

Teaching the Haitian Revolution

Jennifer Pontius-Vandenberg

American students are used to learning about slavery. Elementary school teachers read picture books about Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad. Middle school students learn about the brutality of slavery. High school students study the Atlantic Slave Trade in World History and discuss the legacy of slavery in U.S. History.

But beyond a mention of Nat Turner, students rarely learn about slave revolts and rebellions. The Haitian Revolution seldom shows up in curriculum guides or standardized tests. Picture books on the revolution's leader, Toussaint Louverture, are scarce, and information about Haiti in World History textbooks is minimal.¹

Luckily, students tend to be skeptical. My high school students refused to believe that enslaved people never resisted. Their skepticism and questions led me to research the slave revolt in Saint-Domingue, the former French colony that became Haiti. Spurred by my students who were tired of hearing a one-sided story about slavery and submission, I created a unit on the Haitian Revolution.

Using an Inquiry Design Model, the unit plan engages students in the history of the Haitian Revolution and asks them to consider why this momentous event is often left out of the Western historical narrative.² In this article, I provide historical background and offer suggestions and resources for student learning about the Haitian Revolution.

Historical Background

European Colonization of Hispaniola

In 1492, Christopher Columbus landed on an island in the Caribbean, named it La Española (Hispaniola to English speakers), and claimed it for Spain. As

the Spaniards settled the island, they decimated the original Taíno people either in conflict or by forced labor and disease. After annihilating the native population, the Spanish brought kidnapped Africans to the island to be slaves. By the mid-1500s, over 10,000 enslaved people lived on Hispaniola.

The colony's prosperity fell throughout the 1600s because of maritime piracy. Many Spanish colonists re-settled in the eastern part of Hispaniola, leaving the



Image 1: Outline Map of Colonial Haiti, or Saint-Domingue.

relatively unsettled west to French and British colonists. France gained full control of the western third of the island in the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick and named its new colony Saint-Domingue.

French sugar plantations soon covered the colony. By the mid-1700s, Saint-Domingue was the wealthiest island in the Caribbean. That wealth, however, depended on captive labor. In 1789, some 450,000 enslaved and 55,000 free

people lived on Saint-Domingue. About half of the free population was white, the other half were free people of color.³

Slavery in Saint-Domingue

Often, U.S. students only learn about the slave system in the United States and assume practices were the same everywhere. It is important for them to learn about slavery in Saint-Domingue.

Remind students that in the Southern U.S. states, anyone born to an enslaved woman was enslaved (even if the biological father was white). It was difficult for enslaved people to legally acquire their freedom. When Quakers and other religious activists “purchased” enslaved people in order to set them free, Southern states banned the practice.⁴ There were also strict rules forbidding the education of those enslaved.

Things were different in Saint-Domingue. Not all people of African descent were slaves. A child born to an enslaved mother and a white father could be born free. Enslaved people more frequently bought or earned their freedom, resulting in a large population of *affranchis*, free people of color. Many *affranchis* had plantations and power in the colony. Agostino Brunias's painting (see p. 356) depicting Africans in obvious positions of wealth illuminates this for students. However, French laws ensured that white colonists maintained status and privilege in Saint-Domingue.

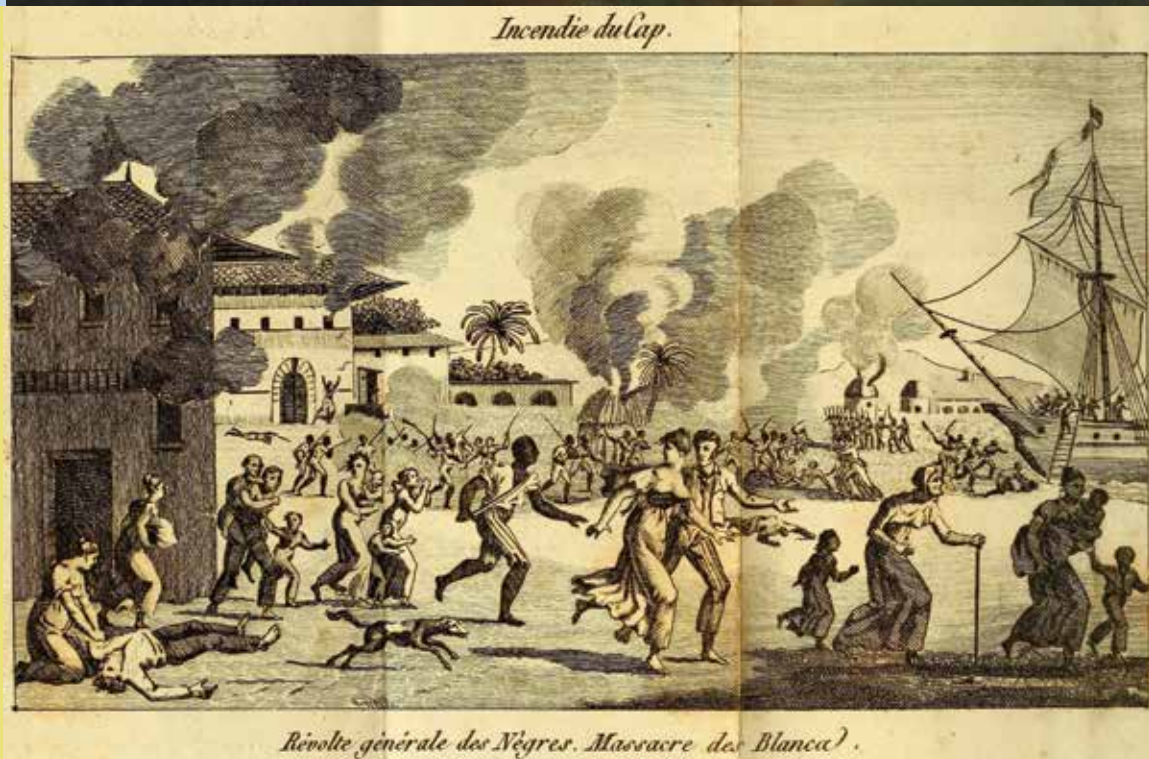
Also, unlike the United States, most Africans that ran away from plantations in Saint-Domingue did not travel hundreds of miles to find freedom. Instead,

Image 2: Agostino Brunias (Italian, ca. 1730–1796). *Free Women of Color with Their Children and Servants in a Landscape*, ca. 1770–1796.

(Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 2010.59_P56.jpg)



Image 3: “Incendie du Cap” (Burning of Cape François). (General revolt of Blacks. Massacre of Whites)



they lived in nearby mountain communities with others who had escaped. Known as maroons, those who ran away to escape slavery became leaders in revolts and revolutions.

Students often make the problematic statement that slavery was “better” in Saint-Domingue, so a discussion about

brutal Caribbean conditions is necessary. Half of all enslaved people who arrived from Africa in the late 1700s died within a few years. Unlike the United States, “managers in Saint-Domingue coldly calculated that working slaves as hard as possible ... was more profitable than managing them in such a way that their

population would grow. They worked their slaves to death, and replaced them by purchasing new ones.”⁵

The 1791 Slave Rebellion

Enslaved people and maroons on Saint-Domingue spent 1791 planning a rebellion that unfolded under the guidance of

Boukman Dutty, an African brought to Haiti by way of Jamaica. On August 22, 1791, over 100,000 people collectively rose up against white colonial masters. They torched plantations, dismantled sugar factories, and killed slave owners.

In Europe, the French Revolution and resulting wars were underway. British, French, and Spanish colonies in the Caribbean were all swept up in the fight. Toussaint Louverture, born into slavery but free by the time of the rebellion, joined the fighting and quickly became a leader. Initially, Louverture and the rebel troops fought for the Spanish, who promised land and freedom. When the French National Convention freed slaves in France's colonies in 1794, Louverture switched sides and fought for the French. Spain quickly surrendered. In 1799, Saint-Domingue was immersed in rebuilding the French colony, now with newly freed black women and men at the helm.

The Leadership of Toussaint Louverture

After the initial rebellion, the newly free took over abandoned plantations and cultivated land for personal use and profit, planting vegetable gardens and building homes. This was not nearly as profitable as cultivating sugar, and Louverture was desperate to bring Saint-Domingue back to its previous levels of prosperity. He supported white French planters as they tentatively returned. He coaxed and forced laborers back to the sugar fields that they had run from.

General André Rigaud rose up against Louverture, starting a civil war. Louverture and his northern army fought against Rigaud's army of mostly *affranchis*. By 1800, Louverture had defeated Rigaud, taken over Santo Domingo, written a Constitution proclaiming himself governor of Saint-Domingue for life, militarized the plantation system, and (again) forced workers back to the sugar fields. Coffee and sugar exports rose, but many on the island wondered if Louverture's "freedom" was worth working in slave-like conditions.

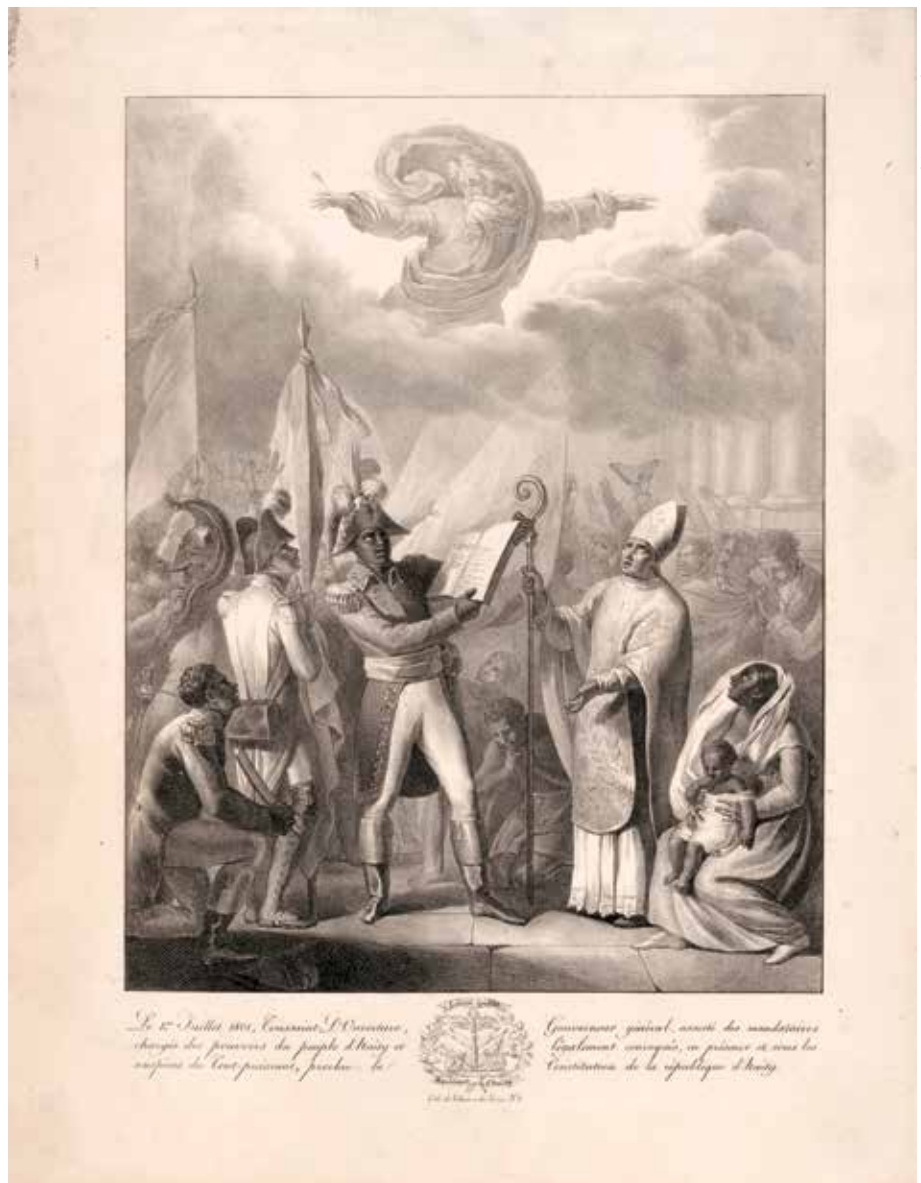


Image 4: Toussaint Louverture writes a Constitution for Saint-Domingue, declaring himself Governor for life, July 1801. Lithograph possibly by Eugène Marie François Villain.

Committed to defending liberty at all costs, Louverture had turned himself into a dictator, and the colony he ruled over into a society based on social hierarchy, forced labor, and violent repression...[Louverture failed] to find a middle way by which a true liberty could coexist with the plantation economy.⁶

War with France

Despite Louverture's attempts to prove the value of Saint-Domingue, the new leader of France, Napoleon Bonaparte,

wasn't convinced. He couldn't accept a Black leader running his colony and writing a constitution without his approval. In 1802, Bonaparte sent General Leclerc to Saint-Domingue to capture Louverture and disarm Black troops. He later sent orders to reestablish slavery, undoing the French National Assembly's abolition of slavery eight years prior. Predictably, war broke out in Saint-Domingue once more Men and women again picked up their weapons and torched the cities. The French captured Louverture and

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The Haitian Revolution: An Inquiry for High School Students

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|----------------------|--|
| Compelling Question | What should we know about the Haitian Revolution, and why don't we know it? |
| Staging the Question | <p>The Haitian Revolution is often overlooked in World History studies. After informing students that the Haitian Revolution was the largest and most successful slave revolt in the world, ask them to hypothesize why it is rarely discussed or taught today. Have students gather data:</p> <p>After searching through their textbook, students can make a bar graph showing how many pages are dedicated to the French, the American, and the Haitian revolutions.</p> <p>Complete an Amazon.com search: How many books in English are written about the French Revolution? How many are written about the Haitian Revolution?</p> |

| Supporting Question 1 | Supporting Question 2 | Supporting Question 3 |
|--|---|---|
| What unique conditions made the Haitian Revolution a success? | Why were nations reluctant to acknowledge the Republic of Haiti? | How did the Haitian Revolution affect the world? |
| Formative Performance Task | Formative Performance Task | Formative Performance Task |
| Students complete reading guides, video notes, and analyze images. | Student participate in a Socratic Seminar | Students research historical events or movements that were influenced by the Haitian Revolution |
| Featured Sources | Featured Sources | Featured Sources |
| Documentary <i>Egalité for All: Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Images • Books: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Freedom Soup</i> <i>Dear Haiti, Love Elaine</i> <i>The Common Wind</i> | Excerpts from: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frederick Douglass's 1893 speech on Haiti • David A. Bell's "The Contagious Revolution" • Thomas Reinhardt's <i>200 Years of Forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian Revolution</i> | List of world events and political movements for student groups to research |
| Summative Performance Task | Students write a new section of the textbook, using the class textbook as a template. Choose a section of the textbook and replace the title, sub-headings, images, graphics, and the text itself with information about the Haitian Revolution. | |
| Taking Informed Action | Students write to the textbook publisher to advocate for more inclusion about Haiti in future editions. Alternatively, students can advocate for other lesser-included topics that are important to their family and community. | |

Considering the Conditions that Made the Haitian Revolution a Success: Using Books, Documentaries, and Images. (Supporting Question #1)

To learn content, have students break into three groups and spend a class period at each station. One small group analyzes images, listing what they see and wonder about each image. Another group watches the PBS documentary *Egalité for All: Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution* (available on YouTube). A third group reads trade books or excerpts (titles are recent and available at libraries). Students rotate so that they all experience each station.

Station 1: Images of the Haitian Revolution

Image 1: In 1697, the Treaty of Ryswick gave France control of the western third of Hispaniola. Beard, J.R (John Relly), *Toussaint L'Ouverture: A Biography and Autobiography*. 1863. Boston, 1863. <https://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/beard63/beard63.html>

Image 2 (see page 356): In 1789, the number of affranchis people in Saint-Domingue was nearly equal to the number of white French colonists. Brunias, Agostino. (Italian, ca. 1730-1796). *Free Women of Color with Their Children and Servants in a Landscape*, ca. 1770-1796. Oil on canvas, 20 x 26 1/8 in. (50.8 x 66.4 cm). Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Mrs. Carll H. de Silver in memory of her husband, by exchange and gift of George S. Hellman, by exchange, 2010.59 (Photo: Brooklyn Museum, 2010.59_PS6.jpg) www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/197252

Image 3 (see page 356): "Slave Revolt, Saint Domingue (Haiti), 1793" (The revolt began on August 22, 1791.)

Top caption: [Burning of Cape Français]; bottom: [General revolt of the Blacks. Massacre of the Whites]. "Shows, from a decidedly pro-colonial perspective, whites fleeing Cap[e] Français in Saint Domingue, as the slave rebellion of 1793 intensified," as described by Slaveryimages.org:

Image 4: Toussaint Louverture writes a Constitution for Saint-Domingue, declaring himself Governor for life, July 1801.

Toussaint-L'Ouverture, chargés des pouvoirs du peuple d'Haïty et auspices du Tout-puissante, proclame la Gouverneur général, assisté des mandataires légalement convoqués, en présence et sous les Constitutions de la république d'Haïty Digital ID: Le 1er. Juillet 1801, (digital file from original print) ppsmsca 31021 <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.pnp/ppmsca.31021>

Station 2: Student Questions for *Egalité for All* (see Resources on page 361)

- How did enslaved people in Saint-Domingue learn about the French Revolution?
- Describe the statement "Haiti wasn't just black and white":
- How was the first slave revolt organized?
- Describe the reaction when the French National Assembly ended slavery:

- Who was Napoleon Bonaparte? How did he take power in France?
- Why did Louverture force a return to the sugar fields?
- How did Bonaparte react to Toussaint's Constitution?

Station 3: Reading about Haiti and the Haitian Revolution

1. *Freedom Soup* (see Resources on page 361) is a picture book about young Belle making "Freedom Soup" with her grandmother. As they dance and peel pumpkins, Belle learns about the Haitian Revolution.

Teachers who read to their high school students make "significant, positive, and long-lasting impressions on their students."* Consider reading *Freedom Soup* aloud to each small group.

Student questions:

Find the page "Long Ago, my country was a land of sugarcane..." and the page "I see the colors of freedom..."

- How is Haiti illustrated differently in the two pictures?
- How much "hard history" should young kids learn? When and how should children learn about slavery?

2. *Dear Haiti, Love Elaine* (see Resources on page 361) is a Young Adult novel about a Miami high school senior who gets suspended from school and sent to her parents' native Haiti.

Student questions:

Read pages 72-76. Choose four historical figures and explain their roles in the Haitian Revolution.

Read pages 248-249.

- Why is the U.S. bringing peanuts to Haiti to feed children a problem for Tony?
- How did rice coming from the USA to Haiti hurt Haitians and help U.S. rice farmers?

3. *The Common Wind* (see Resources on page 361) is a nonfiction account of how enslaved people rebelled, communicated, and found slices of hope and freedom throughout the Caribbean during the 1700s.

Student questions:

Read page 38.

- Why did "many slaveholding whites in the eighteenth-century Caribbean commonly observe that 'it was a very dangerous thing to let a negro know navigation'?"

Read page 107.

- How did the French try to keep information about the French Revolution from enslaved people on Saint-Domingue "to keep the flame of liberty from spreading to the Colonies"?

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* Cyndi Giorgis, "The Power of Reading Picture Books Aloud to Secondary Students," *The Clearing House* 73, no. 1 (1999): 51.

LESSON *from page 359*

Read pages 203–204.

- Why was Thomas Jefferson reluctant to trade with Saint-Domingue?

Socratic Seminar to Discuss Why Nations Like the United States were Reluctant to Acknowledge the Republic of Haiti (Supporting Question #2)

Born into slavery in the United States, Frederick Douglass was a bestselling author, abolitionist, and consul-general to Haiti in 1889. During the Chicago World's Fair in 1893, Douglass gave a speech to commemorate the dedication of Haiti's Pavilion. After reading and annotating excerpts of his speech and excerpts from modern historians, students write questions about the text and engage in a Socratic seminar.

1. From Frederick Douglass, 1893 Speech at Chicago's World Fair <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/haiti/history/1844-1915/douglass.htm>

"Haiti is black, and we have not yet forgiven Haiti for being black ... after Haiti had shaken off the fetters of bondage, and long after her freedom and independence had been recognized by all other civilized nations, we continued to refuse to acknowledge the fact and treated her as outside the sisterhood of nations."

"One of these [Haitian] bays has attracted the eyes of American statesmanship. The Mole St. Nicolas ... is a splendid harbor. We want this harbor for a naval station.... Some rash things have been said by Americans about getting possession of this harbor. *'We are to have it peaceably, if we can, forcibly, if we must.'*"

"Haiti is a country of revolutions ... conspirators against the peace of Haiti ... have allies in the United States. We have men in this country who, to accomplish their personal and selfish ends, will fan the flame of passion in Haiti and will assist in setting revolutions afoot. Shamefully, men in America have boasted to me of their ability to start a revolution in Haiti at pleasure. To them, the welfare of Haiti is nothing; the shedding of human blood is nothing."

"Spanish Christians found in Haiti a million of harmless men and women, and in less than sixty years they had murdered nearly all of them. With religion on their lips, the tiger in their hearts and the slave whip in their hands, they lashed these innocent natives to toil, death and extinction ... they opened the slave trade with Africa.... Until Haiti struck for freedom, the conscience of the Christian world slept profoundly over slavery."

2. From David Bell's "The Contagious Revolution" www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/12/19/the-contagious-revolution-haiti/

"...information could be inflammatory. Enslaved people throughout the Caribbean learned of revolts by the brethren elsewhere."

"At the time [1797] slavery was still legal in New York, and the idea of a black general in the American army was utterly unthinkable (the first black person to attain the rank did so in 1940)."

"...Gonzalez's work superbly illuminates the condition of ordinary Haitians, and how their views and interest could differ from those for their rulers. It shows how African ideas and practices continued to shape Haitian society, and how these ideas and practices differed from those of the self-consciously Europeanized, French-speaking elites."

3. From Thomas Reinhardt's "200 Years of Forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian Revolution":

<https://staff.kings.edu/sites/nicolemares/Hushing%20up%20the%20Haitian%20Revolution.pdf>

"... even if it made some sense for slave owners to hush up the revolution, why should the United States continue to do so, once slavery was abolished? It would be easy to just blame it on the malevolence of racist historians. I think, however, that there is more to it than just malice. I believe that there were (and are) structural features of Western historical discourse that can (and must) be held responsible for it...the main different between the Haitian and the French and American revolution is that the former was utterly incomprehensible for its White contemporaries... for Western historiography in the 19th and early 20th centuries, a revolution by Blacks definitely was something that could not be."

Students Research Historical Events or Movements to Learn How the Haitian Revolution Affected the World (Supporting Question #3)

Present the following list of events and ideological movements to student groups. Have each group choose one to research. Students must learn the specifics of each event and reflect on how the Haitian Revolution influenced each event. Because the events span from 1800 to today, consider having each student group create a visual of each event, and then arrange the visuals in a timeline on the classroom wall, to be referenced throughout the year.

- Gabriel's Rebellion
- The Louisiana Purchase
- Abolitionist movements in the USA
- Menelik II's unification of Ethiopia and defeat of Italians during the European Scramble for Africa (particularly how Menelik, like Toussaint Louverture, challenged myths of black passivity and inferiority).
- Cuban struggle for independence and the Spanish-American War
- African independence movements
- The U.S. occupation of Haiti
- African American and Black Power movements
- The French-Guadeloupien relationship today

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took him to France, where he died in jail. Military leader Jean-Jacques Dessalines commanded troops to victory, ordered remaining white French people on the island killed, and won the war with France, ensuring the permanent abolition of slavery.

Struggles with Independence

On January 1st, 1804, Dessalines signed the Declaration of Independence and called the new nation “Haïti,” the name originally used by the indigenous Taíno people. This independence was not widely recognized. U.S. president Thomas Jefferson, who personally held people in slavery, refused diplomatic relations with Haiti, as did many presidents that followed. Slaveholding states, not wanting Haitian merchants coming to their shores and talking about slave revolts, pressured the U.S. government not to recognize Haiti. It wasn’t until 1862, when Southern states seceded from the Union, that the United States formally recognized Haiti.

French recognition, on the other hand, came with a price: indemnity payments. Haiti was forced to pay France to compensate for the financial loss experienced by French slave owners. The Haitian government had to take loans from French banks in order to make these payments, thus becoming trapped in a cycle of debt and poverty. In 1914, 80 percent of Haiti’s government budget went to paying France and the French banks.⁷

Haiti also struggled to define its economic goals. Some wanted to return to the profitable plantation system. Others wanted to work their own small farms. The divide between the Kreyòl speaking population and the French language of government administration stymied the inclusion of popular opinion into the government. Because national defense was the top priority, military leaders

often received benefits over civilians. In 1915, the United States invaded Haiti, took over its central bank, and occupied the country for 20 years.⁸ This has also left deep scars on the nation. ●

Notes

1. Thomas Reinhardt, “200 Years of Forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 4 (2005): 249. <https://staff.kings.edu/sites/nicolemares/Hushing%20up%20the%20Haitian%20Revolution.pdf>
2. Kathy Swan, John Lee, and S.G. Grant, “The New York State Toolkit and the Inquiry Design Model: Anatomy of an Inquiry,” *Social Education* 79, no. 5 (2015): 316
3. Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012), 19–20.
4. “The Making of African American Identity: Emancipation,” National Humanities Center, July 2009, http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/emancipation/text1/text1read.htm#_edn1
5. Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004), 40.
6. *Ibid.*, 250.
7. Laurent Dubois, *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012).
8. See Jennifer Bauduy, “The 1915 U.S. Invasion of Haiti: Examining a Treaty of Occupation,” *Social Education* 79, no. 5 (October 2015).

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RESOURCES

Student Reading Resources

- Bell, David A. “The Contagious Revolution,” *New York Review of Books* (December 19, 2019), www.nybooks.com/articles/2019/12/19/the-contagious-revolution-haiti/.
- Charles, Tami, and Alcántara Jacqueline. *Freedom Soup*. Somerville, Mass.: Candlewick, 2019.
- Douglass, Frederick. “Lecture on Haiti.” Speech at the Dedication of the Haitian Pavilion in the World’s Fair Grounds, Chicago, January 2, 1893. <http://faculty.webster.edu/corbetre/haiti/history/1844-1915/douglass.htm>
- Dubois, Laurent, and Rocky Cotard. *The Revolution that Gave Birth to Haiti*. Durham, N.C.: Forum for Scholars and Publics at Duke University, 2020. https://fsp.trinity.duke.edu/sites/fsp.trinity.duke.edu/files/Haitian%20Revolution_ENG.pdf.
- Égalité for All: Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution*, directed by Noland Walker (2009; PBS), Available on DVD or on YouTube www.youtube.com/watch?v=IOGvGQYX6SU.
- Moulite, Maika, and Maritza Moulite. *Dear Haiti, Love Alain: a Novel*. Toronto, Ontario: Inkyard Press, 2019.
- Scott, Julius. *The Common Wind: Afro-American Currents in the Age of the Haitian Revolution*. London: Verso, 2018.
- Thomas Reinhardt, “200 Years of Forgetting: Hushing up the Haitian Revolution,” *Journal of Black Studies* 35, no. 4 (2005), <https://staff.kings.edu/sites/nicolemares/Hushing%20up%20the%20Haitian%20Revolution.pdf>.

Additional Resources

- Dubois, Laurent. *Avengers of the New World*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2004.
- Dubois, Laurent. *Haiti: The Aftershocks of History*. New York: Metropolitan Books, 2012.
- Giorgis, Cyndi. “The Power of Reading Picture Books Aloud to Secondary Students,” *The Clearing House* 73, no. 1 (1999): 51–53.
- Swan, Kathy, John Lee and S.G. Grant. “The New York State Toolkit and the Inquiry Design Model: Anatomy of an Inquiry,” *Social Education* 79, no. 5 (2015): 316–322.
- “The Making of African American Identity: Emancipation,” National Humanities Center, July 2009, http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/pds/maai/emancipation/text1/text1read.htm#_edn1