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Perkins, Samuel. (2014). Visions of the Amistad: American Public Engagement with the Amistad Story. In *BSU Honors Program Theses and Projects*. Item 71. Available at: http://vc.bridgew.edu/honors_proj/71
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Visions of the Amistad: American Public Engagement with the Amistad Story

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Submitted in Partial Completion of the
Requirements for Commonwealth Honors in History

Bridgewater State University

December 18, 2014

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Steven Spielberg's movie *Amistad*, released in 1997, is considered to be a good movie. *The New York Times* published a very favorable review of the film when it came out stating that it provides "tough, sobering depictions of the captives' ordeal."¹ It has all of the ingredients of a great historical motion picture; it is interesting, exciting at times, and educational. *Amistad* is a go to film for many high school history teachers to begin discussion on the Amistad case. While the movie follows the movements of high profile characters from the Amistad story such as Martin Van Buren, Cinque, Roger Baldwin, and John Quincy Adams, it leaves out the American public at large. There are scenes where crowds are shown gathered at the caboose of a train to hear Van Buren speak and outside the courtroom in Connecticut, but these are just fleeting images of an American public who was actively reading about and forming opinions on the Amistad case as it was occurring. Maybe it should not come as a surprise that Spielberg's *Amistad* leaves out the American public when talking about different aspects of the Amistad events. Many scholarly sources that look at the Amistad focus on the main political and legal personalities involved in the case (John Quincy Adams' speech to the Supreme Court has been thoroughly investigated), but not on the reaction of the American public. This gap in the scholarly research is understandable as the Amistad event has many important aspects that give scholars numerous choices as to where to direct their research. This oversight is where I directed my own efforts in trying to add a different way to look at the Amistad event as a whole. After analyzing existing scholarly sources on the Amistad event, I look at different newspaper articles about the Amistad event from 1839 to 1845 and investigate the American public's reaction to the case based on how these newspapers present their arguments to their readership. I argue that region and political affiliation had a large impact on how Americans viewed the Amistad event.

¹ "Amistad Film Review: Pain of Captivity made Starkly Real," *The New York Times*, December 10, 1997.

The first group of secondary sources I read look at the Amistad event as a legal story. Many scholars focus on the court cases because this aspect of the event had the most direct impact on American history. They see the Amistad case as a smaller event in the American saga of slavery and abolitionism. However, by focusing primarily on the court cases these scholars inadvertently ignore the experiences of the Amistad captives, who were actually not heavily involved in the American court cases. The book *Mutiny on the Amistad* by Howard Jones focuses mostly on the trials that surrounded the Amistad event. Jones starts out with the mutiny on the Amistad and the eventual seizure of the ship by Lieutenant Gedney. The initial seizure of the Amistad caused a lot of attention to be focused on the captives, with antislavery supporters talking about how they were victims of an oppressive system who had won their freedom through the force of arms and proslavery supporters calling them cannibalistic savages that turned against their righteous masters. The abolitionists saw the Amistad event as an opportunity to bring the horrible institution of slavery into the court system and hopefully land a political blow to the institution. This is why they decided to represent the Amistad captives in court. The second major turning point in the Amistad event was the arrest of Ruiz and Montes by the Amistad captives on charges of false imprisonment and assault. This was the brainchild of the abolitionists as a way to keep the Amistad event in the public eye, but Jones argues that it backfired. The arrests were very unpopular as they were seen as an extreme measure used by the abolitionists to try and upturn the natural order of society.

Jones then moves on to talk about the case in the Connecticut district court. The district court case was important as it was there where the first official arguments were made, where expert witnesses were first brought in, and where the captives themselves were first allowed to testify. The District court proceedings served to humanize the Amistad captives to most of the

public and actually led to many people in the North supporting the captives in the case. The District court ruled that the Amistad captives were never slaves according to Spain's own laws and that they won back their freedom in the mutiny. However, the Van Buren administration was unhappy with this decision for political reasons, as the Southern slaveholders who supported the Van Buren administration were watching the case very closely, and so he appealed the decision to the Supreme Court. With the appeal to the Supreme Court, the abolitionists asked for the assistance of John Quincy Adams in the case. Also, Adams, a former president, defending the captives from the current administration in the highest court in the land created a great story for newspapers to cover and really made it a national event. The Supreme Court case was followed very closely by the entire nation and reached its climax with John Quincy Adams' final speech to the Supreme Court. The court upheld the district court's ruling, effectively freeing the captives.²

The article "Cultivating the 'higher law' in American Jurisprudence," written by Sean P. O'Rourke focuses on the speech that John Quincy Adams gave before the Supreme Court during the Amistad trial and how it used the concept of higher law to paint the cause of the captives as righteous. O'Rourke first defines the concept of higher law as the law that is not created by any nation or group of men, but is instead created by a higher power, such as God. Adams argued that higher law trumps any man made law and so man-made law can be broken if it conflicts with higher law. During his speech, Adams' blamed the Van Buren administration for disregarding higher law completely during the Amistad case and instead tried to bring a quick and politically helpful end to the entire ordeal. Adams then went on to defend the Amistad captives using the idea of higher law, saying that the Amistad captives were invoking higher law to obtain their God-given freedom when they mutinied against their masters. By explaining how

² Howard Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and its impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

the Amistad captives freed themselves according to higher law, Adams implied that the Van Buren administration, the courts, and the entire American nation were all going against God's law regarding slavery. For a very religiously minded American public, this speech would have been very disturbing. O'Rourke argues that Adams' speech was very influential on public opinion towards the end of the Amistad case, but he does not explain this issue. By focusing solely on Adams' speech in the Supreme Court, O'Rourke chooses to not look closely at the work done by the abolitionists in the district court, the pressure placed on Van Buren by Spain and England, or the larger story of the Amistad captives.³

"John Quincy Adams' Amistad Address: Eloquence in a Generic Hybrid," by A. Cheree Carlson also focuses on the final speech that Adams gave before the Supreme Court. Carlson defines Adams's speech as a "rhetorical hybrid" because it is aimed towards two different audiences at the same time, each with their own perspective. The different audiences that Carlson identifies are the Supreme Court justices and the general public of the nation. The Supreme Court justices saw the issue as a purely legal case and would refer to precedent in order to decide the case. The American public, on the other hand, supposedly viewed the issue as a statement on slavery and national pride. Carlson argues that Adams' speech successfully united these two different audiences by referring to three general principles both audiences could understand and support: justice, patriotism, and morality. Adams argued throughout his speech that re-enslaving the captives would not be just according to higher law, that blindly giving into Spain's demands to return the captives would be disgraceful to the country, and that it was immoral to re-enslave the captives as they would be taken back to Cuba and be killed by the colonial government. Carlson states that appealing to these three basic principles allowed the Supreme Court Justices

³ Sean P. O'Rourke, "Cultivating the "Higher Law" in American Jurisprudence: John Quincy Adams, Neo-Classical Rhetoric, and the Amistad Case," *Southern Communication Journal* 60, no. 1 (1994), 33-43.

and the general public to reach the same conclusion, and it brought a favorable result on both fronts for Adams. One critique that can be leveled at Carlson is that she never really defines what he calls the “American public.” She says that abolitionist sentiments were growing in the North and that slaveholding interests controlled the South, but that is her only definition. When Carlson does refer to the public’s reaction to events in the courtroom, she always cites how the abolitionists felt about what occurred. So the article effectively becomes a comparison of how Adams’ speech was received by the Supreme Court justices and how the abolitionist community received it. Carlson assumes the reaction of Southerners to events unfolding in the court room and ignores the reactions that non-abolitionist northerners had to events unfolding in the court room.⁴

A wider perspective on the legal aspects of the Amistad Case can be seen in “Slavery and Abolition Before the United States Supreme Court, 1820-1860,” by William A. Wiecek which covers all of the Supreme Court cases dealing with slavery from 1820 to 1860. Since the article’s scope is so wide, it does not focus on any one case for very long, but it is helpful in finding some precedents that the Supreme Court used in the Amistad case. The specific cases that were used were the *United States v. La Jeune Eugeni* decision and *The Antelope* decision. The Supreme Court’s *La Jeune Eugeni* decision, made in 1822, stated that the African slave trade was morally wrong according to natural law and ruled against the slave trade. However, *The Antelope* decision, decided in 1825, set a different tone on the issue of slavery. The court stated that the African slave trade was wrong according to natural law, but that courts could only deal with

⁴ A C. Carlson, "John Quincy Adams Amistad Address Eloquence in a Generic Hybrid," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 49, no. 1 (1985), 14-26.

positive, or man-made law, so it ruled in favor of the slave owners.⁵ *The Antelope* decision effectively overturned the *La Jeune Eugeni* decision in the Supreme Court. However, both of these precedents were known by the defendants of the Amistad captives and they took a two pronged approach in the Supreme Court case. Roger Baldwin focused on proving that the captives were not slaves based off of Spain's own laws, thus building a case off of positive law according to the precedent set by *The Antelope* decision. However, John Quincy Adams built an argument attacking the institution of slavery and the Van Buren administration's actions during the case on the grounds of higher law, building off of the precedent set in the *La Jeune Eugeni* decision. This two pronged approach worked in the higher law argument, but still based the defense on positive law.

The second group of scholarly works examines the Amistad as a personal story. These sources look at the individual people who participated in the Amistad event and how their stories unfolded and affected the case as a whole. Edward Martin's *All We Want is Make Us Free* focuses on the abolitionists in the case and the religious aspects that influenced how these individuals tailored their message. The book starts out giving a very brief overview of the events that transpired during the revolt itself and when the captives were taken in by Lieutenant Gedney. After this background information is established, the book turns its attention to the three abolitionists that were influential in the Amistad case. These men were Lewis Tappan, Joshua Levitt, and Simeon S. Jocelyn and the book refers to them as the "Friends of the Amistad." It gives a brief biography of each of these men, showing their history with the abolitionist movement and their determination in fighting against the evils of slavery. The book then moves into the splintering of the abolitionist movement in the 1830's and outlining the differences in

⁵ William M Wiecek, "Slavery and Abolition Before the United States Supreme Court, 1820-1860" *Journal of American History* 65, no. 1 (1978), 34-59.

the community that led to the break up. One of the branches that broke off took the name the American Anti-Slavery Society and was led by the famous abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Garrison and other members of the American Anti-Slavery Society did not want to engage in politics as they thought it was corrupt and not worth their time. They instead wanted to try and change the moral outlook of the American people and hopefully make them see the evils of slavery so they would eventually renounce the institution. This branch also thought that women should be allowed into leadership positions in the abolitionist movement instead of being barred from them. The American Anti-Slavery Society did not get involved politically in the Amistad case, but they did support the captives and advocate for their freedom outside the court room.

The second branch to come out of the splintering was the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, which was headed by Lewis Tappan. This group looked to change the hearts and minds of the American public as well, but they also wanted to focus on politics so that they could achieve practical victories against the institution of slavery. This was one of the issues that forced the two main branches apart. The American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society also did not welcome women into their ranks. Since they wanted to focus on the political arena in their battle against slavery, they believed that having women in their group would hurt their legitimacy in Washington as it was not socially acceptable for women to be active in politics at the time. So the American and Foreign Anti-Slavery society did not allow women to join their ranks so that they could achieve substantial political progress towards ending slavery. The American and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society was the faction that took the lead in representing the Amistad captives in the American court system, as this is where they wanted to focus their energy.

All We Want is Make Us Free then takes a drastic turn and begins to focus on the Puritan origins of America and how these origins influenced abolitionist rhetoric on the issue of slavery.

Martin argues that certain sections of American society were heavily influenced by Puritan ideas and beliefs, especially the abolitionists in the North. Many Americans viewed America as a sort of “Beacon on a Hill” where true Christianity and just government would be practiced for the rest of the world. They thought that because their country was the “Beacon on the Hill” that God would found His kingdom on Earth in America. Martin argues that these were all Puritan ideas that survived and lived on in the American psyche at the time of the Amistad event. The abolitionists capitalized on the Puritan beliefs present in the populace and stated that America was founded as a “Beacon on a Hill” for the rest of the world, but the institution of slavery tainted that holy light. Until the institution of slavery ended and Americans repented for their sins, God would not come and begin His Earthly Kingdom in America. Many abolitionists were intensely religious and saw the institution of slavery as a taint on American society. These abolitionists also believed that if they did not struggle against the institution of slavery during their life, then they would be accomplices in helping the institution to continue. Thus, they would be judged harshly by God after they died. This is why many abolitionists were so committed in the struggle against slavery and why they helped the Amistad captives obtain their freedom. This religious tactic was very successful for abolitionists reaching the part of the American public that had been influenced by wake of the Second Great Awakening and feared that what the abolitionists were saying could actually be true. Many Americans became anti-slavery based on religious concerns.⁶

The Amistad Rebellion by Marcus Rediker tries to tell the story of the Amistad event from the perspective of the captives themselves. The book starts by looking at the native societies that the Amistad captives came from. It looked at what these societies produced,

⁶ B. Edmon Martin, *All We Want is Make Us Free: La Amistad and the Reform Abolitionists* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1986).

believed in, and how they structured themselves. There is an entire chapter dedicated to a west African social group called the Poro Society. After a boy became a man, he would enter into the Poro Society. Individuals gained respect in the society by being a great hunter or warrior. The Poro Society was well known up and down the West African coast, and so almost all of the Amistad captives knew about the Poro Society. Rediker used the Poro Society to explain how the Amistad captives organized themselves during the mutiny and in prison. Cinque had a great deal of respect from the Poro Society and so he became the leader of the captives after the mutiny. Rediker then moves on to talk about the middle passage and outlines the passage in vivid detail. He details the hold where the slaves were kept and how cramped it was and also explains how disease spread rapidly and how slaves were barely fed or given enough water. After going through the middle passage, Rediker moves on to discuss about how the captives lived in prison.

Rediker chooses to ignore the court cases that were being argued in the district courts and the Supreme Court as he wants to tell the Amistad story from the captives' perspective. The captives did not attend many of the court hearings and so did not see much of what was going on in the courts. Instead, the captives lived in prison and tried to keep order among their group. The captives learned about Christianity largely as a way to increase their chances of being freed and they performed in the courtyard outside the prison for the amusement of the local populace. This is how the captives lived the Amistad event and this perspective is what Rediker decides to focus on in his book. Finally, Rediker focuses on the captives' fundraising tour after they were freed by the Supreme Court and their eventual return to Mendi Country as part of a Christian mission. The important thing to note about *The Amistad Rebellion* is that it is the same story that is told in other books on the Amistad, but it has a uniquely African perspective on the event. Instead of focusing on John Quincy Adams' speech for an entire chapter, Rediker focuses on the Poro

Society in Southern Sierra Leone and how this society helped the prisoners structure themselves throughout the entire ordeal.

Rediker's goal in writing *The Amistad Rebellion* is to critique the academic scholarship on the Amistad event and what he sees as a huge gap in the historiography. He states that scholars have been focusing too much on the American actors in the court room and not enough on the African actors whose actions freed them from bondage in the first place.⁷ Rediker's solitary focus on the captives ignores what was going on in the American courtrooms during the Amistad event. So the American legal aspect of the case is lost in Rediker's retelling. However, this hardly matters as most of the previous scholarship on the Amistad event is focused on the court cases. Rediker's decision to study the lives of the captives and not the court cases helps to flesh out the Amistad story. The Amistad captives become a tangible part of the narrative instead of becoming something that is forgotten about as soon as the legal story starts. Rediker reintroduces the captives back into the scholarship and succeeds in humanizing them. Rediker's version of the Amistad story is a much more personal tale involving the fate of the captives who the reader has come to empathize with instead of a dry retelling of a court case that would affect the political climate in the United States.

The third group of secondary sources explores the Amistad story in the public's collective memory. These sources focused on how the Amistad event and the Amistad captives were remembered in America and Africa years after it occurred. Iyunolu Osagie's *The Amistad Revolt*, written in 2000, looks at the literature and other media surrounding the Amistad event in both America and Sierra Leone around the time of the Amistad event and years afterwards.

⁷ Marcus Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013).

Osagie opens up her book with a direct critique of the American literature about the Amistad event and how it focuses too much on the American court system's role in the event and how the white abolitionists saved the sad captives by fighting for them in court. She states that there should be more of a focus on the African captives and how they tried to take control of their own destinies. It was just this call that Rediker picked up in *The Amistad Rebellion*, published in 2013. Osagie then switches gears to focus on the Haitian revolution and the effects it had on the Southern population. Some slaves and free blacks in the South were inspired by the Haitian revolution and lead their own individual uprisings against the slaveholders. The Haitian revolution and the few slaves who revolted in the South following it terrified Southern slave owners and focused their attention on issues that involved slaves killing their masters. This would lead to Southern slave owners being very invested in the Amistad case. If the courts ruled that the Amistad captives were justified in revolting, than this would put the whole system of domestic slavery at home at incredible risk. In this context one could see Van Buren's meddling in the case to achieve a favorable result for the Spanish as a result of the political pressure he felt from the Southern slave holding population.

Osagie then moves on to talk about what the captives did once they returned to Africa. After they were freed by the Supreme Court, the Amistad captives went to start the American Missionary Society in Sierra Leone. However, once they got there they ran into several issues. The mission had a hard time attracting natives and was under political pressure from the Mendi King to leave as slave trading was very profitable for the kingdom. Osagie also talks about the state of the country and how it was still embroiled in the horrible slave wars. Many of the Amistad captives deserted the mission to find their family members. Finally, she does state that

the American Missionary Society's mission in Sierra Leone was eventually successful, even though none of the Amistad Africans stayed with it that long.⁸

The Amistad Revolt then completely pivots and begins focusing on more modern memories of the Amistad event. First it focuses on the memory of the Amistad in the country of Sierra Leone. Osagie states that people in Sierra Leone did not know about the Amistad event until relatively recently, as it never really travelled outside of the captives' local communities. After independence in 1961, Sierra Leone launched a massive media campaign throughout the country on the Amistad story to increase national pride. This campaign brought the story back to national recognition and the Amistad Africans became heroes in Sierra Leone. Osagie then focuses on the African American community and their memories of the Amistad event. Members of the African American community would retell the Amistad event mostly through plays, putting their own spin on the events. Plays about the Amistad written in 1930 were very bleak and did not have very hopeful messages. This was a reflection of the problems that were facing the black community in America and throughout the world at that time. During the 1930's there was still heavy segregation and racism in the South and the depression had hurt the economic prospects of the African American community. At the same time, European imperialism in Africa had subjugated the entire continent and the people in Africa were being mistreated by their colonial overlords. This environment of subjugation and segregation surrounding the African population lead to the African American community looking back at the Amistad event as fluke that did not change much of anything in the big picture. However, the plays put on about the Amistad in the 1990's were much more hopeful as segregation and imperialism had retreated over time. This environment lead to the African American community looking back at the

⁸ Iyunolu F. Osagie, *The Amistad Revolt: Memory, Slavery, and the Politics of Identity in the United States and Sierra Leone* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2000.)

Amistad event as a precursor of the great things to come for the African community in America, such as the ending of slavery or the civil rights movement in the 1960's. Osagie concludes with a comment on the Spielberg film on the Amistad. She states that it was not accurate and actually condescending towards Africans, making it appear that they need educated white men to help them solve their problems.⁹

Howard Jones' "Cinque of the *Amistad* a Slave Trader? Perpetuating a Myth," focuses on a smaller aspect of collective memory in America which is the story that Cinque, the leader of the Amistad captives, became a slave trader after he returned to Africa. Jones states that he has researched the topic of the Amistad event extensively and there is not one shred of historical evidence to support the idea that Cinque became a slave trader after he returned to Mendi country. The myth began in a novel written about the Amistad event by a man named William A. Owens in the 1950s. Owens was not a historian, just an author, but stated that he found documents backing up the myth in the New Haven Colony Historical Society' library. Jones went back to New Haven Colony Historical Society Library and searched extensively for the documents, but did not find any of the articles because they were not in the library at all. However, despite the lack of tangible evidence supporting the myth, Jones states that many scholars in the historical community have accepted this myth as fact without really looking into the claim. Since members of the historical community accepted the myth as fact, the general public assumed that it was true, and the misinformation spread rapidly. Jones states that it is the job of the historian to research these types of claims and that the general public expects historians to have done the necessary research to back up what they say, so they just expect what historians say as backed up by facts. However, the "Cinque was a slave trader" myth being

⁹ Osagie, *The Amistad Revolt*.

accepted by the historical community shows that this does not always happen. Jones concludes with a warning saying that the historical community needs to make sure it only reports accurate information that can be backed up by actual evidence so that it can support accurate depictions of historical events.¹⁰

“Revisionism and Collective Memory: The Struggle for Meaning in the Amistad Affair” by Marouf Hasian Jr. and A. Cheree Carlson focuses specifically on the Spielberg film, *Amistad* and the effect it may have on the collective memory of the Amistad event. The article states that Spielberg used the Amistad event as a way to teach the entire history of the slave trade and abolitionism in one film. However, this led to a misleading interpretation of what actually occurred during the Amistad event. One example of this in the movie that the article provides is the addition of a black abolitionist to the group of abolitionists working on the case. There were black abolitionists working to end slavery at the time of the Amistad event, but there were no black abolitionists defending the Amistad captives. Another example is a scene in the movie that shows slaves on the ship that Cinque was being transported in during the middle passage being thrown overboard because they couldn’t feed them. This did occur on several ships that traversed the middle passage, including the *Zong* in 1781, but this did not occur on the ship that brought Cinque over to Cuba. However, the movie shows this happening on Cinque’s ship to graphically show the horrors of the middle passage. The article states that the movie ignores some unpleasant facts such as that the case did little to end the system of slavery in America or that the abolitionists were using the Amistad captives to achieve their own goals and not necessarily because they personally cared about them. These types of facts would not sit well into the story of heroism and righteousness that the movie was trying to convey, and so they were not put into

¹⁰ Howard Jones, “Cinque of the Amistad a Slave Trader? Perpetuating a Myth,” *Journal of American History* 87, no.3 (2000), 923-39.

the movie. However, by leaving these facts out of the film, Spielberg is recreating a version of history that never existed. The abolitionists were human and not saints; they were prone to using people such as the Amistad captives to get what they wanted. The article warns about Hollywood adaptations of historical events, such as Spielberg's *Amistad*, as they may be the only exposure that people will have to particular events and believe that whatever they see is what actually happened. So the actual truth of what happened may be lost to the newly created stories that are less complex and easier to swallow for contemporary audiences.¹¹

Not all of the sources that I looked at fell neatly into the three categories. One source in particular seemed to combine many of the aspects of the three categories. This was Mary Cable's *Black Odyssey: The Case of the Slave Ship Amistad*. This source focuses on the court cases, what happened when the captives returned to Africa, and the political side of the Amistad story. Cable seems to focus on the political aspects of the debate in America and the political aspect of the slave trade in Mendi Country. Cable starts off by describing the mutiny on the Amistad and then how the ship was run after the mutiny. She then shifts to describing the interests of all of the parties involved with the case including England, Spain, the Van Buren administration, the abolitionists, and the captives themselves and each of their political angles. Cable then focuses on the court cases in both the district court and the Supreme Court and the events that transpired during the trial. Cable does focus more closely on what happened when the captives returned to Africa. She states that many of the captives tried to help with the mission when they first returned to Mendi Country, but the mission ran into several issues with not attracting many converts and hostility from the Mendi King as slave trading was a very lucrative asset for his kingdom. Also there was another slave war occurring in the country making the mission's task

¹¹ Marouf Hasian Jr. and Cheree Carlson, "Revisionism and Collective Memory: The Struggle for Meaning in the Amistad Affair," *Communications Monographs* 67, no. 1 (2000), 42-62.

even harder. Many of the captives eventually deserted the mission to go find their family members that they had not seen in over five years and who may have been in danger of being captured in the war. Cable's political focus is shown in this source by how she analyzes how each western faction involved in the case made decisions based on what was politically beneficial to themselves and how the Mendi king made the political decision to support the slave trade as the income would benefit his kingdom. Cable seems to state that the big powers at play in the Amistad event did not care about the captives at all but were just using the captives to achieve their own goals.¹²

After reading a great amount of the historiography that surrounds the Amistad event, I realized that there is not much research that focuses specifically on how the general American public felt about the Amistad event as it was unfolding in and out of the court system. Many of the secondary sources that I read did make a gesture toward mentioning public reaction to the court case at different points and how it affected the object that they were studying, whether that be the abolitionists, the Van Buren administration, the Supreme Court justices, John Quincy Adams, or even the captives themselves. However, none of these sources ever looked closely at public opinion in America and how it was affected by events unfolding in the Amistad event and how these events were reported by the wide variety of local media.

This gap in the contemporary research is where I concentrated my efforts. Instead of focusing on how the several actors in the court case responded to public pressure, I look at how the public engaged the twists and turns of each court case in the Amistad event. In order to assess the public experience, I look extensively at nineteenth century newspapers that fall between 1839, when the Amistad was seized by Lieutenant Gedney, and 1845, a few years after the

¹² Mary Cable, *Black Odyssey: The Case of the Slave Ship Amistad* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971).

Supreme Court ruled in favor of the Amistad Africans and they went back to Africa to form a Christian mission. When looking at the nineteenth century newspapers I focus on the key differences that would influence how the public received their information and how it was tailored for them based on region and political affiliation. These key differences between newspapers had a significant influence on the way that the general public viewed the case. To gauge these different approaches, I concentrate on four different groupings of papers and how they covered pivotal moments in the Amistad story: when the captives were first found, the arrest of Ruiz or Montes, Adams' speech during the Supreme Court case, and reports on the mission that the captives went to go set up after they were freed.

Even after reading newspaper articles about the Amistad event from the time period the question remains, how did the people reading these newspapers feel about what was unfolding before them? I have approached this question with the idea that the newspapers wrote articles meant for a sympathetic audience that contained messages that their readership would agree with. Before delving into the primary sources, I wanted to look at a couple of journal articles that examine why newspapers were produced and how readers reacted to what they read in the early nineteenth century. David Paul Nord explores the question of why newspapers were created in two articles. In "Newspapers and American Nationhood," Nord states that different factions in America created newspapers to spread their opinions on current events and point out possible traitors who would seek to undermine the country. These types of newspapers allowed the common American to feel informed and invested in politics. The newspapers made political dialogue acceptable to everyone in the country, allowing a nation to be built off of the idea of debate and distrust of government.¹³ Nord's article "Religious Reading and Readers in

¹³ David Paul Nord, "Newspapers and American Nationhood 1776-1826," *Proceeding of the American Antiquarian Society* 100 (October, 1990), 391-405.

Antebellum America,” looks specifically at how evangelical Christians in America helped to spread literacy and make books more accessible. Evangelical Christian movements believed that people heard God’s word by reading the Bible and other religious works. Thus, the idea of printing Bibles and religious passages was very important to the Evangelicals. Christian groups printed massive numbers of religious pamphlets and books and brought them to areas such as the frontier that did not have many reading materials. These Christians also taught many people who could not read how to so that they could read the Bible for themselves. By printing mass quantities of religious material and teaching people how to read, these Evangelical Christians made books cheaper, more accessible and more comprehensible.¹⁴ These efforts lead to an increased literacy rate in America, which meant more people were able to read newspapers and have opinions about what was going on in national politics.

Ronald and Mary Zboray’s article “‘Have You Read...?’ Real Readers and Their Responses in Antebellum Boston and Its Region,” provides examples of how antebellum Americans thought about and reacted to what they read. They tried to look at this by reading surviving letters where the author mentions his or her reaction to a book. Many readers tried to analyze the intentions that the author had when writing the work. One couple thought that the author had a political angle to his book and were unhappy with the biased tone. Readers would usually comment on whether or not the book was too long or used words that were too complex. If books did commit these errors then they would not receive a recommendation. Antebellum Americans appreciated works that were both rooted in reality and useful. If a story was too fantastical or was found to contain lies and misinformation then it would most likely not receive a recommendation. If a book provided little use, it was not highly valued. A version of *The*

¹⁴ David Paul Nord, “Religious Reading and Readers in Antebellum America,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 15, Issue 2 (Summer, 1995), 241-272.

Farmer's Almanac would be much more sought after by antebellum Americans than a romantic novel.¹⁵ These different articles paint a picture of an American populace in the early nineteenth century that was not only able to read, but actively engaged and thinking about what they were reading. This highly literate populace was reading their local newspapers during the Amistad event and was actively forming opinions about the event.

In order to compare the regional and partisan aspects of the public discussion over the Amistad, I grouped the newspapers into Northern Whig/antislavery papers, Northern Democratic papers, and Southern Democratic papers. The Northern Whig papers that I read were *The Vermont Phoenix*, *Maumee City Express*, *Daily Courant*, and *The Caledonian*. Northern Whig articles in papers did not point to a readership that cared about the eventual fate of the Amistad captives or the fate of slaves in the South. However, these readers seemed very paranoid about the “slaveholding power” that they believed controlled the national government and in particular the Van Buren administration. So, many Northern Whigs supported the Amistad captives politically because it would hurt the Van Buren administration and Southern slaveholding interests. In order to sell papers, Northern Whig newspapers printed articles that fit into this readership’s world view. An article dated November 29, 1839, from *The Daily Courant* in Hartford, Connecticut, focused on the case in the district court. This newspaper had copied an article from the *New York Commercial Advertiser* and focused on the testimony of Dr. Madden, a British official who lived in Cuba trying to police the illegal slave trade. Dr. Madden’s testimony showed that the illegal slave trade in Cuba was alive and well and that the Cuban colonial government accepted bribes from the slave traders and then allowed them to continue

¹⁵ Ronald and Mary Zboray, “‘Have You Read...?’ Real Readers and Their Responses in Antebellum Boston and Its Region,” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 52, Issue 2 (September, 1997), 139-170.

their illegal practice.¹⁶ There were no official transcripts of lower court cases at this time, so most papers sent journalists to the cases and had them write down their own transcript of the case. Articles like the one in *The Daily Courant* provide just one possible take on what was happening in the courtroom and allowed for the papers to use the proceedings to make the arguments they wanted to make. Keeping this in mind, the article painted the testimony of Dr. Madden in a very positive light and favored the case of the Amistad captives. An article dated May 26, 1840, from *The Caledonian*, a Whig paper based out of St. Johnsbury, Vermont, focused more specifically on the Van Buren administration's involvement in the district court case. The newspaper reprinted a section from the *New Haven Herald*, another Whig paper, which accused the President of the United States of trying to help Ruiz and Montez secure their release from prison when he had no business doing so. The article also charged Van Buren with sending the Schooner Gedney to New Haven to send the captives back to Cuba in advance of the district court decision.¹⁷ This article was written during an election year and so comes off very anti-Van Buren while implying that he was overreaching his constitutional powers and interfering in the courts. These articles show that the newspapers that printed them were writing for an audience in the North that was sympathetic towards the Amistad captives and very much afraid of the administration trying to overstep constitutional boundaries to further the slaveholding agenda.

When events occurred in the Amistad case concerning potentially controversial racial issues, such as the arrest of Ruiz and Montes on charges brought forth by the Amistad captives, the Northern Whig papers remained relatively silent. An article dated October 25, 1839, in the *Vermont Phoenix*, a Whig paper based out of Brattleboro, reported the arrest of Ruiz and Montes in New York. This article plainly stated without comment or analysis that Ruiz and Montez were

¹⁶ "Case of the Amistad," *The Daily Courant*, November 29, 1839.

¹⁷ "Out at Last: Extraordinary Proceedings," *The Caledonian*, May 26, 1840.

imprisoned on charges brought forth by the Amistad captives for assault and false imprisonment. It concluded by saying that Ruiz and Montez were both unable to post bail and so had to stay in jail.¹⁸ An article dated November 2, 1839, from the *Maumee City Express*, a Whig paper based out of Ohio also reported on the arrest of Ruiz and Montes. It stated that Ruiz and Montez were arrested for the charge of false imprisonment brought forth by the Amistad captives. It then stated that the court asked for proof as to why these men should be kept in jail, after which debates ensued between the two sides and the passports of Ruiz and Montes were taken. The article offered no conclusion other than the fact that they were still waiting for a response from the judge.¹⁹ These reports on the arrest of Ruiz and Montes were very short and did not elaborate on the arrests at all. This was unique to the Northern Whig papers as Democratic papers which reported the arrest of Ruiz and Montes printed articles condemning the arrests as upending the established social order, making their opinion on the arrests widely known. The arrests were seen as very extreme at the time and many Northerners and Southerners thought that they were ridiculous. *The Edgefield Advertiser*, a Democratic paper based out of South Carolina, commented on the arrests of Ruiz and Montez by saying that the abolitionists were determined to help the “savages” to put their righteous masters in jail and overturn society.²⁰ I believe that the Whig papers did not want to give their opinion on the arrests as their readers probably did not agree with the arrests so they did not want to anger their readers but they also wanted to remain sympathetic to the Amistad captives for political reasons.

Years after the Amistad captives were declared free by the Supreme Court and returned to Africa, Northern Whig papers were still writing articles about them. An article dated five

¹⁸ “Arrest of Messrs. Ruiz and Montez,” *The Vermont Phoenix*, October 25, 1839.

¹⁹ “Arrest of Ruiz and Montez,” *Maumee City Express*, November 2, 1839.

²⁰ “Arrest of Ruiz and Montes,” *Edgefield Advertiser*, October 31, 1839.

years later on June 2, 1845, also from *The Caledonian*, focused on the Christian mission that the Amistad captives had started with some help from American missionaries when they returned to Africa. The article focused on Reverend Raymond, the missionary who went with the captives and how he had been having conflicts with the King of Mendi country. The King told Raymond and the mission to leave Mendi country because they were against the slave trade and that is how the Mendi nation made most of its money. The article stated that the Spanish and the Portuguese continue the slave trade in Mendi country as a result of this partnership with the King. The article then stated that Raymond had been writing his wife, but none of his letters mention any of the Amistad captives.²¹ This article was four years removed from the Amistad case, which officially ended in 1841, but it showed that the Northern populace was still interested in the Amistad captives and what became of them. At this point, the Amistad captives had left the mission and largely disappeared and the article points this out by mentioning that the letters from Reverend Raymond do not mention any of the captives in his letters about the mission.

Northern antislavery papers were more concerned with the Amistad captives and how the Amistad case would strike a blow to the institution of slavery in America than the Whigs were, but they were just as paranoid about the Southern slaveholding power. For my Northern antislavery papers I looked at *The Vermont Telegraph*, *The Voice of Freedom*, and *The Green Mountain Freeman*. An article dated March 3, 1841, from *The Vermont Telegraph*, based out of Brandon, Vermont, focused on John Quincy Adams' speech in the Supreme Court. It gave a day by day account of the Amistad Supreme Court case in Washington D.C.²² The paper was Baptist in nature and openly anti-slavery, so it covered John Quincy Adams' speech extensively and focused on his arguments of how the institution of slavery was an affront to the higher law of

²¹ "Slave Stealing on the Coast of Africa," *The Caledonian*, June 2, 1845.

²² "Amistad Supreme Court Case," *The Vermont Telegraph*, March 3, 1841.

God. An article dated March 17, 1841 also from the *Vermont Telegraph* focused again on the Supreme Court case. This article quoted a Baltimore paper which says that it sympathized with the slaves and found the Spaniards abhorrent. It then ended with the fact that British ships had captured twenty American ships engaging in the illegal slave trade.²³

The above article shows that not all people who lived in the Southern part of the country sided with the Spaniards in the Amistad debate. Most Southerners sided with the Spanish in the Amistad case as the Spanish claimed that the Amistad captives were slaves who had revolted against their masters and killed white men in the process. The Spanish wanted the captives to be turned over to them so that they could be sent back to Cuba and tried as murders. Southerners, who were afraid of slave rebellions occurring at home, wanted to make an example of the Amistad captives and send the message to all slaves that rebellion would not be tolerated. However, as the article in the previous paragraph shows, many people living in border states where slavery was legal but not as prevalent, were more likely to be sympathetic towards the Amistad captives. Since there were not as many slaves in these border states, the people living there were not as frightened of slave revolts occurring. This is why the anti-slavery paper went to Baltimore to find Southerners who were sympathetic to their cause instead of Charleston.

In the North, there was a significant antislavery audience reading newspapers that were worried about the slaveholding powers in the South trying to take over the government. This paranoia is shown in the articles printed by antislavery papers. An article dated April 25, 1844, from *The Voice of Freedom*, an antislavery paper based out of Montpelier, Vermont, focused on the upcoming Democratic national convention. It named three people who could be contenders for the Democratic nomination; John Tyler, John C. Calhoun, and Martin Van Buren. The article

²³ "The Amistad Case," *The Vermont Telegraph*, March 17, 1841.

stated that the first two were too extreme to receive the general party nomination, but warned its readers that Van Buren was no better than the other two candidates. It then accused Van Buren of trying to uphold the “slave power” in the South by interfering in the Amistad case and giving an advance veto to any type of legislation that would outlaw slavery in Washington D.C. The article asked Northerners if they would continue to bow down to the slave power of the South by noting that one eighth of the freemen in the country (the slaveholders) ruled the other seven eighths, but that the non-slaveholding freemen could resist the slave power through the voting booth.²⁴ 1844 was an election year, but the Amistad was no longer a huge national issue by this point. However, by reminding Northern voters how Van Buren overstepped his constitutional authority in the Amistad case to uphold the slave power in the South, this paper was trying to anger Northern voters to vote against the Democrats, especially Van Buren, in the upcoming election.

Years after the Amistad case was concluded in 1841, many antislavery readers in the North were still interested in the Mendi mission that the captives went to set up. An article dated July 4, 1845, from the *Green Mountain Freeman*, a newspaper based out of Montpelier, Vermont, focused on the Mendi mission and Reverend Raymond. This article started off with a tribute to Raymond’s character given by Arthur Tappan, the brother of Lewis Tappan. Part of Arthur’s tribute included the Mendi King banishing the mission from the country and Raymond’s response to the King. Raymond responded by saying that they would leave, but that the King was banishing God from the country and he will bring divine judgment upon this nation. The article then concluded with the actual letter that Raymond wrote to his wife that the *Caledonian* article had mentioned above. The letter mostly focused on the personal trials of

²⁴ “National Democratic Convention,” *The Voice of Freedom*, April 25, 1844.

Raymond and did not mention the Amistad captives at all.²⁵ This shows that antislavery readers in the North may have forgotten about the Amistad captives and were just interested in how the mission was getting along in Africa.

Even in states where slavery was legal, partisanship was a strong indicator of the position that a paper would take on the Amistad case. An article dated April 17, 1841 from the *Boon's Lick Times*, a Whig paper based out of Missouri, focused on the Supreme Court's decision in the case. It was reprinted from the *New York Commercial Advertiser*. The article was a celebration of the Supreme Court decision that freed the Amistad captives and the recent downfall of the slaving ports on the west coast of Africa. The article stated that both of these events signaled that slavery was almost over.²⁶ *The Boon's Lick Times* was a Whig paper and shared their partisan perspective with the *New York Commercial Advertiser*. However, Missouri was a border state where slavery was legal. Even though the readers of this paper may have politically supported the Amistad captives because a victory for them would hurt the Van Buren administration, they may have not had the moral issues with slavery that some audiences in the North had. This is shown in the paper itself as there was an ad posted on the same page as the Amistad article for a "negro women for sale." The slave was the property of a recently deceased man and was being auctioned off. These seemingly contradictory, but adjacent articles would have been seen as normal for the readers of this newspaper, but certainly appear jarring to a modern reader.

Several Northern and border state Democratic papers largely ignored the issues of race and slavery that were inherently a part of the Amistad case and instead focused their attention on how Britain was intervening in U.S. domestic politics. This attitude can be gleaned through

²⁵ "Mendi Mission-Reverend W.M. Raymond," *Green Mountain Freeman*, July 4, 1845.

²⁶ "The Africans of the Amistad," *Boon's Lick Times*, April 17, 1841.

articles in papers such as *The Baltimore Sun*, *The Democratic Standard*, and *The Ohio Democrat*. Articles from these Democratic newspapers took issues with letters sent to the State Department by the English asking for the president to secure the release of the Amistad captives. An article dated February 27, 1840, from *The Baltimore Sun*, a Democratic paper based out of Maryland, talked about one such British letter to the state department. The article states that Britain's attempt to meddle in the case was insulting towards the United States as it was a domestic issue and not an area where the British should get involved. The article states that if the United States meddled in British domestic issues it would be just as offensive. The article concludes by attaching the actual letter written by the Foreign Office of London to the President of the United States.²⁷ Another article dated March 2, 1841, from *The Democratic Standard*, a Democratic newspaper from Ohio, again focused on British interference in the case. In another letter to the State Department, the British once again asked the president of the United States to secure the release of the Amistad captives as soon as possible, this time citing the fact that it was illegal within Spanish law to import native Africans into Cuba; the captives were free according to Spain's own laws. The State Department replied by saying that the executive branch had no jurisdiction over the case as it was in the judicial branch of the government and that the British should take issue with Spanish subjects defying Spanish laws up with Spain itself and not with the United States.²⁸ These two articles supported the Administration's resistance to British requests as it showed that the United States would not be bullied by Britain when it came to domestic issues. Through these articles, Democratic newspapers in the North were able to support the administration's hard line with the English without commenting on how it was

²⁷ "The Amistad: London Letter to the Executive," *The Baltimore Sun*, February 27, 1840.

²⁸ "Case of L' Amistad," *The Democratic Standard*, March 2, 1841.

protecting the institution of slavery and the interests of the Southern slave power in the case, which may have angered their readership.

A post case article dated March 24, 1842, from *The Ohio Democrat*, a newspaper from Canal Dover, Ohio, focused on how John Quincy Adams, the high profile defender of the Amistad captives in the Supreme Court, was really pro-British. The article stated that Adams was recently appointed chair of the Foreign Affairs committee in the House. It asserted that he was not capable of handling the current issues with England effectively because he personally admired Britain. The article brought up his track record of participation in the Amistad case and his long standing relationships with societies of free black men to show that he had anti-slavery sentiments. It implied that this track record showed that Adams favored England's anti-slavery policy and would not take a hard line against the English on current issues. The article concluded with a warning that the Southern states would not submit to any sort of clause regarding emancipation being included in treaties between England and the United States.²⁹

This anti-British angle taken by Northern Democratic papers shows something important about their readership. Northern Democrats reading these papers supported the Van Buren administration politically. However, I believe that these readers were just as paranoid about the influence of Southern slaveholders on national politics as their antislavery and Whig counterparts. The Northern Democratic newspapers took a position on the Amistad case that their readerships could get behind, the anti-British position. This allowed these newspapers to get Northern Democrats riled up against the Amistad captives in the case not because they were slaves who killed white men and beat their masters, but because they were being used by Britain as an excuse to interfere in American politics. Northern Democratic papers could then support

²⁹ "War with England," *The Ohio Democrat*, March 24, 1842.

the Van Buren administration taking a hard stance against Britain without alienating their readership and ignore the administration's meddling in the court case as a result of pressure from the slaveholding Southern Democrats.

Southern Democratic papers had no such social limitations when focusing on race in regard to the Amistad case. These papers constantly pointed out how the Amistad captives, referred to as "the savages" by the *Edgefield Advertiser*,³⁰ had killed white men in their rebellion and how they were completely uneducated. These papers also singled out Northern abolitionists who helped the captives as extremists trying to undermine society. The Southern Democratic papers I looked at were *The Fayetteville Observer*, based out of North Carolina, and *The Edgefield Advertiser*, based out of South Carolina. An article dated September 18, 1839, from the *Fayetteville Observer* focused on the abolitionists and how they were helping the Amistad captives in court. The article stated that the abolitionists had gone to great lengths to defend the captives which was unnecessary because there was already a treaty in place between Spain and the United States that forced the United States to return the slaves to their rightful owners in the case of shipwrecks or mutinies. To accentuate this point, the article took excerpts from the *New York Times* explaining the treaty, which showed to the *Fayetteville's* readership that even Northerners understood the treaty. The article concluded with the fact that the abolitionists were completely ignoring the treaty and were actively trying to go against all laws and social norms in their effort to defend the slaves.³¹

Southern Democratic papers focused on the extremism of the abolitionists in their articles because their readership was afraid of abolitionists trying to overthrow their established social

³⁰ "Arrest of Ruiz and Montes," *Edgefield Advertiser*, October 31, 1839.

³¹ "The Abolitionists in the North are Making Great Efforts..." *Fayetteville Observer*, September 18, 1839.

order. An article dated October 31, 1839, from *The Edgefield Advertiser* focused on the arrest of Ruiz and Montes. The author was incensed by the fact that Ruiz and Montez were arrested for assault and battery and false imprisonment charges filed by the Amistad captives when Ruiz and Montez were the ones who were beaten and imprisoned by the slaves after the rebellion. The article stated that the captives themselves did not make the charges and it actually goes even further to say that the captives could not understand the charges even if they had an entire lifetime to study it, itself a very racist claim. Instead, the article stated that the abolitionists were the ones who drew up the supposedly ludicrous charges, naming Lewis Tappan specifically as the mastermind behind the scheme.³²

Also many Southerners felt threatened by Britain as an emancipationist world power. An article dated March 11, 1841, also from *The Edgefield Advertiser* examined the Amistad case in the Supreme Court. This article was an extremely long winded defense of the Spanish/proslavery arguments in the Amistad case. It went into highly technical details about Jay's Treaty of 1795 and how international documents needed to be respected in order for international order to persevere. It then concluded by asserting that Britain was using their policy of abolishment of slavery worldwide to expand her power as many other nations, such as the United States, depended on slave labor for their economies. The author implied that England might seize Cuba on the grounds of ending the international slave trade there and then have an easy launching point to invade Florida.³³

Southern Democratic papers saw the Amistad event very differently than the Northern Whig or antislavery papers did and even differently from their Northern Democratic

³² "Arrest of Ruiz and Montes," *Edgefield Advertiser*, October 31, 1839.

³³ "Extracts from 'A brief review of some of the points in the L'Amistad Case'," *Edgefield Advertiser*, March 11, 1841.

counterparts. Articles from Southern Democratic papers explicitly focused on the racial issues involved in the case, the abolitionist involvement in the case, and largely upheld the Spanish side of the court case. This shows something about the readership of the Southern Democratic papers. The readers of these newspapers appeared open to articles about how Northern abolitionists were working to overturn their established social order. Just as the readers in the North seemed afraid of a Southern slaveholding power controlling the national government, the Southern readers seemed worried about Northern extremists trying to free their slaves and incite rebellions in the South. The Southern Democratic articles were very open with their racial views when dealing with the Amistad captives, something unique to the Southern papers. Many of the authors of the Northern articles most likely held similar racial views, but that fact was not put forward in their articles. The racism present in the Southern articles should be seen as a reflection of the environment that they are being written in and the audience for whom they are being written. Slavery and the idea of white supremacy was an ingrained part of antebellum and even post-bellum Southern society. So, it is not surprising to find the Southern articles to be somewhat more open to addressing the racial aspect of the case. Even though Southern and Northern Democratic papers seemed to be reporting on different aspects of the case, they both put forth anti-British sentiments. Southern papers focused on how the British were trying to weaken the United States through global emancipation and Northern papers focused on how Britain was interfering in domestic politics, but both Northern and Southern Democratic papers agreed that Britain should not be involved in the Amistad case.

The American public viewed the Amistad event differently depending on the region that they were in and their own political affiliation. A person who lived in Vermont and identified themselves as a Whig would view the Amistad event very differently from a person living in

South Carolina who identified as a Democrat. Local newspapers published articles with which their readerships would agree, leading to the stark regional differences between the articles focusing on the Amistad event. This research on the engagement of the American public with the Amistad case creates a deeper understanding of the Amistad event overall and helps explain why certain people in the case acted in the way that they did. Public opinion is very powerful in modern day politics and should be seen as just as powerful during the 1840s. Public opinion in America regarding the case no doubt influenced the actors in the Amistad event, shaping their actions subtly, but very importantly. Since the American public was such an integral part of the historical event, maybe Steven Spielberg should have thought about providing them as much screen time as Matthew McConaughey when retelling the story of the Amistad for modern audiences.

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