Introduction

The Journée of June 20, 1793 in Cap Français and the Abolition of Slavery

On the afternoon of June 20, 1793, a white resident hurrying home in the Caribbean trading port of Cap Français witnessed an extraordinary scene. Groups of dark-skinned men were running through the streets, crying loudly to the city's thousands of black slaves, "You are all free! The commissioners say you are all free, all whites are now equal to us, this whole country belongs to us."[1] The men spreading this message were not the black slave insurgents whose revolt, begun almost two years earlier on the night of August 22–23, 1791, had shaken revolutionary France's valuable colony of Saint-Domingue – today's Haiti – and the entire Atlantic world. They were members of the colony's population of free people of color, a group that had been granted citizenship rights and equality with the whites by the French government in April 1792 in the hope of creating a common front to fight the slave insurrection. Now that strategy had failed. The general sent from France to command the forces fighting the slaves and the sailors from the ships in Cap Français's busy harbor were in revolt against the two revolutionary national civil commissioners sent from France in 1792 to save the colony, and against the free men of color who supported them. Outnumbered, the commissioners and their free colored allies took the drastic step of appealing to the slaves, the overwhelming majority of the city's population. For the first time in the 300-year history of colonial settlement in the Americas, the representatives of a European government set themselves on a path that would lead to the abolition of slavery, which the French National

[1] *Extrait d'une lettre, sur les malheurs de Saint-Domingue en général, et principalement sur l'incendie de la ville du Cap Français* (Paris: Pain, An II [1793]), 13.

Convention decreed of February 4, 1794 as a direct result of the events in Cap Français a half year earlier. What this anonymous chronicler witnessed in Cap Français on June 20, 1793 was a true historical turning point.

When he recorded his experience in October 1793, however, this witness did not see it as an inspiring moment of liberation. For him, and for virtually all of the whites who lived through the event, the date of June 20, 1793 would be forever associated not with the end of slavery, but with the violent destruction of a major city, a proud symbol of European civilization in the tropics. The fighting that broke out in the city of Cap Français on that hot Caribbean morning set off, over the next three days, a conflagration that cost thousands of lives and reduced the wealthiest port in the French colonies to ashes. The destruction of Cap Français was bloodier than any of the episodes of urban violence in revolutionary Paris, claiming at least twice as many victims as the journée of August 10, 1792 or the September massacres of that year in Paris, and the death toll – somewhere between 3,000 and 10,000 – makes it the most murderous instance of urban conflict in the entire history of the Americas. The flames that consumed Cap Français had a devastating impact on the overseas trade that had fueled France's prosperity since the beginning of the eighteenth century. No single event in the history of France's second overseas empire, not even the Algerian war of 1954–62, delivered such a sudden and massive jolt to the metropole's prosperity as the destruction of Cap Français in 1793.

In Saint-Domingue itself, the destruction of Cap Français and the proclamation offering freedom to any slaves who would put themselves under the orders of the French revolutionary commissioners transformed the struggle that had begun with the slave uprising of August 1791 and the simultaneous but separate revolt of the colony's free people of color. Appalled by the commissioners' decision, the whites in Saint-Domingue who did not flee the island called on France's enemies, Britain and Spain, to come to their aid. Invasions were launched from the nearby colonies of Jamaica and Santo Domingo, turning the colony into a major front in the war of Europe's monarchies against the revolutionary movement. For Saint-Domingue's free people of color, the crisis of June 20, 1793 represented both a victory and an unprecedented threat. In the fighting for Cap Français, they had been the French republican commissioners' most loyal supporters, but in order to defeat their opponents, the commissioners and the free people of color had had to call on the more numerous slave population. These new "citizens

of 20 June" threatened the privileged political position the free men of color had hoped to occupy thanks to their alliance with the French authorities.

When they made their offer of freedom to the blacks on June 20, 1793, the French commissioners certainly expected that it would be welcomed by the black insurgents whose uprising in August 1791 had struck the first blow against slavery. Eventually, the reversal of French policy carried out on June 20, 1793 did provide the "opening" through which the most capable of the insurgent leaders, a certain Toussaint of Bréda, moved to join the French forces under the new name he adopted just after that event: Toussaint Louverture. Initially, however, Toussaint and the other insurrectionary leaders saw the proclamation of June 20, 1793 as a desperate gamble by a defeated faction. Still embittered by the war that the French authorities had conducted against them since the start of the uprising, and distrustful of the agents of a government that had proclaimed in 1789 that "men are born and remain free and equal in rights" but that had sent thousands of troops to defend slavery in its colonies, the black insurgents cast their lot with France's enemies. It would take nearly a year before Toussaint would break with the other black insurgents and ally himself with the French to create a "colony of citizens" whose population would eventually win their independence in a war against a Napoleonic France that had abandoned its own republican ideals.[2] Without the events of June 20, 1793, the black insurrection might still have prevailed, but the fusion of that movement and the French republican tradition that took place in 1794 would not have occurred, and the significance of an eventual black victory would have been quite different.

The effects of the destruction of Cap Français were not confined to France and Saint-Domingue. France's most valuable colony was a vital part of the vast network of trade and commerce that defined the Atlantic world of the eighteenth century. The events of June 20, 1793 drove thousands of survivors – whites, blacks, and free people of color – to the shores of the new republic of the United States, producing the country's first refugee crisis. The horrifying stories the white colonists brought with them changed the American debate about slavery, convincing

[2] The phrase "colony of citizens" comes from the title of Laurent Dubois's book on French revolutionary colonial policy: *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution and Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787–1804* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

southerners that their "peculiar institution" needed to be defended in the most intransigent terms.[3] The refugees of color, many of whom settled permanently in cities such as Philadelphia and New York, had their own versions of events in Saint-Domingue and brought a new spirit of self-assertion to the growing African-American communities there. Fear of the effect that their testimonies might have on slaves in the United States led to the first American panic about foreign subversion; legislators in states such as South Carolina tried to expel any persons of African descent coming from the French islands. The embattled French minister Edmond Genet, remembered in history primarily for having alienated American political leaders by his clumsy attempts to draw the United States into France's conflict with Britain, actually spent more of his time dealing with the consequences of the events of June 20, 1793 in Saint-Domingue than with any other problem. His decision to favor the antislavery faction among the white refugees over their more numerous opponents was critical in making the French National Convention's vote for abolition possible.

Although the crisis, or the journée, to use a French revolutionary term, of June 20, 1793 in Cap Français had profound effects on the history of Saint-Domingue, France, and the United States, it has never been the focus of a thorough historical study. Dramatic and important as it was, the burning of Cap Français soon receded from public memory, crowded out by other events. In debates about slavery, the flames that consumed the "Paris of the Antilles" in June 1793 merged with images of the fiery destruction of Saint-Domingue plantations at the beginning of the slave insurrection in August 1791 to create one generalized memory of violence. Later, memories of the journée of June 1793 were overlaid by reports of the horrors that followed Napoleon's effort to reimpose white rule in the colony in 1802 and 1803, which led, among other things, to a second burning of the city. After the final defeat of the French in November 1803 and the proclamation of Haitian independence, Saint-Domingue became a taboo topic, mentioned only by a few unhappy former colonists who still dreamed of recovering their lost properties. In the United States, the events in Cap Français were soon overshadowed by reports of the yellow fever epidemic that devastated the East Coast in 1793 and that was often said to have been brought by the refugees from Saint-Domingue.

[3] For an overview of American reactions to the upheavals in Saint-Domingue in the 1790s, see Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550–1812* (Baltimore, Md.: Pelican Books, 1969 (orig. 1968)), 375–86.

As modern historians have sought to reconstruct the story of what we now call the Haitian Revolution, they have rarely given much attention to the episode of June 20, 1793. The most extensive recent account of the journée – the one that first attracted my attention to the event – is the concluding chapter of the American novelist Madison Smartt Bell's powerful novel, *All Souls' Rising*, which ends with the protagonist and his mixed-race mistress making a narrow escape from the burning city into the surrounding hills.[4] It is no surprise that the story of June 20 would attract a writer of fiction. From the time of Homer's *Iliad* and Virgil's *Aeneid*, whose lines came spontaneously to the minds of many of those who experienced the burning of Cap Français, the vision of a rich city invaded and engulfed in flames has had a horrid but irresistible fascination. Like the siege of Troy, the destruction of Cap Français was the occasion for memorable human dramas. Madison Smartt Bell wove historically accurate accounts of some of them into the tale of his fictional characters, but as I have delved into the archival documents about the event, I have realized that, in this case, it is fair to say that what really happened was more extraordinary than what a novelist could imagine.

If historians have not paid much attention to the details of the journée of June 20, 1793, it is not because sources are lacking. The amount of information available about this episode is eloquent testimony to the accuracy of David Geggus's assertion that historians have only begun to exploit the documents available for the study of the Haitian Revolution.[5] Although the revolutionary politicians in Paris took months to grasp the significance of what had taken place, the French National Convention eventually ordered an exhaustive inquiry. Its investigating committee gathered thousands of documents, all still preserved in the Archives nationales in Paris: hastily scrawled orders given by the republican officials in the city, logs kept by the captains of the ships in the Cap Français harbor, correspondence written by Toussaint Louverture and other insurgent leaders, testimonies and depositions by individuals of all sorts who were present. American newspapers from the summer of 1793 are filled with the stories told by the refugees, as are the papers of the minister Genet and of the French consuls in Norfolk, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Charleston, and New York. Many of those who survived

[4] Madison Smartt Bell, *All Souls' Rising* (New York: Penguin, 1995), 477–500.

[5] David P. Geggus, "Underexploited Sources," in David Geggus, *Haitian Revolutionary Studies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002), 43–54.

the catastrophe later wrote memoirs.[6] The events leading up to the journée can be reconstructed from the official correspondence of the republican commissioners and military commanders who scrupulously observed the French government's rules about record keeping, as well as from the papers of their opponents and from the gazettes published in Saint-Domingue. It is true that the vast majority of these documents tell stories seen through the eyes of white participants and witnesses, whereas we have only scanty testimony from free people of color and blacks. This imbalance is regrettable but inevitable: the white participants belonged to a culture of records and the written word, whereas most of the black population was illiterate. Indeed, the whites' virtual monopoly over the generation of paper records was one of the means by which a small minority of European colonists had dominated a much larger slave population. As we shall see, however, the documents written by whites at the time of June 20, 1793 enable us to say a good deal about the behavior of free colored and black participants in these events, and the fact that these documents come from individuals with widely varying perspectives means that the historian is not the prisoner of a single "white" point of view.

Since the documentation about the journée of June 20, 1793 is so abundant, why has this event received so little attention in historical accounts of the Haitian uprising? In part, it is because the details of the journée do not fit the overall frameworks into which the story of the Haitian Revolution and the struggle against slavery in France and in the wider Atlantic world are now usually set, particularly the two "ready-made but deceptive approaches to emancipation" that Robin Blackburn already challenged twenty years ago in his magisterial work on *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery*. "One of these concentrates all attention on respectable metropolitan abolitionism," he wrote, while "the other nourishes a romantic regard for the pristine virtues of rebellion."[7] These two contrasting narratives of the abolition of slavery share the common assumption that this outcome was the result of the conscious intentions and actions of those involved. In fact, both the rebellious slaves in Saint-Domingue and the French abolitionists frequently put other priorities, such as struggles for power among the insurrection's leaders and the

[6] For excerpts from some of these accounts, see Jeremy D. Popkin, *Facing Racial Revolution: Eyewitness Accounts of the Haitian Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 180–232.

[7] Robin Blackburn, *The Overthrow of Colonial Slavery, 1776–1848* (London: Verso, 1988), 530.

defense of French national interests among the abolitionists, ahead of their concern about slavery. Furthermore, the events that led to emancipation in Saint-Domingue and in France often resulted from interventions of groups and individuals for whom slavery was not a major concern.

Although it was the moment when the immediate abolition of slavery suddenly emerged as a practical possibility, the journée of June 20, 1793 was not directly provoked by the black insurgents who had been fighting the whites since August 1791. The journée began as a conflict between rival white groups, both of them led by outsiders to the colony. The city's free men of color were also involved in the struggle from the outset, but armed black insurgents only entered the fray after its outcome had already been determined, and the main leaders of the black struggle, including Toussaint Louverture, not only played no part in the journée, but also rejected the appeal for help made by the beleaguered republican commissioners. Recent research has underlined the important role of the black population in pushing the commissioners to broaden their emancipation offer after June 20, 1793, but the blacks who pressured the commissioners in the summer of 1793 were not the veteran insurgents who had taken up arms in 1791.[8] Only Toussaint Louverture's belated conversion in May 1794 enabled him to claim a place in the coalition supporting the Republic and, eventually, to emerge as its leader.

Even those historians who have understood that the conflict on June 20, 1793 began as a fight among whites have often relied on the highly partisan version of events endorsed by the French National Convention when it passed its abolition decree of February 4, 1794 and have thus mischaracterized the parties involved. C. L. R. James, who devoted only a page of his classic *Black Jacobins* to the event, summarily dismissed the opponents of the commissioners as "counterrevolutionaries," and, in his recent *A Colony of Citizens*, Laurent Dubois perpetuates a common myth when he describes General François-Thomas Galbaud, leader of the attack on the commissioners, as a "royalist."[9] The role of the black

[8] Elizabeth Colwill shows the importance of the demands put forward by the population in Le Cap after June 20, 1793 in her article, "'Fêtes de l'Hymen, Fêtes de la liberté': Marriage, Manhood, and Emancipation in Revolutionary Saint Domingue," in David Geggus and Norman Fiering, eds., *The World of the Haitian Revolution* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009), 125–55.

[9] C. L. R. James, *The Black Jacobins* (New York: Vintage Books, 1963 (orig. 1938)), 126–7; Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens*, 155. In his more detailed history of the Haitian Revolution, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge,

population has also frequently been misunderstood. In *The Making of Haiti*, Carolyn Fick writes that "over ten thousand slaves in Le Cap were now in open revolt" at the moment when the republican commissioners issued their emancipation decree, although in fact, blacks played little role in the first day of violence in the city, and those who subsequently entered the fray were fighting to uphold the authority of the representatives of the French government, not rising against them.[10] The mid-twentieth-century Haitian historian Gérard Laurent, author of a four-volume study of the commissioner Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, is one of the few to have recognized that the whites on both sides sincerely believed they were fighting for the cause of patriotism and the Revolution: "They fought each other in the name of the same country, for the same goal."[11]

The fact that much of the literature about the Haitian Revolution and the abolition of slavery in Saint-Domingue has focused on two specific figures, Toussaint Louverture and the French emancipator Sonthonax, has also worked against a recognition of the nature and significance of the crisis of June 20, 1793. Debate continues about how involved Toussaint was in the outbreak of the slave uprising in August 1791, but there is no argument about his absence from the drama in Cap Français. Not only was he not present at the event, but for many months afterward, he refused to concede that its outcome had any significance for the cause for which he was fighting. Whether they admire Toussaint or take a critical view of him, scholars who make his actions the center of their narratives accord only minimal attention to the journée of June 20, 1793.[12] Gérard Laurent and Robert Louis Stein, Sonthonax's American biographer, have written the best-documented and most accurate recent accounts of the events leading up to June 20, 1793, but the fact that both their books focus

MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), Dubois gives a more accurate characterization of Galbaud and a more substantial account of the journée of June 20, 1793 (pp. 154–9).

[10] Carolyn E. Fick, *The Making of Haiti: The Saint Domingue Revolution from Below* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 159.

[11] Gérard Laurent, *Le Commissaire Sonthonax à Saint-Domingue. I: Le Lutteur* (Port-au-Prince: La Phalange, 1965), 159. One of the better accounts of the details of the fighting on June 20 is the Haitian historian Pauléus Sannon's *Histoire de Toussaint-Louverture*, 3 vs. (Port-au-Prince: n.p., 1920–23), 1: 120–5.

[12] Pierre Pluchon, whose critical biography of Toussaint Louverture is the best documented life of the black leader, dispatches the events of June 20, 1793 in three sentences (Pierre Pluchon, *Toussaint Louverture* (Paris: Fayard, 1989), 81). The novelist Madison Smartt Bell's biography, more admiring of its subject, gives the drama of Cap Français two pages (Madison Smartt Bell, *Toussaint Louverture: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 2007), 52–3.

heavily on Sonthonax means that they give only passing mention to many crucial aspects of the crisis, such as the central role of French sailors in the assault on the commissioners and the importance of the French consuls and the minister Genet in determining its outcome.[13] The biographic approach also tends to make abolition in Saint-Domingue appear to be primarily a consequence of one man's pre-existing convictions. A more careful examination of the circumstances leading to the crisis of June 20, 1793 highlights both the complexities and ambivalences of Sonthonax's actions and the important roles played by many less well-known figures surrounding him and his colleague, Etienne Polverel. These include not only the black insurrectionists, but also the free colored leader Charles Guillaume Castaing, the white plantation owner Louis Dufay – whose speech led to the French National Convention's vote to abolish slavery in 1794 – and, above all, the republican general François-Thomas Galbaud, whose name has remained attached to the crisis in Haitian memory, where it is known as "*l'affaire Galbaud*."

In the past decade, as the Haitian Revolution has moved from the margins of history to occupy a central place in our understanding of the revolutionary era, it has been presented primarily as a rare and heroic example of successful self-liberation by an oppressed subaltern group. The story of the secret meeting of insurrectionary leaders at Bois Caïman that launched the uprising in August 1791 has become, for the people of Haiti, what the tale of the Minutemen at Lexington and Concord is for Americans and the storming of the Bastille for the French: one of the epic moments in the modern struggle for freedom.[14] Despite the troubled history of modern Haiti, the country's declaration of independence on January 1, 1804 is another milestone in that history. For the first time, a colonized population of people of color overthrew white domination and asserted its right to govern itself. It is tempting to assume that this victory was in some sense the inevitable result of the courage and determination shown by the authors of the original insurrection, and that the outcome of the insurrection was inscribed in its origins. To suggest that the connection between 1791 and 1804 was instead highly contingent, that it depended on the outcome of a crisis that was not directly

[13] Robert Louis Stein, *Léger Félicité Sonthonax: The Lost Sentinel of the Republic* (Rutherford, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985).

[14] Marc A. Christophe, "The Ceremony of Bois Caïman," in Cécile Accilien, Jessica Adams, and Elmide Méléance, eds., *Revolutionary Freedoms: A History of Survival, Strength and Imagination in Haiti* (Coconut Creek, FL: Caribbean Studies Press, 2006), 97–100.

produced by the insurrection and that might have had very different results, is to challenge deeply held beliefs about the power of libertarian ideals and of human agency.

To look at the Haitian Revolution in this light – as a sequence of events whose outcome was by no means inevitable – is not to question the courage of the insurgents who rose up against slavery in 1791. The uprising begun in August 1791 was indeed significant: it was the largest slave revolt in modern history, and the only one that ultimately had a successful outcome. As we will see, however, there are important questions about whether the insurgents, prior to the journée of June 20, 1793, had expressed an "unequivocal and unwavering commitment to universal emancipation based upon natural human rights," as a recent essay by Nick Nesbitt claims,[15] and they had certainly not begun to think of demanding independence. It is also far from clear that the insurgency was on the verge of success at the time of the events in Cap Français. Contrary to the image conveyed in many publications about the subject, the slave insurrection did not resemble an avalanche, steadily gaining force as it proceeded. As a structured movement, it was confined to the North Province, one of the three divisions of the colony, and even there, many districts remained unaffected until after the destruction of Cap Français and the proclamation of general liberty in the summer of 1793. Nor was the insurrection's progress a story of unbroken success. The insurgent leaders spent much time quarreling with each other, and in early 1793, their forces suffered such severe defeats that the republican commissioners were able to leave the North Province and turn their attention to suppressing white dissidence in the rest of the colony. On June 20, 1793, the man who would in the end supply the black population with real leadership was not yet aware of his destiny, and he had not yet adopted the name – Toussaint Louverture – under which he would become famous. It was only after the journée of June 20, 1793 that it became clear that the French revolutionary government would not be able to defeat the slave insurrection. It was in the aftermath of this unexpected and far from inevitable event that it became apparent for the first time that victory for the insurgents might be achieved in alliance with the French, rather than by struggle against them.

In addition to challenging overly determinist narratives of the Haitian Revolution, a close examination of the events of June 20, 1793 raises

[15] Nick Nesbitt, *Universal Emancipation: The Haitian Revolution and the Radical Enlightenment* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2008), 145.