

Welcome to Infinite Women. I'm your host, Allison Tyra, and today we're talking about Elizabeth Freeman, also known as MumBet, who fought a legal battle for her freedom from slavery in 1700s Massachusetts.

Elizabeth had been born into slavery around 1744, and was given to her owner's daughter when she was just seven years old, remaining in that woman's household for almost 30 years. In 1780, Elizabeth heard the newly ratified Massachusetts State Constitution, which included that "All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights." With that in mind, she approached a lawyer and abolitionist, Theodore Sedgewick, who agreed to represent her in court. According to his daughter, Catherine, Elizabeth told him, "I heard that paper read yesterday, that says, all men are created equal, and that every man has a right to freedom. I'm not a dumb critter; won't the law give me my freedom?"

That same year, she reportedly prevented her mistress from striking a servant girl with a heated shovel, receiving a deep wound on her own arm as she shielded the girl. She refused to hide the wound as it healed, displaying the evidence of abuse for all to see. Catharine Maria Sedgewick quotes Elizabeth as saying: "Madam never again laid her hand on Lizzy. I had a bad arm all winter, but Madam had the worst of it. I never covered the wound, and when people said to me, before Madam,—'Why, Betty! what ails your arm?' I only answered—'ask missis!' Which was the slave and which was the real mistress?"

In 1781, Elizabeth and another slave in the household, named Brom, became the first African-Americans to file and win a freedom lawsuit in Massachusetts. The county court found slavery to be inconsistent with the new State Constitution, granting them their freedom. Their case was cited as a precedent later that year when another freedom suit, *Quock Walker v. Jennison*, came before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court. Elizabeth and Brom's case laid the legal foundation for that court to essentially end slavery in the state.

After gaining her freedom, Elizabeth took the name Elizabeth Freeman, chose to work as a paid and respected servant in Sedgewick's home and earned a reputation as a healer, midwife and nurse. After she died at age 85, she was the only non-family member interred in the Sedgewick family plot, where the inscription on her tombstone included "She could neither read nor write, yet in her own sphere she had no superior or equal."

Join us next time on the Infinite Women podcast and remember, well-behaved women rarely make history.