

The Haitian Revolution

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1791 marked the beginning of what would become one of the most shocking and impactful revolutions in history. The timeline of the Haitian Revolution would last from 1791-1804, and in that period thousands of former slaves would fight for their freedom.

The Haitian Revolution was a complex web of affairs. At one point there were over a half dozen different parties involved, all fighting for different purposes. Alliances were fickle, as entities changed allegiance based on who was offering the best deal.

The revolution began not only as a slave revolt, but also as a class struggle among white landowners, non-landowners, and the free black landowners. The French military became involved, as well as the British and Spanish forces.

Toussaint Louverture, a former slave, emerged as the leader of the slaves seeking their freedom in the Haitian Revolution. He drew inspiration from the ongoing French Revolution and previous American Revolution to evolve his group's demands and ultimate goals.



Toussaint Louverture

Louverture took to heart the French Revolution's "Declaration of the Rights of Man" and exposed the fraudulent European Enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality for all of mankind.

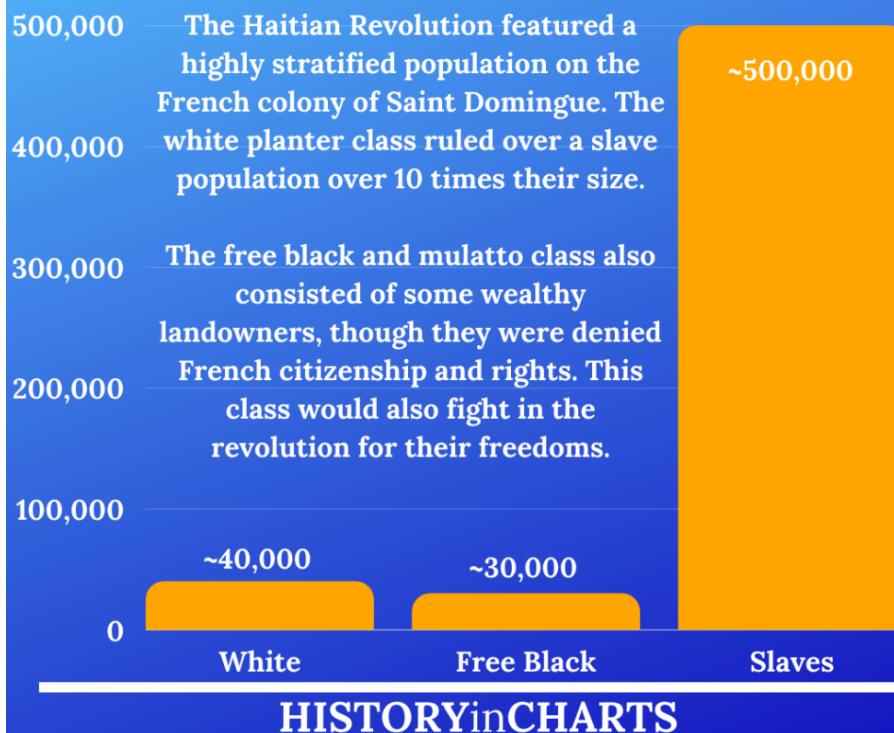
Of course, to Europeans these ideals did not extend to non-white people. This view was also shared by the newly-formed United States despite its pledge that "all men are created equal" in the Declaration of Independence.

The outcome of the Haitian Revolution would have far-reaching implications. Haiti was the second independent country in the Americas following the United States and the revolution was the first ever successful slave revolt in history.

Though Toussaint Louverture would not live to see an independent Haiti, he could rest easy knowing his contributions in the Haitian Revolution led to the first independent black-led republic in the world.

Causes of the Haitian Revolution

TOTAL POPULATION DURING HAITIAN REVOLUTION



profitable colony in the Americas and thus coveted by many other countries.

The colony had a highly stratified social class that was prone to conflict. The white planter class ruled above all, though the white non-landowner class also enjoyed a special status. This group had [a population of roughly 40,000 in 1790](#).

The next social class featured the free black and mixed race population. This group included many wealthy landowners, some even owning slaves themselves, though they were not given full rights due to their skin color. The population of the free black social class was about 30,000.

The last and largest group by far were enslaved people of African descent. The slaves numbered somewhere around 500,000, outnumbering the white population by 10 to 1.

The beginning of the [French Revolution](#) in 1789 was a major cause of the Haitian Revolution.

At the time, Haiti was known as the French colony of Saint Domingue. The colony was known for its large plantations generating cash crops of sugar, coffee, cocoa, and indigo.

Saint Domingue was the most profitable colony in the French Empire, owing largely to the sugar plantations. It was also the most

Slaves were treated poorly and had an extremely high mortality rate. As the death rates were higher than birth rates, slaves needed to be continually imported to keep up with demand. From 1676-1800 some ~773,000 enslaved people were shipped to the colony.

Slave revolts were common in Saint Domingue. More common was the practice of "marooning," where slaves would escape to the mountainous interior and steal/live off the land for survival.

These highly stratified social classes were constantly at odds with each other. With the French Revolution's Declaration of the Rights of Man issued in 1789, the free black landowner class demanded more rights to put them on equal footing.

This initial conflict erupted into a fully-fledged slave rebellion that eventually ignited the island into a brutal war of independence.

Timeline of the Haitian Revolution

Below features a timeline of the Haitian Revolution.

1789-1798

1789-1790 – The French Revolution erupts and the Declaration of the Rights of Man is passed. The free blacks and mulatto class demand full French citizenship and rights. An uprising of the free black populace is suppressed in brutal fashion.

1791-1792 – In August 1791 a full-fledged slave revolt began. In March 1793 the French assembly granted full rights and French citizenship to free blacks and mulattos. The white planter class objects and further violence erupts. The French send military forces and a new governor to enact these measures.

1793 – Great Britain and Spain enter the fight. The British align with the white planter class and see the conflict as an opportunity to restore order and gain control of the lucrative colony. The Spanish controlled the other side of the island of Hispaniola and favored disruption in the colony. They sided with Toussaint Louverture's forces and provided food, supplies, and military support.

1794 – France issues a decree freeing all slaves in February. Louverture turns on the Spanish and fights for the French, now believing in their edict to free slaves and knowing the Spanish did not share the same ideals. Andre Riguard leads free black and mulatto forces in the south to fight against the British.

1795-1798 – The British send more forces to Saint Domingue, though they are defeated. The forces are plagued by disease and the British lose nearly three of every five men sent to the island. The Spanish exits the conflict in 1795 upon a peace agreement with France. Louverture consolidates control and leadership of the colony.

1799-1804

1799-1800 – War of the Knives ensues between Louverture in the north and Riguard in the south. Louverture proves victorious and rules over all of Saint Domingue.

1801 – Louverture invades and captures Santo Domingo, the eastern half of the island of Hispaniola. He abolishes slavery there and now rules over the entire island. Louverture issues a constitution claiming autonomy from France.

1802 – Napoleon sends brother-in-law Charles Leclerc to subdue Saint Domingue and capture Louverture. The French are met with fierce resistance and brutal tactics are employed by both sides.

After two significant generals defect to the French, Louverture agrees to a truce. He is however tricked, then captured and imprisoned in France. He would die months later in a French prison cell.

It is learned that France intends to reimplement slavery and the rebellion resumes. General Jean-Jacques Dessalines defects back to the rebels to fight the French once again. Leclerc dies of yellow fever, along with much of his army.

1803 – Napoleon diverts troops from the Louisiana territory to Saint Domingue. By April, Napoleon anticipates failure and agrees to sell the Louisiana territory to the United States. French forces are dealt a final defeat in November.

1804 – Dessalines officially declares independence on January 1st. The former colony is renamed Haiti, believed to be after the name the original Taino inhabitants used for the island before they were exterminated.

The Aftermath and Response of the United States

The response of the United States to the Haitian Revolution was decidedly mixed. At times the country supported the white planters, sometimes Louverture and the rebels, and sometimes stayed neutral.

The revolution spanned three different presidencies and hence complicated matters. The Washington presidency (1789-1797) favored supporting the white planter class and maintaining the status quo.

The Adams presidency (1797-1801) reversed this policy and provided support to Louverture. Adams was a noted abolitionist and wanted to maintain trade relations with Saint Domingue, though was wary the eventual new country could turn to state-sponsored piracy like the Barbary states.

The Democratic-Republican Jefferson presidency (1801-1809) once again reversed course, though it mainly stayed somewhat neutral and tried to isolate the new country.

Jefferson faced a dilemma. He was an avid supporter of the French Revolution's ideals, though he was a slaveholder himself. He was also enormously popular among southern slaveholders who greatly feared a future spread of slave revolts to America.



Many white planters fled the colony and were admitted into the United States as refugees. Instead, he chose to isolate the new republic and refused to recognize its independence. Every other country adopted this same policy, isolating Haiti economically and politically to show how a black-led republic could not succeed.

Eventually, through the use of gunboat diplomacy, the French agreed to a treaty to recognize Haitian independence in 1825 in exchange for a large sum of reparation payments. The United States refused to follow suit and would not recognize the country until 1862 – during the US Civil War.

The Haitian Revolution and the Louisiana Purchase

The United States has the Haitian Revolution to thank for the massive [territory expansion with the Louisiana Purchase](#).

The newly-formed United States had long sought to further expand westward. At the turn of the 19th century it was more preoccupied with gaining access to the crucial port of New Orleans.

New Orleans is located at the mouth of the Mississippi river and the owner of this port controlled access to all goods flowing from the interior of the continent (as the [Erie Canal](#) had not yet been built). Many Midwestern farmers relied on the Mississippi to ship their goods to market.

The leaders of the United States had much angst over this port city. If Spain or France were to prohibit exports from the US, they feared midwestern farmers could revolt and switch allegiances.

The United States offered to purchase New Orleans several times from Spain, though their offers were rebuffed. When Napoleon gained the French crown the United States' worst fears were confirmed.

A secret deal between Napoleon and Spain saw New Orleans and the Louisiana territory change hands. Napoleon sought to reignite French colonial ambitions and prepared to send two forces to the Americas: one to Saint Domingue to quell the rebellion, and one to New Orleans.

Given the failure of the French military to quell the Haitian revolution, Napoleon was forced to send his New Orleans contingent to Saint Domingue as well. Faced with total defeat, Napoleon gave up his ambitions in the Americas in early 1803.

He would go on to offer the Americans not only New Orleans, but the entire Louisiana territory for just \$15 million. The territory gained in the Louisiana Purchase would represent nearly half the new nation at the time.

Jefferson would owe his thanks for Louisiana to the Haitian revolution, though he would [never acknowledge](#) the fact.