Born the son of a slave, **Paul Cuffe** rose to great success with his countrymen still in bondage. Now, local historians seek to establish Westport African-American's importance to region and nation.

A man for all SouthCoast seasons

The Trail 1&2. Friends Meeting House, Paul Cuffe Memorial and Grave Site 930 Main Road, Westport Village

this Meeting House in 1814 and contributed a major share of the cost. Gravestones commemorat

Located at the end of what is nov west bank of the East Branch the West bank or the east straight of the Westport River and where Cuffe docked most of his ships. He also built a substantial house at this location and his free inte-grated school was established nearby. No structures remain.

Cuffe purchased this 100-acre purchased this 100-acte property in 1799 and sold it to his brother-in-law and sister, Michael and Mary Wainer, in 1800. Parts of the farm remain in Wainer

House Hix Bridge Road, Westport

The 19th century nome of Dr.

James Handy. Records include
his treatment of Cuffe in the last
months of his life in 1817. The

10 • Wainer Early Ho Site

The Captain Paul Cuffe Park at the New Bedford

The park commemorates the life and legacy of Cuffe. He ran a store at the Four Corners near the intersection of Union and North Water Street. The Cuffe Kitchen, located on the second floor of

NEW BEDFORD — "We're reclaiming our history," Lee Blake, president of the New Bedford Historical Society, says with

determination.

Blake was referring to the 200th anniversary this month of the death amiversary this month of the death of Capt. Paul Cuffe, a Southeastern Massachusetts African-American man who is, or at least should be, a towering figure in this nation's history and even world history. His wealth and influence were vast, and he was known and welcomed by prominent people on both sides of the Atlantic. of the Atlantic.

Born on Cuttyhunk Island in
1759 to a former slave and a Native

ransanawouman, raul tuttie led a remarkable career as a skilled busi-markable career as a skilled business of the skilled business of the skilled business partner Michael Wainer built, owned and operated a letter of ships, amamed by African-up and down the Eastern Seaboard and to Africa and to Africa and Europe. It was at that time that Cuffe became one of the country's wealthiest African-Americans. Curtlewas a part of several histori-

African-Americans.
Cuffe was a part of several historically important efforts, both locally and nationally: He and his brother John and others petitioned both the John and others petitioned both the state of Massachusetts and the town of Dartmouth for the right to vote, arguing that they should be exempt from paying taxes unless they had the same voting rights as white citizens. Their effort is seen as part of the impetus for Massachusetts reforming its voting laws and free-ing its slawes in 1783. Onlis own property in Westport, Cuffe established a racially inte-grated school for his children and those from the community. He would also nay half the costs of a

town. Cuffe was deeply engaged in another venture: after freed African-Cuffe was deeply engaged in another venture: after freed African-Americans colonized Sierra Leone in West Africa, Cuffe made two trips seeking to develop agriculture as a colonized seeking to develop agriculture as a constitution of the contract of the c Cuffe's plans, however, stalled during the War of 1812 and he died

five years later.

Cuffe at one point had his ship
Traveller seized by a U.S revenue Traveller setzed by a U.S revenue cutter along with its cargo. Alarmed, he rushed to Washington D.C. and using his political and religious connections obtained a meeting with President James Madison, an unprecedented event for an African-American. Madison released the ship.

Overdue recognition

Blake said the 200th anniversary of Cuffe's death spurred the New Bedford, Westport and Dartmouth historical societies and others to jointly sponsor a symposium aimed



at raising consciousness about his

achievements.

"We have this wonderful opportunity to reclaim this person who

tunity to reclaim this person who was very important for the state of Massachusetts and the nation and who because he was black was not recognized," she said.

Cuffe, she said, "is the most historic figure from the town of Westport, both nationally and internationally. He traveled around the world and met many influential he worn and he people of his time."

He also left behind an enormous resource of his writings, his

mous resource of his writings, his thoughts. "We can see how his ideas evolved," she said. Jenny O'Neill, executive director

of the Westport Historical Society, said she finds it remarkable what an influence Cuffe and his family had "at a time when over a million Arrican-Americans in the United States are enslaved, you have this family of people, the Cuffe family, who are free, one generation away from slavery, and what they are able to achieve." She called Cuffe "a very surprising character for his time" and observed

that "people approach him from dif-ferent perspectives. He takes on sort of a personal meaning to each of us" in the societies, she said.

in the societies, she said.
Yet despite his accomplishments
as a mariner and as a shipwright, and
as a diplomat, Cuffe has never quite

caught hold of the fame bestow caugnt noid of the tame bestowed on other New Bedford figures like abolitionist Frederick Douglass, or even toggle harpoon inventor Lewis Temple. If it weren't for the continued attention given by local historians to the life of Paul Cuffe, his inspirational life might still be gathering dust on a library shelf.

Eight years ago, on the 75oth

Eight years ago, on the 250th anniversary of his birth there was a renewal of interest among the local renewal of interest among the local historical societies in Cuffe that, with the advocacy of James Lopes of New Bedford, eventually resulted in the establishment of a Whaling m the establishment of a Whaling Museum park near his former New Bedford store and Cuffe exhibit inside the museum.

Now, as the 200th anniversary of his death approached, Blake and others mindful of local African-American history sought to once and for all establish his important historical role at a time when most African-Americans were still in

Rights Act in 1964.
Cuffe, whose story began in the late 18th century was what one might call a Renaissance man. Initially isolated on Cuttlynuich, le later taught himself to read. He was good at math. He eventually learned navigation by signing up on a whale.
At times history nipped at his heels; Cuffe was held for three months by the British in New Conducting the Revolutionary War.
But once freed, he built a boat to replace his first one, which had been confiscated. He used his new boat to become a blockade runner, delivering goods and supplies to Nantucket on monoless nights through waters that he knew intimately from growing up on the nearby Elizabeth Islands. He lost another boat or two heads of the control of t historical role at a time whem most African-Americans were still in bondage. African-Americans were still in bondage was a historical figure. The that no one around here was warperping their arms around," she said, "We wanted to make sure he is a heightened historical figure." Historian Kiehard Gifford of Little Compton, R.I. noted that Cuffe overcame obstacles that were built into the economic system in those overcame obstacles that were built into the economic system in those days and was probably helped by New Bedford's most framous whalfug family. Whaling masters William (and) the world of their calings in New Bedford and were known around the world on their cealings in New Bedford and were known around the world on their own merits. "The Rotch name is recognized in all parts of the world, and would drop Rotch Jr.'s name," Gifford observed. "William Junior's name would be recognized across the world, in Sweden, Russia." Cuffe was born on Cuttly hunk of the complete of the control of the contr

A local effort

The interpretive plaque in the New Bedford "pocket park" that was dedicated to Cuffe on Johnnycake Hill in 2011, and which is about to be redesigned and enlarged by the New Bedford Whaling Museum, lists his considerable skills: see captain, philanthropist. community leader. philanthropist, community leader civil rights activist and abolitionist That's a lot of ground to cover, and and depth it deserves. The anniver-sary will also be the occasion for the debut of an African-American and Native American Heritage Trail that marks sites important in the lives of Cuff Slocum, Paul Cuffe and Michael

Wainer.
The Cuffe symposium has been joined by five area groups: the Westport Historical Society, the Dartmouth Historical and Arts Society, the New Bedford Historical Society, the Dartmouth Historical Commission and the Westport Commission and the Westport

Commission and the Westport Historical Commission. Cole and Slade, a husband and wife team, along with Richard Gifford, have been poring through the mountains of Cuffe papers at UMass Amherst and in the New Bedford Free Public Library. It's a big effort. They said that Cuffey apper trail is vast and very rich and detailed

who responded when Cuffe asked of their blessing taking free blacks to Africa. It was Cuffe's view that the U.S. should be helping Slerra Leone and other slawe-trading areas to develop marketable commodifies such as tobacco, to disrupt the cen-turies—did system of the slawe trade. Cole said Cuffe disagreed with the American Colonization Society movement to take free African Americans in the United States back to Africa to Slerra Leone and later Liberia while allowing the United

retook offining ages of the pands who died at sea."

Cuffe also took the fight for racial equality into his own hands and built the racially integrated school for Westport on his own property when other parents balked. The school was the first integrated school in the United States.

the United States.

Cuffe, after becoming part of the Quaker community, joined an international movement seeking to resettle freed slaves in Sierra Leone. His aim was to help the settlers establish an economically-sustainable society. ble society. Having been born on Cuttyhunk,

the world, in Sweden, Russia."
Cuffe was born on Cuttyhunk
Island to Cuff Slocum, a freed
African slave and a Native American
mother. There they made a living
tending sheep for the Slocum family,
the rocky soil being ill suited to raising crops.

ng crops.

After years on the rocky island,

Cutte across the Atlantic to London
and Sierra Leone and Western Africa
and to the White House, all the while
amassing his shipping fortune. He
is said to have been the first black
person to enter the White House by

person to enter the White House by the front door for the meeting with President Madison. The meeting rescued a ship and eargo belonging to Cuffe that had been confiscated by a U.S. revenue cutter. Madison personally gave it back after learn-ing that Cuffe hadn't heard that there was a war on and that there

was an embargo making his cargo

contraband. When Cuffe learned what had

A devout Ouaker, Cuffe tried to

deaths.
"He tried to help people, black and white," said retired Harvard economist and local historian Betty Slade.
"He took on mortgages on the properties of widows of husbands who

Having been born on Cuttyhunk, Cuffe was a mariner, working was wariner, working way up from small boyhood boats to schooners and brigs. Yet to schooners and brigs. Yet lost of since the state of the

tning about people or color in this area and in the nation. "It would be too depressing, they told me."

Things began to change around the color of the color of

paper train is vectorial detailed.

They have prepared a Power Point presentation for the upcoming symposium so scholars and volunteer historians will be introduced to a very complete set of property maps, census entries, correspondence and

the like.

Letters among the Cuffe papers include those from the local Quakers who responded when Cuffe asked

Liberia while allowing the United

enslaved comrades, that they would be able to develop agriculture and sell those products, and in that way change the dynamics and hopefully end the dynamics of the slave trade,"

tation on both sides of the Atlantic. Historian and biographer Jeffrey Fortin wrote on his blog that Cuffe was aware of his role as a representa-tive of African-Americans. "White tive of African-Americans. "White Americans already viewed free African-Americans with fear and skepticism, and Paul Cuffe believed it was his duty to change that by representing his African brethren throughout the Atlantic world as a sober, trustworthy Quaker...," he wrote.

wrote.

The local group bringing Paul
Cuffe back to the region's attention
say their goal is to show the region
how important a figure he is.

"We wanted a lasting presence for
him," said Blake.

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