

# Madame Jumel: A 19th Woman Who Defied Convention

by Jane Lancaster

Eliza Jumel was born as Betsey Bowen in 1775 to a desperately poor couple in Providence, Rhode Island. Her mother turned to prostitution to make ends meet, and in 1783, when Betsey was eight years old, an angry mob attacked the multi-racial brothel where she lived with her mother. After a spell in the workhouse while her mother was in prison and several years as a servant, the teenage Betsey followed her mother's trade, and in 1794 she gave birth to a child she named George Washington Bowen. Abandoning the infant George with a friend, Betsey moved to New York, where she worked as an actress, and became the mistress of a wealthy French merchant, Stephen Jumel, whom she married in 1804.

During their 28-year marriage the couple lived mainly in this mansion in New York or in Paris, where Madame Jumel moved in exclusive aristocratic circles. She became a shrewd businesswoman, protecting her husband's assets, and an art investor, exhibiting a major collection of European paintings in New York in 1817. In 1833, a year after Jumel's death, she married the 77-year-old former vice president Aaron Burr, he was interested in her money, she, perhaps, in his name. The union was not a success and they separated within twelve months and after a scandalous divorce trial the marriage was dissolved.

In both her art collecting and her divorce Jumel defied conventional female roles, and defiantly disregarded social taboos. Such defiance may have inspired her detractors in the Saratoga incident under review, which occurred at a time when to so-called cult of true womanhood was starting to influence notions of correct female behavior. Madame Jumel began spending the season in Saratoga Springs in the early 1830s, and it was there in the 1840s and 1850s that the contradictions in her public position were manifest.

Unlike many Saratoga Springs visitors Jumel was a property owner and an investor: she purchased a graceful Greek Revival house on Circular Street and also several farms where she grew vegetables for the resort's hotel and restaurant trade. Until she purchased the Circular Street property (and sometimes after) Madame Jumel stayed at the sumptuous United States Hotel, which was the place for the New York wealthy to see and be seen. This elite group included many southern planters and slaveholders.

Solomon Northup was a free black man who worked at the United States Hotel in the summer season. In 1841, he was approached by two white men who praised his violin playing and offered him a job in a traveling circus. He agreed to go with the men to Washington DC, where the circus was said to be, and where slavery was still legal. Northup was drugged and sold into slavery on a cotton plantation in Louisiana. After he was freed Northup wrote a book entitled *Twelve Years a Slave*, and for more than a decade he traveled the abolitionist circuit talking about his terrible experience.

While Northup was missing, his wife Ann and children needed to keep body and soul together. This

was problematic since there were few jobs for domestics in Saratoga Springs once the short summer season ended. Madame Jumel stepped in and when she returned to New York in the fall of 1841 she took with her ten year-old Elizabeth Northup, who stayed in Jumel's service for the next two years. Ann Northup and the other two children soon followed. Eight-year-old Margaret Northup became playmate to Madame's adoptive granddaughter Eliza Chase; sometimes Jumel referred to Margaret as her child. Five year-old Alonzo had a "job" as Madame's footman: he would open doors, fetch and carry.

Her glamorous exploits frequently made the local press. In 1850 she was reported as attending a fancy dress ball in Saratoga wearing diamonds valued at \$25,000 which had reputedly belonged to the Empress Josephine, and in 1854 she was reported as sporting the same diamonds at a glittering ball in the Tuileries Palace, Paris.

In the early 1850s she was part of Saratoga Springs' "benevolent" and patriotic society. In 1853 one of her farms was the site of the New York State Agricultural Society's Annual Fair, and in 1857 she welcomed the Utica Citizens Corps, a local militia organization, to her house on Circular Street, where she presented them with a "modest but beautiful" white satin banner. The Saratoga paper described her as a "distinguished lady" and noted her annual return.