

The Haitian Revolution

Beginning in 1791, the struggle for Haitian independence lasted more than a decade before the island nation was declared free from colonial rule in 1804. Like the American Revolution, the Haitian Revolution inspired other colonies to fight for independence. It is important to note that many contemporary Latin American historians do not consider Haiti to be part of Latin America, as they consider Latin America to comprise only the Spanish and Portuguese colonies.

Context of the Haitian Revolution

The island of Hispaniola was first colonized by the Spanish beginning in the late 1400s and early 1500s. The pursuit of gold led the Spanish to enslave the island's native population and force them to toil in mines around the island. Harsh conditions and exposure to European diseases devastated the indigenous population and led the Spanish to begin importing enslaved Africans to the region. Eventually, France established its own permanent settlement, St. Domingue, on the island of Hispaniola.

Like the Spanish, the French relied on enslaved labor to support the colonial economy. By some estimates, the population of St. Domingue in 1789, the year the French Revolution began, was more than half a million people, 500,000 of whom were enslaved Africans. The rest of the population comprised 32,000 white European colonists and 24,000 free people of mixed African and European descent. (known as *affranchis*). St. Domingue had a rigid class structure with white colonists at the top, followed by the *affranchis* and enslaved people. Despite being free, the *affranchis* did not have the rights of French citizens, a fact that would contribute to the Haitian Revolution.

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The Haitian Revolution began as a series of slave revolts beginning in 1791. Led by Boukman, a voodoo priest, slaves in the northern part of Haiti rose up in a violent rebellion against the white plantation owners, burning property and killing families. The colony's white settlers came together to put down the rebellion; however, the island's *affranchis* were swept up by the idea of independence.

Around the same time, France was also undergoing its own revolution, and the National Assembly's passage of the Declaration of the Rights of Man inspired St. Domingue's *affranchis* to demand equal treatment under the law. The French government acquiesced in spring 1791 and passed new legislation extending new protections to St. Domingue's free people of mixed descent, though the majority of the laws were ignored by the white colonists. By late summer of that year, the *affranchis*, followed by the enslaved population, were in open rebellion against the white colonists. The National Assembly, in an attempt to end the conflict in St. Domingue, extended the full rights of citizens to the *affranchis* in 1792; however, at that point the gesture was too little, too late.

Spain (which occupied the other half of Hispaniola) and Great Britain capitalized on the chaos in St. Domingue and encouraged rebelling slaves to join their military ranks to cast the French from the

island. The decision of a French commissioner to abolish slavery in St. Domingue in 1793, however, led many blacks—among them, revolutionary leader Toussaint L'Ouverture—to support the French cause against the British and Spanish.

Toussaint L'Ouverture

Toussaint L'Ouverture was born in 1743 near Cap-Français, the capital of St. Domingue. The son of an educated slave, Toussaint learned how to speak and read French at an early age, though he predominantly spoke Haitian Creole and other African tribal languages. Favored by his master, Toussaint secured various positions of importance on the plantation where he worked before securing his freedom in 1776.

Toussaint's actions were somewhat contradictory at the start of the Haitian Revolution. He first focused on helping his former master and his family find safety during the violent slave rebellions, before eventually amassing and training an army of rebels of his own. In 1793, Toussaint joined forces with the Spanish and served as a general. He exhibited great military prowess during this time. By May 1794, however, Toussaint's allegiances shifted following the French decision to abolish slavery in St. Domingue—an action that Spain and Great Britain refused to take.

Toussaint played an integral role in reestablishing order and restoring the economy of St. Domingue and by 1799 had negotiated the removal of the British from the island. Toussaint also gradually worked to remove adversarial French leaders who stood in the way of his total control of St. Domingue. In 1801, contrary to orders from France, Toussaint and his forces invaded Santo Domingo, Spain's colony on the other half of Hispaniola, and freed its enslaved population. Shortly after, Toussaint named himself governor-general for life.

Toussaint's power and success in St. Domingue, while supported by many, proved a threat to Napoleon Bonaparte, who had gained control of France. In an attempt to regain control of St. Domingue and to reinstate slavery, Bonaparte sent General Charles Leclerc to St. Domingue. Many of the island's white colonists and *affranchis* defected to Leclerc, leading Toussaint to agree to an armistice with the French. In 1802, Toussaint was captured and sent to the Jura Mountains along the Franco-Swiss border, where he died in captivity less than a year later.

Jean Jacques Dessalines

Jean Jacques Dessalines was born about 1758 in West Africa before being enslaved and taken to St. Domingue. In 1791, Dessalines joined the slave revolt and eventually made a name for himself working alongside Toussaint L'Ouverture.

After the arrival of General Charles Leclerc in 1802, Dessalines initially fell in line with the new regime. Dessalines and others, however, rebelled against the French in 1803 after Napoleon Bonaparte announced his intention to reinstate slavery in St. Domingue, despite the abolition of the institution nearly a decade before. Dessalines helped expel the French, declared the country's independence on January 1, 1804, and named himself governor-general. He also renamed St. Domingue Haiti. Dessalines eventually declared himself emperor of Haiti and ruled as a dictator. His policy of stripping land from white colonists and his decision to exterminate the white population on the island made him vastly unpopular and led to an uprising against his rule. Dessalines was killed in 1806 during a revolt by free people of mixed descent.