

ABOLITIONIST DWIGHT P. JANES

A REAL NEW LONDON HERO OF THE AMISTAD

The significance of the *Amistad* is not the ship, Spielberg, subsidizes, or the Seaport, but that it was the first human rights-freedom case to be won before the US Supreme Court.

We now know, one in ten ships carrying enslaved people had insurrections of some sort. But it was in New London where abolitionist Dwight Janes's actions tipped the scales towards freedom for the *Amistad* captives.

Dwight Plimpton Janes had already been an active figure among New London's abolitionists when the *Amistad* arrived in port. Born on July 31, 1801, he grew up in the fiercely anti-slavery community of St. Albans, Vermont. After marrying Jane Winthrop Allyn, daughter of a prominent New London family, Janes lived in Montreal and attended the American Presbyterian Church, led at that time by abolitionist minister Joseph Christmas. Janes carried his views to New London when he moved there in the 1830s and began working for the grocery and mercantile firm Hurlbut, Butler & Co. He joined the American Anti-Slavery Society, distributed abolitionist materials, and tried to start an anti-slavery prayer group at the Second Congregational Church.

Janes managed to get aboard the revenue cutter *Washington* for the initial legal hearing, and noticed that the captives were speaking in their native language. Jose Ruiz, one of the *Amistad*'s owners, told Janes that none of them spoke Spanish or English because they were "just from Africa." It was enough to convince Janes that the captives were freeborn Africans, not Cuban slaves as the Spaniards claimed. He sought to bring the matter to the attention of several prominent abolitionists, writing to Roger S. Baldwin, a New Haven lawyer; Joshua Leavitt, editor of *The Emancipator*; and Lewis Tappan, a silk merchant.

You must let them know that they are among friends or they will be unwilling to say much. This case is exciting a good deal of interest here and no one believes that the blacks ought to be delivered up to the Spanish authorities, or that they are legally guilty of murder, but that they ought to be set at liberty or sent back to Africa.

—Janes in an Aug. 31, 1839 letter to Baldwin

Janes was anxious to keep the abolitionists aware of the case, penning a second round of letters when the captives were transferred to New Haven. When none responded, he enlisted in the help of fellow New London abolitionist William Bolles to write a postscript to another letter. Finally, Tappan replied to Janes to assure him that he and other abolitionists would become involved in the case.

The discussions consequent on such a trial would be highly beneficial to the cause of freedom in the state. We want something to wake the people up as well as to get justice for the sufferers.

—Bolles in a Sept. 2, 1839 letter to Leavitt

At the civil trial regarding the *Amistad*, Janes was a valuable witness for the defense. On January 7, 1840, he testified with New London abolitionist Savillion Haley about Ruiz's remarks. Their recollection helped convince Judge Andrew Judson that the captives had been brought from Africa.

Janes was also called to the stand on January 10 to counter testimony by Antonio Vega, the Spanish consul. Vega suggested that there was no law prohibiting the importation of slaves to Cuba and that the slaves working on plantations often spoke their native language for several years after their arrival. Janes testified that he had spoken with Vega on the subject and that Vega acknowledged that Spain had banned the slave trade to Cuba.

Janes suffered some retribution for his efforts. Robert Coit, a Second Congregational Church deacon who disagreed with Janes on the issue of slavery, recommended his excommunication on September 14, 1839. Coit accused Janes of writing an anonymous article for the abolitionist publication *The Ultimatum* and charging the pastor, James M. MacDonald, with dishonesty regarding the formation of an anti-slavery prayer group. The church membership voted in favor of Coit's request, though they granted Janes' appeal to return to the church three months later. That decision, as well as the divisions in the congregation over the issue of slavery, spurred MacDonald to resign soon after.

In the excitement of the moment, and when met by zealous opponents, or when condemning acts which I thought were wrong, I may have been influenced by personal opinion – may have said things which were harsh. I think I have shown an unchristian spirit. If such has been the case, I acknowledge it was wrong – I hope brethren and sisters will forgive it and earnestly pray that I may be kept from every thing wrong in manner and spirit in the future.

—Excerpt of Janes' appeal to rejoin the Second Congregational Church

I have found such opposition that I cannot pursue my duties. The decision regarding Brother Janes places me in a disagreeable attitude. I feel it is very different from what I had a right to expect. I have some reason to think my removal will be overruled to promote harmony. The affect upon my health and spirits has admonished me of the necessity of seeking dismission.

—Excerpt from MacDonald's resignation from the Second Congregational Church

Shortly after his testimony at the *Amistad* trial, Janes and his wife returned to Montreal. He worked as a grocer and flour merchant, and in the 1870s he was an agent of the Whitehall Transportation Company. Janes remained active in abolitionist efforts, becoming a founding member and vice-president of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada. He was likely involved in work to help slaves who escaped to Canada along the Underground Railroad. His work earned him the nickname "The African Consul."

Janes died of pneumonia on December 26, 1878, at the age of 77. One newspaper obituary declared that he 'had small patience with churches and divines who opposed the cause of human freedom.' He is buried in the Mount Royal Cemetery in Montreal.

