

MANSIONS, MANSARDS AND MILLS

Paul Cuffe finally wins full acceptance for his achievements

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Very wise men say that the victors write history. I can't argue with that truism.

The job of historians is to go back, and look with fair eyes at real sources. It can take a long time before history emerges.

In the magnificent history of Paul Cuffe, it was about 200 years before the importance of his achievements could be understood. Attending the recent Cuffe symposium at the Westport Meeting House, I found myself thinking about his dual identity.

At home Cuffe, the son of a slave and a Native American woman, was always the exception. He had to reconcile his father's blackness and his mother's culture. Exactly what was his position as a mixed race man?

He built himself wealth from nothing. He was allowed to join the Society of Friends. Westport allowed him to buy land. He was supported by William Rotch Sr. and his son William Jr. They introduced him to the Society of Friends in Philadelphia.

It was a life of allowance. I believe this constant allowance by others was partially what drove him to the Sierra Leone project to re-settle black families.

In Africa, they



Donald Blake conducts a smudging ceremony at the graves of Paul Cuffe and his wife Alice. The ceremony took place after a day-long symposium on Cuffe at the Westport Friends' meeting house and Grange. [JACK SPILLANE/THE STANDARD-TIMES/SCMG]

would be free.

Sierra Leone was a British colony and Cuffe had to gain British support for the settlement. The British had turned the Atlantic World into a slave trader's heaven. But in the 1780's the fight to end the slave trade and eventually slavery in England began. Stubborn men of great, unchanging principle – William Wilberforce, Thomas Clarkson and William Allen – led the decades long fight.

On March 24, 1807, Parliament outlawed the slave trade. They at last recognized what Wilberforce had been saying and saying and saying: "You can choose to look the other way, but you cannot say again that you did not know."

These were the men who met, were moved by and respected Paul Cuffe. They had all urged him to come to England and when he arrived in Liverpool in 1811 crowds packed the dock to see him arrive. It was a national occasion.

Philadelphia Quaker Stephen Grellet was there: "During the time I have been at Liverpool, Paul Cuffee, a black man, owner and master of a vessel, has come into port, from Sierra Leone on the coast of Africa. He is a member of our Society, and resides in New England. The whole of his crew are black also. This, together with the cleanliness of his vessel, and the excellent order prevailing on board, has excited very

general attention. It has, I believe, opened the minds of many in tender feelings towards the poor suffering Africans, who, they see, are men like themselves, capable of becoming, like Paul Cuffee, valuable and useful members both of civil and religious Society."

William Allen's diary and letters detail his friendship with Cuffe. At first skeptical, he became a major supporter.

"Clarkson and I are both of the mind that the present opportunity for promoting the civilization of Africa through the means of Paul Cuffee should not be lost. He seems like a man made on purpose for the business he has great experience as well as ... We are

soliciting an order in council for him to return in the Traveller to Sierra Leone."

Allen's diary continued by describing the impact of the man.

"Went up with Paul Cuffee and George Harrison to attend the Board of the African Institution ... Paul was then called in and introduced to the Duke of Gloucester... he returned very sensible and satisfactory answers and his simplicity and strong natural good sense made a great impression upon all parties The Duke appeared much gratified and after Paul Cuffee had withdrawn, a vote of thanks was passed to him."

Cuffe had won. The project of his life succeeded.

On December 10, 1815, 38 African-American colonists left for homes in Africa.

In England, the constant allowance ended for Paul Cuffe. There he was a respected black man of distinction. The question of allowance and identify for the Cuffe family did not end.

His son, Paul Cuffe, Jr. published an autobiography in 1839. The title is, Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Paul Cuffee – A Pequot Indian During Thirty Years Spent at Sea.

He chose allegiance as a Pequot Indian.

The Westport Historical Society symposium concluded at Cuffe's grave with both a Native American smudge ceremony and a wreath laying.

It was a full acceptance of the complete Paul Cuffe.