



Decisions and Choices

Pleading for Justice: Mum Bett (Elizabeth Freeman) and Massachusetts' First Freedom Suit

Historical Context

In 1781, a brave woman named Mum Bett made history when she sued for her freedom and won. Born into slavery sometime around 1742, Bett was enslaved in Massachusetts by a wealthy man named John Ashley, who lived in Sheffield in the western part of the state. Like many enslaved people in New England, Bett worked in the house, cared for children, and did demanding labor without pay or rights. Even though she couldn't read or write, Mum Bett was incredibly sharp. She listened closely to conversations in Ashley's household, where guests often discussed ideas about liberty, justice, and freedom during the American Revolution. One of the key conversations she heard was about the new Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, which stated that "all men are born free and equal." Bett believed those words should apply to her too, not just wealthy white men. After suffering abuse from Ashley's wife, who hit her with a heated kitchen shovel, Bett decided she had had enough. She went to a local lawyer named Theodore Sedgwick and asked him to help her sue for her freedom. Sedgwick took on the case and argued that slavery was illegal under the state's new constitution. The case, known as Brom and Bett v. Ashley, was heard in court in 1781. Bett and another enslaved man, Brom, both won their cases. The jury agreed that keeping them enslaved violated the state constitution, and they were set free. After the trial, Bett changed her name to Elizabeth Freeman, a powerful choice that showed she was now her own person. Elizabeth Freeman didn't stop there. She stayed on as a paid worker for the Sedgwick family and became well-respected in the community. She worked as a midwife, nurse, and healer, and helped raise the Sedgwick children, including Catharine Sedgwick, who later became a famous author and wrote about Freeman with admiration. Her lawsuit helped pave the way for the end of slavery in Massachusetts. Around the same time, another Massachusetts man, Quock Walker, also won a freedom suit. These legal victories contributed to the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court's decision that slavery was inconsistent with the state's constitution, helping bring slavery to an end in the state. Elizabeth Freeman's story shows that even during a time when Black people had very few rights, they had power to make decisions, challenging the system using the law and the very words that American leaders used to fight for their own independence. Her courage and intelligence helped change history.

Connection to Habit

Mum Bett's decision to sue for her freedom is a powerful example of how individuals make bold choices even when the odds are stacked against them. Living in a time when slavery was still legal in much of the country and enslaved people had very few rights, Bett's choice to challenge her status in court was extraordinary. Her case reminds us that decisions are always shaped by the time and place in which people live. Bett's choice was shaped by the injustice she experienced, the revolutionary ideals circulating around her, and her own sense of self-worth. By recognizing her humanity and making a courageous legal move, she not only changed her own life but also helped shift the course of history in Massachusetts. This moment encourages students to see how everyday people, even in difficult circumstances, can make meaningful choices that impact the present and future.

Discussion Questions

- What inspired Mum Bett to take legal action for her freedom, and what does that tell us about her understanding of justice?
- What risks did Mum Bett face by choosing to sue her enslaver, and what does this reveal about her courage to make such a decision?
- How did Mum Bett use the ideas of the American Revolution such as liberty and equality to argue against slavery?
- In what ways did Mum Bett's decision challenge the legal and social system of her time?
- Why do you think her story was not widely told in traditional tellings of United States history for so long? What might this say about whose voices are included in history?
- How does Elizabeth Freeman's story help us better understand the habit of mind Decisions and Choices? How do time, place, and personal experience shape the choices people can make?

Suggested Activity

Materials Needed:

- Mum Bett/Elizabeth Freeman Quotes
- Notebook paper

Step 1: Quote Analysis [15 mins]

Introduce the two quotes and explain that students will analyze how her decision to pursue freedom impacted her sense of purpose over time. Distribute or project both quotes.

Quote 1 : Before Her Case (1781):

"I heard that paper read yesterday, that says all men are born equal, and that every man has a right to freedom. I am not a dumb critter; won't the law give me my freedom?" — Elizabeth Freeman (quoted by attorney Theodore Sedgwick)

Quote 2 : Later in Life (early 1800s):

"Any time, any place, I am ready to meet death. I am free and I have done a great deal for the cause of liberty." — Elizabeth Freeman

Have students answer the following questions for each quote:

- What emotions or values are being expressed?
- What does this quote reveal about Freeman's view of herself and her world?
- How does the quote relate to the themes of freedom and justice?

Students may use sentence starters such as:

- This quote shows that...
- She believed... because...
- It connects to justice by...
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Step 2: Partner or Small Group Discussion [10 mins]

Students share their thoughts in pairs or small groups:

- How does Freeman's first quote show the risks she was willing to take?
- How does her second quote show reflection on her life?
- What do these quotes together teach us about courage and legacy?
- Why is it important to hear from people like Freeman when we study the American Revolution?
- How do her words reflect the NCHE habit of mind "Decisions and Choices"?

Step 3: Exit Ticket [3–5 mins]

Prompt: Choose one of Freeman's quotes. Write a short journal entry as if you were her, explaining what freedom means to you and why you fought for it.

Primary Source

Mum Bet (Elizabeth Freeman) Quotes

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