

The Collaborations of Paul Cuffe and Isaac Cory

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The subject of my remarks this morning concerns a number of little known enterprises that were carried out by Paul Cuffe and Isaac Cory. (In the interest of complete disclosure, I should acknowledge that Isaac was my great-grandfather seven generations back.) Neither he nor Cuffe was born in Westport, with Cuffe's father arriving by way of the Newport slave market, where he was purchased by a Slocum of Cuttyhunk, an offshore island within view of Westport. On Cuttyhunk, Paul's father was permitted to work for others and thereby earn not only his freedom but sufficient funds to buy a shoreline farm in Westport of approximately 120 acres, to which he moved his family.

Cory's path to Westport was different. His ancestors were among the early settlers of Rhode Island, having accompanied the religious dissenter Anne Hutchinson when she and a small group of followers sought religious freedom in the colony of Rhode Island, perhaps giving rise to the old saw that "if you've lost your religion, you'll find it in Rhode Island." There is no evidence, however, that Isaac found his, as there is no reference in any of his papers to church attendance or affiliation, a fact that I mention only because of the almost universal tendency of his biographers to designate him as a Quaker. He lived on Aquidneck Island where he and his wife's family, the Cadmans, operated ferry services across the Sakonnet River to Tiverton, Rhode Island. Or at least they did so, until December 8, 1776, when a force of 8,000 British regulars occupied Newport and the rest of Aquidneck Island. Most of the inhabitants of the island fled across the Sakonnet River to the mainland shore, which then included within its bounds the territory that would become the town of Westport. Once established there, Isaac Cory built, or acquired and outfitted, several relatively small craft known, for some unknown reason, as "shaving mills." Propelled by oars and a single sail, they were armed with swivel guns, small arms, cutlasses, and espointons, the latter being short pikes. Commissioned to cruise against the enemies of the United States, they did their part in harassing British naval operations along the coasts of New England, earning their owners considerable sums for goods taken, as awarded by the admiralty courts set up in New London, Connecticut.

On May 5th in 1790, the Westport town meeting considered a proposal submitted by Isaac Cory to give him and others liberty to set a school house on the highway near the southeast corner of George Brightman's land. Cory found his most ardent supporter in Paul Cuffe for what was to be an integrated school for blacks, whites, and Indian children. The school may not have been sustainable, being without financial support from the town, which did not officially establish town-supported schools until 1797.

In 1802, in the aftermath of the Revolutionary War, Cory and Cuffe jointly built and owned a two-masted vessel for the merchant service, 75 feet in length, and launched with the name *Hero*. For the brig's maiden voyage, Issac Cory was designated her master, but he in fact remained at home. Paul Cuffe assumed the role of sailing master, with Thomas Wainer as his first mate. One of Cuffe's sons was in the crew as were seven others. (The shipping paper is among the documents on exhibit here.) The vessel sailed on February 16th for Wilmington, North Carolina, and then proceeded on to the West Indies with a cargo of trade goods.

For *Hero*'s second voyage, Cory and Cuffe added a third mast to the brig, thereby converting her into a bark, which they intended to use as a whaler. For her fourth voyage, Cory and Cuffe set forth the following orders on September 8, 1810:

“The Bark *Hero* being ready to sail on a whaling voyage to the westward of Cape Horn, we appoint thee, William Bearn, master, [and] recommend that thee proceed to sea on the first wind that the pilot may think safe. Thou will make the best of thy way round Cape Horn in order to obtain a cargo of sperm oil, not refusing to take said cargo in whatever part of the sea thou are favored with the opportunity.

“Thou are fitted for a two years voyage and should return home so as not to overreach that time, oil or no oil. When at the westward of Cape Horn we advise thee to make the first of thy cruise to the windward from latitude 40 to 36 degrees south [i.e., off the central coast of Chile], but this we leave to thy judgment.

“On thy return, when approaching America, thou will endeavor to keep clear of Nantucket Shoals, sailing in with Long Island and making harbor at Newport or on Tarpaulin Cove and give us notice, or get into New Bedford. If it should be moderate, heave to at the mouth of the Bay and send a boat in [to Westport] and we will send a pilot out.

Wishing you a quick passage, successful voyage and safe return.”

Isaac Cory and Paul Cuffe

This voyage certainly did not go well, as we read in a letter to Captains Cuffe and Cory from Captain Bearns in Coquimbo, Chile, on June 30, 1812:

“Capts. Cuffe and Cory—

“I will inform you that I have got Better than I was when Capt. Joy left this port for thine. I was Blind & my eye was attended with a very hard pain & Capt. Joy said he would write every particular to you Concerning the Bark *Hero*.

“The Bark was so bad I could not Cruise on the weather Coast. I got my last Whale the 13th of February at the Galapagos Islands, which filled the Bark. My men was some scurvied, & I tried to get to Tombes & had light airs & calms & a very strong NW current & Rain, which carried me in the Latitude of 5 [degrees] 30’ North. I found it impossible to get into Tombes, then I tried for Coquimbo. I was 73 days in North Latitude and my men getting very Bad with the Scurvy. When I reached this Port, there was but Four men that could come on deck, which was my Mate and Charles G. Head and they was sick.

“I had been confined to my Cabin 12 days before I got to this Port. When I was coming in I was becalmed with a very High swell heaving on the Rocks & thick with fog. I let go both Anchors and brought her up. Previous to this I got the Sick men all in the boat, one died getting him in the boat, which was a Spanish man. I carried all on shore & sent off 18 men to tow the Bark. The Spaniards kept us all out of Doors one Day & one Night in the fog and cold which was very bad for us. Isaac Harte departed this Life in four hours after he got on Shore, but the Rest have got well & I am much better.

“The Bark is very rotten, the tops leaving the Bottom, it was impossible to get her Home or get her Repaired. There was a Survey of five Captains and some Spaniards and they condemned her. I shipped by Capt. Fitch, Ship *Mars*, 219 bbls. of oil, and by Capt. Pinkham, Ship *Alliance*, 480 bbls. I have lost oil by Leaking & turned up 750 bbls & now I have but 699. I sold the Bark for 4,000 dollars, but there is Duties & a number of charges more to be paid out of that. . . .

“The American Consul is a Spanish man and he is trying to take the advantage of me & the Rest of the Captains. I have had much trouble with him concerning the Bark & settlement but I have bound him by Writing.

“It is very hurtful to my eye to Write or I Should Write more particulars. I cannot see with one eye & the other is very weak & in much Pain in my eye and temple.

Yours, etc.

Wm. Bearns

The final collaboration of Isaac and Paul, that I know of, involves not whales, but sheep. This episode begins during Thomas Jefferson’s presidency, when his ambassador to Spain and Portugal sent to his care at the White House, a flock of about 40 Merino sheep, which were considered to have the finest wool of any breed. These Merinos were put out to graze on the White House lawn, setting off one of those crazes that erupt from time to time in the history of our nation. In this case, even hard-headed entrepreneurs like Cory and Cuffe took the plunge, sending Cuffe’s brig *Traveller* to Spain, where their agent acquired 87 merinos. Carried back to Westport, they divided the flock, selling some for inflated prices, while keeping the rest for their own use as breed stock. The wool was used by weavers who lived among them. (The Merino wool coverlet shown here is one of several that descended in the Cory family and is still usable to the present day, with little sign of wear and tear.)

This brings me to the end of the collaboration of Paul Cuffe and Isaac Cory as I know them. Still, the answer to one question eludes me, namely how did Cuffe enter into these partnerships with Cory knowing, as he surely did, that Isaac himself owned two black slaves—one named Jupiter, the other Glasgow—who were left to him in his father’s will. Their last names were “Cory” and they were apparently treated with respect. Both of them were married twice and, in the case of Jupiter, Cory provided him with a cottage to reside in the dunes of Horseneck Beach. Glasgow remained mostly in Rhode Island, where he married and had children. Beyond that, there seems little chance of learning more about these two black Corys, except to suggest that they were set free in 1780 and 1783, and offer further testimony to the magnanimous and forgiving nature of Paul Cuffe, the noble man we honor today.