2b – Revolution Within a Revolution

In 1776, while White colonists sought "a new birth of freedom" through a war with Britain, they held thousands of African Americans in bondage. This cruel contradiction was not lost on Black men and women, who used the principles at the heart of the American Revolution to challenge the institution of slavery.

Black activism during the Revolutionary War was particularly strong in New England, where the Patriot ideals of liberty and independence were shouted on every street corner. Seizing on this revolutionary rhetoric, African Americans presented petition after petition to state legislatures requesting emancipation.

Some African Americans during this era took their demand for liberty to the courts. A slave known as Mumbet was among a handful of Blacks filing such "freedom suits" in Massachusetts.

Born around 1742 in Clavereck, N.Y., Mumbet came to the Bay Colony of Massachusetts as a piece of inherited property, along with her sister Lizzie. Although a much smaller percentage of the population in the North were slaves than in the South, slavery was still an established and accepted institution.

Mumbet worked as a house slave for Col. John and Hannah Ashley in Sheffield, Mass. Col. Ashley was a wealthy merchant, a member of the colonial legislature and a judge. Guests to the Ashley home were equally prominent, and Mumbet often overhead the men debating political and philosophical subjects - including the war with Britain and the natural rights of man - as she served them late-night suppers.

During the winter of 1773, the men encoded their thoughts in a political statement called the Sheffield Declaration. One resolution of the declaration read: "Resolved that Mankind in a state of Nature are equal, free, and independent of each other, and have a right to the undisturbed Enjoyment of their lives, their Liberty and Property." So important was this resolution that part of it would be added to the Massachusetts state constitution a few years later.

Mumbet pondered the meaning of the ringing phrases. The words took root in her mind and, in time, would bear sweet fruit.

One day, several years later, Mumbet's sister Lizzie baked a small bread for herself from the scrapings of the bowl used for the Ashley family's wheat cake. When Hannah Ashley smelled the bread, she became enraged at this act of "thievery." She grabbed a heated shovel from the kitchen hearth and swung it at Lizzie. Mumbet jumped between Hannah and Lizzie to defend her sister, and took a blow that burned her arm.

As soon as her injury healed, Mumbet walked out of the Ashley home and "refused the insult and outrage of slavery." She remembered the words of the Sheffield Declaration and decided that "not being a dumb beast, I had the right to be free and equal." In her years working in the home of a judge, Mumbet had learned a good deal about the Massachusetts legal system, and she decided to use the courts to "try whether I did not come among them who were free."

Mumbet and another of the colonel's slaves, a man named Brom, sought legal help in Stockbridge, Mass., from a young lawyer who had been a frequent guest in the Ashley home, Theodore Sedgwick. One of the authors of the Sheffield Declaration, Sedgwick agreed to defend Elizabeth in Brom and *Bett v. J. Ashley, Esq*., filed in 1781.

Col. Ashley asked the court to return his "property," claiming that he had clear legal title to them as "servants for life." In opposition to the colonel's claim, Sedgwick argued that it was Mumbet and Brom who had been deprived of property - their own persons. The judge decided in favor of the plaintiffs, and Mumbet walked out of the courtroom a free woman.

Along with other successful freedom suits, Mumbet's legal victory tolled the bells for slavery in Massachusetts. Around the same time, other Northern states were enacting laws that called for the gradual emancipation of slaves. By the 1830s, slavery was a Southern institution.

As for Mumbet, following the lawsuit she took "Elizabeth Freeman" for her name. She refused Col. Ashley's invitation to return to his home to work as a paid servant. Instead she worked for lawyer Theodore Sedgwick, nursing his sick wife and helping to raise his children.

The Sedgwick children regarded Freeman with great respect and love. Catherine Sedgwick, who became a novelist, wrote Elizabeth Freeman's biography after Freeman died around the age of 85. !n that text, Sedgwick recalls the deep yearnings for liberty that had prompted her beloved friend to become a freedom fighter in America's other revolution. Sedgwick remembers Freeman once telling her, "Anytime, anytime 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, 1 would have taken it - just to stand one minute ... on God's earth a free woman."

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