

FACT SHEET

Elizabeth “Mumbet” Freeman

Any time, any time while I was a slave, if one minute’s freedom had been offered to me, and I had been told I must die at the end of that minute, I would have taken it, just to stand one minute on God’s earth a free woman, I would.

Quoted by Catharine M. Sedgwick in *Slavery in New England* (1853)

- Elizabeth “Mumbet” Freeman's quest for liberty is an important part of Massachusetts, New England, and American history
- Freeman was born into slavery in New York sometime in the 1740s
- As a child, Freeman was given as a wedding gift to Annetje (Hannah) Hogeboom when Annetje married John Ashley of Sheffield, MA
- Freeman lived her entire adult life in Western MA

THE COURT CASE

- Freeman was the first enslaved African American to successfully file a post-revolution “freedom suit” based on the new MA Constitution (of 1780) and was set free in 1781
- Other 18th c. enslaved people had sued and won their freedom in MA based on broken promises of freedom (in wills, for example) or extreme violence, but Freeman’s freedom suit was different because it was based solely on an article of the new MA Bill of Rights: Article I.

All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights, among which may be reckoned the right of enjoying and defending their lives and liberties; that of acquiring, possessing, and protecting property; in fine, that of seeking and obtaining their safety and happiness.

- According to historical documents, Freeman overheard the constitution’s tenets and was inspired to win her freedom, anecdotal stories of her life mention abuse from Annetje (including striking Freeman with a hot implement and permanently damaging her arm)
- Freeman found an attorney, Theodore Sedgwick, who took her case in May of 1781
- The case was called *Brom & Bett v. John Ashley, Esq.*
- What makes this case unique is there was no claim that her owner had violated the law (because slavery was accepted and legal in MA at the time) but was instead based on her inherent and constitutional right to be “free and equal”

- Colonel John Ashley was ordered to pay significant damages and court costs
- The MA government never enacted a law to formally end or ban slavery in the state, (slavery became illegal nationwide with the ratification of the 13th Amendment in 1865)

MORE ABOUT ELIZABETH FREEMAN

- Freeman was known as Mumbet/Mum Bett in the community and among friends and adopted the surname “Freeman” after gaining her freedom
- As an enslaved woman, she was never taught to read or write so documentation about her life is from those who knew her while she was alive and from her will
- Freeman worked as a nurse, midwife, and healer with knowledge of natural remedies; these roles afforded her a life outside the Ashley house and a public identity in the community beyond that of an enslaved person, even before she won her freedom
- After leaving Colonel John Ashley’s house in Sheffield, she went to work as a maid and governess for her attorney Theodore Sedgwick in Stockbridge Village until 1808, eventually saving enough money to buy her own home
- One of Sedgwick’s children, Catharine, who Freeman helped raise, wrote the most thorough accounts of Freeman’s life, both in published works and in her journals/letters
- Freeman had a daughter, grand-daughter, and great grandchildren
- Only a few women of African descent had wills that went through probate in western MA 1800–1860, Freeman was one of them because she owned land, a house, and personal belongings, and had relatives she wanted to see cared for after her death
- She owned clothing, fabrics, and household goods that are detailed in her will
- Freeman died in Stockbridge, MA on December 28, 1829 (around age 85) and is buried at the Sedgwick family plot in Stockbridge and her epitaph reads:

ELIZABETH FREEMAN, also known by the name of MUMBET died Dec. 28th 1829. Her supposed age was 85 Years. She was born a slave and remained a slave for nearly thirty years. She could neither read nor write, yet in her own sphere she had no superior or equal. She neither wasted time nor property. She never violated a trust, nor failed to perform a duty. In every situation of domestic trial, she was the most efficient helper and the tenderest friend. Good mother, farewell.

- The Boston Historical Society has many items related to Freeman’s life, including the Sedgwick family papers, a miniature portrait of Freeman (painted by Susan Anne Livingston Ridley Sedgwick in 1811), Freeman’s gold necklace worn in the portrait (later turned into a bracelet), and Freeman’s will

- There is a statue celebrating her life at the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.
- She is part of the African American Heritage Trail in MA (Mum Bett's Trail)
- August 21st is the anniversary of her freedom trial and Mumbet Day in Stockbridge
- A movie about her life is in production, release date unknown

MORE ABOUT THE TIME PERIOD & SLAVERY IN MASSACHUSETTS

- The first verifiable documentation so far of enslaved people in Boston is from 1638
- On February 28, 1638, the governor of the Bay Colony noted in his journal that a ship arriving from Bermuda had enslaved Africans aboard. Earlier ships may well have carried enslaved Africans to Massachusetts, but this is the first documented case
- When the Pequot Native people lost a war with the English in 1638, documents show that they were made slaves, and many of them were shipped to Bermuda in exchange for African bondsmen
- In 1641 the Massachusetts Bay Colony adopted a code of laws, being the first of Britain's mainland colonies to make slavery legal
- In 1670, MA made it legal for the children of enslaved people to be sold into bondage
- By 1780, nearly thirty slaves had sued their masters for their freedom. However, these cases were not decided on the basis of any "natural right" to freedom
- Chattel slavery was declared unconstitutional in MA in 1783 (New York in 1827, then Connecticut in 1848, and finally in the U.S. in 1865 with the 13th Amendment)
- Census records show there were approx. 4,500 enslaved people in MA by 1754 and none by 1790 (although some owners may have falsely claimed the people they were still enslaving were now "indentured servants" to escape legal action)
- In the 18th century, women couldn't vote or hold elective office, they were barred from professions, and their property rights in most states were restricted