

On an August day in 1781 Bet Freeman and her lawyers, Theodore Sedgwick and Tapping Reeve, went to the court in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. There, before the judge, they met Colonel John Ashley and his lawyers.

Bet had lived on the western frontier all her life. She knew that people often disagreed with each other, and she knew that sometimes led to fights and warfare. The Indian war and the war with England were fought because people could not agree. As the sun, shining through the windows, spread neat patterns of light on the floor of the courtroom, she was moved by the wisdom and the beauty of this peaceful way of settling disputes. She wondered why people could not always find the answer to their problems in this way.

"I am troubled, Bet," Mr. Sedgwick whispered.

"About my trial?" Bet asked.

"Yes."

"There's no reason for that," Bet replied.

Mr. Sedgwick looked at her curiously.

"Why do you say that?" he asked.

"The law says all people are free and equal. If that is so, how can I, or anyone, be a slave?"

Mr. Sedgwick smiled. Bet would have made a good lawyer, he thought.

"There is no law that makes me a slave.

You told me that."

"That's right. But there are laws about slaves. And there is custom, and that is sometimes stronger than law," he said.

"There's nothing about custom in the constitution. Just you tell those things to the judge and jury in lawyer words. Then everything will be all right."

As a slave, Bet led a quiet life with the Ashley family. But freedom was more important to her than comfort or safety. She lived in Massachusetts, and the state constitution that had been adopted the year before said that all the people of the state were free. Bet was testing the law.

As the trial went on, a feeling of great serenity replaced the disturbing emotions that Bet had felt in the past months.

The judge listened. The jury leaned forward in their seats so that no word would escape them.

Bet sighed with soft contentment when she heard the verdict. She was not the servant of John Ashley for her lifetime.

"You have been given damages for your services since you were twenty-one years old, and costs. What shall I do with the money?" Mr. Sedgwick asked with a smile.

"Pay Mr. Reeve and pay yourself for your lawyers' fees. Pay well because now I have the dearest thing on earth—my freedom. Then, I'd be obliged to you if you will keep what may be left for me. Keep it so I can use it if I need it."

No one was waiting to cheer Bet for her great victory. But the state of Massachusetts and the county of Berkshire had done their part. They had upheld the law. Bet was a free person!

CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. Theodore Sedgwick and Tapping Reeve were Bet's**
 - A judges
 - B uncles
 - C lawyers

- 3. Bet had lived much of her life**
 - A on a southern plantation
 - B on the western frontier
 - C in the city of Boston

- 3. Bet wondered why people could not always settle their disputes by**
 - A court cases
 - B fights and warfare
 - C arguments

- 4. Mr. Sedgwick was troubled about**
 - A his failing business
 - B Bet's trial
 - C the uncomfortable courtroom

- 5. Mr. Sedgwick said that sometimes the law is not as strong as**
 - A Colonel Ashley
 - B custom
 - C the judge

- 6. Bet had been owned by**
 - A Mr. Sedgwick
 - B the Reeve family
 - C the Ashley family

- 7. The state in which Bet was testing the law was**
 - A Massachusetts
 - B New York
 - C Connecticut

- 8. As the trial went on, Bet felt**
 - A hatred toward Colonel Ashley
 - B nervous and worried
 - C great peacefulness

- 9. The verdict said that Bet**
 - A must return to John Ashley
 - B was now free
 - C must move to another state

- 10. Besides her freedom, Bet was given**
 - A money for damages
 - B a new job
 - C cheers from the spectators