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Phrenology and the Science of Race in Antebellum America

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ABSTRACT This paper highlights the circumstances of the *Amistad* case to discuss the connection between phrenology and race in antebellum American society. The trial of the *Amistad* captives in 1840–41 occurred at a time when opinions about racial differences were evolving into scientific theories about racial hierarchies. Phrenology was a popular science disseminated through publications, itinerant practitioners, and visual exhibitions that reinforced long-held beliefs about race. As subjects of phrenological investigation, the African men and children of the *Amistad* were examined, measured, and assessed within the context of ongoing debates about race and about American slavery.

Phrenology, the science that claimed an individual's character and talents could be determined by examining the size and shape of the head, arrived in the United States in the early nineteenth century and flourished widely for over half a century. Though phrenology is no longer considered science in the modern sense of the word, its popularity and influence in antebellum America illustrate the way scientific ideas were adopted into social, political, and cultural practices, and, in turn, how the goals of scientific inquiry and the dissemination of scientific knowledge were shaped by social and cultural circumstances and agendas. More often than not, scientific developments were employed to reinforce prevailing norms about social relations. Phrenology was no exception to this practice; phrenologists based their assessments of mental capacity and behavioral traits on assumed inherent physical and mental differences between races.

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My essay joins the current endeavor among scholars to explore how scientific developments influenced American society. Though phrenology has received a fair amount of attention from scholars over the years, earlier scholars took a hindsight approach to the subject—emphasizing phrenology as pseudo-science rather than an innovation taken seriously by contemporaries. More recent scholarship acknowledges phrenology's position within mainstream scientific inquiry in the early nineteenth century. This renewed interest in phrenology emphasizes how thoroughly phrenology was embedded in American culture and society. The principles of phrenology were widely disseminated through publications, itinerant practitioners, and visual exhibitions. This exposure acquainted Americans with phrenology's view of the human mind, and it enabled Americans to apply phrenology's ideas to many aspects of society, including art, education, and reform. In all these areas, Americans used phrenology to explore long-standing assumptions about race.

Given the general public's familiarity with phrenology, it is not surprising that proslavery advocates and abolitionists employed phrenological evidence to serve their causes. My essay examines the case of the *Amistad* captives to highlight the connection between phrenology and race in antebellum America. The trial of the *Amistad* captives in 1840–41 occurred at a time when new scientific theories about race and racial hierarchies bolstered long-standing opinions about racial differences. As subjects of phrenological investigation, the African men and children of the *Amistad* were examined, measured, and displayed. Phrenologists presented their findings on the captives to the American public within the context of debates on slavery, abolition, and the place of black Americans in a country dominated by white Americans.¹

1. One of the earliest twentieth-century works on the history of phrenology in the United States is John D. Davies, *Phrenology, Fad and Science: A 19th Century American Crusade* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955). Madeleine B. Stern's *Heads and Headlines: Phrenological Fowlers* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972) details the careers of the most successful phrenologists in America, Orson and Lorenzo Fowler. Recent studies include Ann Fabian, *The Skull Collectors: Race, Science, and America's Unburied Dead* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), Courtney Thompson, "Criminal Minds: Medicine, Law, and the Phrenological Impulse in America, 1830–1890" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 2015), and Carla Bittel, *Organs of the Mind: Gender, Phrenology, and Nineteenth-century American Science* (forthcoming). Current scholarship that touches on the scientific context of phrenology in the early United States includes Robyn Lily Davis, *Science in the American Style, 1690–1820: Texts, Ideas, and Objects in Popular Practice* (forthcom-

THE SCIENCE OF RACE

Anglo-Americans had long asserted white superiority and black inferiority. Much of this claim rested on spurious anecdotal evidence—from travelers' tales that depicted African women as beasts (so much so that they mated with apes) to Jefferson's anthropological observations in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787). Jefferson's remarks on behavior, talents, aptitudes, and physical traits were derived from a taxonomy of race that pitted two different theories about human origins against each other: polygenesis and monogenesis. Race was key to both these theories.²

Monogenists and polygenists agreed that there were five separate human types: Caucasian, Ethiopian, Mongolian, American, and Malay. Each type possessed physiologically unique characteristics. The two theories differed only in the origins of human types. Monogenists asserted that all humans

ing), and Andrew J. Lewis, *A Democracy of Facts: Natural History in the Early Republic* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

2. Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 47. In the section titled "Laws" Jefferson wrote: "I advance it therefore as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to the whites in the endowments of both body and mind. It is not against experience to suppose, that different species of the same genus, or varieties of the same species, may possess different qualifications. Will not a lover of natural history then, one who views the gradations in all the races of animals with the eye of philosophy, excuse an effort to keep those in the department of man as distinct as nature has formed them? This unfortunate difference of color, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people"; Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1787; repr., Richmond: J. W. Randolph, 1853), 155. Though Jefferson wrote of distinct races, the term *race* was not used consistently until the mid-nineteenth century. Many writers used the term *nations*. The American Samuel G. Morton defined *race* in the following way in 1848: "But it is necessary to explain what is here meant by the word *race*. I do not use it to imply that all its divisions are derived from a single pair; on the contrary, I believe that they have originated from several, perhaps even from many pairs, which were adapted, from the beginning, to the varied localities they were designed to occupy; and the Fuegians, less migratory than the cognate tribes, will serve to illustrate this idea. On other words, I regard the American nations as the true *autochthones*, the primeval inhabitants of this vast continent; and when I speak of their being of one race or of one origin, I allude only to their indigenous relation to each other, as shown in all those attributes of mind and body which have been so amply illustrated by modern Ethnography"; Morton, "An Account of a Craniological Collection with Remarks on the Classification of Some Families of the Human Race," *Transactions of the American Ethnological Society* 2 (1848): 219.

had one common source (compatible with the Christian Creation narrative). Polygenists, on the other hand, argued that humans originated in different places around the globe, and notable physiological differences were evidence of these distinct beginnings. Overlaid with this human taxonomy was an argument for racial hierarchies, embraced by both theories, which placed Caucasians at the summit. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, generally credited with identifying five distinct human types, asserted that Caucasians were “the primary or immediate of these five principal Races.” Both Mongolians and Ethiopians were extreme deviations from this ideal, and Native Americans and Malays were somewhere in between.³

By the early nineteenth century, the science of race included not just descriptive distinctions between races, but a measurement of difference as well. Craniometry confirmed Blumenbach’s argument for distinct human types. The first to publish data on the exterior measurement of skulls was the Dutch anatomist Petrus Camper in 1794. Camper’s “facial angle” was measured vertically on the skull from the incisors to the most prominent part of the cranium and horizontally from the base of the nose to the ear. The angle of intersection provided a numerical comparison of one skull with another. Camper concluded that the facial angle differed by race and by species. Asians and Africans both displayed a 70-degree angle, whereas Europeans had one of 80 degrees. Though Camper did not explicitly articulate a link between intellectual capacity and his measurements, he ordered his skulls according to facial angle, beginning with an orangutan, then humans. Europeans came closest to the sine qua non of racial beauty, and Africans were nearest to the ape.⁴

3. Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, *A Manual of the Elements of Natural History* (London: W. Simpkin and R. Marshall, 1825), 37. One of the leading proponents of monogenism, George-Louis Leclerc de Buffon, posited that difference and superiority, or inferiority, among humanity resulted from a degeneration caused by environment. Buffon was Jefferson’s *bête noir*. A good account of Jefferson’s anxieties over Buffon’s opinion of American nature is Lee Alan Dugatkin’s *Mr. Jefferson and the Giant Moose: Natural History in Early America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). For Buffon’s claims about latitude and ideal humans—climate-based distinctions and hierarchies—see Thierry Hoquet, “Biologization of Race and Racialization of the Human: Bernier, Buffon, Linnaeus,” in Nicolas Bancel, Thomas David, and Dominic Thomas, eds., *The Invention of Race: Scientific and Popular Representations* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 23.

4. Miriam Claude Meijer, “Cranial Varieties in the Human and Orangutan Species,” in Bancel et al., *The Invention of Race*, 33–47; Francesco Panese, “The Creation of the ‘Negro’ at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century: Petrus Camper, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, and Julien-Joseph Virey,” in Bancel et al., *The Invention of Race*, 52. Fabian, *The Skull Collectors*, 33.

The American Samuel Morton contributed experiments with internal cranial capacity to Camper's craniometric data. Morton collected skulls from every continent, enlisting paid and unpaid skull collectors to rob Native American burial sites and Egyptian tombs, and to scavenge for corpses of unclaimed almshouse inmates in Philadelphia and elsewhere.⁵ Morton used his ever-expanding collection of skulls to measure the cranial interior. He did this by filling craniums with sifted white mustard seed. (Morton later remeasured the skulls using lead shot because the shot packed more consistently than the seed.) The conclusion he drew from this less-than-rigorous exercise was that the five races (as identified by Blumenbach) differed significantly in skull capacity. The means of his measurements in cubic inches are as follows: Caucasian 87, Ethiopian 78, Mongolian 83, Native American 82, Malay 81. Nevertheless, Morton was not prepared to say that smaller brains meant lesser abilities. In an introductory essay to his book on Native American skulls, *Crania Americana* (1839), Morton employed anthropological description to portray the inherent traits in the Negro race. They had "little invention, but strong powers of imitation, so that they readily acquire the mechanic arts." Negroes also had "a great talent for music, and all their external senses are remarkably acute." He noted there was much difference of opinion concerning the intellectual character of the race: "some authors estimate it at a very low scale, whilst others insist that the germ of mind is as susceptible of cultivation in the Negro as in the Caucasian."⁶

5. Fabian, *The Skull Collectors*, 99.

6. Morton conceded that the rare occurrence of "superior mental powers" might be attributed to the fact that "the advantages of education have been inadequately bestowed on them." Samuel George Morton, M.D., *Crania Americana; or, A Comparative View of the Skulls of Various Aboriginal Nations of North and South America to which is Prefixed an Essay on the Varieties of the Human Species* (Philadelphia: J. Dobson, 1839), 253; Stephan Jay Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1981), 53, 87–88. Morton's second book, *Crania Aegyptiaca* (1844), dealt exclusively with ancient Egyptians. Morton's successor in craniometry was the Philadelphia physician J. Aitken Meigs. Meigs was more direct in linking cranial capacity to racial hierarchies: "But the chief value of these osteological differentia lies in their perfect applicability to man, and the facility with which they enable us to distinguish between the various human types. Thus, in the best developed and most intellectual races, the supra-orbital ridge is smooth, well carved, and not much developed; as we descend towards the lower types, it becomes more and more marked, until, in the African and Australian heads, it has attained its maximum development." J. Aitken Meigs, "The Cranial Characteristics of the Races of Men," in George R. Gliddon and Josiah Clark Nott, eds., *Indigenous Races of the Earth; or, New Chapters of Ethnological Inquiry* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1857), 207.

Craniometrics, though increasingly applied to the study of mankind, did not have a large readership. Morton's first book, *Crania Americana*, was priced at the twenty-first-century equivalent of five hundred dollars. This was clearly not a study designed to reach a popular audience. But craniometry, and the claims about racial hierarchies associated with these metric experiments, influenced another group of investigators who also posited theories about the human brain: phrenologists. At the same moment that Morton and others were busy measuring the unburied dead, Americans and Europeans were paying equally close attention to the heads of living men and women. It was the phrenologists who had a popular platform from which to articulate, in Foucault's words, the "anatomy-politics of the negro."⁷

PHRENOLOGY IN AMERICA

Phrenology was the perfect science for the preoccupations of the antebellum era. Riding the crest of reform ideologies that emphasized human perfectibility, phrenology dovetailed nicely with temperance, prison reform, and health reform. Moreover, this "democratic utopianism" wrested authority from professionals and emphasized a layperson's ability to understand, and care for, his or her own physical and mental health. The headline for many of Orson and Lorenzo Fowler's phrenology publications, for example, emphasized this declaration of independence: "To *know ourselves* is a matter of the greatest importance, and there is no other means by which we can acquire this knowledge so well, as by the aid of Phrenology."⁸

Public lectures in the 1830s by the visiting European authors Johann Gaspar Spurzheim and George Combe spurred the popularity of phrenology in the United States. Before that time, curious American physicians and a handful of laypersons read, discussed, and collected texts and objects related to the new science. American interest in the science was based on firsthand encounters with the European theorists and practitioners and with British publications for sale at bookshops and publishing offices in the United States.⁹ This American vanguard knew that phrenology, first promoted by the Viennese physician Franz Joseph Gall in the 1790s, offered a

7. Quoted in Panese, "The Creation of the 'Negro' at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century," 58.

8. Peter McCandless, "Mesmerism and Phrenology in Antebellum Charleston: 'Enough of the Marvelous,'" *Journal of Southern History* 58, no. 2 (1992): 200. Fowler advertisement in Barnum's American Museum, *Catalogue or Guide Book of Barnum's American Museum, New York* (New York, 1850); emphasis in original.

9. There are many advertisements in the American newspapers for Combe's *System of Phrenology*, available at bookstores and circulating libraries.

radical way of thinking about the mind and body and the connection between the two.

Gall based his theory on the idea that the brain is the organ of the mind, an organ composed of twenty-seven innate faculties. The power of a specific faculty depended on its size. Gall drew on earlier studies that suggested the skull takes its outward shape from the shape and size of the brain. Gall's twenty-seven faculties (later phrenologists added to this number) were categorized into five groups: affective (such as amativeness and destructiveness), sentiments (love of approbation, veneration), intellectual (hearing, sight), perspective (form, number, tune), and reflective (comparison, causality). The skull became a map, charting exactly where these faculties lay and how large they were. Balance was key to a healthy mind: an individual might have a large destructiveness faculty, but if an equally large veneration faculty tempered destructiveness, he or she would not be murderous or violent. Gall called his creation "mental -science," or *Schädellehre*. Though Gall published his theory and gave public lectures in Europe in the early 1800s, it was not until Johann Gaspar Spurzheim lectured in Britain in 1814 that phrenology caught the public's attention. Whereas Gall had lectured to elites, Spurzheim lectured to a broad audience of professionals and lay-people—men and women.¹⁰

In the United States there was sufficient acquaintance with the new science as early as 1810 for an academy for young men in Philadelphia to announce that its curriculum included phrenology. A decade later, when Americans began their own phrenology societies, the first of these was in Philadelphia. A group of physicians formed the Philadelphia Phrenological Society in 1822, the same year the first American edition of George Combe's *Essays on Phrenology* was published there. The Philadelphians immediately ordered a complete set of casts prepared by the Edinburgh Phrenological Society. This collection of national crania was sold as a series of thirty preparations representing all races and ethnic groups. Two years later the Philadelphia-trained physician Charles Caldwell published the first American book on the subject, *Elements of Phrenology* (1824), and lectured

10. George Combe, *Elements of Phrenology*, 7th ed. (Edinburgh: MacLauchlan & Stewart, 1850), v–vii. The theory that the skull takes its outward shape from the shape and size of the brain was not new, but Gall's application of the theory to the "reading" of a skull was his innovation. John Van Wyhe, "The Diffusion of Phrenology through Public Lecturing," in Aileen Fyfe and Bernard Lightman, eds., *Science in the Marketplace: Nineteenth-century Sites and Experiences* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 62. Franz Joseph Gall, *The Anatomy and Physiology of the Nervous System in General, and of the Brain in Particular*, . . . (London, 1815).

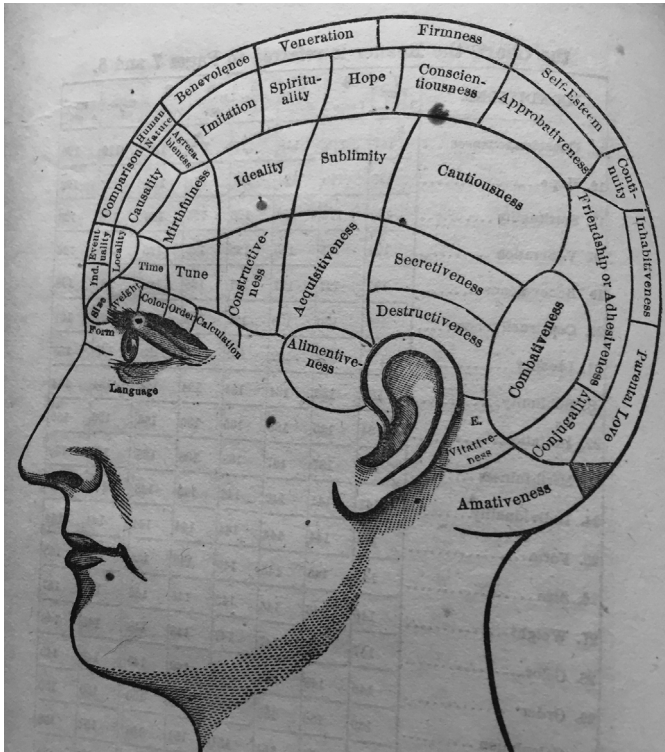


Figure 1. O. S. Fowler and L. N. Fowler, *New Illustrated Self-Instructor in Phrenology and Physiology* (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1859), front matter. Author's collection.

in the northern states. By 1830 phrenology was a legitimate field for American scientific study: the University of Maryland granted the first medical degree with a focus on phrenology that year.¹¹

Phrenology was not merely admired by a handful of practitioners. Phrenologists promoted the science, and they strove to serve as broad a clientele

11. *The Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* (Edinburgh) 1 (December 1823–August 1824): vii; Matthew H. Kaufman, *Edinburgh Phrenological Society: A History* (Edinburgh: William Ramsay Henderson Trust, 2005), 127; Robert E. Riegel, “The Introduction of Phrenology to the United States,” *American Historical Review* 39, no. 1 (October 1933): 73–78; “At the Public Commencement held on Monday, the instant, in the University of Maryland, the degree of Doctor of Medicine was conferred on the following gentlemen—Leonard C. Taylor of Virginia thesis on Phrenology,” *Baltimore Patriot*, April 9, 1830.

as possible, at one and the same time proselytizing the virtues of phrenological analysis and making a living by doing so. Spurzheim's speaking tour in New England in 1832, brief though it was (he died three months after his arrival), fostered both professional and popular interest in the science. Itinerant phrenologists soon spread out over the countryside, stimulating curiosity about this novel method for understanding oneself and others. George Combe, for example, drew paying audiences of over three hundred in Boston, New York, and Philadelphia in the late 1830s.¹²

Practical phrenologists spanned a spectrum from physicians and anatomists, who tied their lectures and publications closely to dissection and measurement, to itinerant lecturers with no medical training who charged a fee for a reading and who spoke extensively about the phrenological organs and their relationship to character and behavior. The most famous of these self-trained phrenologists were the Fowler brothers, Orson and Lorenzo. Orson credited his classmate at the Amherst Academy, Henry Ward Beecher, with introducing him to the science: "In 1833, I borrowed "Combe's Elements of Phrenology," and a phrenological bust, from my classmate, Henry Ward Beecher, and began its study in right down good earnest, without a teacher, but with zeal." The Fowlers' phrenology empire—books, a journal, an almanac, and offices in England and America—was part of an expanding popular culture. In one of his early books, Orson Fowler commented, "But to say the least, this examining heads affords a great amount of innocent amusement, and a very interesting subject of conversation and discussion; and, more than any and every other method which could be devised, is calculated to promulgate the science by bringing it in a tangible and exciting form before the community at large." Drawn by curiosity or a

12. Christopher Columbus Baldwin, librarian at the American Antiquarian Society in Worcester, recorded in 1834 that "William Bentley Fowle Esq. of Boston came to see me today and remained with me two days and a half . . . of late years has been at the head of a school for young ladies. Recently he has made himself famous by his success as a Lecturer on Phrenology"; Baldwin, *A Place in My Chronicle: A New Edition of the Diary of Christopher Columbus Baldwin, 1829–1835*, ed. Jack Larkin and Caroline Sloat (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 2010), 205. Fowle was head of the Boston Female Monitorial School. By the 1820s phrenology generated enough popular interest to be the subject of satire. James Kirke Paulding's *The Merry Tales of the Three Wise Men of Gotham* (New York: G. and C. Carvill, 1826) lampooned lawyers, Robert Owen's utopian experiments, and Gall's phrenology. Combe conveniently included attendance figures for the most of the cities he visited. George Combe, *Notes on the United States of North America, during a Phrenological Visit in 1838–9–40*, 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Maclachlan, Stewart & Co., 1841) 1:364, 366, 3:451.

desire for entertainment, men and women spent money on readings, publications, and lectures.¹³

The Fowlers, like many other itinerant phrenologists, lectured at venues already well attended by the general public, especially lyceums and museums. Before the Fowlers opened their first office in Philadelphia, in 1838, Orson Fowler lectured at Peale's Baltimore Museum. With charts, head casts, and skulls on hand, he instructed his audiences with visual, tangible illustrations of the principles of phrenology.¹⁴ This emphasis on seeing—what pirates, robbers, and heroic men looked like—reinforced one of the central claims of phrenology: visual information was an important part of assessing character. Phrenology readings assigned numerical evaluations to the brain's faculties, but visual comparisons and evaluations were equally important. Phrenology went hand in hand with physiognomy, an ancient practice revitalized by Johann Caspar Lavater at the same moment Gall devised phrenology. One could not easily assess a stranger's cranial formation at a glance, but knowledge derived from the shape of the face, position of the eyes and ears, expression, and gesture provided complementary, and useful, information.¹⁵

When the Fowlers opened offices in Philadelphia and New York City, their establishments were located within easy reach of other cultural and entertainment venues. In Philadelphia, Orson Fowler opened the Phrenological Museum at 210 Chestnut Street, between Sixth and Seventh streets. This was a middle-class shopping district: George Oates's Piano Forte and Music Rooms were next door. Roussel's Perfumery was two blocks east. A "Confectioner & Fruiterer" and a "Comb and Fancy Store," where women

13. Orson Fowler, *Human Science; or, Phrenology* (Philadelphia: National Publishing Co., 1873), 213–17; cited in Stern, *Heads and Headlines*, 213. Orson Fowler, *Fowler's Practical Phrenology* (Philadelphia, 1840), 421.

14. Advertisement for the Baltimore Museum and Gallery of Fine Arts, *Baltimore Gazette and Daily Advertiser*, February 15, 1836.

15. An English translation of Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* was published in Boston in 1794. A briefer (and less expensive) *Pocket Lavater* (New York) appeared in 1817. Americans were quite familiar with the principles of physiognomy. Politicians such as Henry Clay and Daniel Webster were described for newspaper readers in physiognomic terms. Several American artists, notably William Sidney Mount and Hiram Powers, enthusiastically adopted both phrenology and Lavater's physiognomic principles in paintings and sculpture. Charles Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection: Phrenology and the Fine Arts in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). See also Melissa Percival and Graeme Tytler, eds., *Physiognomy in Profile: Lavater's Impact on European Culture* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2005).

might purchase “silver pencils, fancy soaps, pocket books,” were one block away on Market Street. A few blocks farther north was the museum building, an entertainment venue that housed Peale’s Museum and Nathan Dunn’s Chinese Collection, and where George Combe delivered phrenology lectures in 1838.¹⁶

In New York, the Fowler’s Phrenological Cabinet was one block from P. T. Barnum’s American Museum. Close proximity to Barnum’s was advantageous for the Fowlers, and they knew it: they placed an advertisement in the 1850 guide to the museum. Just as Barnum sought to appeal to the curious, often with spectacle rather than instruction, so, too, the Fowlers described the busts, casts, and skulls on view at the Phrenological Cabinet in terms designed to elicit excitement; “heads of the most distinguished men that ever lived” along with the skulls of “Egyptian Mummies, Pirates, Robbers, Murderers and Thieves” highlighted the sensational. And to encourage visitors who might later pay for phrenological readings, the Cabinet’s exhibition was free of charge.¹⁷

The Fowlers were on to a good thing; travelers and social commentators recorded the eagerness with which Americans embraced phrenology. The Englishwoman Harriet Martineau observed, “When Spurzheim was in America, the great mass of society became phrenologists in a day, wherever he appeared; and ever since itinerant lecturers have been reproducing the same sensation in a milder way, by retailing Spurzheimism, much deteriorated, in places where the philosopher had not been.” In Richmond, Virginia, and Charleston, South Carolina, Martineau noted that “all caps and wigs are pulled off, and all fair tresses disheveled in the search after organization.” The New Yorker David Reese Meredith singled out phrenology as one of the popular fads taken up by Americans in the 1830s: “They have swallowed Maria Monk, abolitionism, and homoeopathia; and are now equally busy in bolting down Phrenology and Animal Magnetism.”¹⁸ In contrast to Meredith’s caustic treatment of the science, the author Edgar Allan Poe asserted phrenology’s legitimacy. In a review of Mrs. L. Miles’s *Phrenology* (1835), Poe wrote: “Phrenology is no longer to be laughed at. It

16. A. M’Elroy’s *Philadelphia Directory for 1839* (Philadelphia: A. M’Elroy, 1839).

17. Barnum’s American Museum opened January 1, 1842, on the southeast corner of Broadway and Ann Street. The Phrenological Cabinet was at Clinton Hall—one block away. Barnum’s American Museum, *Catalogue*.

18. David Reese Meredith, *Humbugs of New-York: Being a Remonstrance against Popular Delusion, Whether Science, Philosophy, or Religion* (New York: J. S. Taylor, 1838), 21.

is no longer laughed at by men of common understanding. It has assumed the majesty of a science; and, as a science, ranks among the most important which can engage the attention of thinking beings.”¹⁹ But phrenology was laughed at. In the 1830s the engraver and cartoonist David Claypoole Johnston published annual collections of visual satire on American manners, habits, and political practices. A considerable portion of *Scraps* number 7 (1837) was devoted to phrenology.²⁰ These cartoons and critical comments demonstrate that phrenology had a large (if somewhat skeptical) audience in the 1830s and 1840s. While the science held the public’s attention, phrenology permeated American life: education, reform, art, and entertainment.²¹ It is not surprising that phrenologists turned their attention to the most pressing issue of the era—race.

PHRENOLOGY AND RACE

Just at the time that Americans were introduced to phrenology in a variety of cultural and entertainment venues, the balance of opinion about race was shifting toward a belief that difference was immutable and unchanging. Hosea Easton and Samuel Stanhope Smith were perhaps the last American defenders of an environmentalist theory of difference. Climate, diet, education, and physical labor all played a role in shaping an individual’s character, intellect, and, according to some, skin color. Smith, a Presbyterian minister and president of what is now Princeton University, defended environmentalism because he saw it as a consequence of a unified theory of creation: Christian theology required environmentalism. Smith’s *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (1810), like many early ethnographies, dealt anecdotally with claims about environmental influences. He drew a sharp contrast between blacks in northern

19. Edgar Allan Poe, *Essays and Reviews* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 329. David S. Reynolds notes that Poe’s regard for phrenology is evident in the character of his detective C. Auguste Dupin. It is Dupin’s phrenologic analysis that gives him a talent for solving crimes. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (New York: Knopf, 1988), 246.

20. *Scraps* was, in Jack Larkin’s words, “a sustained visual performance, overwhelming the reader with images.” Johnston’s annual publications each sold more than three thousand copies, from Maine to South Carolina; Larkin, “What He Did for Love,” *Common-place* 13, no. 3 (2013), www.common-place-archives.org/vol-13/no-03/larkin.

21. For a discussion of phrenology’s influence on artists, see Colbert, *A Measure of Perfection*.

states and slaves in the South: “In some of the New England states, for example, we remark, in the body of the people, a certain composed and serious gravity in the expression of the countenance, the result of the sobriety of their domestic education, and of their moral and religious, their industrious and economical habits, which pretty obviously distinguishes them from the natives of most of the states in the southern portion of the Union.” To Smith it was clear that the circumstances of slavery, generation after generation, degraded natural talents and abilities. What scientists saw when they measured, examined, and observed enslaved people was the result of centuries of physical and psychological ill-treatment.²²

Hosea Easton’s writing was inspired by a lifetime of personal experience of prejudice against people of color in New England. Easton was a founding member of the National Colored Convention (NCC), an organization that aimed to reverse the effects of generations of discrimination through an ambitious program of “uplift”—establishing schools, literary societies, and temperance organizations in the North.²³ Easton’s pamphlet *A Treatise on*

22. Comparing southern field slaves to house slaves, Smith wrote: “The field slaves are, in comparison with the domestics, badly fed, clothed, and lodged. They live together in small collections of huts on the plantations on which they labor, remote from the society and example of their superiors. Confined, in this manner, to associate only with themselves, they retain many customs of their African ancestors. And pressed with labor, and dejected by servitude, and the humiliating circumstances in which they find themselves, they have little ambition to improve their personal appearance; and their oppressed condition contributes to continue, in a considerable degree, the deformities of their original climate. The domestic servants, on the other hand, who remain near the persons, and are employed within the families of their masters, are treated with great lenity, their service is light, they are fed and clothed like their superiors; insensibly, they receive the same ideas of elegance and beauty, and discover a great facility in adopting their manners. This class of slaves, therefore, has advanced far before the others in acquiring the regular and agreeable features, and the expressive countenance, which can be formed only in the midst of civilized society. The former are, generally, ill shaped. They preserve, in a great degree, the african lips, nose, and hair. Their genius is dull, and the expression of their countenance sleepy and stupid. The latter frequently exhibit very straight and well proportioned limbs. Their hair is often extended to three and four inches, and, sometimes, to a greater length. The size and form of the mouth is, in many instances, not unhandsome, and sometimes even beautiful; the composition of their features is regular, their capacity good, and their look animated.” Samuel Stanhope Smith, *An Essay on the Causes of the Variety of Complexion and Figure in the Human Species* (New Brunswick, N.J.: J. Simpson, L. Deare, 1810), 169–71.

23. Hosea Easton, *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice: The Life and Writings of Hosea Easton*, ed. George R. Price and James Brewer Stewart (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 17–18.

the Intellectual Character, and the Civil and Political Condition of the Coloured People of the United States and the Prejudice Exercised towards Them (1837) underscored the NCC's goals by articulating, from historical examples and religious teaching, that African Americans were the intellectual, moral, and spiritual equals of whites. Easton concluded, "it is a settled point with the wisest of the age, that no constitutional difference exists in the children of men, which can be said to be established by hereditary laws."²⁴

In contrast to Easton's arguments for racial equality, most phrenologists embraced an essentialist view of humanity in which racial differences were immutable and racial hierarchies were clear.²⁵ American phrenologists followed Franz Joseph Gall's assertion that "the Negro is inferior to the European, intellectually, and that, generally speaking, Negroes have smaller heads and less cerebral mass than European inhabitants."²⁶ The American physician Charles Caldwell vigorously asserted white supremacy and black inferiority in *Elements of Phrenology* (1827). According to Caldwell, only the Caucasian race exhibited "real human greatness," whereas "the genuine African figure occupies an intermediate station between the figure of the Caucasian and the Ourangoutang."²⁷ George Combe's widely available *System of Phrenology* compared the "Natural Talents and Dispositions of

24. *Ibid.*, 67.

25. Phrenologists were, however, convinced that individuals, within the scope of their inherent traits—such as race and gender—had the capacity to develop under favorable circumstances. One of the most popular aspects of phrenology in the early nineteenth century was the emphasis on educating children under the principles of phrenology in order to shape their development. Prince Albert (with his wife's approval) hired George Combe to phrenologically evaluate the young princes and to recommend an educational system. See David Stack, *Queen Victoria's Skull: George Combe and the Mid-Victorian Mind* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2008). One of the earliest American publications on this topic is Joseph A. Warne, *Phrenology in the Family; or, The Utility of Phrenology in Early Domestic Education* (Philadelphia: George W. Donohue, 1839).

26. Franz Joseph Gall, *Research on the Nervous System* (1819), quoted in Panese, "The Creation of the 'Negro' at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century," 55. For a discussion of environmentalist theory in the early nineteenth century, see Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 178–96.

27. Charles Caldwell, *Elements of Phrenology*, 2nd ed. (Lexington, Ky.: A. G. Meriwether, 1827), 245, 253. Caldwell was an unapologetic slave owner. Caldwell considered himself benevolent: "We confidently assure our flagrant philanthropist, that we are ourselves no inhuman traffickers either in 'human nerves and muscles' or in human feelings—We never purchased a slave with a view of selling him again—we have been instrumental in manumitting some, and have educated one to

Nations, and the Development of Their Brains” and found “distinct and permanent features of character which strongly indicate natural differences in their mental constitutions” among Europeans, Asians, Africans, and Americans. Though his wording was less forceful than Caldwell’s assertions, Combe, too, subscribed to racial hierarchies. Of the African, Combe stated, “The annals of the races who have inhabited that Continent, with few exceptions, exhibit one unbroken scene of moral and intellectual desolation; and in a quarter of the globe embracing the greatest varieties of soil and climate, no nation is at this day to be found whose institutions indicate even moderate civilization.” This lack of development was discernible through both anthropological and phrenological observation: “One feature is very general in descriptions of the African tribes; they are extremely superstitious. . . . This character corresponds with the development which we observe in the Negro skulls; for they exhibit much Hope, Veneration, and Wonder, with comparatively little reflecting power. Their defective Causality incapacitates them for tracing the relation of cause and effect, and their great Veneration, Hope, and Wonder, render them prone to credulity, and to regard with profound admiration and respect any object which is presented as possessing supernatural power.”²⁸ Combe claimed that these deficiencies were made up for by traits that made Africans “polite and urbane, and hence [they] make excellent waiters.” Philoprogenitiveness made them “our best nurses, as far as fondness and patience with children are concerned.”²⁹ Combe argued that Caucasians, in contrast, exhibited “superior force of mental character. . . . In short, they indicate a higher natural power of reflection, and a greater natural tendency to justice, benevolence, veneration, and refinement, than the others.”³⁰ Proponents of African colonization enlisted this phrenological evidence of difference to bolster

the profession of medicine—We are even charged by our neighbours and friends with doing an injury to our slaves by too much indulgence—Perhaps we have shown as much sympathy for the African race, and, according to our humble means, rendered them as many services, as Dr. Good has done”; *Elements of Phrenology*, 260.

28. George Combe, *A System of Phrenology*, 3rd ed. (London, 1830), 600, 601, 617.

29. “Chapter II: The Characteristics of Races, Masses, and Nations, in Part Hereditary: Section I. The Colored Race,” *American Phrenological Journal & Miscellany*, September 1, 1843, 417–32.

30. *Ibid.*, 418. George’s brother, the physician Andrew Combe, concurred: “de facto the Negro brain is inferior in intellectual power to that of the European”; Andrew Combe, “Remarks on Tiedemann’s Comparison of the Negro Brain and Intellect with Those of the European,” *Eclectic Journal of Medicine* 2, no. 9 (1838):

their cause, asserting that “the white is not only endowed with a larger volume, but with a better organization of brain than the Negro, so that the first has not only more power, but that power fitted for a superior intellectual and moral direction.” Colonizationists argued that it was their duty to “remove the temptation to the sin of domination over a weaker brother, by restoring him to the condition for which he was created, instead of making vain efforts to do him justice in circumstances where it is morally impossible, and where it is, therefore, an inconsistency to make it a point of religious duty.”³¹ Abolitionists placed less reliance in phrenologists’ claims of inherent racial difference. In a speech delivered before the House of Representatives during the debate on abolition of the slave trade in the District of Columbia in 1837, the Whig congressman William Slade expressed his skepticism: “Differences of intellect. *What* differences? How are they to be *defined*? The science of phrenology may perhaps, by and by, furnish some aid; but in its present imperfect state it can hardly be trusted with so grave a matter as this.”³² Nonetheless, environmental theorists were increasingly drowned out by those who asserted essential, and unalterable, distinctions between the races, and by the results of a decade of violence aimed both at northern blacks and at whites intent on uplifting free people of color.³³

325–28. Reprinted from the *Phrenological Journal and Miscellany* (Edinburgh), December 1837.

31. “On the American Scheme of Establishing Colonies of Free Negro Emigrants on the Coast of Africa, as Exemplified in Liberia,” *Annals of Phrenology*, October 1, 1833, 124.

32. “Anti-Slavery Speech of Mr. Slade of Vermont, on the Abolition of Slavery and the Slave Trade in the District of Columbia. Delivered in the House of Representatives of the U.S., December 20, 1837,” *Union Herald* (Cazenovia, N.Y.), May 18, 1838; emphasis in original.

33. This was Richard Colfax’s argument in *Evidence against the Views of the Abolitionists, Consisting of Physical and Moral Proofs of the Natural Inferiority of the Negroes* (New York: James T. M. Bleakley, 1833). Colfax and other essentialists embraced a “racial modernity”—the belief in an inherent racial hierarchy and racial inequality. James Brewer Stewart defines the term in the following way: “‘Racial modernity’ refers to the developments I see as common to both periods—a reflexive disposition on the part of an overwhelming number of northern whites (intellectuals and politicians as well as ordinary people) to regard superior and inferior races as uniform, biologically determined, self-evident, naturalized, immutable ‘truths’—and the development of integrated trans-regional systems of intellectual endeavor, popular culture, politics and state power that enforced uniform white supremacist norms as ‘self-evident’ social ‘facts’”; Stewart, “The Emergence of Racial Modernity and the Rise of the White North, 1790–1840,” *Journal of the Early Republic* 18, no. 2 (1998): 183n2.

Attacks on free people of color in the North began with the advent of gradual emancipation policies in the 1780s. Black communities in the post-Revolutionary era increasingly displayed attributes of a stable society: they built churches, schools, and successful businesses. They organized mutual benefit societies. Blacks laborers, always a visible presence in port cities, increasingly worked side by side with whites.³⁴ Blacks paraded, sometimes in military-style uniforms, in northern towns and cities.³⁵ By the first decades of the nineteenth century, discomfort with the presence of free people of color in northern towns and cities was bolstered by the American Colonization Society's (ASC) agenda to rid the country of nonwhite Americans; the black race and the white race "must live forever separately and unequally" on opposite sides of the Atlantic.³⁶ But as some reformers denounced the ASC's policies and demanded an immediate end to slavery, white responses to a black presence in northern communities became more frequent and more violent.³⁷ The abolitionists William Lloyd Garrison, Arthur Tappan, and Simeon Jocelyn inflamed local opposition to the integration of blacks and whites in New Haven with their plan, in conjunction with the National Colored Convention, to open a college for black men in 1831. Word of the proposal provoked the town's white citizens to throw garbage at Jocelyn's house and to attack New Haven's black neighborhood,

34. David R. Roediger argues that white working-class identity was predicated on a separation from, and debasement of, black workers, thus contributing substantially to an increasingly defined color line in the early nineteenth century. Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (New York: Verso, 1991).

35. Parades evoked scorn and criticism of blacks performing white citizenship in a series of "Bobolition" broadsides printed from the 1810s to the 1830s. See Douglas A. Jones Jr., *The Captive Stage: Performance and the Proslavery Imagination of the Antebellum North* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2014), 40–49.

36. Easton, *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice*, 19.

37. Joan Pope Melish argues that the presence of blacks in white space propelled the violence in the North: "The fact that these violent acts predated anti-abolitionist actions, persisted in concert with them, and continued after they had subsided supports the argument that the root cause of whites' anger was the presence of the 'free Negro,' and that abolitionists and printers of antislavery tracts were attacked principally because they were seen as advocates of the continuation and even growth of that presence"; Melish, *Disowning Slavery: Gradual Emancipation and "Race" in New England, 1780–1860* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), 201. For the pushback against colonization, see Ousmane K. Power-Greene, *Against Wind and Tide: The African American Struggle against the Colonization Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

known as “New Liberia.”³⁸ Integrated schools in New England were also targeted: Prudence Crandall, threatened by mob violence and by colonizationists’ legal harassment, abandoned her plan for a girls’ school in Canterbury, Connecticut. The Noyes Academy in Dover, New Hampshire, was destroyed by a mob. Whites attacked black neighborhoods in Boston, Providence, New York City, Hartford, Pittsburgh, and Utica. In 1836, a year before he published the *Treatise*, Hosea Easton’s church in Hartford was burned to the ground.³⁹

In the context of this campaign of intimidation, phrenologists joined the national conversation about racial difference with visual displays of the “good negro”: heads and skulls at lectures and museums that emphasized the phrenological claims of the relationship between physical traits and personal behavior. By the early 1840s the Fowlers were selling sets of casts at their New York office. Twenty-five dollars bought thirty-nine heads, masks, and skulls. The majority of ceramic busts were of prominent individuals such as Napoleon, Voltaire, Sir Walter Scott, Aaron Burr, and Henry Clay. Casts were made from live sitters, skulls, or sculpture. Each came with phrenological evaluations demonstrating the subject’s talents. All the casts that were made directly from skulls, illustrated oddities, deficiencies, or exemplary models of phrenological composition. Among the latter were Patty Cannon, murderer (“All the Moral organs small”), a “Carib” (“An untamable savage, and of the lowest order of human beings”), one Tardy, a pirate (“All the selfish organs, very large”), and a “Good Negro, a slave—Selfish Organs, small. Moral, Social, and Intellectual organs, large.”⁴⁰ Another “Good Negro” profiled in the Fowlers’ journal was Eustache, “eminently distinguished for qualities of virtue and benevolence.” A slave in Haiti, Eustache was credited with saving his master and several hundred other white Haitians during massacres carried out under Jean-Jacques Dessalines in 1804. Taken by his owner to France, Eustache taught himself to

38. Bruce Dain, *A Hideous Monster of the Mind: American Race Theory in the Early Republic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 177, and Easton, *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice*, 18–19.

39. Melish, *Disowning Slavery*, 204–7; Easton, *To Heal the Scourge of Prejudice*, 19–22.

40. The Fowlers recommended that “Every school district should possess copies of this collection.” “A List of Specimens Designed for Phrenological Societies,” *American Phrenological Journal & Miscellany*, April 1, 1848, 129. Madeleine Stern claims that the Fowlers were abolitionists. In the 1850s they promoted a plan for an antislavery commune in Kansas. But she also writes that the brothers deliberately kept their publications nonpartisan; Stern, *Heads and Headlines*, 173.

read so he could read aloud to his elderly and increasingly poor-sighted owner. “He secretly applied himself to study; took lessons at four o’clock in the morning, in order that the time necessary for the performance of his regular duties might not be encroached upon; speedily acquired the wished-for knowledge; and, approaching the old man with a book in his hand, proved to him, that if nothing seems easy to ignorance, nothing is impossible to devotion.” Although freed after his master died, Eustache “has always preferred to remain in the condition of a servant, in order that he might turn to account his skill in cookery, and enable himself to do good to his fellow-creatures.” The author thought it unlikely that “another such instance of pure virtue and disinterested benevolence can be found recorded in the annals of history. It is the more striking, inasmuch as the individual belonged to a race generally regarded as deficient in those qualities. “ The key to this remarkable display of seemingly un-Negro-like behavior lay in Eustache’s skull: “It will be obvious to every phrenologist . . . that the head of Eustache was of vary considerable size. In this respect, as well as in its form, it has quite the appearance of a European head.” Eustache’s exemplary cranium was combined with his deferential personality: “In his youth, he was noted for avoiding light and vicious conversation, and for embracing every opportunity of listening to intelligent and respectable whites.”⁴¹

These anecdotes of obedience were concurrent with increasing calls for abolition. George Combe argued that the American slave’s nature, measured by phrenological standards, defused anti-abolitionist fears that liberty entailed rebellion. Combe refuted Henry Clay’s argument that emancipation would generate violence: Combe suggested that phrenology proved black Americans, by their nature, were “essentially amiable.” Comparing blacks to Native Americans, Combe wrote, “The one is like the wolf or the fox, the other like the dog. In both the brain is inferior in size, particularly

41. “Article V. Character of Eustache,” *American Phrenological Journal & Miscellany*, January 1, 1840, 177–82. This desire for compliant blacks was also articulated in the fiction and theater of the era. For example, George Lippard’s novel *Blanche of Brandywine* (1846) was adapted for the stage by James Gilbert Burnett and performed in New York City in 1858. The plot centers on the military conflicts of the American Revolution. Sampson, a slave, fights valiantly for the Patriots. But in upholding the cause of freedom for his white master, he does not ask for his own liberty. Sampson is the loyal slave who doesn’t overstep racial or political boundaries. Douglas A. Jones Jr. uses this play to illustrate the tacit proslavery ideology of the North in the antebellum era in Jones, *The Captive Stage*, 4–5. The most iconic example of this “romantic racialism” is the slave Tom in Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852); Jones, *The Captive Stage*, 109.

If Jefferson's metaphor for slavery was holding a wolf by the ear—the impossibility of controlling a wild creature—Combe's American slave was a domesticated animal who, once free, would be docile and nonthreatening. Combe's description of a hotel worker in Philadelphia confirmed his general assessment of black Americans: "his manner of thinking, speaking, and acting indicates respectfulness, faithfulness, and reflection."⁴³ Anecdotal observations of slave behavior reported in the phrenology journals accorded with Combe's opinion: E. B. Olmstead noted that the "part of Veneration exercised in obedience is characteristically large in slaves." A report of a manumitted slave who voluntarily reenslaved himself noted that this behavior arose from large inhabitativeness: "The love of home, or Inhabitiveness, is the true explanation of this negro's conduct. He preferred his home with slavery, rather than freedom abroad."⁴⁴ Expressions of wishful thinking about passive and obedient black Americans were more than simply an expression of Southerners' fear of slave violence. They were just as much a response to Northerners' anxieties about the free people of color in their midst.⁴⁵ Theories about race, and the arguments for and against slavery, were all in play when the U.S. Coast Guard boarded the schooner *Amistad*. The abolitionists who formed the *Amistad* Committee to aid and defend the Africans faced the challenge of gaining their legal freedom. Hence, the *Amistad* captives' violent act of liberation required a careful public relations campaign: the committee sought to win the hearts and minds of the public. This was no easy task in a society so recently rocked by racial violence and white ambivalence about blacks living in their midst.

CAPTIVES ON DISPLAY

In August 1839 the U.S. Coast Guard seized a ship near Long Island. Aboard the *Amistad* were fifty-three men and children who had been

better." Letter XXXVI, March 1843, in Child, *Letters from New York* (London: F. Pitman, 1879), 198.

43. "Our apartments at the Marshall House are under the charge of a coloured man, who, although a complete negro, has a brain that would do no discredit to an European"; Combe, *Notes on the United States*, 2:48–49.

44. E. B. Olmstead, "George, a Slave, Murderer of Mrs. Foster, with a View of His Skull," *American Phrenological Journal & Miscellany*, November 1, 1849, 341. "Slavery Preferred to Freedom," *American Phrenological Journal & Miscellany*, November 1, 1850, 359.

45. "In promulgating the stereotype of the happy and contented bondsman, Southerners were doing more than simply putting out propaganda to counter the abolitionist image of the wretched slave. They were also seeking to put to rest their own nagging fears of slave rebellion"; George M. Fredrickson, *The Black Image in*

enslaved in Sierra Leone and transported to Cuba. Two Spaniards had purchased the Africans in Havana and then transferred them to the *Amistad*. On the journey to another destination in the Caribbean, several of the captives escaped their chains, attacked the captain and crew, and ultimately forced the crewmembers to redirect the ship toward Africa. Instead, the sailors turned the ship northeast. It was in Long Island Sound when the U.S. Coast Guard apprehended the *Amistad*. The Coast Guard released the Spanish slave owners and crew and jailed the Africans on a charge of murder. Although President Martin Van Buren wished to extradite the captives back to Cuba, abolitionists raised money to defend them in an American court. The ensuing trial involved murder charges against the Africans and property claims by the Spanish ship owners. The Federal District Court in Connecticut first heard the case and decided in favor of the *Amistad* captives: they were ruled to be free people unlawfully enslaved and claimed as Spanish property. The U.S. government then appealed the federal court decision. When the U.S. Supreme Court heard the appeal in January 1841, it ruled in favor of the Africans. Though eighteen men had died before they were freed, eventually the surviving men and children returned to Africa.⁴⁶

The captives spent most of their eighteen-month incarceration in the New Haven jail. As a centerpiece for the American abolitionist cause, a steady stream of visitors reported on the character, behavior, and intelligence of the captives. The Africans drew attention and curiosity from the moment they were arrested. Within a few weeks of their arrival in the United States, the Bowery Theater in New York City staged a new play, *The Black Schooner; or, The Pirate Slaver Armistad*. Meanwhile, in New Haven, the Africans were on display both in and out of the jail. They were allowed to exercise on New Haven Green, where “The massive crowds that filed through the jail assembled to watch bodies fly through the air across the green, then followed them back to their cells for another look.”⁴⁷ When

the White Mind: The Debate on Afro-American Character and Destiny, 1817–1914 (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1971), 52.

46. The most recent account of the *Amistad* is Marcus Rediker’s *The Amistad Rebellion: An Atlantic Odyssey of Slavery and Freedom* (New York: Viking, 2012). See also Howard Jones, *Mutiny on the Amistad: The Saga of a Slave Revolt and Its Impact on American Abolition, Law, and Diplomacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

47. Marcus Rediker’s analysis of the detailed playbill for *The Black Schooner* suggests that the tone of the play may have been sympathetic to the captives. Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 114, 132. “The Negroes of the Amistad,” *New-Hampshire Sentinel*, October 2, 1839. Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 134, points out that these acrobatic displays were part of Mende culture—proving leadership and high status in society.

the captives were transported from New Haven to Hartford in September for the first legal hearing, crowds descended on Hartford to view the captives. The anti-abolition *New York Morning Herald* printed an engraving of the captives in Hartford that showed visiting abolitionists, women and young children, and a phrenologist. It is most likely that the unnamed phrenologist was George Combe. While in Hartford for a series of lectures in September, Combe visited the *Amistad* captives. His detailed phrenology reading of Cinque, who was thought to have been the key leader among the men who freed themselves and attacked the *Amistad* crew, not only reveals Combe's curiosity about Cinque's personality but Combe's abolitionist sympathies as well:

Their heads present great varieties of form as well as of size. Several have small heads, even for Africans; some short and broad heads, with high foreheads but with very little longitudinal extent in the anterior lobe. Their leader Cinquez or Jinquez, who killed the captain of the schooner, is a well-made man of 24 or 25 years of age. His head is long from the front to the back, and rises high above the ear, particularly in the regions of Self-Esteem, and Firmness. . . . This size and form of brain indicate considerable mental power, decision, self-reliance, prompt perception, and readiness of action. . . . It is impossible to look without horror and indignation on these young and unoffending men and children deprived of their liberty, reduced to slavery, and converted into mere "property," by *Christians*; I say by Christians, because I have no doubt that if any one were to deny that their reputed owner, who also is here, or his advocates in the American press, were Christians, he would be prosecuted for a libel on their religious character!⁴⁸

Despite his strong feelings about slavery, Combe did not openly speak in favor of abolition during his American tour. He did not make his comments on the *Amistad* captives public until his travel memoir was published several months after the captives' release. But Combe did take pains to assure his readers (after the fact) that "as the subject lay incidentally in my way, I have not shrunk from it, but have introduced the skulls and casts of Negroes among those of other varieties of mankind, and freely expressed my opinion

48. Combe, diary entry for September 24, 1839, in *Notes on the United States*, 3:75–77. Combe lectured in the United States between October 1838 and June 1840. Combe also did a phrenology reading of John Quincy Adams before Adams took up the defense of *Amistad* captives before the Supreme Court. Combe's assessment of the former vice president was less than flattering. Combe found Adams to be "a man of impulse rather than of clear, sound, and consistent judgment." Adams also had "a limited intellectual capacity to perceive fine and distinct relations, combined with a self-confidence which will rarely allow him to doubt the soundness of his own inductions"; Combe, *Notes on the United States*, 3:107–8.

of the moral and intellectual capabilities indicated by their forms.” Combe went so far as to describe slavery as “a cancer in the moral constitution” of Americans.⁴⁹ And in a private letter to the abolitionist Dr. W. B. Sprague of Albany, New York, Combe declared that slavery was the “darkest stain on the fair face of American freedom.”⁵⁰

Lorenzo Fowler’s reading of Cinque, on the other hand, was intended for immediate publication. Around the same time the Bowery Theater opened *The Black Schooner*, Fowler rushed to the New Haven jail. He published his report on Cinque in the next issue of the *American Phrenological Journal*. Fowler found Cinque’s intellect “better developed than most persons’ belonging to his race.” Moreover, Fowler compared Cinque favorably to African Americans: “His cerebral organization, as a whole, I should think, was also superior to the majority of negroes’ in our own country.” Unsurprisingly, Fowler’s analysis of Cinque coincided with Cinque’s role in the *Amistad* rebellion. Fowler’s report was much more detailed than Combe’s and more closely tied to the events on the *Amistad*. Fowler concluded that Cinque “would have great self possession in times of danger, and might easily conceal, by the expressions of his countenance, all appearance of his real feelings or designs, so that it would be difficult to find him out, or detect his plans.” Cinque’s phrenological faculties “admirably adapt him to take the lead, secure power, and command the respect of others, as well as render him capable of exerting a controlling influence over the minds of those like the native Africans.” Fowler discovered that Cinque’s faculties gave him “a love of liberty, independence, determination, ambition, regard for his country, and for what he thinks is sacred and right . . . joined with an uncommon degree of moral courage and pride of character.” Furthermore, though Cinque was not “revengeful or ill-natured, he has too much pride and love of self to become subject to the will of others.”⁵¹

49. Quoted in Stack, *Queen Victoria’s Skull*, 224.

50. A. Cameron Grant, “George Combe and American Slavery,” *Journal of Negro History* 45, no. 4 (1960): 262.

51. L. N. Fowler, “Phrenological Developments of Joseph Cinquez, Alias Giqua,” *American Phrenological Journal & Miscellany*, December 1839, 138. Fowler’s report may also be the one credited to J. Fletcher, published in the *New Haven Daily Herald* on September 5. Fletcher’s assessment of Cinque is very much like Fowler’s: “The head is well formed and such as a phrenologist admires. . . . In fact, such an African head is seldom to be seen, and doubtless in other circumstances would have been an honor to his race”; Fletcher, “Phrenological Examination of Joseph Cinques, the Leader of the Revolt on Board the *Amistad*,” *New Haven Daily Herald*, September 5, 1839. See Richard J. Powell, “Cinqué: Antislavery Portraiture and Patronage in Jacksonian America,” *American Art* 11, no. 3 (1997): 72n10.

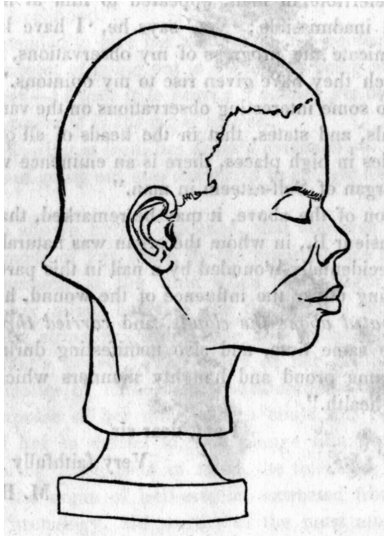


Figure 3. L. N. Fowler, “Phrenological Developments of Joseph Cinquez, Alias Giqua,” *American Phrenological Journal & Miscellany*, December 1839, 136. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.

Fowler took a plaster cast of Cinque during his visit. An illustration of the cast accompanied the *American Phrenological Journal* article. Readers were told that the cast was on display, and copies of it were for sale, at the Fowlers’ New York office. By the following November, at least one itinerant phrenologist had a copy of Cinque’s cast in his collection: H. D. Sweeter advertised that customers could view Cinque’s cast at his office in Concord, New Hampshire, free of charge. Simultaneous with the December 1840 edition of the *American Phrenological Journal*, the Fowlers published an image of Cinque’s cast in *The Phrenological Almanac for 1840*. The *Almanac* reprinted the most interesting or unusual profiles from the previous year’s *Journal*. Images of Black Hawk, Aaron Burr, Maria Monk, and Antoine Le Blanc, “murderer of Judge Sayre, Morristown, N.J.,” accompanied Eustache and Cinque, “leader of the Africans on board Schooner Amistad.” Thus, viewers saw the “good negro,” Eustache, and the leader of a violent bid for freedom, Cinque, side by side.⁵²

Fowler’s cast of Cinque’s head was one of several visual displays of the

52. “Jinqua, the Leader of the Captured Africans on Board the Schr. Amistad,” *New Hampshire Patriot and State Gazette* (Concord), November 21, 1840.

Amistad captives. John Warner Barber had already published *A History of the Amistad Captives*, which contained a profile portrait of Cinque and silhouettes of the other Africans. Also during 1840, the artist Sidney Moultrap created life-size wax figures of the captives (complete with their own hair), and Amasa Hewins painted a 135-foot long panoramic scene of the moment of rebellion aboard the ship. In late 1840 Nathaniel Jocelyn painted Cinque's portrait for the Philadelphia black abolitionist Robert Purvis.⁵³

Barber's drawing of Cinque in profile was based on pantograph silhouettes taken of all the captives. Cinque was the only individual Barber rendered in detail. Barber's portrait is a straightforward depiction of Cinque's likeness. It has facial details, but Cinque's head is presented against the blank page, just as the silhouettes of the other captives are. Barber may have deliberately referred to physiognomy illustrations familiar to Americans. Absent from the profiles were color, eye shape, and facial expression. What remained as the focal point was the shape of the head and the size and position of the nose, mouth, and chin—all emphasizing the African features of the sitters. In contrast to Barber's illustrations, Nathaniel Jocelyn's portrait of Cinque presented the African man in a context deliberately intended to provoke a sympathetic response in viewers. Jocelyn's Cinque was not dressed in the Western clothing he wore in the New Haven jail, as depicted in the *New York Morning Herald* engraving, Moultrap's wax figures, and Hewins's panorama; instead, he was garbed in a white togalike garment, appearing "more like a Greco-Roman divinity than a brutish African marauder." Jocelyn's painting was deliberately timed to go on public display just weeks before the Supreme Court handed down its decision in March 1841.⁵⁴

53. John Warner Barber, *A History of the Amistad Captives* (New Haven, Conn.: E. L. & J. W. Barber, 1840). Barber's book also contained an engraving titled *The Death of Capt. Ferrer*. Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 162, notes that Barber's engraving used "racialized tropes of savagery." Moultrap's wax figures were displayed in New York at Peale's Museum and Portrait Gallery, then in Boston and in Norwich, Conn. In 1847 P. T. Barnum exhibited them at his museum in New York. See Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 159–67. For Jocelyn's painting, see Powell, "Cinqué," 48–73.

54. Powell, "Cinqué," 54. "Cinqué's image contradicted the prevailing perception of the captive Africans as savages. Instead, Cinqué's portrait presented him as the embodiment of a republican (read: abolitionist) ideal, an allegorical representation of Christian proselytizing and missionary work in Africa, and a symbol of black resistance and activism in the face of increasing white-on-black violence and socio-political unrest"; Powell, "Cinqué," 63. Purvis commissioned John Sartain to make an engraving of the painting. Lithographs were sold for two dollars apiece, which was donated to the Pennsylvania Antislavery Association; Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 174.

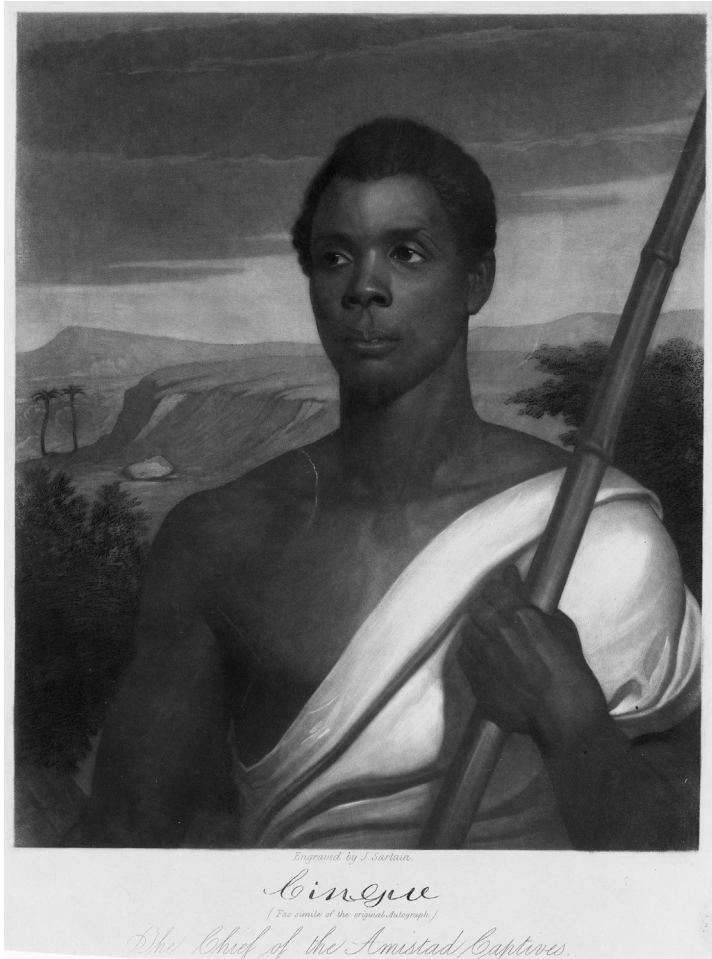


Figure 4. John Sartain, *Cinque: The Chief of the Amistad Captives*, engraving after the painting by Nathaniel Jocelyn, circa 1841. Library Company of Philadelphia.

The Jocelyn portrait, as well as the wax figures and Barber's silhouettes, were in distinct contrast to most visual depictions of blacks in the antebellum era. Edward Clay's popular *Life in Philadelphia* lithographs are more typical renderings: a series of vignettes show black Philadelphians in middle-class finery, shopping, singing, and going about their social activities. The images were clearly intended to ridicule black men and women for imitating whites. Satire emphasized their exclusion from white society rather than suggesting that blacks might share white, middle-class values.

The popular minstrel shows in the antebellum era also evoked laughter and ridicule in white audiences who viewed the spectacle of blacks aspiring to white social and cultural behavior. Phrenology was one target of these performances: Sharpley's Minstrels and Ethiopian Burlesque Troupe performed "The laughable burlesque lecture, on animal magnetism, phrenology & physical knockings" for Philadelphia audiences, and in Sing Sing, New York, the Croton Minstrels delivered "A Burlesque Lecture on Phrenology." A depiction of a black phrenologist, titled "Free-Knowledgy, or Black Bumpology," in *Crockett Comic Almanac* for 1839 echoed Clay's depictions of black Philadelphians and blackface minstrel performances. Charles White's farce, *Wake Up! William Henry: A Negro Sketch Known as Psychological Experiments, Psychology, Bumps and Limps, Bumpology, etc.*, depicted Orson Fowler explaining phrenology to a black man incapable of understanding Fowler's terminology. The explicit message of these comic performances was that phrenology was a ripe subject for humor. The implicit message was that blacks, lacking the intelligence, culture, and education of whites, were fit subjects for phrenology, but not fit practitioners of the science.⁵⁵

55. Powell, "Cinqué," 57; Nancy Reynolds Davison, "E. W. Clay: American Political Caricaturist of the Jacksonian Era" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1980). "Grand and varied entertainments Upper Saloon, Odd Fellows' Hall, this evening. Programme—Part I. Illustrations of dark dandyism! . . . Part II. Grand banjo solo . . . Part III. The operatic burlesque, entitled Miss Rosabel . . . Part IV. Banjo obligato! . . . Part V. Grand terpsichorean display! . . . Part VI. The laughable burlesque lecture, on animal magnetism, phrenology & physical knockings. Part VII. The amusing afterpiece, entitled Il barbiere di Siviglia, or, The barber of Seville! . . . Tickets, 12½ cents Front seats reserved for ladies. To commence at 7 o'clock, precisely"; broadside advertisement for Sharpley's Minstrels and Ethiopian Burlesque Troupe (Philadelphia: Scott's Printing, 1856 or 1857?), Library Company of Philadelphia copy. The advertisement for "The Croton Minstrels Grand Concert," October 31, 1848, included "A Burlesque Lecture on Phrenology," *Hudson River Chronicle*, October 1848, 1. *Crockett Comic Almanac, 1839* (Nashville: Ben Harding, 1838), American Antiquarian Society copy. My thanks to Nancy Bowen for finding this. William J. Mahar says that a humorous lecture on phrenology was "one of the most popular set pieces of the antebellum burlesque lecture style"; Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 70. The text of a broadside, "A Black Lecture on Phrenology" (the first in a British series titled *Follitt's Black Lectures*), gives us a clue to the content of these minstrel performances; Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, 71. Mahar discusses Charles White, *Wake Up! William Henry: A Negro Sketch Known as Psychological Experiments, Psychology, Bumps and Limps, Bumpology, etc.* (New York: De Witt, 1874) in *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask*, 174–75. There may have been at least one itinerant black phrenologist

The *Amistad* captives continued to be displayed after their release from jail in March 1841. The *Amistad* Committee organized a tour of several northern towns and cities. Whether because of curiosity or genuine interest and sympathy, the meetings were filled to capacity and beyond. As many as 2,500 people attended one at the Broadway Tabernacle in New York, where several of the *Amistad* men talked of their experiences and their Christian conversion and sang traditional Mende songs in their native language. This was the final public display of the captives, but not the last time they appeared as phrenology subjects.⁵⁶

Most of the *Amistad* captives returned to Sierra Leone in November 1841. Margru, known as Sarah Kinson, was one of the returnees. Sarah joined the new American mission in Komende. Five years later Sarah returned to the United States to study at the Oberlin Institute. In 1849 she returned again to Sierra Leone to take up a post as the mistress of the Komende Mission's girls' school. Sometime before her second return to Sierra Leone, she visited the Fowlers' office in New York City, where Orson Fowler did her reading. Fowler's analysis of Kinson appeared in the *American Phrenological Journal*, accompanied by a sketch of the now-adult Kinson. (A pen-and-ink portrait of Kinson was created by William H. Townsend shortly after she arrived in the New Haven jail in 1839.) Fowler related her history at Oberlin, where Kinson "excelled in all branches of study, and was one of the first scholars in the institution in mathematics and superior sciences." Fowler's phrenological comments were scant; he simply noted that "the forehead is large, sustained by a vigorous constitution. She is far superior to Africans generally." Once again phrenology damned with faint praise.⁵⁷

Twelve years later, the *Amistad* events still resonated enough with American readers for the *American Phrenological Journal* to show Cinque's cast once again, this time getting several facts wrong, including elevating Cinque to royal status. Side by side with this "prince of Africans" was the image of Daniel Webster, "one of the great among the Anglo-Saxon race." Webster, according to the journal, was called the "Lion of the North" for his courage

in the 1830s; "Our Correspondence Letter from Communipaw, New York, Jan. 12, 1859" recalled his financially successful visit to Philadelphia in 1837 in *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (Rochester, N.Y.), January 21, 1859.

56. Rediker, *The Amistad Rebellion*, 196.

57. Marlene D. Merrill, "Sarah Margru Kinson: The Two Worlds of an Amistad Captive," www.oberlin.edu/external/EOG/Kinson/Kinson.html; "Sarah Kinson, or Margru," *American Phrenological Journal*, July 1, 1850, 230.

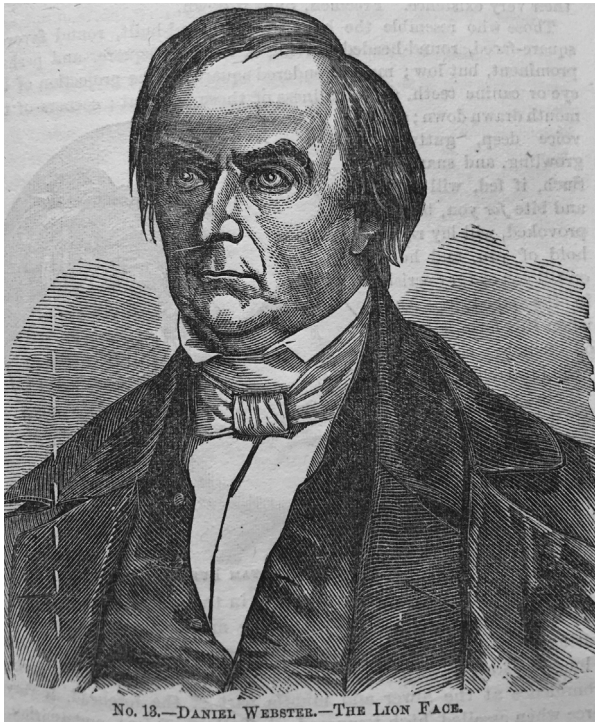


Figure 5. O. S. Fowler and L. N. Fowler, *New Illustrated Self-Instructor in Phrenology and Physiology* (New York: Fowler & Wells, 1859), 49. Author's collection.

and determination. The Fowlers' *New Illustrated Self-Instructor* portrayed Webster's "Lion Face." His prominent forehead and deep-set, piercing eyes indicated Webster's intelligence, fearlessness, and determination. The science of phrenology confirmed what Americans already knew: Cinque and Webster were superior examples of their respective races, but they were not, and never could be, equals.⁵⁸

58. "A Shelf in Our Cabinet—No. 2," *American Phrenological Journal*, March 1862, 52.