artifacts that, although interesting in themselves, were not complementary or compatible. Unfortunately, a few myths were perpetuated. The noted outlaw John Murrell, for instance, did not terrorize the Natchez Trace as he did other areas. He was not born until 1806. By the time he was twenty, the trace was long past its days of heavy travel. On the other hand, one praises the curators for emphasizing that the South, despite the prevalence of slavery, was as much a frontier as any region.

Nor do some major topics, particularly slavery and the American Indians, lend themselves to the 1811 theme. And the unit centered around Tecumseh lacks balance; the overall emphasis is on the Choctaws. However, both the Chickasaws and Choctaws occupied much of present-day Mississippi and the Creeks occupied much of Alabama, not to mention a myriad of smaller tribes.

Curators designed “1811—Year of Wonders in the Mississippi Territory” as a temporary celebration of the territorial bicentennial to appeal to the general public. Judging by the reaction of Mississippians and out-of-state visitors, they succeeded. The exhibition stood from May 14, 1998, until November 16, 1998, in the chamber originally occupied by the state supreme court.

John D. W. Guice
University of Southern Mississippi
Hattiesburg, Mississippi


Long-term exhibition, open Feb. 18, 1998. Tu–Su 12–5; adults $5, seniors $3, students over 18 $3, youth 6–17 $1, children under 6 free. 2,000 sq. ft. David M. Kahn, director; Kate Steinway, project director and curator; Andrea Rapacz, exhibition assistant; Threshold Studio, planning and design; City Stage Co. and VDA, sound and lighting.

School classroom resources available.

Internet: a summary of the exhibition that includes a timeline and information on people involved in the trial, http://www.hartnet.org/chs/

“On her deck were grouped... the remnant of the Ethiop crew, some decked in the most fantastic manner in the silks and finery pilfered from the cargo, while others in a state of nudity, emaciated to mere skeletons, lay coiled upon the decks” (New London Gazette and General Advertiser, Aug. 28, 1839). This arresting depiction of the slave ship Amistad’s African voyagers, at once adorned and vulnerable, captures an essence of the superb exhibition in which it appears, especially in the way that it confers power upon contemporary observation. In 1839, the Portuguese slaver docked in Havana and unloaded her human cargo. But the short trip remaining, to transport some of the slaves to sugar planters on the nearby islands, ran aground. A violent mutiny of the slaves held on this ship followed. Two Spanish sailors were left alive. The Africans ordered them to navigate the ship toward Africa, but they instead subverted this
course and turned the ship toward North America. An American naval vessel seized it off the port of New London, Connecticut, in Long Island Sound. The ensuing trials in Connecticut and in Washington, the latter featuring John Quincy Adams for the defense, are legendary.

But the wistful journey of the black men, women, and children, a journey that ended on the same continent where it began, in West Africa, is perhaps more faithfully recounted than ever before, in the unlikely domain of Connecticut’s most venerable Yankee history clubhouse—the home of the state’s historical society. At long last, the new winds that have blown across her mansion premises have brought with them the ghosts of slave rebellion and abolitionism past. How fitting that “Amistad: A True Story of Freedom” should grace the halls of the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS). The new director and his staff, using resources from the trustees and honorary trustees of the CHS, the Connecticut Humanities Council, and the Beatrice Fox Auerbach Foundation, have ushered in the new century with dissenting inspiration.

Here are artifacts drawn from Mystic Seaport and other collections across the state, which enhance the society's own holdings, perhaps best represented by the town of Plainfield's antislavery banner of 1835. A ship's compass, barrel, and medicine chest vie with spectacular Mende artifacts, lent by consultant William C. Siegmann, which elucidate the presentation of the rituals of the jailed Africans, who taught the children amongst them about the rites of passage practiced in their homeland. These objects appear in the context of the story of enslavement, capture, arrest, imprisonment, trial, and redemption, appropriately conveyed in the spirit of nineteenth-century melodrama. But at every point where sensation might override fact, or tactile object distract from other kinds of evidence, the viewer is convincingly lured back to navigate the waters of historical interpretation. No complexity is dismissed. The artifacts are handsomely complemented by excerpts from the Connecticut, New York, and southern press. We find the New York Morning Herald describing the imprisoned Africans in “comfortable and airy apartments . . . happy as clams at high water” (Oct. 5, 1839). Memoirs, diaries, court transcripts, jailers' logs, and abolitionist tracts appear, several in the form of readable notebooks that have been edited for speedy and intelligent consumption and are available for the public to pick up and look through in the gallery space. As whites enter the drama of the African captives, phrenology and Christianity inspired adherents. Women of leisure, onlookers, abolitionist activists, and players drawn from many sectors of the Connecticut population join the story. Indeed, the exhibition is organized around the lives of individuals as much as the narrative of events. We meet women of both races, including a founder of the Colored Female Anti-Slavery Society of Middletown, Spaniards and Cubans, and members of the Van Buren administration cheek by jowl with its challengers, who emerge from upstart New Haven political circles in the person of the Africans’ lawyer, and future Connecticut governor, Roger Baldwin. At the very center is the righteous and troubled history of the beleaguered African community of captives: the renowned Cinque, but also his co-conspirator, the energetic Grabeau. There are the African children who become literate in captivity; Margru will attend Oberlin; Kali will raise money for the return journey by offering biblical recitations. Freedom
in America proves difficult for some of the Africans. One of the older men will “defy freedom,” by drowning himself.

The humanity and agency of the Africans is a great descriptive strength of the exhibition, which does honor to a city with a school population comprising almost
exclusively children from communities of color, many of whom have already seen this show. The innovative use of lights and sound highlights the story of the trial in a gallery equipped for a seated audience, and youngsters are accommodated throughout the galleries by telescopes, peepholes, and materials mounted at various heights. They are given space along with adults to respond to the show, and the response books have become part of the exhibition itself. They contain clues to its successes and to its disturbing effects. No stone is left unturned, but no happy resolution is afforded to the viewer either. We learn of the prophetic role of the case in relation to the Civil War to follow. We learn what is known of the fate of those who won the right to return to Africa so dearly in the courts. Bravery and a kind of early interracial coalition made this possible, but the fragility of success, the quixotic nature of the victory for those who were its ostensible beneficiaries, and the vagaries of circumstance (notably, the death of a justice) are clear.

The profound achievement of this effort is its willingness to celebrate controversy, to ask that we consider all sides in order to understand the story, even in an effort to affirm the victory. The urgency of seeing all the players, young and old, black and white, men and women, is rendered a requirement of understanding. Africa is not thrown in artificially—it is fundamental to the problem of the Mende in America. The white lawyers and judges and missionaries are not saluted for their unproblematic solidarity. Instead their racial attitudes are soberly recorded. The navy lieutenant who found the ship demanded salvage money for recovering lost property. Judge Andrew Judson, whose first ruling paved the way for the eventual release of the Africans, opposed integration. James Covey, Cinque’s translator, who was discovered by the ingenious Yale College professor Josiah Gibbs, had first been owned by an African slave master, “King of the Bulloms.” Whites who supported the defense wanted the Africans to stay on as domestics. The full panorama of motive affords that rare commodity—popular erudition. For this, along with the accessibility and forthrightness of the presentation, we can truly salute this reconstitution of the Amistad story, even in the ways that it invites other interpretations. Steven Spielberg—eat your heart out! Cinque rises still. He is in Hartford!

Susan D. Pennybacker
Trinity College
Hartford, Connecticut
