



Liberty for All

DURING THE LATE 1700s, as the rhetoric of freedom filled parlors and dining rooms throughout the Colonies, words of independence sometimes touched the ears of those for whom they were not intended. For instance, in Sheffield, Mass., a young African-American slave woman overheard her masters speaking of freedom and equality and decided those concepts must apply to her as well. Her resulting court case set a new precedent and led to the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts.

By Nancy Mann Jackson | Illustration by Antonio Rodrigues

“**M**any people believe that slavery was a Southern tradition and don’t realize that some Northerners also had slaves,” says Joanna Ballantine, regional director of the Trustees of Reservations, which manages historic properties including the Ashley House in Sheffield. “We want more people to realize this and to learn that the Revolution opened up opportunities for slaves to become free and for free whites to realize their own freedoms.”

Fighting Back Against Enslavement

Elizabeth Freeman, born into slavery in New York around 1742, was known as “Bett” in early life and later as “Mum Bett.” She served in the home of Colonel John Ashley of Sheffield for almost 30 years.

In 1773, Ashley was the leader of a group of 11 local citizens who wrote a document known as the Sheffield Declaration. According to Massachusetts Supreme Court documents, the Sheffield Declaration expressed anger at how the British throne was treating its subjects in Massachusetts and resolved

“that mankind in a state of nature are equal, free and independent of each other and have a right to the undisturbed enjoyment of their lives, their liberty and property.”

After overhearing much dining table talk about the issues of liberty and rights, Bett began to chafe against the injustices of slavery, especially the cruel treatment she suffered from John’s wife Hannah Ashley. One day, when Hannah attempted to strike Bett’s sister (some accounts say her daughter Betsy) with a hot shovel, Bett intervened and was struck and burned. She ran away from the Ashley home for good.

Rather than returning to be enslaved again, Bett sought help from Theodore Sedgwick, a young local attorney who had served as clerk of the Sheffield Declaration committee. Sedgwick had been a frequent guest in the Ashley home. (Sedgwick later served as speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, a Massachusetts senator and a judge in the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court.)

In 1781, Sedgwick filed an action ordering Ashley to release Bett and Brom, a male slave, to the sheriff because they were not his legitimate property. When Ashley refused, the case of *Brom and Bett vs. Ashley* was tried before the County

Court of Common Pleas in Great Barrington, Mass. Sedgwick argued that holding slaves was a violation of the Massachusetts Constitution, and the jury sided with him. The court awarded freedom to Bett and Brom, and ordered Ashley to pay each of them 30 shillings in damages. After the ruling, Bett changed her name to Elizabeth Freeman.

Freeman's case set a precedent for the eventual abolition of slavery in the state of Massachusetts. According to the *Massachusetts Judicial Review*, the case was unique because it took place less than a year after the state constitution was adopted and, in contrast to prior freedom lawsuits, there was no claim that the slave owner had violated a specific law. It was simply a direct challenge to the existence of slavery in Massachusetts under the state constitution.

"Freeman's story is important because she had the courage to sue Col.

Ashley for her freedom in 1781, something almost unheard-of at the time, adopting the rhetoric of the Revolution to defend her case, and the ideals of the new 1780 Massachusetts Constitution," Ballantine says. "Mum Bett's suit for freedom led to the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts."

Now a free woman, Freeman lived for many years with the Sedgwick family as a beloved servant. (Revolutionary War veteran Agrippa Hull, the subject of a January/February 2012 *American Spirit* article, also worked in the Sedgwick household.) Freeman worked as a nurse and midwife and eventually owned her own home and land, Ballantine says. When Freeman died on December 28, 1829, she was buried in the Sedgwick family cemetery.

The novelist Catharine Maria Sedgwick, the youngest daughter of Judge Sedgwick, wrote about Mum Bett in "Slavery in New England," published in *Bentley's Miscellany* in 1853. Catharine was very close to her former nurse and quotes her as saying, "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 [sic] a free woman—I would."

Sharing Mum Bett's Struggle

Today, the Ashley House teaches visitors about the story of Freeman and the Patriot family she served. "We want to ensure that future generations understand, on a human level, the story of slavery and the bravery required to bring the story to the forefront," Ballantine says. "Mum Bett and her story are part of the Revolutionary-era struggle for freedom."


Visitors can view an interpretive exhibit that tells the story of Freeman's life and see a copy of Freeman's last will and testament, as well as the Sheffield Declaration. Tours are available on weekends during June and July and by appointment.

"The Ashley House tells two stories in the same house," Ballantine says. "It tells the story of the Ashley family who were leaders of economic, political and social life in the southern Berkshires, and the enslaved woman in the household who stood up against the powerful Col. Ashley and was inspired to incite positive change in the world."

On August 16, 2014, the Ashley House will host Elizabeth Freeman Day to celebrate Freeman's life and the official proclamation of her freedom. To learn more, visit www.thetrustees.org/places-to-visit/berkshires/ashley-house.html. 🧑🏻

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BOOK REVIEW

A Family Saga in Colonial New England

Allegra di Bonaventura's painstakingly researched, beautifully written history, *For Adam's Sake* (Liveright, 2013) captures an almost forgotten aspect of Colonial New England—the common practice of slavery.

The portrait of servitude in New England that emerges is quite different from the South's industrial-scale slavery that many Americans picture.

The author notes "there were other slaveries—even in the North—and the 'forgetting' has been purposeful. New Englanders in the 19th century studiously erased and omitted inconvenient and unsavory aspects of their region's collective past in favor of a more heroic and wholesome narrative."

The central story concerns Adam Jackson's 30-plus years as the slave of Joshua Hempstead, a New London shipwright who maintained a meticulous diary from 1711 to his death in 1758.

Di Bonaventura spent 15 years gleaning Adam's tale out of the mundane details that comprise the diary, Hempstead's many other writings and thousands of contemporary documents. As a result, *For Adam's Sake* chronicles fascinating details about early Colonial law, government, politics and religious fervor.