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A Colonial Society in a Revolutionary Era

The beginning of the Haitian Revolution in August 1791 shocked the entire Atlantic world because it occurred, not in some remote backwater of the Americas, but in the fastest-growing and most prosperous of all the New World colonies. By 1791 Europeans had been staking out territory across the Atlantic and importing African captives to work for them for 300 years, but nowhere else had this colonial system been made to function as successfully as in Saint-Domingue. In the 28 years since the end of the eighteenth century's largest conflict, the Seven Years War, in 1763, the population of the French colony had nearly doubled as plantation-owners cashed in on Europe's seemingly unquenchable appetite for sugar and coffee. Imports of enslaved Africans to the island averaged over 15,000 a year in the late 1760s; after an interruption caused by the American War of Independence, they soared to nearly 30,000 in the late 1780s. No other slaveowners had learned to exploit their workforce with such harsh efficiency: by 1789, there were nearly 12 enslaved blacks for every white inhabitant, and the wealthiest Saint-Domingue plantation-owners were far richer than Virginians like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson. Cap Français, the colony's largest city, was one of the New World's busiest ports; on an average day, more than 100 merchant ships lay at anchor in its broad harbor. The city itself, with its geometrically laid-out streets and its modern public buildings, was a symbol of European civilization in the tropics.



Map 2 The French Colony of Saint-Domingue in 1789.

Source: Adapted from Jeremy Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Uprising* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007).

The Origins of Saint-Domingue

The island of Hispaniola, where Saint-Domingue was located, had been the site of one of the first contacts between Europeans and the peoples of the Americas: Columbus landed on its northern coast during his first voyage in 1492. The Spanish made it the first hub of their empire in the New World; the diseases they brought with them and their harsh exploitation of the population soon killed off the native Taino Indians. By the end of the 1500s, however, the Spanish had found richer opportunities for settlement in Mexico, Peru, and other parts of the Americas. Lacking gold and other easily exploitable resources, Hispaniola was virtually abandoned. During the early decades of the 1600s, the English, French, and Dutch, initially shut out of the scramble for territories on the American continents by the first arrivals, the Spanish and the Portuguese, began staking claims to some of the islands in the Caribbean. France established its first permanent colonial settlement on the small island of Saint-Christophe in 1626; in 1635, the French planted their flag on two larger islands in the eastern Caribbean, Martinique and

Guadeloupe. Together with a small colony on the coast of South America – today's French Guyana – and their outposts in Canada, these islands became the base of France's overseas empire. In the same period, small groups of seagoing adventurers, acting on their own, landed on the northern coast of Hispaniola. These early settlers, not all of them French, were known as *boucaniers* or buccaneers because of the *boucans* or open fires on which they smoked meat from the wild cattle and hogs they found roaming the deserted island.

Eager to expand their colonial domains at the expense of their long-time enemies, the Spanish, the French made a move to claim territory in Hispaniola by appointing a governor for the *boucaniers'* settlements in 1665. In 1697, at the end of the European conflict known as the War of the League of Augsburg, Spain officially ceded the western third of the island to France; the remainder of the island became the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo. By this time, Europeans all across the Caribbean had realized the enormous profits to be made by establishing plantations to grow sugar. The sugar boom first took hold in some of the smaller islands of the eastern Caribbean, such as the British colony of Barbados and the French island of Martinique. By 1700, however, much of the suitable land on those islands had already been used up. Saint-Domingue, a larger colony, offered new horizons for sugar production, and an ever-increasing stream of immigrants, dreaming of wealth, arrived on its shores. In 1687, there were just 4,411 whites and 3,358 enslaved blacks in Saint-Domingue; by 1715, the figures were 6,668 whites and 35,451 blacks, and in 1730 the enslaved population had risen to 79,545. Forty years later, in 1779, there were 32,650 whites and 249,098 enslaved blacks, a figure that would nearly double by the end of the 1780s.¹

The geography of Saint-Domingue dictated its pattern of settlement. Sugar plantations needed flat, well-watered land; colonists rapidly staked out claims in the plain in the northern part of the island and later in the drier valleys between the steep mountain ranges in the west, where irrigation systems had to be built to make sugar-growing possible. The long southern peninsula of the island was the last part of the territory to be settled; harder to reach from France than the other parts of the colony, it was a center for contraband trade with the British, Dutch, and Spanish colonies to its south and west. The French administration divided Saint-Domingue into separate North, West and South provinces. Cap Français in the north and Port-au-Prince in the west were the main administrative centers; smaller cities such as Cayes, the capital of the South Province, were scattered along the coast, at points where ships could anchor and collect the products of the plantations for transport to Europe. By the mid-1700s, Saint-Domingue

plantation-owners had discovered a new cash crop, almost as lucrative as sugar: coffee. Coffee trees could be grown on the slopes of the island's steep mountains, land that was unsuitable for sugar cane. Whereas sugar plantations required large investments of money to pay for the machinery needed to crush the canes, boil their juice, and refine the raw sugar, coffee plantations were cheaper to set up and attracted many of the new colonists who arrived after 1763. Indigo, grown to make a blue dye widely used in European textile manufacturing, was another resource for small-scale plantations, and, by the end of the century, cotton-growing was also becoming an important part of the colony's economy. In 1789 there were some 730 sugar plantations in the colony, along with over 3,000 plantations growing coffee and an equal number devoted to indigo.

In the early days of colonization, the labor force in the French islands included both white indentured servants and enslaved blacks. As the sugar boom created a growing demand for workers, however, plantation-owners throughout the Caribbean became more and more dependent on Africans to work their fields. After the end of Louis XIV's long series of wars in 1713, the French slave trade expanded rapidly. Throughout the eighteenth century, slave ships left the ports on France's Atlantic coast, carrying trade goods to the coast of Africa. There, they exchanged textiles, muskets, and jewelry for black men and women, often captives taken in wars between rival African states. Packed into the holds of overcrowded vessels, the terrified blacks knew only that they would never see their families and homelands again. Close to a sixth of the captives on a typical voyage died from disease or mistreatment before reaching the Americas. Those who arrived in Saint-Domingue were promptly put up for sale and found themselves taken off to plantations where, if they were lucky, they might encounter a few fellow blacks who spoke their native language. In this strange new world, they had to struggle to make some kind of life for themselves, under the control of masters whose only interest was in extracting the maximum amount of useful labor from them.

A Slave Society

Eighteenth-century Saint-Domingue was a classic example of what historians call a "slave society," one in which the institution of slavery was central to every aspect of life, in contrast to "societies with slaves," in which slaves were a relatively small part of the population and most economic activity

was carried on by free people. Organized in work gangs or *ateliers*, enslaved blacks in Saint-Domingue performed almost all of the exhausting physical labor on which the growing and processing of sugar and coffee depended. Much of the field work – hoeing fields to clear away weeds, planting, and harvesting – was done by women; men were often trained to do more skilled jobs, such as sugar-processing, carpentry, or, like the future Toussaint Louverture, serving as coachmen. Children were assigned to a special *petit atelier* as early as possible, to accustom them to work, and those too old or sick to toil in the fields were used to guard the plantation's animals or its storeroom. At the top of the hierarchy among the enslaved workers were the *commandeurs* or drivers, who directed the work in the fields. The smooth functioning of a plantation depended on the *commandeurs*: even though the *commandeurs* were enslaved themselves, plantation-owners and managers treated them with respect to maintain their authority over the rest of the workforce. While most enslaved workers on the plantations worked in the fields or processed sugar and coffee, some were used as domestic servants for the masters and their families. The one skilled job usually reserved for women was the direction of the infirmary; supervising the care of the sick and ferreting out malingerers who were trying to escape work was an important task in the overall management of a plantation.

Caribbean sugar plantations were notorious for the demands they placed on their captive work force and the cruelty with which they were treated (see Figure 1.1). A French observer in the 1780s described the scene he witnessed in Saint-Domingue's sugar fields: "The sun blazed down on [the enslaved blacks'] heads; sweat poured from all parts of their bodies. Their limbs, heavy from the heat, tired by the weight of their hoes and the resistance of heavy soil, which was hardened to the point where it broke the tools, nonetheless struggled to overcome all obstacles. They worked in glum silence; all their faces showed their misery."²² Sugar cane had to be processed as soon as it was cut, before the precious juice began to turn to starch and lose its sweetness. During the long harvesting season, from January to July every year, cane was cut in the fields and immediately fed through the heavy rollers of the crushing machine. The extracted juice then had to be boiled for hours in large cauldrons, while enslaved laborers stirred the syrup in the sweltering heat; it was then poured into molds so that the sugar could crystallize. The same workers who had toiled in the fields during the day were forced to work making sugar long into the night, and accidents caused by exhaustion were frequent; women who had to feed the cane stalks into crushing machines often lost arms that got caught in the machinery. Work on coffee plantations was not driven by the same need for haste as that

involved in sugar production, but the endless routine of planting and caring for the trees, harvesting the beans, spreading them out to dry in the sun, and processing them kept enslaved workers equally busy. In addition to working for their masters, black captives were responsible for producing most of their own food: masters usually gave them small private plots to raise yams, beans, and other vegetables for themselves. In theory, they were supposed to be guaranteed one day a week to cultivate these gardens, but masters never hesitated to commandeer them for other tasks; the enslaved blacks had to make do with whatever free time they could find to tend their crops.

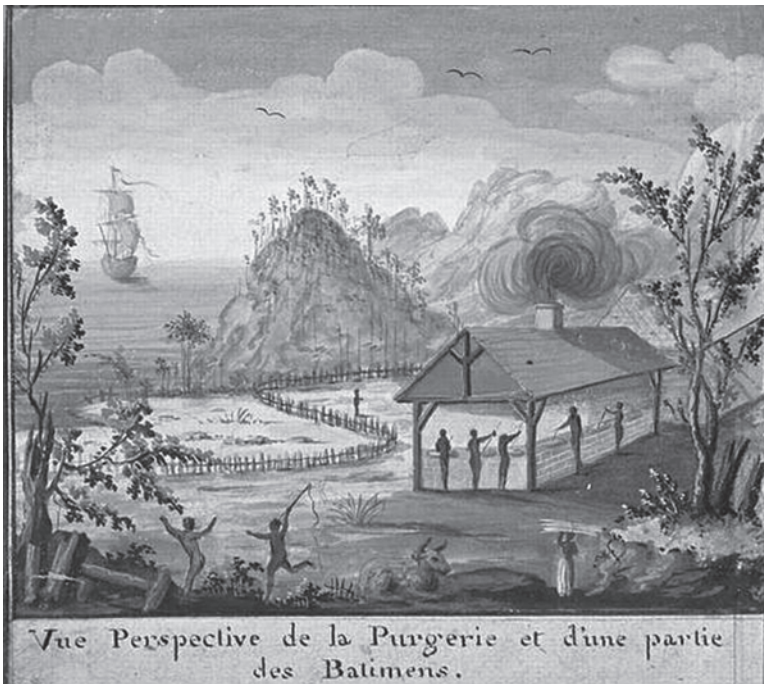


Figure 1.1 Plantations and enslaved labor. An image commissioned by a French plantation-owner around 1780 shows the “purgerie,” where enslaved blacks worked to refine sugarcane juice into sugar for export. In the foreground, a black woman on the right carries cane stalks to be processed, while on the left, a man with a raised whip chases another woman. Even at the height of the Enlightenment period, European whites were not embarrassed by the cruelty and the exploitative nature of the slavery system.

Source: © RMN-Blérancourt, Musée franco-américain du château de Blérancourt.

Living conditions for enslaved blacks on the plantations were harsh. Although Europeans considered blacks uniquely suited to work in the hot Caribbean climate because it resembled the weather in Africa, newly arrived captives fell victim to unfamiliar diseases in their new environment or succumbed to depression resulting from the traumatic ordeal they had been through; as many as a third of them died in their first year in the colonies. The average life expectancy of an enslaved black after arriving in Saint-Domingue was no more than seven to ten years. Most of them suffered from chronic malnutrition: the system of private plots rarely sufficed to provide enough food, and above all they were deprived of meat, a basic element of their diet in Africa. Slaveowners were theoretically obliged to supply their captives with adequate clothing, but few of them paid attention to this rule, and blacks often had only rags to wear or were forced to go around half-naked. Left to themselves, they tried to build huts similar to those familiar to them from Africa, but masters often preferred to force them to live in larger buildings where they could be supervised more easily. Masters discouraged marriages among their captives, for fear that having their own families would give them a sense of independence. Newly arrived blacks, called *bossales*, were sometimes put under the supervision of veterans who spoke their native language, but they still had to learn Kreyol, a combination of elements of French and various African languages that served as the general medium of communication in the colony. At the time of the revolution, African-born *bossales* made up at least half of the Saint-Domingue population. Many of the newly arrived captives at the time of the revolution had military experience, having been taken prisoner in wars in the Congo region of Africa; they would make an important contribution to the uprising that began in 1791.³ Masters considered enslaved blacks born in the colony, known as *creoles*, easier to manage than the *bossales*; the *creoles* grew up speaking the local language and had never known any life outside of the slave system.

Hanging over the enslaved workers at all times was the threat of brutal physical punishment if they angered their masters. Slaveowners and their hired managers routinely whipped them to force them to work and to punish them for any sign of insubordination. To make it easier to identify them if they tried to run away, enslaved blacks were branded with their owners' initials or other marks. Those who were caught after escaping were often forced to wear chains or iron collars, and might be shackled to a post at night. Masters were also legally permitted to cut off disobedient blacks' ears or to cut their hamstrings as punishment. Slaveowners often

built private prisons or *cachots*, where enslaved blacks were locked up in the dark for various offenses. In theory, masters were not supposed to execute their captives, but in practice the authorities rarely intervened to protect them. In 1788, charges were brought against a Saint-Domingue master named Lejeune, who had tortured two enslaved women to death because he suspected them of poisoning other blacks on his plantation. Although Lejeune was initially convicted, other slaveowners protested so strongly against the verdict that it was overturned.

In theory, the treatment of slaves was regulated by the Code Noir or “Black Code” issued in 1685 by the French king Louis XIV. The Code Noir provided a legal basis for slavery in the French colonies, even though the institution was officially barred from the metropole where French judges had laid down the principle that “there are no slaves in France” in 1571. Although the Code Noir was meant to uphold the authority of slaveowners over their human property, it did include some provisions meant to prevent the worst abuses of slavery. Masters were made responsible for providing their captives with adequate rations, they were supposed to furnish them with two new sets of clothing every year, and they were encouraged to provide for their instruction in the Christian religion. In extreme circumstances, the code permitted enslaved blacks to appeal to the royal authorities for protection from their masters. In practice, however, both colonial plantation-owners and French administrators ignored these clauses of the code: enslaved workers were left to furnish most of their own food, clothing was distributed erratically, and little effort was made to Christianize the blacks, for fear that this would require recognizing that they had at least some minimal rights. Few among the enslaved population even knew that they were supposed to be able to protest about extreme mistreatment, and colonial officials rarely paid any attention to their complaints. Nevertheless, blacks who did become aware of the protections they were supposed to enjoy under the Code Noir began to think of themselves as having at least a minimum of rights. In this way, historian Malick Ghachem has suggested, the legal code that defined slavery served, paradoxically, to spread ideas that could ultimately undermine it.⁴

The Culture of the Black Population

Forced to live under the harsh discipline of their masters, the enslaved blacks in Saint-Domingue nevertheless managed to develop some communal life and to find ways to oppose the worst forms of oppression.

Although captives from different plantations were not supposed to mix, masters, knowing that a few concessions made them less likely to revolt against their situation, looked the other way when they gathered for meetings and dances on their weekly days off. When black captives came together they would often hold religious ceremonies that combined African rituals and elements of the Christian practices with which some of them had come into contact. Out of this fusion of elements there emerged in the course of the eighteenth century a distinctive religion, *vodou*, in which worshipers went into trances in which they were seized by the spirits of various African spirits or *lwa*, whom the blacks often identified with particular Catholic saints. *Vodou* ceremonies helped unify an enslaved population drawn from many different African ethnic groups. Individual enslaved blacks were sometimes able to build up a small *pécule* of personal savings by selling part of the crops they raised in their private food plots or by persuading their masters to let them hire themselves out; in certain cases, individuals were able to purchase their own freedom with these earnings.

The prerevolutionary life of the future Toussaint Louverture, then known as Toussaint Bréda because he lived on the Bréda plantation, is an example of the way in which one exceptional individual born into slavery in Saint-Domingue was able to gain free status during the colonial era. Claims that Louverture was descended from a West African king are probably unfounded, but stories passed down in his family that his intelligence, his determination, and his ability to work with animals distinguished him even as a youth are more plausible. He managed to learn to speak and read French; analysis of his largely phonetic spelling suggests that he acquired the accent of the colonists from southwestern France who were numerous in the colony. He became a devout Catholic and remained loyal to that religion throughout his life, although, like many blacks, he may also have practiced *vodou*. Even before he gained his own freedom, he formed a first marriage with a free woman of color, an unusual opportunity for an enslaved man. He became the coachman for the manager of the Bréda plantation on which he lived, and it was probably through this connection that he obtained his legal freedom in the 1770s. After his emancipation, he briefly owned a small plantation with several enslaved laborers, but this venture does not seem to have succeeded and he returned to work on the Bréda population, where his second wife Suzanne and several other relatives were among the enslaved population. Unlike enslaved blacks, Louverture was able to move around freely, which gave him the opportunity to build up a network of friends

and contacts, many of whom would be useful to him when he emerged as a leader of the Haitian Revolution.⁵

Very few enslaved blacks were able to escape the limits imposed on them in colonial Saint-Domingue, but whenever they could, they expressed their opposition to their treatment through various forms of individual and collective resistance. What masters saw as the blacks' inherent laziness was undoubtedly a deliberate response to a system in which they were denied any benefits from their labor. Rather than bear children who would grow up under slavery, women used plants and herbs to induce abortions; like most enslaved populations in the Americas, the captive workforce in Saint-Domingue required constant importations from Africa to maintain its numbers. *Marronnage* or escape from the plantations was another common form of resistance. In some cases, it was a way for blacks to protest against a particularly cruel overseer or *commandeur*, and runaways might negotiate their return to the plantation in exchange for a promise of better treatment. Some groups of *marrons* succeeded in fleeing into the mountains and established independent bands; one group in a remote area along the border with Spanish Santo Domingo maintained itself for nearly a century, although its numbers were relatively small. Runaways could also take refuge in the colony's cities, where they might be able to pass themselves off as freedmen and make a living as day laborers.

Although they normally claimed that they could easily manage their enslaved workforces, masters lived in fear that the blacks might turn against them. Plantation-owners blamed any unexplained illnesses or deaths among their captives or their livestock on poisoning, which the colony's whites claimed was the blacks' main weapon. In 1757–8, the entire colony was swept by fear of a conspiracy, supposedly organized by an enslaved black man named Makandal, to poison all the whites and take over the island. The deaths attributed to Makandal were all among enslaved blacks, and it is not clear that they were due to poison rather than to disease, but he was tortured and burned alive in Cap Français in 1758. According to legend, he turned himself into a fly and escaped from his executioners. Even today, Makandal's name is remembered in Haiti as a symbol of resistance to oppression. Despite the whites' fears, overt collective resistance to the slavery system was rare: unlike the neighboring British island of Jamaica or the Dutch mainland colony of Surinam, for example, Saint-Domingue experienced no major slave revolts in the decades prior to 1791. This was certainly not because the blacks found their situation acceptable, but until 1791 they did not see any realistic prospect of changing it through collective violence.

The White Colonial Order

Although they were heavily outnumbered by the enslaved population, until 1791, Saint-Domingue's minority of white colonists seemed solidly in control of the island. Although the French government kept only a small garrison in the island, the 30,000 white inhabitants in 1789 used the constant threat of force and the resources of European technology to dominate the far more numerous blacks. Trained troops armed with European weapons, supplemented by local police forces, helped deter black resistance. European ships capable of crossing the oceans made the import of enslaved captives and supplies and the export of plantation products possible. Loans from France financed the slave trade and the expansion of colonial plantations. Whereas most enslaved blacks were illiterate, whites used written letters and printed documents to maintain communication between the colony and the metropole. After 1764, the Saint-Domingue newspaper, the *Affiches américaines*, printed notices describing escaped blacks, helping their masters to track them down. Few of the enslaved blacks in Saint-Domingue in 1791 had ever seen Europe, but all of them understood that the white colonists' connection with France made them formidable adversaries.

By 1791 a few of the whites in Saint-Domingue could claim several generations of ancestry in the island, but most of them, like the *bossales* on their plantations, had in fact been born on the other side of the Atlantic. Throughout the eighteenth century, Saint-Domingue was France's land of opportunity, a new frontier where enterprising individuals could hope to escape the restrictions of aristocratic society and make their fortunes. Even the high rate of mortality for new arrivals – whites were as vulnerable to tropical diseases as the blacks – did not discourage ambitious immigrants. The memoirs of one settler who arrived in the colony in 1785 are typical of those who crossed the ocean, looking for possibilities they could not find in Europe. Eager to escape from his domineering parents, this anonymous author enlisted in one of the French army's colonial regiments. Army discipline in Saint-Domingue was lax, and he was able to spend much of his time doing odd jobs to earn extra money. After a few years, he deserted his regiment and went to work as an *économiste* or assistant overseer on a coffee plantation. He was soon making a salary of 3,000 *livres* a year, along with room and board, at a time when an ordinary worker's wages in France were about a sixth as much. He succeeded in winning the trust of the elderly plantation-owner he worked for; when that man died, he left his former employee 6,000 *livres* and "a young

American-born black woman, eighteen years old, for whom he knew I had affection.” Using this money, the young man acquired more enslaved blacks of his own and established a coffee plantation in the southern part of the colony.⁶

Whereas newcomers from France had to struggle to establish themselves and were often referred to, even by the blacks, as *petits blancs*, “little whites” whose only asset was their skin color, the most successful *grands blancs* achieved fortunes that few Frenchmen at home could dream of. Itemizing his losses in the Haitian Revolution, one man listed a sugar plantation with 342 captive laborers, a coffee plantation with 46 others, a stud farm with 48 mares and 148 mules, and a lime-making establishment employing 25 enslaved blacks; he was by no means the wealthiest of Saint-Domingue planters.⁷ Prosperous planters built large houses on their plantations and filled them with expensive furnishings imported from Europe. Freed from having to do any physical labor themselves, the colonists were known for their hospitality and their lavish spending, which often left them heavily in debt. Merchants in the colony’s cities and in France’s ports enriched themselves by supplying these free-spending customers, many of whom spent most of their time in town or left to live in France, appointing hired managers or *gérants* to run their properties. Critics of the slavery system claimed that these managers treated the blacks harshly and skimmed off money that should have been spent on their care, in order to accumulate as much money as possible for themselves, in hope of either buying their own plantations or of returning to France with their profits.

Separated from France by the Atlantic Ocean, the white colonists in Saint-Domingue resented the metropolitan government’s attempt to regulate their lives. From the point of view of the distant authorities in Versailles, Saint-Domingue existed in order to enrich the mother country and help France compete with the other European imperial powers. France’s navigation act, the *exclusif*, required the colonists to buy their supplies only from French merchants and to sell their products only in the mother country. Colonists complained that the merchant houses of Bordeaux, Nantes, and Le Havre overcharged them for products shipped from Europe and underpaid them for their sugar and coffee; especially in the South Province, colonists reacted by carrying on a lively smuggling trade with other Caribbean islands and Britain’s prosperous North American colonies. The white colonists also resented the authority of the military governors and civil intendants sent from France to govern them.

Wealthy and self-confident, the island's plantation-owners wanted to run their own affairs, as colonists in the nearby British colonies usually did. After the end of the Seven Years War in 1763, the French administration tried to tighten its control over its most valuable colony, just as the British were doing in North America. While Britain's colonists demonstrated against measures like a new stamp tax, the Saint-Domingue colonists went further: in December 1768 they staged an outright rebellion which was not brought under control until the following summer. It was a warning of the independent spirit that the colonists would show when revolution broke out in France in 1789.

In the colony's main city, Cap Français, the white population recreated the features of modern European life. Le Cap, as it was commonly called, had a rectangular grid of streets, much easier to navigate than the crooked alleyways of Paris. A large and imposing building housed the colonial administration. The city, with a population of around 18,000 in 1789, was built largely of stone. In addition to its 1,500-seat theater, it boasted separate hospitals for men and women, elegant public squares, and a large barracks complex for the military garrison that protected the colonists from foreign invasion and the threat of a slave uprising. Le Cap's whites considered themselves full participants in the Enlightenment culture of France. The city had bookstores, Masonic lodges, and in 1784 it became the third community in the western hemisphere, after Philadelphia and Boston, to have a learned society, the Cercle des Philadelphes. Saint-Domingue's other cities were less impressive. Port-au-Prince, in the west, was the official capital, even though its population was smaller than Le Cap's. Most of its buildings were made out of wood and its streets were still unpaved at the time of the revolution. The smaller ports scattered along the colony's coastline served primarily as places where ships could anchor to take on the produce from local plantations.

The Free People of Color

Whites shared the cities with enslaved blacks and with members of the colony's third racial group, the free people of color. As in the countryside, enslaved laborers did most of the physical tasks in the cities, loading and unloading ships, working in the building trades, and caring for their masters' households. Enslaved urban workers enjoyed greater freedom than the more numerous laborers on the plantations. Masters often

taught them artisanal skills and then let them hire themselves out, in exchange for a share of their earnings. Rather than being organized into work gangs, they could often circulate on their own, and the fact that it was difficult to distinguish enslaved blacks from free persons allowed runaway *marrons* to blend into the city population. The urban black population would show itself less eager to participate in the insurrection that began in 1791 than the enslaved blacks on the plantations.

Enslaved urban blacks tolerated their situation because they hoped to join the population of free people of color. This third racial category among the colony's population had begun to develop soon after enslaved blacks were imported to the island. Many, but not all, of the free people of color were the offspring of sexual relationships between white masters and enslaved black women: throughout the colony's history, there had always been many more white men than white women willing to leave Europe for the rigors of colonial life. White men routinely exploited enslaved black women for their sexual pleasure. Although the relationships between white men and women of African descent were profoundly unequal, white men often granted freedom to women who bore them children; the Code Noir explicitly authorized this practice. White women often resented their husbands' involvement with women of color; in 1791, a French official had to intervene when a jealous white wife physically attacked an enslaved woman in whom she decided her husband was taking too much interest.⁸

Populations of free people of color developed in all the American colonies, but in the course of the eighteenth century the group in Saint-Domingue came to be larger and more influential than in any of the other Caribbean colonies. Those free people of color who were descended from white fathers often inherited property, including enslaved blacks. Less averse to hard work than the whites, and less tempted by the prospect of leaving the colony for France, they were often more economically successful than the Europeans. Free people of color were essential to the running of the colony. Companies of free men of color were recruited to form the *maréchaussée* or rural police, used to hunt down runaway slaves, and entrepreneurs from this group ran many of the colony's small businesses. White men sought out free women of mixed race, who legend claimed were more skilled at the arts of sex than whites; white women often complained that European men preferred their mixed-race rivals. Sex was not the only reason why white males linked themselves to these women, however. It was not uncommon for white men to leave the

management of their property to energetic free women of color, known as *menagères*, who might or might not also be their mistresses; many of these women became the founders of prosperous families and sought to guide their children into advantageous marriages with other members of the free colored group or even with white men willing to cross the color line in order to improve their economic situation. Like the children of white couples, some children from mixed-race families were sent to France for their education.

As their numbers and wealth increased – by 1789 official statistics showed 28,000 free people of color in Saint-Domingue, almost as many as the 30,000 whites – members of this group increasingly resented laws that condemned them to second-class status. In 1685, the Code Noir had specified that freed blacks had “the same rights, privileges, and liberties enjoyed by persons born free,” and throughout the early part of the eighteenth century, there was little discrimination against them and their descendants in the colonies. From the 1760s onward, however, official policy and white colonists’ attitudes became increasingly prejudicial toward the free people of color. The French government calculated that maintaining a clear separation between whites and non-whites would prevent the colony’s free population from uniting to resist metropolitan authority. A series of laws attempted to limit new manumissions and banned free people of color from entering a long list of professions, including medicine and law, or from wearing fancy clothing and jewelry. Notaries drawing up legal documents had to use specific terms to identify them, and they were forbidden to use the family names of their white ancestors. In practice, many of these laws were often ignored, but free men of color were excluded from all government posts and from commanding military units. When the French Revolution broke out, they would be quick to seize on its promises of liberty and equality to demand the abolition of these restrictions.

Critics and Defenders of Slavery

In addition to the tensions generated by the slavery system and the conflicts between whites and the free people of color, Saint-Domingue in the years before 1789 was increasingly affected by new ideas coming from Europe and the newly independent United States. By the middle of the 1700s, some European thinkers were beginning to criticize slavery as an

inherent violation of natural human rights. The idea of colonialism also came under fire. In 1770 the abbé Raynal's *Philosophical History of the Two Indies* made a scathing denunciation of the effects of European settlement in the Americas. Subsequent editions of this best-selling work added vehement denunciations of slavery. One passage, written by the French *philosophe* Diderot, mentioned slave revolts in several colonies, warning that "these bolts of lightning announce the thunder," and predicted that if slavery was not abolished, a black leader would soon "raise the sacred banner of liberty" and lead a movement to destroy the institution.⁹ Raynal's book circulated freely in Saint-Domingue; it is often claimed that Toussaint Louverture had read it. Raynal himself had connections with royal administrators in charge of the colonies, and colonists feared that his ideas might influence official policy. Other critics challenged colonial policy on economic grounds, arguing that the cost of defending and administering overseas territories outweighed the profits they produced.

The French government's actions during the decades before the revolution were confused and often contradictory. While some officials hoped to reduce the cruelty of slavery, others were more concerned about the possibility of blacks entering France itself. A 1777 edict, the *police des noirs*, expressed fears about racial mixing and set up a registration system meant to exclude blacks from the metropole.¹⁰ In Saint-Domingue itself, royal officials imposed new restrictions on the free population of color. The American Revolution added to the ferment under way in the New World. The conflict interrupted Saint-Domingue's trade with Europe and its supply of new captives from Africa, reminding the colonists of their vulnerability to disruptions resulting from France's foreign policy. White planters were alarmed when the French administration recruited free men of color to join a military expedition sent to besiege British forces in Savannah, Georgia, in 1779. Among the participants in this unsuccessful campaign were André Rigaud, who would later become Toussaint Louverture's most important political rival, and a number of other figures who would play important roles in the events of the Haitian Revolution.

With the end of the American war in 1783, Saint-Domingue's seemingly irresistible economic rise resumed. To make up for the cutoff of imported captives during the war, planters purchased record numbers of new African laborers, and a new wave of whites arrived from France. A decree in August 1784 opened Saint-Domingue's major ports to trade with the newly independent United States. Eagerly welcomed by

the colonists, this breach of the *exclusif* was bitterly opposed by French merchant interests. Although they appreciated the new trade law, the colonists were jolted when the French government issued ordinances on 3 December 1784 and 23 December 1785 intended to mitigate some of the worst abuses of the slave system. Masters and plantation managers were required to keep accurate records of the food and clothing provided to their slaves, and the provisions of the Code Noir allowing enslaved blacks to complain about mistreatment were restated. The colonists reacted violently to what they denounced as an example of metropolitan “despotism.” “This edict violates the sacred rights of property, and puts a dagger in the hands of the slaves, by giving control over their discipline and their regime to someone other than their masters,” one of them wrote.¹¹ To silence this opposition, in January 1787 the French government shut down the Conseil supérieur, the main law court in Cap Français, and merged it with the court in Port-au-Prince. This measure further angered the white colonists, some of whom were ready to call for a revolt like the movement in 1768–9.

By the beginning of 1787, the French government’s attempt to deal with its growing financial problems had started the chain of events that would lead to a full-fledged revolution two years later. Saint-Domingue’s white colonists followed the stages of the pre-revolutionary crisis of 1787 and 1788 closely, and tried to calculate how to turn it to their own advantage. At the same time, they realized that they faced a new danger. In Paris in February 1788, a group of French reformers led by a well-known pamphleteer, Jacques-Pierre Brissot, founded the Society of the Friends of the Blacks. Inspired by the British campaign to abolish the slave trade, the Friends of the Blacks denounced slavery as a violation of natural rights. Its members, who included a number of wealthy aristocrats with properties in the colonies, shared the general European prejudice that blacks were the products of a primitive civilization. The society’s manifestoes called for a gradual phasing out of slavery that, its members claimed, would do no damage to the interests of slaveowners. Despite the moderation of its program, the Society of the Friends of the Blacks clearly underlined the contradiction between the ideals of liberty and equality that the self-proclaimed “patriot” movement in France was demanding and the realities of colonial life. The fact that the French government tolerated the society’s public meetings made the white colonists even more determined to defend their own interests.

Saint-Domingue and the French Revolution

When Louis XVI's ministers announced, in the summer of 1788, that they were going to summon an elected assembly, the Estates General, to deal with the monarchy's financial crisis, white landowners in Saint-Domingue immediately began a campaign to obtain seats for themselves. Their spokesmen cast the colonists as victims of an arbitrary government that imposed rules on them without consultation and favored metropolitan merchants over plantation-owners. Recognizing that the enthusiasm for liberty that was sweeping France made an overt defense of slavery risky, they emphasized the economic importance of the colonies and accused the Society of the Friends of the Blacks of promoting impractical utopian ideas. The Friends of the Blacks tried to persuade local electoral assemblies in France to include calls for the reform or abolition of slavery in the *cahiers*, or lists of grievances that they drew up in the first months of 1789. Few of the *cahiers* actually mentioned slavery, but those that did clearly identified the institution as a violation of natural rights and Christian values. On 17 June 1789, when the deputies of the Third Estate, the representatives of France's commoners, took the radical step of challenging the king and the country's privileged groups, the clergy and the nobility, by proclaiming themselves the National Assembly, the would-be representatives of the white colonists supported them. Some colonists threw themselves into the metropolitan revolutionary movement. Moreau de Saint-Méry, one of the main leaders of protests against the royal administration's actions in Saint-Domingue, presided over the Paris city council on the afternoon of 14 July 1789, the day the Bastille was stormed.¹²

Although many members of the new National Assembly voiced objections to slavery, on 4 July 1789 the deputies voted to give Saint-Domingue six seats, thereby acknowledging the colonies as an integral part of the new national community. By this time, some Saint-Domingue colonists had begun to realize the danger that the new national legislature, in which they were only a small minority, might pass laws that would endanger the institution of slavery, but their protests were ignored by other colonial property-owners who were eager to become deputies. Given that as many as 150 of the 1,200 National Assembly deputies had a direct economic interest in the colonies, it seemed unlikely that that body would do anything to jeopardize the islands' prosperity. The situation changed after the storming of the Bastille on 14 July 1789, which pushed the French revolutionary movement in a radical direction. Three weeks later, on 4 August 1789, the National Assembly voted to abolish all the special privileges that

defined social hierarchy in France. One deputy called for the assembly to consider abolishing slavery as well, although his motion was ignored. On 26 August 1789, however, the assembly passed its famous Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, whose first article proclaimed that "men are born and remain free and equal in rights." Honoré Mirabeau, one of the most prominent revolutionary spokesmen and a member of the Society of Friends of the Blacks, insisted in his newspaper that the clear meaning of the Declaration was that "there are not, and cannot be, either in France or in any country under French laws, any other men than free men, men equal to one another."¹³ The assembly did not listen to Mirabeau, instead deciding that the question of whether the Declaration of Rights applied to the colonies would be settled at a later date. Slaveowners in the colonies understood the danger, however. In Saint-Domingue, the local authorities prohibited the circulation of any newspapers from France because of the subversive ideas they might spread. A short-lived slave uprising in Martinique in August 1789 stoked the white colonists' fears about the impact of news from France.

While Saint-Domingue's white colonists tried to exploit the French revolutionary crisis to gain autonomy for themselves without endangering slavery, members of the colony's free population of color saw the new principles of 1789 as an opportunity to claim political rights for themselves. Already in 1784 a wealthy free man of color, Julien Raimond, had gone to France to lobby on behalf of his group; he had received some encouragement from royal officials who saw his group as more loyal to France than the whites. When whites excluded free men of color from their movement for representation in the Estates General, Raimond and other members of the group in France objected. Initially, the Parisian spokesmen for the free people of color thought they might be able to make an agreement with the whites, who had organized themselves in the Club Massiac to defend their interests. Representatives of the free men of color addressed the group in August 1789, arguing that all of them shared a common interest in protecting slavery. The Club Massiac members rejected these overtures, however, insisting that only the white colonists in Saint-Domingue could make any changes in the colony's racial system. Raimond and his supporters then turned to the Friends of the Blacks, persuading Brissot and his colleagues that the granting of rights to the free men of color would be a blow against racial prejudice and a first step toward the eventual abolition of slavery. Until 1793, debates about the colonies in France focused on the issue of the rights of the free men of color, rather than on slavery itself. In March 1790, the

National Assembly passed two decrees promising that the colonies would be allowed to regulate their own internal affairs and authorizing “citizens” in the colonies to elect assemblies for this purpose. The language of these decrees did not specify whether free men of color were included in the category of citizens, as many French reformers demanded. The white colonists, however, interpreted the laws of March 1790 as giving them the right to decide on the matter, and they excluded the free men of color from the new political assemblies created in Saint-Domingue.

A Colonial Revolution

In Saint-Domingue itself, the collapse of royal authority after the storming of the Bastille allowed the white population to realize its dream of governing itself. The royal intendant François Barbé-Marbois, who had closed down the court in Cap Français in 1787, was forced to flee the island in October 1789. Colonists chose new local governments and imitated the revolutionaries in France by creating a National Guard made up of armed white citizens. Uncensored newspapers appeared in the colony’s major cities, and local “patriots” established political clubs like those that had sprung up in France in 1789. In April 1790, an all-white Colonial Assembly convened in the western port city of Saint-Marc, at a safe distance from the royal army garrisons in Port-au-Prince and Le Cap. Although some of its members warned against taking steps that the metropolitan government might interpret as a claim of independence, the majority decided on a confrontational course. On 28 May 1790, they passed a colonial constitution asserting their right to decide on all laws concerning the internal affairs of the colony. When news of the Colonial Assembly’s actions reached France, it provoked an uproar: supporters of the revolution denounced a plot to make Saint-Domingue independent of France, and possibly even to turn it over to France’s main rival, Britain. In the colony, the royal governor, backed by those whites who had opposed the Colonial Assembly’s actions, used force to disperse the deputies. Sailors on the French warship *Leopard*, stationed in Saint-Marc’s harbor, however, mutinied in support of the assembly; they seized control of the ship and took 85 of the white colonists back to France, where they denounced the governor’s actions. Although the National Assembly sternly rebuked these “Leopardins” for undermining metropolitan authority, they were allowed to stay in France, where they joined the Club Massiac in denouncing the danger of allowing revolutionary principles to spread to the colonies.

While the whites in Saint-Domingue disputed among themselves in 1789 and 1790, other parts of the colony's population were also recognizing that the revolution in France might change their lives. How much the enslaved black population heard about the revolution and how they interpreted the news is hard to measure. Despite the ban on French newspapers, reports about events there circulated widely in the colony, and some blacks undoubtedly heard their masters using the new language of freedom and natural rights. In October 1789, Julien Raimond's brother told him that blacks had heard that the red, white, and blue cockade or ribbon being worn by many whites stood for "liberty and equality," and that they had threatened to rise up for their own freedom.¹⁴ The number of new black captives imported to the colony reached its all-time peak in those years, with more than 30,000 being brought from Africa in 1790 alone; these new arrivals could hardly have mastered Kreyol, let alone French, before the start of the slave uprising in 1791. The free population of color had better access to information. Julien Raimond wrote regularly to an extensive network of correspondents in the island, telling them about his efforts on their behalf. Some members of this group took initiatives of their own to try to obtain the rights that the new French principles seemed to guarantee them. In November, 1789, a white local official in the town of Petit Goâve was lynched by other whites when he helped the local free men of color draw up a petition on their own behalf.

Matters took a more explosive turn in October 1790, when Vincent Ogé, a free man of color who had been in Paris in 1789, returned secretly to Saint-Domingue and organized an armed revolt among members of his group in the mountains south of the Northern Plain, the richest sugar-growing area of the North Province (see Figure 1.2). Prior to the revolution, Ogé had been one of the most prosperous free men of color in Le Cap: he owned extensive property in the city and was accustomed to dealing with whites on a basis of equality. Ogé was convinced that the National Assembly's decrees of March 1790 had been meant to grant rights to his group; when he learned that the colony's whites had continued to exclude them, he decided to act. In his call for insurrection, which attracted only a few hundred followers, Ogé was careful to make it clear that he was not seeking the abolition of slavery, but he warned some of the whites he encountered that he might do so if his demands were rejected. White forces soon dispersed Ogé's movement. He and a few associates fled across the border into the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo, but the Spanish authorities turned them over to the French. After a quick trial in Cap Français, Ogé was tortured to death in Le Cap in February 1791, and over 20 of his supporters were also executed.



Figure 1.2 Vincent Ogé calls on the free men of color to demand their rights. This nineteenth-century illustration shows Ogé, carrying the French flag and wearing the uniform of the French revolutionary National Guard, being welcomed by a group of free men of color on his return to Saint-Domingue in October 1790. Ogé and his supporters, many of them slaveowners themselves, did not call for the emancipation of the slaves, but they were the first group to resort to force to challenge racial hierarchy in the colony.

Source: Bibliothèque nationale, Paris, Cabinet des Estampes.

Although Ogé's insurrection was quickly put down, it had major effects throughout Saint-Domingue and in France. For the first time, the colony's whites' greatest fear – a violent insurrection against the system of racial hierarchy – had materialized. Ogé's threat to offer freedom to the blacks in order to gain enough support to defeat the whites raised the stakes in the island's racial conflict to a new level, and the whites' brutal response made the free people of color realize that they were not likely to obtain the rights they sought peacefully. In the South Province, more than 600 armed free men of color, including André Rigaud, who would eventually become the group's main leader, gathered on a plantation outside the capital city of Cayes and beat off an armed attack from local whites.¹⁵ As agitation among the free people of color increased, some of the colony's enslaved blacks also began to organize against the whites. In January 1791, a conspiracy involving several hundred blacks was discovered in the Port-Salut district in the South Province.

The impression that only force would lead to any change in the colony's racial order was strengthened by the violence with which some white colonists denounced the members of the colony's other racial groups. In 1790 the chevalier de Beauvois, a member of Cap Français's science academy, published a pamphlet asserting that "nature has created several species of men, as she has created several species of animals." Blacks, he claimed, were little better than apes, and they could never be part of a civilized society. As for people of mixed race, Beauvois insisted they should be kept in a subordinate position, forced to work for the benefit of the whites, and forbidden from owning land or having whites working for them.¹⁶ Beauvois's pamphlet was one of the first expressions in print of the pseudo-scientific racism that would become widespread in the western world in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. White violence was not just rhetorical. On 4 March 1791, a mob made up of colonists and sailors and soldiers from France, who had brought revolutionary suspicions of government authority with them, murdered Colonel Mauduit, the commander of the military garrison. Mauduit had fought in the American revolutionary war, and reports of his death shocked newspaper readers throughout the Atlantic world.

In France, the news of Ogé's execution and Mauduit's murder galvanized both supporters of racial equality and defenders of slavery. Brisot and the Friends of the Blacks denounced the harsh punishment inflicted on Ogé, a man who, they claimed, had all the qualifications needed to be a French citizen. Members of the slaveowners' lobby

responded by pushing to make sure that their racial privileges were protected by French law. In mid-May 1791, the National Assembly held its longest and most heated debate about these issues. The colonial deputy Moreau de Saint-Méry challenged his opponents head on by moving that the new French constitution explicitly guarantee that no changes would be made in the institution of slavery without the consent of the white colonists. An outraged Maximilien Robespierre, one of the leaders of Assembly's radical Jacobin faction, replied that it would be better "to let the colonies perish rather than violate a principle" by mentioning the word "slavery" in the constitution of a free country. The best Robespierre and his allies could obtain, however, was an agreement to replace the word "slaves" with the phrase "unfree persons."

Unhappy at having allowed themselves to be pressured into recognizing the legality of slavery, a majority of the deputies voted for an amendment to this law proposed by the deputy Jean-François Rewbell that granted full political rights to free men of color whose parents had also been free. This "Rewbell amendment" would have benefited only a minority of the free people of color, but it did for the first time directly challenge the notion that only racially pure whites could be full citizens in the colonies. The significance of the law was clear to observers in the United States, where newspapers closely followed the French debate because of its implications for race relations throughout the Americas. Moreau de Saint-Méry and his supporters were infuriated by the amendment's passage. For two years, they had fought to establish the principle that only the colonists themselves could decide questions about what they called "the status of persons" in the colonies. By voting for the Rewbell amendment, limited as it was, the National Assembly had asserted the metropolitan government's power to make such decisions; the white colonists feared that the next step would be a law limiting the powers of slaveowners. Their fears were heightened by the assembly's vote to send a three-member Civil Commission to Saint-Domingue to oversee the implementation of the law. Although the members of this First Civil Commission were supposed to rely on persuasion to get the whites to accept the new decree, their appointment represented an effort by the French legislature to rein in the white colonists' dangerous tendency to act as though they were entitled to govern themselves.

When news of the law of 15 May 1791 reached Saint-Domingue at the end of June, virtually the entire white population rose in revolt. General Philibert Blanchelande, the new governor who had arrived in the island

in November 1790, had to tell the French government that he would not be able to enforce the law if it was officially transmitted to him. The colonists' lobby launched a determined campaign to overturn the decree; on 24 September 1791, shortly before it dissolved, the National Assembly reversed itself and voted to leave the fate of the rights of free colored persons entirely in the hands of the white colonists. Meanwhile, however, the members of the First Civil Commission had already sailed for Saint-Domingue; they would arrive only to learn that one of the main purposes of their mission had been cancelled, thereby adding to the confusion in the colony. Because it took two months for news to cross the Atlantic, the assembly handed the white colonists this victory before anyone in France knew of the event that was to totally transform the situation in Saint-Domingue: on 22 August 1791, a massive slave insurrection had begun in the North Province.