

Two Minutes With...Tammy Denease



Brittany Durgin

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Storyteller, historian and performer Tammy Denease brings to life a myriad of historically important African American women, portraying a range of unique individuals from aviation pioneer Bessie Coleman to Margru, a child on the slave ship Amistad. On January 17, Denease will bring her show "Honoring a Slave Heroine: The Mum Bett Story" to Old Sturbridge Village as part of their celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day.

Talk about the story of Elizabeth "Mum Bett" Freeman. Why is she a significant person in US history? Mum Bett was the first enslaved person to get her freedom in the formed United States (Aug 21, 1781). Bett's determination led not only to her freedom, but to the end of slavery in Massachusetts. Although an enslaved person, she commanded/demanded respect and received it from all who knew her. She believed in equal treatment for all slaves or otherwise.

When asked to name important abolitionists and early equal rights pioneers, people think of Crispus Atticus, Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. Why isn't Mum Bett's name mentioned as often as the others? Unfortunately society as a whole is conditioned to think of only a few African Americans as pioneers. Mum Bett is one of many who are obscured through the annals of history.

Does Massachusetts, or even Central Massachusetts, have any other significant history when it comes to awarding freedom to slaves? Another great story is that of Quock Walker. Quock actually began his legal battle before Mum Bett. A descendant of Mum Bett's, Henry Carter, out of Lenox was a soldier in the Civil War.

Talk a little bit about your performance at Old Sturbridge Village on January 17. At OSV I will activate the mind of the audience by bringing Mum Bett to life in authentic period related clothing. The village charm of OSV will enable me to transport the audience to the appropriate time to tell her story.

What steered you into performing and storytelling? Of all the performances and parts you could perform, why this one? Growing up in Mississippi, storytelling is a tradition in my family. My great grandmother (Mary Baxter Johnson) was an enslaved woman who lived to be 125 years of age. My grandmother lived to be 100 years of age. My mother is still alive. I spent countless hours with them learning about my heritage. I guess you could say I grew up with living history, it's in my blood!

For the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday on Monday Jan. 17, storyteller and museum educator Tammy Denease (historicalfirsts.org) will present "Honoring a Slave Heroine: The Mumbet Story" as part of the Martin Luther King Jr. Day activities at Old Sturbridge Village. Old Sturbridge Village is offering free admission for kids throughout the month of January. Check out 800-SEE-1830 or osv.org for more details.