



Paul Cuffe

Daring Seafarer and Early Abolitionist

1759 - 1817

Mariner

Entrepreneur

Philanthropist

Abolitionist

Pioneer



This oil-on-canvas painting once sold as an image of Captain Paul Cuffe – but its origins and attribution are unverified.

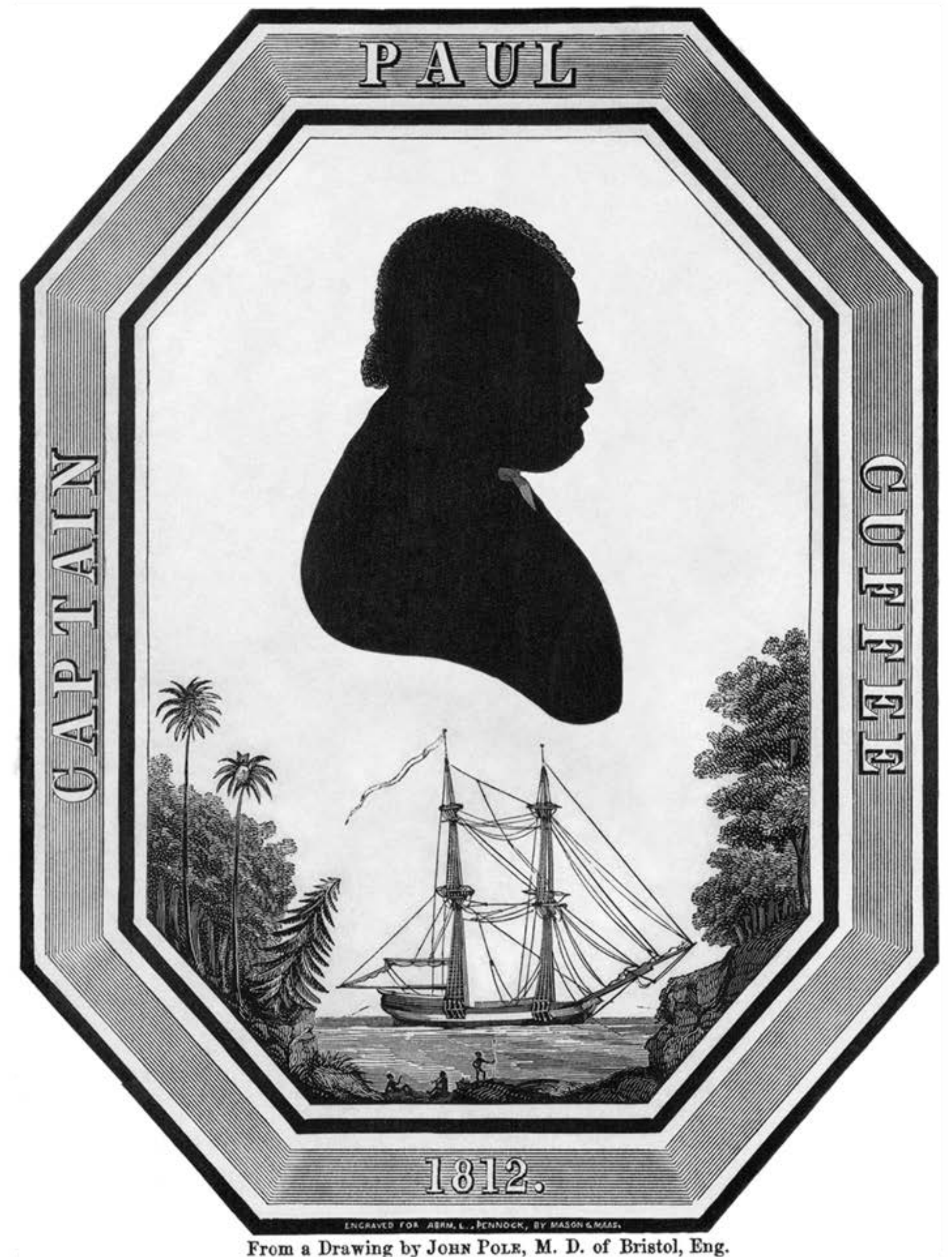


Life Achievements

Paul Cuffe was a sea captain, entrepreneur, and philanthropist who lived through the birth and early life of the United States.

In the early 1800s, he was perhaps the wealthiest Black man in the young republic, renowned and respected for his business sense and moral character.

This engraving of Paul Cuffe by Mason & Maas, is in the Library of Congress.



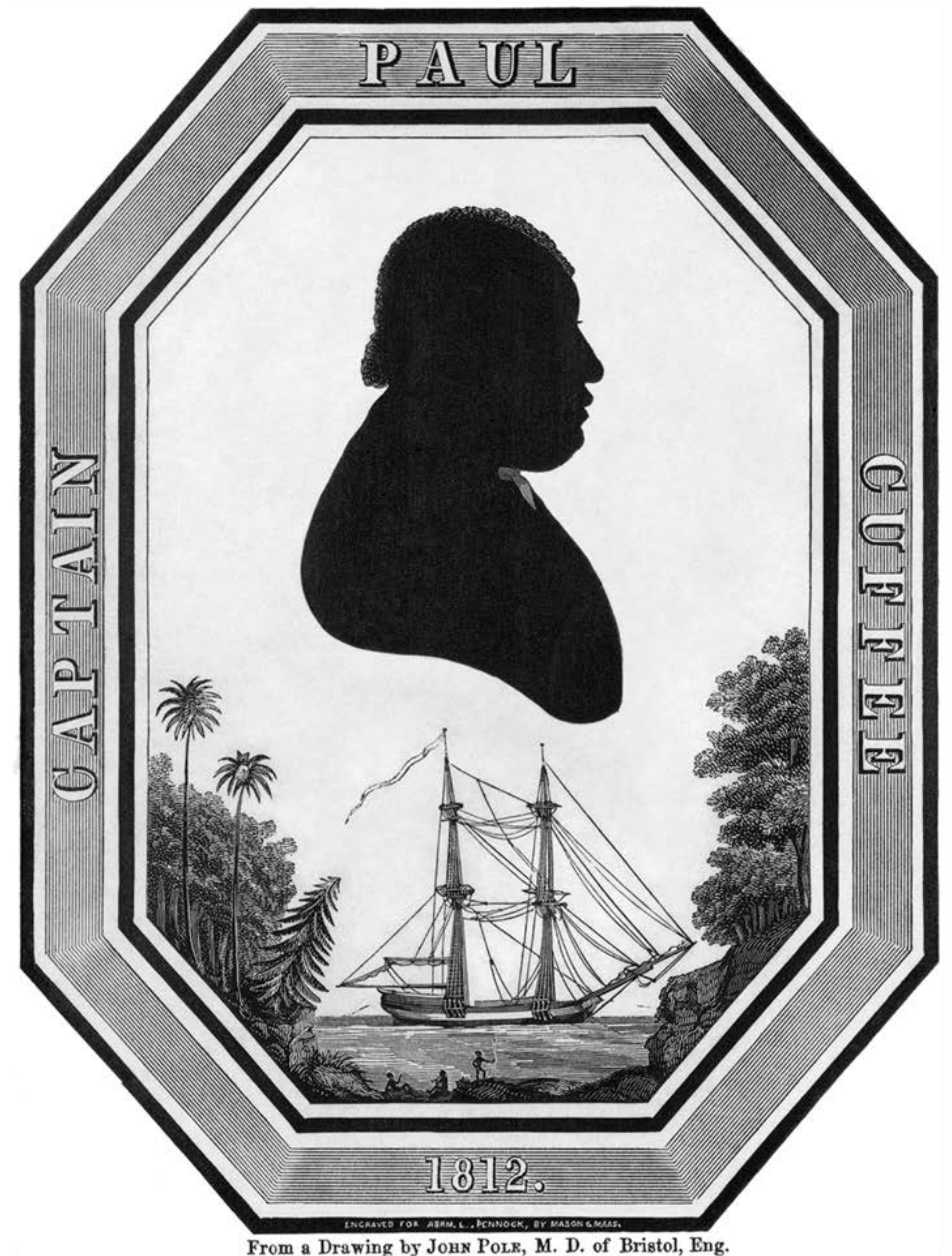


Life Achievements

Cuffe used his wealth and influence to advocate for the abolition of slavery, advance the cause of racial equality, and build solidarity among all people of African ancestry.

Cuffe pioneered one of the first racially integrated schools in America and was the first man of color to visit The White House, where he met with President James Madison in 1812.

This engraving of Paul Cuffe by Mason & Maas, is in the Library of Congress.



ENGRAVED FOR JEREMIAH PENNOCK, BY MASON & MAAS.
From a Drawing by JOHN POLE, M. D. of Bristol, Eng.



Ancestry

Paul Cuffe's father was an Ashanti man (likely born in modern-day Ghana) named Koffi, who had been kidnapped and sold into slavery as a boy. Koffi became a skilled carpenter and was freed by his owner, Jacob Slocum, in 1745.

Koffi took his enslaver's last name and married a Wampanoag Indian woman, Ruth Moses; together they settled on a farm and had seven children.

Paul Cuffe was born Paul Slocum on Cuttyhunk Island, Massachusetts in 1759.

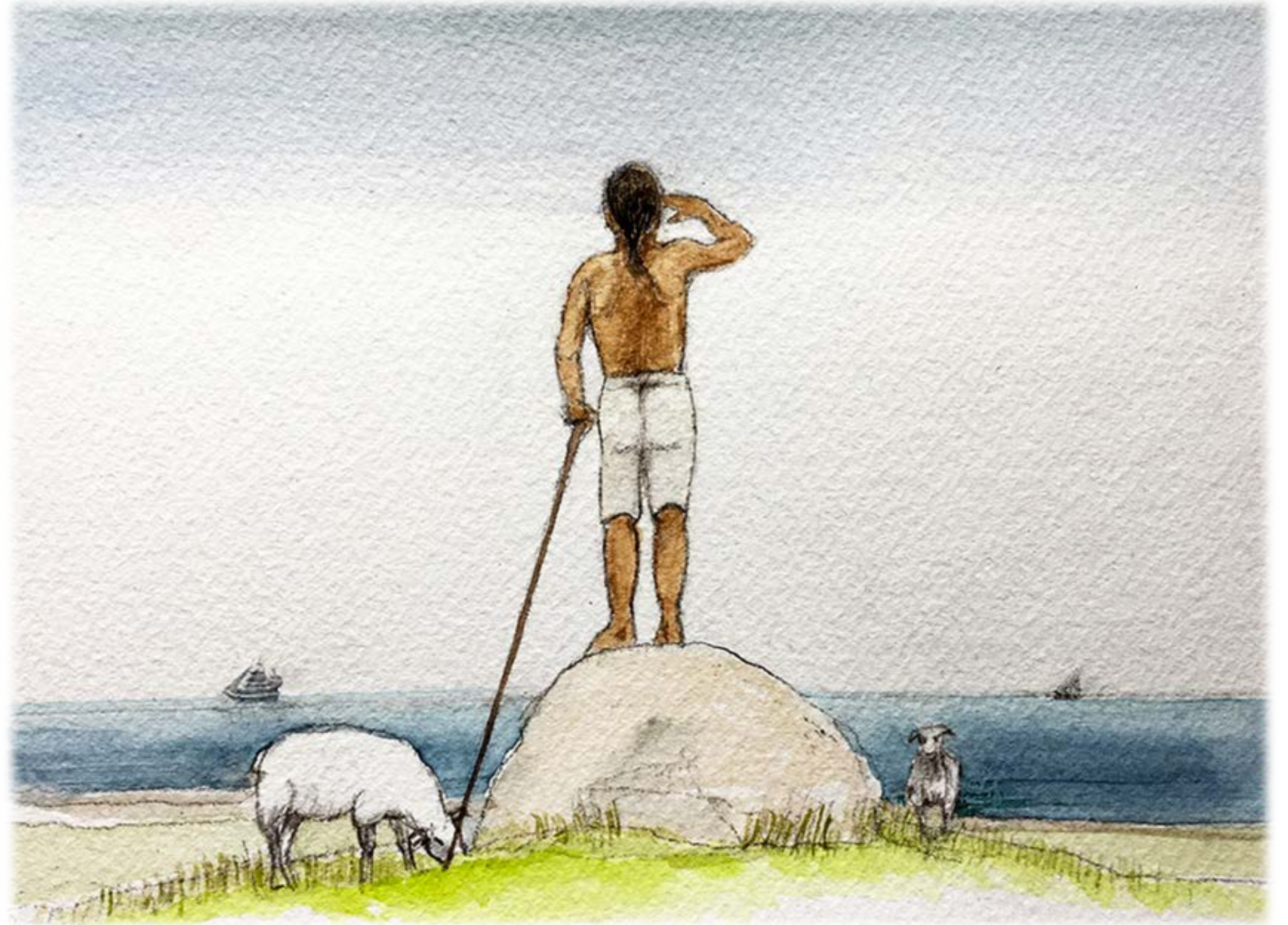
This image from the PaulCuffe.org website depicts the parents of Paul Cuffe.



Ancestry

Paul was only 12 when he and his older brother John inherited the family's 116-acre farm near Dartmouth after their father died in 1772.

Some years later, as young men, the brothers dropped "Slocum" and adopted the surname "Cuffe," an Anglicized version of their father's African name, as a tribute to him.



This image from the PaulCuffe.org website depicts Paul as a boy on Cuttyhunk tending sheep and watching passing ships.



Taking to Sea

Despite owning a farm, the seafaring world of nearby Nantucket called to young Paul. At age fourteen he signed on to a whaling ship, and voyaged to the West Indies in 1773.

During a voyage in 1776, he was imprisoned by the British Navy in New York harbor.

The exact charges are unknown, but they were almost certainly connected to the outbreak of the Revolutionary War.

This image from the PaulCuffe.org website depicts Cuffe on a whaling expedition.





Daring smuggler!

Once released, Cuffe used his seafaring skills to sail much-needed supplies past the British blockade to his neighbors in Nantucket and on Martha's Vineyard, where people were scrounging for basic goods and depended on illicit trade to survive.



This was extremely dangerous work. In addition to outwitting the most powerful navy on earth, Cuffe had to deal with pirates and the natural dangers of navigating the Atlantic coast in the dead of night. While smuggling goods to people on the coast, he formed important relationships with prominent families.

This image from the PaulCuffe.org website depicts Cuffe and a friend nearing Nantucket at dawn.

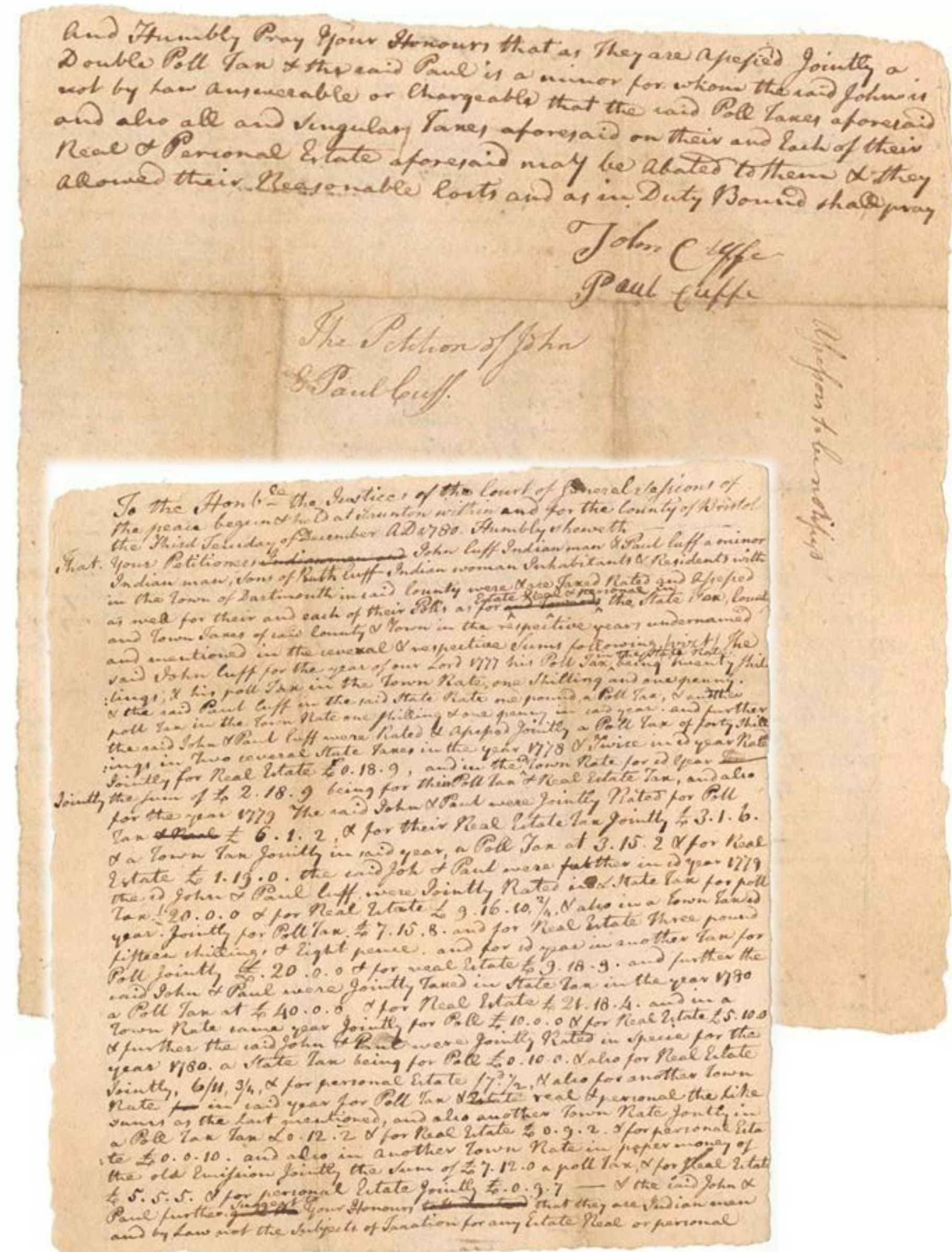
Tax Protests

Paul Cuffe fought for the values of the American revolution on land and sea – even if that meant opposing the patriot leadership.

In the spirit of the famous motto “No taxation without representation,” in 1780 Paul, his brother John, and some other men of color appealed to the Massachusetts state house that as men of “African extract” they were unable to vote and therefore should not be taxed.

Young Paul’s wartime experiences on land and sea strengthened both his commercial ambitions and his resolve to fight for his rights.

Actual petition signed by John and Paul Cuffe regarding taxation from the [National Museum of African American History and Culture](#)





Going into Business

In his twenties, Paul Cuffe was hard at work building a family and a flourishing trading business. In 1783, he married widow Alice Pequet (like his mother, a Wampanoag Indian woman) and went into business with his brother-in-law, Michael Wainer, who had married his sister Mary a few years earlier.

Michael and Mary's sons grew up to serve on the ships that Paul and Michael built. Paul and Alice had seven children.

Paul Cuffe's son, also named Paul, went into the family business and published his *Narrative of the life and adventures of Paul Cuffe* in 1839, a vivid portrait of life at sea in the early 1800s that includes reminiscences of sailing with his father as a boy.



Building the Traveller, painting by Ray Shaw.



Business Success

In 1795, Cuffe shifted his business from whaling and fishing to cargo goods. By 1806, Cuffe and his partners owned a small fleet of vessels, almost all of which were mastered by sailors related to Cuffe by blood or marriage.

As his wealth and network of influential friends grew, Cuffe became known as a community leader and humanitarian.

At home in Westport, MA he helped fund a smallpox hospital and built a racially integrated school, among the first of its kind.

Cuffe had business relationships with people of all races on the Atlantic coast from Baltimore to New York. He also sailed to England and Africa!



The Traveller, painting by Ray Shaw.

Business Success

Imagine what it must have been like sailing across the Atlantic ocean during this era!



The Traveller, painting by Ray Shaw.

How long do you think the trip would have taken?

How dangerous do you think it was?

What hazards would it involve?





“Back to Africa” Colonization

In London, where he stayed many times during his voyages, Cuffe formed close ties to the abolitionist movement. Impressed by this African American entrepreneur and his deep religious convictions, British abolitionists asked Cuffe to sail to a newer British colony—Sierra Leone—created as a settlement for former American slaves who had run away from their masters and joined the British during the Revolutionary war.

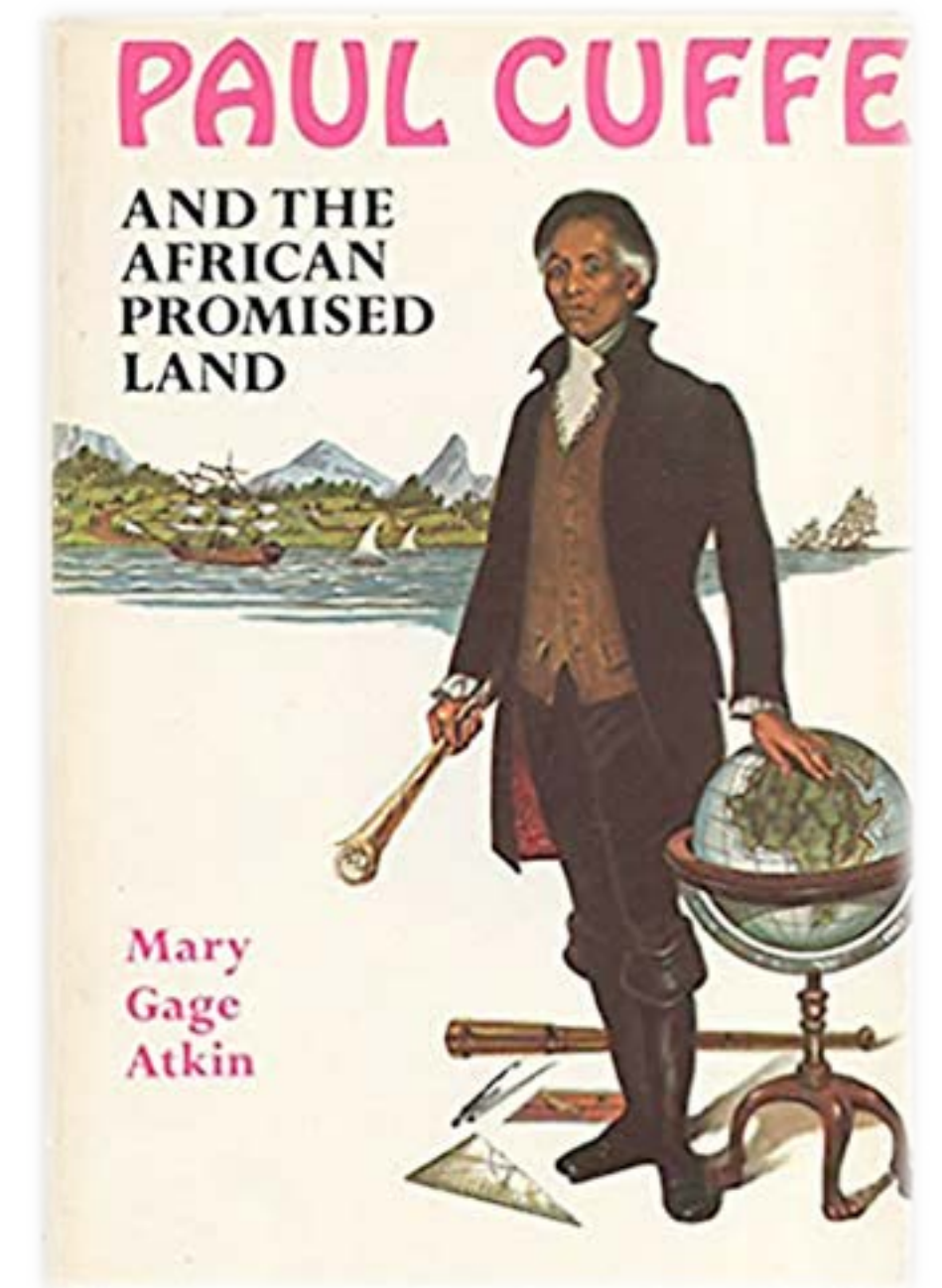
Why would the British be interested in resettling people who had supported them during the Revolutionary War?

Have you heard of the “Back to Africa” movement before?

Why would people have supported it?

Why might other people be opposed to it?

A biography of the Afro-American sea captain who sought to attract freed Blacks from America to the colony of Sierra Leone by Mary Gage Atkin in 1977.





“Back to Africa” Colonization

Like many White Loyalists in colonial America, Blacks who supported the crown were exiled to Nova Scotia after Americans defeated the British.

Where is Nova Scotia?

Do you know what the words “Nova Scotia” mean?

Finding conditions difficult there, these Black Loyalists had petitioned the British government to settle in Africa.

What conditions do you think were difficult?

The British wanted Cuffe to report back on the success of its communities of freed slaves. This relationship with British antislavery leaders like **William Wilberforce** led to Cuffe’s involvement with the colonization movement.





William Wilberforce (1759-1833)

William Wilberforce was a British politician who successfully led the movement to abolish the slave trade. A bill he introduced to abolish the slave trade in the British West Indies passed into law on March 25, 1807.

Wilberforce then campaigned to abolish slavery in all of the British Empire. On July 26, 1833, the Slavery Abolition Act was passed by the Commons (it became law the following month). Three days later Wilberforce died. He was interred at Westminster Abbey.



Portrait of William Wilberforce, at the age of 29, by John Rising, 1790.

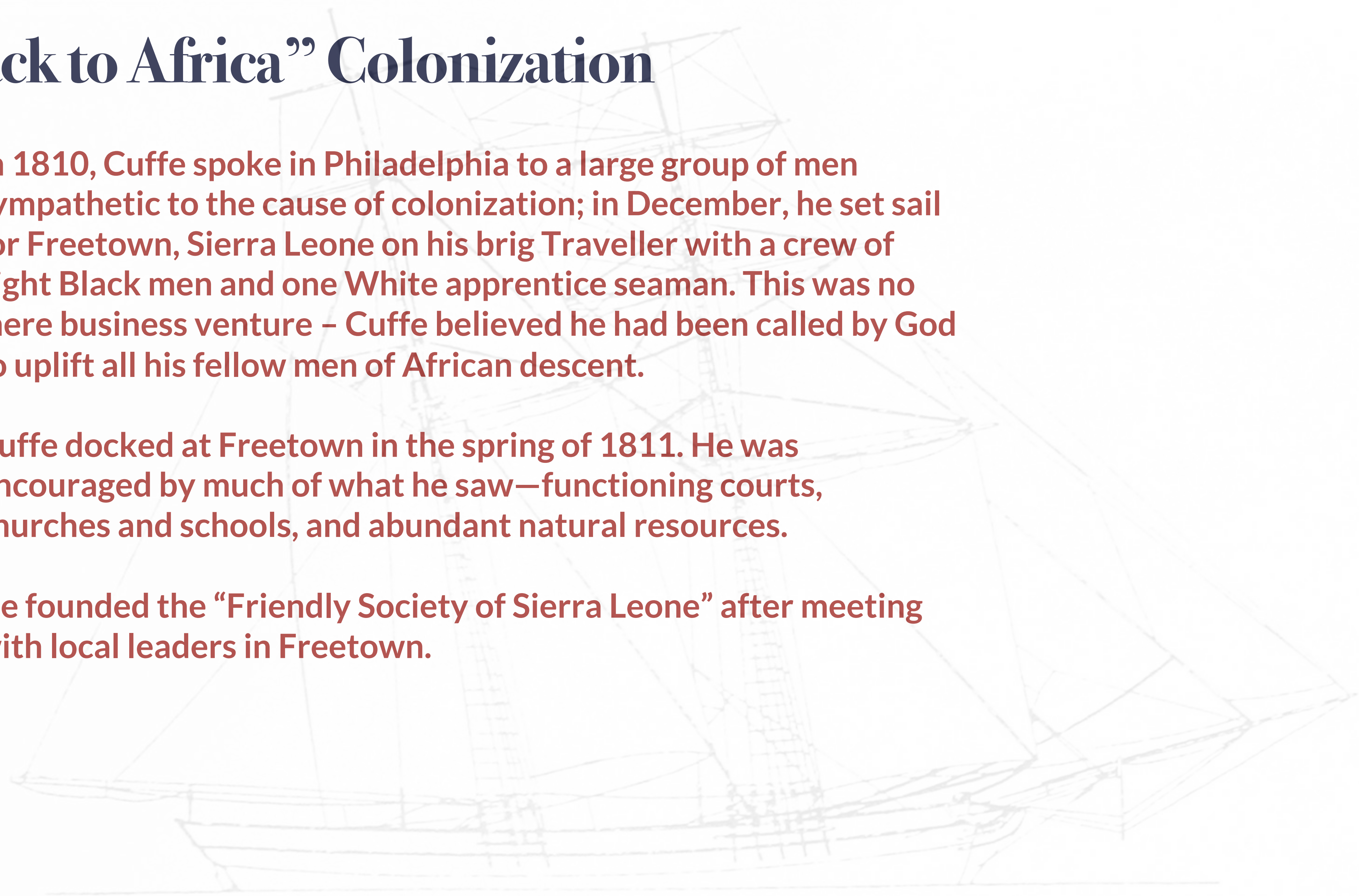


“Back to Africa” Colonization

In 1810, Cuffe spoke in Philadelphia to a large group of men sympathetic to the cause of colonization; in December, he set sail for Freetown, Sierra Leone on his brig Traveller with a crew of eight Black men and one White apprentice seaman. This was no mere business venture – Cuffe believed he had been called by God to uplift all his fellow men of African descent.

Cuffe docked at Freetown in the spring of 1811. He was encouraged by much of what he saw—functioning courts, churches and schools, and abundant natural resources.

He founded the “Friendly Society of Sierra Leone” after meeting with local leaders in Freetown.





“Back to Africa” Colonization

Having stayed in Sierra Leone a few months, Cuffe next sailed for Liverpool, England, where he was now famous. Crowds of Englishmen hoping to get a look at the famed captain greeted the *Traveller*, British writers reported on Cuffe’s daily activities as he and fellow abolitionists toured London and raised funds for the Friendly Society, formalizing its status and laying plans for the recruitment of settlers and the colony’s material development.

War of 1812

When Cuffe returned to the United States, the War of 1812 between America and Great Britain had broken out. Given that the Traveller was carrying goods from Sierra Leone, a British colony, Cuffe's ship and cargo were seized.

But Cuffe had never been afraid to stand up to the powers that be. He appealed to some of his Quaker friends to arrange an audience with President James Madison, whom Cuffe hoped to persuade that the situation was only the result of bad timing, not a deliberate attempt to break the blockade.



Visiting The White House

Cuffe rode the stagecoach from Massachusetts to Washington, D.C. and became the first Black American to visit The White House where he met President James Madison.

Cuffe was, by all accounts, greeted warmly by the President and his advisors, and Madison ordered that Cuffe's ship and cargo be released. He wanted to hear about Cuffe's travels in Sierra Leone and Cuffe's assessment of its prospects.

Madison had a strong interest in colonization and would become a member of the American Colonization Society (ACS) — an effort to colonize Africa with Black American freemen led mostly by White Southerners (including slave owners) and Presbyterian churchmen. This project which would eventually lead to the creation of Liberia.



Statue of James Madison by Walker K. Hancock, Library of Congress James Madison Building, Washington, D.C.

America: His True Home

Though later in life Cuffe did provide advice to the ACS, he was suspicious of their intentions and repelled by the prejudices held by many of its leaders.

Cuffe believed Christianity, commerce, and democracy could help build in Africa a dramatic example of racial equality. The ACS, on the other hand, saw colonization as a way to “repatriate” unequal free Blacks who, in their minds, had no place in America.

Still, though proud of his African ancestry, Cuffe always saw America (especially the Massachusetts coast) as his home.

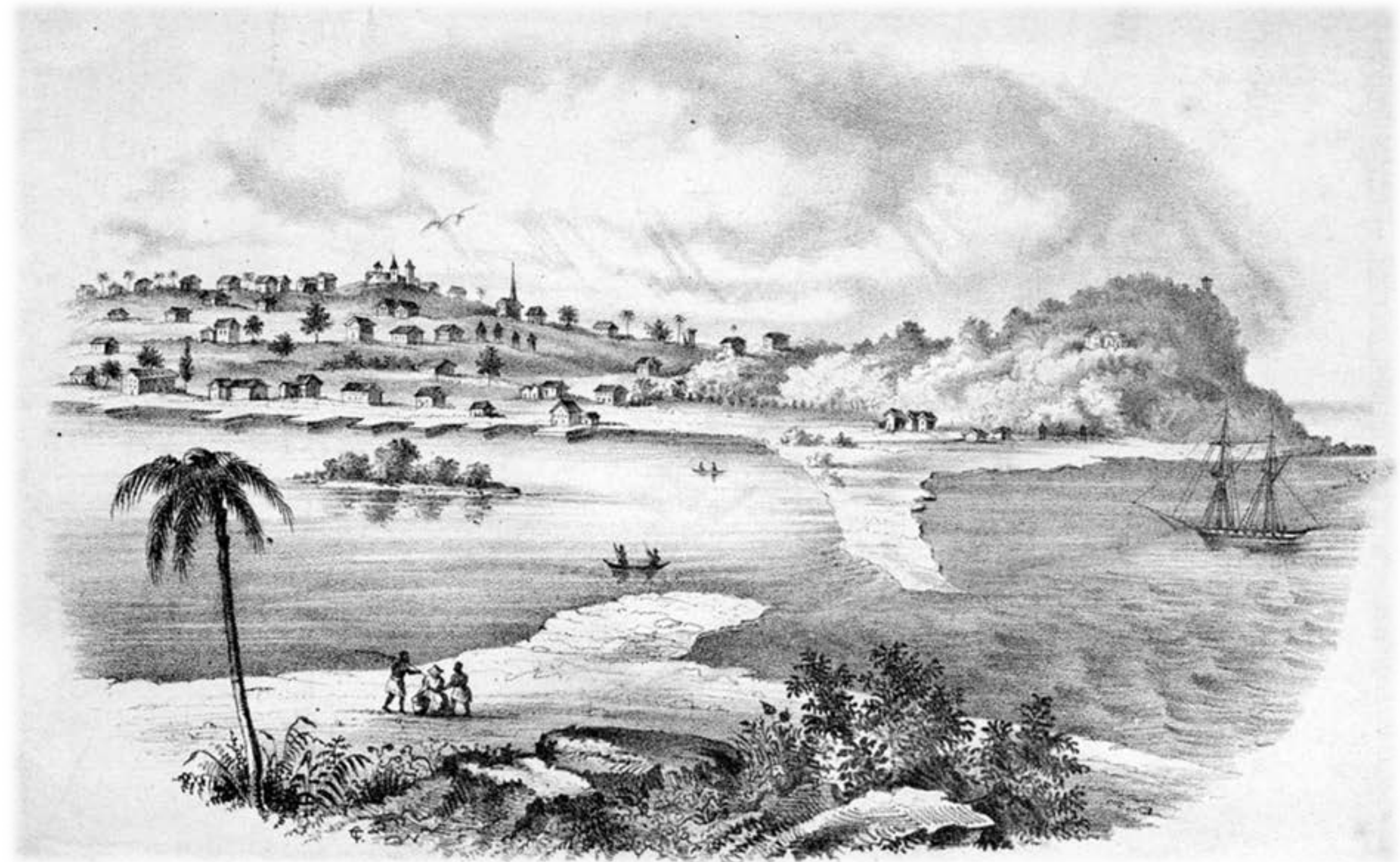


Last Voyage

Cuffe's final voyage to Sierra Leone in 1815 brought 38 African Americans to Freetown.

It seems that Cuffe had been promised funding by his abolitionist friends in Britain to support this venture, but the money never materialized.

Cuffe brought this small number of settlers across the Atlantic at an enormous expense to himself, losing much of his fortune.





Stellar Reputation

One testament to Cuffe's impressive reputation is that, in 1816, a con-artist began raking up debts along the eastern seaboard by pretending to be Paul Cuffe.

When news of this criminal enterprise began to spread through New England, the real Paul Cuffe was outraged and took pains to warn his friends about this swindler.

When the man was eventually caught, investigators determined that he "has had So many names, that it is hard Say what his name is."

Cuffe saw these actions as an attack not only on him personally, but on his antislavery efforts and the reputation of all Black men.



This thirty-two point dry-card gimbaled compass (made in Providence, RI by Isaac Greenwood circa 1780) was used by Paul Cuffe who, at his death, was the best known African American in the country.

(The New Bedford Whaling Museum).



Final Days

As he managed the fallout from the bizarre con-artist affair, Cuffe's health declined sharply. He died at his home in Westport on September 7, 1817.

Cuffe's last words to his family – “let me pass quietly away” – reflect the noble, reserved character for which he was respected and admired in his lifetime.

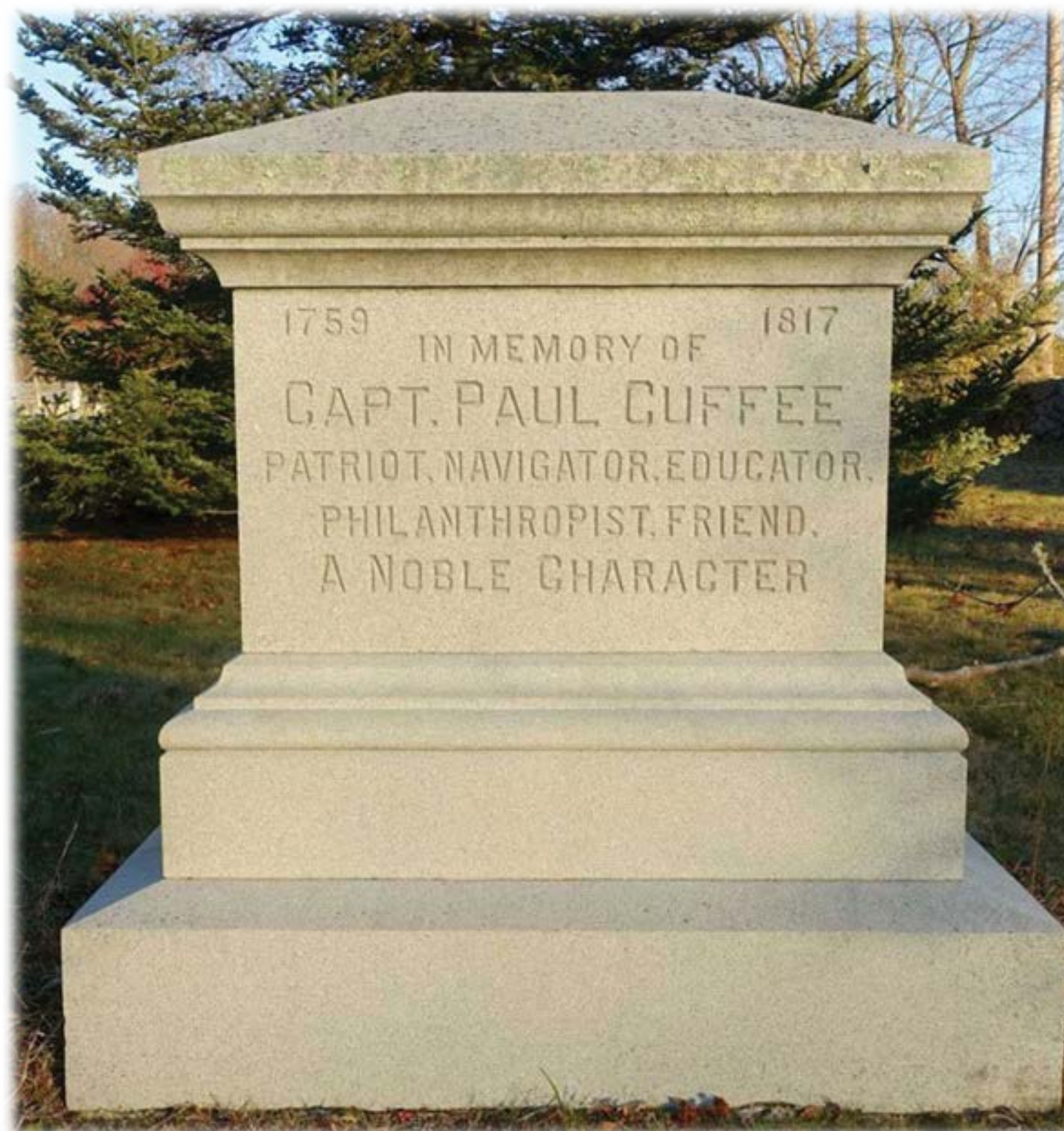
He was buried in the Westport Friends Meeting House cemetery, in MA.



Gravestones commemorating Paul Cuffe (1759-1817) and his wife Alice Abel Cuffe (1755-1819) are located in the cemetery behind the Friends Meeting House at 930 Main Road, Westport, MA.

Cuffe Remembered

Today, Paul Cuffe is widely memorialized and celebrated, especially on the south coast of Massachusetts, where many of his descendants still live.



Cuffe has been called a “Pan-Africanist” and a father of the “Back-to-Africa” movement by later interpreters. In some ways, this is true; Cuffe saw a Black-led colonization movement as a path towards the destruction of the slave trade and the liberation of the African diaspora. But in other ways, his attitudes aligned with those of White 19th century colonialists.

Monument located at Westport, MA Quaker Meeting House.



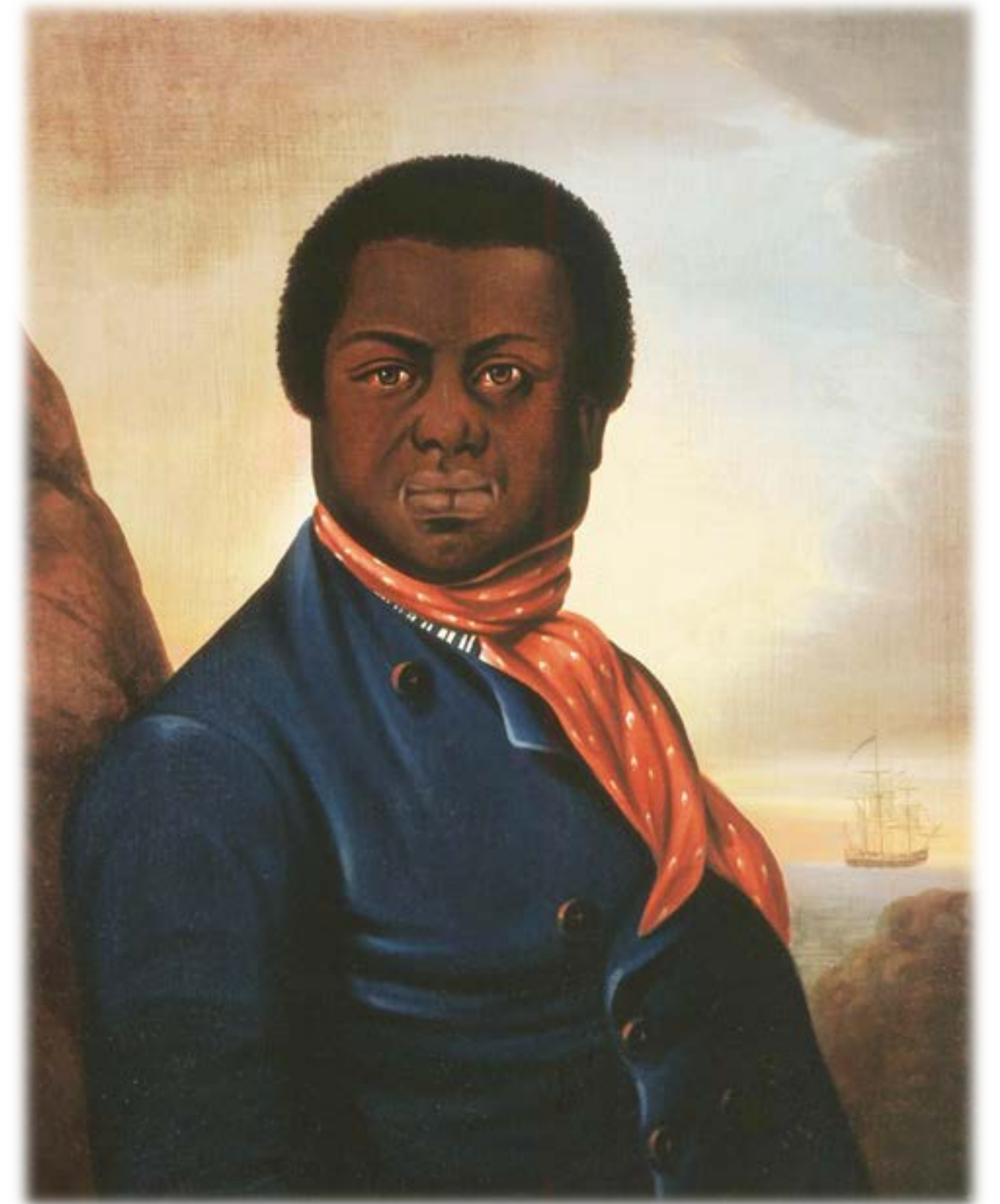


Cuffe's Beliefs

As historian Jeffrey A. Fortin wrote in his study of Cuffe's Sierra Leone venture:

Scholars have often described Paul Cuffe as an early Black nationalist who brought with him the first shipload of colonists to Africa in 1815. Cuffe probably would have endorsed that view. At the same time, he would not have been at all reticent about explaining his determination to export Christian, entrepreneurial, moral, or American, values to Africa.

But very few free Black Americans had any interest in leaving the country in which they had lived all their lives. Those who did preferred to settle in the new Black republic of Haiti. However difficult their situation, most believed that the battle for freedom was here, in America, their home.

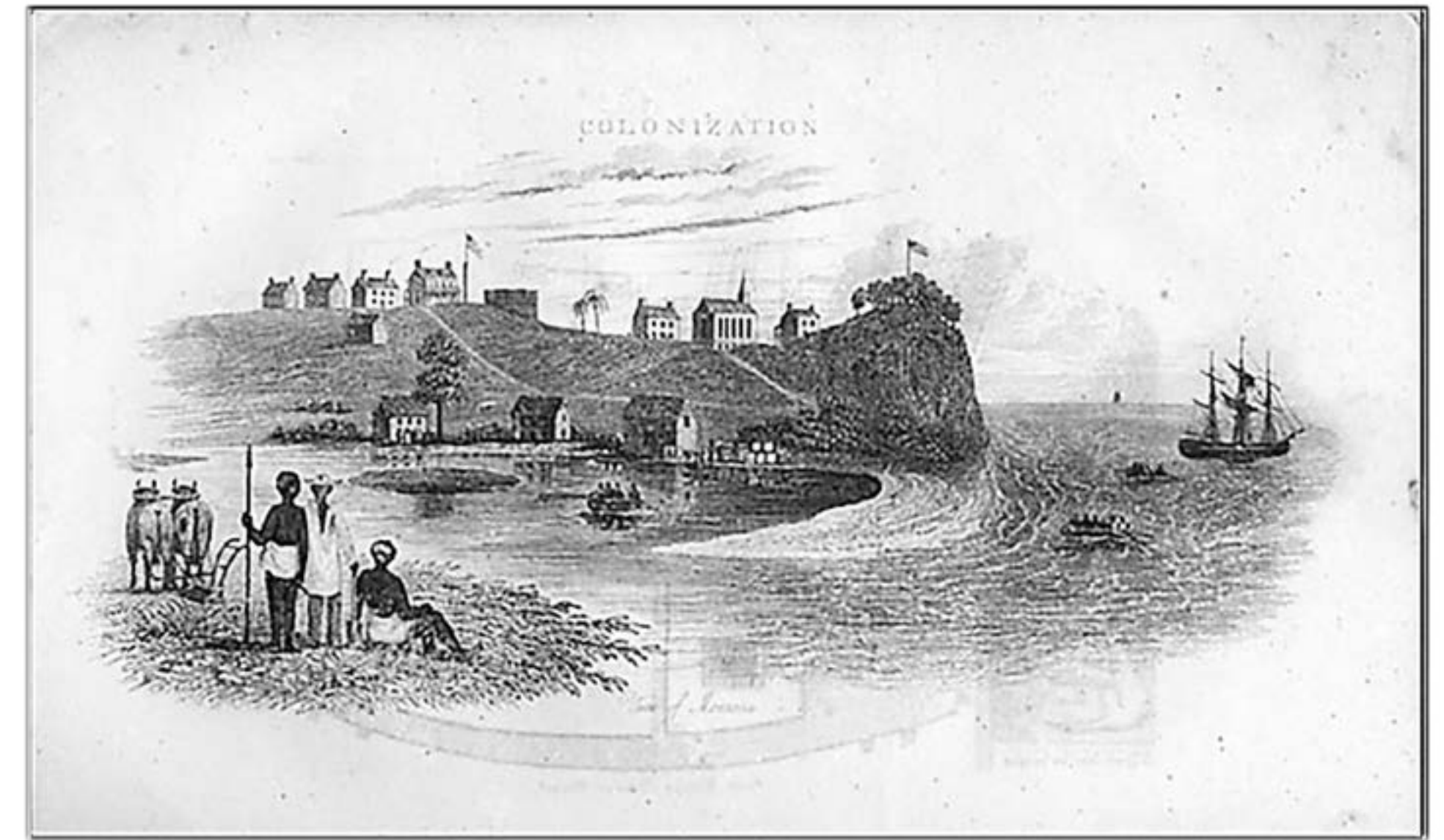


*Portrait of a Black Sailor (Paul Cuffe?)
Oil on canvas circa 1880. Unknown Artist.
(Los Angeles County Museum of Art)*



Cuffe's Beliefs

Liberia is a West African nation founded by Black American colonists in the 1820's. It replicated the social structures of the American South, where most American settlers originated, both in terms of its folkways and form of government. The settlers mostly married among themselves and until 1980, a minority of "Americo-Liberians" held sway over the indigenous African majority.



Colonization of Monrovia in Liberia.

Cuffe himself seems never to have abandoned his colonial dream. A century later, when race relations in America were at their nadir, Black leaders like Marcus Garvey would embrace (though for quite different reasons) a similar vision of building a Pan-African nation as a path to freedom and racial equality.



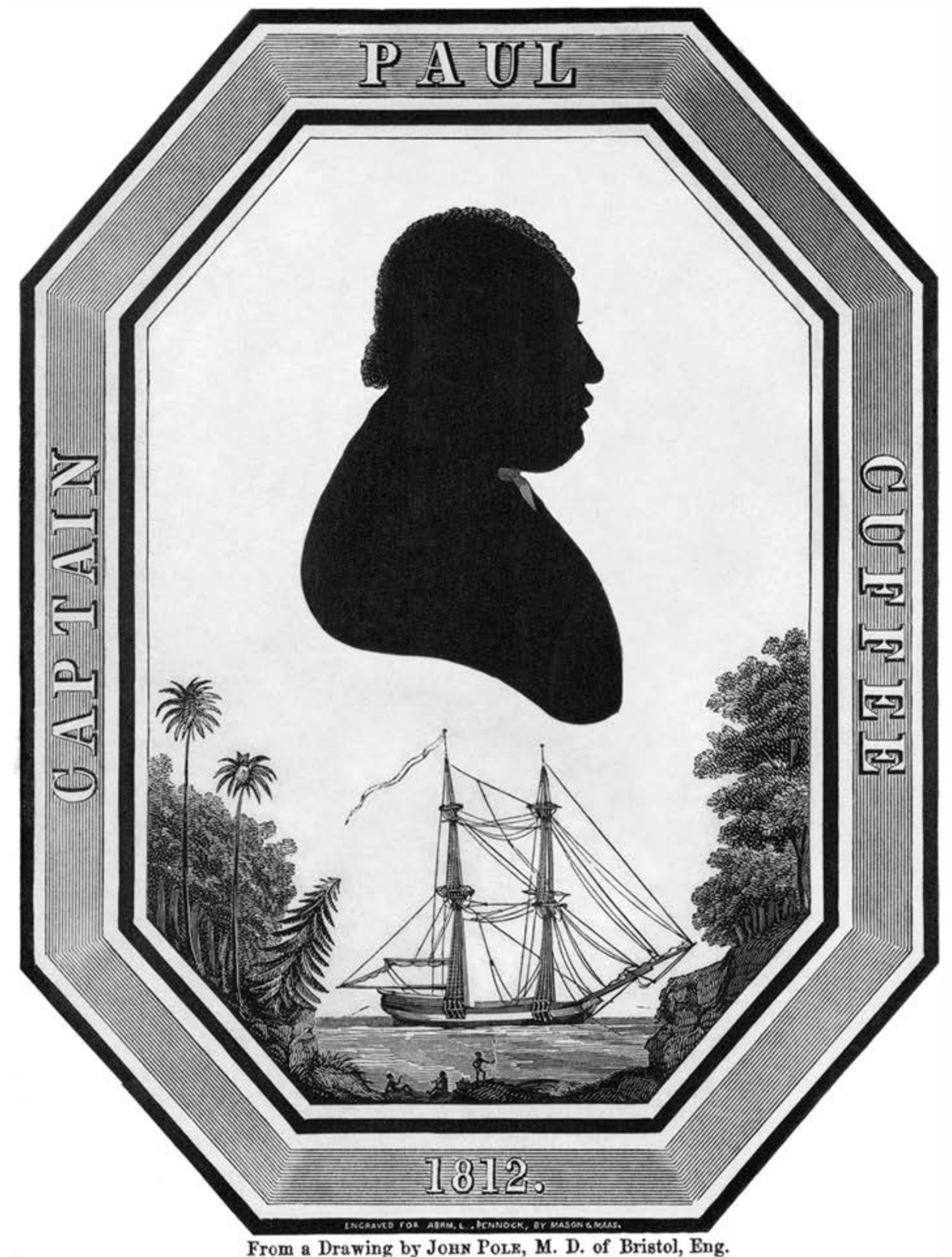
A Leader in His Time

How were Paul Cuffe's beliefs shaped by the times in which he lived?

Are your beliefs shaped by the times in which you live? How so?

How might your beliefs be different if you were living in the 19th century? The 20th?

What about the 22nd century?





Vocabulary

Mariner
Renowned
Advocate
Solidarity
Anglicized
Seafaring
Scrounging
Illicit
Extract
Colonization

Interred
Brig
Abundant
Prejudice
Repatriate
Swindler
Diaspora
Align
Indigenous
Nadir



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