

“Won’t the Law Give Me My Freedom?”

The Story of Elizabeth Freeman

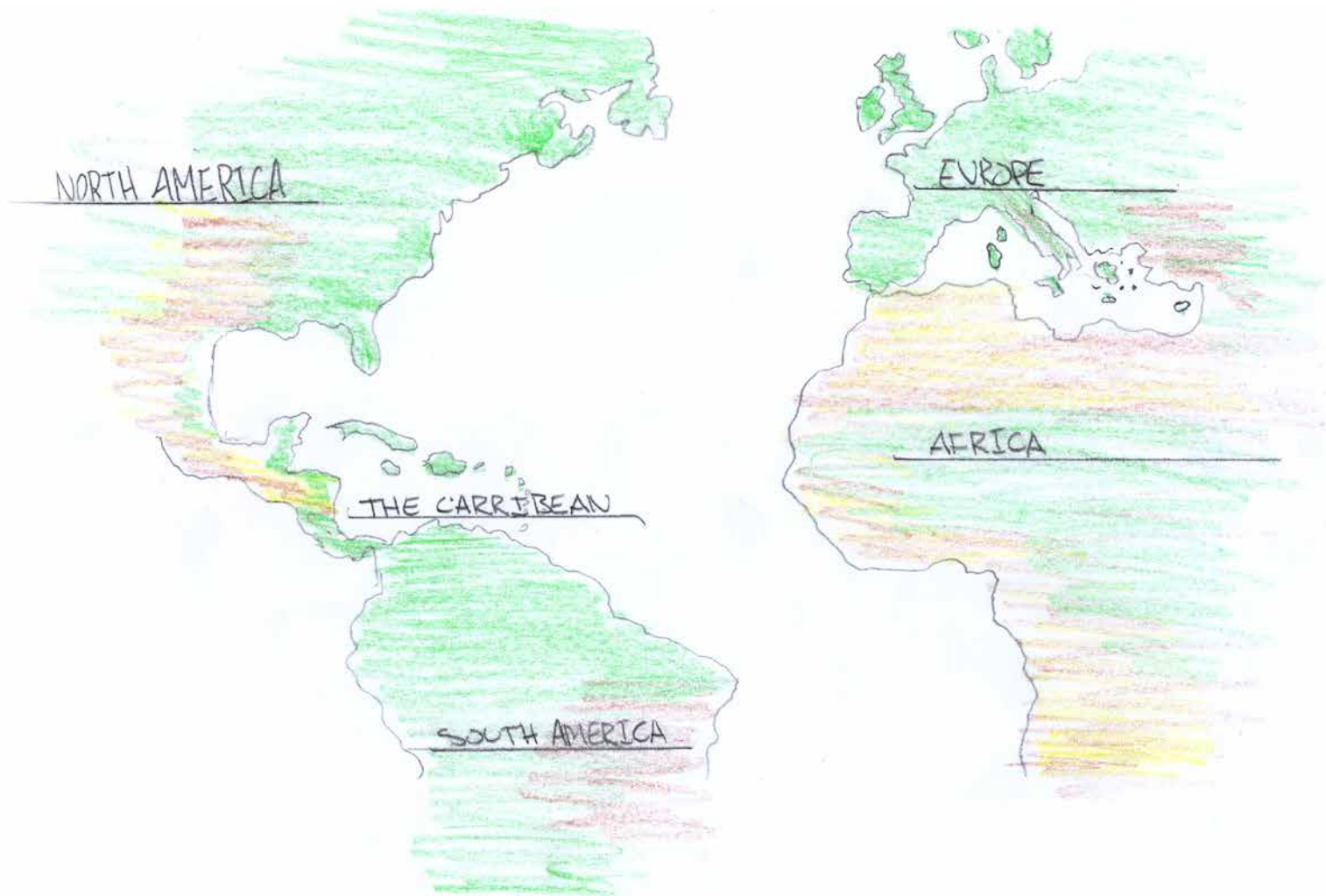


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Tn 1619, the first slave ship arrived in America. Docking along the coast of Virginia, the ship carried between twenty and thirty enslaved Africans. These individuals had been captured in Africa and brought to America to enrich Europe.

To be a “slave” was to be chattel. This meant that you were not considered human, but the legal property of someone else.

Virginia was not the only place that enslaved Africans were shipped, as colonies across North America, South America, and the Caribbean became the new homes of 12.5 million enslaved Africans who survived the journey across the Atlantic. This deadly journey would become known as the Middle Passage.



The geographic location of an enslaved person dictated their labour.

Those enslaved in the US South, the Caribbean, and northern South America often lived on plantations. Plantations were small villages which included large farms where the enslaved were forced to grow crops for the profit of their enslavers.

Enslaved people did not get paid.
Enslavers stole their labor.

In the north, the climate did not support year-round agriculture. Enslaved people in the north were commonly given both outdoor work like farming and domestic tasks, such as cooking, cleaning, and looking after their enslavers' children.

No matter where the enslaved person lived, every aspect of their lives was dictated by their enslaver. If an enslaved person disobeyed an enslaver's command, they could face punishment.

Physical violence was often used to punish the enslaved. In some cases, punishment resulted in death.



One such person enslaved in the north was a woman named Elizabeth Freeman.



She was enslaved by Colonel John Ashley
in Sheffield, Massachusetts.

Elizabeth, along with five other enslaved Black people, were forced to work in his grist mill where they turned wheat into flour.

While enslaved by the Ashleys, Elizabeth was given the name “Mum Bett” because she had a speech impediment. Enslavers often gave cruel names to the enslaved to further control them.

After learning that the Massachusetts Constitution stated that “all men are born free and equal,” in 1781 Elizabeth went to the Great Barrington courthouse to file a lawsuit against the Ashley family.

She alleged that the language of the constitution meant that slavery was unconstitutional. Elizabeth was helped by a lawyer named Theodore Sedgwick who argued her case in front of the court.

It took just one day for the jury to decide that John Ashley had no constitutional right to own Elizabeth Freeman. She was free, and became the first enslaved Black woman to successfully sue for her freedom in Massachusetts.

It was after her victory that she renamed herself from “Mum Bett” to Elizabeth Freeman, a form of resistance against the Ashley family who had given her such a disrespectful name.

After winning her freedom, she began to work for the Sedgwick family.

It is important to acknowledge that while the Sedgwick's did not own Elizabeth, she remained disadvantaged as a Black woman working for a white family.

She was still expected to do many of the same tasks that she had done when she was enslaved. She worked for the Sedgwicks until her death in 1829 and was even buried in the family plot at the local cemetery.

Elizabeth's story remained unknown to the general public for centuries.

But thanks to local activists in Sheffield, her name has gained more recognition.



Nearly 250 years after winning her case, the road that the Great Barrington courthouse is on was renamed to Elizabeth Freeman Way to commemorate her life.


A statue was also sculpted in her likeness and is displayed in the Sheffield town commons.

Enslaved people had no control over themselves or their families and did not control the direction of their lives or identities. Since they were not paid for their labor and forced to be dependent upon their enslavers, they had few possessions and little opportunity to document themselves.

So, for Elizabeth to be granted a statue in her likeness and a road with her name is a powerful form of recognition and resistance against the practice of slavery.

We must acknowledge however,
that there are many enslaved
people whose names we will never know.

This is why we must celebrate Elizabeth's
story. The very act of knowing her name
fights back against those who tried to
silence her, and the millions of other
Africans and people of African descent
forced into enslavement.



Published by Black Maple Magazine, Amherst, MA, USA
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Edited by Charmaine A. Nelson
Design by Emily Davidson

