

Rise to be a Book

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I commend the resilient spirit of Westport and New Bedford area natives, Cuffe descendants, admirers, academics, librarians, merchants, and educators for preparing this remarkable occasion. And a special thanks to Lee Blake and to her committee. Clearly, the Paul Cuffe spirit of self-sacrifice and compassion for others is alive and well. My guess is that he is looking down upon us with approval.

Before proceeding, I'd like to recognize friends of mine who have traveled the investigative journey into the Cuffe past, my wife Marge, my son Byron and daughter Angela, Michael and Ann Westgate, Adele Ames, widow of descendant James Ames, Carl Cruz, and relatives of Eleanor Tripp. Each of you have inspired me in my Cuffe quest.

TWO TITLES, ONE BOOK

Researching, compiling, and interpreting history is political, ever changing, and personal. This brief talk today illustrates these factors, as I relate stories encountered along the way, for history is story-telling. His-story, her-story, the winner's story, the cultural truths from the past. This talk is my story about the writing and publication of a book with two titles.

Rise to be a People, A Biography of Paul Cuffe appeared in 1986. It sold quickly to national and university libraries having standing orders for all University of Illinois Press monographs. Two years later it reappeared in paperback under a new title, one more clearly identify the subject and a broader theme, hence, Paul Cuffe, Black Entrepreneur and Pan-African. The only difference between the two editions was a short postscript stating that Paul Cuffe's Bible recently had surfaced in Lebanon, CT. Intriguingly, within the Bible were various hair types that attracted one of the world famous forensic crime investigators, Dr. Henry Lee, of Connecticut. He alluringly titled the crime laboratory's investigation: "the Bible case." That second edition also sold out.

THE CUFFE APPEAL

What really brings us here today? I expect we share the common goal to honor and explore the life and times of an extraordinary American who arose within the Westport-New Bedford environs. Each of us comes with his/her private thoughts, memories, perhaps shaped by our racial and social identities, and those of our descendants. Should an inquiring historian today in this room, recording device in hand, approached you at the coffee break and ask what

brings you here , how would you reply? Surely, this 250th commemoration has the makings for an oral history project, perhaps for a senior high school paper, the premise for a college thesis, or a kickoff for a Masters or PhD dissertation. Your story might contribute to the larger story, for stories are the ingredients for a people's history. The Cuffe story is in the genre of people's history, in this case of an unknown African-Indian who challenged the racist and culturally dominant assumptions of the trans-Atlantic world.

Quite innocently and naively I entered into the historical process. As luck - or as the universal forces directed - I was clearly present at the right time and place. Cuffe's name surfaced in the mid-sixties during a dinner conversation in West Hartford, CT. Speaking was Walter Yates, a black southern doctoral candidate at the Hartford Seminary Foundation who was researching West African missionary movements. Walter challenged me with two assumptions: 1) that Cuffe had helped found Liberia, the West African asylum for former American slaves; and 2) that Cuffe was looked down upon by contemporary American Blacks for advocating that free persons abandon brethren to perpetual slavery by emigrating to Africa. Yates had heard Mississippi blacks and those elsewhere ridicule "a bad Cuff" in reference to Paul Cuffe.

I was easy bait for the challenge. I needed a master's thesis topic to complete work at Trinity College, and if Yates proved correct, the essential primary material lay somewhere within Massachusetts. Hooked by the assumptions, I very soon found myself seated before a large brown cardboard box in hot, steamy New Bedford. The Free Public Library attendant had produced 'the keys to the kingdom.'

For nearly a month, living in a nearby rooming house, I transcribed scraps of paper, letters, and the like on to note cards. One master's thesis later, over the summer of 1969, I tentatively bore my 75 pp opus to Pittsburgh's Carnegie-Mellon University where I would research primary sources and formulate, under Barry Beyer's direction, new high school curriculums for Project Africa. Also at Carnegie Mellon was Dr. Letitia Brown, a George Washington University historian who eventually authored a history of blacks within the District of Columbia. Letitia liked the thesis. She would introduce me to her publisher. In her view, Paul Cuffe was "a one man civil rights movement." During those weeks I also met a young doctor's daughter exhausted from a course in bio-chemistry. Elated that Letitia would pave the way to publication and convinced that fame and fortune were just around the block, I suggested that marrying a famous historian would beat life in her father's doctor's office. That summer of 1969 Neil Armstrong landed on the moon. I had too.

Converging historical events propelled the Cuffe process, as they must have for George Salvadore of Dartmouth who had published his succinct regional biography, Black Yankee PaulCuffe. European colonialism was then crumbling, as I had witnessed while studying at the University of London several years earlier. Brilliant, enthusiastic Africans, flush with newfound freedoms, optimistically foresaw a new day for African nations, not unlike Cuffe who dreamed of prospering African nations. In the United States, after centuries of unfulfilled promises for democracy, Black Americans were on the march for a new day. Montgomery marchers, Martin Luther King, Jr., the common folk, were engaged in both uplifting and tragic struggles that affected all of multiracial American society.

The fifties and sixties decades blended into the seventies. Alex Haley's blockbuster Roots appeared in book form and then came the riveting TV mini-series. The sensational story traced Kunte Kinte, seized in West Africa, enslaved for the Middle Passage and within the British colonies, and whose family could be traced into the twentieth century. African family genealogy, all American genealogy, intensified. Families sought out their own griots in order to resuscitate the past.

If Paul Cuffe was a 'one man civil rights movement', the time was ripe for more research. And if Alex Haley could trace the roots of Kunte Kinte, why couldn't I do the same by investigating the name "Cuffe"?

The truth about most initial assumptions would prove questionable, if not entirely wrong. Paul Cuffe was not widely disdained for advocating emigration to Africa, he was not involved in the founding of Liberia, existing historical records were not exclusively within a brown paper box, the Kunte Kinte Roots story had many flaws, Cuffe oral tradition could never be traced by his name alone, publication would not be a walk in the park, nor would publication lead to fame and fortune. The good news is that my marriage has lasted, our two children no longer have to ask "when would it be finished," and the book's success has led to my being here today.

THE SEARCH

Often the historian's task is to demythologize the past through fresh investigation of new or the reinterpretation of preexisting evidence. Robert Zenowich, Letitia's publisher at Atheneum Press, encouraged me to proceed because he saw promise, but he knew the historian's craft. He offered two warnings. One, you have hardly begun rigorous research. The second came as I exited his office: "Don't do this for money." He was right on both accounts.

Reconstruction of the Cuffe narrative would depend upon a 007, Scotland Yard investigation. What advice would come from existing Cuffe historians? Who were they, what questions lingered, and where were the golden nuggets? Eventually I discovered abundant material culture and received essential advice from within the circle of professional historians on both sides of the Atlantic. Through those contacts we plowed the fields, unearthed the gems, and reshaped the previous historical narrative.

The most significant body of evidence to reshape the existing narrative came from England. There the golden nugget was a 225 page leather-bound book in which Friend William Allen had copied his epistles from England's philanthropic establishment to Sierra Leone's black settlers. It was prophetically engraved "African Correspondence." Where was it? – in a remote pharmaceutical plant on London's East Side. Whose names appeared? Names included William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson, Zachary Macaulay, and John Kizel of Sherbro Island.

Tangible evidence broadened the story throughout London and Liverpool. At the Public Record Office, where I sat beside an historian examining papers from 11th century Norman times, Cuffe material was found within treasury, colonial, board of trade, and admiralty papers. Missionary sources recounted Methodists, Anglicans, and Lutheran conduct in Sierra Leone along with detailed accounts of individuals who had departed Liverpool in 1811 aboard brig Traveller for Freetown, Sierra Leone. Important media sources such as the Liverpool Mercury and The Monthly Repository converged to explain an original Delaware memoir of 1807. The London Times noted that the Traveller was "perhaps the first vessel to ever reach Europe, entirely owned and operated by Negroes."

Within the United States surprises were in store. In Washington, DC, the National Archives abounded with essential documents such as customs records the included crew lists for his vessels, newspapers announced vessel arrivals and departures. Historical societies had papers: Chicago, Delaware, Massachusetts, Maryland, GA, NC, and Nova Scotia. Public Libraries, beginning with New Bedford, then the New York Public system, produced key records, including papers of the American Colonization Society which drew so much support from Cuffe's exploits. Family papers and church records helped as well.

KEY HISTORIANS

Letitia Brown helped frame Cuffe within the context of works by WEB DuBois, particularly Souls of Black Folk. Black Americans had long viewed themselves through the

eyes of others, hence their “double consciousness,” “the veil,” and the conclusion that “the history of the 20th century is the history of the color line.”

David B Davis, then at Cornell, became one of the most significant teachers on the subject of slavery in Western Culture and the Trans-Atlantic world. Now in his nineties and at Yale, he remains the ‘town crier’ for historians of human bondage.

Christopher Fyfe, then at the University of Edinburgh, was the principle historian of the British colony of Sierra Leone. He invited me to London, very much as Friend William Allen had extended an invitation to Cuffe. Our initial meeting was at Britain’s austere Commonwealth Club, where he introduced himself to every male of African descent before realizing that yours truly was white. His massive treasure trove of references to British government records were at my disposal. With Kevin Lowther, speaking later today on John Kizel, I share indebtedness to Christopher’s largess.

Philip Curtin guided me to the crown jewel letter-copies at William Allen’s Allen & Hanbury pharmaceutical establishment, today GlaxoSmithKline, Britain’s leading pharmaceutical companies. That repository claims the letter-copy cook is now “lost.”

And who has ever worked in the field of American slavery without indebtedness to John Hope Franklin’s classic *From Slavery to Freedom*. As editor of the University of Chicago Press, he showed serious interest in the biography but editor August Meier of Illinois Press finally published it.

PUBLICATION AND LINGERING QUESTIONS

Upon publication in 1986, Illinois Press submitted the book for a Pulitzer Prize in biography. The Pulitzer winner for that year, David Garrow, had written a heralded study of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in which he used newly released FBI tapes recorded during the reign of J. Edgar Hoover.

And several years ago a phone call came from producers of the public television series *History Detectives*. The conversations lead to a program that questioned Cuffe’s whereabouts during the American Revolution. Occasionally, the program repeats.

Present and future historians are pursuing multiple angles, as illustrated by today's presentations. I encourage investigations into his Native American and familial influences: Ruth Moses, Alice Pequit, Gay Head natives, his wife's determination not to leave her native land for Sierra Leone. I remain curious and skeptical about lapses within Cuffe documents, such as a mysterious gap in his log when in Freetown, plus absence of more evidence of his disdain for racial mixture. Why is his blackness only probed within a correspondence hidden away in a Philadelphia archives and not in New Bedford papers? And finally, I wish someone would further examine the 19th century historiography and the hypothesis of "good Cuff, bad Cuff." Was he simply the complementary yin-yang symbol of a American biracial, multiracial society?

WHO WAS PAUL CUFFE?

So after all the research, who was Paul Cuffe? Walt Whitman in *Leaves of Grass*, which, incidentally, mentioned a "Cuff", asked: "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes."

Paul Cuffe was a Black, a free Black, an African, a free African, a Negro, a free Negro, a free person of color, an Indian, a native American, a Wompanoag-Pequot Native, a Black Indian, a British American, an American.

He was a Christian, a Friend, a Quaker, a Puritan, God-fearing, a proselytizer, missionary, civilizer, farmer, shipbuilder, commercial trader, an entrepreneur, industrialist, a merchant, sailor, whaler, shipmaster, captain, fisherman, navigator, neighbor, a family man, a son, a father, a brother, an uncle.

He was rebellious, fearless, timid, a dreamer, pragmatic, inconsistent, a protestor, petitioner, a one-man civil rights movement, an advocate, sagacious, accommodating, inflexible, conciliating, a conformist, naive, a pawn, tribalistic, a separatist, clannish, provincial, a role model, an embarrassment, "bad," a profiteer, a capitalist, thrifty, a Yankee, a social climber, a name dropper, a 'shmoozer,' a salesman, a diplomat, a Federalist, an Anglophile, an humanitarian, a philanthropist.

He was large. He was multitudes. He was Paul Cuffe.