Mumbet: Folklore and Fact

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An historian is, in a sense, an official custodian of our past. Society assigns to the professional historian the task of sifting the infinite events of the past and writing a comprehensible story of those facts that are significant and relevant for us. But few historians flatter themselves by believing that they are the only custodians of the past. If they are the official custodians, there are thousands of unofficial custodians, and among this group of unofficial recorders of the past one of the most interesting is the teller of folktales.

The historian often relies heavily on the work of the folk historian. Although using folk material creates problems for the professional – questions of reliability, for instance – he ignores this material only at the risk of losing an important part of our heritage.

The historian can use this folk material in two ways. He can use it as a source for discovering what has happened in the past, and he can use it to establish the point of view and outlook of the group that tells the folk tales. For example, the historian coming across the ballad of John Henry might try to find out the details of the famous contest between muscle and steam drills, or he might use the song to come to some conclusions about how the singers of the ballad felt about the process of industrialization. I would like to use both these approaches in dealing with the folk literature concerning a famous Berkshire County figure, Mumbet.

Mumbet is one of the most attractive figures in the annals of Berkshire County folklore. There are many stories about Mumbet, most of which have been written down by members of the Sedgwick family, for whom she worked for many years. These stories share the mythical qualities of genuine folk literature; each of these stories has a moral and serves a didactic purpose. Like the story of George Washington and the cherry tree, these stories have an impact and an attractiveness that goes beyond the truth of the "facts." These stories have been repeated because they convey a moral truth – a moral view that is more valuable to the storyteller than the literal truth of the stories. The stories of Mumbet, therefore, tell us not only about that kindly ex-slave, but they also reveal a great deal about the ideas and values of the people who tell the stories.

Mumbet, whose real name was Elizabeth Freeman, was a slave for about thirty years and many of the Mumbet stories concern her days in slavery. According to Catherine Maria Sedgwick, who wrote the story of Mumbet many years after the Negro woman's death, Mumbet's master, Colonel John Ashley was a man of rare understanding.[1] As a rich man and a justice of the court of common pleas, he held a high status in his community, and he was a warm human being who had compassion for all men. His wife, however, Miss Sedgwick tells us, was of a different character.

> The Plan of Providence to prevent monstrous discrepancies, by mating the tall with the short, the fat with the lean, the sour with the sweet… was illustrated by… [Colonel] Ashley and his help-meet. He was the gentlest, most benign of men; she a shrew untamable.

One day, as Mumbet used to tell the story, a young girl who was "in trouble" came to the Ashley house for help. Mumbet brought the young girl into the house and asked her to wait for Colonel Ashley. Mrs. Ashley saw this and immediately took offense; but Mumbet was determined to defend the young girl:

> When Madam had got half across the kitchen, in full sight of the child, she turned to me, and her eyes flashing like a cat's in the dark, she asked me "what that baggage wanted?" "To speak to master." "What does she want to say to

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[1] Catharine Sedgwick, "Slavery in New England," *Bentley's Miscellany*, XXIV (1853), pp 417-424.

> your master?” “I don’t know, ma’am.” “I know,” she said – and there was no foul thing she didn’t call the child.

Mrs. Ashley thereupon told the girl to get out of the house, but Mumbet stood firm:

> “Sit still, child, I said.”

Mrs. Ashley’s temper “rose like a thunder storm,” but “Madam knew when I set my foot down, I kept it down,” and the troubled girl got to see Colonel Ashley.

The story goes on to tell that the unfortunate young girl had been raped by her father and, as might be expected, all the principals died unhappily. But that is not the point of this story. The lesson of the Mumbet story is clear – true honor and virtue are not the product of one’s station in life but an inner quality. Mumbet, the slave was more noble than Mrs. Ashley, her supposed mistress. While Mrs. Ashley raged, Mumbet simply told her, “If the gal has a complaint to make, she has a right to see the judge; that’s lawful, and stands to reason besides.” Obviously the untutored slave had a firmer sense of what was legal and right than her mistress. The lesson is clear: Even a person whom fortune has placed into a humble position can be virtuous and noble.

Another story of Mumbet’s slavery days also involved the evil-tempered Mrs. Ashley. As legend has it, Mumbet had a sickly sister, Lizzy, whom she watched and protected “as the lioness” watches her cubs. One day Mrs. Ashley saw that Lizzy had scraped together the remains of the dough used to bake a cake for the family and had made a cake for herself from these scraps. Enraged at this example of thievery, her intemperate mistress seized a red-hot kitchen shovel and raised it over the terrified young girl. But Mumbet bravely interposed her own arm and caught the full force of the blow intended for her poor sister. Although Mumbet carried the scar of that blow with her all her life, she claimed to have gotten the best of the encounter. Catharine Maria Sedgwick quotes Mumbet as saying:

> "Madam never again laid her hand on Lizzy. I had a bad arm all winter, but Madam got the worst of it. I never covered the wound, and when people said to me, before Madam, 'Why Betty! What ails your arm?' I only answered – 'Ask mistress!'

Miss Sedgwick concludes her version of the story with the question, "Which was the slave and which was the real mistress?"

Catharine Maria Sedgwick's brother, Theodore, also wrote of Mumbet.[2] The point of his Mumbet stories is also didactic, but at the same time his point is more frankly political than his sister's. After telling of Mrs. Ashley's attempted assault on Mumbet's sister and of Mumbet's heroic defense of the girl, Theodore Sedgwick claims that the slave was so enraged by her mistress's act that she left the household and refused to return. Sedgwick points to Mumbet's history as "a practical refutation of the imagined superiority of our race to hers," and his conclusion is obvious from the title of the lecture, "The Practicability of the Abolition of Slavery."

"Having known this woman as familiarly as I knew either of my parents, "Theodore Sedgwick points out, "I *cannot* believe in the moral or physical inferiority of the race to which she belonged."

For Theodore Sedgwick, Mumbet was living proof of the absurdity of the racial prejudice. If Negroes seemed inferior, the reason was the debasing effects of slavery; therefore, "the instant that the weight, which depresses their level in society , is taken off, they will rise and occupy the space that is left vacant for them."

Although Theodore Sedgwick's refutation of radical inferiority put him in an advanced position in the early decades of the nineteenth century, other aspects of the Mumbet legend reveal older attitudes. The story of Mumbet's role in Shay's Rebellion is particularly important in demonstrating another theme in the Mumbet tradition.

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[2] [Theodore Sedgwick] *The Practicability of the Abolition of Slavery: A Lecture Delivered at the Lyceum in Stockbridge, Massachusetts, February* 1831 (New York, 1831), pp 13-18

The Sedgwicks, descended from that firm old Federalist, Theodore Sedgwick, Sr., had no sympathy for the Berkshire farmers who followed Daniel Shays. According to legend, the insurgents came to the Sedgwick house when only Mumbet and one of the children were at home.[3] Mumbet, who was now free, and a servant in the Sedgwick household, was as courageous and determined in resisting the rebels as she had been in defending her sister from Mrs. Ashley's wrath. She barred the door and threatened to pour a kettle of boiling beer on the first of the rebels to enter the house. When one of the leaders of the insurgents wanted to take a favorite horse of her master, Mumbet boldly unsaddled the horse and gave it a slap that sent the animal out of harm's way. She hid the family valuables in her own chest, and when the rebels demanded the key, she "laughed in scorn."

> "Ah, Sam Cooper," she said, "you and your fellows are no better than I thought you. You call me 'wench' and 'nigger,' and you are not above rummaging in my chest..."

At that point, as Mumbet told the story, the leader of the insurgents "turned and slunk away like a whipped cur as he was!" As Catharine Maria Sedgwick put it, Mumbet viewed all the insurgents with "an aristocratic contempt." Mumbet had clearly aligned herself with those who, like Theodore Sedgwick, Sr., opposed the leveling tendencies of the post-Revolutionary turmoil.

Theodore Sedgwick, Jr., who also tells of Mumbet's defense of the family valuables during Shay's Rebellion, points to those events that show that Mumbet's "fidelity to her employers was such as has never been surpassed." This story, then, is a neat balance for the story of Mumbet's opposition to Mrs. Ashley. It shows that Mumbet was not naturally rebellious; in a properly regulated, aristocratic household she was loyal. As Theodore Sedgwick, Jr., put it, "Even in her humble station, she had, when occasion required it, an air of command which conferred a degree of dignity and gave her an ascendancy over those in her rank, which is very unusual in persons od any rank or color."[4] In other words, she was superior among her own kind and, we may infer, she knew her place. Mumbet emerges then as the aristocratic servant of an aristocratic family – she was a good servant to those who knew how to be good masters. Mumbet was a wonderful person, but one of her virtues was that she knew her place.

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[3] Catharine Sedwick, "Slavery", pp 422-424

These stories, then, allow us to gain some insight into the ideas of the people who told them. They reveal a society which was opposed to slavery but which did not believe in the equality of all men – a society which believed that virtue and nobility were not the exclusive qualities of one class but that the virtuous and noble members of the lower classes revealed their nobility in part by acting without presumption and recognizing their place in society. Ironically, it was only after she was free that Mumbet could fit the classical image of the good slave. In these stories, one can almost hear the reverberations of Kipling's immortal lines:

> An' for al 'is dirty 'ide
> 'E was white, clear white, inside
> When 'e went to tend the wounded under fire!

Of all the Mumbet stories, the one that has interested me most is the story of how she won her freedom. My interest in this story was not an attempt to learn something about the tellers of the story but rather to find out as much as possible about what actually happened. I was writing a doctoral thesis on the abolition of slavery in the North, and it was important to me to find out how and why Mumbet won her freedom.

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[4] [Theodore Sedgwick], *Practicability of Aboltion*, pp. 16-18

Even before I had begun formal research for my thesis I "knew" that slavery had been abolished in Massachusetts as a result of a famous case – Quok Walker (who could forget that name?) in 1781. This was clearly stated in my college history textbook:

> Quok Walker sued his master for freedom in 1781 on the ground that the state constitution declared, "All men are born free and equal." He won, and slavery ended in [Massachusetts][5].

When I began doing the research for my dissertation, however, I came upon a disconcerting piece of evidence. I was reading the story of the Duc de La Rochefoucald-Liancourt's visit to the United States between 1795 and 1797. In his account of the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts, there was no mention of Quok Walker; instead he mentioned a case in which the attorney for the Negroes who sued for their freedom was Theodore Sedgwick, Sr., and I knew that Sedgwick had had no connection with the Walker case.[6] Spurred by this intriguing piece of information that threatened to disrupt my view of abolition in Massachusetts, I turned to the *Dictionary of American Biography* for the article on Sedgwick and there I found for the first time the Mumbet story.[7]

The story, as I found it in the *DAB* and subsequent sources, was that in 1781 Mumbet had engaged the services of Theodore Sedgwick and sued her for freedom on the grounds that the new constitution of Massachusetts prohibited slavery. Some sources attributed Mumbet's action to the famous kitchen shovel incident; Catharine Maria Sedgwick said that it was hearing the Declaration of Independence read that inspired Mumbet to end her servitude. All the stories agreed on one point, however: Mumbet's case had been instrumental in demonstrating that slavery was unconstitutional in Massachusetts. In other words, Western Massachusetts claimed for Mumbet the same role as others claimed for Quok Walker.

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[5] Samuel Eliot Morison and Henry Steele Commager*, The Growth of the American Republic* (2 vols.; 5th ed., New York 1962), I, 245.

[6] Francis Alexandre Frederic, duc de La Rochefoucauld-Liancourt, *Travels Through the United States of North America*, trans. H. Neuman (2 vols.; London, 1799), I, 531.

[7] Zachariah Chafee, Jr., "Theodore Sedgwick", *Dictionary of American Biography*, ed. Allen Johnson *et al* (New York, 1938-1958), XVI, 549-551.

At this point I was faced with the problem of reconciling the folk tale of Mumbet with the "official" view that it had been Quok Walker's case that ended slavery in Massachusetts[8]. Fortunately, my task was eased by the fact that the Walker case had been the subject of scholarly re-examination. Two articles on the Walker case cast serious doubt on the "official" story that the case had in fact been the determining factor in ending slavery in Massachusetts. With this in mind I went to the Berkshire County Courthouse in Pittsfield and began my search for the historical Mumbet. I readily found the records of the case as it had been argued in Great Barrington in August, 1781[9]. The case records confirmed most of the folk version. Elizabeth Freeman had sued for her freedom and had won the case. What the folk story did not mention, however, is that Elizabeth Freeman was joined in her case by another slave (known to us only as Brom). Although the folk stories stress that the court's decision was based on an interpretation of the Constitution of 1780, the court records did not confirm this. Instead, the court merely noted that Brom and Bett were not the legal slaves of Colonel Ashley. I also found that Theodore Sedgwick had not been alone in his espousal of the case of the slave. He was joined as an attorney for the plaintiffs by Tapping Reeve, a man who was later to make his mark as the foremost legal scholar in the nation. Colonel Ashley, who was himself an attorney, was represented by David Noble (later a trustee of Williams College) and John Canfield, an unusually able lawyer from Sharon, Connecticut.

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[8] Williams O'Brien, S.J., "Did the Jennison Case Outlaw Slavery in Massachusetts?" *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XVII (1960), 219-241; John D. Cushing, "The Cushing Court and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts: More Notes on the Quok Walker Case,'" *American Journal of Legal History*, V (1961), 118-144.

[9] William O'Brien, S.J., "Did the Jennison Case Outlow Slavery in Massachusetts?" *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XVII (1960), 219-241; Massachusetts: More Notes on the 'Quok Walker Case,'" *American Journal of Legal History*, V (1961), 118-144.

The fact that this case had been attracted such distinguished legal talent led me to believe that this was, indeed, an important case. This impression was confirmed when I found that at the same time that the case of Brom and Bett vs. Ashley was before the court, Ashley had been faced by a similar suit by another of his slaves, Zach Mullen[10]. The fact that the attorneys in the Mullen case repeatedly postponed bringing it to trial led me to believe that Brom vs. Ashley was to be viewed as a test case. After Ashley lost the case of Brom and Bett in the lower courts, he filed notice that he intended to appeal. This appeal was to be prosecuted when the Supreme Judicial Court came to Berkshire County on its next circuit of the state in October. In order to find out what happened at the appeals level, I went to Boston to the Suffolk County Courthouse where the dusty records of the Supreme Judicial Court are kept.[11]

There I learned to my surprise that when Colonel Ashley finally got the chance to reverse the lower court decision, he decided instead to "confess judgment." That is, he formally accepted the ruling to the lower court and agreed to pay the legal fees and other changes assessed at the Great Barrington trial in August.

At this point I was forced to speculate about men and motives. I ultimately came to the conclusion that Ashley has learned that the Supreme Judicial Court had already ruled for Quok Walker when it sat in Worchester and that by the time the court came to Berkshire County, Ashley recognized that the court had ruled that slavery was indeed unconstitutional. Therefore

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[10] Berkshire Court Record Book 4A, pp. 24, 53,237.

[11] Manuscript Book, "Supreme Judicial Court, 1781-1782," p. 96, Office of the Clerk of the Supreme Judicial Court for Suffolk County, Suffolk County Court House, Boston, Massachusetts. For a printed copy of the records, see Arthur Zilversmit, "Quok Walker, Mumbet, and the Abolition of Slavery in Massachusetts*," William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. Ser., XXV (1968), 621-622.

Ashley “confessed judgment” and thereby gave a formal recognition to the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts.[12]

By this time I had come a long way from the folk tale. Mumbet was no longer the solitary slave, standing up for her rights; Theodore Sedgwick was no longer the only attorney to aid her. Moreover there was no direct evidence that the court had ruled her case that slavery was unconstitutional. Yet, upon reflection, I readily conceded that in its outline, at least, the folk tale was true. The folk version, while incorrect in detail did present the essential truth that slavery was abolished by judicial decision and that the case of Mumbet was important in that determination.

The Mumbet stories had proven extremely useful to me. They had not only given me a valuable view of the attitudes of an American aristocracy, but they had altered me to the fact that there were serious difficulties with the “official” story of the abolition of slavery in Massachusetts.

Mumbet helped me to reach the conclusion that slavery had been ended in Massachusetts as the results of a series of cases, not one single landmark decision. Both the Mumbet story and the Quok Walker story (which also is heavily based on folklore) erred in oversimplifying and personalizing a complex legal matter. Yet the folk tales did not the essence of what had happened. While the folk version of abolition was incomplete and oversimplified, it did convey the broad outlines of the story. Moreover, it transmitted the facts in such a way that the story was not forgotten. An impersonal account of several slave cases in the spring and summer of 1781 would have been forgotten, but the stories of Mumbet and Quok Walker were preserved.

In much the same way, historians would argue that the folk version of Abraham Lincoln freeing the slaves was a gross oversimplification – that the emancipation proclamation was not really effective in ending slavery and that it had been Congress which had freed the slaves by passing the Thirteenth Amendment. Folk history tends to oversimplify historical events, and it tends to make impersonal forces into the stories of great men. Nonetheless, as in the case of Mumbet, folk stories can provide valuable materials for the professional historian. I certainly owe a professional debt to Mumbet and the people who preserved her story.

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[12] Zilversmit, “Quok Walker,” 614-624, Arthur Zilversmit, *The First Emancipation: The Abolition of Slavery in the North* (Chicago, 1967), pp. 112-116

Mumbet's gravestone stands in the famed circular Sedgwick plot in Stockbridge Cemetery, next to the stone of novelist Catharine Maria Sedgwick. Mumbet's epitaph, written by Catharine's brother Charles, concludes: "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."

Some of the more popular folk tales in America involve the trickster Brer Rabbit. In the various tales, the scrawny rabbit continually saves his hide by outwitting foes Brer Bear, Brer Wolf and Brer Fox. The Brer Rabbit stories originated in African folklore and were brought to America during the slave era [sources: American Folklore, Encyclopaedia Brittanica]. The most famous story is "Brer Rabbit and the Tar Baby." In it, Brer Fox makes a doll of out tar and puts it by the side of the road. Myths and Folklore. Perhaps because of their nocturnal habits and ability to navigate in the dark, or simply because they appear to be both animal and bird at the same time, bats have long been associated with deity, supernatural forces and the occult. In the mythologies of differing cultures bats symbolize both good and evil, life and death.Â Bat Facts. Bats are mammals of the order Chiroptera of which there are 17 families divided into 2 suborders â€“ the larger Megabats and the smaller Microbats. Only one of these families includes Megabats (of which there are more than 150 species); the other 16 families are all Microbats containing another 850 species or more.