

Paul Cuffee's spirit won Mass. Blacks the vote in 1783

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The rallying cry of the American Revolution — “No taxation without representation” — was raised in 1780 by a free Black resident of Massachusetts whose refusal to pay taxes resulted in the approval of legislation permitting all tax-paying, property-owning residents of that state to vote, regardless of race.

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The mini-revolt of Paul Cuffee was just one of many exploits of this extraordinary entrepreneur who made his mark on American history by being the first African-American to engage in trade and colonization with Africa.

Paul Cuffee was born in 1759, the seventh of the 11 children of John and Ruth Cuffee who owned a 100-acre farm on Cutterhunker, one of the islands off the coast of New Bedford, Mass. His father was a slave who had purchased his freedom, while his mother was a free Black of Indian ancestry.

Nineteenth-century Black author, William C. Nell, described Cuffee as “tall, well-formed and athletic; his deportment conciliating yet dignified; his countenance blending gravity with modesty and firmness with gentleness and humanity.”

Cuffee first went to sea at the age of 16, working as a deck hand on a whaling ship.

The sea provided a rich bounty for Cuffee, making him a wealthy merchant.

After learning the skills of a sailor, including a proficiency in math-

ematics and navigation, Cuffee began to acquire ships of his own (the largest being a 60-ton schooner named the Ranger) as well as having part ownership in other vessels weighing as much as 268 tons.

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Cuffee worked hard for the dignity and betterment of his fellow Black Americans.

His famous tax protest resulted in a short jail term. Paul, his brother John, and four other Blacks petitioned the Massachusetts Legislature to grant Blacks the right to vote. The state's constitution did not bar Blacks from voting, but custom did. The Legislature in 1783 extended the franchise to Blacks meeting the tax-paying, property-owning requirements.

Cuffee's success in the state legis-

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