



The Capture of *La Amistad*

In January of 1839, a group of newly-captured African "slaves" were put on a ship bound for Cuba, where they would be sold into slavery. Among this group were four children, including a young girl, about seven years old, named Margru--"Black Snake." After being sold in Cuba, the slaves were put on another ship, *La Amistad* ("Friendship") to be taken to another part of the island. While en route, however, the slaves revolted and took over the ship in order to sail back to Africa. The two slaveowners, who were aboard the vessel and were not killed during the mutiny, "agreed" to sail the ship back to Africa, but in fact each night they turned the ship back around and headed back northwest, away from Africa. After months go by, the ship has started to look very ragged, and eventually the ship was sighted and brought into port by a group of concerned Americans, who thought the ship was a pirate ship because of its ill-kept appearance and "aimless" course.



On August 29, 1839, the ship was towed to New London, Connecticut, where the re-captured slaves were put in a county jail in New Haven, Connecticut, while the Americans tried to figure out what to do with them. All of the publicity and hubbub over the *Amistad* captives attracted the attention of Lewis Tappan, an East Coast industrialist and abolitionist and early supporter of Oberlin College. Tappan met the captives and helped organize their legal defense and arranged for the captives to stay at the home of the jailer rather than in the jail itself, and though they were not treated particularly well, the conditions there were significantly better.



The trial to determine whether the *Amistad* captives were still the property of the Cuban slaveowners or whether they now owned themselves dragged on until March of 1841, when former President John Quincy Adams defended the *Amistad* captives before the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled that the *Amistad* captives were legally free. They left the jailer's house and moved in to private residences in a nearby community with strong abolitionist sympathies, where they remained as they raised

funds to pay their passage back to Africa. By November 1841, they were ready to sail back to Africa, to Sierra Leone, where some of the American abolitionists would remain to establish a mission, complete with school, for the education and continued conversion of the Amistad captives and other Africans in the region.

Margru, who during the course of the trials had adopted the English name "Sarah Kinson" (despite the fact that Tappan urged her to keep her African name as her last name), returned to the United States in 1846 and then traveled to Oberlin, where she was educated in the local public school before continuing her studies at the Oberlin College's Ladies' Department, making her the first female international student in America. She was by all accounts a very bright scholar, and returned to Africa, to the mission established by and for the returning *Amistad* captives, where she served as a missionary and teacher. She married in 1852 to a Christian African man also living at the mission, and by 1855 they were deemed experienced enough to move inland to start their own mission station. Then, however, things started going wrong: Margru's husband was dismissed from his mission job for "alleged intemperance and for seducing girls at the mission school." At this point, Margru's name disappears from missionary publications, and she is lost to the documentary record.

For more information on Margru, please see "Sarah Margru Kinson: The Two Worlds of an Amistad Captive," by Marlene Merrill, published by the Oberlin Historical and Improvement Organization (now the Oberlin Heritage Center) and available in our museum store. Please also note that the Little Red Schoolhouse, where Margru studied while attending public school in Oberlin, is open to the public through the Oberlin Heritage Center's tour program.