Macedon, New York, 1853


SCRAPER
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ESCAPE ON THE PEARL

The Heroic Bid for Freedom on the Underground Railroad

MARY KAY RICKS

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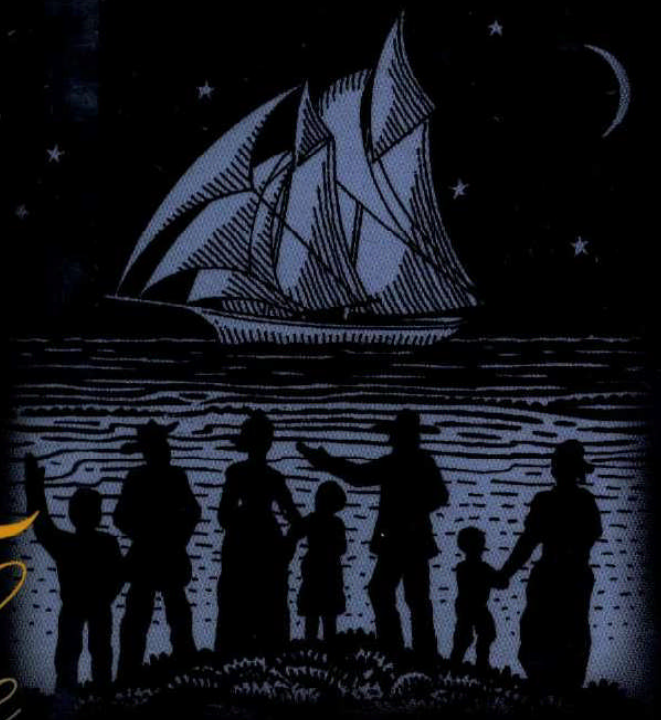

The PEARL

A Failed Slave Escape on the Potomac

JOSEPHINE F. PACHECO

A FAILED SLAVE ESCAPE ON THE POTOMAC

Fugitive Slave Law Convention, Cazenovia, New York, August 22, 1850. Standing in the center is Gerrit Smith. To the right of him is Mary Edmondson; to the left, Emily Edmondson. Seated between Smith and Mary Edmondson is Frederick Douglass. (Courtesy of the Madison County Historical Society, Oneida, New York)

did not work out; there were complaints about the Edmondsons and suggestions that since they were "unsuitable tenants," they should leave. And they did so, departing without warning; *Ten Eyck's Washington and Georgetown Directory* of 1855 listed the senior Edmondson as living on O Street in Washington.[91]

In that same year Emily Edmondson set out on the antislavery speaking circuit. She was already a celebrity among emancipationists, who had watched her grow from runaway slave to active participant in the antislavery movement. Emily and Mary had been much in demand, especially because they had beautiful voices and were willing to sing at antislavery gatherings. At an August 1850 meeting in Cazenovia, New York, protesting against the Fugitive Slave Act, the young women sang "I Hear the Voice of Lovejoy on Alton's Bloody Plains,"

garding himself as a man of honor. At the December fund-raising session, Beecher, rather than apologizing, intensified his attack. A slave trader, he thundered, was no different from a horse trader, always on the lookout for likely people—instead of horses—so that he could satisfy the needs of his customers. "Slavery is a state of suppressed war—the slave is justified in regarding his master as a belligerent enemy, and in seizing from him whatever reprisals are necessary to aid him in effecting a retreat."[61] If Beecher had been slow to come to public opposition to slavery, he more than made up for it with the virulence of his attack, once he had a change of heart.

This time Beecher's eloquence fell on deaf ears, for money was not forthcoming. Still another meeting, on December 16, 1848, proved equally unsuccessful, and the *Tribune*, a few days later, published a lengthy appeal for funds. Mary and Emily as teachers would provide "a voice against slavery louder . . . in the ears of tyrants than that of any thousand denunciatory Conventions ever held."[62] How strange it seems that after a very large sum of money was forthcoming to free the two young slaves, there was little interest in educating them to lead useful lives.

It was all very well to talk about educating Mary and Emily Edmondson, but given the paucity of schools for black girls, few choices were available. Apparently William Chaplin again came to the rescue, for in 1849 the two young women began attending W. R. Smith's "family school" in Macedon, Wayne County, New York. Smith and Chaplin were close friends, and since Smith was known to help slaves on their way to freedom, he must have welcomed the opportunity to assist in the Edmondsons' education. Macedon was full of abolitionists, and Wayne County claimed to be the most northerly stop on an escape route to Canada. Both Rochester and Syracuse, nearby cities, were important centers of antislavery activity.[63] After the 1850 arrest of Chaplin for helping slaves to escape (see chapter 9), William R. Smith wrote a lengthy pamphlet relating the many sacrifices made by Chaplin on behalf of the enslaved.

In 1849 Myrtilla Miner, a teacher from New York City employed at William Smith's school, was asked by Asa Smith, William's father, whether she could "take charge" of a proposed school in the District of Columbia meant to train African American women to become teachers. Since Mary and Emily Edmondson were studying in Macedon in 1849, with the understanding that they would become teachers, it is

arrested by the U.S. Government
confined in a national jail
at Washington
four years and four months.
And, broken by cruel suffering
during confinement he died a martyr
to his benevolent effort.

The monument has been defaced, but one can still read the words.[88]

While Mary and Emily Edmondson were studying in W. P. Smith's school in Macedon, New York, they inspired Smith's father, Asa Smith, to consider the desirability of establishing in Washington a teacher training school for African American women. The elder Smith discussed his idea with Myrtilla Miner, who was teaching in his son's school, and it was from Macedon, after seeking advice from various people,[89] that she concluded to undertake the difficult task. In the twentieth century her school became part of the University of the District of Columbia.

Miner's school received generous support from Harriet Beecher Stowe, who had resolved to do good works with the profits from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. When Emily Edmondson, after Mary's death, insisted on leaving Oberlin without completing her studies, Stowe proposed that the young woman return to Washington and become Miner's assistant. Emily wanted to live in Syracuse with the family of Jermain Wesley Loguen, a former slave, an activist in antislavery, and a preacher (later a bishop) in the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church. But Stowe prevailed, and in 1853 Emily Edmondson joined Miner, who was "pleased" with her, thought she had "much native power," and could easily take charge of a primary-level school and even "a larger advanced class" if she had help. Miner had trouble with ruffians in the neighborhood, and she and Emily practiced pistol shooting to be prepared for any eventuality.[90]

Miner believed that Emily would profit from close association with her mother, Milly Edmondson, and therefore Miner was pleased when the elder Edmondsons moved into a small house on the school grounds. Paul Edmondson was to take care of the property, raise vegetables for sale, and share any profits with Miner. But the arrangement

parcels of his hardscrabble upstate New York land to landless black families, though one parcel of that land was deeded to a white abolitionist named John Brown, who moved there with his large family. After the Supreme Court issued its 1857 *Dred Scott* decision, which denied all blacks the right of citizenship, a discouraged Garnet became a leader in the African Civilization Society, which hoped to set up their own independent colony in Africa.

It's not known how long Mary and Emily stayed in Peterboro; in fact, much of their activity during the next few years is unknown. On December 15, 1848, Frederick Douglass reported in his paper that Garnet had moved some eighty miles west to Geneva, New York, where he was operating a school during the week and preaching on Sundays. It is possible that Mary and Emily accompanied him. A year later, the sisters were living in Macedon, New York, where they were continuing their studies in the home school of William R. Smith, a close friend and ally of William Chaplin. Smith worked as an operative in the Underground Railroad, and Mary and Emily were no doubt pleased to be a part of a home where people were helping runaways make their way farther north. Smith did not make his living from the school. The *National Era* in Washington noted that "our friend" William R. Smith was the proprietor of a nursery for fruit and ornamental trees and plants in Macedon.

At the Smith school, Mary and Emily learned the fundamentals of reading and writing and clearly made a strong impression in the home because plans were made to raise money for them to pursue teacher training. In October 1849, five New York women, including Hannah C. Smith, established a committee to finance the next phase of Mary and Emily's education. The committee issued a public statement that described the Edmonson sisters as young women from a good family with "most exemplary industry and a rare deportment for propriety." The statement added that the sisters were "anxious to acquire information that will, in every way, render them competent and effective as teachers and examples among their people