

Brief biographies of Elizabeth Freeman and Betsey Freeman

Excerpted from: [Glimpses of Their Lives: Slavery and Emancipation at the Colonel John Ashley House \(2025\)](#)

By Olivia R. Scott, Decorative Arts Trust Peggy N. Gerry Curatorial Fellow with The Trustees of Reservations at the Colonel John Ashley House

The article from which this excerpt is taken includes brief biographies of people enslaved by Col. John Ashley at his home in the rural Berkshire town of Sheffield, MA. [Read the full piece in Commonplace Journal.](#)

Elizabeth Freeman [Bett, Betty Freeman], (ab. 1744–1829)

Elizabeth Freeman was born as Bett sometime between 1742 to 1744 in an

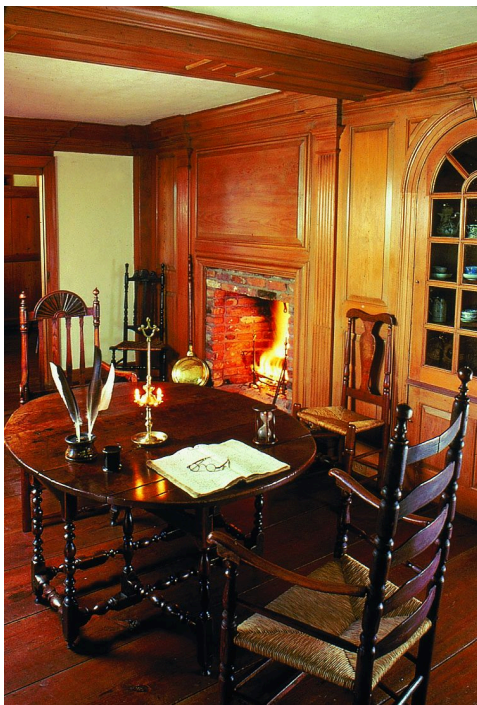


Elizabeth Freeman, 1811, Collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society

unknown location. Many sources point to her birthplace to be in Claverack, New York because they believe she was previously enslaved to Pieter Hogeboom. Theodore Sedgwick II (1780–1839) remembered that “Mum Bett...first lived in Claverac, Columbia county, in the state of New-York, in the family of a Mr. Hogeboom. She was purchased at an early age by Col. Ashley.” However, while she could have been inherited or purchased by Colonel Ashley and his wife Hannah Hogeboom Ashley in 1758, no surviving evidence can be found to conclusively support Claverack as her birthplace. The identity of her parents cannot be determined, though, a friend of Catharine Sedgwick, Harriet Martineau,

claimed that her parents came from Africa. Elizabeth Freeman kept in contact with her parents or possibly brought possessions of theirs with her when she was sold or given to the Ashley family. In her will, she bequeathed her daughter Betsey Freeman “1 do. [gown] received of my father” and “a short gown that was my mother’s.”

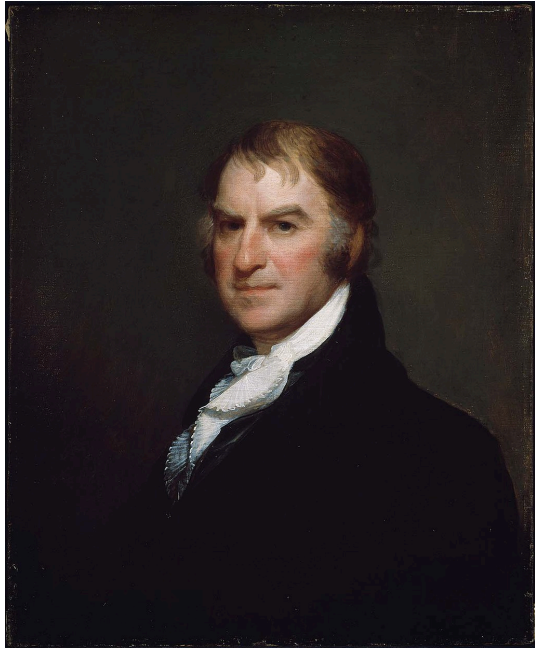
Folklore tells that Elizabeth Freeman was sold or inherited alongside her sister Lizzie. The evidence of Lizzie's existence comes singularly from the story of Elizabeth protecting Lizzie from a blow delivered by Hannah Hogeboom Ashley with a hot "large iron shovel." The Sedgwicks do not discuss the existence of Lizzie beyond this narrative, and nothing suggests that she moved with Elizabeth Freeman to work at the Sedgwick house in 1781. In their investigation on Elizabeth Freeman, Emilie Piper and David Levinson theorized that Lizzie could instead be her daughter, Betsey Freeman. Elizabeth Freeman gave birth to Betsey, or Little Bett, in the early 1770s. The identity of Betsey's father is unknown. Theodore Sedgwick II recalled that Elizabeth Freeman married at a young age and had Betsey with her husband who died fighting in the Revolutionary War. At present, no recorded soldier who died in service can be identified that fits these parameters. Other researchers have claimed that Brom was her common-law husband, which also lacks substantiation. In her 1781 freedom suit, Bett was labeled a "spinster" and, in her later land transactions in Stockbridge, she was addressed as "singlewoman Spinster," rather than widow. However, any possible common-law marriage she may have had could be ignored and unrecognized by the legal system.



2nd floor study, Col. John Ashley House,
Trustees of Reservations

While enslaved in the household of the Ashley family, Bett—as she was called when she lived in the Ashley House—helped with the domestic chores and served the Ashleys, alongside various short-term white female servants and possibly other enslaved women lost to history. One anecdote attests that Bett began practicing nursing and midwifery as early as 1775, implying that she learned the craft while enslaved in Sheffield. The surviving Ashley account books never recorded Bett, but her role in the household operated outside the bounds of Colonel Ashley's accounting of his farm, store, potash, mills, and ironworks. Her invisible labor can be discerned in entries where Colonel Ashley sold items like "my wife's butter" or "a chocolate cake"—goods that Bett undoubtedly would have played a role in producing. Bett also likely tended to the household linens and

repaired domestic textiles and apparel. Her will included a linen pocket handkerchief with an embroidered “B”, a pair of cotton hose embroidered with “B.F.,” and two muslin handkerchiefs embroidered “E.B.P.” As one of her roles



Theodore Sedgwick, Wikimedia Commons

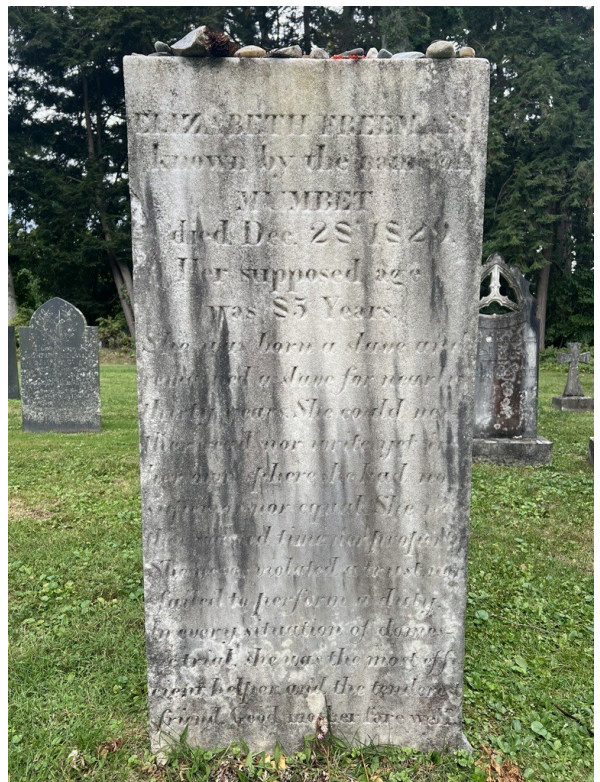
was likely to mark each textile to help with the laborious process of laundering, Bett would have learned some basic needlework skills that she put to service for her personal use. Given that the Ashley family lived in a rural country context, she may have also performed agricultural labor, tending to the livestock and garden.

In 1781, with their lawyers Theodore Sedgwick and Tapping Reeve, Bett and Brom sued Colonel Ashley for their freedom. They were the first enslaved persons to sue on the grounds of unconstitutionality, and their case claimed that slavery was incompatible with the new 1780 Massachusetts constitution. On August 22, 1781, at the court of

Common Pleas in Great Barrington, the case *Brom and Bett vs. Ashley* was decided in favor of Brom and Bett. They were awarded thirty shillings. Aaaaa

Betsey Freeman [Betsey Humphrey, Betty, Little Bet] (ab. 1775–1858)

Betsey Freeman was the daughter of Elizabeth Freeman and an unidentified father. Different contemporary records cite her birthdate as 1770, 1772, and 1775. Thus, Elizabeth Freeman most likely gave birth to Betsey when she was still enslaved to Colonel Ashley, making the infant Betsey enslaved



Freeman's gravestone in Sedgwick Family plot in the Stockbridge Cemetery. Photo taken by Livy Scott.

to him based on the status of her mother. Whether Betsey was the only child born to Elizabeth Freeman cannot be determined, but she is confirmed to be the only one to survive to adulthood. In her early years, she lived in bondage at the Colonel Ashley House and, then after her mother won her freedom in 1781, moved into the Sedgwick household in Sheffield and later Stockbridge. Catharine Sedgwick remembered her as “rather impish” and an exaggerated storyteller, while the compiler of Catharine’s letters, Mary Elizabeth Dewey (1821–1910), described Betsey as a “shiftless creature, a mere pensioner upon the [Sedgwick] family in which her mother had been a trusted friend.”

Sometime before 1803, Betsey Freeman married Jonah Humphrey (1778–ab. 1835), a member of the close-knit Black community in Stockbridge. In 1803, Humphrey and Elizabeth Freeman purchased land together. Betsey would live in this home until 1840. The couple had two daughters: Elizabeth Humphrey Van Schacck (?–1815) and Mary Ann Humphrey Drear (1804–?). Around 1835, Jonah Humphrey left Betsey and their daughter Elizabeth to move to the new southern Liberia colony of Bassa Cover with their daughter Mary Ann. In 1840, the executors of her mother Elizabeth Freeman’s estate sold the family land in Stockbridge, and Betsey Humphrey moved to nearby Lenox for the remainder of her life.