



African American Heritage

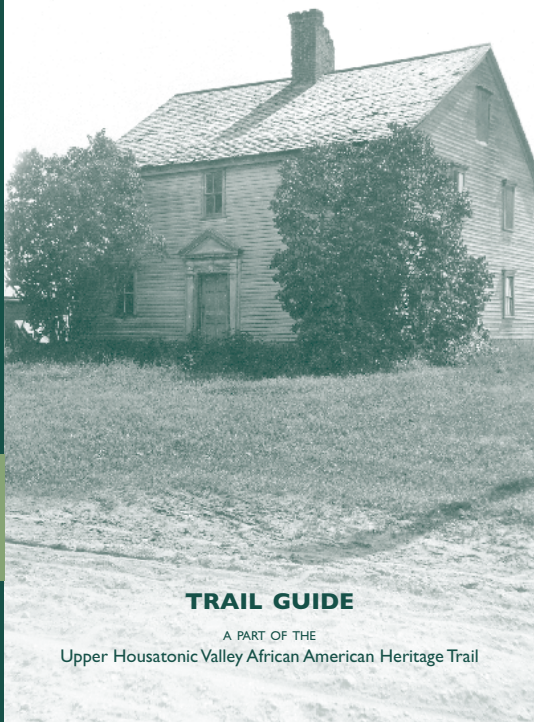
Mum Bett's Trail

Mum Bett *A story of courage*



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TRAIL GUIDE

A PART OF THE
Upper Housatonic Valley African American Heritage Trail

BORN INTO SLAVERY CIRCA 1744, ELIZABETH FREEMAN, also known as Mum Bett, came to the Sheffield home of Col. John Ashley and his wife Hannah as a youth. It is said that she was a gift from Hannah's father, Pieter Hogeboom of Claverack, New York. For many of her first 35 years, she labored in the Ashley household along with four other enslaved Africans: Zack, John, Harry, and Lizzie.

Catharine Maria Sedgwick, the daughter of Theodore Sedgwick, who would eventually help Mum Bett attain her freedom, described John Ashley as "the gentlest, most benign of men," while calling Hannah "a shrew untamable...the most despotical of mistresses." One story recalled by Sedgwick tells of Hannah about to strike young Lizzie with a hot shovel for "stealing" a wheat cake. Mum Bett intervened, raising her arm to stop the blow. She was burned severely.

Not long after this incident, having heard the Declaration of Independence and new Massachusetts constitution (1780) read aloud in the town, Bett determined that she, too, had an inalienable right to freedom. She walked five miles to the Sheffield law office of Theodore Sedgwick to seek his advice. He accepted her case and asked Tapping Reeve of Litchfield, Connecticut, to represent her in court. A male slave named Brom, probably from the household of Col. Ashley's son, was added to the case.

On August 21, 1781, the Court of Common Pleas in Great Barrington heard the case of Brom & Bett vs. J. Ashley. The following day, the court declared "that the aforesaid Brom & Bett are not and were not at the time of the purchase of the original writ the legal Negro servants of him the said John Ashley during their life and assesses thirty shillings damages..." By seeking a universal argument against slavery, the successful suit was instrumental in ending slavery in Massachusetts two years later.

Bett left the Ashley household and took the name Elizabeth Freeman. She went to work as housekeeper for the Sedgwick family in Stockbridge, where she was affectionately known as "Mum" Bett by the children she helped raise.

“Any time, 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.”

~ ELIZABETH FREEMAN



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