

Women's History Month

Mary Ellen Pleasant



Born 19 August between 1812–1817

Died January 4, 1904
[San Francisco, California](#), USA

Known for Entrepreneur and abolitionist

Mary Ellen Pleasant (19 August 1814 – 4 January 1904) was a successful 19th-century [American entrepreneur](#), financier, real estate magnate and abolitionist whose life is shrouded in mystery. She identified herself as "a capitalist by profession" in the [1890 United States Census](#).^[1] The press called her "Mammy" Pleasant but she did not approve, stating "I don't like to be called mammy by everybody. Put. that. down. I am not mammy to everybody in California." In her autobiography published in San Francisco's *Pandemonium of the Press* in January 1902, she stated her mother was a full blooded Louisiana negress and her father was a native Kanaka (Hawaiian), and when she was six years of age, she was sent to Nantucket to live with a Quaker woman named Hussey. She worked on the [Underground Railroad](#) across many states and then helped bring it to [California](#) during the [Gold Rush](#) Era. She was a friend and financial supporter of [John Brown](#), and was well known in abolitionist circles. After the [Civil War](#), she took her battles to the courts in the 1860s and won several [civil rights](#) victories, one of which was cited and upheld in the 1980s and resulted in her being called "The Mother of Human Rights in California".^[2]



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Early years^[edit]

Pleasant made contradictory claims about her earliest years, and her exact origin remains unclear.^[2] Her birthday is known to be August 19, but the year is in dispute. Her gravestone at [Tulocay Cemetery](#) in [Napa, California](#), states 1812, although most sources list her birth as 1814.^[3] In one version of her memoirs dictated to her god-daughter Charlotte Downs, she claimed she was born a slave to a [Voodoo priestess](#) and [John Hampden Pleasants](#), youngest son of [Governor of Virginia James Pleasants](#). In any case, she showed up in [Nantucket, Massachusetts](#) circa 1827 as a 10- to 13-year-old [bonded servant](#) to a storekeeper, "[Grandma Hussey](#)". She worked out her bondage, then became a family member and lifelong friend to Hussey's granddaughter [Phoebe Hussey Gardner](#). The Husseys were deeply involved in the abolitionist movement, and Pleasant met many of the famous abolitionists.

Career and marriages

With the support of the Hussey/Gardners, she often passed as white. Pleasant married James Smith, a wealthy flour contractor and plantation owner who had freed his slaves and was also able to pass as white. She worked with Smith as a "slave stealer" on the [Underground Railroad](#) until his death about four years later. They transported slaves to northern states such as Ohio and even as far as [Canada](#). Smith left instructions and money for her to continue the work after his death.

She began a partnership with [John James \("J.J."\) Pleasants](#) circa 1848. Although no official records exist of their marriage, it was probably conducted by their friend Captain Gardner, Phoebe's husband, aboard his boat. They continued Smith's work for a few more years, when increasing attention from slavers forced a move to [New Orleans](#). J.J. Pleasants appears to have been a close relative of Marie Laveau's husband, and there is some indication that Pleasant and [Laveau](#) met and consulted many times before Pleasant left New Orleans by boat for [San Francisco](#) in April 1852. J. J. had gone ahead and written back that the area seemed promising for the Underground Railroad.

When Mary Ellen arrived in [San Francisco](#), she passed as white, using her first husband's name among the whites, and took jobs running exclusive men's eating establishments, starting with the [Case and Heiser](#). She met most of the founders of the city as she catered lavish meals, and she benefited from the tidbits of financial gossip and deals usually tossed around at the tables. She engaged a young clerk, Thomas Bell, at the [Bank of California](#) and they began to make money based on her tips and guidance. Thomas made money of his own, especially in [quicksilver](#), and by 1875 they had amassed a 30 million dollar fortune (roughly 647 million dollars in 2017^[4]) between them. J.J., who had worked with Mary Ellen from the slave-stealing days to the civil rights court battles of the 1860s and '70s, died in 1877 of diabetes.

Mary Ellen did not conceal her race from other blacks, and was adept at finding jobs for those brought in by Underground Railroad activities. Some of the people she sponsored became important black leaders in the city. She left San Francisco from 1857 to 1859 to help [John Brown](#). She was said to have actively supported his cause with money and work. There was a note from her in his pocket when he was arrested after the [Harpers Ferry Armory](#) incident, but as it was only signed with the initials "MEP" (which were misread as "WEP"). She was not caught. She returned to San Francisco to continue her work there, where she was known as the "Black City Hall".^[5]

After the Civil War, Pleasant publicly changed her racial designation in the City Directory from "White" to "Black", causing a little stir among some whites. She began a series of court battles to fight laws prohibiting blacks from riding trolleys and other such abuses.

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Suing over streetcar segregation

Pleasant successfully attacked racial discrimination in [San Francisco](#) public conveyances after she and two other black women were ejected from a city streetcar in 1866. She filed two lawsuits. The first, against the Omnibus Railroad Company, was withdrawn after the company promised to allow African-Americans to board their streetcars.^{[6]:51} The second case, *Pleasant v. North Beach & Mission Railroad Company*, went to the [California Supreme Court](#) and took two years to complete. In the city, the case outlawed segregation in the city's public conveyances.^[7] However, at the State Supreme Court, the damages awarded against her at the trial court were reversed and found excessive.^{[6]:54}

Later life

Later in life, a series of court battles with [Sarah Althea Hill](#), Senator [William Sharon](#), and the family of business associate Thomas Bell, including his widow Teresa Bell and his son [Fred Bell](#), damaged Pleasant's reputation and cost her resources and wealth. Pleasant died in [San Francisco, California](#) on January 4, 1904 in poverty.

Late in life, she was befriended by Olive Sherwood, and she was buried in the Sherwood family plot in Tulocay Cemetery, Napa, California. Her gravesite is marked with a metal sculpture that was dedicated on June 11, 2011 .^[8]

Posthumous recognition

Pleasant has been featured or mentioned in several works of fiction. [Michelle Cliff](#)'s 1993 book "Free Enterprise" is subtitled "A Novel of Mary Ellen Pleasant" and features her abolitionist activities.^[9] The ghost of Mary Ellen Pleasant is a character in the 1997 novel *Earthquake Weather*, by Tim Powers. Karen Joy Fowler's historical novel *Sister Noon*, published in 2001, features Pleasant as a central character, and Thomas Bell and Teresa Bell as secondary characters.^[10]

Pleasant has also been discussed in film and television. The 2008 documentary Meet Mary Pleasant covered her life,^[11] and a segment of a 2013 episode of the [Comedy Central](#) series [Drunk History](#) covered Pleasant's life.^[12] Pleasant was portrayed by [Lisa Bonet](#).

In 1974, the city of San Francisco designated [eucalyptus](#) trees that Pleasant had planted outside her mansion at the southwest corner of Octavia and Bush streets in San Francisco as a Structure of Merit.^[13] The trees and associated plaque are now known as Mary Ellen Pleasant Memorial Park, which is the smallest park in San Francisco.^[14] Her burial site has been designated a "Network to Freedom" site by the National Park Service.^[8]