

Nataly Kelly

Kaweli



Have you ever heard of Kaweli? He is more widely known by his English name, James Covey. Like many others, Kaweli became an interpreter quite by accident. However, he would interpret for one of the most significant court cases in U.S. history.

In 1839, a captive named Sengbe Pieh led a revolt aboard *La Amistad*, a slave ship en route from Spain to Cuba. He demanded that he and his fellow Africans be taken back home. The navigator agreed, but deceived them and took them to the East Coast of the United States instead. Because the transport of slaves from Africa to the Americas was illegal, a trial ensued. The case became an important cause for those who sought to abolish slavery.

The case eventually reached the Supreme Court in 1841, where it was appealed. The appeal was argued by a former President, John Quincy Adams, who at the time was 73 years old and had not argued a case for more than 30 years. Adams delivered an eight-hour, emotional appeal that eventually led to the freedom of the African captives in 1842. Adams knew a thing or two about interpreting -- he had actually worked as a French<>English interpreter for diplomatic settings as a young man.

John Quincy Adams (1767-1848)

Appointed by President James Madison, John Quincy Adams was the first official U.S. representative to Russia, serving with the official title of Minister Plenipotentiary in the Russian imperial capital of St. Petersburg. Son of President John Adams, a gifted linguist, he became Minister to the Netherlands (1794), to Portugal (1796), Prussia (1797-1801), a member of the U.S. Senate (1803-1808), Minister to Russia (1809-14), Minister to England (1815-17), and Secretary of State to President James Monroe (1817-25). The Presidential election of 1824 was decided, according to the Constitution, by the House of Representatives; Adams, second in the electoral vote, was chosen over Andrew Jackson, and served as the Sixth President of the United States from 1825 to 1829. After leaving the White House, he served nine terms in the House of Representatives, dying in the Capitol Building in 1848. Adams first visited Russia in 1781 as French-language interpreter for U.S. envoy Francis Dana. He served in St. Petersburg during Napoleon's invasion of Russia, strolled along the banks of the Neva with Czar Alexander I, and visited the Observatory in Pulkovo Heights. At the request of dictionary author Noah Webster, he provided books of Russian grammar and vocabulary, the beginning of Russian studies in the United States. His infant daughter died and was buried in St. Petersburg.

Kaweli spoke Mende, the language of some of the captives. He was also fluent in English, due to time spent in England. His arrival and his ability to interpret were a major turning point, because the prisoners' testimony that he interpreted formed the foundation of the case. It wasn't easy to find interpreters back then -- no yellow pages, no internet, no 24/7 telephone interpreting lines. So, finding Kaweli was like discovering a rare treasure.

He didn't just interpret legal information -- although he did that too. He accompanied the Mende speakers and interpreted for them in their daily lives, from their descriptions of the cruel treatment they endured on the ship to the prayers that were recited each morning in prison. To use our modern terminology, Kaweli was not just a court interpreter, but a community interpreter too.

Thanks in great part to Kaweli, the Africans who were taken prisoner on the *Amistad* returned to Africa in 1842. Kaweli joined them.

If you're still not feeling inspired, this beautiful (next page) about Kaweli (James Covey) should change that. And, if you haven't seen it yet, you might want to watch [Amistad](#), a movie by Steven Spielberg.

Reference: *The Interpreter's Launch Pad*, No. 2, July 2011.

www.interprenaut.com

"Translator (James Covey)"

by Elizabeth Alexander

I was stolen from Mendeland as a child
then rescued by the British ship *Buzzard*
and brought to Freetown, Sierra Leone.

I love ships and the sea, joined this crew
of my own accord, set sail as a teen,
now re-supplying in New York Harbor.

When the white professor first came to me
babbling sounds, I thought he needed help
until *weta*, my mother's *six*, hooked my ear

and I knew what he was saying, and I knew
what he wanted in an instant, for we had heard
wild tales of black pirates off New London,

the captives, the low black schooner like
so many ships, an infinity of ships fatted
with Africans, men, women, children

as I was. Now it is my turn to rescue.
I have not spoken Mende in some years,
yet every night I dream it, or silence.

To New Haven, to the jail. To my people.
Who am I now? This them, not them. We burst
with joy to speak and settle to the tale:

*We killed the cook, who said he would cook us.
They rubbed gunpowder and vinegar in our wounds.
We were taken away in broad daylight.*

And in a loud voice loud as a thousand waves
I sing my father's song. It shakes the jail.
I sing from my entire black body.