



## Montgomery County *Commission for Women*

**Emily Catherine Edmonson  
(1835 - 1895)**



**Abolitionist who worked with Frederick Douglass, and whose failed attempt to escape slavery increased the public will to end slavery in the U.S.**

Emily Edmonson was the daughter of Paul and Amelia Edmonson, a free black man and an enslaved woman. Born in [Montgomery County](#), Emily was one of fourteen children, all born into slavery. Law common to all slave states decreed that the children of a slave inherited their mother's legal status. Emily's father, who was set free after his owner died, purchased land in the Norbeck area of Montgomery County. Emily's mother was allowed to live with her husband but continued to work for her legal owner. The couple's children began work early in age as servants, laborers and skilled workers. Like her elder sister Mary, Emily was sent to work as a servant in one of Washington's elite private homes.

When on April 15, 1848, the vessel [Pearl](#) docked on the [Washington wharf](#), Emily Edmonson, with her sister Mary and four other brothers joined a group of slaves in an attempt to reach the vessel and escape slavery as it headed north. Seventy-seven slaves made their way on the Pearl, which was supposed to travel from the Potomac River and the Chesapeake Bay to the Chesapeake & Delaware Canal, finally reaching freedom. Emily was 13 years old. The Pearl, with all the fugitives hidden among boxes, began its way down the Potomac. The captain of a passing steamer reported a suspicious vessel when he reached Washington, prompting pursuit down the river. As the Pearl was docked in a creek waiting for a storm to pass, it was seized by well-armed men. The Pearl was towed back to Washington, where an angry crowd was waiting. The Pearl's two white captains had to be taken into safety as slave traders and other individuals attacked them. The fugitives were taken to the D.C. jail. It is said that when somebody from the crowd asked the girls if they were ashamed for what they had done, Emily replied proudly that

they would do exactly the same thing all over again. Three days of riots and disturbances followed, while new slave traders arrived in D.C. to purchase the fugitives from their furious owners.

Despite Paul Edmonson's desperate efforts to delay the sale of his children so that he could raise money to purchase their freedom, Alexandria's slave trader partners Bruin & Hill bought the six Edmonson siblings. They were taken to New Orleans by boat under inhumane conditions. New Orleans was a market well known for trading young girls as sex slaves or "fancy girls." Paul Edmonson was able to obtain donations from Methodist ministers to gain the freedom of one son. In New Orleans, Emily, as the rest of her siblings, was forced to stay for days in an open porch facing the street waiting for buyers. She was forced to open her mouth to show her teeth, handled brusquely, and exposed to obscene comments. When yellow fever erupted in New Orleans, the slave traders transferred unsold slaves back to Alexandria, Emily and Mary Edmonson among them, as a measure to protect their investments. Their two brothers remained in New Orleans where their eldest brother later purchased the young men's freedom.

Back in Alexandria, the sisters spent the days washing, ironing and sewing by day and being locked up at night. Slave owners Bruin & Hill agreed to sell the sisters for \$2,250. Paul Edmonson continued his campaign to free Mary and Emily. Armed with letters from Washington supporters, he went to the New York offices of the Anti-Slavery Society, where he was sent to the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher, a young Congregationalist preacher who had just arrived in Brooklyn. Beecher's church members raised the necessary funds to purchase the girls' freedom. Accompanied by William Chaplin, one of the individuals responsible for the Pearl escape attempt, Beecher went to Washington to arrange the transaction.

Emily, with her sister Mary, was liberated on November 4, 1848. Celebrations took place in her sister's house in Washington, where all the family gathered. After obtaining their freedom, the Brooklyn church continued to contribute money to send the sisters to school. They were able to enroll in the interracial New York Central College in Cortland, New York. During this period, they did cleaning services to support themselves. While studying, the sisters traveled in the state of New York to participate in anti-slavery rallies. Both sisters attended the protest convention in Cazenovia during the summer of 1850 to demonstrate against the Fugitive Slave Act, soon to be passed by Congress. Under this act, slave owners had unlimited powers to arrest fugitive slaves in the North. The convention, guided by Frederick Douglass' leadership, declared all slaves to be prisoners of war and warned the nation of an unavoidable insurrection of slaves unless they were emancipated.

In 1853, Emily and Mary Edmonson attended the Young Ladies Preparatory School at [Oberlin College](#) in Ohio through the support of Rev. Beecher and his sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, author of Uncle Tom's Cabin. Six months after arriving at Oberlin, Mary Edmonson died of tuberculosis. Eighteen-year-old Emily returned to Washington with her father, where she enrolled in the Normal School for Colored Girls, a school located near the current Dupont Circle that trained young African-American women to become teachers. For protection, the Edmonson family moved to a cabin on the grounds, while Emily and Myrtilla Miner, the white founder of the school learned to shoot. The school became part of the D.C. Teachers College, incorporated in 1976 into the [University of the District of Columbia](#). In 1860, Emily Edmonson married Larkin Johnson. They returned to the Sandy Spring area and lived there for twelve years before moving to Anacostia, where they purchased land and became founding members of the Hillsdale community in Anacostia. At least one of their children was born in Montgomery County.

Emily Edmonson maintained her relationship with Douglass, who also lived in Anacostia. Both continued working in the abolitionist movement. Even after slavery was abolished by an act of Congress in 1862, their relationship continued. One of Emily's granddaughters observed that they were like "brother and sister." Emily Edmonson died at her home on September 15, 1895.

Emily Edmonson's story, although reported extensively in Harriet Beecher Stowe's documentary *A Key to Uncle Tom's Cabin* and John H. Paynter's *Fugitives of the Pearl*, has been largely unknown until it was reported by Mary Kay Ricks in the February 17, 2002 issue of *The Washington Post Magazine*.