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You Say You Want A Revolution:
Slavery in Haiti and the United States in the Early 1800s

By

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Abstract

This thesis explores the remarkable success of the Haitian Revolution and its impact on slavery in the United States. The Haitian Revolution has been covered numerous times by historians and has sparked different themes, theories, and conclusions. One interesting angle is the white French plantation owners' overall role in the event. Their greed, cruelty, poor workforce management, and moral shortcomings contributed to the slave revolt, and the successful revolution shaped how the United States reacted and adapted its version of slavery. This paper examines what went wrong for the plantation owners while also considering what helped the slaves succeed. I argue that the plantation and slave owners inadvertently helped advance the revolution and when news of the Haitian revolt and refugees arrived in America, it ironically strengthened the pro-slavery views and policies in the United States in the early nineteenth century.

Late on a night in August 1791, sugar plantation slaves in the French colony of Saint Domingue (now known as Haiti) gathered at a voodoo ceremony. These slaves had a life that was beyond miserable, full of torture, overwork, and daily brutality. By the next morning, the slaves began to burn down the plantations, kill the brutal owners. Over the next few months, they set in motion the only successful slave revolt in history. The world took note of this, as Saint Domingue was the richest French colony and exported most of the world's sugar and coffee.¹ Nearly half a million West African slaves worked the plantations and outnumbered the French owners and their overseers by ten to one.² This and other key factors led to the Haitian revolution but one of the most interesting is the role that white plantation owners unwittingly played in the revolt's remarkable success. The white plantation owners' greed, cruelty, poor workforce management, and moral shortcomings contributed to the slave revolt. Credit for the successful rebellion belongs to the slaves, but the ineptitude of the whites inadvertently helped the slave cause. When these white plantation owners fled Saint Domingue and landed in the United States, the fear of a similar revolt traveled with them, as did their racist views and fears. As a result, the Haitian Revolution had the effect of strengthening the United States' commitment to slavery.

This paper will argue that the actions of white plantation owners in Saint Domingue had a significant effect on the demise of slavery in Haiti and the continuation of slavery in the United States. Why were French plantation owners so intransigent? How did their racial blind spots transplant themselves so securely in the psyche of the new American nation? One would think that the lesson of the Haitian Revolution would be that African slaves were competent, intelligent, deserving of freedom, and entirely capable of being productive members of society.

¹ Jeremy Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 6.

² Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 6.

Black Americans certainly took this message from Haiti. Yet many other Americans drew the opposite conclusion from the revolt in Saint Domingue.

As with any historical question, context is critical. This paper first describes the setting with the French control of Saint Domingue. The economic importance of Saint Domingue, the operation of the plantations, and the reliance on slave labor all were important underpinnings to the eventual revolution. Then, the paper covers the ways in which the white plantation owners set the table for the revolution. The desire to get rich dominated the attitudes and actions of the colonists, which had disastrous results. Whites were terrified because they were so vastly outnumbered by the slaves and chose to manage by violence. This violence created in the slaves a desperate need to rebel at all costs. The misery of plantation life prompted slaves to escape and survive in the mountains, developing organizational and fighting skills as a result.³ Because the colonists essentially worked their slaves to death, they constantly had to import new slaves, thus ensuring that the slave population always had young and strong men who were not yet broken and who were committed to their freedom. The white colonists seemed to be morally incapable of seeing a slave's perspective, and their refusal to include slaves equally in society only stoked the fires. Finally, whites blamed each other and squabbled among themselves. All these elements worked to inspire and further the slave revolt, ensuring its success.

Next the paper follows the refugees fleeing the revolution in Haiti and the ideas and fears that came with them to port cities in the United States. What did slavery in the United States look like at the time? What role did slavery play in the economy? How did the United States react to the Haitian slave revolt? President George Washington, for example, decided to support the

³ Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2004), 59.

white plantation owners in Saint Domingue.⁴ Northern United States merchants and slave owners in the South felt threatened by the revolt in Haiti. News of the revolt gave hope to American slaves and deepened the fears of Southern slave owners. The violence of the revolt compromised the abolitionists' message but slaves and free blacks continued the quest for freedom. Americans struggled to reconcile their pro-slavery views with their belief that all men are created equal.

The conclusion which emerges from this study is white plantation owners contributed to the demise of slavery in Haiti and the continuation of slavery in the United States. Their actions and blind spots stoked and inspired the slaves' fight for freedom. Slaves were able to take advantage of the plantation owners' practices. The narrow-mindedness of white plantation owners reached all the way to the United States, where it nourished the pro-slavery views and policies, as well as the abolitionist cause. So, slavery both in Haiti and the United States was changed by the behavior of French colonists.

Accounts of travellers from other countries who visited Saint Domingue before, during and after the rebellion are critical primary source materials. For example, Marcus Rainsford (1758-1817) wrote the first complete narrative in English of the Haitian Revolution. Rainsford was a British military officer who visited Saint Domingue in 1797 and 1798 for a total of approximately a year on the island. He was there to recruit black soldiers for the British army but later penned his observations, which were published in 1805 as *An Historical Account of the Black Empire of Hayti: Comprehending a View of the Principal Transactions in the Revolution*

⁴ Tim Matthewson, "George Washington's Policy Toward the Haitian Revolution," *Diplomatic History*, Volume 3, Issue 3 (July 1979): 321–336, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7709.1979.tb00318.x>

of *Saint Domingo; with Its Antient and Modern State*.⁵ Rainsford criticized the French in his book and admired the military prowess of the slave army. He explains the class system in Saint Domingue, which was based on skin color and includes descriptions of the land, the plantations and his meeting with black leader Toussaint L'Ouverture.⁶ Most historians agree that Rainsford's account shaped public opinion at the time because it was widely published and read in Paris, London and the United States. His critique of the French colonists and description of slave treatment is useful for this paper.

Another European visitor to the island, Alexandre-Stanislaus Wimpffen (1748-1819) also disapproved of the French colonial masters' laziness and brutal domination of the slaves in his book, *A Voyage to Saint Domingo, In the Year 1788, 1789 and 1790*.⁷ Wimpffen was a German baron, army officer and travel writer. In his book, Wimpffen reports to his benefactor that the colony is totally dependent on slave labor and thus, is a cautionary tale for other colonies.⁸ Unlike Rainsford, Wimpffen is not afraid to describe and express shock at the treatment of slaves on plantations.

American novelist Leonora Sansay (1773-1821) was even more explicit in describing the violence of the slave revolt. In 1802, Sansay wrote about her visit to Saint Domingue with her husband who owned a plantation there. Sansay wrote letters about her experience to her sister as well as her uncle (who happened to be Secretary of State Aaron Burr). These letters were published as *Secret History Or, The Horrors Of St. Domingo in a Series of Letters, Written By A*

⁵ Marcus Rainsford, *An Historical Account Of The Black Empire Of Hayti: Comprehending A View Of The Principal Transactions In The Revolution Of Saint Domingo; With Its Antient And Modern State* (Durham and London, Duke University Press, 1805/2013).

⁶ Marcus Rainsford, *An Historical Account Of The Black Empire Of Hayti*, 87-89.

⁷ Alexandre-Stanislas Wimpffen, *A Voyage To Saint Domingo, In The Years 1788, 1789, And 1790* (London: Printed for T. Cadell, Junior, and W. Davies, 1817). 334.

⁸ Alexandre-Stanislas Wimpffen, *A Voyage To Saint Domingo*, 4.

*Lady at Cape Francois to Colonel Burr.*⁹ Sansay's vivid descriptions as well as her fear of slave retaliations shed a light on the mindset of white plantation owners. Saint Domingue Colonist Charles Malenfant, a former plantation manager, describes the pressure to produce revenue and how that translated into hardship and often death for the slaves.¹⁰ In contrast to Malenfant, Girod De Chantrans found no justification for the brutality rampant on Saint Domingue plantations.¹¹ Chantrans visited the island for a year and criticized the self-interest and violence of the French colonists.¹²

Blatant racism is a problem with these first-hand accounts from Saint Domingue, all written by white people. While these accounts illustrate the disastrous white colonial attitude, the racism is overt and startling in the present day. Even Rainsford, who supported Haitian independence and admired the fighting acumen of the slave generals, ultimately states that the black people are inferior with a host of negative personality features.¹³ The reader must understand and adjust for this bias. Perhaps if slave documents existed, they would also contain considerable bias. However, there are no comprehensive eyewitness accounts written by the people of color who lived in Saint Domingue. So, the white perspective from Saint Domingue has both alarmed and informed scholars over two hundred years later.

Primary documents illustrating the effect of the Haitian Revolution in the United States include the writings of Thomas Jefferson, whose hypocrisy on slavery informed both his personal and public life. Some of the most interesting documents were written by African Americans, many of them former slaves. Until recently, the African American perspective was

⁹ Mary Hassal (Lenora Sansay), *Secret History Or, The Horrors Of St. Domingo In A Series Of Letters, Written By A Lady At Cape Francois To Colonel Burr* (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1971).

¹⁰ Charles Malenfant, "The Plantation Hierachy," in *The Haitian Revolution A Documentary History*, ed. David Geggus (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 4-6.

¹¹ Girod de Chantrans, "Plantation Slaves," in *The Haitian Revolution A Documentary History*, ed. David Geggus (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 7-9.

¹² Chantrans, "Plantation Slaves," 8-9.

¹³ Marcus Rainsford, *An Historical Account Of The Black Empire Of Hayti*, 74.

relatively unexplored.¹⁴ The first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal* and John Brown Russwurm's commencement speech paint the Haitian rebels in heroic terms and use the rebellion as inspiration to fight for equality in the United States.¹⁵¹⁶ Russwurm, the co-founder of the newspaper, and the second black college graduate in the United States, addressed Bowdoin College in September 1826. David Walker, a free black man who operated a clothing store and provided much help to fugitive slaves, takes a more radical view in his 1829 call to arms in "Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World."¹⁷ Walker's pamphlet urged an immediate revolt, which terrified whites in the North and South.¹⁸

Historians of the Haitian Revolution touch on the question of plantation owners and their role in the revolt. For example, David Geggus has written extensively about the Haitian Revolution and is considered a leading scholar on this topic. He edited and translated a collection of primary documents, which is essential for any student of Haitian history. In his own writings, Geggus challenges some of the conventional narratives about the Revolution, including the role of voodoo, which he discusses in his article *Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century*.¹⁹ Geggus argues that voodoo played a backstage role in the revolt rather than a political call to arms. Like Geggus, historian and writer Jeremy Popkin uses documents and written accounts of white colonists attempting to deal with the swelling revolution in his book

¹⁴ Elizabeth Dillon, and Michael Drexler, "Haiti and the Early United States, Entwined," in *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States: Histories, Textualities, Geographies* (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 9.

¹⁵ "Toussaint Louverture," *Freedom's Journal*, May 11, 1827, New York edition. *wisconsinhistory*, accessed May 3, 2019, www.wisconsinhistory.org/pdfs/la/FreedomsJournal/v1n09.pdf.

¹⁶ John Brown Russwurm, "The Condition and Prospects of Haiti," Speech at Bowdoin College, 1826. *Blackpast*, Accessed May 10, 2019. www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1826/john-b-russwurm.

¹⁷ David Walker, *Appeal To The Colored People Of The World*, (Bedford, Mass, Applewood Books, 1830/2008).

¹⁸ Dillon and Drexler, *The Haitian Revolution*, 83.

¹⁹ David Geggus, *Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century: Language, Culture, Resistance*, Jahrbuch für Geschichte von Staat, Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft Lateinamerikas (Koln, Wien, Bohlau Verlag, 1991).

*Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Revolution.*²⁰ Popkin, a professor at the University of Kentucky who specializes in the history of the French and Haitian Revolutions, approaches the causes of the slave revolt in much the same way as Geggus. But Popkin looks further at slave masters and plantation owners including chapters on "Becoming a Slave-master" and "Masters and Their Slaves During the Insurrection."²¹

In her book *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution From Below*, Carolyn Fick goes further than Geggus and Popkin to analyze slave life on the plantations and argue that the slaves were the principal architects of their freedom.²² Fick, a history professor at the University of Concordia, is an expert on colonial Caribbean slavery. She explores how the slaves organized their remarkable and successful rebellion.²³ Included in Fick's analyses is information about the white plantation owners' actions, reactions, beliefs, and blind spots. For the purposes of this paper Geggus, Fick, and Popkin provide essential background on the revolution, access to primary sources, and details that support the argument that white plantation owners set the table for the slave rebellion.

To understand the effect that the Haitian Revolution had on slavery in the United States, a good starting point is Ira Berlin's *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America.*²⁴ Berlin, who was a distinguished faculty member at the University of Maryland, is considered a leading scholar of slavery in the United States. Berlin wrote many books, but *Many Thousands Gone* is the most recognized, winning both the Bancroft and the

²⁰ Jeremy Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010).

²¹ Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 37-43, 174-179.

²² Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 4.

²³ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 46-76.

²⁴ Ira Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone: The First Two Centuries of Slavery in North America* (Cambridge, Mass, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1998), 217-358.

Frederick Douglass prizes. Berlin's book departs from the typical cotton plantation analysis of American slavery. Avoiding the linear slavery-to-freedom narrative, he instead studies the complex and ever-changing shapes of slavery and freedom. In this context, that Berlin examines the effect of the Haitian Revolution on slavery in the United States. In a chapter entitled "Revolution Generation" he identifies the Haitian Revolution, in context with the American and French Revolutions, as a monumental marker in the move toward freedom because it advanced the application of freedom ideals to *all* people and gave enslaved people a new foundation upon which to claim their freedom.²⁵ Berlin also examines the changes in population, policies, and perspectives resulting from the sizeable influx of white, black, and mulatto refugees from Saint Domingue into the United States during the ten years after the slave revolt began in 1790.²⁶ Overall, this work by Berlin provides support for the argument that the Haitian Revolution strengthened America's pro-slavery stance.

Two recent books examine the after-effects of the Haitian Revolution on American slavery and African American efforts to eradicate it. In the introduction to their essay collection, "The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States," editors Elizabeth Dillon and Michael Drexler argue that the Haitian Revolution affected the United States -- and slavery in particular -- far more than is typically recognized.²⁷ Dillon and Drexler present three major shifts in the nature of slavery in the United States that happened because of events in Haiti: (1) changes in the geography of slavery resulting from the Louisiana Purchase; (2) differences in economic and labor practices; and (3) revisions in the justification of slavery.²⁸ Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon agree that "African Americans have long challenged the conventional narrative

²⁵ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 11.

²⁶ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 242-244.

²⁷ Dillon and Drexler, *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States*, 9.

²⁸ Dillon and Drexler, *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States*, 9-10.

about the Haitian Revolution" in the introduction of their book *The Haitian Revolution and African American Responses*.²⁹ Most historians believe that the Haitian slave revolt inspired the well-known but unsuccessful resistance by Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner.³⁰

In his book, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean*, Alfred Hunt documents the steady stream of refugees from Saint Domingue who landed in southern United States ports and cities, especially in Louisiana.³¹ Accompanying the transplanted colonists, white plantation owners, slaves, and free blacks were their experiences, ideas, and biases. Hunt argues that this infusion of refugees introduced new tensions in the debate about slavery.³² Hunt describes how many whites came to believe that they could not co-exist with free blacks and that black people in general were incapable of creating anything but a lifestyle of poverty.³³ Hunt's perspective deepens the understanding of Haitian immigrants' influence in the United States.

To see how the Haitian Revolution affected abolitionists in the United States, Manisha Sinha's book *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* is an exhaustive resource.³⁴ Sinha demonstrates how the blacks and mulattos from Saint Domingue brought the idea and experience of resistance to Americans sympathetic to anti-slavery ideals.³⁵ The main argument of her book is that American abolitionists were far more than nice white church ladies or quiet Quaker men.³⁶ Many blacks participated in this movement, which she describes as a "radical social

²⁹ Maurice Jackson and Jacqueline Bacon, "Fever and Fret," in *The Haitian Revolution and African American Responses*, eds. (Abingdon-on-Thames, Routledge, 2013), 1-5.

³⁰ Jackson and Bacon, *The Haitian Revolution and African American Responses*, 5.

³¹ Alfred Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge, LSU Press, 2006).

³² Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 107.

³³ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 123-24.

³⁴ Manisha Sinha, *The Slave's Cause: A History of Abolition* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017).

³⁵ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 53.

³⁶ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 2.

movement."³⁷ In fact, Sinha argues that African Americans and slave resistance drove the abolitionist movement, a central contribution that other historians generally overlook.³⁸ Sinha illustrates how black and white abolitionists seized on the successful fight for freedom and referenced it repeatedly in their writings and lectures.³⁹ She also adds details to the opposite argument: that the Haitian Revolution put American abolitionists on the defensive.⁴⁰

How did government leaders in the United States react to the Haitian Revolution? Tim Matthewson, an assistant professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, has written numerous articles and a book about this topic. His writings discuss how George Washington and the two subsequent presidents viewed slavery in the context of America's founding documents as well as their responses to the slave revolt in Saint Domingue.⁴¹ Matthewson focuses on the policy outcomes and precedents created by the White House response. He looks at treaties, trade, and even the personal behavior of Thomas Jefferson and others regarding slaves. This source was useful because it illustrates how slavery policy shifted into a clear pro-slavery stance at the government level following the news of rebellion. Therefore one can study these historians—Berlin, Hunt, Dillon and Drexler, Jackson and Bacon, Sinha, and Matthewson—to trace the arc of black freedom and white fear from Haiti to the United States.

Before the main argument is discussed, it is important to consider the setting—Saint Domingue in the late 1700s. Saint Domingue was an agricultural French colony in the West Indies, perfectly suited for growing high-demand crops such as coffee, sugar and indigo. The fertile soil, mountains, and temperate climate combined to earn Saint Domingue the reputation of

³⁷ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 35.

³⁸ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 2.

³⁹ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 53-59.

⁴⁰ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 115-116.

⁴¹ Tim Matthewson, *Proslavery Foreign Policy: Haitian-American Relations during the Early Republic* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003) Accessed April 15, 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central https://books.google.com/books/about/A_Proslavery_Foreign_Policy.html

Pearl of the West Indies. By 1789, Saint Domingue produced one-half of the world's supply of sugar and coffee.⁴² Europe and the Americas depended on these essential products, making Saint-Domingue the richest colony in France's empire. Growing sugar and coffee are complex and labor-intensive processes from seed to market. Slaves from Africa did all the work. Just before the revolution, a staggering 500,000 slaves worked on Saint Domingue's plantations.⁴³ Some plantation owners had over 1,000 slaves, including those designated as foremen.⁴⁴ Every year, plantation owners imported approximately 30,000 new slaves, not necessarily because of growth but because slaves were literally killed by the cruel hardships of this work.⁴⁵ Ships sailed from France to Africa, picking up slaves and taking them to Saint Domingue where the ships loaded cargo of sugar, coffee, and other products destined for French and eventually American markets. Carolyn Fisk states in her book *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* that by 1789, two-thirds of the approximately half a million slaves in Saint Domingue were born in Africa.⁴⁶ At least in population, Saint Domingue was African.

Managing these plantations and related enterprises were approximately 40,000 whites and some 28,000 free blacks.⁴⁷ Many of these plantation owners were not permanent residents; rather they were French who occasionally visited Saint Domingue but lived far away in France. In the decades before the revolution, most non-slave inhabitants of Saint Domingue were profiting from Europe's hunger for sugar and coffee.

The rebellion started in 1791, when the French Revolution sparked a new concept of participation in government, human rights, and universal citizenship. Plantation owners saw the

⁴² Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 6.

⁴³ Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 6

⁴⁴ Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 6.

⁴⁵ Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 6.

⁴⁶ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 7.

⁴⁷ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 9.

new rights as a way to get out from under the trade restrictions that required them only to send their crops to France. At the same time, they were so wary of slaves and blacks becoming equal to white Haitian inhabitants that they did not allow the "French Revolution's Declaration of Rights of Man and Citizen" to be published on the island.⁴⁸ Yet, with all the merchant ships coming and going from Saint Domingue, news of the "Rights of Man and Citizens" made its way to the non-white population. Free blacks and mixed race individuals believed the Declaration made them free citizens. Slaves also grasped at the opportunity for freedom. In short, every class of people in Saint Domingue had a compelling interest in the French revolutionary ideas, with the slaves having the most to gain.

The desire to get rich lay at the root of the colonists' self-destructive behavior in Saint Domingue in the late eighteenth century. The plantation owners lived in France and only occasionally visited the island, which they found to be too hot, too humid, and too uncultured for permanent residence. They sent young Frenchmen to manage the plantations with the overall goal of creating maximum revenue. In 1814, Charles Malenfant, a former plantation manager in Saint Domingue, described the hierarchy, pressures and workload of plantation management. Malenfant wrote that the overseer is "fully aware of how his unpleasant his situation is, not only how tiring it is but also how little respect he gets from the owner or the estate-attorney."⁴⁹ Overseers spent their days and nights in the fields, observing and directing everything that happened on the plantation. The overseer earned less than his supervisors (managers and estate attorneys) who earned ten percent of the plantations.⁵⁰ This financial incentive results in plantation management staff doing everything they could to send the most amount of money back to the French owner. Malenfant explained that they kept "expenditures to a minimum and

⁴⁸ Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 6.

⁴⁹ Malenfant, "The Plantation Hierarchy," 4-6.

⁵⁰ Malenfant, "The Plantation Hierarchy," 6.

work the slaves in a way that, in a few years, makes his fortune..."⁵¹ Girod de Chantrans, who spent a year in Saint Domingue before the revolution added, "most people in charge of properties are not their owners, and it matters little to them if a slave lives or dies, providing their salaries are paid."⁵² So money was the driving force behind the decisions and actions of plantation colonists, with a terrible outcome for African slaves.

The savage punishments and deprivations on the plantation inspired slaves to escape, no matter the cost. Popkin quotes a French general who observed "the whites had driven many slaves into resistance by their harshness."⁵³ The worst place for a slave in Saint-Domingue was the sugar plantation, which operated year round. Fieldwork took place around the clock at harvest time and typical days averaged eighteen hours.⁵⁴ The grinding season, which ran for five or six months, was equally brutal with the mills running at night to optimize output.⁵⁵ Slaves came in from the fields, then worked the mills, and got only a few hours of sleep before they returned to the fields the next morning. In return, they were fed a subsistence diet of mainly potatoes. Coffee plantation work was just as brutal with horrible working conditions.⁵⁶ Fick says, "to reduce the human spirit to the level of submission required of slaves necessitated a regime of calculated brutality."⁵⁷ The punishment for resistance, if one was caught, was even worse. For example, in *Secret history or, the horrors of St. Domingo in a series of letters, written by a lady at Cape Francois to Colonel Burr* Leonora Sansay describes a scene in which three blacks who tried to burn a plantation were punished by being burned alive.⁵⁸ She describes this act as cruel and "giving a bad example to the negroes, who will not fail to retaliate on the

⁵¹ Malenfant, "The Plantation Hierarchy," 6.

⁵² Chantrans, "Plantation Slaves," 9.

⁵³ Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 94.

⁵⁴ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 29.

⁵⁵ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 29.

⁵⁶ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 29.

⁵⁷ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 34.

⁵⁸ Hassal, *Secret history*, 100.

first prisoners they take.”⁵⁹ This is just one example of the colonists giving the slaves very compelling reasons to retaliate.

The colonists relied on brutality to control the slaves because they were outnumbered ten to one. Popkin quotes Mon Odysee, a white colonist, who stated that: “when one realizes that thirty thousand whites are in the center of six hundred thousand semi-barbaric Africans, one should not hesitate to say that discipline is necessary.”⁶⁰ Colonists ruled with terror and an iron fist. Writing about his voyage to Saint Domingo at the time of the revolution, Alexandre-Stanislas Wimpffen observed “the masters find the plan of beating more practicable then that of instructing!”⁶¹ Slaves who tried to escape were met with violent punishments, and plantation owners showed no remorse for damaging their slave property. The whites chose violence and mistreatment as their form of discipline. They justified this method with the racist opinion that “the African, barely civilized, is considered a child and must be treated as such.”⁶² Of course, not all plantation owners were evil, but as a group they were ignorant and cruel at the least. They were wrong from the start in believing that human beings could be owned. Their reliance on and interactions with their African laborers did not inspire enlightenment in their thinking, despite ample reasons and opportunities to do so. The whites in Saint Domingue could have unified around improvements for slaves or even offered a system of payment for their work. It would have reduced their profits, obviously, but they may have ended up with an intact farm rather than death and destruction. In the end, violence ruled the day.

The self-serving actions of plantation colonists drove many slaves to escape and form guerilla outposts that later became the black army. The French called escaped slaves *marron*.

⁵⁹ Hassal, *Secret history*, 99-100.

⁶⁰ Mon Odysee, "l'oepee d'un colon de Saint Domingue," 1791/1959, quoted in Popkin, *The Making of Haiti*, 71.

⁶¹ Wimpffen, *A Voyage To Saint Domingo*, 99.

⁶² Popkin, *The Making of Haiti*, 71.

The *marron* preferred the difficulties of mountain survival over the brutality of the plantation. Settling in small communities in Saint-Domingue's mountains, far from the reach of slave trackers, they grew food and hunted. They returned to the plantations to free family members. Slaves remaining on the plantation secretly helped the *marron*, giving them food and supplies and even stolen weapons as well as information about white activity.

Marronage may indeed "have contributed to the basic groundwork and general form" of the 1791 uprising, argues Carolyn Fick.⁶³ Often through voodoo ceremonies, *marrons* connected with each other and with slaves on neighboring plantations. Slaves came and went from *marron* encampments and, through word of mouth, knew where to find them. For example, a plantation cook described to interrogators how she helped a *marron* group plan retaliation for the white masters. Her story was recounted in a 1792 speech to the National Assembly by an unnamed deputy from the French part of St. Domingo, who quoted her saying that the rebel band she was with "prepared fire and sword" for the rebellion.⁶⁴

Marronage both attracted fighters and provided the place and leadership to hone fighting skills. Blackburn noted that some of these *marron* leaders were so skilled in military ways that the Spanish army wanted to enlist them.⁶⁵ Many of the newly arrived slaves had military experience because they had fought in tribal wars in the Congo region and had been taken captive.⁶⁶ Marcus Rainsford, the British officer who wrote about Saint Domingue, went there to recruit black soldiers and respected the acumen of the slave army. Other types of leadership came from escaped slave foremen, known as *commandeurs*. According to Popkin, "many

⁶³ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 49.

⁶⁴ *A particular account of the insurrection of the Negroes of St. Domingo, begun in August 1791*. 4th ed. (London, s.n, 1792), 6.

⁶⁵ Blackburn, *Haiti, Slavery, and the Age of the Democratic Revolution*, 646.

⁶⁶ Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 17.

commandeurs, with their expertise in leadership, became key figures in the slave uprising.”⁶⁷

Fick also argues that the *commandeurs* knew the ins and outs of a plantation and were involved in both making and enforcing work decisions there.⁶⁸ This made them good revolutionary leaders. In these ways, slaves used the *marronage* system as training grounds and base camps for the rebellion.

The plantation owners inadvertently helped the black freedom cause because they treated slaves as a resource for getting the most amount of work in the least amount of time. The plantation owners did not care if the harsh conditions killed many of their slaves because they knew more slaves were on their way from Africa, ready to take the place of the dead or weak. Over thirty percent of African slaves brought to the island died within the first few years.⁶⁹ As Fick points out “slaves were literally worked to death because they were units of production and, as such, represented an investment that once amortized, had already yielded its profits.”⁷⁰ Ironically, this workforce replacement system ensured that among the slave population, there were always strong young Africans who had the physical ability to escape, survive and retaliate. New slaves also brought with them a fierce desire for freedom, not yet broken by the cruel brutality of the plantation. Also, many of the new African slaves had fighting experience as warriors in their own countries. Thus, white plantation owners helped to “field” the black slave army.

Colonists tried to ban night meetings and voodoo practices but failed to fully appreciate the fact that voodoo ceremonies gave slaves from separate plantations a way to bond as well as some basic organizational structure. The voodoo religion came from central Africa, home of

⁶⁷ Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 40.

⁶⁸ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 49.

⁶⁹ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 26.

⁷⁰ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 27.

most Saint Domingue slaves.⁷¹ Its main purpose was magical protection from evil.⁷² Voodoo participants chanted and danced, often in a frenzy, and sometimes drank goat blood, all to channel magical power into amulets that slaves wore to keep evil away.⁷³ Voodoo rituals brought slaves together in a literal, emotional, and spiritual sense. This bond carried over to resistance efforts, as Carolyn Fick explains:

It [voodoo] facilitated secret meetings as well as the initiation and the adherence of slaves of diverse origins, provided a network of communications between slaves of different plantations who gathered clandestinely to participate in the ceremonies, and secured the pledge of solidarity and secrecy of those involved in plots against the masters.⁷⁴

The ceremonies themselves were secret and so foreign to the French colonists that they dismissed their religious significance to the African slaves. Even some mulatto and free blacks saw voodoo as primitive and meaningless. After the revolution began, colonists and Toussaint Louverture himself tried to again ban the practice.⁷⁵ Whether powerful or primitive, voodoo did not function as a political rally or military planning organization as historians traditionally assert. It's an exaggeration not founded in fact to claim that voodoo or a particular voodoo ceremony sparked the rebellion, argues Geggus.⁷⁶ In his article, *Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century* Geggus, like Fick, concludes that voodoo contributed to the resistance but was not a catalyst.⁷⁷ Colonists disliked slave gatherings in general but failed to prevent the practice of voodoo and the communal inspiration it gave to African slaves.

It was not only fear that drove the white response to blacks but also an inability to see the African slaves as people. Even free blacks and mulattos received their disdain. The plantation owners feared competition from free blacks and mulattos. Other whites, such as merchants, did

⁷¹ Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo in the Eighteenth Century," 21.

⁷² Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo," 22.

⁷³ Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo," 24.

⁷⁴ Fick, *The Making of Haiti*, 59.

⁷⁵ Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo," 47.

⁷⁶ Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo," 44.

⁷⁷ Geggus, "Haitian Voodoo", 50.

not want to be in the same class as people of color. The white owners were only concerned about themselves and the wealth of their plantations, completely ignoring the actual lives and treatment of the slaves. In his 1805 account of the black empire in Hayti, Marcus Rainsford pointed out that the white beliefs had important consequences: "An ignorance... of human nature, a blindness to actual circumstances, and a want of individual virtue in the colonists, gave birth to the revolutionary spirit in St. Domingo."⁷⁸ Rainsford goes on to give a scathing account of the colonists' moral shortcomings:

The character of the European planters in Saint-Domingue was imperious and voluptuous to a higher degree than in the other islands: this character also shewed itself on every occasion; he was impatient of even the constraint of the laws, avaricious of wealth and honor, and a devotee to all the acts of indulgence.⁷⁹

Girod de Chantrons made similar observations in his writings about Saint Domingue. He said, "the colonist will be a despot as far as he is able."⁸⁰ Chantrons also described how the culture of Saint Domingue's colonists corrupted newly arrived colonists who "start out humane and sensitive and are angry critics of tyranny, but who soon end up as hard-bitten as the oldest colonists."⁸¹ The white plantation owners thought what they were doing was nature's design; that as superior humans they and their colony were meant to prosper. They were blinded by their selfishness and greed, willing to use extreme violence in an attempt for control and power. This way of thinking by the whites provided fertile ground for the successful rebellion. By regarding the massive population of slaves as property and not people, the plantation owners unknowingly assisted in their own demise.

Finally, the whites fought and squabbled with each other. They could not agree on equality for blacks or persons of mixed race or what that freedom should look like. They could

⁷⁸ Rainsford, *An Historical Account Of The Black Empire Of Hayti*, 100.

⁷⁹ Rainsford, *An Historical Account*, 87-88.

⁸⁰ Chantrons, "Plantation Slaves," 8.

⁸¹ Chantrons, "Plantation Slaves," 9.

not come together to defend their plantations or to devise a better way to harvest their sugar and coffee. The rich and the cultured French people in Saint Domingue looked down on the white lower class who worked as artisans, merchants, and plantation staff. In turn, the poor whites of Saint Domingue resented the arrogant upper class. All were locked into a rigid class system founded first on skin color, then on wealth. Popkin evaluates contemporary white authors describing the revolution and concludes, “nearly all these authors...highlight divisions among the white population that allowed the insurrection to spread.”⁸² Popkin asserts that “any deviations from the rigid defense of slavery and of the color line separating white from people of mixed ancestry was virtually impossible because of the violent disagreements among the whites themselves.”⁸³ In sum, the plantation owners' inability to see beyond themselves and the money they were making, as well as their unfettered cruelty, excessive lifestyle, and arrogance, led to their demise and unwittingly aided the slave cause.

Meanwhile, at the time of the Haitian Revolution, two thousand miles away, the United States had won independence from the British and was building its new country. The leaders agreed finally to the United States Constitution in 1787, and George Washington became president in 1789. The United States had important economic ties to Saint Domingue, buying most of the coffee that America imported, as well as sugar and other products.⁸⁴ American merchants realized profits from this important trading relationship. United States merchants sent grain, salted beef and fish to Saint Domingue, and their ships returned filled with sugar.⁸⁵

Slavery in the United States at the time of the Haitian Revolution differed in several important ways from the plantation slavery model in Saint Domingue. First, the country as a

⁸² Popkin, *The Making of Haiti*, 24.

⁸³ Popkin, *The Making of Haiti*, 7.

⁸⁴ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 30.

⁸⁵ Matthewson, "George Washington's Policy," 327.

whole was deeply conflicted about slavery. By the early 1800s, every northern state had enacted some plan of emancipation.⁸⁶ Throughout the North and other Southern states, emancipation progressed slowly and unevenly. The majority of America's 600,000 slaves were in the South, with nearly half of them in Virginia.⁸⁷ By 1803, the United States had nine free states and eight slave states.⁸⁸ The second difference was that slave work in the United States was less strenuous, and the production and processing for cotton and other main products was less dangerous. The masters also had much smaller estates than the sprawling plantations of Saint Domingue. Even though slaves in the Southern United States worked primarily in agricultural production like Saint Domingue, most slave-masters owned and lived on the land and had done so for generations. Slaves often worked their whole lives on the plantation and raised their families on the land.⁸⁹ As a result, preservation of family was a key concern for the slaves in the United States. The third difference is that the United States slave population could, and did, reproduce itself. This was called "natural increase" and meant that most slaves were third and fourth generation Americans. Unlike the African-born slaves arriving in Saint Domingue, African-American slaves did not experience the culture shock, language barrier, and other aspects of immigrant life.

In addition to differences, slavery in Saint Domingue and the United States shared some similarities. The southern states in the United States operated as a plantation society very similar to the French colonial growers in Saint Domingue. Both functioned as agricultural powerhouses fueled by slave labor although United States plantations had far fewer slaves. Both viewed slavery primarily as a business necessity. Both had fought for freedom from colonial rule. Both

⁸⁶ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 228.

⁸⁷ Alan Taylor, *The Internal Enemy: Slavery and War in Virginia, 1772 -1832* (New York W W Norton, 2014) 20, 404.

⁸⁸ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 228.

⁸⁹ Berlin, *Many Thousands Gone*, 197.

had experienced the excitement of liberties espoused in the French revolution and the American bid for independence from Britain. Both had enormous blind spots when it came to granting these liberties to enslaved people. Into this complicated and conflicted setting of slavery arrived news of the slave uprising in Saint Domingue.

News of the Haitian Rebellion arrived regularly through the merchant trading ships arriving from Saint Domingue as well as eyewitness accounts from the thousands of plantation owners, free blacks, and slaves fleeing Saint Domingue. "The Haitian Revolution provided a focal point for United States attitudes toward... black freedom and slavery," says Alfred Hunt.⁹⁰ The accounts from Saint Domingue put race and slavery into the daily conversation of Americans, black and white.

Although it may seem logical that the United States, as a new nation dedicated to freedom for all, would also extend that liberty to persons of color, the Haitian Revolution provoked the opposite result. Southern state governments and slave-owners tightened up their pro-slavery views and policies. Hunt points out that the successful revolution in Haiti "may well have been the most important event causing slave owners to become increasingly recalcitrant about abolition of slavery in the United States during the early 19th century."⁹¹ In his article "George Washington's Policy Toward the Haitian Revolution," Timothy Matthewson asserts that the United States federal government believed the Haitian Revolution posed dire and direct threats to the country's interests.⁹² Matthewson notes that within the United States, "it was slaveholders and merchants who recognized that American interests were tied to Saint

⁹⁰ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 1-2.

⁹¹ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 2.

⁹² Tim Matthewson, "George Washington's Policy Toward the Haitian Revolution," *Diplomatic History*, Volume 3, Issue 3, (July 1979) :336.

Domingue's plantation society and became the most active supporters of the French planters."⁹³ As Secretary of State to President Washington, Thomas Jefferson advocated a pro-French policy. France was an important ally against the British. France had helped the American colonies win their independence; for these reasons Washington and Jefferson administrations did not want to ruin that relationship by supporting the slave revolt in Saint Domingue. So they granted the 1793 French white plantation owners' request for help in suppressing the slaves.⁹⁴ Fearing the slave revolt might be contagious and protecting America's coffee and sugar imports, government officials sent \$726,000 to the French colonists.⁹⁵ This money was actually a debt owed to France from the American Revolution, which the United States decided, with the approval of the French government, to repay by sending it directly to Saint Domingue. Individual states also helped the French in Saint Domingue. In South Carolina, which was a slave state, planters gave their counterparts in Saint Domingue \$3,000.⁹⁶ South Carolina's governor Charles Pinckney even lobbied President Washington to help put down the slave uprising and warned of ominous threats to southern states.⁹⁷ The slave revolt, Pinckney said, would become "a flame which would extend to all the neighboring islands, and may prove a not very pleasing or agreeable example to the Southern States."⁹⁸ Meanwhile, merchants in Pennsylvania worried about damage to trade with Saint Domingue that might result from the rebellion, or a successful revolution, or both. They persuaded that state to send two boatloads of supplies.⁹⁹

Washington's decision to aid the colonists in Saint Domingue was remarkable because it was the first and only time that the United States attempted to put down a foreign slave revolt.

⁹³ Matthewson, "George Washington's Policy," 336.

⁹⁴ Matthewson, "George Washington's Policy," 321.

⁹⁵ Matthewson, "George Washington's Policy," 324.

⁹⁶ Matthewson, "George Washington's Policy," 324.

⁹⁷ Matthewson, "George Washington's Policy," 326.

⁹⁸ "Charles Pinckney to George Washington, 20 September, 1791" Founders Archives, National Archives, accessed May 31, 2019, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-08-02-0379>.

⁹⁹ Matthewson, "George Washington's Policy," 325.

By doing so, racism was officially inserted into American foreign policy.¹⁰⁰ The response to Saint Domingue established the United States as a slave-holding nation, despite its origins in the notion of freedom. Matthewson points out that racism existed even before the American Revolution, but "nowhere has this theme been more apparent than in United States foreign policy toward Haiti."¹⁰¹ Of all the possible diplomatic options--and in spite of the country's recent fight for liberty from a colonial power--Washington still chose a pro-slavery--and pro-colonial--approach.

The Haitian Revolution further legitimized United States slavery as well as the territory and power of southern slaveholders. The American Revolution, with its emphasis on liberty, represented an opportunity for the nation to move away from slavery. Indeed, early leaders delayed efforts by slave-holding states to enshrine slavery into the nation's founding documents. At the time, Southern states did not have the political power to prevail on the slavery issue. Southerners did suggest a successful compromise that slaves be counted as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of determining taxes and representation in Congress.¹⁰² The Constitutional convention also delayed a ban on international slave trade until 1808 and put in a placeholder for fugitive slave policy.¹⁰³ When the Atlantic Slave Trade ban took effect, all slave transactions were limited to within the United States. This created what historians call "the second slavery" as Northern states sold excess slaves to cotton plantations in the South, where the new cotton gin allowed production to soar.¹⁰⁴ The Louisiana Purchase in 1803, which arose out of France's defeat in Haiti, doubled the size of the United States, and opened up huge tracts

¹⁰⁰ Matthewson. "George Washington's Policy Toward the Haitian Revolution," 336.

¹⁰¹ Tim Matthewson, *Proslavery Foreign Policy: Haitian-American Relations during the Early Republic* (Santa Barbara, 2003), 139.

¹⁰² US Constitution Article 1 Section 2.

¹⁰³ US Constitution Article 1 Section 9, and Article 4, Section 2, Clause 3

¹⁰⁴ Dillon and Drexler, *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States*, 9.

of land for development that depended on slave labor.¹⁰⁵ In these ways, the Haitian Revolution helped cement slavery as an American institution and increased the power of Southern slave states.

The justification for slavery took on bold, unapologetic tones as a result of the events in Saint Domingue. Before the Revolution, Matthewson writes, "slave owners had been willing to consider emancipation as a slow, sure and gradual program."¹⁰⁶ Slave-owners established freedom dates for their slaves and could foresee a time when black workers could earn a wage and live free. But the revolt in Saint Domingue changed the way that Southerners viewed and defended slavery. The reports of slaves murdering their masters and burning down the plantations incited fears of massacre and ruin. Some of these reports were vivid, first-hand accounts told by the thousands of French plantation owners who fled Saint Domingue for port cities in the United States. Jeremy Popkin describes the flight of white colonists from Saint Domingue as the "first refugee crisis in the history of the United States."¹⁰⁷ In her history of abolition, *The Slaves Cause*, Manisha Sinha writes:

Fleeing planters, many of whom arrived with their slaves, elicited the sympathy of whites and relief efforts by local, state, and federal governments, alarming slaveholders with their horror stories. Memoirs and works written by white slaveholding expatriates reinforced and encouraged racist depictions of the Haitian rebels.¹⁰⁸

These white refugees were followed by mulattoes and free blacks from Saint Domingue. They were seen as possible rebels who could organize violent revolts on southern plantations. Dubois argues, "for the south, Saint Domingue was first and foremost a dangerous example."¹⁰⁹ In a letter to James Monroe in July 1793, Thomas Jefferson wrote "A total expulsion of all the whites

¹⁰⁵ Dillon and Drexler, *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States*, 9.

¹⁰⁶ Matthewson, *Proslavery Foreign Policy*, 140.

¹⁰⁷ Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution*, 3.

¹⁰⁸ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 61.

¹⁰⁹ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap, 2005.) 27.

sooner or later [will] take place, it is high time we should foresee the bloody scenes which our children certainly, and possibly ourselves, have to wade through and try to avert them."¹¹⁰

The American slaveholders saw the Haitian Revolution as a sort of rallying cry, a way to further their views and stoke fears of a similar takeover by unhappy slaves in the South. The Saint Domingue story convinced the South that they could expect vicious and violent retaliation if slaves were emancipated.¹¹¹ This mass hysteria also contributed to the notion that slaves were inherently violent and unable to take care of themselves. Geggus explains, "the violence of the revolution, always selectively reported, discouraged white public opinion from empathizing with the insurgents and helped cast savagery in racial terms."¹¹² The result was a profound paradigm shift that "equated emancipation with economic ruin and the massacre of whites."¹¹³ Rather than an unpleasant but necessary business expense, slavery was now viewed as the means for survival. As a result, Matthewson says "southerners had abandoned their apologies for slavery, wielding the Haitian example like a weapon against antislavery."¹¹⁴ Furthermore, Hunt points out, "the south used the example of Saint Domingue in support of their conviction that blacks were incapable of civilization on their own."¹¹⁵ For the southerners, the emancipation was not about freedom and equality of blacks; it was about southerners restoring racial fears to the center of attention in the Southern United States.¹¹⁶

The United States lost moral high ground to Britain because of its re-commitment to slavery during the revolt in Saint Domingue. After its own revolution, the United States had become more vocal among other countries such as Britain and France in challenging the

¹¹⁰ "Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe," 14 July 1793, in Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution*, 196.

¹¹¹ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 2.

¹¹² Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution*, 184.

¹¹³ Matthewson, *Proslavery Foreign Policy*, 140.

¹¹⁴ Matthewson, *Proslavery Foreign Policy*, 140-141.

¹¹⁵ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 2.

¹¹⁶ Matthewson, *Proslavery Foreign Policy*, 140-141.

institution of slavery. The leaders of the American Revolution, including Washington, Jefferson, Adams, and Hamilton, all had well-known leanings toward emancipation in the North. The Haitian Revolution and its aftermath forced other countries to take a long look at their views of slavery and their laws concerning it. In his article "The Rights of Black Men and the American Reaction to the Haitian Revolution," Matthewson states that "by the mid-nineteenth century, because of various events and trends, including the Haitian Revolution, slavery was abolished in most of the hemisphere."¹¹⁷ This left slavery viable and expansive only in Cuba, Brazil, and the southern United States.¹¹⁸ Jefferson's policy on slavery expansion in the United States, particularly the purchase of Louisiana and the allowance of slavery there, turned the nation into a major slave nation, in contrast to Britain and France where abolition had been enacted by 1848.

The Haitian Revolution only deepened the United States' hypocrisy about freedom and slavery. Most of the leaders in the new United States believed that slavery and the ideal of the new republic were mutually exclusive, but the events in Haiti exposed these beliefs as hollow and meaningless. Washington and Jefferson, in particular, acted in opposition to their professed anti-slavery stances. Both men eventually freed some of their personal slaves, but their racist beliefs persisted in their official actions. Washington instructed his unmanageable slaves be sent to Haiti.¹¹⁹ President Washington "filled the structure of the Constitution with pro-slavery policy grounded in racism and white supremacy," says Matthewson.¹²⁰ In 1793, Washington signed the Fugitive Slave Act, which activated a provision of the United States' Constitution on that topic. Under this law, escaped slaves were never safe. Kidnappers rounded up free blacks and sold them to the South. Although Washington also ended United States' participation in the

¹²⁰ Tim Matthewson, "Abraham Bishop, The Rights of Black Men, and the American Reaction to the Haitian Revolution," *The Journal of Negro History* 67, no. 2 (Summer, 1982): 210.

¹¹⁸ Matthewson, "Abraham Bishop." 210.

¹¹⁹ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 5.

¹²⁰ Matthewson, *Proslavery Foreign Policy*, 139.

international slave trade, he enacted this prohibition more to prevent rebellious slaves from entering the country than to move toward abolishing slavery. The ban resulted in a robust domestic slave trade and an increase in slave population.¹²¹

Thomas Jefferson was deeply conflicted about slavery. While he believed his own words about all men being created equal, he carved out an exception for black people. Jefferson's 1788 discourse on slavery and race declared his opposition to slavery; but as Berlin notes, Jefferson also stated that the black race was inferior and that this inferiority "is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people."¹²² Berlin states that Jefferson's belief in black inferiority was restated so often that he came to believe that "black people must be removed from the American republic" and would search in vain for a place to receive them.¹²³ Jefferson believed that freed slaves should be returned to Africa or go to Haiti.¹²⁴ This idea of colonization became popular with whites because it freed the slaves but did not mean they would be living side-by-side with white people. Forced colonization was a bad and expensive idea. Even the African Americans who tried to emigrate under this approach returned home because they were, after all, Americans.¹²⁵ As Secretary of State, Jefferson strongly advocated support for the plantation slave-owners in Saint Domingue. During his presidency, Jefferson was so intent on acquiring Louisiana that he turned away from the abolition fight. In the end, Jefferson, whose roots were in the plantation society of Virginia, did not have the will to "deny the basic legitimacy of Virginia's slaveholding society."¹²⁶

¹²¹ Dillon and Drexler, *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States*, 9.

¹²² Ira Berlin, *The Long Emancipation: The Demise of Slavery in the United States* (Cambridge, Mass, Harvard University Press. 2015), 90-91.

¹²³ Berlin, *The Long Emancipation*, 92.

¹²⁴ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 6.

¹²⁵ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 180.

¹²⁶ Matthewson, *Proslavery Foreign Policy*, 142.

For black Americans, the success of the Haitian Revolution was a seismic, life-changing event. It demonstrated to slaves in the United States and around the world that it was possible to claim their freedom. It suggested that a life doomed to slavery was not necessarily the only option. It changed the way slaves thought of themselves. The Haitian Revolution proved that slaves were smart enough to rebel, forming groups and organizing resistance. Sinha devotes an entire chapter to her assertion that the Haitian revolution energized activism in the United States.¹²⁷ Frederick Douglass, in a speech at the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, captured this zeal when he said that the slaves were "striking for their freedom, they struck for the freedom of every black man in the World."¹²⁸

The pervasive idea that the black race was inferior presented a constant obstacle for slaves and free blacks working for their freedom. Hunt says that American blacks consistently cited the Haitian Republic as an indication of the potentialities of black people.¹²⁹ They pointed to Toussaint Louverture as a powerful example of an intelligent, educated black person. John Brown Russwurm praised Toussaint and the Haitian nation in his commencement address "The Condition and Prospects of Haiti" that he gave in 1826 at Bowdoin College in Maine.¹³⁰ Russwurm was the second black person to graduate college in the United States at the time. Of the Haitian slaves, Russwurm said, "Restored to the dignity of man to society, they have acquired a new existence; their powers have been developed; a career of glory and happiness unfolds itself before them."¹³¹ He went on to say that "they can demonstrate that although the God of nature may have given them a darker complexion, still they are men alike sensible to all

¹²⁷ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 62.

¹²⁸ Frederick Douglass, "Speech at Chicago World Fair 1894 in Geggus, *The Haitian Revolution A Documentary History*, ed. David Geggus (Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 2014), 204.

¹²⁹ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 2.

¹³⁰ John Brown Russwurm, "The Condition and Prospects of Haiti," Speech at Bowdoin College, 1826. *Blackpast*, Accessed May 10, 2019. www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1826/john-b-russwurm.

¹³¹ Russwurm, "The Condition and Prospects of Haiti."

the miseries of slavery and to all the blessings of freedom."¹³² Russwurm and another free black, Samuel Cornish, co-founded the first black newspaper, *Freedom's Journal*, which ran a three-part series through the month of May 1827, describing Toussaint as a hero, extolling the courage and vision of the Haitian rebels, and pointing out their capacity for self government.¹³³ The *Freedom's Journal* had readers in Northern parts of the United States, Haiti, Canada, and England.

The success of the rebels in Haiti may have inspired some free blacks and slaves to revolt immediately. Jackson and Bacon describe the failed raid in 1800 led by Gabriel Prosser, a slave blacksmith in Virginia. Betrayed by other slaves, Prosser referenced the Haitian Revolution in his defense statement at his trial.¹³⁴ Haitian Revolution also appears to have motivated the rebellion of other slaves, including the famous Nat Turner in August 1831.¹³⁵ David Walker's radical pamphlet "Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World" published in 1829, called on slaves to revolt against masters, and to take up arms for equality.¹³⁶ There was considerable backlash from all sides to his militant stance.

Saint Domingue was both a gift and a curse for American abolitionists. Manisha Sinha says that the "abolitionists' understanding of the Haitian Revolution was influenced by one of the few sympathetic eyewitness accounts written by Marcus Rainsford in 1805" in which he conveyed the racist behavior of the colonists toward slaves.¹³⁷ "American abolitionists praised the Haitian Revolution from the start," writes Sinha.¹³⁸ In the first written response to the rebellion, a Connecticut abolitionist Abraham Bishop wrote *The Rights of Black Men*. Bishop

¹³² Russwurm, "The Condition and Prospects of Haiti."

¹³³ "Toussaint Louverture," *Freedom's Journal*, 1827.

¹³⁴ Dillon and Drexler, *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States*, 5.

¹³⁵ Dillon and Drexler, *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States*, 5.

¹³⁶ David Walker, "Appeal To The Colored People Of The World."

¹³⁷ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 56.

¹³⁸ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 59.

invoked the United States Declaration of Independence and principles of freedom, asking "Is not [the black] cause as just as ours?"¹³⁹ However, the violence of the Haitian Revolution and subsequent slave revolts in the United States had a chilling effect on the anti-slavery argument.¹⁴⁰ Abolitionists were up against the belief that slaves were violent by nature and emancipation in any form would simply cause violent revenge. The national conversation about slavery sometimes even suggested that white abolitionists caused the Haitian Revolution.¹⁴¹ The more militant abolitionists were not worried about that, as Hunt explains "they chose to see the violence in Saint Domingue as a portent. If slave owners in the United States did not repent the sin of slavery, Armageddon might come at the hand of vengeful slaves. In other words, end slavery or else."¹⁴² In these ways, the Haitian Revolution lowered the voice of white abolitionists but inspired black abolitionists who steadfastly clung to the words of equality in the Declaration of Independence.

Thus, a slave revolt nearly 2,000 miles away had a powerful influence in race relations in the United States. It defined American foreign policy at the time. It involved the country in a foreign war against black people. It clarified the Constitution's veiled support for slavery. It solidified and continued the practice of slavery and fueled the public fear of slaves. It inspired free black persons and slaves and furthered the abolitionist cause. These shadows cast by the Haitian Revolution lingered for many years, as white Americans came to view slavery as a permanent institution, necessary to the nation's economy.

The Haitian revolution is an historical outlier because of its success and lasting impact, particularly on the United States. The Haitian Revolution was a catalyst for slaves all around the

¹³⁹ Sinha, *The Slave's Cause*, 60.

¹⁴⁰ Sinha. *The Slave's Cause*, 115.

¹⁴¹ Dillon and Drexler, *The Haitian Revolution and the Early United States*, 10.

¹⁴² Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 3.

world, showing that white supremacy could be defeated and that a powerful imperial power could be beaten back. The white plantation owners in Saint Domingue provided a fertile ground for the seeds of the revolution. Those seeds also became implanted in the American approach to slavery. The French colony of Saint Domingue, until the Revolution in 1791, fed the world's appetite for sugar and coffee, which was produced with the sweat and blood of African slaves. By 1804, when the slaves declared their independence, Saint Domingue (Haiti) exported something quite different—the idea that black persons could be equal members of society. Both hope and fear traveled to the United States, already conflicted over its peculiar institution of slavery. Fear won out, at least in the short term, as the United States tightened the chains that would bind African American slaves over the next fifty-plus years.

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