

“Thou Art Often the Companion of My Mind”: Paul Cuffe, James Forten, and the Portrait of a Friendship

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My goal in this presentation is not to cover the same ground so ably covered by this morning’s speakers and by those you will hear later this afternoon. I am not going to focus on the story of Paul Cuffe’s pioneering efforts with regard to African resettlement. Fascinating though that is, I do not intend to discuss it, except in passing, nor in talking about Cuffe’s friend James Forten do I propose to explore his own on-again off-again response to that great undertaking. What I want to do is to step back for a brief time and look at the personal dimension – the relationship between these two remarkable men as documented in some two dozen letters, half of them housed in this building and the other half in the New Bedford Free Public Library. Were there other letters? There almost certainly were, for the friendship between Paul Cuffe and James Forten endured for more than two decades. Either those letters – and there were probably a good many of them -- were lost over the course of two centuries, or they remain to be found. Whatever the case, they are not available. We have what we have – but the correspondence that *has* come down to us is and remains invaluable for what it tells us about these two men and the circumstances in which they found themselves.¹

There has been a tendency in recent years, as there was in their own day, to lump Paul Cuffe and James Forten together. And yes, there were certain similarities. Both were freeborn men of color, and they were fairly close in age: Forten was the younger of the two by seven years. Both had been captured at sea during the War for Independence, Cuffe on a whaler and Forten on a privateer, and both had suffered imprisonment. Both made their living from seafaring after the war, one as a ship’s captain and the other as a master sail-maker. Moreover, both were deeply spiritual men. There, though, the similarities end. Paul Cuffe was the son of an African man and a Native American woman. At least on his father’s side, James Forten had to look back several generations to find that direct link with Africa. His father had been born free in Philadelphia. His grandfather had been born in the city and had toiled for years as a slave before acquiring his freedom. It was James Forten’s great-grandfather who had been enslaved and brought to Pennsylvania by either Dutch or British traders shortly after William Penn’s own arrival.

Regional differences also played a role in shaping the characters and attitudes of these two men. Paul Cuffe had been born on Cuttyhunk in the Elizabeth islands of New England, and James Forten on Third near Walnut Street in Philadelphia, a short stroll from Independence Hall. Although educated at the Friends' African School in Philadelphia – and able to say that some of his best friends were Friends – Forten was no Quaker but a lifelong Episcopalian. Paul Cuffe was, of course, a convert to Quakerism.

How, where and when did Paul Cuffe and James Forten become acquainted? Almost certainly their first meeting took place in Philadelphia. Except for his time as a privateer and then a prisoner (1781-82), and a fairly brief period after the Revolution when he sailed to England on a merchantman, Forten never ventured far beyond the city of his birth. Not so Paul Cuffe, who roamed much further afield. Cuffe was in the City of Brotherly Love as early as 1793 to sell a cargo of whale oil and bone, and buy ironwork for a schooner he was planning on building. If he used his visit to inquire about sails -- a vital component, after all, of his new vessel -- he might have taken a walk down by the Delaware to inspect a few of the sail-lofts and have been surprised to encounter white sail-maker Robert Bridges' foreman. No semi-skilled sailor hired to help sew canvas when the loft was coping with a rush of orders, and no mere apprentice or journeyman, although he had been both, by 1793 James Forten was Robert Bridges' right-hand man and designated successor. For Cuffe, who knew only too well the realities of racial discrimination, the young man of color with such bright prospects was a remarkable find. Either on that visit or on a later one the two met, talked, and became fast friends.

Captain Cuffe was often in Philadelphia for trade and to converse with his fellow Quakers, a good many of whom were merchants like himself. But they were white men. Cuffe visited with them and enjoyed their company. He also took the time, though, to make connections within the city's burgeoning free community of color, and some of those connections were made through James Forten. No, Philadelphia was not the haven so many black people expected to find as they fled enslavement in Maryland or Virginia, prevailed on owners to free them, or hoarded the money to buy their liberty, but it was better than what they were leaving behind. Pennsylvania's Gradual Abolition Law (1780) and the changing economic climate which made slave labor less attractive financially, at least in Philadelphia, meant that legal or *de facto* freedom was the status of the majority of black urban dwellers by the 1800s and

1810s. Black churches flourished, a black Masonic Lodge came into being, and black schools and mutual support societies cropped up from one end of the city to the other. It was very different indeed from Westport...and certainly from Cuttyhunk.

In 1798, Robert Bridges retired and James Forten took over the sail-loft. By dint of hard work and useful connections, he thrived. Whenever one of Cuffe's vessels was in port, he did running repairs to its canvas. He worked on the *Resolution*, the *Alpha* and the *Traveller*.² He knew Cuffe's nephew, Paul Wainer, who part-owned the *Resolution* and sometimes captained her for his uncle. And through Cuffe he almost certainly increased his circle of acquaintance among Quaker ship-owners and merchants. If Forten provided Cuffe with introductions to influential people of color such as ministers Absalom Jones and Richard Allen, Cuffe returned the favor by making Forten known to his contacts among the city's white Quaker elite.

Of the two men, James Forten was arguably the better writer, but then he had had more early education than his friend, and, situated as he was in what was for many years the nation's intellectual capital, he had advantages that Paul Cuffe did not. He managed to acquire and read many more books, and he also indulged in a passion Cuffe might have frowned upon. Until the Southwark Theatre closed, and the newer, more fashionable theatres in center city Philadelphia enacted policies of rigid segregation, James Forten enjoyed going to plays. That literary, and even theatrical turn, emerges in some of his letters. For example, in February of 1815 he gave Cuffe a vivid word-picture of "the great joy that was manifested [*sic*] by all classes of Society" in Philadelphia when the news arrived that the war with Britain was over – "indeed the peopul for some time appeared to be all most frantic." And he conjured up a winter scene, with the Delaware, as he said, "all frozened over" and "Sleighs & Sleds...passing & repassing constantly."³ But if Paul Cuffe's literary skills were less well developed than James Forten's, and his handwriting less elegant, his sentiments were no less sincere. "[D]ear James thou art often the companion of my mind," was the postscript to one letter, and "I am thy ashured friend" was how he ended many of them. James Forten closed *his* letters with "your ever affectionate friend and well wisher."⁴

Although Paul Cuffe and James Forten were fairly close in age, generationally there was a gulf between their families. With a widowed mother to support and a business to build up, James Forten delayed marriage well past the typical age for men in the post-Revolutionary era.

In 1803, when he wed for the first time, he was almost 37. His wife, Martha, died less than a year later. He did not immediately remarry, as so many widowers did, once a brief period of mourning was over. To begin with, since his and Martha's union had been childless, he was not faced with the need to find someone to raise a motherless infant. And he had another crisis to cope with in addition to the loss of Martha. His sister suddenly found herself a widow, and she turned to James to help her raise her four children. Not until he had made suitable arrangements for them could he think about marrying again. But eventually he did. His second wife was Charlotte Vandine, a woman half his age, who was of African, Dutch and Native American ancestry. The couple married in 1805. Their first child, a daughter, Margaretta (named for James's mother, Margaret), was born in 1806, and over the next two decades they had eight more children. Paul Cuffe married far earlier. He was 24 in 1783 when he and 28-year-old Alice Pequit wed. And when James and Charlotte Forten were welcoming their children into the world, the Cuffes were already grandparents.

One especially touching aspect of the Cuffe-Forten letters is the evidence they provide of the father-daughter relationship that developed between Paul Cuffe and Charlotte Vandine Forten. She was, after all, younger than his firstborn, Naomi. Their friendship was cemented by, among other things, a love of reading. In October of 1815, for example, Paul Cuffe was contrite. Charlotte had received him most kindly on his recent visit to Philadelphia, "and I did not her the favour of bid[d]ing far[e]well." Worse, when he returned to Westport and unpacked, he discovered he had inadvertently taken a book she had loaned him. He was mortified, and most insistent that she buy herself another copy at his expense.⁵ On another occasion, when she had, according to her husband, "been very ill with the sore throte" – and it is worth remembering that strep throat could kill in an era before antibiotics – she was on the mend and longed to see her old friend. "[S]he thought during her indisposition," James wrote to Paul, "could she but have sene you it would have made her well."⁶

The two families, the Cuffes and the Fortens, were known to each other, even if it was only through their letters and the visits of Paul Cuffe to the Forten home. When tragedy struck, they offered one another what solace they could. In the autumn of 1814, for example, hearing from James Forten that his six-year-old daughter had succumbed to hydrocephalus, Cuffe wrote: "I with thee hope we may always keep in remembrance that we are to Die Sooner or Later and

my desire is that we maybe prepared to meet thee [*sic*] final period.”⁷ The passing of Cuffe’s “loving and affectionate [*sic*] Sister” brought condolences from James Forten and his family, along with the pious hope that, great though Cuffe’s loss was, “I know that you are sensible that your loss is her gain,” since she had died strong in her Christian faith.⁸ The death of the Cuffes’ eldest daughter, Naomi, followed soon thereafter by the passing of her husband, left Paul and Alice to raise their two orphaned granddaughters. Cuffe wrote to Forten of the sorrow he and his wife had had to bear – a sorrow that was offset by their delight in their “promising” young charges.⁹ The families shared each other’s anxious moments – Charlotte’s severe illness one autumn, and Alice’s tendency to be afflicted with respiratory problems every winter.¹⁰ They shared each other’s joyful events as well. In the spring of 1816, for instance, James Forten wrote: “I am happy to let you know that it has pleased Divine Providence, to bless us with a nother Daughter, on last Sab[b]ath day. Charlotte is as well as can be expected, and Joines me in love to you and family.”¹¹ They constantly asked to be remembered to one another’s families. On one occasion, when sending his love to Charlotte and the children, for instance, Paul Cuffe added: “[T]ell them I often see them in a contemplate V[i]ew.”¹²

Paul Cuffe and James Forten were very much family men. They cared deeply about their wives and their children, but their concern extended to their other kinfolk as well. As I have already noted, the plight of his widowed sister, Abigail Forten Dunbar, had forced James to delay marrying again, and even after his marriage to Charlotte he accepted that Abigail and her children needed his help. He housed them, found apprenticeships for the boys, and married his niece off to one of his journeymen. Paul Cuffe watched over the doings of his own kith and kin. Generally he approved of the way they conducted themselves. Brother-in-law Michael Wainer was a much-valued partner, and nephew Paul Wainer a credit to the family. Alas, the same could not be said about every member of the Cuffe clan. John Marsten, Cuffe’s nephew by marriage, had abandoned his young wife, Mary Wainer, the daughter of Paul Cuffe’s sister, and headed off to sea. Of course, sea-faring was the norm among the Cuffe men, but Paul Cuffe sensed that Marsten did not intend to return home anytime soon. He had heard the young man was in Philadelphia. Could James Forten find him and talk some sense into him? Forten did his best. He tracked down Marsten and passed on Cuffe’s message that he needed to take care of his family. Marsten promised to head back to his wife as soon as he could, but he explained that he was a little short of cash. Could Forten make him a short-term loan? Of course, he would pay him back.

Alas, when the loan became due Marsten had disappeared. “He has completely deseaved me,” Forten was obliged to confess to his old friend. He believed Marsten had gone to sea again, and promised to let Cuffe know on what ship and where he was bound as soon as he could find out.¹³ Cuffe, who had endured plenty of forced absences from home over the years, was disheartened. “I am persuaded the Longer a man is from his family the more a Stranger he will becom[e] unto them, unless he is directed by the right Spirit.”¹⁴ His anxiety over Marsten persisted. If James could not get him to return home could he at least prevail upon him to write to his wife?¹⁵

Paul Cuffe and James Forten were astute businessmen, constantly watching the state of the market. Through 1814 they commiserated about the war with Britain. It was costing them and the nation financially – “all merchantable business seems to wear a gloom of Death,” Cuffe wrote.¹⁶ It was wrecking their plans for links with Britain’s colony of Sierra Leone. Worst of all, for two men of strong religious faith who knew from their own sufferings just what war meant, conflict of any kind, whether between individuals or nations, was something to be avoided.

Over the years James Forten handled a great many business arrangements for Paul Cuffe, and not just those relating to his “African Enterprise,” although admittedly he played a vital role in recruiting emigrants in Philadelphia and helping them settle their affairs before they set sail for Sierra Leone. At his friend’s request he also tried to find people with certain specific skills (for instance, setting up and managing a rice mill) that Cuffe thought were needed in the colony. He had white business acquaintances of his own, for example, iron merchant Thomas Ash, whom he described as “a very greate friend,” and he did his best to put them in touch with Cuffe.¹⁷ There were other matters of a more delicate nature. A white Quaker friend of Cuffe’s, John James, once very wealthy but now virtually bankrupt, was truly to be pitied – although Forten could not refrain from a little moralizing, observing, “wonderful are thy afflictions o Lord.”¹⁸ His own losses, as he mentioned to Cuffe, prevented him from coming to John James’s aid, but Cuffe himself intervened, using Forten as an intermediary. He sent a draft for \$50 drawn on a New York banking house, with instructions that Forten was to get the money to the James family without bringing Cuffe’s name into the business. He had no wish to embarrass an old friend. As he observed, “my wishes are to do no hurt.”¹⁹

Anxious to be regarded as a man of good standing in the business community, James Forten appreciated the need to have his word taken as his bond. So many deals were concluded

with a handshake. So much in the world of commerce in this era depended on an individual's good name. If Forten cared about his own standing, he also cared about Cuffe's, and he hurriedly issued a warning when it seemed Cuffe's reputation was in danger. An unpaid bill for work done on the brig *Alpha* by a ship's carpenter in Philadelphia needed taking care of at once because (so Forten had heard) the man thought Cuffe meant to cheat him and was talking about suing. He cautioned: "[S]uch a step in this City w[h]ere your credit and carracter stands so very high" would be disastrous to Cuffe personally and to "the good cause."

The preservation of his good name became a major concern of Paul Cuffe's towards the end of 1816. He was appalled to discover that a wily imposter was going the rounds. The man had turned up in New Bedford claiming to be the son of African American churchman Richard Allen, whom Cuffe had been introduced to by James Forten on one of his trips to Philadelphia. "Ralston Allen," as the imposter called himself, had told people he was himself an ordained minister, and he actually preached – Cuffe did not say how effectively – to a group of African Americans in the town. He was no minister of the Word, though, but "a great Secundal." After his sojourn in New Bedford, the confidence man headed for Boston, where he passed himself off as Paul Cuffe's brother-in-law. Because the Cuffe name meant something in the white business community, the man was able to talk one merchant out of a considerable quantity of goods – presumably by saying that he should send the bill to Captain Cuffe in Westport -- only to have his scheme thwarted at the last moment when the merchant made a couple of discreet inquiries. From Boston the villain made for Albany, New York, where he tricked an overly-trusting farmer out of a horse and a suit of clothes. Decently attired and provided with a means of transportation, he headed south. He made use of Cuffe's Quaker network in Pennsylvania and Maryland, transforming himself into no less a personage than Paul Cuffe himself and getting hospitality from various Friends who believed his story that he was on his way to Washington to present a memorial to Congress with "plans for Civilizing Africa." One man who had actually met Cuffe became suspicious and interviewed the so-called Paul Cuffe, who hastily changed his tune, saying first that he was Cuffe's son and then his son-in-law. He had gotten out of Maryland without being thrown in jail, but Cuffe had every reason to believe he was doubling back to Philadelphia. Would James Forten please be on the look-out and take appropriate action? Cuffe concluded his letter: "[B]eware of wolves in Sheeps Clothing are the advice of thy affectionate and ever wellwishing friend."²⁰

In fact, James Forten needed no such warning. His letter detailing the doings of the imposter crossed in the mail with Paul Cuffe's own letter. The false Cuffe had been arrested in York, Pennsylvania, where he identified himself as John Cuffe. The man had had the temerity to write to Cuffe's white acquaintance, John James, in Philadelphia – the same John James Cuffe had helped out of his financial difficulties. John James gave the letter to Forten, and he forwarded it to Cuffe, explaining: “[T]he Signeter of the letter is John Cuffe, son of the old celebrated Captn Cuffe. [W]e knew you had no son of that name.”²¹

Paul Cuffe wrote back to thank James Forten for his letter and to say that the self-styled John Cuffe had had the nerve to write to him reiterating his claim to be his son and had asked for Cuffe's help to get him out of jail. Cuffe, usually a merciful man, was not softened by his pleas. He replied to the man, expressing his hope “that he might not be permit[t]ed to go out again to de[c]eive the nations until the thousand years Should expire.” Not surprisingly, he added, “I have heard nothing more from him since.”²²

The false Cuffe sat in jail and served what the real Cuffe regarded as a well-deserved sentence, but there were other people who were in trouble and distress through no fault of their own, and both Cuffe and Forten reached out a hand to help them. In March of 1817, for instance, Forten dashed off a letter to Cuffe describing the plight of one Cuffe Johnson. A couple of years previously, the young man had sailed with Cuffe before shipping out from Boston with a white captain. The captain, one William Yeabe, took him to New Orleans, where he sold him as a slave. The man's complexion (“very black”) and his way of speaking led Forten to believe that he “is an African by burth,” perhaps someone his old friend had met on one of his ventures to Sierra Leone. Could Cuffe help? The sailor's free papers were on file in New Bedford and recorded in Boston. The matter was urgent. Cuffe Johnson was in Philadelphia with his master (who had presumably bought him legitimately), but how long they would stay Forten had no idea.²³ Given the urgency of the matter, Forten was somewhat surprised when he heard nothing from Cuffe. He expected a letter by return. What could be the matter? It was not like Cuffe to ignore something as important as this.²⁴

When a letter finally came, it gave James Forten and his family their first inkling that Paul Cuffe's health was failing. He described to them “a Very seveer turn” he had suffered when he was away from home. It lasted eight hours, during which time “I under went as much as

human nature was capable of enduring.” He found comfort, though, in his faith: “[M]ay we be prepared for sudden death and the Lord’s visitation.”²⁵ James immediately wrote back, but he was worried, and Charlotte even more so, when, after a prolonged silence, they received another letter from Cuffe. It was from him, but they could immediately see it was not in his handwriting. He had had to dictate it from his sick-bed because by July of 1817 he was too weak to hold a pen. James Forten hurriedly wrote back to express his own and Charlotte’s concern. She was even more anxious than he was. “[S]he think[s] you must be very ill indeed.”²⁶

Within a matter of a few weeks their worst fears were justified. On September 10 Rhode Cuffe wrote to inform them of what they would soon learn from the press announcements – and Paul Cuffe’s passing was reported in newspapers from New England to as far south as the nation’s capital. She wrote: “It has pleased Almighty God to remove from this transitory world my affectionate and venerable father.” She supposed James and Charlotte had been aware of her father’s condition. He had not been well since February, but he had borne his affliction with great fortitude and a confidence that his “work has gone before hand to judgment.” Shortly before he died, he had gathered his family around him and “described to us in a wonderful manner his view of the celestial city...saying he longed to be gone to join with Moses and the lamb in the Eternal Song.” Although they knew the state of his soul, his death had left a great void in their family. Alice Cuffe sent her love, and there was a reference to a gift from her to the Fortens that her husband had delivered on what turned out to be his last visit to Philadelphia. Alice hoped “at some future day to visit your region Should health and strength permit it.”²⁷

Alice Pequit Cuffe died in 1819 without that visit having been paid, but the ties between the two families endured. Paul and Alice’s daughter, Ruth, was widowed with young children, and she wed a former resident of Philadelphia, Richard Johnson. Johnson had been a sailor, and may well have known James Forten during his days in the Quaker City. In New Bedford he prospered, becoming a merchant and in time a ship-owner. Johnson was himself a widower with several children when he and Ruth married. When it came time to apprentice Ruth’s son, Shadrach, and Richard’s son, Ezra, there was no question about what trade they would learn and where and under whose guidance they would learn it. The two teenagers were sent to Philadelphia to board with James and Charlotte Forten and master the “mysteries” of sail-making in the Forten loft.²⁸ The bond forged between Paul Cuffe and James Forten – the bond formed

most likely by a chance meeting on the wharves along the Delaware River and cemented by shared ideals and aspirations – endured for decades.

¹ The biographical information on James Forten is from my book, *A Gentleman of Color: The Life of James Forten* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

² See, for instance, Forten to Cuffe, Sept. 20, 1816, Old Dartmouth Historical Society Library (hereafter ODHSL). I have retained the original spelling throughout.

³ Forten to Cuffe, Feb. 15, 1815, New Bedford Free Public Library (hereafter NBFPL).

⁴ Cuffe to Forten, Aug. 6, 1814, ODHSL; Cuffe to Forten, Jan. 8, 1817, NBFPL

⁵ Cuffe to Forten, Oct. 22, 1815, ODHSL.

⁶ Forten to Cuffe, Jan. 25, 1817, NBFPL.

⁷ Cuffe to Forten, Sept. 23, 1814, ODHSL.

⁸ Forten to Cuffe, July 25, 1817, NBFPL.

⁹ Cuffe to Forten, Jan. 27, 1815, ODHSL. *New Bedford Mercury*, April 6, 1810 and July 8, 1814.

¹⁰ Forten to Cuffe, Sept. 20, 1816, ODHSL; Cuffe to Forten, March 1, 1817, NBFPL.

¹¹ Forten to Cuffe, Apr. 6, 1815, ODHSL

¹² Cuffe to Forten, Jan. 8, 1817, NBFPL.

¹³ Forten to Cuffe, Jan. 5, 1815, NBFPL

¹⁴ Cuffe to Forten, Sept. 23, 1814, ODHSL.

¹⁵ Cuffe to Forten, Dec. 15, 1814, ODHSL.

¹⁶ Cuffe to Forten, Dec. 15, 1814, ODHSL.

¹⁷ Forten to Cuffe, April 14, 1817, NBFPL.

¹⁸ Forten to Cuffe, Jan 5, 1815, NBFPL.

¹⁹ Cuffe to Forten, Jan. 29, 1815, ODHSL.

²⁰ Cuffe to Forten, Jan. 23, 1817, NBFPL.

²¹ Forten to Cuffe, Jan. 25, 1817, NBFPL.

²² Cuffe to Forten, March 1, 1817, NBFPL.

²³ Forten to Cuffe, March 4, 1817, NBFPL.

²⁴ Forten to Cuffe, April 14, 1817, NBFPL.

²⁵ Cuffe to Forten, March 1, 1817, NBFPL.

²⁶ Forten to Cuffe, July 25, 1817, NBFPL.

²⁷ Rhoda Cuffe to Forten, Sept. 10, 1817, NBFPL.

²⁸ Winch, *Gentleman of Color*, 89.