

What was the significance of the Amistad rebellion for enslaved people and for all Americans?

In February 1839, Portuguese slave hunters captured hundreds of African people in Mendeland, in what is today Sierra Leone, and transported them across the Atlantic for sale at a Cuban slave market. Many nations had outlawed the international slave trade by this time, but it was a profitable industry that persisted illegally. In Havana, Spanish plantation owners Pedro Montes and Jose Ruiz purchased 53 of the captives—including four children—and forced them aboard the schooner *La Amistad*.

As the ship sailed toward the site of the enslavers' plantations in Puerto Principe, Cuba, the Africans feared for their lives. Led by Sengbe Pieh (also known as Joseph Cinqué), they organized a revolt. They broke free from their chains, killing the captain and ship's cook and demanding that the surviving crew members return them to Africa. Though initially sailing east, the Spanish crew attempted to deceive the Africans by reversing course. After 63 days, the ship ended up near the coast of Long Island, New York, where U.S. naval officers apprehended and escorted it to Connecticut. Charged with murder and piracy, the African captives were imprisoned in New Haven. The case—and the fate of the African prisoners—garnered immediate and worldwide interest.

Though the original charges were soon dropped, claims were filed by Montes and Ruiz, asserting the captives were their lawful property. President Martin Van Buren, under pressure from Spain, wished to extradite the Africans to Cuba. In response, abolitionist groups organized and mounted a vigorous defense on behalf of the Africans, contending that they were native-born, free Africans who had been illegally abducted and transported under the U.S. Act Prohibiting Importation

of Slaves of 1807. Former president John Quincy Adams would ultimately represent the Amistad captives before the U.S. Supreme Court.

During the 18 months that the case made its way through U.S. courts, the African people worked with a translator and studied English so they could tell their story in their own words. They became powerful advocates on their own behalf, testifying in court and writing letters demanding their freedom. In one letter to his lawyer, John Quincy Adams, 12-year-old Kale—the lone boy aboard the Amistad—wrote: “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... [Americans] say we make you free. If they make us free they tell truth, if they not make us free they tell lie. If America...no give us free we sorry...for America people great deal because God punish liars...Dear friend, we want you to know how we feel.”

On March 9, 1841, the U.S. Supreme Court found, in a 7–1 decision, that the Africans had been illegally captured, could not be considered slaves and should be returned to their homeland. The U.S., however, did not provide the funds for repatriation. The Africans and their abolitionist supporters spent the next eight months touring the U.S. to raise the necessary resources, and in November 1841, the 35 surviving Amistad captives set sail for Africa.

While the Amistad decision did not hold that slavery in its entirety was wrong, it spotlighted the humanity of African people and the inherent inhumanity of the slave trade, and of treating human beings as chattel. In this way, the 53 African captives played a critically important role in the battle against slavery in the U.S.