



The Pearl: A Failed Slave Escape on the Potomac

Josephine F. Pacheco

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In the spring of 1848 seventy-six slaves from the nation's capital hid aboard a schooner called the *Pearl* in an attempt to sail down the Potomac River and up the Chesapeake Bay to freedom in Pennsylvania. When inclement weather forced them to anchor for the night, the fugitive slaves and the ship's crew were captured and returned to Washington. Many of the slaves were sold to the Lower South, and two men sailing the *Pearl* were tried and sentenced to prison.

Recounting this harrowing tale from the preparations for escape through the participants' trial, Josephine Pacheco provides fresh insight into the lives of enslaved blacks in the District of Columbia, putting a human face on the victims of the interstate slave trade, whose lives have been overshadowed by larger historical events. Pacheco also details the Congressional debates about slavery that resulted from this large-scale escape attempt. She contends that although the incident itself and the trials and Congressional disputes that followed were not directly responsible for bringing an end to the slave trade in the nation's capital, they played a pivotal role in publicizing many of the issues surrounding slavery. Eventually, President Millard Fillmore pardoned the operators of the *Pearl*.



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