

Chapter 1

The limits of emancipation: freedom contained in Haiti: 1804–1844

Bon pawol pale, the truth speaks, children come listen, listen to me, a revolution is truly starting.
Boukman Eksperyans

Introduction

On 22 August 1791 Boukman Dutty and other enslaved people in St Domingue launched the greatest revolt for freedom from slavery known in the Americas. Following this, the revolutionary government of France at its 1794 Convention passed an Emancipation Act, abolishing slavery in its Empire. From 1794 onwards all European governments with Caribbean colonies passed Emancipation Acts, making it illegal for anyone to own people as property. The last European country with colonies in the Caribbean to pass emancipation legislation was Spain in 1886.

These abolition of slavery Acts did not immediately grant the newly freed people the same civil rights and liberties as the White community. They also did not put the emancipated Black people on an equal social standing with formerly free minority groups, such as Jews and propertied Coloured people.

Toussaint L'Ouverture

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-43545-1 - Freedoms Won: Caribbean Emancipations, Ethnicities and Nationhood

Hilary McD. Beckles and Verene A. Shepherd

Excerpt

[More information](#)

In the British colonies the Abolition Act of 1833 only unconditionally freed children under six years old. The majority of 'freed people' went through a further period of bondage. The British and Dutch officially called this period 'the Apprenticeship'; in Cuba it was called the *patronato*; in Puerto Rico the *régimen de contratación*; and in the territories ruled by Denmark, it was called 'free birth' or 'free womb'.

In the French-colonised Caribbean there was no formal period of partial emancipation. However, before 1804 in Haiti (the former St Domingue), the newly emancipated people still had to work on a contract basis for their former enslavers.

In this chapter we will learn about:

- 1 Freedom and bondage in revolutionary Santo Domingo and Haiti.

This timeline will help you to organise information around the dates of important events:

Timeline

22 August 1791	Start of Haitian Revolution
1794	Revolutionary government of France passed Emancipation Act; implemented in Haiti
1795	Toussaint takes over Haiti as ruler
1801	Workers' rebellion in Haiti led by Moïse
1802	Toussaint captured
	Napoleon re-imposes slavery in the French-colonised Caribbean
1803	Toussaint dies at Fort de Jour
1804	Dessalines declares Haitian Independence
1806	Dessalines killed and Christophe takes over
1818–1843	Boyer rules Haiti
1833	Emancipation Act passed, British-colonised territories
1838	End of Apprenticeship, British-colonised territories
1844	Independence in Santo Domingo
1848	Abolition of slavery – French-colonised Caribbean
1886	Emancipation in Spanish-colonised Cuba

1 Freedom and bondage in revolutionary Haiti

In 1793 the former enslaved population in St Domingue defeated the French and their allies, Spain and Britain. By 1795 Toussaint L'Ouverture was in political and military control of St Domingue. He was anxious to rebuild the economy and to restore trade and production levels. The question was whether he could rebuild the economy with free rather than bonded labour, especially as there was huge opposition to the use of bonded labour from all the European and American enslaving nations.

Toussaint's rule

Toussaint developed an agricultural policy to help rebuild the plantation sector. This policy returned many properties to the families who had owned them during slavery. It also encouraged foreign trade with European merchants, and tried to attract investments from Europe and the United States. Toussaint believed that this policy was the key to economic restoration, as well as to political and social stability. But not all freed people supported this policy. They did not warm to his idea that they should return in large numbers to work on the large coffee and sugar estates. Neither did they readily accept his vision of them as a service labour force needed to rebuild an economy based on exports.

After the revolutionary abolition of slavery, workers throughout St Domingue continued to resist and rebel when forced to return to work on the large estates. Many fled to the hills to live as peasants or to join the Maroon communities. Others migrated to the towns in search of work that was not linked to plantation slavery. In the rural villages people preferred to be independent farmers and peasants rather than labourers on former estates. The rural people associated the old economic system with plantation slavery. For them liberty meant not working on the plantations under a system that controlled their social, economic and political life.

So Toussaint was faced with a dilemma – how could he supply labour to the plantations restored to former owners? Workers would work on the plantations only if they were forced to do so. Toussaint's answer was to use the law to force people to work on the plantations, backed up by the courts. The government issued an order that stated that:

- All freed people who were plantation labourers must return to the plantation on which they lived before the abolition of slavery.
- Those who did not return to the plantations would be arrested and placed at the disposal of the army.

- Those who refused to work or who left the plantation without permission would be reported to the military commanders, so that legal action could be taken against them.
- In return for their labour, workers would receive a quarter of the crop produced, or a quarter of its net value. The other three-quarters belonged to the landowner. They would also be given provision grounds, which they could cultivate for themselves.

But government also introduced new labour laws, known as the rural code (see page 5 for description) to protect the labourers from abuse and injustice at the hands of landowners. For example, the landowners were not allowed to use a whip or any other form of corporal punishment. Another example was that the code said the working day could only last from 5 a.m. to 5 p.m. However, many of these measures simply helped to bring back elements of the forced labour system of the plantations against which the workers had fought and died in large numbers.

Worker's rebellion of 1801

It was anticipated that there would be popular opposition to Toussaint's rural development policy. In 1801 a workers' rebellion took place in the Northern Department against Toussaint's government. It was led by one of the more radical leaders, General Moïse. He was in favour of breaking up the large plantations and making land available to the freed people. This policy was in direct opposition to Toussaint's policy. The workers aimed to prevent the White community from regrouping as an elite, to unite the Coloured and Black people, and to declare the independence of St Domingue. The revolt was severely suppressed by Toussaint's army which executed over 1,000 workers. Moïse was arrested, condemned as a traitor, and shot.

Napoleon tries to re-impose slavery

Moïse's revolt was not the only serious challenge that Toussaint and his government had to face. Napoleon's government was determined to overthrow the revolution and re-impose slavery in St Domingue. So, workers had to support Toussaint to protect their freedom, but at the same time they opposed his economic policies. The major challenge Toussaint faced was to lead people who had high expectations of freedom and who supported his military strategies, but who opposed his economic policies. He lived in constant expectation that someone within his own ranks would betray him.

Napoleon's top priority was to capture Toussaint. He believed that if he could cut off the 'head of the revolution',

then the 'body' would 'fall and die'. In 1802 he succeeded in cutting off the 'head' through a deceitful plot. Toussaint was invited to a meeting with French officials in Port au Prince supposedly to discuss the future relations between his country and France. Here he was kidnapped and taken to France. In France he was imprisoned high in the French Alps at Fort de Joux where he died on 27 April 1803.



Fig 1.1 Napoleon Bonaparte

Dessaline's rule

The officers of Toussaint's army had not supported his policy of negotiation with the French because they did not trust the intentions of the French government. Once Toussaint was captured, his officers were determined to resist Napoleon's attempts to restore slavery. They also resolved to step up the war for independence.

Jean-Jacques Dessalines emerged as his replacement to lead the armed forces. Dessalines and Henri Christophe, another of Toussaint's top military commanders, revived the struggle against the French and they succeeded in defeating the French army. In 1804 Dessalines named himself Jean-Jacques I, Emperor of Haiti. He expelled the rest of the Napoleonic army and declared St Domingue independent of France. He renamed the country 'Haiti' after the Taino word meaning 'mountainous'. He also positioned Haiti as a safe haven for hemispheric Blacks fleeing enslavement.

Dessalines's economic policies, which were similar to those of Toussaint, resulted in even harsher measures taken against workers. The idea of meaningful freedom was becoming less and less of a reality to workers.



Fig 1.2 Jean-Jacques Dessalines

Dessalines imposed a military dictatorship on the newly independent country. He brought a large percentage of land under the control of the state. He planned to rebuild agriculture by establishing a number of large agricultural projects and by using the plantations. But first he had to rebuild the large plantations, which had been ruined in the war of liberation. This required the mass mobilisation of labour. Second, he had to tackle the task of producing in workers a commitment to high productivity.

Dessalines declared that all Haitians, except soldiers, must be available for work to cultivate the plantations. Women could not join the army even though at independence in 1804 they outnumbered men 3:2. So women formed the majority of the labour force. They took on the greater share of the hardship associated with this policy of compulsory plantation labour. Women protested against the injustice of this. They had fought alongside the men in the war of liberation. Now these economic and social policies put them in an inferior position to men; while men were promoted as the more privileged citizens.

Labourers were treated like serfs. They were forbidden to leave, without permission, the plantations to which they were assigned. But overseers, mostly soldiers, were told not to whip the labourers; most of them still did so. Government officials at the local level kept a daily record of the work done by each labourer. Those labourers, who were said to be idle or lazy were made to build public roads. Workers resented these measures in the same way as they had resented Toussaint's measures. There was widespread public protest, which divided the army that was called upon to suppress the opposition: some soldiers supported the workers, while others did not. This situation bred rebellion amongst officers. So Dessalines' government experienced diminishing popular support. He was eventually assassinated in 1806.

Henri Christophe's rule

The Coloured community had settled mainly in the south. They saw themselves as a separate political group, with its own interests. They had made a bid to replace Dessalines with one of their own leaders. It was generally believed that they were responsible for creating the circumstances in which Dessalines was murdered. They had opposed him and were determined to overthrow his government. However, despite this aggressive political campaign of the Coloured people the Black general, Christophe, emerged as President to succeed Dessalines. He had established his own political base in the north of the country. The bitter struggle between the Black and Coloured elite for political leadership grew stronger. It ended in Haiti being divided into two separate 'countries': Christophe ruled in the

north while Pétion, the leader of the Coloured people, governed in the south.

Just like Toussaint and Dessalines, Christophe tried to revive the large sugar and coffee plantations using forced labour. Women, who were the majority of workers, worked from dusk till dawn in the fields, often with their children. For these women there were many similarities between slavery against which they had fought and the new conditions of work. Those women who were not strong and healthy were expected to do so-called 'lighter work' around the estate and to look after the children of field labourers. This was to make sure that ill-health was not used as an excuse to avoid work, a practice that was common during slavery.

Christophe's labour arrangements in the north were very different to what was happening under Pétion's leadership in the south. Pétion's policies were more advantageous to peasant farming and to helping workers get land. The result of this policy difference was that people thought that Pétion's republic was more favourable to Black workers than Christophe's kingdom. So it was normal to find Black workers crossing the border in flight from Christophe's kingdom to Pétion's republic to seek a better life for themselves.



Fig 1.3 Henri Christophe

Jean-Pierre Boyer's rule

Jean-Pierre Boyer took over the government of both the north and south of Haiti after Pétion died in 1818 and Christophe died in 1820 and so united the country once again. In 1826 he introduced the dreaded *Code Rural* which was designed to re-organise the agricultural economy of Haiti. The *Code Rural* was based on the principle that peasants were obliged to work on plantations and if they refused to they would be punished. The objectives of the code were:

- To make it possible for the Haitian economy to recover the levels of productivity achieved under Dessalines.
- To make sure that there was a constant supply of labour, which was sometimes short because peasants had a tendency to evade work and leave the plantations to cultivate their own land.

Terms of the Code Rural

The main terms of the *Code Rural* were as follows:

- No one was excused from working on the land, except for government servants and professionals.
- Landowners could not abandon the plot on which they lived and to which they would be attached from then onward, without prior permission from the local justice of the peace or military chief.
- Children of agricultural workers were not allowed to attend school without the permission of the authorities, if it meant they would be abandoning their parents' plots.
- Workers could not leave the countryside under any circumstances to engage in business.
- Workers could not build their own houses and leave the plantations on which they were supposed to be working for a living.
- Workers were not allowed to spend more than eight days outside the plantation even with permission from the plantation owner.
- A fine or imprisonment would result if a worker failed to stay for three years with one employer.
- Vagrancy was forbidden.
- Pregnant women had to work up to their fourth month of pregnancy.
- Women had to return to work four months after the birth of their children.
- Soldiers were assigned to each plantation to make sure that the code was obeyed.

The *Code Rural* did not achieve its objectives for the following reasons:

- There was worker resistance to this form of enforced labour.
- The army could not enforce the regulations.

- When the army no longer feared a French invasion it relaxed military discipline.

It was not only in Haiti that Boyer's policies were unpopular among the people. They were also unpopular in Santo Domingo.

Santo Domingo

In 1822, President Boyer, feeling secure that Haiti was united, boldly invaded the neighbouring Spanish colony of Santo Domingo. He reached his objective by taking control and abolishing slavery there.

Toussaint had already attempted this in 1801, but at that time the Spanish forces were backed by French enforcements, and they managed to stop Toussaint's efforts to abolish slavery. Haitians remained determined to remove slavery from the entire island of Hispaniola. Toussaint's occupation of St Domingo was, therefore, shortlived.

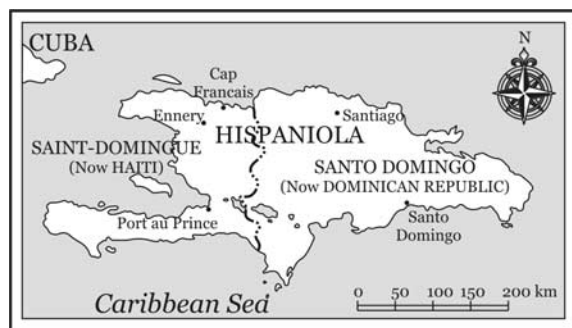


Fig 1.4 Hispaniola

Toussaint had also in the short period tried to change the agricultural land policy in Santo Domingo and to reorganise the system of labour. As in St Domingue, he tried to bring in an export-oriented plantation system based on forced labour rather than a traditional economy based on small-scale livestock farming and subsistence agriculture. In this respect Boyer's regime was similar to Toussaint's. He selected military commanders to govern Santo Domingo and to make sure that production for export was continued under the *Code Rural*. He passed laws to force freed people to grow only export crops. People were not allowed to own large tracts of land.

Boyer's occupation of Santo Domingo, in contrast, lasted for 22 years. In this time there was increasing Spanish colonial opposition to Haitian rule of the country. The Spanish government had criticised the invasion of its colony. The Haitians responded by saying that invasion was necessary to bring freedom to the enslaved, to secure the borders of Haiti, and to unite the country in its opposition to slavery and colonialism. But the liberated

workers also opposed Boyer's land policy and the stringent policies of his government, just as the workers had done in St Domingue under Toussaint. Boyer's overthrow strengthened anti-Haitian sentiments in Santo Domingo and this led to separatist agitation. This was successful since, in 1844, Santo Domingo declared its independence from Haiti.

To sum up

Slavery had ended in Haiti and Santo Domingo, but the newly emancipated did not experience complete liberation. Consequently they resisted autocratic regimes and all systems of reformed-slavery, such as the new labour codes.

Revision questions

- 1 Read the extract and answer the questions that follow:

The abolition of slavery in St Domingue through slave revolution and warfare against the French and their allies, and the achievement of independence in 1804, left the Haitians free of Imperial rule. Several rulers from among the people of Haiti came to power between 1795 and 1804. Their policies at times antagonised the freed people.

- a Name two rulers who came to power in Haiti between 1795 and 1804.
 - b State four reasons why the rulers in Haiti 'antagonised the freed people' between 1795 and 1804.
 - c State three ways in which Haitians resisted the policies of their rulers in the period 1795–1804.
- 2 Explain the importance of Haitian independence in your life.