

1839. Lewis Tappan and the Amistad Case

Source: www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USASTappanL.htm

Lewis Tappan was born in Northampton, Massachusetts in 1788. In 1828 he joined his brother, Arthur Tappan, as a silk merchant in New York City. The Tappans were deeply religious and contributed large amounts of money to campaigns against slavery and the use of alcohol and tobacco. In 1831, they helped found the American Anti-Slavery Society in New York. Lewis Tappan is probably best remembered for organizing a committee of New York City's leading abolitionists to aid in the defense of the kidnapped Africans on the Amistad. During their trial in Connecticut, Lewis Tappan wrote reports published in the *New York Journal of Commerce*. After the passage of the Fugitive Slave Law in 1850, Lewis Tappan declared it was now legitimate to disobey laws promoting the slave system and he became an active supporter of the Underground Railroad. He died in Brooklyn Heights, NY in 1873.

1. Appeal to the Friends of Liberty, September 4, 1839

Thirty-eight fellow men from Africa, after having been piratically kidnapped from their native land, transported across the seas, and subjected to atrocious cruelties, have been thrown upon our shores, and are now incarcerated in jail to await their trial for crimes alleged by their oppressors to have been committed by them. They are ignorant of our language, of the usages of civilized society, and the obligations of Christianity. Under these circumstances, several friends of human rights have met to consult upon the case of these unfortunate men, and have appointed the undersigned a committee to employ interpreters, able counsel, and take all necessary means to secure the rights of the accused. It is intended to employ three legal gentlemen of distinguished abilities, and to incur other needful expenses. The poor prisoners being destitute of clothing, and several having scarcely rags to cover them, immediate steps will be taken to provide what may be necessary. The undersigned, therefore, makes this appeal to the friends of humanity to contribute for the above objects. Donations may be sent to either of the Committee, who will acknowledge the same, and make a public report of their disbursements. (Signed) SIMEON JOCELYN, JOSHUA LEAVITT and LEWIS TAPPAN

2. Letter describing Africans from the Amistad

I arrived here last Friday evening, with three men who are natives of Africa...to act as interpreters in conversing with Joseph Cinquez and his comrades. On going to the jail, the next morning, we found to our great disappointment, that only one of the men, [John Ferry], was able to converse with the prisoners. Most of the prisoners can understand him, although none of them can speak his Geshee dialect. You may imagine the joy manifested by these poor Africans, when they heard one of their own color address them in a friendly manner, and in a language they could comprehend!

The four children are apparently from 10 to 12 years of age....They are robust [and] full of hilarity....The sheriff of the county took them to ride in a wagon on Friday. At first their eyes were filled with tears, and they seemed to be afraid, but soon they enjoyed themselves very well, and appeared to be greatly delighted.

Most of the prisoners told the interpreter that they are from Mandingo. The district of Mandingo, in the Senegambia country, is bounded by the Atlantic Ocean, and is directly north of Liberia. Two or three of the men, besides one of the little girls, are natives of Congo, which is on the coast just south of the equator.

Cinquez is about 5 feet 8 inches high, of fine proportions, with a noble air. Indeed, the whole company, although thin in flesh, and generally of slight forms, and limbs, especially, are as good looking and intelligent a body of men as we usually meet with. All are young, and several are quite striplings. The Mandingos are described in books as being a very gentle race, cheerful in their dispositions, inquisitive, credulous, simple hearted, and much given to trading propensities.

I remain, very truly yours, LEWIS TAPPAN

Questions

1. The “Appeal to the Friends of Liberty” describes the captives on the Amistad as “thirty-eight fellow men from Africa.” Why is this phrase significant?
2. What does the appeal suggest about the connection between abolition and religious beliefs?
3. Why is the committee raising money?
4. What image does Lewis Tappan try to create in his report to the *New York Journal of Commerce*?