

ASSEMBLY EDUCATION COMMITTEE

STATEMENT TO

ASSEMBLY JOINT RESOLUTION No. 59

STATE OF NEW JERSEY

DATED: FEBRUARY 7, 2022

The Assembly Education Committee reports favorably Assembly Joint Resolution No. 59.

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.

This bill was pre-filed for introduction in the 2022-2023 session pending technical review. As reported, the bill includes the changes required by technical review, which has been performed.