

Paul Cuffee: Black-Indian and Quaker

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Paul Cuffee (January 17, 1759 – September 9, 1817)

A few notable Friends [Quakers] of African [Black-Indian] descent did exist. One of the best known was Paul Cuffee, the prominent mariner widely recognized for his “sober” demeanor and sterling character. Cuffee’s father, who was freed in 1742, and his mother, a member of the Wampanoag tribe of Massachusetts “followed” (attended) Dartmouth Monthly Meeting [of Friends]. Though they were not members, they brought their children up according to Quaker principles. Having taught himself reading, writing, mathematics, navigation, and other seafaring skills, Paul Cuffee had shipped aboard a whaling vessel by the time he was fourteen years old. During the [American] Revolution, he and his brother David built a small vessel to smuggle goods through the British blockades. Over time, the Cuffee family bought more ships and Paul owned shares in up to ten vessels, ran a mercantile business in New Bedford, operated a sawmill and a windmill in Dartmouth, and farmed more than one hundred acres in modern-day Westport (carved out of Dartmouth in 1787). In 1800 he bought a gristmill and turned its management over to a group of African American partners.

Cuffee attended Quaker meeting for much of his life used the language of Friends, and dressed in Quaker gray and wide-brimmed black hat. But he did not become a member of Westport Meeting (New England Yearly Meeting) until 1808, when he was 49 years old....At the time he joined Westport Meeting he was the only member of African descent in New England Yearly Meeting.

Cuffee founded the first school in Westport, which was open to both European and African American children. Many of Cuffee’s Quaker colleagues actively opposed enslavement, and Cuffee himself was a lifelong proponent of racial equality. In 1780 he and other Dartmouth men of African [and probably Indian] descent petitioned the Massachusetts legislature to exempt them from taxation on the grounds that “we are not allowed the Privileges of freemen of the State, having no vote for Influence in the election with those that tax us”; neither, the petition noted, could they inherit property. His letters relate his frequent encounters with racial prejudice and his commitment to abolition. Cuffee died in 1817; **his grave and that of his wife, Alice Pequid Cuffee, are “just outside the back door” of Westport Friends meetinghouse, “apart” from where the Quakers are buried.** (P. 192)

In a letter to his sister in the 1820s, Paul Cuffee’s brother John asked, “Why do the colored run after the Whites and joins their churches—and are called brothers and sisters and partake of the same bread and wine and yet are held as slaves and are treated worse than the Dumb Beast

of the field.” Such churches, he declared, help “to keep Negroes in slavery and whips and kills us and yet calls us Brethren.” (P. 204)

References:

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