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### Benjamin Hanby - A Gift of Song

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# Benjamin Hanby

*A Gift of Song*



Edited by  
JANE W. BRADFORD

Illustrations by  
DAVID MANKINS

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*Adapted from the book*  
**CHOOSE YOU THIS DAY\***

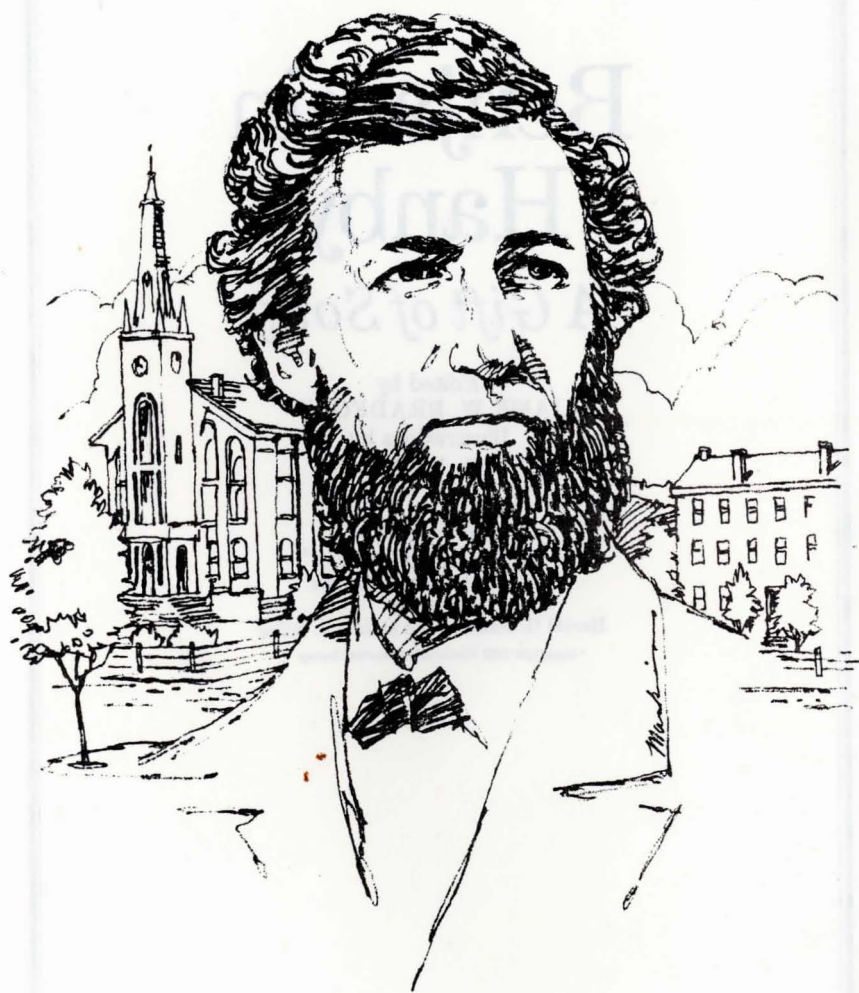
*by Dacia Custer Shoemaker*

*Edited by*

Harold B. Hancock and Millard J. Miller

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Benjamin Russell Hanby  
1833-1867

## BENJAMIN HANBY

### A GIFT OF SONG



Benjamin Russell Hanby was born July 22, 1833, in Rushville, Ohio. He was the oldest of eight children born to William and Ann Hanby.

William Hanby was a saddle and harness maker and he became a minister and circuit rider of the United Brethren Church. He edited and published the church newspaper called *The Religious Telescope*. Later, he was made a bishop of the United Brethren Church, which united with the Methodists to form the United Methodist Church.

When Ben was a young boy, he helped his father by folding, delivering and collecting money for the newspaper. In those days, people lived far apart and Ben rode horseback through the countryside delivering the papers. To pass the time, he would make up songs and sing loudly as he rode through the woods and fields of southern Ohio. When he was fourteen years old he



bought a flute with money he earned from his paper route. It was his first musical instrument.

At sixteen, Ben Hanby left his home in Rushville to enter the new Otterbein University in Westerville, Ohio, which his father had helped to found. College days for Ben were divided between his college classes and teaching school to help pay his expenses. Because of this it took him almost nine years to graduate.

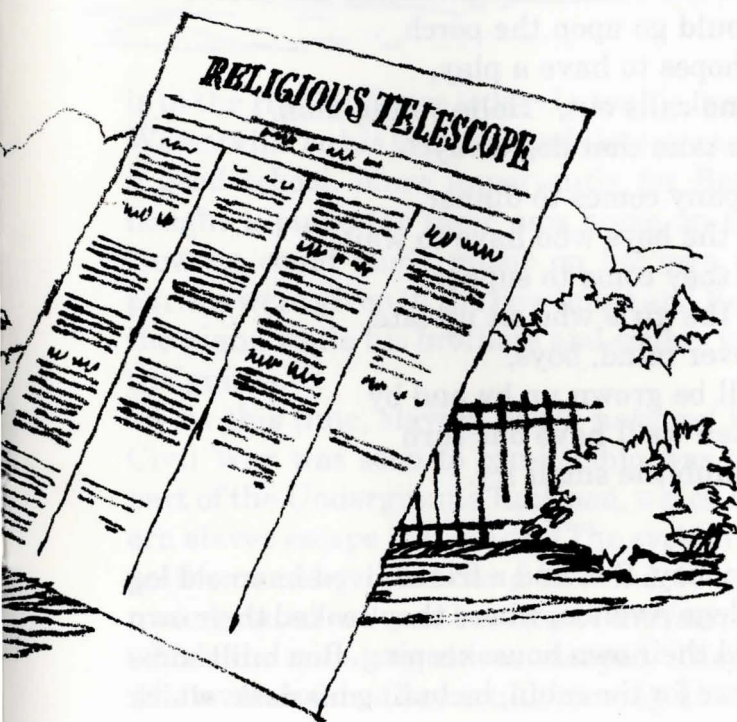
When he entered Otterbein, Ben did not have any formal musical training. He played the flute by "ear" and developed a strong baritone voice. By this time, his love of music was so great he traveled three miles to Central College to practice on the only the piano in the



area. That piano can be seen today in the Hanby House in Westerville.

As a school teacher, Ben did not agree with the strict methods and discipline of the day. He wanted to make school a happy experience for children. There was much singing and story telling in his classes. He even set the multiplication tables to music. Ben read and studied all he could about the new Infant Schools, the forerunner of the present day kindergarten or primary schools.

While he was at Otterbein, Ben was a leader in many student activities, including editing a student newspaper. He also conducted an informal Infant School for Westerville children. In the summertime, they would



meet under the trees on the campus, and in the winter-time, they would gather in his room. He would recite poems, sing songs, and tell stories to his delighted listeners.

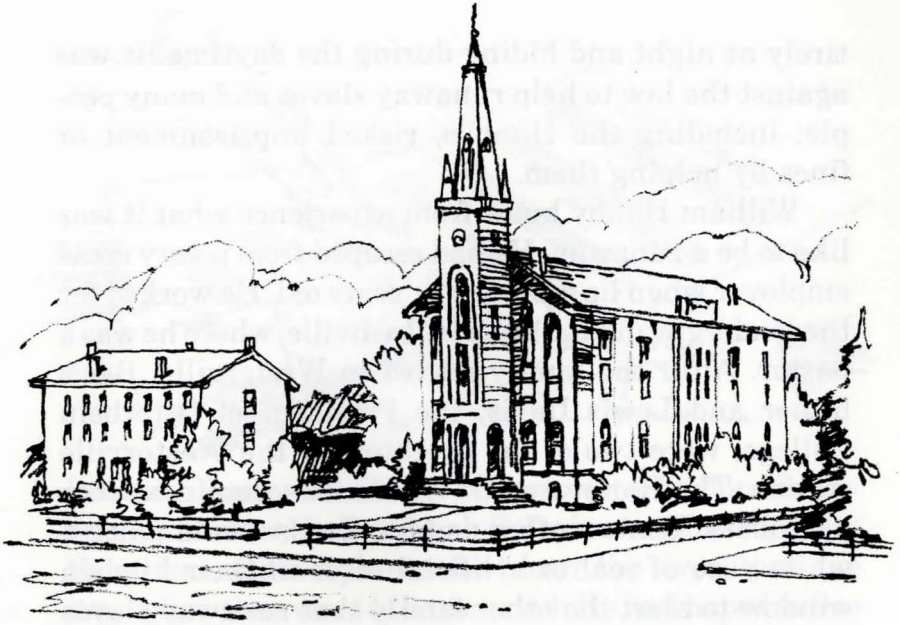
One poem he wrote for his young students was about his brother, Willie, who, when a child, did not like all the childhood do's and don'ts:

### THE BOY'S COMPLAINT

My sister has her rags and dolls  
    strewn all about the floor,  
While old dog, Towser,  
    dare not stick his head inside the door!  
If I should go upon the porch  
    in hopes to have a play,  
Someone calls out, "Hello young man,  
    you take that dog away!"  
If company comes to dinner,  
    'tis the boys who have to wait.  
And if they come to supper,  
    'tis the girls who sit up late.  
But never mind, boys,  
    we'll be grown up by and by  
And then we'll have our turn  
    to snub the small fry.

To save money, Ben and a friend lived in an old log cabin on College Avenue, where they cooked their own meals and did their own housekeeping. Ben built some of the furniture for the cabin, including his desk, which





is in the Hanby House today. Later his family moved to Westerville so his brothers and sisters would be close to a good school. More importantly for Ben, his father bought a piano for their new home on Grove Street. Now he could study music on his own piano. Many parties were given in the new home and Ben would play the piano while his brothers and sisters would sing for the guests.

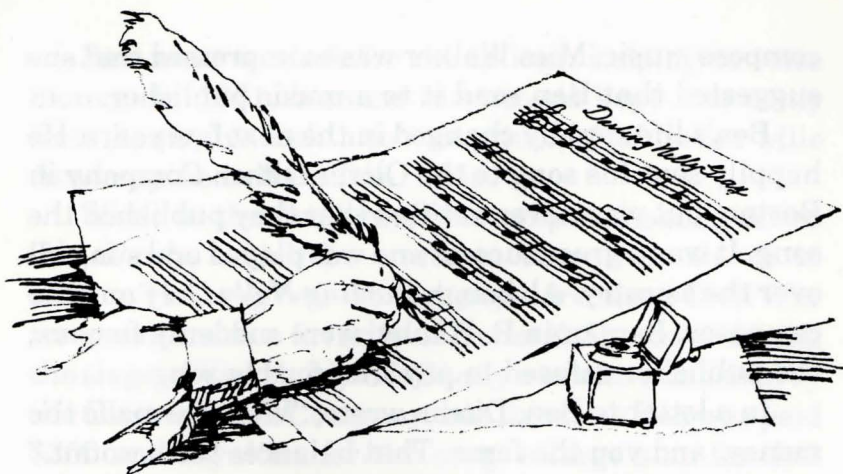
At this time, slavery was a national issue and the Civil War was soon to come. Ohio was an important part of the Underground Railroad, which helped southern slaves escape to Canada. (The system was actually neither underground nor a railroad. It was called the underground railroad because of the fast, secret way in which the runaway slaves escaped. They traveled by whatever means they could, moving about almost en-

tirely at night and hiding during the daytime.)It was against the law to help runaway slaves and many people, including the Hanbys, risked imprisonment or fines by helping them.

William Hanby knew from experience what it was like to be a runaway. He had escaped from a very cruel employer when he was twenty years old. He worked for the Underground Railroad in Rushville, where he was a pastor. After the family moved to Westerville, Ben's father and Lewis Davis, the President of Otterbein College, were two of the operators of the Westerville station. The Hanby and Davis families were next door neighbors. Ben's mother or Mrs. Davis would place a white vase of real or artificial roses in their kitchen window to alert the other family that runaway slaves were expected and they should get ready to feed and hide them. The number of roses in the vase indicated how many runaways were coming. The escaping slaves were hidden in the Hanby saddle and harness shop and guarded by a large dog named Towser.

Late at night, when the town was quiet, Ben would walk up and down College Avenue to be sure it was safe to move the runaways. When he was sure no one was about, they would be led up a back alley to a small farm implement factory on Knox Street. They would be hidden in a wagon under a load of hay and rakes and taken to the next station on the Underground Railroad in Mt. Vernon, Ohio.

Ben's father once told him a sad story of the romance and death of a young slave named Joseph Selby. In 1842 the Hanbys took care of Selby, who was very ill, at their



home in Rushville. He told his story to Bishop Hanby and Dr. Simon Hyde. Joseph Selby's sweetheart, Nelly Gray, was sold to a plantation "down the river," just one day before they were to be married. He had hoped to flee to Canada to earn enough money to buy her freedom, but he died at the Hanby home before realizing his dream. Selby is buried in the Rushville village cemetery.

Several years later, in 1850, Ben wrote the first verse and the melody of a song which became known as *Darling Nelly Gray*. In 1855, Ben saw a slave auction while he was traveling in Kentucky for Otterbein College. The sight made him very sad and he remembered the story of Nelly Gray. He added four verses and a second chorus to the earlier song, finishing it in 1856.

A party was given in the Hanby home in honor of Ben's music teacher, Cornelia Walker. Ben's brothers and sister sang the new song accompanied by Ben playing the piano. He dedicated the song *Darling Nelly Gray*, to Miss Walker, who had taught him how to

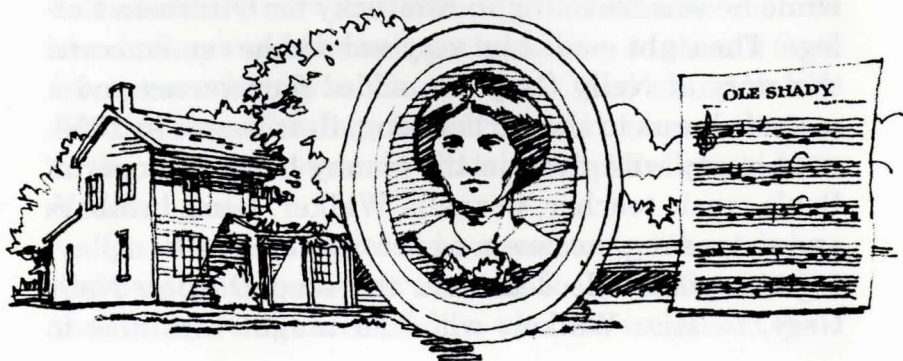


compose music. Miss Walker was so impressed that she suggested that Ben send it to a music publisher.

Ben's life rapidly changed in the next few years. He happily sent his song to the Oliver Ditson Company in Boston, but was never notified that they published the song. It was a great success and was played and sung all over the country. Although *Darling Nelly Grey* and the composer, Benjamin R. Hanby, were suddenly famous, the publisher refused to pay him for his song.

In a letter to Ben, Ditson wrote, "We have made the money, and you the fame. That balances the account." Finally after Ben took legal action, he received \$100 for the song, and twelve free copies! Out of the money he received he had to pay \$50 to his attorney.

Miss Walker had also helped Ben meet secretly with his college sweetheart, Kate Winter. Meetings between the two were strictly forbidden by Kate's mother, who had higher ambitions for her daughter than to marry a "poor preacher." Kate had graduated from Otterbein in 1857. The couple overcame the Winter family objections and were married in 1858, the day after Ben graduated from Otterbein.





Ben went to work for the college, helping to raise money. In 1861, because his travels kept him away from home, he took a job as principal of Seven Mile Academy near Hamilton, Ohio.

While at the Academy, Ben composed a song called *Ole Shady*, which he wrote to encourage slaves to escape. The song became very popular among Civil War troops and was a favorite of General Sherman during the siege of Vicksburg. *Ole Shady* was also published by the Oliver Ditson Company, but this time Ben was paid \$300 and royalties for the song, a large sum for that time. However, a pro-slavery trustee of the Academy did not like the anti-slavery content of the song and Ben was asked to resign his job.

Ben was appointed pastor of a United Brethren church in the small town of Lewisburg in western Ohio in 1862. By this time he had composed many songs and hymns and worked part-time for a music publisher in Cincinnati. He made his church bright and cheerful with his music. The children and young people were attracted and filled the church every week. He was not so popular with some of the older and more conservative members who thought that musical instruments were "tools-of-the devil"! Opposition to instrumental music in churches was not unusual for that day. The year before, the United Brethren General Conference prohibited the use of choirs in their churches and later extended that to include instrumental music. The criticism continued until Ben was forced to resign.

Ben continued to work for the Cincinnati publisher and was appointed pastor of the church in New Paris,

Ohio, near the Indiana border. As before, he used music and shorter sermons to attract young people to his services. Again he was opposed by the conservative members, so, he left his pulpit and resigned from the ministry.

By now Ben and Kate had two children, a son, Brainerd, and Minnehaha, named after the heroine of Longfellow's poem, *Hiawatha*. When his daughter cried, sometimes Ben would call her Minneboo-hoo! With his growing family to support, he renovated an old store room in New Paris and opened a singing school for children and young people. The community called it the "Singing Church" and it was well attended by children and their parents. Ben could not afford to buy music for his school so he wrote his own and made them into songbooks.

Despite the popularity of the school, it provided very little income. Ben was frequently ill, but even so, he wrote what has become his most popular song, a Christmas song called *Up On The Housetop*. It is still sung by children around the world.

George Root of the music publishing firm of Root and Cady in Chicago heard of the "Singing Church" and offered Ben a position as head of the children's music division. The offer was quickly accepted and, in 1865, Ben and his family moved to Chicago. He organized singing schools and children's concerts throughout the Mid-West, using Root and Cady instruments and music. He worked with some of the best known music-evangelists of the time. Ben composed many new songs and hymns and co-authored a quarterly publication





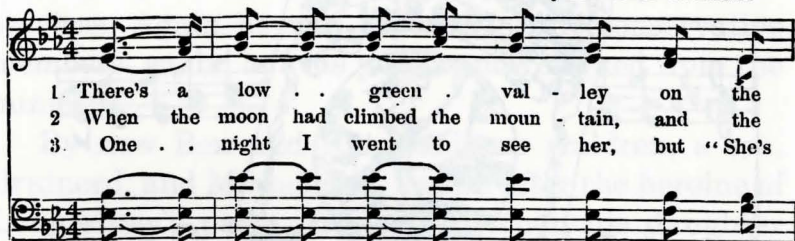
called *Our Song Birds*. His health improved and he was quoted as saying that his first year in Chicago was filled with "boundless and quite inexpressible joy." In 1867 he was to receive a salary of \$3000 a year plus royalties on all his songs. His future was no longer in doubt.

While on a lecture tour through Wisconsin in the summer of 1866 he caught a severe cold and became ill. While recuperating, he continued to write and composed his most beautiful hymn, *Who Is He In Yonder Stall?*. It has appeared in over one hundred hymnals in the United States and England. Ben never recovered from that illness and he died the following spring on March 16, 1867, at the age of thirty-three.

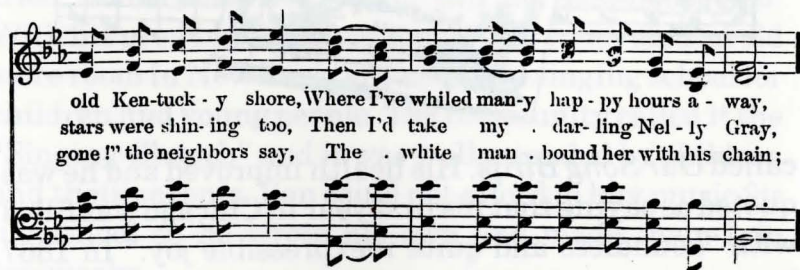
He was buried in the Otterbein Cemetery, Westerville, Ohio, in a lot with his parents. A simple stone shaft marks his grave, with an inscription from one of his songs, "Over the silent sea' passed Benjamin R. Hanby." He had returned to the small town to which he had given the gift of song.

# DARLING NELLY GRAY

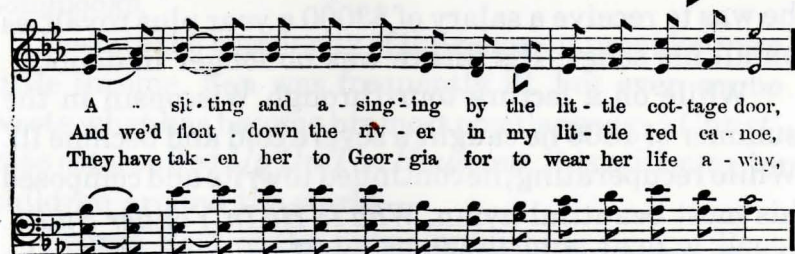
Words and music by BENJAMIN R. HANBY



1. There's a low . . green . val - ley on the  
 2. When the moon had climbed the moun - tain, and the  
 3. One . . night I went to see her, but "She's



old Ken-tuck - y shore, Where I've whiled man - y hap - py hours a - way,  
 stars were shin - ing too, Then I'd take my . dar - ling Nel - ly Gray,  
 gone!" the neighbors say, The . white man . bound her with his chain;



A . sit - ting and a - sing - ing by the lit - tle cot - tage door,  
 And we'd float . down the riv - er in my lit - tle red ca - noe,  
 They have tak - en her to Geor - gia for to wear her life a - way,

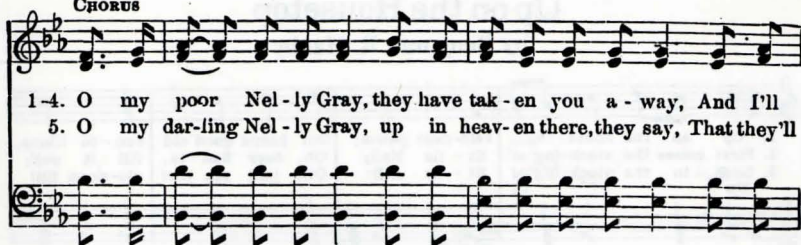


Where . lived my . . dar - ling Nel - ly Gray.  
 While my ban - jo . . sweet - ly I would play.  
 As she toils in the cot - ton and the cane.

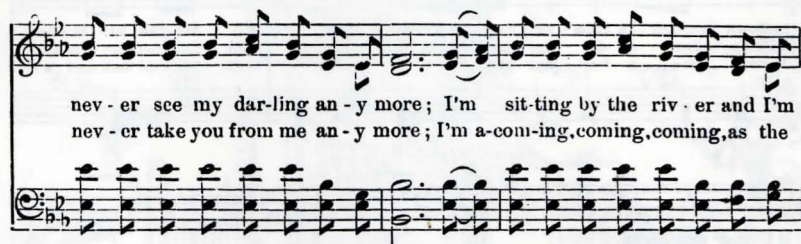
As original owners of the copyright of the song "Darling Nelly Gray" we certify the above to be a reproduction of the song as published in 1856 and which was entered according to Act of Congress, in the year 1856, by Oliver Ditson, in the Clerk's Office of the District Court of Massachusetts - OLIVER DITSON COMPANY. Boston, Mass., June 1924.



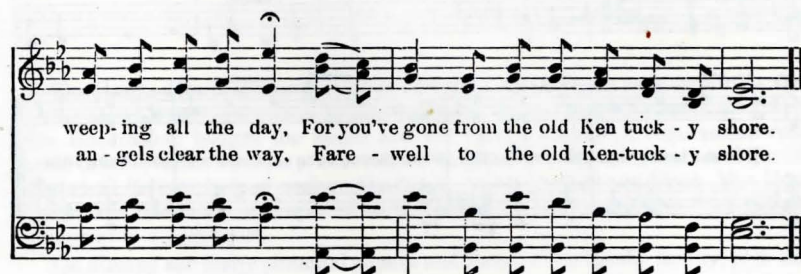
CHORUS



1-4. O my poor Nel - ly Gray, they have tak - en you a - way, And I'll  
5. O my dar - ling Nel - ly Gray, up in heav - en there, they say, That they'll



nev - er see my dar - ling an - y more; I'm sit - ting by the riv - er and I'm  
nev - er take you from me an - y more; I'm a - com - ing, coming, coming, as the



weep - ing all the day, For you've gone from the old Ken tuck - y shore.  
an - gels clear the way, Fare - well to the old Ken - tuck - y shore.

4 My canoe is under water and my banjo is unstrung,  
I'm tired of living any more;  
My eyes shall look downward and my song shall be unsung  
While I stay on the old Kentucky shore.

5 My eyes are getting blinded and I cannot see my way;  
Hark! there's somebody knocking at the door.  
Oh, I hear the angels calling, and I see my Nelly Gray,  
Farewell to the old Kentucky shore.

# Up on the Housetop

by Benjamin R. Hanby

1. Up on the house-top— rein-deer pause; Out jumps good old San-ta Claus,  
 2. First comes the stock-ing of lit-tle Nell; Oh, dear San-ta, fill it well;  
 3. Look in the stock-ing of lit-tle Bill; Oh, just see that glo-rious fill!

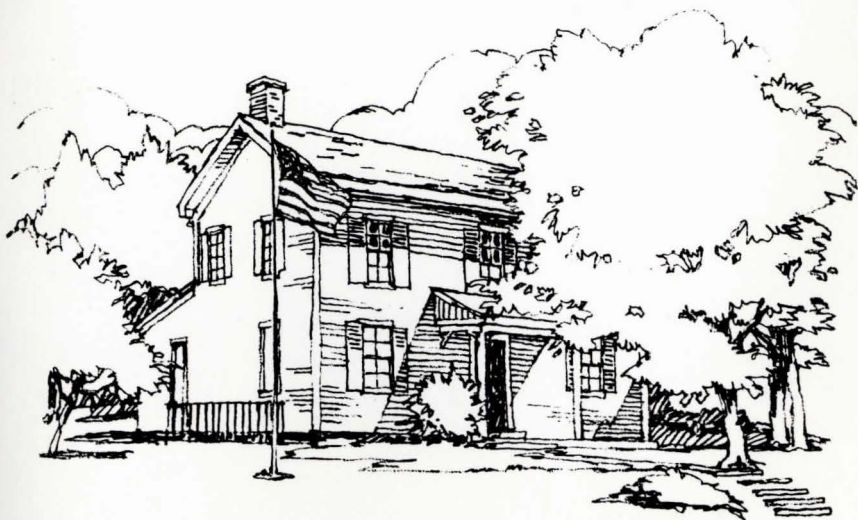
*mp*

(1) Down through the chim-ney with lots of toys, All for the lit-tle ones'  
 (2) Give her a dol-ly that laughs and cries, One that can o-pen and  
 (3) Here is a ham-mer and lots of tacks, Whis-tle and ball and a

## Chorus

(1) Christ-mas joys. Ho, ho, ho, who would-n't go? Ho, ho, ho, who would-n't go?—  
 (2) shut its eyes. Ho, ho, ho, who would-n't go? Ho, ho, ho, who would-n't go?—  
 (3) set of jacks. Ho, ho, ho, who would-n't go? Ho, ho, ho, who would-n't go?—

Up on the house-top, click, click, click, Down through the chim-ney with good Saint Nick.



The Hanby House is now located at 160 West Main Street in Westerville, Ohio. It was saved from destruction by the efforts of Dacia Custer Shoemaker. In 1926 Mrs. Shoemaker bought the house and the Hanby Memorial Association raised funds to have it moved to its present location. The federal government and the Ohio Historical Society helped restore the house to its original condition. The Hanby House was dedicated and opened to the public in 1937 as Ohio's first and only memorial to a composer.

On display are many personal papers and items of the Hanby family, plus Ben's first musical instrument, early copies of Ben's music, and other items of interest.

Hanby House is owned by the Ohio Historical Society and maintained and operated by the Westerville Historical Society. From May 1 to September 30, Hanby House is open from 10:00AM to 4:00PM on Saturdays and 1:00PM to 5:00PM on Sundays. Arrangements may be made for other tour appointments. There is a small admission charge.

The Westerville Public Library gratefully acknowledges the cooperation of the Westerville Historical Society in the development of this booklet. Special thanks are due to Marilyn Gale, Dr. Harold Hancock, and Dr. Millard J. Miller for their thoughtful reading and comments on the Ben Hanby story.

Recognizing the importance of Ben Hanby in the Westerville heritage, the Westerville Public Library has prepared and made available a 17-minute slide/cassette program. The Audio-Visual Department of the Library can provide further information and reservations for the use of the show. Please call (614) 882-5225.



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