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Democracy Dies in Darkness

Opinion: In today's uphill struggle to combat voter suppression, remember the Pearl

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Opinion by **Colbert I. King**

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Next week will commemorate the 173rd anniversary of one of the most courageous acts in antebellum America that most Americans have never heard of. It occurred here in the nation's capital on April 15, 1848.

The story, and its meaning for today, will be explored in depth Thursday by [the Pearl Group](#), a collection of community members, in an online event broadcast from Westminster Presbyterian Church in Southwest D.C.

At the end of this remembrance, the Wharf near the Washington Marina should never be seen in the same way. And the stretch of land called Pearl Street tucked between Maine Avenue and Wharf Street ought to likewise take on a whole new meaning to anyone who didn't know the story.

This Pearl is not the glistening, well-polished and widely sought gem.

As recounted in detail on [the Congressional Cemetery blog](#), the Pearl was the name of a 54-ton schooner that was banked in the Potomac River on the night of April 15, 1848, at a secluded spot near the Seventh Street Wharf, where the marina is now.

The ship was waiting for precious cargo: enslaved descendants of Africans bought to work in bondage as domestic servants and artisans in D.C.-area homes, boarding houses and hotels, and even the White House.

Seventy-seven people — “men, women, children, mothers, fathers, old, middle-aged, and young” — slipped away from their enslavers after dark. They made their way at great risk to the Wharf, where the Pearl waited to sail them to freedom.

History records the attempt as the largest known nonviolent escape attempt ever made by enslaved Black people in America.

The effort was as zealous as it was precarious: to travel 100 miles down the Potomac River to the Chesapeake Bay, then sail 120 miles up the bay, and journey up the Delaware River to the [free state](#) of New Jersey.

Things didn't turn out that way.

The elements were against them. And they may have left behind a Judas at the dock.

The Pearl didn't get far before the wind died down, forcing the schooner to spend the night anchored near Point Lookout, Md. By daybreak, a number of slave owners discovered unlit fireplaces and unprepared breakfasts and realized that what they had was gone. Outraged, they launched a hunt with an armed posse guided by information that may have come from a freed Black man, Judson Diggs, who had helped one of the escapees reach the wharf, [according to historical accounts](#).

The informant, whoever it was, reportedly had helped two escapees board the Pearl. And, in the spirit of Judas, sold his brothers and sisters down the river.

The wind had picked up in the morning but not enough to give the Pearl much of a start.

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The Pearl's crew was taken off to jail and charged with multiple counts of theft and illegal transportation of slaves. But not before they were paraded, along with the enslaved, in chains in the city. A mob rioted and attacked an antislavery newspaper and stormed the streets with the intention of capturing and hanging the White crew. The captives made it to the jail. But the Washington Riot of 1848 ensued, lasting three days.

An Alexandria-based slave-trading company bought the captive Blacks from their D.C. owners, and for punishment, sold most of them to the Deep South and New Orleans, where they were expected to be put to work on cotton and sugar plantations. The enslaved Black women and children were returned to their owners.

The story fills out with accounts of freed Blacks organizing escape attempts, and their efforts to purchase enslaved wives and children, and the heroic role played by abolitionists who gave money, time and unswerving devotion to the bold venture. Thursday's commemoration program will feature presentations about the bravery by the event's conveners.

The story of the Pearl's bid for liberation is, however, not a 19th-century tale. It is our story as well. The struggle for freedom and equality is as much alive today. The same touchstone — human liberty — is at stake.

The effort to maintain a racial hierarchy relegating Black people to second-class citizenship did not end with the Civil War and the 13th, 14th and 15th Reconstruction amendments.

To be sure, present legislative attempts to suppress the franchise of Black people may avoid provisions that on their face were limited by language to one race. Modern-day white supremacists are too smart for that.

But there's no mistaking that the nationwide Republican push to enact hundreds of new election restrictions that disproportionately affect tens of millions of Americans in cities, and Black voters in particular who overwhelmingly vote Democratic, is unlike anything seen since Jim Crow.

The intent then was to give electoral advantage to the enemies of freedom for citizens of a darker hue. So too now.

In today's uphill struggle to combat voter suppression, remember the Pearl.

Read more from [Colbert King's archive](#).

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