

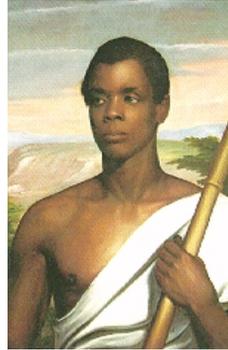
African American Voices Lesson Plans

Lesson Plan: The Amistad Trials

Subject: U.S. History

Grade level: 8

NGSSS-SS: **SS.8.A.3.15** - Examine this time period (1763- 1815) from the perspective of historically underrepresented groups.



**Description/
Abstract of Lesson:** The students will develop understanding for the Supreme Court decision that set free the Amistad Africans through a cooperative learning activity. The students will express various perspectives on the Amistad case through role-play and essay writing.

Objective(s): The students will

- Understand the judicial process, including appeals to the Supreme Court
- Understand historical events through various perspectives

Materials:

- Internet Resources
- Movie: Amistad (School Version)
- Sheets or blankets

Duration: 3 class periods

**Lesson Lead In/
Opening:**

1. Before the class begins, the teacher will move all desks towards the walls, leaving a large open space in the center of the classroom. The teacher will place sheets or blankets on the floor.
2. As students walk in, the teacher will instruct them to lay on the floor closely next to each other.
3. The teacher will ask the students questions about the experience. For example:
 - Describe how you're feeling right now.
 - How do you think you would feel if you were forced to stay in this position for over a month?
 - If you would be forced to stay in this position for a long time, how would you not be able to function as a real human being?
4. Explain to the students that African peoples experienced much worse conditions while being chained down inside slave ships in many cases for several months, half of which died due to the horrible conditions.
5. Have the students write about the experience in their journals.

Activity 1:

1. Introduce the historical case of the Amistad Africans; how they were experiencing horrific conditions in a slave ship and rebelled against those who were keeping them in those conditions. Explain how they ended up in U.S. custody and were put on trial. Explain further on how this was considered the most important slavery-related case in the United States before the Dred Scott Decision.

2. Have the students watch the slave ship scenes in the movie *Amistad*.

3. Have the students discuss what they saw in the movie. (i.e. what shocked them, what they did not understand, etc.)

4. Explain to the students that they are going to be learning about the trial and how the Amistad Africans were able to win the case and return to their homeland in West Africa.

5. Divide the class into groups of four. Explain to the students that they will be involved in a JIGSAW activity. Each student in the group will be reading about different aspects of the Amistad African trial. For example:

- Biographies of the Key Participants
- Background Story of the Case
- The Supreme Court Decision
- Letters and Personal Testimonies

After learning the material, each student will teach the other students in the group about what he/she learned in the assigned reading.

The reading material for this activity may be found on the Internet. Here are some suggested web sites:

<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/amistad/AMISTD.HTM>

<http://www.historycentral.com/amistad/amistad.html>

<http://www.archives.gov/education/lessons/amistad/>

www.mysticseaport.org/amistad/

<http://academic.sun.ac.za/forlang/bergman/real/amistad/cinque.htm>

6. The groups will be given four questions to answer related to the reading material. Each group will designate a spokesperson.

Sample Questions:

- Considering the general relationship between the southern and northern states on the issue of slavery, why do you believe President Van Buren interfered in the court case the way that he did?
- What difficulties do you believe Cinque was experiencing in understanding the court process?
- Despite denying having abolitionist ideals, why do you believe John Quincy Adams decided to become involved in the case?

- What was the main reason the Supreme Court decided to rule in the favor of the Amistad Africans?

7. Each group will present answer(s) to one of the four questions to the rest of the class.

Activity 2:

1. Have the students watch the movie *Amistad*.
2. While watching the movie, have the students identify key personalities and their roles/actions.
3. After the movie, discuss the key events of the movie as well as the roles of the most influential personalities throughout.
4. Have each student imagine that he/she is one of the key personalities of the movie. The students are to write a persuasive essay to another key personality in the movie raising a concern for some type of action. These roles are to pre-assigned by the teacher. Students are NOT to pick the personality or essay of their choice.

The following are examples of essays:

- Imagine that you are Roger S. Baldwin, the attorney for the Amistad Africans. Your case has just been appealed to the Supreme Court. Because of your lack of experience in handling Supreme Court cases and considering that the majority of the Supreme Court justices are southern slave owners, you are compelled to seek the assistance of a very experienced lawyer and politician, former President of the United States and current congressman from Massachusetts, John Quincy Adams. Write a letter to John Quincy Adams explaining to how difficult your case is and how his assistance is very much needed.
- Imagine that you are Cinque of the Amistad Africans. After winning a very grueling battle in court, you have just been informed through an interpreter that the "Top Chief" of this strange land (The President of the United States) has decided to have the case retried in the highest court of the land (The Supreme Court). Write a letter to President Van Buren explaining the harsh treatment you have endured as a human being since you were kidnapped from West Africa and how he should consider dropping his case and allowing the Amistad Africans to return to their homeland. Be sure to emphasize how your people were illegally smuggled by the Portuguese through Sierra Leon, a colony of Great Britain (which banned the slave trade in 1808).
- Imagine that you are John C. Calhoun, a former congressman, former Vice-President of the United States and a major proponent of slavery. You are concerned that the results of the district court's decision in the Amistad case would be considered a threat to southern-slave owning states which would lead to them band more closely and rebel against the government, leading the United States closer to civil war. Write to President

Van Buren about your concerns and how he should appeal the case to the Supreme Court.

- Imagine that you are Queen Isabella the Second of Spain. You have just been informed of the United States military has captured a small Spanish vessel, L' Amistad, in U.S. waters. You are also informed that most of the ship's crew has been killed by enslaved Africans. The only crew members left alive have been Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montes. According to the Treaty of 1795 between the United States and Spain, any vessels, people or cargo seized belonging to the other country that are damaged as a result of piracy or robbery should be returned without question. Write to President Van Buren about how L' Amistad, its crew and cargo (including slaves) should be returned to Spain according to the provisions in the Treaty of 1795. Be sure to emphasize reasons why as slave owning nations the two countries should work more closely together and more strongly defend each other.

5. Have students share their letters with the rest of the class.

Higher Order Thinking Questions:

1. Why do you suppose this case was considered the most important court case to both abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates up until the Dred Scott decision?
2. Even though he demonstrated a history of opposing slavery, why do you believe John Quincy Adams was hesitant to become involved in this particular case?
3. Even though it was actually Roger S. Baldwin's arguments that convinced the Supreme Court of ruling in favor of the Amistad Africans, why do you suppose the maker of the movie only showed what John Quincy Adams argued?
4. Was Roger S. Baldwin wrong for originally approaching the case as an issue of "stolen goods"?

Extended Lessons:

1. Have the students develop a mock trial, taking the President to court for unconstitutionally interfering with the court system by removing the original judge in the district trial.
2. Have the students do a research project on other successful African rebellions in the Americas (i.e. in South Carolina, Brazil, Haiti, Jamaica, etc.)

Assessment:

- Evaluate JIGSAW activity according to historical accuracy, grammar and neatness.
- Evaluate role-play letters according to historical accuracy, grammar and neatness.
- Consider cooperation/participation grades for cooperative-oriented work.
- Consider creativity grade for role-play letters.

**Suggested Books
In Lesson:**

Pate, A. (1997) Amistad: A Novel Based on the Screenplay, Signet.

Myers, W. D. (2001) Amistad: A Long Road to Freedom, Puffin.

Jones, H. (1988) Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy, Oxford University Press.

Owens, W. A. (1997) Black Mutiny: The Revolt on the Schooner Amistad, Black Classic Press.

**Additional
Web Resources:**

On the Amistad Africans Case

<http://www.socialstudies.com/c/product.html/?record@TF41540>

www.yale.edu/glc/curriculum/amistad/lesson.html

Other Successful African Rebellions

http://www.slaveryinamerica.org/history/hs_es_insurrection.htm

<http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Slavery/articles/lockley.html>

<http://www.huarchivesnet.howard.edu/0008huarnet/adams.htm>

<http://www.mltranslations.org/Brazil/Zumbi.htm>