

# Primary Source

U.S. Supreme Court, *U.S. v. Amistad* 40 US 518, 1841



How did the principles of the Declaration of Independence contribute to the quest to end slavery from colonial times to the outbreak of the Civil War?

- ☐ I can interpret primary sources related to Founding principles of liberty, equality, and justice from the colonial era to the outbreak of the Civil War.
- ☐ I can explain how laws and policy, courts, and individuals and groups contributed to or pushed back against the quest to end slavery.
- ☐ I can create an argument using evidence from primary sources.
- ☐ I can analyze issues in history to help find solutions to present-day challenges.

## Building Context

In June 1839, dozens of Africans in chains destined for slavery on Cuba's plantations successfully broke free and took control of the ship, named the *Amistad*. They intended to sail back to Africa, but the remaining Spanish crew secretly altered course and the ship arrived in the United States. The *Amistad* was seized by the U.S. Navy and the courts were asked to determine the fate of the ship and the people on board. Spain demanded the return of the ship and the enslaved people, but wealthy U.S. abolitionists organized a legal team led by John Quincy Adams to defend the Africans in their bid for freedom. The case went all the way to the Supreme Court, which ruled 7-1 in the Africans' favor.

## United States v. The Amistad, 40 U.S. 518 (1841)

Source: <https://supreme.iustia.com/cases/federal/us/40/518/>

It is plain beyond controversy, if we examine the evidence, that these negroes never were the lawful slaves of Ruiz or Montez or of any other Spanish subjects. They are natives of Africa, and were kidnapped there, and were unlawfully

Notes

transported to Cuba in violation of the laws and treaties of Spain and the most solemn edicts and declarations of that government. By those laws and treaties and edicts, the African slave trade is utterly abolished; the dealing in that trade is deemed a heinous crime; and the negroes thereby introduced into the dominions of Spain are declared to be free. [593]	
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### Comprehension and Analysis Questions

1. In his closing argument before the Supreme Court, former president John Quincy Adams, arguing for the Africans, pointed to the copy of the Declaration of Independence hanging in the court's chambers several times. Why did Adams use the Declaration to support the Africans' case?

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2. How does the story of the Amistad illustrate the role of individual action and the court system in the quest to end slavery?

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