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The Making of "Mammy Pleasant": A Black Entrepreneur in Nineteenth-Century San Francisco (Women in American History)

Lynn M. Hudson

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Mary Ellen Pleasant arrived in Gold Rush-era San Francisco as a free black woman with abolitionist convictions and a predilection for entrepreneurial success. Behind the convenient and trusted disguise of 'Mammy', she transformed domestic labor into enterprise, amassed remarkable real estate, wealth, and power, and gained notoriety for her work in fighting Jim Crow. Pleasant's legacy is steeped in scandals and lore. Was she a voodoo queen who traded in sexual secrets? A madam? A murderer?In "The Making of Mammy Pleasant", Lynn M. Hudson examines the folklore of Pleasant's real and imagined powers. Emphasizing the significance of her life in the context of how it has been interpreted or ignored in the larger trends of American history, Hudson integrates fact and speculation culled from periodicals, court cases, diaries, letters, Pleasant's interviews with the San Francisco press, and various biographical and fictional accounts. Addressing the lack of a historical record of black women's lives, the author argues that the silences and mysteries of Pleasant's past, whether never recorded or intentionally omitted, reveal as much about her life as what has been documented. Through Pleasant's life, Hudson also interrogates the constructions of race, gender, and sexuality during the formative years of California's economy and challenges popular mythology about the liberatory sexual culture of the American West.

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