



The Ashley House

The Ashley House was once the center of social, economic, and political life in 18th-century Sheffield. With five enslaved workers in his household, Col. John Ashley was also the largest slave owner in the town.

Built in 1735 on the west bank of the Housatonic River, the Ashley House was moved in 1930 to its current location. Now an historic house museum operated by The Trustees of Reservations, the house survives to tell its stories of freedom.

While the Ashley family and other English colonials fought for autonomy from the British government, Bett and other African Americans struggled for – and won – their own freedom from enslavement.



Ashley House photo and interior study photo courtesy of The Trustees of Reservations; Sketch of Judge Sedgwick's House in Stockbridge from Minot sketchbook, courtesy of the Stockbridge Library Historical Collection; Shay's Rebellion Marker photo by Sara Sheehy.



Judge Sedgwick's House

Shay's Rebellion



During Shay's Rebellion (1786–1787), in which angry farmers rebelled against the high tax burden levied on them to pay war-time debts, Mum Bett's bravery was again tested when she lived in the Sedgwick household. As a member of the state legislature and a strong opponent of Shay's insurrection, Theodore Sedgwick and his Stockbridge home (pictured above) became targets of pillaging by the rebels. Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Theodore's daughter

and the source of much of what we know today about Mum Bett, relates several incidents in which Bett defended the household in her care. On one occasion, upon hearing of the approach of the insurgents, she is reported to have barred the windows, put a cauldron on to boil, and threatened to scald to death the first invader. Knowing she would keep her word, the rebels slunk away. On another occasion, she hid the family possessions in her own trunk, taunting and daring the rebels to open it. Her sharp tongue and defiance again prevailed.

The last battle of Shay's Rebellion took place in Sheffield in 1787, when General John Ashley's troops defeated the insurgents.

The Stockbridge Cemetery

“ Elizabeth Freeman, Known by the name of Mumbet... She was born a slave and remained a slave for nearly 30 years. She could neither read nor write yet in her own sphere she had no superior or equal. She neither wasted time nor property. She never violated a trust nor failed to perform a duty. In every situation of domestic trial, she was the most efficient helper, and the tenderest friend.

Good mother, farewell. ”

These are the words written on the tombstone of Mum Bett, who was born enslaved, but died in 1829 a free woman. Her grave lies next to that of Catharine Maria Sedgwick's in the family plot, known as the “Sedgwick Pie.” She is the only non-family member buried there.

Much of what we know about Mum Bett comes from the writings of Catharine, who often praised the woman who helped raise her. Catharine writes, “The clergyman of the village visited her ... and

Sedgwick Pie at Stockbridge Cemetery photo licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution ShareAlike license, Wikimedia Commons.



Sedgwick Pie

... said, 'Are you not afraid to meet your God?' 'No, Sir,' she replied, calmly and emphatically—'No, Sir. I have tried to do my duty, and I am not afraid!' She had passed from the slavery of spiritual conventionalism into the liberty of the children of God.

“She lies now in the village burial ground, in the midst of those she loved and blessed; of those who loved and honoured her. The first ray of the sun, that as it rose over the beautiful hills of Berkshire, was welcomed by her vigilant eye, now greets her grave...”

The Great Barrington Court House

Mum Bett's case was brought before the Court of Common Pleas in Great Barrington on August 21, 1781.

Not much is known about the argument used to bring about the favorable verdict, but Catharine Maria Sedgwick writes: "... She chanced ... to hear the Declaration of Independence read [and] went the next day to the office of Mr. Theodore Sedgwick... 'Sire,' said she, 'I heard that paper read yesterday, that says all men are born equal, and that every man has a right to freedom. I am not a dumb critter; won't the law give me my freedom?' I can imagine

her upright form, as she stood dilating with her fresh hope based on the declaration of an intrinsic, inalienable right. Such a resolve as hers is like God's messengers – wind, snow, and hail – irresistible.”

Her verdict proved instrumental in ending slavery in Massachusetts.

Located on what is today the front lawn and sidewalk of the Great Barrington Town Hall, the Court House went out of use in 1787, when the Court of Common Pleas moved to Lenox. The building itself disappeared by 1839.