

CAPTAIN PAUL CUFFEE A PRE-GARVEYITE

New England Black Sea Captain Sought to Colonize Free Negroes in Africa.

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U.S. War with England, 1812, Shattered Plans.

Paul Cuffee, of southeastern Massachusetts, the son of a former African slave and a poor Indian woman, became a nationally known figure just after the Revolutionary War by the devotion of his wealth and energy to the attempt to carry all free Negroes back to Africa.

Sam Cuffee, Paul's father, was brought from Africa to Cuttyhunk Island, in Buzzards Bay off the coast of Massachusetts, and freed by a ship-wrecked captain he had once rescued. The pirate taught Sam the ways of the world and put money-making opportunities in his way. At length Cuffee married an Indian girl. Gaining freedom shortly after, he purchased a 100-acre farm on Cuttyhunk Island.

Paul, the youngest son of a struggling family of ten, was born in 1759. Life was hard on the tiny island, and educational facilities were poor. He, however, taught himself to read and to write, and he later said he learned principles of navigation in two weeks.

The death of his father when he was 15, placed the burden of supporting a mother and two unmarried sisters upon Paul's youthful shoulders. He saw his destiny written in salt water. He went whaling. He made trading voyages to the West Indies. On one trip he was captured by the British, for the Revolutionary War was going on, and spent three months in prison in New York. He continued short trading voyages through the war.

Changes Life

The close of the Revolutionary War marked a big change in Cuffee's life. His trips on the sea had netted him much money. He moved to the mainland, taking up residence on East Westport River. Here he married an Indian woman, raised his children, and here he brought the families of his brothers and sisters.

Used Colored Crews

Vessels were built at his wharf and they sailed with colored crews to all parts of the world. His fortune grew, and by 1806 he owned one ship, two brigs, and many smaller vessels.

Community Leader

Capt. Cuffee was a leader in his community, despite his color. He had warm friendships, and intimacies with white citizens, which spread to New Bedford near by. His hobby was education. There was no schoolhouse near where he lived. Cuffee built a school at his own expense on his property and opened it to whites and blacks.

Voted in Massachusetts

In those days, even the free Negroes had but few political rights. By his agitation, the state of Massachusetts recognized the political rights of the Negro.

Wealth Grew Fast

Cuffee's wealth grew fast, but his great dream, the betterment of the Negroes, grew slowly. He longed to help the spiritual and material condition of the free blacks in America. He wanted American blacks to migrate back to their old home in Africa, and build up communities which would be able to withstand the effect of European imperialism. In his opinion the blacks had little chance of improving themselves in places where the whites predominated.

Sierra Leone

The British settlement of Sierra Leone, built up between 1780 and 1800, was the embodiment of his idea. The colony was begun by pious men who wanted a haven for unfortunate Negroes. The British government, however, saw Sierra Leone in the light of a dumping ground where Negro nuisances could be sent.

First Passenger List 400

The two interests worked together and secured the first contingent of more than four hundred. Included were a few white women of damaged reputation. It was a motley band, and no man of faint heart could have seen much hope for the future prosperity of the colony.

Cuffee arrived in Sierra Leone in 1811 just after that colony had passed through its first throes of disorder and was settling down to a respectable life. He made the trip at his own expense to see how he could use it to further his own objects.

Advised Colonists

He gave the colonists much advice on spiritual and business matters and left his nephews behind to teach the people about agriculture. He founded the Friendly Society of Sierra Leone.

Cuffee's brig, the Traveller, took him and his crew from Sierra Leone to England, in the fall of 1811 when war clouds were gathering. His plea to the British government for a grant of land was refused.

War Halts Plans

Returning to America he worked feverishly upon his schemes. He wrote, lectured and conferred with whites and blacks, spreading his propaganda. The War of 1812 came on, and the busy plannings had to stop. He petitioned Congress for aid but was refused because of enmity towards England.

Thirty-eight on Second Trip

Matters rested until 1815 when Cuffee's second expedition, carrying thirty-eight black freemen to Sierra Leone left Boston. He personally paid for the passage of thirty passengers. Before returning to America he waited in the colony until the band was happily settled, with a house on each farm.

Besieged by Applicants

Back in America news of the project spread and he was besieged by applicants for the journey to the new colony. But he was delayed by difficulties in making the proper commercial arrangements, and in 1817 he died.

He had hoped that his work would be carried on by the two African institutions which he founded in New York and Philadelphia. These organizations pointed the way to the American Colonization Society which was created later. This society was run by whites and later it developed Liberia for the black freemen from the United States.

Cause Lost

Cuffee's African colonization plan failed, and interest dwindled as time went on. Nothing but a few rotting timbers on the East Westport River beach remain to show where Paul Cuffee lived and worked. Houses, warehouses and ships are gone. Even memory of Paul Cuffee in Southeastern Massachusetts is faint today.

Captain Dean Tries

One of his descendants, Captain Harry Dean, of Philadelphia, made an effort to carry out his ancestor's dream by an effort to build a Negro empire in South Africa. His exploits are told in the recently issued seafaring book "The Pedro Gorino."