

# The Haitian Revolution

## Introduction

“The Haitian Revolution represents the most thorough case study of revolutionary change anywhere in the history of the modern world.”  
– Franklin Knight

“...the Haitian Revolution—a revolution small numbers and geography. Nevertheless, it had enormous ramifications for the study of world history.”  
– Howard Spodek

## Economic

In 1789, the French colony of Saint Domingue was among the richest European colonies in the Americas. Its plantations produced sugar, cotton, indigo, and coffee. In fact, the colony produced 2/3 of French tropical imports and generated nearly 1/3 of all French foreign trade. The wealth rested on a brutal slave regime. St. Domingue’s harsh punishments and poor living conditions were notorious in the Caribbean. Because of high mortality rates and expanding demands for labor, the majority of the colony’s 500,000 slaves were African born.  
– Richard W. Bulliet

St. Domingue produced close to 1/2 of all the sugar and coffee consumed in Europe and the Americas, as well as a substantial amount of cotton and indigo.  
– David Geggus

## Social Structure

40,000 white settlers, 30,000 *gens de couleur*, and 500,000 slaves

Whites were divided into three groups: European bureaucrats, *grand blancs* (“big whites”) who were planters (resident or absentee), merchants, lawyers, etc. and the *petit blancs* who were estate managers, artisans, shop clerks, inn keepers, etc.

*Gens de couleur* were free men of color (mulattoes). They outnumbered whites in 2 of the 3 colonial provinces. Most lived in the country, where they made up rural police force and militia. Some *gens de couleur* were wealthy, educated in France, and owned slaves (approximately 25% of all slaves in Haiti). However, anyone in St. Domingue with a black ancestor was subject to legal restrictions. The *gens de couleur* were banned from holding public office and certain occupations (lawyer, doctor, etc.), forbidden to wear fine clothing, and were not allowed to sit with whites in church or when eating.

Slaves: St. Domingue had the most slaves in the Caribbean. From 1785-1790, Haiti imported over 30,000 slaves from Africa annually. As a result, twenty-something young men from Africa comprised a significant portion of the black population. Bantu slaves called “Congoes” were the largest African group and formed 1/3 of the population. Average life expectancy for slaves was 15 years. Many slaves ran away into the mountains to avoid plantation labor.

## Leaders of the Haitian Revolution

Vincent Ogé

Ogé was a light-skinned mulatto and leader of the Society of the Friends of the Blacks. Ogé lobbied the French National Assembly to give the *gens de couleur* political representation and voting rights. Ogé claimed he did not intend to weaken slavery. Instead, he argued that making free men of color equal to whites in political rights would strengthen their devotion to France and reinforce the system of slavery. White colonists were determined to keep the *gens de couleur* out of politics. In 1790, Vincent Ogé returned to Haiti and raised an army of 300 *gens de couleur* and demanded an end to racial discrimination. The uprising was crushed; he was captured by the French and suffered excruciating punishment by being broken on the wheel. His martyrdom made him a symbol for the cause of the *gens de couleur*.

Boukman Dutty

Boukman was a voodoo priest and a major catalyst for the slave uprising in Haiti. Boukman was a slave in Jamaica before being sold to a French plantation owner and sent to Haiti. Nicknamed Zamba (elephant) for his large powerful stature. His French name indicates he was literate (or a Muslim “book man”). Nevertheless, he is often credited for leading a religious ceremony that sparked the beginning of the slave uprising in Haiti.

From *Worlds Together, Worlds Apart*

According to one description of the forest ceremony [to start the August Uprising], the priestess arrived “armed with a long pointed knife that she waved above her head as she performed a sinister dance singing an African song, which the others, faced down against the ground, repeated as a chorus. A black pig was then dragged in front of her, and she split it open with her knife. The animal’s blood was collected in a wooden bowl and served still foaming to each delegate. At a signal from the priestess, everyone threw themselves on their knees and swore blindly to obey the orders of Boukman, who had been proclaimed supreme chief of the rebellion.”

## Francois Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture

L'Ouverture was a self-educated former domestic slave. He offered to fight for the French if they would agree to free all of the slaves. With his help, the French army restored French control of St. Domingue after invasions by England and Spain. Many Africans joined his army. As a commander, he was brilliant at organization and diplomacy. His troops were well-trained and outlawed the slaughter of enemy troops. L'Ouverture and his followers (black Jacobins) eventually gained autonomous control of St. Domingue. In 1801, he issued a constitution for St. Domingue and declared himself governor for life. Napoleon in response sent forces to St. Domingue. In 1802, he was captured, sent to France where he died in prison.

## Jean Jacques Dessalines

Dessalines served as L'Ouverture's inspector of agriculture. A menial slave, he disliked white society and spoke only *Creole*. He was a ruthless commander whose armies committed well-publicized atrocities against the French and their Haitian allies. His battle cry was "burn houses, cut off heads!" He achieved independence in 1804 for Haiti. He tried to expel all remaining Europeans and proclaimed himself emperor. He banned whites from owning land, as well as the cultivation of certain crops such as sugar.

## Timeline of the Haitian Revolution

- 1789 French Revolution begins.  
Wealthy planters (*grand blancs*) seek self-rule while *gens de couleur* demand equal rights with whites. Fear Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen is a threat to their colonial authority.  
Vincent Ogé goes to France to speak to the National Assembly.
- 1790 Whites fight whites for control of colonial assemblies.  
Ogé returns from France, organizes a military force, and demands an end to racial discrimination.  
Ogé's forces are defeated; he flees to Santo Domingo (Dominican Republic)
- 1791 Vincent Ogé is captured, tortured, and executed by planter forces.  
French National Assembly grants *gens de couleur* born of free parents equal rights to whites (including suffrage)  
Whites announce they will not honor the decree. French political power collapses.  
**August Uprising.** On August 14, slaves motivated by Boukman and armed with machetes march from plantation to plantation killing, looting, and burning the fields. 100,000 slaves join the cause in the next two weeks.  
By the end of 1791, slaves kill 4,000 whites, burn 180 sugar plantations, and take control of 1/3 of the island.
- 1792 In March, the National Assembly grants equal rights to all free persons  
Jacobins send 7,000 troops to St. Domingue to stop the revolt; believe all whites are royalists or separatists  
French agents deport the colonial governor and dissolve the colonial assembly  
French government (Jacobins) aligns with *gens de couleur*; *gens de couleur* promoted to public office
- 1793 At request of white planters, Great Britain invades St. Domingue  
August 1793, a Jacobin commissioner abolished slavery in Haiti in order to gain black allies; **EMANICIPATION**  
High point of power by *gens de couleur*; now revolution is between the *gens de couleur* and black slaves
- 1794+ Years of constant warfare (Whites supported by England vs. French supported by *gens de couleur* and slaves)  
French, with help from Toussaint L'Ouverture, finally defeat British in 1798.  
Revolution and war for independence now led by Toussaint L'Ouverture; L'Ouverture overcomes his rivals to rule St. Domingue autonomously
- 1797 L'Ouverture named governor-general of St. Domingue; tries to rebuild the colony and repair the economy by restoring the plantation system. Ex-slaves are required to work on plantations in return for a share of the profits
- 1801 L'Ouverture issues a constitution for the island and named himself governor for life; L'Ouverture unifies St. Domingue and Santo Domingo.  
Napoleon, angered by L'Ouverture's actions, invades. French lose 40,000 men to wounds and yellow fever.
- 1802 Napoleon sends a military expedition, led by his brother-in-law Victor Leclerc, to reestablish slavery and French control over the entire island of Hispaniola. Thousands of French soldiers die of tropical diseases (yellow fever).
- 1803-04 L'Ouverture captured, deported, and died in a French prison in 1803.  
Leadership falls to Jean Jacques Dessalines.  
Napoleon eventually admits defeat and turns attention to fighting the British.  
Haiti gains its independence in 1804.

## Bibliography

This handout is adapted from the Haitian Revolution handout created by Ellen Bell.

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