



PAUL CUFFEE (1759-1817)

Paul Cuffee was born on the island of Cuttyhunk on Buzzards Bay, the 7 of 10 children of Kofi Slocum, a freed African slave, and Ruth Moses, a Wampanoag Indian. When Paul was 8 the whole family moved to a 116 acre farm in what is now Westport, MA. They were free people over 100 years before Abraham Lincoln set the slaves free.

Paul showed an early affinity for boat building, navigation, and trade. He became a Quaker and received encouragement from the wealthy Rotch family, Quaker merchants and whalers in New Bedford. Paul built his own ship and despite his color and that of his crew he successfully traded in the seaports of the South. Eventually, he sailed on both sides of the Atlantic, and owned a small fleet of ships usually skippered by his relatives.

After a long struggle in the courts Paul succeeded in getting the right to vote. He was being taxed and he faced the authorities with the pre-Revolution slogan “No taxation without representation!” Having had to teach himself to read and write, he built a school and supported a teacher on his farm in Westport, welcoming white children as well as his own. Perhaps the first integrated school in America was opened by a man of color.

A man of commanding presence, magnetism and legendary integrity, Paul was admired by blacks and whites alike. Upon his return from a British colony in Africa, and unaware that his country was at war with Britain, his ship was impounded by the U.S. Revenue Service. He gained fame by his rapid six-day trip to Washington to see President Madison, a slave owner, who immediately gave him his ship back.

After he had become one of the wealthiest men of color in the U.S., Paul could have rocked on his porch in Westport waiting for his ships to come home. A very devout man, he felt he must always work to please God and help make a better world. He devoted his energies to taking free blacks to Africa, feeling that it was a land of opportunity for them. In Africa he tried to persuade people to stop selling each other as slaves, believing there was great potential there for a farming economy. In late 1816, tired by his final 60-day voyage home and by negotiations with slave trading chiefs, he lost his health. Gathering his family around him on September 7, 1817, he said. “Let me pass quietly away”.

We like to tell our students that if Paul Cuffee could accomplish what he did in his day, surely they can overcome the obstacles in their own lives.

David Burnham
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