Guide to the Mary Ellen Pleasant Financial Correspondence and Notes MS.R.102

Finding aid prepared by Olivier Muth, 2004; revised by Jolene Beiser, 2021.
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Contributing Institution: Special Collections and Archives, University of California, Irvine Libraries
Title: Mary Ellen Pleasant financial correspondence and notes
Creator: Pleasant, Mary Ellen
Identifier/Call Number: MS.R.102
Physical Description: 0.1 Linear Feet (1 oversize folder)
Date (inclusive): 1892-1897
Abstract: NOTE: This finding aid has been flagged for review and is currently under revision (2021-02-11) This collection consists of materials documenting the financial affairs of Mary Ellen Pleasant, an African American woman and entrepreneur known as the Mother of Civil Rights in California. Items include a small autograph note; a signed promissory note; three handwritten letters from A. P. Overton, president of the Savings Bank of Santa Rosa (California), to Pleasant; and three handwritten copy letters from Pleasant to Overton. All items concern a promissory note for $3,000 and a mortgage to a Mrs. Guimaraes.
Language of Material: English.
Access
Collection open for research.
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Biography
Mary Ellen Pleasant, referred to as the Mother of Civil Rights in California, was an African American woman who was born a slave near Augusta, Georgia, in 1814. In the 1840s she married James W. Smith, who died suddenly between 1844 and 1848. In the 1850s she became the wife of John James Pleasance (the name was later anglicized to "Pleasant"). In 1852, to escape persecution under the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, she moved to San Francisco and ran her own boardinghouse. The money she earned was used to aid runaway slaves, provide legal assistance to them, and acquire numerous other businesses in California. Pleasant became an expert capitalist, amassing a $30,000,000 fortune with her secret partner, Thomas Bell, a Scotsman. In 1858 she decided to return to the East Coast to help her former brother-in-law gain his freedom from slavery and to work with abolitionist John Brown. She continued to fight for this cause even after the Emancipation Proclamation and the California Right-of-Testimony (the right to testify in court) were promulgated in 1863. In 1883 she even helped challenge the powerful Senator William Sharon in a highly publicized human rights case. Mary Ellen Pleasant died in 1904.
For further biographical information, see Lynn M. Hudson's biography on Mary Ellen Pleasant, and Susheel Bibbs, Heritage of power (San Francisco: MEP Productions, 1998). A biographical article on Mary Ellen Pleasant is also available online through "MEP Productions" (http://www.mepleasant.com).
Scope and Content of Collection
This collection consists of materials documenting the financial affairs of Mary Ellen Pleasant, an African American woman and entrepreneur known as the Mother of Civil Rights in California. Items include a small autograph note; a signed promissory note; three handwritten letters from A. P. Overton, president of the Savings Bank of Santa Rosa (California), to Pleasant; and three handwritten copy letters from Pleasant to Overton. All items concern a promissory note for $3,000 and a mortgage to a Mrs. Guimaraes.
Arrangement
The collection is arranged by genre of material.
Subjects and Indexing Terms
African American women -- California -- San Francisco.
African American businesspeople -- California -- San Francisco.
Abolitionists.
Letters -- California -- 19th century -- Women authors.
Businesspeople.
Pleasant, Mary Ellen -- Archives
Overton, A.P.
Pleasant, Mary Ellen -- Finance, Personal -- Archives

box FB-021, folder 13  Correspondence with A. P. Overton 1897
box FB-021, folder 13  Financial note 1894
box FB-021, folder 13  Promissory note 1892