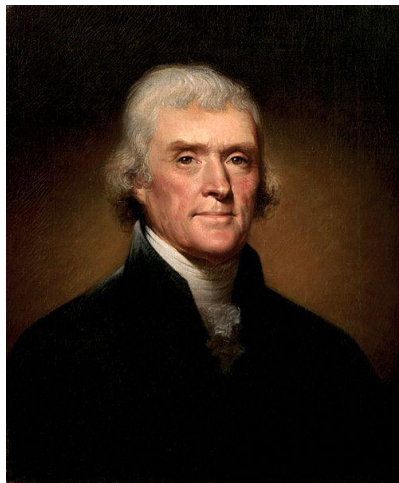


“the liberty of the whole earth”: Thomas Jefferson and the French and Haitian Revolutions



French image of “The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen,” 1789



Thomas Jefferson in 1800



Toussaint L’Ouverture, ca., 1794.

Background Essay: Given their proximity to the American Revolution, it was inevitable that Americans would follow events in revolutionary France and Saint-Domingue with fervor. Thomas Jefferson, as one of the luminaries of the American Revolution took great in both revolutions. He witnessed the beginnings of the French Revolution while American minister in France, and was secretary of state during the crucial years when the Bastille fell, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen was issued, and the French royal family was arrested and executed. Increasingly, Jefferson’s view of the French Revolution colored his views of his domestic political opponents who deprecated events in France, and led him to believe that Hamilton and his supporters were “monocratic” counter-revolutionaries trying to reverse the outcome of the American Revolution. Thus, to a large extent, and to both supporters and detractors of the French Revolution, events in France and the United States came to represent a single struggle to vindicate the ideals Jefferson had expressed in the Declaration of Independence.

Events in revolutionary France inspired another bloody revolution much closer to home: in Saint-Domingue in the Caribbean. Saint-Domingue mattered to Americans not only because it was so

much closer and therefore immediately relevant than France, but also because much American commerce depended on the island. Saint-Domingue was a tiny place but an economic giant: it produced 60% of the world's coffee and 40% of its sugar. The revolution began as a consequence of long-standing resentments among the free populations of the island. The wealthy white plantation owners (called *les grands blancs*, perhaps 15,000 in number) commanded the huge slave population of the colony and consequently its economic and political power. Resentful of their monopolization of wealth and power were the poorer whites (*les petits blancs*, who were artisans, shopkeepers, slave dealers, overseers, and day laborers) and the free people of color (*les gens de couleur*), who numbered about 28,000. Their demands for greater economic and political power received a huge boost when the French National Assembly adopted the Rights of Man and the Citizen in 1789. The ethnic tensions resulting over what these revolutionary ideals should mean in Saint-Domingue led to political turmoil and ultimately violence. Inspired by these demands for rights and equality made by the poorer free residents, the roughly 500,000 slaves on the island revolted in 1791 to claim their own liberties and rights. The success of the slave revolt there coincided with the rise of the Jacobins in Paris, and led to some of the most radical manifestations of the French Revolution, namely the abolition of slavery on the island in 1793 and the extension of citizenship to black men. Given the context of the times, the terrible violence of the revolution, and Saint-Domingue's proximity to the US, Americans were fascinated with (and some horrified by) these events. Newspapers responded by featuring the latest news, and thousands of white planters, many bringing their slaves came to the United States seeking asylum. All of these factors forced Americans to consider how they felt about these events. Eventually, the slaves combined with the *gens de couleur* (or free people of color) and French Republicans sent to administer the colony to establish a government based on the abolition of slavery and equal rights of all citizens regardless of color. This coalition spent most of the 1790s securing their achievements in establishing freedom and rights against foreign invaders (Britain and Spain) and domestic forces trying to reverse the revolution. By 1794, the primary military and political force on the island was Toussaint L'Ouverture, who though nominally under French authority, ruled the island autonomously for most of the 1790s. By 1799 Napoleon Bonaparte decided to re-instate French control of the island, and slavery as well. Thus began a second revolution in which the former slaves fought to be a separate country independent of France. Napoleon's military invasion reached Saint-Domingue in 1802, and while initially successful (including deceiving L'Ouverture and sending him to a French prison where he died), the French occupation was defeated by a combination of disease, a lack of supplies, and the determined opposition of black military forces. The departure of the French led to independence, which was finally achieved in 1804 with the establishment of the Haitian Republic.