

## The Freedom Schooner *Amistad*

### *Chorus:*

C---F---C-F---C-----G-C

*She's the A-mis-tad, the A-mis-tad!*

-----G-----F-----C

*She's the freedom schoo-er, the A-mis-tad! (2X)*

C-----F--C---F--C-----G-C

She's got an eagle up forrard and ra-kish masts,

-----G-F-----C

Sure looks sharp as she flies past;

-----F-----C---G-----C

She's tearing up the bay, kicking up 'er heels,

-----G--F-----C

That's the way that free-dom feels! (CHO)

Back in them days of slavery,

The *Amistad*, she sailed the sea;

Well, she sailed up, and she sailed down,

Sailed into Havana town. (CHO)

They loaded 'er down with rum and stores,

Fifty-three captives from Africa's shores;

They was locked together with iron chain,

But they broke loose, their freedom to gain. (CHO)

Then, they sailed East, and they sailed North,

They sailed West, and back and forth;

They was captured in Long Island Sound,

And hauled away to New London Town. (CHO)

They was charged with murder and piracy,

And other high crimes on the high seas;

The Abolition folks helped 'em win release,

That's how they returned to Africa in peace. (CHO)

Now, it's West Palm Beach to Portland, Maine,

'Cross the Lakes and back again;

She carries this message, both near and far,

Color makes no difference, it's who you are. (CHO)

She's got an eagle up forrard and rakish masts,

Sure looks sharp as she flies past;

She's tearing up the bay, kicking up 'er heels,

That's the way that freedom feels! (CHO)

Other verses:

So it's haul 'er in, sheet 'er back!  
Swing 'er bow on the starboard tack;  
Haul 'er in, swing 'er round,  
Let's get back to New Haven Town.

## The *Amistad* Event: Background Information

For almost three years between the dates of April 1839 and January 1842, 53 African captives had one simple desire: to return to their homeland. Unknowingly, their personal struggle for freedom prompted national debates on slavery, economics and what constituted human rights. Their unprecedented victory marked the first civil rights case to be heard, fought and won in the U.S. Supreme Court. The story of these Mende Africans is a story with amazing characters - African and American, black and white, male and female, young and old, who pursued freedom and ultimately triumphed through courage, perseverance, and cooperation.

## The Slave Trade in the 19th Century

By 1820 many nations had made the slave trade illegal; however, due to its prosperous nature, the trade flourished for decades. It was under this climate that in 1839 a Portuguese slaver, the *Tecora*, left the coast of West Africa with five hundred Africans chained together and packed into the ship's cramped, dark, stifling cargo hold. Most of these Africans were kidnapped by European or African slave traders for profit or sold into slavery to repay a debt. After a grueling ten-week voyage, this slave ship, like many others before and after it, slipped by anti-slavery patrol ships and landed near Havana, Cuba.

In Havana, two Spanish men - Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montez - purchased forty-nine men, one boy and three girls to work on the sugar plantations at the other end of Cuba. The 53 captives and crew were then boarded onto another ship, *La Amistad* which ironically is Spanish for "friendship", and set sail for their four day voyage to the other end of the island.

## The Revolt

On the morning of July 2, 1839, armed with sugar can knives (machetes) and led by Sengbe Pieh (often referred to as Joseph Cinque), the Africans took control of *La Amistad*. Only two Mende men and two Spanish men were killed. Ruiz and Montes were taken captive and the rest of the crew jumped overboard and escaped in a boat.

For the next eight weeks, the *Amistad* zigzagged through the Bahamas and into the Atlantic Ocean. The Africans obviously wanted to sail back to Mendeland in Africa, but they knew little about operating a schooner and navigation. Since the *Tecora* had sailed West towards the setting sun, Sengbe instructed the Spaniards to sail the *Amistad* towards the East and the rising sun. During the day, the Spaniards followed Sengbe's instructions; at night, however, with no sun to guide the Africans, the Spaniards sailed the ship Northeast. Ruiz and Montes hoped to eventually be spotted by another ship and rescued. Food and water became very scarce. What was intended to be a four day trip turned into several difficult weeks. Disease broke out and some of the Africans died. Along the Eastern seaboard of the United States, rumors broke out as other ships spotted *La Amistad* the "long, low, black schooner" with its shredded sails and suspicious looking crew of heavily armed black men. On August 27, 1839, (four months after their capture) while anchored off the coast of Long Island in search for food and water, the Mende's voyage came to an end. T.R. Gedney, the captain of the U.S. Navy vessel the *Washington*, took control of the *Amistad* and sailed it right into the port of New London, Connecticut. Although slavery had almost totally disappeared, legislation outlawing it had yet to be passed; slavery was still legal in Connecticut.

## Different Sides of the Story

Once the *Amistad* arrived in Connecticut, the schooner, the people on board and their story became the center of a huge media blitz, which lasted throughout the African's two-year stay in the state. In addition to Gedney's claims on the ship, Ruiz and Montes wanted their "property" back. Many legal and ethical questions of international proportions were raised. Were the Africans the legal slaves of Ruiz and Montes as their official documents claimed? Were the Africans pirates and savage murderers? Had the Africans been kidnapped and illegally enslaved? If so, were they free men, which would entitle them to rebel if their lives were threatened? Did Spain have the right to demand the return of their African slaves to Cuba? While these and other questions were being pondered, the African men and little boy were placed in a New Haven jail while the three little girls were housed with the jailor and his wife.

As the abolitionists rallied around the Africans, their struggle to communicate and tell their side of the story prompted Yale professor, Josiah Willard Gibbs, to find a solution to the language barrier. Gibbs learned from the Africans how to count from one to ten in the Mende language. He then combed the docks in New York repeating the numbers out loud until he caught the attention of James Covey, a young Mende man who was a sailor on a British ship docked in New York. Covey left for New Haven with Gibbs immediately and served as a translator for the Africans throughout their stay in Connecticut.

### The *Amistad* Africans in Connecticut

For nineteen months, the Africans were imprisoned during a series of trials and appeals. The conditions at the jail were bare and the Africans were filled with dread. During all the wait time, the local abolitionists taught many of the Africans how to read, write and speak English. In addition, the Africans spent hours learning to read the Bible and quote passages from it. People from all over came to catch a glimpse of them.

### The Long Legal Battle

The cards seemed stacked against the Africans. President Van Buren's administration feared retaliation from Spain if the ship and its "cargo" were not returned to Cuba and pro-slavery judge, Andrew Judson, was assigned to hear the case. Nevertheless, on January 13, 1840, Judge Judson ruled that based upon the evidence the Africans had been illegally obtained and transported and were not therefore anyone's property; they were free people and should remain so. The Van Buren administration immediately appealed the New Haven Court's decision which meant the case would now go the Supreme Court in Washington D.C.

The African were not allowed to go to D.C., the Africans continued to await their fate in their Connecticut jail. Representing them for the appeal was Roger Sherman Baldwin, an abolitionist lawyer, and John Quincy Adams, former President of the United States. At the time, Adams, an outspoken anti-slavery advocate who was also a powerful public speaker and statesman- was 73 years old. In his argument, Adams referred repeatedly to the copy of the Declaration of Independence, hanging on the wall of the courtroom, reminding the justices of the unalienable rights it guaranteed to all men.

The final decision was six to one (two Southern judges were unable to vote for health reasons). The decision was made upon legal grounds and was not particularly influenced by the American ideals of freedom raised by Adams. The kidnapping of the Mende had been illegal; Ruiz and Montes' documents were falsified; and the Africans were free people.

## Homeward Bound

Once again, the Mende found that freedom literally had a price. It took eight months after the Supreme Court decision for the abolitionists to raise enough money to send the Africans back home. In the meantime, they were released from jail and sent to live in Farmington, Connecticut that was home to a number of influential abolitionists and anti-slavery sympathizers. On November 27, 1841, the *Gentleman* set sail from New York to Africa carrying the four children and the surviving thirty-one men of the original forty-nine *Amistad* captives. Several Christian missionaries also accompanied the Africans in order to set up a mission in Mendeland. James Covey, the interpreter, also returned to Africa. Finally, on January 15, 1842, two years and nine months after their ordeal began, they arrived in Freetown, Africa. Little is known of the Africans' eventual fates in their homeland. Upon arrival, many men found their families were gone—probably victims of the slave trade just as they had been. Several did keep up sporadic contact with the missionaries over the years. One of the little girls, Margru, ultimately returned to America to study at Oberlin College in Ohio which was the first institution of higher education in the U.S. to admit African and African American students. She then went back to Africa to teach at the mission

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