

0. SET THEM FREE! - Story Preface
1. THE SLAVE TRADE
2. THE AMISTAD MUTINY
3. CAPTURED AGAIN
4. THE FIRST TRIAL
5. JOHN QUINCY ADAMS FOR THE DEFENSE
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Exemplar of shackles used in the slave trade. The Amistad defendants had one major request of John Quincy Adams (as expressed in a letter written to him by 11-year-old Kale): "All we want is make us free..." Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons. PD

When the case came before the high court Adams, who was nearly deaf, was in rare form. The hearing took place in the Old Supreme Court. His actual argument lasted 8½ hours, over two separate days. (One of the justices died, causing a delay.)

As he spoke for the *Amistad* captives, the ex-president pointed to the framed Declaration of Independence. With emotion he asked:

***Is it possible to speak of this demand [to send the Africans back to Cuba] in language of decency and moderation? ...Has the expunging process of black lines passed upon these two Declarations of Independence in their gilded frames? Has the 4th of July '76 become a day of ignominy and reproach?***

No other case, before or since, was precisely on point. Adams had little "legal" precedent. What he *did* have counted most. His main thrust was the eternal law of nature wherein every person is free. And it was *that* law - the *eternal* law - on which Adams staked his claim.

***...I know of no other law that reaches the case of my clients, but the law of Nature and of Nature's God on which our fathers placed our own national existence.***

Associate Justice Joseph Story told his wife (in a letter) that Adams' argument was "...extraordinary...for its power, for its bitter sarcasm, and its dealing with topics far beyond the records and points of discussion." In short, Adams gave the Supreme Court no choice. The justices *had* to do the right thing.

It took about one month. Justice Story wrote the majority opinion. There was one dissent.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/SET-THEM-FREE-Amistad-Incident)

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## Shackles for Kidnapped Slaves

The *Amistad* defendants never wanted to be in the United States. They did not ask to leave their African homes in shackles. They were brought to America against their free will. John Quincy Adams argued their case, before the Supreme Court, to honor their request to go home.

Kale - an 11-year-old boy who learned English while an *Amistad* captive - put it best in a [letter to Adams \(dated January 4, 1841\)](#):

*All we want is make us free...*

*Kale, and all the other Amistad defendants, wanted to be forever free of the shackles of slavery.*

*Image of slave shackles, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons. PD*

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## Joseph Story - Associate Justice, U.S. Supreme Court

Image online, courtesy U.S. Library of Congress.

The information, quoted above, is available at the University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law website.

View this asset at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Joseph-Story-Associate-Justice-U.S.-Supreme-Court>



## Old Supreme Court

Image online, courtesy Architect of the Capitol. PD

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## SET THEM FREE!

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