Cowles-Amistad Letters Reveal Life of Africans
Rich historic content comes to light beginning Juneteenth at Connecticut Historical Society

Hartford, CT (June 2013) – In honor of Juneteenth, the oldest nationally celebrated commemoration of the ending of slavery in the United States, on June 19, a special exhibit including the four Amistad related letters and their transcriptions will open at the Connecticut Historical Society (CHS) in Hartford.

Immediately after acquiring 94 historically-significant letters written by Charlotte Cowles of Farmington, CT to her brother Samuel between 1833 and 1846 the CHS began the tedious task of transcribing the letters and analyzing for content. CHS acquired the letters at auction on March 21, 2013, from Swann Auction Galleries with a winning bid of $66,000 (after fees) and took physical possession of the batch about a week later. A collaborative, money-pooling effort helped CHS win with the help of Farmington Historical Society, Farmington Bank, David and Mary Dangremond and others in the local community.

While the bulk of the letters, referred to as the Charlotte and Samuel Cowles Correspondence, were focused on the life and activities of the 13-25 year old young female Charlotte, four letters give rich, historic insight into the lives of the former captives of the Amistad ship. Several others mention the abolitionist movement in Connecticut as well.

Barbara Austen, archivist at the CHS, spent over a month transcribing all of the letters, word-by-word, into legible documents, as preparation was made to make them accessible to the public. The “Mende” refer to the fifty-two West African tribesmen who were onboard the schooner Amistad, during the famous mutiny.

“The most remarkable letters are those that describe Charlotte Cowles’ personal contact with the Mende and her observations on their interactions and behavior both with Farmington residents and among themselves,” remarks Austen. She continues, “Dr. Marcus Rediker, a scholar from Pennsylvania, has already read these letters and finds that they show a shift in the power structure among the Mende from what would have been traditional if they were home.”

The other letters in the collection reveal the divisions within Farmington between those who were pro-slavery and those who were anti-slavery. The names of nationally known abolitionists who came to Farmington is impressive, as are Charlotte’s breadth and depth of reading, including scholarly, popular literature, and abolitionist newspapers.

Beginning Wednesday, June 19, in conjunction with the celebration of Juneteenth, a special exhibit including the four Amistad related letters or their transcriptions will open at the CHS in Hartford. In addition, all 94 letters will be made available online to the public by going to CTHistoryOnline.org and using search term “Charlotte Cowles”.

Year-round programs and research aides are currently being developed surrounding the content of the letters to include readings, narratives, exhibits and a symposium.
“Having all the letters transcribed and digitally available in just two months since purchasing them, means they're now all available for researchers and historians. We're really excited to work with researchers and start building programs and educational components around these historically significant letters.” explains **Kate Steinway**, CHS director

The Connecticut Historical Society is located at 1 Elizabeth Street in Hartford. For more, visit [www.chs.org](http://www.chs.org) or call (860) 236-5621.

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**About the Connecticut Historical Society (@ConnHistSoc):**

Founded in 1825, the Connecticut Historical Society is a non-profit museum, library, research and education center. CHS strives to inspire and foster a life-long interest in history and ignite a passion for learning about history through research assistance, exhibitions, tours and programs for all ages. Visit [www.chs.org](http://www.chs.org) or call 860-236-5621.