

On March 9, 1841, the US Supreme Court ruled in favor of slaves from Sierra Leone. The story, told in Steven Spielberg's 1997 movie, "Amistad," influenced our decision to begin mission work in Sierra Leone 15 years later.

In 1839, a Spanish slave ship left the island of Sherbro in Sierra Leone with a load of Mende and Sherbro slaves^a perhaps several hundred in all. After the ship reached Cuba, 53 slaves were placed on a smaller ship, the Amistad, bound for plantations in Cuba.

Among them was Sengbe Pieh^a about 26 years old, possibly a chief's son, with a wife and three children. He had been kidnapped by four Africans as he walked to his farm and sold to Portuguese slave traders. Cuban slavers later gave him the name Joseph Cinque.

During the journey, Cinque led a revolt which killed all but two of the ship's crew and two slave owners. They ordered that the ship be directed to Africa, but the crafty Spaniards sailed a zigzag course and the Amistad drifted northward for two months.

In August 1839, an American ship seized the Amistad off the coast of New York. The Sierra Leoneans were taken to Connecticut, where slavery was still legal. They were charged with mutiny and murder.

News of the slave ship landing in New England spread quickly. Christians rallied to provide food, clothing, and other support. Anti-slavery activists across the country came to their defense.

A Connecticut court declared that the Africans were not truly slaves. The case continued to the Supreme Court, which also sided with the Africans (over President Martin Van Buren's objections). The justices declared that the Africans had been illegally enslaved and had acted in self-defense.

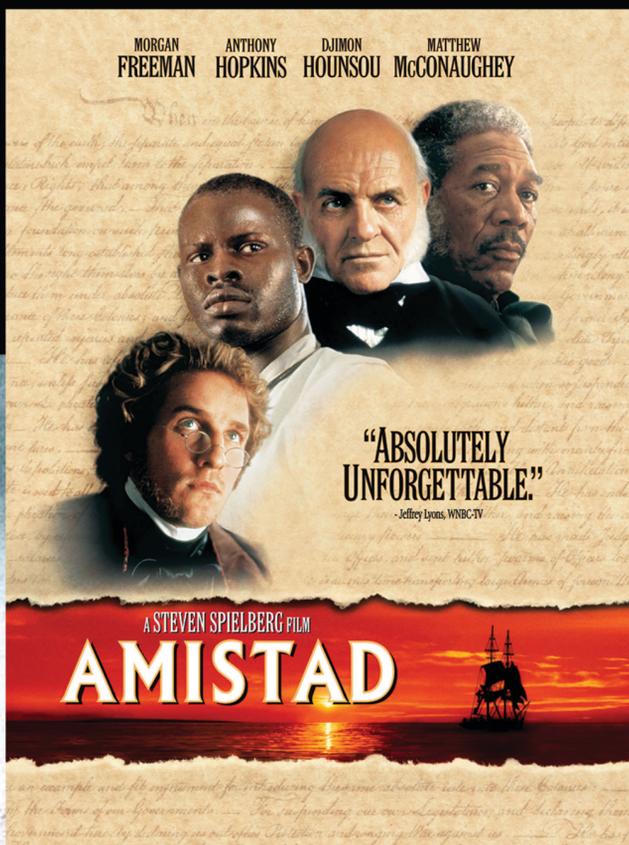
The case drew America's attention to Sierra Leone, and created much interest in missions, particularly in Africa.

The former slaves returned to Sierra Leone in January 1842, accompanied by five missionaries who started what became known as the Mende Mission. In 1846, the American Missionary Association assumed responsibility for the Mende Mission.

Back in Sierra Leone, Joseph Cinque found that his hometown had been destroyed by war, and that his wife and children were gone. There were many rumors about his later life^a that he reverted to paganism, that he emigrated to the West Indies, that he became a slaver himself. However, he most likely showed up at the mission around 1879, died shortly thereafter, and was buried at the mission.

In 1855, the United Brethren Church decided to begin mission work in Africa. We knew little about the Dark Continent, but knew the story of the Amistad. We sent three men to explore opportunities in Sierra Leone. Missionaries from the Mende Mission were a huge help to us in becoming acquainted with the country, scouting locations, and getting settled.

In 1882, the American Missionary Association transferred all assets of the Mende Mission to the United Brethren church. This greatly expanded our work in Sierra Leone.



Donald DeFreeze founded the Symbionese Liberation Army, which was most notorious for the 1974 kidnapping of Patty Hearst. DeFreeze called himself Field Marshall Cinque, taking the name from Joseph Cinque. He died in a shootout with police in May 1974.



Joseph Cinque

La Amistad