

John Quincy Adams to Roger S. Baldwin

Boston, Massachusetts, November 11, 1840.

Autograph letter signed, 1 page.

Roger S. Baldwin, Esq^r. New Haven Conn^t.

Boston 11. Nov^r. 1840.

Dear Sir

I have received your obliging Letters of the 2^d. and 4th: inst^t together with the narrative of the case to be tried before the Supreme Court of the United States, at their next January Session, of the Captives of the Amistad.

I consented with extreme reluctance at the urgent request of M^r Lewis Tappan and M^r Ellis Gray Loring, to appear before the Court as one of the Counsel for these unfortunate men; My reluctance was founded entirely and exclusively upon the consciousness of my own incompetency to do justice to their cause, In every other point of view there is in my estimation no higher object upon earth of ambition than to occupy that position.

I expect to leave this city next Monday the 16th. inst^t. for Hartford; and hope to be the next Morning Tuesday the 17th. at New Haven – I shall then desire to see and converse with you concerning the case and will if necessary devote the day to that object I have engaged to be at New York on the 18th.

I am with great respect Dear Sir

Your obed.^t Serv^t

J. Q. Adams

Notes: Adams was the first and only former president to argue before the Supreme Court. He returned to the Court because of the Amistad case in which he defended 49 illegally enslaved Mendeans. The Mendeans had rebelled on board the Spanish schooner, *La Amistad*, while being transported to Cuban plantations and forced their former owners to sail for Africa. The schooner, however, was sailed up the coast of the United States until stopped by a U.S. revenue ship off Montauk Point, N.Y. Ensuing trials in Connecticut pitted the former owners, American revenue officers, Spanish officials and the U.S. government against the Amistad captives and abolitionists. Abolitionists sought to win freedom for the Mendeans and used the trials to publicize the evils of slavery. To everyone's surprise, the District Court ruled that the Mendeans

were free, could not be claimed as property, and must be returned to Africa. The U.S. government, under pressure from Spain, appealed to the Supreme Court where, with co-counsel Baldwin, Adams argued for the Africans' freedom. They won, in what historian Howard Jones calls the most important legal case on slavery before *Dred Scott*. Eventually, private funds were raised to enable the Africans to return home. See Howard Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad*. More information about the Circuit and District Court trials is available in the papers of William S. Holabird, GLC 5636. District Attorney Holabird prosecuted the government's case at the Circuit and District Court level.