

Reuben Cuff's Domestic Landscape, Part III:

Tying the Cuffs to the Padgetts in Lower Alloways Creek, 1739-1798

© 2012 Janet L. Sheridan

Published in the *Salem County Historical Society Newsletter* Vol. 57, No. 3 (Fall 2012)

My previous articles in this newsletter tied Reuben Cuff (1764-1845), son of a slave, preacher, and one of the founders of the African Methodist Episcopal, to a surviving colonial stone house (Figure 1) in Lower Alloways Creek Township, and drew conclusions about Cuff's everyday life and relative economic standing from both his house and archival records.¹ This article will look at the Cuff family legend and attempt to verify it with documentary evidence.



Figure 1. Setting of the Cuff-Dubois House, looking south, in 2008.

Reuben Cuff's heritage is legendary in Salem and Cumberland County. The genealogists of Gouldtown in Cumberland County, William and Theophilus Steward, gave an account of it in their 1913 history of Gouldtown, Cumberland County, though "it properly belongs to Salem County."² There are other versions of the story with very different details; all seem to rely on oral tradition.³ The Stewards' version is the earliest published account, and derives at least in part from the Cuff family bible and Reuben Cuff's descendents in 1913. This article will consider the Steward version:

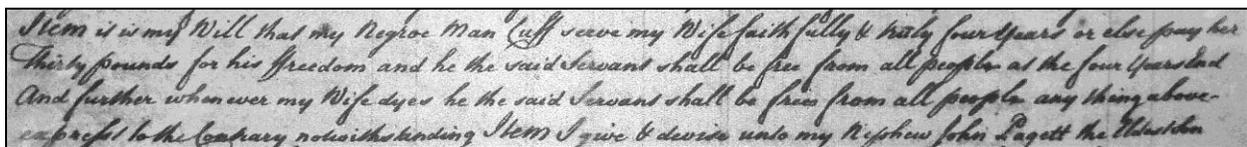
The Cuff family was of slave origin, though in a time quite remote; Cuff, a slave, was owned by a man named Padgett. Padgett had three daughters, and he, by some means, got into the Continental Army, in the French and Indian War, and was killed. Cuff took care of the widow, and she finally married him. He was called "Cuffee Padgett"; they had three sons....The names of these sons were Mordecai, Reuben, and Seth....These three brothers, sons of Cuffee Cuff, became farmers; but later, Reuben became a

preacher in the Methodist Society, and organized a church in Salem, and was one of the founders of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in America....Reuben kept a Bible record of his own family....his record shows that he was born in Salem, March 28, 1764.⁴

Other versions share the essential tale of the marriage of a slave Cuffee to a Padgett widow. Who were these Padgetts who had a slave named Cuff? Did a Padgett serve in the French and Indian War and die? Did Cuffee marry a widow Padgett? Two eighteenth-century wills in the New Jersey Archive lend credence to the Cuff-Padgett story, but also add questions.

On August 9, 1739: "I, John Pagett of Alloways Creek precinct in the Co:ty of Salem & Province of New West Jersey, Husbandman" set down his will. Among John Pagett's many provisions for leaving property to his wife Ann and to a number of nephews and a niece was this item (Figure 2):

It is my Will that my Negroe Man Cuff Serve My Wife faithfully & truly four years or else pay her Thirty Pounds for his Freedom & he the said Servant shall be free from all people at the four years End & further Whenever my Wife Dyes he the said serv:t shall be free from all people any thing above Exprest to the Contrary notwithstanding.⁵



It is my Will that my Negroe Man Cuff serve my Wife faithfully & truly four years or else pay her Thirty pounds for his freedom and he the said servant shall be free from all people at the four years end And further whenever my Wife dyes he the said Servant shall be free from all people any thing above expressed to the contrary notwithstanding Item I give & devise unto my Nephew John Pagett the Elder

Figure 2. Provision in John Pagett's will of 1739 for Cuff's freedom.

Though making a key connection between a slave (as a servant who was not free) named Cuff and Pagetts/Padgetts, and revealing a widow Padgett, there are also conflicts between the legend and the facts of this record. First, John Pagett's death in 1739 could not have been due to the French and Indian War (1755-1763), nor even King George's War (1744-1748), both of which drew upon New Jersey militia. When John Pagett put down his will on August 9, he was "sick and weak of body," and his witnesses, Jonathan Waddington, Richard Bradford, and Joseph Hancock were local people. So, John Pagett was not off fighting when he died, sometime before December 4, 1739, the date of his inventory. Also, the statement that Padgett was in the Continental Army is erroneous. The provincial regiment was known as the "Jersey Blues," not the Continental Army, which formed after the outbreak of the American Revolution.⁶ The story doesn't work if he fought in the Revolution; the three Cuff sons were born in the 1760s. Unfortunately, records of colonial military enlistments before the Revolution are scant, but thus far the name Pagett/Padgett is not in any surviving record.⁷

The second conflict is that John and Ann Pagett apparently had no children; he willed items only to nephews and a niece, so they were not the parents of the three Padgett daughters in the story. Thirdly, Ann Pagett died the following year, so she could not be the mother of Reuben, Mordecai and Seth Cuff.

Cuff's manumission was a relatively early example of a Delaware Valley trend that gained momentum as the eighteenth century wore on. The trend of freeing slaves in wills began in Philadelphia in 1735 among more prominent Quakers responding to the antislavery agitation of their time.⁸ Friends were feeling the inconsistency between the practice of slavery and their religious beliefs, but were not ready to outright divest themselves, at least in their lifetimes, of their significant investment in human chattel and its role in their economic prosperity. A willed manumission was a compromise. This practice was also noted in Monmouth County, New Jersey among Quakers.⁹

Quakers led the way in all manumissions in both urban and rural areas around Philadelphia, though it was a minority of Quakers who acted. Smaller numbers of other religions, especially Anglicans but also a few Presbyterians and Baptists, also manumitted slaves.¹⁰ Was John Padgett a Quaker? The Padgetts were descended from French Huguenots, Calvinistic Protestants similar to Presbyterians. Their ancestor John Pagett, a weaver of Stow Creek Township, purchased 500 acres on Stow Creek in 1703. A clue to their affiliation was found in Ann Pagett's account of her estate after her death in 1740. In it were listed "moneys paid to Abraham Reeves for a Subscription of John Pagetts the Building a Meeting House at Cohansie," and more to Thomas Pagett, executor of John Pagett "for building a Pew & Glazing a Window in Cohansie Meeting House." The term "meeting house" in the eighteenth century was universal across religious sects, versus its modern association with Quakers. Both John and his brother Thomas were contributors to the building of a new Presbyterian meeting house in Greenwich 1735.¹¹ Thomas Padgett, Jr. was involved in the Logtown Presbyterian Church, founded around 1750 in Harmersville.¹² So John Pagett's act was a more unusual example of Presbyterian manumission, and shows the influence Quaker reformers were having on non-Quakers in the region.

Nevertheless, John Pagett's will of 1739 proves a connection between a freed slave named Cuff and a widow Pagett, and locates them in Lower Alloways Creek where Reuben Cuff lived in 1798.¹³ Cuff had the choice of buying his freedom in 1739 or serving the widow Ann Padgett until 1743 when he would be "free from all people."

Ann Pagett died sometime before March 6, 1739/40 without a will, and her "only son" William Murdoch applied to the county surrogate to act as her administrator.¹⁴ Ann had been the widow of bricklayer John Murdoch of Mannington, whose 1723 will mentioned his wife Anne, son William and two daughters—Margrett married to Robert Conneway, and the other unnamed.¹⁵ Therefore Ann Padgett, but not John, was the mother of three children, but only two daughters, not the legendary three. Ann Pagett's probate account failed to reveal a third daughter by payments Murdoch made to Robert Conway and John Smith, her daughters' husbands who made claims on her estate in 1740.

Cuff was not the only Pagett slave. Among the items willed to Ann Pagett by her husband John were all of his "White and negroe servants." His probate inventory of December 4, 1739 listed among his belongings "White Servants and Negros" valued at a combined 60 pounds, a bit more than his seven beds and furniture valued at 58 pounds, and roughly ten percent of his net worth of 585 pounds.¹⁶ There is no accounting, however, of how many individuals this amount of money stood for. The value of the white servants would be the time owed on what were probably seven-year indentures to their master, John Pagett. The value on the "Negros," who were enslaved, would have been the market value

of their bodies. But we cannot discern the values of each from this aggregated record of 60 pounds. Murdoch's inventory of his mother's estate dated March 8, 1739/1740, however, included "2 white Servants Time & three Negroes" all valued at 20 pounds.¹⁷ In just three months the value of her servants and slaves were reduced by two-thirds, suggesting she had fewer bondsmen by then. The difference of forty pounds may be partly accounted for by the absence of Cuffee, whether he purchased his own freedom right away or was liberated by Ann Pagett's death. There was no evidence of that transaction. And how Cuff alone among the Pagett slaves gained the favor of his freedom is not answered in these documents.

Cuff's age in 1740 is not apparent. It is likely that he was young, because the majority of male manumissions in the region were teens or men in the prime of their productive years, mostly under the age of 30.¹⁸ Such men could more easily take care of themselves than an elderly person, who would need support. If he was in his twenties, he would have been in his forties when Reuben was born, in 1764. Thus this freedman Cuff could easily be the legendary ex-slave father of Reuben Cuff.

There is no record of a marriage between Cuff and a Padgett woman, however. This event would have taken place between 1756, the beginning of the French and Indian War, and 1764, when Reuben was born. A racially mixed marriage was not illegal at that time, but no church authority would have sanctioned it—therefore it would not have been recorded. However, mixed race couplings did occur, but would have been regarded more like a common-law marriage not validated by a church or state.¹⁹ So this point is possible, but not confirmed.

Missing also is the identity of Cuffee's wife, the mother of Reuben. What white woman of child-bearing age in 1764 entered the picture a generation after the John and Ann Pagett story? Was she a Padgett at all? The time is just right for a French and Indian War widow to be bearing children. But she is still a mystery.

There are more Padgett-Cuff connections, however. In 1739, John Pagett willed all his lands to his nephew John Pagett, eldest son of his brother Thomas, and to his wife Ann "the use of my Place & all my Lands During Her Widowhood." The nephew John Pagett died in 1769, willing all of his lands to his wife, Rebecca, who he identified as a Quaker.²⁰ This was six years after the French and Indian War ended and five years after Reuben was born, so this rules out the widow Rebecca Pagett as Reuben's mother.

But Cuff emerged later in relation to Rebecca Padgett. Widow Rebeccah Padgett of Lower Alloways Creek, recorded a will on March 28, 1780. She died shortly before August 1, 1789, the date on her inventory. She left her lands and estate to three sons—Amos Street Padgett, Clement Street Padgett and Ephraim Padgett, two daughters—Sarah Street Padgett and Rachel Street Padgett, and a grandchild Hannah Padgett. To her eldest son Amos she willed "Fifty Acres of Land where I Now Dwell..." and to her second son Clement, "Sixteen Acres of Land Where Cuffeth Padgett now Lives."²¹ (Figure 3) He was on their land and he had their name in 1789. This Cuffeth was likely Reuben's father, and may the same who was freed in 1740. The exact location of this land is not yet known, but at this time Reuben was 25 years old, and one year from being married to Hannah Pierce, so he may still have been in his father's household on the Padgett's sixteen acres.²²

Figure 3. Bequest of Rebecca Padgett in 1789 revealing Cuffeth Padgett on her land.

In Rebecca Padgett's Quaker parlance, Cuff was "Cuffeth," and she knew him as a Padgett. Was this because of a marriage, did he take the name of the people who freed him, or was he a Padgett by blood? Miscegenation, or mixing of the races, was not unusual among slave owners and slaves, but usually between a slave-owning man and a female slave, who was coerced into a sexual liaison. The will seems to confirm that this widow Padgett was not in a liaison with Cuffeth, at least as far as the record is concerned, because she lived on a fifty-acre parcel and Cuffeth lived on a separate parcel of sixteen acres. And, Cuffeth did not inherit the sixteen acres he occupied. Though free, as a man of color, he could not legally own land at that time.²³ He may have been a "cottager." It was common in the region for freed slaves to remain on their former master's land in a cottage provided by the landowner, together with rights to use a plot of land during their lifetimes without holding legal title to it.²⁴ This appears to be the case with Cuff and the Padgetts, and may explain the difficulty of finding a deed for Reuben Cuff's land.

These Padgett probate documents confirm kernels of the Cuff legend. They contain the idea of an enslaved Cuff in a Padgett family, and of a widow Padgett who Cuff may have served prior to "being free from all people." It also places Cuff on Padgett land in Lower Alloways Creek, in a continuing relationship with the Padgetts.

The Stewards' story continues into the lifetimes of the sons of Cuffee:

... and when these went to school they were taunted by the other boys as being the sons of "Old Cuffee Padgett;" so they would have their father drop the Padgett and take the name of Cuffee Cuff. The names of these sons were Mordecai, Reuben, and Seth....

Indeed, "Cuffee Padgett" was counted in the 1774 Lower Alloways Creek tax list.²⁵ In 1789, "Cuffeth Padgett" appeared in Rebecca Padgett's will. But in 1793, Cuffee did not appear in the military census of the township, so he must have died between 1789 and 1793. The military census of 1793 counted Reuben, Mordecai and Seth in close proximity to each other, but as Cuffs, not Padgetts.²⁶ Their embrace of the name Cuff is confirmed in the 1798 Direct Tax List, where both Reuben Cuff and Mordecai Cuff are listed among landowners in Lower Alloways Creek Township.²⁷ The shift in surname from Padgett to Cuff reported by the Stewards lends truth to the story of the school house taunts. But why were they taunted? This may have been an indication of the tightening of racial lines in Salem County and their realization that, as mixed race, they could not integrate into white society. Choosing their African name may have been a rejection of their whiteness and a commitment to their blackness.²⁸ The concurrent rise of black Methodism, with its embrace of black autonomy and self-development, and Reuben's ultimate role in organizing national and local black institutions, lends credence to this idea.

The taunt, “Old Cuffee Padgett” also hints that their father was elderly in their youth, which supports the idea that the Padgett’s freed Cuff of 1740 is their father. He may have been in his 50s or older by the time the boys were in school.

Other records have a different view point of Cuffee’s name, however. *The Christian Recorder*, the newspaper of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia and a voice of the black community since 1854, reported in the obituary of Rev. Burgoyne Fremont Cuff that his grandfather Reuben was the son of “Padgett Cuff.”²⁹ Here, the Padgett linkage was affirmed, but in reverse, revealing a different memory of his name. What did Cuffee call himself? Stewards’ account further said:

The grave of Cuffee Cuff is in the colored burying ground at Canton, N. J., the land for which was given by his oldest son, Mordecai, and his is the first grave in it. Mordecai dug the grave himself for his father....

The Cuff Cemetery exists in Canton, but there is no marker from Cuffee’s grave to indicate what name he was known by among his people in his time. However, a map of the cemetery recently given to the Salem County Historical Society shows the location of Cuff, as “Cuffie Cuff” not far from his son Reuben.³⁰ According to this, the Steward story rings true. This location is not far down the road from the house Reuben Cuff occupied in 1798, reinforcing the early presence of the Cuff family in this neighborhood of Lower Alloways Creek.

The Stewards also said that the Cuff sons went to school. This would have occurred between 1770 and 1780 for Reuben. As free sons of a white woman, the boys would have had a better chance of getting schooled. Education for blacks in Salem County was very lacking in 1797, as reported by the county Abolition Society, despite a 1788 law that required slave owners to teach their slaves to read and write, and despite Quaker advocacy to educate blacks in the late eighteenth century.³¹ Further, literacy among Salem County free blacks in the nineteenth century was rare.³² But Reuben Cuff was unusual among blacks of his time in that he was literate: he signed his name on public documents, versus making an “X” mark, a signifier of illiteracy.

Thus records verify several aspects of the Cuff history as told by William and Theophilus Steward in 1913. The relationship between a slave named Cuff and the Padgett family, from his liberation to the land he occupied, is proven, as is the shift in surname from Padgett to Cuff, the education of the sons, and the location of Cuff’s grave. But there are still outstanding questions: a Padgett dying in the French and Indian War, the identity of Cuff’s wife, the location of Cuff’s cottage, and whether it is the same as the previously discovered home of Reuben Cuff in 1798. But in all likelihood, the enslaved man Cuff conditionally freed by John Padgett in 1739 and finally freed by Ann Paget’s death in 1739/1740 is Reuben Cuff’s father.

¹ “Reuben Cuff’s Domestic Landscape, Part I: The 1798 Connection,” *Salem County Historical Society Quarterly Newsletter*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Spring 2009); “Reuben Cuff’s Domestic Landscape, Part II: The House and the Shifting Landscape of Home,” *Salem County Historical Society Quarterly Newsletter*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (Winter 2011).

-
- ² William Steward and Theophilus G. Steward, *Gouldtown, A Very Remarkable Settlement of Ancient Date*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co., 1913) , 66.
- ³ “Cuff family is among the county’s oldest,” Sally Salem’s Notebook,” *Today’s Sunbeam*, September 29,1975.
- ⁴ Steward and Steward, Ibid 113-114.
- ⁵ Will of John Pagett, Salem County Wills, 675Q, B4 P210, Microfilm, NJ Archive.
- ⁶ Mark Edward Lender, *One State in Arms: A Short Military History of New Jersey* (Trenton: New Jersey Historical Commission, 1191 repr 2001), 19.
- ⁷ Timothy G. Cutler, personal communication, August 7, 2012.
- ⁸ Gary B. Nash and Jean R. Soderland, *Freedom by Degrees: Emancipation in Pennsylvania and its Aftermath* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 62.
- ⁹ Graham Russell Hodges, *Slavery and Freedom in the Rural North: African Americans in Monmouth County, New Jersey, 1665-1865* (Madison, Wis.: Madison House, 1997), 74.
- ¹⁰ Nash and Soderland, 64.
- ¹¹ John Warner Barber and Henry Howe, *Historical Collections of the State of New Jersey Containing a General Collection of the Most Interesting Facts, Traditions, Biographical Sketches, Anecdotes, Etc. Relating to Its History and Antiquities; with Geographical Descriptions of Every Township in the State* (Newark, N.J.: B. Olds, 1844), 144.
- ¹² Thomas Cushing and Charles E. Sheppard, *History of the Counties of Gloucester, Salem, and Cumberland New Jersey : with Biographical Sketches of Their Prominent Citizens* (Philadelphia: Everts & Peck, 1883), 421-427.
- ¹³ Janet L. Sheridan, “Reuben Cuff’s Domestic Landscape, Part I: The 1798 Connection,” *Salem County Historical Society Quarterly Newsletter*, Vol. 54, No. 1 (Spring 2009).
- ¹⁴ Account of William Murdoch Admr of Ann Pagett, Salem County Wills, 674Q, B4 P223, Microfilm, NJ Archive.
- ¹⁵ *Documents relating the Colonial History of the State of New Jersey, Vol XXXIII, Calendar of Wills, 1690-1730* (Patterson, NJ: The Press Printing and Publishing, 1901), 333.
- ¹⁶ Inventory of John Pagett, Salem County Wills, 675Q, Microfilm, NJ Archive
- ¹⁷ Inventory of Ann Pagett, Salem County Wills, 674Q, Microfilm, NJ Archive.
- ¹⁸ Nash and Soderland, 165.
- ¹⁹ Timothy Hack, Ph.D. candidate in History, University of Delaware, and Assistant Professor, Salem Community College, personal communication, March 4, 2008.
- ²⁰ Will of John Padgett, Salem County Wills, 1517Q, B13 P542, Microfilm, NJ Archive.
- ²¹ Will of Rebecca Padgett, Salem County Wills, 1916Q, B31 P345, Microfilm, NJ Archive.
- ²² Steward and Steward, 114.

²³ Paul Axel-Lute, comp., "The Law of Slavery in New Jersey: An Annotated Bibliography," (2005, rev 2012), <http://njlegallib.rutgers.edu/slavery/bibliog.html>. In New Jersey, a 1713/14 law banned free blacks from owning land until it was repealed in 1798.

²⁴ Nash and Soderland, 188.

²⁵ NJ Tax Lists Index 1772-1822, August Tax List, 1774, 141. From Ronald V. Jackson, Accelerated Indexing Systems, comp. *New Jersey Census, 1643-1890* [database on-line] (Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations, Inc, 1999).

²⁶ James S. Norton, *New Jersey in 1793* (Salt Lake City: n. p., 1973), 366. Proximity is assumed by the order of names in the list, which is not alphabetical, so may indicate the travel path of the delineator, much as it does in Federal censuses of 1850 and later.

²⁷ United States Direct Tax, 1798, "A" List. Salem County, New Jersey: Lower Alloways Creek Township, New Jersey State Archive Record Series New Jersey General Assembly / Tax Ratables (Duplicates), 1786-1846, Book 1520.

²⁸ Thanks to Timothy Hack for this insight into historical race relations, personal communication, 15 August 2012.

²⁹ *The Christian Recorder*, January 8, 1891.

³⁰ Items related to the Cuff Cemetery Association, Salem County Historical Society Library (2011.031).

³¹ Abolition Society for the County of Salem, "Salem County Return of Blacks," 26 April 1797 (Salem County Historical Society, 2003.MSS.255).

³² Author's observation from reading public documents such as deeds, incorporations, wills, etc. signed by African Americans in Salem County as well as Federal Census.