

Amistad's Key West visit: more than meets the eye

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Although the presence of the Freedom Schooner *Amistad* in Key West is historic in many ways, there is not much more of her to meet the eye than the mere tops of her characteristic raked schooner masts, viewed from a distance, as she lies docked at the U.S. Coast Guard Station. She arrived there on April 1, fresh from her history-making voyage to Cuba, but her nearly unnoticed presence (but for a Key West Citizen front-page photo and caption) belies a host of significant ties to this Southernmost city, particularly at the present time. Although, unlike during her first visit to Key West in 2003, the vessel is not open to the public, her presence is a most timely reminder of Key West's rich, and sometimes heroic history related to that sordid chapter of human history known as the Middle Passage or Atlantic "slave trade" (a misnomer that involved neither "slaves," but human beings, nor legitimate "trade," but one of the worst recorded crimes against humanity).

For starters, with or without public notice, for Key West to be the first port in the United States for the *Amistad* to visit on her homecoming voyage from her landmark visit to Cuba, where on March 25 she also celebrat-

ed the 10th anniversary of her launching, is no small matter. It will be recalled that it was in Cuba where the saga that has inscribed this vessel's name, which means "friendship," originated in 1839, forever etching it into the annals of maritime. The story has been told and retold in numerous books and accounts: and most famously, albeit with more fiction than fact, by the Spielberg film, of the 53 African captives, recently arrived from Sierra Leone, West Africa, who, while being transported aboard a small coastal trading schooner called "La Amistad" from Havana to slavery in Puerto Principe, Cuba, revolted, seized control of the vessel and ordered her owners to sail them back to Africa. The owners, attempting to deceive the Africans, sailed east by day, and north by night, hoping to reach a sympathetic Southern port in the U.S., but their zigzag course eventually brought them to Long Island, NY, and then to Connecticut, where the Africans' case became an Abolitionist cause célèbre, reaching as high as the U.S. Supreme Court, with former President John Quincy Adams arguing on their behalf. They won their freedom and changed the world.



The Amistad in Havana © 2010 Wojtek Wacowski

The modern Freedom Schooner, built in Connecticut as a larger reproduction of the original *Amistad*, commemorates this remarkable victory in her travels to cities along the coast, and internationally, having visited England and Sierra Leone itself, where she was warmly welcomed. Perhaps her warmest welcome ever, however, was most recently in Cuba, the culmination of a tour which also took her to Bermuda and Santo Domingo. Cuba has always been, arguably, the most important destination for her to visit, because of these historic origins. Like most Caribbean islands, Cuba is infused with a deep-rooted African cultural presence, and the *Amistad* story is well known there. For this reason, this powerful reconnection with history overshadows even the other history-making aspect of the voyage—its arrival in the Cuban ports of Matanzas and Havana of a ship flying the U.S. flag, which required close to a decade of negotiations to make a reality.

While the *Amistad's* triumphant return home after such an experience might be muted

in Key West, it can hardly be overlooked because of a number of connections to this city's own history. For example, is it anything less than providential that this visit would occur during the landmark 150th anniversary year of the Key West African Cemetery, adjacent to the historic West Martello fortress near Higgs Memorial Beach? In 1860, a total of 1,432 Africans were rescued from three captured American-owned slave ships in 1860, and brought to Key West, where their numbers nearly doubled the population of the small city.

Just as the *Amistad* captives in Connecticut some 21 years earlier were surrounded by supporters of their cause, the community of Key West rallied heroically to provide food, clothing, blankets and assistance to these new arrivals, as a misnamed "slave depot" was hastily constructed to house them until they could be "repatriated" to Africa. However, 295 of their number, mostly young people, did not survive the twelve weeks of detention there, primarily due to illnesses and

conditions they had suffered aboard the ships prior to their rescue. The first of those Africans had arrived in April of 1860, the same month as the *Amistad's* timely arrival in 2010.

Nor is the African Cemetery, with its memorial monument now under construction, the only direct connection that the storied City of Key West has to Middle Passage history. It was to this city, in 1827, that 120 African survivors of the tragic wreck of the Spanish (Cuban) slaver *Guerrero* off Key Largo were brought to become part of a saga to rival any Hollywood movie script, which was documented by indefatigable Florida Keys historian Gail Swanson, who also brought to light the forgotten story of the African Cemetery. Ms. Swanson had also documented Key West's connections to the slave ship *Fenix* and to the freedom ship *Ajax*. (She has sent copies of her article and book to Key West to be presented to the Captain and crew of the *Amistad*.)

Perhaps the best known, and earliest dated, connection in Key West to the Middle Passage is the display of artifacts from the 1701 wreck of the English slaver *Henrietta Marie*, as part of the permanent collection of the Mel Fisher Maritime Museum, which include, actual iron shackles. The artifacts from this wreck spawned a nationally touring exhibition called "A Slave Ship Speaks." The Museum has since presented an exhibition entitled "The Last Slave Ships," and has continued to collect data, documents and artifacts related to the Middle Passage, making it an emerging prominent resource for study of this history. Lead Archaeologist Corey Malcom has also

added significantly to Ms. Swanson's already rich research on the Cemetery by locating actual burials and by identifying the location where the rescued Africans were originally brought to shore on the island.

The Freedom Schooner *Amistad's* bonds with Key West are not only limited to connections with Middle Passage history, but also with yet another generous local contribution to her noble cause. It is not widely known that when the nation celebrated its Bicentennial in 1976 with an impressive Tall Ships Parade in New York, that celebration of Freedom would have had no representation of any African presence were it not for a handsome schooner which "stood in" on that occasion for the historic *Amistad*. That was at the birth of the project to build a permanent Freedom Schooner to commemorate that historic victory, and that schooner was none other than Key West's own flagship, the Schooner *Western Union*, which, of course, has a fascinating history of her own.

It is in the way of ships and the sea that in an expanse as vast as the oceans, such coincidences and connections so commonly occur, and so often converge in such "key" maritime-based locations as Key West. While the Freedom Schooner lies in the Southernmost city's welcoming waters, she may be largely out of public sight, but most definitely should not be out of the public mind, as we remember all of the history, and heroism, that both she and the Key West community represent as legacies passed on to our present generations, for us to pass on.