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The History of the Amistad
By Quentin T. Snediker and Christopher F. Amer

EDITOR’S NOTE: In the last issue of Legacy (Vol. 1, No. 2, November 1996), there was an article on live oaks being saved for historic shipbuilding. The following is a more in-depth account of the history of the Amistad, a historic ship being restored in Mystic Seaport, Connecticut, with live oak from South Carolina. Dr. Snediker is the Director of the Mystic Seaport Museum.

The Amistad’s story began in January, 1839, when 53 African natives were kidnapped from the Mendi country near modern-day Sierra Leone and illegally sold into the Spanish slave trade. The captives endured physical abuse, sickness, and death during a horrific journey to Havana, Cuba, and upon arrival were fraudulently classified as native Cuban slaves and sold at auction.

The Africans were purchased by Don Jose’ Ruiz and Don Pedro Montez, who planned to transfer them to another part of the island aboard the coasting cargo schooner Amistad, whose name means “friendship” in Spanish. Desperate and frightened, the Africans staged a revolt three days into the journey and seized control of the vessel, killing the captain and cook and driving off the rest of the crew. They were led by a 25-year-old Mendi named Sengbe Pieh, known to the Spanish as Cinque, who used a loose spike to unshackle himself and his companions. Montez and Ruiz were ordered to sail east for Africa, using the sun as their guide. At night, however, the Spaniards would secretly change course, hoping to sail back to Cuba or to the southern United States. After 63 days the bedraggled Amistad arrived at Montauk point, Long Island, where she and her African “cargo” were seized by a Federal survey brig as salvage. Amistad was towed into New London, Connecticut, on August 29, 1839, where the real struggle for freedom—a lengthy legal battle—began.

Charged with murder and piracy and claimed as salvage property, Sengbe and the others were sent to prison in New Haven after a judge in New London ordered the case to be heard at the next session of the U.S. Circuit Court, in Hartford. Groups involved with the growing abolitionist movement organized a legal defense and began to provide for the Africans’ physical well-being and educational instruction. The “Amistad Committee,” as they came to be known, even located a translator who could speak Mende fluently and thus allowed the captives to tell their own story. Three days into the circuit court trial, the judge referred the case to the U.S. District Court.

The implications of this case were profound. If the Africans were found guilty under American law, they faced death or permanent slavery at best. If they were handed over to Spanish authorities without trial, as Spain pressed President Martin Van Buren to do, the Constitutional separation of powers was openly compromised. If freed after a trial, key pro-slavery forces would be embittered and likely withdraw their support for the 1840 presidential election.

Hoping that the courts would order the Africans returned to Cuba,
President Van Buren requested and received a concurring opinion from U.S. Attorney General Felix Grundy and the Cabinet. Secretary of State John Forsyth had a ship ready to sail for Cuba immediately after the trial, to prevent an appeal.

The Africans' defense centered around the fact that the importation of slaves from Africa was illegal under Spanish law. During the district court trial, Sengbe and the others described how they had been kidnapped, mistreated, and sold into slavery. The district court judge agreed, ruling that the Africans were legally free and should be transported home. (The murder and conspiracy charges were dropped in the circuit court trial, the judge having found the United States had no jurisdiction in those incidents.) Dismayed, the President ordered an immediate appeal, and the case went to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Here, Sengbe and the other Africans, were defended by former President John Quincy Adams, who, though elderly and nearly blind, had been persuaded by the Amistad Committee to take the case. In February, 1840 he argued passionately in defense of the Africans' right to freedom, describing President Van Buren's illegal attempts to influence the judicial system and circumvent the Constitution. In March, 1841 the Supreme Court issued its final verdict: the Amistad Africans were free people and should be repatriated.

The Amistad Committee spent the rest of 1841, educating the Africans and raising money for their return voyage. Toward the end of the year, the 35 survivors of the Amistad affair and five American missionaries sailed for Sierra Leone and established a mission colony, which formed the basis for the eventual independence of Sierra Leone from Great Britain by encouraging schooling and political reform.

In the United States, the Amistad affair unified and advanced the abolitionist movement. Civil libertarians increasingly used the judicial system to press their case, inflaming political passions throughout the country and laying the groundwork for the abolition of slavery and eventually the modern civil rights movement. A key legacy of the Amistad affair is the network of schools and colleges founded by the American Missionary Association for the purpose of educating black Americans and giving them the means to pursue their rights, a practice which began during the Amistad trials and continues to this day.

Amistad America Inc. is a new, not-for-profit, educational organization. The consortium consists of the Mystic Seaport Museum, the Amistad Committee, Amistad Affiliates, the Connecticut African-American Historical Society, and other interested individuals as a partnership to promote the project to build the Amistad replica. Almost 150 years after the incident, Mystic Seaport will build a reproduction of the schooner. The Amistad will sail again as a floating classroom and be used as an educational tool designed to foster cooperation and leadership in America's youth.

HUNLEY UPDATE

By Christopher F. Amer, Jonathan M. Leader, and Steven D. Smith

The year 1997 begins with renewed resolve by the Naval Historical Center and the South Carolina Hunley Commission to move ahead with planning the future of the H.L. Hunley submarine. Institute archaeologists, Jonathan Leader and Christopher Amer, met in December, 1996 with both groups to discuss criteria to ensure that the archaeological recovery, conservation, curation, and exhibition of the submarine will meet acceptable professional standards. A working draft of requirements pertaining to the siting and construction of a facility to conduct the work was delivered to the Commission and the Navy last month. We anticipate that a request for proposals to conduct the work will be announced later this year.

Research continues on the submarine. Scientists are still analyzing the data from the corrosion tests conducted on the hull of the Hunley but are optimistic that the hull can be recovered. The results of the joint South Carolina Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology (SCIAA)/National Park Service (NPS)/Naval Historical Center (NHC) 1996 assessment of the site were presented at the Society for Historical Archaeology Conference in Corpus Christi, Texas, on January 10, 1997, in a session on American Naval Archaeology. Recent research involves the explosive charge and delivery system used on the vessel. No evidence of a spar was found during the assessment. However, an 1899 drawing by Simon Lake and a drawing of Singer's Torpedo, of the type believed to have been used in the attack on the Housatonic, provide clues as to the appearance and possible configuration of the device, and a web discussion group is currently devoted to answering the question as to how the torpedo attached to the Hunley.

For the second time since its inception the Hunley Update Web site (http://www.cla.sc.edu/sciaa/hunley.html) has been presented an award. The Web Site Excellence-Anthropology award was presented by Wayne Neighbors, CEO of Vee Ring Ltd., to SCIAA for its continued “excellence in public service” through the Hunley web site.

The South Carolina Hunley Commission has formed a not-for-profit organization to handle donations for recovering, conserving, and exhibiting the vessel. Donations can be made to “Fund To Save the Hunley,” P.O. Box 12444, Columbia, SC 29211.