

AMISTAD AT SEA

It is nearly midnight on a warm, late-August night, and the Freedom Schooner Amistad is sailing into the open ocean for the first time.

Capt. Bill Pinkney points out the lighthouse of Block Island as it blinks in the inky darkness, then the one at Montauk Point, just a few miles from where the original Amistad was captured. At the wheel, he patiently waits to feel the ship sway in the ocean swells as they replace the gentle rollers of Long Island Sound, where the ship has spent the first year of its life on the water.

But the young black man kneeling on the deck nearby doesn't notice the ship rocking. Arthur Hardy Doubleday, who joined the crew just days before, is staring at a familiar, triangular outline glowing in the darkness. Martha's Vineyard has just appeared on the ship's electronic chart plotter.

“There it is,” says Doubleday, a junior at Trinity College in Hartford. “My home.

“I'm riding in on a re-created slave ship in the middle of the night with one of the most famous captains in the world. I can't believe this,” he says.

Later, Pinkney will explain to his new crew member that the original Amistad was not a slave ship but a cargo schooner that carried kidnapped Africans. Eric Chanu, the French sailor who helped build the new Amistad before sailing on her, will teach him how to hang the sails.

“Arthur, you don't have any tools?” asks Dennis Burroughs, another of the ship's veterans. “We've got to get you some tools, my man.”

At dawn, when the bluffs of Gay Head on Martha's Vineyard appear on the horizon, Doubleday is at the wheel.

For Amistad America, which owns and operates the ship, Martha's

Vineyard -- now the nation's largest African American resort community -- is the perfect destination for the first open-ocean sail. And Labor Day weekend, the climax of the island's summer season, is the best time to visit.

For Doubleday, the sail home on the Amistad is the beginning of a voyage into a legacy that he has always been involved in but often took for granted. Doubleday is a "wash-ashore," a resident of the Vineyard who wasn't born there. His mother, Marie Doubleday, bought their property there when he was 4 weeks old.

He had heard about the schooner's trip on a recent visit to Mystic, where it was docked, and volunteered for the crew.

"The Amistad is history under sail," he says. "It makes me want to look at the Heritage Trail again and look into my roots. When you've got this stuff in your backyard, and you've got all these people that are dedicated to it, you forget about it." The Vineyard has its own African American Heritage Trail.

African American history on Martha's Vineyard began more than 300 years ago -- about the same time that colonial island history did -- with enslaved servants working the land of some of the island's oldest properties. In 1763, Elisha Amos, a member of the Wampanoags -- the island's tribe of Native Americans -- willed his house and livestock to his wife, Rebecca, a native of Guinea, in West Africa, making her the first African property owner on the Island.

The abolition of slavery on the island 20 years later and the opportunities presented by the whaling industry to people of color made Martha's Vineyard a haven where African Americans could own land, start businesses and build a community. In the mid-1800s in Edgartown, William A. Martin, the great-grandson of Rebecca Amos, became the first whaling captain of African descent.

In 1789, a slave who had been freed in Virginia gave one of the

first Methodist sermons at Pulpit's Rock in what is now Oak Bluffs. Forty-five years later, the Methodist Campground Meetings began under a tent in what is today called the Tabernacle. Those meetings would transform the island from a community of farmers and seafarers to a resort of international acclaim.

After the Civil War, African Americans began moving to the island for its beauty, religious community and business opportunities. In 1879, votes by people of color would lead the Eastville and Farm Neck sections of Edgartown to break away to form their own town, called Oak Bluffs.

After landing in Vineyard Haven and dressing down the ship, Doubleday is most interested in one thing: the beach. On his way to the Oak Bluffs Town Beach with crew members Joy Collins of the Higganum section of Haddam, Beth Cairns of Philadelphia and Troy Bent of the Bronx, N.Y., Doubleday drives through the Highlands, the large African American neighborhood up the hill from the famous gingerbread Victorian cottages. He meanders through the narrow roads to point out the Shearer Cottages, once a laundry, and then the first black-owned guesthouse on the island.

“Someone got the wise idea of charging their family and friends to come down here,” he says.

After their swim at the town beach, Doubleday takes his mates for the traditional jump off Second Bridge -- a span best known for the shark that swam under it in “Jaws.”

Near the bridge, Doubleday points out Spike Lee's joint -- a large house in a row of mansions.

“A few summers ago, it was common to see him biking with these high tube socks and goggles,” Doubleday recalls. “He looked like an idiot, but I guess that's what he likes to do.”

On the way back to the ship, they stop for one more swim, this time at the Inkwell, a few hundred feet of sand sandwiched

between two jetties that once separated the "black" beach from the expansive "white" beaches on either side of it. The beaches are colorblind now, and the name, once pejorative, is now a point of pride. On Marie Doubleday's car, beside the white oval "MV" bumper sticker for Martha's Vineyard, is another one with the letters "INK" for the now-famous beach.

Back on the deck of the ship, Pinkney is waiting for his crew to get ready for the first of several receptions. The local NAACP; Sail Martha's Vineyard, an educational sailing organization; and Seafarer's Friend, a Boston missionary organization that sponsored the Vineyard trip, have all planned events for the ship and its crew. It's a big change from Pinkney's last visit to the island, 40 years ago.

"When I last came here, in 1961, it was just growing as a black resort town," he recalls. "Now it's one of the places to be."

Nearby, crew members are gossiping that Scotty Pippen owns the long black yacht one dock away from the Amistad, but Pinkney just shrugs. There's a long list of black celebrities known to own property on or visit the island. He is more interested in getting island resident Walter Cronkite -- a friend from the New York Yacht Club -- on board the ship.

As the island fills up with its Labor Day weekend crowds, Doubleday finds himself hunting down sites related to the island's African American history. He hunts through Eastville Cemetery for graves hidden amid the woods behind a lobster hatchery. He gabs with a family friend, Peggy Amos, at her house about its former owner, U.S. Sen. Edward Brooke of Massachusetts, who in 1958 was inspired by the Vineyard's exclusively white club to open a club exclusively for blacks. On Saturday, Doubleday joins black, white and Wampanoag Vineyarders as they dedicate two new sites on the island's African American Heritage Trail. In October, the Amistad leaves Connecticut for a "Friendship Tour" that will take it down the Eastern Seaboard this year and to the Gulf Coast in 2002. The schooner will visit the Great Lakes in 2003.