

Paul Cuffe (1759-1817)

Entrepreneur, sea captain, social activist, philanthropist, colonizationist and leader who fought for the empowerment of African Americans.

Written by Vanessa Julye

Paul Cuffe was born in Cuttyhunk, Massachusetts in a family of ten children. His father Kofi was a manumitted enslaved African and a member of the Akan tribe of Ghana. Paul Cuffe's mother, Ruth Moses, was a Native American of the Wampanoag tribe from Martha's Vineyard. Ebenezer Slocum, a Friend, purchased Kofi (later Cuffe Slocum) in the 1720s. Twenty-two years later John Slocum purchased Cuffe Slocum from his uncle and freed him in 1745. Although Paul Cuffe's parents had been strongly influenced by Friends, there is no evidence that they belonged to a Quaker meeting.

Paul Cuffe taught himself mathematics, navigation, and other seafaring skills, and earned his wealth through whaling and trade in the Americas and Europe. His shipping career began at the age of sixteen, when he signed up to be a member of a whaling vessel. Cuffe began building his shipping enterprise during the Revolutionary War, and over a period of years he owned shares in up to ten ships. During the War he built a boat with his brother, David, and the two of them smuggled merchandise through British blockades. In 1793 Cuffe married Alice Pequit, with whom he had six children named Paul, William, Mary, Ruth, Alice and Rhoda.

During that period in American history the shipping industry was dangerous because of the constant threat of pirates. But purchasing and delivering merchandise on the Atlantic coast, specifically in the South, was particularly hazardous for Cuffe and his crew because they were all African American. In 1793 Congress passed a fugitive slave law that gave owners of enslaved Africans the right to retrieve an escaped enslaved person from another state. The enslaved were not entitled to a trial, a hearing, or able to testify for themselves. This law put Cuffe and his crew in continual peril of being kidnapped and sold.

Paul Cuffe saw education as a means of liberation, and he fought for equal rights in many ways. He was always eager to teach young men who wanted to learn the science of navigation and skills of a merchantman. In 1799 he established a school on his own property in Westport, Massachusetts that was open to all children regardless of their race. In 1800 he bought a gristmill in Acoaxet, and was a century and a half ahead of his time when he urged mills to include African Americans in the planning stages of organizations whose goal was helping blacks. He encouraged African Americans up and down the East Coast to think about their social and economic status. In 1780, when only men of European descent had the right to vote, he and other African Americans protested taxation on his father's estate on the grounds of no taxation without representation.

Despite his long involvement with Friends, Paul Cuffe did not join Westport Monthly Meeting until 1806, when he was forty-nine. He dressed in the manner of Friends, wearing Quaker gray along with a wide-brimmed black hat. In mid-September 1810 Cuffe shared a leading he was experiencing with his meeting: to establish a trading community in Sierra Leone that would trade goods instead of humans. A committee was appointed to meet with and advise him on this matter. During the October business meeting a letter of recommendation was read and approved, and Cuffe also received a traveling minute from New England Yearly Meeting for this undertaking. It was the first of three minutes Cuffe would receive from for his travels related to establishing this system of commerce in Sierra Leone.

Cuffe became an important and well-respected member of the Religious Society of Friends. During Westport's January 1813 business meeting Cuffe was one of six members appointed to rebuild the old meetinghouse. At yearly meeting sessions in 1815 he was asked by the Meeting for Sufferings to help make decisions about the Meeting House in Boston.

More Resources on Paul Cuffe

“Paul Cuffe: Early Pan-Africanist”; By Rosalind Cobb Wiggins; in *Black Quakers, Brief Biographies*; Kenneth Ives, Editor; Progresiv Publishr, 1995; (out of print, available at some libraries)

Captain Paul Cuffe's Logs and Letters, 1808-1817: A Black Quaker's Voice from within the Veil;
By Rosalind Cobb Wiggins; Howard University Press, 1996

[Memoir of Captain Paul Cuffe](#), Liverpool Mercury; Africans in America Resource Bank, WGBH
Boston;

Rise to Be A People; By Lamont D. Thomas; University of Illinois Press, 1986.

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