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The Amistad

The idea of the Amistad—the rebirth of interest in Amistad—really goes back quite far. While Mr. Spielberg's efforts in recent years really brought it to public focus, the main impact of the story of the Amistad is highlighting concern the concern for human rights in this country. Amistad has really never vanished from the awareness or the conscience of the American people. The Amistad and its influence on the America never had any hiatus; it never stopped influencing this country.

From 1839 to 1841, 53 Africans who wound up on these shores—literally, on the beach right outside these doors at Culloden Point — brought a great deal of national focus to the issue of slavery, and the issues of race to date still continue to concern the American people. From the time of the Constitution to the present, it has been one of the fundamental problems we face as a society. How do we deal with all of these issues that are sort of the legacy of the horrors of slavery?

The Amistad as a moment in time really helped to galvanize this nation's attitudes towards the institution of slavery—helped to give a face to an otherwise nameless and faceless institution to many northerners. To be an abolitionist in 1839 was sort of a radical ambition. Amistad is the incident that really served to galvanize the American people against the institution of slavery. That opposition really didn't boil until the Civil War, of course, but the Amistad trial served to bring the many disparate interests together in opposition to the institution of slavery. As I said, to be an abolitionist in 1839 was sort of very radical. But by 1860, certainly, it was no longer considered radical to be absolutely against slavery. And it's the Amistad incident that served to really bring this to the fore.

Had the Amistad incident occurred in New York, it wouldn't have had the influence that it had on the American people. In fact, the Amistad were only 15 rods off the Montauk beach, just outside these doors. Why didn't the case get tried in the New York court system. In 1797, New York State had completely abolished slavery. But by fate and the winds, the Amistad pasengers wound up back in Connecticut where slavery had not been banned. We've got a little bit of insight we would like to shed on that as we go forward.

The Amistad was a freedom vessel. In fact, it was really quite different from a slave ship. It was so ingrained in the American economy that we can think of Amistad as a slave ship but, in fact, it was simply a cargo vessel.

The central charcater of our story is the gentleman who was about 23 at the time and really is a biblical character in the Amistad incident. Singbe — given the name "Cinque" by the Spanish in their subterfuge to try and cover his identity as an illegal captive was being sold as a legal slave under Spanish law. So his captors gave him a false passport and called him "Cinque" and that's the name that he was known by

during the court trial. But, in fact, Singbe was his name in Mendeland presently within the country of Sierra Leone. Recently, we have come in contact with three men who are the great-grandsons of Singbe and they like to make it very clear that he should be known as "Singbe" and not as "Cinque". Singbe was, as I say, about 23 at the time and I don't think that we can really appreciate the leadership abilities that this young man had considering the circumstances that he found himself under. He and about 450 other individuals, kidnapped on the west coast of Africa, were loaded aboard what is in classic terms today described as a slave ship. This was a vessel on which we can't imagine the horror that these people endured; literally, 450 people stuffed into a vessel that was only about 110 feet long. About 40% was the usual rate of mortality for people making this middle passage; the voyage lasted about two months.

Anyway, Singbe and 53 of his fellow Mende survived this passage, wound up in Cuba, and there were sold to plantation owners from another part of Cuba—eastern Cuba—and put aboard the *Amistad*. Again, the *Amistad* was not one of these classic middle-passage slave ships. My point about the slave ship issue versus cargo ship—it's important to put in context the history of the legalities of the slave trade.

Beginning in the 15th century really, Europeans began to kidnap Africans for enslavement—both in Europe and with the development of the sugar economy in the New World, for labor in the New World. The first Africans were brought to the United States shores to be sold as slaves in 1619 in Virginia, but really, the Spanish and Portuguese had a thriving economy based on Africans' labor in the New World long before that.

By about 1808, numerous European nations began to increasingly restrict the slave trade. After 1808, the United States and Great Britain signed a treaty which forbade the importation of newly kidnapped Africans for enslavement in any British Colony or in the United States. By 1820, the British had persuaded the Spanish to sign on into these international agreements as well. It did nothing to address the plight of people who were born into slavery in the New World. You could be born, live and die a slave after 1808 in the United States and any British Colony, but it did prohibit the importation of newly kidnapped people for enslavement. That's an important thing to understand in context to the *Amistad* incident because in 1820, some of the people that were aboard the *Amistad* weren't yet born so they could not have been born in the New World before the importation of new Africans for enslavement became illegal. That was one of the pivotal points that allowed them to be given their freedom by the court system.

We refer to this horrible trade as the middle-passage and this kind of has its maritime roots in thinking of things in the triangle trade—remember, 6th grade history about the triangle trade where not every vessel made a three-legged voyage. A voyage is a round trip; if you start in Sag Harbor, go around the world and come back, you have completed your "voyage". But any stop that you've made along the way, let's say, the trip between Sag Harbor and that stop is a "passage". So, in the triangle trade, manufactured goods might have started typically in Liverpool,

England, loaded aboard a ship, taken to the west coast of Africa, there sold or traded for human beings. These purchased people were put aboard these ships, the ships would make the passage across the Atlantic, ending up in the New World at Havana which was the principal port for this slave trade. This finished the second leg, or second passage. Then, from Havana, sugar products would have been brought back to Liverpool, completing the voyage of three legs, the middle passage being that which carried Africans from the west coast of Africa to the New World for enslavement. So, this is where we get the term "middle passage"; it's a very specific maritime connotation. But, today, we just think of it to mean the slave trade as a whole.

After about 2 weeks in Havana, these people were sold to plantation owners from eastern Cuba and put aboard a vessel that I like to think of as sort of the tractor trailer of its day—certainly not a comfortable accommodation. But in 1839, no accommodation was really comfortable. The *Amistad* might have carried Spanish gentlemen or ladies on one voyage and then, on the next voyage, people bound for a life of enslavement on sugar plantations. So, the vessel didn't have the character of the middle-passage slave ships.

This woodcut is based on the words that Singbe used himself when he described to a newspaper man in New Haven the slave ship on the middle passage from Africa. It describes the experience that they had aboard the *Tecora*. Only 3 feet 3 inches of headroom—just absolutely, unimaginably crowded conditions, no sanitation, poor food. Literally 40% of the people on board such vessels would perish on the voyage. But the economics were such that for the capital involved in sponsoring these voyages and the people involved in making profits, there was still plenty of profit to be made. A vessel would literally be paid for in one successful trip. So this is what inspired people, despite the international agreements to continue in this nefarious trade. So, again, it's quite rare to have the graphic description based on the experience of an individual in this trade, so it's really a remarkable document. It was published in 1840 by this man named John Barber in his work called "The History of the *Amistad* Captives" which goes into a lot more and is one of the primary documents connected to the case.

The bottom line is that the *Tecora* came into Havana with Singbe and his fellow *Amistad* passengers on board. I mentioned that after 1820, it was illegal even under Spanish law to bring newly captive Africans into Spanish colonies in the New World. However, the British were estimating conservatively that 25,000 individuals every year were still being smuggled into the Island of Cuba. So, it wasn't a very effective treaty. The Spanish government really took no steps to enforce these laws whatsoever. In fact, for a fee of what equated to \$10 U.S. at the time, you could obtain one of these false passports for someone who was smuggled into the country. You could get a legal Spanish document that said this person was born legally a slave on the Island of Cuba. This is where Cinque got his title "Cinque" rather than Singbe;—it was on such a phony document. The document exists now in the National Archives. It was part of the court testimony and part of

the court evidence for the case, so it's pretty interesting to track it that far.

Anyway, in Havana, these people were put aboard this small vessel called the *Amistad* that did the work that tractor trailers do for us today, carrying every commodity of household life. Additionally, aboard the *Amistad*, in addition to the 53 Africans, there were literally tons of cargo—barrels of olive oil, boxes of property, hardware of many descriptions, umbrellas, looking glasses, books, charts, maps, as well as two cases of sugar cane knives that Singbe and his fellows made good use of, as we now know. The voyage was suppose to last about 4 days; it was only 310 miles, but it is all to windward, and about 2 days out—actually, it was midnight between the second and third day, so you'll hear it described differently, because it was after midnight and before 3:00 a.m., as best we can decide—that the Africans took the vessel.

This is a painting that was painted by a WPA artist by the name of Hale Woodruff in 1939 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the *Amistad* incident. This has always been very much part of the history of the struggle for human rights in this country. Many people have been very well aware of it for many years. The painting takes a lot of artistic license. Number one, it depicts the scene in daylight instead of at night, and I think that it really depicts far more violence than occurred aboard the deck of the *Amistad* in 1839—it was June 22nd, that, in fact, only 3 people lost their lives. The Africans knew that they didn't know how to navigate a sailing vessel—you know, this is like putting me in the cockpit of a 747; I wouldn't know how to get the thing going at all—you know, just a completely different technology than with my background. So they really weren't out to commit mass murder by any means. They knew that there was this dependence on some knowledge on the part of their Spanish captors to navigate the vessel. The first man killed was Silistino who was the legal slave property under Spanish law of the captain and owner of the vessel. He was the cook, not treated very well himself. But earlier in the voyage, he had taunted Singbe and the other Africans that when they got to their destination they would be cooked and eaten. And that threat while to Silistino was in jest, actually, to someone born on the coast of west Africa who, for many generations had witnessed millions of people being kidnapped by this insatiable appetite of the white man in the New World, there was a very strong tradition that the Caucasian race was consuming Africans. So when Silistino made this jest, it was taken quite seriously. And this is what we think inspired Cinque to risk all and take the vessel. So, the first man they killed was Silistino, who was going to cook them when they got to their destination. Next man killed was one of the captains themselves. They came up with their sugar cane knives, they killed Silistino, they went after the captain, the captain took his single-shot pistol—which was the only technology he had—and shot one of the captains dead and when that captain was shot, then the other captives fell on the captain with the sugar cane knives. That was the end of the carnage.

Because of this mutual dependence, certainly, the few Spanish on board were easily overwhelmed by 53 Africans, or now 52 Africans. But the Africans recognized fully that they needed the knowledge of the Europeans to navigate the ship. Two crewmen actually escaped. They got out in a small boat—they were only about 14 miles off the coast of Cuba—they got back to Havana and sent out word and a Spanish gunboat went out after the Amistad, but never did catch up.

So, after, they take the Amistad about 14 miles off the Cuban coast and they begin to try and navigate back to their homeland which the vessel was really not equipped to do; she didn't have enough food or stores on board. They fell into the Bahamas, spent about 2 or 3 weeks sailing around the Bahama Islands, going ashore trying to trade for more food and water. Afraid to communicate with anybody, they foraged wherever they could, but, in fact, had they turned themselves over to British authorities in the Bahamas in 1839, they would have been immediately set free because the British emancipated all people held in enslavement in their New World colonies after 1833.

Again, not trusting what authority might do with them, they continued on their voyage. After about a little more than 2-1/2 weeks, they found their way clear of the Bahama Islands and now they were in the open sea, and at that point, things were getting pretty desperate on board. They were running low on food and water, and after about two months, I think more by the influence of the Gulf Stream than any real and tangent navigation, they wound up right here, at Culloden Point, just outside these doors. They wound up anchored there on the 24th of August, 1839, anchored just—according to the court testimony—15 rods off the beach, less than a quarter of a mile, and about 20 of them went ashore and spread out all over what is now very close to where we're sitting, looking for more food and water with the intention of continuing their voyage further to the east.

Chances are they wouldn't have made it, even if they got the food and water; Amistad really wasn't big enough or well-equipped enough to make a trans-Atlantic voyage, especially with only two competent and experienced seamen on board. One of the reasons they survived as long as they did, I think, is this man Pedro Montez, who was 53 at the time, and Luiz, who was 28; Montez, in an earlier part of his career, had been captain of coasting vessels and had sailed all around the Caribbean and the east coast of the United States as captain., So he knew the waters, he knew how to navigate and were it not for his individual maritime expertise, I think they probably would have been lost at sea long before they wound up in Montauk. In fact, the night before they saw the Montauk lighthouse, and in desperation, Montez was trying to run the ship ashore because he knew that if they get set out much further, they would probably perish at sea. So, they were trying to run the ship up on the beach, but the tide sent them around the island, and the next morning, they wound up anchoring right off the point.

While they were, they did have quite a bit of contact with some of the locals. The court testimony, again, says that there were only 4 houses out here at that time—quite different from today. But they did have some interaction with the local

people, traded for some potatoes, for some gin, water, and, of course, the locals exploited them to no end. For instance, they paid \$17—or one gold doubloon, which in 1839, was worth \$17 U.S.—for a barrel of water. You wouldn't pay that for a barrel of water today. So, again, they had some gold on board and it was being rapidly taken from them by the local citizenry. They bought some dogs—certainly, not for accompaniment, but as livestock to take with them.

Capt. Henry Green was a whaling master, who sailed a vessel out of Sag Harbor. He was out on the East End gunning with a couple of friends, one by the name of Conklin, another by the name of Fordham, and there was a fourth man in there—and I'm not sure what his role was—but he's given the name of Fisher in the court deposition. Capt. Green saw the opportunity. There was no ability to communicate at all with these Africans, but in fact, one of them spoke a few words of English, a couple of them spoke some Spanish. There was another crewman aboard the vessel by the name of Antonio. Antonio was a 16-year-old—again, he was a slave of the captain, born in Africa suffered this middle passage—but he was 16 and he spoke fluent Spanish. So, there was some exchange between Fordham, Conklin, and Green about what was going on here.

And Green was given to understand that they really wanted to continue their voyage to Africa. He, of course, being a mariner, saw a great salvage opportunity because the vessel wasn't under command by any traditional sense. There was no authority figure on board that would be recognized by courts of law. The vessel was insured for \$40,000 when she departed Havana, \$22,000 of which was the value of the captives. So, Capt. Green thought that there was a good opportunity there if he were to take the vessel. So he promised that he would return the next morning and sail the vessel to Sag Harbor where they could prepare for this extended voyage -a promise he made to the Africans that he had no intention of keeping. Meanwhile, while he's on the beach making this negotiation, the U.S. Navy brig, Washington, comes over the horizon. She had been out in Block Island Sound sounding the depths.

The Washington was operating out of New London for the summer. It was on survey duty adding depth measurements to an navigation chart. And she sees this ship anchored off Culloden Point, which is not a very safe anchorage. So, first of all, the captain of the Washington must have thought what's a ship doing there. They get a little closer; they see a bunch of half-clad, dark-skinned men running around on the beach; they see Capt. Green and his horse and carriage, and a few others; and they think that they may be some smuggling activity going on.

So, the Washington felt perfectly justified in coming closer and sending an armed party of four to investigate. They board the vessel, and with that, Luiz Montez falls at the feet of the young officer who's in charge, and immediately begins communicating the Spanish side of the story. The Africans don't have an opportunity to communicate their side of the story in the least.

Capt. Green is left somewhat chagrined because the Washington tows the Amistad back to New London. A lot of controversy as to why that happened. As I mentioned earlier, I think it was 1797 slavery was completely abolished in the State of New York. So modern readers say that, in fact, Lt. Gegney on the Washington towed the Amistad back to New London because he would have an opportunity to claim

salvage on the value of the captives in Connecticut courts because Connecticut didn't abolish slavery until 1848. In fact, that's kind of erroneous because it really is the federal court system that decides maritime cases.

I think that the wind we know from the logs of various vessels involved, was light from the southwest, as it usually is in August; it was getting late in the day; the tide was ebbing. He had a square-rigged vessel, the brig Washington, and he had to tow another sailing vessel. So, if he decided to go to Sag Harbor as the port of entry for this area at that time, it was about 22 miles. He would have had to come here through the tide; it would've been a horrendous thing to do in a sailing ship, just from a navigation point of view. Whereas, all he had to do was fall off the wind and run home into his home port, New London I am quite confident that that's why he wound up in New London—not to give him advantage one way or the other in the salvage plans.

But, of course, what that did is it made it very difficult for Capt. Green to pursue his salvage plan on the other side of the sound, but he pursued it to some extent anyway. At the New London customs house, the vessel was consigned for care and keeping. Then the captains themselves were transported to New Haven. And this is why New Haven had such an interest in this. And for their entire time of incarceration during the court trials, the Africans were kept in jail in New Haven.

The vessel stayed in New London, but Capt. Green did make his appearance before the court in New Haven. His claim was dismissed by the judge because Capt Green really hadn't taken charge of the situation; he had arranged to make some future deal, but it hadn't really been consummated, so the court just threw out the claim by Green, Fordham, and Conklin's and we lose their involvement in the case from that point. Capt. Green got into farming after whaling, and I really don't know much about his life beyond that.

In 1839, the Africans went through their trials. There was a group of New Haven citizens and prominent abolitionists who rallied to their support, both financially, spiritually and educationally. Mostly centered around Yale, but Louis Tappan was one of the principal financiers, the founder of the New York Mercantile Exchange, now known as Dunn & Bradstreet—very prominent citizen, very dedicated to abolition. There was so much energy created around this; as I say, it served to galvanize the abolitionist movement.

Abolitionists in 1839 were a disparate bunch. Some called for immediate abolition with no reparation of the property rights of the individuals who claimed to own other individuals; others wanted gradual elimination of slavery. But the Amistad case really served to really put a face on this institution, if you will. It was the media event of 1839. Every newspaper up and down the coast covered it; they interviewed the Africans once they could speak English. To many Americans who stood on the fence on the issue of slavery, when they began to see these individuals as individuals—not just as nameless laborers in another part of the country—it really served to galvanize the abolitionist movement and give it energy. So, when the Africans found their way home after the Supreme Court case and raising initial

funds to charter a vessel to return home, that energy didn't dissipate.

In 1846, the smaller groups that had rallied to support the Africans organized into a larger group called "The American Missionary Association", which became the principal voice for abolition in this country until the time of the Civil War. In fact, immediately upon Lincoln signing the Emancipation Proclamation, they sent 400 missionaries into the south to establish schools for the recently freed African-Americans and any whites that would attend these schools. During Reconstruction, a lot of these schools were turned over to the municipal governments and became the infrastructure for the public school system in many rural parts of the southern states. Not only that, some of the schools continue today as what we think of as historically black colleges which find their legacy directly in the Amistad incident. This is why a mural stands in the library at Talladega?. Another very interesting part of Talladega's involvement, not only did they put up that mural in 1939, but when they built this library, they put a mosaic on the floor and that mosaic is an image of the Amistad, very much like that painting. The tradition at Talladega is that when you walk across the rotunda in this library, you do not tread on the image of the Amistad; you walk around it, because the Amistad is a real icon for the struggle of human rights in this country; again, it's not something that Spielberg or Mystic Seaport are partners in the project we discovered—this is a living part of the educational opportunity for people of African descent in the south, and it was really brought home to me.

I've been talking about this at quite a few places. Out in Chicago, I met a man who graduated from Talladega in the late 40's, and his personal connection to Amistad, because he's an alumni of one of these schools, is really quite moving and he said, "You got to remember: Growing up in Mississippi and Alabama after and during the war," he said, "For a black man, the only way I could get an education and become a professional was to go to one of these historically black colleges, and that these schools would not have existed were it not for the Amistad incident." And I think that to many Americans, Amistad is a very significant part of our history, not only did it occur in 1839, but it has a lasting, living legacy like to this very day.