

Haitian Revolution



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Events of the Haitian Revolution

Primary Source:
Haitian Declaration of Independence (1804)

Legacy of the Haitian Revolution

Events of the Haitian Revolution

During the Age of Revolutions, calls for liberty, equality, and human rights echoed around the world. But nowhere did they lead to a more profound upending of established order than in Saint-Domingue, a French colony in the Caribbean that came to be called Haiti as a result of the events described below. The revolution in Haiti brought about unparalleled social, economic, and political transformations. But if it was unparalleled in its implications, today it is also the least known of the three revolutions in this module. This is largely due to reactions elsewhere to Haiti's revolution, which grew out of a massive and successful slave revolt followed by the creation of an independent government run by Black people of African descent. The prospect of enslaved people freeing themselves threatened plantation-based economies dominated by wealthy white landowners in the United States, the Caribbean, and Brazil. A Black-led revolution

against enslavement not only threatened their economies: it threatened the entire racist ideological, political, cultural, and social systems upon which those economies were based. After all, the claim that Black people could govern themselves challenged the white supremacy that justified the institution of slavery. White leaders in Europe and the Americas did not know how to even conceive of the Haitian Revolution. Their first response was fear and horror. After that, they actively worked to isolate and marginalize the small nation, so that it went from being the wealthiest area of the Americas to one of the poorest.



Map of Saint-Domingue (Haiti) in of 1789

In the late 18th century, however, Haiti was the by far the most profitable and powerful colony in the French empire, and possibly in the world, especially because of its centrality to the lucrative global sugar trade. Sugar plantations in Haiti's lowlands and coffee plantations in the mountains produced and exported more of those commodities than any other place in the world. The intensity of production was also very costly in human lives. Work was brutal and hard. The cruelty exacted on workers by slave owners was severe and dehumanizing. Tens of thousands of people died annually because of the harshness of the work, but also because of the terrifying violence exacted on workers by colonists. Indeed, the average life expectancy of an enslaved laborer on a Haitian plantation was only seven years.

To compensate for these deaths, plantation owners constantly replaced those who died with newly-imported enslaved people from the west coast of Africa. As a result, by the 1770s and 1780s Haiti had become the largest single importer of enslaved people, with tens of thousands of individuals arriving there annually from the west coast of Africa, mostly from the Kongo region. Haiti's booming plantations were a significant source of revenue for France, especially important because of the dire economic situation brought on by decades of war against Britain and Spain.



Map of Atlantic trade of enslaved peoples, 1500-1900

On the cusp of the Haitian Revolution, there were 500,000 enslaved people in Haiti, about half of whom had been born in Africa. Haiti was also home to 30,000 white French colonists and about the same number of free Black or mixed-race people, known as *gens de couleur*, many of whom owned businesses and plantations, even though they did not have the rights of French citizens after 1789.



View of a Sugar Plantation, French West Indies, 1762

There had been slave revolts and other resistance to the brutality of slavery in Haiti for a long time, so in some ways the outpouring of resistance to dehumanization and oppression had a long tradition there, as elsewhere in the Americas. On a smaller scale, many people self-emancipated by fleeing their enslavement. Such self-emancipated people, called maroons (or *mawon* in Haitian Creole), sometimes lived in small communities near plantations where they could access food and other resources. At other times, they formed armed independent communities of mutual defense and support. Some free Blacks even learned to read French, giving them access to understanding the wider colonial order of which they had become a part. Others worked in ships or in Haiti's ports, giving them access to news discussed orally about events back in Europe, including French Revolutionaries' demands for *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*. Such claims resonated with many people living in Haiti. The idea that some French valued liberty and equality surely provided many with inspiration or opportunity in the face of the horrors of plantation enslavement.

In the early phase of the French Revolution, white colonists and *gens de couleur* in Haiti took diverse and uncertain positions on how they understood themselves in relationship to the new revolutionary regime. They debated without resolution about how the *Declaration of the Rights of Man* (1789) might apply in a slave society. Many free Blacks and *gens de couleur* called for legal equity to whites; many working-class whites allied with the wealthy whites who dominated the government in opposition to such efforts.



Map of the Haitian Revolution, 1793-1809

These efforts were eclipsed in the summer of 1791 by a massive insurrection of 100,000 enslaved people who decided to skip such debates and seize their freedom for themselves. While they sought *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, the target of their anger was the brutality of the plantation system itself. They burned sugar cane fields and sugar refineries as they attacked most of the plantations in the colony. Many enslaved people living in Haiti were not new to warfare. Many were military veterans who been sold into slavery because they had been serving in wars in the Kongo, so they had knowledge of African military techniques and strategies. They were able to draw on this training as anger and resentment turned to uprising.

In the early months of unrest in 1791, a number of leaders emerged. One of these was Dutty Boukman, a maroon and priest of the *vodou* religious system practiced among Blacks in Haiti, who died later that year. Another leader of the Haitian Revolution was Toussaint Louverture, a free Black man and former slave with African-born parents, who was also educated in both African and European traditions and understood the Enlightenment intellectual traditions upon which the French Revolutionaries built their arguments about the rights of citizens and demands that the governed represent the interests of the governed. Louverture was also a brilliant military commander. Like George Washington, he organized an army of poorly trained and inadequately equipped soldiers to fight against professional military battalions from Europe, avoiding



*Portrait of Toussaint Louverture
enslaved people in Saint-Domingue*



*Toussaint Louverture on
Horseback, ca. 1802*

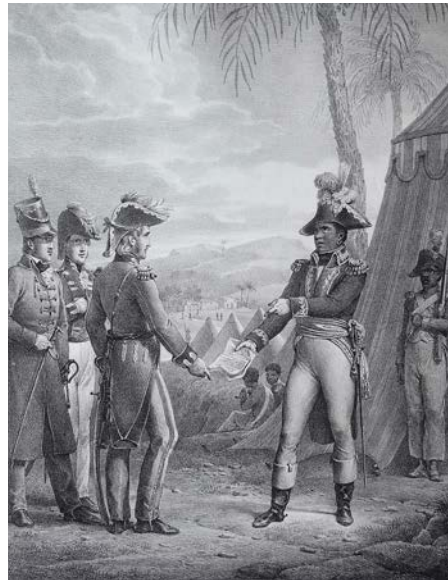
pitched battles and relying on guerilla fighting strategies. Louverture, a voracious reader, also implemented tactics used by the Roman legions and drew inspiration from the Roman slave revolt of Spartacus during the 1st century BCE. In 1793, Louverture also wrote a public letter to all the disenfranchised of Haiti calling for liberty and equality for all and declaring himself the leader in the struggle to achieve this end. Later that year, he accepted gifts of weapons and ammunition from the Spanish government—who hoped to use the situation to wrest the profitable colony from France. Louverture used this opportunity to capture Haiti’s cities for the revolutionaries. Plantation owners responded by turning to the British government for help, which extended the war further.

The French Revolutionary governments in Paris gradually responded to the realities on the ground in Haiti. In May 1791, they extended political rights to freeborn persons of color. In April 1792, they voted to end all racial discrimination in the colonies and sent Haiti a new colonial governor, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, who was an abolitionist. Later that year, the more radical Jacobins under Maximilien Robespierre took the leading role in guiding the Revolution, including orchestrating the execution of King Louis XVI and beginning the violent purges known as the Reign of Terror. In February 1794, the Jacobin government in Paris declared slavery abolished and established citizenship for former enslaved people living in French colonies. All at once, one million Blacks became French citizens.



*The decree of the French “Law of
4 February 1794,” which abolished
slavery in the French empire*

Soon after, Louverture shifted his allegiances. Previously, he had strategically allied with Spain against France. Now he embraced an alliance with France. With French support, Louverture's troops drove the Spanish and British forces out and suppressed all dissent to the new revolutionary order. He even turned on his former ally Sonthonax and his colonial government, which was popular in Haiti because of Sonthonax's role in ending slavery. When Sonthonax returned to France, Louverture became Haiti's governor-general. Controversially, Louverture aimed to rebuild Haiti's economy by convincing former enslaved Blacks to go back to work on the sugar plantations. However, when Napoleon's government back in France seemed like it might support restoring slavery, Louverture's government in Haiti acted to oppose such a reversal. In 1801, Louverture appointed an assembly to create a new colonial constitution that would keep Haiti a colony of France but give its governors—especially Louverture—broad powers. That July, his government introduced a new constitution that permanently abolished slavery and any form of racial discrimination.



Depiction of Louverture receiving British generals in 1798, during negotiations for British withdrawal from San Domingue

By this point, the new French emperor, Napoleon Bonapart, had begun looking for ways to financially support an expansion of the French army so they could more effectively fight their ongoing war against Austria and Prussia. He looked to Haiti. After the slave revolt and the abolition of slavery, production of sugar and coffee had decreased. Napoleon's brother-in-law arrived in Haiti in 1802 with a large contingent of French soldiers to force workers back onto plantations and possibly back into slavery, but certainly ending the prospect that a Black-ruled republic would remain in Haiti. This was unacceptable to Toussaint and the formerly enslaved people of Haiti. A combination of Louverture's military prowess and a hard season of Yellow Fever defeated the French army. However, on May 6, 1802 Louverture was captured in battle. He died in a French prison in April 1803. Napoleon did reinstitute slavery in another French Caribbean colony, Guadeloupe. In response, Haitians erupted in anger. Louverture's lieutenant, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, broke from France and led a war for independence. In December 1803, as the Napoleonic Wars were ramping up in Europe, the French withdrew from Haiti for good. On January 1, 1804, Dessalines formally declared independence from France, leaving Haiti as the first Black-ruled republic in world history.



General Jean-Jacques Dessalines

Primary Source: The Haitian Declaration of Independence (1804)

This document was written by Louis Boisrond Tonnerre, secretary to President Jean-Jacques Dessalines who took control of Haiti after the French captured Toussaint Louverture.

- *How does the Haitian Declaration of Independence compare to the Declaration of Independence of the United States of America?*
- *Who do you think the audience for this document is supposed to be?*
- *What can we learn from this document about Haitian ideas of liberty, equality, and human rights?*

Source: "The Haitian Declaration of Independence," translation by Laurent Dubois and John Garrigus, accessed April 2025, <https://wp.stu.ca/worldhistory/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2015/07/Haitian-Declaration-of-Independence.pdf>

January 1, 1804

The Commander in Chief to the People of Haiti

Citizens:

It is not enough to have expelled the barbarians who have bloodied our land for two centuries; it is not enough to have restrained those ever-evolving factions that one after another mocked the specter of liberty that France dangled before you. We must, with one last act of national authority, forever assure the empire of liberty in the country of our birth; we must take any hope of re-enslaving us away from the inhuman government that for so long kept us in the most humiliating torpor. In the end we must live independent or die.

Independence or death . . . let these sacred words unite us and be the signal of battle and of our reunion.

Citizens, my countrymen, on this solemn day I have brought together those courageous soldiers who, as liberty lay dying, spilled their blood to save it; these generals who have guided your efforts against tyranny have not yet done enough for your happiness; the French name still haunts our land.

Everything revives the memories of the cruelties of this barbarous people: our laws, our habits, our towns, everything still carries the stamp of the French. Indeed! There are still French in our island, and you believe yourself free and independent of that Republic which, it is true, has fought all the nations, but which has never defeated those who wanted to be free.



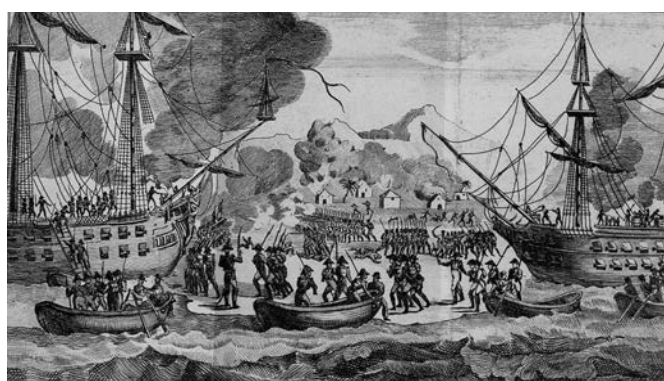
Louis Boisrond Tonnerre on a 1954 Haitian stamp, celebrating the 150-year anniversary of the Haitian Revolution.

Indeed! There are still French in our island, and you believe yourself free and independent of that Republic which, it is true, has fought all the nations, but which has never defeated those who wanted to be free.

What! Victims of our [own] credulity and indulgence for 14 years; defeated not by French armies, but by the pathetic eloquence of their agents' proclamations; when will we tire of breathing the air that they breathe? What do we have in common with this nation of executioners? The difference between its cruelty and our patient moderation, its color and ours the great seas that separate us, our avenging climate, all tell us plainly that they are not our brothers, that they never will be, and that if they find refuge among us, they will plot again to trouble and divide us.

Native citizens, men, women, girls, and children, let your gaze extend on all parts of this island: look there for your spouses, your husbands, your brothers, your sisters. Indeed! Look there for your children, your suckling infants, what have they become?... I shudder to say it ... the prey of these vultures.

Instead of these dear victims, your alarmed gaze will see only their assassins, these tigers still dripping with their blood, whose terrible presence indicts your lack of feeling and your guilty slowness in avenging them. What are you waiting for before appeasing their spirits? Remember that you had wanted your remains to rest next to those of your fathers, after you defeated tyranny; will you descend into their tombs without having avenged them? No! Their bones would reject yours.



Landing of a French fleet in Santo Domingo to fight against revolutionaries in 1802

let us begin with the French. Let them tremble when they approach our coast, if not from the memory of those cruelties they perpetrated here, then from the terrible resolution that we will have made to put to death anyone born French whose profane foot soils the land of liberty.



Haitian Declaration of Independence, 1804

And you, precious men, intrepid generals, who, without concern for your own pain, have revived liberty by shedding all your blood, know that you have done nothing if you do not give the nations a terrible, but just example of the vengeance that must be wrought by a people proud to have recovered its liberty and jealous to maintain it let us frighten all those who would dare try to take it from us again;

We have dared to be free, let us be thus by ourselves and for ourselves. Let us imitate the grown child: his own weight breaks the boundary that has become an obstacle to him. What people fought for us? What people wanted to gather the fruits of our labor? And what dishonorable absurdity to conquer in order to be enslaved. Enslaved?... Let us leave this description for the French; they have conquered but are no longer free. Let us walk down another path; let us imitate those people who, extending their concern into the future, and dreading to leave an example of cowardice for posterity, preferred to be exterminated rather than lose their place as one of the world's free peoples.



Toussaint Louverture fighting the French at the Battle at "Snake Gully" in 1802

Let us ensure, however, that a missionary spirit does not destroy our work; let us allow our neighbors to breathe in peace; may they live quietly under the laws that they have made for themselves, and let us not, as revolutionary firebrands, declare ourselves the lawgivers of the Caribbean, nor let our glory consist in troubling the peace of the neighboring islands. Unlike that which we inhabit,

theirs has not been drenched in the innocent blood of its inhabitants; they have no vengeance to claim from the authority that protects them.

Fortunate to have never known the ideals that have destroyed us, they can only have good wishes for our prosperity.

Peace to our neighbors; but let this be our cry: "Anathema to the French name! Eternal hatred of France!"

Natives of Haiti! My happy fate was to be one day the sentinel who would watch over the idol to which you sacrifice; I have watched, sometimes fighting alone, and if I have been so fortunate as to return to your hands the sacred trust you confided to me, know that it is now your task to preserve it. In fighting for your liberty, I was working for my own happiness. Before consolidating it with laws that will guarantee your free individuality, your leaders, who I have assembled here, and I, owe you the final proof of our devotion.

Generals and you, leaders, collected here close to me for the good of our land, the day has come, the day which must make our glory, our independence, eternal.

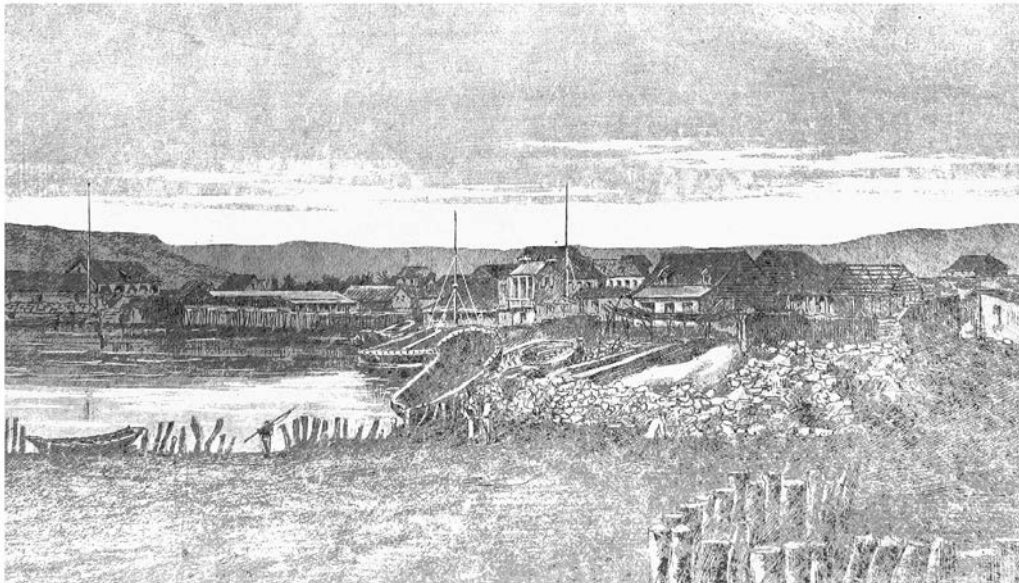
If there could exist among us a lukewarm heart, let him distance himself and tremble to take the oath which must unite us. Let us vow to ourselves, to posterity, to the entire universe, to forever renounce France, and to die rather than live under its domination; to fight until our last breath for the independence of our country. And you, a people so long without good fortune, witness to the oath we take, remember that I counted on your constancy and courage when I threw myself into the career of liberty to fight the despotism and tyranny you had struggled against for 14 years.

Remember that I sacrificed everything to rally to your defense; family, children, fortune, and now I am rich only with your liberty; my name has become a horror to all those who want slavery. Despots and tyrants curse the day that I was born.

If ever you refused or grumbled while receiving those laws that the spirit guarding your fate dictates to me for your own good, you would deserve the fate of an ungrateful people. But I reject that awful idea; you will sustain the liberty that you cherish and support the leader who commands you. Therefore vow before me to live free and independent, and to prefer death to anything that will try to place you back in chains. Swear, finally, to pursue forever the traitors and enemies of your independence.

* * * * *

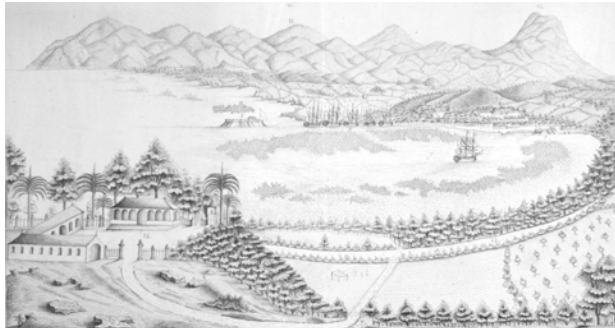
Done at the headquarters of Gonaives, the first day of January 1804, the first year of independence.



View of Gonaives before 1892

Legacy of the Haitian Revolution

For many living in Europe, news of the Haitian Revolution was met with utter disbelief. The entire idea of a Black revolution ran so counter to everything that many felt they understood about the world that they disregarded reports as false and fantastical rumors. Of course, leading government officials in France knew that such reports were accurate. Colonial governments and plantation owners reacted to Haiti's successful slave rebellion and eventual independence with horror. Leaders in Britain, Spain, and France all refused to recognize Haiti's new government. So did leaders in the newly established United States of America. Meanwhile, political leaders in all these countries actively worked to ensure that information about Haiti could not reach their own enslaved populations so they would not be inspired to free themselves. The slave trade to Haiti ceased, but the overall volume of slaves brought across the Atlantic from Africa to the Americas did not decrease: The reduction in Haitian plantations' production of sugar and coffee created a market for production elsewhere, and these new or expanded plantations used enslaved laborers. As a result, the economy in Haiti declined dramatically, even as freedom and human dignity were expanding.



Landscape drawing of Port-au-Prince Haiti under siege in 1803 (top); Map of the "Louisiana Purchase," of 1803 (bottom)



Indeed, the Haitian Revolution proved a major impetus for France to withdraw from existing plans to expand its slave-based colonial system. In 1803, the French sold its territory of Louisiana (present-day Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Missouri, Iowa, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, and parts of Texas, North Dakota, Minnesota, Wyoming, Colorado, and New Mexico) to the new United States. This transaction made possible the massive colonial expansion into the Great Plains, territories occupied by the Osage, Pawnee, Omaha, Sioux and many other Indigenous peoples, and later locations to which other native peoples from further east were forcibly displaced. While rarely taught in U.S. history classes, then, the Haitian Revolution played an important

role in shaping the United States.

France acknowledged Haiti's independence only in 1825. That year, the French government (which had restored their monarchy after Napoleon's defeat in 1815) agreed to recognize Haiti and engage in trade if Haiti would "pay back" France for the value of the property it lost in the revolution—including human property. They settled on a figure of 150 million francs—ten times the amount the United States paid for the Louisiana Purchase. Haiti had to borrow this money from

French banks, and it took them 122 years to finish paying it back. The lack of economic development in Haiti can be attributed to this massive debt and the economic isolation imposed on Haiti by the United States and other nations.

For its part, the United States did not recognize Haiti until 1862. A year into the Civil War, federalists in the North abolished slavery, including freeing all escapees from enslavement in the Confederacy who could make it to the North. It was then that the government in the North formally recognized Haiti's independence. But the U.S. would not remain committed to Haiti's sovereignty. In 1915, the United States invaded Haiti and occupied the country for the next 29 years. This move was part of a growing willingness of the U.S. to intervene militarily in the Caribbean and Latin America in order to expand its political and economic influence, often understood by promoters of this form of aggressive interventionism as necessary to keep Europeans from interfering in matters in the Western hemisphere. The U.S. occupied the country until 1934, in spite of violent resistance from some Haitians resentful of American disregard for their sovereignty.



President Jean-Jaques Dessalines meeting French Baron Mackau to discuss the French King's demand for 150 million francs in "reparations"



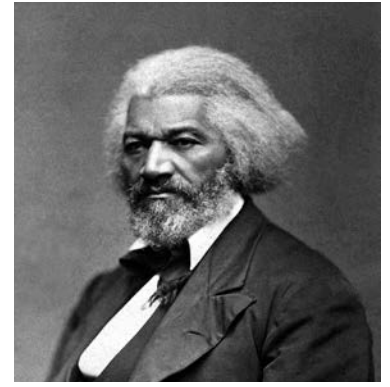
A street scene in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in 1920, during United States occupation

As time went along, outside of Haiti, a kind of collective (and willful) amnesia set in among educated elites in Europe and the United States. In the late 19th and early 20th century, as the American and French Revolutions became standard curricula in high school history classes, Haiti's dramatic call for full citizenship for Blacks quietly disappeared from discussions of key events in world history.

Despite efforts to isolate Haiti and minimize the significance of its revolution, the Haitian revolutionaries' fight for freedom proved inspiring for a few white observers. As early as 1803, the English poet William Wordsworth wrote a sonnet in honor of Toussaint Louverture. In it, Wordsworth neither celebrated Louverture as a military hero nor addressed his complexity. Instead, the poet mournfully celebrated "Toussaint—the most unhappy of men!" who was unable to live to see his own legacy but offered inspiration for the world through his actions like a force of nature: "There's not a breathing of the common wind/ That will forget thee! Thou has great allies: Thy friends are exultations, agonies,/ And love, and man's unconquerable mind." French novelist Victor Hugo's first novel, *Bug-Jargal* (1826, written when Hugo was just sixteen) is set during the Haitian Revolution, a story of friendship between an elite white man and a heroic Black revolutionary.

But it was among intellectuals in the Black diaspora to whom the full significance of the Haitian revolution was most clear. During the World's Fair of 1893, the leading Black American intellectual and politician Frederick Douglass gave a powerful speech in Chicago on the significance of Haiti and its revolution:

My subject is Haiti, the Black Republic; the only self-made Black Republic in the world. I am to speak to you of her character, her history, her importance and her struggle from slavery to freedom ... of her probable destiny; and of the bearing of her example as a free and independent Republic, upon what may be the destiny of the African race in our own country and elsewhere...



Frederick Douglass, c. 1879

While slavery existed amongst us [in the United States], her example was a sharp thorn in our side and a source of alarm and terror. She came into the sisterhood of nations through blood. She was described at the time of her advent, as a very hell of horrors. Her very name was pronounced with a shudder. She was a startling and frightful surprise and a threat to all slave-holders throughout the world, and the slave-holding world has had its questioning eye upon her career ever since... Until she spoke no Christian nation had abolished negro slavery. Until she spoke no Christian nation had given to the world an organized effort to abolish slavery. Until she spoke the slave ship, followed by hungry sharks, greedy to devour the dead and dying slaves flung overboard to feed them, ploughed in peace the South Atlantic painting the sea with the Negro's blood. Until she spoke, the slave trade was sanctioned by all the Christian nations of the world, and our land of liberty and light included. Men made fortunes by this infernal traffic, and were esteemed as good Christians, and the standing types and representations of the Saviour of the World. Until Haiti spoke, the church was silent, and the pulpit was dumb.



Statue of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, at Cap-Hatien, created in 1913

Of course, Haitians themselves have long celebrated the Haitian Revolution. A 1913 statue of Jean-Jacques Dessalines remains in place today in the city of Cap-Hatien. Another Dessalines statute from 1953 can be found in the city of Gonaïves. In the capital city, Port-au-Prince, the central square of Champ de Mars has early 20th-century statues of Dessalines, Louverture, a monument to the country's 1801 constitution, as well as an iconic statue of maroons' contributions to the revolution that was added in 1967 (during the Caribbean's Black Power movement). More recently, artists have produced memorials to the revolution at Bois Caïman, the site of the ceremony led by Dutty Boukman that sparked the first revolt in 1791. Every year January 1 is celebrated as independence day during which Haitians eat a special soup (*la soupe joumou*) that symbolizes freedom and liberation from enslavement and repression.

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Page 2:

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French General Toussaint Louverture receiving British General Thomas Maitland, on 30 March 1798. Drawing by François Grenier de Saint-Martin, lithography by Jean-François Villain, 1821, Public Domain, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Le_g%C3%A9n%C3%A9ral_Toussaint_L%27Ouverture_recevant_le_g%C3%A9n%C3%A9ral_anglais_Thomas_Maitland_le_30_mars_1798_\(cropped\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Le_g%C3%A9n%C3%A9ral_Toussaint_L%27Ouverture_recevant_le_g%C3%A9n%C3%A9ral_anglais_Thomas_Maitland_le_30_mars_1798_(cropped).jpg)

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Général Jean-Jacques Dessalines (1758-1806). Héros de l'Indépendance d'Haïti (1804-1806), The New York Public Library, Fair Use, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/5bac1dd0-c60a-012f-a948-58d385a7b-c34#/?uuiid=510d47de-189b-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>

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Louis Boisrond Tonnerre on a 1954 Haitian stamp, celebrating the 150-year anniversary of the Haitian Revolution, (1804-1954), Public Domain, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Louis_Boisrond-Tonnerre.jpg
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