

United States v. *The Amistad*

February is Black History Month, and at *SAIL*, we're remembering an important maritime milestone in the fight to abolish slavery with the story of the *Amistad* Revolt.

BY LYDIA MULLAN

Life for enslaved Africans working on early American plantations was bleak, but among the worst atrocities committed during this period was the transatlantic trafficking operation itself. It is difficult to overstate the horrors experienced aboard these ships. By 1814, most nations formally involved in the transatlantic slave trade recognized this and had begun to outlaw international trafficking.

It takes more than treaties to put a halt to an unscrupulous but lucrative operation, however, and traders carried on in secret. The last known slave ship to bring captives to the United States, a schooner called *Clotilda*, was still operational over four decades later. By that time, the British Royal Navy's Squadron had seized approximately 1,600 ships—transporting 150,000 Africans—in violation of the new law.

So, when the Portuguese ship *Tecora* illegally transported Mende captives (native to modern-day Sierra Leone) to Cuba in 1839, it was in good company. The 53 captives were sold in Havana and packed aboard the Spanish two-masted schooner *La Amistad* to be transported to a plantation near Puerto Principe, Cuba.

Conditions were predictably horrible, and the schooner's cook went out of his way to taunt the prisoners, telling them that they would be killed and eaten as livestock. On the third day, a captive named Sengbe Pieh managed to escape his shackles and release other captives as well. They revolted against the Spanish crew



Construction on the re-creation of *La Amistad* began in 1998, leading to a turbulent record of ownership before *Discovering Amistad* became the steward of the ship, maintaining her and educating visitors.

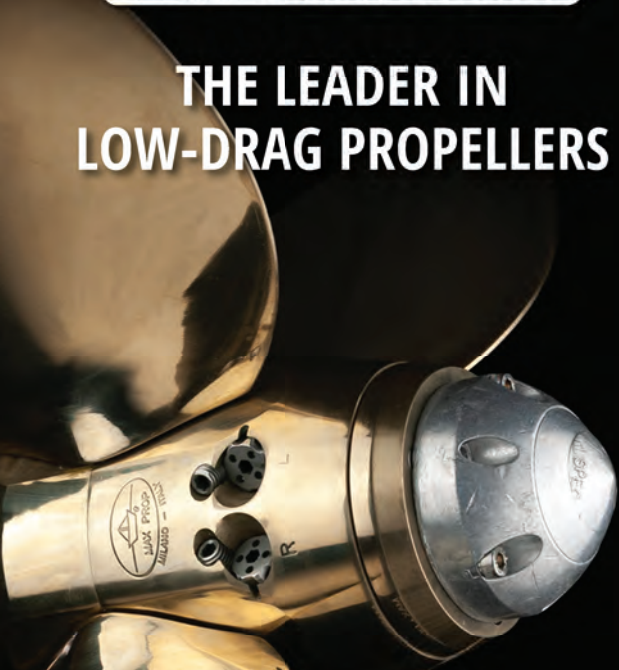


QUALITY MARINE EQUIPMENT
SINCE 1981

MAX PROP

AUTOMATIC FEATHERING PROPELLERS

THE LEADER IN LOW-DRAG PROPELLERS



AVAILABLE IN
2, 3, 4 & 5
BLADE DESIGNS



OUTSTANDING REVERSE

The Max-Prop provides up to 80% more power and control in reverse than a comparable fixed-blade propeller.



EXTREMELY LOW DRAG

Under sail, the Max-Prop will increase sailing speed by 15%, the largest difference being noticed when sailing in light air.

UNDER SAIL



La Amistad is depicted in New London with her interceptor to the left as the Mende make their way to shore.

and took control of *La Amistad*.

Three Mende men and two of the crew were killed in the struggle, and others escaped in a lifeboat. Pieh commanded the remaining crew to sail the ship back across the Atlantic and return the Mende to Sierra Leone. However, unbeknownst to Pieh, the Spaniards set a course that took them northwards. They assumed that once they entered American waters, they would be intercepted and assisted.

It took until Long Island, New York, to be seized, but ultimately the ship was spotted and towed to New London, Connecticut. Pieh and the other 42 remaining captives were incarcerated in Connecticut on charges of murder and piracy. None of the Mende spoke English, which made it difficult to explain their abduction until an interpreter could be found.

Two lawsuits ensued, one by the crew of the ship that had intercepted *La Amistad* claiming it as their property, and the other against the Spanish for trafficking the Mende. Due to the involvement of abolitionists and human rights groups, jurisdiction issues, and the numerous parties claiming ownership, the case received widespread attention.

In fact, *The United States v. The Amistad* (1841) went all the way to the Supreme Court of the United States, becoming one of the most influential rulings on slavery in the pre-Dred Scott era. The court ultimately decided in favor of the Mende, stating that as free citizens (due to the illegal nature of their capture and transport) they were entitled to take whatever legal measures necessary to secure their freedom, including the use of force. After a multiple-year-long ordeal, they were free, giving hope and motivation to the American movement to abolish slavery.

Today, the story of the *Amistad* Revolt is taught by Discovering Amistad, an organization dedicated to the upkeep of a modernized reconstruction of *La Amistad*, built in Mystic, Connecticut. Its programs have reached more than 16,000 visitors, teaching about slavery and the people who have fought for a more equitable America, past and present. It also hosts an annual Juneteenth festival in partnership with Mystic Seaport Museum to reflect on and celebrate African culture in America. For more on the work of Discovering Amistad, visit discoveringhamistad.org.