

## A Portrait of Paul Cuffee

Written by Ezra Aharone  
Thursday, 04 August 2016 14:40

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Then there's the monumental but seldom-noted feats of Paul Cuffee who was born free in 1759 in Massachusetts. His African-born father, Kofi (Cuffee) Slocum, was captured at age 10 from the Ashanti Kingdom and later freed by Quakers. Cuffee always related to his roots, which fueled his life's inspiration to return to Africa. So his "both/and" correlations begin with the fact that his ancestry traces directly to the Kingdom of Ashanti, which remains today as a "constitutionally protected, sub-national traditional state in the Republic of Ghana."<sup>i</sup>

Against all odds, he ultimately became a ship captain, shipbuilder, and ship owner. Among his fleet he had the 268-ton "Alpha" and the 109-ton "The Traveller." "By the time he was in his early twenties, few people had greater knowledge of the currents, shoals, and weather variations of the Massachusetts islands."<sup>ii</sup> During the Revolutionary War he used his ships as blockade runners to evade British patrol ships and deliver food and supplies for America.

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He was a renowned international commercial trader who imported and exported goods as far as Africa, Europe, and Caribbean nations. In his day, he was the largest employer of Black people in America.<sup>iii</sup> Being a taxpayer because of his vast landholdings, he gained the right to vote in Massachusetts. When Whites in Westport refused to admit his children in their schools, he financed and built the first recorded fully integrated school in America.<sup>iv</sup>

Cuffee's influence was so widespread that he became the first Black man to enter the front door of the White House on official business. He met with President James Madison concerning one of his ships that the military seized during the War of 1812 as he was returning from Sierra Leone and England.<sup>v</sup>

Commerce was a main impetus behind his resettlement plans in Africa. In a "both/and" manner, he envisioned expansive trade and mass emigration to Africa. He sailed his favorite ship "The Traveller" to Sierra Leone, West Africa with an all-Black crew on his first African trip in 1811. There, he founded the Friendly Society of Sierra Leone to eliminate confusion between his ventures and that of the American Colonization Society (ACS) and other prominent Whites who wanted to cleanse the country of Blacks who they thought would taint the White genepool through commingling.

To distinguish his plan from British and American efforts essentially to use colonization as a way of removing the threat that free African Americans posed to the continuation of slavery, in 1811 Cuffee founded the Friendly Society of Sierra Leone<sup>vi</sup>, a cooperative black group intended to encourage "the Black Settlers of Sierra Leone, and the Natives of Africa generally, in the Cultivation of their Soil, by the Sale of their Produce."<sup>vii</sup>

Cuffee encountered great difficulties from Whites in America and Sierra Leone. In response, he also established the African Institution in 1812 to promote his emigration initiatives. Then, in February 1816 he journeyed again to Sierra Leone with 38 people aboard "The Traveller," which was the first recorded group of formerly enslaved Africans who returned to Africa predicated totally upon their own resources and freewill.<sup>viii</sup> In his "both/and" efforts, "Cuffee hoped to send at least one ship every year to Sierra Leone, transporting African-American settlers and goods to the colony and returning with marketable African products."<sup>ix</sup>

But Black support for his plans stalled in part because of the growing climate of aversion towards the ACS motives. Remember, notable Blacks like James Forten, Richard Allen, and Absalom Jones were making it clear that they adamantly opposed leaving America. So despite

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Cuffee's genuine motives, they saw "colonization" as a twofold plan of Whites to rid the country of free Blacks as a dastardly means to expand slavery.

Another factor that thwarted Cuffee's initiatives was the racial hatred and spite of some Whites who resented any type of Black progress or success. Even as late as the 1960s, accomplished Blacks could become violent targets of zealot Whites who knew they would never face legal charges. Although such Whites could care less about Africans leaving America, Cuffee, in their eyes had become too wealthy, too prominent, and too independently powerful without White oversight or involvement. The combination of barriers eventually rose too high for Cuffee as an individual to surmount, and he unfortunately died in 1817 before he could complete a second journey. At the time of his death he was believed to be the wealthiest Black man in America, with an estate worth \$20,000.x

Although there is no definitive evidence that Cuffee was a sovereignist in a political sense of wanting to establish self-government, he symbolized "both/and" capacities through his legacy of independent pro-action and grit-determination to establish bilateral trade and economic relations with Africa, which is an admirable ideal that remains just as necessary today. As well, the fact that he owned ships and facilitated shipping is a valuable/profitable area of economic development that we as Black/African people have left untouched. His works, independence, and entrepreneurialism leave indelible marks in history that breathe modern life into the economic relevance and cultural validation of the "Concept and Doctrine of Both/And."

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i *Guyanese Online*, Guyana News and News from Guyanese Associations Worldwide, "BBC Kingdoms of West Africa – Ashanti," <https://guyaneseonline.wordpress.com/>

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[2013/02/17/bbc-kingdoms-of-africa-asante/](http://www.bbc.com/news/2013/02/17/bbc-kingdoms-of-africa-asante/).

- ii The Paul Cuffee School, A Maritime Charter School for Providence Youths, <http://www.paulcuffee.org/about/mission-history/paul-cuffee/>.
- iii "Paul Cuffee and the Back-to-Africa Movement," *The New England Historical Society*, <http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/paul-cuffee-back-africa-movement/>.
- iv The Paul Cuffee School, A Maritime Charter School for Providence Youths, <http://www.paulcuffee.org/about/mission-history/paul-cuffee/>.
- v "Paul Cuffee and the Back-to-Africa Movement," *The New England Historical Society*, <http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/paul-cuffee-back-africa-movement/>.
- vi Captain Paul Cuffee, Bridgewater State University, <http://www.bridgew.edu/hoba/Cuffee.cfm>.
- vii Henry Louis Gates, Jr, "Who Led the First Back-to-Africa Effort?" *100 Amazing Facts About The Negro*, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/who-led-the-1st-back-to-africa-effort/>.
- viii Gates, "Who Led the First Back-to-Africa Effort?" *100 Amazing Facts About The Negro*, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/african-americans-many-rivers-to-cross/history/who-led-the-1st-back-to-africa-effort/>.
- ix Ibid.
- x Paul Cuffee and the Back-to-Africa Movement," *The New England Historical Society*, <http://www.newenglandhistoricalsociety.com/paul-cuffee-back-africa-movement/>.

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This article is an excerpt of the book *The Sovereign Psyche* released this year. It is available on [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com), co.uk and .ca. Ezra Aharone is an Adjunct Associate Professor at Delaware State University and the author of two acclaimed political books:  
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