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The Trafficking of Elisha Webb: Black Freedom Claims in British North America
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This article examines the story of Elisha Webb, an African-descended woman who was born free (ca. 1716) on Virginia’s Eastern Shore. In 1737, she was illegally sold into slavery and trafficked to Portsmouth, New Hampshire. Webb’s efforts to regain her free status, which she successfully obtained in 1742, illustrate the politics of African American legal claims to freedom in early North America. Although individuals such as Webb accomplished vital work in gaining their liberty, too often we have understood their claims to freedom as politically inchoate. By blending microhistory, legal history, and biography, the article reconceptualizes prerevolutionary freedom suits as part of the long trajectory of Black antislavery politics. Cases such as Webb’s reframe prerevolutionary freedom suits as arising from a vernacular tradition that provided one point of origin for abolition. Webb’s freedom suit makes visible three key areas of this vernacular tradition—the collective, portable, and instrumental legal knowledge in Black communities; the role of networks within Black communities and across Black and white neighborhoods; and the distinctive position of Black women in antislavery work.