



EPISODE 10, 2004: PAUL CUFFEE MUSTER ROLL , MASSACHUSETTS

Tukufu: Our last story reveals the full extent of African-American involvement in the Revolutionary War. The year is 1780. The war of independence is entering its fifth ferocious year. In the northern colonies, the Continental Army is forcing the British to withdraw. But in the south, bitter battles still rage. Meanwhile, in revolutionary Massachusetts, the Patriots have already formed their own government and are writing a radical new constitution. But for most African Americans who live there, little has changed. Many remain enslaved. And those who are free are denied the vote and dismissed as second-class citizens. But one young, African-American freeman named Paul Cuffee is fighting back. He's building a fortune in transatlantic trade. Campaigning for equal rights for non-whites and starting a society to help African-Americans find full freedom back in Africa. Over 220 years later, a man in Las Vegas has an old document that could reveal an unknown chapter in this remarkable man's life. For the past 40 years, Doctor Darville Knowles has collected African American memorabilia. Some time ago, he came across what seemed to be a Revolutionary War muster roll. Among this list of men signing up to fight for the Revolution, one name stood out.

Darville Knowles: I looked at the name and it said Paul Cuffee and a light went off and I remember my grandmother talking about Paul Cuffee who offered to take the slaves back to Africa and I remember her saying we are all children of Paul Cuffee.

Tukufu: Could the Paul Cuffee, often pronounced Coefee, on the muster roll be the famous Paul Cuffee? And would a black man fighting racism in revolutionary Massachusetts really sign up to fight the British? I'm Tukufu Zuberi and I've come to Las Vegas to investigate this story. So, what do we have here?

Darville Knowles: This is a document which I acquired probably 25 or 30 years ago and it is a muster roll.

Tukufu: What can I help you with?

Darville: Number one, I want to know if this is an authentic American Revolutionary War document. And number 2, the Negro listed is Paul Cuffee.

Tukufu: Paul Cuffee?

Darville: I want to know if this Paul Cuffee is the Paul Cuffee of American history.

Tukufu: Paul Cuffee was known to be anti-establishment and if you have a document indicating he signed on for the revolution, that would be tremendous... Do you have anything else I can go on?

Darville: No, other than just my grandmother's recollection of Cuffee and some the stories she told, I think you're pretty much on your own.

Tukufu: Well, I'm gonna do my investigation and get back to you as soon as I can. Paul Cuffee is a real hero of mine. The son of a former slave father and Indian mother, Cuffee was born a free man on the tiny island of Cuttyhunk, off Martha's Vineyard. Starting as a simple seaman, Cuffee quickly proved himself seaworthy and rose in rank to Captain. By 1800, Cuffee owned shares in several ships and had made his fortune from whaling and trans-Atlantic trade. But even as a successful black businessman, Cuffee still faced discrimination. He waged a long campaign against the racist policies of the newly established Massachusetts legislature and fought for the right to vote. Later in life, Cuffee came to believe that freeborn blacks and former slaves would only find full equality back in Africa. In time, this controversial 'back to Africa' movement not only shaped the history of West Africa, but won rights for blacks here at home. Cuffee is a huge figure in African-American history ... but I've never heard anything about him serving in the Revolutionary War. So I want to take a closer look at Darville's document.

It claims to be a "descriptive list of 16 soldiers in the town of Falmouth." It's signed "July 7th, 1780" and sure enough it includes the name of a 5'11 negro" called "Paul Cuffee". But there are a couple of things that bother me. First Paul Cuffee's name seems to have been tampered with. And the muster roll is in remarkable good condition for a 200 year old document. Before I do anything else, I need to confirm that the muster roll is authentic. So I've come to Boston, to Skinner's Auction House, one of the foremost authorities on revolutionary era artifacts. I'm showing the muster roll to their manuscripts expert, Stuart Whitehurst. First I ask Stuart to explain exactly what a muster roll is.

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Stuart Whitehurst: To muster means to collect names and assess so a muster roll is a roll of men that is being mustered into the service, collected for the service

Tukufu: According to Stuart, ours appears to be a preliminary muster roll, the first stage in compiling a register of soldiers in the county. Do you think this is an authentic muster roll?

Stuart: Well, that's, sometimes that's where the hard part comes in. Actually you have to ask a number of questions when you start. One, is the paper correct for the period.

Tukufu: The paper on which an official document was written should be high quality, made from cotton or linen rags. And that's just what Stuart finds.

Stuart: You can see the chain lines running across. That actually indicates that the document is made of rag paper. You also have the watermark, which is the paper manufacturer, their seal of approval. Ironically, most of the paper makers of the time were English.

Tukufu: Next Stuart makes sure the writing wasn't done recently, using an 18th century piece of paper.

Stuart: If you were to go into an 18th century account book and slice out a blank page and use the type of ink that's being used here, Iron Gall, it would balloon, the ink would absorb into the paper very quickly.

Tukufu: So what about our document?

Stuart: When you look at the names, they've got a sharpness to them.

Tukufu: Which means the writing was done shortly after the paper was made. Finally Stuart analyses the writing itself – looking for distinctive signs of 18th century penmanship.

Stuart: Small affectations that you have in 18th century writing, which you find very frequently one of which is this, you can actually see in the second word up here which is a descriptive, and that, it looks like a "F" doesn't it? Well, that is typically the way certain "S" were written during the course of the 18th century.

Tukufu: These are great pieces of evidence. But what will Stuart make of Cuffee's name being tampered with?

Stuart: I wouldn't say necessarily it's been tampered with. I would say the person writing it made a mistake. And during this time period paper was extremely expensive. A small correction like that would not have been reason to rewrite this entire piece of paper. In fact, we have two men's names completely crossed out. So I wouldn't consider that in any way an indication that it isn't real. In fact probably more indication that it is real.

Tukufu: So, I have an authentic revolutionary war muster roll and my Paul Cuffee entry is real.

Stuart: Given how it's written, the small correction. Absolutely authentic.

Tukufu: That's really great news. Next I need to know more about the role of African-Americans in the Revolutionary War. So I've come to the Massachusetts Genealogical Society to speak with an expert on African Americans in the 18th century, David Lambert. According to David, many African Americans saw the Revolution as their route to freedom. A fact that the British were quick to take advantage of.

David Lambert: Well, obviously, the British were trying to entice the numbers in to fight on behalf of -- and actually turn against their masters down south who obviously a lot of them were not loyal to the king.

Tukufu: In 1775 the British Governor of Virginia, Lord Dunmore promised that any slave of a Patriot master who fought for the Loyalists would be freed. But the British reneged on their promises. And within four years, most African



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Americans were fighting alongside the Patriots.

David Lambert: By 1779, we are beat so badly by the British that Washington calls up that any men of color, including slaves can bear arms to fight the British.

TZ: So the slave comes and saves freedom?

David: Definitely...

Tukufu: By the war's end, significant numbers of African Americans, both slave and free, had fought in the Colonial Army.

David Lambert: Say if you had three hundred thousand Colonial soldiers, five thousand of them would have been African American.

Tukufu: Five thousand! With this many African Americans serving, it's more than possible our Paul Cuffee joined them. But has David ever heard of Paul Cuffee fighting for the Revolution?

David: I've obviously heard of Paul Cuffee, the famous abolitionist, but not with the militia. That's rather an interesting document. No, I haven't seen that before.

Tukufu: So we're no closer to proving the Paul Cuffee on this document is the famous Paul Cuffee. I need to try a different approach. I've come to Connecticut, to Bridgeport University to meet a man who's spent the last 30 years researching Cuffee's life –Professor Lamont Thomas. What will he make of the muster roll?

Lamont Thomas: I would first of all be very enthusiastic. This is from Falmouth, not terribly far from Westport.

Tukufu: Westport was where Paul Cuffee lived for most of his life. So this sounds hopeful. But what I need to know is what Paul Cuffee was doing during the Revolutionary War?

Lamont: He was beginning to run the blockade to Nantucket. He was dodging the British.

Tukufu: According to Lamont, in 1776 the British captured Cuffee and sentenced him to 3 months in a New York prison. But not because he was a military threat.

Lamont: He was seeking wealth. He's black in a white society, but he's looking for green.

Tukufu: And what was Paul Cuffee doing in July, 1780? Could he have been in Falmouth, signing up for the army?

Lamont: He was engaged in challenging the Massachusetts legislature on a petition.

Tukufu: What was that about?

Lamont: The government of Massachusetts was desperately in need of money and they were taxing all the families in Dartmouth, Mass., a very poor community. And they compiled a resolution to resist taxation without representation. He was not sitting around Falmouth ready to go to war.

Tukufu: This doesn't sound good. Then Lamont reveals a final fact about Paul Cuffee that could seal the deal.

Lamont: Paul Cuffee was brought up in a Quaker community.

Tukufu: Quakers are traditionally pacifists. It's highly unlikely that if the Paul Cuffee was a Quaker, he would have volunteered to fight. So you're saying that the Paul Cuffee listed here on the muster roll is not the same Paul Cuffee who was the shipper, the Quaker and the famous historical figure.

Lamont: The Paul Cuffee I'm interested in does not comply in any respect except for his name.

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Tukufu: This is a big disappointment. But if the Paul Cuffee on the Muster Roll isn't the Paul Cuffee – who is he? Back in Boston, the Massachusetts State Archives contains comprehensive census data on the state's residents. I'm meeting archivist, Michael Comeau. Before helping me look for more details about the Paul Cuffee mentioned on the muster roll, Michael shows me something fascinating - The original petition to the Massachusetts legislature written by the famous Paul Cuffee in 1780. "While we are not allowed the privilege of free men of the state having no vote or influence in the election with those that tax us. Yet many of our color, as is well known, have cheerfully entered the field of battle in the defense of the common cause." The Paul Cuffee is using the argument of "no taxation without representation" against the Massachusetts' government ... challenging them to live up to their revolutionary ideals. It's a remarkable document for its time – but we're still no closer to finding more details about our Paul Cuffee. Just as we're about to give up, we find a document that might help. It contains a reference to Paul Cuffee from Falmouth.

Michael Comeau: That is another muster roll that I believe you will find him listed on.

Tukufu: Yes, you're right. Here we go. Paul Cuffee. This is a county muster roll, which would have been compiled from a number of local muster rolls like ours. Oh look, he served until December 12th. That would mean he served for about five months. This makes sense – by 1780, northerners didn't need to serve as long as soldiers close to the southern battlefields. Finally, among the museum's micro-films I find one last detail about the Paul Cuffee on Darville's document. I wonder how Darville react to the news?

Tukufu: Unfortunately, this is not the Paul Cuffee you and I had hoped it would be.

Darville: Really, that is disappointing...

Tukufu: I then tell Darville, about my final discovery. If the muster roll marks the beginning of our Paul Cuffee's military career, the document I found marks the end. It's a pay roll revealing he received an honorable discharge with full pay. So we know our Paul Cuffee served admirably before he returned to civilian life. And, like almost all the 5000 other African Americans who fought alongside him, slipped from common memory.

Darville: I'm still glad to have the document and thanks for all your help.

Tukufu: Well, it's been a great, great journey and thank you for allowing us to pursue your story.

Darville: Thank you very much.

Tukufu: The freedoms that both Paul Cuffee's fought for were a long time coming. The Continental Congress of 1787 caved in to colonies with a large number of slaveholders. It would take another war before slavery was abolished in North America. And another 185 years before all African Americans were formally granted the full rights of US citizenship.

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