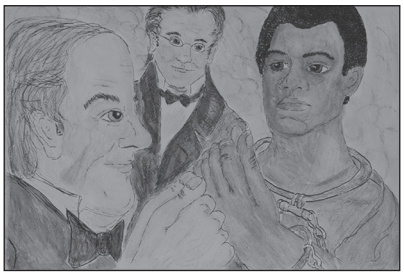
Signs of Freedom: Deaf Connections in the Amistad Story

Kim A. Silva

In 1839 the capture of the Spanish schooner *La Amistad* by the US Navy in Long Island Sound revealed the United States' first successful mutiny by rebel Africans under the leadership of Sengbe Pieh, or Cinque. Were these captives Cuban slaves who defied their masters? Or were these free Africans who had been unlawfully kidnapped from their country in violation of international law? The Amistad affair became an international case tried by the US Supreme Court and defended by former president John Quincy Adams. The crux of the case rested on the identification of the language used by the Amistad captives. Where the Amistad Committee's African-language translators failed, the signs used by the Deaf succeeded. Deaf educators Thomas H. Gallaudet and George E. Day relayed riveting stories of the captives to the newspapers and helped to identify the elusive Mende language. The charismatic and controversial leader Cinque ultimately became known as the "Black Prince" in the popular press.[1]

Oral history from the American School for the Deaf (ASD) affirms that the founders of the school, Laurent Clerc and Thomas H. Gallaudet,



Clerc and Gallaudet meeting Cinque. Painting by author.

were the first interpreters for Cinque, the leader of the Amistad revolt. In 1839 Clerc and Gallaudet went to New Haven, Connecticut, to meet with the Amistad Africans and help with communication since the captives' spoken language was unknown by their captors. Clerc and his students met Cinque and the Amistad Africans again in 1841, when they harvested crops together at Austin F. Williams's farm in Farmington, Connecticut. It was easy for the Africans and the Deaf students to communicate because both used sign language and gesture. During this visit, the men's gymnastic-like dancing astonished these students.[2]

Although this oral history did not include the name of the African people aboard the *Amistad,* the history of the Amistad case identifies most of the captives as being Mende. Mende people are historically renowned for their artistry in mime, storytelling, and dance.[3] Once these details were confirmed, my research led to the writing of a manuscript that I titled "A Sign of Freedom," which turned out to be an amazing detective story with tantalizing clues.

How should oral history via the unwritten sign language of Deaf people be evaluated? What criteria and validation tools determine the accuracy of this information? Answering these questions not only serves to illuminate and enhance the history of the Amistad affair but also guides others to recognize and validate Deaf oral history in their own communities.

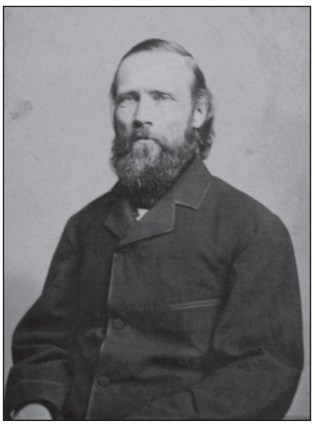
The author of *A Guide to Historical Method,* Gilbert J. Garraghan, a Jesuit priest, succinctly describes the criteria for evaluating the veracity of oral history. Oral history may be accepted if it satisfies two broad conditions. The first is "an unbroken series of witnesses beginning with the first reporter to the living mediate witness," or Deaf oral historian. The second condition for evaluating oral history is "several parallel and independent series of witnesses testifying to the fact." Garraghan suggests

that other means of verifying oral history may exist, and I maintain that family ties, shared professions (e.g., teachers of deaf people), and genealogy are all effective tools.

The Witnesses

Using the oral history method, I identified Samuel Porter (1810–1901) as the "first reporter" of Amistad history. Porter was a Deaf teacher at both ASD and the New York School for the Deaf and a professor at Gallaudet College. In March 1841, after the Supreme Court verdict of freedom for thirty-six Amistad Africans, the men, one boy, and three girls from the ship were sent to Farmington, Connecticut, until funds could be raised for their return to Sierra Leone. During the same year, Porter was living in his family home when his parents, the Reverend Noah Porter and his wife, Mehitable, who were abolitionists, agreed to care for the youngest Amistad captive,[4] a nine-year-old girl named Margu.[5] At this time Porter had resigned from teaching Deaf students to pursue a career in the ministry. His increasing hearing loss, however, caused him to leave his theological studies at Yale, and he became editor of the *Congregational Observer.* After the Amistad Africans left for Sierra Leone in November 1841, Porter accepted a position as teacher at the New York School for the Deaf. When a teaching position became available at ASD, Porter returned there and later became an esteemed professor at Gallaudet College. The Yale Obituary Record of 1902 describes Samuel Porter as carrying "within his recollection almost the entire history of the movement for the education of the Deaf. . . . He retained to a remarkable degree, to the close of his life, his powers of body and mind."

David Halberg, curator emeritus of the ASD museum, is recognized as the "living mediate witness" or Deaf oral historian of Amistad history at ASD. At the age of seven, Halberg became fascinated with ASD Deaf history when his Deaf teacher, Mary Emma Atkinson (class of 1883), and his woodshop teacher, Charles Dermody (class of 1892), told him stories. He graduated from ASD in 1948 and was a classroom teacher for thirty-nine years. In 1955 Halberg joined Loy E. Golladay as ASD museum curator. Golladay himself worked as curator from 1944 to 1969. From 1963 to 1998 Halberg also worked with a hearing teacher, Frank Asklar,



Samuel Porter. Gallaudet University Archives.

in the museum. These men were interviewed for Harlan Lane's famous book about the history of Deaf people, *When the Mind Hears*.

The "unbroken series of witnesses" who related the Amistad story to Halberg were his Deaf teachers, house parents, and volunteers, most of whom graduated from ASD and/or did research in the ASD museum. Other Deaf historians and witnesses include Walter G. Durian (curator 1917–1958), Walter C. Rockwell (class of 1909), James Sullivan (class of 1911), Joseph Bouchard (class of 1915), Algot Anderson (class of 1917), and Marie Szopa (class of 1919).

In April 1998 the National Association of the Deaf held Laurent Clerc Headstone Restoration unveiling celebrations at Spring Grove cemetery, the Connecticut Historical Society, and ASD. During this week Halberg related Amistad history and cited Reuben Morris, who graduated in 1926 with an ASD certificate, as his authoritative source of information. Morris, who was from a multigenerational Deaf family, stated that his great-grandmother was a student under Laurent Clerc. Genealogical research proved that Morris's great aunt, Emeline Elmina Robbins, and cousin, Charles Augustus Jack, were both students at ASD in 1846.

Deaf Oral History and the Abolitionist Movement

Garraghan's "particular conditions" for evaluating the veracity of oral history also corroborate the oral history shared here. Three of the particular conditions require the oral history to report an important public

event, be generally believed, and be one of a limited duration, a maximum of 150 years from cultures that excel in oral remembrance. The Amistad affair satisfies the first requirement. The mutiny and the trial of the Amistad captives were widely reported in the news as the case moved from Circuit and District to Supreme Court trials. In 1839 the American public did not discuss slavery, as speaking out for abolition was dangerous and often risked violent destruction from anti-black and anti-abolitionist mobs. Connecticut had sixteen episodes of anti-racial violence from 1833 to 1837. Abolition was also feared to cause a schism in the nation's unity. Prior to 1839 illustrations of American slavery show a benign system or depict Africans as animals or buffoons. During the Amistad affair, African American Abolitionist, Robert Purvis, commissioned the artist, Nathaniel Jocelyn to paint the first heroic portrait of an African, *Portrait of Cinque.* After the rebellion, sympathetic illustrations of the horrors of enslavement began appearing in publications in the United States, and people began to move from having a private opinion to taking action. The Amistad affair may have been a catalyst for the Civil War.[6]

Garraghan's fifth particular condition is that the necessary critical spirit and means of investigation be at hand to evaluate the evidence preserved through storytelling. Gary E. Wait, archivist of the ASD museum and the Hartford History Center, embodied this critical role during my fourteen years of research for my unpublished manuscript, "A Sign of Freedom." Wait, who is renowned for his research, has served as editor for many authors of prominent books on Deaf history, including *A Deaf Artist in Early America* and *People of the Eye,* both by Harlan Lane; *Edmund Booth, Deaf Pioneer* by Harry G. Lang; *Samuel Thomas Greene* by Clifton F. Carbin; *My Heart Glow* by Emily McCully; and *Words Made Flesh* by R. A. R. Edwards.

Returning to Garraghan's "broad conditions," what independent and parallel witnesses support the oral history of Clerc's and Gallaudet's roles as the first interpreters for Cinque, the Amistad leader? In 1825 ASD enrollment records show that African American students were accepted and fully integrated. In 1828 Gallaudet was active in the American Colonization Society and worked together with Lewis Tappan to ransom Abduhl Rahhaman, the Moorish prince. Rahhaman, who was from Teembo, Foota Jalloh, was rescued from forty years of slavery

in Natchez, Mississippi, and returned to Liberia. This points to Clerc's and Gallaudet's sympathy for the abolitionist cause.[7]

There is also evidence for Clerc's and Gallaudet's facility in and promotion of signed communication between individuals who do not speak the same language. In 1834 the *Literary and Theological Review* published Gallaudet's "Language of Signs Auxiliary to the Christian Missionary," in which the use of sign language by missionaries was promoted. Gallaudet described various examples of successful signed communication between Clerc and a Chinese man, as well as his own success with more than twenty youths sponsored by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. In September 30, 1839, the *New York Commercial Observer* published an article about Gallaudet's visit with the Amistad Africans during the Circuit Court trial held in Hartford. The article stated that "he [Gallaudet] finds little difficulty communicating with them [Amistad Africans] using the signs . . . employed with deaf."

In 1839 Gallaudet's colleague Tappan headed the Amistad Committee, a group of abolitionists dedicated to publicizing and defending the Amistad Africans. Tappan worked closely with Theodore Dwight Weld, chief editor for the American Anti-Slavery Association. Theodore Weld's brother was Lewis Weld, principal of ASD. Lewis Weld married Mary Cogswell, the oldest sister of Alice Cogswell, the first pupil enrolled at ASD. In a letter dated April 29, 1841, Austin F. Williams wrote to Lewis Tappan and stated that "Bro. (Theodore) Weld" accompanied the Amistad Africans, Cinque, and Kinna to an antislavery meeting in Bloomfield, Connecticut.

During the three trials the Amistad Africans were imprisoned in New Haven from August 1839 to March 1841. Two professors from Yale, Josiah Willard Gibbs and George E. Day, worked together to decipher and identify the captives' unknown spoken language. An October 9, 1839, article titled "Plans to Educate the Amistad Africans in English" in the *New York Journal of Commerce* stated that Professor Gibbs, who was working day and night, was assisted by Professor Day. After learning the numbers "*Eta, fele, sauwa* . . . one, two, three?" Gibbs went to the New York harbor and approached every black person with this question.[8]

After locating James Covey, a Mende African working on a British ship, and soliciting his aid as a translator for the Amistad trials, Gibbs testified in court and then pursued publication of his Mende/English

vocabulary lists. Meanwhile, Day and his student assistants from Yale held classes in the New Haven jail six days a week for the Amistad men. Day's letter to Tappan of October 19, 1839, states that "in accordance with the advice of Mr. Gallaudet, we have procured (20 to 30) pictures of single objects . . . at the close of the day many of them [Amistad Africans] had learned committed all the words." More cards were needed but could not be found in New Haven; however, "if Mr. Bartlett or Mr. Cary, Instructors of the Deaf & Dumb Institution . . . were to undertake to search for them [word cards]. Either . . . would willingly engage in the business." Day, who was a former teacher at the New York School for the Deaf, used Gallaudet's *Elementary Book for the Use of the Deaf and Dumb at the Connecticut Asylum* as a textbook. Many of the exercises in this book include references to the use of sign language (e.g., "your signs are clear"; "your signs are obscure"; "do you know our manual alphabet?"). Day's earliest connection to ASD was through his father's rental of the Day House as a second building for the growing institution.

After a verdict of freedom, thirty-six Amistad Africans were sent to the town of Farmington until funds could be raised for their journey home to Sierra Leone. The three girls lived with abolitionist families while the men, including the adolescent, Ka-le, had their own quarters above Samuel Deming's store. Later, Austin F. Williams built a dormitory on his farm for the men's use. This was the farm that annually donated food to ASD.

The youngest Amistad captive, nine-year-old Margu lived with Samuel Porter at his father's home. Samuel's sister, Rebecca Porter, was engaged to John Keep, the minister of the Unionville Congregational Church. From 1834 to 1835 Keep and Day were both teachers at the New York School for the Deaf. From 1852 to 1880 Keep returned to teaching deaf students in Ohio, New York, and Connecticut. Porter and Keep taught together at ASD from 1854 to 1860.

John T. Norton's family soon became favorites of the leader, Cinque, and his second-in-command, Grabo. One reason for these friendly relations was that the Norton family had a son the same age as Cinque's own son in Sierra Leone. Charles Ledyard Norton wrote about his reminiscences of his close relationship with the two Mende leaders. During the

Civil War, Col. Norton helped organize and commanded the Twenty-ninth Regiment, Conn. Volunteer Infantry (Colored.).

The other reason for the friendly relations between the Norton family and Cinque was ease of communication. The Amistad leaders were not fluent in spoken English, but the Norton family could sign. Elizabeth Cogswell Norton, John's wife, was the older sister of Alice Cogswell. John T. Norton was a friend of Dr. Cogswell, and a family letter mentions Mr. Norton's inclusion at a tea at the family's home. Alice's journals describe her as a young Deaf woman who was always willing to teach sign language to her hearing friends. This indicates that the Norton family had access to learning sign language.

The *Phrenological Journal and Magazine of Moral Science* for the year 1845 describes a visit by the Amistad Africans to the Hartford Retreat for the Insane, now known as the Institute of Living. Of this visit Dr. Amariah Brigham wrote, "They [Amistad Africans] saw many patients and stated that insanity was rare in Africa. Cinquez [*sic*] stated that he had seen one case." In 1830 Gallaudet retired from his position as principal and teacher at ASD. He later accepted the position of chaplain at the Hartford Retreat and recommended many humane practices and activities for patients suffering from mental illness. Brigham and Gallaudet worked closely together, and Gallaudet's ability to communicate would have been an asset when the Amistad Africans visited this hospital. Coincidentally, Dr. Mason F. Cogswell, the father of Mary, Elizabeth, and Alice Cogswell, was one of the founders of both ASD and the Hartford Retreat for the Insane.

Minorities are under represented in history, and the Deaf community has faced discrimination against both their sign language and their culture. Even as Deaf storytelling is revered, its accuracy and its contribution to authentic history have often been doubted, disparaged, and overlooked. Historians have only recently come to value the importance of oral history as a complement to the written form. Although sign language is for the most part an unwritten language, Deaf culture excels in oral remembrance. Deaf oral history deserves respect and critical analysis so that a more complete history, including Deaf community connections, will be restored and retold.

Resources

The American School for the Deaf Museum contains a wealth of artifacts and archives related to the first school for Deaf students and to Deaf history in general. It has documents from the school's antecedents in Europe as well as other state schools for Deaf students whose founders came from ASD. This repository of information is highly recommended as a resource for both the serious historian and visitors. For more information, contact the following:

American School for the Deaf
139 North Main Street
West, Hartford, CT 06107
museum@asd-1817.org
(860) 570-2300 Voice

For those who are interested in the Farmington Historical Society's Amistad tours in Farmington, Connecticut, or in an Amistad PowerPoint presentation, please email the author at ksilva@farmingtonhistoricalsociety-ct.org or contact the following:

Farmington Historical Society
P.O. Box 1645
138 Main Street
Farmington, CT 06034
(860) 678-1645 Voice

For more information about the ASD/Amistad connections please visit the following website: www.deafis.org/.

David Halberg, curator emeritus of the American School for the Deaf museum, is willing to share his oral history with other interested historians. Museum archivist Gary E. Wait is now retired. Researchers interested in requesting an interview should contact ASD or Kim A. Silva.

Reuben Morris Family Genealogy

Reuben Morris's maternal genealogy links him to his great aunt, Emeline Elmina Robbins, who entered ASD in 1846. Morris had Deaf

parents who were both ASD alumni and Deaf relatives of the Jack family in Maine.

Reuben Blake Morris*(Deaf ASD alumnus)

Born 1909

Mary Isabella Davenport (Deaf ASD alumna)

Born 1884

Nellie A. Purrington Gale Davenport (partially Deaf) (Deaf sister's name unknown)

Born 1859

Sarah Isabella Robbins Purrington - **Emeline Elmina Robbins** (Deaf younger sister; ASD alumna)

Born 1834

Augustus Jack (Deaf cousin; ASD alumnus)

Born 1835

Notes

1. "An Incident," *New York Commercial Observer* (September 30, 1839).

2. David Halberg, curator emeritus of the ASD museum, interview by Luisa Gasco Soboleski and Kim A. Silva, Amistad oral history interview video, filmed and edited by Krystina S. Carver, presentation at the Deaf History International conference in July 2012.

3. Sankofa Kuumba Mende Artists' workshop, August 5, 2000.

4. John Treadwell Norton to Lewis Tappan, March 22, 1841, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University.

5. John Swaray, Mende preceptor, interview by Kim A. Silva, March 20, 2013, stated that the American spelling of "Margru" is incorrect.

6. Arthur Abraham, *The Amistad Revolt: An Historical Legacy of Sierra Leone and the United States,* accessed July 20, 2013, www.sierra-leone.org/Books/Amistad.pdf.

7. "The Unfortunate Moor," *African Repository and Colonial Journal* 4, no. 8 (October 1828).

8. Leslie M. Alexander and Walter C. Rucker, eds., *Encyclopedia of African American History,* vol. 3 (ABC CLIO LLC) 314, accessed July 22, 2013, books.google.com/books?isbn=1851097740.

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* Boldfaced font indicates that the person was deaf.

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