

Cuffe's Social Networks and Entrepreneurial Success

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What a pleasure it is to participate in this symposium honoring the 250th birthday of the greatest early African American entrepreneur. I want to thank my Westport colleagues who helped me find primary and secondary sources as I prepared for the *Black Entrepreneurs of the 18th and 19th Centuries* exhibitions at the Federal Reserve Bank of Boston and the Museum of African American History in Boston. I am grateful to Betty Slade, Norma Judson, and Jenny O'Neill and especially to Emily Sutton for their contributions to my understanding of Paul Cuffe's life and career, as well as to Paul Cyr of the New Bedford Free Public Library. I am also indebted to Lamont Thomas for his incomparable data-rich biography of Captain Paul Cuffe, *Rise To Be A People*.

Today I want to speak briefly about how Paul Cuffe's social networks contributed to his remarkable entrepreneurial success within a dangerous geopolitical context and how these social networks were revealed both during his lifetime and after his death in his probate records.

Born to a self-emancipated African father and a Wampanoag mother on Cuttyhunk Island in 1759, Paul Cuffe lived most of his life on land in the village of Westport, Massachusetts. In his youth when he appealed to the Massachusetts legislature for voting rights as a tax payer, he claimed his Indian heritage; in later life he emphasized his African identity. Paul Cuffe's contemporaries described him as "a man of noble personal appearance, tall, portly, and dignified in his bearing."¹ At the time of his death in 1817, Paul Cuffe probably was the most famous African American on both sides of the Atlantic. Cuffe's fame derived from his prowess as a merchant mariner, his entrepreneurial enterprises on land, and his philanthropy at home and abroad. He was a man of extraordinary personal and social courage, a life-long risk-taker, a resourceful and resolute entrepreneur, a skillful and indefatigable networker, the patriarch of an extended family, and an exponent of the Quaker virtues of honesty, thrift, truthfulness, fulfillment of promises, and hard work.²

Resourceful Entrepreneur: Kinship, Community, and Religious Networks

As a resourceful and courageous black mercantile entrepreneur, Cuffe's career as a merchant mariner was of ever increasing scope within a constrained and dangerous geopolitical context. When he began trading between Westport and Nantucket in 1779, slavery was legal in the American colonies and continued to be legal in southern states throughout his career. Until 1807 the transatlantic slave trade was legal and continued illegally throughout his life. Ships with black crews were liable to be seized and their crews sold into slavery. More than once Cuffe's ships evaded capture by foreign vessels. Yet Cuffe sailed from Maine to Georgia, from Savannah to Sweden, from Westport to the West Indies and to West Africa armed with appropriate documents, well-maintained vessels, and disciplined crews. It took great personal courage and resolve to venture confidently around the Atlantic Ocean world as Cuffe did. Moreover, stormy relationships between England and France and the United States impeded opportunities to pursue his transatlantic maritime ventures—in 1806, for example, his ship was delayed for three months in Savannah due to a French blockade; in 1808 and during the war of 1812, the United States placed an embargo on trade with England. In fact, when the *Traveller* returned from the British colony of Sierra Leone in 1812, she was impounded in Newport until Cuffe secured the release of his ship with its African cargo.

Paul Cuffe achieved his entrepreneurial success by resourcefully maximizing social networks based on kinship, community, and religious affiliations. Cuffe built his career as merchant mariner on his family ties and his Quaker affiliations. Almost without exception, his ships were commanded by family members and manned by black crews. In his maritime endeavors, Cuffe's most important partners were his brother-in-law, Michael Wainer, and Michael Wainer's sons. Michael Wainer became Cuffe's first major business partner as Cuffe began to trade along the Atlantic coast and to buy ever larger boats in the 1780s but retired to farm in 1800. Michael's eldest son Thomas became first mate of Cuffe's ship the *Alpha* on its 1806 coastal and transatlantic voyages; he captained other Cuffe ships including the *Hero* on her voyage to Portugal and Spain, the *Ranger* on the coastal trade route, and the *Traveller* on her voyage to Sierra Leone in 1810-12. Paul Wainer shipped on the 1806 whaling voyage of *Hero* as mate and keeper of the log and Cuffe appointed him captain of the *Traveller* in 1815. Jeremiah Wainer captained the *Ranger* on her coastal trading voyages from 1801 until his death at sea in

1805. John Wainer served as first mate on the *Traveller's* first voyage to Sierra Leone. Cuffe's own sons, Paul and William, who were at least a decade younger than their youngest Wainer cousins, joined crews on their father's ships later in his career. The centrality of kinsmen in Cuffe's maritime endeavors is reflected in the fact that of the seven crew members on the 1815 voyage to Sierra Leone only one was not a relative of Captain Cuffe.

In his 1839 memoir, Paul Cuffe, Jr. remembered his first voyage in 1806 with his father, providing a fascinating glimpse of the rhythms and challenges of commercial trading:

... with the novelty attending a sea voyage I was highly pleased. Nothing uncommon attended this voyage... to Pasamaquaddy, for Plaster of Paris. We made this voyage down in about 10 days. After loading our vessel, which took two weeks, we again set sail for Wilmington,... at which port we safely arrived in 16 days, discharged our freight, took in ballast and 300 bushels of apples, and sailed for Savannah,... where we arrived ...in about twenty days, where we again discharged our freight and reloaded our vessel with Cotton, Rice, and Logwood. Here we lay three months in making preparation for sea again. From this place we made out into the broad Atlantic... This was a long, tedious voyage,...we sailed a great number of days in a northward direction, until we made the Grand Banks; then we steered away for the northern coast of Scotland, which we reached in about fifty days. Thence we continued our course... into the Northern Sea, and made the entrance to the Baltic...thence along the coast of Copenhagen to Gottenburgh...Here we lay six weeks, sold our lading, and took in a load of iron, steel and hemp. From thence we sailed for Elsinore...where we took in a number of passengers for Philadelphia, at which place we arrived after a long passage....During this voyage we had much rough weather;... we were compelled to throw overboard fifty tons of iron while on the Grand Banks. During this gale we lost our fore-top-mast, jib-boom and long boat.³

On land, Cuffe invested in enterprises that were ancillary to his primary maritime trading interests. He partnered with family members to build his ships, to run his grist mill, and to farm his land in Westport and opened a West Indian import store in New Bedford with two sons-in-

law. He also partnered with white Quaker neighbors to build ships and to engage in commercial ventures.

Over the years of his mercantile career Cuffe owned numerous ships. He also built four in his Westport shipyard between 1796 and 1807: the *Ranger*, a 60-ton, square sterned schooner; the 162-ton brig *Hero*; the 268-ton *Alpha*; and the 109-ton brig *Traveller*. In addition to his relatives, Cuffe employed white craftsmen to assist in ship building and repairing.⁴ Apart from the *Traveller*, Cuffe also shared ownership with relatives and white Westporters. In 1804, Cuffe owned the *Ranger* jointly with his nephews, Michael and Jeremiah Wainer; the *Hero* was owned $\frac{1}{4}$ by white Westporter Isaac Cory and his son; $\frac{1}{4}$ by Thomas Wainer, and $\frac{1}{2}$ by Paul Cuffe; the *Alpha* initially was owned $\frac{3}{4}$ by Paul Cuffe and $\frac{1}{4}$ by his Quaker neighbor Lemuel Milk and later was co-owned with Philadelphia Quaker, John James, who bought Cuffe's share in the ship for \$6,500 in 1815. Although Cuffe often had co-owners for his ships, he always maintained a controlling interest of at least 50% in his vessels. The one exception to this policy occurred in 1806 when three white merchant mariners from the neighboring town of Dartmouth invited Cuffe to invest in their schooner, *Hope*, which traded on the New Bedford to Philadelphia run.⁵

Cuffe's Quaker connections gave him entrée to distant markets along the Atlantic coasts in the United States, in Europe, and in West Africa. Many of his Westport neighbors were Quakers and Cuffe joined their meeting in 1808. The wealthy Rotch family, Quaker founders of New Bedford, probably knew Cuffe from his earliest trading ventures between Westport and Nantucket and provided him with entrée to other affluent Quaker merchants in Providence and Philadelphia. Quaker commercial and abolitionist connections in England also assisted Cuffe's "civilizing mission" to Sierra Leone, through which he sought to prove that profitable trade without human trafficking was possible between Africa, America, and England.

In times of trouble Cuffe enlisted the assistance of his Quaker network in America and in England. When customs officials impounded the *Traveller* in Newport on its return from Sierra Leone in 1812, Cuffe immediately mobilized his Quaker network in Newport, New Bedford, Providence, and Philadelphia—gathering letters of support for the release of his brig and her African cargo from the U.S. District Attorney in Newport, the past Collector of Customs in Newport, the Governor of Rhode Island, a U.S. senator, the former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives as well as from prominent Quaker merchants—William Rotch, Jr. in New

Bedford, Thomas Arnold and Moses Brown in Providence, and John James in Philadelphia. John James introduced Cuffe to Samuel Hutchinson with whom Cuffe stayed in Washington and who accompanied Cuffe to his meetings first with President Madison and then with the Secretary of the Treasury. The Secretary agreed that Cuffe's ship and his cargo would be restored to him. In two weeks time, Cuffe had traveled overland by stage from Newport to Washington and successfully persuaded the president and his secretary to release Cuffe's ship, thanks to both his own resoluteness and his judicious use of Quaker connections. Although the release of the *Traveller* is perhaps the most dramatic example of Cuffe's resourceful use of his Quaker network to resolve concerns, several others are recorded in his letters over the years.⁶

During his lifetime Paul Cuffe experienced not only considerable financial success but also considerable financial distress. His first voyage to Maryland brought him a \$1,000 cargo of corn for the New Bedford market; an 18-month whaling voyage to southeast African waters netted Cuffe a profit of \$1,700, but the War of 1812 inhibited his commercial ventures and he took an \$8,000 loss on his 1815 voyage to Sierra Leone, because he paid the passage of most of the 38 African American settlers and he met severe trading restrictions in the colony. Cuffe achieved a reputation as a resourceful, respected, and reliable business man not only in his home community of Westport but elsewhere in the Atlantic World.

With the profits garnered from his maritime ventures in trading and whaling Cuffe invested in real estate and commercial projects in Westport. His first real estate purchase was a small 35 rod-parcel on the Westport River in 1789 for 4L 18 shillings; his second in 1799 was 40 acres in the same area for \$1,000 and his third was the 100 acre homestead farm of Ebenezer Eddy for \$2,500. In 1800, he and two black neighbors purchased a windmill on Westport Point for \$120 to grist grain brought in his ships from mid-Atlantic states. In the last months of his life, he signed a contract with Quaker Joseph Tripp to establish a salt works. Between 1809-1816 Cuffe also invested and traded in real estate: Cuffe joined two white Quakers in purchasing several tracts of land including a cedar swamp, two salt marshes, and two farms for \$6,890 which they traded back to the original owner the following year; Cuffe and Michael Wainer bought a salt marsh for \$210; Cuffe expended \$13,000 to add open land, a salt meadow and two farms to his personal holdings. Not only did Cuffe purchase real estate but he loaned money to Westport neighbors and took mortgages on their land as security. For example, in 1812, he

loaned Nathaniel Sowle \$158.76; the loan was secured by a mortgage on 31 acres of land and repaid on time. In 1814, he loaned Burnea Devoll \$600 payable in four years and secured by a mortgage on 48 acres. While he provided mortgages for loans to Westport neighbors, the prudent Cuffe never mortgaged any of his own land.

Cuffe's Probate Records and Social Networks

When Paul Cuffe's will was entered in the Bristol County Probate Court in 1817, the record of the will took four long pages and the inventory of his real and personal estates another eight. The total value of the estate was approximately \$20,000—the equivalent of \$322,000 today.

Paul Cuffe's probate records reveal the importance of his commercial networks and his concern for the wellbeing of his family and his church. The witnesses, appraisers, and executors of the will were white Westport and New Bedford business associates and friends. Cuffe's role as family patriarch is expressed most fully in his will. His will distributes real and personal property first to his wife Alice, his children, his grandchildren, his siblings, some of his in-laws and cousins, and then to the Westport Society of Friends. He further specifies his unmarried daughters' rights to live in their mother's house before and after her death as long as they are unmarried. To his beloved wife he left all his household goods except two desks, a bookcase, and his books; he also left her their dwelling house, one half of all his lands and livestock, and all the family provisions on hand, one hundred dollars, and all the profits from his salt works or \$100 annually should the salt works fail. He left to his daughter Mary Phelps another house and land; to his son Paul his maple desk and half his clothing, the farm that he had inherited from his father, \$500 to be invested and the income used for the support of Paul's family and a 25% share in the brig *Traveller*; to his son William he gave another plot of land of c. 40 acres and \$300 to build a house on the land, a 25% share in the brig *Traveller*, his walnut desk and book case, his dictionary, and 50% of his clothing; to his four other daughters he left each a 1/8 interest in the *Traveller*, and to his two orphaned granddaughters, he left each \$50 to be given to them when they became 21 years old. To his siblings and a few "cousins", he gave \$10 outright or \$ 6 annually, though "should they...make bad use of the money...I request my executors to pay them in provision or cloathing, and such things that may be for their comfort." Any residue of his estate was to be divided equally among his six living children, though his executors were

instructed to retain sufficient funds to ensure that the annual payments mentioned in the will could be made.

In addition to his family Paul Cuffe remembered the Society of Friends in Westport, leaving fifty dollars to “be paid over to their treasurer, by my executors, according to the direction of the monthly meeting.” Cuffe’s parents are said to have adhered to Quaker principles though they were not Quakers. Cuffe joined the Westport Meeting and assumed Quaker dress in 1808. He obtained traveling letters from the Meeting before embarking on his voyages to Sierra Leone and his trip to Washington to meet with President Madison. He contributed his services to the Meeting as an active member of various financial, investigative, and building committees and as the principal financial contributor to the building in 1813 of the sparsely elegant Meeting House in the graveyard of which Paul Cuffe and his wife are buried.

Paul Cuffe’s will reveals that he had considerable durable property, that the well-being of his immediate and extended family and his church were his primary concerns, and that he was a careful and insightful planner for their future prosperity.

The inventory of Cuffe’s estate discloses his complex relationships with Westport neighbors, his commercial interests, and his personal acquisitions. His real estate included not only the land and buildings mentioned but a six-acre woodlot, two meadows, and a cedar swamp. The total value of his real estate was assessed at \$4,119. The most valuable item in his personal estate was the brig *Traveller*, assessed at \$1,800, the next was his share of the salt works on Joseph Tripp’s land \$800, then there were the thirty-three notes and obligations, primarily mortgages on land, that were owed to his estate by black and white Westport residents that totaled approximately \$4,158 and revealed a web of obligation among kin and neighbors to one of the most affluent members of the Westport community. The inventory of his numerous possessions discloses traces of his entrepreneurial endeavors as merchant mariner, shipbuilder, and farmer. Among the items assessed are iron hoops, old rigging, charts, fish hooks, whale lancets, half pint French tumblers, African peppers, casks of varnish, timbers and boards, saws and planes, scythes and plough shares, oxen, hens and lambs. His household items included a large looking glass, 6 Windsor chairs, trunks and chests, beds, bolsters, pillows, quilts, sheets, large plates and small plates, pitchers and teapots, cream pots and sugar bowls, skillets and kettles, knives and forks. His wearing apparel that was to be divided between his two sons was

also itemized. Finally there is his library of books that this self-educated man treasured—his Bible, his two-volume dictionary, a concordance, as well as books and pamphlets on history, art, and other topics. His appraisers assessed his personal property as totaling \$14,022.57. They also noted additional obligations owed to him in Sierra Leone. Perhaps the appraisers did not enter these obligations in their summation, because they thought that they were less likely to be met than those closer to hand in Westport. Paul Cuffe’s will and the inventory of his estate reveal aspects of his life concerns and achievements but fail to convey the full texture of his remarkable life journey.

Conclusion

Paul Cuffe achieved his entrepreneurial success through his effective mobilization of members not only of his extended Afro-Indian family but of his religious community within Westport and across the Atlantic world. But as remarkable as that ability was, even more significant was the philosophy that underlay his prudent, shrewd, courageous, and resourceful business acumen. At the end of an 1816 letter to a fellow merchant mariner, he appended this “watch word”:

In experience I have ever found when I attended to my business I seldom suffered loss. I have found it to be good to make choice of good companions. I have ever found it not to be profitable for me to sit long after dining and make a tipling habit of wine and other liquors. These very people who adopt these practi[ce]s when they see a sober steady man, they will put business in his way.⁷

Paul Cuffe became a model of integrity and entrepreneurial success not only in his own time but in ours. And so we honor the continuing salience of his achievements today.

Endnotes

¹ Ricketson: 255

² Cuffe articulated his precepts for living in an 1816 letter of advice to his nephew Thomas Wainer: “See to this before it is too late: Look about thyself—awake to industry, deal honestly, live frugally, and...prohibit thyself from unnecessary expenses. I am a member of the Society that are combined for the purpose of discouraging intemperance, therefore, I take the liberty of inquiring of thee whether thou makes use of intoxicating liquors—if so, my candid advice to you is to take up a firm resolution and leave off making any kind of use of them unless for sickness. Confine thyself at home. Understand me all business must be attended to, but do not go after strange flesh; love mercy, walk humbly, and fear God. Observe the above advice and I believe thee will get along well and be comfortable here and be happy hereafter. (Wiggins:485-6)

³ Cuffe, Jr:3-4. Paul Cuffe, Jr. erroneously states that this voyage took place in 1808.

⁴ For example, the account book of David Lake, a white carpenter from Tiverton, RI shows that Cuffe paid Lake for repairing the *Ranger* in 1806 with cash, sugar, and lottery tickets. (David Lake Account Book, 1805-07, Rhode Island Historical Society Library, MS.

⁵ Principal sources of information: Thomas, *passim*; Loomis, Chapter 3, and Putney, “Pardon Cook...”, 47-54.

⁶ In 1811, when the British Navy tried to press into service Cuffe’s young African apprentice into service in Liverpool, Cuffe enlisted prominent Quaker merchants and abolitionists to write to the Admiralty for the young man’s release. Cuffe traveled to London where he went with famed Quaker abolitionist Thomas Clarkson to the Admiralty. There he discovered that the youth’s release had already been ordered. (Sherwood:174-176)

⁷ Wiggins: 467.

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