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Abolitionist Aunty: Jane Chester

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ABOLITIONIST AUNTY

Jane Chester

1801-1894

EARLY LIFE & ESCAPE FROM SLAVERY

Jane Morris Chester was born enslaved in Baltimore, Maryland on July 5, 1801. Around 1828, she escaped enslavement and made a treacherous journey north to Harrisburg, where she married George Chester. Below, an obituary tells the story of her journey north to escape slavery and find George.

opulent Judge George Pressbery. At the age of 17 years, with a full understanding with the man whom she married, George Chester, who had arranged for her escape, "Jane" left Baltimore. She walked a distance of three miles at night, met the wagon which conveyed her twenty-three miles, and then walked the remainder of the road to York. When she reached her destination Mr. Chester was there to meet her, and on their arrival in Harrisburg by stage they were at once married and lived in a frame building where the Hershey house now stands, doing business there in a restaurant for sixteen years. Mr. Chester built what was once



Jane Chester, photo courtesy of Yvonne Martin.

THE UNDERGROUND RAILROAD & THE OLD EIGHTH

After marriage, Jane and George owned a successful Harrisburg restaurant where abolitionists often gathered to talk about their work. Fueled by her own past, Jane and her husband provided aid to fugitives escaping enslavement.

One of Jane's twelve children, Thomas Morris Chester, continued his parents' work with an active role during the Civil War. T. Morris Chester recruited African Americans to serve the Union forces during the war, and was the only black journalist during the initial years of the war. Sadly, Thomas passed away shortly before Jane died, leaving her heartbroken.

THE "AUNTY" YEARS

Jane Morris Chester was born enslaved in Baltimore, Maryland, on July 5, 1801. Around 1828, she escaped enslavement and made a treacherous journey north to Harrisburg, where she married George Chester. After George's death in 1859, Jane, fondly called "Aunty" by Harrisburg citizens, continued to operate the restaurant and opened a premier catering business for Harrisburg elites, including events for two Pennsylvania governors. Using funds from her business, Jane purchased a home in the Old Eighth Ward at 305 Chester Street, where she hosted meetings and dinners with many important people from across the nation. Jane was also renowned by locals for her homemade taffy. An excerpt from another obituary, talking about her reputation in the city, is featured on the right.

"AUNTY" CHESTER DEAD.

She Was Well Known Throughout the City—Her Famous Taffy.

Ninety-one years ago Jane Morris was born a slave in Baltimore. She was owned by 'Squire Presbury, who sold her services un'til she was thirty to Dennis A. Smith, but she came to Harrisburg before the time had expired and lived in several families, among them Alexander Graydon and Judge Mordecai McKinney. In 1826 she married George Chester and remained here until her death. Her husband was a famous restaurateur and built a house on the site of the present Hershey House on Market street. Upon the death of her husband she continued the business of catering and saved enough to purchase the home at 305 Chestnut street, where she died. She also educated her children, the late Thomas Chester having held several prominent positions as consul. During the

