

A SELF-MADE MAN
Capt. Paul Cuffee



By the erection of this lasting Memorial in honor of the courage, achievements and life work of Capt. Paul Cuffee, a resident of Westport, Mass., for many years, the donor, a great grandson, hopes to awaken and stimulate energy and ambition in the rising generation of Negro youth, that they may profit thereby.



DEDICATED JUNE 15TH, 1913
REV. TOM A. SYKES OF THE WESTPORT SOCIETY
OF FRIENDS OFFICIATING

A BRIEF SKETCH OF PAUL CUFFEE'S LIFE

In the year 1728 there was brought to Dartmouth, Mass., near the present city of New Bedford, a Negro boy, as a slave, by a sea captain, Slocum by name. By indulgence of his owner he was permitted to perform various labors for the white residents of the town, after his master's work was done and by hard work and thrift, after many years of toil he was enabled to hand over to his master a satisfactory amount of money and obtained his freedom.

His acquaintance with Ruth Moses, an Indian woman of the Wampanoag tribe ended in their taking each other in marriage and continuing in his praiseworthy habits of industry and frugality he was enabled soon after this occurrence to purchase a farm of one hundred acres on the island of Cuttyhunk, a part of the Dartmouth township and brought up a family of ten children, four sons and six daughters.

Paul the youngest son and the subject of this sketch, was born on the Cuttyhunk farm, being fourteen years of age upon the death of his father, which occurred in 1773.

The land which his father left proving unproductive, afforded but little provision for the numerous family and he and his brothers labored under great disadvantages, besides being deprived of the means and opportunity for acquiring even the rudiments of an education.

Paul was not, however, easily to be discouraged and found opportunities of improving himself in various ways and cultivating his mind, entirely by his own persistent exertions and the little assistance occasionally received from persons who were friendly disposed toward him.

Aided by these means, he soon learned to read and write and he also attained considerable proficiency in arithmetic and skill in navigation. We may form an estimate of his natural talent for the speedy reception of learning, from the fact that with the assistance of a friend, he acquired such a knowledge of navigation in the short space of two weeks, as enabled him to command the vessel, in the voyages which he subsequently made to the West Indies, England,

Russia, Spain, Africa and the several ports along the Atlantic coast, all of which were profitable.

At the age of twenty, Paul thought himself sufficiently skilled to enter business on his own account and laid before his brother, David, a plan for opening commercial intercourse with the State of Connecticut, Long Island Sound and Nantucket.

They encountered numerous discomfitures, such as would have caused the courage of most persons to fail, being twice intercepted and robbed by pirates, but Paul's disposition was not of a yielding nature and success finally came and he was enabled to dispose of his small cargoes to advantage, the profits strengthening the confidence of his friends and enabled him to enlarge his plans.

At the age of 25 years, he became the master of a small covered vessel of twelve tons and soon thereafter married an Indian woman, a descendant of the same tribe to which his mother belonged and later on hired a small house on the Westport river, on the mainland, nearby, and removed his family from Cuttyhunk. He soon procured a vessel of eighteen tons, in which he sailed to the banks of St. George, in quest of codfish, and returned with a valuable cargo.

THIS IMPORTANT ADVENTURE WAS THE FOUNDATION OF AN EXTENSIVE AND PROFITABLE FISHING ESTABLISHMENT FROM WESTPORT RIVER, WHICH CONTINUED FOR A CONSIDERABLE TIME; AND WAS THE SOURCE OF AN HONEST AND COMFORTABLE LIVING TO MANY OF THE INHABITANTS OF THAT LOCALITY.

At this time he formed a connection with his brother-in-law, Michael Wainer, who had several sons, well qualified for sea service, four of whom subsequently laudably filled responsible positions as captains and first mates.

A vessel of twenty-five tons was then built and in two voyages to the Straits of Belle-isle and Newfoundland, he met with such success as enabled him to build a vessel of forty-two tons, in which he made several profitable voyages.

He next proceeded on a whaling voyage to the same place and found other vessels engaged in that industry.

Yet of seven whales taken in all, six were killed by Captain Cuffee and his crew and two of the six fell by Captain Cuffee's own hand.

He returned heavily freighted with oil and bone, in the autumn of 1793, being then in his thirty-fourth year.

He disposed of his cargo in Philadelphia and found his pecuniary circumstances flourishing.



CAPT. CUFFEE

IN SILHOUETTE AND HIS FAVORITE VESSEL, THE BRIG TRAVELLER

While there he purchased iron necessary for bolts and other work suitable for a schooner of seventy tons and soon after his return to Westport the keel was laid and the vessel completed in 1795 and named the "Ranger."

He next made a voyage to Norfolk, Virginia, with a cargo valued at \$2,000, with his new schooner, which he disposed of at a profit and while there learned that a very plentiful crop of Indian corn had been gathered that year on the eastern shore of Maryland and that he could procure a schooner load at a very low price at Vienna, on the Nanticoke river.

Thither he sailed, but on his arrival the people were filled with astonishment and alarm.

A vessel owned and commanded by a black man and manned with Negroes, was unprecedented and surprising.

The white inhabitants were struck with apprehensions of the injurious effects which such a circumstance would have on the minds of the slaves.

Under these notions several persons associated themselves for the purpose of preventing Captain Cuffee from entering his vessel or remaining amongst them. On examination Captain Cuffee's papers proved to be correct and the custom-

house officers could not legally refuse the entry of his vessel. Captain Cuffee combined prudence with resolution and within a few days the inimical association vanished and the inhabitants treated him and his crew with respect and even kindness.

Many of the principal residents visited his vessel and in consequence of the pressing invitation of one of them, Captain Cuffee dined with his family in the town.

Upon his return to Westport, he disposed of his cargo of 3,000 bushels of Indian corn at a profit of one thousand dollars. He soon made another trip and sold same at same profit and made subsequently other profitable trips.

In the year 1797 he purchased the house in which his family resided also the adjoining farm. For the latter he paid \$3,500 and placed it under the management of his brother who was a farmer.

By judicious plans and diligence in their execution, he gradually increased his property and gained the esteem and regard of his fellow citizens.

In 1800 he built a brig of 162 tons, his share one-half, his brother one-quarter, and the other one-quarter by persons not related to his family. The brig was commanded by Thomas Wainer,



FRIENDS' MEETING HOUSE AT CENTRAL VILLAGE
GOD'S ACRE IN REAR

Captain Cuffee's nephew, whose talents and character were perfectly adapted to such a situation.

In 1805 the ship "Alpha" of 268 tons was built, Captain Cuffee's interest being three-quarters and the vessel commanded by him.

In 1806 the brig "Traveller" of 109 tons was built. This fleet and speedy brig was Captain Cuffee's favorite vessel.

All the vessels were built at a dock upon his farm property, located on the east branch of the Westport river, commanded by Negro captains and manned by Negro crews.

Having had no education by attending school and there being no school in the township, Captain Cuffee built a schoolhouse upon his own farm, provided an instructor and opened it free to all, white and colored, and all the neighborhood availed themselves of the opportunity to attend.

For a long time his mind had been affected with the degraded condition of his African brethren in the United States.

After mature reflection and observation, his thoughts turned to the free "British settlement" at Sierra Leone, Africa.

In 1810, finding his property sufficient to warrant the undertaking, he embarked in his brig

"Traveller," manned entirely by Negroes, and sailed to the land of his forefathers. While in Sierra Leone he was treated with great kindness by the governor and the principal residents and proposed a number of improvements.

From Sierra Leone he sailed to England and visited the offices of the British Colonization Society, where he met with much respect and attention.

This mission of inquiry was entirely at his own expense, a sure indication that it was prompted by a genuine benevolence.

The British Colonization Society agreed to defray the expenses of seven immigrants as a beginning and provide them with land and farming implements upon arrival.

Captain Cuffee returned home and made preparations to take a number of freemen to Africa, but the war with England broke out in 1812 and he was obliged to cease his activities in that direction.

Upon cessation of hostilities, in 1815, Captain Cuffee induced thirty-eight (38) freemen in all to emigrate, and he carried them over in his brig "Traveller," and after a voyage of fifty-five (55) days from Boston arrived safely at Sierra Leone.



AS THE DOCK LOOKS TODAY AT LOW TIDE. NOTHING CAN BE SEEN AT HIGH WATER. NOTICE FEW REMAINING TIMBERS

The entire expense of thirty-one (31) emigrants fell upon him, which amounted to the sum of \$4,000.

This incident occurred upon his return from Sierra Leone via England, in the same year, on the brig "Traveller." Having on board quite a large and varied cargo of merchandise obtained in Sierra Leone and England, much of which was supposed to be contraband goods, and on nearing the mouth of Buzzards bay, the brig was hailed and boarded by an officer of the Newport (R. I.) cutter, and after an examination of his manifest, was taken into Newport.

Captain Cuffee was not the man to be satisfied with any decision of the custom's official at Newport, and immediately repaired to Washington, D. C., previously stopping in the Quaker city of Philadelphia and obtaining letters of recommendation.

He then presented himself to President Madison, without counsel, stating his grievances, as he was fully competent to do.

His fine appearance, combined with his eloquent appeal and sound reasoning, in the presence of the great men of the country then in office at the national capital, gained an order to the collector of the port at Newport, R. I.,

directing him to detain the brig "Traveller" no longer, but to restore her with her cargo to the man like whom few in similar circumstances would have succeeded. Included in this cargo were 160 head of Merino sheep, said to be the second importation of such into the United States.

Captain Cuffee was arranging for a third voyage to Sierra Leone, when he was seized with the complaint which terminated his labors and his life.

He died in the autumn of 1817, in his 59th year, leaving two sons, four daughters, and two grandchildren by a deceased daughter; also a valuable estate. The executors named in his will, which was executed April 18, 1817, were William Rotch, Jr., and Daniel Wing, both of New Bedford and representative and wealthy citizens. * * *

Paul Cuffee, on the 10th of February, 1780, jointly with his brother, John Cuffee and five other freemen of color residing in Dartmouth township, petitioned the honorable council and house of representatives in general court assembled for the state of the Massachusetts Bay, in New England, thusly:



LOOKING DOWN WESTPORT RIVER TOWARDS THE OCEAN FROM
THE OLD CUFFEE WHARF FROM WHICH HE SAILED

"THAT HAVING BEEN DEPRIVED OF ENJOYING THE PROFITS OF OUR 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;

"Yet of late, contrary to the invariable custom and practice of the country, we have been and now are taxed both in our polls and that small pittance of estate which through much hard labor and industry we have got together to sustain our families withal;

"We apprehend it, therefore, to be hard usage, and will doubtless, if continued, reduce us to a state of beggary whereby we shall become a burden to others if not timely prevented by the interposition of your justice and power.

"Your petitioners further show that we apprehend ourselves to be aggrieved, in that, while we are not allowed the privilege of freemen of the state, having no vote or influence in the election of those that tax us, yet many of our color, as is well known, have cheerfully entered the field of battle, in the defence of the common cause; and that as we conceive against a similar exertion of power (in regard to taxation) too well known to need a recital in this place,

"We most humbly request, therefore, that you would take our unhappy case into your serious

consideration, and in your wisdom and power grant us relief from taxation while under our depressed circumstances; and your poor petitioners as in duty bound shall ever pray."

This appeal met with a warm and almost indignant opposition from some in authority. A considerable majority, however, perceiving the propriety and justness of the petition, were favorable to the object, and with an honorable magnanimity, in defiance of the prejudice of the times, a law was enacted by them, rendering all free persons of color, liable to taxation, according to the ratio established for white men, and granting them all the privileges belonging to other citizens.

That was a day equally honorable to the petitioners and to the legislature; a day in which justice and humanity triumphed over prejudice and oppression, and a day which ought to be gratefully remembered by every person of color within the United States; and the names of Paul and John Cuffee should always be united with its recollection.

Captain Cuffee was a man of the strictest integrity, modest yet dignified in his manners, of a feeling and liberal heart, public spirited and well versed in the business of the world; and



GENERAL VIEW OF CUFFEE FARM AND LANDING TODAY. TAKEN FROM REMAINS OF OLD WHARF

his acquaintance and friendship valued by the best citizens, such as William Rotch, for instance, at whose home he was a frequent visitor and guest. * * *

Captain Cuffee, in his younger days, when an ordinary seaman, in the year 1776, was made a prisoner by the British on the high seas and held as such for three months in New York.

In 1808 he joined the Friends' Meeting at Acoaxet (Indian name for Central Village), and showed a deep religious feeling in the meetings, then held in the old meeting house. In four instances he received special certificates from this society to far away places, twice bearing certificates to Africa. He occasionally appeared in the ministry.

His communications were usually short and modestly expressed, but marked by good sense and a deep devotional feeling.

It is to the memory of this frugal, industrious and upright member, whose remains are interred in "God's acre" in rear of the meeting house, in Central Village, Westport, Mass., that the monument pictured herein is erected—a man of whom his race is justly proud and whose life may well long be an example to them and to white men alike.

Surely the life of Paul Cuffee is worthy of emulation, and an INSPIRATION to Negro youth all over the United States.

Starting with nothing, having no schooling, yet by sheer grit and hard work he learned to read and write and engage in business successfully.

A SELF-MADE MAN,
PATRIOT, NAVIGATOR, EDUCATOR,
PHILANTHROPIST, FRIEND.
A NOBLE CHARACTER.