

4-1-2003

Making History Public: A Case Study of Amistad America

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Educational Studies Senior Research Project

Trinity College

Monday, December 16, 2002

Amistad America : A Public History Case Study

Amistad America's Mission Statement

AMISTAD America, Inc. is a national, non-profit educational organization. Its mission is to promote reconciliation and harmony among races through ownership and operation of Freedom Schooner *Amistad*. *Amistad* visits ports nationally and internationally as an ambassador for friendship and goodwill - it serves as an icon and catalyst for teaching the historic lessons of perseverance, cooperation, leadership, and justice inherent in The Amistad Incident of 1839 - and it is a floating classroom and monument to the millions of souls that were broken or lost as a result of the insidious Transatlantic Slave Trade. The home port for Freedom Schooner *Amistad* is Long Wharf Pier in New Haven, Connecticut.¹

Questions

Part One: Who comes to see Amistad and why during it Port stops? What is their experience like? And how do they feel about this experience?

Part Two: What type of sailor works for Amistad? How do they feel about their work and the schooner's mission?

Thesis

Amistad has the complex task of sailing a tall ship and telling the Amistad story. Because of the historical significance of this story, it appeals to those who have interests in racial issues in the United State. However, because Amistad is also a re-created

¹ Mission Statement taken from Amistad America's website www.amistadamerica.org 2002.

Baltimore Clipper², the schooner is attractive to boat enthusiasts. These factors have lead Amistad America to balance its crew with people who have previous tall ship experience with others who are passionate about the Amistad story itself. However, Amistad America has yet to find the right balance between its sailing program and it education intuitive.

Significance: The Historical Event

In 1839 over fifty Mende people were taken from Sierra Leone by Portuguese slave traders. Taken from their homes these captives soon found themselves in the geographical heart of the American slave trade, Havana Cuba. Bought by two Spanish planters the captives were shipped aboard the trading schooner *La Amistad* destined for a plantation elsewhere in Cuba. On July 1, 1839 the captives lead by Sengbe Pieh took control of the ship killing captain and cook. Being native rice farmers these now liberated people, were ill equipped to sail *La Amistad* to Sierra Leone. Eventually ending up in Long Island sound, *La Amistad* was seized by the U.S. brig *Washington* on August 24. The two surviving Spanish planters along with Captain and crew of the U.S. brig *Washington* claimed ownership over *La Amistad* and imprisoned the captives. These differentiating claims lead to a long court battle over ownership that eventually ended up in the U.S. Supreme Court. On behalf of the captives, former President John Quincy Adams argued that the captives were not slaves but free citizens of Sierra Leone, therefore they could not be claimed as property. In 1841 the Supreme Court decided in favor of the captives on the grounds that the slave trade, the actual importation of slaves

² Small, fast sailing ship developed by Chesapeake Bay (U.S.) builders in the 18th century. Its speed made it valuable for use as a privateer, for conveying perishables, and in the slave trade, and its hull design gives it claim as an ancestor of the larger of the 19th century. Most **Baltimore clippers** had two steeply raked masts that were rigged with various combinations of fore-and-aft and square sails.

not ownership of domestic slaves, was in fact illegal. The surviving thirty-five men eventually returned to their Sierra Leone.³

Many consider this proceeding to be the first major civil rights case in U.S. legal history. The Supreme Court decision would not have been possible if it were not for the various people from both White and Black ethnicities that came together and worked cooperatively for one common goal, freedom. Today Amistad America uses this story to “promote reconciliation and harmony among races” aboard the Freedom Schooner *Amistad*.

The Contemporary Issue

A public history organization must know what the public expects from their visits. They must strive to satisfy their intended audience in order to achieve their mission in actively engaging members of the public about history. In the ongoing debate over public history, a historian must decide what is the most effective strategy for this engagement. For those who plan how interpretations are going to be done, they must balance the history that they are trying to represent, with the history that the public can absorb with one visit.⁴ It's like reading the newspaper in comparison to a scholarly journal. In a news article writers are aware of the fact that they must present their most important information in the first few paragraphs. They must also write at a fourth grade level to insure that their whole audience will be able to follow what they are writing quickly and effortlessly.⁵ However, a writer for a scholarly journal writes for an “educated audience,” much more in depth, and with a larger vocabulary. The public

³ Jones, Howard. *Mutiny on the Amistad*. New York: Oxford University Press 1997.

⁴ White, Shame. *Representing Slavery: A Roundtable Discussion*. 2001. Common Place The Interactive Journal of Early American Life. <www.common-place.org>.

⁵ Wartner, Aaron. Connecticut Historical Society: Director of Communication. Personal interview. 6 December 2002.

historian must find the balance between these two worlds. They don't want to over simplify history, but they also don't want to lose their audience through over stimulation of numerous details. Amistad America stands in an even more challenging situation. In addition to trying to present history effectively to the public, they must also sail a schooner.

The Birth of an Idea

During operation Sail 1976 Warren Q. Marr II, former editor of NAACP's *Crisis Magazine* renamed an old Western Union vessel *La Amistad* to serve as one example of African America's contribution to the American maritime experience.⁶ The idea was planted and over twenty years later a replica of Amistad was launched at Mystic Seaport in Mystic, Connecticut. Today freedom schooner *Amistad* tours the country education school children and the general public about the events of 1839. *Amistad* has proven to be a very popular vessel. Last year it completed its first tour of the East coast and this year it is currently in the middle of a Gulf Coast tour. *Amistad's* signature is its physical being acts as a reminder of history's past. Some visitors come because of the historic racial issues being discussed during their tour, while others come for the sailing experience.

Methodology

From October 30th to November 3rd, twenty-nine public surveys and thirteen ship's crew surveys were administered in St. Petersburg, Florida. There were three different times public surveys were administered, school tours, public tours, and public sails. For each of these different times a member of the public would be asked if they

⁶ Amistad America <www.amistadamerica.org> 2002.

would like to partake in a study on public history organizations, the questions would be read to them, and their answers were recorded in written form by the interviewer. During both the school tours and public tours the interviews took place after the tour experience was over. During the public sails, the interview took place during the actual sailing experience. Typically the crew was interviewed during a half hour break they had during the day. The interview would take place off the ship.

The Surveys

The purpose of the public survey was to gain a basic idea of who visits Amistad? Why they visit? What do they think Amistad's mission is? And what were their impressions of their experience? The survey typically took about ten minutes depending on how detailed the interviewee answered the questions (please see public survey).

The purpose of the crew survey was to identify who works for Amistad? Whether they had past sailing experience? What are their reasons for working for Amistad?

The surveys are analyzed using qualitative thematic analysis.⁷ The surveys are divided into sub groups that best represent commonalities that occurred among different individuals. These themes are represented in graph form (see graph one, two, and three) with qualitative analysis to explain what the subgroups mean.

Results

The Public: The Generalist

⁷ Yow, Valerie Raleigh. Recording Oral History: A Practical Guide for Social Scientists. Sage Publications: 1994.

In the case of the public, the visitors can be divided into three different thematic groups. The first and least frequent were the Generalists. They made up 24% of those surveyed (please see Graph 1). The generalist represented the visitor who came to see Amistad because it was something to do. For them coming to see the schooner was like going to see a movie on a rainy day. Although they appreciated the importance and significance of the schooner, it was the fact that the schooner's visit was advertised that brought them to the ship. They viewed Amistad's visit to St. Petersburg as positive, but could not articulate on this point. These visitors did not frequent museums and Amistad was one of the only "cultural"⁸ events they had been to in the last six months.

The Historians

The Historians made up 33% of those surveyed. (Please see graph 1) The historians had very specific reasons for visiting Amistad. Unlike the generalist who viewed their visit to the schooner as something to do, the historian sought out Amistad when it came to St. Petersburg. One historian gave the following for why he came to see the schooner.

I saw the picture and I wanted to see the ship. I wanted to get a feeling for how it was. Because my grandfather was a slave until he was about nine years old.

This is a typical defined answer by this group. The historian gives a clear reason for his visit that has a historical connection to the Amistad event. That is not to say that all historians had relatives that were slaves, however, all did have some connection with

⁸ During the interview individuals were asked whether they had been to a museum or a cultural event in the last six months. All of the Generalist responded no.

history in general. Historians had previously read about, seen the movie⁹, or had general interests in African American culture. Unlike the Generalist who came to see Amistad because it was something to do, the Historians came because of their interests in history.

Historians were able to talk about the difference between their experience on Amistad from that of other museums or cultural events. One historian stated, “With Amistad it put me where those slaves were, the spot. It made me feel sort of like what they felt like.” Another historian stated, “Amistad was real. This schooner is more hands on.” These comments are a few examples of the “touch it feel it” aspect of the public’s experience. Many museums goers go to museums not because they don’t have access to artifact at home, but because they want to see the actual artifact for themselves.¹⁰

Historians came to see the schooner with well-defined expectations. Unlike the generalists who were impressed by the combination of a ship and the significant historical event, the Historian wanted more. Already being familiar with American history, they came to Amistad to not simply “see the ship,” but to engage. They wanted to learn or get a feeling from their experience. Generally speaking the Historian was not satisfied with their tour. When asked: if your primary expectations from your visit to Amistad were met, historians had this to say:

#1 I wanted to see more of what happened. More activity of what happened during slavery time and the actions that were taken.

⁹ Steven Spielberg director *Amistad* a major motion picture that depicted the Amistad events of 1839.

¹⁰ Wartner, Aaron. Connecticut Historical Society: Director of Communication. Personal interview. 6 December 2002. Many museums have put their exhibits online (www.chs.org, www.cthistoryonline.com, www.mysticseaport.org, and www.amistadamerica.org). However, many people still feel the need to actually travel to the museum to see the artifacts for themselves.

2 It was not real enough, too commercial. The pictures on the wall should have been larger. They should have some clay molds of the faces.¹¹

3 Somewhat...I would like to have been below ship and talk more. I would like to have understood the hardship and why it is so important.

4 I just wanted more information about slavery. It was important for me to learn more about this human rights case.

5 Yes, once again for me it makes me feels I can't possibly experience what these people experienced. There is a different part of me that is touched by my time here.

Out of the five statements above four give reasons for why the Historian was not satisfied with their touring experience. All four reasons are around one common theme, not enough information about the Amistad incident itself. The Historian must be put into proper context, they are visitors, who possess a knowledge about History and therefore expect to learn more when they go schooner like Amistad or a museum. When they feel that they have not been giving enough information or history has been glossed over their overall satisfaction with their experience goes down. For the most part Historians were not pleased with their experience in the context of learning more about history. However, statement # five does give positive feed back in regards to touring experience.

It is important to remember that the Historian is different than the Generalist. While the generalist is interested in the overall presence of Amistad, the Historian feels as though they have a personal investment in the schooner's presence. Therefore, when they come to the schooner they have clear expectations. Because the historian already had idea of what their experience *should* be the schooner itself acts as an artifact while

¹¹ This historian is referring to the main salon where visitors can see drawings of former captives. Please see appendix for an example of portrait.

the crew is there in a reactionary position. The Historian feels as though they know the history or at least have a general idea. They are looking for more. For example many historians note that they did not get the feeling of what it was like to be a slave. This can be interpreted as the Amistad's inability to give them a clear picture of the past. On the one hand, they appreciate the presence of the schooner because it gives them an idea of what these types of schooners were like. On the other hand, the tour itself did not give the Historian enough of an idea of what it was like to live during the time period of the Amistad incident. This was the expectation the historian was looking for when they came to visit Amistad.

The Boaters

The boaters were the largest thematic group representing 43% of those surveyed. (Please see graph 1) The boater was attracted to Amistad because they themselves have a connection with boats, sailors, or marine life. When asked why they came to see Amistad one boater commented, "I wanted to see the history, I wanted see how she was built, I am a sailor and I read John Adams. In the book there is reference made to the Amistad incident." This statement represents this group. This particular individual makes reference to boats and history. In fact, 55% of Boaters surveyed had been to a museum in the past twelve months. Meaning, Amistad was one of many cultural events they had been to in recent history.

The Boaters' main attraction to Amistad is the fact that it is a recreated Baltimore Clipper, the fact that Amistad is a type of schooner that has a significant American history, gave these boat ethicist enough reasons to come visits and learn more about the

Amistad incident. When asked: what are your primary expectations from your visit to Amistad and where these expectations met boaters had this to say:

#1 To learn more about what the story was. I wanted to know about all the materials used and the building history
Expectations met?
I was able to find all the different types of lumber used; however, I thought [Amistad] was going to be bigger.

#2 Just to get a sense of what the actual ship would have been like. Reinforced the fact this was not originally a slave ship, that it was a transporter.
Expectations met?
Yes, walking around its great to actually be able to go down bellow.

#3 I wanted to meet the captain.
Expectations met?
Yes...I would like to sail on it.

#4 Exactly what I thought I would see. To see the ship and learn a little more about the history.
Expectations met?
Yes.

There are differences between Boaters and Historians. While the Historians came to see Amistad because of the historical significance, the Boater comes because Amistad is a modern day sailing schooner. The Historian feels that the experience was not educational enough, while the boater feels that the experience was educational in regards to learning more about the schooner and how it was built. Some boaters will make reference to learning more about the African American experience, but for the most part they mentioned learning more about the actual schooner in regards to their Amistad experience.

Amistad, as a tall ship, acts as a bridge between what the Boaters may consider “mainstream” history, and the lesser known African American experience.¹² By simply being on the ship and learning about the experience, the Boater is learning about the African American maritime history. Or at least that is the idea behind Amistad’s presence. The same is true of the Historian. 38% of Historians surveyed made reference to learning more about the schooner and how she was built (see graph 2). Therefore the touring experience seems to be giving enough information about the actual schooner, but could improve on the quality of information given about the actual incident of 1839.

The Crew

The crew of Amistad represents an interesting cross section of society. Some are lifetime sailors, men and women who have dedicated their lives to being at sea, while others are using their time aboard Amistad to figure out what their next step in life is. The crew of Amistad is unique in that unlike many of the other tall ships that carry the US flag, none, have the expressed and sole mission to, “promote reconciliation and harmony among races through ownership and operation”¹³ While there are over two hundred and twenty five vessels listed as members of the American Sail Training Association¹⁴, Amistad being one of them, Amistad is the only one that makes the discussion of race a central part of its mission. Therefore, when a crewmember signs with Amistad, regardless of past sailing experience, that person is contracting on to a very different type of tall ship.

¹² What is meant by mainstream is what many consider to be traditional US history taught in High Schools. However, Amistad reminds visitors of the African American experience within the American history context. White, Shame. Representing Slavery: A Roundtable Discussion. 2001. Common Place The Interactive Journal of Early American Life. <www.common-place.org>.

¹³ Amistad America <www.amistadamerica.org> 2002.

¹⁴ The American Sail Training Association <<http://tallships.sailtraining.org>> 2002.

Crewmembers who may find sailing to be as natural as breathing may find themselves lost when talking to a member of the public about slavery. While at the same time, crewmembers whom have no tall ship sailing experience but are very knowledgeable about African American history may find themselves lost when out sailing between ports. Therefore the captain is charged with a very challenging task of balancing the crew with both people who know how to sail, and people who are motivated to speak about race to strangers for weeks at a time in cities they have never been to. The Captain must bring together these two types of crewmembers and create an environment that is conducive to working in harmony. The idea being that the ones who know how to sail will teach the others, while the ones who may not be so excited to speak with the public on daily basis will be helped by those who do.

The crew of Amistad can be divided into two thematic groups, the first group is the sailors and the second group is the interpreters (please see graph 3). The sailors are crewmembers and officers who have previous tall ship experience. Their previous tall ship sailing experience gives them a different outlook on the daily functioning of the schooner and their own interactions with the public. The interpreters are crewmembers whom may know how to sail, however, have never worked or completed extensive tall ship sailing before Amistad. When asked why they work for Amistad, a sailor is more likely to mention Sailing as their primary reason, while a Interpreter will discuss the historical significance of the Amistad event or public interaction as part of their reasons.

Sailors

1 Just to keep the ship running and give the crew a little bit of sail training.

2 I like to work on tall ships and this was a job that was available

Interpreters

1 To reach the people of the four corners of the earth to tell them about how human dignity came together as one for peace, love, and unity.

2 To do something where I would talk to a lot of people. I expected not to be this comfortable with this but I am real comfortable now.

Not all sailor and interpreters could be categorized by this method. In fact there was at least one crewmember in each group that gave an answer that was more typical of the other group than their own. For example one sailor stated, "I've been sailing professionally for the past year. I did a lot of activism in college and I saw this boat as a balance between activism and sailing. Just bringing people out for two hours doesn't really do it for me." This person is sailing for Amistad because there is a balance on this schooner between the sailing life and social significance. While one Interpreter said this, "I want to gain experience on how systems of ship work. I want to gain sailing experience." The crew unlike the public was much harder to categorize because for every general theme, there was always a significant exception to the rule.

The Interpreters focus more on the education and historical significance of the Amistad incident when they speak about their work experience. None held any positions outside of deckhand. The interpreters are in an interesting position. On the one hand they are learning what it takes to sail a tall ship. On the other hand, they are communicating with the public on a daily basis. Some times balancing the two tasks can be very challenging. Interpreters feel as though there is not enough time dedicated to telling the Amistad story, and telling it well.

Interpreters

1 I feel like I could contribute a lot to the mission but I get cut off...I feel like I could really reach the kids but I get cut off from the short time we have with the kids.

2 To teach young kids. I read the books; most of the crew follows what the office tells them to say. But that's not me. I say half of what the office tells us to say and half of what I have read.

The interpreter feels frustration when they have to shorten their education program. This may be because they have mastered retelling the story of the Amistad incident, before they have mastered tall ship sailing. Meaning, they feel as though they can speak more authoritatively about the problems with the education program, but can't do the same when speaking about their sailing experience because they are still learning this complex task. However, interpreters are not alone in this frustration.

Sailors also feel that there needs to be more organization in regards to the educating of the public. The Sailors unlike the Interpreters have previous tall ship experience. They have worked on other boats and have experience what it means to be on a ship with an education program. Although Amistad is a unique ship, the education aspect of its mission is very common among tall ships. Therefore, a Sailor brings a different perspective to the discussion of the education program on board.

Sailors

1 we need an educator on board who can support the programs. We don't have a problem sailing.

2 There is a lack of overarching guidance for the interpretation program.

Like the Historians, crewmembers of the schooner share a common concern about the quality of the information that is being given to the public. Although Interpreters and Sailors are from two different backgrounds, one having previous tall ship experience, they both share a common concern about the education program. This concern carries over into other issues that are central to Amistad's existence, its mission.

Amistad's mission is its guidance. The people who work for Amistad are familiar with it. People who visit the ship read about the mission on brochures they take home with them. In fact, it is the mission that makes Amistad the very special ship that it is. However, what a mission statement may state on paper, and what it is in reality are two different things. Crewmembers in general were either very clear about Amistad's mission or gave their own interpretation of it through their experience working for Amistad America.

The Clear Ones

1 There's a lot for education and teamwork and bringing everyone together to work as a family. To educate everyone about race.

2 To spread awareness of the Amistad incident of 1839 and its relevance to modern affairs and local issues

3 We are taking this incident and using the example we have learned from this group of Blacks who had strength and perseverance and the Whites who were willing to fight injustice. We use these lessons to say that whites and blacks can work together in unity, not just whites and blacks but all races.

Although these interpretations are not exact copies of the actual mission, crewmembers tend to give an answer that is close to actual one. This may reflect how they feel about the schooner and the work they do on a daily basis. Their positive interpretation of the mission may be one indication that they are satisfied with their work. However, there are negative interpretations of the mission. Some crewmembers felt passionate or even angry about the ways in which Amistad was operated.

Their Own Versions

1 The mission is fairly ambiguous. It has the feeling of family and brotherhood but that's not the long-term mission. I feel as though Amistad America has not defined what they will be doing in twenty years and that leaves today's mission fairly ambiguous.

2 Sometimes I am not sure what the mission is. People generally know the basics. To give some cultural connection to African Americans. Every other day it seems like they have a different mission.

3 It's a fake story. It's not the whole story.

Unfortunately the survey was unable to dig deep enough with its question to find give a different answer on why these crewmembers feel the way they do. However, what is important is that there are significant amounts of people who are a part of the ship's crew who are unclear about the actual mission of the ship. That is not to say they don't know what the stated mission is, all of the crew could state this mission. However, on a daily basis, these crewmembers did not feel the mission or did not see the mission being delivered to the public. This is a problem that Amistad America as an organization must address over the long term in order to insure that it will continue to carry out this mission decade from now.

Conclusion

Amistad America is a public history organization that must balance sailing a schooner with presenting history. The organization has been able to successfully tour the East coast twice in two years. Having reached thousands of school children and members of the public, Amistad America must be proud of this accomplishment. However, like any organization there is always room for improvement. In order for Amistad to improve its presentation of history, it must address the issues that both the Historians and crewmembers discussed in the surveys.

- Members of the public should be given more time to tour the ship and absorb their surroundings
- The crew as a whole need a member of the officers to be in charge of the education program.

- The crew needs to have senior staff articulate the details between sail training and the education program.
- All members of the schooner need to be apart of both the sail training and the education program.

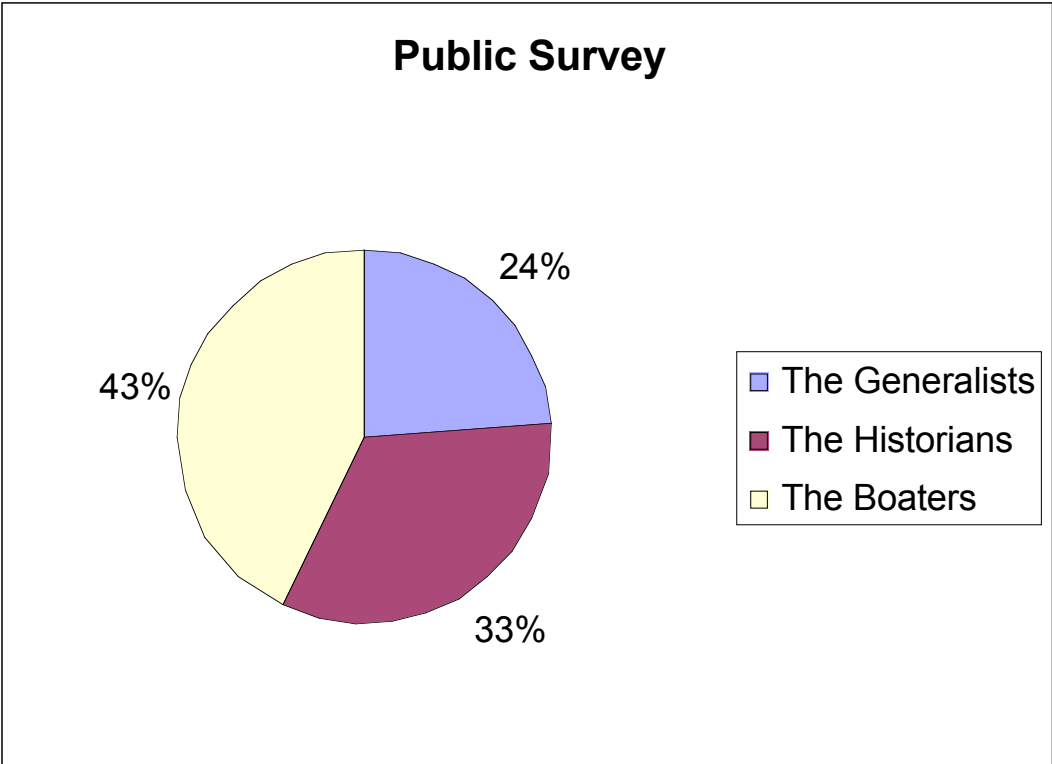
In order for Amistad to reach the next level of excellence, it must address these issues.

These issues are not issues that can be fix immediately but take the investment of time and co-operative energy on the part both the schooner's crew and office headquarters.

The education program a good, but to make it great more attention must be paid to giving the public the details of the Amistad Incident and slavery in general that they desire.

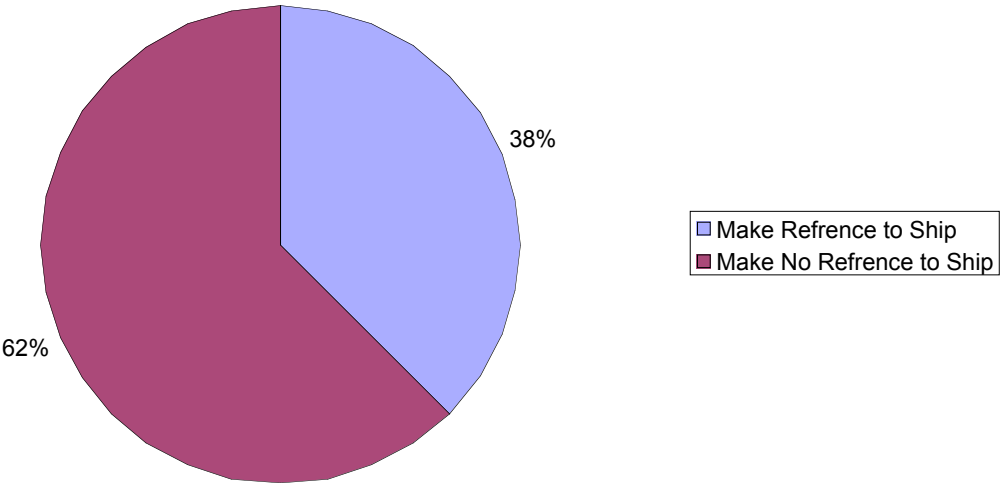
Amistad must also make sure that those that work for them know the importance of their work. At times it seemed as though some of the crewmemebers had lost touch with how important what they were doing is, however, no one can doubt that what those deckhands, mates, and captain do on a daily basis it the mission of Amistad.

Graph 1



Graph 2

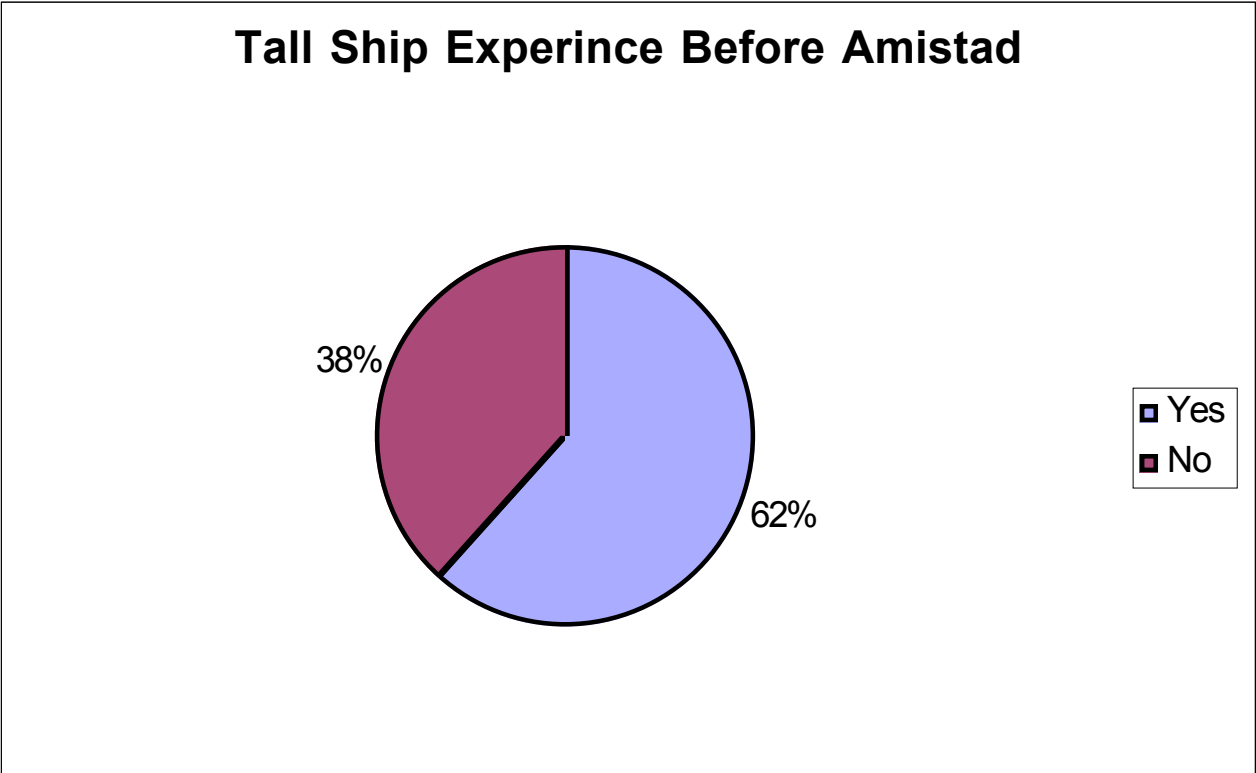
Historians Reference To Learning More About the Ship



Pictured here is Suma one of the African Captives. This and other portraits are hung in the main salon for visitors to get an idea of what the African Captives looked like. One historian made reference to these portraits stating they should be larger or maybe converted to clay molds.



Graph 3



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