

# Captain Paul Cuffee, Master Mariner of Westport, Massachusetts, 1759-1817

By KATHARINE A. WILDER

**A**S the words on his monument state, Paul Cuffee was a "self-made man, a patriot, navigator, educator and philanthropist," and all this at a time when the black race was brought to America in slavery.

His story began in 1726 when a Negro boy was brought to Dartmouth, Massachusetts as a slave to Captain Slocum. By working for his master and for others, the Negro bought his freedom from Captain Slocum and was called Cuffe Slocum, after the practice of taking the owner's surname. Cuffe Slocum married Ruth Moses, an Indian woman, and the couple settled on a farm of 100 acres on the island of Cuttyhunk, off the Dartmouth township. On this island the couple raised a family of ten children, four sons and six daughters. Paul was the seventh child, and he was barely fourteen when his father died in 1773.

The Cuttyhunk farm was not very productive. There was no schooling in those days, yet Paul and his brothers and sisters learned to read and write through their own efforts. Paul became proficient in arithmetic and navigation which were so necessary for one who would make his living by means of the sea. By the time that he was sixteen years old he was a sailor on a whaling vessel and later able to command a vessel to the West Indies. On his third voyage during the Revolutionary War he was captured by the British and held in New York for three months. Later Paul was released to return to Westport for work in farming,

although that was never his means of livelihood.

He proved himself a leader among his family, and in 1778 he persuaded his brothers to drop their father's name, Slocum, the reminder of slavery, and to take his Christian name, Cuffee, as the family surname. This was done legally, and henceforth the family was known as the Cuffee's.

On February 10, 1780 Paul Cuffee, together with his brother John and five other free Negroes, petitioned the General Court Assembly of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts:

That having been deprived of enjoying the profits of labor or the advantage of inheriting estates from our parents, as our neighbors, the white people do, having some of us not long enjoyed our freedom. . . .

We apprehend ourselves to be aggrieved, in that, while we are not allowed the privilege of free men of the state, having no vote or influence in the election of those who tax us, yet many of our color, as is well known, have entered the field of battle, in the defense of the common cause.

We most humbly request, therefore that you take our unhappy case into your serious consideration, and in your wisdom grant us relief from taxation while under our depressed circumstances.

This appeal met with indignant opposition from some, but they were in the minority. The majority perceived the justice of the petition, and in 1783 a law was enacted in the Massachusetts Assembly rendering all free persons liable to taxation according to the ratio established for white men and granting them

all the privileges belonging to a citizen. This included the privilege of voting in free elections.

Paul Cuffee was proving himself a leader in other ways and became the master of a vessel of twelve tons. By the time he was 25, he was married to Alice Pequit, an Indian woman. The couple hired a small house on the Westport River where his boats could dock. Later he enlarged the area into a farm.

He acquired a vessel of eighteen tons and sailed the banks of St. George in quest of codfish, and returned with a cargo. This adventure was the foundation of an extensive and profitable fishing business from the Westport River which continued for a considerable time. He purchased another vessel of twenty-five tons and proceeded to embark in the whaling industry, making several profitable voyages. By 1793, finding his financial returns promising, and landing at Philadelphia, he purchased iron necessary for a schooner of seventy tons. After returning to Westport, he laid the keel for the schooner "Ranger." The latter was launched in 1795. With this schooner he sailed for Norfolk, Virginia with a crew of black men and a cargo valued at \$2,000. After disposing of the cargo in Norfolk, he learned of a crop of Indian corn that was available on the eastern shore of Maryland and sailed there.

The Southerners at the port in Maryland were astonished to see a vessel commanded by a black man, and with a Negro crew. They were alarmed that their slaves would get ideas and tried to prevent his ship entry into port. His papers, however, were in order, and there was no legal reason to refuse him entry. Within a few days hostility vanished and he was treated with courtesy. Captain Cuffee was invited to dine with the fam-

ily of one resident. He then brought back 3,000 bushels of Indian corn which he sold at \$1,000 profit.

Back home in 1797 he bought the house his family lived in and the adjoining farm which his brother managed. He built a schoolhouse to which all residents, regardless of color, could attend and hired the teacher.

After 1800 he built schooners at a dock on the farm property, ships which were manned mostly by Negro crews and captains.

The dream of his life was to do something to alleviate the suffering of his race. The suggestion that black men embark to Africa, where they might find free soil, grew on him. He thought of the free British settlement of Sierra Leone, Africa. In 1810 he sailed on his brig, *Traveller*, to Sierra Leone where he was met with great respect. He then sailed to London to confer with the British Colonialization Society, which agreed to defray the expenses of immigrants and to provide them with land and farming implements. Captain Cuffee bore the expense of the entire voyage. He intended to return as soon as could be arranged when he got back to the United States, but the War with Britain in 1812 delayed the matter. It was not until 1815, after the war was over, that Captain Cuffee induced thirty-eight freemen to emigrate to Africa. Carrying them in the "Traveller," he arrived safely in Sierra Leone after a voyage of fifty-five days. Again, he bore the total expense of \$4,000.

Coming back with his cargo, his boat was boarded by a Newport customs official and detained. Captain Cuffee immediately went to Washington, D. C. armed with letters of recommendation and he gained an audience with President

Madison. The fine appearance and sound reasoning of Captain Cuffee convinced the President that his cargo was not contraband as had been feared in Newport. He was given an order that his vessel was to be released by the customs officials and he landed with a cargo of 160 head of Merino sheep, said to be the second importation of such into the United States.

He was arranging a third trip to Sierra Leone with the same object in mind, that of taking freemen to settle in that country, when he was stricken with a malady that resulted in his death in 1817 at the age of 59. He is buried in "God's acre," in the rear of the Friends Meeting house, in Westport, the Central Village.

He had become a member of the Friends Society of Westport in 1808 and helped rebuild the meetinghouse in Central Village with both labor and money. The first meetinghouse stood until 1813 when that year it was decided to erect a new one. Paul Cuffee and Joseph Tripp were among those appointed to take charge of construction. The building erected was a model of neatness with large fireplaces, galleries, and no cushions on the pews. The beams were bare in the ceiling, and it must have been a very austere place. In 1872 the building was modernized, the fireplaces removed, and the galleries done away with. He always showed a deep religious feeling, attending meetings regularly when he could. In a few instances, he bore special certificates from the Society to other lands, and twice to Africa.

He owned a large interest in several boats of varying tonnage, and he also owned various parcels of land.

In appearance he was tall, athletic, a man of remarkable dignity, tact, and piety. At his death he left an estate of

\$20,000, which was a fortune in those days. He was unselfish in his efforts to help his fellow man and this impressed all who knew him.

Over the years his name has not been forgotten in his own town and vicinity. Since he left a family of two sons and four daughters, there are several descendants at the present time. In 1913 a great-grandson caused a monument to be placed at his grave in "God's acre" with the words quoted at the beginning of this article. By the erection of this memorial, in honor of Captain Cuffee, it was hoped to inspire future generations of black youth. In addition, a small pamphlet was printed, giving the life story of Paul Cuffee. This booklet was loaned to the writer by a Westport resident. The story gave some of the details of this article. The writer also used clippings from newspapers and a brief sketch of Captain Cuffee in the *Dictionary of American Biography*.

There is still more information as contained in a lengthy article of November 6, 1961 in the *New Bedford Standard Times*. This was an account of the observance of the 150th Celebration of the Westport Monthly Meeting of Friends. Two hundred guests were present, and high tribute was paid Captain Paul Cuffee at this gathering. H. E. Tucker, Head of the Chancery of the Sierra Leone Embassy in Washington, D. C., was the guest speaker. He said he was proud to take part in the celebration honoring Captain Cuffee, because it was largely through the efforts of the Captain that Sierra Leone was able to emerge as a great power in Africa. It was a memorable occasion honoring a black man who holds a high place in the history of Westport and who should hold an equally high place in American history.