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Content Warning: This essay reprints for critique an illustration that crudely depicts an act of anti-Black violence.

**Landed Agency:
Retelling the Elizabeth Freeman Story**



Figure 1. The sole surviving image of Elizabeth Freeman, a watercolor-on-ivory portrait, was painted by Susan Anne Livingston Ridley Sedgwick in 1811.¹

In the Berkshire Mountains of Western Massachusetts, visitors to the town of Great Barrington are greeted by a classic New England downtown, including a bookstore, a coffee shop, and a few restaurants. One prominent fixture is more unique, however: the

¹ Susan Anne Livingston Ridley Sedgwick, *Elizabeth Freeman*, Miniature portrait, watercolor on ivory, 1811, Massachusetts Historical Society, masshist.org/database/viewer.php?item_id=23&pid=36.

road out front of Great Barrington's town hall is labeled by two street signs. They proclaim that what was once known simply as "Castle Street" is now also called "Elizabeth Freeman Way."² Meanwhile, a short drive south in Sheffield, Massachusetts, the town green boasts a bronze statue of the same Freeman, a Black woman who lived 200 years ago.³ A local center supporting survivors of domestic violence also bears her name.⁴ These are the material manifestations of what has become a kind of folkloric project in Western Massachusetts, using Freeman's image as a powerful tool to make positive representations of early America.



Figure 2. A bronze statue of Elizabeth Freeman stands on a town green in Sheffield, Massachusetts. The town, where she lived for decades while enslaved by John Ashley, has celebrated her legacy and the story of her freedom suit, which was argued by Theodore Sedgwick, who also resided in Sheffield at the time.⁵

² Shaw Israel Izikson, "Elizabeth Freeman Way unveiled in Great Barrington." *The Berkshire Edge*, October 30, 2023, theberkshireedge.com/elizabeth-freeman-way-unveiled-in-great-barrington.

³ Kerri Lee Alexander, "Elizabeth Freeman," National Women's History Museum, 2019, womenshistory.org/education-resources/biographies/elizabeth-freeman.

⁴ "Who was Elizabeth Freeman?" The Elizabeth Freeman Center, accessed November 15, 2025, elizabethfreemancenter.org/who-we-are/elizabeth-freeman.

⁵ Sheffield Historical Society. "Elizabeth Freeman Monument," accessed December 14, 2025, sheffieldhistory.weebly.com/elizabeth-freeman-monument.html.

Elizabeth Freeman⁶ was born into slavery in 1740s New York.⁷ Shortly thereafter, enslaver Pieter Hogeboom sent Freeman to live in Sheffield, Massachusetts with his daughter, Hannah, who married a man there, John Ashley.⁸ As enslavers, Ashley and his new wife were abusive. Hannah's violence, in particular, may have played a part in Freeman's decision to launch a 1781 freedom suit, going before the Berkshire County Court of Common Pleas in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. Represented by local lawyer Theodore Sedgwick, Freeman won manumission, or release from slavery. She was the first person to do so on constitutional grounds following the 1780 ratification of the Massachusetts Constitution — which Ashley had helped author, and about which Freeman is said to have overheard discussions, including details concerning universal freedoms and equality.⁹

It is no surprise that New Englanders, from Great Barrington to Sheffield and beyond, have taken up Freeman's case as an example of their history's redeeming qualities. Arguing that Massachusetts, or even colonial America as a whole, offered freedom and opportunity to all people — even the most marginalized, such as Freeman — is a useful maneuver for those who seek to whitewash history and erase legacies of racial terror close to home.

⁶ Contemporary accounts sometimes call Freeman "Mumbet" (or a variation in spelling such as Mum Bet), and she was called this name by the Sedgwicks during her life. Accounts vary in differentiating the two names, but I find credence in Sari Edelstein's assessment that "it is not the name she gave herself nor is it the name her own child gave her" and may have in fact been a paternalistic nickname. This aligns also with the Trustees of Reservations' claim that Freeman was "the name that she chose for herself when she won her freedom." I thus refer to Freeman only by the name "Elizabeth Freeman" in this essay. See: Sari Edelstein, "'Good Mother, Farewell': Elizabeth Freeman's Silence and the Stories of Mumbet," *The New England Quarterly* 92, no. 4 (2019): 591, [jstor.org/stable/26858282](https://www.jstor.org/stable/26858282). See also: The Trustees of Reservations, "A Story of Justice and Freedom: The Legacy of Elizabeth Freeman," accessed December 15, 2025, thetrustees.org/content/elizabeth-freeman-fighting-for-freedom.

⁷ Alexander, "Freeman."

⁸ I am intentionally keeping my discussion of Pieter Hogeboom, John Ashley, and Hannah Ashley (nee Hogeboom) to the minimum amount necessary in order to provide context for Freeman's own story. In practicing interdisciplinary work across history and critical race theory, I am less interested in chronicling the lives of these men and women whose experiences have received considerable attention in the literature. Instead, I focus on a particular, critical account of certain issues in Freeman's history and its historiography. I refer those seeking a broader historical account to multiple extant works, including Piper and Levinson's. See: Emelie Piper and David Levinson, *One Minute a Free Woman* (Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area, 2010).

⁹ "Massachusetts Constitution and the Abolition of Slavery." Massachusetts Court System, accessed November 2, 2025, mass.gov/guides/massachusetts-constitution-and-the-abolition-of-slavery#-the-mum-bett-case.

But the truth is more complex. Recent scholarship has problematized the way Freeman's story has been told; in particular, concerns have been raised about historians' approach to the juncture between Freeman's history and the Sedgwick family's.¹⁰ Freeman went on to work for the lawyer who helped secure her freedom, but she then faced additional inequities in his household. Adding further complexity to her narrative, Freeman went on to live out the final 26 years of her life at home on property of her own. Surprisingly, this last aspect of Freeman's biography has received relatively little attention in the literature.

This essay will consider the many representations of Freeman's life, take up her property ownership as a crucial key to understanding her agency, and ultimately seek to recompose a critical, holistic narrative of her life.

Grounding: A Perspective In the Making

When Freeman awoke in Stockbridge, Massachusetts on September 25, 1803, she was greeted by a natural beauty similar to that which New Englanders enjoy today. The air would have been chilly, perhaps 40 or 50°F.¹¹ While advancing colonial agriculture was starting to deforest the region's pines, oaks, and other native trees in order to make space for farmland, a rural canopy would still have been present, on the precipice of brilliant autumnal change.¹² Also, from her Stockbridge home Freeman "enjoyed [an] unhindered view of the northern face of Monument Mountain," which was a feature of

¹⁰ Edelstein, "Farewell."

¹¹ Midwestern Regional Climate Center. Williamstown, Massachusetts weather data, FORTS data, accessed November 11, 2025, mrcc.purdue.edu/FORTS.

¹² Ipswich, Massachusetts Shade Tree Beautification Committee, "Native Trees of Massachusetts," March 20, 2025. ipswichma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/17557/Native-Trees-of-Massachusetts-3725.

the Berkshire landscape then, as now.¹³ She may have particularly appreciated the vista that Autumn because its vantage point on Cherry Hill Road was an upgrade to a familiar sight: for about two decades, Freeman had lived slightly further North, on Plain Street, where the view may have been obstructed.¹⁴

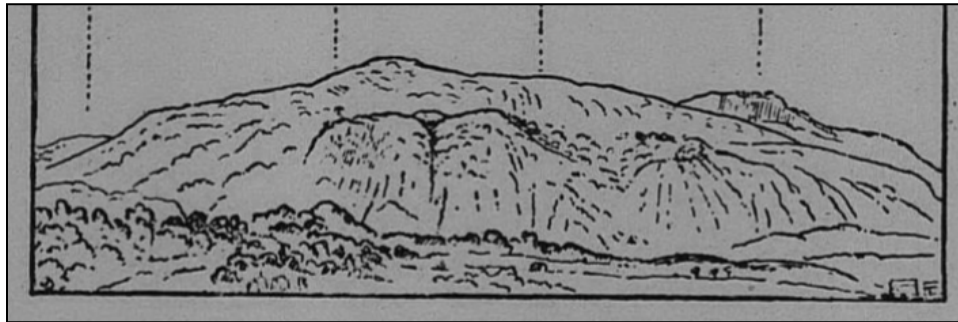


Figure 3. An illustration in the 1894 *Fourteenth Annual Report of the United States Geological Survey* showed Monument Mountain, a feature of the Berkshire landscape, from the West side.¹⁵

Enduring Exploitation: Life With the Sedgwicks and Ashleys

On Plain Street, Freeman had lived with the wealthy Sedgwick family, by whom she was employed as a servant. Much of the information available today about Freeman's life is narrated by the Sedgwicks themselves. Catharine Maria Sedgwick, in particular, wrote extensively about Freeman.¹⁶ Her narration must be read skeptically, however.

Evidence suggests that the Sedgwicks' treatment of Freeman enacted a form of paternalism that has been wielded throughout history against people who are treated as

¹³ Bernard A. Drew, *If They Close the Door on You, Go in the Window* (Attic Revivals Press, 2004): 33. Monument Mountain would have significance throughout Freeman family history, as Freeman's daughter's brother-in-law once "almost start[ed] a mini-coal rush" after reporting the valued substance's presence on that peak; see: Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 159-160.

¹⁴ Plain Street, as it was known in 1800, is now called Main Street. See: Carole Owens, "DATELINE STOCKBRIDGE: Eighteenth-century Stockbridge was something of a destination," *The Berkshire Edge*, April 26, 2023, theberkshiredge.com/datetime-stockbridge-eighteenth-century-stockbridge-was-something-of-a-destination.

¹⁵ T. Nelson Dale, "The Structure of Monument Mountain in Great Barrington, Massachusetts." In *The Fourteenth Annual Report of the United States Geological Survey to the Secretary of the Interior, 1892-1893*, United States Geological Survey, 1894, link.gale.com/apps/doc/BAJXIW686554147/NCCO?u=mlln_w_mounthc&sid=bookmark-NCCO&xid=b2161bb9&pg=1.

¹⁶ See: Catharine Maria Sedgwick, "Slavery in New England," *Bentley's Miscellany* 34 (1853): 417-424. See also: "The Practicability of the Abolition of Slavery: A Lecture" (1831), archive.org/details/practicabilityofsedg/mode/2up.

“other” or less-than. Vincente L. Rafael identifies this dynamic as “white love,” explaining that “the allegory of benevolent assimilation effaces the violence of conquest by construing colonial rule as the most precious gift that ‘the most civilized people’ can render to those still caught in a state of barbarous disorder.”¹⁷ In Freeman’s case, the Sedgwicks saw her as an exception to their racist worldview, and they may well have seen their employment of her as helping perpetuate that exception.¹⁸ Furthermore, the Sedgwick children treated Freeman as a mother; she, however, had not chosen to be their mother, only their employee. She had a family of her own, which the Sedgwicks neglected.¹⁹

These sorts of complex contradictions were characteristic of Freeman’s relationship with the Sedgwicks. Theodore Sedgwick, the lawyer who advocated for her freedom in court, was at once “a primary author of the first Fugitive Slave Law of 1793,” playing a major role in the violent perpetuation of slavery as an American institution deep into the 19th century.²⁰ Sedgwick, then, advocated for Freeman’s freedom but not her kin’s.

In many ways, Freeman was connected with the Sedgwicks by necessity. After her victory in court, she chose to accept their offer of employment against an alternative so grim as to hardly present a choice at all: John Ashley, the enslaver from whom she had just won her freedom, wanted her to come back and work for wages at the very same site of violence from which she was just freed.²¹ Such were the limitations on true freedom

¹⁷ Edelstein, “Farewell”: 592, 594-95, 614. Vincente L. Rafael, *White Love and Other Events in Filipino History* (Duke University Press, 2000).

¹⁸ Edelstein, “Farewell”: 600, 609.

¹⁹ Edelstein, “Farewell”: 613. See also: Catharine Maria Sedgwick and Mary E. Dewey, ed., “Life and Letters of Catherine M. Sedgwick” (1871): 326, archive.org/details/lifelettersofcatharine/mode/2up.

²⁰ Edelstein, “Farewell”: 594.

²¹ Katie Woods, “Elizabeth Freeman (Mum Bett) (c.1744-1828),” Massachusetts Women’s History Center, accessed December 15, 2025, mawomenshistory.org/resources/biographies/elizabeth-freeman-mum-bett-c1744-1828.

faced by many freedmen at the time: economic manifestations of structural racism constrained possibilities for people who were previously enslaved, leaving them limited options. So, Freeman did what she had to, refusing Ashley and going to work for the Sedgwicks for years to come.

Gaining Independence: Relocation and Landownership

When Freeman arrived at the opportunity to stop living with the Sedgwicks, she did. In fact, a close reading of property records that Freeman went on to generate reveals that she moved to Cherry Hill Road in Stockbridge, Massachusetts even before buying land there.

Property deeds in the early 19th century had to contain various descriptive details about the specific location of land being sold, as a registry of street addresses did not exist in the way one does today. When Thomas Peters sold Freeman her first piece of land, he wrote in the corresponding deed that the property was that “on which... Elizabeth and [her son-in-law] Jonah now dwell,” indicating she had moved in prior to that purchase.²² Such a record indicates that Freeman did not just prioritize becoming a landowner — as she would go on to do, also — but she prioritized, too, becoming independent in her living situation; particularly, she took her independence from the white families with whom she had long dwelled.

²² Thomas Peters, “Deed,” in *Recorded Land* 41 (Berkshire County Middle Registry of Deeds, 1803): 277.



Figure 4. A photo taken by David Levinson, one of the authors of *One Minute a Free Woman: Elizabeth Freeman and the Struggle for Freedom*, shows Freeman's former property in 2009.²³

It was as such that Freeman found herself with the aforementioned clear mountain view in September 1803. She was living then with her extended family, including her daughter, Betsey Freeman, and Betsey's husband, Jonah Humphrey. Amidst the Autumn chill, the foliage's transformation not far off, it was a relatively ordinary New England life. But on the 25th of that month, Freeman, with Humphrey, would seize the day in extraordinary terms. On September 25, 1803, Elizabeth Freeman became a landowner.

Such an achievement was momentous in the life of any Massachusetts resident in the early 19th century; after all, it would be another 18 years, until 1821, before even white men were fully enfranchised as citizens of the Commonwealth if they did not possess a freehold estate of certain value.²⁴ Making her purchase even more remarkable

²³ David Levinson, *A portion of Elizabeth Freeman's former property in Stockbridge in 2009*, Photograph, in *One Minute a Free Woman* by Emelie Piper and David Levinson (Upper Housatonic Valley National Heritage Area, 2010): 146.

²⁴ Alexander Keyssar, *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* (Basic Books, 2010): 331.

was the fact that Freeman was far from just any Massachusetts resident. Rather, she was Black, a woman, and a formerly enslaved person. Any *one* of those marginalized identities could have prevented Freeman from accomplishing the wealth- and power-building feat of becoming a landowner; all together, the three factors posed the longest of odds. They were odds, however, that Freeman defied. She would go on, in fact, to expand her property and to leverage her land as a tool of kinship. Such actions must be foregrounded in historians' accounts of Freeman's life if her agency is to be well-represented.²⁵

During and after her achievement of landownership in 1803, Freeman exercised agency in new ways. Her property records offer key clues about that agency; modern advances in historical research methods, drawing on critical race theory, can help us decipher those clues. Marisa Fuentes, for example, writes about “stretch[ing] archival fragments by reading along the bias grain.” Every document contains a multitude of information, beyond core content, including small signals through the semiotics of tone and word choice in context. When a history is prone to biased interpretation and has been minimized by structural racism or another driver of violence in the archive,²⁶ historians can recover elements of depth and precision by looking at that history's materials from every angle. Going against the grain, deeper analyses can be formed in order to make up, in a way, for prior deep erasures. Tiya Miles, in her groundbreaking public history practice, employs Fuentes's methods in working to identify “obfuscated

²⁵ “Agency” as a category of analysis can be nebulous, as agency takes many forms in many contexts. For the sake of this essay, which takes great care to assess Freeman's agency in moments of both deficit and security, I will offer a working definition: agency, I believe, is a holistic sense of autonomy and control in decision-making, particularly in cases of major life choices. One may have the literal choice to accept or decline a job, but in practice lack the agency to turn down an opportunity that is disproportionately hard to come by for someone in a marginalized position, for example.

²⁶ See: Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” *Small Axe* 26, no. 2 (2008).

realities.”²⁷ By working this way with Freeman’s property records, a scant body of evidence about her life — left slim by no accident, a representation of the systemic racial violence that archives hold and perpetuate — can be transformed to generate new understandings of how Freeman lived.

Exercising Agency: Representations in the 1803 Deed

Applying methods such as Fuentes’s and Miles’s to the 1803 deed authored by Thomas Peters produces several additional representations of agency in Freeman’s life.

For one, the fact that Freeman moved to her property before she owned it countervails the minimization of Freeman’s house in white narratives, particularly those of Catharine Maria Sedgwick. Sedgwick once diminutively wrote of the structure as “[Freeman’s] little hut—her then independent home.”²⁸ But in fact, it was a house that she lived in at her earliest opportunity. Sedgwick’s dual naming of the “hut” and “independent home” might be read as a lamentation — “*why would she leave us Sedgwicks for such a hut?*” being the subtext — but in Freeman’s choices, we can see her home as a rejection of such paternalism.

We also see Freeman’s agency in the 1803 deed’s evidence of family relationships, which shaped Freeman’s ability to make use of her land. Freeman made multiple property transactions over the years with Jonah Humphrey, her son-in-law. In their book *One Minute a Free Woman*, Emelie Piper and David Levinson offer analysis of the

²⁷ Marisa J. Fuentes, “Introduction,” in *Dispossessed Lives: Enslaved Women, Violence, and the Archive* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), [jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c5chby](https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1c5chby). Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley’s Sack, A Black Family Keepsake* (Random House, 2021).

²⁸ Catharine Maria Sedgwick and Mary E. Dewey, ed., “Life and Letters of Catherine M. Sedgwick” (1871), 42, search.alexanderstreet.com/view/work/bibliographic_entity%7Cbibliographic_details%7C4332839.

agential kinship politics present in this Freeman-Humphrey partnership. Describing the pair's collaboration, Piper and Levinson write, "She provided the money, he the labor."²⁹

Indeed, Humphrey contributed to one way in which Freeman built wealth as a landowner — farming. While farm labor would not have been as necessary to the Freemans' survival as others', thanks to Elizabeth's work as a midwife and nurse,³⁰ it was a way in which kinship could be leveraged for material gains. As in many parallel histories of African American life circa-1800, such relations can be seen as a mode of cultural resistance to the racial-economic oppression enforced by white settlers whose own economic successes may have been blunted at times by individualist politics. According to Piper and Levinson, the household was fed by produce from "Indian corn for its flour; hay for the livestock; hemp and flax for clothing; roots crops like carrots, beets, and potatoes; cabbage and greens; apples for cider; a few heads of cattle, cows, and pigs; and a horse or two for transportation and farm labor."

Accordingly, to picture a day on the Freeman family land is to imagine a bustling affair: featuring the attending to livestock, nurturing homegrown crops that would become family meals, and making trips to the store for supplementary foodstuffs (which Piper and Levinson describe as happening once or twice each year) might each have been regular activities.³¹ This portrait is one full of agential implications. Freeman and her kin, then, made decisions about how much capacity for farmwork could be mustered in a given season, dictating which crops to plant and how many animals to raise. One could imagine Freeman weighing in on whether to save some apples for her

²⁹ Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 153.

³⁰ I found little information about Freeman's work outside the home, but I do believe she indeed had these occupations and records of her work were lost to history. Future directions for research about Freeman might include more focused exploration of whether new facts can be found about her professional life.

³¹ Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 149-150.

grandchildren to snack on, as opposed to pressing them all for cider. When, one day in 1816 a member of Freeman’s extended family, Enoch Humphrey Jr., “indulged himself with [the purchase of] a felt hat” from a local merchant, perhaps Freeman would have expressed reservations.³² Or, perhaps she celebrated the purchase, practicing a mindset of abundance and not scarcity. After all, she was known to collect fine goods of her own: in her last will and testament, she left descendants silk shawls, chintzes, cloaks, gowns, and — notably — to her great granddaughter Mary Elizabeth Drear, “a black velvet hat.”

Overall, the communal living and laboring of Freeman with her kin was a stark contrast to the life she lived with the Sedgwicks. No longer under pressure to care for people whose core beliefs cut against her agency, Freeman chose a life, a family, and a home of her own.

Furthermore, Freeman not only lived in a Black family home but also in a Black neighborhood. When Thomas Peters detailed the location of his (or, now, Freeman’s) property in the 1803 deed, he noted that it was positioned “sixteen rods, to land of Agrippa Hull.”³³ That Freeman lived next to Hull is notable in several ways. For one thing, he was the wealthiest Black landowner in the area. (Freeman would become the second-wealthiest.³⁴) For another, Hull had his own history of extraordinary agency as a Black American in the early 19th century: born free, he enlisted and fought in the Continental Army as a Revolutionary, before working for the Sedgwicks alongside Freeman and then, like her, gaining independence in financial and domestic situations.³⁵ Perhaps most significantly, the two were good friends, according to

³² Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 150. Piper and Levinson found evidence of this in the “Seymour Account Book, an original document that logged purchases.

³³ Peters, “Deed.”

³⁴ Edelstein, “Farewell”: 598.

³⁵ Gary B. Nash and Graham Russell Gao Hodges, *Friends of Liberty : Thomas Jefferson, Tadeusz Kościuszko, and Agrippa Hull: A Tale of Three Patriots, Two Revolutions, and a Tragic Betrayal of Freedom in the New Nation* (Basic Books, 2008). François Furstenberg, “Friends of Liberty: Thomas Jefferson, Tadeusz Kosciuszko, and Agrippa Hull; A Tale of Three Patriots, Two

historians Gary B. Nash and Graham Russell Gao Hodges. They write in *Friends of Liberty : Thomas Jefferson, Tadeusz Kościuszko, and Agrippa Hull: A Tale of Three Patriots, Two Revolutions, and a Tragic Betrayal of Freedom in the New Nation* that it was to Hull's "delight" when Freeman moved in next-door.³⁶ Adding to the picture of Freeman's life with extended family, then, is an illustration of agency through friendship. Back when Freeman lived at the Sedgwicks' imposing estate, it is unlikely that she would have had many opportunities to enjoy the friendship of Black neighbors. In fact, it may have been that Hull was a friend of Freeman's precisely because he was someone whom, before they shared a property line, was in proximity to Freeman. (He, too, did paid work for the Sedgwicks.) By building her own estate, Freeman created opportunities for platonic connection outside white spaces.

Adding to the context of her connection with Hull, Freeman was even further enmeshed in socio-geographic relationships that demonstrate her agency. According to a map by Lion Miles, which Nash and Hodges present in *Friends of Liberty*, multiple Black people owned land in the same area as Hull and Freeman. Furthermore, geographic features in the area were known as "Negro Pond" and "Negro Brook."³⁷ While is unclear whether these names were used affirmatively by Black residents or derogatorily by white neighbors, they further provided evidence of a Black community that Elizabeth Freeman joined when she moved to Cherry Hill Road.

Revolutions, and a Tragic Betrayal of Freedom in the New Nation," *Journal of American History* 96, no. 1 (2009).
academic.oup.com/jah/article/96/1/193/737963.

³⁶ Nash and Hodges, *Friends*: 197-198.

³⁷ Lion Miles, "The Landholdings of Agrippa Hull and Related Blacks in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, 1784-1839," n.d., in *Friends of Liberty: Thomas Jefferson, Tadeusz Kościuszko, and Agrippa Hull: A Tale of Three Patriots, Two Revolutions, and a Tragic Betrayal of Freedom in the New Nation*, by Gary B. Nash and Graham Russell Gao Hodges (Basic Books, 2008), 198.

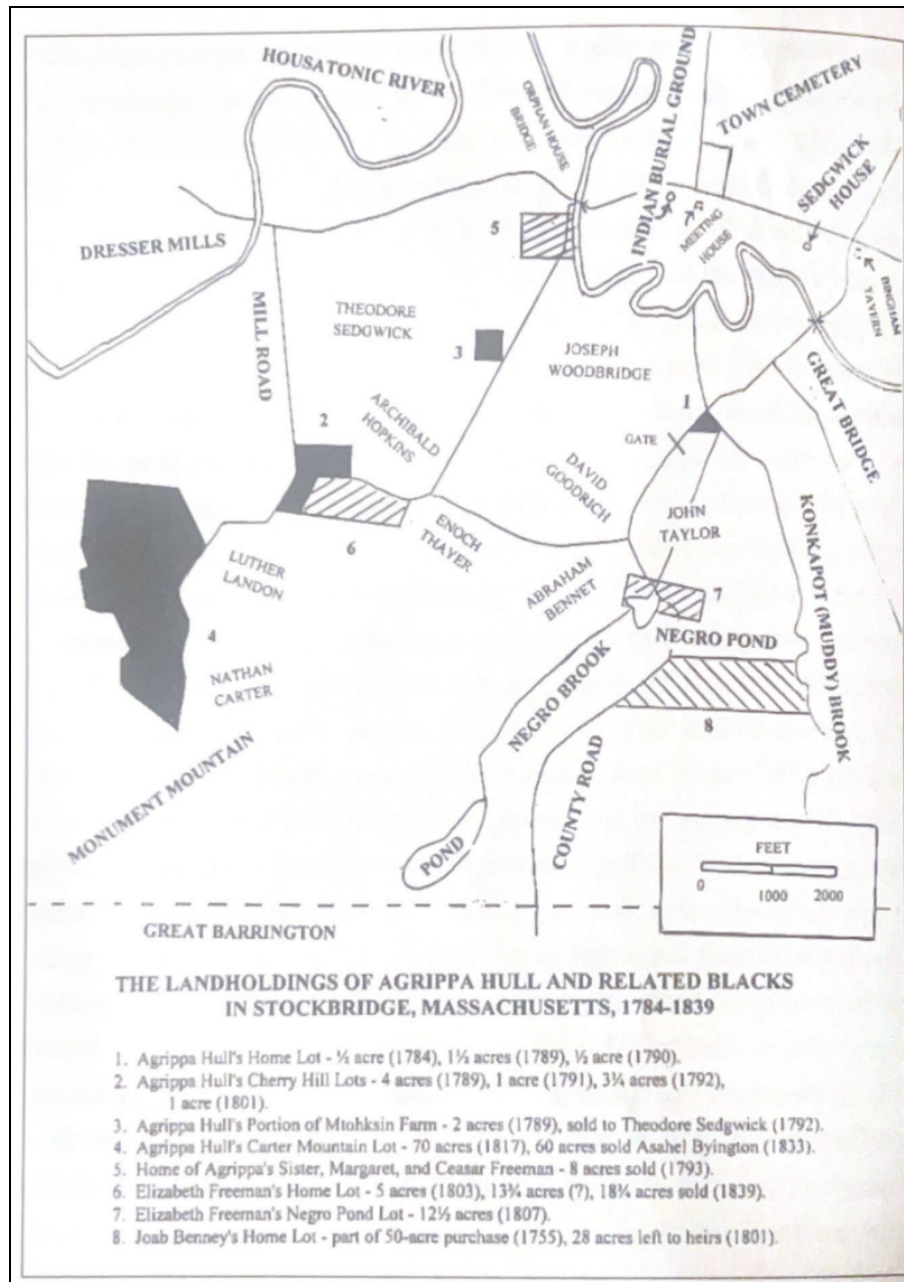


Figure 5. Drawn by Lion Miles and printed in Piper and Levinson's *One Minute*, this map provides a visual representation of Black landownership in an area of Stockbridge.³⁸

A final representation of Freeman's agency in the 1803 deed is found in the context of how — or, by *whom* — it was documented. Thomas Peters, the seller and deed author, appears to have been a Black man. His name is included in a list, written by

³⁸ Miles, "Landholdings."

Piper and Levinson, of Black landowners in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.³⁹ If Peters was indeed Black, then the 1803 deed is the earliest extant document that named Freeman and was written by someone within her own Black community.⁴⁰ Considering most accounts of Freeman's life have been narrated by white authors, it is powerful to know that a document exists today in which a Black man used his pen to invoke Freeman, and indeed to mark an extraordinary moment in her life.

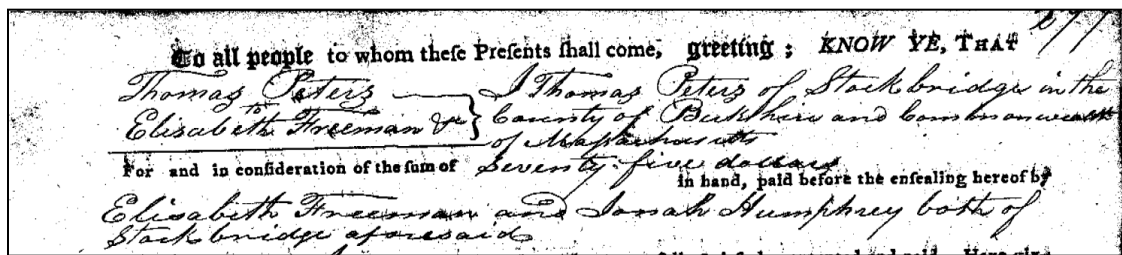


Figure 6. Preserved by the Berkshire Middle Registry of Deeds, this deed appears to be the earliest surviving document in which Elizabeth Freeman is mentioned in the writing of a Black contemporary.⁴¹

Furthering Agency: Representations in 1807-1811 Deeds

While Freeman's 1803 purchase holds special significance as that which made Freeman a landowner, three more purchases that followed warrant close readings, as well.

On December 1, 1807, Freeman and Jonah Humphrey jointly purchased approximately 12.5 acres from the estate of John Taylor.⁴² This purchase was notable for two reasons in particular.

For one, it marked the expansion of Freeman's holdings. With this purchase, Freeman asserted that she would not be satisfied with the land she had, instead striving for and earning additional property. According to Lion Miles's map, this new tract of

³⁹ Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 145.

⁴⁰ While the document authored by Peters is the *earliest* such representation, it is not the *only*. A second deed, that of the 1809 "mortgage" discussed later in this paper, was written by a Black man.

⁴¹ Peters, "Deed."

⁴² Ephraim Taylor, "Deed," in *Recorded Land* 46 (Berkshire County Middle Registry of Deeds, 1808): 98-99.

land was not conjoined to Freeman's original plot.⁴³ That quality of being a separate, second property connotes the wealth that Freeman was then amassing. While Piper and Levinson speculate that she may have made this purchase in order to source wood, it is worth considering whether it may have been an investment as well as a practical move on Freeman's part.⁴⁴ To be sure, she would need wood for the winter, as Piper and Levinson explain. But also, she had lived on her original property for at least four years by the time of her second purchase, presumably having gotten by just fine without acres of additional woodland for logging. Could Freeman, then, have purchased a second property not only for pragmatic reasons, but also for the mere sake of it — gathering abundance, not reacting to scarcity? When white men amass land holdings, they are often thought of as building wealth; Black women such as Freeman deserve the same credit.

Such wealth-building practices are generally violent in their enactment of settler-colonialism against the original, indigenous inhabitants of New England. However, freedmen's landed agency is more complex than white men's colonial wealth-building. Enslaved people and their descendants arguably cannot be called settlers due to their lack of agency and shared status of dispossession. Furthermore, opportunities for solidarity between Black and indigenous people may be hindered at the boundaries of what anthropologist Circe Sturm calls "the analytic limits of settler colonialism."⁴⁵ To be sure, Freeman's land holdings were only recently removed from a history of hostile takeover by colonists from the Stockbridge-Munsee Band of Mohican Indians. Both dispossession and empowerment can be held, at once. Freeman's agency

⁴³ Miles, "Landholdings."

⁴⁴ Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 146.

⁴⁵ Circe Sturm, "Race, Sovereignty, and Civil Rights: Understanding the Cherokee Freedmen Controversy," *Cultural Anthropology* 29, no. 3 (2014), doi.org/10.14506/ca29.3.07.

was not disconnected from the stripping of others' agencies by shared oppressors. But her agency existed nonetheless.⁴⁶

Moreover, Freeman's 1807 purchase is significant for its relationship to the man whose estate sold it to her. Reading the deed, a picture emerges in which the seller, Ephraim Taylor, operated from a deficit. Ephraim was representing the estate of John Taylor, and John's property needed to be sold in order to cover his debts. Ephraim wrote that he had "bargained" with the property asset in question, in furtherance of his duty as a debtor, and granted over John's 12.5 acres to Freeman in exchange for \$49. The price stands out from its counterparts — all of Freeman's other purchases were priced roundly in \$5 or \$10 increments; furthermore, a review of 50 contemporaneous land deals in the same record book returned just seven cases of a price not ending in \$0 or \$5.⁴⁷ Why did Freeman not make a deal for \$50, like would be standard practice for land purchases at the time? Perhaps Freeman literally drove a hard *bargain*, taking advantage of Ephraim Taylor's weak position as a debtor to negotiate a specific, lower price. Regardless, it is clear that the 1807 purchase was one in which Freeman countervailed trends commonly discussed in terms of Black landownership in the early 19th century; while Black land loss was seeding multi-generational impacts, Freeman was enacting Black land *gain* through the debt-driven land loss of a white family.⁴⁸

Freeman's third property transaction took place on April 1, 1809. It was more of a loan arrangement than a purchase, which in itself is quite notable for understanding

⁴⁶ Several scholars writing about a range of topics in Afro-Indigenous Studies helped develop my perspective on the dynamic between Freeman as a Black landowner and the indigenous people whose land she then occupied. See: Alexandra E. Stern, "The Reconstruction Origins of Black Wall Street," *Black Perspectives*, June 1, 2021, aaihs.org/the-reconstruction-origins-of-black-wall-street. See also: Sturm, "Understanding." See also: Ashleigh-Rae Thomas, "Who Is a Settler, According to Indigenous and Black Scholars," *VICE*, February 15, 2019, [vice.com/article/who-is-a-settler-according-to-indigenous-and-black-scholars](https://www.vice.com/en/article/who-is-a-settler-according-to-indigenous-and-black-scholars).

⁴⁷ The only exception is that a few purchases ended in £0 or £5.

⁴⁸ There is no specific evidence that Taylor was white, but given the significant racial disparities in landownership at the time and his lack of notation in lists of Black landowners, it seems fair to conclude he was likely white. If, by chance, he was not, Freeman's cunning and self-advancement would still be of note.

how Freeman found agency in land ownership.⁴⁹ In this case, Freeman and her son-in-law Jonah Humphrey struck a deal with his brother, Enoch Humphrey Jr. This arrangement is well-explained by Piper and Levinson and can also be discerned directly in the 1809 deed. Essentially, Enoch would possess a portion of Elizabeth and Jonah's land temporarily, but could make the purchase permanent if he paid them \$250 — a sort of mortgage, as Piper and Levinson describe it.⁵⁰ Such an arrangement further demonstrates how Freeman used her land to support her family.

Agency is further represented in the deed that Enoch Humphrey Jr. drew up for this 1809 transaction because it is a unique legal document. Sections of the form were crossed out and replaced with original, handwritten legal terms. On Enoch Humphrey Jr.'s part — and arguably Freeman's by association — this was an act of legal creativity, critically fitting into the narrative of agential Black legal history espoused by Dylan C. Penningroth.⁵¹ Penningroth demonstrates how Black people's use of the law during this period was historically notable but not unusual; he makes the case that long before the law-focused advocacy of the civil rights movement, legal tools were already in thorough use within Black communities. The fact that members of the Freeman family were able to produce original legal writing, then, demonstrates their propensity for taking advantage of every opportunity they could to extend their agency and better their lives — both with and against the tide of structural norms and systems in their era.

The last land purchase that Freeman made was a full-circle moment in the history of her kinship relations and land ownership; on January 16, 1811, she bought out

⁴⁹ Enoch Humphrey Jr., "Deed," in *Recorded Land* 47 (Berkshire County Middle Registry of Deeds, 1809): 233-234. Piper and Levinson write also of a second deed that was part of the transaction, in which Freeman and Jonah Humphrey deed over the property to Enoch Humphrey Jr., which he would have then deeded back to them in the event of non-payment as represented in the preceding citation. However, Piper and Levinson's citation for the second deed leads to a record that does not appear to be relevant; there may have been an error, obscuring the relevant deed's location.

⁵⁰ Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 146-147.

⁵¹ Dylan C. Penningroth, *Before the Movement: The Hidden History of Black Civil Rights* (Liveright, 2023).

Jonah Humphrey's stake in their until-then-shared property, becoming the full, sole owner of the land on which she lived.⁵² This was possible because she had the means for self-sufficiency, but also because of what was likely a long-running, intentional choice to preserve selfhood: Freeman never married. By living as a "spinster," as she was often called in legal documents, Freeman maintained the ability to possess all of the rights of ownership over any property she purchased.⁵³

Ultimately, the 1811 purchase concluded a multi-year saga for Freeman. Within a decade, she had gone from being a resident of her employer's household to owning double-digit acreage in her own right. She worked with family members along the way, but was not dependent on them in the end.

Elizabeth Freeman exercised agency in every way she could. Taking for herself and her family all of the power and wealth that the title accorded, she became a landowner.

Missing the Mark: Gaps in the Modern Literature

As this essay has demonstrated, Elizabeth Freeman majorly transformed her life and legacy by amassing resources using them to her and her family's advantage during the last 26 years of her life — from her first land purchase in 1803 through her death in 1829. It is shocking, then, how extensively this element of Freeman's story is underrepresented in today's literature about her life. For example, in a 2021 feature for *American History* magazine, J.D. Zahniser wrote over four pages about Freeman's legal life but then dedicated just a single paragraph (the piece's second-to-last, followed only

⁵² Jonah Humphrey, "Deed," in *Recorded Land* 48 (Berkshire County Middle Registry of Deeds, 1811): 654.

⁵³ Aileen B. Agnew, "Women and Property in Early 19th-Century Portsmouth, New Hampshire," *Historical Archaeology* 29, no. 1 (1995), [jstor.org/stable/2561635](https://www.jstor.org/stable/2561635).

by notes on her death and burial) to consider her landowning years. The article features Freeman's portrait as a full-page cover photo, presenting itself as a story about her successful quest for freedom. And yet, what she did with that freedom is made an afterthought.⁵⁴

In order to understand how a narrative about Freeman has coalesced without due consideration of her landowning years, it is first worth analyzing a broader set of issues which recent scholarship has identified in the literature. A 2019 essay by Sari Edelstein, titled "'Good Mother, Farewell': Elizabeth Freeman's Silence and the Stories of Mumbet" lays bare majorly problematic tendencies in the historical canon. Edelstein thoroughly dissects inadequacies across scholarship on Freeman identifying a "re-inscriptive" quality in much of the literature. She particularly critiques the ways in which scholars have overrelied on the "ur-text," or seminal document, among white narrations about Freeman — Catharine Maria Sedgwick's 1853 essay, "Slavery in New England."⁵⁵ She highlights contradictions between the supposed values and actual actions of Catharine Maria Sedgwick, Theodore Sedgwick, and the Sedgwick family as a whole, illustrating how they practiced white love and racist control in their home, and how Theodore Sedgwick legislated against Black freedom outside the home.⁵⁶ She further applies this criticism in a close reading of the aforementioned Sedgwick essay, identifying its fundamental condescension and spotlighting its revelations of deeper racism.⁵⁷ And, her critique identifies the implications of the issues it exposes, entering a conversation

⁵⁴ J.D. Zahniser, "Just to Say, I Am Free," *American History*, April 13, 2021, [research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=acteed2c-2d8b-3e2a-b739-cea513fb08e2](https://www.research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=acteed2c-2d8b-3e2a-b739-cea513fb08e2).

⁵⁵ Edelstein, "Farewell": 614.

⁵⁶ Edelstein, "Farewell": 594-95, 614. Rafael, *White Love*.

⁵⁷ Edelstein, "Farewell": 588-593.

about modern multiculturalism and the pitfalls of reclamation projects seeking to identify “the Rosa Parks of [one’s] time.”⁵⁸

Tested against works outside the scope of Edelstein’s review, her critique holds up well. One such article is Bethany K. Dumas’s entry on Freeman in *American National Biography*.⁵⁹ This biography of approximately 1,000 words was written for a reference book that positions itself as a “biographical dictionary.” Writing for a broad, public audience, Dumas perpetuates what Edelstein critiques as “how white storytelling serves to contain and functionalize black lives.”⁶⁰ Containing Freeman’s life within what might be called *white doubt*, Dumas writes of a gown only “supposedly” having belonged to Freeman’s mother⁶¹ when in fact, the gown’s history is one of very few facts recorded by Freeman herself, via dictation in her will.⁶² Furthermore, in a move that functionalizes Freeman’s life to serve an external purpose, Dumas concludes her writing not by reflecting on Freeman’s experiences, but rather by placing those experiences within a broader history.⁶³ Overall, Dumas’s biography does not escape what Edelstein assesses is the role of the Freeman narrative, as popularly told, in “cementing the already whitewashed vision of early New England that endures in mainstream literature.”⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Edelstein, “Farewell”: 601. Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 68.

⁵⁹ Bethany K. Dumas, “Freeman, Elizabeth,” *American National Biography* 8 (Oxford University Press, 1999): 439-440.

⁶⁰ Edelstein, “Farewell”: 610-11.

⁶¹ Dumas, “Freeman”: 439. It is particularly disturbing that a story of Freeman’s *mother* was needlessly questioned in this way, as mentions of Freeman’s ancestors are extremely rare. That Freeman named her gown as being her mother’s is a powerful representation of intergenerational kinship which should not be diminished.

⁶² Freeman dictated her will to Charles Sedgwick; Edelstein notes the complexity of even this being mediated by a Sedgwick. See: Edelstein, “Farewell”: 598-600; Elizabeth Freeman, “Last Will & Testament,” *Berkshire County, Massachusetts Probate File Papers* (New England Historic Genealogical Society, FamilySearch.org, and AmericanAncestors.org, 2017), americanancestors.org/databases/berkshire-county-ma-probate-file-papers-1761-1917/image?pageName=4959:1&volumeId=48368&rId=1414995822.

⁶³ Dumas, “Freeman”: 440.

⁶⁴ Edelstein’s analysis of this “cementing” comes in a section dedicated to the effects of children’s literature, but I believe that localized effect is one which she identifies as intertwined with effects of representations in other locations. See: Edelstein, “Farewell”: 607.

Another piece of writing about Freeman, the aforementioned J.D. Zahniser article “Just to Say ‘I Am Free,’” was published two years after Edelstein’s essay.⁶⁵ Zahniser nonetheless re-inscribes much of the narrative that Edelstein critiqued. Zahniser approaches rather uncritically the Catharine Maria Sedgwick essay which Edelstein had recently re-examined, calling it a “sentimental 1853 reminiscence.”⁶⁶ A similar treatment is applied to the 1811 portrait of Freeman, which Edelstein and other scholars had criticized but which Zahniser describes as “present[ing] a paragon of respectability.”⁶⁷

Zahniser is best known for *Alice Paul: Claiming Power*, a biography she finished after its original author passed away. In a review, the book is criticized by historian Sylvia D. Hoffert for a reason that will be familiar to readers of Edelstein: Hoffert writes, “despite their years of research, the picture [Zahniser and her predecessor] paint of Paul is no different than that of other historians.”⁶⁸ Again, Freeman’s story is handled within the context of a tendency to re-inscribe.

Additionally, there exists at least one writing about Freeman that does not need Edelstein’s sharp critique in order to be understood as problematic. Deeply, directly racist, this kind of story gives Freeman’s life a “tall tale” treatment and uses racist tropes in mobilizing her narrative for what can only be described as some perverse notion of entertainment value, while targeting children as audience. Taking extraordinary liberties in fictionalizing Freeman’s story is Harold W. Felton’s 1970 book, *Mumbet: The Story of Elizabeth Freeman*. Featuring crude, hand-drawn illustrations by Donn

⁶⁵ J.D. Zahniser, “Just to Say, ‘I Am Free,’” *American History* 56, no. 3 (2021): 63-64, research.ebsco.com/linkprocessor/plink?id=ac1eed2c-2d8b-3e2a-b739-cea513fb08e2.

⁶⁶ Zahniser, “Just to Say”: 65.

⁶⁷ Edelstein, “Farewell”: 597-98; Zahniser, “Just to Say”: 65.

⁶⁸ Sylvia D. Hoffert, “J. D. Zahniser and Amelia R. Fry. *Alice Paul: Claiming Power*,” *The American Historical Review* 120, no. 3 (2015): 1035–1036, doi.org/10.1093/ahr/120.3.1035.

Albright, the work is authored by a man who describes himself as having “pursued folk heroes and tall tales with enthusiasm... rank[ing] him as a master-yarn spinner.”

Felton’s writing is deeply problematic, as he calls life under enslavement “a good life” in which John Ashley, the enslaver, was “stern, yet not unkind” and in which “the slaves took pride in their work.” Uncomfortable to read, the text shows disrespect for Freeman’s personhood in its dramatization and racist exploitation.⁶⁹



Figure 7. An inexplicably crude illustration needlessly adds to the harm perpetuated by the “tall tale” storytelling in Harold W. Felton’s *Mumbet: The Story of Elizabeth Freeman*.⁷⁰

Whether in uncritical historical works or explicitly racist books for young readers, the collection of texts that comprise Freeman’s representation has serious limitations. Such issues make clear how Freeman’s landownership has been able to be marginalized. White narrations of Freeman’s life, going back as far as Catharine Maria Sedgwick’s

⁶⁹ Harold W. Felton, *Mumbet: The Story of Elizabeth Freeman* (Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1970): 14.

⁷⁰ Donn Albright, Illustration, in *Mumbet: The Story of Elizabeth Freeman* by Harold W. Felton, (Dodd, Mead, and Company, 1970): 23.

“Slavery in New England,” took predictable liberties in centering the parts of Freeman's story that were most proximal to white expectations and in which white people were most involved. Further writings, both scholarly and literary, then took those narrations at face value. Again and again, a story was told that made Freeman an agent of American liberty and justice under the law but not an agent in her own life. The most significant actions that she took to exercise individual agency — moving into her own home, purchasing property, raising a family, and the like — were thus neglected. Likewise, the deeds which now appear to comprise the most significant set of original documents demonstrating Freeman's agency were relegated to occasional footnotes and afterwords.

Overlooking Agency: Edelstein's Totalization

Despite Edelstein's critique illuminating how such marginalization could have happened, her essay itself fails to take up the substantial role of landownership in Freeman's life. Like the literature it criticizes, “Good Mother, Farewell” focuses on Freeman's life while enslaved, then while employed by the Sedgwicks, but not later, when she lived on her own land. This seems a significant omission in work that considers the limits of freedom — limits which were inherently pushed against by Black landowners in the 19th century. Edelstein does mention the landowning period of Freeman's life twice, but she does so in ways that are themselves contained: once within discussion of the Catharine Maria Sedgwick essay she so discredits, and once again in discussion of Freeman's last will and testament.⁷¹ In the case of the will, to relegate Freeman's landownership to discussion of how that land was passed on *after* her life is to fail to do justice by her life as she lived it.

⁷¹ Edelstein, “Farewell”: 592, 598.

Edelstein discusses Freeman's will as "one document... that provides insight into Freeman's own wishes."⁷² But there is not only one such document available; Freeman's deeds, too, indicate her wishes — to acquire property, to partner with family members in doing so, and to reap all the benefits provided by such actions — quite clearly.

There are other limitations in Edelstein's analysis, too. The fact that Freeman was friends with Agrippa Hull is conspicuously absent from most accounts of Freeman's life, and Edelstein's essay is no different in making this omission. Edelstein also lends credence to a theory that minimizes Freeman's agency in seeking her manumission in the first place, noting that "more than one historian has speculated that Sedgwick took on the case to burnish his reputation in the county and that Freeman was handpicked as the ideal petitioner." She presents rather uncritically Arthur Zilversmit's proposition that Freeman may have been "selected... in order to determine whether or not slavery was constitutional in Massachusetts" in what another work calls a "test case."⁷³ This would be less objectionable if Zilversmit and other scholars had stronger evidence for the claim Edelstein re-inscribes, but the opposite is true: Zilversmit writes only that "it is also possible" that Freeman was selected, and he cites no sources to affirm this possibility.⁷⁴ Freeman may well have brought the case herself, and the fact that her agency has been overrepresented in other elements of her story's telling should not take away from this particular element's potency.

Might Edelstein, then, be overcorrecting for the literature? — taking a narrative that has had false notions of agency injected into it and, in turn, stripping that story of

⁷² Edelstein, "Farewell": 598.

⁷³ Edelstein, "Farewell": 603. Arthur Zilversmit, "Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 25, no. 4 (1968): 619, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1916801>. Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 68.

⁷⁴ Zilversmit, "Quok Walker": 619.

agency entirely? The lack of attention Edelstein gives to Freeman's life after working for the Sedgwicks is one indication that this could be the case.

Gaps Overlapping: Shortfalls by Piper and Levinson

While many accounts of Freeman's life center her time with the Ashleys and Sedgwicks while neglecting her later, more independent lifeways, Piper and Levinson's *One Minute a Free Woman* stands out for its comprehensive examination of Freeman's landownership. The book contains an entire chapter focused on Freeman's property and family. However, Piper and Levinson's work has its own limitations. To be sure, this essay owes a great deal of credit to their work supporting analysis of how Freeman related with her land. But as much as they merit attribution, Piper and Levinson leave room for criticism, too.

Much of the whitewashing logic that Sari Edelstein exposes in "Good Mother, Farewell," is visible in Piper and Levinson's analyses.⁷⁵ While Edelstein is mostly critiquing works that fail in part due to their brevity and oversimplification, she nonetheless identifies broader issues that, even in a deeply-researched account such as Piper and Levinson's, can problematize scholarship.

In particular, concerns arise in analysis of Piper and Levinson's treatment of uncertain facts and open questions about Freeman's life. In these cases, they tend to default away from curiosity and capacious consideration — as Tiya Miles and Marisa Fuentes encourage⁷⁶ — and toward more constraining approaches. This limitation is

⁷⁵ Edelstein, "Farewell."

⁷⁶ Fuentes, "Introduction." Miles, *All That She Carried*.

seen in Piper and Levinson's chapter on Freeman's landownership, titled "Elizabeth Freeman at Home."⁷⁷

Contravening the key intervention that Edelstein makes on the importance of family in Freeman's story, Piper and Levinson concede uncritically to the antagonistic position that Sedgwick family members took toward Freeman's daughter Betsey. In particular, they re-inscribe a narrative that Betsey became "a shiftless creature" after being "spoil[ed]" by her mother. Then, Piper and Levinson take their re-inscription a step further when they extrapolate that Elizabeth Freeman might have made the choice to leave her land in trust to Betsey — as opposed to leaving a direct inheritance — out of "her own worries about her child's financial future." Piper and Levinson name that this was done "probably on Charles [Sedgwick]'s advice," as he transcribed the will, and yet they fail to interrogate such advice for its potential ulterior motives. If Charles Sedgwick did indeed direct Freeman to make him a middleman in holding property for her daughter, that was an act of white repossession, even if temporary. Edelstein's critique demands careful consideration of such potential.⁷⁸

Moreover, Piper and Levinson look rather uncritically at the transfer of Freeman's gold beads, a rare surviving object from her life, which ended up in Sedgwick family hands. Where Edelstein asks important questions about whether Freeman's wishes were violated in the (non-)execution of her will, Piper and Levinson assume that Freeman "must have changed her mind and given the necklace" to Catharine Maria Sedgwick despite her will stating that she wished otherwise.⁷⁹ Such a conclusion is without justification.

⁷⁷ Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 129-180.

⁷⁸ Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 137-138.

⁷⁹ Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 174.

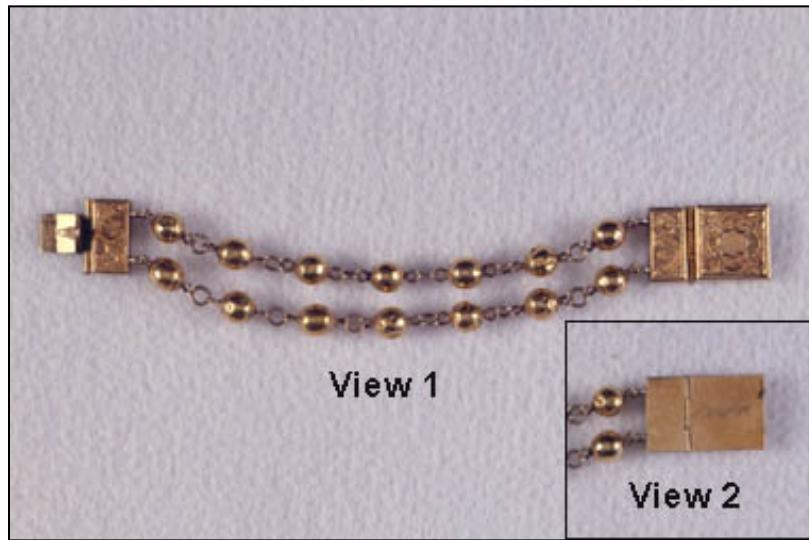


Figure 7. A diagram from the Massachusetts Historical Society showcases the bracelet made from Freeman's gold beads, a rare surviving object from her life.⁸⁰

Another, particularly troubling, piece of Piper and Levinson's analysis comes when they discuss Freeman's landownership in the context of histories in which "Black families failed to make their land a financial success." Piper and Levinson make this characterization simply because, after several decades, Freeman's descendants had to sell their land.⁸¹ To be sure, Black land loss must be examined critically, and it is unfortunate that Freeman's family held her properties for three or four decades instead of 10 or 20. But to say that her pursuit then ended in financial *failure* is to diminish the very real agency that she exercised both during her life and in kinship politics for posterity.

Overall, while Piper and Levinson's consideration of Freeman's landownership was a substantial attempt at making meaning out of the landowning period of her life, it was an imperfect attempt at that.

⁸⁰ "Bracelet made of gold beads from necklace of Elizabeth Freeman ("Mumbet")." Jewelry. Gold. Massachusetts Historical Society, masshist.org/database/548.

⁸¹ Piper and Levinson, *One Minute*: 154.

In Conclusion: Intervening to Make the Agential Narrative Whole

In totality, a dually constituted problem emerges in analysis of the literature about Elizabeth Freeman, particularly when considering Edelstein's and Piper and Levinson's works as two of its seminal entries: Edelstein, having produced a critique that illuminates issues in Piper and Levinson's work, largely fails in her own work to consider Freeman's agency as a landowner. Then, scholars are left with problems in all accounts: where Edelstein succeeds, Piper and Levinson falter; where Piper and Levinson succeed; Edelstein falters.

It has been this essay's goal to bridge the gap. Drawing on each of the aforementioned works' strengths and countervailing each's weaknesses, this essay seeks to be the first intervention that makes *whole* the historical account of Freeman's agency, in all its forms. Picturing her life on Cherry Hill Road, her view of the nearby mountain, the daily tasks that her family worked together to accomplish — these insights create a perspective that has been missing. Where there are holes in the literature, there are patches to be found in the form of historical scraps, once discarded but now treasured. From the Hogeboom household, to the Ashleys', to the Sedgwicks', to her own, Freeman's home and sense of place were reshaped again and again, her life never simple or uniform. Neither can historians' engagement with her story, then, be simple. Freeman is not an icon of American equality, nor is she a bystander to history. Her story is not so categorizable. It is complex — it is human.

As of this writing, the 200th anniversary of Elizabeth Freeman's passing is just four years away. Upon that occasion, *will her story have been well told?*

That is a question which goes beyond matters of historiography and into matters of justice. As Edelstein's work makes clear, the recovery of stories like Freeman's matters deeply; historians have a responsibility to get this right. By aligning the work of Edelstein, Piper and Levinson, and others; identifying the gaps therein; and seeking to fill them in at last, historians can draw ever closer to meeting such a solemn obligation.

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