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How Haiti Saved the United States

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In the late 18th century, Toussaint L'Ouverture (1743-1803) led a slave uprising, also known as the Haitian Revolution, that liberated the former French colony and created the Republic of Haiti. As you read, take notes on the international impact of the Haitian Revolution.

Part 1: The Early United States

[1] A slave revolt in Haiti¹ saved the United States. How did it happen? Largely through the efforts of one man: Toussaint L'Ouverture.

No longer a slave himself, Toussaint nonetheless trained and led the half million African slaves of Haiti to victory after victory, over England and France, for more than a decade. In the process, he kept America free from European domination.

In 1791, the new country of the United States of America was just getting on its feet. George Washington would run for re-election that year, and the two great political parties (Federalist and Democratic-Republican) were angling to get their men into top positions in government yet again. The western borders of the country were ever expanding, as was the number of states admitted into the Union.²



["General Toussaint Louverture"](#) by Unknown is in the public domain.

Bad for the fledgling country, though, was the presence of European troops all around:

- English troops were still in Canada, stirring up trouble.
- French troops were in Haiti and in Mexico.

1. Officially known as the Republic of Haiti, it is located on the island of Hispaniola in the Caribbean.
2. "The Union" was another name for the United States.

- Spanish troops were in South America and Central America.

[5] The potential for European involvement in American affairs was high. President Washington and other government officials met with European officials time and again, trying to keep the peace and keep Americans out of European wars. But the more America refused to fight, the more both sides came to hate America.

Europeans had been bringing African slaves to America and the surrounding area since 1619. By 1791, the slavery system was so ingrained in the lifestyles of both Europeans and Africans that it seemed like it could go on indefinitely. At least that's what the Europeans thought.

The Africans saw it differently. And in 1791, they rose up in defiance of their captors. The place was Saint Dominigue (Haiti), a small Caribbean island then owned by France. This was France's wealthiest colony, and that wealth came almost exclusively from the plantations that were worked by African slaves.

Part 2: The Haitian Revolt

The slaves set fire to the plantations they worked in and demanded their freedom. With crops burning to a crisp as a backdrop, the slaves offered to fight for their right to freedom. Leading them was Toussaint L'Ouverture, himself a former slave. He was so successful at training and leading the 500,000 slaves (10 times the number of plantation owners) that even though it took a long time, they eventually conquered all of Haiti and all of Santo Domingo, the other half of the island. In 1801, L'Ouverture proclaimed himself governor-general of the entire island. He also outlawed slavery on the island.

This didn't sit well with Napoleon, Emperor of France. The French didn't like losing Haiti, their wealthiest colony; and they certainly didn't like losing their colony to a rebel leader and a bunch of slaves. So Napoleon set a trap for L'Ouverture; sadly, the Haitian hero fell for it and was thrown into prison, where he died in 1803.

[10] In that same year, French armies sailed to Haiti and tried to reinstate slavery, with French masters in charge, as before. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, one of Toussaint's generals and a former slave, led the Haitian forces to victory. It was a great day for Haiti and a great day for Africans everywhere.

On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared the creation of the Republic of Haiti. This was the first black republic³ anywhere in the world.⁴

3. a state in which supreme power is held by the people and their elected representatives, and which has an elected or nominated president rather than a monarch
4. The key word here is "republic." Independent, black-majority states already existed in Africa

Part 3: The Haitian Legacy

So how did all this affect the United States? Well, 1803 is the year that the U.S. and France agreed on the Louisiana Purchase. While all of the Haitian struggles were taking place, France was also fighting against England and other European powers in the Napoleonic Wars.⁵

Napoleon dreamed of a widespread French Empire. This included Haiti and other territories in North America, including Louisiana. He had even, at one time, considered attacking the United States itself.

But by 1803, with the European wars not going the way he had hoped, he needed money. So when American representatives came calling, he agreed to give up Louisiana (all of it) for a big chunk of money.⁶

[15] The loss of Haiti contributed to the protection of America in three ways:

1. It convinced Napoleon to abandon his dream of an American Empire.
2. It made him desperate for money, making him sell the Louisiana Territory and abandon all claims to it (and any future plans of invading America).
3. It gave hope to enemies of France everywhere. For a certain time, at the beginning of the Napoleonic Wars, France's Grand Army of the Republic seemed unbeatable. But England and other countries slowly turned the tide. The seemingly small victory of a half million slaves over the feared French soldiers in Haiti was an example of just how vulnerable French power really was to a determined, spirited freedom fighting force.

Without either Louisiana or Haiti as a jumping-off point, France would never again have the opportunity to attack the United States. And for this, America has to thank Toussaint L'Ouverture and his determined fellow rebels, many of whom gave their lives in the name of freedom. Many former slaves lived to see their dream come true. Partly because of their efforts, many Americans did, too.

long before Haiti, but these states went largely unrecognized by the white European and American worlds.

5. The Napoleonic Wars lasted from 1803 to 1815 and took place all over Europe. They were led by Napoleon I, who was attempting to expand his French empire.
6. The U.S. paid a total of sixty-eight million francs (\$15,000,000 USD) which averages to less than three cents per acre. The modern equivalent would be approximately \$237 million in U.S. dollars, or less than forty-two cents per acre.

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Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which of the following statements best summarizes a central idea of the article?
 - A. Haiti provided the U.S. with aid following the Haitian Revolution that guaranteed American independence from Great Britain.
 - B. The Haitian Revolution was the earliest and most successful slave rebellion in world history.
 - C. The Louisiana Purchase was a mistake for France because it encouraged colonies like Haiti to rebel.
 - D. The Haitian Revolution created the Republic of Haiti and helped the early U.S. remain independent.

2. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "Toussaint nonetheless trained and led the half million African slaves of Haiti to victory... In the process, he kept America free from European domination." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "The potential for European involvement in American affairs was high... the more America refused to fight, the more both sides came to hate America." (Paragraph 5)
 - C. "On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared the creation of the Republic of Haiti. This was the first black republic anywhere in the world." (Paragraph 11)
 - D. "Napoleon dreamed of a widespread French Empire. This included Haiti and other territories in North America, including Louisiana." (Paragraph 13)

3. PART A: What does the word "defiance" mean as used in paragraph 7?
 - A. anger
 - B. stubbornness
 - C. resistance
 - D. disagreement

4. PART B: Which of the following quotes best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "what the Europeans thought." (Paragraph 6)
 - B. "The Africans saw it differently." (Paragraph 7)
 - C. "they rose up" (Paragraph 7)
 - D. "of their captors" (Paragraph 7)

5. What connection does the author draw between the Haitian Revolution and the Louisiana Purchase?
