on the big picture.

I choose the term *enslaved* over slave, because ‘slave’ perpetuates an identity imposed upon full and real human beings, based upon color and supposed physical traits decreed by perceived, negative differences between ‘races.’ The enslaved, when they could get free, risked everything for liberty, for their development and their families’, and in large part they formed the humble vanguard and motive force of the UGRR. They were assisted by whites and their brethren who were somewhat or somehow free, the “free people of color.” The railroad conductors were for the most part believers in a God of both liberty and justice (often AME or Baptist, often Quakers or Presbyterians). They were believers in the founding ideals of this country, as Cox attests: the link between our founding Revolution and our Union. They were not fashionable, nor were they tolerated, any more than those struggling against human trafficking today are fashionable (although tolerated). If all the country or the world were abolitionist

today, there would be no more trafficking. And Native and other women of color would be free to move about as they wished.³

When about ten years ago I came across Ann Hagedorn's Beyond the River,⁴ I was delighted to find so many parallels with my mother's family history!

Did I have history in my ancestral past? Nearly all my life the Thomson family tree had been pointed to with pride, with its five generations dating to 1700, yet hardly anyone had really read it, with its little annotated narratives and accomplishments in 1890 calligraphy. The story of the little orphan girl ---her parents recently deceased--- adopted by one of the greatest UGRR families in American history, the Rankins, in the late 1820s? Who knew that? [**Slide, close-up of fam. tree.**]

What I have found is a lot of history in my tree, indeed a time capsule of early American history. I have also found a spiritual connection to the foundation of my own, early work in civil rights, from the time that I was 15, and my support for black power. I can say that I “came by this honestly,” as someone pointed out. I began the multicultural part of my life by listening to and appreciating all kinds of people. I have lived in many places, though I'm a Michigander since 1963, with a bug for adventure. The journey continues as I appreciate different gifts that are bestowed on all by a Creator who plays no favorites. I think that “natural law” as

found in the nation's Declaration, and the theology of human rights that my ancestors possessed, were often *very* similar.

What does it mean now, for *all of us* to be heirs to an American Revolution that declared itself as a struggle of freedom against both tyranny and evil, as a deep struggle for human rights? In 2020, we have some work to do. For me, part of this is to know my Scottish ancestors' fight for survival--- in a tribal kinship often leading up to a national identity, Scottish, which would be subsumed by this new nation's creation, and by the Union. My part is tied to how Covenanters were horribly persecuted, on the moors of Scotland, as my Mother sought to impress upon me as an item of family history. Covenanter was a name for what persecution meant, wreaked upon true believers chased from their stone sanctuaries, and then from their fields, while the pastors were beheaded. In my research I saw how they believed in nationhood and church together as a Scottish oath and pledge, against many perceived 'sellouts' to the faith: the Scottish covenant.

I came to find out in my journey that in "Penn's Woods," one of the American colonies, in November of 1743, a certain Reverend Alexander Craighead of South Central Pennsylvania and his community of faith declared themselves free and independent of the Crown. They declared it with swords raised high, a sign of their serious oath, though in doing so they bucked up against the colonial-era

church. They were rebuked by their Synod, a governing body, and went into exile first at the Virginia frontier, and then in Mecklenberg County, North Carolina. Because their recent ancestors had lived roughly in Scotland and Northern Ireland—perhaps in search of isolated beauty--- in the Carolina mountains they flourished. There and in other parts of the ‘frontier,’ Scots-Irish folks would rise up readily in 1775 to throw off the Crown and its defenders, under new flags and new declarations. Their battle with Native America (allies of the British, or innocent neutrals) was to be terrible and prolonged, even well through the 1780s and early 1790s.⁵ This cultural, political and military war was to continue even as part of the second war for independence, the War of 1812.

Meanwhile in pre-Revolution Pennsylvania you found an odd blend of peaceable Quakers and German-speaking Anabaptists, at the East, and not-so-peaceable Scots-Irish at the West. The sylvan utopia of William Penn? --- not for these folk! They had fought for everything that they had, and didn’t care for paperwork, outside government, official money, or meddling in their life ways. They had been hired, in a way, to be a buffer between the peaceful utopia in the East, and the native people who might fight --- and did fight--- against encroachment. (They were aided in this by a Scottish Quaker governor, Logan, in the early 1700s).

Scottish culture might have involved some whisky (still embodied in the noun and adjective, ‘Scotch’), but moreover it was the spirit of a different sort that defined them (the Short Catechism and the Scriptures were found everywhere). They pined for a preacher to come and meet their needs, of baptisms, weddings, and more. They did hard work on the land, rarely improving its quality. They enjoyed camaraderie, binding themselves by family, song, and the great communion festivals that harked back to Catholic times in the Scottish homelands, before the Reformation of John Knox in the 1500s. (See Cane Ridge, America’s Pentecost, by Paul Conkin, about the 1801, multi-faith, somewhat integrated gathering in the northern Bluegrass which changed the face of Kentucky’s ‘wild’ early culture.⁶ My Thomsons were part of that, even as organizers, alongside of their sister church at Cane Ridge, both under the Rev. Barton Stone.)

In a nutshell, the *Scots-Irish* were those Scots who passed through Northern Ireland for however many years or decades, on their way across the pond (or who stayed behind in Ireland). Studies of them in America have focused on peculiarities of culture--- hillbillies, frontier (or later) soldiering, folk and country music, the Fox Fire books, humble class status, limited geographies, feuds, NASCAR, and troubles with Oxycontin. (See the authors J. D.Vance, Hillbilly Elegy; or James Webb, Born Fighting. How the Scots-Irish Shaped America.) But there are other sides to the enduring remnants of Scots culture, which have been

largely ignored, and sometimes not even written into histories of the frontier or the West (that ‘West’ which was different from what we know now as the West, which came after 1865). There are church ways that blended into the very definition of mainstream Protestantism, and middle class culture, among these remnants of Scottish culture.

These were the Scots Irish, in my experience, who helped propel the American Revolution, yet also remained true in devotion to its Cause, a liberty ordained by the Almighty, in order to free the enslaved and to aid them on their way north. I wonder how much of Appalachia was involved in this (parts of eastern Tennessee were pro-Union, for example). For a similar trajectory among African Americans, from the Revolution through to continued ideals of equality and freedom, one may look at a fine study of rural settlements throughout the old Northwest Territory, The Blood and Sinew of the Land by Anna-Lisa Cox.⁷

[Slide: Photo of the map from Cox, p. viii-iv.] Also, consult LaRoche, mentioned at the beginning. For a northward facing branch of the UGRR, involving both blacks and whites, we may examine Ann Hagedorn’s Beyond the River, a literary nonfiction account of the 1820s through 1850s, Ohio River Valley, focused on the Rev. John Rankin and his family, operating interracially in efforts toward freedom. There is another branch to the west of Ripley, Ohio, and northwest of Cincinnati--- that of Decatur Co. IN. We know of its involvement

with the Rankins, because of old ties of church and family. Attorney William Smith has researched much of this. I would like to posit that the Fugit Twp. Scots Irish who settled there, in the 1820s, decided to be near to an African American settlement which preceded it by a few years. They also employed people from the settlement, on their own farms. This network of blacks and whites had seen up close what slavery did to people (both to the ‘owned’ and corrupted ‘owner’), in northern Kentucky.⁸

My mother’s Thomsons had moved to Carlisle, there in northern Kentucky, in the early 1790s, from Westmoreland Co., PA. They were central to forming an antislavery church called Concord Presbyterian at Carlisle. They accompanied the Donnells and others in this move, following a common Scottish immigration pattern: follow your pastor and/or your church --- often driven by reasons of poverty and other crises. (American land and real estate patterns--- “sell high” where you are and “buy low” where you are going--- were already in place.)

There were many events of the 1780s and 90s, world-wide, which would have influenced the struggle for liberty: in 1780, Pennsylvania was the first state of the new nation to abolish slavery. In the Northwest, its Ordinance of 1787 did not allow slave-holding (see Cox for her exposition of its statutes), though this was circumvented through ‘indenture.’ The volatile French Revolution of many years

duration initially extended the hand of friendship to the Haitian Revolution of 1791. The United States were terrified of people of African descent rising up, though *they wanted nothing less* than that for which many of the ‘rest of us’ had risen, in 1776. And in 1794 Philadelphia, America was witness to its first abolition convention. In that year the national Presbyterian Church declared itself opposed to slavery. (Then in the 1830s, well, then they flip-flopped!)

The Thomsons had landed in Kentucky at a very opportune time, circa 1792, after scouting by their eldest, my fifth great-grandfather, William. Father James Thomson was aging (we would too, if we had joined the militia at age 48, in 1778) yet he would last another 25 years, until 1817. Mother Mary was fit and probably still in fine singing voice--- a remarkable feature, notes ‘the tree’--- at age 56, in 1792. Her youngest daughter (of the nine progeny) was 12 years old, and the three other children born in PA would thrive, marrying and farming in KY or in IN. One, John, would become a minister, trained under the Rev. Robt. Finley (most likely at the latter’s school attached to Cane Ridge Presbyterian Church, in the early 1790s).

Bringing in a bit of Tennessee history, Ann Hagedorn relates how the Rev. Rankin and his recently married Jean Lowry (m. January 2, 1816) were ousted from the Union Presbytery of TN in the summer of 1817. (QUOTE) “Time and

again, his visions of equality would far exceed the understanding of those far more powerful than he, including the leadership of his church.”⁹ (UNQUOTE) (31)

The Rankins were headed to a free state, they thought, in Ohio. But they were ‘waylaid,’ so to speak, by an aspiring congregation very avid to hear Mr. Rankin preach the antislavery gospel. The church of Thomsons and Donnells in Concord had, in 1807, along with twelve other churches, formed the Kentucky Abolition Society.¹⁰ **[Slide of KAS letter to national abolition headquarters in Philadelphia, 1809]** The church-based network called for--- beginning with abolition--- justice for those held in bondage; the education of black children; and for antislavery sermons and speeches.¹¹ (Hagedorn, 33) The KAS survived for about 14 years. In echo of what happened at the 1792 constitutional convention of Kentucky, the state was just not going to decide to become a free state. (I thoroughly recommend that you see the address to the Convention by the Rev. David Rice,¹² for its great insight into the dynamics of cultural conflict and his powerful psychological and economic analyses of prejudice. Maybe he should be called the “Apostle of Kentucky” for more than being the first Presbyterian preacher to evangelize in the state. His words were tragically prescient.)

Rankin's brother-in-law Samuel Lowry followed John and Jean to Kentucky (who arrived in 1817), says Hagedorn.¹³ Lowry relations are interwoven in the Thomson family tree compiled in 1890, even going back to Westmoreland Co., from which Thomsons and others had migrated to Kentucky. And Samuel Lowry would be the first preacher at Kingston, in Decatur Co. IN,¹⁴ almost as if John Rankin and he had plotted to create a broad network of anti-slavery in the new states where they settled.

Before the point of breaking with Kentucky in 1822, Rev. Rankin led Concord church for three years while it tried to educate enslaved children. The educators and children were horribly beaten for it. When I say breaking point, 1822 was a hinge in time, when both the abolition society dissolved, and much of Concord Church set out to leave the South forever. The Panic of 1819 had the Ohio Valley upset enough. Mother Thomson, Mary (Polly), was to die in 1822. The 1822 events of the Denmark Vesey uprising at Charleston, SC, brought new tensions everywhere over slavery and freedom. (If you read the details of this, and the aftermath, it was so horrible that it should make us hang our heads in shame.)

Researcher William Smith estimates that the migration of Concord's community to Decatur Co. Indiana was from 120 to 150 people, at the same time that Jean and John Rankin were setting up housekeeping in Ripley, Ohio. They

were positioned along the river on a high bluff, with a beacon lamp in their window. The pastor built up a fine church. The Rankins lived to the south of two major settlements of African Americans, the Gist settlements. **[Rankin slide]** There 950 formerly enslaved people had come several years earlier, manumitted and brought to live on former Virginia military land owned by the British entrepreneur, Samuel Gist, Hagedorn tells us. A major line, or lines, of the UGRR extended through this area and its towns—Sardinia, Red Oak, etc.--- to the north and west of Ripley.

A similar pattern was in place at Fugit Township in Indiana: beginning with the Snelling family, or before them, free blacks had settled along the Franklin and Decatur Co. borders before white abolitionists showed up.¹⁵ I would like to see more accounts of how people owned land, lived, farmed and worked to free their brethren and sisters, but Bone and Sinew shows how this happened in exemplary cases. **[Slide/s of map, repeat from above.]** Her stories of former Northwest Territory achievement are based on public records and histories of hundreds of families and communities. There was often a valiant struggle against terrifying threat and attack, both legal and physical. Her research shows that “raise yourself by your bootstraps” was *exemplified* by African American entrepreneurs long before the motto became current in the 20c, usually as an admonition and a proof-test. So many were persecuted for doing that, *exactly*, pulling themselves up, in

the early half of the 19c--- and especially where success was achieved. There were eyes on their land and the work they had done there--- covetous eyes afflicted by “prejudice.” There was fear and a lack of comprehension, a turning of blind eyes on the aspirations of others. (It got worse until 1850, and then even worse after 1850, when so many free communities had to flee.) And a surrounding climate of acquiescence was then (as it is now) a large part of the picture. There was *legislation* being passed by state legislatures, reflecting passive and active aggressions.

Ann Hagedorn narrates the struggle of the railroad—with characters like the Collinses and Campbells of Ripley; Dresser, Mahan, Lovejoy and Weld. There are skirmishes and incidents worth telling, though none showing such bravery and strategy as those of John P. Parker (active from 1845 in Ripley). His autobiography titled His Promised Land was ‘discovered’ at the Duke U. archives only a few decades ago, and published in 1996.¹⁶ **[Slide]**

Accelerating violence in the 1830s was met by *growth* of the UGRR, for example the Ohio Anti-Slavery Society (with 120 local groups by 1836, up from 25 the year before). In the pre-Civil War of the 40s and 50s, mobs and riots, “slave catching” and large bounties placed upon Rankin and on Parker, were the norm. Itinerant anti-slavery preaching was a big part of this. Rankin lost his pulpit, in

1846, but he grew a new church, the Free Presbyterian, which was explicitly anti-slavery.

Parker called the ‘Ripley group’ to which he belonged, “the intermediary between the spirit of the Revolutionary patriots and the fiery New England group” (i.e. that surrounding Wm. Lloyd Garrison beginning about 1830).¹⁷--- I have found this to be true too of abolition forces at Fugit Twp, in Decatur Co. IN, in (or nearby to) which area the bulk of my ancestors’ Concord Church had gone. Their parents may have left revolutionary comrades in the graveyard of their previous church, Old Salem Church in Westmoreland; but the children were going to flourish in a township which was side-by-side with the Snellings and others, all making new lives for themselves as well. One free black lady, Jane Speed, owned 80 acres in her own name, which was a remarkable thing for any woman of that time, and astounding for an African American woman.¹⁸ The vast majority of black families at Fugit Twp. had to flee north, after 1850, while the Scottish whites were able to remain. Still, the routes of the railroad remained open--- through Fort Wayne, then Toledo and then on to Detroit and often continuing into Canada. Smith says that the conductor Baptiste, operating out of Madison, Indiana, on the Ohio River and to the southwest of Decatur Co., was part of this network. I am convinced that aspects of comparative domestication in the 20th and 21st centuries

lead us to think of the protagonists of history as permanently settled (and maybe as unmoving) as we might be. Perhaps yet unwritten histories will attest to the great deal of movement back and forth, and back; up and down, and up again, across the map. Parker and Tubman are certainly examples of this.

Hagedorn shows the 1850 cholera and the Fugitive Slave Law that year as parallel, yet different: the latter was “a blight of a different kind . . . a plague of prejudice.” The new ‘law,’ practically made to be broken, was exactly what it pronounced: anyone accused of fleeing, and anyone accused and convicted of aiding them, could be enslaved or jailed. It made fugitives of virtually all black and brown people, and enabled situations for their enslavement. And so yes, it decreed that there would be fugitives, and slaves for the Cotton Power: its Fugitive Slave Law. Secrecy increased. Resentments grew. But aid to the railroad swelled as never before. Kingston Church and its community declared themselves as belonging to the Free Presbyterian church, in 1850, and there would be many ties between the Rankins and Hamiltons, McCoys and Donnells, alongside of Thomsons and others, over these years and in years to come.

Ripley, Ohio, **[Slide]** had to decide as a community to be neutral during the Civil War, because everybody knew what would happen *otherwise*: it would have seen armed battle between posses, and bloody ground between warring houses. Everyone should know by now, as the Scots knew then from their history, that

there are no wars quite like those with religious and ethnic backdrops to provide the fuel, and borders to fight over: wars over identity, and who ‘we’ are destined to be. The five Rankin boys (David Wilmot died of typhoid in 1827) would all go serve the Union in the war, and all would return whole. They had learned a lot about war, even without much use of their arms, during the 30 and more years before an officially named “Civil War” rent the country in two.

Their father? He died twenty years later, in 1886, having borne the scars of a martyr both for his country and his church. Others had died earlier in that struggle, and would see success perhaps only from the afterlife in which they believed. (Jean Rankin died in 1878, in Kansas.)

And the “many thousands gone,” to quote Ira Berlin’s book title, and the formerly enslaved? *Those who survived often prospered*, whether at Cass Co., in southwest Michigan, in Detroit or in nearby Ontario. The poignant stories of their return to Ripley, to offer thanks? we may think of them as a great testimony to the legacy of liberty: ours, theirs or anybody’s.

Anna-Lisa Cox asks poignantly of the African American farms and other freedom enterprises, “These hundreds of settlements, these thousands of people . . . rose on the land they worked and loved--- they all deserve recognition and remembrance. (They) helped preserve liberty and equality, defending and growing

it on America's first free frontier, and they should never be forgotten. ... They were there. Some still are.”¹⁹

There may not be much that we can say, or do, as an encore. Except in the work which we ourselves do--- in the history that we make, and the histories that we may seek to revive and tell, in order to show our very truest and surest of foundations. [**Slide of Rankins**]

Footnotes

- 1) Wilbur Siebert, The Underground Railroad from Slavery to Freedom (New York: MacMillan, 1898)
- 2) Cheryl Janifer LaRoche, Free Black Communities and the Underground Railroad. The Geography of Resistance (U. of Illinois Press: 2014)
- 3) National Underground Freedom Center, freedomcenter.org. 50 E. Freedom Way, Cincinnati, OH 45202; and David Blight, ed. Passages to Freedom: The Underground Railroad in History and Memory (Smithsonian Press, 2004). This is a companion book for the opening of the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati.
- 4) Ann Hagedorn, Beyond the River, the Untold Story of the Heroes of the Underground Railroad. (New York, Simon and Schuster, 2002; paperback edition, 2004).
- 5) Allan Eckert, That Dark and Bloody River (New York: Bantam, 1995). This work is based on the research shown in footnotes, amply annotated, but it reads (very similar to Hagedorn's) like "narrative non-fiction," with both feelings and real life written into what might otherwise be dry history.
- 6) Paul Conkin, Cane Ridge, America's Pentecost (Madison: U of Wisconsin Press, 1990).
- 7) Anna-Lisa Cox, The Bone and Sinew of the Land (New York: Public Affairs, Hachette, 2018).
- 8) For a broad view of economics--- meaning, what was *done* to African-descent people in the name of it--- in this country, see Edward Baptist, The Half Has Never Been Told. Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism (New York: Basic Books, 2014; paperback 2016).
- 9) Hagedorn, 31.
- 10) Letter in files of the Pennsylvania Historical Society, Phila. PA: "The acting Committee of the Kentucky abolition society / Met at Elder William B - - -clay, Franklin County-- / To the president of Philla. (sic) Abolition society / Sendeth greeting" . . . from "Carter Tarrant, Pres't" of the Kentucky Abolition Society, May 27, 1809. . . "sent to the house of Doctor W. Rodgers."
- 11) Hagedorn, 33.
- 12) Rev. David Rice, "Slavery Inconsistent with Justice and Good Policy," address to the Kentucky Constitutional Convention, 1792, in pamphlet form. (Philadelphia: 1792; London: Gurney, 1793). "Thus reducing men is an

indignity, a degradation to our own nature.” (5) “National vices will be punished with national calamities.” (24)

- 13) Hagedorn, 34.
- 14) William O. Smith, “Kingston Church—Speech Notes,” pp. 3, 9, and 12. Samuel Lowry was seven years at Kingston, 1825-1832. Email received by Rex Hauser on 5/10/2020, 13 pp.
- 15) Cox, 255-256, n. 25. An account of the black settlement may go back much earlier than 1822, as you may see by googling Indiana History, Early Black Settlements, Decatur County.
- 16) John P. Parker (ed. Stuart Seely Sprague), His Promised Land. The Autobiography of John P. Parker, Former Slave and Conductor on the Underground Railroad (New York: Norton, 1996).
- 17) Ibid., and Parker quoted in Hagedorn, 233.
- 18) Telephone conversation with Wm. O Smith, May 9, 2020.

Additional bibliography:

David Blight, Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2019).

Danjuma Gibson, Frederick Douglass, a Psychobiography (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

James G. Leyburn, The Scotch-Irish. A Social History (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1962).

Toni Morrison (Ed. Carolyn C. Denard), What Moves at the Margin. Selected Nonfiction (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2008).

Toni Morrison (ed. David Carrasco, et al), Goodness and the Literary Imagination (Charlottesville: U of Virginia Press, 2019).

Slides. Following along the text of the talk, by page number, here are the slide suggestions:

Intro: Photo of Rex with the family tree behind, book covers of Hagedorn and Cox books, cover of John P. Parker autobiography.

P. 3, top, where footnote 4--- Cover of Beyond the River, Hagedorn.

P. 3, top--- Rex with the family tree

P. 3, middle--- close up of tree for Almira Jane McConaughy.

p. 7, middle--- Map in two pages from Cox, Bone and Sinew.

P. 10, middle --- section of Kentucky Abolition Society letter, 1809.

P. 11, top--- “Thomson’s” file slide

P. 12, top--- the Rankin couple, John and Jean, photo from findagrave.com.

p. 12, bottom--- Two slides from Cox, the legend (viii) and the two-page map (viii-ix). These were nicely combined by Clements.

p. 13, Parker’s book cover.

p. 15, bottom--- Clements slide of Ripley city plan.

p. 17, John and Jean Rankin photo. Here it would have been good to show the photo from Hagedorn of the grown-up boys and others.

Misc. notes on slides:

Photo of Thomson (1890) family tree, with detail of the dates for the orphan girl taken in by Jean and John Rankin, 1827. Also see Hagedorn, 206 on the orphaned niece.

Photo of map showing African American settlement of the Midwest, from Cox, viii-ix.

Kentucky Abolition Society letter from Pres. Tarrant, May 27, 1809. PA Historical Soc.

Photo of **Jean and John Rankin** available at findagrave.com, Memorial IDs are 25537133 and 8760833.

Covers of books by Hagedorn and Cox.

Cover of autobiography of John P. Parker, His Promised Land.