

Farmington Historical Society

FARMINGTON, CONNECTICUT

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Dear Cora -

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Connecticut Historical
Commission

Here is a sampling
of our resources.

Please let me know
if you'd like anything
else.

Carol Leonard

678-1645

Farmington Meadows looking northwest from Riverside Cemetery. The Mendi were given fifteen acres of meadowland to raise vegetables for their own use. Some root vegetables, pumpkins and squash raised here were taken aboard ship on the return home in November 1841. On hot summer days these excellent swimmers frequently enjoyed the cool water of the river and canal. The Farmington Canal was formerly where the new road was recently built in the lower part of the cemetery.

First Church of Christ, Main Street, Farmington.

The Mendi attended church each Sunday and sat in the pews of the balcony shown here. Most of the church members' children also sat in the balcony. Members housed, clothed, educated and tried to Christianize the Mendi. For many days shortly after the arrival of the group, some 40 women of the church met in the nearby Academy building to sew shirts, coats and pants for them.

First Church of Christ, Congregational. The 1840 census shows Farmington's population at 2,041. Of these, 115 were free blacks. All families sat in assigned seats; free blacks were assigned the pews shown here, near the south tower entrance.

Gravesite of Foone: "From all accounts, he was a brave and courageous man who was anxious to return home," said Chairman Valentine Strasser, head of state of Sierra Leone during ceremonies here Sept. 25. Because the Mendi were expert swimmers, it is believed that Foone committed suicide. He was very homesick and his religion taught that when a person died he was reunited with family members.

Canal gate house and basin. The Mendi were frequent visitors to the gate house, now remodeled into offices. They often passed through the building to board canal boats, as their abolitionist supporters took small groups to towns as far away as New York, Philadelphia and Washington to earn money through performances. They sang Mendi songs and read from the Bible in English, and Cinque told the story of their kidnapping, imprisonment and trials. People were always impressed with his oratory. Collections were taken up to finance their return to Sierra Leone.

Pitkin Basin was a large pond by the Canal House, where canal boats were moored at night. It was here that Foone drowned.

The Deming Store. Samuel Deming owned this store which in 1841 was on Main Street on the present site of the firehouse. He was a wealthy farmer and merchant, a Christian gentleman and a strong supporter of the anti-slavery cause. One of the three Farmington abolitionists responsible for bringing the Mendi to the town, he gave the use of part of the second floor of his store to house them while the carriage house was being built on Austin Williams' property. The room, only 18 x 20 feet, later became their classroom. For exercise they went outside on the street while they lived here. A free black couple, who ran a boarding house about 100 rods from the store, offered to cook for the Africans and provided a place to eat.

The second floor of the Deming Store became the classroom in May 1841 when the Mendi moved into their new quarters on the Williams property. Here they were divided into four groups according to ability. They continued their education, begun by Yale students during their imprisonment in New Haven. Sherman Booth, T.F. Fessenden and the Rev. Raymond were hired to tutor them, and sons of local abolitionists, including John Pitkin Norton, also volunteered. The three girls also attended classes; their lessons were reinforced with help from the families with whom they lived.

Farmington walking tour guide,
signed by His Excellency,
Chairman Valentine E.B. Strasser,
head of state, Sierra Leone.

Chairman Valentine Strasser, 28 year old head of state of Sierra Leone. on Friday, September 25, stood at the grave of his countryman, Foone, whose actions, he said, have kept alive the spirit of freedom for black people everywhere. Standing beside Chairman Strasser are Betty Coykendall, town historian; the Rev. Lidabell Pollard of Farmington's First Church of Christ, Congregational; and Town Councilor Arline Whitaker.

Evan Cowles, a descendant of prominent abolitionist Thomas Cowles, greets Chairman Strasser at Oldgate, the Cowles family homestead for more than 200 years. One of the founders of the Anti-slavery Society in Farmington, Thomas Cowles participated in the Underground Railroad and helped to raise money for black fugitives to buy their freedom.

This letter from Austin F. Williams, addressed to Lewis Tappan in New York, contains a confidential section referring to Foone's death.

Muslim leaders who participated in the joint Christian-Muslim ceremony at Riverside Cemetery Sept. 25, 1992, are seen leaving Oldgate, 148 Main Street.

In the spring of 1841, Austin F. Williams, one of three staunch abolitionists directly responsible for bringing the Mendi to Farmington, bought this property and had a dormitory built to house the men of the Amistad group. Cinque, the Mendi leader, had his own room on the second floor, while the others were housed in larger and more comfortable space than that afforded over the Deming Store. Walls were plastered, and wood stoves kept them warm. Tables, bunks and shelves were built for their comfort, and fresh water was readily available. The four acre field provided ample room for exercise.

Chairman Strasser stands in front of Austin Williams' house, built in 1842, looking toward the quarters in which his countrymen were housed from May to November.

Williams, an importer and exporter, had a store on Main Street and another in New York, as well as a lumberyard in Plainville. After the Civil War, he worked in Washington, D.C., finding jobs for former slaves.

The "outhouse" at the dormitory at 127 Main Street, used by the Mendi. This four-holer is backed by another three-holer. It was built into one corner of the dormitory, reached by outside doors.

A delegation from Sierra Leone stands in front of Samuel Deming's home, 60 Main Street. One of the three leading abolitionists in Farmington, he was known as a man of sterling character - a strong anti-slavery spokesman, a Christian gentleman and a successful, well-to-do farmer. To join the anti-slavery movement was, at this time, to risk the loss of business and the disapproval of many influential friends.

The Farmington Historical Society, at the end of its walking tour of Amistad-related sites, presented Chairman Strasser with a book containing copies of original letters written to Lewis Tappan of New York, head of the national anti-slavery movement, by Austin Williams and Samuel Deming. In addition to the letters, the book included account sheets from 1841, copies of books used to teach the Amistad story in the fifth grade of Farmington public schools, and The Amistad Event, published by the United Church Board of Home Ministries.

Chairman Strasser signs copies of the Amistad Walking Tour, published by the Farmington Historical Society, for Board members and tour guides Peg Yung and Day Ketcham.

A luncheon for the official party, sponsored by the Farmington Town Council, was held at Barney House. Now a conference center, Barney House was built by John Treadwell Norton, one of the three leading abolitionists responsible for bringing the Mendi to Farmington. An active reformer and moderate abolitionist, Norton held office in anti-slavery and harbored runaway slaves as early as 1839.

Three natives of Sierra Leone strain to read the inscription on Foone's gravestone, placed here 150 years ago.

A delegation of Sierra Leone expatriates gather around Foone's gravesite for the Christian/Muslim ceremony.

Betty Coykendall, Farmington town historian, welcomes Chairman Strasser and his official delegation to the town.

Carol Leonard, Farmington Historical Society president, greets Chairman Strasser.

Fr. James Tully, a Catholic missionary who lived for several years in Sierra Leone, was introduced to Chairman Strasser by his friends in the delegation from Boston.

Chairman Strasser, accompanied by Dr. Arthur Abraham, secretary of education, joined a walking tour of sites where the Mendi worked, played, attended school, resided and attended church services. Peg Yung was the Farmington Historical Society's tour guide for the official party.

Former U.S. Ambassador to Sierra Leone Arthur Lewis discusses the memorial event with Carol Leonard. Alfred L. Marder, president of the Amistad Committee, Inc., of New Haven, is standing to the left of Ambassador Lewis.

The Rev. Mrs. Pollard of Farmington's First Church of Christ, Congregational, leads the Christian service at the gravesite.

Dr. Leslie G. Desmangles, associate professor of religion and area studies at Trinity College, a Farmington resident and member of the Historical Society, pointed out that, as a result of this incident, the American Missionary Association went on to found some 500 schools, including some of the most prestigious black universities in the United States.

The Muslim ceremony was led by Mohammed Barrie, a Boston clergyman who conducted the service in Arabic.

The highlight of the Muslim ceremony came when Dr. Arthur Abraham, secretary of education for Sierra Leone, anointed Foone's grave with water from the Farmington River.

The Amistad Event: Farmington's Role in the Nation's First Civil Rights Case

These are copies of
options for photos used
in an exhibit showing
the events of Sept. 25,
1992, when the Sierra
Leone delegation visited
Firmington.

I thought they'd give
you a good idea of
some of our resources
here, as well as the
photos that could be
made available if
needed.

From John Pithkin Norton's diaries:

March 12. Captives set free.

March 16. The captives of the Amistad are coming en masse tomorrow (to Farmington) to stay for a time and continue their education. They are to be located in the upper story of Mr. Deming's building.

March 17. Father went to Berlin for Amistad freemen but their coming was delayed. Carpenters (are) at work on their bunks, bedding to be mere straw and a blanket. They sleep in their clothes.

March 18. Went to RR at Berlin with Father. Found a dozen sleighs waiting. 30 arrived by RR - small men, respectable appearance, more so than any other body of colored persons I have seen. They have the look and actions of men. I brought seven of them and to my surprise found that I could easily talk with them. They talked to each other in their own language, laughed and joked a lot. They suffered such from the cold - plenty of blankets in the sleigh but they were still cold. They have now taken possession of their new quarters and in a few days people will probably learn that these thirty Africans are not about to murder every inhabitant.

March 19. The three girls arrived here this afternoon with Mr. Lewis Tappan.

March 20. I went to see the Amistad negroes. Cinque is very suspicious and looked with evident uneasiness at us. His face is capable of a most savage expression. Kinna, the one that came up from New Haven yesterday with the little girls, is a very fine looking, intelligent man.

March 23. Went to hear a class of Africans read. It is a most interesting employment. They are so willing and eager to learn that teaching them is a perfect pleasure. Some of them read very well, indeed - Kinna with fluency.

March 24. I saw one of the Africans tumble today. His agility is most astonishing. They will not show their feats unless paid. Even Cinque descends to tumble for money.

March 25. Went into African room this morning. I found Mr. Booth (a tutor engaged to teach them) trying to give them directions respecting their future conduct. Among other things, he mentioned the tumbling for money. At this there was a general burst, all talked together and Cinque strode across the room, his voice raised, his eyes flashing and his arm stretched. For a few minutes all was confusion, but they soon became quiet and expressed through Kinna their acquiescence in Mr. Booth's wishes.

March 26. Improvement in reading. Kinna reads with perfect propriety, proper emphasis and inflection.

March 27. Heard Africans again this morning. One of them, to detect the truth of my explanation, asked me a word of which he knew the meaning and seemed much pleased to find I gave him the right signification. "Now I know you no tell me bad," he said. They like employment and work at piling wood.

May 4. Assisted in raising the new building for the Africans. It is so constructed as to be used for a barn after they leave.

May 20. Anti-slavery meeting in Hartford. Mendi present for an exhibition. They read, spelled, sang and spoke, doing very well in all their performances.

May 26. Africans engaged in moving (into their new quarters in Austin Williams' barn).

May 28. Taught Africans for an hour in their new home. They will be quite comfortable there.

July 8. Funeral of Foone. Africans sang at the grave. He was buried within a few feet of the Indian monument.

Sept. 7. Terrible stir among the Mendi last night. Henry Hart, with three other villains, assaulted Grabbeau. He escaped

from them and went home. Cinque and the rest became anxious and half of them marched up the street. A rascally gang collected in front of Phelps' and were with great difficulty restrained from making an attack on the Mendi. It was Noble Andrus that struck Cinque and, as Cinque this morning expressed it to me "He put his hand on him and he fell down." Andrus was pretty well flogged and if the flogging had extended to Henry Hart, it would have p3...Norton diary

been an excellent thing. If the Africans had not been restrained, they would have routed the whole crew and most probably killed some of them. The general feeling of the town is one of deep indignation against Hart and his comrades.

Sept. 8. Kinna and I cut up milkweeds and docks. (He was) very communicative, saying that Cinque is very strong and brave, never gets angry. If Cinque had told them to fight, they would almost have killed someone. He told the story of their capture and conveyance to Cuba and facts about the Mendi country. On the way to Cuba, they had scarcely any water and were sometimes brought up on deck to take fresh air and chained there in the full blaze of the tropical sun. This was so intolerable that they often begged to go below again.

Nov. 17. Grand farewell to the Mendis at church. A great crowd, house and gallery filled. Dr. Hawes preached the sermon and there were exercises from the Mendi as well as several songs. Cinque delivered a speech in Mendi. Mr. Williams explained the need for funds and in a few minutes \$1150 was subscribed.

A reminiscence by Charles Ledyard Norton, John's younger brother:

In 1841, the case of the Amistad captives was of international importance, and never has Farmington been so truly the center of public attention as when these distinguished foreigners were among her visitors.

Their story is quite as romantic as those served up in the modern novel, and I am permitted briefly to recount it here for I can clearly remember -- as clearly, that is, as a child who was barely three years old at the time -- how this Black Prince used to toss me up and seat me upon his broad shoulder while he executed a barbaric dance on the lawn for my entertainment.

During all the weary months since their capture, the Africans had been kept in confinement in New Haven. When it was decided to quarter them in Farmington pending arrangements for their return to Africa, there was consternation among the timid souls in the quiet village. Stories of cannibalism were plentifully circulated, and there were formal protests against forcing such a burden upon the community. But Mr. Tappan and his friends prevailed at last and with but little delay the whole band of thirty-seven embarked on the journey.

Barracks were erected on land at the rear of the old Wadsworth house adjoining the cemetery and here the former captives made their home. Cinque was a born ruler and, ably seconded by his lieutenant, Grabbo, he maintained a very creditable degree of discipline among his followers. They were, for the most part, free to roam about, except for regular school hours, and townsfolk soon ceased to fear them. Anxious mamas at first trembled and kept their children behind bolted doors, but before long it was no uncommon sight to see the big grown-up blacks playing with little white children in village dooryards.

The African visitors ... were often welcomed by my father, the late John T. Norton, at his home (now known as Barney House and the site of our luncheon today). I retain dim, childish memories of these strange, kindly black men. A broad flight of steps led down from the southern piazza of my father's house, and I distinctly remember seeing the athletic Cinque turn a somersault from these steps and then go on down the sloping lawn in a succession of hand springs, heels over head, to the wonderment and admiration of my big brothers and myself. Again, I recall a visit to the barracks, where I beheld the whole company clad, as it seems to me, in dark brown or gray jeans. In my childish eyes they seemed a mighty host and as such will always remain in my memory.

I was a favorite, too, with Foone, who was allowed sometimes to take me out for excursions in the neighborhood. The ex-captives were expert swimmers and very fond of bathing in the canal basins or in the mill pond until, unfortunately, poor Foone, on a day in July, was taken with a cramp and drowned, in spite of the efforts of his companions to rescue him. A messenger came at once for my father. We were sitting on the

piazza in the cool of the evening; it was early dusk when we saw a dark figure striding up the path. Taking no notice of the rest of us, he went straight to my father and said in broken accents - "We want you -- Foone he daid" - and with that he turned about and sped away, big tears chasing one another down his dark cheeks.

After so long a time, I may easily be at fault in details, but these are some of the memories that linger with me concerning this singular episode of sixty years ago.

One additional comment. You would probably be interested to know that during the Civil War, this Charles Ledyard Norton was the commander of the Connecticut 29th Regiment -- the state's first black regiment.

- John Pitkin Norton
and Charles Ledyard Norton
were the sons of John
Treadwell Norton. They
lived in his home on
Mountain Spring Rd - now
Barney House, where
we held the luncheon for
the Sierra Leone visitors
1st September. One of
our members read these
pieces during the luncheon.