Did Cinque Enter The slave Trade?

By Lucius H. Henegan

With reference to the historical controversy which seems to have been stirred up by publication of the DAWN article, "The First Cinque" in August, the nub of the question as reflected in some of the mail DAWN has received boils down simply to "Did Cinque enter the slave trade business after returning to Africa?"

To be frank, we don't know for sure since they did not have instant replay in the media in those days and all we have to go on are letters and documents that have survived.

The sources I consulted for the DAWN article break down into three categories on this point: some say he was a slave trader, others say maybe, and still others either did not touch the subject or said they were not sure.

In the "Amistad Revolt—Slave Uprising Aboard the Spanish Schooner" by Helen Kromer (Franklin-Watts, Inc.), on page 75, she asks the same question: "What happened to Singbe (Cinque)?" after the captives were returned to their homeland. She continues:

"Over the years many different stories came from American missionaries regarding news of the former Amistad people after their return to Sierra Leone. In 1844 a permanent mission was established at Kaw Mendi on Sherboro Island.

"Some came back to the mission and stayed for short periods of time, and then left. Some were recaptured in tribal wars and sold again into slavery. Only the children stayed for any length of time.

"About Cinque—there are several stories . . . one has it that after he left the mission, life did not go so well (for him) and he returned to serve as interpreter until his death. Another account says he became a prominent and powerful chieftain among his own people and a third account says he became a slave trader, and a fourth says he settled in the West Indies."

Continuing the speculation about Cinque, Miss Kromer says, "It is hard to tell which of the stories are true. Some of the letters from the American missionaries have disappeared as well as some of the other important documents so that a complete record no longer exists. But if Cinque did go to the West Indies, he returned to Africa, for in 1879—when along in years—he returned to the mission and announced that he had come home to die."

The author writes that he was buried in a cemetery behind the mission in a "Christian service" conducted by a young black minister, the Rev. Albert P. Miller who had recently graduated from Fisk University the year before.

"*The Amistad Affair*" by Christopher Martin (Abelard-Schuman), on page 213, states:

"After a short time Cinque came back to the mission (Sierra Leone) without his Christian ways but with a new wife and a grasping hand. He quarreled with the missionaries and left them once more to return to Mendi land. He became a chief, a slave trader and eventually came back to the mission (when he did not prosper) and remained as an interpreter at the Mission."

From these efforts, as we know, sprang black schools of learning in the South such as Hampton, Talladega, LeMoyne, Fisk, Dillard, Tougaloo, Atlanta U., Houston-Tillotson also Howard University which was aided by the AMA in conjunction with the Freedmen's bureau.

One more thought. Even our most revered heroes have some blemishes. We may not like to admit them or even notice them. I'm sure we recall the oft-told incident concerning Oliver Cromwell, renown general, statesman and "lord protector of England" when he was sitting for a portrait. He said to the artist:

"I desire you would use all your skill to paint my picture truly like me, and not flatter me at all; but mark all these roughnesses, pimples, warts, and everything you see, otherwise I will never pay a farthing for it."

I hope this clears away the doubts about Cinque's alleged behavior unless somebody can come up with proof positive that he did NOT engage in slave traffic. I'll have to stand with my sources which say that all indications point to the fact he did. I still admire him as a brave man and one whose place in history is fixed—warts and all.

We would have probably never heard of Cinque or had the Cinque legend if (1) the ship's cook had not in a moment of macabre and grotesque humor told Cinque that the captives would be cut up, cooked and eaten by the *Amistad* crew; (2) a coastal storm had not delayed the ship's passage from making into port on schedule.

"*Black Odyssey*" by Mary Cable (Viking Press) states:

"Not long after Cinque returned to his homeland (April 1842) one of the American missionaries, James Steele, wrote to a friend that Cinque had 'relapsed' again." But was happy to note that "we have freed ourselves from the influence of that villainous Cinque who has caused us most of our troubles. It was apparent he preferred a career as a trader and businessman rather to that of missionary."

It is understandable that some readers of the DAWN article reacted the way they did because old cherished legends don't die easily or fade away (like old soldiers) but hang on and on.

In the context of the 1800's we have to remember that slavery was a way of life for many people in the "civilized" world. It was an instant "cash crop," like trafficking in narcotics today.

I have just finished reading a book called *"The Free Negro in Ante-Bellum Louisiana"* by H. E. Sterk in which there is a whole chapter devoted to free black men in that state who themselves owned slaves.

The correspondent from Dillard University was correct about some good results that flowed from the Amistad episode. The American Missionary Association was a direct outgrowth.

Table of Contents

2 Did Cinque enter the slave trade?
4 Frizzies can ruin your new year
6 Ex-pro lineman calls own plays
Quick Quotes
7 John Brown: 115 years later
9 Vigor and vision makes business queen
14 Signs point to '75 as 'up-down' year
16 Blue collar jobs on rise in cities
18 Ex-WAC recalls historic decision
19 Historic Inauguration
21 Deadwood Dick among great cowboys
22 Black General heads AF finance network
23 'Show and Tell'

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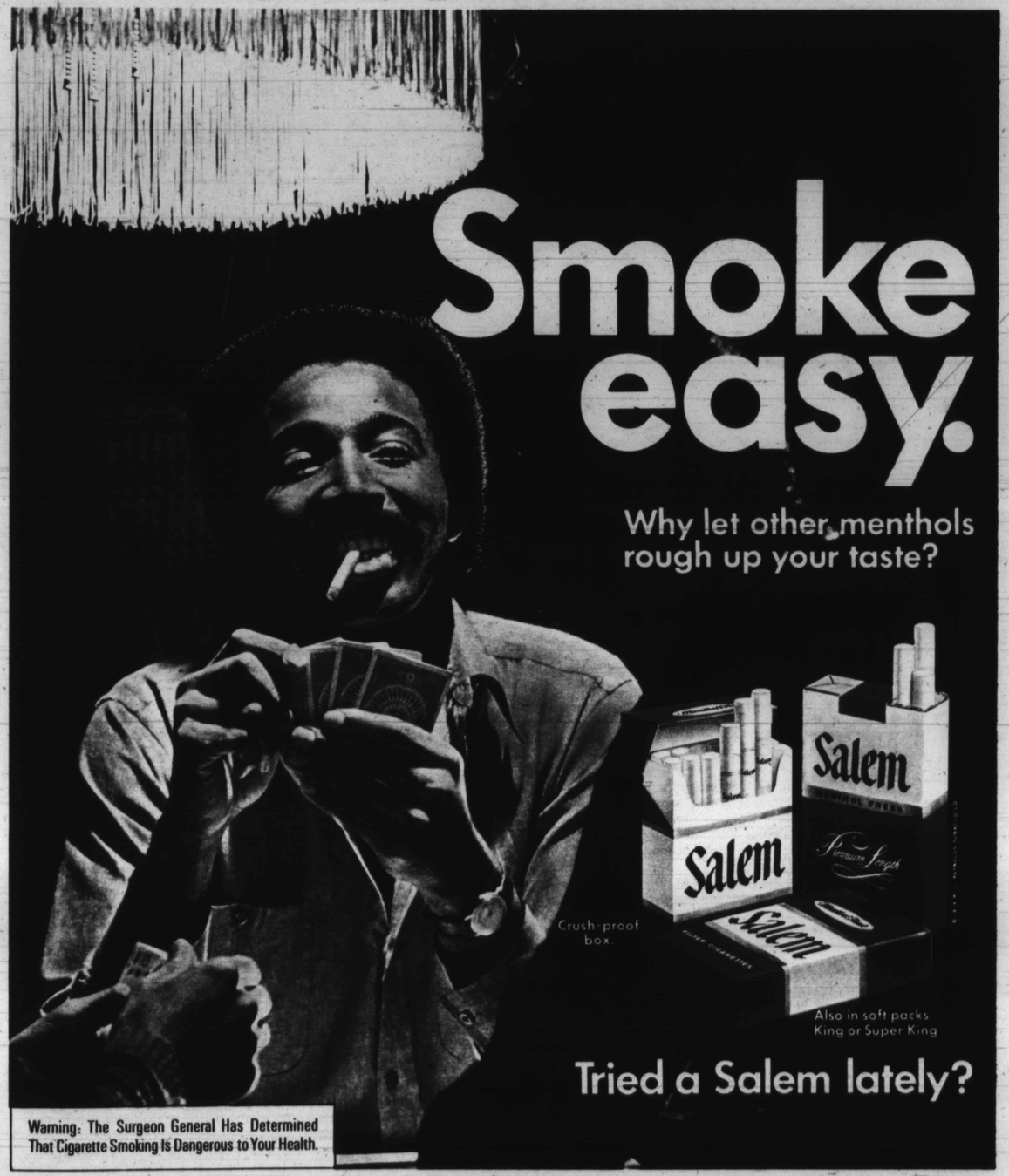

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