

United States v. Amistad

Federal Trials and Great Debates
in United States History

Case Summary:

- After being illegally captured and transported to Cuba in 1839, a group of Africans overthrew their captors at sea and attempted to return home.
- The ship was intercepted off the U.S. coast and several parties made competing claims about the Africans' legal status.
- The Africans prevailed at trial and on appeal, successfully arguing they were free.
- Although the case did not contest the validity of slavery, it was seen as a victory for abolitionists.

History of the Case:

The transatlantic slave trade was brutal and inhumane. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, millions of Africans were forced into cramped, unsafe, and unsanitary conditions for weeks at sea. Countless thousands died during the passage from their homelands to the new world. In the early nineteenth century, several western nations, including the United States and Spain, banned the transatlantic slave trade. Nevertheless, many American states retained their own domestic slave markets and illegal international trading continued in some areas.

In 1839, a group of slavers illegally transported more than 500 inhabitants of the Mende region of West Africa (now part of Sierra Leone) to Cuba. Although Cuba was then ruled by Spain, which had abolished the transatlantic slave trade, local government administrators often turned a blind eye to illicit trade activities and in some instances falsified documents to make such trades appear legitimate. Two Spanish planters bought forty-nine Mende men and four children from this illegal consignment. They intended to transport them along the Cuban coast to their plantations in a ship called *L'Amistad* ("The Friendship").

While at sea, several of the Mende broke free from their chains and killed members of the ship's crew. They then forced the planters to steer the ship back towards Africa. However, the planters secretly steered the ship north and westward at night. After approximately two months, the ship reached the Long Island Sound and a U.S. Navy vessel took the ship, with its remaining malnourished passengers, to shore in Connecticut.

Shortly after the Mende came ashore, the U.S. Attorney for the District of Connecticut attempted to indict them for murder and piracy. After a grand jury (a body assembled to decide whether there is enough evidence to proceed with a criminal charge) in the U.S. Circuit Court for the District of Connecticut made findings of fact, Supreme Court Justice Smith Thompson determined that United States courts did not have jurisdiction to hear a criminal case in which the alleged crimes took place in foreign waters on a Spanish ship. Although this ruling ended any criminal prosecution against the Mende, it was far from the conclusion of their legal jeopardy.

Relying on documents purporting to prove their case, the Spanish planters claimed that the Mende were legally-purchased slaves from Cuba and that they were entitled to take them back to the island as their property. The Spanish government subsequently backed these claims on the basis of a treaty with the United States that required the return of lawful property to Spanish citizens. The United States government, interpreting the treaty to oblige them to do so, intervened in the case in support of the planters' claims. The captain of the naval vessel that took the Amistad ashore attempted to make a "salvage" claim for a reward for finding and securing the ship and its contents, including the Mende. Finally, the Mende argued that they had been kidnapped and thus belonged to no one and should be returned to their homes.

Touching as it did on both international politics and the increasingly divisive issue of slavery, the legal proceedings over the Mende and the Amistad immediately drew significant national attention. Sengbe Pieh, the de facto Mende leader who came to be known as “Cinque” in the United States, testified movingly about the plight of his compatriots and became a symbol for the nobility of enslaved peoples enduring hardships at the hands of their oppressors. Moreover, while the case did not directly challenge the validity of domestic slavery, many outside groups came to see the case as a proxy battle between abolitionists and anti-abolitionists.

The *Amistad* case progressed through every level of the federal judiciary, beginning with the U.S. District Court for the District of Connecticut, the trial court with primary jurisdiction over maritime matters, followed by an appeal to the Circuit Court, over which Justice Thompson presided, before a final appeal in the Supreme Court of the United States. The Mende prevailed at every phase of the litigation, although this result belies important nuances in individual courts’ rulings. For example, District Judge Andrew Judson directed that the Mende had to be returned to Africa and ordered them turned over to President Martin Van Buren for prompt return under federal statutes banning the importation of slaves. He also granted the naval captain’s salvage claim except as it related to the Mende. The United States appealed to the circuit court on behalf of Spain and the planters appealed the salvage award. Justice Thompson issued a “pro forma” decree, which simply upheld the lower court’s decision to enable the case to be appealed to the Supreme Court. The Supreme Court, while agreeing that the Mende were entitled to their freedom, held that the law on which Judge Judson relied did not apply to the Mende since they had never legally been slaves in the first place. They would have to find their own way home.

Similarly, while former President John Quincy Adams, who helped to represent the Mende before the Supreme Court, made a lengthy and widely-reported argument about the failures of the Van Buren administration’s policies and the injustice of slavery, Justice Joseph Story’s opinion for the Court decided the case on narrower grounds. Upholding the lower courts’ rulings that the planter’s documents were falsified, Story reasoned that the Mende were free under Spanish law. The planters were thus not entitled to recover them and the United States was not required to send them to Cuba under its treaty obligations. After winning their case, the remaining Mende had to secure their passage back to Africa. With the help of American abolitionist organizations, they gave performances and sold memorabilia related to their case, eventually securing the funds for a return to Africa.

Though the case is widely regarded as a landmark in the legal history of slavery in the United States, it generally raised more questions than it answered, highlighting as it did the injustices of the slave trade and the perverse morality of treating humans as property. In the decades that followed the case, the Supreme Court assumed an increasingly important role in defining the legal system’s fraught relationship with slavery. Most historians agree the Court largely failed in this enterprise, as the infamous decision in *Scott v. Sanford* (1857), which restricted Congress’ ability to restrict the spread of slavery and denied African Americans citizenship, damaged the judiciary’s reputation and exacerbated the nation’s divisions.

Legal Issues:

- Did federal courts have jurisdiction over crimes alleged to have been committed in foreign seas on a Spanish ship?
- Was the United States obliged to return the Mende to Cuba under its treaty with Spain?
- Were the Mende free or legally enslaved?

Questions for Discussion:

- Why did the judges discuss complex issues of property, maritime, and international law, rather than simply declaring that slavery was morally wrong? What does this tell us about the role of the courts in American society?
- Pro- and anti-slavery groups saw *Amistad* as a struggle between their causes even though slavery’s validity was not a legal issue in the case. What does this say about the symbolic significance of lawsuits? Are there dangers in interpreting legal disputes between individual parties so broadly?