

LA AMISTAD: A CHILD'S JOURNEY



ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

What do you think the experience was like for children who came to the U.S. on the Amistad? How do you think the experience changed them?



OBJECTIVES

Students will:

- Learn about the rebellion by the kidnapped Mende aboard the slave ship *La Amistad*.
- Analyze a fictionalized child's perspective on the Amistad by creating a visual representation of it.
- Describe the lives the children of the Amistad were forced to leave behind and identify connections between these children's lives and their own.
- Interpret Hale Woodruff's murals depicting the Amistad and discuss the social and emotional effects of the rebellion and legal victory.



LEARNING STANDARDS

See the [standards alignment chart](#) to learn how this lesson supports New Jersey State Standards.



TIME NEEDED

60–90 minutes



MATERIALS

- AV equipment to project images
- *Journey on the Amistad—A Child's Perspective* handout (one per student)
- Drawing implements (markers, crayons, colored pencils)
- *Amistad Knowledge Cards* handout (one set per small group)
- *Gallery Cards* handout (one per student)



VOCABULARY

abolitionist	captive	enslaver	mutiny
bondage	enslaved	La Amistad	rebellion

Procedures

NOTE ABOUT LANGUAGE

When discussing slavery with students, it is suggested the term “enslaved person” be used instead of “slave” to emphasize their humanity; that “enslaver” be used instead of “master” or “owner” to show that slavery was forced upon human beings; and that “freedom seeker” be used instead of “runaway” or “fugitive” to emphasize justice and avoid the connotation of lawbreaking.

NOTE

In 1938, the artist Hale Woodruff was commissioned to paint a series of murals for the new Slavery Library at Talladega College. The school, formed by a group of former enslaved people and new freedmen, was Alabama’s first college dedicated to the educational needs of Black people. *Rising Up: Hale Woodruff’s Murals at Talladega College* portrayed six noteworthy events in the history of Black people, from slavery to freedom. Three of the pieces focus on the Amistad rebellion.

- 1 Project the image of the ship, La Amistad at <https://www.history.com/topics/abolitionist-movement/amistad-case>. Ask students if they have ever heard of the ship and invite them to share their prior knowledge. Briefly provide information from the site above (or a source of your choosing) about the Amistad rebellion and subsequent court case.
- 2 Project the painting *The Mutiny on the Amistad*, which is part of the series *Rising Up: Hale Woodruff’s Murals at Talladega College*: <https://high.org/exhibition/rising-up>. Invite students to observe it closely. Have students engage in a turn-and-talk with a partner in which they discuss what most stands out to them in the painting and why. As a class, continue to examine the painting using some of the questions below.
 - What feelings do you think the African people aboard the Amistad experienced after being forced from their homes and held captive on this ship? What do you think it took for them to rebel?
 - What do you notice about the style of the painting, such as the colors and shapes the artist uses? What feelings does the style of the mural cause you to experience?
 - Notice that Cinqué (the rebellion’s leader) is battling the cook (in the yellow bandana) and another African is fighting the captain (in the green hat), but the faces of the white men are not shown. Why do you think the artist made this choice? [*The reason was to not humanize the enslavers.*]


- 3** Share with students that there were four children aboard the *Amistad*, three girls and a boy, and ask them to consider what it might have felt like for someone their age to be in such a frightening situation. Tell students that they will create a drawing—like Hale Woodruff—about the *Amistad*, but from a child’s point of view. Distribute the handout *Journey on the Amistad—A Child’s Perspective*, and explain that the story is a fictional account of what the experience of *La Amistad* might have been like for a child. Read aloud or have students independently read the story. After, direct students to sketch a portrait of the narrator or the scene as they imagine it. When students are done with their drawings, have them share and discuss in pairs or small groups. (Keep students in their small groups for the next step.)
- 4** Point out Sierra Leone on a map and ask students to consider what type of life the children on the *Amistad* were forced to leave behind in their home country. Give each small group a set of *Amistad Knowledge Gallery Cards*. Instruct group members to take turns drawing a card, reading it together, and discussing the questions at the bottom. Encourage students to make connections between these children’s lives and their own, and to reflect on the idea that before they were taken into captivity, the children of the *Amistad* had lives not so different from their own.
- 5** Project (but omit the titles of) the two remaining *Amistad* murals at <https://high.org/exhibition/rising-up>: *The Trial of the Amistad Captives* and *The Repatriation of the Freed Captives*. Distribute copies of the *Gallery Cards* handout to students and review the instructions with them. Have students do a “gallery walk” and close observation of one or both paintings. When they are done, have students share their titles and captions in small groups or as a class. Share the actual titles and answer any questions students may have. Make sure they understand the following key points:
- Mural #2: *The Trial* depicts the court case in which the African people argued they had been illegally captured and had the right to fight for their freedom. The Court agreed and set them free.

NOTE

The captives aboard the *Amistad* were taken from Mendeland (also spelled Mendiland), in modern-day southwest Sierra Leone. The Mende people, whose language is also called Mende, are one of the two largest ethnic groups in Sierra Leone.

NOTE

For additional context and analysis of the murals, see the article “*Amistad and after: Hale Woodruff’s Talladega murals*” in *The Magazine ANTIQUES*: <https://www.themagazineantiques.com/article/amistad-and-after>.

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- Though the Court freed the African people, the U.S. government did not provide funds for their passage back to Africa. This money was raised by abolitionist groups, and the 35 surviving Africans returned home two years after they had been captured, as depicted in mural #3: *The Repatriation*. The other 18 people died at sea or in prison awaiting trial.
 - The Amistad case is one of the most important court cases in U.S. history. It ruled that enslaved people were not property and could not be owned. The case showed that many people—including powerful individuals—were against slavery. It strengthened the abolitionist movement, which would lead to the end of slavery 25 years later.

Discussion Questions

1

How do you think it felt for millions of enslaved Americans to learn of the case freeing the Amistad captives, even while they remained in bondage? Do you think they felt more hopeful or discouraged? Why?

2

How does it make you feel to read what could have been a child's version of history? Why are these kinds of sources difficult to find?

3

What connections did you discover between your life and the West African children aboard the Amistad? What kinds of things do children everywhere have in common?

4

What do you think was the first thing the children of the Amistad did when they returned home?

5

How do you think the children—and their families and communities—were different as a result of the Amistad events?

6

Efforts to end chattel slavery in the U.S. began in the late 1700s, but slavery did not become illegal until the 1860s. What does this tell you about the way change happens? What other movements for change are you aware of that took a long time to reach their goals?

Lesson Extensions

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- + Edinger, Monica. *Africa is My Home: A Child of the Amistad*. Somerville, MA: Candlewick Press, 2013.
 - + Janovy, C.J. "With Powerful Murals, Hale Woodruff Paved The Way For African-American Artists." *NPR*, December 19, 2015. <https://www.npr.org/2015/12/19/459251265/with-powerful-murals-hale-woodruff-paved-the-way-for-african-american-artists>.
 - + PBS Newshour Extra. "Lesson plan: Six murals tell the story of La Amistad and the African slave trade." January 29, 2015. <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/extra/lessons-plans/rising-up-the-talladega-murals-lesson-plan-and-digital-student-guide>.
 - + State Bar of Georgia. "The Amistad Case: 'Give us Free'." June 20, 2018. YouTube video, 7:22. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9_zTN6tsDpw&t=18s.
 - + Studies Weekly. "The Amistad." March 4, 2016. YouTube video, 1:21. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NE1xFtoFvco>.
- Have students create a map tracing the route of the Mende captives aboard *La Amistad*, from their home in Sierra Leone to Cuba and north to New York and Connecticut. Have them include the journey back to Africa for the 35 people who survived.
 - *The United States v. The Amistad* was an important court case that helped to pave the way for the abolition of slavery. Assign students to research another U.S. Supreme Court decision related to slavery. *Dred Scott v. Sandford* (1857) is the most famous. Lesser-known cases include *Prigg v. Pennsylvania* (1842), *Strader v. Graham* (1851), and *Ableman v. Booth* (1859). Have students create a poster illustrating the significance of the case.
 - Hale Woodruff's murals helped educate the public about the evils of slavery. Have students explore other works of art that were used to resist slavery, such as the painting "Am Not I A Man And A Brother," (c. 1800), based on English potter Josiah Wedgwood's design: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-merseyside-43233175>. This image depicts an enslaved African man, in chains, kneeling at a sugar plantation in the Caribbean. It became the dominant image of the abolition movement in Britain.

Amistad Knowledge Cards Photo Credits

SLAVE SHIP: Sullivan, George L. *Dhow Chasing in Zanzibar Waters and on the Eastern Coast of Africa*. 1873. The Graphic: An Illustrated Weekly Newspaper, London.

RICE AND PLANTAINS: Nwachukwu, Nancy. *Jollof rice with fried fish and fried plantain*. March 17, 2013. Wikimedia Commons. Accessed June 17, 2020. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:jollof_rice_with_fried_fish_and_fried_plantain.jpg.

MANKALA: Burnett, Colin. *Wooden Mancala board*. June 30, 2005. Wikimedia Commons. Accessed June 17, 2020. https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?title=File:Wooden_Mancala_board.jpg&oldid=195747615.

CHILDREN PLAYING: Gitau, Git Stephen. *Shallow Focus Photography Of Two Kids Playing On Swing*. Digital image. Photo by Git Stephen Gitau from Pexels.

CHILD WITH MOTHER: Dazzle Jam. *Girl With Braided Hair Standing While Carrying Boy Wearing Beige Long Sleeved Top*. June 21, 2017. Digital image. Pexels.



Journey on the Amistad— A Child's Perspective

NAME: _____

I am so cold, and hungry, and tired, but I cannot sleep. I need to sleep. Maybe I'm dreaming. Maybe I am home in bed with my baby sister and brother. We are huddled together, full bellies, with plans to play tag, and hunt and fish. Maybe I am dreaming. But I can't close my eyes. Then I will see the white face man who hit me and took me. I can't close my eyes. I hate his face. I don't ever want to see it again. If I sleep, I will see it again. Maybe I should try. Maybe this is a dream.

Or maybe my daddy will come for me. He is so big and strong. He will find me, and take me home. And my mom will hold me, and fill my belly and tell me stories. They will find me, and protect me. I will never have to see another white faced man again.

It is so cold here. Why is it so cold? I haven't seen the sun in so long. Is there no sun where we are going? Where are we going? Why did the white faced men take us?

I hope my baby brother and sister are safe. They were still sleeping when I last saw them. I should have stayed. I shouldn't have snuck away to play with my friend Imani before sunrise. I should have stayed. Then, I would still be with them. I miss them. And I miss Imani. I hope she got away. She was running so fast when we saw the white faced men. She was always faster than me. I hope she got away. I hope she is warm and her belly is full. I hope I will see their faces again.

Maybe I'm just dreaming. My eyes are so heavy. I can't stop them from closing anymore. Maybe when I wake up I will be home.

Below, sketch a portrait of the storyteller or the scene that is taking place as you imagine it.



Amistad Knowledge Cards



THE CHILD ON THE SHIP

- Slave ships were cold and dark.
- Some children were hungry and seasick.
- The children were separated from the adults and they felt alone and scared.

Question for discussion: Discuss a time when you felt alone and scared.



THE CHILD IN THEIR HOME COUNTRY

- In West Africa, some children ate rice and plantains.
- Some children slept in village huts with their whole family, including grandparents.
- West Africa is very hot and the children went to the beach and swam in the ocean.

Questions for discussion: What is a favorite food in your home? What activities does your family enjoy?



THE CHILD PLAYING WITH FRIENDS

- Some children in West Africa play Mancala.
- Children played on the beach around the fishing boats.
- Children used their imaginations and made up a lot of games.

Question for discussion: What are some of your favorite games and why do you like them?



THE CHILD WITH THEIR MOM

- In West Africa, children are considered the hope and future of a community.
- Children are loved by their mom and dad. Each day after school they are hugged and kissed.
- One day, the children will be the leaders and elders of their community.

Question for discussion: What do you do with your mom or dad that is special?



Gallery Cards

NAME: _____

As you view the Hale Woodruff murals, think about the following questions and write notes about what you observe. Then give each mural a title and caption (short description) that you think captures the main idea.

- 1 What do you think is taking place in the scene?
- 2 Who do you think are important figures in this scene? What do you think they are thinking or feeling?
- 3 What objects did the artist include to help us understand this moment in history?
- 4 How does the painting make you feel? How does the artist create these feelings?

MURAL #2

Title: _____

Caption: _____

Notes: _____

MURAL #3

Title: _____

Caption: _____

Notes: _____

~ Use the back of this page to write additional notes if you need more space. ~