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The ghost who haunts the smallest park in San Francisco changed America



Andrew Chamings

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The corner of Bush and Octavia streets, San Francisco, Oct. 14, 2020.

Andrew Chamings

I'm sat on the corner of Bush and Octavia streets in Pacific Heights on a breezy October day. On the wind is the sweet, minty smell of eucalyptus. A quiet blankets the city, still healing from the tumult of 2020.

The reason I'm here, at what has been described as the most haunted corner in the city, is not exactly to *find* a ghost, but maybe to understand one.

The six giant trees rustling above my head were planted over a century ago not by a spirit, but by a historical figure whose life was more tragic, heroic and confounding than any ghost story.

A Black woman who passed as white, Mary Ellen Pleasant spent her life fighting to empower African Americans and end slavery. She was both celebrated as the "Mother of Human Rights in California," but also demonized as a brothel-owning, magic-weaving, murderous "Voodoo queen."

No one knows for sure exactly where or even when Pleasant was born (her three memoirs even contradict each other), but she once wrote that her mother was a Black Voodoo priestess and her father was the son of Virginia Gov. James Pleasants.

After working her way out of indentured servitude to an abolitionist family in Nantucket, Massachusetts, Pleasants helped enslaved people escape the South on the Underground Railroad before turning her eyes to California.

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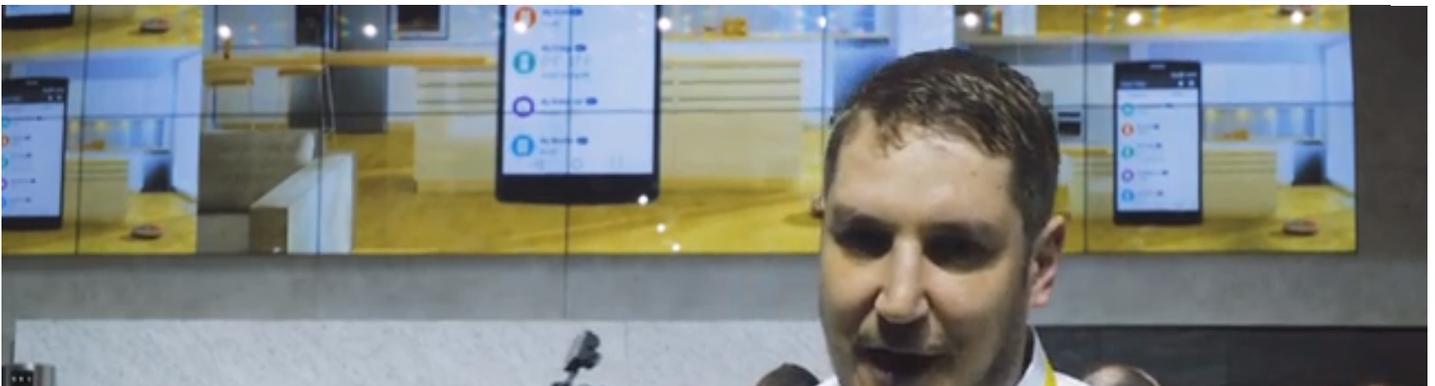
Mary Ellen Pleasant, date unknown.
Archival / Unknown

Pleasant was in her mid-30s when she caught wind that the new Gold Rush-rich city of San Francisco seemed promising as a safe terminus for the railroad, and maybe a place where she could gather funds to fight the ultimate fight — the abolition of slavery in America.

When she stepped foot onto San Francisco's Embarcadero in 1852, the city was in a fervor as 300,000 people arrived in California to find their riches. Pleasant immediately saw her fortune not on the banks of the American River, but in the young men teeming through the new city's vice-ridden streets.

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Still passing as a white woman, Pleasant set up classy boarding houses and restaurants for men across the city, from gold miners to wealthy, powerful politicians, bringing a little shine to the muddy, lawless town.

With her new business partner, a young white banker named Thomas Bell, Pleasant created a tiny empire. She built laundromats, flour stores and restaurants. Every powerful man in the city knew her and her establishments. From the outside it seemed that she was simply a shrewd, incredibly successful businesswoman, but Pleasant was working an agenda that would lead to a revolution.

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She became entwined in the elite inner circles in the city. The 11th governor of California, Newton Booth, lived in her Washington Street boarding house, and she even threw him a gala to celebrate his inauguration.

Pleasant learned every secret of the city and weaponized them to lift Black people up. Living as a double agent of sorts, she never hid her identity to the Black residents of San Francisco, who in turn kept her race a secret as she used her leverage to empower the burgeoning Black community in business and opportunity. She secured them housing, jobs, loans, funded legal battles and made it acceptable for high society to hire Black employees.

She became reverentially known as "Black City Hall" by her African American peers, as the rest of the city still thought her to be white, though rumors and gossip around the enigmatic woman would soon start to close in.

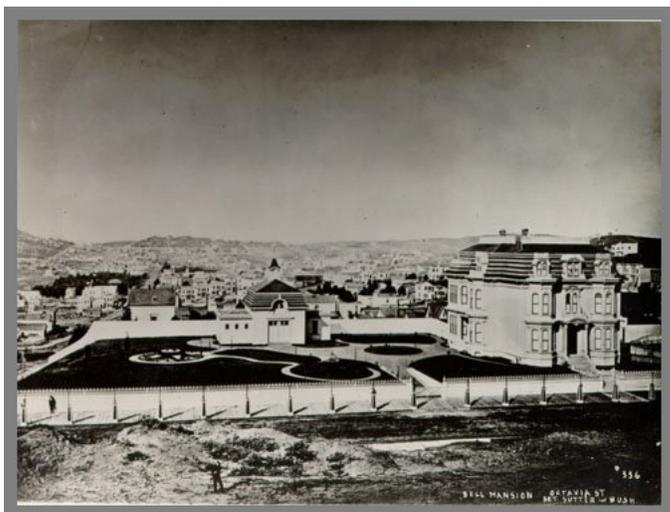
Beyond fighting the secret fight for equality on the West Coast, Pleasant had bigger, more revolutionary goals.

In 1857, she took a two-year departure from San Francisco to help famed abolitionist John Brown lead an uprising against slavery that would become known as a dress rehearsal for the Civil War — the Harper's Ferry Revolt. The attempted uprising in Virginia, in which Colonel Robert E. Lee would defeat the 22 abolitionist insurgents, ended with Brown hanged for treason.

At his execution, a note was found in his pocket from "M.E.P" that read: "The ax is laid at the root of the tree. When the first blow is struck, there will be more money to help."

Pleasant escaped capture and returned to San Francisco, later admitting she helped fund the fight that left America teetering on the edge of war. The sum she donated was \$30,000 – almost \$1 million today.

Back in San Francisco, Pleasant and Bell had amassed a fortune of \$30 million (around \$650 million now) and together they built an extravagant mansion on the corner of Octavia and Bush, and with it an entire walled block of manicured grounds.



Mary Ellen Pleasant's mansion and grounds on Bush and Octavia streets, San Francisco. Date unknown.
Archival / Unknown

As word spread of Pleasant's activism with John Brown, alongside the rumor that she may actually be Black herself, San Franciscans gossiped about how the opulent mansion was in fact a brothel. The city newspapers wrote salacious rumors about the witchcraft and orgies happening behind the ornate doors in Pacific Heights.

But Pleasant wasn't dissuaded from her fight by the tabloids, and for the first time in her life identified herself as "Black" on the post-Civil War census. She also started litigating for equality.

A century before Rosa Parks would spark the Civil Rights Movement by refusing to relinquish her seat on an Alabama bus, Pleasant was removed from a San Francisco street car because of the color of her skin. She took the case to the state Supreme Court and won, resulting in the outlawing of segregation on San Francisco's public conveyances.

The revelation that a Black woman had been running the halls of power in San Francisco, and winning battles in court, exacerbated the hatred aimed at her from the press and on the street.

The "Voodoo queen" on Octavia Street was a target from every angle, but again, Pleasant didn't back down.

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“My cause was the cause of freedom and equality for myself and for my people. And I'd rather be a corpse than a coward,” she wrote in an unpublished memoir.



Mary Ellen Pleasant's former mansion, circa 1928. The eucalyptus trees that still stand today can be seen on Octavia Street on the left.

Archival / Unknown

Among the Black community she became fondly known as "Mammy Pleasant," but she didn't take kindly to others using it.

In what may be one of the first examples of a person of color telling a white person in power to not appropriate their language, Pleasant told the San Francisco Call:

"I don't like to be called mammy by everybody. Put. That. Down. I am not mammy to everybody in California. I received a letter from a pastor in Sacramento. It was addressed to Mammy Pleasant. I wrote back to him on his own paper that my name was Mrs. Mary E. Pleasant. I wouldn't waste any of my paper on him."

In later life, Pleasant attempted further litigation against racial practices but was largely unsuccessful, as the newspapers continued to denigrate her character. The San Francisco Chronicle continued to spread outlandish rumors, including the allegation that she stole babies and sold them on a black market.



The San Francisco Chronicle, Jan. 19, 1902. The city's press reveled in painting Mary Ellen Pleasant as a nefarious, magical evildoer. This story published in the San Francisco Chronicle two years prior to her death said Pleasant performed "weird voodoo rites" and kept her household under "a sort of hypnotic spell." The story also describes how Pleasant held "strange orgies" and fed the children "stale buns and meat ostensibly bought for chickens."

San Francisco Chronicle

After funding numerous battles for equality, and losing multiple court cases, Pleasant died in poverty in San Francisco in 1904, and was buried in Napa, where a statue adorns her grave today.

Her mansion and grounds on Octavia Street were pulled down in 1928, but the eucalyptus trees she planted, like the idea that the fight against inequality should be fought and won, still stand strong today.

In 1974, the city of San Francisco designated the trees that Pleasant had planted as a Structure of Merit. The trees and plaque are now known as Mary Ellen Pleasant Memorial Park, the smallest park in San Francisco.



Mary Ellen Pleasant Memorial Plaque on the corner of Bush and Octavia streets, San Francisco, Oct. 14, 2020.

Andrew Chamings

The tiny park on the corner of Bush and Octavia is now the starting point for San Francisco's ghost tours, where ghost hunters are told that Pleasant's spirit summons chills, frightens dogs and even throws nuts from her trees at passersby. While the tours present the spooky tales as myth, stories are repeated to this day about how Pleasant was a Voodoo sorcerer who was once seen eating a man's brains, and was responsible for the deaths of four people.

Those horror stories still aren't true, and I don't believe in ghosts, but amid everything that's still happening in America over 150 years later, sitting on this pretty corner of San Francisco, it feels like Mary Ellen Pleasant's spirit is out there somewhere.



The eucalyptus trees on Octavia Street, San Francisco, Oct. 14, 2020.
Andrew Chamings

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