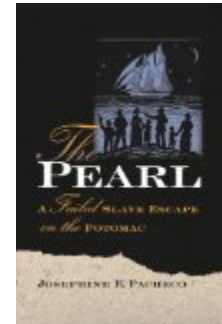


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Josephine F. Pacheco. *The Pearl: A Failed Slave Escape on the Potomac*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005. x + 307 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2918-9.

Reviewed by Mary Beth Corrigan (Independent Scholar)
Published on H-DC (April, 2006)



The Legacy and Significance of a Failed Mass Slave Escape

Late one Saturday night in April 1848, seventy-six enslaved men, women and children, anxious to escape and secure their freedom, boarded a schooner, *The Pearl*, anchored in Washington. Its captains Daniel Drayton and Edmund Sayres intended to sail down the Potomac River and up the Chesapeake Bay to Philadelphia, where the fugitives could hide from their owners and live in freedom. Instead, the tides prevented the boat from reaching the bay. Early Monday morning, a posse boat organized by the slave owners found the boat anchored at a sheltered spot near the mouth of the Potomac. The story of the *Pearl* –including its planning and aftermath–has long fascinated devotees of Washington history.[1] Now, Josephine Pacheco has added the first book-length account: *The Pearl: A Failed Escape on the Potomac*. She presents the *Pearl* as a major effort of the antislavery movement that ultimately shaped the sectional conflict of the 1850s.

Pacheco effectively explains the planning of the *Pearl* by antislavery activists and the enthusiastic response of enslaved men, women, and children. Daniel and Mary Bell, a free black couple who longed to secure the freedom of their own children, initiated the planning for the *Pearl*. To purchase their own freedom, both Daniel and Mary overcame huge obstacles posed by their owners. They wanted the freedom of their children as well and hoped to avoid their experience of long and bitter negotiations with reluctant and capricious owners. The Bells approached William Chaplin, a radical abolitionist, who had helped several Washington slaves run away. Chaplin, in turn, contacted a fellow activist in Philadelphia

who recommended Daniel Drayton to organize the escape of the Bells. Drayton was willing and experienced; a year earlier, he had transported an enslaved family of six from Washington to Philadelphia by boat. Drayton paid 100 dollars to Edward Sayres, the captain of the *Pearl*, to sail to Washington, and hired waterman Chester English to pick up the fugitives and take them to Philadelphia. When Drayton and his crew docked at the Washington wharf, they had no idea how many slaves would come aboard. The mission of the *Pearl* created such excitement within the African-American community that seventy-six enslaved men, women and children, a far larger number than Drayton imagined, took advantage of this well-financed effort to gain freedom.

Pacheco describes well the three days that followed the capture of the *Pearl*, when mobs converged on the streets to quash antislavery agitation in the nation's capital. As word of the *Pearl* spread throughout the city, several men gathered at the Washington City Jail to seize and then lynch Drayton, Sayres, and English. They also wanted to destroy the press offices of the *National Era*, an antislavery newspaper edited by Gamaliel Bailey. Erroneously convinced of Bailey's complicity in planning the mass escape, the mob threw bricks and stones and broke several windows of the *Era's* offices. These posses also targeted Ohio Congressman Joshua Giddings, perhaps the most strident of the antislavery legislators. From the beginning of the riots, the mob was on the lookout for Giddings. When the Congressman walked to the jail to offer his sympathy and to promise legal assistance to Drayton and his crew, the mobs converged on the prison

again and tried to block his entrance. Undeterred, Giddings completed his visit, and though the jailers warned him that they could not protect him when he left, he faced the mob and walked away unharmed. Despite the enormity of the threat, these antislavery agitators survived largely because the police force restrained the mob. Pacheco notes that the numbers of policemen increased as the mob began to diminish. In the end, Drayton and his crew were not lynched and faced trial; Bailey and his newspaper endured; and Joshua Giddings continued to press for the end of slavery.

The fugitives on board the *Pearl* did not fare nearly as well, though Pacheco maintains that the antislavery movement supported them as much as possible. Most owners sold their slaves after retrieving them from the *Pearl*. Thanks to the reports submitted by New York Congressman John I. Slingerland to antislavery organs, Northerners learned of the sale of the erstwhile fugitives. By April 21, 1848, slave traders had put fifty of them onto rail cars bound for Baltimore, where they would receive transport to the Lower South—perhaps to New Orleans, Natchez, or Huntsville. Pacheco tries to trace the whereabouts of *Pearl* fugitives who remained in the District, but can only positively account for one, a man named Hannibal, owned by Washington resident Arianna Lyles as of 1862. One abolitionist organ claimed that a Washingtonian purchased the freedom of Mary Bell and two children, but Pacheco questions the accuracy of that account. Pacheco describes in depth the efforts of Paul and Amelia Edmonson to secure the freedom of their six children: Richard, Samuel, Ephraim, John, Mary, and Emily. Following their capture on the *Pearl*, their owners sold them to the Alexandria, Virginia, slave-trading firm of Bruin and Hill, which, in turn, transported them to New Orleans. Meanwhile, Paul and Amelia contacted antislavery sympathizers and managed to enlist the assistance of the prominent Beecher family. Henry Ward Beecher used his pulpit to deliver the message of the Edmonson family and managed to raise the money to purchase the freedom of the six Edmonson children. His sister Harriet Beecher Stowe published the story of the Edmonsons, which informed her highly influential work *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Later, the Beechers also raised money to send Mary and Emily to Oberlin College.

Pacheco's account of the *Pearl* focuses so much upon the antislavery movement that it slights the role of the African-American community in its planning. Pacheco correctly points out that activists such as Chaplin and Cleveland raised the money and organized the expedition, but she dismisses the central role accorded to

African Americans by Harriet Beecher Stowe and John Paynter (p. 70). Although both these authors have biases and misconceptions regarding the *Pearl*, their conclusions regarding the African-American community are not entirely misplaced. African Americans transformed Drayton's expedition from a modest slave escape of seven slaves to a major one of seventy-six slaves without the knowledge of the organizers or crew. As Pacheco points out, the entire community was aware of the *Pearl*'s mission. Such secrecy indicates a high level of organization and unity within the African-American community. Certainly, the participation of seventy-six slaves demonstrates the fervent desire for freedom throughout this community. Their activism changed Drayton's expedition into one so noteworthy that riots broke out in Washington for three days, northerners read about the fugitives for weeks in abolitionist organs, and Congress vociferously debated its implications.

Pacheco misses this point in part because her portrayal of this community does not include free blacks. "Slavery in the Nation's Capital," the book's weakest chapter, represents her attempt to describe the African-American community and relies largely upon travel accounts, antislavery reporting, and a reading of the literature on Washington and urban slavery. She overlooks the presence of a large number of free blacks: in 1848, they outnumbered slaves by more than three to one. Only one other slaveholding city, Baltimore, had more free black than slave residents. A large, viable free black community provided considerable opportunities to enslaved men and women. Enslaved and free black people frequently married, worshipped together, and formed a cohesive community that actively sought the freedom of its members. Moreover, free black activists frequently visited Philadelphia to nurture important ties to the antislavery movement. Pacheco missed an opportunity to provide insight into the role of this dynamic and resilient community in the Underground Railroad.[2]

Pacheco focuses not only on the local impact of the *Pearl* but also on its national ramifications, as she believes it is a neglected event in the history of the sectional crisis. She notes that the *Pearl* influenced the debate of the Fugitive Slave Law and the end of the slave trade in the District in 1850. On at least two occasions, southern representatives brought up the specter of the *Pearl* to advocate for a strong Fugitive Slave Law. Congressman Thomas L. Clingman of North Carolina believed that District slave owners regarded the number of fugitives so corrosive to the city's slave system that they considered its destruction inevitable (p. 196). In the summer

of 1850, the capture of William Chaplin with two runaway slaves—owned by two Southern Congressmen—in Silver Spring, Maryland, brought back memories of the *Pearl*. Senator Henry Foote of Mississippi recalled it as “one of the most enormous outrages ever perpetrated on rights of property, ... one of the most unblushing, high-handed, fiendish, outrageous attacks upon the rights of property existing in the District” (p. 207). In addition to these examples, Pacheco recounts arguments pressing for federal protection of fugitive slave posses that certainly complement Clingman’s and Foote’s views but do not expressly mention the *Pearl*. Pacheco also claims that the *Pearl* heightened distaste for the slave trade in the District, as several Congressmen and Senators cited the cruelty of the slave pens in their support of the bill to ban such trading. For these reasons, Pacheco maintains that the *Pearl* was instrumental to the adoption of the Compromise of 1850 and should be taught to all students of American history.

Pacheco overstates the role of the *Pearl* in the Compromise. The southern desire for an effective Fugitive Slave Law was so longstanding and fervent that the *Pearl* probably did not add urgency to the cause of southern lawmakers, but rather merely validated their argument. Likewise, the push to ban the interstate slave trade dated nearly to the founding of the District and included a petition campaign that overwhelmed Congress and led to the passage of a gag rule preventing the reading of these petitions in 1837. Again, the *Pearl* provided lawmakers an immediate and emotional reference point, but did not significantly alter the debate leading to the Compromise.[3]

Even without establishing the significance of the *Pearl* in this legislation, Pacheco brings out its importance as an endeavor by the antislavery movement. She ably recounts the northern and southern reaction to the attempted mass escape and brings out the uncomfortable position of the District within the highly charged sectional debate. In the process, Pacheco’s study touches upon some significant themes in southern history: the

threat posed by African-American communities to the broader urban society; law and order within free and slave societies; and relations between slave owners, non-slaveholders, and antislavery advocates in the Chesapeake region. Although Pacheco frustrates the reader by not fully developing these themes, she provides a solid account of an almost mythic event among local historians that establishes its importance within the antislavery movement. *The Pearl: A Failed Slave Escape on the Potomac*, therefore, constitutes a significant contribution to the growing literature on antebellum Washington.

Notes

[1]. The story of the *Pearl* has been widely told. Popular accounts include Mary Kay Ricks, “A Passage to Freedom” *Washington Post Magazine* (February 17, 2002), p. W20; and a play by Judlyne A. Lilly, “The Pearl,” presented by The Source Theatre in Washington, D.C., in February 1992. Both of these accounts, Lilly’s in particular, draws on the work of John H. Paynter, a descendent of one of the *Pearl* fugitives: “The Fugitives of the *Pearl*,” *Journal of Negro History* 1 (July 1916): pp. 234-264; and *The Fugitives of the Pearl* (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1930). For scholarly accounts, see Stanley Harold, *Subversives: Antislavery Community in Washington, D.C., 1828-1865* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003) and Hilary Russell, “Underground Railroad Activists in Washington, D.C.,” *Washington History* 13, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2002): pp. 38-39.

[2]. For more on the ties between free black and enslaved people, see Mary Beth Corrigan, “A Social Union of Heart and Effort: The African American Family on the Eve of Emancipation,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Maryland, 1996).

[3]. On the slave trade within Washington and its role within the sectional debate, see Mary Beth Corrigan, “Imaginary Cruelties? A History of the Slave Trade in Washington, D.C.,” *Washington History* 13, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2002): pp. 4-27.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-dc>

Citation: Mary Beth Corrigan. Review of Pacheco, Josephine F., *The Pearl: A Failed Slave Escape on the Potomac*. H-DC, H-Net Reviews. April, 2006.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11612>

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.