



Pearl as Metaphor

"The Pearl was the name of the vessel on which 77 African Americans sought to escape from enslavement in Washington DC. Thinking of what a pearl is and how it is made can serve as a metaphor to help us become conscious of the historical importance and contemporary significance of that courageous act in 1848. It can also be a basis for understanding the story of African Americans in Washington and the nation—a hidden history now coming to light."

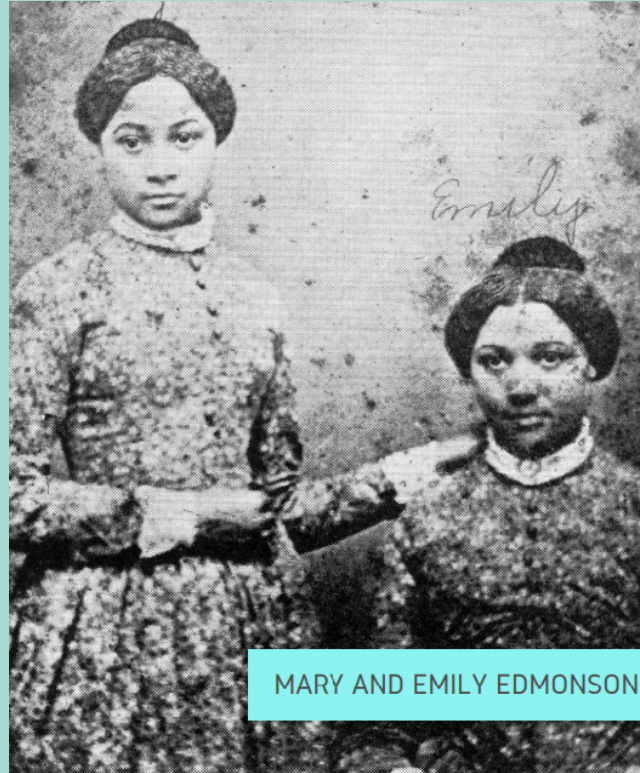
Dr. Sheila S. Walker,
Cultural Anthropologist

THE PEARL GROUP

We are a group of SW community members invited by Vyllorya Evans and Rev. Ruth Hamilton of Westminster Presbyterian Church to renew interest in the story of "The Pearl" and its powerful meaning for today. We honor the long-standing work of The Pearl Coalition led by Mr. David Smith, grandson of founder Mr. Lloyd Smith. Group participants have included: Audrey Hinton, Vania Georgieva, Dr. Sheila S. Walker, Georgine Wallace, Kenneth Ward, and Chris Williams.

Special thanks for this year's Commemorative Event to: Jonathan Holley, soloist; Lavonda Broadnax and Marcia Cole, Female Re-Enactors of Distinction; and Lexie Albe and Jessie Himmelrich, SW BID.

REMEMBER THE PEARL



MARY AND EMILY EDMONSON

COMMEMORATING THE HISTORIC ESCAPE TO FREEDOM FROM SLAVERY

APRIL 15, 7PM
AN ONLINE EVENT

FEATURING:
DC HISTORIAN C.R. GIBBS
& DAWNE YOUNG,
EDMONSON DESCENDANT

[TINYURL.COM/PEARLSW](https://tinyurl.com/pearlsw)

APRIL 15, 1848

APRIL 15-18
VISIT MEMORIAL SITE AT
SW DUCK POND
FLOWERS ENCOURAGED

THE PEARL ESCAPE OF 1848

UNDERGROUND RAILROAD SIGNAL



Those using the Underground Railroad utilized the local plants for nourishment and even navigation as they traveled north. One UGRR legend refers to use of the Green Rose.

According to Stephen Scanniello, Professional Rosarian, the rose was “allegedly used as a signal on the Underground Railroad.” Maryland Quakers on the Underground Railroad wore the rose and used it to identify one another. It also signaled a safe house. The Green Rose is difficult to find but the green flowers we are using today are meant to remember the contributions of these brave individuals and celebrate the memories of all involved.

AFTERWORDS

Due to a yellow fever epidemic in New Orleans, the slave trader, not wanting to lose his investment in his human property, brought Mary and Emily back to DC. By this time, their parents, with the help of abolitionists in many different states, had raised sufficient funds to pay for their daughters’ freedom. Mary and Emily joined the efforts to raise funds to buy the freedom of other siblings and friends, telling their story to packed churches in the north. Harriet Beecher Stowe publicized their account in Chapter 6 of *A Key to Uncle Tom’s Cabin*. They studied at Oberlin College, where Mary died. Emily returned to DC and taught school. She became a lifelong friend of Frederick Douglass. A statue of the two sisters stands by the former slave pen in Alexandria where they were held.

Finally, by Sunday evening, they came to the broad Chesapeake where freedom must have seemed so close. But bad weather arose and the man responsible for the vessel refused to let the Captain proceed across the Chesapeake. They tried to hide the boat in a cove at Point Lookout, but their valiant escape was foiled when they were sighted by an armed posse searching for them in a steamboat.

Brought back to the city, the whole group, including the white crewman, was paraded through the streets. The sheer audacity of the attempt led to several days of riots by enraged whites. Many of the escapees, including Mary and Emily Edmonson (shown), saw their worst fears come true when they and their brothers were quickly sold to a notorious Alexandria slave trader who eventually filled another ship to carry them down to the slave market of New Orleans. The first Middle Passage was the horrific journey from Africa to the Americas. While this trans-Atlantic trade to the US ended officially in 1808, the “second middle passage” continued and grew till over one million African Americans had been separated from their families and “sold down the river.” This is part of The Pearl story.

Although sometimes referred to as “The Pearl Incident,” it is clear this was far more than an incident. Its impact changed the future. It is fitting that when emancipation finally came to DC in 1862, it happened on April 16, the anniversary of the day the attempted escape was discovered. We invite you to remember The Pearl, be inspired by it, and make this Washington DC story your own.

This courageous bid for freedom by 77 men, women, and children was one of the many attempted escapes by enslaved African Americans now coming to light. It was the most significant attempt in the nation’s capital.

The escape was planned by the District’s Underground Railroad (UGRR)—a coalition of free and enslaved African-Americans and white allies—in coordination with UGRR connections up and down the East Coast. A political goal was to bring pressure on Congress to end slavery in the nation’s capital. The goal of the escapees was freedom and an end to the constant threat of being separated from their loved ones. Captain Drayton hired The Pearl vessel for the escape. The plan was to sail from the Southwest waterfront down the Potomac River into the Chesapeake Bay and north to freedom. The brave people came from all over DC, many of them enslaved in some of the most powerful homes in the city. They arrived quietly after dark, going below deck till all were gathered. It was the evening of Saturday, April 15. They set sail. Progress was slow.



Photo courtesy of the Pearl Coalition