

Marker for 'mother of civil rights in California'

STATE HISTORY Marker for slave who became tycoon

Trevor R. Hunnicutt, Special to The Chronicle Published 4:00 am, Monday, June 27, 2011

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Dr. Susheel Bibbs, a Mary Ellen Pleasant scholar, speaks at the gravestone dedication for Mary Ellen Pleasant, a prominent figure in the Civil Rights movement at Tulocay Cemetery in Napa, Calif., on Saturday, June 11, 2011. Dr. Bibbs has done international research on Pleasant as well as enactments (chautauquas), based on her research.

Though she is a pioneer in California history - a woman born into slavery who became a millionaire and a forerunner

to civil rights leaders like **Martin Luther King Jr. - Mary Ellen Pleasant** was nearly forgotten after her death in 1904.

Opponents maligned her in newspapers, her wealth was scattered, and when her name was spoken at all, it was with the added sobriquet "mammy," which she despised.

Now a group of Pleasant's champions are fighting to make sure she is restored as the "mother of civil rights in California." On June 11, several of them gathered at Napa's Tulocay Cemetery to dedicate a new gravestone for her burial site.

"Whenever we have an African American who is a marker for freedom, then it's very important that we lift that ancestor so that others can see that person and benefit from their achievements," said **Susheel Bibbs**, who has researched Pleasant's life. "She reached across boundaries of race and class yet didn't lose sight of her goal, which was liberty for herself and her people."

Pleasant mastered the art of reinvention, transforming herself from slave to tycoon in raucous Gold Rush San Francisco. She rescued other slaves and successfully sued San Francisco streetcar operators for black citizens' right to equal access in 1868.

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Past full of falsehoods

Yet Pleasant has been the subject of little serious scholarship. Her documented life is a minefield of falsehoods and contradictions. One major source of information is Pleasant herself, who wrote often untruthfully about her investments and the dates and circumstances of her birth.

Bibbs, a former UC Berkeley communications professor, became fascinated with Pleasant in 1991 while researching a role based on her life for an opera that never came to be. She went on to write a book, "Heritage of Power" (MEP Productions; \$24.95), and develop a one-woman show about Pleasant which she performs locally and made into the PBS film "Meet Mary Pleasant."

Bibbs said Pleasant sometimes lied about her circumstances - removing shameful or discreditable elements from her biography - to deflect criticism for her outspokenness.

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"When I look at what she said, it had a lot to do with people respecting her, and at times when she was being disrespected, she altered things," said Bibbs, noting that in those years of Yellow Journalism, Pleasant's opponents paid to have false and scandalous stories printed about her. **William Sharon**, a U.S. senator from Nevada who owned **real estate** in California and against whom Pleasant testified in his divorce proceedings, was her most notorious rival. Other powerful community members fought against the causes she espoused and wrangled with her in business dealings.

Secrets kept power

Lynn M. Hudson, author of another book about Pleasant, "The Making of 'Mammy Pleasant': A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco," (University of Illinois Press; \$20) said that Pleasant's "secrets" - like claiming to be a servant when she was wealthy - allowed her to maintain power in an age when she was targeted as a prominent black woman.

According to Pleasant's private memoirs, she was born to a slave who was ultimately killed for practicing voodoo. Her father was **John Hampden Pleasants**, the son of a former Virginia governor who owned the plantation on which Pleasant's mother worked. The exact date of her birth is unknown but assumed to be between 1814 and 1817. Bibbs says it is difficult to prove whether her mother was killed or know how Pleasant was freed, but that much of the rest of her story about being born into slavery checks out.

Once free, Pleasant moved to Nantucket, Mass., and became an indentured general-store clerk while living with a Quaker family. She eventually married a radical abolitionist and, after his death, vowed to use his fortune to better the lives of other black Americans.

After several risky, peripatetic years as a slave rescuer, Pleasant fled to San Francisco on a steamer in 1851. Onboard, she met merchant **Thomas Bell**, who became her business partner. Pleasant eventually owned boarding houses, restaurants, brothels, and invested in mining, railroads and real estate. At one time, she owned a 30-room mansion on the corner of Octavia and Bush, now the site of a memorial plaque near six trees she planted on her property more than a century ago.

Wealth helped in court

Her fortune enabled her to fight civil rights battles in court, such as the desegregation of streetcars in North Beach almost a century before the Montgomery bus boycotts, leading some to see her as a progenitor to King. Despite the mystery surrounding her life, she became an inspiration to generations of amateur researchers and historians.

Suzy Jones, whose mother studied Pleasant, joined Bibbs in donating money for the white Sierra granite plaque that now adorns the grave site. She wants to see that a second memorial plaque at Fillmore and O'Farrell streets is replaced with one

that does not use the word "mammy."

Jones, a biotechnology financier, said that Pleasant's sense of justice has inspired her to be "driven by a higher purpose."

"When you have that (consciousness) you are less likely to become disenfranchised or to become a victim to anything or anybody," said Jones. She believes that preserving Pleasant's history is crucial, especially since the Bay Area Black community has dwindled.

The theme of preservation was on display at the recent gravestone dedication ceremony. Pleasant, who has no living relatives, is buried in a plot belonging to a family that cared for her in her later years.

Halifu Osumare, the officiant at the recent cemetery ceremony, stood on Pleasant's grave site and poured out water from a dish. Osumare explained that the tradition comes from Yoruba culture, as does the belief that ancestors live as long as their names are called out.

"Mary Ellen Pleasant," Osumare chanted between Yoruba dialogue and song. The words hung in the air. "Love and respect to you."

For more information about Mary Ellen Pleasant, go to bit.ly/jOq9Ik or mepleasant.com. Some of Pleasant's private papers and records can be found in the San Francisco Public Library's San Francisco History Center or African American Center.

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