Black History Month II - Amistad faces revealed - Notes

The U.S Library of Congress states:

In 1839, the Spanish slave ship Amistad set sail from Havana to Puerto Principe, Cuba. The ship was carrying 53 Africans who, a few months earlier, had been abducted from their homeland in present-day Sierra Leone to be sold in Cuba. The captives revolted against the ship's crew, killing the captain and others, but sparing the life of the ship's navigator so that he could set them on a course back to Africa. Instead, the navigator directed the ship north and west.

After several weeks, a U.S. Navy vessel seized the Amistad off the coast of Long Island. The Africans were transported to New Haven, Connecticut, to be tried for mutiny, murder, and piracy. These charges later were dismissed, but the Africans were kept in prison as the case turned to salvage claims and property rights. In a trial in Federal District Court, a group of Cuban planters, the government of Spain, and the captain of the Amistad all claimed ownership of the Africans. After two years of legal battles, the case went before the U.S. Supreme Court, which ultimately ordered that the captives be set free.

Thirty-five of the former captives returned to their homeland; the others had died at sea or while awaiting trial.

New Haven resident William H. Townsend made drawings (and in most cases recorded the names) of the Amistad captives at the time of their trial. These drawings have been preserved in the library of Yale University.

Note:

- 22 of the faces are reproduced in the attached document.
- It is unclear whether, over the course of the trial, Townsend recorded images of all 53. However, it is interesting to note that none of those whose image is captured is identified as Sengbe Pieh, often named as 'leader' of the revolt.
- Some of the names recorded appear to bear no relation to names found in present day Sierra Leone and this may be due to how they were recorded and or sounded to unfamiliar ears.
- Some names do strike a chord: Bar (probably 'Bah'); Suma, etc.
- There are smaller images with the names, followed by larger images.

Ade Daramy