

# SENATE JOINT RESOLUTION

No. 121

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## STATE OF NEW JERSEY

219th LEGISLATURE

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INTRODUCED JUNE 10, 2021

**Sponsored by:**

**Senator JOSEPH P. CRYAN**

**District 20 (Union)**

### **SYNOPSIS**

Designates February 28 of each year as “Amistad Day.”

### **CURRENT VERSION OF TEXT**

As introduced.



1   **A JOINT RESOLUTION** designating February 28 of each year as  
2    “Amistad Day.”  
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4   **WHEREAS**, The *Amistad* case is arguably the most important legal case  
5    involving slavery to arise during the nineteenth century; and  
6   **WHEREAS**, Aside from raising issues of criminal and international law,  
7    and of property rights, the case served as a test of the United States’  
8    commitment to live up to its founding principles; and  
9   **WHEREAS**, In 1839, Portuguese slavers illegally transported hundreds  
10   of Africans from present day Sierra Leone to Cuba, then a Spanish  
11   colony, in violation of treaties that outlawed the international slave  
12   trade; and  
13   **WHEREAS**, 53 of the Africans were later purchased by two enslavers  
14   and boarded onto a schooner called *La Amistad* that set sail from  
15   Havana bound for Puerto Principe (now Camagüey), Cuba; and  
16   **WHEREAS**, During the voyage, Joseph Cinque, one of the Africans  
17   aboard the ship, found a way to unshackle himself and the others  
18   aboard and planned a mutiny; and  
19   **WHEREAS**, On the morning of July 2, and in the middle of a storm, the  
20   Africans killed the captain and a crewmember using knives found  
21   in the cargo hold and captured Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montes, the two  
22   enslavers who had purchased them, before gaining control of the  
23   ship; and  
24   **WHEREAS**, Cinque ordered Ruiz and Montes to sail the *Amistad* back  
25   to Africa and, although the two men complied during the day, at  
26   night they steered the ship northward towards United States waters;  
27   and  
28   **WHEREAS**, After nearly two months at sea, a U.S. Navy ship seized  
29   the *Amistad* off the coast of Long Island, New York and escorted it  
30   to New London, Connecticut, where authorities freed Ruiz and  
31   Montes and jailed the Africans; and  
32   **WHEREAS**, Ruiz and Montes, along with the Spanish government, then  
33   went to court arguing that the *Amistad* and its cargo be returned  
34   pursuant to a 1795 treaty between Spain and the United States and  
35   that the Africans be re-enslaved; and  
36   **WHEREAS**, In January 1840, the federal district court in Connecticut  
37   ruled that the Africans aboard the *Amistad* were illegally enslaved,  
38   that they would not be returned to Cuba to stand trial, and that they  
39   should be allowed to return to Africa; and  
40   **WHEREAS**, The case was later appealed to the Supreme Court where  
41   abolitionist groups enlisted the help of former President John  
42   Quincy Adams to represent the Africans aboard the *Amistad*; and  
43   **WHEREAS**, In presenting his arguments before the court, Adams noted  
44   that the case was a test of America’s willingness to stand up for the  
45   ideals upon which it was founded saying that “the moment you  
46   come to the Declaration of Independence, that every man has a  
47   right to life and liberty, an unalienable right, this case is decided”;  
48   and

1   **WHEREAS**, On March 9, 1841, the Supreme Court ruled by a 7-1 vote  
2       that the Africans had been illegally enslaved, that they should be  
3       allowed to return to their homeland, and that they had rightfully  
4       exercised the natural right to fight for their freedom by staging a  
5       mutiny aboard the ship; and

6   **WHEREAS**, In honor of the brave men and women who fought for their  
7       freedom aboard the *Amistad* and to ensure that the history and  
8       contributions of African-Americans are properly integrated into  
9       social studies curricula in the State's public schools, the Amistad  
10      Commission was established in 2002; and

11   **WHEREAS**, To advance this purpose, the commission distributes  
12      educational materials to school districts and holds annual teacher  
13      workshops concerning the African slave trade, slavery in America,  
14      the vestiges of slavery, and the contributions African-Americans  
15      have made to our society; and

16   **WHEREAS**, The commission also continuously monitors and assesses  
17      the extent to which the materials it distributes have been included in  
18      curricula across the State and makes recommendations to the State  
19      Board of Education on the ways in which content about the slave  
20      trade, American slavery, and African-American history can be  
21      further incorporated into the New Jersey Student Learning  
22      Standards; and

23   **WHEREAS**, The State of New Jersey further recognizes the  
24      contributions and accomplishments of African-Americans by  
25      joining with other states and the federal government in designating  
26      February of each year as "Black History Month"; and

27   **WHEREAS**, It is fitting and proper to set aside a day during Black  
28      History Month to further highlight the importance of the *Amistad*  
29      case to the American abolitionist movement and to the cause of  
30      liberty and equality throughout the world; now, therefore,

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32       **BE IT RESOLVED** *by the Senate and General Assembly of the*  
33       *State of New Jersey:*

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35       1. February 28 of each year shall be designated as "Amistad  
36       Day" throughout the State of New Jersey in recognition of the  
37       importance of the *Amistad* case to the American abolitionist  
38       movement and to the causes of liberty and equality throughout the  
39       world.

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41       2. The Governor shall annually issue a proclamation calling  
42       upon public officials and the citizens of this State to observe  
43       "Amistad Day" with appropriate ceremonies, programs, and  
44       activities.

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46       3. This joint resolution shall take effect immediately.

STATEMENT

This joint resolution designates February 28 of each year as “Amistad Day” throughout the State of New Jersey in recognition of the importance of the *Amistad* case to the American abolitionist movement and to the causes of liberty and equality throughout the world. The *Amistad* case is arguably the most important legal case involving slavery to arise during the nineteenth century and has been seen by many as a test of the United States’ commitment to live up to its founding principles.

In 1839, Portuguese slavers illegally transported hundreds of Africans from present day Sierra Leone to Cuba in violation of treaties that outlawed the international slave trade. 53 of the Africans were later purchased by Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montes, two enslavers, and boarded onto a schooner called *La Amistad* that set sail from Havana bound for Puerto Principe (now Camagüey), Cuba. During the voyage, Joseph Cinque, one of the Africans aboard the ship, found a way to unshackle himself and the others aboard and staged a revolt. The Africans would go on to gain control of the ship and ordered Ruiz and Montes to sail the *Amistad* back to Africa. Although the two men complied during the day, they steered the ship northward towards United States waters at night.

The ship was later seized by the U.S. Navy off the coast of Long Island, New York, and escorted to New London, Connecticut, where authorities freed Ruiz and Montes and jailed the Africans. Ruiz and Montes, along with the Spanish government, then went to court arguing that the *Amistad* and its cargo be returned pursuant to a 1795 treaty between Spain and the United States and that the Africans be re-enslaved. The case was eventually appealed to the Supreme Court, which ruled by a 7-1 vote that the Africans had been illegally enslaved, that they should be allowed to return to their homeland, and that they had rightfully exercised their natural right to fight for their freedom by staging a mutiny aboard the ship.

Given the importance of the *Amistad* case to the American abolitionist movement and to the causes of liberty and equality throughout the world, this joint resolution calls upon the State to set aside a day during Black History Month to commemorate the men and women aboard the *Amistad* who bravely fought for their freedom both on land and at sea.