

# The Haitian Revolution

## The Origin

The origin of the Haitian Revolution can ironically be traced to the Revolution that started in their Mother Country France in 1789. In that year, the French people rallied and motivated by the watchwords of Liberty, fraternity and Equality decided to begin the process that would radically change the political and social order of France.

This revolution appealed to the Grand Blancs of San Domingue as the colony was named before the revolution. They decided that it was an opportune time to demand more political power from the newly elected Constituent Assembly in France. The Constituent Assembly denied them their requests.

In an unprecedented move, they called elections in 1790 for a General Assembly and excluded the small/poor whites (Petit Blancs) and coloureds from participating. Needless to say this would mean that they, the White colonists (Grand Blancs) would 'win' the election.

Having gained control of the Assembly the Grand Blancs proceeded to defy colonial authorities and the Constituent Assembly in France. To signify their revolutionary status they wore a red tassel and became known as the pompons rogues.



*Vincent Oge*

The conflict between the whites and the coloureds gave the slaves a chance to fight for their own freedom. The rebellion started in the most prosperous and

densely populated area, in the northern part of Haiti.

### **Why did these groups revolt?**

The Grand Blancs or rich whites, most of whom were planters, wanted to get rid **of the** Mercantile System. Please note that Haiti produced one third of the sugar reaching the world market. They wanted greater freedom of trade than the concessions granted to them in 1784. Since France was in a state of revolution herself, they thought it was a good time to do so.

There was much discrimination against the free coloureds. The Petit Blancs or poor whites were jealous of the free coloureds many of whom had inherited property from their white fathers and had gone into coffee cultivation, sugar being viewed as 'the exclusive domain' of the Grand Blancs.

As a result many restrictions were placed on these free coloureds. They could NOT

- be called Monsieur or Madame
- carry arms or be promoted to any top ranking position in the army.
- marry any white person, not even a poor one!
- vote or of course hold any political position
- attend the same theatres or plays as the whites. If they chose to attend the same Church, they could not sit in the same area or seat with a white person

The slaves revolted for pretty much the same reason as their counterparts in the British West Indies.

Each group on the French island felt the other to be its enemy. The planters hated the officials, despised the poor whites, and distrusted the growing class of the coloureds and poor whites who wanted the privileges of the planters.

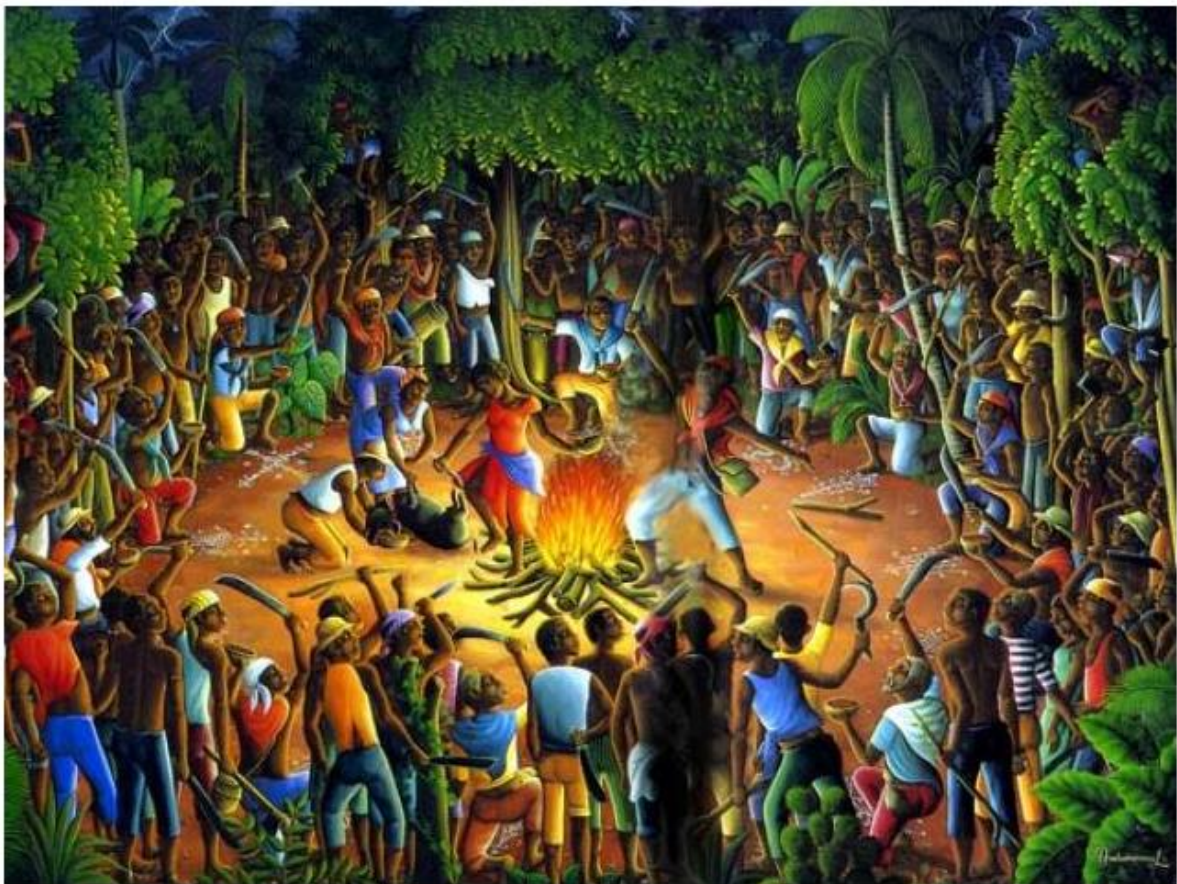
## Course

The slave rebellion was initiated by a voodoo ceremony on the night of August **14, 1791**. It was led by a slave known only as **Boukman**. By dawn the rebellion was in full swing, within a week fields and buildings had been set ablaze. The white and coloured masters were slain.

The poor/small whites and colonial authorities/militia combined to crush the Grand Blancs' revolt and dissolved their Assembly.

It was while, they, the whites, both 'great and small' were pre-occupied with their 'diplomatic' war that the free coloureds decided to use the opportunity to stage their own revolt and the rest is still history.

The coloureds were able to get the support of the "Amis de Noirs" or Friends of the Blacks. Led by Vincent Oge, who had declared himself the protector of the coloureds, they staged their own revolt. Their numbers were too small however, and Oge eventually gave up and was tortured and executed.



*Voodoo ceremony before the revolt*

The rebellion was exceptional and it forced the whites and the coloureds to join together to fight against their common enemy. This agreement was called **The**

**Concordat.** It was intended to keep the mulattoes/free coloureds' in their place'. They did not want them to ever get the impression that they were equal to them merely because they had a bit of wealth.

In 1792, a remarkable slave by the name of Toussaint **L'Overture** assumes leadership of the Haitian revolution. Between 1792- 1803 in the colony of Saint Domingue erupted into the civil war. In response, French reinforcements were sent in May of 1792, they too found themselves in conflict with the coloureds. The new Commissioner sent from France, **General LeClerc** attempted to capture Toussaint. Toussaint formed an alliance with the Spanish and gained black control over the entire north of Saint Domingue, except Le Cap.



A picture of Boukman, taken from



Toussaint L'Overture

for more information on Boukman please follow this link: [Boukmaninv](#)

The war now came to involve three European nations:

1. **France** who was desperately trying to regain this precious colony back
2. **England** who wanted to get Haiti for herself
3. **Spain**, who owned the 'next door' (literally) colony of Santo Domingo and was justifiably afraid that the revolution would spread to her colonies and that her slaves would be tempted to either start a revolution or jump next door to freedom.

In order to gain the needed support of the free coloureds, the Assembly in France gave them most of the rights and privileges that they were fighting for. They gladly took it, but by then most of them had defected to the slaves' side.

While the war continued, Toussaint who was successful in defeating all three groups by a policy of alliance and counter alliances decided that it was time to move to another level.

### **Toussaints' Reforms**

In 1801 he conquered Santo Domingo.

He created a central assembly to make laws.

He banned slavery and discrimination based on colour.

He proclaimed himself Governor for life.

Napoleon sent an army led by Le Clerc to defeat Toussaint and Toussaint undertook a "scorched earth" policy against Le Clerc.

He instituted the fermage system. It was a labour system designed to continue the production of the colony's exports crops which had been disrupted due to the war.

In a bid to encourage this production and export, he decreased the taxes and custom duties.

He made treaties with foreign Governments.

He built roads, schools and other public buildings.

In 1802 while locked in a life long struggle with Le Clerc, peace was negotiated by Cristophe but Toussaint was captured by trickery and taken to France.

In 1803 on the twenty-seventh (27th) day of April, Toussaint died of cold and hunger in Jiora Mountain prison.

### **Jean Francois Dessalines**

After the capture of Toussaint, Dessalines took over leadership of the revolution. Dessalines however, did not maintain Toussaint's policy to revive sugar or to militarize labour. On January 1, 1804 Dessalines declared that the colony was independent and was to be called Haiti the Tainos word for mountainous. He declared himself Emperor of Haiti.





*Jean Francois Dessalines*

From 1804-1806 Dessalines brought a large percentage of Haiti's land under state rule. He tried to revive agriculture and kept daily tallies of the amount of work by labourers and idlers were punished. He encouraged stable family life and Catholicism, but discouraged Voodoo. Dessalines' rule ended with his assassination in 1806.

### **Why was this Revolution successful?**

(i) Good leadership. Toussaint provided skilled military leadership. He was ably assisted by Jean Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe.

(ii) The rebels had the advantage. They knew the area better than the invaders. They were familiar with both the territory and climate.

(iii) France was preoccupied with her own revolution 1789-1815. She herself was going through different stages. At one point her leaders agreed with and tried to reinstate Slavery. At another time, her new leaders, the radicals who disagreed with Slavery sent decrees to abolish it. (1794)

**(iv)** The troops sent from France to reinforce the local militia lost a number of their men within a few days. They died from tropical diseases such as yellow fever.

**(v)** The division and rivalry between the Grand Blancs and the Petit Blancs gave the blacks time to gather and plan their strategies.

**(vi)** The whites, engrossed in their own struggle were taken by surprise. Some fled the country leaving their property behind. Many of these became bases of operation and headquarters for the rebel groups.

**(vii)** The slaves, unlike the whites, were determined to fight to the end, even if it meant death. After all, they had little to lose in a society where they were seen and treated just a little better than animals.

**(viii)** The slaves were united by the strong bond of religion. They believed that they were indeed invincible and that the victory was theirs!