

Rev. Paul Cuffee Gravesite
Suffolk County, New York

**NATIONAL REGISTER OF HISTORIC PLACES
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Section number 7 Page 1 **DESCRIPTION**

Summary Paragraph:

The Rev. Paul Cuffee Gravesite is a parcel of about one acre of land in Hampton Bays (formerly Canoe Place), Town of Southampton, containing a marble grave marker dated 1812 and related cemetery features: a fence enclosure, an urn, a bench and a sign, installed ca. 1920. The long, narrow triangular lot is bordered to the south by the Montauk Highway and to the north by the tracks of the Long Island Rail Road. With the exception of the gravesite, which is visible within a small clearing at the center of the parcel, the property is wooded and densely overgrown, making access difficult. Both the railroad tracks and the road bed that flank the property have been elevated several feet above the natural grade, resulting in the gravesite appearing to lie within a gulch or deep depression. A New York State historic marker dated 1949 marks the location of the site at the edge of the highway but is not considered as contributing since it was installed after the period of significance.

The Cuffee gravestone is a memorial marker dated 1812 that identifies the noted Indian preacher's time of death and relationship to the New-York Missionary Society who installed the stone. It is of white marble, hand-tooled and carved on one side; the back is left roughly finished, and years of exposure have resulted in its deterioration, most importantly a break, significant edge chipping and surface erosion. The stone has been reset in a concrete base and the break has been repaired, although serious condition issues continue to threaten its integrity including bed cracking and overhanging vegetation.

Surrounding the memorial stone is a fenced enclosure and several other features dating from about 1920 evidently installed to protect and venerate the site. The fence is formed primarily of concrete posts drilled to support horizontal wooden rails. A concrete sign, a bench top and the remains of a pedestal that once supported an urn, are also intact, all dating from the same period. Due to serious run-off from the elevated highway, however, both the bench and sign are deeply embedded in the ground and the lower rails of the fence have also disappeared along the south and east sides. One additional feature, the arched top of a marble grave marker of unknown date, is also visible within the enclosure.

The Cuffee Gravesite is one of ten historic burial sites and cemeteries owned by the Town of Southampton. Now a single marker surrounded by a twelve-foot square enclosure, the gravestone was once surrounded by numerous Indian graves, headstones and a church established on the property in the early 1800s. The property was therefore the burial place of other members of the Shinnecock tribe, whose remains were removed to the nearby reservation in the 1860s. It is the only burial ground among those that are owned by the Town that was exclusively devoted to Native American graves.

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

The Rev. Paul Cuffee Gravesite occupies a narrow triangular parcel of land situated in Hampton Bays, Town of Southampton (Suffolk County, NY). It is bordered on the south by Montauk Highway (County Road 80), north by the Long Island Rail Road and east by a small plot of wooded land that is also bordered to the south and north by each of these two east-west corridors. The 1.058-acre property (Section 227/Block 1/Lot 11) was acquired from Woodland Development, LLC, in November 2003 by the town utilizing Community Preservation

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Funds designated for “park and recreational” purposes. The site is one of ten historic cemeteries and burial grounds now owned and managed by the Town of Southampton.

The gravesite is roughly centered on the wooded property and is located within a small clearing. The tall white marble stone carries the following inscription:

*Erected
by
The New-York Missionary Society,
In Memory of
The Rev. Paul Cuffee,
An Indian of the Shinnecock Tribe.
Who was employed by the Society,
For the last thirteen years of his life, on the
Eastern part of Long Island,
Where he laboured with fidelity and success.*

*Humble, pious and indefatigable,
In testifying the gospel of the grace of God,
He finished his course with joy,
On the
7th of March, 1812,
Aged 55 years and three days.*

The condition of the stone has been compromised, having been broken and exposed to the natural affects of weathering. The break has been repaired and the stone reset above grade on a concrete base.

In addition to the grave marker, the site preserves four other contributing features: a post-and-rail fence, a sign, a bench and a garden urn. Each of these features is fabricated in part or entirely of cast concrete and appears to date from the 1920s. A fragment of another marble grave marker is also visible. It is deeply imbedded in the earth and may prove to be a footstone associated with the Cuffee grave marker.

The nominated property is thickly wooded and overgrown with dense underbrush. Its narrow triangular shape terminates in a point at the westerly end corresponding to the intersection of the highway and the railroad tracks. Both the south (highway) and north (tracks) boundaries are elevated above the original ground level. The railroad tracks are supported on a bank of loose rocks or “trap” that elevates them about three-feet above the natural grade; the highway, similarly, is elevated in its approach to a bridge that clears the tracks at the west end of the site. As a consequence, the nominated property now rests within an artificial hollow or gulley that is a consequence of the engineering of both transportation corridors. The grave site is accessible via a steep embankment along the north side of Montauk Highway.

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An iron New York State marker dating from 1949 is located at the point of entry to the site at the edge of the highway. It reads:

*INDIAN PREACHER
GRAVE OF REV. PAUL CUFFEE
OF THE SHINNECOCK TRIBE
1790-1812. GRANDSON AND
SUCCESSOR TO REV. PETER
JOHN AND SAMSON OCCUM*

Although the sign contains minor historical inaccuracies, it serves the purpose of marking the grave site and is one of only a few such signs on Long Island that makes reference to this aspect of the region's important Native American history.¹ This sign is outside of the property boundary and is not part of this nomination. The NYS marker is basically a directional sign to guide people from the highway to the gravesite or to provide the historical information (inaccurate as it may be) to the less adventurous who choose not to descend into the ravine.

Contributing Resources:

Cuffee gravestone

The Rev. Paul Cuffee gravestone is a hand-shaped, tooled and carved white marble tablet measuring approximately 44 ½-inches high, 22 inches wide and three-inches thick. It has been re-set into a cast concrete base that appears to date from the early 1900s. The base measures eight-inches high, 30 inches wide and 12 inches deep. The stone's inscription faces east, a tradition of eighteenth and early nineteenth century Long Island gravestones, suggesting that it may retain its original orientation despite the fact that it was dislodged from the ground and anchored into the newer base. As mentioned above, the condition of the stone is not good; breakage, bedding cracks, edge chipping and surface erosion are among its most serious condition problems.

The stone has suffered one severe break which required that the top section be reattached to the bottom. It is evident from the accelerated weathering of the top section, notably the excessive edge chipping and surface erosion, that the bottom section probably remained upright while the top lay on the ground, where its edges were subjected to more abuse and its surface deteriorated more quickly with contact to ground moisture. The repair holds the two sections together, but the adhesive used in the reattachment does not match the stone color and no attempt was made to fill the voids associated with the break. It may be surmised that the installation of the concrete base, which appears to date from the early 1900s, took place in the context of an overall repair of the stone and corresponded to the reattachment of the upper and lower sections.

¹ The State Historic Marker Program was begun in 1926 as a program of the State Education Department to commemorate the Sesquicentennial of the American Revolution. Over 2,800 of the small, cast iron site markers were erected statewide during the duration of this program. This statewide initiative to identify and interpret local historic sites, including many that survive only in archeological form, has continued to be an important aspect of local historic preservation efforts to this day.

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The stone has developed a serious fracture and significant edge chipping. The fracture, which occurs at the top in the center of the stone, is due to a flaw in the natural bedding of the rock. Exposure to freeze-thaw cycles associated with seasonal water temperatures has accelerated the widening of the crack. The fracture does not yet affect the appearance or the legibility of the front of the stone, but over time it threatens to push the layers of the stone apart. Conservation treatment of the stone would stabilize this condition. The significant edge chipping, which is most pronounced on the left and right lobes at the top of the stone, is more difficult to treat. At present it does not affect the inscription and poses no long term threat to the stone's condition. Surface erosion is especially evident on the finished side that bears the carved inscription, where the lower lines of script are now barely decipherable. Despite this condition problem, the stone is essentially intact. Its primary inscription remains legible where the letters are larger and cut more deeply.

The stone is relatively tall, over five-feet high on its base, and therefore ranks among the larger gravestones of the period for this region. The fact that it was fabricated as a memorial to the Rev. Cuffee by his employer, the New-York Missionary Society, no doubt explains its distinctive size. Its three-lobed top, a late Federal-era variant of a style that predominated throughout the eighteenth century, is characteristic of the period as is the use of white marble, which appeared in the early nineteenth century and soon supplanted both slate and brownstone in popularity for grave markers. Regrettably, marble proved less durable than other stone types, and the surface weathering, edge chipping and severe cracking that are found in the Rev. Cuffee stone are all symptoms of the stone material chosen for his memorial. The dense tree cover and underbrush surrounding the gravestone are additional condition problems and potential threats to the longevity of the Cuffee stone. Deterioration of the fence enclosure necessitating its replacement along the west side adjacent the grave marker has already resulted from the proximity of the vegetation.

Fence enclosure

The fence that surrounds the gravestone creates an area that measures approximately twelve-feet square. It is formed of three equally spaced posts positioned along each side, one of which is centered and the others paired at the corners, to which are attached horizontal boards that create a "post-and-rail" type enclosure.² There is no opening in the fence, the height of which (three-feet) enables visitors to access the gravesite with little difficulty. The posts are of two types: cast concrete and wood. They measure approximately four-inches square and are drilled out to receive bolts that anchor the horizontal rails. The concrete posts appear to belong to the original enclosure, whereas the wooden posts are evidently replacements of the original system. Similarly, the one-inch by four-inch horizontal boards appear to combine earlier elements with later replacements. The west side of the enclosure, which is situated closest to the encroaching vegetation, has been rebuilt with wooden posts and newer rails. All of the fence posts and rails are painted white.

At present, three rails are visible on the north and west sides of the enclosure whereas only two are visible on the south and east sides. Comparison with photographs dating from 1922 reveals that the grade has risen by as much as ten-inches along the south and portions of the east sides, resulting in the disappearance of the bottom

² An article by historian William S. Pelletreau that appeared in the *New York Times* on August 28, 1909 shows a tall, wooden picket fence surrounding the gravesite. By 1922, however, when photographer Eugene Armbruster visited the site, the concrete fence posts and associated cemetery features were already in place.

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rails. This is evidently due to the accelerated run-off from the highway which is now elevated above the gravesite.

Sign

The small sign situated just beyond the southeast corner of the fenced enclosure is also made of cast concrete. Two posts measuring four-inches square support a tablet measuring twenty-two inches wide, twelve-inches high and two and one-half inches thick in which three and one-half inch letters announce the "INDIAN GRAVE." The concrete tablet is supported on the posts with iron straps that are anchored to the posts with iron bolts. Now painted white, it appears that the recessed lettering – enhanced with black paint – was originally painted dark green. As built, the sign posts incorporated a chain that was draped between them and supported on bolts like those that support the tablet, the purpose of which appears purely decorative. (This feature may still exist but is concealed below grade.) The use of cast concrete as the sign material, the measurement of the posts and the manner in which the tablet is attached all suggest that the sign is contemporary with the fence.

Bench

Aligned with the south side of the fenced enclosure is a concrete slab that is now set into the ground. It measures seven-feet long, 21-inches wide and about five-inches thick. It is unpainted, and although it appears at first glance to be the base for a bench, archival photographs reveal that it *is* the bench, and that its concrete support has been concealed by the build-up of ground surrounding it due to run-off from the highway. A comparison of the height of the bench with that of the adjacent fence and sign reveals that the grade has risen between eight and ten inches, effectively concealing the bottom of all three contributing features.

Urn

Within the fenced enclosure and somewhat embedded in the ground is a cast concrete urn measuring roughly sixteen inches square at the top. It aligns with the gravestone at the opposite side of the enclosure and stands eleven and one-half inches above grade with about two to three inches buried below grade. Its recessed panel sides, the bottoms of which are now buried on all four sides, indicate that it was designed to be above grade. A six-inch square opening in the middle appears to be provided for planting. Photographs taken in 1922 show that the existing "urn" was originally one of several parts of a pedestal that supported an urn of different design, the overall height of which exceeded that of the fence. Only a single section of this cemetery feature has survived to the present day.

Stone fragment

An intriguing stone fragment remains embedded in the ground between the urn and the fence. Measuring about ten-inches long and two-inches thick, it rises above grade by only a few inches. It may be the top of a footstone associated with the Cuffee marker, or the rounded center section of a smaller tombstone, in which case it would be the only archeological evidence of the "Indian Cemetery" that once surrounded the Rev. Paul Cuffee grave site. Although it aligns roughly with the Cuffee stone and is positioned on axis to its east as is customary with

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footstones, its distance from the larger marker (approximately ten-feet) exceeds the usual spacing between head- and footstones and therefore calls into question its original purpose. The stone appears to be marble with parallel tooling on the edge, a characteristic of grave markers of the early-nineteenth century period and a detail that matches the Cuffee stone. Archeological investigation is needed to identify the origin of this stone fragment.