

Portraits of Enslavement and Freedom

Inquiry Question: What can portraits tell us about the past?

Grade Spans: 3-5

Glossary

Enslaver: someone who bought and owned other people as their property

Merchant: someone who buys and sells goods, and imports those goods from other countries

Negotiate: to come to an agreement with someone by talking with them

Looking at Images

While you look, ask yourself:

- What do you notice?
- What do you think you know about the person, or people, in the image?
- Who might have seen this image?
- Do you think it was made to be seen publicly, or privately?
- What do you wonder?

[Samuel Shrimpton, Enslaver, 1675](#)

Samuel Shrimpton was a wealthy Boston merchant who made money by participating in the slave trade and enslaving African people. This portrait was painted in 1675. Slavery remained common and legal in Massachusetts until about 1790.

Located in the background is the first known image of an enslaved person in New England. Click on the image and zoom in to see the painting in more detail.





An up-close image of the person depicted in the background of Shrimpton's portrait.

Phillis Wheatley

Phillis Wheatley was a poet. She was the first Black woman to have her work published in the American colonies. Born in the Senegambia region of west Africa, she was kidnapped from her home when she was around seven or eight years old and the wealthy Wheatley family bought and enslaved her in Boston.

Wheatley learned English and how to read and write while she was enslaved. After publishing her first book of poems, she negotiated her freedom. This image appeared in the front of her poetry book. The engraving was done by Scipio Moorhead, a Black man who was enslaved in Marblehead, MA by Reverend John Moorhead.

You can compare this lithograph, with Wheatley's signature at the bottom, to the [original engraving](#) that appears in her 1773 book, *Poems on Various Subjects, Religious and Moral*. She was about 19 or 20 years old at the time the engraving was made.



Elizabeth Freeman, 1811

Elizabeth Freeman was born into slavery in New York. When her enslaver's daughter married a Massachusetts man, Freeman was forced to go to Massachusetts with her. Freeman could not read or write, but in 1780 she got a lawyer and used the Massachusetts courts to sue for her freedom. In freedom, she worked as a housekeeper and bought a home where she lived with her children and grandchildren.

Freeman was about 67 years old at the time this portrait was painted. Susan Anne Livingston Ridley Sedgwick painted this miniature watercolor portrait in 1811. Sedgwick was related to Freeman's lawyer, Theodore Sedgwick. Freeman also worked for Theodore Sedgwick's family as a free woman.

You can see the gold beads she wears as a necklace in the portrait [here](#).



Cite the Sources in this set:

1. Samuel Shrimpton, Oil on canvas by an unidentified artist of the British school, 1675, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/database/6070>.
2. Phillis Wheatley, Lithograph by Pendleton, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/database/1760>.
3. Elizabeth Freeman Miniature portrait, watercolor on ivory by Susan Anne Livingston Ridley Sedgwick, 1811, Massachusetts Historical Society, <https://www.masshist.org/database/23>.