



AMERICA ON THE WORLD STAGE

ALBEMARLE | CHARLOTTESVILLE | GREENE | MADISON | ORANGE

A
TEACHING
AMERICAN
HISTORY
GRANT PROGRAM

PROJECT TITLE: Global effects of the Haitian Slave rebellion	
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SCHOLARSHIP & RESEARCH

1. **Primary Investigative Question(s)** –What were the causes of the Haitian Slave rebellion? What were the global effects of this rebellion?

2. **Contextual Essay:**

In 1791, the first and only successful slave rebellion broke out on the island of Saint Domingue (present day Haiti). The Haitian Slave rebellion had a global impact that reached beyond the island. Some of these effects included loss of land and resources for the colonial French empire, increased concern of future slave rebellions in the United States, and the spread of ideas of abolition and emancipation worldwide.

The French colony of Saint Domingue (colonized in 1665) was one of the wealthiest French colonies in the world. In 1780, the colony grew two-fifths of the world's sugar and produced large quantities of coffee (Knight, 107). These cash crops and others were grown and harvested on large plantations, and white planters imported African slaves for labor. By the mid-eighteenth century, there were about 25,000 white plantation owners and about 500,000 slaves living in Haiti. These plantations produced sugar, coffee, cotton, and indigo and exported their goods to France, the United States, and other nations (Knight 107-108). "Saint Domingue was at the heart of the Americas, connected in many ways to empires that surrounded it, and quite far from the nation that governed it (Dubois, 28)."

In Saint Domingue there was a stringent caste system that was determined by race and relationship to the plantation. The caste system had the following groups: *grand blancs*, the white plantation owners; *petit blancs*, the small merchants and farmers who were also white; *gens de couleur (affranchis)*, who were the free blacks, and the slaves (Knight, 108). The grand blancs consisted of large plantation owners, overseers, artisans, and supervisors. The petit blancs consisted of merchants and proprietors and the like. Conflict arose as the gens de couleur felt that their wealth and education should earn them a spot above the petit blancs in the Saint Domingue caste system (Knight, 108-109). The grand blancs and petit blancs held a strong mistrust for the gens de couleur because of their education, wealth and race.

Relations between the various groups deteriorated throughout the eighteenth century and by the French Revolution (1789-1799) the colony was in unrest. The gens de couleur and the slaves were unhappy with their place in society, which was at or near the bottom of the caste system. In 1791, slaves in the northern part of the colony staged a revolt against their masters. They killed their masters and burned their plantations. The rebellion soon spread and engulfed the colony. Toussaint L'Ouverture, a slave, emerged as a great leader and organized the slaves and gens de couleur into a small army. L'Ouverture used his diplomatic skills to recruit and organize the army, and quickly discovered that he also had strong military skills. L'Ouverture led the rebellion from 1791 to 1802 without any prior military training (Hickey, 364).

The initial rebellion led to a brutal civil war, and numerous lives were lost. "The revolution began as a challenge to French imperial authority by colonial whites, but it soon became a battle over racial inequality, and then over the existence of slavery itself (Dubois, 3)." The French government sought to gain control of the rebellion by abolishing slavery in the French empire in 1793. The grand blancs would not accept the abolishment

of slavery by the French government. In 1799, Napoleon attempted to regain control of the colony and reinstate slavery. The rebellion continued and the casualties were numerous.

From 1791-1803, an estimated 300,000 people from the island were killed (Hickey, 364). Most of the whites were killed or driven off the island. The resources of Saint Domingue were plentiful and profitable, and other European countries wanted to seize the opportunity to add this wealthy island to their empires. While France fought to regain autonomy in Saint Domingue, Britain tried to take advantage of the tumult in Saint Domingue and gain control of the colony. From 1793-1796, Britain lost many soldiers in battle and to diseases such as malaria and yellow fever. The French tried to regain control from 1802-1803, but were unsuccessful (Hickey, 365).

In 1802, Napoleon Bonaparte sent one final mission led by Charles LeClerc to try to gain control of Saint Domingue and reinstate slavery. Napoleon was desperate to regain control over the colony and its wealth of resources. In a letter in 1802, LeClerc wrote the following, "I have received, Citizen General, your letter with the list of the troubling subjects with which you contend. Show no mercy with anyone that you suspect.... One must be unflinching and inspire great terror; it is the only thing that will suppress the blacks (Mintz, 2007)." LeClerc deceived L'Ouverture and captured him and sent him to prison in France, and L'Ouverture died in France in 1803. The rebellion continued under one of L'Ouverture's generals, Jean-Jacques Dessalines. Dessalines was able to defeat the French and declare Haiti an independent nation on January 1, 1804 (Peguro, 36).

The loss of Saint Domingue was a crushing blow to France and the ramifications of the Haitian Slave Rebellion would affect all corners of the French empire including possessions in North America. The French were interested in the Mississippi River Valley and expansion in North America. In 1762, France ceded the Louisiana territory to Spain for the duration of the Seven Years War. Spain offered in 1796 to retrocede Louisiana back to French control, but the French believed the price was too high. Later, when Napoleon took power in 1799, he decided that the Louisiana territory would help in New France, and the Spanish returned Louisiana to France through the Treaty of San Ildefonso. After LeClerc's failed expedition, Louisiana became unimportant to Napoleon without an established foothold colony in Saint Domingue (Hunt, 34-35). Napoleon knew that selling Louisiana to the United States was a good way to gain American support as he returned to war with England (Hunt, 36).

The global impact of the rebellion was realized in Europe and Haiti. The British lost an opportunity to trade with one of the wealthiest colonies in the Caribbean. The Treaty of San Ildefonso forever changed the map of the Spanish empire. On January 1, 1804 the Haitians declaration of independence meant a loss of the most prosperous colony for France.

In Haiti, the revolution led to their declaration of independence and the birth of the first free black ruled nation in North America. As the revolution wore on under L'Ouverture's leadership, many nations including the United States set up embargos against them. L'Ouverture had difficulty locating provisions for his people (Hickey, 368). The embargo meant that the citizens of Saint Domingue were unable to trade or find provisions for themselves or their families.

The impact of the slave rebellion on the United States was seen by the acquisition of the Louisiana Territory, and an increased fear of future slave rebellions. President Thomas Jefferson was interested in gaining access to the port of New Orleans and the Mississippi River. He worried that Napoleon would close the port and make it difficult for American traders to use it. Jefferson sent then Governor of Virginia, James Monroe, to negotiate the purchase of New Orleans (Matthewson, 230). Jefferson knew that the French were in need of money due to the loss of Saint Domingue. "Even as Haiti struggled, the ramifications of its revolution reshaped the world around it. The victory of the black troops of Saint-Domingue paved the way for the Louisiana Purchase. Bonaparte's mission to the colony had been the centerpiece of a new colonial policy aimed at reinvigorating the French presence in the Americas—Louisiana was meant to supply food for the reconstructed plantation society of Saint-Domingue—and when it was crushed he had little choice but to give up his ambitions, to the profit of an expanding United States (Dubois, 304)." With the loss of the colony, Napoleon offered the port of New Orleans and all of Louisiana to the United States. The United States purchased the Louisiana Territory from France in 1803 (Matthewson, 231), which doubled the size of America, and opened up routes to the western territories for further expansion.

While many Haitians were happy to be free of French rule, many Saint Domingue refugees were fleeing to Cuba, Louisiana, and the east coast of the United States. Although the refugees received aid from these countries, many citizens especially in Louisiana and the American South were fearful of slave rebellions. Precautions were taken to decrease the opportunity for slave revolts. Some of these precautions included harsher slave laws and deporting people who were suspected of inciting rebellious ideas (Hunt, 25). In April of 1795, a slave revolt in Point Coupee Parish near New Orleans was swiftly put down and many of the conspirators were executed or imprisoned. People who were suspected of having connections to the rebellion in Saint Domingue were watched vigilantly. A free black tailor, who was from Saint Domingue, was banished by the then governor of the Spanish

owned Louisiana territory. When the governor was asked why he had banished the man: "He is a native of the part of Saint Domingue that belongs to the French and is mixed up in all the intrigues and harassments of the French colony, besides being ungovernable and audacious. Having such character around under the present circumstances in which I am placed, might produce bad results (Hunt, 27)." Slave owners throughout the American South were worried about slaves rebelling against them, and the Haitian rebellion began to increase their fear of abolition. "Frederick Douglass, who served as the U.S. ambassador to Haiti after diplomatic relations had been reestablished, declared in 1893 that when the "black sons of Haiti" had "struck for freedom," they had "struck for freedom for every black man in the world (Dubois 305)."

The study of the Haitian Slave rebellion provides a glimpse of the global effects of the first successful slave rebellion. Slave revolts in other countries began to occur and the ideas of abolishment and emancipation of slavery increased as a result. Slave owners in the American South became fearful that their own slaves would revolt. This successful rebellion marked the end of French colonial rule in North America and allowed the United States to gain access to land that doubled the country's overall size.

3. Annotated Bibliography

Secondary Sources:

Knight, F.W. (2000). The Haitian Revolution. *The American Historical Review*, 105(1), 103-115.

Summary: This journal article discusses the factors leading to the slave revolt and its global effects. The article shares the background information about the large amount of wealth maintained by the people of St. Dominique. The article also shares the hierarchical class system (grand blancs, petit blancs, and gens de colour). The global effects of the slave revolt are felt as many white slave owners in the American south are fearful of their own slaves revolting.

Hammond, J.C. (2003). "They are very much interested in obtaining an unlimited slavery": Rethinking the expansion of slavery in the Louisiana Purchase territories, 1803-1805. *Journal of the Early Republic*, 23(3), 353-380.

Summary: This article discusses how slavery became what kept many people who were moving to the Louisiana Territory abiding by federal laws. Although Congress wanted to limit the slave trade, many were afraid that these Louisiana settlers would begin seceding from the country.

Hickey, D.R. (1982). America's response to the slave revolt in Haiti, 1791-1806. *Journal of the Early Republic*, 2(4), 361-379.

Summary: The United States gained a large amount of sugar and molasses from the French colony of St. Domingue on the western coast of Hispaniola. In 1791, during the French Revolution the slaves of St. Domingue rebelled against their masters and became an independent colony. The revolt was led by Toussant Louverture organizing the blacks into a fighting force. The American response was to arm white planters. Both the British and the French tried to gain control of the rebellion, but to no avail.

Peguero, V. (1998). Teaching the Haitian revolution: its place in western and modern world history. *The History Teacher*, 32(1), 33-41.

Summary: This article shares information about making connections between the Haitian slave revolt and revolutionary and abolitionist ideas. As the first successful slave revolt, America acquired the Louisiana Territory as an indirect result of this revolt. An interesting teaching idea given by the author was to have students compare dialogue between Napoleon and Toussant Louverture.

Matthewson, T. (1995). Jefferson and Haiti. *The Journal of Southern History*, 61(2), 209-248.

Summary: This article shares the many views of Thomas Jefferson on the issue of slavery and how Haiti shaped his views. The author outlines the ways that the French attempt to regain control over St. Domingue. Finally, the article provides a connection from the slave revolt to the Louisiana Purchase.

Hunt, A.N. (1988). *Haiti's influence on antebellum America: Slumbering volcano in the Caribbean*. Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press.

Summary: In this book, Hunt shares the global effects of the Haitian slave rebellion. He gives examples of revolts that occurred along the Mississippi River and were quickly put down in order to avoid further rebellions. Finally, he shares how the Louisiana territory changed owners from France and Spain to finally being sold to the Americans.

Dubois, L. (2004). *Avengers of the new world: the story of the haitian revolution*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Summary: Dubois shares information about major causes of the Haitian Revolution. He shares many Haitian accounts of what happened during the fourteen-year revolution. Finally, Dubois shares many of the effects that were felt globally by countries around the world.

Primary Sources:

“Charles Victor Emmanuel LeClerc letter” c. 1802

Accessed from *Digital History* (<http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu>) 23 April 2011.

Summary:

This document was written in 1802 by General Charles Victor Emmanuel LeClerc, a French commander, who was attempting to put down the rebellion in Saint Domingue. In the letter, LeClerc speaks confidently about suppressing this rebellion. There are also sharp depictions of the violence used by the French to end the rebellion in Saint Domingue.