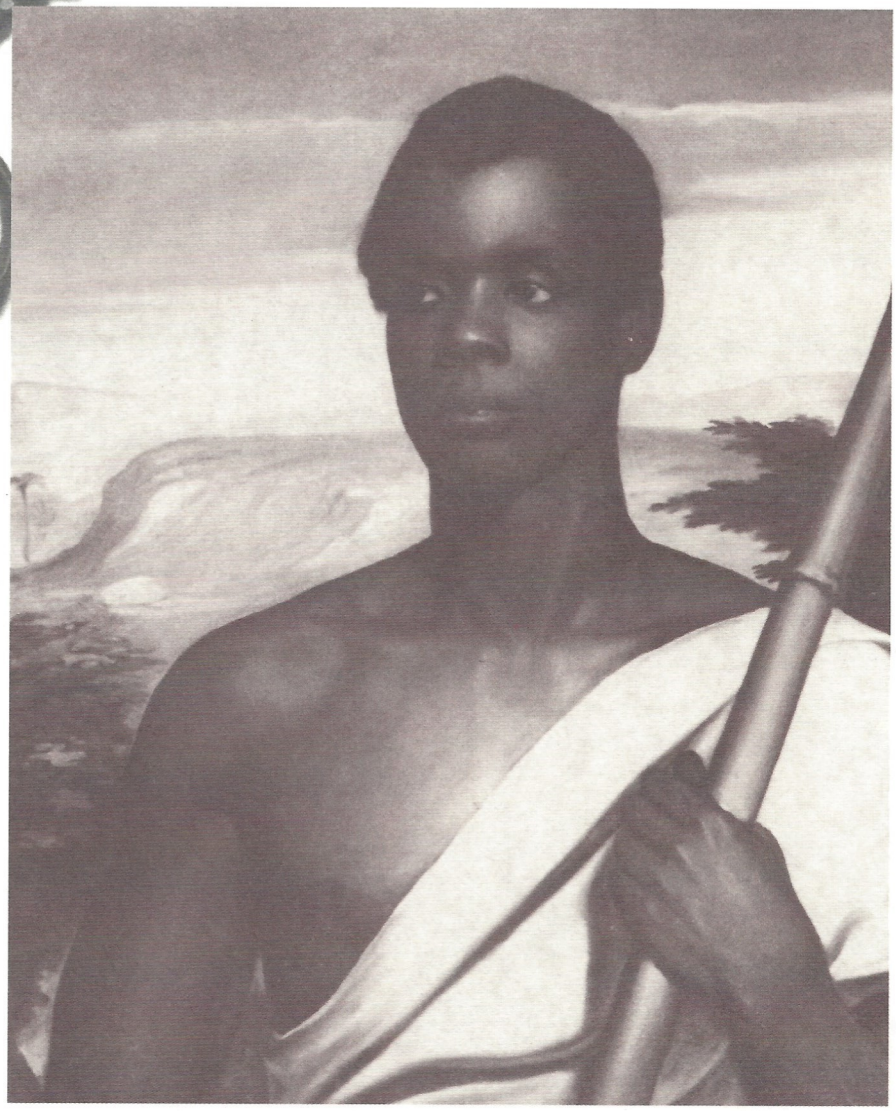


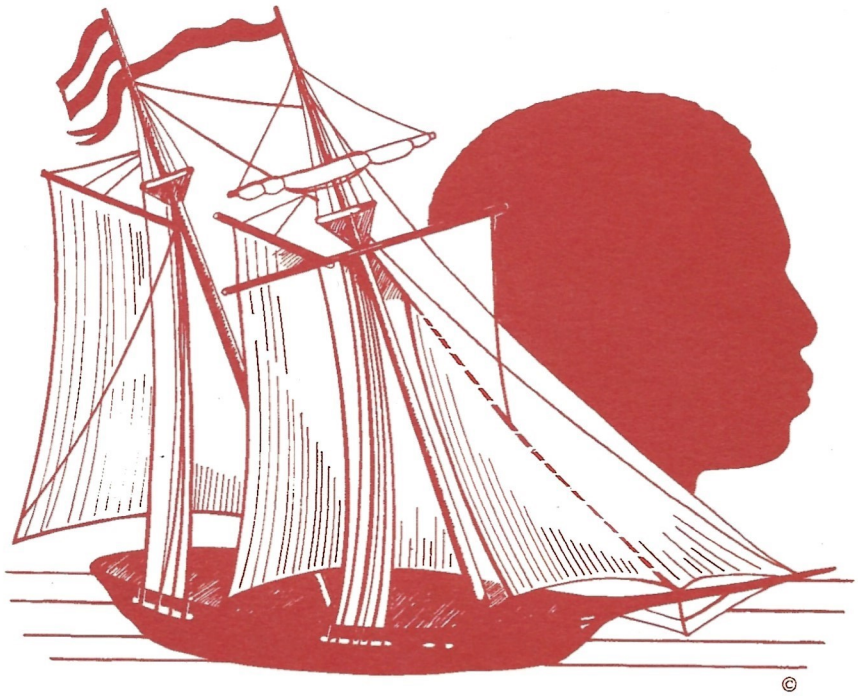
Free Men: The *Amistad* Revolt and the American Anti-Slavery Movement

Death of Captain Ferrer, The Capture of the Amistad from John Warner Barber's *A History of the Amistad Captives,* 1840. New Haven Colony Historical Society

The sleek ship's name of "Amistad," the Spanish word for "friendship," was a vicious mockery. For it sailed from Havana on June 28, 1839, on a barbaric mission: the transporting of 53 Africans, victims of the trans-Atlantic trade in human flesh, to the western end of Cuba, there to spend the rest of their lives in the nightmare of slavery.

Before the *Amistad* reached its destination, the Africans seized control of the vessel in a bloody bid for liberty. Their revolt set in motion a chain of events that focused public attention in the United States as never before on the volatile issues of slavery and the human and legal rights of Black individuals. The incident raised fundamental moral, social, legal, religious, diplomatic, and political questions, and had an impact on American history that continues to be felt today.

The odyssey that ended with the return of the surviving *Amistad* Africans to their homeland is a story of how, at a critical moment in history, a diverse assemblage of human beings, Black and White, African and American, displayed courage as well as dedication to the principles of freedom and justice in pursuing difficult, even dangerous courses of actin to achieve a significant victory over injustice and cruelty.



(Cover) Neck and Ankle Shackles, 18-19th century Simpson Collection, Amistad Foundation, Wadsworth Atheneum

(cover) Cinque by Nathaniel Jocelyn, circa 1840 New Haven Colony Historical Society

Mendeland 1839 – African Homeland

West African Women Expressing Oil, Sherbro, West Africa from T.J. Alldridge, *The Sherbro and Its Hinterland,* 1901. Yale University

The *Amistad* saga began in the region of western Africa today embraced by the country of Sierra Leone, in the heart of the Mende culture, which flourished in the early nineteenth century as it continues to do today. A vital people with powerful military capability, the Mende in the early 1800s were extending their influence over larger and larger areas of territory. Conversely, the Mende fiercely resisted any encroachment from outsiders. They had never been conquered by a foreign invader.

The Mende then as now lived a deliberately plain, frugal lifestyle in small villages surrounded by farm land on which rice was the most commonly grown crop. To be a farmer was the most prestigious occupation in Mende society. An independent people, the Mende's system of government historically has been a democratic one, in which men and women alike participate. Unlike many other cultures in Africa, the Mende have had no use for a monarchy and its expensive trappings, which must be supported by taxing the people, a practice the Mende find repugnant.

By the early nineteenth century the Mende judicial system was already highly developed, complete with the concept of a specific set of individual rights similar to those of the U.S. Constitution's Bill of Rights. The Mende are a litigious people, frequently taking disputes to court. Trials are conducted as open-air events, serving as a form of entertainment, which members of the entire community, including children, frequently attend. As a result all Mende are familiar with the concepts and operation of courts of law.

For centuries a system of powerful secret societies, or "poros," has been central to Mende culture. Each poro exerts great influence over certain aspects of Mende life and is responsible for preparing its members, both male and female, for their roles in Mende society. Mende men spend several years living in poro schools, where they are instructed in many different subjects, including farming, ethics, and history, and where they are afforded an opportunity to explore their own particular

Basket, Sierra Leone, West Africa, 20th Century, Private Collection

Mutiny on the Amistad by Hale Woodruff, 1939. Talladega College

the other end of Cuba. The *Amistad* crew consisted of the captain; his two slaves, one a cook, the other a cabin boy; two White sailors; and a Ruiz and Montes. The ship set sail into history on the morning of June 28, 1839.

Contrary winds slowed the schooner's progress. The intense tropical sun beat down, food and water were in short supply, and several of the Africans were whipped by their captors.

Meanwhile, below decks the African men probably organized themselves into an informal poro society, and, in the Mende democratic tradition, elected 25-year-old Cinque as their leader. They were now powerfully bonded and organized to deal with the crisis that confronted them.

On the third day out from Havana the ship's cook taunted Cinque with a cruel joke, indicating via gestures that when the Africans reached their destination they would be killed and eaten. That night Cinque and Grabeau used a nail Cinque had found to pick the locks on the iron collars fastened around the Africans' necks. Freed of their shackles, the Africans were determined not to submit meekly to the ghastly fate they had been led to believe awaited them.

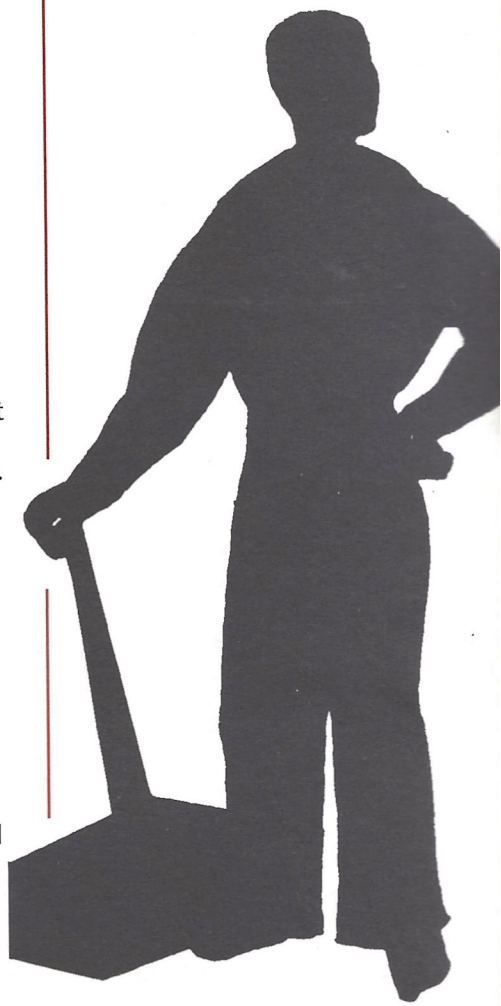
The Revolt
July 1, 1839

A search of the vessel's hold turned up a shipment of machetes -- sugar cane knives with two-foot long blades. Armed with these cane cutters, the Africans crept up onto the *Amistad's* deck in the rain-swept pre-dawn hours of July 1, and launched an assault on the crew. They killed the hated cook and the captain; the captain managed to kill two of the Africans before he himself was finally overwhelmed. The two White sailors escaped in a boat. The Africans took as prisoners the Spaniards Ruiz and Montes and the captain's personal slave Antonio.

Within minutes the Africans had control of the ship. Now they had but one goal: to return to Africa. Coming from interior regions of the continent, they knew little about ocean navigation. But Cinque had observed that the *Tecora* had sailed toward the setting sun as it took them away from Africa. To return to Africa, he reasoned, the *Amistad* should head toward the rising sun.

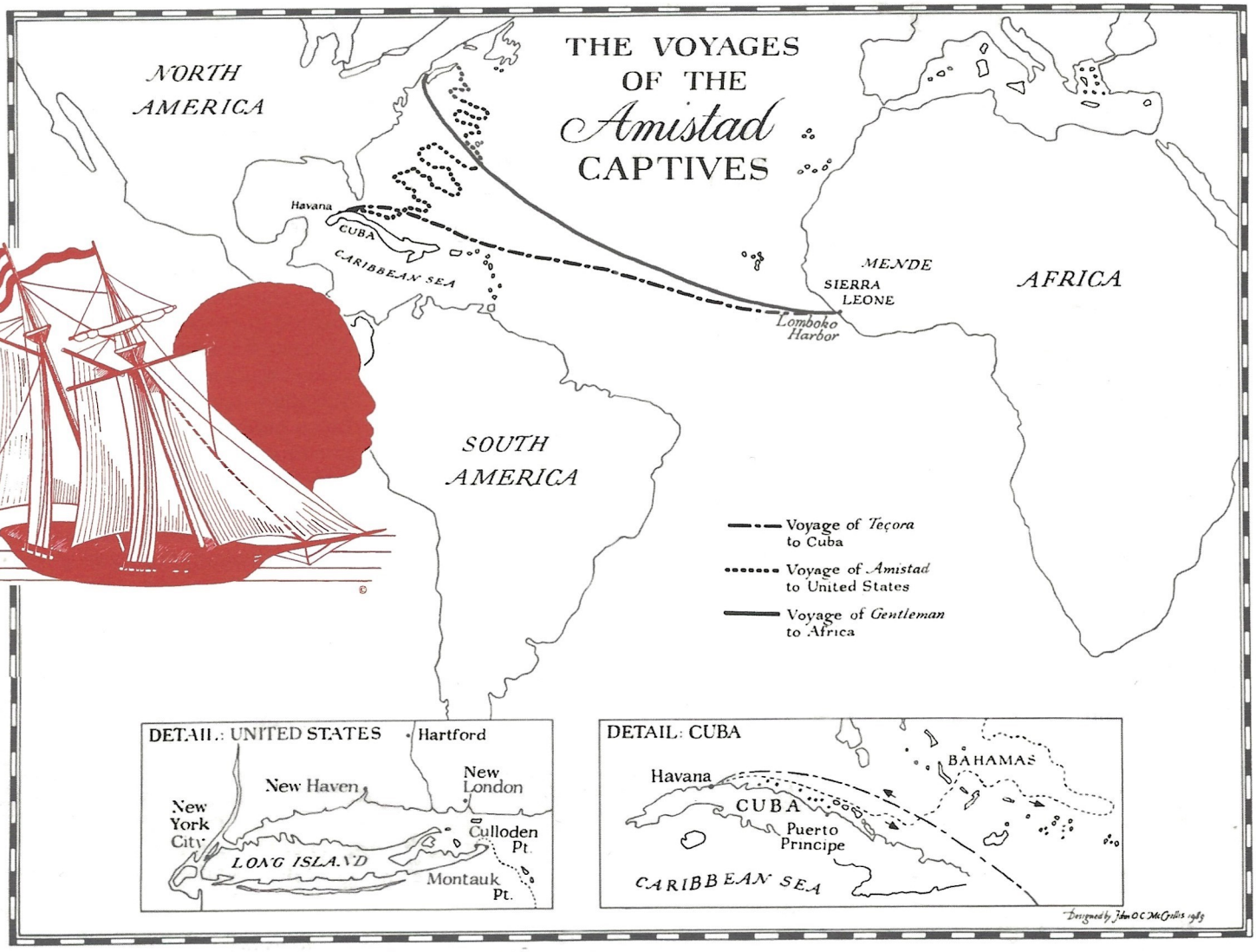
Cinque ordered Montes to sail th *Amistad* eastward. But at night, when Cinque had no sun by which to determine direction, Montes surreptitiously headed th ship northwest, hoping the *Amistad* would encounter another vessel that would rescue him and Montes from the Africans.

Week after week the *Amistad* continued on its wanderings,

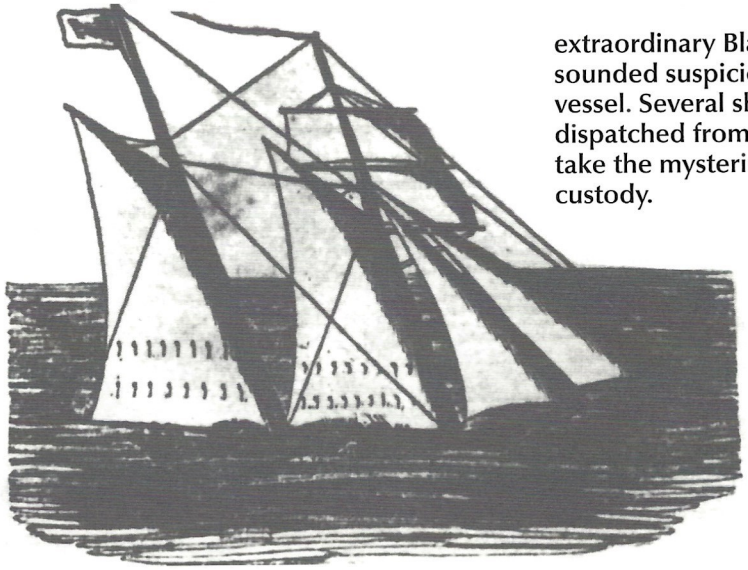


Silhouette of Cinque, Stanley-Whitman House, Farmingt

Map of the Voyage of the Amistad by John O.C. McCrillis, 1989



following a zig-zag course that ran roughly parallel to the North American coast. Death stalked the ship as food and water began to run low and sickness broke out. Eight of the Africans perished from the hardships. The vessel took on a haunted appearance, as its sails became shredded and barnacles encrusted its hull. The *Amistad* was sighted by several ships, and even made brief contact with one, but their crews were frightened off by the sight of the fierce-looking, heavily armed Africans manning the ship. Rumors began to fly up and down the eastern seaboard of the "long, low" schooner with the extraordinary Black crew, which sounded suspiciously like a pirate vessel. Several ships were dispatched from American ports to take the mysterious vessel into custody.



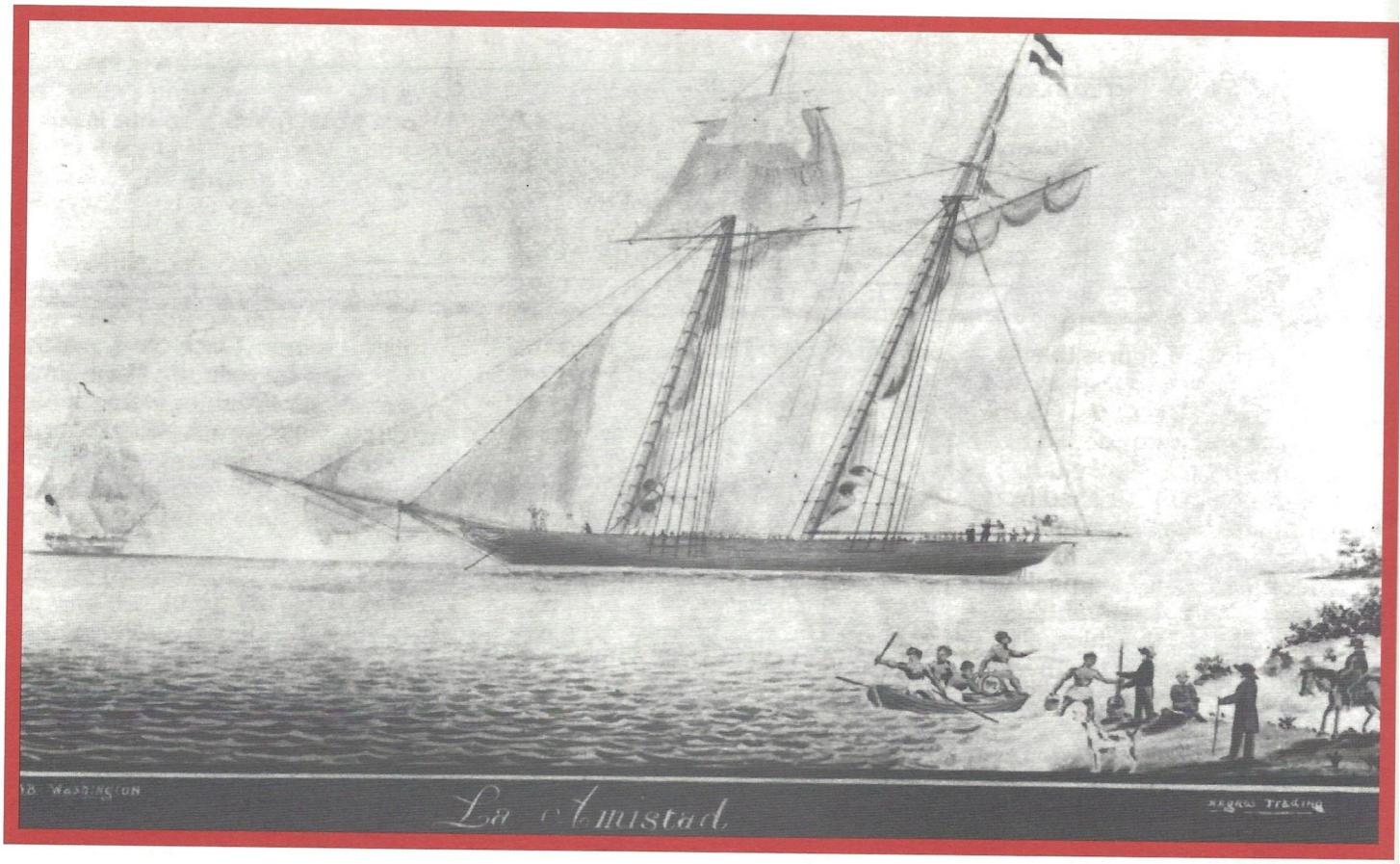
"The Long Low Black Schooner" from the *New York Sun*, August 21, 1839

"The Piratical Schooner" Captured
August 26, 1839

The *Amistad*'s bizarre voyage ended on August 26. After anchoring the ship off the tip of Long Island, Cinque and several companions went ashore to barter for supplies, and perhaps also to locate a pilot to sail them to Africa, something they had realized Montes either could not or would not do. While they were on the beach the U.S. Navy ship *Washington*, under Lieutenant Commander T.R. Gedney, came upon the *Amistad* and quickly took control of it from its African crew.

Cinque and several of his men, observing the *Washington's* approach, began to row frantically back to the *Amistad.* Before they reached the ship, they were chased by some of Gedney's men back to land, and there taken prisoner. Back on board the *Amistad,* Cinque attempted to escape by leaping overboard, but was captured and once more sent to the ship's hold with his fellow Africans. Undaunted, Cinque persistently exhorted the Africans to rise in revolt against these new enslavers, until the Americans at last isolated him from his followers.

Gedney had the option of sailing the *Amistad* to a port in either New York State or Connecticut. In New York slavery was no longer legal; in Connecticut slavery had almost totally disappeared, but legislation outlawing it completely had yet to be passed. Gedney hoped to receive a percentage of the ship and its cargo as a reward for recovering them. In Connecticut that cargo might be judged to include the extremely valuable Africans, who had sold in the Cuban slave market for more tha $20,000 -- worth many times that much in today's money. These circumstances probably explain why Gedney sailed the *Washington* and the *Amistad* into the harbor of New London, Connecticut, on August 27.



Watercolor of *La Amistad,* 1839, New Haven Colony Historical Society

Slavery in the United States

Enslavement of Africans had been practiced in the United States for more than two centuries, so that in 1839 there were approximately two and a half million Blacks in bondage in this country. Most were in the South, where their labor formed the foundation of part of the economy. By contrast, slavery never took deep root in the North, thanks to circumstances that included a climate too cold to grow crops such as cotton, which required many workers to successfully cultivate, and a settlement pattern of small family farms as opposed to large, labor-intensive plantations.

During the Revolutionary War era, the spirit of liberty moved all the New England states to pass legislation providing for either immediate or gradual emancipation of slaves within their borders. Connecticut's law decreed that any Black person born in the state after March 1, 1784, would be free upon turning 25, an age that was later lowered to 21. Thus in Connecticut in 1839 there lived more than 6,000 free Blacks, and fewer than 20 slaves. But no matter how rare in actual practice, slavery still had not yet been completely legislated out of existence in Connecticut.

Many Americans who did not own slaves themselves condoned or at least tolerated the practice. Many others, North and South, were untroubled by slavery's existence, or, if they disapproved of it, were content simply to prevent it from expanding into new areas of the nation, thereby, it was hoped, condemning it to gradual extinction. Americans everywhere worried that the issue of slavery might ultimately split apart the Union itself.

Neck and Ankle Shackles. 18-19th Century, Simpson Collection, Amistad Foundation, Wadsworth Atheneum

The Abolition Movement

The *Amistad* Africans soon learned that they were not entirely without friends in this strange land. Upon hearing of their plight, a number of sympathetic Americans mobilized to aid the Africans. For close to a decade a small group of abolitionists -- so called because they sought to abolish slavery from America -- had been attempting to prick the consciences of complacent Americans concerning Black bondage. Slavery they believed to be both a sin against Christianity (in that it denied Black individuals their God-given right to act as free moral agents), as well as a betrayal of the ideals of American democracy. It was an intolerable blight which had to be swept from the land.

The abolitionists had had scant success. In 1839 out of a national population of approximately 17 million there were only about 150,000 abolitionists, the majority of them women. Many Americans, even those opposed to slavery, considered abolitionists to be dangerous fanatics who would willingly tear American society apart in their radical crusade. The Georgia state legislature offered a $5,000 reward for radical abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison in order to try him on the charge of treason against the state. In the 1830s anti-abolitionist riots, involving not just street toughs but prominent

local leaders, took place in many Northern communities; in 1834 a lawless crowd ransacked the New York City home of wealthy abolitionist Lewis Tappan and burned its furnishings, while the next year in Boston William Lloyd Garrison, editor of the radical abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator,* narrowly escaped being lynched, In 1837 in Alton, Illinois, a mob killed abolitionist Elijah Lovejoy.

Many free Blacks, including a number of escaped slaves, actively participated in the abolitionist movement. One of these, Rev. James W.C. Pennington, was an escaped slave who rose to become a prominent clergyman and community leader in Hartford and New Haven in the 1830s and 1840s. In 1843 Rev. Pennington represented the Connecticut Anti-Slavery Society at an international anti-slavery conference in London.

Opponents of slavery disagreed among themselves on many fundamental questions, including their ultimate goals. In the first decades of the nineteenth century the emphasis was on the gradual emancipation of slaves and the "colonization" of free Blacks in settlements outside the United States. Then in the early 1830s emerged the radical abolitionists, who rejected colonization, contending that all slaves should be liberated immediately without any compensation to their owners, and then incorporated into American society.

Abolitionists also differed on the means they should employ. Some abolitionists considered moral persuasion the most effective weapon against slavery. Toward that end they

Poro Society Men in Dancing Costume, Upper Mende from T.J. Alldridge, *The Sherbro and Its Hinterland,* 1901, Yale University

disseminated millions of anti-slavery publications throughout not just the North but the South as well, until Southern postmasters refused to deliver what they considered dangerously radical material.

Other abolitionists felt that emphasizing slavery as a religious sin would have a greater impact. Still others were convinced that merely striving to persuade individual Americans to change their minds would not succeed in eliminating slavery, and that aggressive political action was necessary. One of their tactics was to deluge the U.S. Congress with hundreds of petitions requesting the abolition of slavery in the District of Columbia; Congress responded with a motion to automatically table all such expressions of public opinion.

The sudden arrival of the *Amistad* Africans on American soil was, many abolitionists believed, literally a heaven-sent opportunity to draw popular attention to the evil of slavery and to win public sympathy for their crusade. The *Amistad* Africans were not faceless statistics, but courageous flesh-and-blood human beings who, motivated by a thirst for liberty with which an individual of any race could identify, had thrown off their chains and taken charge of their own destiny

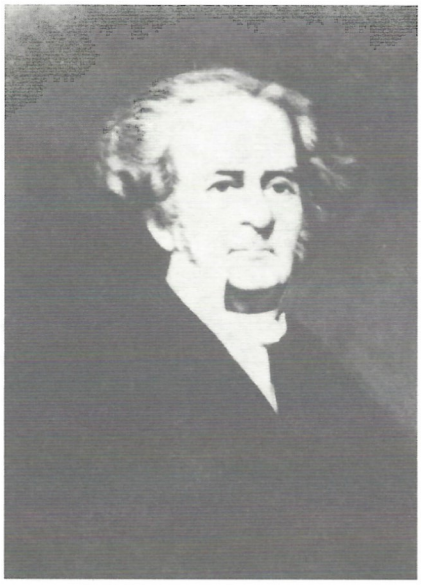
Margru by William H. Townsend, 1839, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library Yale University

Hearing at New London
August 29, 1839

From the moment they arrived in New London, the *Amistad* Africans became the objects of public attention as well as the central figures in what would become an increasingly complicated legal case. For having come this far alive they could thank the traits, abilities, and traditions instilled in them by Mende culture. They had endured physical and mental suffering with patience and fortitude. They had displayed intelligence, resourcefulness, cooperation, discipline, and swift, decisive action in both seizing the *Amistad* and using it to steadfastly pursue their illusive goal of returning to Africa.

The Mende poro system and democratic tradition had enabled the Africans to organize themselves effectively and to select one of their number to lead them in the dangerous revolt. Cinque had shown himself to be a living embodiment of the ideals of Mende manhood. The Africans would need to draw even further on their Mende heritage to find the strength and skill to carry them through the ordeals that still lay ahead.

The Africans odyssey through the American system of jurisprudence commenced when U.S. District Judge Andrew Judon held a hearing on board the *Washington* on August 29. To have Judson presiding over the hearing boded ill for the Africans. Just six years earlier he had played a prominent role in the persecution of Quaker schoolteacher Prudence Crandall for operating a school for Black girls in Canterbury, Connecticut. Judson had worked for passage in 1833 of the infamous "Black Law" prohibiting out-of-state Black students from entering



Lewis Tappan, Courtesy of Dun and Bradstreet

Connecticut to attend school -- a piece of legislation designed expressly to suppress Crandall's school, which included out-of-state Black girls in its student body. In addition, Judson served as prosecuting attorney when Crandall was tried for her "crime" of educating Black children. Crandall and her students were the targets of vicious harassment, culminating in a mob assault on the school in 1834, which at last forced Crandall to close her school and leave Connecticut.

In the *Amistad* case, judge Judson ordered that the surviving adult Africans be tried in September before the U.S. Circuit Court in Hartford for the crimes of mutiny and murder. He did not charge the African children, who remained in custody as witnesses. Judson ordered all the Africans transferred to the New Haven jail to await the trial. A sideshow atmosphere prevailed in the jail, as curious folk from the surrounding countryside paid twelve and a half cents each for the privilege of filing through to gawk at the Africans.

The Amistad Committee
September 7, 1839

In less than a week the abolitionists formed the *Amistad* Committee to solicit funds to pay for both the support of the Africans and for their legal counsel. Its members were Rev. Joshua Leavitt, editor of the New York anti-slavery newspaper *The Emancipator*; Rev. Simeon S. Jocelyn, a militantly abolitionist New Haven clergyman who had helped escaping slaves on their way to freedom via the underground railroad; and Lewis Tappan, a wealthy, devoutly Christian New York merchant. The *Amistad* incident acted as a cohesive force for the various factions of the abolitionist movement, inspiring them to put aside their differences, if only temporarily, and join forces to achieve a larger goal.

The most immediate problem the Africans' attorneys had to grapple with was the fact that the accused men could not speak in their own defense, since they knew only Mende or another African language. At last they located in New York an African, John Ferry, who spoke Mende, if not fluently, at least well enough to translate the basics of the Africans' account of what happened to them.

U.S. Circuit Court Hartford
September 12, 1839

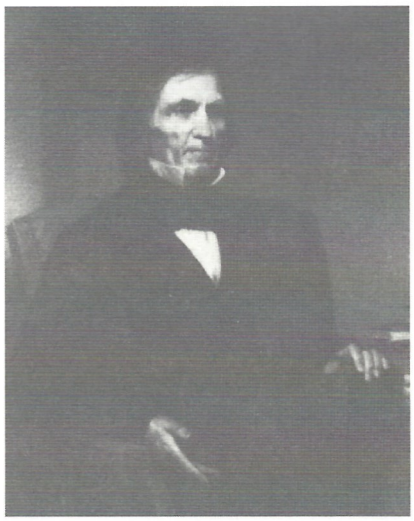
Old State House, Hartford by D.W. Kellogg after E.W. Clay, 1834, The Connecticut Historical Society

In mid-September the *Amistad* Africans arrived in Hartford for trial on charges of mutiny and murder before the U.S. Circuit Court -- a proceeding presided over by Associate justice Smith Thompson of the U.S. Supreme Court and Judge Andrew Judson. The trial opened at the present-day Old State House, then the state capitol. The Africans were defended by a team led by New Haven attorney Roger Sherman Baldwin, the grandson of Declaration of Independence signer Roger Sherman. Baldwin had several times in the past defended the rights of Black individuals.

Having been exposed to the publicity conducted Mende system of justice, the Africans were familiar with the principles and practices of courts of laws. They understood the nature of the proceedings, and several of them gave testimony via the interpreter.

Justice Thompson ruled that the U.S. Circuit Court had no jurisdiction to try the Africans on the murder and mutiny charges, since the *Amistad* was a Spanish ship and the revolt had taken place in Spanish waters. He referred the problem of untangling the conflicting claims on the ship and its cargo, particularly determining whether or not the Africans should be considered part of that cargo, to the U.S. District Court. The issue now was: were the *Amistad* Africans property, or were they people with rights?

Judge Judson called the U.S. District Court into session posthaste, then set a November trial date to allow time for examination of the claims. Judge Judson agreed to the abolitionists' request that the Africans be released on bail in the interim -- providing that the amount of the bail be determined by the price the Africans would sell for in the Cuban market. The abolitionists rejected Judge Judson's terms, believing that to accept them would be tantamount to acknowledging the right to classify human beings as property. Although they remained in custody, the African men were allowed to live in a house in New Haven rather than in jail cells, and the girls were housed in a private home.



Josiah Willard Gibbs, Yale University

The Struggle to Communicate

The need to fully bridge the language gap between the Africans and those working to help them was crucial to a successful legal defense. That problem was at last solved through the efforts of Yale professor Josiah Willard Gibbs. Gibbs learned from the Africans the Mende words for the numbers one through ten, then combed the New York City docks repeating them. In this way he found James Covey, a

young Mende man who as a child had been bound for North America on a slave ship, but had been rescued when the vessel was intercepted by a British patrol. Covey learned to speak, read, and write English at a missionary school in Sierra Leone, then signed on as a sailor on a British ship which was in New York.

While the Africans awaited their day in court, Yale student volunteers instructed them in speaking, reading, and writing English. In the hope of converting them, the Africans were also taught the principles of Christianity. There was at that time no respect for the validity of the Africans' own religious beliefs, which Christians considered nothing more than paganism.

Diplomacy and Politics

The *Amistad* incident meanwhile was evolving into both a diplomatic crisis and domestic political headache. The Spanish government was seeking the return of the *Amistad* and all of its cargo to its owners and the extradition of the Africans to Havana to stand trial under Spanish justice. It based these demands on the terms of two Spanish-American treaties, Pinckney's Treaty of 1795 and the Adams-Onis Treaty of 1819.

U.S. Attorney General Felix Grundy advised U.S. Secretary of State John Forsyth that President Martin Van Buren should turn over the ship, its cargo, and the Africans to the Spanish government for whatever trial and punishment the Spanish government might deem fitting. Although himself a New Yorker, President Van Buren was eager to avoid an international incident and to retain the powerful backing of Southern slave-supporting Democrats in the impending 1840 presential election. With this political consideration uppermost in his mind, Van Buren accepted Grundy's advice.

To turn the Africans over to the Spanish almost certainly would have meant death for them. The abolitionists countered this powerful threat from the federal authorities with expert testimony to prove that the *Amistad* Africans were not "ladinos" simply being transported under Cubs's legal domestic slave trade, but victims of the outlawed importation of slaves from Africa. As such they had never been slaves under Spanish law.

The U.S. District Court trial opened in November of 1839, but after only a couple of days a series of misfortunes necessitated putting the case off until January of 1840. In the interim the diplomatic crisis worsened, with the Spanish government threatening that refusal to return the *Amistad* and its cargo, including the Africans, would constitute a violation of the Spanish-American treaties and render them void. The Van Buren administration began exerting even greater pressure to see the U.S. District Court decide against the Africans, thereby both placating the Spanish government and pleasing powerful slave-holding Southerners.

Tontine Hotel and the New Haven Green by Robert O'Brien and John Warner Barber, 1840, New Haven Colony Historical Society

U.S. District Court New Haven
January 8, 1840

The trial of the *Amistad* Africans opened in January of 1840 in New Haven -- with Judge Judson presiding. By now there were only 36 Africans surviving, several more of them having perished in New Haven, where they had spent most of the four months since their arrival in Connecticut.

Silhouette of John Quincy Adams by E.B. & E.C. Kellogg after William Henry Brown, The Connecticut Historical Society

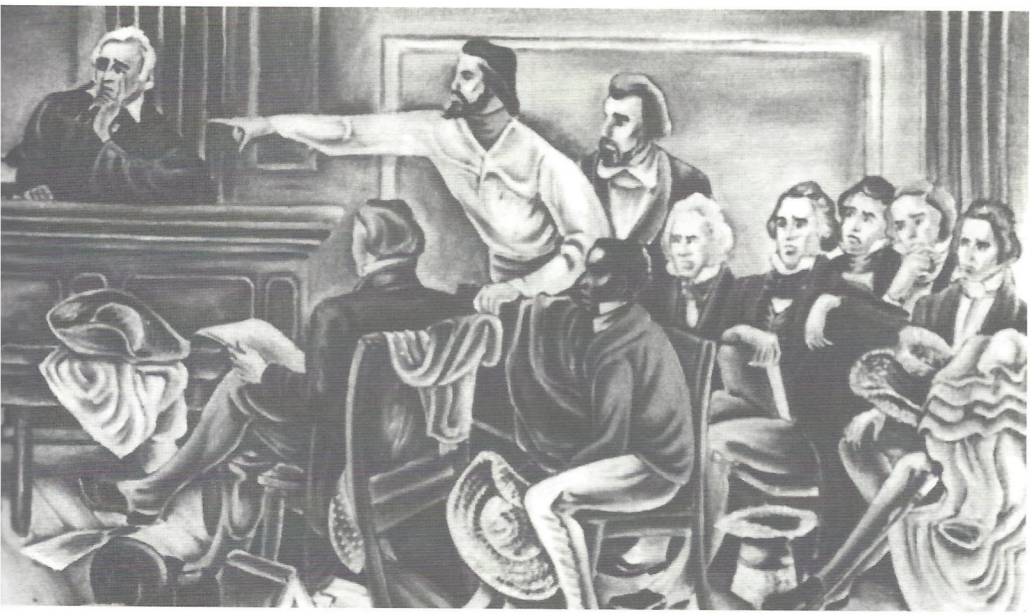
Trial of the Amistad Captives by Hale Woodruff, 1939, Talladega College

At the direction of President Van Buren's administration, which had as its top priority the impending presidential election, a ship had been stationed in New London for the purpose of immediately transporting the Africans to Havana if the verdict of the U.S. District Court went against them. Abolitionists considered this act an outrageous interference with due process of law, since it would give the Africans no chance to appeal a verdict against them. If the verdict favored the Africans, the district attorney was directed to file an appeal at once.

After six days of testimony, including dramatic accounts given by Cinque, Grabeau, and Fuliwa through the interpreter, Judge Judson stunned the public by rendering a decision in favor of the *Amistad* Africans. Gedney and his men were granted salvage rights on the ship and cargo -- but that cargo did not include the Africans, whom Judson declared "were born free and ever since have been and still of right are free and not slaves." Judson, who had resisted great pressure from the White House to bring in a verdict against the Africans, ordered that the Africans "be delivered to the President of the United States to be transported to Africa, there to be delivered to the Agent appointed to receive and conduct them home." Despite this victory, it would be a long time before the *Amistad* Africans would see their homeland. The district attorney, acting on the Van Buren administration's orders, appealed the verdict, and a full year later the case reached the U.S. Supreme Court.

Public Awareness

Meanwhile the abolitionists continued working to generate as much public sympathy as possible for the beleaguered *Amistad* Africans. They were



Grabo by William H. Townsend, 1839, Beinedke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

depicted in numerous works of popular art, including wax figures of the Africans that were exhibited across the country. Artist Nathaniel Jocelyn painted a striking portrait of Cinque that captured the man's great dignity, charisma, and powerful will.

A play based on the revolt, entitled *The Black Schooner, or, The Pirate Slaver Amistad,* did a brisk business in New York City.

Popular history writer and illustrator John Warner Barber of New Haven in 1840 issued a pamphlet on *The History of the Amistad Captives,* complete with a hand-colored engraving depicting the shipboard revolt and silhouette sketches and brief biographies of each of the Africans. For the first time, the public met each surviving *Amistad* African as a human being, with a family and a life in Africa from which he had been torn through an act of outrageous injustice.

U.S. Supreme Court
Washington, D.C.
February 20, 1841

For the crucial defense of the Africans before the country's highest court, five of whose members were from the South, the abolitionists realized they needed a champion of national stature. After several renowned figures, including famed orator Daniel Webster, declined to take on the ultra-sensitive case, the abolitionists turned to former President John Quincy Adams, popularly known as "Old Man Eloquent."

Adams, son of President John Adams, had forged a most distinguished record of public service as a lawyer, diplomat, Senator, Cabinet officer, and as President from 1824 to 1828. Although a strong foe of slavery, Adams was not an abolitionist. He did not subscribe to the

Silhouette of Rober Sherman Baldwin by E.B. & E.C. Kellog after William Henry Brown, Connecticut Historical Society

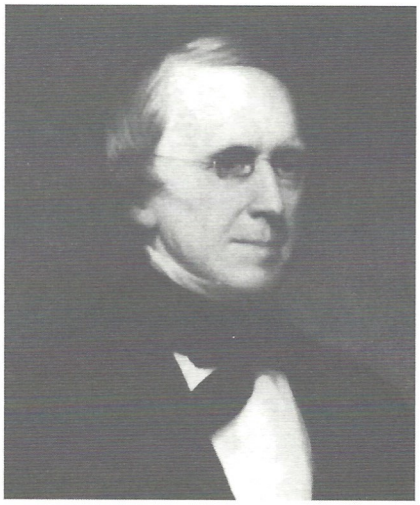
abolitionists' radical demand for an immediate end to slavery, which he considered unrealistic and impractical, but instead supported gradual emancipation by means of constitutional amendments.

At age 73 Adams was reluctant to take on the responsibility of defending the *Amistad* Africans. He pleaded his advanced age and pointed out that it had been 30 years since he had appeared before the Supreme Court. However, Adams was at last convinced that his participation was crucial if the defense was to have any chance of success.

The case finally came before the U.S. Supreme Court in February of 1841. Defense attorney Roger Sherman Baldwin reviewed the basic facts, arguing that the Africans had never legally been slaves under Spanish law. The Africans' violent action to liberate themselves from their captors was not a crime, Baldwin said, but the justifiable act of free men. He pointed out that it was not the Africans alleged owners, but the U.S. federal government, acting as a tool of the Spanish government, which had pressed the case against the Africans by appealing the U.S. District Court's decision declaring them free. This, Baldwin asserted, was an illegal and inappropriate interference on the part of the federal government.

When his turn came to speak, John Quincy Adams attacked the Van Buren administration for its shameful, unconstitutional interference in the *Amistad* case. He hammered again and again on the theme of the Africans' search for justice, and compared their act of "self-emancipation" to the actions of heroes who had overthrown tyrants in ancient

Roger Sherman Baldwin by Nathaniel Jocelyn, circa 1840, Mattatuck Museum, Waterbury



Athens. He also demonstrated that the legal precedents and treaties cited by the federal government, including one treaty he himself had negotiated, did not apply to the case.

The Supreme Court's decision was no foregone conclusion. A group of abolitionists in the town of Farmington, Connecticut, fearing that the verdict might go against the Africans, seriously considered engineering a jail break, after which they would spirit the Africans to freedom and safely across the border in Canada.

Such drastic action proved unnecessary. The U.S. Supreme Court's verdict on March 9, 1841, completely vindicated the long-suffering *Amistad* Africans. The Africans, the Court found, "by the law of Spain itself, are entitled to their freedom, and were kidnapped and illegally carried to Cuba, and illegally detained and restrained on board of the *Amistad*." The Africans were not property, but free individuals; the Supreme Court ordered them released immediately from custody.

"Glorious," was Roger Sherman Baldwin's reaction to the Supreme Court's decision. "Glorious not only as a triumph of humanity and justice, but as a vindication of our national character from reproach and dishonor."

The Farmington Experience

The Supreme Court did not, however, make any provisions for the Africans' support or for their ultimate return to Africa. The abolitonists set about seeking a temporary haven for the newly liberated Africans and raising the funds to send them home.

The *Amistad* Africans found a refuge in the town of Farmington, a few miles west of Hartford. Farmington counted among its citizenry many abolitionist sympathizers who had expressed sustained interest in the *Amistad* Africans during their extended trials. It also was attractive because the Africans could be supported there at relatively little expense. Also in Farmington they could continue to be educated and, it was hoped, converted to Christianity in order to serve as missionaries to Africa.

The 36 survivors of the 53 Africans who had originally set sail on the *Amistad* nearly two years earlier arrived in Farmington in March of 1841. The three girls were housed

in private homes, while a special structure was erected for the men.

The Africans pursued a rigorous daily schedule of farm and craft work, formal schooling by a Yale student, and instruction in Christianity. The Africans expressed sincere gratitude to the people who had gone to such great lengths to help them gain their freedom. In a Bible presented to John Quincy Adams in appreciation for his work, Kali wrote, "We thank you very much because you make us free." Yet the Africans maintained their fierce pride and dignity, refusing to fawn over their benefactors or to allow themselves to be exploited.

Photograph of Farmington Congregational Church by Robert J. Bitondi, 1989

From the beginning, some Farmington residents were apprehensive about the settlement in their midst of these highly controversial strangers. While New Englanders were gradually coming to oppose slavery, almost no Americans of that era believed in racial equality or that different races might live together in harmony. Daily contact with the Africans helped dispel many townspeople's doubts and fears, but friction between individuals from such vastly different cultures proved unavoidable.

Kali by William H. Townsend, 1839, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

This friction came to a head in September of 1841, when a number of Farmington residents incited a brawl with several of the Africans. There were no serious injuries or damage, but the ugly incident made it clear that the abolitionists' hope that the *Amistad* Africans might remain in the United States was a vain one. The Africans themselves yearned desperately for their homeland, a fact underscored by the tragic death in August of 1841 of one of their number, a man named Foone. Foone, a good swimmer, drowned in the Farmington River. The circumstances of his death suggested that, having lost hope of ever again seeing Africa, Foone committee suicide in the belief that he would return home in the afterlife.

The abolitionists had been busy raising the substantial sum of money necessary both to cover the cost of boarding the Africans in Farmington and to return them to Africa. Their fund-raising techniques included personal appearances by several of the Africans at anti-slavery meetings throughout the Northeast. Audiences were impressed and moved when one of the Africans, a man named Kinna, read from the Bible in English. Then would follow the charismatic Cinque describing in his mother tongue the sufferings they had endured as pawns of the slave trade and telling again the riveting story of their take-over of the *Amistad.*

Some considered these lectures demeaning, contending that the Africans were being made to perform like sideshow attractions. However

Return to Africa by Hale Woodruff, 1939, Talladega College

questionable in taste the presentations may have been, they did succeed in raising funds to send the Africans home and also demonstrated to the American public that Africans were intelligent, sensitive human beings.

Return to Africa
1841

At last the necessary funds were accumulated. After an emotional farewell service at the Farmington Congregational church, in which many townsfolk took part, the Africans at long last set said from New York for their homeland in November of 1841 -- more than two years after they had seized the *Amistad.* Accompanying the Africans was a contingent of missionaries under the auspices of the *Amistad* Committee, who planned to settle in Africa and dedicate themselves to making converts to Christianity. The next year the *Amistad* Committee merged with the newly formed Union Missionary Society, which undertook the support of the African mission. The Union Missionary Society's first officers were Hartford's renowned Rev. James W.C. Pennington and New Haven's Rev. Amos Beman, both free Blacks and both active abolitionists.

The Africans arrived at the port of Freetown in Sierra Leone in January of 1842. They were unique in realizing that aching dream of millions of kidnapped and enslaved Africans: to come home from oblivion.

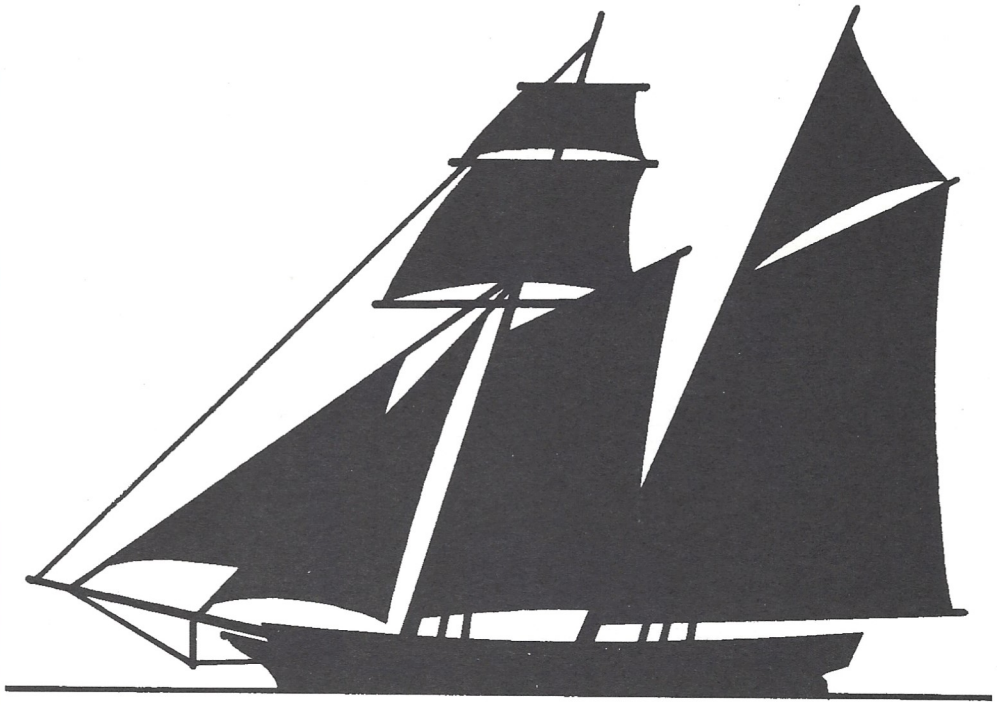
Little is known of the Africans' eventual fates in their homeland. Several did keep up sporadic contact with the missionaries over the years. One of the girls, Margru, ultimately returned to America to study at Oberlin College in Ohio, the first institution of higher education in the United States to admit Black students. She then went back to Africa to teach at the mission.

The Long Term Effects

Imperfectly and belatedly, a degree of justice had at long last been rendered through the heroic efforts of numerous individuals. Although the *Amistad* affair had no major impact from a strictly legal standpoint, it nonetheless had significant long-term effects.

The moving plight of the *Amistad* Africans, their fierce determination to be free at any cost, their victimization by the illegal slave trade, and their odyssey through the American legal system attracted attention to the abolitionist cause. Unfortunately the abolitionists became even more deeply divided. Their principal organization, the American Anti-Slavery Society, split into two opposing factions in 1840 over several issues, the most volatile of which was women's participation in the abolitionist movement. Ironically, many men who championed the rights of Black individuals were adamant about denying women such fundamental rights as that of speaking in public, even against slavery.

The abolitionist movement remained fragmented throughout the 1840s. It gained momentum in the 1850s as the North became increasingly apprehensive about the power of the slave-holding South. The American Missionary Association, which in 1846 was established as the successor to the Union Missionary Society, became one of the most powerful abolitionist organizations in the nation.

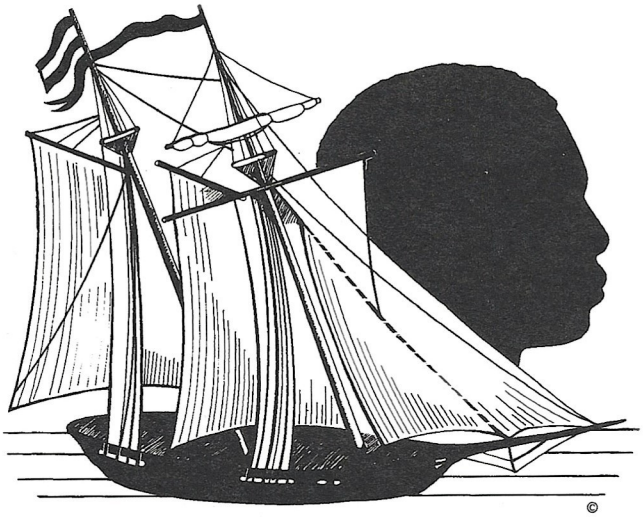


The growing tensions between the North and South, of which slavery was but one serious cause, in 1861 exploded into the Civil War, the bloodiest conflict in American history. Four years and more than 600,000 lives later, slavery was at last banished from America.

The American Missionary Association rose to meet a new critical challenge: educating the millions of illiterate Blacks who were liberated from slavery by the war. The Association supported elementary and secondary schools for Blacks well into the twentieth century. As part of its massive educational effort it established many major Black institutions of higher education which still operate today, including Talladega College, Fisk University, LeMoyne-Owen College, Dillard University, Tougaloo College, Huston-Tillotson College, Berea College, Hampton University, and Atlanta University, and it continues to support all but the last three of these schools. The American Missionary Association also founded and supports the *Amistad* Research Center in New Orleans.

The *Amistad* saga has been commemorated over the intervening century and a half in many different ways. It has inspired books, novels, music, and poetry, and has been honored in the names of a host of organizations.

Revolutionary patriot Patrick Henry's stirring demand to "Give me liberty or give me death" could have been Cinque's rallying cry as he led his fellow Africans in their desperate take-over of the *Amistad*. The *Amistad* Africans' determination to be free at any cost, the efforts of numerous individuals, African and American, to restore them to freedom and return them to their homeland, and the enduring educational accomplishments in the United States of the American Missionary Association constitute a proud legacy for all Americans of triumph over cruelty and ignorance, of courage, and of dedication to liberty, justice, and human dignity.



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