

Connections between the American Revolution and the Haitian Revolution

By Laurent Dubois, The Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History, adapted by Newsela staff on 10.29.19

Word Count 1,428

Level 1040L



Image 1. The attack and taking of the Crête-à-Pierrot fort, a major battle of the Haitian Revolution that took place from March 4 to 24, 1802. Original illustration by Auguste Raffet in 1839 and printed in the "History of Napoleon," published in 1839.

In the late 18th century, two successful revolutions occurred in the Americas. The first was in the United States, which won independence from Britain in 1783. The second was in Haiti, which was then the French colony of Saint-Domingue. That second revolution began with a mass uprising of enslaved Haitians in August 1791.

Haiti's revolution led first to the ending of slavery in the colony in 1793, then to slavery's end throughout the French empire in 1794, and finally to Haitian independence from France in 1804.

What was the relationship between these two remarkable revolutions?

The story of these revolutions is usually told separately. However, we can learn a great deal about both if we examine them as intertwined stories. A third revolution, in France, is also deeply connected with the other two. The French Revolution began in 1789 and lasted until 1799.

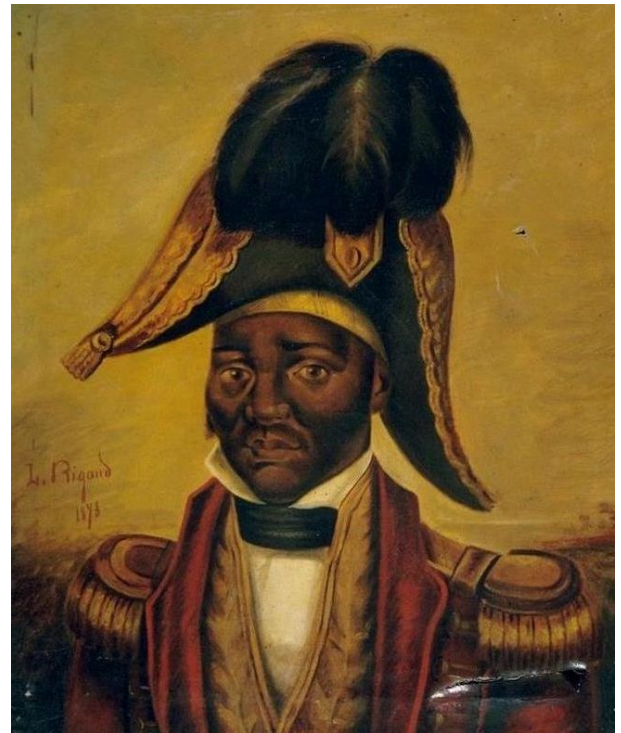
The Revolutions: American And Haitian

The American Revolution, which began in 1776, came first. While it was a strong challenge to the system of colonial rule, it did not cause a true social revolution. Colonial elites kept their wealth and power and became the new national elite. Slavery persisted and even expanded following the revolution, despite moves to ban it in the Northern states.

The American Revolution did serve as a powerful international example, however. The new political ideas it introduced helped to inspire the French Revolution. The French Revolution brought about great social transformation within France. Its unfolding was closely tied to events in France's most important colony, Saint-Domingue. The revolution in France caused a weakening of colonial governance in Saint-Domingue. It also brought bold new political ideas about liberty and equality to the colony.

The contrast between the Haitian and American revolutions is striking. In both places slavery was important, but in Saint-Domingue it was absolutely central as 90 percent of the population was enslaved. When the year 1789 began, almost no one would have imagined that the French colony's slave system would soon be completely overturned. Yet, by 1793 there was no one was enslaved in Saint-Domingue. By 1804, the colony had become a new nation, led by an ex-slave general named Jean-Jacques Dessalines.

The Haitian Revolution was an anti-slavery revolution largely made by enslaved people of African descent. As such, it posed a direct threat to countries around the world that profited from slavery, including the United States. No foreign nation even acknowledged Haitian independence officially until France did so in 1825. It took the United States until 1862 to recognize the country. It was the very last nation to do so.



Independence Affected The Americas' Economy

Haiti and the United States have taken very different paths since both achieved independence. Yet, the two countries were once much closer, and that closeness influenced how their revolutions evolved.

The economy of the Americas was dramatically different in the 18th century than it is today. The Caribbean was an economic center. Indeed, in many ways, it was much more significant than North America from the perspective of European empires. The booming sugar and coffee plantations of colonies like Saint-Domingue and Jamaica were the motor of the broader Atlantic economy. Though only the size of Maryland, the French colony of Saint-Domingue created as much wealth for France as the 13 North American colonies did for England.

This situation made North America dependent on the Caribbean. The North American colonies, especially New England, profited from their considerable trade with Saint-Domingue. Merchants from the British colonies brought lumber and provisions to the French colony. They came home with various goods, particularly molasses, which was turned into rum in New England refineries.

The governments of France and Britain tried to stop this trade, which they considered illegal. However, they had very little success. Indeed, exchanges between the U.S. colonies and Saint-Domingue continued even during the Haitian Revolution, when merchants in U.S. colonies supplied crucial weapons and ammunition to the rebels.

This trade relationship between the two colonies had political effects in both places. In North America, the profitable trade with Saint-Domingue helped drive the demands for free trade that became part of the American Revolution. The success of the American Revolution, in turn, inspired certain French planters and merchants in Saint-Domingue. During the 1770s and 1780s, these men frequently demanded freer trade, sometimes through violent revolt.

Fighting For Freedoms

When revolution broke out in France in 1789, white colonists in Saint-Domingue pressed for more economic freedom, though few called for outright independence. For these white colonists, the American Revolution served as an inspiring example: the United States had managed to secure political and economic independence while preserving slavery. The latter point was key because white planters in Saint-Domingue were worried that antislavery views in France would encourage slave revolt in the colony.

The link between the American Revolution and black rebels in Saint-Domingue is more complex. One little-known part of the story is the role played by troops from Saint-Domingue in the American Revolution. In 1779, several hundred "gens de couleur" — free men of African descent — joined the French military, which was supporting the American rebels, and fought at the siege of Savannah. A number of important Haitian revolutionaries were part of this mission. That experience might have helped inspire them to fight for revolution in Haiti.

The first stage of the Haitian Revolution occurred between 1789 and 1791, when free people of color began to fight — at first peacefully, and then violently — for political rights. At the same time, increasingly powerful divisions began to develop within the white population and between planters and French administrators. This situation created an opening that the enslaved population took advantage of. In 1791, tens of thousands of enslaved people in the north of Haiti went into open and violent revolt against the plantation system. They burned cane fields, killed masters, and smashed the machinery of sugar production.

This uprising soon became a powerful political and military movement. Within two years that movement had forced local officials to declare an end to slavery in the colony. This decree was confirmed in February 1794 by the National Convention in Paris, which ended slavery throughout the French empire.

Haiti's 1793 decree was the first national abolition of slavery in history. It was a stunning victory not only because of what it brought about, but also because of how it had happened. Slaves had transformed themselves into military leaders and then full-fledged citizens. Their actions resounded across the Americas. Throughout the 19th century and beyond, the Haitian Revolution became a key reference in debates about slavery, emancipation, and race. For some, it was an inspiration. For others, it was a source of terror.

Independence With Principles

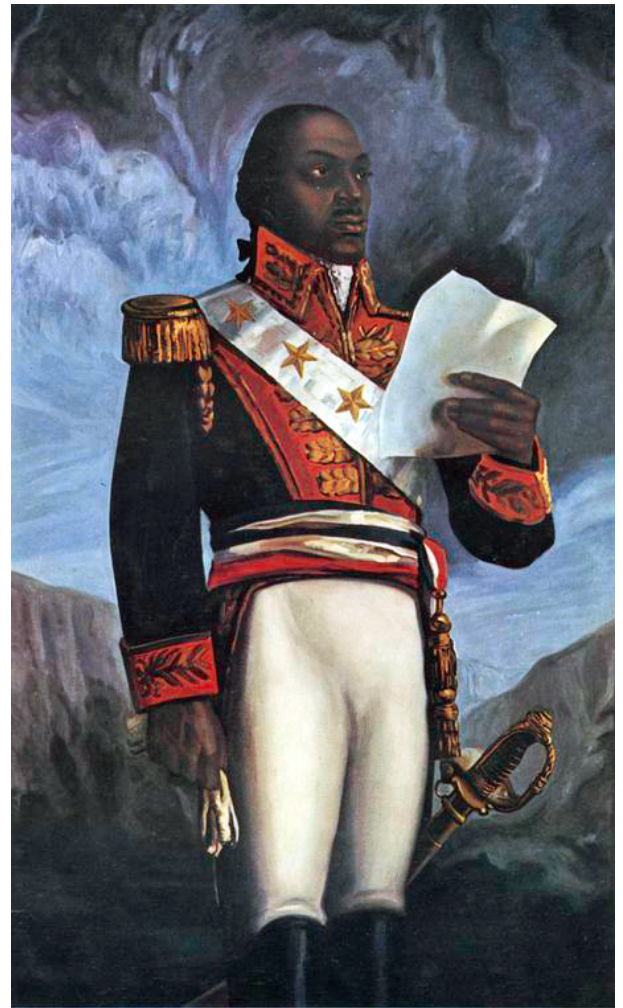
The history of U.S. policy toward Haiti is mixed. Presidents John Adams and Thomas Jefferson pursued very different policies. Adams offered support to Toussaint Louverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution, and at one point the U.S. Navy actually helped the black general defeat one of his internal enemies, André Rigaud. Jefferson was much less willing to support Haiti, as he was fearful the example of slave revolt might spread to the United States.

Starting in late 1801, France's Napoleon Bonaparte began to reverse the ban on slavery decreed in 1794 and to strike out against Toussaint Louverture and the new leadership in Saint-Domingue. For the Haitian revolutionaries, it became increasingly clear that Napoleon aimed to bring about a return to slavery. That threat led to outright war between French and Haitian forces, a war that ended with Haitian independence in January 1804.

Haiti's Declaration of Independence was not just a declaration of the right to self-rule. Even more fundamentally, it was a powerful attack on slavery and racism.

The American and Haitian Revolutions did share a common set of principles. However, of the two peoples, the Haitians lived up to those principles the most, by insisting that claims about freedom and natural rights were incomplete as long as slavery persisted.

Laurent Dubois is a history professor at Duke University. His books on Haiti and the French Caribbean include "A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804," "Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution" and "Haiti: The Aftershocks of History."



Quiz

1 Read the following selection from the section "Fighting For Freedoms."

Haiti's 1793 decree was the first national abolition of slavery in history. It was a stunning victory not only because of what it brought about, but also because of how it had happened.

Which answer choice is the BEST definition of the word "stunning" as it is used in the selection above?

- (A) impressive
- (B) electrifying
- (C) beautiful
- (D) unexpected

2 Read the following paragraph from the section "Independence Affected The Americas' Economy."

This situation made North America dependent on the Caribbean. The North American colonies, especially New England, profited from their considerable trade with Saint-Domingue. Merchants from the British colonies brought lumber and provisions to the French colony. They came home with various goods, particularly molasses, which was turned into rum in New England refineries. The governments of France and Britain tried to stop this trade, which they considered illegal. However, they had very little success. Indeed, exchanges between the U.S. colonies and Saint-Domingue continued even during the Haitian Revolution, when merchants in U.S. colonies supplied crucial weapons and ammunition to the rebels.

Which word from the paragraph helps you to understand that numerous goods were traded between the North American colonies and the Caribbean?

- (A) profited
- (B) considerable
- (C) particularly
- (D) crucial

3 What is one reason why the author includes information about John Adams and Thomas Jefferson in the article?

- (A) to reveal that the Haitian Revolution was supported globally
- (B) to suggest that the American Revolution inspired the Haitian Revolution
- (C) to indicate how the Haitian Revolution affected American politics
- (D) to highlight different perspectives about the Haitian Revolution

4 The author includes information about the American Revolution first.

WHY does the author choose to include information about the French Revolution next?

- (A) to show how Haiti declared its independence from colonial powers
- (B) to explain the military strategies that were commonly used during that time
- (C) to provide context about the factors that inspired the Haitian Revolution
- (D) to describe trade among North America, Haiti and France during the revolutions