

A Short Summary of the Haitian Revolution

* The intent of this summary is to give you a cursory and brief overview of Haitian history from 1492 through 1804. As a consequence of brevity, I've had to select, omit, emphasize, and over-simplify complex events. For those interested in a more comprehensive depiction of the Haitian Revolution or Haitian history in general, I have included a list of books that may be helpful at the end of the summary.

Christopher Columbus landed in the Americas on October 12th, 1492, and made his first settlement along the northern coast of what is present-day Haiti December 6th of that same year. After a short stay following an amicable reception from the Taino natives, Columbus returned to his patrons King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, informing them of the massive quantities of gold the natives possessed. Enticed by the lure of riches, the King and Queen provided Columbus 17 ships and 200 men to return to the island with orders to convert the Tainos to Christianity and essentially enslave them to mine and then surrender their gold. Succumbing with great speed to direct massacre, the brutal conditions of indentured servitude, and European diseases, the Taino population dwindled from one million to 29,000 within two decades. Over the next 30 years, they were all but exterminated. It is one of the most successful and expeditious examples of genocide in recorded human history.

During this Spanish occupation, Bartolomé de Las Casas, the first ordained priest on the island, was a stern critic of the brutal Spanish treatment of the Tainos. However, his advocacy for social justice was selective in scope. In a bid to save the indigenous population, he ironically advocated for the importation of African slaves to take their place. Though he did not invent the slave trade, Las Casas was one of its early exponents.

Spain began importing kidnapped Africans to Haiti (then named Hispañola by Columbus) in the early 16th century both to mine the natural resources and to work on plantations. However as the Aztec and Inca empires fell, the Spanish who remained would leave Hispañola to pursue new opportunities in Central and South America that promised great wealth. For the next 150 years, the Western portion of the island remained relatively uninhabited.

In 1697, the Spanish ceded the western half of the colony to the French in the Treaty of Rhyswick. The island's capital, Santo Domingo, had increasingly been used to refer to the entire island, and the French would simply translate this to rename their colony *Saint-Domingue*.

Unlike the Spaniards who focused primarily on the extraction of gold from the land, the French would focus their energy on the establishment of plantations. From the

outset, these plantations depended on forced labor. While tobacco, coffee and especially Indigo would play an important part in the economy of Saint Domingue, by far the most lucrative crop was sugar.

Sugar required far more skill, timing, and labor to be transformed than the other crops. Sugar cane had to be grown for nine to fifteen months, crushed within days after it was cut, and then the juice had to be expertly boiled and processed for days. Despite their dependence on forced labor, sugar plantations thrived because they promised the greatest profit returns on initial investment for their owners. By 1750, Saint-Domingue, an area roughly the size of Maryland, would be the world's largest sugar exporter.

Rapid economic growth would coincide with increasing strains on Saint-Domingue's social structure.

The white population was divided in complex ways. Wealthy absentee landowners who could afford to live in France and hire managers to run their plantations took great issue with France's trade laws, which among other restrictions disallowed the sale of any commodity directly to foreign markets. They also came to have radically different perspectives and interests from the Colonial Ministry in Paris, who controlled Saint-Domingue's policy. In the lead up to 1789, they were eagerly awaiting an opportunity to transform their relationship with France to improve their economic possibilities.

Meanwhile, most poor and middle-class whites immigrated to Saint-Domingue following the end of the Seven Years War in 1763. While they came to Saint-Domingue in search of fortune, they found that wealthy planters owned most land and dominated local society. The absence of opportunity fueled a jealousy of the wealthy white class and especially of an equally sizable class of mixed-raced people, many of whom owned successful plantations and businesses.

When France obtained Saint-Domingue from the Spanish, there were very few European women present and it was common for European men to become attached to and even father children with African women. Many of these women and children were subsequently freed, giving them rights to own land, slaves, and pursue wealth. This mixed-race population, politely referred to as *gens du couleur*, expanded to eventually equal the white population in size by 1789. While both races lived harmoniously for a time, whites would launch a systematic campaign of discrimination targeting the *gens du couleur* midway through the 18th century. Laws were passed forbidding them to wear the same fabrics as whites, disallowing them to send their offspring to be educated in France, and banning them from attending public forms of entertainment. By 1789, *gens du couleur* had virtually no political rights whatsoever.

Meanwhile, throughout the 18th century, upwards of one million Africans were kidnapped and sold into slavery in Saint-Domingue and conditions for the slaves

were extraordinarily severe. Owners and masters, unburdened by humanitarian concerns, found it most profitable to work their slaves to the death and then purchase new ones. In the fifteen years leading up to the Haitian Revolution, nearly 500,000 Africans were kidnapped and imported into Saint Domingue. As an unintended consequence, by 1789 most of the slave population had been deprived of freedom within the previous ten years, directly contributing to the volatility of the situation. As Haitian scholar Laurent Dubois notes, "The enslaved were 'omnipresent and attentive observers' who had an astute sense of the divisions among their oppressors." The bickering between the whites and gens du couleur as well as France's preoccupation with their own Revolution blinded all parties to the prospect of a slave uprising.

Though fighting initially broke out in June of 1791 between whites and gens du couleur, a giant and well-planned slave insurrection took place in the northern province of Saint-Domingue two months later. It was preceded by a massive Vodou ceremony in the woods near Le Cap at Bois Caïman in which slave delegates from many plantations engineered the revolt. In the first two weeks, approximately one thousand slaves destroyed over 200 plantations in the northern plain. Within a month, the slave army ballooned to 20,000. In an effort to combat the growing force of slave fighters, colonial France granted gens du couleur citizenship and full rights and persuaded them to join the whites in repressing the slaves.

While not a chief instigator of the initial slave insurrection, Toussaint Louverture emerged as one of the early architects of the movement fueled by the idea that all enslaved persons should be free. Born in Saint-Domingue on the Bréda Plantation, Toussaint fast rose up the ranks to become coachman to the estate manager and then steward of all livestock. Eventually he would earn his freedom. In August of 1793 Toussaint issued a proclamation to make known his desire for liberty, equality, and the abolition of plantation slavery and called for unity under that cause. Up until this point, he had only been involved in the slave rebellion behind the scenes.

Toussaint was a strategist and a master at building alliances to achieve victories. For example, early in the revolution he fought for the Spanish who were providing covert support to the slaves in an effort to destabilize Saint Domingue and potentially reap the financial rewards of its plantation economy. However he would desert the Spanish for the French when France's National Assembly, in an effort to quell the uprising, promised freedom to all slaves. In the words of Jean Bertrand Aristide, "Toussaint did have the ability to understand multiple perspectives. He understood that the exercise of power required continuous vigilance and identification of different types of enemies – the immediate enemy and the enemy to come."

Over the course of the next decade, Toussaint would gain control over most of the colony and his political skills would eventually land him as Saint-Domingue's top ranking officer. However in 1789, Napoléon Bonaparte would orchestrate a coup

d'état in France against the regime in power. Once in control, he would develop plans to restore Saint-Domingue to its profitable plantation economy. In 1802, Toussaint was captured and extradited to France where he would die in a mountain prison in April 1803, but his principal lieutenant, Jean-Jacques Dessalines would eventually carry the torch and lead Saint-Domingue to autonomy. France would take heavy losses as a result of Napoléon's bid to return Saint-Domingue to slavery. By December of 1803, only 8,000 French soldiers and sailors remained of the 80,000 originally dispatched to Saint-Domingue in the previous 3 years prompting France to cut their losses. On January 1st, 1804, in Gonaïves, Jean-Jacques Dessalines declared the colony's independence, renaming it *Haiti*, the name Taino natives had originally used.

As Peter Hallward writes, "Of the three great revolutions that began in the final decades of the eighteenth century – American, French, and Haitian – only the third forced the unconditional application of the principle that inspired each one: affirmation of the natural, inalienable rights of all human beings." Haiti remains the only such case where slaves have eradicated slavery in the society where it took place.

Suggested further reading:

- Toussaint Louverture – Madison Smart Bell
- Slave Revolution in the Caribbean – Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus
- Avengers of the New World – Laurent Dubois
- Damming the Flood – Peter Hallward
- Toussaint Louverture The Haitian Revolution – Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Bertrand Aristide