

The Edmonson Sisters

CASH FOR NEGROES

I wish to purchase immediately, for the South, any number of NEGROES from 10 to 30 years of age, for which I will pay the highest cash price. All communications promptly attended to. West End, Alexandria, Va., Oct. 26.—tf.

JOSEPH BRUIN Alexandria Gazette, October 28, 1846

The West End in the 19th century centered on Duke Street and Diagonal Road. Largely undeveloped, the area was devoted to stockyards, agricultural shipment, and “a” notorious business: the slave trade. The house at 1707 Duke Street (left) was part of a two-acre complex owned by Joseph Bruin, partner in Bruin & Hill, a successful slave-trading enterprise. The property included this building used as a slave jail and office, a house where Bruin lived with his family, slave pens, and various outbuildings. From here, Bruin purchased, warehoused, and transported thousands of slaves for sale in the Deep South from 1844 to the beginning of the Civil War. In 1848, Mary Edmonson, 15, and Emily Edmonson, 13, who had joined four of their siblings and seventy-one other blacks in a failed attempt to escape slavery on the *Pearl*, were purchased by Bruin and destined for auction in New Orleans and a likely fate as “fancy girls” in that city's brothels. Their story and their father's efforts to free them became a call to action for the abolitionist movement.

While in captivity at Bruin's slave jail, the Edmonson sisters worked washing clothes. The remains of a cistern (circle of bricks in ground), left, is near the location of the wash house.



Courtesy Library of Congress

Fear of being sold was a constant in a slave's life. A changed agriculture economy reduced demand for slave labor; a thriving interstate business then developed selling slaves west and south. Those bound for auction were transported by ship or rail, or walked over land in “coffles.”

The Business of Slavery

As children of a free black father, Paul, and slave mother, Amelia, the Edmonson children were legally slaves. Their lives were relatively stable on their father's farm near Sandy Spring, Maryland, until the poor health of their owner raised concern that the children would soon be sold. This frequently happened to settle estates, to pay debts, or to punish rebelliousness. According to some accounts, by the time of the Civil War, between 500,000 and 800,000 enslaved people had been forcibly moved by this interstate commerce.



Trustees of the British Museum

The *Pearl* fugitives left Washington, D.C., for the trip north on April 15, 1848. The *Pearl* was captured near the mouth of the Potomac River and brought back to Washington.

Map Courtesy Library of Congress



Paul Jennings
Courtesy Estate of Sylvia Jennings Alexander



Daniel Drayton
Courtesy Library of Congress

Paul Jennings, a butler belonging to Senator Daniel Webster and once owned by President James Madison; freeman Daniel Bell; and Samuel Edmonson, a “hired-out” slave and brother to Mary and Emily, organized the *Pearl* escape. Of the white crew, Daniel Drayton and Captain Edward Sayres, served four years in prison for the escape; most of the captured fugitives were sold in New Orleans.

Freedom

Paul Edmonson's efforts to free his daughters brought him to New York City in the fall of 1848 and eventually to the Plymouth Congregational Church in Brooklyn, led by the Rev. Henry Ward Beecher. Rev. Beecher took up the Edmonson's cause, preaching about the fate of the Christian, light-skinned Edmonson sisters should they be sold down south, and quickly raised Bruin's asking price of \$2,250. By November 1848, Mary and Emily were free.



Courtesy Portrait Collection, Historical Society of Washington, D.C.

Abolitionists encouraged the freed sisters to become teachers and, by 1853, Mary (left) and Emily (right) were studying at Oberlin College. Mary died of tuberculosis soon after; Emily returned to Washington, D.C., to help educate young black women. Emily married shortly before the Civil War and eventually moved to Anacostia with her husband. She remained a life-long friend of her neighbor, Frederick Douglass. Emily died in 1895.



From the collection of the Madison County Historical Society, Oneida, NY

The Edmonson sisters (standing on either side of abolitionist Gerrit Smith, center) joined Frederick Douglass (in dark jacket to right of table) and others in Cazenovia, New York, in 1850 to protest the Fugitive Slave Act, a federal law requiring officials and citizens in free states to help capture runaway slaves.



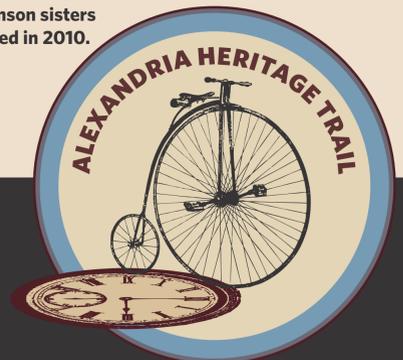
Rev. Henry Ward Beecher
Courtesy Library of Congress



Harriet Beecher Stowe
Courtesy Library of Congress

Rev. Henry Ward Beecher in 1860. His sister, Harriet Beecher Stowe, published the anti-slavery novel, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, in 1852 and later wrote extensively about the Edmonson family and the efforts to free Mary and Emily. She also helped support the sisters during their time at Oberlin.

In front of you, above, is a bronze sculpture of the Edmonson sisters by Erik Blome, dedicated in 2010.



CITY OF ALEXANDRIA EST. 1749