The Legacy Of

PAUL CUFFEE
Who Is

PAUL CUFFEE?
“He is described as tall, with straight hair, of light complexion, with dignity of mien.”
Zephaniah W. Pease, History of New Bedford 1918

“Paul Cuffee, or Cuff is represented to have been a man of noble personal appearance, tall, portly and dignified in his bearing.” Daniel Ricketson, History of New Bedford 1858

“Paul was unmistakably both African and Native American in physical inheritance. He was big enough to stand out, and he dressed in his sober Quaker grey and wide brimmed black hat, he was impressive.” Rosalind Cobb Wiggins, Captain Paul Cuffe’s Logs and Letters, 1808-1817 1996
Paul Cuffe was born on Cuttyhunk Island, at the west end of the
Elizabeth Islands chain in Massachusetts, on January 17, 1759. He was the seventh child and fourth son of Cuff Slocum, an emancipated slave from West Africa, and Ruth Moses, a Native American woman from Cape Cod.

Paul’s parents saved enough of their earnings to purchase an existing 116-acre farm in the mainland town of Dartmouth to which the family moved in the spring of 1767 and lived there together until 1772 when Paul’s father died. Cuff Slocum bequeathed this farm to his two younger sons, John and Paul, and it remained in their possession for the next half century. But in 1773 Paul initiated his seafaring life as a 14-year-old crew member on a whaling voyage to the West Indies leaving management of the farm to his older brother.
On February 25, 1783, Paul Cuffe married Alice Abel Pequit, widow of James Pequit and daughter of a prominent Wampanoag family on Martha’s Vineyard. They had seven children, five daughters and two sons, all of whom were born in the Dartmouth/Westport area and lived to maturity.

Paul joined forces with his older brother-in-law, Michael Wainer, a Wampanoag who had married his older sister, Mary, in 1772. Paul and Michael established a shipping business across the South Coast of Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut. In 1789 Paul acquired a small waterfront property on the west bank of the East Branch of the Acoaxet (Westport) River and he and Michael began building a series of increasingly larger sailing ships that they used to expand their ocean trading business along the East Coast and up into the Canadian Maritime Provinces, and also for fishing voyages to the Grand Banks and whaling voyages throughout the Atlantic Ocean. As Michael and Mary Wainer’s sons matured, they served as mates, captains and masters of those ships.
Paul Cuffe became one of the wealthiest persons of color in the United States and he used his wealth to support local activities such as a smallpox hospital, an integrated school and many people in difficulty no matter what their ethnic or racial background. His landholdings and shipbuilding in Westport were extensive and he partnered with the white community as well as with persons of color in Westport and elsewhere.

As Paul Cuffe expanded his commercial dealings around the Atlantic Ocean, he became increasingly engaged with Quaker businessmen and Abolitionist leaders in Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York and London. The British Abolitionists in particular saw Paul Cuffe, a prominent black entrepreneur and humanitarian, as a potential ally in their efforts to create a successful colony for the freed slaves from both America and England who had already been transported to the African territory of Sierra Leone.
Paul Cuffe sailed to Sierra Leone in 1811 to assess the situation among the various freed-slave communities, the British Government officials and private traders, and the local African people and see whether he could help improve their conditions. After several months of exploring conditions in Sierra Leone, he sailed to England to consult with the leaders of The Africa Institution that was committed to promoting commerce and civilization in Africa and providing continuing advice on British colonial policy there.

Paul Cuffe received a remarkably warm reception from both the Quaker community and the leaders of the African Institution in England. He sailed into Liverpool choosing that as his commercial base and made two trips to London to pursue various aspects of his Sierra Leone initiatives. He spoke to the members of the African Institution about the potentials he saw for raising export crops, setting up factories and shipyards similar to those he was familiar with at home that could process goods for export and also build ships for transporting such cargos. He was always basing his recommendations on helping Africans, both the returned freed slaves and the local population, to carry on these activities.
On the other hand, he also discovered in England that some of the English merchants in Sierra Leone saw Cuffe’s plans as a threat to their protected monopoly positions. These merchants took measures to undermine his efforts. One of the merchants sent a letter to the African Institution warning them that Paul Cuffe “was an unscrupulous businessman and not to be trusted.” They also conspired to have a young man from Sierra Leone, Aaron Rogers, impressed off Cuffe’s ship in Liverpool and kept captive first in Liverpool and then in Portsmouth. Rogers was serving as an apprentice to learn navigation from Paul Cuffe with hope he might become a skilled mariner and even a future captain of ships sailing out of Sierra Leone. Paul Cuffe first sought to have Aaron Rogers released in Liverpool. When that failed, he went to London and enlisted the support of influential Quakers and leaders of the African Institution, who in turn interceded with the British Admiralty and arranged for Rogers’ release.
From England Cuffe and his crew sailed back to Sierra Leone and set about organizing his Nova Scotian friends into a “Friendly Society” that “would serve as the catalyst for the development of an African People to be counted among the historians’ nations, and it would keep records of its actions to ensure that future historians would be able to reconstruct the story of that nation’s rise and progress.”
When Cuffe returned to Westport from Sierra Leone in April 1812, the onset of the war between England and the United States rendered the cargo he was carrying from the British colony of Sierra Leone illegal and the Newport customs officials seized his ship. Undaunted, Paul Cuffe rode the stage coach to Washington where, through the intercessions of his Quaker friends, he was received by President James Madison (a first for a Black American) and the Secretaries of State and Treasury who issued orders that his ship and cargo be released. But the war prevented any further involvement with Sierra Leone until after it ended in 1814.
In 1808 Cuffe had been welcomed into membership in the local Meeting of the Quakers in Westport and they had strongly supported his Sierra Leone mission. Upon returning home from Sierra Leone and thwarted by the war from maritime activity, he became more actively involved with the local Meeting. He was appointed to a committee to decide whether a new Meetinghouse building should be constructed and, if so, to oversee and raise the funds for that undertaking. Paul became a leader of that committee and contributed half of the cost of the new building.
After the war with Britain ended, Paul Cuffe led a third trip to Sierra Leone. He transported 10 families of 38 persons on his ship the Traveler. The agreement with these new settlers was that they would work to assist the local people to become more productive and able to engage in world trade with local commodities, rather than exporting slaves. He had been promised financial support for this venture from the African Institution in London, but that support failed to materialize and he ended up meeting most of the costs himself. Some of his passengers stayed on in Sierra Leone and some later moved on to the new colony of Liberia where they reportedly prospered.
A new American organization called the American Colonization Society was being formed about the same time that Paul Cuffe returned from his third trip to Sierra Leone and its leaders sought his support and endorsement. While its goals of resettling freed slaves in Africa initially seemed consistent with Cuffe’s own, it soon became clear to him and other African American leaders that the Society was mainly sponsored by slaveowners who were more interested in removing the free black presence from American society than they were in supporting African development. Cuffe did not give it his support after listening to strong objections from other free blacks. He saw his efforts very differently as providing training and machinery and boats to the people of Africa so that they could improve their condition and rise in the world.

Early in the following year, 1817, Paul Cuffe came down with an illness that eventually led to his death on September 7th. He was buried the next day in the cemetery behind the Westport Friends Meeting House and was honored and memorialized in many halls and sanctuaries around the Atlantic in the following months.
QUICK FACTS IN RECENT HISTORY OF PAUL CUFFE’S LEGACY:


- Governor Deval Patrick of Massachusetts issued a proclamation honoring the 250th anniversary of the birthday of Paul Cuffe[47] on January 17, 2009 by declaring it Paul Cuffe Day in Massachusetts.

- The Massachusetts State House and Senate issued citations on January 17, 2009 honoring Paul Cuffe's birth.
On September 7, 2017 Governor Charlie Baker of Massachusetts issued a proclamation honoring the 200th anniversary of Paul Cuffe's death by making that date Paul Cuffe Day in Massachusetts.

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The New Bedford Whaling Museum opened the Captain Paul Cuffe Park at the corner of Water and Union Streets in 2018.

The Paul Cuffe Symposium Committee Inaugurated the Paul Cuffe Heritage Trail celebrating Native American and African American Heritage from New Bedford to Westport on September 7, 2017 which honors Cuff Slocum, Paul Cuffe, and Michael Wainer.

The Paul Cuffee Maritime Charter School for Providence Youth was established in 2001 in Providence, Rhode Island.

The Paul Cuffe Math-Science Technology Academy ES was established in 2003 in Chicago, Illinois, replacing the Cuffe Elementary School.