You Are All Free

The abolitions of slavery in the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue in 1793 and in revolutionary France in 1794 were the first dramatic blows against an institution that had shaped the Atlantic world for three centuries and affected the lives of millions of people. Based on extensive archival research, *You Are All Free* provides the first complete account of the dramatic events that led to these epochal decrees, as well as to the destruction of Cap Français, the richest city in the French Caribbean, and to the first refugee crisis in the United States. Taking issue with accounts that claim that Saint-Domingue's slaves simply freed themselves, or that French revolutionaries abolished slavery as part of a general campaign for universal human rights, the book shows that abolition was the result of complex and often paradoxical political struggles on both sides of the Atlantic that have frequently been misunderstood by earlier scholars.

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You Are All Free

The Haitian Revolution and the Abolition of Slavery

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Preface

The inspiration for this book can be traced to two very different sources: a Sunday morning walk in one of Lexington, Kentucky's, local parks and the experience of the presidency of George W. Bush. In mid-2006, I had recently finished the manuscript of an earlier book on the Haitian Revolution, *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Revolution*, a project that had drawn on my interests in autobiographical writing. In my commentaries on the various selections included in that volume, I had taken pains to put readers on their guard against the partiality of the texts I included and of their many omissions. I had, so to speak, kept the literary analyst's hat that I had acquired in the course of nearly a decade of writing about autobiography firmly on my head and put the constructed and subjective nature of these narratives in the middle of my interpretation of them. In the course of my walk – in a park that, like much of central Kentucky, occupies what was once farmland originally cleared with the help of slave labor in the years around 1800, even as slavery was being so spectacularly dismantled in Haiti – I was pondering what to do for my next research project. It occurred to me to wonder how the events described in the eyewitness documents I had collected, and especially the most spectacular episode of the Haitian Revolution – the burning of the main city of the French colony of Saint-Domingue and the simultaneous issuance of the first emancipation proclamation in the French empire in June 1793 – would look if I switched headgear and wrote from the perspective of my original discipline of history. I already knew where most of the relevant archival sources were located, and I calculated, optimistically, that an upcoming two-month stay in Paris would allow me to go through most

of them. Refreshed from my walk, I went home and began to work out a research plan.

My decision to revert to working as a "pure" historian also responded, however, to some reflections about the way in which President Bush had launched the United States into the bloody adventure in Iraq, the outcome of which remains, as I write this in the spring of 2010, deeply uncertain. From the start of my graduate training in history in the early 1970s, I had imbibed the lesson that the great events of history were to be explained in terms of large impersonal forces – social structures, cultural paradigms, intellectual discourses – and that "traditional" political history, with its emphasis on individuals, short time frames, and contingent events, was inevitably superficial. Yet, here the United States was, in the fall of 2006, bogged down in the third year of a war that seemed less the product of long-term and inevitable processes than of decisions taken by a handful of political leaders. Whatever its ultimate results, the Iraq war will undoubtedly be remembered as a historical event of considerable proportions. It occurred to me that it might be fruitful to take a fresh look at the political circumstances in which the first total abolition of slavery came about in 1793 with this perspective in mind and to ask whether it was wholly explainable in terms of structural factors such as the cruelty of the plantation system, the enormous numerical advantage of the black population over its white oppressors, and the power of the moral arguments put forward by the abolitionists of the day.

In attempting to write, for the first time in my professional career, a "simple" narrative political history, I soon discovered that this venerable genre of scholarship is not simple at all. In contrast to the sources employed in social or cultural history, the official papers, letters, and published documents on which political history relies may seem to speak for themselves, but in fact they require careful analysis and interpretation. The motives for human action can be as artfully concealed behind a flood of words as they can be in quantitative data or enigmatic forms of behavior. The reconstruction of events offered here depends on certain assumptions about human psychology and on the dynamics of political conflict; although I have tried to document my claims about the events that took place in Saint-Domingue (today's Republic of Haiti), France, and the United States as carefully as possible, I am under no illusion that I have produced a completely objective account, or that other scholars cannot interpret the evidence differently.

I also originally thought of this project as a "small" piece of historical research, because I intended to limit it to a period of no more than

a year and a half, from the arrival in the colony of Saint-Domingue of the French civil commissioners Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel in September 1792 to the passage of the National Convention's decree abolishing slavery in February 1794. As it has developed, however, I have realized that although the scope of this study may be narrow, its implications are broad. The episode described here was a crucial one in the struggle that led, almost a century later, to the final abolition of Negro slavery in the Americas. It raises important questions about the relative weight of moral and political ideas and of conscious human intentions in bringing about the most radical act of abolition in that entire century of struggle. I do not intend to deny the importance of the abolitionist critique of slavery in undermining the institution, or to minimize the determination with which the black insurgents in Saint-Domingue fought to escape their chains. I do argue, however, that circumstances played a much greater role in determining the outcome of events in Saint-Domingue than previous historians have been willing to concede. Certainly the eventual abolition of slavery was not the result of a series of accidents. Nevertheless, the history of that abolition would have looked very different if the events surrounding the violent journée of June 20, 1793, had not taken place or had had a different outcome, two eventualities that could easily have occurred, just as our contemporary world would look very different if George W. Bush had not decided to embark on his "war of choice" in the Middle East in 2003.

Although this book has taken on a very different form, and its conclusions have come to seem to me to have much greater significance than I realized when I embarked on it, I was correct about one thing: the sources for the study of the events covered here are rich and fascinating. In recent decades, it has been fashionable to decry the "fetishism of the archives" associated with older approaches to historical research. In this case, however, the documentary sources available to the historian are so varied and so vivid that it has been hard to resist the temptation to exploit them to the fullest. There is an additional justification for doing so: the history of the Haitian Revolution, when it has not been neglected altogether, has all too often been written on the basis of only a handful of sources, many of them cited by authors who never looked at the original papers and relied instead on sometimes inaccurate or incomplete versions of key documents found in published books. Now that the events in the French colony of Saint-Domingue are assuming their rightful place in the history of modern struggles for freedom, it certainly

behooves scholars who have the opportunity to do so to use the original sources that are available.

Like all historians who work on the early years of the Haitian Revolution, I have relied heavily on the documents in series D XXV of the Archives nationales in Paris. These papers, collected by the French parliamentary commission set up in 1795 to determine the responsibility for the "disasters" in Saint-Domingue between 1789 and 1794, form the basis for all serious scholarly research on the first years of the Haitian Revolution. Unlike the more standardized contents of many of the other document series in the Archives nationales, series D XXV contains an extraordinary hodgepodge of materials: official letters, orders, proclamations, private correspondence, ships' logs, police interrogations, captured documents from the black insurgents, and many other items. I was able to exploit this gold mine as extensively as I did thanks to fortunate timing. For several years around the turn of the millenium, the Archives nationales was crippled by a crisis resulting from the discovery of asbestos contaminating the CARAN, the modern research building opened in the 1980s. From the late 1990s to 2006, scholars were forced to work under difficult conditions in various temporary reading rooms. Committing oneself to a project that relied heavily on access to documents in the Archives nationales became something of a gamble. Fortunately for me, I embarked on this project just when the Archives's main reading room finally reopened. From 2006 to 2009, I enjoyed the benefit of its excellent working environment and of a helpful staff who seemed genuinely pleased to be able to offer readers the services that they had not been able to provide during the "time of troubles." The Archives nationales has also been at the forefront of the revolution that has allowed researchers to use digital cameras to photograph documents, which can then be read at leisure on the computer screen. As I write this, however, plans are under way for the construction of an entirely new archival center in the northeast suburbs of Paris, currently scheduled to open in 2011. One can only hope that the period of transition from the Archives's historic home in the atmospheric quarter of the Marais to their new location will not be too prolonged or disruptive. In any event, I will always have fond memories of crossing the Seine in the early morning, en route to the Archives, enjoying the sights of the city and anticipating the surprises to be found in yet another promising carton from the D XXV series.

In addition to the Archives nationales, this project has drawn on materials from many other libraries and archives whose assistance I would like to acknowledge. These include the Bibliothèque nationale de France,

the Centre des Archives d'Outre-Mer in Aix-en-Provence, the Centre des Archives Diplomatiques de Nantes, the Service historique de l'armée de terre, the Service historique de la marine, the Newberry Library, the John Carter Brown Library, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the Van Pelt Library at the University of Pennsylvania, the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, the New York Historical Society, and the University of Kentucky Library. I have been a relatively late comer to the international community of scholars interested in the history of the revolutionary era in the Caribbean and the struggle for the abolition of slavery. Colleagues in this field have been exceptionally generous in providing encouragement, bibliographical tips, and often copies of their own research notes. I would especially like to thank Anja Bandau, Madison Smartt Bell, Yves Bénot, Jean-Charles Benzaken, Elizabeth Colwill, Myriam Cottias, John Davies, Daniel Desormeaux, Marcel Dorigny, Seymour Drescher, Laurent Dubois, Carolyn Fick, Andrée-Luce Fourcand, Julia Gaffield, John Garrigus, David Geggus, Malick Ghachem, Jean Hébrard, Laënnec Hurbon, Erica Johnson, Martha Jones, Darrell Meadows, Joanne Melish, Claire Payton, Knox Peden, Anne Perotin-Dumon, Jennifer Pierce, Dwayn Pruitt, Dominique Rogers, Alyssa Sepinwall, Miranda Spieler, Aletha Stahl, Jeffery Stanley, and Ashli White for their advice and assistance. Invitations to lecture at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, the Institut d'Histoire de la Révolution Française, and the Collège de France provided valuable occasions to extend my research. I am grateful to Christophe Prochasson, Jean-François Revel, Jean-Clément Martin, Pierre Serna, Daniel Roche, and Roger Chartier for these opportunities. Audiences at the Consortium on the Revolutionary Era, the Society for French Historical Studies, the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies, the Haitian Studies Association, and at colloquia on "The French Atlantic" at Florida State University, "Paris Croisé" at the Freie Universität Berlin in 2007, "Républiques en miroir" at the Institut de l'histoire de la Révolution française in 2008, and "Affranchis et descendants d'affranchis dans le monde atlantique (Europe, Afrique et Amériques) du XVe au XIXe siècle," in Bordeaux in 2009 offered helpful criticism of my work, as did those who attended my presentations at the University of California, Riverside, Reed College, the McNeil Center for Atlantic History at the University of Pennsylvania, the University of Virginia, the Early American History Seminar of the Kentucky Historical Society, and the Rocky Mountain Early American History Seminar. Elizabeth Colwill, Seymour Drescher, David Geggus, Lynn Hunt, and Joanne Melish read

the manuscript, in whole or in part, in its later stages and provided helpful suggestions for improvement. At Cambridge University Press, Eric Crahan shared my excitement about this project. Appointment as the T. Marshall Hahn, Jr., Professor of History at the University of Kentucky provided welcome funding for my research. Although I am grateful to all the individuals and institutions named here for their assistance, it goes without saying that the opinions expressed in this book are my own responsibility. Unless otherwise indicated, translations from sources in other languages are also my own.

In November 2008, thanks to the Haitian Studies Association and particularly to Aletha Stahl, I was able to make a short trip to Haiti and, in particular, to visit the city of Cap Haitien, where the crucial events of June 1793 described in this book took place. Together with our wonderful guide, Harry Nicholas, Aletha Stahl, Elizabeth Colwill, and I used the 1795 street map reproduced in this book to find the location where the future Convention deputy Jean-Baptiste Belley led the defense of the civil commissioners Sonthonax and Polverel, and the spot on the quays where their opponent, General Galbaud, made the plunge into the harbor that marked the end of white domination in the colony. Short as it was, this trip gave me a glimpse, not only of the difficulties facing present-day Haitians as they try to build a functioning democratic society, but of the obstacles facing Haitian scholars and teachers of history who would like to study and transmit the story of their country's past. Even before the devastating earthquake that struck much of the country on January 12, 2010, severely damaging most of Haiti's documentary repositories and its institutions of higher education, it was the rare Haitian historian who could hope to enjoy the possibilities that I, as a well-funded faculty member from an American research university, have benefitted from. One can only hope that the reconstruction efforts now under way will include programs that will give our colleagues from the country where these vitally important events took place the opportunity to study them.

This book is dedicated to my mother, Juliet Greenstone Popkin, who has encouraged my love of reading and writing ever since I was a small child. It was her patience and hard work that made it possible for our family to accompany my father, Richard H. Popkin, to Paris in 1952–53, a trip that was my introduction to French culture. In 2008, it fell to me to help my mother prepare to move out of the Los Angeles apartment in which she and my father had spent many happy years before his death in 2005. My father, a prominent historian of philosophy, published

numerous books, but it was only as I sorted through the piles of paper in my mother's apartment that I discovered how much writing she herself had done over the years. I was especially moved by several insightful autobiographical essays she had written about her own childhood and about some of the foreign trips she had made with my father. The time and effort she put into raising her three children and supporting my father's career held my mother back from becoming a published author in her own right. Unlike my father and me, my mother has always been happier talking to people than sitting at a desk taking notes. Late in life, when my father retired, my mother finally realized her lifelong dream of entering the publishing business by setting up a small literary agency. None of the books she helped shepherd to publication made her rich, but she loved talking to authors and editors, and she took pleasure in facilitating the appearance of a number of books she truly admired, some of which, like Margaret McCord's *The Calling of Katie Makanya*, the life story of a black woman from South Africa, won literary awards. Helping me put together a prospectus for *You Are All Free* was one of the last tasks my mother took on before she had to wind up the Julie Popkin Literary Agency. It was an act of faith in her son, but also an act of faith in the importance of books. I hope the final result will justify my mother's confidence, both in her offspring and in the importance of the printed word.