

Haitian Revolution, 1791-1811
AP World History
Kienast

Haiti was originally established by the French as the colony of St. Domingue in the late 1600's. Sugar plantations were established there and Haiti quickly became the wealthiest colony in the world with 10% of all African slaves imported just to St. Domingue. The social impact of slavery upon Haiti was distinctly different than in many other parts of the world. African slaves were treated brutally, but the children that slaveowners had with their slaves were treated much better than in other American colonies. These mixed-race children were free, could be educated and often were given privileges that even some whites could not attain. That said, race privileges were strictly controlled by a legal code called the Code Noir ("Black Code"). As a result, there were four distinct classes of people in Haiti. Planters, who owned the sugar farms, and white tradesmen who managed and were craftsmen on the sugar farms were the first two classes. The tradesmen were from lower social classes in France. They hoped to improve their lives by coming to Haiti. The third social group was called the *gens de couleur*, and were the fairly privileged half children of planters. They were fighting for the same opportunities as white tradesmen. There was class tension between whites and mixed-race Haitians because the *gens de couleur* used their parental social status and influence to get ahead while the tradesmen relied on Code Noir to suppress mixed-race Haitians. The last and largest group of Haitians were African slaves who had no rights or privileges.

The outbreak of the French Revolution in 1789 impacted Haiti because everyone in Haiti had sympathy for a different French group. The planters sympathized with the royalty in France, the *gens de couleur* sympathized with the bourgeoisie because they were both intelligent groups that were denied power under the current system, and the white tradesmen sided with the *sans-coulottes* because they were anti-elite.

The *gens de couleur* realized that a rebellion in Haiti might lead to more rights for themselves. The slave rebellion began in Northern Haiti, just after French Revolution broke down into chaos, August 22, 1791. Within weeks of the start of the rebellion, all the significant plantations were liberated. The planters decided to flee to other French colonies or to the American colonies since, as nobility, they could not go back to France during the French Revolution.

Almost immediately the French government under the administration of Robespierre began the emancipation of Haitian slaves due to the idealism contained within the revolution that all citizens were equal. The Haitian revolutionary cause was helped the revolutionaries came under the rule of a leader well-versed in Enlightenment philosophy, Toussaint L'Ouverture. The good will between France and Haiti came to an end in 1799 with the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte. Napoleon needed money to rebuild France and saw value in keeping Haiti as a sugar colony. Napoleon decided against emancipation of Haiti's slaves and sent the French navy to crush the rebellion.

Toussaint L'Ouverture fled to the hills and continued to fight, but was captured in 1792 during peace treaty negotiations with the French and died less than a year later in French prison. Toussaint's assistant Jean-Jacques Dessalines became the new leader in 1792 and was much more brutal, known for slaughtering the remaining mixed-race and white Haitians. The entirety of the white and mixed-race population of Haiti either left or was exterminated by 1804. The rise of Dessalines also led to a series of brutal dictatorial control of Haiti that continues, nearly unbroken, until today.