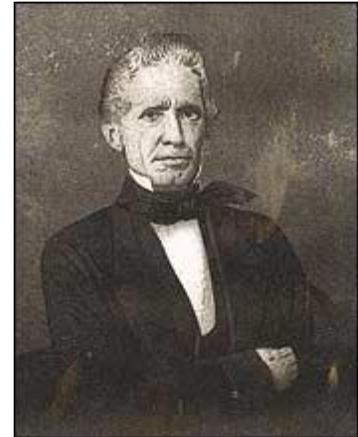


# Escape on the Pearl

By Mary Kay Ricks

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Daniel Drayton orchestrated the escape attempt by 77 D.C.-area slaves. (The Granger Collection)

One hundred and fifty years ago today, the capital was still reeling from one of the most bitter and divisive events in its short history -- the daring slave escape and subsequent "Washington Riot" that inflamed partisans on both sides of the abolitionist debate and eventually helped to change the nation's conscience. On the evening of April 15, 1848, 77 slaves quietly slipped away from their quarters in Washington City, Georgetown and Alexandria. In a light rain, they walked through the unpaved and mostly unlit streets of Washington to the Pearl, a 54-ton, bay-craft schooner waiting in the Potomac River.

The runaways -- old and young, male and female, mothers with children -- had worked in homes, boardinghouses and hotels. Most were enslaved descendants of Africans brought to the Tidewater area on Liverpool slave ships to be sold to tobacco planters in Maryland and Virginia.

According to Josephine Pacheco, professor emeritus of history at George Mason University, former first lady Dolley Madison owned one slave heading for the Pearl. Abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison claimed that another worked in President James K. Polk's White House.



(The Post)

Two days before departure, three white men brought the Pearl to a secluded spot near the Seventh Street wharf. Daniel Drayton, who chartered the small schooner for \$100, later wrote in his memoirs that he always believed in the nobility of the cause although he was paid for his services.

Drayton was in charge of arranging for the "cargo." Capt. Edward Sayres, owner of the Pearl, was in charge of the ship and its one-man crew, a young sailor and cook named Chester English.

To reach freedom, the Pearl would have to travel undetected more than 100 miles down the Potomac to the Chesapeake Bay, then another 120 miles up the bay, across the Delaware Canal and along the Delaware River to New Jersey, a free state.

The ship arrived as Washington was ablaze with bonfires and streets were crammed with crowds acclaiming the new democratic revolution in France and across Europe. Sayres and English joined the celebrations in Lafayette Park and listened to the impassioned speeches.

In one, Sen. Henry S. Foote of Mississippi, an unapologetic slave owner, proclaimed that the events in France held out "to the whole family of man a bright promise of the universal establishment of civil and religious liberty."

April 1848 was an exhilarating time. In Europe, revolution also had erupted in Germany, Austria and Italy. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels had just completed a pamphlet titled *The Communist Manifesto*. Activists were arranging the first women's rights convention, which would be held three months later in upstate New York. And in Washington, the principles of freedom again were clashing with the reality of slavery, moving the nation toward civil war.

### **Spreading the Word**

Small clusters of blacks, free and enslaved, rimmed the crowd. Three men, key figures in the Pearl escape plan, slipped away to inform trusted friends that a freedom ship would be ready for boarding on Saturday evening.

One was Paul Jennings, Sen. Daniel Webster's butler. The legendary orator may have met Jennings in the White House, where he had been brought as a valet for his owner, President James Madison, who had held office from 1809-17 and died in 1836. Years later, his widow, Dolley, returned to Washington with Jennings. By 1847, her financial affairs were in such disorder that she sold Jennings to an agent for \$200.

Webster later purchased Jennings for \$120 and freed him on condition that Jennings would repay the purchase price at the rate of \$8 a month. On the day that Jennings stood in the park, he still owed Webster a considerable sum.

Jennings had open access to Webster's library and traveled north with him frequently. He apparently met Capt. Drayton during a visit to Philadelphia.

The second black conspirator was Daniel Bell, who was the free husband of a slave family and is credited with financing the venture to bring his wife and children to freedom. Bell apparently was engaged in litigation over his family's legal status but feared ultimately losing the case or running out of money.

Such cases often went to court. Heirs often contested wills that diminished their inheritance by freeing slaves.

The third man was a "hired-out" slave named Samuel Edmonson, whose family plays the central role in this story. He and five of his 13 brothers and sisters planned to board the Pearl.

They were the children of Paul and Amelia Edmonson, a free black man and his wife, a slave. Under law, all 14 of the couple's children were slaves. When they reached the appropriate age, their Maryland owner hired them out in Washington as servants, laborers and skilled workers.

This practice grew largely out of the collapse of the formerly labor-intensive tobacco plantation system, leaving planters with too many slaves. Those not sold south serviced homes and hotels.

### Revelations and Goodbyes

On Saturday, the day of departure, Samuel Edmonson left the elegant home of his employer, a prominent attorney who lived across from city hall, and hurried to the home of Elizabeth and John Brent, his sister and brother-in-law. The Brents' parlor was a haven for the Edmonson siblings working in Washington and the site of a Sunday morning gathering for a small religious group that had broken away from a congregation dominated by the white-controlled Foundry Methodist Church.



Mary and Emily Edmonson.

John and Elizabeth Edmonson Brent are considered founders of the John Wesley A.M.E. Zion Church now located at 14th and Corcoran streets NW. After purchasing his own freedom, Brent secured his wife's. The couple bought land and built their home on the southwest corner of 18th and L streets NW, now occupied by a Borders Book & Music store.

Much of the personal detail about the Edmonsons and their associates in this account comes from a book titled *Fugitives of the Pearl*, written in 1930 by John Paynter, a grandson of John and Elizabeth Brent.

Many historians consider Paynter's anecdotes to be unverifiable, apparently based on stories passed among family members and friends over the years. Actually, extremely few documented facts are known about how the enslaved Americans involved in the Pearl escape acted or felt.

That evening at the Brents' house, the gathering included Samuel's parents, who frequently came into Washington from their home in Maryland to visit and shop. Samuel revealed his plan to board the Pearl and take his siblings with him.

The Edmonson parents knew the risk only too well. Several years earlier, their oldest son, Hamilton, had been caught in an escape attempt and was sold south to New Orleans. They were concerned for their children's safety, particularly for the two young sisters, Mary and Emily, who descendants say were 15 and 13, respectively.

As time grew short, Samuel Edmonson left to collect Emily, hired to a family that lived near the corner of 22nd and G streets NW, and then Mary, at a home on G Street between 12th and 13th streets. The three stopped at a bakery on F Street and purchased six dozen buns, then went down 12th Street and crossed the malodorous Washington Canal (now paved over as Constitution Avenue).

In the twilight, they likely passed the construction site of the Smithsonian Institution; a few blocks to the west, they might have seen preparations for construction of the Washington Monument. To the east stood the Capitol that would not receive its permanent dome until the time of the Civil War.

As they finally neared the river, they crossed an expanse of open field in front of the wharf tucked under a high bank. Three of their brothers -- Richard, Ephraim and John -- were aboard the ship.

A cab driver named Judson Diggs also arrived near the ship with an escapee and his trunk. To Diggs's vexation, the penniless passenger simply promised to send money later to cover his fare. Diggs, who traded in information and goods, was well acquainted with the Edmonson family and knew that the siblings would be aboard.

Although less refined than the Brents, Diggs had been welcomed into the Brent home as a religious brother and sometimes joined the family at tea, according to Paynter. Then Emily Edmonson caught his eye. One evening, Diggs turned to Emily and awkwardly extended a piece of stale cake from his pocket and then a marriage proposal, proudly offering his mortgage-free home.

Diggs would not forget that Emily could not repress laughter at the sight of the cake or her distaste at the marriage proposal.

### **Off to a Bad Start**

Close to midnight, the Pearl embarked in a light fog and moved little more than half a mile before the wind died. With the ship unable to go forward, the terrified passengers knew that they could not turn back.

At daybreak on Sunday, with the Pearl just past Alexandria, the wind picked up. The ship was uncomfortably close to homes in which families abandoned by the 77 slaves were waking, startled to find no fires, no breakfast and no servants.

Capt. Sayres opened his sails to speed south toward Point Lookout near the mouth of the Potomac. As the ship began to make good time, the passengers sang religious songs and listened to the young people read from Scripture. The older slaves probably could not read.

Back in Washington, Georgetown and Alexandria that morning -- as church bells heralded services and fire bells rang an alarm at the slave escape -- authorities assembled a posse that headed for the usual country roads. Runaways were hardly uncommon; newspaper ads featuring an icon of a black man with a pole over his shoulder were routine. However, the scope of this escape was beyond anyone's imagination. According to Washingtonian Vincent DeForest of the National Park Service, it was the single largest known escape attempt by enslaved Americans.

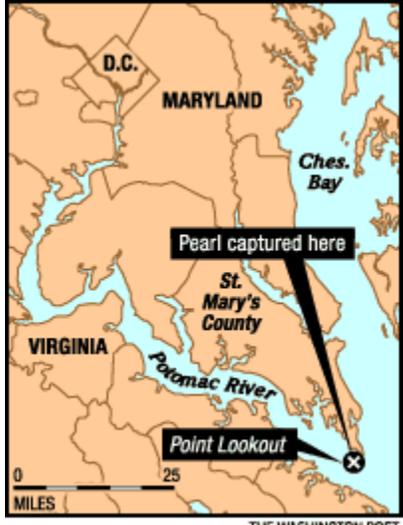
Not long after the Pearl reached Point Lookout, a powerful northwesterly squall arose, cutting off access to the bay. Drayton argued fiercely to take the ship south into the nearby Atlantic, but Sayres refused, saying his small craft could not handle rough seas. Instead, Sayres dropped anchor in a small cove called Cornfield Harbor, and Drayton suggested that everyone sleep.

Meanwhile, a pursuing posse encountered Diggs, who was still rankled about the fare and directed pursuers toward the river. Constables and civilians jumped aboard the Salem, a steamboat owned by the prosperous Dodge family of Georgetown, who reportedly owned slaves on the Pearl. The Dodges owned the only tobacco warehouses that remain today at the foot of Wisconsin Avenue.

The Salem steamed south and almost abandoned pursuit before discovering the Pearl in Cornfield Harbor. Several of the unarmed slaves rose to fight the boarding party, but Drayton persuaded them to surrender. The crew members were taken from the ship and interrogated.

English, the young mate and cook, wept in fear. He argued persuasively that he believed that the 77 runaways were on a pleasure cruise, perhaps a picnic. He was later released.

## Return to Bondage



On Tuesday, the Pearl was towed back to Washington. When it passed the wharves at Alexandria, the slaves were displayed in chains to angry whites. More crowds awaited them in Washington.

The male slaves were manacled, as were Drayton and Sayres, soon to be charged with theft and illegal transportation of slaves, and all were marched across Pennsylvania Avenue to the city jail.

Women and children were left unfettered. Mary and Emily Edmonson walked behind their brothers with heads high and arms around each other's waists. When the procession reached Gannon's slave market, its owner lunged with a knife at Daniel Drayton and cut his ear. Other people tried to get at Sayres.

In the growing panic, the guards hailed a cab and bundled the two white prisoners off to jail. A reporter recorded that a large, angry crowd had gathered and that "most bitter imprecations against the abolitionists and the abolition paper of the District" were heard.

(Although Drayton denied that abolitionists were behind the escape scheme, there is some evidence that William L. Chaplin, a member of the Anti-Slavery Society and owner of abolitionist newspapers in Rochester and Albany, also was involved in planning the escape and procuring the ship.)

Members of the crowd concluded that the culprit must be Gamaliel Bailey, editor of *New Era*, a moderate abolitionist newspaper recently relocated to Washington in a building across from the U.S. Patent Office (now the National Portrait Gallery and Museum of American Art).

About 1,000 people gathered in front of the newspaper, demanding that it be closed immediately, debating whether to lynch Bailey and hurling rocks and brickbats. Thus began the three-day standoff that became known as the Washington Riot of 1848.

Drayton and Sayres were awaiting prosecution by Philip Barton Key, U.S. attorney for the District of Columbia and son of Francis Scott Key, author of the national anthem. The two were charged with 77 counts of theft and 77 counts of illegal transportation of slaves. Neither could meet his bond of \$77,000, \$1,000 for every slave.

The Alexandria slave-trading business of Bruin and Hill was busy at the jail, buying the captured slaves from their irate owners and preparing for a trip to the lucrative slave market in New Orleans. Some people who knew the Edmonson family rushed to help. The woman who had "hired" Mary unsuccessfully attempted to buy her. By the next day, the slave traders had purchased all of the Edmonson siblings.

## Taking Sides

The turmoil soon continued in Congress. Rep. Joshua Giddings of Ohio introduced a resolution asking why, in the light of the popular struggles for freedom in Europe, the Pearl fugitives were being jailed for attempting to enjoy the freedom for which America's forefathers had died. Rep. Isaac E. Holmes of South Carolina retorted that, if the House considered such a resolution, he would move to add an amendment

inquiring why the "scoundrels who caused the slaves to be there ought not to be hung." A new congressman named Abraham Lincoln voted with the moderates to close debate.

The mob eventually settled on a concrete demand, giving editor Bailey until 10 a.m. next day to remove his printing press from the city or have it destroyed.

As Bailey reported later in his paper, he told the crowd from his office steps that he refused "the surrender of a great constitutional right -- a right which I have used, but not abused -- in the preservation of which you are as deeply interested as I am."

He also published a statement denying complicity in the escape in the *Daily National Intelligencer*, a newspaper owned by Washington Mayor William Seaton.

On Wednesday, April 19, a justice of the peace, six auxiliary guards, several police and a few citizens deputized as constables, placed themselves between the National Era building and the tense crowd. When concern arose that the editor's home and family would be attacked, Seaton, also Bailey's neighbor, helped to move the children to safety.

The deadline for removal of the press passed, and the crowd thinned but returned the next day. On Thursday, concerned officials, including the postmaster general and the director of the Washington Monument Society, told President Polk that a riotous crowd was planning to pull down the National Era's press.

That evening, in front of the National Era, authorities increased protection. A correspondent for a New York newspaper reported that guards numbered 75 to 100, probably the largest amount of law enforcement muscle assembled in Washington before the Civil War.

In addition, the reporter stated, "there were present a great number of government clerks, who had been requested by the president and the heads of departments as conservators of law and order." The crowd was dispersed that night for good.

### **Sold South**

After two weeks in the Baltimore slave pen, while the Edmonson parents desperately attempted to raise money to free their children, the captured fugitives were transported with other slaves on the brig Union.

Inclement weather extended the usually difficult seven-day trip to New Orleans by two days. Food and water supplies were low, and spirits even lower. On deck one bleak day, as the Union rounded the Florida Keys, family legend has it that Emily Edmonson began singing, and others joined in:

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down,

Yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion . . . .

At the slave market in New Orleans, Emily and Mary were made to stand on an open porch to attract buyers.

One day, as if out of a dream, the oldest Edmonson sibling, Hamilton, who had been sold south in 1840 after an unsuccessful escape attempt, appeared at the jail. He had worked to obtain his freedom, was living in New Orleans and had opened his own business as a cooper.

Hamilton arranged for purchase of his brother Samuel by a prosperous English cotton merchant to work as his butler. But before Hamilton could do anything for his other brothers and sisters, the dreaded yellow fever hit New Orleans. To protect their investments, the slave traders transferred unsold slaves to Alexandria.

Drayton and Sayres came to trial in July and were defended by the famous educator Horace Mann, who had come to Washington to fill the congressional seat of former President John Quincy Adams. A few years before, Adams had won freedom for Africans on the slave ship *Amistad* in argument before the Supreme Court.

Neither man was convicted on theft charges. Both, however, were convicted of transportation and remained jailed pending payment of \$10,000 in fines and court costs.

Paul and Amelia Edmonson continued their crusade to raise money to buy the children. A \$900 donation from John Jacob Astor III purchased only one sibling. The family decided that Richard Edmonson was most needed, and he became the first to be freed.

Paul Edmonson then took his campaign to free Mary and Emily to the New York offices of the Anti-Slavery Society and was sent to the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher whose church members raised the necessary funds. Edmonson hurried back to purchase the girls' freedom before they were returned to New Orleans.

Ephraim and John Edmonson, the other two brothers who had been on the *Pearl*, remained in New Orleans where Hamilton worked for their release.

## **Epilogue**

The *Pearl* episode came to a close. But it would have repercussions for decades.

Many people believe that the affair significantly strengthened the anti-slavery cause. In 1849, Rep. Abraham Lincoln unsuccessfully proposed a bill for the "compensated emancipation" of slaves in the District. In 1852, Beecher's daughter, Harriet Beecher Stowe, published her monumental work, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in serial form in *Bailey's National Era*.

In slave-owning territories such as Maryland, Delaware and the District, it was against the law for any free black or slave to possess *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or any other incendiary tract. Stowe later included the Edmonsons's story in her non-fiction work, *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

In 1862, under President Lincoln and after the outbreak of the Civil War, slaves in the District became the first freed by federal law. Their owners were the only slaveholders compensated for loss of "property" under a law much like the one that Lincoln proposed 13 years earlier.

Mary and Emily Edmonson attended Oberlin College through the support of Rev. Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe. Mary Edmonson died within the year, however, and a grief-stricken Emily returned to Washington. She joined the legendary educator, Myrtilla Miner, who alarmed the city's white citizens by

opening the Normal School for Colored Girls, a college preparatory school in a city where slavery remained legal. In 1854, Minor wrote:

"Emily and I lived here alone, unprotected, except by God. The rowdies occasionally stone our house in the evening. Emily and I have been seen practicing shooting with a pistol. The family [Paul and Amelia Edmonson] have come with a dog."

City official Walter Lennox, who had co-authored a 1848 handbill calling for calm during the Washington Riot, published a statement in the *National Intelligencer* on May 6, 1857. Describing the school as "misguided philanthropy," he warned that "we cannot forget the events which disturbed the peace of our country some few years since, consequent upon the act of Drayton and Sayres. . . ."

The school property, three acres between 19th and 20th streets and N Street and New Hampshire Avenue up to Dupont Circle, was purchased for \$4,000 and later sold for \$40,000 in 1872. The school eventually became part of D.C. Teachers College, incorporated in 1976 into the University of the District of Columbia.

Drayton and Sayres, widely admired in the black community, were pardoned by President Millard Fillmore after serving four years and four months. In 1859, Philip Barton Key, who successfully prosecuted Drayton and Sayres, was killed by Rep. Daniel Sickles of New York, the outraged husband of Key's lover.

Key had rented a house on 15th Street NW in a black neighborhood where he and Mrs. Sickles frequently met. Sickles received an anonymous letter from someone familiar with the comings and goings on 15th Street.

Who sent the letter remains unknown. Perhaps it's coincidence, but John Brent's will shows that, in addition to his house at 18th and L streets NW, he also owned a house on 15th Street.

Samuel Edmonson never abandoned his pursuit of freedom. After a few years as a slave in New Orleans, according to John Paynter, Samuel escaped on a ship to Jamaica. From there he went on to Liverpool and, with his wife and child, sailed to a new life in Australia.

Many descendants of the Edmonson family live in the Washington area, and a family reunion was scheduled last weekend. "We are committed to passing our heritage on to our children," the reunion announcement stated, "and continue to live the good life and fight the good fight."

*Mary Kay Ricks is director of Tour D.C., which specializes in walking tours of Georgetown.*