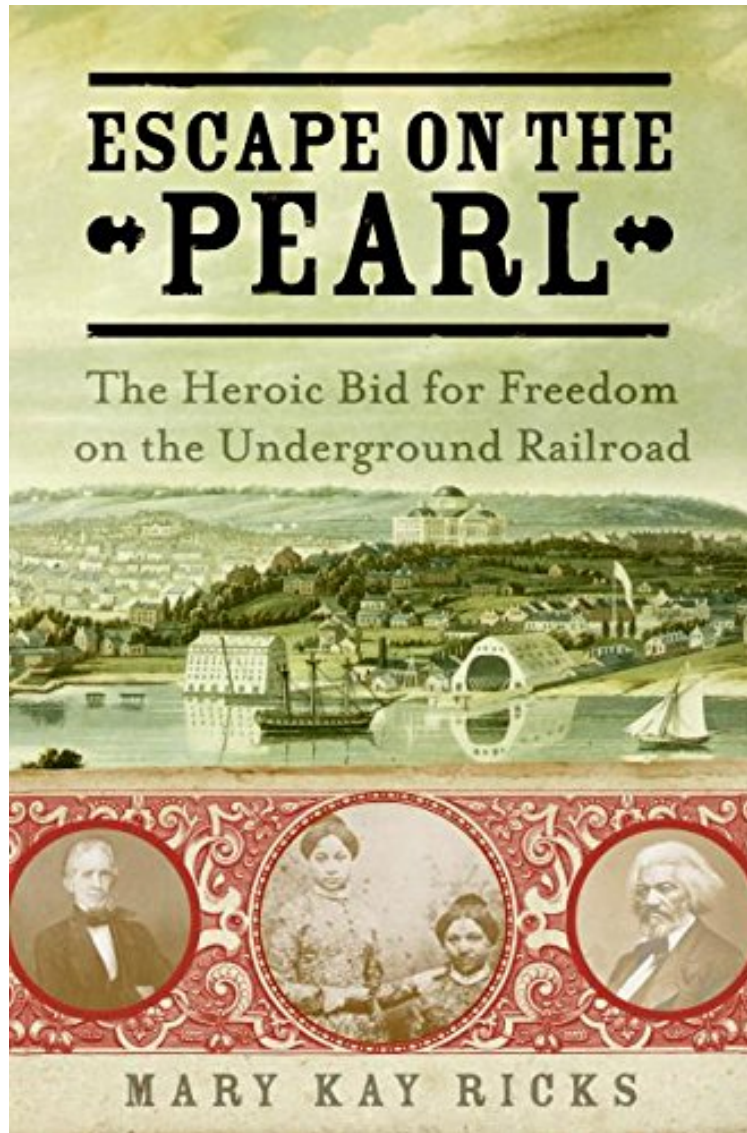


[Free pdf] Escape on the Pearl: The Heroic Bid for Freedom on the Underground Railroad

Escape on the Pearl: The Heroic Bid for Freedom on the Underground Railroad

Mary Kay Ricks

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Mary Kay Ricks : Escape on the Pearl: The Heroic Bid for Freedom on the Underground Railroad before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Escape on the Pearl: The Heroic Bid for Freedom on the Underground Railroad:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Exceptionally fine but electronically flawed!By Richard, Sausalito

California Unfortunately this thoroughly researched and annotated book cannot be searched electronically because the advertised links are not there. Apart from that the title is deceptive in that the *Escape* is but a very minor portion of the book. The book details the state of slavery in D.C. as well as the many States for the period before Lincoln until after his death. Very well written, brings the individuals and their lives into clarity. Highly recommended despite the non-existent links. Richard, Sausalito, California 0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Fascinating By ctgall did not enjoy the book for at least the first hundred pages. It was difficult to connect with members of the family and seemed quite dry. However, on picking it up again, I thought it was fascinating. I enjoy American history, and this became a very good textbook read after that. I lived in Washington DC for 35 years, so I found all the descriptions of buildings and streets interesting. I could place much of it. I also grew up in the Hartford, Connecticut area so know a lot about Harriet Beecher Stowe. That part was interesting. It also helped with confirming some of the other books I've read, fiction and nonfiction, regarding slavery. I do rather strongly think that you need to like reading about early American history to enjoy it. Otherwise, it might not be such a fascinating read. The one thing I came away with was the strength and nobility of the family. And what a horrible injustice slavery was, and how evil and hard-headed some people could be. And how Congress has not really changed, but for the gunfights. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. which I love, but it became pretty dry reading in parts ... By Suzy H. Laird There was a lot of historical content, which I love, but it became pretty dry reading in parts because of this. I really enjoyed the characters of the Edmondson family, and several of the other more well-known historical characters. I have not finished the book.

On the evening of April 15, 1848, seventy-seven slaves attempted one of history's most audacious escapes—and put in motion a furiously fought battle over slavery in America that would consume Congress, the streets of the capital, and the White House itself. Setting sail from Washington, D.C., on a schooner named the *Pearl*, the fugitives began a daring 225-mile journey to freedom in the North. Mary Kay Ricks's unforgettable chronicle brings to life the Underground Railroad's largest escape attempt, the seemingly immutable politics of slavery, and the individuals who struggled to end it. All the while, Ricks focuses her narrative on the intimate story of two young sisters who were onboard the *Pearl*, and sets their struggle for liberation against the powerful historical forces that would nearly tear the country apart. After a terrifyingly calm night, the wind came up as the sun rose the next morning, and the small schooner shot off down the Potomac River. Hours later, stunned owners—including a former first lady, a shipping magnate, a former congressman, a federal marshal, and a Baptist minister—raised the alarm. Authorities quickly formed a posse that chased the fugitives down the river. But with a head start and a robust wind that filled their sails, the *Pearl* raced ahead—unaware that a violent squall was moving into their path and would halt their bid for freedom. *Escape on the Pearl* reveals the incredible odyssey of those who were onboard, including the remarkable lives of fugitives Mary and Emily Edmonson, the two sisters at the heart of the story, who would trade servitude in elite Washington homes for slave pens in three states. Through the efforts of the sisters' father and the northern "conductor" who had helped organize the escape, an abolitionist outcry arose in the North, calling for the two girls to be rescued. Ultimately, Mary and Emily would go on to stand shoulder to shoulder with such abolitionist luminaries as Frederick Douglass and attend Oberlin College under the sponsorship of Harriet Beecher Stowe. A story of courage and determination, *Escape on the Pearl* revives one of the most poignant chapters of U.S. history. The Edmondsons, the other fugitives of the *Pearl*, and those who helped them can now take their rightful place as American heroes.

.com When 77 slaves attempted a daring escape down the Potomac River in a schooner called the *Pearl* in 1848, the nation's capital—especially the dozens of prominent citizens whose domestic slaves had disappeared—was shaken by the news. In returning to this audacious but largely forgotten episode in *Escape on the Pearl*, Mary Kay Ricks follows the stories of many of the slaves who made the perilous attempt and in the telling gives a short history of the last decades of American slavery and the country it divided. But most fascinating is her portrait of Washington, D.C., in the years before the Civil War, where North and South came together on territory where slavery was still legal, and where, for the African American residents of the city, the relative freedoms of the North and the terrors of transport to the brutal plantation slavery of the Deep South felt equally close. *Escape on the Pearl* is Mary Kay Ricks's first book, after years of research on abolitionism and local D.C. history. For our Grownup School feature she has recommended the 11 books to read on the Underground Railroad, and she also answered a few of our questions about her book: Questions for Mary Kay Ricks .com: How did you first come across the story of the escape on the *Pearl*? Mary Kay Ricks: While researching 19th-century Washington history for a different project, I kept stumbling on references to an escape attempt on a schooner named the *Pearl* that set off pro-slavery riots in the streets of Washington. The incident went on to spark fierce debate on slavery in Congress—a discussion it always worked hard to avoid. I was a co-founder of Washington, D.C.'s High School Friends of SNCC during the civil rights struggle of the 1960's, so I thought I was well-versed in the struggle for freedom. Yet I had never heard the story of the *Pearl*, nor had most people I knew. I began researching the escape, and eventually accrued much material, even letters—never analyzed in connection with the story—that described much of the planning of the escape. I had to write this book. .com: It was an explosive story at the time. What did the news represent for American society when it broke in 1848? Ricks: The capture of a

schooner attempting to take nearly 80 enslaved Americans to freedom on a schooner represented a breakdown of order and an organized resistance to slavery in the nation's capital that served as a harbinger of the growing conflict that would lead to the Civil War. At the same time, discussions in Congress were becoming increasingly fractious over whether slavery could be extended to the vast swath of new territory that had just come under the exclusive jurisdiction of the federal government at the conclusion of the Mexican War. Southern politicians clamored to extend slavery into those lands and Northern politicians began to come together for the first time, for a variety of different reasons, to demand that it remain free soil. It was this struggle over whether those new lands would be free, slave, or a mix of each that led directly to the Civil War.

.com: One striking thing to me about the society you describe was that there wasn't a clean line between slavery and freedom. Families--even married couples--were divided between slave and free, some slaves were working for wages to buy their freedom, and free blacks, especially after the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, were always in danger of being reclaimed into slavery. What did freedom mean for African Americans before the Civil War, and what did they do to achieve it? Ricks: Freedom, verified by legal papers that free people were required to carry on their persons, meant that you couldn't readily be taken away and sold to a slave trader, that you had some say in where you lived and worked, and that you could possibly work hard enough to raise money to free loved ones who were still enslaved. Purchasing freedom was a project fraught with obstacles. To give an example of just how costly slaves could be, Paul Edmonson, the free father of six children who joined the Pearl escape, owned a 40-acre farm in Maryland that was valued less than any of those children was as a slave. (All 14 Edmonson children were enslaved because their mother was a slave--that was the universal law in slave jurisdictions.) Enslaved African-Americans attempting to purchasing freedom were always at an extreme disadvantage because the arrangement relied on the good faith of an owner. Slave testimonies are filled with accounts of slaves who had paid all but the last few installments on their freedom when the owner changed the terms of the contract or ignored it completely and sold the nearly free person to a trader. And the death of owner could change everything as heirs worked to undo any promises of emancipation. That happened to 11 members of the Bell family who took their chances on the Pearl. Fear of sale or removal to the Lower South was very real. In a little known American exodus, nearly one million slaves from the Upper South were part of a forced migration to new lands, which often separated them from loved ones who were owned by different people. Slaves often knew the warning signs that their owner was looking to sell, and some were able to find contacts for passage on the Underground Railroad. But it was simply unfeasible for large numbers of slaves, even those in the Upper South, to reach freedom. Money and other resources were extremely limited and escape usually meant splitting up families, the one thing that the enslaved attempted to avoid at all cost. Escape was also terribly risky and could land a fugitive, if captured, in a worse situation in the Deep South. That is what made the Pearl escape all the more extraordinary. And for those who did successfully reach the North, there was no guarantee that they would remain free. When the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 was passed, more than 20,000 fugitives from slavery who had lived in the Northern states for years packed their bags and moved to Canada. Freedom meant leaving your homes and the country you were born in.

.com: Last year, James Swanson's *Manhunt* painted a vivid picture of Washington, D.C., at the end of the Civil War as a small town that is hard to recognize from our perspective. Your book could be seen as a prequel to that book in a way, both in its story of how we got to the Civil War and its same close attention to the geography of the capital city. What was the Washington you describe like in the 1840s? Ricks: Before the Civil War, Washington was a city where the majority of politicians lived in boarding houses and hotels. Neighborhoods had popped up like isolated gopher holes where a few gleaming white-marble buildings rose out of the mud surrounded by small wooden and brick houses on streets rife with loose geese, pigs, and even cows. The Capitol, the U.S. Patent Office (today's newly refurbished Portrait Gallery and Museum of American Art), the Executive Mansion, and the Post Office (now a hip downtown hotel) were then and are now spectacularly beautiful buildings. But much of the city, in contrast, looked bleak. Only Pennsylvania Avenue was paved. In 1848, long after New York, Boston, Baltimore, and even Newark had gas lighting, Congress had only just approved the formation of the Washington Gas Light Company. But theatre was popular and so were bowling, billiards, and gambling. Although many described Washington as a backwater with little sophistication, the newspaper advertisements show a surprising range of goods and foods from imported food delicacies, wines, and sherry to piano fortes. Pharmacies were well-stocked with supplies of Swedish leeches. But enormous changes would come with the Civil War. The population in the District of Columbia, about 51,000 in 1850, nearly trebled to over 130,000 by 1870. Many whites who had come to Washington for war jobs decamped the overburdened and rundown city after the war. But the 40,000 African Americans who had fled the Confederacy stayed.

.com: You share a last name with two of the fugitive slaves on the Pearl (and with some of their descendants)? Was that just a happy coincidence, or have you found a connection between their families and yours? What connections has writing about this story made for you? Ricks: Two fugitives of the Pearl shared my last name but were not owned by people named Ricks. In fact, not one of the fugitives on board the Pearl shared a surname with an owner. My husband's family arrived in Virginia sometime in the mid-17th century as Quakers and became slave owners. They later became Baptists, probably when the Society of Friends forbade slave-owning. Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* includes a copy of a runaway slave advertisement placed by one of my husband's ancestors. It is more likely that the fugitives on the Pearl, both of whom were transported to

New Orleans with the Edmonsons, were descended from slaves who been owned at some time by a different branch of the English Ricks family who had come into Maryland many years before. Interestingly, my family and I now feel very connected to an African-American couple from Maryland named Vernon and Janet Ricks, who are members of Mt. Zion United Methodist Church in Georgetown, a congregation which was formed in 1816 as the first black church in the District of Columbia and figures prominently in my book. Vernon Ricks, who may well be related to the two men who took a chance for freedom in 1848, and his wife are very active in their church, the NAACP, and many civic organizations. I worked with Vernon and Janet, Mt. Zion, the National Park Service, and a consortium of Georgetown organizations when I wrote and directed an historical recreation of an 1858 escape on the Underground Railroad to celebrate the 250th anniversary of the founding of the tobacco port that is now a part of the District of Columbia. Vernon took on the role of Alfred Pope, a member of Mt. Zion and one of the few Pearl fugitives who had not been sold south after capture, and Janet played his wife. Later, my family was invited to a special Sunday at Mt. Zion to honor the Ricks family that had been part of that congregation for several generations. When the Ricks family members in the church were asked to rise, my husband and I, his parents, and our two children rose as well. From Publishers Weekly

When the Pearl slipped out of the U.S. capital one spring night in 1848 carrying 77 fugitives from slavery, "the largest known attempted escape on the Underground Railroad" had begun. But the ship was overtaken and the slaves sent to New Orleans to be sold, only to be spared by a fluke and returned to D.C., where Henry Ward Beecher took an interest in their plight and Harriet Beecher Stowe recounted their story in her *Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The "lost" story of their role in the abolition of the slave trade in Washington is one worth telling, but Ricks isn't up to the job. Though a knowledgeable walking tour guide, she's defeated by the story's many threads: the background on slavery, abolition, the Underground Railroad and Washington D.C., the Pearl story (which is really two stories—one about its crew, one about its passengers) and the story of the remarkable Edmonson family, two sisters and four brothers hired out by their owner who joined the heroic escape. When focusing on the Edmonsons, Ricks shines fresh light on the peculiarities of slavery in the capital city. But too often she lapses into digression and repetition in this occasionally stimulating account.

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From Booklist

An 1848 attempted escape of 70 fugitive slaves aboard the schooner Pearl set the stage for a highly publicized campaign to challenge slavery in the nation's capital. Among the fugitives were six members of the Edmondson family, who were hired out as slaves to Washington's most prominent families. The sisters, Mary and Emily, would become famous in abolitionist circles. The Edmondsons' access to the powerful families and the prominence of the sisters heightened the growing debate about slavery, particularly the 10-year lobbying effort to end slavery in Washington, D.C. By focusing on the Edmondsons, Ricks brings a human scale to what was a cause celebre at the time. Drawing on private letters, newspaper reports, and court records, Ricks provides a vivid and detailed account of the heroic escape attempt and the ensuing courtroom drama within the broader context of resistance to slavery. This is a compelling account of a famous campaign and court case that has since languished in the historical past.

Vanessa Bush

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