

From Saint-Domingue to Haiti: How the Impetus of the Haitian Revolution Changed Throughout the Revolutionary Process

Henry Watt-Walter

Abstract

In recent decades scholars have established the Haitian Revolution as a momentous historical event alongside the other canonical Atlantic revolutions. The Haitian Revolution was distinctive, however, because it was the only slave revolt in the Americas to overcome European colonial governance and found an autonomous state. This extraordinary event erupted out of the extreme societal conditions in the French colony of Saint-Domingue. Supported by France, the plantocracy dominated the colony through mass enslavement and political exclusion of the colony's free population of colour. These two structural conflicts determined the revolutionary process. Initially, the political and economic conflict between intransigent white Domingans and aspirational free Domingans of colour resulted in a civil war and as this conflict destabilized the fragile structure of colonial oppression the enslaved population seized control of the revolutionary process.

In the 18th century, Saint-Domingue developed into one of the world's most dynamic and brutal colonies. Saint-Domingue was France's premier Caribbean colony and the immense wealth it produced for the metropole relied entirely on plantation slavery. Like all societies based on plantation slavery, Saint-Domingue was violent and stratified. Saint-Domingue, however, had an active and influential population of free people of colour which disrupted the white enslaver and black slave dichotomy characteristic of most plantation slavery systems. The resulting tensions between white Domingans and free Domingans of colour escalated into a civil war which weakened the societal structure of the colony and catalyzed an immense slave insurrection. This revolt radically transformed Saint-Domingue by destroying colonial society and creating a new political order based on the autonomy of the formerly enslaved. This paper will consider the pre-revolutionary conditions in Saint-Domingue and then trace the shifting causal factors of the revolutionary process which culminated in an autonomous state constituted by the formerly enslaved. As the Haitian Revolution involved several phases and actors it had no single impetus. The initial cause of the Haitian Revolution was the political and then military conflict between white and free Domingans of colour, but as the slave insurrection overwhelmed all other actors, it dominated Saint-Domingue and drove the Haitian Revolution toward its momentous conclusion.

Any discussion of the Haitian Revolution must consider the extreme nature of Saint-Domingue's society because the colonial environment conditioned the origin and course of the revolutionary process. In Caribbean plantation colonies, a small group of white colonizers controlled the political and economic life of the colony by enslaving a large concentration of black Africans.³¹⁵ With the support of its European metropole, this plantocracy developed the system to a distinctly extreme level. In the 1780s, 215,000 enslaved Africans were imported, expanding the slave population of Saint-Domingue to 500,000 by 1791, while the white population was only 30,000.³¹⁶ Furthermore, the conditions on Saint-Domingue's 7,000+ plantations were atrocious. A litany of horrors were inflicted on an enslaved population that was perpetually belaboured and malnourished.³¹⁷ Consequently, the mortality rate of the enslaved population on Saint-Domingue was between five and six percent.³¹⁸ Around one third of Saint-Domingue's enslaved population laboured on the colony's 730 sugar plantations on which conditions were distinctly harsh.³¹⁹ During harvest, slaves could work up to

³¹⁵ Jeremy Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 2-3.

³¹⁶ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 1-19.; Trevor G. Burnard and John D. Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 253.

³¹⁷ Carolyn Fick, "Emancipation in Haiti: From Plantation Labour to Peasant Proprietorship," *Slavery and Abolition*, no. 2 (2000): 11, doi.org/10.1080/01440390008575304.

³¹⁸ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge Mass.; London: Belknap, 2004), 40.

³¹⁹ David P. Geggus, "Slave Society in the Sugar Plantation Zones of Saint Domingue and the Revolution of 1791-1793," *Slavery and Abolition* 20,mno. 2 (1999): 31, doi.org/10.1080/01440399908575276.

twenty-hour days adjacent to boiling vats of sugar and their limbs were sometimes severed by the sugarcane grinding machines.³²⁰

The societal consequences of plantation slavery were highly impactful throughout the course of the Haitian Revolution. As historians Carolyn Fick and David Geggus observe, violence is inherent to slave systems because they are based upon violent oppression which generates violent resistance.³²¹ In such societies escalating violence is inevitable because oppressors must resort to extremes to maintain their control. Therefore, colonies like Saint-Domingue are inherently violent and experience mass violence and structural pressures toward revolt. This pernicious reality informed the perspectives and actions of the revolution's participants in two ways. Firstly, it made the plantocracy highly opposed to any reform that could conceivably reduce their power and apparatuses of oppression. Secondly, it produced a formidable slave revolt and provided a contrast so profound for the formerly enslaved that they would never again accept enslavement.³²²

The motivation to maintain such a volatile society was the enormous wealth it produced for the elites. Alongside coffee, cotton, and indigo, Saint-Domingue was a premier sugar producer. Sugar was one of the most valuable commodities on European markets and in 1790 alone France imported an astounding 75,000,000 *livres* worth of sugar from Saint-Domingue, which was equivalent to approximately 20% of France's total expenditure.³²³ The planters and merchants controlled virtually all of the wealth that was not extracted to Europe and in the elite neighborhoods of Cap Français (the colony's primary port), property rents varied between five and ten thousand *livres* annually, which was comparable to similarly prestigious property areas in Paris.³²⁴

Crucially, this wealth and power was not only held only by white elites. Saint-Domingue was distinctive among Europe's plantation colonies for having a dynamic population of free people of colour. Dominguan society was defined and obsessed by race, and the rigid racial hierarchy was challenged by people born from relations between those of European and African descent. Initially, the white Dominguans had been unperturbed by the free Dominguans of colour, but as the free Dominguans of colour accrued more wealth and power the white Dominguans became ideologically and economically threatened by them.³²⁵ While there were only

³²⁰ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 45-46.

³²¹ David P. Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint-Domingue 1793-1798* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), 32, 32; Carolyn Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution From Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990), 46.

³²² Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 140-155.

³²³ Robert Stein, "The French Sugar Business in the Eighteenth Century: A Quantitative Study," *Business History* 22, no. 1 (1980): 14, doi.org/10.1080/00076798000000001.; Peter McPhee, *Liberty of Death: The French Revolution* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2017), 41.

³²⁴ Burnard and Garrigus, *The Plantation Machine*, 64.

³²⁵ Jeffrey L. Stanley, "Demanding Racial Equality: Free People of Colour and the 1791 Concordats in Saint-Domingue," *Slavery and Abolition* 43, no. 1 (2022): 22-23 doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1080/0144039X.2021.1978230.; Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 20-22.

approximately 28,000 free Domingians of colour in Saint-Domingue by the mid-1780s, the elite Domingians of colour were merchants and planters themselves and owned one third of the colony's property and one quarter of its slaves.³²⁶ They were actively advancing their position as well, participating in 45% of rural property transactions in the 1780s and 35% of urban transactions.³²⁷ Furthermore, wealthy free plantation owners of colour like Vincent Ogé travelled to France to participate in intellectual and political institutions.³²⁸

In response to the influential free population of colour, white Domingians zealously endeavoured to economically and politically limit them by instituting a system of political and legal racialization. Manumission laws were tightened, all free Domingians of colour were obligated to provide documentation of their freedom even if it had been achieved generations previously,³²⁹ and Saint-Domingue's legal system defined an astounding 13 different legal categories of race.³³⁰ Free Domingians of colour were reclassified from 'white' to 'nonwhite', and, accordingly, courts in Cap Français declared it necessary to determine whether a witness was "stained with mixed blood."³³¹ As a result, Domingian society was radically restructured as race replaced class as the primary social division.

The white Domingians' dogmatic initiatives to subordinate the free Domingians of colour had profound consequences for Saint-Domingue and the conflict between white and free Domingians of colour. Class identity and conflict were subordinated to conflicts of racial identity,³³² and the free Domingians of colour were outraged at the injustices inflicted onto them by white Domingians.³³³ In a letter between two prominent free Domingians of colour, Louis Félix Mathurin Broisrond-Tonnere wrote to Julien Raimond voicing his dismay, declaring that "it is no longer possible to bear the imperious humiliations of the whites who have illegally assumed the right to govern us... Never before have we suffered so many arbitrary humiliations."³³⁴ The outraged, prosperous, and powerful free Domingians of colour then organized and politicized themselves to impose their will on the intransigent white Domingians.

Just as the brutality of plantation slavery affected the Haitian Revolution by conditioning the behaviour of participants, so too did the immense wealth concentrated

³²⁶ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 19.; Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 22-24.

³²⁷ John D. Garrigus, "Colour, Class and Identity on the Eve of the Haitian Revolution: Saint-Domingue's Free Coloured Elite as *Colons Américains*," *Slavery and Abolition* 17, no. 1 (1996): 25, doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1080/01440399608575174.

³²⁸ David P. Geggus, "Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession During the Constituent Assembly," *The American Historical Review* 94, no. 5 (1989): 1298, www.jstor.org/stable/1906352.; John D. Garrigus, "Blue and Brown: Contraband Indigo and the Rise of a Free Colored Planter Class in French Saint-Domingue," *The Americas* 50, no. 2 (1993): 249-250, www.jstor.org/stable/1007140.

³²⁹ John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 108.

³³⁰ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 19.

³³¹ John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 142-144.

³³² Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 17.

³³³ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 24-29.

³³⁴ Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 244-245.

among Saint-Domingue's divisive elites. With regard to the elite white Domingians, their wealth contributed to a profound hubris that impelled them to advocate for their autonomy in relation to France,³³⁵ while also obdurately resisting any and all measures that would advance the political position of the free Domingians of colour.³³⁶ These free Domingians of colour demanded systemic recognition and equal political rights.³³⁷ Without their wealth and position of power within the society, however, their demands would have been much weaker in scope and conviction.³³⁸ Therefore, without a dynamic elite of free Domingians of colour, the conflict between the white and free Domingians of colour would have been less destructive to the colonial structure.

The conflicting objectives and perspectives of the white and free Domingians of colour converged with the outbreak of the French Revolution to initiate the process that became the Haitian Revolution. The advanced development of Atlantic networks and the prominence of absentee planters in France ensured that Saint-Domingue was informed and affected by revolutionary ideals.³³⁹ The prevalence of revolutionary ideals and the Domingians' use of them is evidenced by the fact that in 1789 Saint-Domingue had one newspaper and in 1793 there were over a dozen.³⁴⁰ White Domingians leveraged the ideals of popular sovereignty and utility to advocate for increased autonomy and the abolition of the *exclusif* with France.³⁴¹ Free Domingians of colour invoked the ideals of equality and popular sovereignty to assert the legitimacy of their claim to political rights. The facile audacity of the white Domingians' invocation of grand revolutionary ideals while simultaneously resisting the political rights of the free Domingians of colour accentuated the hypocrisy of their position, thereby intensifying the free Domingians of colour's aims.³⁴² The clashing objectives of the white and free Domingians of colour fundamentally destabilized the colony and propelled it toward revolution.

The first significant violent manifestation of the conflict between white and free Domingians of colour occurred when Vincent Ogé, a wealthy free planter of colour returned from France where he was advocating for the rights of free Domingians of colour. Ogé was immensely frustrated by the dogmatic white Domingians and the Parisian assembly's hesitation to rectify the injustices faced by free Domingians of colour.³⁴³ Upon his return, Ogé led a futile revolt against the white plantocracy which

³³⁵ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 76-81.; Jeremy D. Popkin, "A Colonial Media Revolution: The Press in Saint-Domingue, 1789-1793." *The Americas* 75, no. 1 (2018): 4. doi.org/10.1017/tam.2017.95.

³³⁶ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 24-29.; Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 228-245.

³³⁷ Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 228-245.; Stanley, "Demanding Racial Equality," 21-27.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, 172.

³³⁹ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 8 & 33.

³⁴⁰ Popkin, "A Colonial Media Revolution," 3.

³⁴¹ A mercantilist term meaning that Saint-Domingue could only trade with France.; Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 35.

³⁴² Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 28.

³⁴³ Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 236-237.

was crushed by the colonial forces. Ogé was tortured by being broken on the wheel after which his head was paraded around Cap Français on a spike.³⁴⁴ While Ogé had every intention of upholding slavery, in their prejudicial convictions the white Domingians conflated Ogé's revolt with the threat of a slave rebellion.³⁴⁵ Writing to his father about the event, enfranchised white Domingian Blaise Garnier wrote that "all the whites of the island have gathered to choose the leaders of the Patriotic Troops that we need...against our sworn enemies."³⁴⁶ While militarily ineffectual,³⁴⁷ the revolt Ogé participated in intensified the conflict between white and free Domingians of colour by exacerbating the white Domingians' dogmatic obduracy and provoking outrage among free Domingians of colour. Additionally, it galvanized both groups and further entrenched the rigid and vitriolic racial divisions in Saint-Domingue.³⁴⁸

The draconian punishment of Vincent Ogé was one of many events that displayed the white Domingians' fierce obduracy. Many white Domingians' subsequent actions were determined by a combination of revolutionary fervour and intense notions of superiority and exceptionalism. In Autumn 1789, a particularly extreme group of white Domingians expelled the colony's French representative, François Barbé-Marbois, and convened an assembly in the city of Saint Marc the following spring.³⁴⁹ The Saint Marc assembly immediately declared its right to govern colonial affairs without French approval and rejected any and all participation by free Domingians of colour.³⁵⁰ Yet the assembly was promptly dispersed by Governor Antoine de Peynier and a group of loyal white Domingians.³⁵¹ The white Domingians' loyalty to the French must not be overemphasized, however, as upon the arrival of the new governor, Philibert François Rouxel de Blanchelande, the white Domingians forced his compliance to ensure the subordination of free Domingians of colour.³⁵²

In 1791, the white Domingians' racialized zeal preventing free Domingians of colour from obtaining political rights generated a civil war in Saint-Domingue. In June 1791, Saint-Domingue received news of the May 15 Decree enacted by the French government in Paris which established the political rights of people of colour with free parents.³⁵³ Despite the fact that this excluded most free Domingians of colour,

³⁴⁴ David P. Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 64-65.

³⁴⁵ Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 237-242.

³⁴⁶ Blaise Garnier, quoted in: Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, 63.

³⁴⁷ John D. Garrigus, "Vincent Ogé Jeune (1757-91): Social Class and Free Colored Mobilization on the Eve of the Haitian Revolution," *The Americas* 68, no. 1 (2011): 58-60, doi.org/10.1353/tam.2011.0078.

³⁴⁸ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 32.

³⁴⁹ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 29.

³⁵⁰ Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 244.

³⁵¹ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 82.

³⁵² Jeremy D. Popkin, "The French Revolution's Royal Governor: General Blanchelande and Saint Domingue, 1790-92," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2014): 209-219, www.jstor.org/stable/10.5309/willmaryquar.71.2.0203.

³⁵³ Stanley, "Demanding Racial Equality," 25-26.; Geggus, "Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession During the Constituent Assembly," 1303.

Governor Blanchelande, perpetually pressured by the white Domingians, refused to enact the law.³⁵⁴ Free Domingians of colour responded by forming militias to enforce their demands and by electing Pierre Pinchinat to represent, who was a prominent politician and ardent advocate of the rights of the free Domingians of colour.³⁵⁵ Beginning on September 7 1791 with an agreement between himself and the influential white planter Hanus de Jumécourt, Pinchinat embarked on an arduous autumnal campaign of signing agreements exchanging recognition of political rights for allegiance with the separate white factions on Saint-Domingue.³⁵⁶ Pinchinat secured many concordats, but when France rescinded the May 15 Decree in September 1791 most white Domingians blatantly reneged on the concordats.³⁵⁷ Free Domingians of colour were dismayed and a fight broke out in the colony's capital, Port-au-Prince, between the white and free Domingian of colour's respective militias which ignited a civil war.³⁵⁸

During the civil war between white and free Domingians of colour, the societal structure of Saint-Domingue was destroyed and the Haitian Revolution progressed radically in this anarchic environment. Throughout the conflict, white Domingians were perpetually incapable of uniting, because they fundamentally disagreed about Saint-Domingue's relationship with France and the place of free Domingians of colour in the colonial structure.³⁵⁹ In contrast, the free Domingians of colour formed a relatively cohesive political and military unit,³⁶⁰ all the while maintaining a convoluted and fluid web of alliances with the fragmented white factions.³⁶¹ In the autumn of 1791, Governor Blanchelande's bleak report encapsulated the state of affairs in Saint-Domingue at the outbreak of civil war:

For nearly three months, left to my own resources, surrounded on all sides by enemies redoubtable because of their number and their ferocity, continually harassed on my own side by enemies almost as dangerous, who never stop blackening my conduct and that of my collaborators by putting the most malignant and odious interpretation on it, tormented by the difficulty and, often, the impossibility of sending sufficient forces everywhere they are needed. . . , obliged to consult public opinion and often to reconcile a thousand different interests before doing anything . . . I struggle constantly against the multiplied efforts of monsters determined to destroy the colony.³⁶²

³⁵⁴ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 85 & 119.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 119-121.

³⁵⁶ Stanley, "Demanding Racial Equality," 26.

³⁵⁷ Geggus, "Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession During the Constituent Assembly," 1294-1303.; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 125.

³⁵⁸ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 126.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 119-122.; Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 18 & 34.; Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*, 244.

³⁶⁰ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 119.

³⁶¹ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 51.

³⁶² Governor Blanchelande, quoted in Popkin, "The French Revolution's Royal Governor," 215.

The insoluble anarchy Governor Blanchelande described continued when the French Civil Commission led by Léger Félicité Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel arrived in Autumn 1792 with six thousand French soldiers and a mandate to stabilize the colony and enforce the political rights of free Dominguanes of colour.³⁶³ Upon their arrival, the commissioners were bitterly resisted by the obdurate and fragmented white Dominguanes.³⁶⁴ With the military support of armies comprised of free Dominguanes of colour, Sonthonax established his authority and granted political rights to free Dominguanes of colour.³⁶⁵ During this struggle, Sonthonax dissolved the exclusively white colonial assembly and deported the most active white subversives.³⁶⁶ Several months after the commission arrived, the British and Spanish invaded Saint-Domingue.³⁶⁷ The introduction of foreign actors escalated the conflict by further complicating the strategic picture and existentially threatening Saint-Domingue.³⁶⁸

As the civil war escalated and foreign actors entered the conflict, the nature of the Haitian Revolution fundamentally transformed. Whereas before this transition the conflict between white and free Dominguanes of colour drove the change in Saint-Domingue, the massive slave insurrection which had erupted across Saint-Domingue's northern plain in August 1791 eventually came to dominate the colony.³⁶⁹ While the slave revolt was immediately impactful, it did not become the primary impetus of the revolution until 1793. There were several reasons for why the slave revolt did not immediately become the dominant force in the colony. Firstly, the slave revolt was initially confined to the northern plain and its spread was facilitated by the chaos of the civil war.³⁷⁰ These slave revolts had no coherent strategy or objective beyond freeing themselves and enacting retribution and only in the northern province did unified leadership emerge under Georges Biassou and Jean-Francois who were formerly enslaved black Dominguanes.³⁷¹ Therefore, the insurrection was initially too weak to overwhelm the colonial structure. Secondly, the febrility generated by the convergence of the conflict between white and free Dominguanes of colour and revolutionary ideals catalyzed the slave insurrection. David Geggus emphasizes the

³⁶³ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 52-54.; Stanley, "Demanding Racial Equality," 33-34.

³⁶⁴ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 52-54.; Robert R. Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax: The Lost Sentinel of the Republic* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985), 70.

³⁶⁵ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 52-54.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 54.

³⁶⁸ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 388-390.

³⁶⁹ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 34-38.

³⁷⁰ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 91-117 & 137-139.

³⁷¹ 'Jean-François' is his full name as it appears in the sources.; Jeremy D. Popkin, "A Haitian Revolutionary Manifesto? New Perspectives on the 'Letter of Jean-François, Biassou, and Belair,'" *Slavery and Abolition* 43, no. 1 (2022): 3.; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 91-117.

impact of revolutionary instability on the insurrection, stating that “for two years, the slaves of Saint Domingue had watched their masters white and colored, violently assail established authority.”³⁷² Thirdly, the power of the initial revolt was limited and its later revolutionary dominance must not be projected back onto its nascency. When Sonthonax and Polverel arrived in September 1792, their primary concern was white Dominguan intransigence, insubordination, and the civil war it had generated.³⁷³ David Geggus argues that if a large and unified army could have been mustered during the initial stages of the revolt it probably would have been defeated.³⁷⁴ Consider, as well, the fact that Britain was able to suppress a similar, albeit less potent slave revolt in Jamaica during the Seven Years’ War because the colonists were connected to the metropole and marshalled significant forces.³⁷⁵

The fourth and foremost reason for why the conflict between white and free Dominguans of colour was the initial impetus for the Haitian Revolution is the fact that it is highly improbable that any rebelling slave force would have been accepted, legitimized, and integrated into formal governance apparatuses without the existential threat to established actors introduced by war. As the civil war escalated, white and free Dominguans of colour increasingly perceived it as a struggle for the future of Saint-Domingue. Accordingly, free Dominguans of colour allied themselves with atomized slave forces in the southern and western provinces.³⁷⁶ Similarly, many white Dominguans resorted to the extraordinary expedient of arming their own slaves to fight for them.³⁷⁷ The most transformational instance of this phenomenon occurred in June 1793 when Governor General François-Thomas Galbaud rallied the remaining zealous and vitriolic white Dominguans in Cap-Français and attacked Sonthonax and Polverel, forcing the Civil Commission to flee.³⁷⁸ In response, Sonthonax enacted a monumental decision. In an effort to obtain the support of the numerous armies of the formerly enslaved surrounding Cap-Français,³⁷⁹ Sonthonax issued an official proclamation which declared “freedom to all the Negro warriors who will fight for the republic,” and that they will “will be equal to all free men” thereby receiving “all the rights belonging to french citizens.”³⁸⁰ This strategy was successful as armies led by formerly enslaved men Jean-Louis Pierrot and Jean-Louis Villatte helped the commissioners recapture Cap-Français and deport the colony’s remaining white Dominguans.³⁸¹

³⁷² Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 39.

³⁷³ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 53.

³⁷⁴ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 121-122.

³⁷⁵ Vincent Brown, *Tacky’s Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War* (Cambridge, Mass.; London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020), 44-63, 86, 179-185, & 219-224.

³⁷⁶ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 131.

³⁷⁷ Ibid., 133.; Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 39-40.

³⁷⁸ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 57-58.

³⁷⁹ Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax*, 63.

³⁸⁰ Etienne Polverel & Léger Félicité Sonthonax’s Proclamation, quoted in Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax*, 75.

³⁸¹ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 159.; Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 57-61.

The leveraging of armies of the formerly enslaved by white and free Dominguan of colour as well as by the French representatives was the critical point in the Haitian Revolution. This is because it transformed the enslaved from being property waiting to be restored or destroyed to being the most powerful actors in Saint-Domingue. The acceptance, legitimization, and integration of slaves by both the French representatives and the white and free Dominguan of colour granted the rebelling slaves a permanence and power they had never experienced or that anyone had initially intended or expected.³⁸² Once they had achieved this position, the actions and objectives of the numerically dominant and extremely motivated formerly enslaved propelled the Haitian Revolution forward.

The important process in which slaves achieved permanence and then power is illustrated by the settlement at Platons in the mountainous central region of the colony, which was established by the formerly enslaved as they escaped and overthrew the plantation structure. As the slave insurrection expanded and spread throughout Saint-Domingue, the formerly enslaved established small fortified communities where they developed rudimentary agricultural and political systems.³⁸³ Platons was a particularly prominent settlement and its population expanded above ten thousand.³⁸⁴ In settlements like Platons, the formerly enslaved experienced freedom, independence, and power in ways they never would have while enslaved on plantations. Historian Carolyn Fick describes this phenomenon as an “irreversible transformation” in the lives of these people.³⁸⁵ The contrast between even a dismal freedom and plantation slavery was so intense that once the formerly enslaved won their freedom, defended it, and experienced it they were never again willing to accept enslavement and would sacrifice their lives to preserve their freedom.³⁸⁶ This determination transformed Saint-Domingue because it established the socio-political base for what would become a new society without slavery. Initially, the slaves at Platons only demanded improved conditions of enslavement, but after they maintained their freedom by repelling an attack and developing their rudimentary settlement, they demanded total abolition.³⁸⁷ The former slave and man whose leadership these enslaved people would eventually coalesce under, Toussaint Louverture, wrote a letter in 1797 to the French describing the importance of the phenomenon illustrated by Platons. Louverture said that his people had only “accepted their chains” because “they had not experienced a state happier than slavery” and that they would now rather “be buried in the ruins of their country than suffer the return to slavery.”³⁸⁸

³⁸² Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 159.; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 100-117 & 138-148.

³⁸³ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 137-142.; Fick, “Emancipation in Haiti,” 17-23.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 145-155.

³⁸⁵ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 137-142., 150.

³⁸⁶ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 141.; Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 64 & 104.

³⁸⁷ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 143-144.

³⁸⁸ Toussaint Louverture, quoted in Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 209.

Slave settlements like Platons were established and developed throughout Saint-Domingue after the initial insurrection.³⁸⁹ By progressively growing in size and strength, these settlements formed the base for the expanding organization and power of slave armies.³⁹⁰ By the end of 1793, armies of the formerly enslaved were one of the most powerful forces in the colony and the French predominantly relied on armies by the formerly enslaved and the free Dominguan of colour to fight the British, Spanish, and their allied slave armies. In the six year struggle for Saint-Domingue from 1793 to 1798, the colony's already precarious societal structure was annihilated, white Dominguan power was destroyed,³⁹¹ and the French became entirely reliant on black armies to repel the foreign invasions.³⁹²

Out of this existential and anarchic maelstrom emerged the slave army commanded by Toussaint Louverture.³⁹³ During the ascension of Louverture and his slave army their objectives propelled the Haitian Revolution onward. Louverture's vision of a militarized and centralized Saint-Domingue with an economic base of free black agrarian labourers determined the course of the revolution by demanding the elimination of his opponents.³⁹⁴ After he was proclaimed governor by Sonthonax in 1797, Louverture promptly expelled him to increase his authority.³⁹⁵ Louverture then did the same to General d'Hédouville, who had been sent by France specifically to reassert French authority.³⁹⁶ Louverture was equally severe with non-white actors. In 1796, Jean-Louis Villatte had overthrown Étienne Maynaud de Laveaux's authority in Cap-Français and Louverture used this to justify his seizure of Cap-Français, after which he immediately imposed his authority on Laveaux.³⁹⁷ In 1799, after the foreign threats were vanquished primarily by Louverture and André Rigaud, Louverture attacked Rigaud and captured the southern province, gaining complete control of the colony.³⁹⁸

Once Louverture established his supremacy and amassed an army of 30,000 formerly enslaved Dominguan his vision for Saint-Domingue directed the revolutionary process.³⁹⁹ His vision was represented by the constitution he implemented in 1801. In addition to abolishing slavery, it established an authoritarian regime led by "citizen Toussaint Louverture, general in chief of the army of Saint

³⁸⁹ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 85.

³⁹⁰ Geggus, *Slavery, War, and Revolution*, 118-130 & 189.

³⁹¹ Ibid, 102.

³⁹² Ibid., 118-130 & 189.

³⁹³ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 62-89.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 103.; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 239.

³⁹⁵ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 223.

³⁹⁶ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 92-94.

³⁹⁷ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 190-192.; Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 78.

³⁹⁸ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 231-239.

³⁹⁹ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 120.; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 231-251.; Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 183-203.

Domingue.”⁴⁰⁰ Interestingly, the constitution describes its polity as “the French colony of Saint Domingue” and that it “forms part of the French empire [sic], but which is subject to special laws.”⁴⁰¹ Yet Louverture did not involve France in drafting the constitution, and promulgated it without their consent.⁴⁰² While technically not a declaration of independence, this was certainly a brazen assertion of autonomy that was unacceptable to France and core to Louverture’s vision for Saint-Domingue.⁴⁰³

The French were outraged by Louverture’s independent constitution, as well as by the fact that he had been conducting independent diplomacy with the United States.⁴⁰⁴ These blatant affronts contributed to Napoleon Bonaparte’s decision to send an army commanded by General Leclerc to reconquer Saint-Domingue.⁴⁰⁵ While Louverture was captured in the invasion, the French were ultimately defeated by his cause.⁴⁰⁶ His former lieutenant, Jean-Jacques Dessalines replaced Louverture and cleverly inserted himself into the French administration as their agent commanding the black armies.⁴⁰⁷ Yet again, the French relied on these black armies and Dessalines was thus able to impose his authority onto the French representatives.⁴⁰⁸ Dessalines continued Louverture’s military dictatorship and contributed his own vision for Saint-Domingue, which was to unify Domingians against the French by reconciling with the free Domingians of colour and eradicating the remaining white Domingians.⁴⁰⁹ Ultimately, the former slaves were too determined and powerful to not be victorious and therefore free. Under Dessalines, the impetus remained with these armies and their leaders who declared independence in 1804,⁴¹⁰ and adopted the new name ‘Haïti,’ a word derived from the language of the Indigenous Taíno people who were eradicated by the Columbian exchange.⁴¹¹

⁴⁰⁰ Article 28 of Toussaint Louverture’s 1801 Constitution, quoted in Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, 160-164.

⁴⁰¹ Philip Kaisary, “Hercules, the Hydra, and the 1801 Constitution of Toussaint Louverture,” *Atlantic Studies* 12, no. 4 (2015): 399-401, doi-org/10.1080/14788810.2015.1072678. Articles 1 & 2 of Toussaint Louverture’s 1801 Constitution, quoted in Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*, 160-164.

⁴⁰² Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 107-111.

⁴⁰³ Lorelle D. Semley, “To Live and Die, Free and French: Toussaint Louverture’s 1801 Constitution and the Original Challenge of Black Citizenship,” *Radical History Review* 115 (2013): 65. doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1215/01636545-1724724.

⁴⁰⁴ Phillipe R. Girard, “Liberté, Égalité, Esclavage: French Revolutionary Ideals and the Failure of the Leclerc Expedition to Saint-Domingue,” *French Colonial History* 6, no. 1 (2005): 58-59, doi.org/10.1353/fch.2005.0007.; Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 251.; Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 94.

⁴⁰⁵ Popkin, *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*, 114-118.

⁴⁰⁶ Ibid., 126-34.

⁴⁰⁷ Ibid., 127-131.

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 131.; Julia Gaffield, *The Haitian Declaration of Independence: Creation, Context and Legacy*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 115-116.

⁴¹⁰ Ibid., 115-116, 25.

⁴¹¹ David P. Geggus, “The Naming of Haiti,” *New West Indian Guide* 71, no. 1/2 (1997): 46-55, www.jstor.org/stable/41849817.

In conclusion, the Haitian Revolution was a complex and prolonged process that resulted in the former slaves of Saint-Domingue establishing an independent state. The initial impetus, however, was not these slaves, but the dispute between white and free Domingians of colour over their respective positions within the society of Saint-Domingue. When the slave insurrection erupted in August 1791, it did so within the context of an anarchic and ruinous civil war that demolished Saint-Domingue's oppressive colonial structure. Without these circumstances, the slave insurrection would have been less effective and certainly would not have been leveraged and integrated by formal governments. It was primarily due to this context that slave armies established and developed themselves into the most powerful force in Saint-Domingue by 1793. Once the enslaved achieved their freedom and acquired confidence, they were determined to maintain their profoundly transformational position. Under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the formerly enslaved secured supremacy over Saint-Domingue and implemented their revolutionary vision of an independent state constituted by the formerly enslaved. Thus, conflict between white and free Domingians of colour initiated a revolutionary process during which the formerly enslaved came to dominate the colony. After seizing control, the revolutionaries destroyed the colonial structure and radically enacted their independence.

This paper was written in the Fall semester of 2023 for Dr. Jill Walshaw's HSTR 342B: Revolutionary and Napoleonic Europe.

Bibliography

- Brown, Vincent. *Tacky's Revolt: The Story of an Atlantic Slave War*. Cambridge, Mass.; London, England: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2020.
- Burnard, Trevor G., and John D. Garrigus. *The Plantation Machine: Atlantic Capitalism in French Saint-Domingue and British Jamaica*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.
- Dubois, Laurent. *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution*. Cambridge Mass.; London: Belknap, 2004.
- Fick, Carolyn. "Emancipation in Haiti: From Plantation Labour to Peasant Proprietorship." *Slavery and Abolition* 21, no. 2 (2000): 11-40. doi.org/10.1080/01440390008575304.
- Fick, Carolyn. *The Making of Haiti: The Saint-Domingue Revolution From Below*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1990.
- Gaffield, Julia. *The Haitian Declaration of Independence: Creation, Context and Legacy*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008.
- Garrigus, John D. *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Garrigus, John D. "Blue and Brown: Contraband Indigo and the Rise of a Free Colored Planter Class in French Saint-Domingue." *The Americas* 50, no. 2 (1993): 233-263. www.jstor.org/stable/1007140.
- Garrigus, John D. "Colour, Class and Identity on the Eve of the Haitian Revolution: Saint-Domingue's Free Coloured Elite as Colons Américains." *Slavery and Abolition* 17, no.1 (1996): 20-43. doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1080/01440399608575174.
- Garrigus, John D. "Vincent Ogé Jeune (1757-91): Social Class and Free Colored Mobilization on the Eve of the Haitian Revolution." *The Americas* 68, no. 1 (2011): 33-62. doi.org/10.1353/tam.2011.0078.
- Geggus, David P. "Racial Equality, Slavery, and Colonial Secession During the Constituent Assembly." *The American Historical Review* 94, no. 5 (1989): 1290-1308. www.jstor.org/stable/1906352.

- Geggus, David P. "Slave Society in the Sugar Plantation Zones of Saint Domingue and the Revolution of 1791-1793." *Slavery and Abolition* 20, no. 2 (1999): 31-46. doi.org/10.1080/01440399908575276.
- Geggus, David P. *Slavery, War, and Revolution: The British Occupation of Saint-Domingue 1793-1798*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982.
- Geggus, David P. *The Haitian Revolution: A Documentary History*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2014.
- Geggus, David. "The Naming of Haiti." *New West Indian Guide* 71, no. 1/2 (1997): 43-68. www.jstor.org/stable/41849817.
- Girard, Philippe R. "Liberte, Egalite, Esclavage : French Revolutionary Ideals and the Failure of the Leclerc Expedition to Saint-Domingue." *French Colonial History* 6, no. 1 (2005): 55-77. doi.org/10.1353/fch.2005.0007.
- Kaisary, Philip. "Hercules, the Hydra, and the 1801 Constitution of Toussaint Louverture." *Atlantic Studies* 12, no. 4 (2015): 393-411. doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1080/14788810.2015.1072678.
- McPhee, Peter. *Liberty or Death: The French Revolution*. New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2017.
- Popkin, Jeremy D. "A Colonial Media Revolution: The Press in Saint-Domingue, 1789-1793." *The Americas* 75, no. 1 (2018): 3-25. doi.org/10.1017/tam.2017.95.
- Popkin, Jeremy D. *A Concise History of the Haitian Revolution*. Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012.
- Popkin, Jeremy D. "A Haitian Revolutionary Manifesto? New Perspectives on the 'Letter of Jean-François, Biassou, and Belair.'" *Slavery and Abolition* 43, no. 1 (2022): 3-19. doi.org/10.1080/0144039X.2021.1978231.
- Popkin, Jeremy D. "The French Revolution's Royal Governor: General Blanchelande and Saint Domingue, 1790-92." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 71, no. 2 (2014): 203-228. www.jstor.org/stable/10.5309/willmaryquar.71.2.0203.
- Semley, Lorelle D. "To Live and Die, Free and French: Toussaint Louverture's 1801 Constitution and the Original Challenge of Black Citizenship." *Radical History Review* 2013, no. 115 (2013): 65-90. doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1215/01636545-1724724.
- Stanley, Jeffrey L. "Demanding Racial Equality: Free People of Color and the 1791 Concordats in Saint-Domingue." *Slavery and Abolition* 43, no. 1 (2022): 20-39.

doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1080/0144039X.2021.1978230.

Stein, Robert R. *Léger Félicité Sonthonax: The Lost Sentinel of the Republic*.
Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985.

Stein, Robert. "The French Sugar Business in the Eighteenth Century: A Quantitative Study." *Business History* 22, no. 1 (1980): 3–17.
doi.org/10.1080/000767980000000001.