



# SPHERE

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## Elizabeth Freeman and Her Legal Stand for Freedom

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### The Sedgwick Pie

In Stockbridge Cemetery, located in Massachusetts, there is a burial plot known as the Sedgwick Pie because of its unusual round shape. The Sedgwick family was buried in circles, positioned so that on Judgment Day, when they arise, they will see each other's eyes first.

But the most interesting part of the Sedgwick Pie belongs to Elizabeth Freeman—the only nonfamily member buried in the plot. Freeman was a black woman who had been enslaved in Massachusetts and gained freedom in 1781 through the law, not by escaping.



## Early Life as Bet

Elizabeth Freeman was born around 1744 and given the name Bet, which was a common name for enslaved people. When she was 7 years old, she was given to Hannah and John Ashley of Sheffield, Massachusetts. John Ashley ran a 50-acre farm, sawmill, and general store.

As an enslaved person, Bet worked the fields, cooked meals, served guests, made clothes, and helped raise the Ashleys' four children. She became known as a skilled midwife. Bet could not read or write, and her husband died while fighting in the Revolutionary War.

## The Turning Point

In 1780, Hannah Ashley became angry with another servant named Lizzy. As punishment, she heated a kitchen shovel in the fire to harm Lizzy. Bet protected the young girl and received a bad burn and scar on her arm. She refused to cover the wound, wanting everyone to see how badly enslaved people were treated. She told the story whenever anyone asked about her scar in the presence of Hannah Ashley.

## Learning About the Law

In 1773, town leaders met at John Ashley's home to protest British rule. Bet served the guests but also listened carefully to their discussions, demonstrating her curiosity about ideas of freedom. Here she met Theodore Sedgwick, a 27-year-old lawyer.

Seven years later, in 1780, Massachusetts approved a new constitution stating: "All men are born free and equal, and have certain natural, essential, and unalienable rights." Although the Constitution did not give equal rights to black and Native Americans, it removed some old limits on freedom and left room for future changes. Bet understood this and resolutely used this important moment in American history to claim her freedom.

## Taking Action

With extraordinary courage and determination, Bet approached lawyer Theodore Sedgwick and asked him to sue for her freedom. Her curiosity about the law helped her understand its power, as she told him, "The Bill of Rights said that all [in the nation] were born free and equal, and since I'm not a dumb beast, I'm certainly one of the nation." When Sedgwick asked how she learned this, she replied, "By keepin' still and mindin' things."

Taking the case was risky for Sedgwick since John Ashley was powerful and influential. He partnered with another lawyer, Tapping Reeve. Since women could not file lawsuits alone, they combined Bet's case with that of another enslaved person named Brom so that the case wouldn't be rejected because of rules about court procedures.

## The Historic Trial

The trial drew a large crowd to the simple wooden courthouse. The lawyers argued that Bet and Brom were not only being mistreated as enslaved people but that they were also being wrongly classified as something they were not—the Ashley family's property.

The jury ruled that “Brom and Bet are not and were not the legal Negro servants of John Ashley.” They were awarded 30 shillings to cover court costs. Although a small payment for a lifetime of work, Bet's case set an important precedent and helped establish that slavery violated Massachusetts's constitution.

## Elizabeth Freeman

After winning, Bet left the Ashleys and began working for the Sedgwick household. To celebrate her victory, she chose the name Elizabeth Freeman as a symbol of her new life as a free woman. She was known for her independent spirit and kind nature as she helped raise the Sedgwick children, including the future novelist, Catharine Sedgwick.

Elizabeth once told Catharine about her desire for freedom: “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.”

Freeman died on December 28, 1829, and was buried in the Sedgwick family plot with a marble tombstone. This was a rare honor for a black woman of that time.

## Her Legacy

Elizabeth Freeman's case illustrates that the American Revolution marked a turning point in the relationship between enslaved people and the colonists. Freeman's case cleared the way for enslaved people in Massachusetts to fight against slavery not by running away to Pennsylvania but by standing their ground on the letter of the law. This legal approach would later become common among abolitionists, including Frederick Douglass.

Freeman's curiosity, courage, and perseverance transformed her life and created meaningful change for many others. Her story shows how knowledge of one's rights and the law can empower people—even in the most difficult circumstances—to work toward fairness for all.