

LA AMISTAD: IN THEIR OWN WORDS



ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How did African people *win* their freedom in the Amistad case as opposed to *being granted* freedom?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Explore the key events and significance of the 1839 Amistad rebellion.
- Describe the legal status of slavery in the U.S. in 1839 and the society into which the Amistad captives were taken.
- Analyze primary source documents that reveal the voice and agency of the kidnapped African people.
- Write a newspaper article exploring how the Amistad captives won their freedom.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

60 minutes



MATERIALS

- AV equipment to project handouts and play an audio interview
- *Slavery in the U.S. at the Time of the Amistad: A Snapshot* handout (one copy to project)
- *In Their Own Words* handout (one per student)
- *Report of Cinque's Testimony* handout (one per student)
- *Letter from Kale* handout (one per student)



VOCABULARY

Amistad	enslaver	import/importation
abolitionist	fugitive	Mendi
emancipation	Fugitive Slave Act	
enslaved	gradual emancipation	

Procedures

NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

When discussing slavery with students, it is suggested the term “enslaved person” be used instead of “slave” to emphasize their humanity; that “enslaver” be used instead of “master” or “owner” to show that slavery was forced upon human beings; and that “freedom seeker” be used instead of “runaway” or “fugitive” to emphasize justice and avoid the connotation of lawbreaking.

PART I

The World Forced Upon Them—The U.S. at the Time of the *Amistad* (20 mins.)

NOTE

The film *Amistad* has been celebrated for educating viewers about the brutality of the slave trade and conveying the perspectives of the African people who were victimized by it. It has also been criticized for perpetuating stereotypes, for example of the “noble savage” and “white savior.” Help students to see these contradictions, even in the brief film trailer, and to think critically about how media influences our understanding of the history of slavery.

- 1 Play the trailer for the film *Amistad* [2:36]: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BJFDOvGMD0U>. Ask students if they are aware of the rebellion that took place aboard the ship *La Amistad* in 1839, and the subsequent Court case. Allow them to share prior knowledge, and provide background as needed using the following article or a source of your choosing: <https://www.history.com/topics/abolitionist-movement/amistad-case>.
- 2 Ask students: “What was the legal status of slavery in the U.S. in 1839?” In small groups, have them discuss what laws and practices they think existed at this time that either supported or prohibited slavery. Have them write each idea on a separate sticky note. Emphasize this is just a brainstorm, and they don’t have to be certain their ideas are correct.
- 3 One at a time, invite groups to share the contents of one of their sticky notes and, as a class, determine if it is accurate. As the discussion progresses, have groups add to and sort their sticky notes so they are tracking what is and isn’t correct. Project the handout *Slavery in the U.S. at the Time of the Amistad: A Snapshot*, to help guide the discussion, and allow students to conduct additional research as needed to clarify their understanding.

- 4 Comment that the 53 African people aboard the *Amistad* arrived in a foreign land deeply divided over slavery, where a majority of the white citizenry regarded them as less than human. They didn't know the language or customs, yet they were able to win their freedom. Share that in this lesson, students will explore documents revealing how these individuals were able to assert their voice and secure their own liberty.

PART II

Winning Their Own Freedom (40 mins.)

- 5 Distribute the handout *In Their Own Words* to students and review the directions with them. Play the following audio lecture, produced by the Mystic Seaport Museum: *The Amistad Rebellion by Dr. Marcus Rediker—Episode 11, Building an Alliance/Interactions in Jail* [6:03] (scroll to the bottom of the page to access episode 11): https://educators.mystic-seaport.org/scholars/lectures/amistad_rebellion. Direct students to take notes in the first row on the handout as they listen. After, discuss the following questions:
- How was the period of imprisonment a time of learning as much for the white abolitionists as for the African captives?
 - How were the African people able to tell their own story, in their own words, to the American people?
 - What does Dr. Rediker mean when he says the Africans and the American abolitionists had a “different project”? What were the goals and priorities of each group?
 - How did the African people resist American efforts to “civilize” or reform them? What strategies did they use to assert their own identity and needs?
- 6 Tell students they will continue their investigation by reviewing two primary source documents. Distribute the handouts *Report of Cinque's Testimony* and *Letter from Kale*. Individually or in pairs, direct students to read and annotate the documents and to continue adding notes to the graphic organizer they began earlier. When students have completed their work, gather the class and discuss key observations and questions that arose from their analysis.

NOTE

Students may be interested to learn of the fate of Kale (sometimes spelled Kali), who was 10 years old when kidnapped from his home, and one of only four children aboard the *Amistad*. After being freed, Kale engaged audiences with his intelligence and command of English as the African people embarked on a fundraising tour to earn their passage home. Kale impressed mostly white, Christian groups with his ability to correctly write any sentence read to him from the Christian gospels. After returning home in 1842, he stayed with American missionaries, was employed by the Mendi mission, and married. As a young man, he contracted a disease that disabled him for the remainder of his life.¹

1 Sillinger, Brett. *Sierra Leone: Current Issues and Background*. Hauppauge, NY: Nova Science Pub Inc., 2003.



7 Share information about the verdict with students: On March 9, 1841, the Supreme Court ruled 7-1 in favor of the Africans. Justice Joseph Story, in his majority opinion, wrote: “There does not seem to us to be any ground for doubt, that these negroes ought to be deemed free.” While Justice Story did not state that slavery in its entirety was wrong, he did assert that the Africans on the Amistad had been free, were illegally kidnapped and, therefore, could not be considered slaves. The decision supported the idea that human beings should not be thought of as property, and was critically important in the battle against slavery. In 1842, the triumphant 35 surviving Africans returned to their homeland. The U.S. government refused to pay for their passage, so the funds had to be raised by private abolitionist groups.

8 Conclude the lesson by engaging students in a conversation using some of the discussion questions below, and highlighting the ways in which the Amistad captives advocated for their own freedom rather than simply waiting for others to grant it to them.

9 As a follow-up assignment, have students imagine they are journalists covering the Amistad decision in 1841. Direct them to write a brief article entitled “In Their Own Words” that explains how the African captives used their own voice and agency to win their freedom.

Discussion Questions

- 1 Describe the U.S. society the African people aboard the Amistad were forced into in 1839. What thoughts and feelings do you imagine they had as they entered this new world?
- 2 What arguments did the Africans mount for their own defense? How were they effective?
- 3 In an interview with Professor Rediker, he corrects himself after stating the captives were “granted freedom,” and instead says they “won their freedom.” What is the difference, and why is it important?
- 4 What qualities did it take for the African captives to win their freedom in a foreign and often hostile land?
- 5 Do you think the fate of the Amistad captives would have been different if the ship had been intercepted in a Southern state? Explain.
- 6 Has your understanding of the Amistad rebellion and the African people aboard the ship changed as a result of this lesson? Explain.
- 7 How is the history you learned from analyzing the primary source documents different from other narratives you have heard about the experiences of enslaved people?

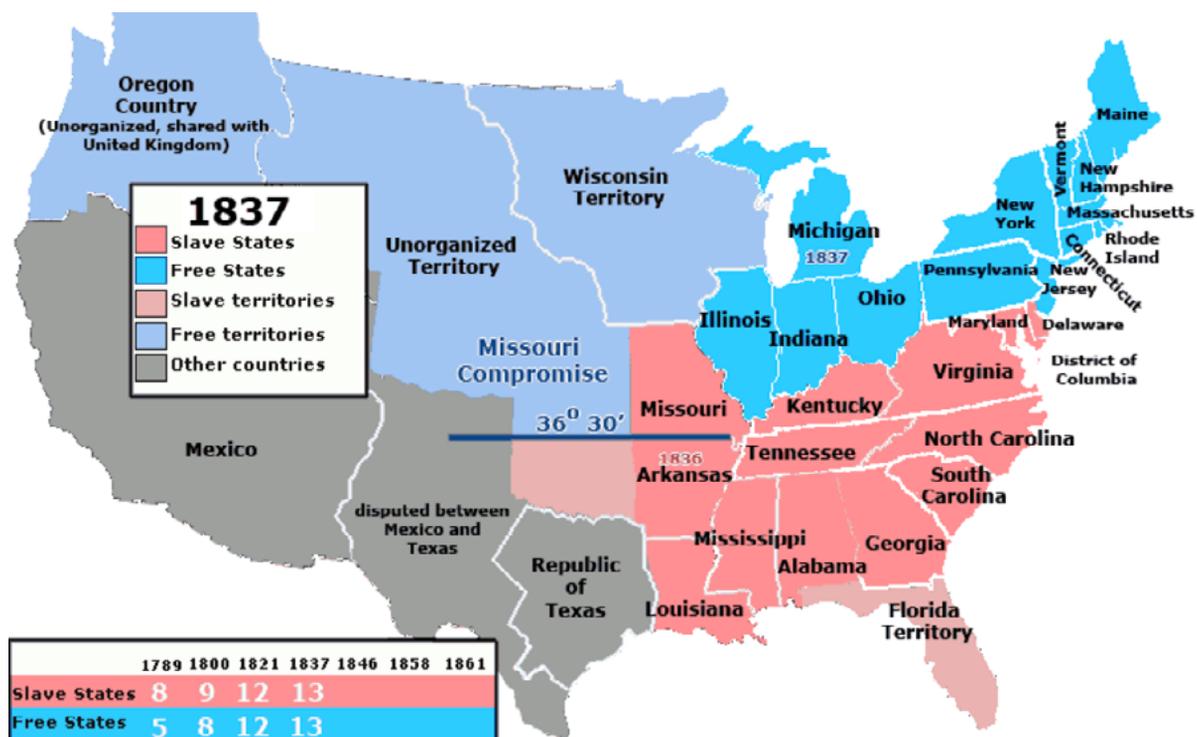
ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Linder, Douglas. “The Amistad Trials: An Account.” <https://famous-trials.com/amistad/1241-account>.
- + Mystic Seaport Museum. “Scholar Interviews: Interview of Dr. Marcus Rediker.” <https://educators.mysticseaport.org/scholars/interviews/rediker>.
- + Mystic Seaport Museum. “Audio Lectures: The Amistad Rebellion by Dr. Marcus Rediker.” https://educators.mysticseaport.org/scholars/lectures/amistad_rebellion.
- + Slave Voyages. “Explore the Dispersal of Enslaved Africans Across the Atlantic World.” <https://www.slavevoyages.org>.
- + Thirteen/WNET. Slavery and the Making of America. <https://www.thirteen.org/wnet/slavery/index.html>.



Slavery in the U.S. at the Time of the Amistad: A Snapshot

YEAR	LAW or PRACTICE
1793	The Fugitive Slave Act made it a crime to shelter people escaping enslavement or to interfere with the arrest of an enslaved person.
1794	The Federal Slave Trade Act prohibited American vessels from transporting enslaved people to any foreign country and from outfitting ships for the purpose of importing enslaved people.
1807	The Act Prohibiting Importation of Slaves of 1807 banned the African slave trade, making it illegal to import any further enslaved people into the U.S. (though people of African descent already in the U.S. could still be legally enslaved).
1818/1827	"Gradual emancipation" laws freed enslaved people in stages—in Connecticut (where the Amistad captives were jailed and tried) by 1818 and New York (where the Amistad was first seized) by 1827.
1827	Some Northern states, however, supported slavery in other ways, such as: permitting enslavers from other states to bring in enslaved people; allowing slave ships to anchor and restock in their states; and arresting and returning those escaping enslavement to their former enslavers.
1820	The Piracy Act made participation in the international slave trade punishable by death.
1839	Slavery was legal in 13 Southern states and prohibited in 13 Northern states (see map below).



MAP SOURCE: Wikipedia. "Slave States and Free States." https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave_states_and_free_states.



IN THEIR OWN WORDS

Listen to/read the documents below and annotate them by highlighting key phrases and jotting thoughts and questions. Add notes to the chart that show how the African captives stood up for their freedom and told their story, in their own words.

HOW DID THE AFRICAN PEOPLE...

DOCUMENT/SUMMARY	tell their story and convey their identity?	communicate their needs and demands?	strategize to win their freedom?
<p>Audio lecture by Dr. Marcus Rediker: Building an Alliance/ Interactions in Jail (July 2012) In this talk, an expert on the Amistad rebellion discusses how the African captives educated themselves, collaborated and strategized to gain their freedom.</p>			
<p>Report of Cinqué’s Testimony (January 10, 1840) In this news article, the court testimony of Joseph Cinqué, the leader of the Amistad rebellion, is summarized. In his testimony, Cinqué describes his kidnapping and the mistreatment he experienced aboard the Amistad.</p>			
<p>Letter from Kale (January 4, 1841) In this document, 12-year-old Kale sends an emotional appeal to his attorney, the former U.S. President John Quincy Adams. He stands up for his people, demands their freedom and challenges the U.S. to live up to its ideals.</p>			



Report of Cinqué's Testimony

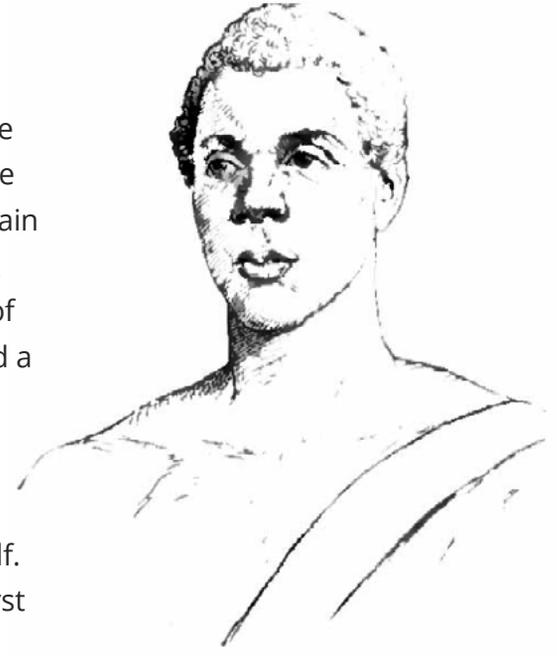
NAME: _____

This report of Joseph Cinqué's testimony in court was published in the New York Journal of Commerce on January 10, 1840.

Cinque, the leader of the Africans, was then examined. Cinque told Captain Gedney he might take the vessel and keep it, if he would send them to Sierra Leone. His conversation with Captain Gedney was carried on by the aid of Bernar, who could speak a little English. They had taken on board part of their supply of water, and wanted to go to Sierra Leone. They were three and a half months coming from Havana to this country.

Cross examined by General Isham. Cinque said he came from Mendi. He was taken in the road where he was at work, by countrymen. He was not taken in battle. He did not sell himself. He was taken to Lomboko, where he met the others for the first time. Those who took him—four men—had a gun and knives. Has three children in Africa. Has one wife. Never said he had two wives. Can't count the number of days after leaving Havana before the rising upon the vessel. The man who had charge of the schooner was killed. Then he and Pepe sailed the vessel. Witness told Pepe, after Ferrer was killed, to take good care of the cargo.

The brig fired a gun, and then they gave themselves up. When they first landed there they were put in prison. Were not chained. They were chained coming from Africa to Havana, hands and feet. They were chained also on board the Amistad. Were kept short of provisions. Were beaten on board the schooner by one of the sailors. When they had taken the schooner they put the Spaniards down in the hold and locked them down.



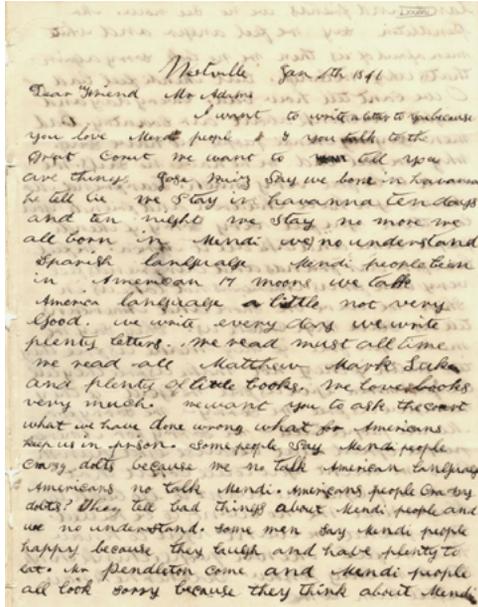
ARTICLE SOURCE: Spartacus Educational. "Amistad Mutiny Primary Sources." <https://spartacus-educational.com/USASamistad.htm>.

IMAGE SOURCE: Jacques Reich (based on the 1840 portrait by Nathaniel Jocelyn), *Portrait drawing of Joseph Cinqué, the African leader of the "Amistad" revolt*, 1900, Appletons' Cyclopædia of American Biography, 1900, v. 1, p. 616, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Appletons%27_Cinque.jpg.



Letter from Kale

NAME: _____



Westville, Jan. 4, 1841

Dear Friend Mr. Adams:

I want to write a letter to you because you love Mendi people, and you talk to the grand court. We want to tell you one thing. Jose Ruiz say we born in Havana, he tell lie. We stay in Havana 10 days and 10 nights. We stay no more. We all born in Mendi—we no understand the Spanish language. Mendi people been in America 17 moons. We talk America language a little, not very good. We write every day; we write plenty letters. We read most all time. We read all Matthew, and Mark, and Luke, and John, and plenty of little books. We love books very much. We want you to ask the Court what we have done wrong. What for Americans keep us in prison. Some people say Mendi people crazy, Mendi people dolt [*stupid person*], because we no talk America language. America people no talk Mendi language. American people crazy dolts? They tell bad things about Mendi

people and we no understand. Some men say Mendi people very happy because they laugh and have plenty to eat. Mr. Pendleton come and Mendi people all look sorry because they think about Mendiland and friends we no see now. Mr. Pendleton say we feel anger and white men afraid of us. Then we no look sorry again. That's why we laugh. But Mendi people feel bad. O, we can't tell how bad. Some people say, Mendi people no have souls. Why we feel bad, we no have no souls? We want to be free very much.

Dear friend Mr. Adams, you have children, you have friends, you love them, you feel very sorry if Mendi people come and take all to Africa. We feel bad for our friends, and our friends all feel bad for us. Americans not take us in ship. We were on shore and Americans tell us slave ship catch us. They say we make you free. If they make us free they tell truth, if they not make us free they tell lie. If America give us free we glad, if they no give us free we sorry—we sorry for Mendi people little, we sorry for America people great deal because God punish liars. We want you to tell court that Mendi people no want to go back to Havanna, we no want to be killed. Dear friend, we want you to know how we feel. Mendi people think, think, think. nobody know. Teacher, he know, we tell him some. Mendi people have got souls. We think we know God punish us if we tell lie. We never tell lie; we speak the truth. What for Mendi people afraid? Because they have got souls. Cook say he kill, he eat Mendi people—we afraid—we kill cook. Then captain kill one man with knife, and cut Mendi people plenty. We never kill captain if he no kill us. If Court ask who bring Mendi people to America, we bring ourselves. Ceci hold the rudder. All we want is make us free, not send us to Havanna. Send us home. Give us Missionary. We tell Mendi people Americans spoke truth. We give them good tidings. We tell them there is one god. You must worship him. Make us free and we will bless you and all Mendi people will bless you, Dear friend Mr. Adams.

Your friend,
Kale

SOURCES: Digital History. "Letter from Kale to John Quincy Adams." http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=3927; Massachusetts Historical Society. "Kale's Letter." <https://www.masshist.org/objects/cabinet/january2003/kale.htm>.