

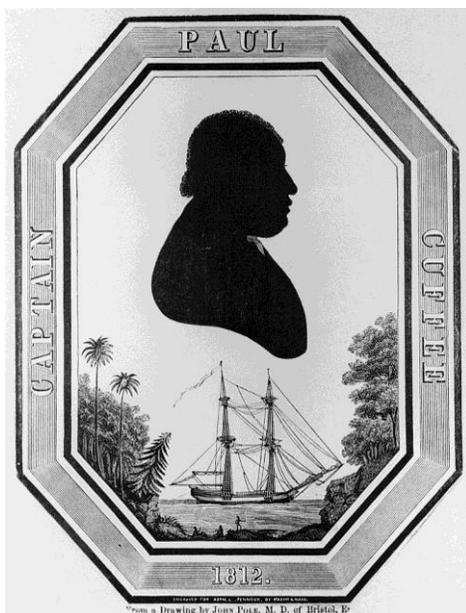


Paul Cuffe: An Early Example of African American and Native American Diasporism and Cosmopolitanism

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This fall, the Whaling Museum will premiere an exhibition devoted to the life, times, and impact of Captain Paul Cuffe - abolitionist, entrepreneur, merchant, whaler, navigator, and much more. Using artifacts from the Museum's permanent collections and works from partner institutions and private holdings, the exhibition will coincide with the much-anticipated opening of Captain Paul Cuffe Park on Johnny Cake Hill, adjacent to the Museum's Bourne Building and Wattles Jacobs Education Center. Themes to be explored include Cuffe's African and Native American ancestry, Cuffe's descendants, Cuffe's life, work, and achievements, and his relationship with other prominent New Bedford and Westport residents.

Paul Cuffe was born on the island of Cuttyhunk (off the coast of New Bedford) in 1759 as the free-born son of Kofi Slocum, a formerly enslaved West African (an Ashanti from modern-day Ghana) and Ruth Moses a Wampanoag woman. After his father's death, when he was 13, Cuffe took to the sea and engaged in many other pursuits in order to take care of his mother and his family. Eventually, working with his brothers, Cuffe became one of the wealthiest men of color in the country, rising to national repute, even becoming one of the first men of color to have a formal meeting with a sitting U.S. President.



Above: Silhouette of Paul Cuffe above his brig, The Traveller, presumably docked in Sierra Leone.

Despite his successes, Cuffe lived in a society where slavery was still legal, and segregation and lack of equality for people of color was the norm. Throughout his life he spoke out and worked for equality. Cuffe and his brother petitioned the state of Massachusetts in 1780 to protest the fact that while free African Americans were taxed, they did not get full citizenship rights. This petition eventually was instrumental in African Americans being granted full citizenship in the state of Massachusetts in 1783. The achievement was referred to in 1811 as “a day which ought to be gratefully remembered by every person of colour within the boundaries of Massachusetts, and the name of John and Paul Cuffee [sic] should always be united with this recollection” (*The Belfast Monthly Magazine*, 1811).

Paul Cuffe was also an active and prominent member of the Quaker community. He provided loans and assistance to community and family members when they faced difficulty, and established an integrated neighborhood school in his community in Westport, MA. Paul Cuffe had a vision for repatriation to Africa and traveled to Sierra Leone in order to promote industry there. He believed that a new type of triangular trade in commodities could be established between Africa, Europe, and the United States that would eventually replace the slave trade.

Outside of his own community, Cuffe worked with community leaders from Nova Scotia to petition the governor and Parliament to encourage the emigration of African descendants from English colonies to Sierra Leone. He believed in this vision so much that he fully funded 38 individuals to settle in Sierra Leone in 1816, supporting them and providing provisions for a full year.

Cuffe is an early example of African American and Native American diasporism and cosmopolitanism. He forged for himself a transnational, global, and connected identity through his travels from several U.S. ports to the West Indies, Africa, and Europe, where he brought news, goods, trade items, and people. He was a cosmopolitan figure in that he could navigate and negotiate social interactions in many areas of society in multiple countries and urban settings.

Cuffe was engaging in the earliest stages of Black Atlantic diasporism through his triangular travels between the U.S./West Indies, Europe, and West Africa. Diasporas and diasporic communities are defined on the basis of: dispersal from a center (homeland) to a periphery; maintenance of a memory or vision of the original homeland; the belief that they are not accepted by their host country; a desire to return to the original homeland; commitment to the restoration of their homeland; and consciousness and solidarity defined by a continuing relationship to the homeland (Safran, 1991).

Colonialism and slavery had tremendous impacts on African diaspora communities, but there is considerable variation among those communities. “A shared history of displacement, suffering...or resistance, may be as important as the projection of a specific origin” (Clifford, 1994).

Considering Cuffe through a lens of diasporism, we can explore his role in the development of the “Black Atlantic,” which here refers to a culture that is not specifically African, American, Caribbean, or British, but all of these at once. A black Atlantic culture transcends ethnicity and nationality to produce something new (Gilroy, 1993). This lens can also help us understand how the method, timing, and character of dispersal of African peoples throughout the globe shaped communities, including those in New Bedford, Westport, Nova Scotia, and Sierra Leone. Additionally, we can begin to think about what these diasporic communities have in common and how and why they differ. The diasporic perspective can explain Cuffe’s identity as simultaneously African, American, and Native American, why he felt pulled toward Africa, yet invested heavily in his own community, and why he felt it was important to send African Americans to Africa to create industry and prosperity.



Above: Compass used by Paul Cuffe now part of the New Bedford Whaling Museum collection.

As the son of a Native American woman, Paul Cuffe was engaging in a global seafaring industry that was increasingly attracting Native American men, specifically Wampanoag men. Native men from the New England area became world travelers in whaling and other seafaring industries. Although not widely studied, we can speak of a “Native American diaspora” resulting from both the dispersal of Native American slaves throughout the Caribbean, and the movement and networking of Native men throughout the globe. These movements have resulted in New England –descended Native American communities in diverse locations such as Bermuda and New Zealand.

Although Cuffe engaged regularly with those outside of his immediate African American and Native American communities, he clearly had a focus on educating and elevating communities of color based on a shared “racial” identity. These communities were separate from, and had little opportunity to be a part of, the white majority with regard to equal access to political or socioeconomic resources, even though Massachusetts provided better opportunities than other areas of the U.S. at that time. Therefore, African-descended people in the U.S., such as Paul Cuffe, had to create their own, often parallel institutions and communities. Within these communities, individuals replicated and internalized many of the Euro American institutions they were partially incorporated into, while also looking to Africa in search of continuities consistent with African cultures and tradition.

Paul Cuffe and members of his community were able to create and maintain African and Native American identities utilizing various mechanisms. Particularly with regard to his African identity, Cuffe had the benefit of encountering individuals of African descent throughout the globe to help forge an identity based on a shared plight, common goals, and historical affiliation with the continent of Africa.

The Captain Paul Cuffe exhibit and park will, in part, view Cuffe through a diasporic lens and explore his early and significant role in the Atlantic World. He is an early example of African American transnationalism and global travel by free African Americans. Cuffe was one of the first to espouse “Black Nationalism” and to advocate that African-descended peoples in the United States, Europe, Canada, and the West Indies repatriate to West Africa to create a society on par with those of the United States and Europe. It is our goal that visitors understand the local, regional, and global impact of Paul Cuffe’s diasporic perspective in his life, work, and vision.

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Gilroy, Paul (1993) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness*. London: Verso Publishing.

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Safran, W (1991) “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora* Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 83 -99.

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