



# CATALOG

[View email in your browser](#)

[Share this email with a friend](#)

## **Trial of the Century: La Amistad**

In February of 1839, Portuguese slave hunters abducted a large group of Africans from Sierra Leone and shipped them to Havana, Cuba, a center for the slave trade. This abduction violated all of the treaties then in existence. Fifty-three Africans were purchased by two Spanish planters and put aboard the Cuban schooner Amistad for shipment to a Caribbean plantation. On July 1, 1839, the Africans seized the ship, killed the captain and the cook, and ordered the planters to sail to Africa. On August 24, 1839, the Amistad was seized off Long Island, NY, by the U.S. brig Washington. The planters were freed and the Africans were imprisoned in New Haven, CT, on charges of murder. Although the murder charges were dismissed, the Africans continued to be held in confinement as the focus of the case turned to salvage claims and property rights.

District of Connecticut  
In the S<sup>d</sup> Circuit of the U. States

Be The President of the United  
States of America -  
The Marshall of  
the District of Connecticut  
Writing

We command you that you have before  
our Circuit Court now in session at  
Hartford in and for said District of  
Connecticut at the opening of the Court

the bodies of the thirty ~~white~~ Africans  
called by the names

Burnah	Carfon	Forn	Shannah
Conowah	Choolay	Carla	Cabbah
Bangyah	Tah	Yahonah	Yongnam
Nichob	Dannah	Burnah <sup>d</sup>	Chah
Pornah	Peah	Beah	Alorrah
Nahquai	Quah	Lee	Can
Fivira	Fahjinal	Tah	Yahbi
Fahannah	Bern	Tavon	Corhamah
Yahbow	Kannah	Carla <sup>d</sup>	Chahno

of Siqua  
or by whatever names they are  
called now in your custody & keeping  
whether in Prison or detached in and under  
your charge & care together with the  
cases of their capture and detention & to  
decide and do what said Court may  
order and adjudge in the premises & have  
you there this writ with you return  
thereon - Writing to His Honor B. Taney Esq  
Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the U. States  
at Hartford the 21<sup>st</sup> day of Sept. 1839.

Wm. Marshall  
Clerk

In the matter of  
Cinqué & the Africans,  
for a Habeas Corpus.

Warrant of  
Habeas Corpus.

United States v. Cinque and the Africans, Warrant for Habeas Corpus, 11/19/1839. [National Archives Identifier 2641484](https://www.nationalarchives.gov/identifier/2641484).

President Van Buren was in favor of extraditing the Africans to Cuba. However, abolitionists in the North opposed extradition and raised money to defend the Africans. Claims to the Africans by the planters, the government of Spain, and the captain of the brig led the case to trial in the Federal District Court in Connecticut. The district court ruled that the case fell within Federal jurisdiction and that the claims to the Africans as property were not legitimate because they were illegally held as slaves. The U.S. District Attorney filed an appeal to the Supreme Court.

This [case file contains the records filed in the "Amistad" case](#). In the trial before the Supreme Court in January 1841, the Africans were represented by former U.S. President John Quincy Adams. Preparing for his appearance before the Court, Adams requested papers from the lower courts one month before the proceedings opened. For 8 ½ hours, the 73-year-old Adams passionately and eloquently defended the Africans' right to freedom on both legal and moral grounds, referring to treaties prohibiting the slave trade and to the Declaration of Independence.

In the matter of the United States Appellants  
Single and others, against the appellants

I, J. Quincy Adams, Counsel for the said Africans, moves the Court  
for a certiorari to the <sup>10th</sup> Bench of the Circuit and District Court of  
the United States for the District of Connecticut, to annul the  
record of the proceedings in the said District and Circuit Courts  
in this case, by sending up copies of the following papers:

1. The proceedings of the Court of Enquiry taken by the honorable  
judge of the District Court on board the Schooner Amistad on the 29<sup>th</sup>  
of August 1839, and particularly the indictment against the said  
Africans for the murder of the captain and mate or cook of the  
said Schooner. The warrant of seizure issued by the said District  
Judge on the said 29<sup>th</sup> of August 1839, directed to the Marshal of the  
said District, together with the returns and other papers according  
to Law and the return made by the said Marshal on the 30<sup>th</sup>  
of August aforesaid to the said warrant of seizure; and the return to the  
said motions.
2. The two warrants of seizure issued by the said District Judge  
on the 18<sup>th</sup> of September 1839, and the returns of the Marshal  
thereon with the process of motion and return thereon.

3. The warrant of seizure issued by the said District Court on the  
19<sup>th</sup> of September 1839, and the return of the Marshal thereon.
4. The instructions of the judge of the Circuit Court to the Grand  
Jury on the
4. The Bills of Indictment filed by the District Attorney against  
the said Africans for the murder of the Captain and Cook  
of the Amistad, and also for piracy; and the proceedings  
of the Grand Jury, and the Instructions of the Circuit Court  
to the said Grand Jury thereon.
5. The writ of Habeas Corpus in behalf of the said Africans  
on the said 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> of Sept. 1839, the return, and the decision  
of the said Circuit Court thereon.

John Quincy Adams' Request for Papers Relating to the Lower Court Trials of the Amistad Africans [Petition for Certiorari], 1841. [National Archives Identifier 301671](https://www.archives.gov/fundamentals/301671)

The Supreme Court decided in favor of the Africans, stating that they were free individuals. Kidnapped and transported illegally, they had never been slaves. Senior Justice Joseph Story wrote and read the decision: "It was the ultimate right of all human beings in extreme cases to resist oppression, and to apply force against ruinous injustice." The opinion asserted the Africans' right to resist "unlawful" slavery. The Court ordered the immediate release of the Amistad Africans, and 35 of them were returned to their homeland. The others died at sea or in prison while awaiting trial.

The United States App<sup>ts</sup>  
The Defendants Claimants of the  
Schooner Amistad, her tackle  
and furniture, together  
with her cargo, and the Africans  
mentioned and described in the  
several Citations and Returns.

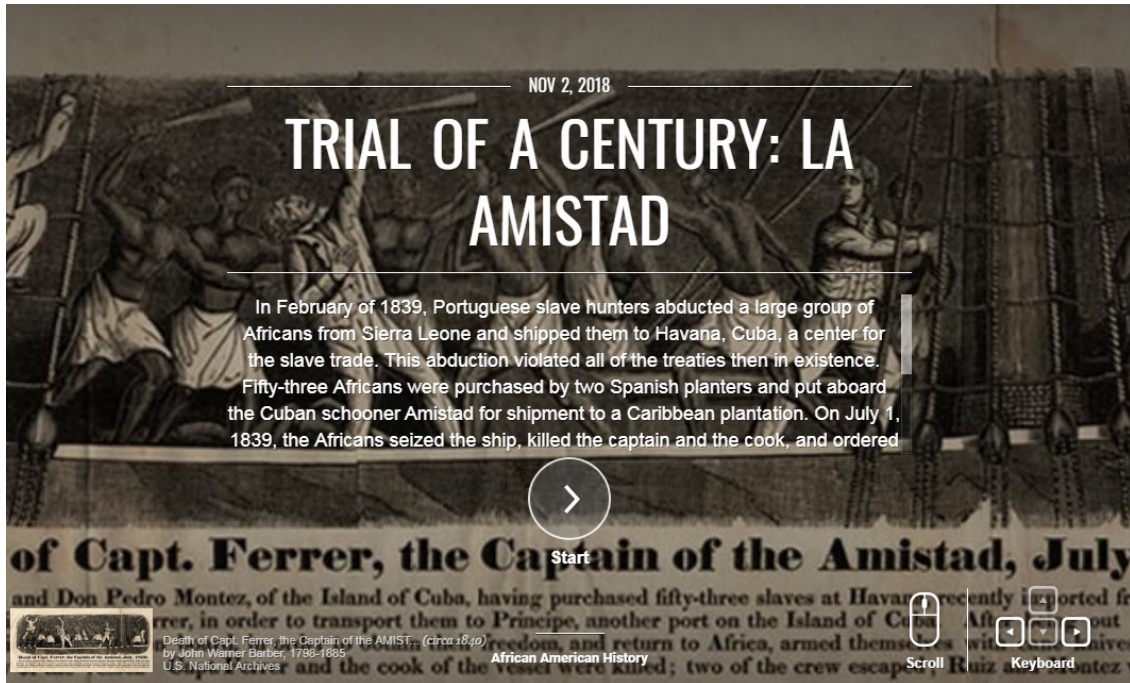
On appeal from the Circuit  
Court of the United States for  
the District of Connecticut—  
This Cause came on to be  
heard on the transcript of the re-  
cord from the Circuit Court of  
the United States for the Dis-  
trict of Connecticut, and was ar-  
gued by counsel on both sides.  
In consideration  
whereof, it is the opinion of the Court that there is error in that  
part of the record of the Circuit Court affirming the decree of  
the District Court which orders the said Negroes to be delivered  
to the President of the United States to be transported to Africa in  
pursuance of the Act of Congress of the 3<sup>d</sup> of March 1819; and that  
as to that part it ought to be reversed; and in all other respects  
that the said decree of the Circuit Court ought to be affirmed. It is  
ordered that the said decree be affirmed, and the said Negroes except  
as to the part aforesaid, and as to that part that be reversed;  
and that the cause be remanded to the Circuit Court with di-  
rections to enter in lieu of that part a decree that the said Ne-  
groes be and are hereby declared to be free, and that they  
be dismissed from the custody of the Court and be discharged  
from the Court and go thereof free, without delay.

March 9, 1841

3. The warrant of seizure issued by the said District Court on the  
19<sup>th</sup> of September 1839, and the return of the Marshal thereon.
4. The instructions of the judge of the Circuit Court to the Grand  
Jury on the
4. The Bills of Indictment filed by the District Attorney against  
the said Africans for the murder of the Captain and Cook  
of the Amistad, and also for piracy; and the proceedings  
of the Grand Jury, and the Instructions of the Circuit Court  
to the said Grand Jury thereon.
5. The writ of Habeas Corpus in behalf of the said Africans  
on the said 18<sup>th</sup> or 19<sup>th</sup> of Sept. 1839, the return, and the decision  
of the said Circuit Court thereon.

Opinion of the Supreme Court in *United States v. the Amistad*, 3/9/1841. [National Archives Identifier 301672](#)

You can learn more about this case, and find teaching activities and related primary sources for educators on our [website](#). And see our latest [Google Arts & Culture exhibit](#) about the Amistad case:



Want to help make these records more discoverable? Help us transcribe records from the Amistad case in our newest mission on the [Citizen Archivist dashboard](#)! Every word you transcribe improves search functionality in our Catalog and helps to unlock history.

**Get Started Transcribing!**

---

## Archives Cookie Exchange

We love being surrounded by delicious and decadent treats this time of year, but we suspect this [200 Year Old Pound Cake Recipe](#) might tip the holiday scale with all the butter, sugar, eggs, and flour it calls for!

## 200 Year-old Pound-cake Recipe

1-lb. of sugar  
1-lb. of flour  
1-lb. of butter: (scant)  
9 large eggs



Mix sugar and butter, add well-beaten egg-yolks. Add flour gradually and last, add stiffly beaten egg-whites. Flavor with lemon extract. Bake in flue cake-pan, slowly, for at least one hour. Ice and then cover with English walnut-halves.

Nelle Tilford Noland

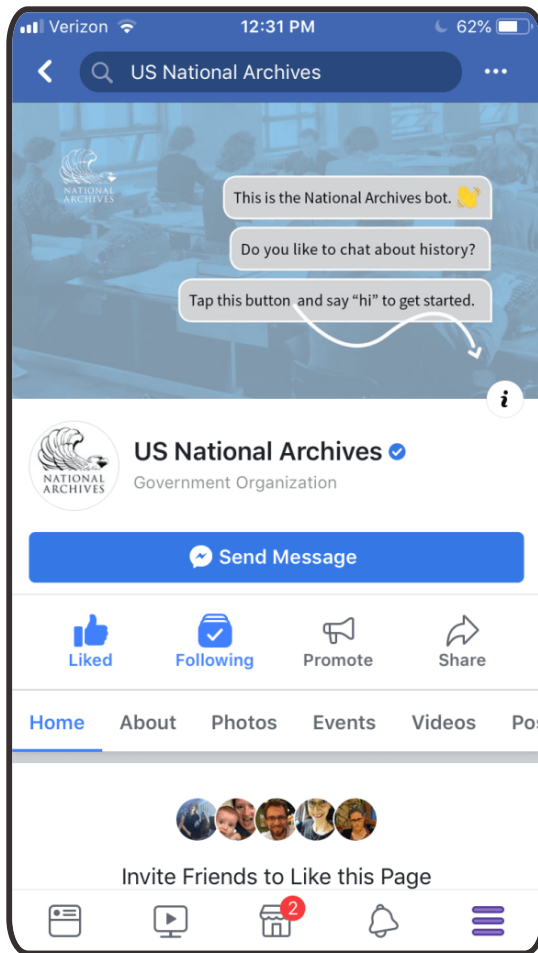
This cake recipe was passed down through the Truman family, and shared with Bess Truman by Mary Ethel and Nellie Noland, cousins of Harry S. Truman.

Want to see more recipes from the archives? For more delicious and historic recipes this holiday season, be sure to follow #ArchivesCookieExchange on the [@USNatArchives Instagram account](#). Recipes and stories will be shared each week in December.

Have you tried this pound cake recipe, or any others from our holdings? Let us know how they turn out! Happy vintage baking!

## Facebook Chatbot

We're exploring new ways to interact with citizen archivists. Visit the [National Archives Facebook page](#), and give our



chatbot a try! To start chatting with the bot, tap on the “send message” button, and type “hi” in the text box. When you choose tag a document, the bot will serve you a single page from the Catalog, and you can identify the document as typed, handwritten, or both. This helps us sort the documents by difficulty, which can then help citizen archivists transcribe the records in the Catalog.

You can also use the bot to answer your questions about visiting the National Archives and starting your research, learn some Archives trivia, or see an interesting photo from our Catalog.

---

Questions or comments? Email us at [catalog@nara.gov](mailto:catalog@nara.gov).



---

[Privacy policy](#)

[Subscribe](#) or [Unsubscribe](#)