



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

**“I would rather
be a corpse
than a coward.”**

Mary Ellen Pleasant



Self-made millionaire [Mary Ellen Pleasant](#) never learned to read or write, yet she became a notorious [anti-slavery crusader](#) and the secret funder of abolitionist John Brown’s failed insurrection at Harper’s Ferry.

Born in Philadelphia in 1814 to parents of mixed race, Pleasant was known for her quick wit and street smarts. She also had a [reputation](#) for embellishing her life experiences when it suited her needs. In 1901, she [dictated](#) her autobiography to a journalist, but much

of her history is undocumented because of conflicting narratives, and probably because she was a woman of color.

As a child, Pleasant was sent by her parents to live as an [indentured servant](#) to a Quaker family on Nantucket. Determined to educate herself whenever and wherever she could, Pleasant became a clerk in the family store and learned the complexities of running a business. Like many Quakers, the family with whom Pleasant lived were abolitionists. Through their connections she was initiated into Nantucket's Anti-Slavery Society and became actively involved in helping fugitive slaves escape via the Underground Railroad.

As a young woman in the 1840s, Pleasant moved to Boston and became a tailor's assistant. She [married](#) James Smith, a wealthy mixed-race merchant who shared her anti-slavery conviction. According to fragments of a letter Pleasant wrote, her husband passed as white. He often wrote for the country's leading abolitionist paper, [The Liberator](#) which brought the couple into the inner circles of the movement. The pair [helped](#) slaves escape to Canada, Nova Scotia, and Mexico.

Pleasant's husband died in 1848 and left her with an inheritance worth more than \$1 million in today's dollars. She threw herself more boldly into anti-slavery work and began a partnership, or possibly a marriage, with a former slave named John James Pleasant whose last name she adopted.

Like Harriet Tubman, Pleasant risked her life by venturing onto Southern plantations to guide slaves to freedom. She [adopted disguises](#), even masquerading as a jockey or stable boy to avoid suspicion. Eventually, her reputation made her a [hunted woman](#). She fled first to New Orleans, then to San Francisco in [1852](#). There, Pleasant took a job [cooking](#) for a prominent family. She used her position to eavesdrop on conversations of the wealthy who came to dine and overheard stock tips and financial opportunities that she subsequently acted on. Investing funds inherited from her first husband, Pleasant [purchased](#) restaurants, laundries, and homes throughout the city, creating a vast fortune.

She also put her money to work in other ways. In 1859, the abolitionist John Brown was hung for his attempt to start a slave insurrection at Harper's Ferry. An anonymous note in his pocket read: "The ax is laid at the foot of the tree. When the first blow is struck, there will be more money to help."



Mary Ellen Pleasant
Image/Wikimedia

The identity of the person who had funded Brown's purchase of guns, ammunition, and horses, remained a mystery until 1901. "Before I pass away," [Pleasant said](#), while dictating her autobiography, "I wish to clear the identity of the party who furnished John Brown with most of his money to start the fight at Harpers Ferry and who signed the letter found on him when he was arrested." She admitted to donating \$30,000 (almost \$900,000 in 2022 dollars).

During the Civil War, Pleasant [provided](#) assistance to illegally enslaved Blacks in California, a free state since 1850. She hid them in her own home and the homes of friends. Following the war, Pleasant used her fortune to help former slaves relocate to San Francisco and found them homes and jobs. Pleasant also aided young women trying to escape exploitative men in the rough, frontier atmosphere of San Francisco by helping them relocate and find work.

Pleasant's nickname, "[Mother of California Civil Rights](#)", resulted from two important legal cases. In 1863, she financed a lawsuit that gave Black men and women the right to have their testimonies heard in California courts. In 1866, Pleasant organized a sit-in of San

Francisco streetcars because Black passengers were denied their use. She filed a [lawsuit](#) against the North Beach and Mission Railroad Co., and won. The decision was appealed but was later upheld by the California State Supreme Court in 1868.

Although her reputation as a philanthropist and entrepreneur earned her friends across many social circles, Pleasant was plagued by scandal later in life. Her ownership of several boarding houses attracted rumors that they were brothels for well-to-do men.

Another [controversy erupted](#) when Pleasant moved in with a wealthy couple to become their housekeeper. Gossip suggested that she was the man's lover or a cunning thief extorting significant sums from her employer. When the man fell to his death from an upstairs window, rumors erupted that Pleasant had murdered him. Charges were never brought, but at the age of 85, Pleasant was forced to move out of the estate which she asserted belonged to her. In 1899, Pleasant declared bankruptcy, although at the time, the Oakland Tribune [estimated](#) her worth at between \$35,000 to \$150,000.



Designed by Mary Ellen Pleasant but named for her employer, Bell Mansion was located at 1661 Octavia St. in San Francisco.



Despite the controversy, Pleasant received an outpouring of get-well cards, flowers, and well wishes from the community when she fell ill before her death in 1904. An article in The San Francisco Examiner [said](#) that her “deeds of charity are as numerous as the gray hairs on her proud old head.”

In 1976, the African American Historical and Cultural Society created [Memorial Park](#) in San Francisco to honor Pleasant. The park is on the [site](#) of her formerly disputed mansion. A ranch that she had purchased in Sonoma, Beltane, was [designated](#) a

Black historical site by the National Park Service in 2021. Pleasant is buried in Napa and her gravesite is marked with a sculpture that was dedicated in 2011.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask a friend: How much of your hard-earned money would you be willing to give to assist others?

Ask yourself: Would you risk your life repeatedly, as Mary Ellen Pleasant did, to help others?

Thank you Doreen and Nancy for suggesting that I research Mary Ellen Pleasant. Do you know a hidden story you'd like to share? If so, email me and I'll look look into it!

[Sharon Spaulding](#) is a feminist historian and researcher who specializes in the life and times of Mary Ware Dennett (1872-1947). The curator of Dennett's family archives, Spaulding is at work on a book about Dennett. In 2020,



Time magazine included Dennett as one of the most important women in American history.

Spaulding received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her work. Her journalism has appeared in [Ms. Magazine](#), [Smithsonian](#), [New Hampshire Magazine](#), BOLD, and others. She lives near Salt Lake City with her husband and two dogs.

Sharon is available to delight audiences with the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. Contact her at: Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com.

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