

Making Freedom

African Americans in U.S. History

SOURCEBOOK 2



A Song Full of Hope

1770–1830



COMPILED AND EDITED BY
THE CURRICULUM SPECIALISTS AT
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FOREWORD BY
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The Life and Times of Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman, 1742–1829

As the English colonies moved closer to the War of Independence, the intensity and pervasiveness of public discourse about the natural rights of human beings could not help but raise contradictions in the minds of many about a whole group of people being legally held in chattel bondage.

When Elizabeth Freeman came to work at the Ashley house in the 1740s, she was just a young girl and Sheffield was a frontier town in western Massachusetts. John Ashley was an up-and-coming businessman as well as a lawyer. Elizabeth, known then as Bet, and her little sister had been “given as wedding presents” to Mr. Ashley’s young wife, Annetje, also called Hannah. The three of them probably spoke only Dutch when they came to Sheffield. Soldier, lawyer, and judge, John Ashley was well respected as a fair man in his community, but his wife was known to be demanding and capricious.

In an incident after almost thirty years of service, Mrs. Ashley tried to hit Elizabeth Freeman’s sister, Lizzie, with a fire-heated hearth shovel and Freeman, now known as Mum Bett, stepped between them to receive the blow. The scar on her arm was visible for the rest of her life. More importantly, it was reported to be the motivation for Mum Bett to leave the Ashley home in the spring of 1781 and seek a lawyer to sue for her freedom from both Col. Ashley and his son, John Ashley Jr. Because he did not comply with Freeman’s demand, Col. Ashley became the defendant in this case, and he was compelled to give up his twenty-year position as a popular local judge to avoid a conflict of interest.

Like the more famous Quok Walker case and many other freedom-from-slavery petitions that followed, Elizabeth Freeman and her lawyer, Theodore Sedgwick, based their claim on the Bill of Rights in the newly approved Massachusetts Constitution (1780), which stated that “all men are born free and equal” and that “every subject is entitled to liberty.” Because she was a woman, Mum Bett had no legal standing in a court of law. She was, therefore, joined in her suit by Brom, an African American man who was also enslaved to the Ashley household. Despite an appeal to the Superior Court of Adjudicature, the Ashleys lost the case both there and in the lower Berkshire County Court of Common Pleas. The juries stated that Brom and

Bet had never been “the legal Negro servants” of the Ashleys, who were then required to pay damages of 30 shillings as well as the court costs of £5, 14 shillings and 4 pence.

Elizabeth Freeman went to work for her lawyer’s family, the Sedgwicks, until she retired at an old age with savings, land, and many grandchildren. Her first husband had died fighting in the Revolutionary War. There is evidence that her second husband was an ancestor of W. E. B. Du Bois. Theodore Sedgwick, a close personal friend and a protege of John Ashley Sr., went on to become a delegate to the Continental Congress and Senator from Massachusetts.

Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman’s story is an especially powerful one because we have several anecdotal accounts of who she was as a person by people who knew and cared for her. In addition to court documents, we have her final will, which provides information about her relationship with the Sedgwicks and documents her belongings as well as some of her relatives. There is even a miniature watercolor painting of her likeness when she was an older woman. As with many early African Americans, we cannot read Elizabeth Freeman’s actual words in her own writing, but unlike many, we can hear vivid details about the life she led and even her statements as they have been handed down by those who heard her speak them. As we read, it becomes clear that the stories share an antebellum northern white consciousness, revealing many levels of imbedded racism. Still, we are able to get some sense of what life was like for an African American woman in a northern community in the late eighteenth century.

Elizabeth Freeman lies buried in a Stockbridge, Massachusetts graveyard, apart, where people of color were put to rest. Her epitaph was written by the son of Judge Sedgwick, it reads:

ELIZABETH FREEMAN,

Known by the name of

Mum Bett,

Died December 28, 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 nor equal: she neither wasted time or

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.

Organizing Idea

Expectations raised by the Revolution’s rhetoric of liberty resulted in many African Americans petitioning the courts to seek their freedom. Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman was one of those people. Her strength, competence, and self-respect positively affected all people who knew her.

Student Objectives

Students will:

- ❖ learn to use primary and secondary source documents to piece together elements from one woman’s life as they become familiar with a significant period in history and the historical figure Elizabeth Freeman
- ❖ gain some understanding of how court action can affect social practice
- ❖ make decisions about what kinds of information to include or leave out when creating a documentary portrait of someone’s life

Key Questions

- ❖ What personal resources does it take to challenge a well-established economic and social institution?
- ❖ What conditions were present at the time of Elizabeth Freeman’s case that made it possible for her to be successful?

Primary Source Materials

DOCUMENT 2.5.1: Elizabeth Freeman’s watercolor portrait, 1811

DOCUMENT 2.5.2A AND B: Image and transcript of Elizabeth Freeman’s last will and testament, October 8, 1829 (handwritten); image on CD only

DOCUMENTS 2.5.3: “Slavery in New England” by Catherine Maria Sedgwick, 1853

Supplementary Materials

ITEM 2.5.A: Additional vocabulary lists for primary sources

ITEM 2.5.B: Study guide for “Slavery in New England”

Student Activities

Reading and Discussion of the Will

Activity 1

As a class, examine the image of Elizabeth Freeman (2.5.1). Consider the name “Mum Bett,” by which she was known. Can you tell anything about her? Now read the original copy of her will (2.5.2A), then read the transcript (2.5.2B). What do you notice about the way the document is written? What more can we learn about Elizabeth Freeman from the information that is provided in her will?

(Possible answers: handwritten, no periods, irregular capitalization, E. F. signs it with an X, indicating that she probably is unable to write; it includes parts that are crossed out, indicating that E. F. might have changed her mind about

division of property as the will was being written; because designation of recipients and items jumps around a little, it is possible to envision the four women going from room to room inventorying the items as E. F. makes decisions about what to give to whom; we don't have information about who actually penned the document.)

Working individually or in small groups, ask students to find evidence to answer the following questions? State the documentation that provides evidence for the response and then give the answers.

- ❖ Did Elizabeth Freeman write this will herself? How do we know? Who was present with her as she inventoried her belongings and decided which items to give to whom? Why do you think Charles Sedgwick Jr. is not one of the witnesses?
- ❖ Did Elizabeth Freeman own any land and, if so, to whom does she bequeath it? How does she divide it and under what terms does she bequeath it? What does this tell us about her ability to plan for the future and the wisdom of her financial sense?
- ❖ To whom did Elizabeth Freeman leave the items listed in her will? Did Elizabeth Freeman have any descendants? If so, can we identify any individuals by name, as well as the number of generations? What might you speculate about Elizabeth Freeman's concern for her family? What can we say about her relationship with Charles Sedgwick Esq.?
- ❖ Given the descriptive details of some of the items that she leaves Josiah Amos and Lydia Maria, where do you think they lived at the time the will was written? Do we know how old they were?
- ❖ List at least eight items that you find identified in the will. Be sure to include a few that you think are the most valuable. What can you speculate about the nature of Elizabeth Freeman's economic status?
- ❖ Many people of African descent who lived in the eighteenth-century American colonies had arrived recently from Africa due to kidnapping from their villages and farms. Do you think that Elizabeth Freeman may have known her mother and father on this continent? What evidence do you have? Can we know for sure? Do we know the name they gave her as a baby in their arms?

Activity 2

Research Extension—Drawing Conclusions from a Will

Are any of the items of clothing or furniture in the will (2.5.2B) unfamiliar to you? Make a list. Find books at the library or information on the web that can help you explain their functions.

Given what you know about early American history, what do you think is the reason that Amos Josiah is left property but Lydia Maria does not receive any?

For more information about the kind of clothes Ms. Freeman was handing down, look at these websites:

African American women's clothing in eighteenth-century Virginia:
www.history.org/almanack/life/clothing/intro/african1.html

Women's clothing terms in eighteenth-century America:
www.history.org/almanack/life/clothing/women/index.html

Reading and Analyzing—“Slavery in New England”

Activity 3

Through reading and discussion, students will explore Elizabeth Freeman’s character and her influence on those around her, including nineteenth-century writer and feminist Catherine Maria Sedgwick. As a class, identify some of the qualities our culture associates with a “good” character or a “bad” character. On the board, brainstorm a list for each of these. Discuss what it means to “have a personality” and what is meant by “strength of character.”

Divide students into groups of five. Distribute complete sets of “Slavery In New England” by Catherine Sedgwick (2.5.3) to each group. Ask a team member to be in charge of one section (note that Section 5 is shorter and may be of use to students with differing learning abilities). As a provocative guideline, ask students to try to identify places where they notice Sedgwick’s genteel, and often not so subtle, racism.

- ❖ Each student should first answer the questions for the appropriate section on the Study Guide (Item 2.5.B).
- ❖ Then have students reread the section and make a list of the most important incidents from Mum Bett’s life that Catherine Sedgwick chooses to describe. Next to each incident, students should write the personal qualities they believe Elizabeth Freeman demonstrates.
- ❖ Answers to the two section questions and the lists of characteristics can then be shared with the other group members. The small group can discuss these and see if there is agreement.
- ❖ Have each small group share their lists of personal qualities with the whole class.
- ❖ As a class, think about, discuss, and write down other things students wish they could find out about Mum Bett, things that they can now only guess at.

Essay Writing—Admirable Qualities

Activity 4

Write a brief essay describing the qualities you most admire in Elizabeth Freeman. Be specific and give examples. Are there people in your own family or neighborhood who show the same kinds of personal qualities today? Close your essay by describing that person and some stories from his or her life.

Activity 5**Reading “Slavery in New England” in Full**

Students can read the complete article “Slavery in New England” (2.5.3) and answer these questions individually or in small groups:

- ❖ How does Sedgwick characterize the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Ashley?
- ❖ What does she say about the “question of equality between the sexes”?
- ❖ What does she say was the cause of the pivotal shovel confrontation?
- ❖ How did Mum Bett help the “gal in trouble”?
- ❖ Did Mum Bett give the girl Mrs. Ashley’s food?
- ❖ How did Elizabeth Freeman talk about freedom?
- ❖ What do you think Sedgwick means by “wider abuses make rebels”?
- ❖ Of the ways Mum Bett chose to resist the Shay’s War men, which would you choose?
- ❖ Why do you think Mum Bett wasn’t scared to die?
- ❖ This article was written in 1853 while chattel slavery was still legal in many states. How many years after Mum Bett won her freedom in court was it written? How many years after her death?

Activity 6**Extended Research—Catherine Sedgwick**

Catherine Sedgwick began to write in 1822, eight years before Mum Bett’s death. Her work addressed issues of women’s rights, prisons, slavery, and minority groups. Students can write a paper or create a detailed poster reflecting Sedgwick’s work and her ideas.

Further Student and Teacher Resources

Chase, Arthur C. *The Ashleys: A Pioneer Berkshire Family*. Beverly, MA: The Trustees of the Reservations. (a very informative and comprehensive booklet)

Chronicles of Old Canaan, courtesy of the Sheffield Historical Society, page 22.

Cushing Family (William J.) Personal Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

Earle, Alice Morse. *Home Life in Colonial Days*. New York: The MacMillan Co., 1898.

Eckert, Allen W. *The Frontiersmen*. New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1967.

Jones, Rhett S. “Trifling Patriots and a Freeborn People: Revolutionary Ideology and Afro-Americans.” *Brown Alumni Monthly* 76 (December 1975): 23–28.

MacDonald, Mimi. “Mum Bett’s Freedom Struggle,” *The Berkshire Courier*, July 1981.

MacManus, Edgar J. *Black Bondage in the North*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1973.

Martineau, Harriet. “Restless Slaves,” in *Report on Western Travels*, 1836.

Sedgwick, Theodore, and Catherine Maria Sedgwick. *Personal Papers*. Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

Twombly, Robert. “Black Resistance to Slavery in Massachusetts.” *Insights and Parallels: Problems and Issues of American Social History*, William O’Neill, ed. Minneapolis: Burgess Publishing, 1973.

Walter, Mildred Pitts. *Second Daughter: The Story of a Slave Girl*. New York: Scholastic Trade, 1996.

Wilds, Mary. *Mum Bett: The Life and Times of Elizabeth Freeman—The True Story of a Slave Who Won Her Freedom*. Greensboro, NC: Avisson Press, 1999.

Zilversmit, Arthur. “Mum Bett: Folklore and Fact.” Taken from a speech given to the Berkshire Historical Society, 1969. Sheffield Family History Center, Sheffield, MA.

———. “Quok Walker, Mum Bett and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts.” *William & Mary Quarterly*. Volume XXV (1968).

Websites

www.MumBett.com

www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2p39.html *Africans in America bio*

www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part2/2i1534.html *historian Margaret Washington’s useful response to the question: “What’s the significance of Elizabeth Freeman successfully suing for her freedom in Massachusetts?”*

www.thetrustees.org *select “westregion” for information on Colonel John Ashley’s House, where Mum Bett worked as a slave. The house is open to the public.*

Catherine Sedgwick websites

www.bedfordstmartins.com/litlinks/fiction/sedgwick.htm

www.cohums.ohio-state.edu/english/People/Bracken.1/Sedgwick/

www.csustan.edu/english/reuben/pal/chap3/sedgwick.html

www.salemstate.edu/imc/sedgwick/index.html

www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/notable/sedgwickc/index.html

www.theodoresedgwick.com/

Contemporary Connection



A Notable American Woman

Although Elizabeth “Mum Bett” Freeman is not mentioned in the National Women’s Hall of Fame, she is well known in Berkshire County, Massachusetts, and her story continues to be researched and documented by scholars. There is an official Mum Bett website: <http://MumBett.com>. The site offers viewers the opportunity to sign a letter petitioning to have a “Mum Bett” stamp and mentions an effort to transform the facts of her life into a TV series.

In the 1990s when two crisis centers for women merged in Berkshire County, the decision was made to rename the new agency as the Elizabeth Freeman Center. This name was chosen to honor a woman who found a way to rise above her situation—a woman who “stands in” to represent all women who struggle for a better life.

What are the names and stories of women in your community who have spoken up for their rights and whose actions have benefited others? Are there schools, community centers, or other institutions named after women? Students should research these questions and bring the information back to the class.



Primary Source Materials for Lesson 5



2.5.1

Elizabeth Freeman's
watercolor portrait, 1811

Courtesy of Massachusetts Historical Society

2.5.2A AND B

Image and transcript of Elizabeth Freeman's last will and
testament, October 8, 1829 (handwritten)

I Elizabeth Freeman of Stockbridge Massachusetts do make and publish this my last will and testament as follows—

1st after the payment of my past debts I hereby give & bequeath to Charles Sedgwick Esq. of Lenox all my real Estate (excepting that conveyed to my Great grandson Amos Josiah Van Schaac (sic)) in trust & for the uses & purposes herein after

mentioned - that is to say It is my will & intention that one undivided half of said real Estate should be held by the said Charles for the sole use and benefit of my daughter Elizabeth & her heirs & the other half for the use & benefit of my Great Grandchildren Amos Josiah Van Schaack & Lydia Maria Ann Van Schaack & their heirs . . .

Secondly I give & bequeath my household furniture & other personal property as follows—To my Daughter Elizabeth I give the following articles viz:

Three gowns—1 black Silk—1 D^o [“ditto,” an abbreviation that was often used to signify “that which is the same as what precedes it,” i.e., another black silk gown] got from Philadelphia—1 D^o [black silk gown] recd of my father—my largest silk shawl—a large home made birds eye petticoat—a short gown that was my mothers a white shawl with flowers—2 linen pocket handkerchiefs—one marked B.

The image of Document 2.5.2A and the full text of Document 2.5.2B are available on the CD-ROM.

2.5.3

“Slavery in New England” by Catherine Maria Sedgwick, 1853

Mum-Bett’s character was composed of few but strong elements. Action was the law of her nature, and conscious of superiority to all around her, she felt servitude intolerable. It was not the work—work was play to her. Her power of execution was marvellous. Nor was it awe of her kind master, or fear of her despotic mistress, but it was the galling of the harness, the irresistible longing for liberty. I have heard her say, with an emphatic shake of the head peculiar to her: “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 *airth* a free woman—I would.”

The full text of Document 2.5.3 is available on the CD-ROM.