

Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy, By Howard Jones. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 1987. Pp.ix, 271.

Mutiny On The Amistad, is an account of how a shipload of African captives one day appeared in New York harbor and confronted the American nation with the issue of slavery and the rights of Blacks. The book presents a step-by-step view of the preceding turmoil among the American government, the Spanish government, the abolitionists who defended the captives, and the southern slaveowners.

Chapter one gives a historical perspective of the circumstances which led to the Amistad's appearance in New York harbor in the summer of 1839.

The Amistad captives were taken from Africa to Cuba in violation of Spanish law which forbade slave trading, but not slavery within Cuba. Once in Cuba, the slaves were sold to the owners and operators of the Amistad.

On July 1, 1839, the captives led by Joseph Cinque, revolted and took control of the ship. They intended to have the ship return them back to Africa, however, due to their lack of navigational skills they had to rely on their new captives to sail the ship. The captain by day sailed the ship toward Africa but at night he turned the ship in a northerly direction towards the American coast. After nearly two months of zig-zagging, an American patrol ship "seized" the Amistad which was anchored off the coast of Long Island, N.Y. What followed was the judicial turmoil which Jones dedicated most of the book to analyze.

Chapter two characterizes the effort of the abolitionists to use the Amistad case as an emotional arena to debate the issue of slavery. The two Spanish shipowners petitioned the U.S. government to return their "property" at once. The abolitionists were determined to establish that Black persons, irrespective of color, were human beings and thus were entitled to certain rights. The abolitionists attempted to appeal to the religious and moral ideals of the nation. They felt that before emancipation was achieved, they first had to evangelize the nation. The Amistad case presented a forum to force the nation to confront the horror of slavery. However strong the abolitionists' effort, they still were not able to curb the strong sentiment of racism even among themselves.

Chapter three characterizes the turmoil which President Van Buren's administration was faced with. The abolitionists pleaded with him not to use "executive authority" to turn the ship, cargo, and captives over to Spain. The southerners demanded that the U.S. government stay out of Spanish law and turn the captives over to Spain. President Van Buren, thinking of reelection, took a laissez-faire attitude on the issue. His administration feared that whatever stand they took would offend some of their constituents. So they sat back and stayed "soft" on the issues and hoped that time would let the matter blow over.

Chapter four presents the first trial along the road toward ultimately securing the release and freedom of the Amistad captives. Their strategy was to petition the court for three separate writs of habeas corpus to secure the release of three young girls who were not involved in the bloody mutiny and thus had no reason to be detained. The abolitionists hoped that if the writs

were granted they would mean that Blacks are human beings and not mere property and therefore were entitled to certain constitutional rights. Among these rights was an ability to petition for a writ of habeas corpus on the ground that there was not a legal bases to enslave them. The abolitionists valiantly argued for the writs, but in the end they were denied. To grant them most certainly would have infuriated southerners.

Chapters five through seven analyze the struggle of the abolitionists to prove that the Amistad captives were free men and therefore not merely the "property" of the two Spanish shipowners. A hearing on this issue was the second step of the journey. The author suggests that during this time the Van Buren administration was involved in dishonest and maybe illegal practices. They were sure that the district judge would rule that the captives were slaves—therefore the property of the spaniards. The administration made a plan that immediately following the judge's decision, the slaves would be loaded on a ship and given to Spain. This plan called for a blatant disregard of the captives' right of appeal. However, the district court ruled that the captives were Africans and not slaves, thus not property. But this decision was tempered with the order that the captives should be returned to Africa under presidential supervision. Even though the captives were not slaves, the decision showed that they were not wholly free. The U.S. District Attorney appealed this decision to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Chapter ten presents the final step of the abolitionists' struggle. The Supreme Court found error with the district court's opinion. The district court was mistaken in ordering that captives were returnable to Africa under presidential supervision. The captives were not slaves or property so they did not fall under the court's mandate. The Amistad Blacks were finally free. However the court ruled that slaves were property and thus the captain's aid, who was undisputably a slave and not a captive, was returned to his master in Cuba. The victory of the abolitionists was a small one.

This is a very interesting work. I felt that it got lost some times in the tedious accounts of trial proceedings. But I recommend it to those who are intrigued with the mentality of the slavetrading era.

CEDRIC L. PAYNE