

LA AMISTAD: GLOBAL INCIDENT. PERSONAL PERSPECTIVES



ESSENTIAL QUESTION

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



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Explore the key events and significance of the 1839 Amistad rebellion.
- Analyze primary source documents to understand perspectives on the Amistad case and slavery in the mid-1800s.
- Interpret a portrait of the rebellion’s leader to learn about prevailing stereotypes of people of African descent, and how abolitionists countered them.



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 show a video and project images
- *Transatlantic Slave Trade: The Amistad* handout (one per student)
- *Primary Sources: La Amistad* handout (one per student)
- Station sources (one copy of the following for each station, enlarged):
 - Entry in the American Anti-Slavery Almanac*
 - Editorial from The Democrat*
 - Letter from Cinqué to Lewis Tappan*
- *Cinqué Portrait by Nathaniel Jocelyn* handout (one to project)
- Sticky notes



VOCABULARY

abolitionist

enslaved

transatlantic slave trade

Amistad

enslaver

stereotype

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.

- 1 Project the image of the ship *La Amistad*, at <https://www.history.com/topics/abolitionist-movement/amistad-case>. Ask students if they have heard of this case and allow them to share their prior knowledge. Provide a brief overview of the Amistad rebellion and court case using information from the History.com article or by showing one of the following videos:

- “The Amistad” (1:21): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NE1xFtoFvco>.
- “The Amistad Case: ‘Give us Free’” (7:22): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_zTN6tsDpw&t=18s.

- 2 Distribute a copy of the handout *Transatlantic Slave Trade: The Amistad* to each student and project the definition below. Individually or in pairs, have students trace the route of the African captives on the map and write a definition of the transatlantic slave trade in their own words. Allow them to add details or illustrations reflecting what they have learned about the journey of the captives so far. Provide access to atlases as needed.

[The] transatlantic slave trade [was a] segment of the global slave trade that transported between 10 million and 12 million enslaved Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to the Americas from the 16th to the 19th century. It was the second of three stages of the so-called triangular trade, in which arms, textiles, and wine were shipped from Europe to Africa, slaves from Africa to the Americas, and sugar and coffee from the Americas to Europe. (Source: Transatlantic Slave Trade by Thomas Lewis, Britannica, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/transatlantic-slave-trade>)

NOTE

For each source, a brief excerpt is featured. Students should focus only on this excerpt, rather than trying to decipher the entire selection. Students who are able to go further can access the full text on a laptop or tablet using the URLs at the bottom of each source.

3 Tell students they will analyze and compare several primary sources about the Amistad incident, written between 1839 and 1841, in order to better understand the perspectives of people during that era. Distribute the *Primary Sources: La Amistad* handout to each student and review the directions with them.

4 Set up stations for each source below by placing an enlarged version of the handouts in separate work areas. Depending on the class size, you may need two stations for each source. Divide students into small groups and assign them to rotate stations until they have read and recorded their observations for all three sources. Circulate while students are working, and support them with any challenging language and concepts.

SOURCES

- *Entry in the American Anti-Slavery Almanac*
- *Editorial from The Democrat*
- *Letter from Cinqué to Lewis Tappan*

5 Debrief on the stations exercise using some of the following questions:

- What language or ideas did the anti-abolitionist writer use to influence his readers?
- What stereotypes or bias did you notice in the *Anti-Slavery Almanac*, even though its writers were supportive of the captives?
- What did you observe about Cinqué's tone? Did his manner surprise you? Explain.
- Overall, what did you take away about attitudes toward Black people and slavery in the mid-1800s?
- Why is it important to read primary sources and to not rely only on secondary sources?

6 Project the handout *Cinqué Portrait by Nathaniel Jocelyn*. Share that the portrait was commissioned by Robert Purvis, a wealthy Black abolitionist from Philadelphia, to fight against the stereotype of Africans as savages who were unworthy of freedom. Explain that stereotypes against people of African descent were common in newspapers,

theater, art and literature of the day, and that abolitionists understood they had to change perceptions in order to end slavery.

- 7** Direct students to observe the portrait closely and identify symbols the artist used to shift people’s ideas about people of African descent. In pairs or small groups, have them write each symbol they notice on a separate sticky note. Then invite groups, one at a time, to post one of their notes onto the portrait and explain their thinking. Continue this process until a variety of ideas have been explored. Use the following to guide the discussion as needed:¹
- Cinqué’s faraway gaze makes him look thoughtful, visionary and noble.
 - His broad shoulders and strong chest, bicep and collarbones convey strength and power.
 - The staff in his hands symbolizes masculinity and power.
 - The toga he is wearing is associated with ancient Greece or Rome, and symbolizes nobility, heroism, and the political values of western nations.
 - The warm light that shines on his forehead and chest make it seem as though the heavens are illuminating him, and that he is virtuous and intelligent.
 - The background represents an African landscape, but the palm trees suggest a hint of the tropic or exotic, maybe even the American South.

- 8** Conclude the lesson by discussing the significance of the Amistad case. Emphasize that it is one of the most important court cases in U.S. history because it established that enslaved people were not property to be owned and helped to humanize them, thereby strengthening the abolitionist movement.

NOTE

The Picturing United States History website includes an interactive version of the Cinqué portrait. You can click on sections of the portrait to reveal information about what each represents. See <https://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/white-into-black-seeing-race-slavery-and-anti-slavery-in-antebellum-america/3/>.

¹ Sources: Powell, Richard J. "How Cinque was Painted." *Washington Post*, December 28, 1997. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1997/12/28/how-cinque-was-painted/64bcb5bd-bae9-4db4-9be8-52352c21a829/>; Burns, Sarah L. and Brown, Joshua. "White into Black: Seeing Race, Slavery, and Anti-Slavery in Antebellum America." Picturing United States History. <https://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/white-into-black-seeing-race-slavery-and-anti-slavery-in-antebellum-america/3/>.

Discussion Questions

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Burns, Sarah L. and Brown, Joshua. "White into Black: Seeing Race, Slavery, and Anti-Slavery in Antebellum America." Picturing United States History. <https://picturinghistory.gc.cuny.edu/white-into-black-seeing-race-slavery-and-anti-slavery-in-antebellum-america/3>.
- + National Park Service. "The Amistad Story." <https://www.nps.gov/subjects/travelamistad/index.htm>.
- + NPR/WNYC. "With Powerful Murals, Hale Woodruff Paved The Way For African-American Artists." <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/19/459251265/with-powerful-murals-hale-woodruff-paved-the-way-for-african-american-artists>.
- + Powell, Richard J. "How Cinque was Painted." *Washington Post*, December 28, 1997. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1997/12/28/how-cinque-was-painted/64bcb5bd-bae9-4db4-9be8-52352c21a829>.
- + Rediker, Marcus. "Audio Lectures—The Amistad Rebellion." Mystic Seaport Museum. https://educators.mysticseaport.org/scholars/lectures/amistad_rebellion.
- + Slave Voyages. "Explore the Dispersal of Enslaved Africans Across the Atlantic World." <https://www.slavevoyages.org>.

1

What did you learn from the primary documents that was new or surprising? What did they reveal about the slave trade or attitudes toward people of African descent?

2

What stereotypes about Black people were common in the mid-1800s? How did these beliefs keep slavery going?

3

How did people of African descent resist stereotypes and false ideas about their humanity?

4

Why was the Amistad rebellion and case important, not just for enslaved people, but for all Americans?



Transatlantic Slave Trade: The Amistad

NAME: _____

Trace the route of the African captives on the map and add details or illustrations showing what you know about their journey. Write a definition of the transatlantic slave trade in your own words.



SOURCE: <https://www.navytimes.com/news/your-navy/2019/08/25/mutiny-on-the-amistad-all-we-want-is-make-us-free/>



Primary Sources: La Amistad

NAME: _____

Read each primary source and add notes to the chart. Then answer the questions below.

Source	Author	Important Details	Point of View, Biases

1 What did you learn from these primary sources that you might not learn from modern-day secondary sources, like a textbook?

2 What did you learn from reading these different perspectives about attitudes toward Black people and slavery in the mid-1800s?



Entry in the American Anti-Slavery Almanac 1841

NAME: _____

Nine of the Africans have died. They have been in jail about a year. They have been instructed daily by benevolent persons. They have made some progress in reading and speaking the English language; and their conduct has been very exemplary. James Covey, a native Mendi, providentially brought to this country, acts as interpreter. They are cheerful, inoffensive, grateful, obedient, and are fast throwing off their pagan habits—but long for liberty and their homes.

President Van Buren, at the request of the Spanish minister, sent a U. S. ship to New-Haven last winter, to convey the Africans to Cuba, to be given up to the Spaniards, in case Judge Judson had not decided as he did.

Ye who love liberty, pray for Cinquez and his companions, and send your money to the committee appointed to protect them, that they may employ able counsel to defend them. S. S. Jocelyn, Joshua Leavitt, and Lewis Tappan, are the committee, and the donations can be sent to Lewis Tappan, Treasurer, No. 122 Pearl street, New-York.

DESCRIPTION OF CINQUEZ, GRAB-EAU, AND JAMES COVEY THE INTERPRETER.



SING-GEE, [Cingue,] (generally spelt Cinquez) was born in Ma-ni, in Dzh-o-poa, *i. e.*, in the open land, in the Mendi country. His mother is dead, and he lived with his father. He has a wife and three children, one son and two daughters. His king, Ka-lum-bo, lived at Kaw-men-di, a large town in the Men-di country. He is a planter of rice, and never owned or sold slaves. He was seized by four men, when traveling in the road, his right hand tied to his neck. Ma-ya-gi-la-lo sold him to Ba-ma-dzha, son of Shaka, king of Gen-du-ma, in the Vai country. Ba-ma-dzha carried him to Lomboko and sold him to a Spaniard. At Lomboko he was transferred to a slave-ship, and taken to Havana.

After the terrible "middle passage" [that] between decks, when the space is less than three feet, they arrived at Havana. Here they were put into one of the large cells, or dungeons, called *botoceros*, and confined for nearly a few days. Joseph Bates and Peter Manning brought them. Bates brought Cinquez and Manning brought the children, three—two girls. They put them on board the schooner *Amiral*, a cutter, for Puerto Principe, Cuba, a new located island from Havana. When they were two or three days out, they were taken severely ill, and died. A quarrel took place. The cook and cabin were killed, and two sailors fed in a lock. Cinquez, the master's agent of the whole, remained the command. He established a mild government over his comrades and company. Italy and Maria was near the wharves for the things sent—their own native Africa. They did not say for, but in the night they dived the Africans, and ran towards the United States.

In the way they sailed on the American coast, and came to within off Cuba (St. Paul, Long Island). Here some of them landed, made purchases, (paying for all they took), and stayed some, intending to proceed on their passage, but they were taken possession of by Lieutenant Galt, of the U. S. Ship, *Washington*, and carried into New London, Conn. Judge Judson heard them over in the Circuit Court for trial on the charge of murder. The court, after a long trial, decided that they were guilty of no crime, and were ordered to be sent back to Africa. But our government, on the other hand, the court decided that our courts have no jurisdiction of officers committed on board Spanish vessels on the high seas. At length, the case went up to the Supreme Court of the United States in a matter of fact; there it will be decided January, 1841. These three years ago they were kept in an American jail eighteen months, and at last perhaps delivered by the tender mercies of the Spaniards!

One of the Africans here died. They have been in jail about a year. They have been instructed daily by benevolent persons. They have made some progress in reading and speaking the English language; and their conduct has been very exemplary. James Covey, a native Mendi, providentially brought to this country, acts as interpreter. They are cheerful, inoffensive, obedient, and are fast throwing off their pagan habits—but long for liberty and their homes.

President Van Buren, at the request of the Spanish minister, sent a U. S. ship to New-Haven last winter, to convey the Africans to Cuba, to be given up to the Spaniards, in case Judge Judson had not decided as he did. Ye who love liberty, pray for Cinquez and his companions, and send your money to the committee appointed to protect them, that they may employ able



Source: American anti-slavery almanac, for 1841 New York: Published by S.W. Benedict, 1841 (i.e. 1840). <https://digital.librarycompany.org/islandora/object/Islandora%3A2771>



Editorial from *The Democrat* (Huntsville, Alabama)

November 23, 1839

NAME: _____

THE CASE OF RUIZ AND MONTEZ.—ATROCIOUS DEVELOPMENT AT NEW HAVEN.—The extraordinary arrest and imprisonment of Messrs. Ruiz and Montez, at the suit of the Amistad savages, instigated by the abolitionists, will come up to-day before Judge Ingles, for further review and examination. The same matter will also be brought before Judge Oakley, to show cause why a discharge from jail should not be ordered. It is expected, therefore, that some strange and curious developments will be made relative to the conduct and intrigues of the abolitionists—the malignant interference of Lewis Tappan, and the uses to which these savages have been put by the fanatics.

This matter, in connexion with the abolition intrigues, is beginning to assume a most revolting and audacious character—a character that makes the blood boil and the heart burn. On the arrival of these savages in this country, with their hands crimsoned with the blood of several white men, they were seized upon by a band of fanatics, who, under the name of humanity and religion, have been levying contributions on the public while they were proposing to teach these savages the elements of religion and civilization. All sorts of intrigues have been adopted to deceive the public, and to annoy and harass the foreigners, who hardly escaped with their lives from the Amistad. Under the pupilage of the abolitionists, the savages have been made the instruments of crime and wickedness in order to gratify malignity and hate. There can be no doubt that their instigators, whoever they are, are liable to an indictment for subornation of perjury—and we trust that the friends of justice and humanity at New Haven will take speedy steps to inflict the just punishment provided by law against such acts.

We do not speak at random. In this day's paper, is a very important letter from our correspondent at New Haven, whose accurate information, and mode of judging are of the simplest kind. From his statements every calm mind must be satisfied that the savages have sworn to what they know nothing of and cannot substantiate. They are ignorant of the nature of an oath, and cannot be held responsible for what they are made to swear, but their advisers and abettors are the guilty parties on whom the vengeance of the laws ought to fall.

But this is not all the horrors of the abolition intrigues. It seems that Jiqua and his associates have been furnished secretly with knives. Who did this? Who would do this? Is it not likely that those weapons were conveyed to the savages by the same fanatics who would suborn them to perjury, in order to incarcerate Messrs. Ruiz and Montez? Is not this the most probable supposition? And if so, for what intent were they furnished with the weapons of murder? Was it to make the prison of New Haven as red with the blood of the white man as the decks of the Amistad?

Humanity must shudder at such doings; religion hang her head; and justice cry aloud for vengeance! If this is the first fruits of the lessons of religion and civilization which have been taught these savages by the abolitionists, it is time for our courts of justice to pause—and to inquire whether they ought to lend themselves to the attempts of such fiends any longer. The first movements of the fanatics with these negroes only excited ridicule and contempt. Turning somersets at sixpence a head, eating three dinners per day, or kissing little white girls as they were handed up to them by their abolition mothers, might be tolerated as the madness of the hour that time might cure. But when we see insolence, perjury, false imprisonment, and preparations making among the savages for blood and massacre, it is full time to ask whether our courts of justice are to tolerate such things any longer. Let us know.—*N. Y. Herald, Oct. 23.*



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SOURCE: Newspapers.com. "Anti-abolitionist editorial against the arrest of Montes and Ruiz, two Spaniards on the Amistad." *The Democrat* (Huntsville, AL), November 23, 1839. <https://www.newspapers.com/topics/civil-war/amistad-case>.



Letter from Cinqué to Lewis Tappan

February 29, 1841

NAME: _____

NOTE

- Cinqué was the Mendi man who led the revolt aboard the Amistad.
- Lewis Tappan was a New York City businessman and abolitionist, who helped organize the defense of the Amistad captives.
- John Quincy Adams (“Mr. Adams”) was the sixth president of the United States and defended the Amistad captives before the U.S. Supreme Court.

Dear Sir

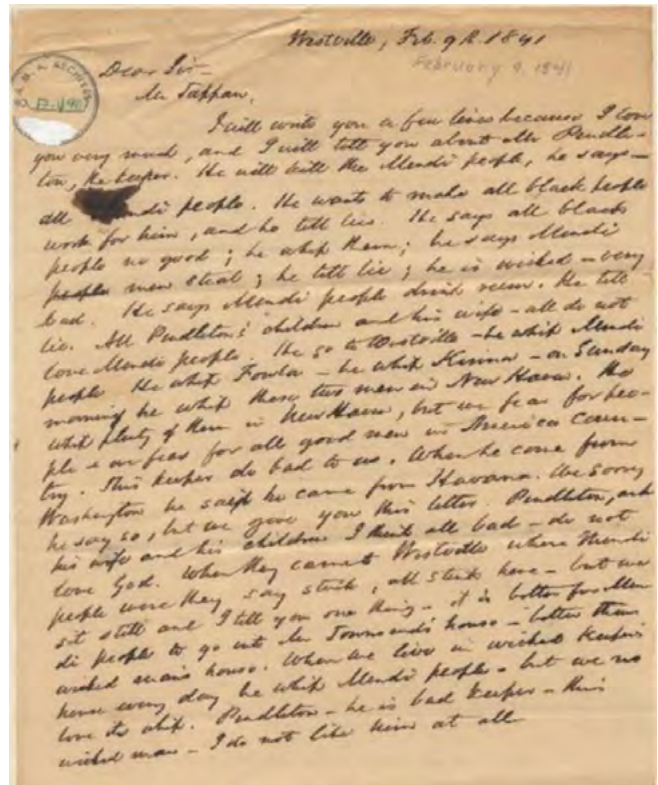
Mr. Tappan,

I will write you a few lines because I love you very much and I will tell you about Mr. Pendleton keeper [of the jail in New Haven, Connecticut.] He will kill the Mendi people, he says all Mendi people. He want make all black people work for him and he tell bad lie. He says all black people no good, he whip them. He says Mendi men steal, he tell lie, he is wicked, very bad. He says Mendi people drink rum, he tell lie...

...My friend, I want you to tell Mr. Adams about Pendleton he bad. The Lord God want all men to be good and love him, the Lord. Jesus Christ came down to make us turn from sins. He sent the Bible to do good on earth. My friend, I want you to pray to the great God to make us free and go our home and see our friend[s] in Mendi country. We want to see our friends in African Country and we shall pray to God to make our ____ very good and we want the God to have mercy on our friend[s].

Your dear friends

Cinque





Cinqué Portrait by Nathaniel Jocelyn



SOURCE: National Portrait Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, https://npg.si.edu/object/npg_NPG.69.66.