

# The Haitian Revolution

The year is 1791. The United States is in its first years as the first republic in the western hemisphere. Europe is in disarray as the French Revolution burns across the face of France and the French revolutionaries are getting ready to draft the Declaration of the Rights of Man. And on the tropical French-owned island of Haiti, far from anyone's eyes, French craftsmen, planters, soldiers and government officials are closely watching the events unfolding in their homeland. It is an uncertain time; no one knows if the revolution will be successful or not and loyalties are deeply divided. While they watch the revolution in France, however, the planters are unaware that a revolution is brewing beneath their very feet.

The French plantations in Haiti contained some of the cruelest conditions that African slaves had ever had to endure. The coffee and sugar plantation required vast amounts of labor in order to make a profit, and as a result, the slave population far outnumbered the French population. In addition, because of the large number of slaves, the African slaves have retained much of their culture and established their own social and justice systems separate from the French. But the French, even with the examples of the American and French revolutions, are blissfully unaware of the fire they are sitting on.

Then on August 22, 1791, barely over two years after the French peasants stormed the Bastille, 100,000 African slaves rose up against the hated French in Haiti. They were led by a religious leader named Boukman and their revolution was different than both the American and French revolutions in that it was driven entirely by sheer hatred. These men and women had been enslaved most (or all) of their lives. They wanted more than just liberty, they wanted vengeance. Over the next three weeks, the Haitian slaves burned every plantation in the western half of Haiti and executed every Frenchman they could find. The French fled to the coast and pleaded with the war-torn government of France to get them out of Haiti, while the island burned around them.

The great hero of the Haitian Revolution was a slave named François Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture. He was a fifty year old carriage driver when the war broke out and while he did not participate in the burning of the plantations or the executions of the plantation owners, he did quickly realize that the revolution would fail unless the slaves became more organized, both politically and militarily. His first move was to train a small group of slaves, who trained other slaves, who trained other slaves and so on. He then realized that Haiti was caught between three nations; France, who wanted Haiti back, and England and Spain, who wanted Haiti for themselves. Toussaint's genius was in figuring out how to play all three nations off of each other. By doing so, each would destroy the others and leave Haiti to the black revolutionaries.

In the end, Haiti remained under the nominal protection of France with Toussaint as their leader. But France had their own problems to deal with and pretty much left Haiti alone to do as they wished. Toussaint was such a great leader that he was as well loved by the French as he was by the Haitians and things continued in this way until the early 1800s when Napoleon Bonaparte came to power in France. Aside from the fact that Napoleon did not like sharing power, he also was a devoted racist and passionately despised blacks. Napoleon sent General Victor Leclerc with over twenty thousand soldiers to kick out Toussaint, who then waged guerilla warfare against the French. Eventually he made peace with the French and retired from public life in 1802. In 1803, the French tricked him into a meeting where he was arrested and sent to France, and he died in prison later that year.



After the death of Toussaint, the revolution was carried on by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, another ex-slave. But unlike Toussaint, Dessalines was very angry over his treatment as a slave and was



determined never to allow the return of slavery. The war fought between LeClerc and Dessalines was, on both sides, one of the bloodiest and most horrifying struggles in history. LeClerc was desperate to leave Haiti, as his men were dying of yellow fever and the guerrilla attacks were taking a large toll on his men. So he decided to simply execute blacks whenever and wherever he found them. The slaughter that he committed on innocent civilians was not repeated for 150 years, and his successor, Jean-Baptiste Rochambeau, simply continued this policy. Dessalines responded that every atrocity committed by the French would be returned to them and for every Haitian killed by the French, the revolutionaries would kill one Frenchman.

Meanwhile, as all of this was going on, Dessalines ordered the immediate execution of all Europeans that had ever expressed any kind of opposition to the new revolutionary government. Napoleon did little to nothing during this time.

Finally, 12 years after the war had begun, Rochambeau surrendered and went back to France, and Dessalines declared Haiti to be a republic. He took the three-colored French flag and removed the white from it, creating the red and blue flag of Haiti, and Haiti has been an independent nation ever since.

The response in the United States was immediate and dramatic. The Haitian Revolution suddenly changed the equation that had been operating in North America. The white slave owners had always believed themselves to be kind and fatherly, while expecting the slaves to be child-like and grateful. And while white slave owners would publicly declare that slaves were happy being slaves, in reality they knew otherwise and slave owners all throughout the southern United States began to build “slave shelters” to hide in if the American slaves were to ever revolt.