

“the liberty of the whole earth”

Reading Set C: Jefferson and the Rebellion in Saint-Domingue, 1791-1797.

Introduction: *These documents reflect Jefferson’s views toward the slave rebellion in Saint-Domingue which began in 1791; the slaves had effectively wrested their freedom from the whites (grands blancs) and free blacks (gens de couleur); Republican France, trying to maintain political and economic control of the valuable island, officially abolished slavery there in August 1793. Both Britain and Spain opportunistically took advantage of the political turmoil in France to try to assert military control of Saint-Domingue, but without success. Toussaint L’Overture effectively established control over Saint-Domingue, defeated a number of white and black challengers to his power, and ruled the colony largely independently of France.*

(NOTE: Jefferson and other Americans referred to Saint-Domingue at times as St. Domingo. Saint-Domingue did not officially become Haiti until 1804.)

Directions: Read the short background essay on the Haitian Revolution first, which provides historic context, then read the following documents and answer the questions which follow.

Document C1: 1791 March 24. (Jefferson to Martha Jefferson Randolph). Their islands, but most particularly St. Domingue and Martinique are involved in a horrid civil war. Nothing can be more distressing than the situation of the inhabitants, as their slaves have been called into action, and are a terrible engine, absolutely ungovernable...An army and fleet from France are expected every hour to quell the disorders.

Document C2: 1791 August 7. (Jefferson to Thomas Mann Randolph). A decree of the National assembly of France, giving the rights of citizenship to the free people of colour of St. Domingo, has thrown that colony into a dangerous fermentation.

Document C3: 1791 August 30. (William Short to Jefferson; the decree Short refers to is the giving of citizenship to free people of color (*gens de couleur*), which was rejected by the white plantation owners (*les grands blancs*) on the island.)

The intelligence which continues to arrive from S. Domingo increases the alarms here. It is probably much exaggerated [*sic*] by the different parties for different purposes, but is in reality bad enough. The troops there have taken side with the white inhabitants who are unanimously against the decree in favor of the *gens de couleur*. The commissaries intended to be sent there so long ago have resigned--others named have set out--whilst at Brest the assembly determined (a few days ago) that their departure should be suspended until the colonial committee should have made their report on the late troubles. It is said they sailed before this determination could be announced to them. This is the more unfortunate as they

will go with orders to enforce the decree of May 15. and it is probable the assembly will either repeal or modify it. The colonial committee however are so much divided on this subject that several of its members have quitted it.

Document C4: 1791 September 8. (Sylvanus Bourne to Jefferson). A new and alarming Catastrophe hath assailed this devoted island. About the 23d. of August. an insurrection among the negroes took place at Lembay about 3 or 4 Leagues distant and from thence to Lemonade, being about 10 Leagues they have burned and laid waste all the Plantations. Their whole plan is marked with bitter resentment for former injuries and the cry of "les droits de l'homme" [the rights of man] is echoed thro their camp. They still continue their depredations and Government, for want of regular troops is unable to act offensively against them, and I fear it will be a long contest, and ruinous to the property of the Island. The City is now a perfect Garrison Passisaded all around and Cannon mounted at every avenue. The noble plain which fronts this City and which perhaps had not a parallel on the Globe for the rich luxuriance of its soil, elegance of its Buildings and the various decorations of art that the highly cultivated taste of its opulent possessors had given to it, is now again but a barren waste...Here we have a lively instance of the baneful effects of Slavery, and I wish that America might add another laurel to her wreath of Fame, by leading the way to a general emancipation.

Document C5: 1791 November 24. (Jefferson to William Short). The subject of independence and their [representatives from Saint-Dominique] views towards it having been stated in the public papers, this led our conversation to it; and I must say they appeared as far from these views as any person on earth. I expressed to them freely my opinion that such an object was neither desireable on their part nor attainable: that as to ourselves there was one case which would be peculiarly alarming to us, to wit, were there a danger of their falling under any other power: that we conceived it to be strongly our interests that they should retain their connection with the mother country: that we had a common interest with them in furnishing them the necessaries of life in exchange for sugar and coffee for our own consumption, but that I thought we might rely on the justice of the mother country towards them, for their obtaining this privilege: and on the whole let them see that nothing was to be done but with the consent of the minister of France. I am convinced that their views and their application to us are perfectly innocent...It would be unwise...that the colonists should be disgusted with either France or us: for it might then be made to depend on the moderation of another power whether what appears a chimaera might not become a reality.

Document C6: 1791 November 29. (Nathaniel Cutting to Jefferson). Doubtless you have been particularly inform'd of the horrid devastation that has lately desolated the richest part of this flourishing colony. Therefore I shall not intrude a new detail on that subject. I will only observe that the damages are estimated upwards of one milliard [billion] tournois [francs].--The unparalleled distress wherein this Colony is involved, seems only to be the necessary consequence of those unhappy dissensions whereof I gave you some account last year. Permit me now to acquaint you that I am very apprehensive the Ravages of the Insurgents will not be confin'd by the boundaries of the Northern District of St. Domingue...The People of Colour have recently declared that they will never submit to the Decree of the national assembly of France of the 24th of Sept. [returning power to the *grands blancs*] ulto. which guarantees to the white colonists the Initiative that they have been so long struggling for.--A Body of Mulattoes to the number of one thousand, a few days since marched into Port-au-Prince in Battle array. This reinforcement to their Class, gives it an immense superiority in point of Force in that City.--Those Gentry declare that sooner than submit to the Decree beforemention'd they will join their forces to that

of the Revolted Negroes and deliver the whole Country North of Port-au-Prince to Fire and Sword.--In addition to the painful apprehensions which this threat inspires in the breasts of the Planters, another circumstance gives them infinite uneasiness.--The ancient maroon negroes [runaway slaves] who have for many years past eluded the vigilance of all pursuers, have formed a junction with the Brigands who have recently scatter'd firebrands and death on this side of the mountains. A strong Party of them are reported to have dashed through a part of the Spanish territory and are now hovering on the borders of the fertile, wealthy but defenceless Plantations on the banks of the Artibonite. The distress [sic] Inhabitants have not force sufficient to oppose the incursions of this savage banditti; they are moreover apprehensive that their own Slaves will greedily participate the work of destruction.--In fine, this peerless Colony is apparently on the verge of total Ruin!

Document C7: 1792 January 5. (Jefferson to William Short). We receive with regret daily information of the progress of insurrection and devastation in St. Domingo. Nothing indicates as yet that the evil is at it's height, and the materials as yet untouched, but open to conflagration, are immense.

Document C8: 1793 January 2. (Jefferson to David Humphreys). The French West Indies become more and more dependant [*sic*] on us for subsistence. There is at present some glimmering of hope that the efforts of the free inhabitants will be directed with more efficacy to the reduction of the common enemy [the rebelling slaves]. However we are far from certainty on that subject.

Document C9: 1793 July 14. (Jefferson to James Monroe). The situation of the St. Domingo fugitives (aristocrats as they are) calls aloud for pity and charity. Never was so deep a tragedy presented to the feelings of man...I become daily more and more convinced that all the West India Island will remain in the hands of the people of colour, and a total expulsion of the whites sooner or later take place. It is high time we should foresee the bloody scenes which our children certainly, and possibly ourselves (south of the Potomac), have to wade through and try to avert them.

Document C10: 1793 December 23. (Jefferson to William Moultrie). It is my duty to communicate to you a piece of information, although I cannot say I have confidence in it myself. A French gentleman, one of the refugees from St. Domingo, informs me that two Frenchmen, from St. Domingo also, of the names of Castaing and La Chaise, are about setting out from this place [Philadelphia] for Charleston, with design to excite an insurrection among the negroes. He says that this is in execution of a general plan, formed by the Brissotine party at Paris, the first branch of which has been carried into execution at St. Domingo. My informant is a person with whom I am well acquainted, of good sense, discretion and truth, and certainly believes this himself...Castaing is described as a small dark mulatto, and La Chaise as a Quarteron, of a tall fine figure.

Document C11: 1797 August 28. (Jefferson to St. George Tucker). Perhaps the first chapter of this history, which has begun in St. Domingo, and the next succeeding ones, which will recount how all the whites were driven from all the other islands, may prepare our minds for a peaceable accommodation between the justice, policy and necessity; and furnish an answer to the difficult question, whither shall the colored emigrants go?...But if something is not done, and soon done, we shall be the murderers of our own children.

DOCUMENT QUESTIONS:

1. In the first letter excerpt to his daughter(doc C1), how does Jefferson seem to regard the news about the rebellion underway in Saint-Domingue?
2. How had the French government's decree caused turmoil and violence in Saint-Domingue? How do you think Jefferson felt the decree? Explain.
3. In the letter for Sylvanus Bourne and later from Nathaniel Cutting(docs C4 and C6), what seem to have the factors that led to the slave rebellion? How had the rebellion affected Saint-Domingue? How do you think Jefferson would have responded to these letters, especially Bourne's last sentence (Jefferson never wrote Bourne back)?
4. What policy does Secretary of State Jefferson want to pursue regarding Saint-Domingue? Why do you think he opposes independence for Saint-Domingue? How do you think he justified that position given that in the Declaration of Independence he had declared a universal right of revolution?
5. What do the letters from Jefferson to William Short, David Humphreys, and James Monroe (docs C7-C9) reveal about Jefferson's view of the revolution occurring in Saint-Domingue? Where do his sympathies lie? What explains those sympathies?
6. What does the last sentence in the letter to Monroe suggest about how Jefferson saw the significance of events in Saint-Domingue? What does the letter to William Moultrie of South Carolina suggest about how Jefferson viewed rebellion in Saint-Domingue?
7. Judging from the letter to St. George Tucker in 1797, what's the lesson Jefferson has drawn from the rebellion in Saint-Domingue?

Summative Questions

8. Do Jefferson's views of events in Saint-Domingue change over time? Explain.
9. Why did Jefferson seem to think the revolution in Saint-Domingue was important for the United States?
10. How does Jefferson seem to regard the violence associated with the rebellion in Saint-Domingue (that is, was it deplorable, unfortunate but necessary, or appropriate)? Explain why you think so.
11. In the event of similar popular revolutions like this around the world, what do you think the United States' policy should be? Would you support Jefferson's policy? Explain.

12. Based on these documents, to what extent did Jefferson live up to his view of himself as a champion of the freedom and equal rights of man around the world?