

1839. The Amistad Case as reported by New York Morning Herald

(Based on material from the Gilder Lehrman Institute www.gliah.org and www.yale.edu/glc)

In June 1839, 52 African captives revolted as they were being transported on the Spanish schooner Amistad from Havana to Guanaja, Cuba. Led by Joseph Cinque, a Mende from the Sierra Leone region of West Africa, the rebels ordered two surviving Spaniards to sail the ship eastward to Africa. The crew sailed eastward during the day, but veered north-westward at night, hoping to encounter a British ship patrolling for vessels engaged in the illegal slave trade or to reach a friendly port.

In late August, the U.S.S. Washington seized the Amistad near the Long Island coast. A hearing was held in New London, Connecticut, and the Africans were charged with mutiny, murder, and piracy. Abolitionists quickly took up the cause of the Amistad rebels. They insisted that since the Africans had been illegally imported into Cuba and were legally free at the time that they entered U.S. waters, the rebels should be released from jail.

Ultimately, former President John Quincy Adams represented the Amistad rebels before the U.S. Supreme Court. The Court ruled that the Africans had been illegally transported as slaves from Africa to Cuba and were thus free. However, it also made it clear that the case was highly exceptional and that slaves in general had no right to rebel or escape their bondage.

“The Case of the Captured Negroes,” September 9, 1839

A) The highly important nature of the case connected with the disposal of the Negroes recently captured on board of the L’Amistad, has induced us to take more than the ordinary measures to get all the facts and main features of this interesting affair as fully and as accurately as possible. The extraordinary fabrications that have been put forth by the “Journal of Commerce,” in relation to this important case, require to be promptly exposed and refuted. The whole affair is of too serious a nature to be treated with levity, or to be made the subject of the ridiculous invention, overdrawn and exaggerated statements, and catch-penny falsehoods, to which the Journal of Commerce, copying from some penny paper, has given credence, publicity, and sanction. It is a matter of the utmost moment; affecting the credit and character of the Spanish government, of the authorities of this country, and of the lives of 30 or 40 human beings.

Questions

1. According to this passage, what is the goal of the *New York Morning Herald*?
2. What does the article say about coverage by other newspapers?
3. According to the *Morning Herald*, why is this case important?

B) In order, therefore, to arrive at the truth, and the full details of the affair, we have dispatched two highly intelligent and competent correspondents, for that purpose, to Connecticut; one to New London, and one to New Haven, to obtain all the facts of the case, a letter from each of which we this day lay before our readers, promising that all our information is obtained from the most direct and unquestionable source. In addition to this, Senor Ruiz, the owner of a majority of the Negroes on board of the L’Amistad, called on us personally, yesterday, and furnished us with full and accurate information in connection with this curious transaction from its commencement down to this time. He states the two thirds of the account in the “Journal of Commerce” is but a tissue of falsehoods, without the least foundation in fact; calculated to injure all parties, to mislead the public on every important point, and to make an entirely false issue in a case that is of itself, upon the strength of its simple facts, sufficiently complicated to create a great deal of ill feeling, and difficult in arriving at a correct decision on its merits.

Questions

1. What does Senor Ruiz claim?
2. In your view, is he a reliable source? Explain.

C) Senor Ruiz states that the character and conduct of the Negroes as totally different from the statements published and endorsed by the “Journal of Commerce;” so far from being a hero, Cinguiz is as miserably ignorant and brutalized a creature as the rest of them; that the speeches and declarations reputed to have

been uttered by him, are all pure invention from beginning to end; that he made no speech whatever; and that if he had, there was no one who could translate what he said; the cabin boy knows nothing of the language, as asserted by the "Journal;" and had he been able to tell Mr. Hyde, according to the "Journal's" account, Mr. Hyde knows nothing of Spanish, and the boy cannot speak English. The accounts, therefore, in the "Journal of Commerce" must be looked upon, by all who are desirous of understanding the real merits of the case, and of getting at the facts, as worthy only of derision and contempt; and as an impudent attempt on the part of that paper to palm off upon an intelligent community, the most infamous fabrications in a matter that deeply concerns the character, the credit, and the best interests of all classes of our citizens.

Senor Ruiz informs us, that he first met these Negroes in the fields close to Havana; he saw them and examined them for two or three days before he made his purchases; and even then he did not purchase the whole of those that he found there. He did not inquire whether they were Congo Negroes, or Mandangoes, or where they came from; he saw they were stout bodied men and he bought them; he took them to Havana, entered them according to the laws of the place, got out his bill of lading, and shipped them under the sanction of the authorities of the place. These are the topics and points upon which the whole difficulty of the case will hinge. These are the pivots upon which the decisions turn. Senor Ruiz says that he had no idea of the Spanish minister claiming them from this government as property; but he believes the minister will claim them as murderers, to be delivered up and sent to Havana for trial, for murdering a Spanish ship master, on board a Spanish vessel, in Spanish waters.--And, as we see, by the papers, that Senor D'Argaiz, the new Spanish minister, has arrived at Washington, the presumption is that they will be demanded forthwith, and therefore that all these difficult, intricate, troublesome and long mooted points will come up at once, be met, and set at rest at once and forever.

Questions

1. According to Senor Ruiz and the *Morning Herald*, how are other newspaper accounts false?
2. What does the newspaper believe will be the reaction of the Spanish government?

D) In the meantime the abolitionists are making immense exertions to get the Negroes set free; they are raising subscriptions, collecting money, clothing and feeding them; employing the most able counsel, riding over the country, by night and day, to get interpreters who can converse alike in their language and in English; rummaging over musty records, old statutes, treaties and laws, in order to "get a peg to hang a doubt upon" in relation to delivering them up. Some of them they will endeavor to have used as states evidence, (if tried here) in order to prove that there was no legal authority for shipping them on board the L'Amistad. The canting semi-abolition papers, like the "Journal of Commerce" and the "American" and "Post" are all endeavoring to mis-state, misrepresent, and throw difficulties upon the matter in order to get the Black murderers set free. The Southern papers have articles proving the propriety of the surrender. Meanwhile, the Negroes are getting fat and lazy; perfectly indifferent to the disposal to be made of them. They only do two things on the coast of Africa; that is, eat and steal. On board the L'Amistad, after the murders, they did little else but eat and steal. They quarreled with themselves about the food, they drank up what little liquor there was on board; and then, although having entire possession of the vessel, they began to steal individually every thing they could lay their hands on and to cram the articles into bags. After this, they rummaged and searched parts of the vessel daily. One day they would find one thing, and another day another; at last they opened a locker and found six demijohns of wine; these they drank in two days, and then they began to steal from each other. And if released and sent back to Africa, they will have no other occupation than eating and stealing again.--Senor Ruiz says that they are all great cowards, and had the captain killed one on the night of the mutiny they would have been subdued instantly, and all have run below. His impression is that they will be sent out to Havana, the ringleaders executed, and the rest given up to him. We shall see. It is a most singular case; we shall follow it up closely; and, unlike the "Journal of Commerce," we shall do so accurately.

Questions

1. What are abolitionists trying to do?

2. How does the *Morning Herald* describe the appearance and behavior of the Africans from the Amistad?
3. The *Morning Herald* claims, “It is a most singular case; we shall follow it up closely; and, unlike the “Journal of Commerce,” we shall do so accurately.” How do you respond?

Follow-up: In this newspaper article, Africans and African Americans are referred to as “Negroes.” Do you think documents like these should present the original language or be edited to reflect modern usage of words? Explain. Write a letter to the editor of the *New York Morning Herald* responding to what you have read.