

“The Unfortunate Persons from St. Domingo”: Refugees from the Haitian Revolution
and the Contradictions of Early American Politics

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Over the course of more than two hundred years of national history, openness to the downtrodden and those seeking asylum has become a crucial (if controversial and sometimes flatly contradicted) element of the American national identity. Many Americans take pride in tracing their lineage to one of the millions of immigrants who, for example, fled the Irish Famine of the 1840s or the Eastern European persecution of Jews in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. Of course, laws like the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 or the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 demonstrate that the celebration of immigrants could be severely limited.¹ Waves of new arrivals over the years, whatever their reason for immigrating, have had strong impacts on American politics. An early example can be found in those who fled from the Haitian Revolution, many thousands of whom poured into United States. The young country faced its first true refugee crisis, and the contentious political world of the early Republic did not come through it unscathed. The influx of refugees from the Haitian Revolution forced the American people and government to confront the inherent contradictions in the issue of slavery, creating debates that were shaped by the presence and the voices of those refugees and that began to push the country toward its impending crisis regarding the practice of human bondage.

By 1790, the colony of Saint Domingue was the most profitable of France's colonial possessions, producing large quantities of coffee, sugar, and other products for European and American consumption.² The wealthy white planters and even the moderately powerful free people of color (many of whom were the offspring of white male planters and their female slaves) were vastly outnumbered by the enslaved population of the island. Many of the white elites, both in Saint Domingue and back in Europe, recognized this situation as a powder keg ready to explode. The General Assembly in the colony claimed to have “long...forseen the evils which afflict us” when the slaves rose in revolt in August of 1791.³ The ensuing war lasted for over twelve years and came to include Britain and Spain as belligerents as well as the French and the Haitians, as the Napoleonic wars

spilled over into the colonies. The conflict waxed and waned in response to several key events, including the commissioners of the colony freeing the slaves in 1794 and Napoleon's attempt to reintroduce slavery in 1802. Finally, at the start of 1804, the former slaves triumphed and declared the Independent Republic of Haiti, effectively ending the war, but patterns of social turmoil would continue for many years afterward.

From the very beginning of this conflict, most of those trying to escape it fled to American shores. Refugees poured into cities along the East coast, including Philadelphia, Baltimore, Charleston, and New York, and eventually spread throughout the country.⁴ No exact count exists, but one refugee estimated that 25,000 Frenchmen entered the United States from the French West Indian colonies in the wake of the French Revolution, and most of these would have been refugees from Saint Domingue.⁵ Naturally, a large number came from the wealthy white planter class, who fled from the vengeance of those they had enslaved, but free people of color and slaves also arrived in huge numbers. By one estimate, the net arrival of slaves to North America doubled between 1790 and 1800, a huge jump from previous decades, and the refugees almost certainly contributed to this increase.⁶ Fear, coercion, loyalty, or self-preservation drove slaves to accompany their masters or to flee alone to American shores. The influx of refugees began with the first outbreak of conflict in 1791, and the last wave did not arrive until 1810, when the expulsion of the French from Cuba sent a huge group of former Saint Domingans to New Orleans. With the ink barely dry on the Constitution, the American government suddenly faced a dramatic refugee crisis.

As the flood of refugees began to pour onto American shores, the slave trade – and slavery in general – quickly became even hotter issues than they already had been. Americans had to find some way of differentiating themselves from Saint Domingue in order to assure themselves that they did not risk the same violent fate as the refugees pouring onto their shores. Ashli White, one of the most important scholars of the Haitian refugee crisis, has argued that the primary means of assuaging this

anxiety was to depict American slavery as a gentler, more benevolent system than the harsh plantation culture of the Caribbean.⁷ As such, descriptions flooded the press of the cruelty and violence of life in pre-revolutionary Saint Domingue. One columnist wrote a vicious tirade against the Caribbean slave masters, men who “called themselves Christians,” who turned “that salubrious and most fruitful island...into a hell.” Women died of fatigue, their children starved, and the exhausted men hung themselves out of sheer grief.⁸ Crucially, this writer said nothing whatsoever about slavery in the United States, focusing instead on “the cursed influence of avarice,” the desire for profit which so typified Caribbean slavery. The plantation owners of the American South, who still fancied themselves paternalistic protectors of their slaves, could read such violent descriptions and reason that they were not like that, and so condemn the Saint Domingans who had spurred their slaves to violence without actually changing their own ways. This sense of American exceptionalism also provided a convenient way for slaveholders in the United States to ignore the inherent contradiction of talking about liberty and equality, using rhetoric very similar to that of the Haitian rebels, while continuing to own their fellow human beings.

Not everyone could ignore the fundamental absurdity of American slaveholders and politicians talking about freedom while maintaining the institution of slavery. Abraham Bishop, a Connecticut radical, responded to the revolution by penning a series of pieces entitled “The Rights of Black Men” for a small Boston newspaper. Unlike most Americans, he saw the ridiculous inconsistency between support for slavery and supposedly republican ideals. “We believe, that Freedom is the natural right of all rational beings, and we know that the Blacks have never voluntarily resigned that freedom. Then is not their cause as just as ours?”⁹ he asked. He even employed the language of inconsistency, calling on his countrymen to “be consistent Americans” and apply their own ideals of freedom and liberty to the downtrodden people of Haiti.¹⁰ Unfortunately for both Bishop and the Haitians, few Americans agreed with these statements, something that Bishop himself soon realized.¹¹ The few others who publicly

conceded the right of slaves to fight for freedom did so in a much more tempered fashion, as in the case of one writer, published in London, who lamented the “outrages” and “enormities” committed by the rebels even as he conceded that similar outrages had long been perpetrated by the masters of the colony.¹² For many years, even such tepid support as this remained rare.

While American slaveowners tried to convince themselves that they were gentler masters than the cruel Saint Domingans, they continued to live in fear of a similar slave revolt in America. Especially in the Deep South, where the slave population was often larger than the white population, slave uprisings could and did occur. In 1800, a Virginian slave called Gabriel organized a large portion of the enslaved population in the Richmond area. Their attempt to overthrow their shackles was defeated by poor weather and leaked information, but it terrified the local planters, as did a further attempt led by a different slave two years later. Douglas Edgerton argues that Gabriel drew inspiration from the events in Saint Domingue, which he learned about from refugees in the Richmond area who willingly spread their political ideals to their fellow slaves.¹³ Faced with an influx of information from the outside world, those in power in these areas had to figure out how to confront the contradictions of slavery that the Saint Dominguan refugees taught their slaves to better understand.

Responses to the increased fear of slave revolts brought on by the refugees were varied. Some, especially anti-slavery activists, tried to argue that Saint Domingue should serve as a warning to American policymakers about the dangers of continuing to support slavery. The influence of the refugees could not be kept out, and the same violence that had occurred in the Caribbean would spread to the United States if slavery persisted there. Even Thomas Jefferson, himself a slaveholder, spoke of the danger involved in keeping slaves. In a letter to James Monroe he warned that the whole of the West Indies would soon be taken over by people of color, and that it was “high time we should foresee the bloody scenes which our children certainly, and possibly ourselves (South of Pawtomac) have to wade through, and try to avert them.”¹⁴ Of course, many of those who made their living from the sweat

of enslaved laborers disagreed with the notion that only reform or abolition could prevent violent revolt. Instead, a crackdown on the very limited freedoms then enjoyed by the slaves provided an alternative means of controlling the population and preventing copycat rebellions based on the news from Saint Domingue. No one seemed to see the hypocrisy in trying to control the spread of those ideas of freedom and self-determination on which the American government had been founded. In Virginia, after Gabriel's Rebellion showed what a dangerous effect such rhetoric could have, the white planter class quickly curtailed the relative freedom that had allowed Virginia's slaves to meet and plan that rebellion in the first place.¹⁵ Other states had gotten out ahead of Virginia by explicitly banning the entrance of any Saint Dominguan refugees of color who might carry rebellious ideas. In 1793, South Carolina governor William Moultrie decreed that “all free negroes and people of color who have arrived from Saint Domingo,” who were considered “dangerous to the welfare and peace of the state,” had ten days to depart from the state or they would be jailed.¹⁶ Rather than attempting to reform the system and decrease the incentive of slaves to revolt, Moultrie and other state leaders hoped that halting the flow of information would keep them safe. In the end, some bans were fairly effective in keeping out refugees of color and some were not, but as history has shown time and time again, the spread of ideas is not so easily halted.

Responses to the slavery issues brought on by refugees of color varied significantly across different regions of the United States. In the 1790s there were only a few states where slavery was completely illegal, but the general trend of a pro-slavery South and a freer North had begun to fall into place. Pennsylvania, in a precedent-setting move, passed a gradual abolition law in 1780. The text of the law directly compared the plight of the slaves to “that state of unconditional submission to which we were doomed by the tyranny of Britain,” drawing the explicit connection between American revolutionary actions and the emancipation of enslaved laborers. The law freed all slaves born after its passage, although they could still be kept as indentured servants until the age of twenty-eight, and

required all owners to publicly register the names and ages of their slaves.¹⁷ Surprisingly, these restrictions did not deter all of the new arrivals, and thousands of refugees, including whites, free people of color, and slaves, poured into Philadelphia beginning in 1793. Significant numbers of slaves were freed in the few years after the refugees' arrival (the Pennsylvania Abolition Society record 456 manumissions of French slaves by 1796), but many white refugees also “played fast and loose with Pennsylvania's abolition law” or exploited vagrancy laws to keep their human property in line.¹⁸ Furthermore, economic hardship, discrimination, and local distrust of those who might spread the contagion of rebellion forced many of the newly-freed refugees of color to go back to work for their former masters. Still, while they continued to face discrimination and adverse conditions, within a decade or so of arrival most former Saint Dominguan slaves had gained at least some level of freedom in Philadelphia, where the abolition law prevented them from being held indefinitely in their former state of servitude.

In states where slavery remained legal, less could be done about the “problem” of Saint Dominguan refugees and their slaves. Sara Rivers Cofield has explored a specific case occurring in Frederick County, Maryland. A Frenchman called Jean Payen de Boisneuf and his relatives the Vincendières fled from Saint Domingue in 1793 and built a plantation in Frederick County called “L'Hermitage.” As French Catholics in an area predominantly inhabited by Protestants of German descent, they were viewed with suspicion. Their largest clash with the local community came over the subject of punishment of slaves. Coming from the violent plantation culture of the Caribbean, this family treated their slaves more harshly than the people of Maryland were willing to accept, and residents of the area brought multiple cases against the family for excessive mistreatment of slaves. Most were dismissed, but Boisneuf was convicted of “excessively, cruelly, and unmercifully” beating a specific slave as well as of failing to properly feed and clothe his human property.¹⁹ While these charges may have stemmed partly from distrust of foreigners and clashing religions, they do reveal

some interesting details about Americans' attempts to come to terms with the country's relationship with slavery. Boisneuf's violent, Caribbean approach to slavery, the sort that had led the slaves of Saint Domingue to revolt, could be condemned, while the small-scale and supposedly gentler variety practiced in Frederick Country was acceptable. Logistical gymnastics of this sort allowed other slaveholders living near L'Hermitage to explain away the revolution in Saint Domingue and justify why they believed it would never happen to them.

Some particularly unique regional responses to slavery came from New Orleans. The refugees who ended up in that city, including all different racial and class groups, arrived much later than most Haitians who came to the United States. Whereas most of the previously mentioned groups arrived directly to the United States in the 1790s, the New Orleans refugees came in 1809 and 1810 by way of Cuba. Many had fled to Cuba years earlier, but when tensions grew between France and Spain the French were expelled from this Spanish-controlled colony, forcing about ten thousand former Saint Domingans to continue on to New Orleans.²⁰ The population of the city doubled almost overnight. Because the New Orleans refugees formed such an enormous group, they did not have to assimilate the way that Saint Domingans did in the rest of the country.²¹ Slavery declined all across the South during the antebellum years, but in New Orleans it declined much more slowly, and the white refugees held onto their slave-owning traditions for as long as they could.²² Stories from home about the violence and danger the slaveowners had endured during the revolution kept them wary of allowing too much freedom to their charges. Furthermore, the large size of the refugee community made laws about slavery much harder to enforce. Congress banned international trade in slaves in 1808, so the refugees could not legally bring their human property with them from Cuba. However, their great numbers and significant power in the region eventually forced the government to back down from any attempts to enforce this law, and Congress passed a bill exempting the refugees from the law against the slave trade. Americans throughout the country celebrated their progressiveness in banning the trade

and mocked France for continuing to import slaves, while this obvious contradiction to the ban went ignored.²³ The white New Orleans refugees were largely able to maintain their former attitudes toward slavery and their human possessions without significant interference, a luxury afforded to them by their large numbers.

Overall, the refugees from Saint Domingue, including those of the white planter class, the free people of color, and slaves, had a tangible impact on American politics in the years surrounding their arrival, bringing to light a variety of contradictions prevalent in the American political discourse of the day. Perhaps most powerfully, the refugees threw new light on the already contentious contradictions of a country that purported to view all men equally but allowed some men to own others. Americans cracked down on their own slaves, tried to differentiate their system from the cruelty of the Caribbean, and reinterpreted local slavery laws across the country. In the end, as so often happens, the refugees (with the partial exception of the community in New Orleans) either departed or assimilated. As a distinct cultural group, they largely faded away within a few decades, but their impact on the American political sphere lasted for many years afterward. Saint Dominguan influence contributed to a failed slave revolt near New Orleans in 1811, and other small revolts in the following years were often attributed to such influences, whether probable or not.²⁴ Concerns generated during the height of the refugee crisis persisted for generations as American debates about slavery grew during the antebellum years. James Alexander Dun has noted that “by 1860 Saint Domingue had become a byword for slave revolt in many American minds and had developed into a trope for the massacre of whites.”²⁵ The legacy of the Haitian Revolution itself, and the refugees specifically, persisted in the American consciousness and in national rhetoric as the country prepared to deal with the slavery question once and for all. Long after most of the refugees had died and their children had departed or assimilated, the political implications of their presence and the stories and ideas that they brought with them continued to shape the politics of the American republic.

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- ² Philippe R. Girard, *The Slaves Who Defeated Napoleon* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2011), 5.
- ³ General Assembly of the French Part of St. Domingo, *A Particular Account of the Commencement and Progress of the Insurrection of the Negroes in St. Domingo, Which Began in August Last* (Saint-Domingue: Printed by Order of the National Assembly, 1791), 3, *The Making of the Modern World* (U3602336958).
- ⁴ Jeremy D. Popkin, *You Are All Free: The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 289.
- ⁵ Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 38.
- ⁶ Susan B. Carter, “Decennial Net Migration to English America, by Region and Race, 1630-1800,” *Historical Statistics of the United States*, <http://hsus.cambridge.org/HSUSWeb/table/showtablepdf.do?id=Ad3-15>.
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- ⁸ “Anti-Avaro,” “From the Balance,” *Oracle of Dauphin, and Harrisburg Advertiser* (Harrisburg, PA), August 23, 1802, *America's Historical Newspapers* (10DF808B81579CD8).
- ⁹ Abraham Bishop, “The Rights of Black Men,” in “Abraham Bishop, 'The Rights of Black Men,' and the American Reaction to the Haitian Revolution,” Tim Matthewson, *The Journal of Negro History* 67.2 (1982): 150, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717572>.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 151.
- ¹¹ Tim Matthewson, “Abraham Bishop, 'The Rights of Black Men,' and the American Reaction to the Haitian Revolution,” *The Journal of Negro History* 67.2 (1982): 149, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2717572>.
- ¹² *An Inquiry into the Causes of the Insurrection of the Negroes in the Island of St. Domingo* (London: J. Johnson, 1792), 2, *The Making of the Modern World* (U3602372963).
- ¹³ Douglas R. Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion: The Virginia Slave Conspiracies of 1800 & 1802* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 46.
- ¹⁴ Thomas Jefferson to James Monroe, July 14, 1793, *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. John Catanzariti (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 26:503, quoted in White, *Encountering Revolution*, 1-2.
- ¹⁵ Egerton, *Gabriel's Rebellion*, 164-165.
- ¹⁶ William Moultrie, “State of South Carolina. By His Excellency William Moultrie, Governor and Commander in Chief in and Over the State Aforesaid: A Proclamation,” *State Gazette of South-Carolina* (Charleston, SC), October 31, 1793, *America's Historical Newspapers* (10767ACE37342FD8).
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- ²¹ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 46.
- ²² Paul Lachance, “Repercussions of the Haitian Revolution in Louisiana,” in *The Impact of the Haitian Revolution in the Atlantic World*, ed. David P. Geggus (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2001), 224.
- ²³ Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010), 199-200.
- ²⁴ Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America*, 117.
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