

Enslaved woman wins her freedom

By our civil rights correspondent

November 5, 1766

JENNY SLEW is one of the first people held as a slave to be granted freedom through trial by jury. Boston-born lawyer Benjamin Kent represented Slew, who was kidnapped from her home in Ipswich and forced into servitude. Kent is said to be a member of the Sons of Liberty and friend of John Adams.

Slew, whose mother was a free white woman and father was of African descent, was awarded four pounds—the British unit of money—in damages. Legal experts say slavery in Massachusetts may die out if future court cases are successful.

Massachusetts has been involved in the slave trade since the early 17th century. It was even made legal for the children of enslaved people to be sold into slavery. Boston ships have been selling enslaved people to Rhode Island, Connecticut, and Virginia for decades. About 4,000 enslaved people reside in Massachusetts, though Boston's free African-American population is large.

Ports such as Boston and Salem have also grown wealthy from the trade—between North America, Britain, and Africa—which is built on slavery. Typically, the West Indies exports raw sugar or molasses to New England, where it is turned into rum. The rum is then shipped to Britain along with lumber and other items. Britain then transports textiles, rum, and manufactured goods to Africa to be traded for enslaved people destined for the West Indies, and the cycle starts again.

RECENT SCHOLARSHIP suggests that American slavery began in earliest colonial times, targeting people of the New England Indigenous Nations. The general perception has been that slavery was less common in an “enlightened” New England. However, throughout the 17th century, Native people comprised the vast majority of enslaved persons. Native slavery was an immediate and lucrative way to finance rebuilding “New England” after the devastation of King Philip’s War. Thousands of Native people were shipped to the West Indies and Bermuda.