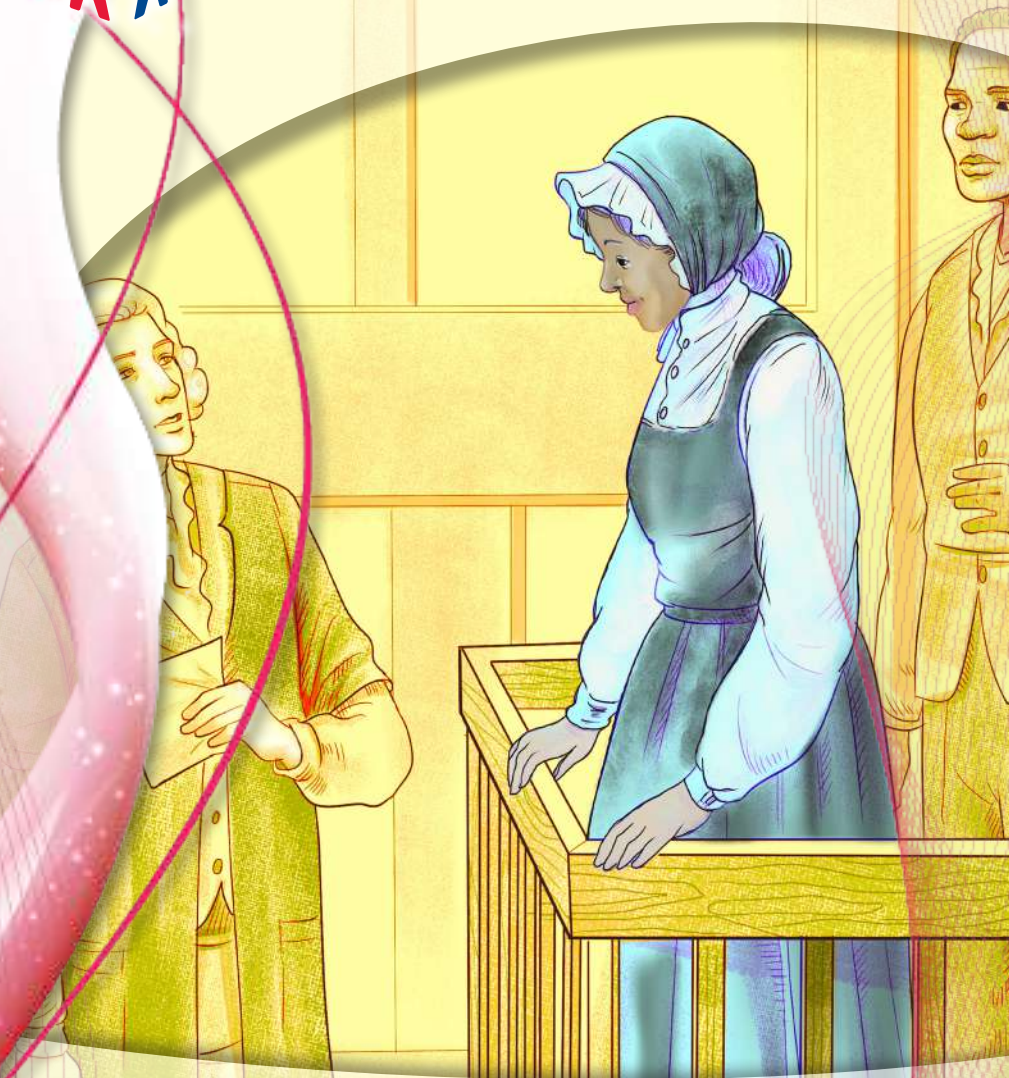




Core Knowledge **VOICES IN HISTORY™**



Elizabeth Freeman

Fighting for Freedom

by Nancy Churnin

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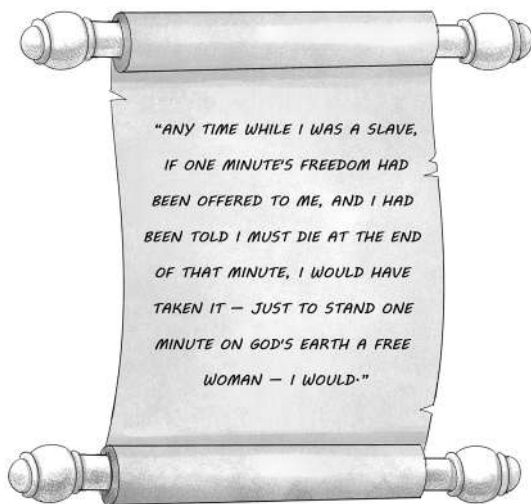
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1

Yearning for Freedom

Bet and her husband had a plan. They knew it was dangerous. But they wanted freedom more than anything—freedom for themselves and for their daughter, Little Bet.

Many enslaved men were volunteering to fight for the colonists' right to be free of King George III in exchange for winning their own freedom.

Bet's husband told Colonel John Ashley Jr., his enslaver, that he was willing to join the battle, too. Colonel Ashley agreed. Soon, Bet's husband was one of more than five thousand Black soldiers who would fight beside white colonists in the Revolutionary War. Bet and Little Bet clung to him. What if they never saw him again? This was going to be a difficult war. The Revolutionary soldiers were not well trained in warfare. They were outnumbered and didn't have the guns, ammunition, uniforms, or food supplies of the British soldiers and their mercenaries—the nearly thirty thousand trained German soldiers that the British paid to fight for them.

mercenaries: hired soldiers from other countries

Bet couldn't make up for all of that. But she slipped dry beans, a precious bit of salted meat, biscuits, and a clean piece of cloth in her husband's sack. She slipped a prayer in her kiss.

"Don't worry, Bet," he whispered as he swung Little Bet up high in his arms. The little girl giggled, her legs kicking happily as he gave her one more hug. "I'll save my money. I'll be back. I'll be free, and I'll earn enough to buy your freedom and Little Bet's, too."

Then, before Bet could blink back tears, he was off in a cart pulled by horses, crammed against other men. Hooves kicked up dust that stung their eyes. Bet felt the clop clop in her chest. She squeezed her daughter's hand. She knew she had to be strong. She didn't have time to worry. There was too much work to do.

Washing. Drying. Cooking. Baking. Healing. Making soap. Dipping candles. Sweeping. Dusting. Polishing. Tending the herb garden. Taking care of the children. Keeping homes warm and lit and families clean, clothed, and fed was a laborious job in the 1700s. This was before homes had running water, gas, electricity, or any modern labor-saving devices.

While men worked morning to night on farms or in stores, women spent sunrise to sunset chopping and hauling wood, tending to fires, cooking, pickling, and



canning food. They dragged water from rivers in tubs or buckets in order to boil it over a fire so they could scrub clothes with harsh soap they made themselves. Sometimes during winter, their hands froze as they collected snow to melt and boil. Unless, of course, they were from families with money. Then they could hire help for a few hours a day. And if they had even more money, they could buy help that would be there all the time.

Some people could afford to purchase enslaved people, who, once bought, were considered personal property. Enslaved people had to work as long and as hard as their

enslavers demanded, with no compensation. They had no rights, meaning they were not in charge of their own lives. Families were often separated, as enslaved people's family members could be sold to others. Even children could be separated from their parents. A slave owner could buy someone like Bet and call her by any name they chose without ever asking or caring what her real or preferred name might be. They could do all these things because they had the power to do so. The law was on their side, with courts, police, and soldiers ready to enforce it.

Bet's enslavers, Captain John Ashley Jr. and his wife, Mrs. Hannah Ashley, were the richest family in town. Bet and her daughter always had food and clothes—not always what or as much as they wanted, but more than poorer families. Still, Bet had no control over any moment of the day, the work she did, or when she slept or for how long. She had no say over anything at all. Seeing loved ones and friends enslaved was intolerable.

"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 earth a free woman—I would." Bet said years later, remembering those days.

2

A Deep Sense of Right and Wrong

John Ashley was a well-educated man—a lawyer, a judge, and a colonel. He was a leader who spoke gently and never raised a hand to hurt anyone, and he was often the first one to whom people would turn for protection against injustice.

But John had been brought up with the idea that enslavement was part of life, and it was no use trying to get him to see otherwise. His wife, Hannah, believed the same thing. Hannah was also harsh in her treatment of Bet and other enslaved people in her household.

Bet was a skilled healer. Some said she had learned the art of using herbs as medicine from her mother and had taught the skill to her own daughter, Little Bet. Others said she had been torn from her mother too early to learn anything. They believed she learned her talents from other enslaved women working for the Ashleys.

One thing was certain. Bet knew what she was doing. She could cool a fevered brow and calm a delirious mind. It was said she never lost a baby in delivery.

healer: someone who makes others healthy

delirious: affected by confused thinking

Bet knew that Hannah would complain every time she helped someone in the community. But Bet didn't care. When someone needed help, she would find a way to get there and give it. Bet knew that saving lives and easing the pain of others was always the right thing to do. And no one, not even Hannah Ashley, was going to stop Bet from doing what she knew was right.

Nevertheless, Bet knew that every time she stood her ground, she took a risk. After all, if Hannah got angry enough, she could sell Bet or punish her. But Hannah never followed through on her threats because Hannah couldn't manage without Bet. Bet ran the Ashleys' great big estate until it purred. Every meal was on time; all the clothing was clean and mended. Every fireplace was immaculate. Every floor gleamed with polish. Every child was happy, tended to, and gently taught right from wrong. And when someone was hurting in body or mind, Bet knew just what to do.

Bet was also wise enough not to argue with Hannah.

Bet wished she too could go off to war to win her freedom, as her husband had. But no one would allow a woman to do such a thing. Rules were different for men and women. Besides, who would look after Little Bet?



3

A Dream Dies, Another Begins

One day, John Ashley pulled Bet aside. He could not meet her gaze. Bet's heart skipped a beat. She knew that whatever he was going to say would be bad news.

John told her that her husband had died bravely in battle, fighting against the British for their new country, the United States. His words fell like shovels of dirt on her ears.

"I'm sorry, Bet," he said.

Her eyes stung with tears she refused to let fall. Would their dreams die, like the fires they tried to keep lit in the deep winter snow? No! Bet would find a way to keep her and Little Bet's hopes and dreams alive. She thought of how her husband had died a free man. It had been worth it, even if it was just for a brief time.

Now Bet needed to come up with another way to gain her and her daughter's freedom.

That night, she held Little Bet gently as she told her that her father had died a free man and a hero. She promised her daughter she wouldn't let his dream for their freedom die. She sang softly as Little Bet cried until she hiccuped and fell asleep.

4

Standing Her Ground

People said John Ashley was as kind a man as his wife was mean. He was certainly a rich and powerful man—the owner of the biggest house in Berkshire County, Massachusetts. He had his own ironworks, a sawmill, a cider mill, and a mill for grinding grain, along with a general store, a fifty-acre farm, and woodlands.

People said Bet was lucky to be working for him.

Bet didn't feel lucky. Bet often thought of the moment she had been pulled away from her own parents as a child, with just a silk shawl, a gift from her father, and a short dress from her mother to remember them by—keepsakes she had treasured all her life. Bet hoped that John would not be so heartless, that he would not send her daughter away.

Despite her circumstances, Bet treated everyone with respect and dignity. She treated the children in her care

keepsakes: items kept in memory of something or someone

with the same kindness and firmness she showed her own daughter. She knew, deep in her soul, that everyone should be treated equally—that everyone should have the right to live where they wished, work where they wished, and pursue happiness as they saw fit. Why couldn't others see that too?

Bet also knew that if she tried to escape with her daughter, she wouldn't make it very far. It would be highly unlikely that they could successfully escape from someone who had the law on his side, plus the money and influence to track them down wherever they fled. Somehow, she had to get John to agree to let her go. But how? Each day, as Bet carried out her endless chores, she contemplated how to overcome the reality of her and her daughter's enslavement.



Then, one afternoon, a young girl who lived in a nearby home came through the gate while Bet was working outside. The girl asked to see John Ashley. Bet studied her face. Bet could see that something bad had happened, and it wasn't something she could cure with her herbs or healing skills. The girl needed help of the kind that only John, with his powerful social and legal connections, could give. John wasn't at home, so Bet brought the girl to a room next to the kitchen to calm her down. She spoke to her gently.

Just as Bet managed to soothe the girl, Hannah strode in. Hannah was not happy that a strange girl was in her house, waiting to see her husband. She yelled at Bet for letting the girl in and demanded she leave immediately.

Bet didn't waver. She told the girl to sit still. Even as Hannah's anger grew, Bet reassured the girl and spoke to her softly.

Bet turned toward Hannah, her gaze firm. She was determined to ignore Hannah. Bet won, and Hannah finally withdrew.

Eventually, John returned home, and Bet took the girl to see him.

Bet carefully lit candles on John's desk so John, sitting in his high-backed chair, and the girl, who sat right across from him, could see each other. Bet stood in the shadows, as John asked the girl her name. The girl responded, trembling: Tamor Graham. Bet listened as Tamor haltingly told her sad story—a story that Bet, mindful of the girl's privacy, would never share, not even years later to the one person she most trusted to write about her life.

When they were done talking, John turned to Bet with tears in his eyes. She knew he was grateful to her for helping Tamor. He asked Bet to protect and comfort Tamor while he found her a safer place to live.

Bet nodded. She was glad that John was going to help Tamor. His help would make all the difference. She was happy she had played a role in that. But she wondered why John couldn't see that she and Little Bet needed help, too— help to be free.

She sighed. And then she thought: If John wouldn't help her, maybe someone else would. But who?

Seeking Freedom

The first documented transportation of enslaved Africans to New England was in 1638, when Captain William Peirce of Boston returned from the Caribbean, where he had traded several captured Pequot people for “some cotton, and tobacco, and negroes.” Massachusetts declared enslavement legal in 1641, and the law was amended in 1670 to make it legal for the children of enslaved people to be enslaved too.

Massachusetts never had anywhere near as many enslaved people as the southern colonies. In the South, a lot of labor was needed to plant, tend, and harvest on plantations. But despite this fact, Massachusetts played a major role in the slave trade.



Leaders in the community—including three of Massachusetts's most respected judges, John Saffin, John Coleman, and John Campbell—were slave merchants involved in what was known as the triangular trade, a key part of the northern economy.

New England merchants would trade farm produce, lumber, and manufactured goods for sugar and molasses from sugar plantations in the West Indies. They then used the sugar and molasses to make rum, which would be sold to leaders in Africa in exchange for more enslaved people for the West Indian plantations. Enslaved people who were not considered suitable for work in the West Indies were often brought back to New England to be sold there. Slave traders earned a lot of money, employed a lot of people, and were admired in communities where few seemed to question the morality of selling people. Back when Massachusetts was still a colony, two Massachusetts slave traders, William Pepperrell and Charles Hobby, were knighted by the British Crown.

Well-to-do people in New England had enslaved people drive their coaches, cook their dinners, run their homes, and work as bakers, launderers, tailors, sailmakers, weavers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, cabinetmakers, naval carpenters, shoemakers, brush makers, glaziers, and printers. People would hire out their enslaved help to others. When this happened, the enslaved person was allowed to keep a portion of the fees, which they could save to buy their freedom.

Enslaved people continually sought freedom. Between January 6, 1773, and February 10, 1780, Black people in Massachusetts, both enslaved and free, filed at least eight petitions aimed at abolishing slavery by appealing to officials for their rights. Several of these efforts were aided by Prince Hall, a free Black resident of Boston. One petition, filed on April 20, 1773, asked colonists to adopt the Spanish tradition that

allowed enslaved people one free day a week to earn money to buy their freedom. Another asked for children of enslaved people to be set free at the age of twenty-one. The requests grew more heated as the American Revolution approached, with enslaved people noting the hypocrisy of colonists demanding freedom for themselves that they denied to others. That's why, dangerous as it was, when colonists offered freedom to enslaved people willing to help them fight the British, many, like Bet's husband, seized the opportunity.

5

The Mystery of Bet

Many of the stories about Bet's life are based on fact, but still much is unknown. Words cited as Bet's own words are drawn from a book written by someone she knew, trusted, and loved. Nevertheless, passages that portray specific actions and words are really just best guesses of what she might have said and done.

For instance, most agree on the time that Bet stood her ground against Hannah and made sure that a young girl in need got her chance to talk with John. They also agree on another terrifying time when Bet tried to protect a young, enslaved person from Hannah's wrath. People don't agree on who she was protecting in that second incident. Was it a friend? A sister? Or could it have been Bet's own daughter, Little Bet?

Let's imagine that Bet was protecting her daughter. Let's imagine the chilling confrontation that might have happened as Bet cleaned up the evening meal for the Ashley family, as she always did. Just as she settled the plates in the kitchen and got ready to wash them, Hannah strode in, checking to make sure everything was in order.

Everything was as it should be, as it always was with Bet in charge. But then Hannah saw something that angered her. Was Little Bet taking a bite of . . . a wheaten cake? Yes! Little Bet's hand froze on the morsel she had brought to her mouth. All the child had done was scrape the great oaken bowl for leftover scraps after her mother had kneaded the family dough. Before the bowl had been scrubbed, Little Bet had found just enough to make her own small bit of bread.

Hannah was furious! Little Bet was stealing her food.

Hannah grabbed a red-hot shovel that Bet had just used to clean ashes from the fireplace, lifted it over the terrified child, and brought it down . . . on Bet's outstretched arm, which Bet had thrust out in time to take the blow meant for her child.

Sizzle . . . scream! The shovel sliced Bet's arm to the bone, leaving a gaping wound.

kneaded: worked and formed

Embarrassed and frightened by what she had done, Hannah stumbled out.

Bet sat down, dizzy and in tremendous pain. She gestured for someone in the household to take her crying, terrified child out of the kitchen to settle her down. Someone else helped her clean and care for the wound and put herbs on it so it would heal. Bet accepted a cloth to stop the bleeding. But she refused to wrap her wound in a bandage or hide the ugly scar that followed.

She wanted people to see what Hannah had done. Because as far as Bet was concerned, her ugly wound was Hannah's shame, not hers.

At that time, it was illegal throughout the northern colonies to deliberately maim or kill an enslaved person. However, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to prove that Hannah had deliberately injured Bet. As for Bet, she had no intention of hiding the evidence of Hannah's crime.

When they went to church that Sunday, people gasped when they saw the wound on Bet's arm. When they asked how it happened, she said pointedly, "Ask missus." Their eyes darted toward Hannah. They shook their heads at how Hannah could do such a thing to anyone and especially to their beloved Bet, who had helped and saved the lives of so many in their community. Hannah bit her lip and looked away.

maim: injure badly

Putting the Pieces Together

There's a lot we know about Bet. But there's even more we don't know, at least not for certain. As enslaved people were not allowed to learn to read and write, Bet had no way of writing her own story. So what we do know is what other people have written about her. Sometimes the accounts of her life conflict. Sometimes, there are large gaps in the story of her life. For instance, some people have said she was sent to the Ashley home as a six-month-old baby, transported on a sled that cut through the snow. Others say she went there at age seven, with a dress from her parents that she would treasure all her life and an early knowledge of healing herbs taught to her by her mother. Some say she was sent alone, while others say she went with a sister named Lizzie, whom she protected as well as she could.

People even disagree about her name. Some call her Bet, but others have called her Bett, Betty, Mum Bett, or Mumbet. Her husband's name is a mystery because it was never put in writing. What you read about their goodbyes are best guesses about what they might have said, done, and felt when Bet's husband left to fight in the Revolutionary War, and how Bet and Little Bet coped with the awful news of his death.

It is because of Catharine Maria Sedgwick, an author who would come to know and love Bet later in her life, that we know most of what we do. Catharine met Bet after most of these events occurred and had to depend on Bet's memory and her willingness to share details. While Catharine couldn't put all

the pieces together, there was one thing she was sure of, and that was the majesty of Bet's character. Catharine wrote of the woman she called Mumbet, "I do not believe that any amount of temptation could have induced Mumbet to swerve from truth. She knew nothing of the compromises of timidity, or the overwrought conscientiousness of bigotry. Truth was her nature—the offspring of courage and loyalty. In my childhood I clung to her with instinctive love and faith."

timidity: lack of courage

overwrought: overly excited

conscientiousness: quality of being very careful

bigotry: hateful and unfair treatment of a group of people

6

Bet's Plan

Bet was just one of many enslaved people to thirst for freedom. A few enslaved people did win freedom by claiming that the people who enslaved them had promised to free them, only to go back on their word. In 1701, an enslaved man named Adam accused his enslaver, John Saffin of Boston, of violating an agreement in a contract to free him. Adam won his freedom in 1703. In 1735, an enslaved man named James claimed that he had been freed in his late enslaver's will. The will had been misplaced, however, and the enslaver's son refused to let him go. The court freed James two years later, in 1737.

But the Ashleys had made no such promise to Bet. They had no intention of ever letting her go. As for Bet, she wouldn't leave without her daughter. She had to find some way of freeing them both—and more, if she could.

In 1777, Vermont, a colony next to Massachusetts, abolished slavery. Bet wondered if finally Massachusetts would do the same.

violating: breaking

will: legal document explaining what happens to a person's property after they die

But people in Massachusetts remained divided about the issue. In 1778, a state constitution was proposed that would allow every free male resident twenty-one and over “excepting Negroes, Indians and molattoes [sic]” to vote. Many people were outraged by the inequality. Voters rejected the proposed constitution.

One day, in June 1780, Bet was told to prepare for a gathering in the Ashley home. Bet set to work. She prepared and set out heavy trays laden with meat and bread and pickles, along with various beverages.

As she served food to those who had gathered there, she listened carefully to their conversations.



She recorded in her mind every word that was spoken and the spirit in which the words were said as the men discussed their state's new constitution. Bet heard John and his young friend, the lawyer Theodore Sedgwick, who lived four miles away in Sheffield, talk of how all people were born free and equal. But it wasn't just what Theodore said that caught her attention. John and many of the others talked about freedom often, but they only visualized freedom for white men like themselves. But this Theodore . . . there was something different about the way he spoke. Could it be that when Theodore talked about everyone's rights, he meant everyone?

Now that the United States was a free and independent nation, Founding Father John Adams had added Thomas Jefferson's words about all people being created equal to the new Massachusetts constitution.

But the only man in the room who seemed to really understand what a declaration of freedom and of equality meant was Theodore, thought Bet.

That gave Bet an idea for a new plan. She thought and thought and nursed it until her plan began to grow like one of her herbs poking its way through the soil. It was risky. Still, Bet was willing to risk her life for freedom.

visualized: pictured in one's mind

There was just one problem. The constitution said, "All men are born free and equal." Just as she had not been able to enlist in the Revolutionary War because she was a woman, would someone say she did not have the right to be free because she was a woman? She thought and thought. And then she had it. She would find an enslaved man she could trust with her plan.

Bet had decided that she didn't want to reveal her plan to anyone in John and Hannah's home who might give her away. So one night, after finishing her work, she slipped off down the road to drop off healing herbs at the home of John's son, John III. John III was a general and the enslaver of her friend, a man named Brom.

When Bet got to the house, she told Brom of her plan. At first Brom hesitated. This was dangerous business that Bet was proposing. But it was hard to say no to a woman who had right on her side. Brom agreed to help. But he also made it clear that she and Little Bet would have to take their first steps to freedom alone.



7

A Big Gamble

The next day, Bet arranged for others enslaved in the Ashley home to oversee and run the household while she went to the market for needed items. Before she set off, she left careful instructions. She made extra sure everyone understood their tasks.

Bet looped an empty shopping basket over her hand and set out on the long walk to Sheffield. But before she got to the market, Bet walked toward a home she'd never been to before. She knocked on the door.

"Is Mr. Sedgwick here?" asked Bet.

Bet waited as the servant went to Theodore Sedgwick's office.

Theodore came to the door, puzzled.

"You're a long way from home, Bet. What brings you here?"

Bet looked him straight in his eyes. Had she been right? Could she trust him? Could she ask him . . . ?

Theodore smiled kindly back at her.

Yes, she would ask him.

“Sir,” she said, “I heard that paper read yesterday that says all men are born equal and that every man has a right to freedom. I want my freedom. I want Little Bet’s freedom. I want everyone’s freedom.”

Theodore’s jaw dropped.

“But . . .” he began. And then, as if not knowing how else to respond, he added, “It says all *men*”—emphasizing the word *men*.

“Yes, it says all men are born free and equal. My friend Brom is a man, and he wants his freedom too.”

Theodore shook his head. But Bet could see he was thinking.

“You know John Ashley is my friend,” he said at last.

“But the constitution of this state says I’m free,” Bet replied.

Theodore looked at her. He could feel, in her unwavering gaze, her firm sense of right and wrong. Finally he spoke again.

“I can take this to court. But if we win, where will you go, Bet? How will you live? And if you lose. . . .”

Bet knew what he was saying. If they won, who would hire her and pay her a living wage to support her daughter?

And if they lost, there was no telling what John and Hannah Ashley might do to punish or make an example of her.

Bet thought about her husband, risking his life—and losing it—to be free.

She thought, too, of her daughter, Little Bet—a little girl who, like her mother, had never known anything but enslavement.

She thought of the words that whispered through her days like a ribbon curling around a bonnet: *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.* And she knew what she had to do.

“It is worth everything to me,” she said. “It is the right thing to do.”

8

A Knock at the Door

Bet finished her shopping and walked home, where she cooked, cleaned, and waited. Days passed. Bet wondered if Theodore Sedgwick had lost his nerve. But no, she believed in him. And she was right to, for on May 28, 1781, someone knocked on the door of the Ashleys' home.

Bet opened the door and saw . . . a sheriff!

"Is Colonel John Ashley here?" the sheriff asked.

Bet went to get him.

The sheriff handed John a piece of paper. It was a legal paper called a writ, and it demanded that Bet and Brom, who lived in John's son's house, be released, as they did not legally belong to the Ashleys.

As John read it, his eyes widened. His face reddened. John refused to let Bet or Brom go. He sent the sheriff away. But the sheriff returned again and again. Finally,

writ: legal document signed by a court official

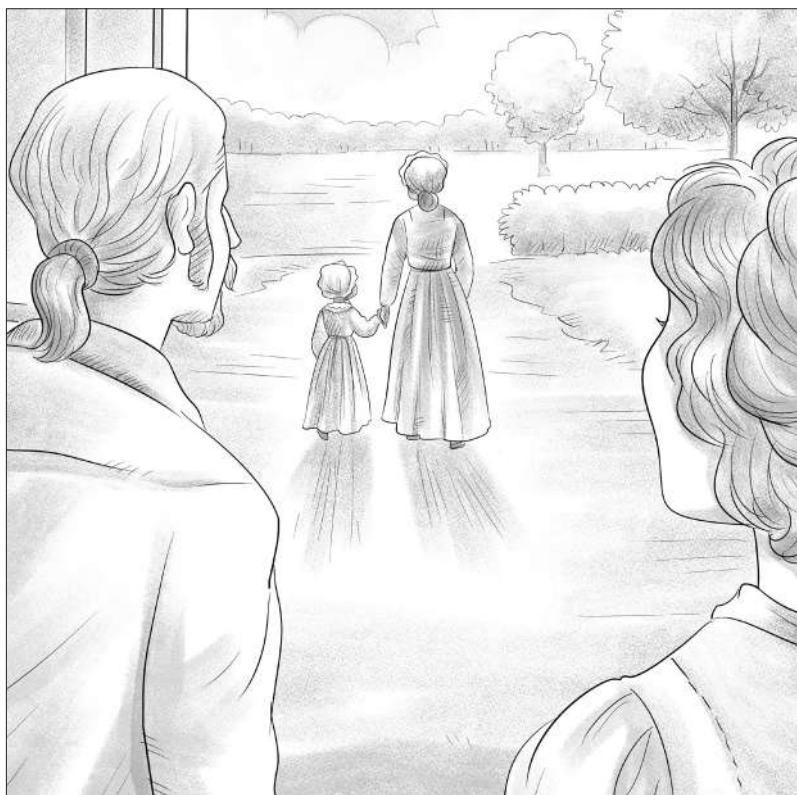
the sheriff arrived with an order from the court that John could not refuse. A court proceeding had been announced: *Brom and Bett vs. J. Ashley, Esq.*, to be held on August 21, 1781.

John, by law, would have to let Bet and Brom leave with the sheriff until the trial.

Where would Bet and Brom go while they waited to be heard? Theodore left word with the sheriff that he had worked that out. He had found a home where Brom could work for a wage. The sheriff asked Bet if she and Little Bet would like to help Theodore's wife, Pamela, and their three children, Eliza, Frances, and Theodore II, also for a wage. She said yes, happily.

John looked grim but agreed to follow the law. He would also allow Bet to keep Little Bet with her until the court made its decision. After all, he was sure the court would decide in his favor. Bet would be back soon.

Hannah glared as Bet gathered up her few belongings, including her treasured silk shawl from her father and the short dress from her mother. Hannah was angry. Like her husband, she didn't believe Bet had the right to her freedom. Hannah wanted to yell, but she didn't because she was also a little scared. How would she manage her household without Bet?



Bet stayed focused on the life she had visualized for herself—her life as a free woman. Even if her court case failed, every minute of freedom would be worth the risk. She left the house that had been her home for decades. It was the biggest, grandest house in town. She held her head high. She didn't look back.

9

A New Life

Theodore Sedgwick's home was nowhere near as large or fancy as the Ashleys' estate had been. Pamela was sickly and sometimes cried out in a panic, terrified of things that weren't there. But Bet knew how to calm her. And she and Little Bet had never been happier.

The work seemed similar on the outside—cooking, cleaning, running the household, caring for the children. But on the inside, the difference was enormous. Bet worked for the Sedgwicks of her own free will, and she was paid money that she could save for a home of her own that she hoped to buy someday.

Plus, right from the start, the Sedgwicks treated her with respect, appreciation, and admiration. The children, who loved their sick mother but didn't get the care they craved from her, turned to Bet. The Sedgwick children called her Mumbet, their other mother. They adored her, and she adored them. The Sedgwick children played with Little Bet and treated her like a little sister.

Meanwhile, Theodore was working hard on Bet's case. Bet could tell that he was growing anxious. John Ashley was the kind of man who always won, in life and in legal matters. He was well liked, had tremendous influence, and had the money to hire the best attorneys. Sparing no expense, John brought in Jonathan Canfield from Connecticut and David Noble from Williamstown, Massachusetts, to make his case.

Bet understood that things would be bad for her and her daughter if the court forced them to return to the Ashleys. Word was spreading that Hannah was hollering about what she would do with her "runaway slave" when she got her back. Bet knew a lot was at stake for Brom, too.

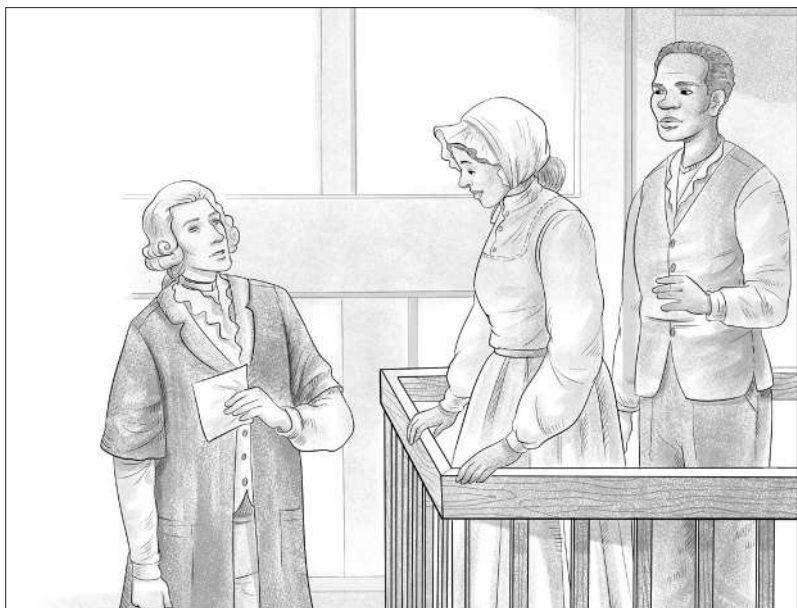
But Bet trusted Theodore. When his confidence wavered, she let him know with encouraging smiles that she believed in him, that they had the power of right on their side. Meanwhile, Theodore saw how Bet was transforming the lives of his family for the better. He was moved by how everything Bet did, to the smallest word and action, stemmed from her mighty sense of right and wrong. Her example made him even more determined to work hard to make things right. He studied, took notes, and tested arguments. He was grateful when a lawyer he admired, Tapping Reeve, agreed to help.

Finally, less than a year after the Massachusetts constitution went into effect, the day of the trial arrived. On August 21, 1781, crowds surged around Theodore, Tapping, Bet, Brom, and John Ashley as they walked into the courthouse in Great Barrington. This was the fight that would determine the future of Bet, Little Bet, and Brom—and hopefully, many others!

10

The Trial

Inside the courtroom, Theodore took a deep breath. He had decided he wasn't going to argue the case in what was considered the typical way. He wasn't going to claim broken promises of freedom or misuse by a slave owner of an enslaved person. No, with Bet's encouragement, he was going to claim that Bet and Brom were free under the new Massachusetts constitution that stated that all men were created equal.



It was risky to be the first person to use a new argument for which there was no precedent, or similar case with the outcome he wanted. But if he won—and oh, he had to win!—then Theodore would succeed in winning the freedom not only of Bet and Brom but of Little Bet and every other enslaved person in Massachusetts, too.

John and his lawyers, on the other hand, were relying on precedent. After all, Massachusetts had made slavery legal in 1641. John had followed the law when he bought Bet, just as his son had followed the law when he bought Brom. That same law, which was more than a century old, had changed over the years to allow children of enslaved people, like Little Bet, to be enslaved too. It seemed like a simple, straightforward case to John and his team.

A jury of Berkshire County farmers filed in to take their seats. John, now in his seventies, was a great man in Berkshire. He was a respected man. Could Theodore—a young lawyer and legislator from Sheffield at the beginning of his career—convince this jury to change the way things had been done for as long as any of them could remember?

Theodore and Tapping had decided to keep their argument simple, too. Yes, slavery had been the law of the land for a long time. But times were changing. There was a new hunger for freedom in their new country—the United

States of America. They appealed to the consciences and hearts of the jury by arguing that no one had the right to enslave others. They said that even though there had been a law that allowed enslavement, that law was annulled—struck down—by the new Massachusetts constitution.

After both sides made their case, the jury left to deliberate. Bet went back to the Sedgwick home. Brom returned to the home where he was working. Bet cared for Pamela and the children. She hugged Little Bet. When her heart fluttered, she quieted herself down and reminded herself not to worry. She had right on her side.

The hours ticked by slowly. Finally, Theodore called Bet.

“The jury has come to a decision!” he exclaimed.

It was time to go back to court. The Sedgwick children hugged Bet tight, not wanting to let go. What if the court ruled against Bet and they never saw her again?

11

The Decision

“**H**as the jury come to a decision?” asked the judge.

The foreman, the leader of the jury, nodded yes. The judge asked for the decision. Bet could tell that Theodore and Tapping were very nervous. Bet studied the jury. She could always read people’s hearts and minds. Suddenly, her heart flooded with calm, knowing what they would say before they said it.

Bet and Brom could not be anybody’s property. They had been illegally held in bondage.

John’s jaw dropped in shock as people in the courtroom erupted in applause. His lawyers whispered angrily to each other. They couldn’t believe it. The judge pounded the gavel and told everyone to quiet down.

“Is that all?” the judge asked.

“No, your honor,” the foreman said. “We also find that Colonel John Ashley owes Bet and Brom thirty silver shillings and an additional five pounds, fourteen shillings, and four pence to pay for this suit.”

bondage: state of being forced to work for someone else

suit: court action

Now Bet's jaw dropped, too! The jury was awarding Brom and her money? Payment for damages—money owed for their unpaid labor—and the cost of the lawsuit? She told Theodore and Tapping to take what fee they thought was fair and give her the rest.

Bet was free at last!

Then she heard John calling her name. Bet turned to him, surprised. Unlike Hannah, John had never yelled or raised his voice to her. Would he now, after this crushing defeat?

"Now that you have your freedom, will you work for us again . . . for a wage?" he asked softly, aware that for the first time since he'd known her, she could say no. He told her that Brom had agreed to return to work for his son, but this time as a paid worker.

She looked at John. Had the trial changed his heart? Did he finally understand that enslaving others was simply wrong? She looked into his eyes, and she knew then that while he accepted the decision, he didn't agree with it. He admired her and needed her—he wanted her to run his house—but he still didn't truly believe she should be free.

She turned to look at Theodore. She could see he was worried that she would leave him to return to the

grandest estate in town, to employers who could offer a better salary than anyone else. Plus, Bet had spent most of her life in the Ashley home. Her memories and ties—and those of her daughter—ran strong and deep.

“I’m sorry, Colonel Ashley,” she replied at last. “I’m working for the Sedgwicks now.”

She took Little Bet’s hand and walked toward Theodore. She looked up at him. He could see that there was one more thing she wanted to ask of him as her lawyer.

“I want a new legal name,” she said. “Bet is short for Elizabeth. I am free, and I want to have a second name too, like you do. Elizabeth Freeman. I want that to be my legal name.”

12

Elizabeth Freeman

The Sedgwick children jumped up and down, squealing, upon seeing their father return with Bet and Little Bet.

“Mumbet is here to stay! Mumbet is never going away!” they exclaimed.

Then their father told them that her name wasn’t Mumbet or Bet anymore, but Elizabeth Freeman. And that she could, in fact, leave whenever she liked because she was free. She would stay if she liked and would leave when she liked.

The children were confused. Then Elizabeth opened her arms. One by one, they hugged her tightly. She whispered to them.

“You can call me Mumbet,” she said, “because you are my special children. Elizabeth Freeman is for everyone else. And I’m happy to work for your family. I’m not leaving anytime soon.”



13

Freedom for All

Elizabeth continued working for the Sedgwicks as a free woman. Her daughter, Little Bet, stayed by her side until Little Bet married and had children of her own. Elizabeth helped deliver more Sedgwick children. She encouraged the ninth child, Catharine, who was always telling stories, to become a writer. And Catharine did! It's because of what Catharine would grow up to write that we know as much about Elizabeth as we do. Catharine's quotes are the ones often used to tell this story.

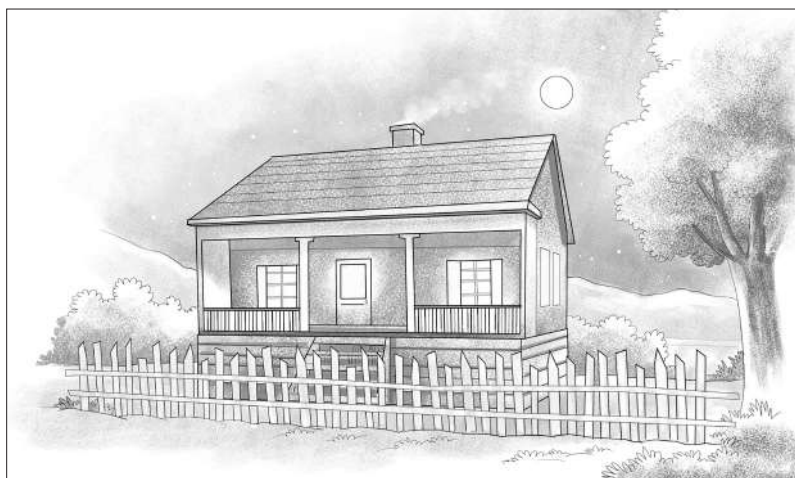
The tenth and final Sedgwick child, Charles, wrote her epitaph—ending with the words “Good mother, fare well”—for the grave that rests in the Sedgwick family plot, next to that of Catharine, who loved her Mumbet with all her heart.

After Elizabeth won her court case, other enslaved people sued for their freedom. Two years after the case, the people of Massachusetts accepted that Elizabeth's case had won freedom for all in their state. No enslaved person had to sue for their rights anymore.

epitaph: writing on a grave or tomb

sue: take legal action

Elizabeth saved the wages she was paid. When she was ready to retire, she used her money to buy a house of her own.



Her children and grandchildren visited alongside the Sedgwick children and grandchildren, who considered her their mother and grandmother too.

In fact, people of all races came by to thank her and pay her respect. Throughout her life, she had helped many in her community with her kindness, her care, and her healing skills. Her battle in court, her determination, and her courage had resulted in freedom for thousands.

Theodore had helped, but the true bravery was Elizabeth's. She had risked so much.

It would be decades before all people were free in the United States. That would not happen until after the

Union's victory in the Civil War and the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. But back in the 1780s, Massachusetts, thanks to Elizabeth, became one of the early states to let freedom ring.

Elizabeth Freeman had a strong sense of right and wrong that guided and empowered her all her life. When Elizabeth heard the phrase “All men are born free and equal,” she knew she needed to do all she could to make sure the people who wrote it acted upon it.

Elizabeth didn't live to see freedom come to everyone in all of the United States. But she helped focus the conscience of the country on the words enshrined in the Massachusetts constitution and the Declaration of Independence. Just as her husband had risked and given his life to win freedom on the battlefield, she risked everything to argue in a court of law that freedom was part of the promise of the United States. She moved her state and her country one big step forward in the direction of hope and justice.

Her win was everyone's win—and the United States', too.

The Good Mother

Elizabeth Freeman's headstone includes her legal name as well as the name the Sedgwicks lovingly called her. It reads:

ELIZABETH FREEMAN

known by the name of

MUMBET

died Dec. 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, nor 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.

Discussion Questions

1. What are three examples of Elizabeth's kindness and how she cared for others?
2. Do you think Elizabeth is someone you would have enjoyed knowing as a friend? Why or why not?
3. As an enslaved person, Elizabeth was expected to obey her enslavers and let them do what they wanted. What are three examples of how Elizabeth refused to go along with what her enslavers wanted? Why did she refuse?
4. In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. wrote, "One has not only a legal but a moral responsibility to obey just laws. Conversely, one has a moral responsibility to disobey unjust laws." Do you think Dr. King would have approved or disapproved of Elizabeth's refusal to obey certain orders from her enslavers? Why?
5. Elizabeth could have made a case for her freedom using arguments that worked before, by showing her scar as evidence that she had been mistreated. Why do you think Elizabeth wanted to fight for her freedom using the words in the Massachusetts constitution when no one had ever won freedom that way before?

6. Before Elizabeth won her freedom, she was known by whatever name her enslavers gave her, such as Bet or Bett or Mumbet. Why do you think it was important for her to have a new legal name, Elizabeth Freeman? Why do you think she chose that name?
7. Elizabeth Freeman once said, “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 earth a free woman—I would.” Why did Elizabeth say that? Do you agree with her about the importance of freedom?

Meet the Author



Nancy Churnin is an award-winning children's book author who writes about people who have made the world a better place and who inspire children to be heroes and heroines too. She admires Elizabeth Freeman for her courage, her perseverance, and how hard she fought for the right of all people to be treated equally and with dignity and kindness. Those are principles Nancy admires and tries to follow, too.

Nancy won a 2021 National Jewish Book Award, a 2022 Sydney Taylor Honor Book award, and a 2022 National Communications Contest award from the National Federation of Press Women for *Dear Mr. Dickens*,

a true story that inspired the creation of an educational program at the Charles Dickens Museum in London. She has also won two Sydney Taylor Notable Book awards, for her works *Irving Berlin: The Immigrant Boy Who Made America Sing* (2018) and *A Queen to the Rescue: The Story of Henrietta Szold, Founder of Hadassah* (2021).

Born and raised in New York City, Nancy lives in North Texas, where she enjoyed being a theater critic for the *Dallas Morning News* before becoming a full-time author. Her books come with free teacher guides, resources, and projects she hopes you'll try on her website, nancychurnin.com.

Meet the Illustrator



Santosh Neogi was born in Kolkata (in Western India). He is a graduate of the Lucknow College of Arts and Crafts in Lucknow, India. Santosh draws inspiration from the colonial architecture, the captivating art galleries, and the cultural festivals that are all part of his home. These were the influences that prompted him to start painting at a very young age. Kolkata's rich culture inspires him to paint using rich tones and colors. Santosh has spent the last several years pursuing his career as a children's book illustrator.

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Santosh Neogi & Ivan Pesic

Title Page Illustration by

Santosh Neogi

Text Illustrations by

In Courtesy Nancy Churnin / 50

In Courtesy Santosh Neogi / 52

Santosh Neogi / 3, 7, 11, 14, 23, 26, 32, 36, 43, 45

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