

Mumbet

By Heidi Wojtas

Dreamscape Productions created a production of *Mumbet's Declaration of Independence*, a book written by Gretchen Woelfle. The teacher can either show the video or read the book. It provides a basic understanding of who Mumbet was, although the lesson provided digs deeper into her life.

After reading the book or showing the video to students, the teacher can pass out the piece of paper with events from Mumbet's life in timeline form, or have them already pre-cut for them to assemble. Have the students check with the teacher before gluing into place.

The teacher and class will go over the timeline. After doing this, the teacher will pass out paragraph readings about Mumbet. Students will then act out the scene from her life as described in the paragraph they read. They can create conversations among the characters as needed. This activity provides differentiation as to the grouping and the level/length of the text. After each group has performed, hold a question and answer period. Then ask each student to create an acrostic poem about Mumbet.

Resources used:

[Answering the Cry for Freedom, Stories of African Americans and the American Revolution](#) by Gretchen Woelfle

[Mumbet's Declaration of Independence](#) by Gretchen Woelfle, book and Dreamscape DVD

[Mumbet: The Life and Times of Elizabeth Freeman](#) by Mary Wilds

[Mumbet The Story of Elizabeth Freeman](#) by Harold W. Felton

Mumbet.com

Cut out each strip of information and then assemble them in chronological order. Before gluing, have your paper checked by your teacher.

1783 Massachusetts makes slavery illegal.
After earning her freedom, for the next 27 years, Mumbet works as a housekeeper and caregiver for the Sedgwick family. She also works as a midwife.
August 21, 1781 Mumbet faces John and Hannah Ashley in court.
Born around 1742-1744 in Hudson Valley, N.Y., and given the name "Bet" by her owner.
While working for the Ashley family, Mrs. Ashley accused Lizzy of stealing bread, Mumbet protects Lizzy with her arm, which is burned down to the bone. "Ask Missus" Mumbet would say when asked what happened to her.
1780: Massachusetts leaders write a state constitution that reads "All men are born free and equal..."
Mumbet and her sister are separated from their mother when Hannah Hogeboom marries John Ashley. Mumbet and Lizzy were presents from Hannah's father.
Feb. 1884 Marie, granddaughter of Theodore Sedgwick, gives a portrait of Mumbet to the Massachusetts Historical Society.
After Massachusetts passes their constitution, Mumbet goes to see Theodore Sedgwick and says "I am not a dumb critter; won't the law give me my freedom?"
January 1773: Mumbet overhears town leaders discussing ideas of revolution and hears the words "God and nature have made us free." BUT these words aren't law yet.
After hearing her case presented in court by Theodore Sedgwick, on August 21, 1781, a jury of all white men gives Mumbet her freedom also granting her 30 shillings for her years of labor in the Ashley house.
Upon arriving at the Ashley house, Mumbet and her sister Lizzy live in a small room next to the kitchen.
12/28/1829: Mumbet dies and becomes the only African-American buried in the Sedgwick family plot in the Stockbridge cemetery.
Feb. 1787 While still employed and living at the Sedgwick house, Mumbet protects the family's silver from a group of men rioting against the newly formed government and taxes. The men search the house for riches, which Mumbet has hidden in her trunk, which she sits upon. This home invasion is led by Daniel Shays (Shays' Rebellion)
1807: Mumbet retires from the Sedgwick house and purchases a small house of her own.
1853: Catherine Sedgwick writes <u>Slavery in New England</u> and bases it upon Mumbet's life.

Reading One:

Bet had spent an active day and now dinner was cooking in the great open fireplace in the kitchen. Lizzie had been sick all the night before and had felt weak since morning. Bet had not stopped all day, trying to do Lizzie's work, as well as her own. From the pantry she heard Mistress Ashley screaming at Lizzie. Bet opened the pantry door. A terrible sight met her eyes. Lizzie was crouched near the kitchen table and Mistress Ashley stood by the fireplace. She held the heavy iron shovel above her head. Bet rushed forward and put her arm out to ward off the blow. The shovel fell and its hard metal edge struck her arm, cutting it to the bone. "I had a bad arm all winter, but Madam had the worst of it," Mumbet said. "I never covered my wound and when people said to me before Madam "Why Betty! What ails your arm?" I only answered "Ask missus."

Reading Two:

Bet had heard the lawyers and the other gentlemen talk when they met at the Ashley house. They all agreed it was right that the new Massachusetts constitution declared everyone was born free and equal. Bet told Lizzie and Brom, another slave living in the Ashley house, what she was going to do. On a cold, wet day, pretending to go to the store, Bet walked four miles to see Mr. Sedgwick in the village of Sheffield. On the walk she remembered why she was walking... "All men are born free and equal" she practiced saying. Upon arriving at the Sedgwick house, Theodore invited Bet inside. He asked her the purpose of her visit. Bet stated. "I am so far from the Ashley House, Mr. Sedgwick, because I want to be free. The Massachusetts constitution says that everybody is born free and equal. If everybody is free, there can't be any slaves, because slaves aren't free." While Mr. Sedgwick and Bet are talking there is a knock on the door. It is Colonel Ashley demanding that Bet return home, stating she is his "servant for life." Bet leaves with Col. Ashley.

Reading Three:

Time had passed and Bet thought Mr. Sedgwick had forgotten all about her. Col. Ashley was a kind man to Bet and felt bad that she wanted her freedom, wanted to leave his house and family. Then one day there was a knock on the door. A man stood at the door "Is Colonel Ashley in? I have a writ of replevin (paper for Bet's release from slavery) for Bet and I must take her with me." Colonel Ashley responds stating "She is my servant for life, I will not permit it; she is my property." Col. Ashley then looks at Bet and states "Tell the sheriff you will not go with him, Bet." Bet drew herself up straight and says "Colonel Ashley, sir, I want my freedom, like the constitution says." Col. Ashley sends the man away and refuses to let Bet leave.

Reading Four:

In a hot courtroom in August of 1781, in front of a judge and a jury of white men, Bet confronts Col. John Ashley. Mr. Sedgwick is concerned about the court proceeding and its outcome. He isn't sure if Bet will win her freedom. "There is no law that makes me a slave" Bet says to Mr. Sedgwick. His reply, "There are customs in Massachusetts, and sometimes customs are stronger than laws." Evidence is shown and the lawyers argue their side of the issue. There is no real record of what was said in the courtroom, but whatever was said was compelling enough for Bet to win her freedom. She was also awarded 30 shillings for her years of work. Col. Ashley asked Bet to return to his house as a paid housekeeper, but she refused. The next day she went back to the courthouse and chose her new name, "Elizabeth Freeman".

Reading Five:

Many farmers were unhappy about the new government in the U.S. after winning the Revolutionary War. Daniel Shays was one of those unhappy farmers. He and other farmers took to mob action and broke into people's houses to steal money from the wealthy. Daniel Shays chose to break into the Sedgwick house when Mr. Sedgwick was away on business. Mrs. Sedgwick, her children and Mumbet were at the house when the farmers arrived. Mumbet knew they were coming and took all the silver from the house and locked it up in her trunk located in her room on the 3rd floor of the house. She shoved the key to the trunk in a handkerchief in an apron pocket. The men knock on the door, and Mumbet is pushed aside as they enter the house, searching for Mr. Sedgwick and his valuables. Mrs. Sedgwick is lying in her bed with her children, as the room is checked by two men. Mumbet tries to serve them something to drink, but the men don't like it. They continue searching the house. They finally reach the 3rd floor and Mumbet sits upon the trunk. They demand she get off the trunk and Mumbet refuses, stating her personal belongings are in it. The men leave.

Reading Six:

Catharine Sedgwick decides to write a book based on Mumbet. She interviews Mumbet and Mumbet recaps her life story for Catharine. She tells Catharine about purchasing her own home in 1807 working as a nurse and midwife, supporting her daughter, "Little Bet," her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. She also shared the portrait painted of her by Maria Sedgwick in 1811. (Students should hold it up for the class to see).



Closing Activity is to have the students create an acrostic poem using Mumbet's name and either summarizing her story or writing words that describe the kind of person Mumbet was.

M

U

M

B

E

T