CAPTAIN PAUL CUFFE 1759-1817

Paul Cuffe is born January 17th on Cuttyhunk Island in Massachusetts. His father, Cuff Slocum, is a freed slave and a farmer. His mother, Ruth Moses, is a native American. He is the 6th of 10 children and youngest son of the family.

He moves with his family from Cuttyhunk to a 120-acre farm on Old County Road in Dartmouth (now mostly in Westport).

He joins the crew of a whaling vessel, learns navigation and teaches himself to read and write.

He is captured by the British in New York harbor while crewing on a whaling ship, imprisoned for three months, and released. He goes to Dartmouth (now mostly in Westport) to the farm left to him and his brother John by his father at his death in 1772.

He repeatedly slipped through the British Navy's blockade to deliver goods to residents of Nantucket. He was intercepted once by the British and once by pirates, but otherwise successful. His boyhood spent on the Elizabeth Islands probably helped him navigate these waters on moonless nights.

Paul Cuffe and his brother John with others petitioned the State to exempt free African Americans and Mulattoes from taxation because they could not vote, providing an impetus to the 1783 voting reform in Massachusetts.

He marries Alice Abel Pequit, a native American. Over the next eighteen years they have eight children.

He purchases a 0.2-acre property on the Acoaxet (now Westport) River from Lemuel Soule, establishes wharf and boatyard where he builds a fleet of ships and partners with his brother-in-law, Michael Wainer, to expand their trade network up and down the Atlantic Coast.

His ships with all black crews and himself or Michael Wainer's sons as captains, trading along the US coast. He builds an integrated public school-house on his own property. He trades in Sweden and takes on two Swedish apprentices. Paul Cuffe was one of the wealthiest African-Americans at his time.

He purchases two properties on the Acoaxet (now Westport) River from Ebenezer Eddy—the 100-acres Eddy Homestead that he sells to Michael and Mary Wainer the following year, and the 40-acre Allen Lot that he retains as farmland.

By now he has built a substantial house and out-buildings on the boat-yard property that is among the top 10 high value properties recorded in the 1798 national property tax assessment in Westport.

The War of 1812 halts his efforts to assist the people of Sierra Leone. On his return, his brig Traveller is seized by US customs. He successfully petitions President James Madison for its release. He was granted a meeting with the President at the White House, perhaps the first African-American to be so honored. The Senate approves, but the House rejects his petition to continue trade with Sierra Leone despite the war with Britain.

He commits to helping his African brethren. He sails to Sierra Leone and then to Liverpool, where he may have been the first black captain of the first all-black crew to enter that port. He meets with Thomas Clarkson, William Wilberforce, William Allen, and other abolitionists in England. He returns to Sierra Leone and then to Westport.

Cuffe is accepted in the Westport Friends Meeting. He has gained the admiration of influential Quakers and abolitionists around the world who rally to him in difficult times. He enters a business partnership with his sons-in-law in New Bedford.

He is appointed to a committee to determine whether to build a new meeting house for the Westport Friends Meeting and then plays a leading role in supervising and funding the new Meeting House.

End of the war with Britain allows Cuffe to return to Sierra Leone. On this, his third voyage, his passengers included 38 people of color including 20 children emigrating to Sierra Leone. They mainly had farming skills which were utilized in various ways.

His health deteriorates and he is treated by Dr. James Handy. He dies in Westport on September 7, 1817. He is buried the next day on the grounds of the Westport Friends Meeting House. He is eulogized around the world.

1754-1763
French and Indian Wars across interior America and Canada

1759
Slave revolt in Jamaica

1759

1767

1773

1775-1783
American War of Independence

1776
The Philadelphia Yearly Meeting prohibited members from owning slaves

1776

1777-1783

A slave, Elizabeth Freeman "Mum Bet" is the first black woman to file and win a case in Massachusetts and is set free

1780

1781

1783
Slavery abolished in Massachusetts

1783

1787

On February 22, (Old) Dartmouth divided into Dartmouth (Westport and Dartmouth) and New Bedford (New Bedford, Fairhaven and Acushnet). On July 2, Dartmouth divided into present-day Dartmouth and Westport while New Bedford did not change.

1789-1797

1789-1799
French Revolution

1798

1799

1801-1807

1801
Haitian rebel leader Toussaint L'Overture abolishes slavery on Haiti

1807
US Congress passes legislation forbidding importation of slaves

1808

1810-1811

1812-1814

1812
War of 1812-14 between US and Great Britain

1813-14

1815-16

1817