

The Edmonson Sisters

Mary (1832–1853), Emily (1835–1895)

Running Away

On the night of April 15, 1848, three Edmonson siblings, all enslaved, walked through Washington, D.C., toward the schooner *Pearl*. Emily was 13, Mary was 15, and Samuel a few years older. They were fleeing toward freedom. Seventy fugitives were silently aboard the ship that night, including three more Edmonson brothers, as it sailed in darkness down the Potomac River, bound for Philadelphia. The escape had been planned by two white abolitionists, William Chaplin and Gerrit Smith, and two free black men in Washington, including Paul Jennings, who had been enslaved for most of his life by James and Dolley Madison.

The next morning, slave owners discovered their slaves were missing. Apparently informed about the *Pearl*, a search party gave chase in a steamboat. Despite its head start, the *Pearl* had encountered fierce winds as it entered Chesapeake Bay, and dropped anchor for several hours while still in Southern waters. This allowed the steamboat to catch up and capture the fugitives. A month later, the six Edmonsons were in the hold of another ship, the *Union*, headed south to the slave market in New Orleans. A very high price—\$1,200 each—was set for Mary and Emily because they were young, beautiful, and light-skinned. There was a brisk market for “fancy girls,” a euphemism for sex slaves.



Mary and Emily Edmonson, ca. 1850–1860. Photomechanical print. Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division, Washington, D.C., 91789694.

Freedom

The *Pearl* was the largest slave escape ever attempted in the United States, and the story was widely covered. The girls’ father, Paul Edmonson, a free black, worked tirelessly with Chaplin and others to raise the money to buy their freedom. Those who knew them called the sisters pious and moral, “exemplary . . . irreproachable.” The prospect of what awaited Emily and Mary horrified white abolitionists and churchgoers.

Many enslaved women were sexually exploited, but their personal stories were not often known in the North. Mary and Emily became potent symbols of the special evils of slavery for young women because their situation was so dramatic and public, and because of their youth, appearance, and conduct. Henry Ward Beecher, in one barnstorming speech on their behalf, called sexual slavery a “worse fate” than slavery. It may have seemed so to the white parishioners. Coins were dropped into collection baskets, and although many, many coins were needed, the sisters were freed in November 1848, seven months after they boarded the *Pearl*.

Fighting for Abolition

But the Edmonsons were much more than symbols. Still teenagers when they were freed, Mary and Emily moved to New York State, attended school, and joined the antislavery effort. They met leading

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Ezra Greenleaf Weld, *Fugitive Slave Law Convention, Cazenovia, New York, 1850*. Daguerreotype. Courtesy of the J. Paul Getty Museum.

abolitionists, including the wealthy Gerrit Smith, who had probably funded the ill-fated *Pearl*. The sisters worked desperately with their father and others to free their still-enslaved siblings. They attended antislavery meetings, told their story, and were often asked to sing; they had beautiful, inspiring voices.

In August 1850, Congress was preparing to pass the Fugitive Slave Law, which would require the return of runaways who fled to the North. Outraged abolitionists met to protest in Cazenovia, New York. They were further incensed when William Chaplin

was arrested in Maryland on his way to Cazenovia; he was helping a slave escape.

In a photo taken at the Cazenovia meeting, Frederick Douglass sits at a table on the speakers' platform. Gerrit Smith stands behind him, flanked by the two Edmonson sisters. At the time, many abolitionists believed that women should not speak in public. A black woman speaking was almost unheard of. But one of the Edmonsons—probably Mary, the taller sister—stepped forward to address the crowd. William Chaplin had helped to organize the *Pearl* escape, spearheaded the intense fundraising effort on the sisters' behalf, and personally handed over the purchase money to the girls' owner. Mary spoke firmly, with poise, about his arrest and imprisonment. One audience member described her as a “young and noble-hearted girl,” using “words of simple and touching eloquence.”

Mary and Emily enrolled in an integrated upstate New York college. Harriet Beecher Stowe befriended them, wrote about them, and offered to pay their tuition to Oberlin College in Ohio. Shortly after arriving at Oberlin, Mary died of tuberculosis at age 20. Emily, grief-stricken, returned to her family in Washington, where she taught in Myrtilla Miner's school for black women and continued her abolitionist work. Her life was hardly free of risk. In 1854, Miner wrote in a letter: “Emily and I lived here alone, unprotected except by God, the rowdies occasionally stoning the house at evening and we nightly retired in the

expectation that the house would be fired before morning. Emily and I have been seen practicing shooting with a pistol.”

Emily married Larkin Johnson in 1860 and bore four children. She enjoyed a close lifelong friendship with Frederick Douglass, and died the same year he did, 1895.

Discussion Questions

- ★ Why did the case of the Edmonson sisters capture national attention?
- ★ What did the Edmonson sisters do after they were set free? What made their actions radical?
- ★ What do Emily Edmonson's experiences as a teacher at a school for black women tell us about the day to day realities of free black women in the 1850s?

Sources: John H. Paynter, A. M. [the great-nephew of Mary and Emily Edmonson], “The Fugitives of the *Pearl*,” *The Journal of Negro History*, Carter G. Woodson, ed., Vol. 1, No. 3, June 1916, <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13642/13642-h/13642-h.htm> (accessed by M. Waters 9-17-2016); Mary Kay Ricks, *Escape on the Pearl: The Heroic Bid for Freedom on the Underground Railroad* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).