

What does the named memorial “Elizabeth Freeman Way” tell us about ourselves?

An excerpt from remarks given by Dr. Alexandria Russell, Black Women Legacies Founder & Executive Director, at the Unveiling of Elizabeth Freeman Way on October 28, 2023 at the Great Barrington, Massachusetts Town Hall.

Named memorials like the one we are commemorating today have a long history that began almost a century after Elizabeth Freeman’s death. African American women developed a robust and vibrant infrastructure of named memorials all over the United States through the culture of recognition, which is the simultaneous relationship between celebrating a namesake and celebrating oneself. These women were determined to be acknowledged and appreciated, despite the dominant caricatures and erasure from historical narratives.

They were reaping the harvest of seeds planted by Elizabeth Freeman a century earlier when she demonstrated the power of proclaiming your own name rejecting, Mum Bett as her identifier. In turn, the women of the Jim Crow era made named memorials a way to disseminate history, educating present and future generations about the women whose sacrifices and tenacity have made are all of our societies better.

When Elizabeth Freeman proclaimed her name, she was also alluding to the long pan-Africanist tradition of call and response—the tradition of calling names to evoke memory and to document our humanity.

Today, our commemoration of Elizabeth Freeman way highlights the first African American woman to successfully file a lawsuit for freedom in the state of Massachusetts. We celebrate Elizabeth Freeman’s tenacious determination to emancipate, not only herself, but others in bondage—enslaved by the physical and intellectual constraints of slavery in New England and beyond. She dedicated her life as a nurse and midwife to nurturing her community with medicinal care that permeated throughout the region.

Today in our commemoration, we simultaneously recognize ourselves in our quest to acknowledge the power of the past to inform our actions in the present. This public history stands among other new memorials in New England like the Phyllis Wheatley statue in Boston, the Harriet Wilson statue in Milford, New Hampshire, and the Elizabeth Freeman statue right here in the Berkshires. These memorials signify a cultural landscape that says the stories and the lives of black women matter and should be acknowledged for shaping our communities into better spaces.

When we call the name of Elizabeth Freeman Way, we call on the tradition of liberatory advocacy, we call on the tradition of social justice, and we call on the tradition of claiming space as a path to make our society better for future generations.

Thank You!

Black Women Legacies