Justice: John Quincy Adams and *The Amistad*

- **Compelling Question**
  - How can you protect justice for yourself and others?
- **Virtue:** Justice
- **Definition** – Justice is the capacity to determine and preserve our common rights.
- **Lesson Overview**
  - In this lesson, students will analyze the reasons why John Quincy Adams acted as the defense attorney for the Africans on *The Amistad*. They will discuss Adams’ role in the case and will write a journal entry as though they were one of the actors in the case and evaluate the actor’s interpretation of justice. Finally, they will determine ways they can protect justice themselves.
- **Objectives**
  - Students will evaluate John Quincy Adams’ role in *The Amistad* case.
  - Students will understand the importance of protecting justice to advance freedom.
  - Students will determine ways in which to protect justice in their own lives.
- **Background**
  - Like his father, John Quincy Adams understood the necessity for a virtuous citizenry. Adams served in many public offices throughout his life such as diplomat, state senator, U.S. Senator, Secretary of State, U.S. Representative, and sixth President of the United States. In his role as a U.S. Representative, John Quincy Adams fought against the continuation of slavery. During his term in the House, Adams successfully defended the Africans who took over a Spanish ship called *The Amistad* after they were captured illegally in Africa to be sold in Cuba.

In 1839, a Spanish ship kidnapped a group of Africans from the coast of Sierra Leone with the intent to sell them as slaves in Cuba despite the fact that the slave trade had been prohibited by the Spanish, British, and United States. The Africans were then to be transported from one Cuban port to another, but that effort was thwarted when the Africans freed themselves from their shackles. They then killed the ship’s captain and cook and took control of the vessel. The ship meandered along the coast of the United States until it was discovered by the *USS Washington* just off from Long Island, New York. The commander of the United States ship took custody of the Africans and took them to Connecticut to claim rights to the property including the ship itself, the cargo, and the Africans.

It has been said that there are two sides to every story, but in this situation there were at least five sides. The case was first brought to the United States District Court where the commander filed a suit to claim the Africans and cargo. Two of the masters on the ship filed suit to have the Africans and cargo returned to them. However, the United States Attorney for the District of Connecticut filed suit to have the property returned to the Spanish government. The Africans themselves maintained that they were not property or slaves and could not be returned to any owner. There was even more contention when President Martin Van Buren ordered that the Africans be returned to Cuba despite the continued appeals in the case. Many viewed the president’s order in the confusing case as an overreach of executive power.

In the ruling, the district court ordered that the Africans be returned to Africa under the protection of the president and did not award them to the Spanish government. They ruled that the commander of the *USS Washington* be awarded one-third of the ship’s property and the ship masters also be awarded one-third of the ship’s property. Under an order by President Van Buren, the case was appealed to the circuit court that upheld the district court’s finding. The case was then appealed to the United States Supreme Court.

Adams delivered an extensive defense of the Africans citing the prohibition of the international slave trade. He insisted that the people on board the ship were not property but were free people. He also argued that the executive branch should not have been involved in the case. The Supreme Court found in favor of Adams and the Africans in *United States v. The Amistad* (1841).
• **Vocabulary**
  
  o Contentious
  o Apprehensive
  o Appalled
  o Lament
  o Warrant

• **Introduce Text**
  
  o Have students read the background and narrative, keeping the “Walk-In-The-Shoes” question in mind as they read. Then have them answer the remaining questions below.

• **Walk-In-The-Shoes Questions**
  
  o As you read, imagine you are the protagonist.
    
    ▪ What challenges are you facing?
    ▪ What fears or concerns might you have?
    ▪ What may prevent you from acting in the way you ought?

• **Observation Questions**
  
  o What was John Quincy Adams’ role in The Amistad case? Did this case alter or strengthen his identity? How so?
  o What was Adams’ purpose as the attorney for the Africans?
  o What does the purpose of Adams’ role in the case say about his identity?

• **Discussion Questions**
  
  o Discuss the following questions with your students.
    
    ▪ What is the historical context of the narrative?
    ▪ What historical circumstances presented a challenge to the protagonist?
    ▪ How and why did the individual exhibit a moral and/or civic virtue in facing and overcoming the challenge?
    ▪ How did the exercise of the virtue benefit civil society?
    ▪ How might exercise of the virtue benefit the protagonist?
    ▪ What might the exercise of the virtue cost the protagonist?
    ▪ Would you react the same under similar circumstances? Why or why not?
    ▪ How can you act similarly in your own life? What obstacles must you overcome in order to do so?

• **Additional Resources**
  
  o Nagel, Paul C. *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, A Private Life*
  o Argument of John Quincy Adams, before the Supreme Court of the United States: in the case of the United States, appellants, vs. Cinque, and others, Africans, captured in the schooner Amistad, [http://www.gilderlehrman.org/collections/33e4a049-4612-4f6c-8bab-093978836610](http://www.gilderlehrman.org/collections/33e4a049-4612-4f6c-8bab-093978836610)
  o John Quincy Adams Defends the Amistad Captives before the U.S. Supreme Court, [http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=294](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/disp_textbook.cfm?smtID=3&psid=294)
  o *Amistad* (1997) directed by Steven Spielberg
Handout A: Justice: John Quincy Adams and *The Amistad*

**Background**

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**Narrative**

Former president John Quincy Adams entered the Supreme Court chamber housed in the United States Capitol to deliver closing remarks in a contentious case. Adams was serving in the House of Representatives when he volunteered to be part of the defense team for the thirty-six Africans who took over a Spanish ship called *The Amistad* after being captured illegally in Africa to be sold in Cuba.

After he accepted the case, Adams was extremely nervous. He made a careless mistake and lost his temper in a debate in the House where he ranted against Congressman Henry A. Wise of Virginia. Adams and Wise were rivals in the House and regularly disagreed about issues of slavery. Adams was appalled by his own behavior and continued to lament his actions. Because of his nerves and embarrassment about the situation, Adams had asked his colleague Roger Baldwin to make the opening statements before the Supreme Court.

The next day, John Quincy Adams stood to address the justices in the closing argument for the defense. Adams focused his eight-hour-long speech on moral and judicial principles surrounding the case. His main concern was that the Africans, who stood to lose the most from the Court’s decision, would maintain their liberty and find justice. Adams reminded the Court that their purpose was to protect justice which he defined as “the constant and
perpetual will to secure to one HIS OWN right.” He explained that the lives and liberties of each of the thirty-six Africans depended upon the decision of the Court.

Adams believed that the rights of the Africans had not been protected. The United States Navy had no warrant to seize the Africans’ ship, nor did President Martin Van Buren and his administration have the right to get involved in a court case because of the separation of powers between the branches of government. Adams adamantly argued that the Supreme Court was part of the judicial branch and not the executive branch, and that the Court was not under the power of the president or his administration. According to Adams, not only had the president overstepped his constitutional bounds, but he put the lives and liberties of the Africans at risk in doing so.

Adams’ impassioned defense led all but one of the Supreme Court justices to agree with him. The Africans were freed and allowed to return to their homes. In 1842, after raising the funds necessary for travel, the thirty-nine Africans returned to Africa. Adams valiant fight for justice did not end there—the man who hired him to assist on the case never received a bill for Adams’ service.