

Rev. Paul Cuffee Gravesite
Suffolk County, New York

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STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Known as the Rev. Paul Cuffee Gravesite, the burial ground is locally significant under Criteria A for Native American History and B for its association with the “Indian Preacher” Paul Cuffee whose missionary work among Long Island’s eastern tribes was recognized as extremely important in his own time. Furthermore, the New-York Missionary Society employed Cuffee and erected his memorial. The mission was significant as the last such institution functioning in a region considered an untamed “frontier” since the earliest settlement period, and historically important in the context of how Native American inhabitants were “civilized” and converted to European culture and customs. Neither Cuffee nor the New-York Missionary Society are represented by any other tangible relic.

Also significant under Criterion Consideration C, the Rev. Paul Cuffee Gravesite is significant as a grave of a person of outstanding importance to the history of Long Island and the Town of Southampton, Suffolk County, New York. It is primarily associated with the eastern Long Island Native American population whose numbers had greatly diminished by the time the Rev. Paul Cuffee died in 1812. Also the site of an Indian church and burial ground, the geographical boundaries of the site were severely reduced by the extension of the railroad through the area in 1869, a further indication of how “progress” marginalized Native Americans. All that remains visible today is Cuffee’s stone and a system of fencing, signage and devotional furniture installed ca. 1920. The Rev. Paul Cuffee Gravesite is the first nomination to be considered with the multiple property document entitled *Historic Cemeteries of the Town of Southampton, 1640-1930*, one of several properties that collectively represent the settlement patterns, burial practices, and the funerary arts and stone-carving technologies that cover the entire history of the region.

The period of significance for the Rev. Paul Cuffee Gravesite is 1812-1920. It encompasses the date of his death, the installation of the memorial gravestone in 1812, the subdivision of the property by the railroad in 1869 and ends with the construction of cemetery features ca. 1920 (a fence, garden urn, bench and sign) that were intended to protect and venerate the burial site.

Criterion A: Ethnic Heritage—Native American

As one of the last great Indian missionaries working on Long Island, the Rev. Paul Cuffee stands with other important preachers such as Peter John and Sampson Occum in the story of how Long Island tribes were assimilated by religion into European culture and settlement practices. The Rev. Paul Cuffee Gravesite is significant as the burial place of an important Native American preacher and missionary who exerted a major influence on the Shinnecock and other Long Island Indian peoples between 1790 and 1812. The nominated property is one of ten historic cemeteries and burial sites owned by the Town of Southampton that represent the evolution of burial practices, religious customs and regional settlement patterns from the seventeenth to the early nineteenth centuries. The Cuffee gravesite is especially significant for its association with Native Americans and the missionary groups that interacted with them, whose activities exerted an influence on the social fabric of eastern Long Island Native Americans from the eighteenth through the early-nineteenth centuries.

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Criterion B: The Rev. Paul Cuffee

Born in Brookhaven (Suffolk County) in 1757, Paul Cuffee was ordained in 1790 by a council of ministers from the Connecticut Convention (Congregational). Having taken up residence in Canoe Place (now part of Hampton Bays), he became a member of the Strict Congregational Convention in 1792, at which time he was pastor of a church at Cold Spring (Sebonac, Town of Southampton). In 1798, Cuffee received a commission from the New-York Missionary Society to proselytize among the Montauk Indians, work that he continued until his death at age fifty-five on March 7, 1812. References to Cuffee's work in the *New-York Missionary Magazine* (1799 – 1809) indicated that he ministered to four Indian congregations between Islip and Montauk. With his death in 1812, the missionary tradition of "laboring among the Indians" began to wane as interest gained momentum for consolidating the tribes within a centralized location or reservation.

Criterion Consideration C: (Gravesite of a historical person of outstanding importance)

Cuffee's gravesite is the only tangible evidence of the man and the missionary society that sponsored him. Now a single marker surrounded by a twelve-foot square enclosure, the gravestone was once surrounded by numerous Indian graves, headstones and a small church established on the property in the early 1800s. The property was once the burial place of other members of the Shinnecock tribe, whose remains were removed to the nearby reservation in the 1860s. With both the church and accompanying burials gone, the only physical remnant of Cuffee's life and work are his grave and marker.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Beginning in the eighteenth century, missions to the Indians on eastern Long Island were largely supported by the Presbyterian Church in Scotland. Countrymen living on Long Island from time to time wrote to their mother Church (the Church of Scotland) describing the spiritual destitution of the Indians and their desire to propagate the gospel among them. As a result, *The Society in Scotland for Propagating Christian Knowledge* was instituted in Edinburgh in 1709. The Society established a Board of Correspondents in New York in 1741, who appointed the Rev. Azariah Horton, a member of the Presbytery of New York and a resident of Southold, New York to labor as a missionary on eastern Long Island to the Poospatucks, Shinnecoeks and Montauk Indians. His was the first foreign mission established by the Presbyterian Church. Reverend Horton preached the gospel for eleven years, ending his missionary labors in 1752.

Following in Horton's footsteps was the Rev. Samuel Occum (or Occom), the second preacher sent to propagate the gospel among the Indians on eastern Long Island. He himself was an American Indian, a Mohegan from Connecticut born in 1723 who as a youth was converted to Christianity during the First Great Awakening. Driven by religious fervor, Occum taught himself to read the bible and was eventually admitted to the Rev. Eleazor Wheelock's preparatory school in Lebanon, Connecticut. Wheelock was one of the firebrands of the Great Awakening who essentially became Occum's mentor, a relationship that lasted until 1768 when Occum realized that money he raised for missions was being diverted to Wheelock's school. Another factor in the

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falling out was that Wheelock insisted that Occum leave Long Island to preach among the New York Iroquois, traditional enemies of the Algonquians, which included the Mohegans. Occum lived and worked among the Montauk and was well known for his preaching. He began his missionary work on Long Island in 1753 where during his six years of mission work, he earned the respect of both Native Americans and colonists.

In 1798, the Rev. Paul Cuffee received a commission from the New-York Missionary Society to proselytize among the Montauk Indians, work that he continued until his death at age fifty-five on March 7, 1812. References to Cuffee's work in the *New-York Missionary Magazine* (1799–1809) revealed that he ministered to four Indian congregations between Islip and Montauk. With his death in 1812, the missionary tradition of "laboring among the Indians" began to wane as the number of Long Island's eastern tribes decreased and interest in consolidating them into a central location gained momentum.¹ By the 1860s, the scattered members of the Shinnecock Nation relocated to a reservation near Southampton Village where their descendants remain to this day. Cuffee's gravestone, erected by the New-York Missionary Society in 1812, memorialized the man as "an Indian of the Shinnecock tribe, who labored with fidelity and success [and was] humble, pious and indefatigable in testifying the gospel of the grace of God."

Historian Nathaniel S. Prime summed up in 1845 the declining missionary efforts to the Indians after the death of Cuffee:

About one mile west of Canoe Place, on the angle formed by the junction of the north and south roads, where the Indian Church formerly stood, among the bushes and trees, which are now considerably grown up, forming a part of the unbroken forest, may be discerned a small enclosure of paling just large enough to encompass a single grave; while other depositories of the dead are scattered around. Within that enclosure, lie the mortal remains of the last native preacher to the Long Island Indians. A plain head stone marks the spot... Since the death of PAUL, the Indians have been indebted for religious instruction, almost exclusively to the L. I. Convention, which has continued to exercise an oversight over them; and afford such assistance as was within their power. On the 12th of Oct. 1827, the Convention ordained the Rev. William Benjamin, as pastor of the church at Canoe Place; and he continues to labour there half the time. This church and that at Poosepatuck are the only ones that remain. Shinnecock Neck is situated about 2 miles west of the village of Southampton, and is the residence of the remnants of the Shinnecock tribe of Indians. Their church formerly stood beyond the hills, about three miles west, within sight of the isthmus called Canoe Place. It was afterwards removed a little to the west, at the spot where the grave of the Rev. Paul Cuffee is still to be seen. The Indians, having taken up their residence some years ago on this Neck, removed their church thither, where the Rev. William Benjamin supplies them half the time.

¹ The New York Missionary Society was an interdenominational volunteer society that was dedicated to teaching the gospel to Native Americans on the American frontier, founded in 1796 by the New York Presbyterian, Baptist and Dutch Reformed clergy. It was the first interdenominational missionary association formed after the end of American Revolution. The Society was also the first innovative project of its kind to arise out of an era of American benevolent activity funded by the mercantile strength of New York City for domestic missionary efforts to address the moral conditions of the new frontier settlements.

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Canoe Place. — In this vicinity a church was organized by the L. I. Presbytery, in 1819. But being feeble and having no stated preaching or house of worship, it has become extinct. The last principal member died last winter, and, on his dying bed, called the few remaining members around him, and recommended them to the church of Southampton, where they have been received. A small Congregational church, under the name of Warner-town, still exists in this vicinity, which consists of only twelve members.²

Prime's account of the early Indian church on the Montauk Highway and the Canoe Place settlement was especially interesting because it made mention of another building, "a small Congregational church," located in nearby Warnertown (Canoe Place), which was likely the chapel that stood farther south on Canoe Place Road. The circumstances were unknown surrounding the disappearance of the earlier building located on the main highway. Based on Prime's account, it could be concluded that the earlier building no longer stood when the railroad was built in the late 1860s, although the remnants of the adjacent burial ground of which the Rev. Paul Cuffee gravesite is the sole survivor were still visible at the time.

With all the references made to the Cuffee gravesite, it was clear that by the mid-nineteenth century the site was a well established landmark. Writing in 1874, historian Richard M. Bayles described the site as a passerby would see it from the train:

... About half a mile east of Good Ground station the railroad passes through an old Indian burying-ground, which was also at an early period the site of a church belonging to the Shinnecock tribe. This ground is now grown over with bushes and trees, and bears no discernible evidence of the use to which it was once consecrated, except that within a little enclosure of weather-beaten picket fence a plain head-stone guards a single grave. This is but a few rods from the track, on the south side, and can be seen from the car window while passing by. It is the grave of the Rev. Paul Cuffee, a native preacher of the Shinnecock tribe, who is mentioned by the historians as a man of extraordinary eloquence and talent.³

Describing the area in 1882, Long Island historian William S. Pelletreau also mentioned the site:

The Shinnecock tribes of Indians have a piece of land about half way between this place and Good Ground, and here their church stood in the early part of the present century. The railroad crosses this tract, and about two rods south of the track is the grave of Paul Cuffee, the last native preacher to the Long Island Indians. The grave was originally enclosed with a neat paling, which is now in ruins.⁴

Historian James Truslow Adams also included a description of the site in his account of the region when he wrote a history of Southampton in 1918:

² Nathaniel S. Prime, *A History of Long Island: From its First Settlement by Europeans to the Year 1845* (New York: Robert S. Carter Co. 1845), 117-118 & 216-217.

³ Richard Bayles, *Historical and Descriptive Sketches of Suffolk County, 1874*, 321-323.

⁴ William S. Pelletreau, "The Town of Southampton," in Munsell's *History of Long Island, 1882*, 30.

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... Paul Cuffee was born at Brookhaven, March 4, 1757, and also became a minister, laboring mainly among the Indians of Montauk and Canoe Place. He died March 7, 1812, and is buried about one mile west of the latter place on the north side of the main road, where the Indian church stood, his grave being marked by a stone erected by the New York Missionary Society.⁵

As late as 1925, references to the site were still being included by historians, including Henry Isham Hazelton:

About half a mile west of the Good Ground station the railroad passes through an old Indian burying ground which was also, at an early period, the site of a church belonging to the Shinnecock tribe. When Bayles wrote this ground was grown over with bushes and trees and bore no discernable evidence of its original use, except that within a little enclosure of weather-beaten picket fence a plain headstone guarded a single grave. It was the grave of the Rev. Paul Cuffee, a native preacher of the Shinnecock tribe, who was mentioned by former historians as a man of extraordinary eloquence and talent.⁶

While the Indian church on Montauk Highway had by all reliable accounts disappeared prior to construction of the railroad in 1869, its adjacent burial ground remained to some extent visible at that time. Newspaper accounts shed light on the progress of the railroad through Canoe Place, and the manner in which it resolved the obstacle in its path:

The *Riverhead News* has the following items in regards to the Branch Road. We learn from a reliable source that the grading between Beaver Dam and Canoe Place is almost about one third finished. An embankment has to be raised to considerable distance, to a height of 16 feet, and a cut made through elevation of 28 feet between the above points. Rocks of the boulder species have been found, many of which will have to be blasted before removed. An injunction was issued by the Court last week to restrain the B.R.R. [Branch Railroad] from running over the old Indian Burying Grounds at Canoe Place. This spot has been used as a burial ground by the Indians for centuries. The notorious Priest Paul's remains lie there. In case the road has to curve round it a cut of 18 feet through a hill will be necessary. The bridge over Tuthill's Creek will be finished this week where just seven miles of the Branch road will have been completed. (*The Corrector*, 21 August 1869)

The impediment of the burying ground was quickly resolved, however, according to the following newspaper report:

Progress of the Branch Road--From a gentleman who was over a portion of the route this week, we learn that the road is fully graded, so far as it can be by men and teams, up to Squires' mill, Good Ground. What work remains to be done on that part of the road will be completed by the

⁵ William Truslow Adams, *History of the Town of Southampton (East of Canoe Place) 1918*, 41.

⁶ Henry Isham Hazelton, *The Boroughs of Brooklyn and Queens Counties of Nassau and Suffolk, Long Island New York 1609-1924*, vol. II, 803.

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gravel train. The track is laid to Tuthill's Mill. The gang on Shinnecock have completed as far as Payne's. There is a heavy embankment not yet commenced to be raised at Canoe Place. It is also said that the injunction asked for to restrain the Road from passing through the Indian Burial Ground at Canoe Place will be removed on the Company's agreeing to re-inter the remains and erect a monument.
(*The Corrector*, 4 September 1869)

CONCLUSION

The Rev. Paul Cuffee was known as a talented and gifted missionary who worked among the American Indians on eastern Long Island. He followed in the footsteps of the legendary preacher Samuel Occum and remained in the memory of the residents of Southampton with his gravesite becoming a well-known landmark. Benjamin F. Thompson's account stated that "Paul [Cuffee] was born at Brookhaven March 4, 1757, and lies buried about a mile west of Canoe Place, where the Indian church then stood. Over his grave a neat marble slab has been placed."⁷ Several nineteenth century historians made mention of an Indian cemetery and church that once stood along present-day Montauk Highway, alongside of the railroad tracks. The Branch Road ran on a regular schedule to Good Ground by December of 1869. Within the following year it was completed through Southampton and Bridgehampton, reaching its ultimate destination of Sag Harbor. In the process, the old Indian burying ground was built over and the Rev. Paul Cuffee Gravesite, evidently the only visible remains of the cemetery and the church that once stood nearby, was left untouched to literally serve as a monument to an earlier time.

Several of the accounts mentioned that the gravesite was overgrown and difficult to recognize as the resting place of Rev. Cuffee. In the 1920s, an effort was made to restore the site by marking it with new fencing, a sign, a bench and cutting back the foliage. In 1949, the State of New York Education Department placed a historic marker along the roadside as a tribute to Cuffee. Over the years, the site came under the jurisdiction of the Town of Southampton, which maintains the appearance of the site in keeping with the 1920s "restoration," as an honor to Cuffee's work on eastern Long Island and his place in Southampton and Native American history.

⁷ Benjamin F. Thompson, *The History of Long Island, 1843 [1918]*, 128.