

HISTORY SERIES

He believed in black economic independence

Paul Cuffee

1759-1817 Sea Captain-Educator

First Black Nationalist



Paul Cuffee and his favorite brig, Traveller Westport Town Hall.

Paul Cuffee, wealthy sea captain-mariner, educator, civil rights activist, and philanthropist was probably the first black nationalist.

Cuffee believed that free blacks in America could join hands with blacks in Africa forming a Pan-African economic movement of colonization and civilization of Africa — namely Sierra Leone, British settlement in West Africa.

He believed too that a successful colonization using agriculture and black maritime trade on African rivers and with European and American nations as its base would give Africans (and relocated blacks) an economic alternative to the profitable slave trade.

From his dreams sprung thought of founding Liberia and later spurred the growth of the American Colonization Society. But, by early 1817, the year of Cuffee's death, he and his sympathizers realized that the Society was merely trying to get rid of free American blacks.

Free blacks, firmly planted in American soil, could not be forced to return to a country they were encouraged to spurn. Yet, Cuffee hoped for black trade across the ocean uniting American blacks with black African brothers.

Self-Taught

Cuffee was born in 1759, the son of a former slave and an Indian woman on the Island of Cuttyhunk, off of New Bedford (now Dartmouth), Massachusetts. He was the youngest boy in a struggling family of 10 living in a Quaker atmosphere.

There's a story surrounding his father Cuffee. On the coast of Rio de Oro, West Africa, a pirate ship was wrecked captained by a Scotchman named McKinnon Paige. He was the sole survivor.

The pirate received friendship and care from a young native, Said Kafu. The two wandered over the world and after a time, ended up in New Bedford. The pirate took the name of Slocum and Said Kafu became Sam Cuffee, his slave.

Master's Name

Some sources say that Sam Cuffee was called Cuf-

fee Slocum. It was the habit at this time in history for slaves to adopt the last names of their masters. Later the family name became Cuffee.

The elder Cuffee gained his freedom and bought a 100-acre farm on Cuttyhunk, later marrying an Indian girl.

Life on the tiny island was hard and educational facilities were poor. Paul taught himself to read and write. In later years, he is said to have told stories saying he learned all the necessary principles of navigation in two weeks.

Surrounded by sea, Cuffee knew his destiny was on the oceans. He went whaling alone and on a trading voyage to the West Indies.

In 1775

During the Revolutionary War, he was captured by the British and imprisoned for three months in New York. After his release, he continued to make short trading voyages.

The end of the war saw a great change in Cuffee. He made a good sum of money from his trade ventures. He also gained enough experience on the sea for a master mariner's position.

He moved from his island home and settled on the Westport River. He married an Indian woman from the same tribe as his mother's.

Cuffee brought many of his brothers and sisters and their families to Westport where he raised a family of his own. At his wharfs, several vessels were built under his watchful supervision. And when the ships sailed, they were manned by black crews.

Cuffee was a Quaker, and so was his brother John. The Quakers, who led the fight against slavery, were Pacifists and didn't believe in the War.

John, Paul and the Quakers refused to pay taxes for the war effort, on both sides.

Right's Activist

When the brother's were taken to jail, it is believed they claimed to be Indians state some sources. Indians were not taxed in Massachusetts.

However, he joined other free blacks in using the Revolutionary War argument of "All Men are

created equal" and no taxation without representation.

This was so stated in the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780, drafted by a white man, John Adams and ratified by white residents.

The next year, 1781, John and Paul noting that the Bill of Rights in that Constitution included article 1 proclaiming all men free and equal, petitioned the Dartmouth Selectmen for equal rights, or no taxes.

Under Article 1, slaves sued and won freedom and when the first U.S. census was taken in 1790, Massachusetts was the only state with no slaves listed.

Cuffee believed that the black man with equal rights could gain economic independence on his own. He set out to prove just that.

He began his fishing industry. In his first vessel, he went to St. George's Banks for codfish. Soon codfish boats were making regular trips between Banks and Westport.

A little later, he headed his own whaling expedition, returning with his ship hold full of oil.

By 1806, Cuffee owned one

ship, two brigs and many smaller vessels and his wealth grew. He bought a farm on the Westport River where he maintained wharves and warehouses.

He left the management of his farm to his brother. In fact most of his family, if not all, worked in his business from commanding vessels to shipping agents.

Educator

Cuffee never forgot the fact that he didn't even see the alphabet until he was 15. He desired to have his children and his relative's children get a good education.

There was not a schoolhouse near where he lived, not even a school teacher. Through town meetings, he tried to get the town to build one. Nothing came of it.

Finally Cuffee built at his own expense a school for children of all races on his property. Some sources state that even though he built the school, the town paid the salary of the teacher.

Cuffee became acquainted with many free blacks on the east coast. Together they bought a windmill and traded quite regularly as far south as Wilmington, Delaware and even in the slave states.

One story tells of Cuffee taking cargo on his

schooner Ranger to Norfolk, Virginia. After unloading, he heard of a plentiful harvest of Indian corn in Maryland and went there with high hopes.

He stopped at the town of Vienna, where townfolk were alarmed at the presence of a free black sea captain and an all-black crew. They were afraid they would give their slaves ideas.

Cuffee conducted himself with dignity and relieved the anxiety of the residents. He maintained a great rapport with the whites and was even invited to dinner.

Sierra Leone

Cuffee was one of the few black members of the Religious Society of Friends in 1810. Quakers in the U.S. and in England felt he was just what was needed for a free black colony in Sierra Leone.

The Sierra Leone colony had been built up between 1780 and 1800. It was first a settlement for slaves freed from slavers, other "unfortunate Negroes" to promote civilization in Africa and reveal to the world that "the Negroes could be some use other than as mere articles of the slave traffic."

Distinguished members of the African Institution of London got Cuffee a British trading license and he sailed for Africa.

There he found black British loyalists who'd settled originally in Nova Scotia. After fighting on the British side of the Revolution, they had trouble with whites in Nova Scotia. They petitioned and were sent to Sierra Leone.

Cuffee also found Jamaican "Maroons" who'd lost a guerrilla war with the British and later deported to the West African settlement.

When he arrived in 1811 Cuffee saw the settlement as an embodiment of his ideas and dreams. His form of nationalism was of economic separatism. He quickly organized a trade society.

He got the settlers to sign a petition for a whale fishery and looked into the prospects of building a sawmill to take advantage of the abundance of trees. He believed trade would open up Africa to civilization and material wealth.

Two of Cuffee's crew remained in Sierra and he took four young blacks with him, sons of settlers to learn the sea trade. The English were impressed when Cuffee sailed his brig, Traveller, his favorite ship into Liverpool. He interested Quaker William Allen in black trade and later helped to organize a program to send goods to the trading society he set up in Africa.

Cuffee was also offered land in Sierra Leone, all he could colonize, he could keep.

When the War of 1812 with Britain broke out, Cuffee contributed nothing. He was a Quaker.

The British notified him they'd give him a trading license, if the U.S. Government would approve his taking a cargo to Sierra Leone. The government, headed by James Madison, as President, said no.

After the war, Cuffee took 38 free blacks to Sierra Leone. Most of the Northern former slaves had no funds to pay passage or for supplies to live on until a harvest.

Cuffee footed the bill for both. He had no trouble getting land grants but could not obtain a trading license. He was forced to pay high prices and duties.

Last Year

Cuffee died of a heart attack in 1817. During his last year of life, he was troubled about the slavery issue. He wondered how slavery could be halted when more and more slaves arrived in the U.S. every day. He was also alarmed about the violence which met slave insurrections.

Cuffee looked at the economic solution to slavery. He felt free slaves could work for a share of the venture. He also entertained the idea of a second black colony in America.

Cuffee proved black colonization could work in trade fluctuations. Northern missionaries consulted him, considering him an expert.

However, when the American Colonization Society was formed, free blacks saw it as a means to secure slavery in the Southern states.

With blacks turning away from colonization, and whites insisting on a return to Africa, the Black Abolitionist Movement soon followed.