

## This Day in History... March 9, 1841

# Court Issues Ruling in the *Amistad* Case

On March 9, 1841, the US Supreme Court issued its final ruling in the case of *United States v. Schooner Amistad*. The decision ended a two-year legal battle over whether a group of kidnapped Africans were property—or free people who had fought for their liberty.

The story began in 1839 along the west coast of Africa, in what is now Sierra Leone. A group of Africans, including a man known as Sengbe Pieh, later called Cinqué, were captured by slave traders. They were transported across the Atlantic to Havana, Cuba. Spain had officially banned the international slave trade in 1820, but illegal trafficking continued. In Havana, the captives were sold to two Spanish planters, José Ruiz and Pedro Montes.

Ruiz and Montes placed the enslaved Africans aboard a schooner named *La Amistad*. The ship was headed from Havana to Puerto Príncipe, Cuba. During the voyage in late June 1839, the Africans broke free from their chains. They armed themselves with sugarcane knives found on board. In the struggle, they killed the ship's captain and the cook. They ordered Ruiz and Montes to sail the vessel back to Africa.

The plan did not succeed. During the day, the Spaniards steered east toward Africa. At night, however, they secretly turned the ship north and west. After weeks at sea, the *Amistad* drifted near the coast of Long Island, New York. On August 24, 1839, officers from the US Navy brig Washington boarded the ship. Lieutenant Thomas R. Gedney took control and escorted it to New London, Connecticut.

Gedney claimed salvage rights to the ship and its cargo, including the Africans. Ruiz and Montes demanded the return of what they called their property. The Spanish government, under young Queen Isabella II, pressed US officials to honor treaty obligations and return the captives to Cuba. President Martin Van Buren faced political pressure. Southern leaders worried that freeing the Africans could threaten the institution of slavery in the United States.

*John Quincy Adams stamp from the Presidential Series*



The legal case quickly became complex. Several claims were filed in federal court. Gedney sought salvage compensation. Ruiz and Montes claimed ownership of the Africans. The Spanish government demanded their return. Meanwhile, American abolitionists organized a defense committee. They argued that the Africans had been illegally kidnapped and were free under international law.

In January 1840, a US District Court in Connecticut ruled that the Africans had been unlawfully captured and transported. Because Spain had banned the international slave trade, they could not legally be slaves. The court ordered that they be freed and returned to Africa. The US government appealed the ruling to the Supreme Court.

Former President John Quincy Adams, then serving as a member of the House of Representatives, agreed to defend the Africans before the Court. Adams was 73 years old. He had long opposed slavery. In February 1841, he delivered arguments that lasted more than eight hours over two days. He insisted that the Africans were not property. He argued they had acted in self-defense against unlawful captivity.

On March 9, 1841, the Supreme Court issued its decision in *United States v. Schooner Amistad*. The Court ruled 7–1 in favor of the Africans. Associate Justice Joseph Story wrote the majority opinion. He stated that the Africans were “natives of Africa” who had been kidnapped and unlawfully transported. Because they were free individuals, they had the right to resist captivity. The Court ordered that they be released.



*Joseph Story stamp from the 2009 Supreme Court Justices Issue*

The ruling did not challenge slavery where it already existed in the United States. It focused narrowly on the legality of the international slave trade and the specific facts of the case. Still, the decision angered many Southern slaveholders. It also strained diplomatic relations with Spain for a time.

After the ruling, the Africans remained in the United States for several months. Abolitionist groups raised funds for their return. In November 1841, 35 surviving Africans sailed from New York aboard a ship called the *Gentleman*. They arrived in Sierra Leone in early 1842. Some later worked as missionaries or teachers.



*Poet Robert Hayden later wrote “Middle Passage” about the Amistad affair.*

The *Amistad* case was one of the most closely watched legal battles of its time. It raised questions about property, freedom, and the reach of federal power. It also brought national attention to the illegal slave trade. Though the decision did not end slavery, it established that people who were illegally enslaved could not be treated as lawful property under US law.

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