

Background on the name Amistad

Amistad is the Spanish word for “friendship”.

It is the name of a two-masted schooner which is celebrated as the ship on which Mende tribe slaves revolted and, with the support of American Protestant leaders in New England, successfully fought for their freedom eventually winning their freedom by decision of the United States Supreme Court in 1841.

The story: On the morning of June 28, 1839, La Amistad (Friendship) set sail from Havana, beginning an adventure of far-reaching historical consequences. On board the schooner were 53 Africans who had been abducted from West Africa and sold in violation of international law. Their intended fate was enslavement on plantations down coast from Havana. On the third day out the Africans seized the ship and ordered that the crew to Africa, toward the rising sun. Each night the Cuban crew reversed direction. Zigzagging for two months the ship eventually was brought by northerly winds and currents to Long Island. The Africans were jailed and charged with piracy and murder. In New York City, a group of Christian abolitionists, headed by Lewis Tappan, formed a defense committee. Attorney Roger Baldwin, with help from former President John Quincy Adams, took the case to the United States Supreme Court, which ruled that the Africans be set free and given safe passage back to Africa.

The Significance: Many American church leaders recognize the revolt on the Amistad by slaves as an important expression of humanity’s yearning and risking all for freedom. Many recognize the support of the imprisoned slaves by members of New England churches and the organizing of the Abolitionist Movement as the initiation of one of the major themes in the mission of American churches: the elimination of slavery and the affects of slavery that still linger in American culture.

This recognition has taken the form of an annual Amistad Sunday in the church calendar of several American church lectionaries; the use of the name in the naming of churches (e.g. The Amistad United Church of Christ); the naming of the chapel in a denominational headquarters; the construction of a replica ship which docks in ports on the east coast and is used as an educational experience for children; the careful housing of the archival materials at Tulane University in New Orleans; the establishment of the Amistad Research Center at Mystic Seaport in Mystic, Connecticut; and the 1997 film released by DreamWorks, directed by Steven Spielberg, starring Anthony Hopkins as former President John Quincy Adams, Matthew McConaughey as Roger Baldwin, Morgan Freeman as a freed slave and Djimon Hounsou as Cinque, the leader of the rebellion. The film received four Oscar nominations.

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