

32 *Amistad* Means Friendship



In Havana, Cuba, where Sengbe Pieh was sold after being captured illegally, the Spanish gave him a certificate calling him a *Ladino*: a Spanish-speaking slave not born in Africa. Such slaves could still be sold.

In 1839, Sengbe Pieh was working on a road connecting his small mountain village to the next tribal town. He was 25 years old, with shining brown skin, close-cut black hair, clear wide eyes, and a face that reflected a nature both innocent and strong as a nut tree. Pieh was not a prince—as some would later call him—but he was a born leader. He was the father of three children.

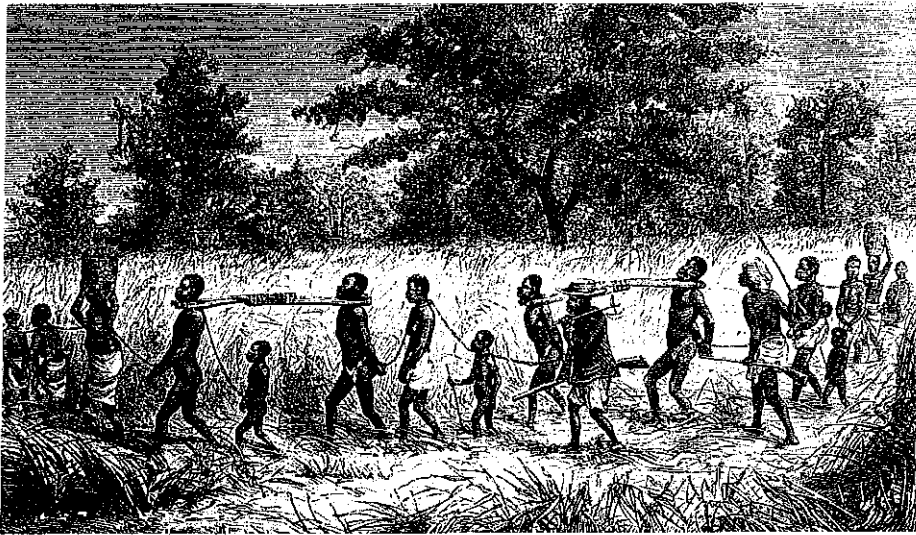
Pieh had never been far from his village in Sierra Leone, but when four strange men stepped out of the bush and surrounded him, he knew at once who they were. Sierra Leone, in Africa, was a British colony. It had been a center of the slave trade for almost 300 years; since 1562 to be exact, when England's Sir John Hawkins set out on a slave-gathering expedition.

Slave trading had made people rich: in England, the United States, Spain, the Arab nations, and Africa. But now there were abolitionists, who disapproved of slavery. They were horrified by the idea of selling people, and they were doing something about it. In 1787, some British abolitionists founded Freedom Province, on the Sierra Leone coast. In 1792 they built the city of Freetown and began returning blacks to Africa. In 1808 the United States outlawed the foreign slave trade. That means it became a crime to bring new slaves into the country. Those who were already slaves could still be bought and sold inside the United States. Be sure that you understand that it was the slave trade—not slavery itself—that was outlawed. No more Africans were to be brought to the United States. (Britain and Spain also made foreign slave trading

I teach the kings about their ancestors so that the lives of the ancients might serve them as an example, for the world is old but the future springs from the past.

—MAMADOU KOUYATÉ, A GRIOT FROM MALI, FROM *SUNDISTA: AN EPIC OF OLD MALI* (1217–1237)

When Herman Melville read about the *Amistad* (and it was one of the big newspaper stories of his day), it started his creative mind churning, and he wrote a novella (which is a short novel) called *Benito Cereno*. It is a strange, disturbing story.



Yoked in a *coffle* or neck fetter (*coffle* comes from the Arabic word for caravan, *cafila*), these West Africans are marched to the Bight of Benin on the Atlantic. There they are kept tied up in the *barracoon* or slave barrack until the ship has a full load. Below is a painting of a slave ship's hold (made after the ship was captured by an antislavery ship).



illegal.) Slavers—those who ran slave ships—were now criminals. If a slaver was caught, the penalty was death.

So in 1839 Pieh should have been safe. But he wasn't. It may have been illegal, but there was still big money to be made by selling slaves. (Just as, a century or so

later, there would be big money made selling illegal enslaving drugs.)

The four men would not let Pieh say good-bye to his wife and children. Pieh wondered if they would know what happened to him. Would they think he was eaten by a lion, or would they guess the truth?

The rough men with guns had captured other Sierra Leoneans. For three and a half days they kept them marching. Finally they came to the coast. Most had not seen the ocean before; the roaring water terrified some of them.

There were worse terrors to come. They were soon to be chained—neck to neck and ankle to ankle—and thrown inside a ship into a hold so low they could only sit, not stand. For two months they would be held like that—with rice to eat but little water. One in every three of them died. Finally they were brought on deck, allowed to wash, and given some extra food. Pieh knew the journey must be coming to an end. But where were they? What would happen next? He heard the word *Cuba*, but he didn't understand Portuguese—the language of the ship's crew—and he knew no one would answer his questions anyway.

And then the ship stopped. The crew put spyglasses to their eyes and searched the water nervously. The slavers were watching for British cruisers. They were doing something illegal and they knew it. If they were captured no one would come to their rescue. Nightfall came and quietly the ship

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A Slaveowner Says What He Thinks

James Henry Hammond, a slaveowner, convinced himself that slavery was a fine institution. Here are Hammond's words in a letter to an English abolitionist written in 1845: *I repudiate, as ridiculously absurd, that much lauded but nowhere accredited dogma of Mr. Jefferson, that 'all men are born equal.' No society has ever yet existed...without a*

natural variety of classes....

Then Hammond got to what was a real problem. There was a shortage of labor in the South.

You will probably say, *emancipate your slaves, and then you will have free labor on suitable terms. That might be if there were five hundred where there now is one, and the continent, from the Atlantic to*

the Pacific, was as densely populated as your Island. But until that comes to pass, no labor can be procured in America on terms you have it....I have no hesitation in saying that our slaveholders are kind masters, as men usually are kind husbands...and friends—as a general rule, kinder.

Whose opinion is Hammond ignoring?

proceeded. The Africans were loaded into boats, rowed ashore, marched into the Cuban jungle, and put in crude shacks. The slavers had made it.

Now they needed to show that these Africans were actually slaves (or children of slaves) brought to the island before the slave trade was made illegal. So each African was given a European name and false identity papers. Sengbe Pieh became Joseph Cinque (SIN-kay). Once that was done the Africans were ready to be sold on the legal market.

And that is exactly what happened.

They were marched to Havana, the Cuban capital, and put in a big open-air stockade. Buyers came and looked them over. There was one problem that everyone ignored. None of these Africans spoke Spanish. They could speak only African languages. Some were children. Anyone with sense could guess they had not been born in Cuba. But, as I said, there was big money in this business. Cuba was a Spanish colony. The Spanish and Cuban authorities looked the other way.

José Ruíz went into the stockade looking for slaves to buy. He saw the newly arrived men. He noticed Cinque. He examined his teeth. He was pleased. Joseph Cinque was lean, muscular, and healthy. Ruíz paid the captain \$450 for Cinque and the same amount for each of 49 other blacks. His partner, Pedro Montes, bought four children: three girls and a boy. The oldest was nine.

If the Africans thought they were through with ships they were wrong. They were now dragged on board a small Baltimore-built



On board ship, many slaves got sick: cleanliness was almost impossible, the food was scanty and bad, and they were often beaten. Many sickened from depression and terror, or from being kept locked up belowdecks. Slavers forced them to dance to fife or drum, to keep their muscles in shape. It was another horrible humiliation.



This is an artist's version of the *Amistad* story. But it doesn't make sense that the ship's crew would stand around watching while the slaves are roused to mutiny. Perhaps Cinque is telling his companions what has happened to them since they reached America.

A **mutiny** is a rebellion against authority, especially sailors or soldiers rebelling against officers.

Sarah Harris, the daughter of a black farmer, wanted a good education, so she asked Prudence Crandall if she could enroll in her school in Canterbury, Connecticut. All the girls in the school were white. You can read what happened in Gail Collins's excellent book, *American Women: 400 Year of Dolls, Drudges, Helpmates, and Heroines*.

schooner, the *Amistad*. They were headed for an island port. The captain, four crew members, and Ruiz and Montes were breaking the law—they knew these people had not been born in Cuba—but they weren't worried. Their papers seemed legal. They had done this before.

Each black prisoner was given a banana, two potatoes, and a small cup of water—as a day's rations. It

was hot and sultry. When one man took extra water he was beaten, and gunpowder was rubbed in his wounds.

Cinque was terrified. Using sign language, he asked the brown-skinned cook, Celestino, what was going to happen to them. The cook—in a cruel joke—ran his finger across his throat. Then Celestino pointed to barrels of beef—they were part of the ship's cargo. He laughed. Cinque thought he was to be turned into meat. Were Ruiz and Montes cannibals? They were cruel and crude enough. Cinque shuddered at the thought.

Then he found a big iron nail. Quietly Cinque used the nail to pick the lock on the chain that circled his neck. That night he freed the others. Frantically they looked for weapons and found boxes of sugarcane knives—knives with fierce blades two feet long.

It was stormy that night, and dark, without moonbeams. The crew had lowered the sails. The ship was quiet. The mutiny began at 4 A.M. Fifteen minutes later it was over. The captain was dead, and so was Celestino. Two sailors had jumped overboard and were not heard of again. Ruiz and Montes were prisoners. Antonio, the captain's slave, was unhurt.

Now the problem Cinque faced was how to get back to Africa. He didn't know how to sail; he'd hardly been on deck before. He didn't know where he was. He did know that Africa lay in the direction of the rising sun. So he forced the two Spaniards to sail east—toward the sun—and prayed they would make it across the ocean.

What he didn't know was that every night Ruiz and Montes changed course and sailed back west. So the *Amistad* zigzagged along the American coast heading for New York, not Sierra Leone.

At last they spotted land, but it was to the west. Cinque knew he had been tricked. He also knew he



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needed food and water. He took a rowboat to land and was soon captured. The *Amistad*, the Africans, the two Spaniards, and the four children were in Connecticut waters. Now what was to be done with them?

In 1839, President Martin Van Buren was planning to run for reelection. The last thing he wanted was an incident that would cause controversy. Anything that had to do with slavery was guaranteed to do that. The *Amistad* couldn't have landed at a worse time—for Van Buren. This was the situation:

Blacks had mutinied and killed whites. That was just what every Southern plantation owner feared.

A slave ship had been captured with blacks aboard who were courageous enough to fight for their freedom. That was just what the Northern abolitionists had been waiting for.

A Spanish ship had been captured. The Spanish ambassador called it an "outrage."

A slave ship had broken the terms of the Spanish-English anti-slavery treaty. Would the British use that as an excuse to invade Cuba? Clearly, this was no simple affair.

"Send the blacks back to Cuba," said those who approved of slavery.

"Set them free," said those who didn't.

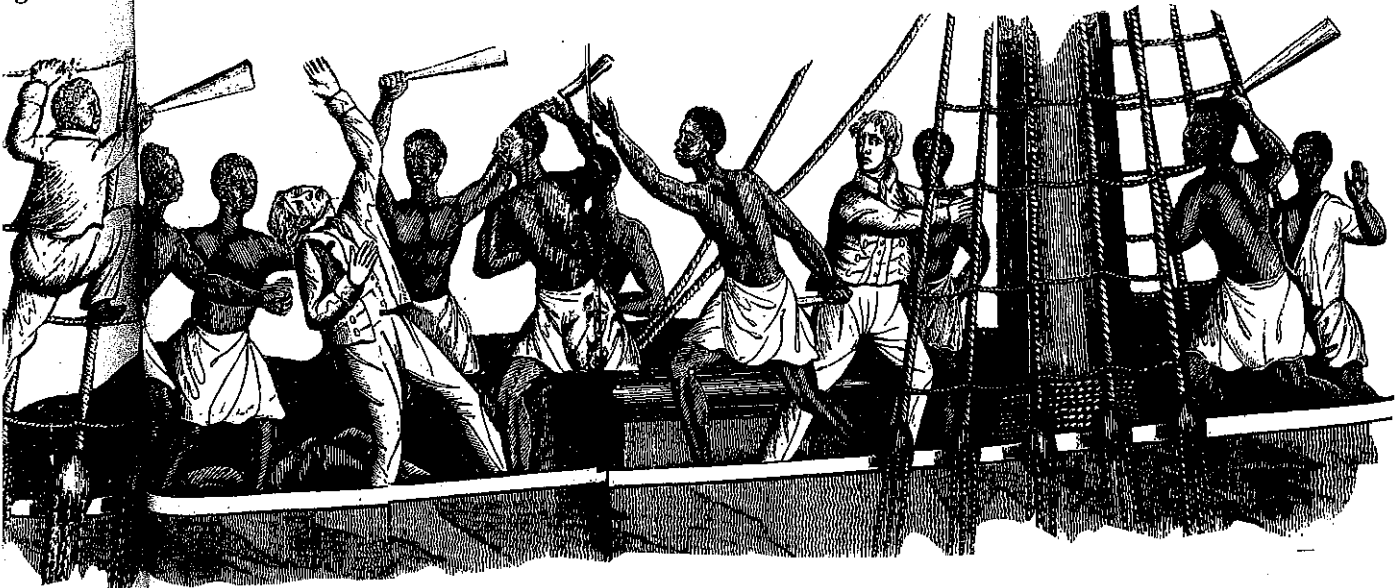
This matter would have to be decided in the courts. In Connecticut a judge said the Africans had been captured illegally. The laws prohibiting the slave trade had been broken, he said, and the captives should be freed.

That wasn't the end of it. Everyone knew that the Connecticut judge hated slavery. The case was appealed. The next judge was a



Martin Van Buren lost the race for president in 1840 when he ran against "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too." That was the campaign slogan of Whig William Henry Harrison (who fought Native Americans at Tippecanoe) and his vice president, John Tyler.

There's no mistaking this for anything but the mutiny: the blades of those knives are three inches wide at the end.



Old Man Eloquent



When John Quincy Adams entered the House of Representatives, in 1831, he was 64, short, stout, bald, with a sense of duty that often made him seem quarrelsome. He was an ex-president; he was brilliant; but he saw himself as a failure—until he became a congressman. He loved that job, was reelected eight times, and fought—with all

his might—against slavery. He knew that was important. The supporters of slavery in Congress had insisted on a “gag rule.” That meant any antislavery petitions were laid aside without discussion. The Southerners didn’t even want the subject brought up. Adams kept introducing antislavery petitions anyway. He fought the gag rule—doggedly, stubbornly, ceaselessly. Finally, in 1844, the rule was defeated. In 1848, Adams had a stroke and died right there in the House. Even his enemies knew an uncommon man was gone.

Making Up History

You will read in some books that Cinque returned to Africa and became a slave trader himself. That is not true. And yet that story has been written many times. Why? Because an author who learned the story of the *Amistad* and Joseph Cinque decided to write a novel about it. A novelist can write anything that makes a good story. He decided it would give the story an ironic twist to have Cinque become a slaver himself. A historian read the novel, thought it was true, and retold the story in a history book. (History books, of course, should always be true.) Then another historian quoted the first historian, and then another, and another. And that is how made-up stories sometimes come to be history.

New Englander with a different record. He seemed to approve of slavery. He had made a teacher, Prudence Crandall, close the school where she taught black students. The abolitionists were discouraged.

President Van Buren had a ship readied in the New Haven, Connecticut, harbor. He thought the *Amistad* affair would soon be over. The ship was to take the blacks back to Cuba as soon as the decision was announced. Van Buren wanted them out of the United States—quickly—before another appeal could be made.

The judge studied the law. He may have approved of slavery, but he knew the law was more important than his personal feelings. There was no question about it, he said. These were free people—captured illegally. They couldn’t be taken to Cuba against their will.

Those who believed in slavery were furious. They had only one place left to go—the U.S. Supreme Court, where five of the nine justices were Southerners. Now the abolitionists were desperate. So were Cinque and the men and the children. They had learned some English. They understood what was going on. Besides, they were weary and wanted to go home. The abolitionists asked an old man to help them. He agreed and said he would take no money for doing it. His name was John Quincy Adams. Some people called him “Old Man Eloquent.”

In 1841, Adams stood before the Supreme Court and talked for eight hours. One of the justices said it was an “extraordinary” argument. It all came down to one thing, said the former president, and that could be found in the Declaration of Independence.

I know of no other law that reaches the case of my clients, but the law of Nature and of Nature's God on which our fathers placed our own national existence.

The Supreme Court agreed. Cinque and his companions were free.

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