

How Did the Mende Become Slaves?

The Spanish, who controlled Cuba, had a treaty with Britain outlawing the slave trade in 1820. Despite this law, the kidnapping and transportation of Africans was very profitable and continued for many years. Most Africans were pressed into slavery by other Africans collaborating with European slave traders. Many were kidnapped from their villages, taken from their homes or while working in the fields. Some had been taken in raids or wars with other tribes or were already in bondage in the Mende society and were simply sold to the Portuguese or Spaniards. Others, like Cinque, were sold to repay an unpaid debt. Two of the Mende girls had been put up by their fathers as security for debts and sold when the debts could not be paid.

Although the Africans came from many different backgrounds and walks of life within the Mende society, to their captors they had one major thing in common, they were all young and healthy, good candidates for future slaves. Most of the Mende men were married and had families. Cinque was one of several hundred Africans kidnapped and taken from their homes in April of 1839. Chained, they were forced to walk many miles to Sierra Leone where they were then transported to Lomboko on the west coast of Africa. This was the center of the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Here they were purchased by Pedro Blanco of Havana, the most notorious of the slave traders.

The Voyage From Africa

The African captives (about 500 in number) were loaded into the hold of the large Portuguese slave ship, Tecora. For most of the Africans, it was the first time they had even seen the ocean. The voyage of a slave ship across the Atlantic Ocean was known as "The Middle Passage". It was a voyage of extreme hardship. Africans were chained to one another in an area only four feet high. They were given only one cup of rice and one cup of water a day. There was no medical care available and no sanitary facilities. About one third of the captives died during the two month crossing from either malnutrition or physical abuse. Although transporting African captives to Cuba was illegal, slave ship captains became experts on dodging British patrols, bribing officials and smuggling their illegal cargo ashore.

The Mende Arrive In Cuba

The Tecora landed in Cuba in June of 1839. Once in Havana, the Africans were put into "barracoons" or large, open-air pens where they were sold to individual slave traders. The 53 Africans, most of whom were Mende, (49 adult men and four children - three girls and one boy) were purchased by two Spaniards, Don Jose Ruiz and Don Pedro Montes.

Ruiz and Montes were not concerned about the fact that it was illegal to buy and transport newly captured Africans; they had experience on how to break the law and not get caught. They bribed officials and obtained false trespassos or passports for the African captives, making it appear that the Africans had been in Cuba since before the 1820 treaty with Britain and Spain. They then hired a merchant ship called La Amistad to carry their cargo to another Cuban port, to be sold for what they anticipated would be a healthy profit. Cinque and the others were bound for Puerto Principe and a life of slavery.

The Africans were once again loaded onto a ship. It was June, 1839 and the weather was very hot and humid. The trip should have taken two days but the wind shifted and the voyage dragged on. When Cinque asked the ship's cook about their fate, the cook played a cruel trick on Cinque. Using sign- language, he indicated to Cinque that the Africans were to be killed and eaten. Horrified, Cinque went to the other Mende and convinced them that they must fight for their lives.

The Revolt

Using a nail that Cinque had found, he and another Mende, Grabeau, picked the locks on the iron collars fastened to their necks. Once free, the Africans searched the ship's hold and discovered a shipment of sugar cane knives with two-foot long blades.

Now armed, the Africans were ready to take over the Amistad. They crept up onto the deck of the ship in the early-morning hours of July 2, and launched an assault on the crew. The Mende killed the cook and the captain, who had managed to kill two of the Africans before being overcome. The two sailors the ship carried as crew jumped overboard and escaped in a boat. Ruiz and Montes were taken captive, along with the captain's slave. The death toll stood at four: two Mende and two Spaniards.

Homeward Bound?

Homeward bound, or so the Africans thought. Knowing nothing about navigation but reasoning that if the Tecora had sailed from Africa towards the rising sun, legend has it that Cinque headed the Amistad toward the rising sun. The plan was a good one, but at night, without the sun to guide him, Cinque was forced to turn the navigation of the Amistad over to Montes. Hoping to be spotted by another ship and rescued, Montes altered the ship's heading at night, heading northeast. The combination of the two men serving as navigators created an erratic, zig-zig course for the Amistad up the Atlantic.

Food and water were scarce. Disease broke out, taking the lives of eight of the Africans. Sails became shredded, barnacles encrusted the Amistad's hull. The Amistad was spotted several times by other ships, but the presence of heavily armed Africans manning the strange vessel frightened off any would-be rescuers. The Amistad had taken on the appearance of a pirate ship, and rumors of the "long, low, black schooner" began to spread up and down the eastern seaboard.

The Voyage Comes To An End

The voyage came to an end on August 26, when, after anchoring the ship off the tip of Long Island, Cinque and several other Africans went ashore to barter for supplies. While Cinque and the others were on the beach, the U.S. Navy ship, Washington under the command of Lieutenant Commander T.R. Gedney, came across the Amistad and took control of the ship and the African crew.

Cinque and his men had observed the Washington approaching the Amistad and began to row frantically back to the ship. But Gedney's men had spotted them, chasing the Africans back to land where they were taken prisoner. Brought back to the Amistad, Cinque tried to escape and was isolated from his fellow captives .

Hoping for salvage rights to the ship and its cargo, a percentage of the value as a reward for recovering the Amistad and the Africans, Gedney decided to sail the Amistad into New London. Historians assume Gedney reasoned that slavery, although just about extinct, was still legal in Connecticut. The Africans had been sold in the Cuban slave market for more than \$20,000. In a state where slavery was still legal, the "cargo" might be extremely valuable. It is believed that Gedney rejected the idea of taking the ship into a New York Harbor, since slavery had been abolished in that state.

The Amistad's arrival in New London was the beginning of another chapter in the strange saga of the Mende and their fight for freedom.



HOMeward BOUND

Farewell

The funds had been raised to hire a ship to return the Mende to their homeland. An emotional farewell service was held at the Farmington Congregational Church, with many of the townspeople taking part. More than two years after the Mende had seized the Amistad, they were, at last, on their way home. In November of 1841 they set sail from New York, bound for Sierra Leone. They arrived in Sierra Leone in January of 1842.

The American Missionary Association

The Amistad Committee that was organized to raise funds for the Africans ultimately became the American Missionary Association. Hoping to settle in Africa and dedicate themselves to converting the Africans to Christianity, missionaries, who had been working for the release of the Africans, sailed with the former captives to Sierra Leone, laying the foundation of what was to become the American Missionary Association. The Association later took on the task of educating the millions of illiterate slaves who were liberated after the Civil War and went on to establish major black institutions of higher education such as Fisk University, Hampton University, and many others.

And What of the Mende Captives?

Very little is known about the former captives when they reached Africa. Although the missionaries had hoped that the Mende would help them found a mission in Africa, most of the Mende left the group before it reached Mende country. Reportedly, Cinque found, upon reaching home, that most of his family had been sold into slavery. Legend has it that he returned to the mission in 1879 where he died shortly thereafter.

Some of the Mende did maintain some contact with the mission. One of the girls, Margru, ultimately returned to the United States where she attended Oberlin College in Ohio, the first institution of higher learning in this country to admit black students. When she completed her education, she returned to Africa to teach at the mission.

The Legacy

It would be 1865 before slavery would come to an end in this country. Although few remembered the Amistad incident; it, nonetheless, left its mark on the pages of our history. . . No, it's not foolish to believe that good can triumph over evil and injustice.

The Mende left us a legacy, a lesson on the meaning of human dignity.