

The Pearl
-A Model

The Pearl Incident

April 15-17, 1848



Escape of the Pearl
-Edmondson Sisters

On the night of April the 15th 1848 there was the largest known attempted escape on the Underground Railroad in the history of the United States. Seventy-seven enslaved black Americans attempted to run away on board a schooner, named the Pearl, docked at Washington D.C.'s Seventh Street wharf, down the Potomac and up the Chesapeake Bay in an effort to reach New Jersey and freedom.

Involved were freedmen, slaves, members of the Underground Railroad, both black and white.

The abolitionist movement had been eager for some time in the 1840's to strike a significant blow against the forces of slavery in the United States. In the Congress abolitionists were agitating for the end of slavery in the District of Columbia specifically because Congress had the authority to make all laws regarding the administration of the city. Time after time when the matter was brought up for debate it was tabled or shouted down.

A bold act that would shock the nation and give hope and impetus to the many who wanted to see the expansionist goals of the southern states checked if not rolled back. An escape from Washington D.C. would deliver the greatest shock and emotional impact. And to that end abolitionists, William Chaplin and Gerrit Smith, who engaged Captain Daniel Drayton along with freedmen Thomas Smallwood (a conductor on the railroad), Paul Jennings (former slave to Dolly Madison) and Daniel Bell (father of several of the escapees) proceeded with the planning and execution of the escape on the Pearl.

Late in the evening of the 15th seventy-seven escapees, which included 17 children from the Edmondson and Bell families, boarded the Pearl. Waiting at the dock her crew, Captain Daniel Drayton, Underground Railroad operative who found and engaged the boat, Captain Edward Sayers who "captained' the boat, Chester English who was the deckhand and cook, and freedman Paul Jennings who had helped to organize the escape. They sailed late that night and all day on the 16th heading down the Potomac attempting to reach Chesapeake Bay.

Late in the day after having come in sight of Point Lookout, Maryland at the mouth of the Potomac the wind changed, and the water grew rough. The Pearl could no longer make headway. They had to wait for the weather to calm and the wind to change to a favorable direction.

Around 9 p.m. that night Captain Sayers dropped anchor at the mouth of the Potomac just shy of Point Lookout in a place called Cornfield Harbor, to spend the night.

On the morning of Sunday the 16th of April slave holders learned that their "property" had escaped downriver. The Dodge family of Georgetown, who claimed three runaways, offered their steamboat, the Salem, for the search. Major Hampton C. Williams led the posse while Captain

Samuel Baker commanded the Salem with 35 men well-armed men and “well-fortified with brandy and other liquors.”

The Salem and the posse pursued the Pearl down river. By early evening they discovered the Pearl. The escapees could not resist and chose to surrender in order to avoid bloodshed because they only had one weapon on board. The two captains Drayton and Sayers argued vigorously with the angry posse to prevent that the people from being harmed.

Drayton and Sayers were moved to the Salem. The Black men had their arms bound behind their backs, the women and children were left untied, and all remained on the Pearl. The posse leader Major Williams interrogated Captain Drayton who admitted to accepting enslaved people aboard the Pearl and further acknowledged that he had the help of abolitionists in organizing the escape, but he would not give any names even though he was “roughly handled”. Captain Drayton was told by one of the posse members that he “had committed the highest crime, next to murder known in their laws”.

On the morning of the 17th, the Salem took the Pearl in tow to Washington. On the Pearl a guard was posted over the women to make sure that none of them could attempt suicide by jumping overboard themselves or with their children.

The two captains were jailed and subsequently tried and sentenced to prison but four years later they were pardoned by President Millard Fillmore. All of the escapees were put in jail or a holding pit. A few of the fugitives were returned to their owners but most were sold south. There they were sent to the slave markets of New Orleans to be sold to the large hard driving cotton plantations. Several got lucky when they were freed after members of the black community along with their white abolitionist allies were able to raise the money to purchase their freedom.

Two of the fugitives, Emily and Mary Edmonson (13 and 15 at the time of the escape) had their freedom purchased and went on to become part of the abolitionist lecture tour. Alongside Frederick Douglas they toured the north recounting their story of escape on the Pearl. With further help from the movement, they attended Oberlin College, and eventually Emily returned to Washington to raise her family in the same neighborhood as her abolitionist comrade Frederick Douglas. She became a teacher at Miner Teachers College, Washington, D.C.

**All quotes were taken from: Mary Kay Ricks Escape on the Pearl, the Heroic Bid for Freedom on the Underground Railroad (HarperCollins – eBooks 2014)*