

Jessica Yauri Cambi -Third Place

Elizabeth Freeman, formerly known as "Mum Bett," used her knowledge and determination to successfully sue and win her freedom by relentlessly challenging the Massachusetts State Constitution, making her a true symbol of courage and perseverance. Although her date of birth is uncertain, it is believed she was born into slavery in 1742 in Claverack, Columbia County, New York. Freeman and her younger sister, Lizzie, grew up on Pieter Hogeboom's plantation, but both were later given to Hogeboom's daughter and her husband, Colonel John Ashley. Ashley was a judge who moderated a local committee that wrote the Sheffield Declaration that stated "mankind in a state of nature are equal, free, and independent of each, and have a right to the undisturbed enjoyment of their lives, their liberty and property." (citation) These were the words that motivated Freeman to sue for her freedom and would ultimately change slavery in Massachusetts. With the help of Theodore Sedgwick, an attorney who helped draft the Sheffield Declaration, and Brom, an enslaved man, Freeman began the long and difficult process of fighting for freedom. In the Brom and Bett v. Ashley case, Sedgwick argued that because of the Massachusetts constitution which outlawed slavery, Bett and Brom were not Colonel Ashley's property. The jury granted both Freeman and Brom their freedom, thirty shillings, and covered the costs of the trial. Freeman then went on to become a paid domestic worker, a prominent healer, a midwife, and a nurse for the Sedgwick household.

Because of her courage and determination Freeman became the first African-American woman to win her way out of slavery under the Massachusetts constitution and would abolish the institution of slavery within the state of Massachusetts. Because of her life, she inspires many to take action against injustice today. She demonstrated bravery and proved an amazing leader not only in court, but also when protecting her sister from being hit by Mrs. Ashley. Knowledge along with the right strategy and courage were crucial and she used those skills when she overheard the drafting of the Sheffield Declaration which states the freedom of everybody within the borders of MA; she knew it also applied to her and with that one line she fought for her freedom.

Freeman has become someone whom I admire. She knew that fighting for her freedom was going to be a long and difficult process, and the outcome was unclear, especially being an enslaved woman of color; however, that didn't stop her. Nothing stopped Freeman. She stood in a courtroom full of white men and didn't leave until she was heard. Similar to this case was the Dredd Scott v Stanford. Scott was an enslaved African American who sued for his freedom. Although Scott was unsuccessful, cases like both Freeman and Scott motivated and encouraged the Civil Rights movement.