Avengers of the New World
The Story of the Haitian Revolution

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ON NEW YEAR'S DAY 1804, a group of generals gathered in Saint-Domingue to create a new nation. Their leader, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, had once been a slave. So, too, had several of the men who joined him in signing their Declaration of Independence. Some had been born in Africa and survived the Middle Passage; others, including Dessalines, had been born into slavery in the French colony. They signed their names next to those of men who had once been slave owners, including one apparently was nicknamed “the good white.” Many were men of mixed European and African descent who had been free long before the Revolution began, several of whom had fought against Dessalines in a brutal civil war a few years earlier. Now, however, they stood behind him to declare that they had forever denounced France, and would fight to the death to preserve their independence and freedom. Haiti was founded on the ashes of what had been, fifteen years before, the most profitable slave colony in the world, its birth premised on the self-evident truth that no one should be a slave.¹

It was a dramatic challenge to the world as it then was. Slavery was at the heart of the thriving system of merchant capitalism that was profiting Europe, devastating Africa, and propelling the rapid expansion of the Americas. The most powerful European empires were deeply involved and invested in slavery’s continuing existence, as was much of the nation to the north that had preceded Haiti to independence, the United States. For decades Saint-Domingue had been the leading example of the massive profits that could be made through the brutal institution. Then, in 1791, the colony’s slaves began a massive uprising. It became the largest slave revolt in the history of the world, and the only one that succeeded. Within a
few years these Caribbean revolutionaries gained liberty for all the slaves in the French empire. The man who came to lead Saint-Domingue in the wake of emancipation, Toussaint Louverture, had once warned the French that any attempt to bring slavery back to the colony was destined to fail. Although he did not live to see it, he was proven right. When freedom was threatened by Napoleon Bonaparte’s regime, the people of Saint-Domingue fought successfully to preserve it. Through years of struggle, brutal violence, and imperial war, slaves became citizens in the empire that had enslaved them, and then founders of a new nation. This book tells the story of their dramatic struggle for freedom.

For many who fought slavery—especially slaves elsewhere in the Americas—the Haitian Revolution became an example of what could be accomplished and a source of hope. For those who defended slavery, it became an illustration of the disastrous consequences of freedom. During the nineteenth century an economically and politically isolated Haiti became the object of scorn and openly racist polemic. Most historians in Europe and North America ignored the Haitian Revolution, but in Haiti itself two scholars wrote detailed histories, basing their accounts on archives and on interviews with surviving witnesses and participants, creating a rich nationalist historiography that was little known outside the country.

On the eve of World War II the Caribbean intellectual and activist C. L. R. James wrote The Black Jacobins, which remains the classic account of the revolution. James, looking toward the struggles for independence that he saw emerging in Africa, saw the story as an example of both the possibilities and dangers of such struggles. He understood—as the title of the book makes clear—the potent cross-fertilization between the revolutionary transformations that took place in France and the Caribbean. He also eloquently described the dilemmas faced by Louverture as he sought to defend freedom in a world dominated by slaveholding empires. James insisted that the story he had to tell was deeply relevant for the world in which he lived. The Martinican poet and activist Aimé Césaire similarly noted, a few decades later, that Haiti was where the “colonial problem,” which the twentieth century was “trying to resolve,” was first posed in all its complexity—where the knot of colonialism was first tied, and where it was first untied.

More recently historians in Haiti, France, and the United States have provided new perspectives on colonial Saint-Domingue and the process that destroyed it through detailed studies of slave life and the communities of free people of color, new histories of the revolution, and examinations of the impact of African culture on its development. At the same time, studies on slavery, slave resistance, and the process of emancipation in the Americas have provided new tools for understanding the Haitian Revolution. All these works make it possible to see with more clarity what the events of the period meant for those who lived through them. And they highlight their crucial importance in the broader struggles over the meaning of freedom and citizenship that shaped the Atlantic world during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The revolution began as a challenge to French imperial authority by colonial whites, but it soon became a battle over racial inequality, and then over the existence of slavery itself. The slaves who revolted in 1791 organized themselves into a daunting military and political force, one ultimately embraced by French Republican officials. Facing enemies inside and outside the colony, these Republicans allied themselves with the insurgent slaves in 1793. They offered freedom in return for military support, which quickly led to the abolition of slavery in the colony. The decision made in Saint-Domingue was ratified in Paris in 1794: the slaves of all the French colonies became citizens of the French Republic.

These events represented the most radical political transformation of the “Age of Revolution” that stretched from the 1770s to the 1830s. They were also the most concrete expression of the idea that the rights proclaimed in France’s 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen were indeed universal. They could not be quarantined in Europe or prevented from landing in the ports of the colonies, as many had argued they should be. The slave insurrection of Saint-Domingue led to the expansion of citizenship beyond racial barriers despite the massive political and economic investment in the slave system at the time. If we live in a world in which democracy is meant to exclude no one, it is in no small part because of the actions of those slaves in Saint-Domingue who insisted that human rights were theirs too.

The goal of the slave insurgents during this first phase of the Haitian Revolution was not to break away from France. Indeed, at the time it was slave owners, not slaves, who clamored most for autonomy and even for independence. And along the way the slave rebels became the allies of imperial power and helped preserve the colony against France’s enemies, gaining freedom and citizenship in the process. What one writer called “the worst catastrophe ever to befall an empire” was in fact a dramatic chal-
lenge to what empires had been and, for a brief time, a model for a different kind of imperial relationship. Only in the early nineteenth century did a true war of national liberation begin in Saint-Domingue. Ultimately, while emancipation had been won through an alliance with the French Republic in 1794, it was preserved by the defeat of the French army in 1804. The people of the new nation of Haiti avoided the tragic fate of those on another French island, Guadeloupe, where most of the population was reenslaved in 1803.5

The period between these two moments of dramatic transformation was dominated by the legendary leader Toussaint Louverture. Serving the French Republic as the highest-ranking general in the colony, he defended Saint-Domingue from foreign invasion. By the end of the decade, as the central military and political leader in the colony, he began crafting an autonomous domestic and international policy, laying the foundation for the struggle for independence that followed his capture and death in 1803. During these years he confronted the major dilemmas that would haunt both his successors in independent Haiti and nationalist leaders elsewhere in the Caribbean. (In a 1963 afterword to his book, C. L. R. James compared him to Fidel Castro.) To preserve emancipation, Louverture decided that he must preserve the plantation economy and encourage the return of white planters who had fled. Locked in conflict with ex-slaves who had a very different vision of what freedom should mean, he maintained and perfected a coercive system that sought to keep them working on plantations.

Historians of “postemancipation” societies have explored how the end of slavery led to new conflicts, and new forms of oppression, in plantation societies such as Jamaica, Cuba, and the United States. Revolutionary Saint-Domingue was the first such society in the Americas, and what happened there became a touchstone in subsequent debates about how best to move from slavery to freedom. Abolition in Saint-Domingue took place abruptly, with no period of transition of the kind that was then under way in the northern United States, and which most abolitionists advocated. Faced with a dramatically new situation, administrators in Saint-Domingue had to invent a regime for containing and channeling the impact of emancipation. Within a few years, those who were overseeing the new regimes of labor that replaced slavery were black, and often ex-slaves. Still, the struggle that developed between managers and plantation workers over the terms of freedom was similar in many ways to the struggle that would shape later processes of emancipation. Placing the Haitian Revolution in this context helps us make sense of the complex social conflicts that defined it.6

The Haitian Revolution was a uniquely transcultural movement. The population of Saint-Domingue in the eighteenth century was not just majority slave; it was also majority African. These slaves had come from many different regions and political, social, and religious contexts, and they shaped the revolution with what they brought with them. James recognized decades ago that the Haitian Revolution was a precursor to the struggles for African decolonization. Now we are increasingly coming to understand that it was itself in many ways an African revolution. But as David Geggus has recently noted, the question of how to avoid “the twin perils of exoticizing or occidentalizing the slaves” in order to “imagine the attitudes and beliefs of those Africans and children of Africans of two centuries ago” remains “the most intractable question facing historians of the Haitian Revolution.”7

Since the moment slaves rose up in Saint-Domingue in 1791, accounts of the revolution have focused a great deal on its violence. The fact that some of the atrocities in the Haitian Revolution were committed by insurgent slaves, and later by black officers and troops, has made them the object of fascination and intensive debate. Many writers have felt the need to answer for the violence of one or another party. Did one side commit horrors first, and others only in retaliation? Were the atrocities of the slave insurgents merely responses to those of the slave owners? Political violence was a major feature of the Haitian Revolution, as it was of all other revolutions before and since. The Haitian Revolution deserves a reading that places the violence in context, acknowledges its complexity, and does not use it as a way to avoid confronting the ideological and political significance of the ideals and ideas it generated.

Understanding the Haitian Revolution also requires avoiding using racial designations—white, mulatto, black—as categories that can generate explanations rather than as social artifacts that demand them. Interpretations of individual and collective action during the revolution that are based primarily on racial or class categories often fail to provide a complete or coherent picture of how and why people acted as they did. The communities of African descent who were not enslaved, for instance, were enor-
urally diverse, both socially and politically. While many within them were of mixed European and African ancestry, not all were, and the common use of the term “mulatto” to describe them is misleading. (For this reason I have avoided using the term, which racializes and simplifies a complex reality, in favor of the term gens de couleur, which I translate as “free people of color” or “free-coloreds.” This term was favored by many politically active members of this group in the late eighteenth century.) Clearly, racial identification was a crucial part of the revolution and, along with economic, social, and cultural factors, influenced how individuals and groups acted and responded to one another. At the same time, complicated ideological and political forces often divided groups that we might be tempted to see as unified by “race.” The most useful approach is to focus on the political projects that emerged at the different stages of the revolution, and on the ways they were shaped by and in turn shaped the individuals and groups that articulated them. Though I do of necessity use racial terminology throughout this work, my intent is to avoid essentializing differences and instead to highlight their mutability and shifting political and social meaning.8

Many of the central protagonists of the Haitian Revolution, unlike those of the other Atlantic revolutions of the period, left behind few written traces of their political thought. (The major exception is Toussaint Louverture.) Most of what we know about their actions and ideals comes from the writings of (often quite hostile) witnesses, whose views about slavery and slaves profoundly influenced what they wrote. Those who provided details about the words and actions of rebelling slaves, for instance, generally did so with the purpose of convincing their readers that one group or another was responsible for the insurrection. Many later historians have read such sources “against the grain” to tell eloquent stories of the silenced and the marginalized. Their work is an inspiration for my own attempt here to grasp a fleeting moment that is in many ways beyond us, to spur the imagination as well as to invite response and revision. This is a story that deserves—and indeed demands—to be told and retold.9

The impact of the Haitian Revolution was enormous. As a unique example of successful black revolution, it became a crucial part of the political, philosophical, and cultural currents of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. By creating a society in which all people, of all colors, were granted freedom and citizenship, the Haitian Revolution forever transformed the world. It was a central part of the destruction of slavery in the Americas, and therefore a crucial moment in the history of democracy, one that laid the foundation for the continuing struggles for human rights everywhere. In this sense we are all descendants of the Haitian Revolution, and responsible to these ancestors.
CHAPTER ONE

Specters of Saint-Domingue

In the mid-1790s, Philadelphia, capital of a nation recently born of revolution, was teeming with exiles driven from their homes by a cycle of revolution sweeping the Atlantic world. Some came from France, victims of one or another political purge. But many more had come from the Caribbean, particularly Saint-Domingue, facing slave revolution. There were white masters and merchants, previously rich and now reduced to dependence on former trading partners or charity. There were free people of color whose presence in Philadelphia became the subject of some controversy. And there were many slaves, brought as property from colonies where slavery no longer existed, treated as property in a city where the institution was only slowly being extinguished.

Among these exiles was a man named Médéric-Louis-Elie Moreau de St. Méry, a lawyer, writer, and sometime resident of Saint-Domingue. Like many exiles, he had arrived carrying almost nothing. He was in fact lucky to be alive: a warrant for his arrest had been issued in Paris just as he escaped the port of Le Havre in 1793. In his haste he had left behind an irreplaceable possession: a set of boxes filled with notes and documents he had collected over a decade of research for books he was writing on French Saint-Domingue and Spanish Santo Domingo. Friends promised to send the essential notes after him. But in the midst of war and revolution there was little certainty. Would the boxes find him? Had they been burned as fuel on a ship or thrown overboard for want of room? Had they sunk to the bottom of the sea during a storm or an attack? By great good fortune, the boxes reached Moreau in Philadelphia. “It is one of the joys in life I savored the most,” he wrote. He at once resumed working on a book that had been near completion when, as he put it, the revolution “made me powerless to accomplish my project.”

Moreau was a citizen of the Atlantic. Born of an important creole family in Martinique in 1750, he left for Paris at nineteen to study law. He received his degree two years later and took up a prestigious position at the Paris Parlement, the most important court in the nation. In 1774 he suddenly resigned and left for the Caribbean, where he settled in Saint-Domingue. He established himself as a lawyer, married into a well-connected family in 1781, and gradually became an important figure. Moreau was also a freemason, and in one of the lodges of Le Cap, of which he later became president, he rubbed elbows with many of the leading men of the colony.
Through his work as a lawyer in Saint-Domingue, Moreau became irritated about something he would harp on for most of the rest of his life: no one, especially the administrators on both sides of the Atlantic who governed the Caribbean colonies, knew anything about them. He decided to try to solve the problem, and, working with other members of a local scientific society called the Cercle des Philadelphes, he began to gather information on Saint-Domingue’s law, history, environment, and economy. It was a classic Enlightenment project, based on the idea that knowledge would promote better governance. Because many of the archives he needed to consult were in Paris, he returned there in 1783. The Colonial Ministry provided him with an allowance and access to its archives. In 1784 he published the first part of what became a six-volume history of colonial legislation. He returned to Saint-Domingue, where he continued his research and his struggles with the royal administration. In 1788 he again left the colony for Paris. He was poised to produce his Description of the Spanish and French colonies when the French Revolution began. Moreau quickly became active in politics. He was chosen as the president of the electors of the city of Paris and participated in the raging debates about colonial policy. Meanwhile his project languished. There was little time to write history as he tried to survive it. Like many political moderates, he ended on the wrong side during the Jacobin Terror and had to flee for his life.²

He ended up in Philadelphia and returned to his writing. He published a Description of Spanish Santo Domingo in 1796, but faced a peculiar problem with regard to the French colony: in the years he had been away from it, much of what he had known there had been destroyed or irrevocably transformed by revolution. Moreau worried that the story of Saint-Domingue, the “most brilliant” of the colonies of the Antilles, might be forgotten if he “did not hurry to offer a truthful portrait of its past splendor.” At the same time, he imagined “a crowd of people” accusing him of doing “useless work or hoping to excite regrets for which there was no longer any remedy.”³

But it was worth telling the story of Saint-Domingue, Moreau insisted. If there was to be a reconstruction of the colony, as he firmly hoped, it would have to be based on knowledge of what the ruined plantations and towns had once been, and an understanding of how the colony had functioned, and why things had ultimately gone so wrong. It was possible, Moreau believed, to make the colony once again “a source of riches and power for France. In these fields still smoking with blood and carnage, we must bring back abundance.”⁴

In its “short existence,” Moreau wrote, Saint-Domingue was “a colony whose nature, splendor, and destruction” were unique in “the annals of the world,” and a part of the “History of Nations,” like the great civilizations of Greece and Italy. His book, Moreau hoped, might encourage people to “meditate on Saint-Domingue,” and to draw as much from this act of contemplation as they would from looking at the “debris of Herculaneum.” A century and a half later, another Martinican, Aimé Césaire, would similarly insist that “to study Saint-Domingue is to study one of the origins, one of the sources, of contemporary Western civilization.” Both writers insisted that rather than being seen as a place on the margins of Europe and its development, Saint-Domingue must be seen as central to this history.⁵

Curiously, Moreau shied away from one aspect of Saint-Domingue’s history. “Has the time come to write on the colonial revolution? . . . I think not.” That was why his book, as he announced, represented Saint-Domingue as it was “on the first day the revolution appeared there.”⁶ And it was why “1789” was repeated throughout the text, often simply as “this year.” Like many exiles, Moreau sought to return home by writing about it. That home had been completely transformed by slave revolution, and his work was a walking tour of a vanished world. But, harboring hope that the colonial world might be rebuilt, the exile was also calling up specters of the past in an effort to exorcise the present. In the process he left a remarkable snapshot of the brilliant and brutal colony of Saint-Domingue.

“One good white is dead. The bad ones are still here.” This, Moreau wrote, was what the blacks of Le Cap heard in the melody of the funeral bells of the church. It was, perhaps, a subtle way of saying that the only good white was a dead one. Each time the bells rang, another corpse joined the generations of the dead haunting Saint-Domingue. The colony was a graveyard for its original inhabitants, decimated by Spanish colonizers; for its European settlers and soldiers, who succumbed in large numbers to fevers; and of course for the many slaves who died there from execution, overwork, sorrow, or (though rarely) the weight of years.⁷

The dead were divided as the living were. Some whites—individuals of importance in the colony, or those rich enough to pay the 3,000-livre charge for this honor—were still buried near the church, in a single tomb built for the purpose. (In France they would have been placed under
the church itself, but this practice had been given up in the heat of the tropics to spare worshipers from the stench of rotting corpses under their feet.) In the tomb were the bodies of two governors of the colony, as well as the bones of the Jesuits who had died there during the first half of the eighteenth century. When Moreau visited in 1777, he noticed some bones sticking out of the ground in the tomb, but doubted what some said about them—that they were the remains of those Jesuits, miraculously preserved.

The church graveyard was small, however, and most whites were buried in a cemetery at La Fossette, on the outskirts of Le Cap. La Fossette had first been used as an overflow cemetery during an epidemic in 1736, receiving the bodies of two ill-respected groups: blacks and sailors. A few decades later, with the cemetery surrounding the Le Cap church too full, it became the official town cemetery. La Fossette—originally called L'Afrique by the Company of the Indies when it occupied the area as part of its slave-trading operations—also had a cemetery for non-Christians. Unbaptized African slaves—called *b ossales*—who had died soon after their arrival were buried around the “Croix bossale.” (The 1685 Code Noir, which governed the treatment of slaves in the French colonies, stipulated that unbaptized slaves be buried “at night in a field near the place where they died.”) It was perhaps these graves that brought slaves to the area for “dances” on Sundays and holidays. Outside the second-largest town in the colony, Port-au-Prince, African slaves were buried in a swampy site also called “Croix bossale.” Animals, however, often disinterred the corpses. Local officials, worried about the “exhalations” through which the “dead seemed to menace the living and punish them for their disregard for humanity and morality,” established a better-placed cemetery for slaves.

Throughout Saint-Domingue the enslaved often created their own cemeteries by taking over those no longer used by whites. In one town in the Northern Province an abandoned cemetery was still “recognized by the superstitious veneration of the negroes.” In the parish of Aquin, in the south, slaves buried their dead near the ruins of the chapel on the site of an early settlement. Attempts to force them to use the official cemetery failed; the slaves just waited until night to bury their dead. So the bodies of those once enslaved were buried alongside the bodies of those once free. Elsewhere the dead of both groups were united for other reasons. Moreau noted with disgust that in one small town “white and *homme de couleur,* and free and slave” were all buried together because there was no tradition of registering the burials. In another, little-populated part of the colony a small cemetery, marked by a cross, indiscriminately welcomed the bodies of “the whites and negroes.” Natural forces sometimes also brought the dead together. In 1787 a ravine overflowed during a powerful tropical storm, drowning two slaves, sweeping away carriages and furniture, exhuming the corpses from a small cemetery, and carrying them into the ocean—itself a giant cemetery for those Africans who had not survived the middle passage.

The dead were inescapable in Saint-Domingue, as Moreau lamented in describing the entrance to one town where the sight of a pleasant fountain was offset by the cemetery beside it. It was as if a vow had been taken always to strike travelers with the “lugubrious” presence of the departed. At the same time, Saint-Domingue was a powerful life-source for the booming Atlantic economy, generating fortunes for individuals on both sides of the ocean. Its plains were covered with sugarcane cultivated on well-ordered and technologically sophisticated plantations, supported by efficient irrigation works. The mountains were full of burgeoning coffee plantations, and the towns bustled with arriving and departing ships, passengers, and goods of all kinds. Within a century it had grown from a marginal Caribbean frontier into the most valuable colony in the world. In the process it had welcomed a bewildering mix of people—Gascons, Bretons, Provençals from France; Ibo, Wolof, Bambara, and Kongoïse from Africa. On the verge of a revolution, it was a land of striking contrasts.

Christopher Columbus landed on the island during his first voyage, in 1492. The indigenous Taíno seem to have called it Ayiti, but Columbus gave it a new name: La Española. On the northwest coast of the island, Columbus left behind a small group of sailors in the care of a local Taíno chief. He returned the following year to find the settlement abandoned and destroyed, with most of those he had left behind buried nearby. The chief he had entrusted with his men claimed that a group of Caribs from another island had attacked and he had been powerless to defend the Spaniards. It is more likely that (not for the last time) the initial peace between Europeans and the indigenous peoples had devolved into violence.

This first European settlement in the Americas had failed, but more followed, and quickly. Española—or Hispaniola, as it came to be known in the Anglophone world—was the ground zero of European colonialism in the Americas. The brutal massacre and bewildering decimation of indigenous people that took place there would be repeated again and again in the
following centuries, though rarely with the same startling speed. Under the encomienda system, settlers were granted the right to the labor of indigenous people in order to mine for precious metals. It was not technically slavery—workers were not owned by the settlers—but in practice it was little different. Overworked, attacked by diseases against which they had no immunity, executed as punishment for revolt, and often committing suicide to escape their brutal conditions, the indigenous population declined precipitously within the first few decades of Spanish colonization. By 1514, of a population estimated to have been between 500,000 and 750,000 in 1492, only 29,000 were left. By the mid-sixteenth century the indigenous population of the island had all but vanished.\(^{13}\)

The “devastation of the Indies” was chronicled by Bartolomé de Las Casas, who arrived in Hispaniola as a young settler in 1502, and was transformed by what he saw. Within a decade he became the first priest ordained in the Americas, and a harsh critic of the brutal treatment of the Taino by the Spaniards. He decried those who justified Spanish brutality as a necessary response to the barbarism and violence of the natives: “our work was to exasperate, ravage, kill, mangle and destroy; small wonder, then, if they tried to kill one of us now and then.” He documented horrifying acts of violence meant to terrorize the population. “It was a general rule among the Spaniards to be cruel; not just cruel, but extraordinarily cruel so that harsh and bitter treatment would prevent Indians from daring to think of themselves as human beings or having a minute to think at all.”\(^{14}\)

In Moreau’s Saint-Domingue there were many reminders of this history. Workers building a canal on a plantation in Limonade discovered, along with several Spanish coins, the bodies of twenty-five Spaniards who had been buried in a traditional Taino manner. They were, Moreau believed, the corpses of those left behind by Columbus in 1492. And the anchor found buried in the dirt on a plantation near the ocean was, he wrote, that of Columbus’ Santa Maria, which had sunk off the coast of the island in 1492. Elsewhere there was forensic proof of Spanish cruelties. In a cave in the north of the colony were found five skulls with their foreheads flattened—a common practice among the indigenous peoples of the Caribbean—which identified them as “Indian.” No other bones were found, however, and Moreau concluded that this was because the “Spanish had dogs to whom they gave over the corpses of their unfortunate victims.” He knew his history well: in 1493 Columbus had indeed brought attack dogs—mastiffs and greyhounds—to terrorize the Taino population.\(^{15}\)

The colony was in fact full of haunting reminders of its vanished inhabitants. In Limonade one encountered “with each step, debris of the utensils of the indigenous people who lived here,” and in Quartier-Morin, “everywhere you find their bones, their simple but ingenious utensils, their hideous but sometimes very artistically made fetishes.” On one sugar plantation, each hole dug for the cane turned up “some new vestiges of the existence of this race now erased from the list of humans.” In the church of the town of Jérémie, in the Southern Province, a stone carved with the figures of four seated women, the work of the “natural” inhabitants of the island, had been turned into a bénitier—a holy-water font. Near the town of Les Cayes was a peninsula where it was easy to find “fetishes” left behind by its former inhabitants, as well as small caves they had carved into the rock, and small figurines made of conch shells. “The regret of the philosopher is awakened,” wrote Moreau, “when he thinks about the fact that from a people so numerous, there is not one left to enlighten us about its history.”\(^{16}\)

The first site of European conquest in the Americas, Hispaniola became a pioneer in another way during the sixteenth century. Las Casas had, ironically, advocated the importation of African slaves to save the brutalized indigenous population. Soon imported slaves replaced the rapidly dying indigenous ones, serving as laborers in a new industry that supplemented that of mining. Sugarcane had been brought to the colony by Columbus in 1493, and by the early 1500s the Spanish began establishing the first sugar plantations in the New World. By the 1530s there were more than thirty sugar mills in the colony, and by the mid-sixteenth century the annual production of sugar reached several thousand tons.\(^{17}\)

The capital of Hispaniola, Santo Domingo, flourished, eventually boasting the first Catholic cathedral and the first European university built in the Americas. From there the conquest of neighboring Cuba was launched. Soon the Spaniards continued on to the mainland and the conquest of Mexico. Hispaniola was soon overshadowed by the treasures unveiled, and the opportunities opened up, with the fall of the Aztec and Inca empires. Having been for a few decades at the center of the new Spanish empire, Hispaniola was soon consigned to its margins. The sugar economy
in the eastern portion of the island declined by the end of the sixteenth century. Ginger and cacao cultivation briefly took its place, but by the latter half of the seventeenth century cattle ranches were “the only real commercial endeavor on the island.” Many slaves gained their freedom, and new slave imports to the colony were limited. By the end of the eighteenth century only 15 percent of the population remained enslaved. Meanwhile the western part of Hispaniola remained for the most part unsettled. The name of the island’s capital, Santo Domingo, was increasingly used to refer to the entire island, and the French who eventually settled there in the early seventeenth century simply transplanted the name into French, calling their colony Saint-Domingue.\textsuperscript{18}

During the seventeenth century the French and British successfully challenged Spanish and Portuguese hegemony in the Americas. Pirates opened the way for this new phase of European colonization. Throughout the sixteenth century, ships heavy with silver and gold dug by indigenous slaves out of the mines of the Americas constantly crossed the Atlantic. These floating treasure chests, often traveling relatively unarmed, were all-too-tempting prey. The Spanish and Portuguese defended their ships against these marauders, at significant cost, while English and French governors saw that it was in their interest to support piracy against their enemies. By weakening the Spanish hold on the seas and establishing unofficial settlements elsewhere in the Caribbean, the pirates opened the way for more permanent, colonial settlement supported by European royal governments.\textsuperscript{19}

Spanish explorers had found the Carib inhabitants of the eastern Caribbean quick to resist encroachment, and had left these islands for the most part untouched. It was here that British and French settlements initially took root. The first was a colony on the tiny island of St. Christopher, where English and French lived side by side. From there the English founded Barbados, the most important of the early Caribbean slave colonies. It developed so rapidly that within a few decades settlers left a crowded Barbados and established a colony on the mainland—South Carolina. In 1635, meanwhile, the French founded colonies in Martinique and Guadeloupe. Throughout the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries the Caribs managed to survive by playing off the French and the British against each other. Gradually, however, they were isolated on certain islands, and by the end of the eighteenth century even those were colonized by the British. Only a few small indigenous communities remained.\textsuperscript{20}

As the colonies of the eastern Caribbean grew, a motley crew of pirates and settlers from St. Christopher, both French and English, settled on the island of Tortuga, northwest of Saint-Domingue. The pirates—called flibustiers by the French—were joined by another group, called boucaniers, who lived on mainland Hispaniola. The Spanish had introduced new species there—not only dogs, many of whom escaped into the wild, but also pigs and cattle—which, without human or animal predators, had thrived in the intervening century. The boucaniers hunted the wild cattle, smoked the meat using an indigenous method called the boucan, and sold it to sailors on passing ships. Gradually settlers on both Tortuga and the mainland began to grow provisions and tobacco.\textsuperscript{21}

The Spanish repeatedly tried to dislodge these interlopers in Tortuga and the northern coast of Saint-Domingue, but the French settlement survived and continued to grow. The French named a royal governor to oversee Tortuga and the coast of Saint-Domingue in 1664, and he personally recruited settlers for the colony from his native region of Anjou. A population of 400 Europeans there when he first arrived grew to 4,000 by 1680. The flibustiers and boucaniers were joined, and ultimately outnumbered, by colonists who founded small plantations.\textsuperscript{22}

In 1697 a French commander arrived in the growing colony of Saint-Domingue. Preparing to attack the Spanish port of Cartagena, he nailed an invitation on the church of the settlement at Petit-Goâve calling on flibustiers and inhabitants of the “coast of St. Domingue,” including “negroes,” to join him. The recruits from Saint-Domingue participated in the siege, capture, and brutal pillage of Cartagena. One of the officers taking part in the raid, Joseph d’Honor de Gallifet, who later served briefly as governor of the colony, invested his portion of the loot in land, establishing plantations that were to become some of the most successful in the colony. The defeat suffered by the Spanish in Cartagena contributed to their decision to cede the western portion of the colony of Hispaniola to the French with the 1697 Treaty of Ryswick. A century later the siege of Cartagena was still remembered for other blessings it had brought to the French colony. There was a roadside statue of the Virgin Mary looted from the Spanish port town in 1697 in the Southern Province; under it a candle usually burned. The most famous of the stolen relics was a cross revered in the church of Petit-Goâve. Moreau described the powerful devotions of the worshipers who gathered around it each evening, especially on Fridays, and most of all on Good Friday, placing hundreds of burning candles un-
derneith it, so that the floor was covered with wax and the walls stained with smoke. Normally the climate of Petit-Goâve bred masses of mosquitoes, but there were few in the town thanks to the cross from Cartagena.23

Having gained official status as a French colony, Saint-Domingue—one of the last colonies founded in the Americas—would soon outshine all others. The earliest plantations in Saint-Domingue were worked by both African slaves and European engagés, or indentured laborers. The latter worked alongside the slaves, but for limited terms—in the French case for three years—after which they became free. Along with the remaining filibusters and boucaniers, many of these former indentured laborers started farming small plots of land, notably with tobacco, a crop that required little initial investment and could quickly turn a modest profit. But the competition of Virginia tobacco, changing colonial policies, and the emergence of other crops soon ended tobacco cultivation in Saint-Domingue. The second crop to take off in the colony, indigo, involved a more sophisticated processing procedure that turned the harvested grasses into a blue dye, and so required a bit more capital. Nevertheless, small indigo plantations appeared throughout the colony. This crop would remain an important part of the island’s economy, but it was soon overshadowed by the crop that came to dominate Saint-Domingue for the rest of its century-long existence: sugar.

Sugar was the economic miracle of the eighteenth century. Originally from the Middle East, sugarcane had been cultivated on Spanish and Portuguese islands of the eastern Atlantic for centuries. The Spanish in Hispaniola and the Portuguese in Brazil pioneered cane cultivation in the Americas, and the French and English drew on their examples and on the knowledge and finances of the Dutch in establishing their plantation societies in the Caribbean. These colonies both depended on and drove the expansion of the emerging capitalist system of the Atlantic world. Starting in the seventeenth century a remarkable spiral of cause and effect transformed sugar from a luxury enjoyed by only the wealthiest Europeans to a necessity that was a central part of many Europeans’ diets.24

Slavery was deemed essential to the production of sugar. In the Caribbean, plantations often had several hundred slaves carrying out the difficult tasks of planting and harvesting cane, and a smaller group specializing in its transformation into sugar. Once harvested, cane must be processed quickly, and during certain periods work continued all night. The highly diversified and industrialized sugar plantations of Saint-Domingue

and its nearby British competitor Jamaica had some of the largest numbers of slaves of any colonies in the Americas. A fifth of the slaves on these plantations worked in occupations other than fieldwork, as specialists who processed the sugarcane, as artisans making barrels to transport it, or as domestics serving masters or managers. The combination of “field” and “factory” made the plantation regions of the Caribbean some of the most industrialized in the eighteenth-century world.25

At first many plantations were worked by a combination of African slaves and white indentured laborers. In Saint-Domingue in 1687, whites outnumbered slaves, 4,411 to 3,356. But by eighteenth century, labor in the Caribbean had been deliberately and obsessively racialized. With the exception of a few managers and overseers, plantation workforces were entirely of African descent. In Saint-Domingue by 1700, the population of slaves had grown to 9,082, while the population of whites had decreased by several hundred. As sugar plantations proliferated over the next decades, the numbers of enslaved increased dramatically; by midcentury there were nearly 150,000 slaves and fewer than 14,000 whites, and on the eve of the revolution, 90 percent of the colony’s population was enslaved.26

The number of plantations in Saint-Domingue increased with startling rapidity as well. From 1700 to 1704 they jumped from 16 to 120. In 1713 there were 138, 77 of them in the Northern Province. All of these produced raw sugar, which contained many impurities. Bigger profits were available to those who could afford technology to purify sugar on-site, removing the molasses and turning it into an edible (though still brown) sugar, which could be sold at a higher price. The number of plantations removing molasses grew; in 1730 there were 5 in the north, but by 1751 there were 182, compared with 124 that did not refine sugar. In 1790 there were 258 of the former and only 30 of the latter.27

Sugarcane production required good land, irrigation, a large labor force, and expensive equipment. It promised major profits, but it required an initial investment far greater than tobacco or indigo. Once the sugar boom hit Saint-Domingue, there was a rush to purchase the best land and a vertiginous rise in prices. The governor wrote in 1700 that a plantation that had sold for 70 écus eighteen months earlier could now not be purchased for 2,000, even when nothing was being cultivated there.28

As the fertile land in the colony was bought up for sugar plantations, some whites were left behind. Many retreated to the interior, scraping by farming small plots of land. Others turned to crime: throughout the eigh-
eteenth century, the colony’s mountains were home to armed bands of whites who preoccupied administrators. Along the coasts, other small communities existed outside the world of the plantations. Moreau described a group in the south as “amphibious beings” whose lives as farmers and sailors recalled those of the colony’s early settlers. At the estuary of the Arthibonite River there was a “kind of Republic” composed of men who worked as saltmakers and had renounced marriage, and whose property could not be inherited by their offspring but must instead be returned to the community. In the late eighteenth century local plantation owners, disgruntled by the presence of a community that “was a source of problems for the discipline of their negroes,” managed to expel the saltmakers from their land, to which they had no official title. A governor, however, intervened when the saltmakers threatened to leave the island forever.29

Such holdouts were a small minority. Most whites on the island, many of them recent arrivals from Europe, wanted a plantation and the profits that came with it. But even with good land still available, such a goal was hard to achieve. Most plantation owners took out loans from merchant houses in France to get started. If all went well, these loans could be paid off over time and the planter could grow wealthy. But in many cases the planters failed, and the merchant houses acquired the plantations that had been the collateral for their loans. By the end of the eighteenth century, many merchant houses in France’s major port towns of Bordeaux, Nantes, and La Rochelle owned plantations in Saint-Domingue. These were managed by salaried administrators and overseers. Many young men came to the colony seeking such positions, but despite the booming economy there were not enough of them, and those who failed swelled the ranks of poor and unemployed whites. In 1776 one observer noted the “great misery” of many whites on the island and opined that those who came to the colony with no useful skills were likely to end up dead on the side of the road. This was the fate of one “unknown white man, aged 14 or 15, without a beard,” who was found by police in 1779; a surgeon determined that he had died of misère—poverty—and he was buried anonymously in a local graveyard.30

The second half of the eighteenth century saw Saint-Domingue’s population and economy expand dramatically. With France’s cession of Canada to the British in 1763, the Caribbean became the main destination for Frenchmen seeking their fortune in the Americas. Saint-Domingue, with its reputation for transforming colonists into rich men, was the most attractive in the region. During these decades a new plantation crop boomed: coffee. Coffee plantations were less expensive to start up and maintain than sugar plantations, and they had another important advantage: they could be established in the mountainous regions of Saint-Domingue, where there was still land available. Mountainous terrain, accounting for 60 percent of the colony, was useless for cultivating sugar. Thus the coffee boom did not compete with the continuing sugar boom. Instead, it added to the already enormous wealth produced in the colony. By the eve of the revolution Saint-Domingue was “the world’s leading producer of both sugar and coffee.” It exported “as much sugar as Jamaica, Cuba, and Brazil combined” and half of the world’s coffee, making it “the centerpiece of the Atlantic slave system.”31

Three-quarters of sugar and coffee produced in the colonies and sent to France was reexported to other countries in Europe. Because restrictive French trade policies kept the prices planters could demand for their products down, metropolitan merchants in the port towns made extraordinary fortunes from this business. The livelihood of as many as a million of the 25 million inhabitants of France depended directly on the colonial trade. The slave colonies of the Caribbean were an engine for economic and social change in metropolitan France. The historian Jean Jaurès pointed out the “sad irony” that the fortunes created in Nantes and Bordeaux during the eighteenth century were a crucial part of the struggle for “human emancipation” that erupted in the French Revolution. Many among the bourgeoisie who were frustrated with the limits placed on them by the Old Regime system were wealthy thanks to the sugar and coffee produced by slaves in the Caribbean. In 1789, 15 percent of the 1,000 members of the National Assembly owned colonial property, and many others were probably tied to colonial commerce. The slaves of Saint-Domingue who had helped lay the foundation for the French Revolution would ultimately make it their own, and even surpass it, in their own struggle for liberty.32

A passenger arriving by ship from France in the late eighteenth century would generally journey along the coast, first of Spanish Santo Domingo, and then of the French colony. If it was night there would be lights shining from the plantation houses and flames dancing in the mills, where, wrote Moreau, “the sugar crystals that are the principal riches of the colony, and which bring us so much enjoyment, are being prepared.” Aboard ship, everyone would be changing into clean clothes saved for the landing.
Reaching the port of Le Cap, the ship would anchor, and the passengers would descend into small boats to be carried into the harbor: "What a spectacle! How different from the places left behind! One sees four or five black or darkened faces for every white one. The clothes, the houses... have a new character."33

For residents of Le Cap, a ship from France meant the arrival of goods and news from across the Atlantic. On Sundays, in the area called the "marché des blancs" (the "white market"), sailors trying to supplement their meager salaries offered for sale treasures they had brought from France: dry goods, pottery, porcelain, jewels, shoes, hats, parrots, monkeys. Efforts by the administration to stop this practice failed, and the market was very popular with townspeople. "It is fashionable," wrote Moreau, "to take a turn in the marché des blancs, even if one has nothing to buy there." The trading of the ship's actual cargo occurred along the Rue du Gouvernement, where merchants and naval captains had shops. In front of each store was a board, usually decorated with a drawing of the ship whose cargo it advertised. In a matter of a few steps, one could "journey through the whole of France," hearing Gascon, Norman, and Provençal accents. Slaves constantly brought goods back and forth from the port.34

Ships brought something else of great value: news. Residents gathered in houses near the port to speak to new arrivals or to pass along what they had heard to one another. Arriving news found its way into a newspaper called Affiches Américaines. Starting in 1788, when the wealthiest residents of Le Cap could gather in a cabinet littéraire, a club whose members paid annual dues for access to an "elegantly furnished" room with a library containing "all the interesting newspapers" along with a billiard room. The same building was home to the Cercle des Philadelphes, the scientific society that supported Moreau's work on his Description. Its members pursued a wide variety of intellectual pursuits, from botanical experiments to the ill-fated attempt by one plantation owner to introduce camels from Africa.35

Le Cap was the size of Boston. It had a population of 18,850, though several thousand of these were soldiers and the majority of the rest were slaves. Its fifty-six streets were organized in a grid, marked with signs and street numbers, and in the wealthiest part of town close to the port were partially paved. There were imposing buildings scattered throughout Le Cap: Le Gouvernement—the house of the administration—which had been the home of the Jesuits until their expulsion from the colony in 1763; the military barracks behind it, which could house more than a thousand soldiers; a convent; a large church with an imposing facade; a prison that held (separately) both black prisoners, often runaway slaves, and white criminals and debtors; and several hospitals. There were twenty-five bakeries and, on the outskirts of town, a slaughterhouse. An elaborate municipal water system fed several fountains that provided "fresh and limpid water" from the "neighboring mountains" in public squares. To the south, in a neighborhood called "Petite Guinée," free people of color were concentrated, although others lived elsewhere in the town. In contrast to the other cities of the colony, notably Port-au-Prince, most of Le Cap's 1,400 houses were built of stone. They had "gardens or thick trellises shading them from the sun," and many were inhabited by exotic birds from Sene-
gal, Guiana, and the Mississippi. Those from Senegal had the striking ability to “change in color without changing their feathers.”

Le Cap, which one resident called “the Paris of our island,” was a lively cultural center, one of the most important in the eighteenth-century Americas. It boasted a theater with a 1,500-person capacity, where Molière’s Le Misanthrope was performed in the 1760s. In 1784 Le Mariage de Figaro opened there soon after its premiere in Paris. A local play, Monday at the Cap, or Payday, was also performed. Racial segregation was strictly maintained in the theater, where the ten boxes at the top were reserved for free people of African descent, three for “free blacks” and the rest for “mulattoes.” As a result, many mothers could not sit with their daughters. Free-coloreds were also banned from participating in the dances at the theater, though they were allowed to watch from their boxes. Le Cap was also full of “cabarets,” some legal and many more not, where liquor and gambling were available. There were other forms of public entertainment, such as a traveling wax museum where visitors could see Voltaire and Rousseau, Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, and, in 1789, George Washington in his uniform. Le Cap’s public bathhouses, unlike those in France, did not separate men and women, so that “husband and wife, or those who considered themselves as such, could go to the same bath and the same bathtub”—an arrangement that, Moreau mused, was probably what made them so popular.

Le Cap was built on an extensive and protected bay, and its large and well-constructed port was the most important in Saint-Domingue. It was the first port of call for most ships arriving in the colony, and the easiest from which to join the transatlantic convoys. There were roughly a hundred larger ships in the harbor at any given time, and sometimes as many as six hundred. A visitor in 1791 described workmen “busy with all kinds of labor” at the port, loading “hogsheads of sugar or casks of indigo.” Another later recalled that the harbor was “filled with merchandise being shipped,” where “all was bustle, noise, and cheerful labor.” The port was fed by the thriving plantation region that surrounded it. The northern plain, traversed by streams from the mountains, was an ideal place for sugar plantations. In 1789 the Northern Province, which included Le Cap, the plain, and the surrounding mountains, contained 288 sugar plantations, most of them producing refined sugar; 443 indigo plantations; and more than 2,000 coffee plantations. The population included 16,000 whites and at least 80,000 slaves. Among the latter were many who would participate in the
uprising of 1791. The province was also home to several free men of African descent who would become important revolutionary leaders. Vincent Ogé, a free man of color, lived in the town of Dondon; a decade before the revolution Toussaint Bréda, once a slave and now a free man, rented a small property near the plantation where he had been born.38

Saint-Domingue contained two other provinces—the Western and the Southern. They were separated from the North, and from one another, by high mountain ranges. Only in 1751, when Port-au-Prince—the largest town in the Western Province—became the island’s capital, was a passage cut across these mountains. The royal government paid for the road, but slaves built it, carving a 100-foot stairway into the rock. Not until 1787, however, was it possible to travel from Le Cap to Port-au-Prince by carriage. Each region had its mountains, its plains, and its port towns. For most of the colony’s history, people and goods moved from region to region by sea.39

The Western Province was the second in the colony in population and wealth. Its capital, Port-au-Prince, was the second-largest town in Saint-Domingue. One man who traveled to Saint-Domingue in the 1780s made fun of the grand idea French planters had of Port-au-Prince, which they described as a “throne of luxury and voluptuousness” and considered their “Jerusalem.” Having heard their tales, he wrote, he approached the town with “that vague anxiety that precedes admiration and prepares enthusiasm,” only to find himself in front of “two rows of cabins” arranged around “dusty air they call a street.” Port-au-Prince had the look of a “tartar camp,” though the presence of the government, garrisons, and the port made it an active city and the “rendezvous for all conspirators and fortune-seekers” in the colony.40

There are two plains in the Western Province: the Cul-de-Sac surrounding Port-au-Prince and, to the north, a plain traversed by the snaking Artibonite River bordered by the port towns of Gonaïves and Saint-Marc. Both plains were dry, the Artibonite plain so much so that one writer described it as “Egypt.” During the second half of the eighteenth century, government-sponsored irrigation projects put slaves to work building canals that ultimately irrigated nearly half of the land on the Cul-de-Sac. Consequently, sugar production in the area boomed. In 1789 there were 314 sugar plantations in the Western Province, more than in the north, although many of them were smaller and produced unrefined sugar. Indigo cultivation was much more important in this region than in the north, involving over 1,800 plantations. There were more than 500 cotton plantations and more than 800 coffee plantations. Slaves were again the largest group in the province.41

On a long peninsula to the south and west was the Southern Province, whose capital was Les Cayes. It was both cut off from the Western Province and divided internally by the highest mountains in the colony—indeed in the Caribbean. The province included two plains that surrounded Les Cayes, and another smaller plain around the town of Jerémie. It was
the least developed of the colony, with only 191 sugar plantations, most of them making unprocessed sugar, and approximately 300 coffee plantations and 900 indigo plantations. It had the smallest population of the three.\textsuperscript{42}

Moreau noted that the customs in this region were different from those elsewhere in the colony, as was the creole spoken there. The clothes of the residents had changed little since the first European settlers had arrived. The Southern Province was the last to be fully settled by the French, and remained the most isolated from Atlantic shipping and from the rest of the colony. It was in many ways more connected to the nearby British colony of Jamaica than it was to France, and something of an “English enclave.” The inhabitants of the region traded consistently and illegally with the British, as well as with ships from Spanish Cuba, Curacao, and other areas. Contraband trade was carried on throughout the colony, but it was particularly developed in the south. Huge quantities of indigo were traded to the British, although in official statistics they made up only a tiny portion of the exports of Saint-Domingue. Many free people of color profited from this expanding trade, including a man named Julien Raimond. One day he would carry the demands of this group to Paris.\textsuperscript{43}

“Geography,” writes one historian, “was in Saint-Domingue ‘the mother of history.’ Each region had its own landscape, customs, and demography, and these would shape the revolution to come. The geographic location of the colony in the wider world would likewise profoundly shape its political history. Saint-Domingue was at the heart of the Americas, connected in many ways to the empires that surrounded it, and quite far from the nation that governed it. It was part of an evolving Atlantic world, one in which many of the subjects of empires gradually came to dream of one day being citizens of their own nations.”\textsuperscript{44}

In 1777 a crowd gathered in the main plaza of Le Cap to watch the hanging of a ship captain convicted of stealing. But when the executioner opened the trap below his feet, the rope snapped, and the captain found himself sprawled on the ground. He cried “grace,” and several people in the crowd repeated the word. The executioner, unmoved by the miracle, prepared to hang the captain again. The man resisted, wrapping his feet around the ladder and refusing to move, and the crowd erupted and attacked the executioner. Mounted policemen tried to stop the crowd but were showered with rocks and fled. The executioner dragged the captive away down the street, but two big sailors—perhaps from his ship—at-tacked him and freed the captain. As the executioner returned toward the Place des Armes, he was attacked by a group of blacks, who pummeled him with stones until he was dead. “I saw the corpse of this unfortunate under a pile of stones,” Moreau wrote of the murdered executioner; “his head was completely flattened.” There was one unlikely survivor from the incident: “a little mouse,” which the executioner had adopted, “was in his pocket” and “found living and unharmed.”\textsuperscript{45}

The port towns of the Atlantic world were notorious for their unruly crowds of sailors, slaves, market-women, small-time crooks, prostitutes, and others who were scraping by on the margins of their colonial societies. They were also, of course, prone to more widespread sedition and revolt on the part of wealthier individuals who, having left their European homes, came to have very different perspectives and interests from those of their European governors. Saint-Domingue was no exception. In its short history it saw two major uprisings before the one that ultimately destroyed it.

In November 1723, a crowd of a hundred women attacked the Maison de l’Afrique, the island seat of the powerful Company of the Indies. Led by a one time actress named Sagona, owner of a bar in the town, they smashed the windows of the building, broke in, and threw furniture, books, and papers into the street. They tracked some of the company’s officials down to a nearby house, where Sagona placed a gun against the throat of one of them and said, “Drink, traitor, it’ll be your last.” Reportedly he was saved just in time by the intervention of an officer. The next night the rioting continued as a larger crowd again attacked the Maison de l’Afrique and then set fire to a plantation owned by the company at La Fossette. In the crowd were 60 men, armed and dressed like women, and more than 300 women, some covered in flour and others wearing fake moustaches. The uprising, triggered by the granting of trading privileges to the company, lasted several months. Although many of the participants were poor whites, some wealthy men in the colony supported it, with one declaring that if the rebels won there would be open commerce “with all nations,” “Republican liberty,” and no more taxes. The revolt was so widespread that the governor briefly considered offering freedom to those slaves “who abandoned their masters and gathered under the flag of the king.”\textsuperscript{46}

Such revolts were a part of a broader refusal by many in Saint-Domingue to accept the plans of the royal administrators for the colony. Wealthy slave owners also consistently flouted and opposed the royal laws
and regulations imposed on them. In doing so they took advantage of the
division of administrative power in Saint-Domingue between a governor-
general, who was in charge of the military aspects of colonial governance,
and the intendant, who was in charge of civilian life. However, their pow-
ers overlapped considerably, and they were often at odds with each other, a
circumstance that suited many planters as it made the application of royal
policies difficult. Moreover, laws passed in the métropole had to be regis-
tered in the colony by the local consells, or courts, which sometimes ref-
used to do so in protest.47

This administrative structure was similar to that of many provinces of
France, but there was much that made Saint-Domingue unique. It was,
first and foremost, a slave colony, one in which white settlers and other free
people were a minority of the population. In 1789, according to official fig-
ures, there were roughly 465,000 slaves in the colony, 31,000 whites, and
28,000 free-coloreds. Masters, who were taxed on the basis of the number
of slaves they owned, had an interest in underreporting the true numbers,
so that it is likely that the slave population was higher, probably near a half-
million. (The United States, in contrast, had a total population of 700,000
slaves in 1790.) Furthermore, the towns harbored 26 percent of the col-
ony’s whites, who made up only 4 percent of the rural population. A few
examples from the northern plain highlight the startling imbalance in the
population. In the parish of Limbé there were 300 whites, 200 free-
coloreds, and 5,000 slaves, while in the neighboring parish of Acul, where
the 1791 insurrection would begin, there were 3,500 slaves and 130
whites.48

Masters and colonial administrators agreed that it was vital to contain
this slave population. But they often disagreed vehemently about how to
do it. The King’s 1685 Code Noir laid out detailed regulations regarding
the treatment of slaves—their hours of labor, food, housing, clothes, and
punishment—as well as related issues such as the process of emancipation.
For the next century slave masters brazenly, openly, and consistently broke
almost every provision of this code. As one planter activist, Tanguy de la
Boissière, wrote in 1793, the Code Noir was always “judged absurd” and its
implementation “never attempted.” Indeed, over the course of the eight-
teenth century, local legislation as well as new royal legislation reversed
many of its key provisions, particularly those relating to the status of eman-
cipated slaves. Masters in Saint-Domingue, as in North America, re-
sponded to any attempt to interfere with their power over slaves with vio-
lement hostility and stubborn resistance.49

In the mid-1780s reform-minded administrators in the Colonial Minis-
try in Paris, driven in part by reports of small uprisings on plantations,
passed two royal decrees meant to improve the condition of the slaves in
the Caribbean. Many of their provisions were aimed at curbing the auton-
omy of plantation managers—and therefore their power to abuse their
slaves—by requiring them to keep careful registers of the work and pro-
duction on the plantations. The reforms also improved the provisions of
the Code Noir by granting slaves not only Sundays but also Saturday after-
noons off, limiting the hours of work that could be demanded, and guar-
fanteeing improvements in food and clothing. Slaves were given the right
to complain about abuses against them, and severe punishments were pro-
vided for masters and managers convicted of murdering slaves.50

The masters of Saint-Domingue and some merchants in France publicly
attacked the new regulations. One merchant who owned property in Saint-Domingue argued that they would make the work of plantation
managers impossible. “How can we contain the negroes if they can accuse
whites?” he asked. “To believe the accusations of the slaves is to open the
door to revolt and arm them against the whites.” He saw in the royal de-
crees a sinister goal, that of “emancipating the negroes and placing the
whites in chains.” An officer in the colony who admitted that slavery was
“terrible” nevertheless wrote that the decrees were an attack on “the sac-
red right of property.” By placing their work regime and discipline under
the control of people “other than their masters,” the decrees put a “dagger
in the hands of the slaves.” The court in Le Cap refused to register the or-
dinance, setting off a battle between the local administrators and Versailles
that led to a 1787 royal edict shutting down the rebellious court and trans-
ferring its powers to Port-au-Prince. In the same year, while Martinique
and Guadeloupe were granted the right to create colonial assemblies,
Saint-Domingue was not. Morreau was in Saint-Domingue at the time,
and he and his colleagues in the Cercle des Philadelphes openly attacked
these decisions and the “despotic” administration that passed laws without
consultation with the colony. In the process they helped lay the foundation
for the demands for self-government that would later explode into open
rebellion.51

Another bone of contention between planters and French officials was
the economic policies of the royal government. In the late seventeenth century, under the leadership of the administrator Jean-Baptiste Colbert, the exclusif, or monopoly, was put into place. The monopoly meant that only ships from French ports could trade with the colonies. From the perspective of the royal government, the colonies existed to contribute to the economy of the metropole, and it was therefore perfectly logical that the planters should be constrained in this way. France, after all, protected the colonies with its navy, supported their growth with its slave and merchant ships, and supplied settlers and government. It was to be a monogamous relationship of control and support in which colony and mother country would expand in power and wealth together. French ships would buy slaves in French ports in Africa, bring them to French colonies in the Caribbean, and bring back plantation commodities to Europe to be sold by French merchants. The money and the profits would stay within the family.  

This was the theory. In practice, of course, things were very different. First of all, French ships consistently failed to deliver sufficient supplies—notably provisions and slaves—to the rapidly expanding colony. The planters contributed to their own problems by focusing obsessively on producing commodities for export, making it necessary to import provisions. French merchants, meanwhile, paid less for colonial commodities than the planters thought they should. It was an illogical system in many ways. Saint-Domingue was next to the thriving British colony of Jamaica, near Spanish Cuba, and quite close to both the North and South American mainlands. There were markets all around. But trade with these prosperous neighbors was prohibited; everything had to travel thousands of miles across the Atlantic.  

The exclusif was consistently honored in the breach. Pirates, the midwives of the French colonies, had woven links among various Caribbean islands and with the nearby mainlands, and there were always individuals happy to make a profit transporting contraband from one colony to the next. To acquire slaves, planters, especially in the Southern Province close to Jamaica, developed an ingenious system that allowed them to circumvent French merchants in two ways. British traders would bring slaves from Jamaica, and French planters would purchase them with barrels of sugar and coffee. Among the slaves the Jamaicans sold this way were some they especially wished to get rid of because they were rebellious. One slave

who probably came from the British West Indies, Boukman, would lead the 1791 slave revolt in the colony.  

In addition to nearby British and Spanish colonies, not to mention Dutch traders, the inhabitants of Saint-Domingue found other willing partners in crime among the merchants of New England. The “subproducts” of sugar—particularly rum and molasses—were traded for a wide variety of provisions. (In the early 1790s U.S. ships brought “flour, corn, oats, rice, biscuits, salt beef, salt cod, herring, mackerel, salmon, fish, oils, peas, potatoes, onions, and apples,” as well as “live animals including pigs, cows, sheep, and turkeys.”) Although many North American merchants came to Saint-Domingue, often the trading took place on small islands such as the Turks and Caicos and the Bahamas, where there was little imperial control. New England merchants in turn traded rum with Native Americans or used it to purchase slaves in Africa. Although their empires were often at war during the eighteenth century, the colonies of North America and the French Caribbean depended on one another as they grew.

Saint-Domingue's economy was sustained by the contraband trade. Small boats plied the shores, buying and selling illegally, and even the leading citizens of the colony participated. It was impossible for the colonial government to repress this trade; harsh legislation against such dealings only highlighted the royal government's impotence. "I am alone against the entire colony" lamented one governor in 1733 when he was criticized for having been too lenient in his punishment of planters convicted of participating in the contraband trade. In the wake of the Seven Years' War, and again after the American Revolution, which opened the way for more intensive trade between North America and Saint-Domingue, administrators made concessions to planters and loosened monopoly regulations, allowing foreign ships to trade certain goods in certain French Caribbean ports. But they excluded some products, and levied heavy import taxes, so the contraband trade continued. The dependence on illegal trading enticed settlers with the possibility that their profits would be greater in a context of lesser imperial control. Many French planters, furthermore, envied the boisterous assemblies of the British colonies. Indeed, as early as the Seven Years' War, some openly supported British attempts to take over the colony, believing their interests would be better served within a different empire.

Saint-Domingue, like all the other colonies of the Atlantic world, was an evolving paradox. While it held out the promise of wealth to its white set-
tlers, it also disappointed many of their hopes. As an extension of the mother country, it was meant to contribute to its power and expansion, and many whites who migrated to Saint-Domingue retained close ties with France and sought to return as soon as they had made their fortunes. But many settlers stayed, as did their children, and in the process they developed new ways of living and seeing the world. Saint-Domingue survived and thrived because its settlers flouted the regulations imposed on them from Paris, trading consistently with their British and Spanish neighbors—especially during times of war. Colonists had different interests from those of the royal governments that controlled them and the metropolitan merchants with whom they traded. They had more in common with British sugar planters in Jamaica than with their cousins in Paris or Bordeaux. The term “creole”—a descriptor that referred to something that was born in the Americas, and could be applied as much to animals and plants as to people, and as well to those of European descent as to those of African descent—captures this difference.

Some writers explained the difference of white Caribbean creoles in racial terms. The English-born planter Bryan Edwards, for instance, identified two physical differences from the “natives of Europe”: their “considerably deeper” eye sockets guarded them “from those ill effects which an almost continual strong glare of sunshine might otherwise produce,” and their skin felt “considerably colder than that of a European; a proof, I think, that nature has contrived some peculiar means of protecting them from the heat.” Others fixated on the corruption fostered in the personalities of creoles by the limitless power they had over their slaves. Moreau described dangers faced by creole men who never left the colony, shaped by their constant ability to turn their “will into law for the slaves,” and who ended up abandoning themselves to music and dancing “only for the voluptuous pleasures.” The naturalist Michel Étienne Descourtiz, who visited Saint-Domingue in the late 1790s, similarly blamed the climate for corrupting the “virtue” of creole women, whose “sedentary life” excited their “voluptuous affections.” He claimed that although creoles were born good and virtuous, they were corrupted by the fact that they were destined to command slaves, and developed a “savage, ferocious, egotistical and dominating instinct.” He blamed the looseness of their upbringing, in which every “extravagant desire” was entertained by their parents, and so created men who were the “burden of European societies who disdain the ridiculous.” viewing the colonies as distant realms of excess and violence, and their inhabitants as fundamentally different, served to create a distance between slavery and the Europeans who profited from it and consumed what it produced.56

Fantasies of depravity and rapid evolutionary adaptation among the creoles were a skewed response to the fact that settlers did create societies distinct and different from those of their fellow nationals across the Atlantic. This circumstance was something the creoles of the Caribbean shared with those of the mainland to the north and south. But their destiny would be quite different. When the thirteen colonies revolted, the wealthiest colonies of the British empire—those of the Caribbean—did not join them, in part because concern about controlling their slaves overshadowed a desire for independence. While slaves played a major role in the American Revolution, primarily by escaping to join the British, who held out the promise of freedom, in the new United States slavery was ultimately consolidated rather than destroyed. In contrast, the victorious struggle for national independence that soon followed in Saint-Domingue became a successful struggle against slavery. And its major protagonists were not slave owners but slaves themselves.57

The creoles of Saint-Domingue, after all, were a tiny minority surrounded by a vast population with their own interests and interpretations of the world. The enslaved were “omnipresent and attentive observers” who had an astute sense of the divisions among their oppressors and developed a rich vocabulary to describe it. They referred to the newly arrived whites who often served as their overseers as moutons France—French sheep. (The term would be used later to refer to the French troops that arrived, and were decimated, in 1802.) They coined the term petit blancs—little whites—to refer to those who did not own land, contrasting them to the grand blancs (big whites), also called Blancs blancs, or “White whites,” whose ownership of property made them true whites. The vocabulary of the slaves was eventually adopted by everyone on the island, and in turn helped to “aggravate the tensions between whites.” In this way, slaves’ interpretations of the fissures in their masters’ society provided categories that deepened them, laying kindling that would help set the colony alight.58