Abolitionists and Amistad Raise Slavery Issue
The Making of a Nation No. 51

From VOA Learning English, welcome to The Making of a Nation — our weekly program of American history for people learning American English. I'm Steve Ember in Washington.

Last week on our program, we talked about the election of 1840. William Henry Harrison easily defeated Martin Van Buren and became the ninth president of the United States.

By that time, another political force was growing in the country. It did not come from Van Buren's Democratic Party. Nor did it come from Harrison's Whig Party. It grew out of slavery.

The dispute over slavery appeared to have been resolved for a time. A political compromise in 1820 kept a balance between slave and non-slave states. The compromise also barred slavery in the northern part of the Louisiana Purchase.

But during the 1830s, the issue of slavery rose to the surface again. A major reason why the dispute came to life again was cotton.

Cotton plants grew in many fields across the southern states. Black slaves planted, picked and took care of the cotton crops. They also had other duties on southern farms.

Northern ships then carried southern cotton to the markets of Europe. Manufactured goods needed in the South came from the North.

The situation deeply troubled the political leaders of the South. They worried that cotton made their states economically dependent on the industrial North.

What made things worse was the fact that most federal spending on public works projects went to the northern states.

Then there was the old dispute over import taxes. Taxes on foreign goods mostly helped the manufacturers of the North. The taxes were to be lowered in 1842. But that was still years away. No one could be sure what would happen then.

Such were the general political and economic conditions in the United States when the abolitionist movement began to make itself known.

Abolitionism was an effort to end slavery and the slave trade. At first, religious groups organized the abolitionist movement. Then in the 1830s, anti-slavery societies began operating in New York and New England. Many abolitionist groups published newspapers, pamphlets and booklets. They flooded the country with anti-slavery petitions.

Abolitionists believed slavery was evil, and that there could be no compromise with evil. They did not like the idea that slaves should become free slowly, over time. And they did not think slaveholders should be paid to free their slaves. They just wanted all slavery to disappear immediately.

"They were regarded as this wild-eyed fanatic group on the far left inside of the anti-slavery movement. People who were willing to do anything. Radicals. They would upend society. This was the view that people had of them."

Howard Jones is an historian. For many years he taught at the University of Alabama. He says the abolitionists did not have much popular support.

In the South, slavery was not a question of right or wrong. It was a question of survival. Some southerners believed that without slavery, their whole economic system would lie in ruins.

In the North, the abolitionists did not yet have major support. Some feared the abolitionist movement would weaken the rule of law. Even if they did not like slavery, these people believed the Constitution permitted it.

As a result of the public feeling at the time, abolitionists struggled to communicate their message. Some states even sought to stop the flow of anti-slavery literature across their borders.

In 1836, the House of Representatives declared it would not listen to any anti-slavery petitions. This decision became known as the "gag rule." The Senate did not pass such a rule. But it did develop a complex, indirect method to delay action on anti-slavery petitions.

Then something strange happened. Historian Howard Jones says some abolitionists believed the event was God's way of helping their cause.

In August of 1839, a slave ship appeared in waters off the coast of New York. The ship was carrying two white, Spanish-speaking men and about 50 men, women and children from Africa. The captain was missing.

American sailors stopped the ship, and brought everyone to the mainland. No one knew what to do with the Africans. Were they criminals? Slaves? If so, who did they belong to?

The Africans did not speak English or Spanish, so they could not explain themselves. The government jailed the Africans in New Haven, Connecticut while officials tried to decide what to do. The slave ship was called the Amistad, and the case became known as the Amistad case.

One of the leaders of the abolitionist movement, a man named Lewis Tappen, was very wealthy. Howard Jones says that Mr. Tappen sought to use the Amistad case to gain support for ending slavery.

"What Tappen wanted to do was to use his almost unlimited financial resources to take these people to court, the Amistad captives, 53 of them, and show that they were human beings, that they had a right to be free."

The abolitionists found a free black man who spoke both English and Mende, the language of a few of the Africans. This translator helped explain what happened.

The Mende said they had been kidnapped from their homes in West Africa. They were forced to march to the coast. There, white slave traders bought them.

At that time, the United States, Spain and many other countries had signed treaties to ban the international slave trade. The United States had also made buying slaves from Africa illegal, but the government did not enforce the law.

A Portuguese ship brought the Mende and several hundred other captured Africans to Cuba. Many died of sickness, starvation or beatings on the long trip across the Atlantic Ocean, which was called the Middle Passage. Those who survived were brought to a market in Havana.

Cuba was a Spanish colony at the time. Spanish law said slavery was legal on the island, but the slave trade was not. To get around the law, many traders acted as if captured Africans had been living in Cuba as slaves for a long time.

For instance, one of the young Mende men was named Sengbe Pieh. Two Cuban middlemen bought him and about 50 other men, women and children for farms on the other side of the island. The middlemen wrote his name in

their records as Joseph Cinqué. They gave the other Africans Spanish names, too, so it would seem like the Africans had been born in Cuba.

Then they loaded the group onto a ship called the Amistad — a name that means "Friendship" in Spanish – and chained them below deck.

Historian Howard Jones says the Amistad was like a taxi.

"It would transport slaves wherever you wanted them to be taken. They weren't really slaves, they'd never been enslaved, but they were called that at this point. That's a critical issue."

A few nights later, Sengbe Pieh and some of the other Africans broke free. They found weapons and waited until sunrise. The next morning, Pieh and his shipmates killed the captain of the Amistad and the cook. Two crew members escaped. The Cuban middlemen were the only white people who remained.

The Africans said they would let the Cubans live, but only if they brought the ship back to Africa. The middlemen agreed. During the day, they sailed the Amistad southeast. But at night, they turned the ship northwest, toward the United States, hoping to arrive one day in a friendly Southern port.

Nearly two months later, the food and water on the Amistad were gone. Several of the Africans took a small boat to land to get more supplies. The captain of a government ship saw them. He brought the Africans and the Amistad into port in the northern state of Connecticut.

The Cuban middlemen told their side of the story. They said the Africans were slaves who had revolted and claimed the ship's passengers as property.

The Spanish government agreed with the middlemen. It demanded that the ship and the Africans be returned to Cuba. Spanish law, Spain's Queen said, would decide what happened next.

Martin Van Buren, who was president at the time, liked the Spanish idea. He did not want to cause problems with Southern voters and politicians. He wanted to avoid the issue.

But it was too late. The captain of the government ship said the Amistad and the Africans on it belonged to him. He said he had found them, and he had a right to sell the Africans as slaves. The captain gave the middlemen

permission to go, and he gave the Africans to the US government to decide the case.

The charges against the Amistad Africans were serious. They were accused of being murderers and pirates. If they were found guilty, they could be enslaved for the rest of their lives or put to death.

But the abolitionists claimed the Amistad Africans were something entirely different. They said the Africans were captives who had been kidnapped illegally. The Africans should not be punished, the abolitionists said, but returned to Africa.

Historian Howard Jones says the abolitionists looked forward to presenting the case in court. They also hoped Sengbe Pieh and the others could help with their communication problems. They wanted the Amistad Africans to tell Americans what life in Africa was like.

"But more important than that, what it was like on the dread African slave trade, that Middle Passage, those thousands of miles of crossing the ocean to the new world. And then by extension throw a dark light on what slavery was like itself."

Whether Americans started to listen to the abolitionists, and what happened to the Amistad Africans, will be our story next week.

I'm Steve Ember, inviting you to join us next time for The Making of a Nation — American history from VOA Learning English.