If Paul Cuffe Had Lived a Few Years Longer: Sierra Leone and Liberia, as They Might Have Been

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What if Paul Cuffe had lived a few more years and been able, as he hoped, to be of use to his brethren in Africa? In revisiting the early history of Sierra Leone and the American colonization movement, I have concluded that Cuffe's death in 1817 was untimely not only for his family, but for the economic and political development of West Africa's Windward Coast.

My premise is this: Cuffe's standing at home and with English supporters, as well as his commercial skills and New England practicality, would have helped Sierra Leone's struggling black entrepreneurs to compete with the dominant European merchants. Cuffe's prestige and African experience also would have guided the American colonization movement to a safe haven in the Sherbro region of modern-day Sierra Leone. Together, these developments would have promoted the emergence of more ethnically coherent nations than the Sierra Leone and Liberia of today.

During his final year and a half, Cuffe was well aware of the obstacles in his path. His first voyage to Africa in 1811-1812 was a commercial squib; his second and last, four years later, was a financial sacrifice. He had to subsidize passage and subsistence for several of the nine African-American settler families. When he returned home in 1816, he was owed large sums by merchants and others in Sierra Leone.

It was a somewhat exasperated Cuffe, in August of 1816, who asked a friend in Boston to inform the people of color that he would *not* be taking new settlers to Sierra Leone in the fall.[1] Cuffe had raised expectations. Boston blacks, in particular, had responded eagerly. Now everything was on hold. In effect, Cuffe said, there would be no voyage until the African Institution in London secured a license for him to trade with Sierra Leone.

He also hoped that body would provide financial support for new African-American settlers. Cuffe had committed substantial assets to blazing a path to Africa. He

understood the enormous cost involved if hundreds—and perhaps thousands—of African-Americans determined to follow in his wake. Others—not Cuffe—would have to bear this cost.

By late 1816, the American Colonization Society had been formed and interested parties began peppering Cuffe for advice regarding Sierra Leone. As the year drew to a close, however, Cuffe was concerned that he had heard nothing from William Allen, his abolitionist ally in London. He wrote Allen, suggesting that he come to England to forge a way forward.[2] But when Cuffe's health began to deteriorate, he must have sensed that he was unlikely ever to see England or Africa again.

In Sierra Leone, the Friendly Society—which Cuffe and several black settlers had started in 1812—also was doing poorly.[3] This was to have been the vehicle through which legitimate commerce—as an antidote to the slave trade—could be promoted between the colony and free black communities in America. In England, Allen and the influential African Institution likewise saw in the society a means to encourage agricultural development in Sierra Leone and a profitable trade with England.

From the start—as Cuffe himself conceded—the Friendly Society lacked coherence. Its motive force was John Kizell, a former slave and one of the so-called "Nova Scotian" settlers. But Kizell was based down the coast in the Sherbro—not far from where he had been born—and unable to exert sustained leadership in Freetown, where most members resided. More important, the society lacked reliable access to shipping which would have allowed it to compete with the European merchants. The latter monopolized trade through its control of cargo space, as well as credit.

Cuffe's unheralded arrival in Freetown in early 1811 was a grain of sand in Sierra Leone's oyster, from which a pearl might have formed. The British governor—a naval commander named Edward Columbine—was impressed with Cuffe's business acumen. The English traders were slow to recognize the African-American as a legitimate competitor. But when they learned that he had been invited to meet with the African Institution in London and to carry goods legally to England, they attempted vainly to sabotage him. When he met Cuffe in the summer of 1811, William Allen quickly perceived in him the answer to his prayers. "The present opportunity for promoting the

civilization of Africa through the means of Paul Cuffee, should not be lost," he enthused. "He seems like a man made on purpose for the business."[4]

Cuffe confronted several hazards in advancing his Sierra Leone plan. There was the inherent expense, the enmity of Freetown's white merchants and the noxious influence of the slave trade. The War of 1812 had foreclosed partnership with the British colony for the duration. Then a post-war economic slump depressed commerce on both sides of the Atlantic.

Nonetheless, a healthy and proactive Paul Cuffe would not have abandoned his African designs. To begin with, Cuffe almost certainly would have been drawn into more direct contact with the American Colonization Society. The decision by Congress in early 1817 to encourage voluntary emigration of free blacks to Africa was a watershed moment, which Cuffe's pioneering visits to Sierra Leone had helped make possible. The next step was to identify a suitable location for a settlement.[5]

With the Monroe Administration refusing, on principle, to become involved in a colonial venture, the society scrambled for means to send an exploratory mission to Sierra Leone. By mid-1817, the colonization society had already enlisted Reverend Samuel Mills and Ebenezer Burgess, a college math instructor, to scout the Sherbro region and negotiate for land with the inhabitants. Had Cuffe been well—and had the society provided modest funding—it is arguable that Cuffe would have offered to take Mills and Burgess to Sierra Leone in his own brig, the *Traveller*. They would probably have proceeded first to England to solicit the advice and endorsement of the African Institution and British authorities.

Mills and Burgess, in fact, did sail directly to England in late 1817. They met with Allen and other notables of the African Institution—no doubt commiserating over Cuffe's recent death. According to Allen, the two Americans spoke of "many thousands" of free blacks coming to Sierra Leone—a figure consistent with the 20,000 being rumored in Freetown.[6]

Had Cuffe accompanied Mills and Burgess, he would have had an opportunity to develop with the African Institution a strategy to nourish their mutual interest in the Friendly Society. He would also have fostered closer ties between the American colonizationists and potential allies in England. Sailing on to Sierra Leone, Cuffe would

have introduced Mills and Burgess to the governor—Charles MacCarthy—and to the Friendly Society members.

MacCarthy and the white merchants were opposed to an American settlement in the Sherbro. MacCarthy despised American republicanism; the merchants feared American competition. By the time Mills and Burgess actually arrived in March of 1818, however, the British Government was concluding that it had no pretext to block an American initiative on the coast.[7]

Cuffe was widely respected in England, where he would have discussed the establishment of a shipping link between the Friendly Society and Britain. Allen had earlier suggested to Cuffe that he sell the *Traveller* in England and buy an English-registered ship to carry goods between the colony and Britain. With shipping assured, the Friendly Society would have had greater incentive to produce agricultural goods for the English market.

As a businessman and mariner, Cuffe understood oceanic commerce. His participation in developing a freight service dedicated to the Friendly Society would have encouraged Allen and other adherents to the African cause to invest in such an undertaking. They had already created a separate body to conduct trade in Africa and had a financial stake. Having their own brig—commanded by Cuffe—would have been a logical and feasible next step.

In these circumstances, Cuffe probably would have begun spending extended periods in Sierra Leone. Only by doing so could he have fulfilled his African mission. Had he devoted quality time in Sierra Leone, beginning in 1818, Cuffe would have instilled greater financial discipline among the Friendly Society members and helped to loosen white merchants' stranglehold on the import-export trade. The African Institution, in the meantime, is unlikely to have ended its support to the heavily-indebted society, as it reluctantly did the following year.

The re-invigoration of an emergent black business sector in Sierra Leone also has to be considered in the context of colonization. When the first African-American settlers arrived in early 1820, Sierra Leone's European traders resolutely opposed their being rooted anywhere near the colony. A more vigorous and assertive black business

community—led by Kizell, whom Mills had described as a "second Paul Cuffe"—would have welcomed a nearby American settlement.

Kizell and Cuffe were age-mates and fellow entrepreneurs. Kizell had been sold into slavery at thirteen. He was shipped, in 1773, from the coastal Gallinas region of today's Sierra Leone to Charleston, served with British and loyalist forces in the Revolution and ultimately returned to Africa with more than 1,100 former slaves after ten wilderness years in Nova Scotia. Kizell ultimately settled as a trader in the Sherbro.

Cuffe and Kizell met in Freetown in early April 1811. They appear to have taken quickly to each other. Cuffe would have seen in Kizell a fellow businessman, a devout Christian, and someone who agreed that legitimate commerce would drive out the slave trade. Both believed that blacks in America were ordained to play a crucial role in Africa's revival.

Cuffe's focus was to raise the level of civilization in Africa. He believed that a select cadre of African-American farmers and mechanics—persons with real skills—was needed. Kizell believed that black people *belonged* in Africa and that *all* blacks in America would return to the motherland if a way opened.[8] Although Cuffe, in his last year, was supportive of large-scale emigration to Africa—linked to the manumission of slaves in the southern states—he never openly embraced Kizell's vision of a mass exodus of black Americans.

Mills and Burgess, escorted by Kizell to the Sherbro in 1818, palavered with the chiefs for land on which to settle the first wave of African-American colonists. Cuffe would have been there, too, if he had been alive to carry Mills and Burgess to Africa. His involvement in this early stage of colonization would have been critical in the events to come.

Even with Kizell's help, Mills and Burgess secured only a general promise from the Sherbro chiefs that land would be made available to African-American settlers. Mills died on his way back to the United States. Burgess, now the colonization society's lone source of firsthand knowledge of the Sherbro, strangely had no visible hand in planning the pioneering voyage one year later.

This was a fatal disconnect. Had Cuffe accompanied Mills and Burgess, he would almost certainly have remained actively engaged with the colonization society after his

return to the United States. This would have facilitated better planning and timing, which was rushed by the society in late 1819 when President Monroe finally sanctioned a naval mission to intercept American slavers in West Africa. African-Americans were to be "hired" to build a receiving station for recaptured slaves, but the real purpose was transparent: to begin colonizing free blacks far from American shores.

Cuffe would have insisted that Kizell be kept informed and instructed to prepare for their arrival. In the event, Kizell heard nothing until the first settlers arrived in early 1820, just as the rains were about to begin. A third of the settlers and all three white agents were dead within months. Negotiations for land on the Sherbro mainland aborted. Kizell was widely blamed—unfairly, I maintain—for this unhappy ending. Joined by fresh emigrants, the survivors in early 1822 raised the American flag at Mesurado, further down the coast in what would become Liberia.

Governor MacCarthy may have been anti-republican, but he was essentially pragmatic in his dealings with Cuffe in 1816, with Mills and Burgess in 1818, with the colonization society agents in 1820 and with U. S. naval officers in the early 1820s. Had the Americans settled in the Sherbro, MacCarthy would have sought ways in which the British and American colonies could cooperate, especially in containing the slave trade.

Therein lies the historical rub for Sierra Leone. With the African-American colonists established at Mesurado, instead of the Sherbro, the American navy's anti-slave trade squadron began focusing on *its* part of the coast. Slave trading was consequently displaced northward and intensified in the Sherbro and Gallinas regions of modern-day Sierra Leone, where it thrived in the 1820s and 1830s. Had the Americans settled in the Sherbro, the American navy would have suppressed the slave trade in that quarter. In concert with the British, they might have had similar success in the nearby Gallinas.[9]

A growing American settlement in the Sherbro might have competed with British economic interests, but these two nodes of colonial influence could have operated, informally yet in tandem, to promote agricultural development and exports in lieu of slaving. They would also have connected the interior more directly to the two coastal colonies and hastened integration of the hinterland respectively with British Freetown and American Sherbro.

Under this scenario, the British would probably have focused on the Temne country to the immediate north and east of Freetown. The Americans would have concentrated on the Mende-dominated south of modern-day Sierra Leone. Sierra Leone today thus would be more or less coterminus with its Northern Province, and possibly include parts of the Republic of Guinea.. Liberia would occupy Southern Province and perhaps part of Eastern Province—godfathered, in effect, by Paul Cuffe.

Sierra Leone, as we know it, might have been largely spared another quarter century of continued depredation by the slave trade. It would have come to independence free of the north-south, Temne-Mende and urban-protectorate rivalries which took root during the 19th century and endure today.

Sherbro-qua-Liberia could have become an equally compact Americo-Mende state. The Americans' arrival in the early 1820s coincided with Mende expansion into the Sherbro and the consolidation of Mende influence over much of today's Southern Province. The Mende—less dependent on the slave trade than the indigenous people who tried to expel the American colonists at Mesurado—probably would have accommodated an African-American presence. A Sierra Leonean authority on Mende history, who has reviewed this paper, finds this plausible.[10]

Another venerable Sierra Leonean, who has recorded his family's long history in the Sherbro and the neighboring coastal region, also regards this alternative history as credible. Sierra Leone might have been spared ethnic tensions which, he laments, continue to bedevil his benighted land.[11]

Sierra Leoneans have a Krio phrase to express the futility of defying fate: In the face of any difficulty, they say, "How for do." It is a statement of fact, not a question.

Paul Cuffe was anything *but* fatalistic. He believed that people had the power of choice and redemption. His death punctuated West African history *with* a question mark. Would the future have been very different, had Cuffe returned to Sierra Leone during these formative years?

No question.

Abbreviations

NBFPL – New Bedford (Mass.) Free Public Library.

NA – National Archives of the United Kingdom, Kew

Endnotes

1. Cuffe to Jedediah Morse, August 10, 1816, Cuffe Papers (NBFPL).

2. Cuffe to William Allen, December 19, 1816, Cuffe Papers (NBFPL).

3. William Allen, journal entry for January 5, 1817, *Life of William Allen, With Selections from his correspondence*, Volume I. London: Charles Gilpin, 1846, 312-3. "I also wrote to the 'Friendly Society,'" Allen recorded, "which I fear is not doing well."

4. Allen, July 30, 1811, *Life of William Allen,* 139.

5. The U. S. Senate and House on February 11, 1817, jointly resolved to authorize the president "to enter into a convention with . . . Great Britain, for receiving into the Colony of Sierra Leone, such of the people of the free people of colour of the United States, as, with their own consent, shall be carried thither. . . ." This was reported in the *Royal Gazette and Sierra Leone Advertiser* of August 23, 1817.

6. "Two Africans," writing in the April 25, 1818, edition of the *Royal Gazette and Sierra Leone Advertiser*, claimed to have seen "private letters from America" which projected 20,000 African-American settlers. CO271/2 (NA).

7. In response to a query from Governor MacCarthy to the Colonial Department, a Privy Council official wrote on April 25, 1818, that "the Lords of this Committee do not see how the Americans can be prevented from forming an establishment on the Coast of Africa, if they shall think fit to do so." CO267/48 (NA).

8. Reverend Samuel J. Mills quoted Kizell in the journal he kept during his visit to the Sherbro in early 1818. See Gardiner Spring, *Memoirs of the Rev. Samuel J. Mills*, London, 1820, pp. 141-2.

9.Two British commissioners, writing to the Foreign Office on April 29, 1823, reported that the slave trade had "considerably diminished" between Cape Mount and the Gallinas. "The American settlement at Mesurado, although not possessing strength to impose any direct restraint, has by its mere presence and object a strong contracting influence and the armed Schooner employed in connection with it . . . [is having] effect." See FO84/21/88 (NA).

10. Professor Arthur Abraham, Virginia State University, in emails to the author, July 8 and September 2, 2009. Abraham cautions that, had they settled in the Sherbro, the African-American colonists might still have lorded over their hosts in ways similar to the Liberian experience, leading eventually to open conflict. I am indebted to Professor Abrahams for his critique of this paper as it evolved.

11. Peter L. Tucker, personal conversation with author, August 18, 2009. See Tucker's *The Tuckers of Sierra Leone, 1665-1914*, self-published in London, 1997.