

AMERICANS MOURN DEATH OF ABOLITIONIST

PAUL CUFFE, WHO HAS DIED AGED 58, CROSSED RACIAL AND CULTURAL DIVIDES

By our obituaries editor

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RENOWNED shipowner, merchant and political campaigner Paul Cuffe died last month in the town of Westport, Massachusetts, marking the end of a remarkable life. A devout, hard-working sailor and entrepreneur, Cuffe was a self-made man, rising to become one of the wealthiest men of mixed race in America.

Cuffe was born on January 17, 1759 to Cuffe Slocum, a freed slave and skilful carpenter, and Ruth Moses, from the Wampanoag tribe of Aquinnah on the island of Martha's Vineyard. After taking his father's first name as his surname following his father's

death in 1772, Cuffe became a seaman, serving on whaling ships and then, during the Revolutionary War, as a privateer smuggling supplies through the British blockades. In 1783, he married Alice Pequit, a member of the Pequot tribe of Connecticut with whom he had seven children.

After the war, Cuffe opened a shipyard with his brother-in-law and became a successful merchant and farm owner. A committed Quaker, Cuffe combined hard work and resourcefulness with a political conscience: Paul and his brother John refused to pay their taxes in the 1770s on the basis that, despite being free men, they were denied the right to vote and briefly jailed. However, their taxes were reduced following the dispute.



As his wealth and influence grew, Cuffe became a leading voice in the abolitionist and humanitarian movements to resettle freed slaves in Sierra Leone, and he sailed to Britain and West Africa to advance this cause. He also did much to help the poor at home, including establishing a smallpox hospital and a racially integrated school.

In 1812, after Cuffe's cargo was

seized on charges that it had broken an embargo, he traveled to Washington, D.C. to meet President Madison, who ordered its release. Cuffe is thought to be the first free black American to have been received by a sitting president at the White House.

The respect and affection widely felt for Cuffe is summarized by his friend Reverend Peter Williams Jr.: "Such was his reputation for wisdom and integrity, that his neighbors always consulted him in all their important concerns; and, oh! what honor to the son of an African slave, the most respectable men in Great Britain and America were not ashamed to seek him for counsel and advice!"