In order to understand the Haitian Revolution, it is important to understand the French colony of Saint-Domingue. Saint-Domingue was located in the Caribbean on the island of Hispaniola, alongside Spain’s colony of Santo Domingo (present-day Dominican Republic).

To help you understand the revolution that began in 1791, the first part of your reading will trace the history of the island. You will read about the Tainos, the original inhabitants of Hispaniola, and how their society was devastated by European colonizers. You will read about how the colonization of Hispaniola was related to European competition for colonies in the Americas. You will also explore the contours of life in eighteenth century Saint-Domingue and consider how different groups had very different experiences in the colony. The reading will help you consider how conditions on and off the island gave rise to the only successful slave revolt in history.

The Tainos of Hispaniola

The island of Hispaniola was colonized first by the Spanish and then by the French. By the end of the seventeenth century, there were two colonies on the island: Spanish Santo Domingo in the east and French Saint-Domingue in the west. But long before the arrival of Europeans, a group of people called the Tainos inhabited Hispaniola.

Who were the Tainos?

The Tainos were the original inhabitants of Hispaniola. They migrated from South America to populate much of the Caribbean many generations before the arrival of the Spanish. Taino groups lived on present-day Cuba, Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, as well as on Hispaniola. The groups on these islands shared a common language and culture, and there was some travel amongst them, particularly between Hispaniola and Puerto Rico.

The Tainos on Hispaniola lived in large villages governed by caciques, or chiefs, who could be male or female. They were experienced woodworkers, potters, weavers, and carvers, and they used sophisticated agriculture and fishing techniques. Historians estimate that before the arrival of Europeans, the indigenous population on Hispaniola numbered anywhere from 500,000 to a million people.
What happened when the Spanish landed on Hispaniola?

On December 6, 1492, on his first voyage to the Americas, Christopher Columbus landed on the northern coast of Hispaniola. There, he established the first European settlement in that part of the world, a small fort named La Navidad. He left behind thirty-nine of his men to search for gold. The men mistreated the Tainos, pillaging their villages and committing acts of violence. The Tainos retaliated by killing the men and burning down the fort. When Columbus returned a year later with seventeen ships and twelve hundred men to expand the settlement, he found the ruins of La Navidad.

Nonetheless, Columbus and his men took control of the island and created a colony they called Santo Domingo. The Spanish conquistadores, or conquerors, enslaved the local people and forced them to mine for gold in the southern part of the island. Within a few decades of exposure to European diseases and the harsh conditions of slavery, much of the island’s native population had perished.

“The pattern established at the outset has remained unchanged to this day, and the Spaniards still do nothing save tear the natives to shreds, murder them and inflict upon them untold misery, suffering and distress, tormenting, harrying and persecuting them mercilessly....”

—Bartolomé de las Casas, a Spanish priest, 1552

Many Spaniards intermarried with indigenous women. The indigenous population numbered just 60,000 by 1509. It was around this time that Santo Domingo’s mines ran out of gold. Many settlers left the island and migrated to other, more lucrative areas of Spanish conquest, including present-day Mexico and Peru.

European Settlement

With the gold mines exhausted, the remaining settlers began to grow sugar and raise cattle. Having decimated the indigenous population, the Spanish began to import African slaves to work in the sugar mills and plantations. The first African slaves in the Americas were brought to Hispaniola in 1502. By 1546, there were approximately twelve thousand slaves on the island. This was only a tiny fraction of the hundreds of thousands of Africans that Europeans would later bring to Hispaniola.
The labor of these enslaved Africans created an economic boom for much of the sixteenth century. The colonial economy was dependent on trade. Merchants exported the cow hides and sugar produced on the island in return for manufactured goods from Spain. The city of Santo Domingo became a thriving port and a key location in Spain’s growing colonial empire.

**How did events in Europe affect Santo Domingo?**

When Columbus returned to Spain to recount his expeditions, many were astounded at the abundance of natural resources he had found on Santo Domingo. The island’s riches quickly sparked interest throughout Europe. Other countries, including France, Portugal, and Britain, looked to expand their influence in what they called the “new world.”

Throughout the period of European colonialism on Hispaniola, powerful European countries fought in a series of wars. Leaders competed for political and territorial control in Europe as well as for colonies abroad. The Caribbean was one arena of these wars. Europeans fought to wrestle colonial possessions away from rivals and to disrupt colonial trade by robbing commerce and treasure ships. European competition in the Caribbean would later play an important role in the Haitian Revolution.

The threat of enemy navies and pirates took a heavy toll on Santo Domingo. In order to protect its treasure ships, Spain reorganized its fleet to meet in the safer port of Havana, in its nearby colony Cuba. Fewer and fewer trade ships entered the port of Santo Domingo for fear of attack by enemy ships. Merchants in Santo Domingo found it increasingly hard to trade and the island became isolated from other colonies in the region.

For much of the next three centuries, Spain’s colony on the eastern side of the island would grow only haltingly. The sugar industry declined and the colony stopped importing slaves. Most people in Spanish Santo Domingo lived in poverty. They survived through subsistence agriculture and illegal trade with European sailors and French settlers on the western part of the island.

**How did the French take control of western Hispaniola?**

Beginning in the early 1600s, small groups of pirates and buccaneers settled in western Hispaniola. These early settlers hunted wild livestock, smuggled goods, and traded with passing ships.

During the same period on the eastern part of the island, Spanish colonial administrators forced Santo Domingo’s population to live close to the city of Santo Domingo. They were hoping to limit illegal trade in the fron-
tiers. This concentration of Santo Domingo’s small population left large portions of the island open for settlement. Throughout the 1620s, British and French settlers increasingly occupied the western third of Hispaniola, threatening Spain’s claim on the island. Although the Spanish authorities attempted to dislodge these new settlers, Spain was never again able to control the entire island.

By the 1670s, the French had created a number of more permanent settlements. They grew tobacco, which led to the development of a plantation-style economy on the western side of the island. Over time, the settlers expanded their production to include indigo, coffee, and sugar. Sugar would eventually account for a vast majority of the exports from this side of the island. As the French expanded their operations, they needed more and more labor. Beginning in the 1670s, they relied on the African slave trade to supply them with workers.

The French settlements on western Hispaniola provided both opportunities and problems for the Spanish colony in the east. Trade between the two sides of the island flourished, revitalizing the fledgling economy in Santo Domingo. At the same time, competition for control of the island, as well as frequent wars in Europe between France and Spain, often spilled over into violence between French and Spanish troops on Hispaniola.

In 1697, the Treaty of Ryswick ended a war in Europe that had pitted Spain against France for nine years. The treaty gave France official control of the western third of Hispaniola. France named its new colony Saint-Domingue.

Life in Saint-Domingue

The colony of Saint-Domingue existed for just over one hundred years. For much of that time, it was the wealthiest colony in the Caribbean. By the mid-1700s it was the world’s largest sugar exporter. In order for French planters to sustain such dramatic growth, they depended on the African slave trade for ever-increasing numbers of slaves.

The growth of both Saint-Domingue’s economy and its slave population in the latter part of the eighteenth century far exceeded other Caribbean colonies. Some historians have suggested that this burst in growth may be one reason why a slave revolt was successful in Saint-Domingue and not elsewhere.

How did Saint-Domingue’s economy develop?

European colonies in the Caribbean were truly “global” economies. In Saint-Domingue, as in other Caribbean colonies, slaves from Africa reaped the wealth of the Caribbean for
the benefit of Europe. All goods produced in Saint-Domingue were sent to France, where they were re-exported to other European countries. Saint-Domingue quickly became a crucial part of the French economy.

The French devoted nearly all land in Saint-Domingue to plantations, growing mainly sugar, coffee, and tobacco. In creating their plantation empire, the French developed a sophisticated infrastructure system, building roads and water systems throughout the colony. They also cleared huge amounts of forest to make space for crops. This began the widespread deforestation of the western side of the island, a problem that continues to plague Haiti today. Throughout the eighteenth century, the economic needs of Saint-Domingue put a great deal of strain on the land and led to struggles over control of the border region with Spanish Santo Domingo.

For most of Saint-Domingue’s French-born planters, Saint-Domingue was a colony of “production” rather than a colony of “residence.” This meant that many planters hired managers to administrate their properties while they remained in France. Only the planters born on the island tended to live on their own plantations. By 1791, there were only about thirty-two thousand whites in the colony, as compared to half a million enslaved people.

The economy of Saint-Domingue grew explosively and it quickly became France’s most lucrative colony. By 1789, there were more than seven thousand plantations producing indigo, coffee, cotton, cocoa, tobacco, and sugar.

The wealth of the colony depended on the labor of hundreds of thousands of enslaved workers. In fact, many planters at the time described their wealth not in terms of money or land but by the number of slaves that they owned. Although purchasing a slave was expensive, colonial trade was so profitable that owners did not hesitate to work their slaves to death.

**How was life for enslaved people in Saint-Domingue?**

Although numbers vary widely, historians estimate that well over 700,000 Africans were brought to Saint-Domingue between 1700 and 1791. Most were from the Congo region and present-day Angola, while some were from as far away as Mozambique in southeast Africa. The religious practices, agricultural techniques, languages, political ideas, and military knowledge of these enslaved Africans heavily influenced colonial society. They also gave shape to the mass revolution that overtook the colony at the end of the eighteenth century.

Life for enslaved people consisted of dangerous work in the mills or back-breaking work in the fields. They generally rose before dawn and finished after dark. Some owners did not provide their slaves with enough food. At times, enslaved people struggled or negotiated with their owners to receive small plots of land that they could work in their free time to grow their own crops.

**How was the community of enslaved people in Saint-Domingue diverse?**

On the eve of the Revolution, about two-thirds of enslaved people were African-born. Because 5 to 10 percent of slaves in the colony died each year due to disease, malnutrition, and brutal work conditions, planters con-
stantly needed to import more. At the same time, as the century progressed, production on the island increased and the demand for more labor skyrocketed. The number of slaves imported increased from about two thousand per year in 1725 to nearly forty-eight thousand per year in 1790. Some estimate that as many as 50 percent of all slaves brought to Saint-Domingue arrived in the fifteen years leading up to the Revolution.

Enslaved people came from many cultures and spoke a variety of languages. While most were born in Africa, many were born on the island. These slaves tended to be better off than first-generation slaves. In part this was because they were more accustomed to growing their own crops and selling the surplus. Slaves born on the island also tended to have more family ties and to practice Catholicism, although this was often used to disguise Vodou religious practices (see box on page 8).

Some enslaved people were considered “elite.” These were the slaves given positions of authority, for example as domestics working in estate homes, as commandeurs, or “drivers,” who supervised groups of workers, or as artisans like carpenters and blacksmiths. Most of the elite were born on the island. Planters considered them to be reliable and trustworthy. Many of these same elite later used their positions of power to become some of the Revolution’s most effective leaders and organizers.

**Who were the affranchis?**

In addition to the large slave population, there was also a growing number of free people of color, or affranchis. (Affranchi means “ex-slave” and was often used by whites as an insult because it related free people of color to the system of slavery.) By 1789 there were nearly as many affranchis as whites in Saint-Domingue. Most affranchis were mulatto, or of mixed descent. Many were the illegitimate children of white planters, the African women these planters took as mistresses, or descendants of these groups. Others had bought their freedom from their owners.

Despite the restrictions imposed on slaves, free people of color began to amass considerable wealth and power in the 1750s. Several hundred became wealthy planters and merchants and some even had slaves of their own. Many others served in the colonial militia and the maré chaussée, a local police force created to control the growing slave population. Many
Vodou and Resistance to Slavery

Vodou, also known as “vodun” or “voodoo,” is a religion still practiced by the majority of Haiti’s population today. Vodou shares many similarities with other religions that developed among enslaved Africans in the Americas, including Voodoo and Hoodoo in New Orleans and the U.S. Gulf Coast, Santería in Cuba, and Candomblé in Brazil. Vodou is frequently misunderstood, in part because it has been widely misrepresented in the Western media. For example, Hollywood has portrayed the religion as primitive and savage, ignoring its rich history and complexity.

Vodou was created by the diverse enslaved population of Saint-Domingue and has its roots in a number of West and Central African religious traditions. Under the French, slaves were forced to convert to Catholicism and forbidden from practicing their traditional religions. Colonial authorities saw the practice of Vodou as a threat to their authority. But they were never able to suppress it successfully. Early Vodou practitioners mixed elements of Catholicism with Vodou, often as a way of disguising banned Vodou practices. The mixing of these traditions helped create the Vodou religion that exists today.

Vodou rituals are incorporated into the daily lives of its practitioners. Vodou recognizes a kind but distant creator God, called Bondye, who is the maker of the universe. But practitioners direct their prayers and rituals to the lesser divinities, called Iwa (pronounced “Iwa’h”), who are the agents of Bondye. The Iwa influence or control different spheres of life and many are associated with specific Roman Catholic saints. There is no book or central figure that defines Vodou, and beliefs and practices vary widely among different regions and practitioners. In most rituals, practitioners pray to specific Iwa for specific purposes, usually through singing, dancing, drumming, and food offerings. Priests (oungan) and priestesses (manbo) also play important roles as healers, both by administering natural medicines and by asking for help from the Iwa. The Iwa work through the transformative powers of magic, which can be harnessed for defensive or offensive purposes.

Vodou was important for enslaved people in the colonial period for a number of reasons. Vodou provided a way for enslaved people to assert some independent control over their lives. It allowed them to reaffirm their individual dignity, while also strengthening social bonds that were not based on the system of slavery. Vodou became a very powerful way of bringing people together and uniting them. People took encouragement from the intervention of powerful oungan and manbo who used magic to oppose white colonists. In addition, because Vodou was outlawed, the practice of Vodou was, itself, a form of resistance.

How did the colonial authorities try to control Saint-Domingue’s people of color?

By the time the Revolution began in 1791, there were approximately thirty-two thousand whites, twenty-eight thousand affranchis, and half a million enslaved people in the colony. In order to control Saint-Domingue’s people of color, white planters and administrators created a highly structured, repressive society.

In 1685, France’s King Louis XIV issued the Code Noir, or Black Code, a set of codes that outlined France’s position on slavery in its colonies. The Code established that slaves

whites were concerned about the growing status of affranchis.

“These men are beginning to fill the colony and it is of the greatest perversion to see them, their numbers continually increasing amongst the whites, with fortunes often greater than those of the whites…. These coloreds imitate the style of the whites and try to wipe out all memory of their original state.”

—Colonial administrators writing to French officials, 1750s
were the personal property of their masters. It also put strict limits on the behavior of slaves—for example, forbidding them to assemble for any reason, including marriage ceremonies or dances—that were enforced by violent punishments. Fugitive slaves who were caught could have their ears cut off, be hamstrung (a method of crippling by severing leg muscles), or killed. Free blacks discovered to have helped slaves could lose their freedom. The Code also gave planters the right to shoot on sight anyone they thought to be a fugitive, resulting in the deaths of many.

At the same time, the Code created some protections for slaves and outlined minimum standards for their treatment. For example, the Code dictated the minimum amount of food that owners or overseers had to provide for their slaves and set the maximum hours of work. It also put limits on the brutality that owners could use against their slaves.

But in practice the protections of the Code were not enforced and the treatment of slaves was at the discretion of the owners and overseers. Most slaves were underfed, undernourished, and overworked. Sometimes plantations had as many as two or three hundred slaves and only a handful of whites. Many planters used violence and terror to control their slaves and motivate them to work. They used a variety of brutal punishments, for example burning slaves in ovens, pouring boiling cane sugar over their heads, or putting salt, pepper, or lemon in wounds left by whippings.

How did enslaved people resist slavery?

Some historians have pointed out that there were far fewer organized slave rebellions in Saint-Domingue than in nearby colonies. Many find this surprising considering the successful revolt that eventually took place. Scholars have attributed this relative lack of

"[I]t is the feeling of absolute power the master holds over the slaves’ person that prevents them from stabbing the master to death. Remove this break and the slave will attempt anything."

—Nicolas Le Jeune, coffee planter in the North Plain

Whites also attempted to control the population of free people of color. Many felt that white dominance in the colony was threatened by successful affranchis. In the 1760s, the colonial government issued decrees designed to limit the ambitions of affranchis and prevent their becoming too much like whites. As a result, the affranchis found that they were stripped of many of the freedoms and privileges they had enjoyed. New laws forbid them from sitting with or dressing like whites, holding public office, practicing privileged trades (such as law or medicine), and assembling in public after 9 p.m. These offenses were punishable with fines, imprisonment, loss of freedom, or amputation of limbs.
revolts to a number of different factors, including the diversity of the enslaved community and the military strength of Saint-Domingue’s colonial government.

But enslaved people found other ways to resist slavery besides open revolt. Infanticide (killing one’s own child), suicide, and plots to kill the master or overseer were not uncommon. For many, resistance to slavery also meant finding ways to reaffirm their human dignity. For example, enslaved people across the island practiced Vodou (see box on page 8). Other cultural activities, such as dancing, gave enslaved people ways to express themselves and have lives independent from the confines of slavery.

Many others chose to run away from the plantations. Commonly known as “maroons,” these runaways fled to the interior mountain regions of the island and formed their own communities. Some joined with maroons from Santo Domingo. It was in these communities that the Haitian language developed, mixing elements of Spanish, French, Portuguese, and a number of African languages.

While some remained in the maroon communities, others fled to other towns in the colony and posed as free blacks. Many maroons would run away for days or weeks at a time and then return to the plantations. Enslaved people who remained on the plantations would often provide maroons with shelter, supplies, and information to help them evade capture. Maroons were later crucial to the fight for Haiti’s independence. Maroon leaders were some of the Revolution’s most powerful figures, responsible for organizing attacks and uniting rebel groups throughout the colony.

Who was François Makandal?

As the eighteenth century progressed, there were some signs that enslaved people would not continue to accept Saint-Domingue’s slave society. For example, the poisoning of planters and their families became a popular form of resistance. The most significant slave rebellion before the Revolution was a plot to poison all the whites in the north of the colony. The conspiracy, which took place in 1757, was led by François Makandal, a maroon leader who might also have been a Vodou priest. Makandal intended for the plot to spread to all parts of the colony, mainly through the actions of trusted house slaves.

Within a matter of months, Makandal was captured, convicted, and executed. His plot rattled whites in the colony. Many towns passed further restrictions on the practice of Vodou. In some areas, planters executed all of their slaves, fearful of additional poisonings. Torture and brutality by whites increased, but isolated cases of poisoning continued periodically for the rest of the century.

Significantly, Makandal’s conspiracy had forged a network of resistance among enslaved people from different plantations. Networks like this would be crucial in the Revolution three decades later. In addition, the story of Makandal was told among enslaved people across the island, fueling the idea that resistance could be successful in Saint-Domingue.

You have just read about the creation of Saint-Domingue and how the colonization of Hispaniola was related to Europe’s competition for colonies in the Americas. You have read about how Saint-Domingue’s economy grew in leaps and bounds, fueled by the massive influx of African slaves. You have seen how the colonial structure oppressed people of color and provided few protections to the slave population. You have also read about the ways in which enslaved people in the colony resisted slavery.

In Part II of your reading you will explore the early events of the Haitian Revolution. Keep in mind what you have read about here as you consider questions such as: What factors led to the outbreak of this conflict? What did different groups in the colony hope to achieve? How did European countries view their role in the Americas?
Part II: Revolution in Saint-Domingue

In 1789 revolution broke out. But this revolution was not in Saint-Domingue, it was in France. Eventually the French Revolution would result in the overthrow of the French king and the establishment of a republican government in France. (A republic is a representative government without a monarch.) It would also throw the colony of Saint-Domingue into tumult.

The French Revolution created the external conditions that helped Saint-Domingue’s enslaved people lead a successful revolt. Just two years after the start of the French Revolution, the people of Saint-Domingue would rise up in the largest slave revolt ever seen in the history of the world.

The French Revolution

In the early years of the French Revolution, there was intense debate and discussion in France about a number of issues—the rights of individuals, political participation, and the future of French government. Of particular importance to the people of Saint-Domingue, French legislators also discussed the future of France’s colonies, the rights of free people of color, and whether to abolish slavery and the slave trade.

How did people in France view slavery?

In France, a small but growing population had begun to protest France’s support of slavery. In 1788 a group of French men and women formed an association called the Société des Amis des Noirs (Society of the Friends of the Blacks) to write pamphlets and lobby the French government.

France’s antislavery campaign had its roots in the French Enlightenment. The Enlightenment was a period in which writers and philosophers introduced new ideas and ways of thinking about improving society and government. It took place across Europe in the eighteenth century.

Some Enlightenment writers and their followers condemned slavery. They opposed slavery because they claimed that it was a stain on the French character. Still, most supported the colonial system and called only for a gradual end to slavery. Events in Saint-Domingue would later push many in France to oppose slavery more strongly.

At the same time, many French revolutionary leaders cautioned against abolishing the slave system. Although most were appalled by the brutal treatment of slaves by colonial planters, they knew that France’s economy depended on trade with its colonies. Saint-Domingue in particular was crucial. It supplied the goods for more than 40 percent of France’s foreign trade.

This engraving is from a book by Abbé Raynal, a French Enlightenment philosopher who wrote of the horrors of slavery in the colonies. In this image, men beat and kill black slaves, while a man in classical garb writes on a pillar.
"[The colonial]...regime is oppressive, but it gives a livelihood to several million Frenchmen. This regime is barbarous but a still greater barbarity will result if you interfere with it without the necessary knowledge."

—Antoine-Pierre Barnave, spokesman for the colonial committee of France’s National Assembly, September 1791

In 1789, the National Assembly decided that France’s new constitution, which gave many new rights to citizens of France, would not apply to France’s colonies.

**How did events in France affect Saint-Domingue?**

The preface of France’s new constitution was called the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen. The Declaration’s first proclamation—"Men are born and remain free and equal in rights"—resonated with many enslaved people across the colony.

The debates in France also fueled the growing divisions among the rest of the population of Saint-Domingue. For example, whites interpreted the Declaration of the Rights of Man differently. Planters and other wealthy colonists believed the Declaration applied only to the rights and privileges of the white elite. Poorer whites, on the other hand, wanted the new French constitution to provide them equal privileges to the wealthy.

The French Revolution also fueled new divisions among the white population. Many saw the changes in France as an opportunity to gain more autonomy (or even outright independence) for the colony. They were tired of decrees issued by distant French officials, whom they saw as ignorant of the needs of the colony. Others, who were loyal to the king, were concerned that the revolutionary government threatened the king’s authority. But despite these differences, nearly all whites agreed that it was necessary to maintain slavery and to limit the power of the *affranchis* population.

The *affranchis*, for their part, hoped to convince the new French government to award them equal rights to whites. They were frustrated by the repressive regulations of the colony. They did not want economic change; many were slaveholders and supported the institution of slavery. Instead, they wanted an end to racial discrimination among free people. Much to the anger of Saint-Domingue’s whites, the *affranchis* worked with sympathetic groups in France to have their views heard among French decision makers.

In the months leading up to the Revolution in Saint-Domingue, the divisions among whites and *affranchis* intensified, often to the point of violence. In addition, the political turmoil in France left Saint-Domingue’s colonial administrators with little authority to control these growing disputes. Nearly every planter was too preoccupied with the colony’s power struggles to pay attention to the growing unrest of the enslaved population.

**Revolt in the North**

Although there were a number of local revolts by enslaved people in early 1791, historians generally consider August 1791 the start of the Haitian Revolution. The Revolution began with a rebellion in the north that soon engulfed the area and inspired revolts across the colony.

This rebellion was not spontaneous. It was the result of months of planning and strategizing on the part of enslaved people, maroons, and even some free blacks. Enslaved people built networks of communication among the different plantations, eavesdropping on whites and exchanging information. An enslaved man named Boukman Dutty was the rebellion’s lead organizer. In early August 1791, delegates from plantations across the central region of the North Plain met in secret to set a date for the insurrection to begin. On this day, Boukman would give a signal, the plantations would be set alight, and a general slave revolt would begin.

Once the decision was made, a group of enslaved people and maroons met to solemn-
nize their pact to fight together in a Vodou ritual.

“The god of the white man calls him to commit crimes; our god asks only good works of us. But this god who is so good orders revenge! He will direct our hands; he will aid us. Throw away the image of the god of the whites who thirsts for our tears and listen to the voice of liberty which speaks in the hearts of all of us.”

—Boukman Dutty, August 1791. This speech was recounted in a memoir published in 1824.

What happened in the early months of the rebellion?

From the first night, this slave revolt was the largest and most violent yet experienced in the American colonial world. Enslaved people led rebellions on plantations throughout the north, burning fields, sugar processing facilities, and homes. The insurrection quickly grew. Over the next several months, enslaved people on more and more plantations in the north rose up. Armed with torches, guns, sabers, and makeshift weapons they spread from plantation to plantation. By the end of September, the rebels had burned more than one thousand plantations and killed hundreds of whites. They had also burned Cap Français, the largest city in the colony, to the ground.

Many whites panicked, sending frantic requests for military aid to Santo Domingo, Cuba, Jamaica, and the United States to no avail. Others increased their repression of the remaining slave populations. They sought to uncover new plots and conspiracies, and killed hundreds in an attempt to limit the spread of the revolt.
The Haitian Revolution

“There can be no agriculture in Saint Domingue without slavery; we did not go to fetch half a million savage slaves off the coast of Africa to bring them to the colony as French citizens.”

—A colonist in Saint-Domingue, 1792

As the rebel armies grew and gained territory, rebel leaders focused their energies on strategic military operations, tactical maneuvers, and new political alliances. The rebels raided plantations for military equipment, traded with the Spanish for weaponry, and caught colonial forces off guard with surprise attacks and ambushes. More and more joined their ranks. By November, nearly half of all enslaved people in the northern part of the colony had joined the rebel armies.

What did the rebels want?

In the beginning, many of the rebels had limited goals. Most wanted to achieve better working conditions on the plantations, for example additional days of rest and the end of the use of the whip as punishment. In addition, there was a rumor that the French king had already emancipated the slaves but that Saint-Domingue’s colonists were refusing to accept the king’s decree. Some rebels fought for a freedom they believed they already had been granted.

As the revolt progressed, the goals of the rebels became more radical. Many began to see general emancipation and the expulsion of whites from the colony as the ultimate goals of the struggle. In fact, in November 1791, when rebel leaders tried to negotiate with the colonists for better working conditions and an end to fighting, their troops forced them to return to battle. The troops vowed they would continue fighting for freedom, even if it meant killing their own leaders.

How did the affranchis and whites use slaves in their own power struggles?

In the midst of the revolts in the north and central regions of the colony, the divisions among affranchis and whites sparked violence. On May 15, 1791, the French government had declared that all free people of color born of free parents were equal in rights to whites. Although this decree affected only a few hundred people, the whites of Saint-Domingue vigorously opposed it and refused to put it into practice. Four months later, France repealed the law.

Incensed, many affranchis joined the rebel armies or began rebellions of their own. At the same time, the divisions between colonists loyal to the king and those who wanted autonomy from France deepened as the political tumult in France continued. The various factions of affranchis and
whites organized their own armies to fight for power. Many armed their slaves to fight with them. These groups believed that once they defeated their rivals, they could convince the slaves to return to the plantations.

How did events in Europe shift the balance of power in Saint-Domingue?

In April 1792, the French government decreed that all free people of color would be given the full rights of citizenship. The colonial government and the **affranchi** armies worked together to overpower the whites—who strongly opposed this decree—and quell the slave revolt. The French government dispatched three new commissioners to take control of the colony. These commissioners imprisoned many whites and appointed prominent **affranchis** to positions of power. As the conflict between whites and **affranchis** eased, the colonial government had some success containing the slave revolts.

Then, in September 1792, the French government deposed the French king and declared France a republic. Later that year, French officials put King Louis XVI on trial, found him guilty of treason, and executed him. Almost immediately, France was at war with most of Europe, sending shock waves throughout the colony.

Europe in Saint-Domingue

Many European countries, still ruled by monarchs, had watched the French Revolution unfold with unease. They were appalled by the execution of the king and staunchly opposed to the creation of the French republic. These leaders believed France’s revolution might inspire their own populations to revolt. At the same time, they believed they could take advantage of a weakened France to claim more power and territory for themselves.

Saint-Domingue—one of the greatest wealth-producing colonies in world history—held particular appeal. By the late eighteenth century, Saint-Domingue produced more exports than all of Spain’s and Britain’s Caribbean colonies combined. Spain and Britain each hoped to seize the colony, simultaneously striking a blow at France’s economy and taking the lucrative colony for themselves.

**How did Spain and Great Britain become involved in the conflict in Saint-Domingue?**

In the early years of Saint-Domingue’s slave rebellion, both Spain and Great Britain had tried to remain neutral, fearful of provoking war with France. At the same time, both were afraid that the revolution in Saint-Domingue would spread to their neighboring colonies, inspiring slaves to revolt in places like Jamaica and Cuba.

Spanish Santo Domingo, which shared a long border with Saint-Domingue, was particularly affected by the conflict. Many enslaved and free people of color in Santo Domingo were sympathetic to the rebels’ cause. In addition, white colonists and rebel soldiers from Saint-Domingue regularly crossed the border into Santo Domingo for safety or provisions. While this was profitable for traders in the frontiers, Santo Domingo’s government worried about the consequences of supporting either the French or the rebels.

*“We do not know in the end which side will be our enemy.”*  
—Governor García of Santo Domingo, May 1792

Spain and Great Britain’s policy of neutrality ended with the execution of the French king. Within days, both were at war with France. Saint-Domingue quickly became one of the arenas of these European wars.

Britain and Spain’s involvement threw much of the island back into chaos. British and Spanish troops joined the colonial militia and white, rebel, and **affranchi** armies vying for territory and power in the colony.

**How did the involvement of European powers affect the colony?**

All sides in the conflict relied on slaves or rebel troops to do the bulk of their fighting. The colonial government continued to
The Haitian Revolution

Revolution, Freedom, and Land

In the early days of the Revolution, the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue responded to the conflict in many different ways. Hundreds of thousands became soldiers in the rebel armies. Many others joined in the fighting at various points in the conflict, or helped the rebels in other ways, for example by providing food and information. Others were forced by the rebels to join the cause. Some helped their white masters escape the rebel armies, while others were killed or tortured by whites seeking to uncover information about rebel plans. Still others chose to remain on the plantations in spite of the fighting. As whites abandoned their lands in droves, blacks took over the land, growing food for subsistence and adopting a peasant lifestyle.

As more enslaved people won their freedom, many who were not soldiers became less enthusiastic about joining in the continued fighting. The power struggles of the affranchi, colonist, and European groups on the island meant little to their day-to-day lives. More and more settled on abandoned plantations and grew their own crops.

Most of the former enslaved people equated freedom with the right to possess and work their own land for their own purposes. When colonial administrators tried to coerce former slaves to return to work for wages, they faced a great deal of resistance.

“How does one prove to a person who fulfills his needs on very little and who has not the desire for wealth that he must work without respite, as the prosperity of the colonies and the interests of national commerce do require, if just a few days work each month suffice to fill his individual needs?”

—Colonist in Saint-Domingue

As the Revolution progressed, it became clear that there was a division between the desires of the masses and the aims of rebel leaders. Most leaders interpreted “freedom” to mean the end of slavery and colonial oppression, but they supported the plantation system as long as workers were paid wages. For many of the former enslaved of Saint-Domingue, “freedom” meant owning land and working for oneself. The discrepancy between the aims of these two groups became increasingly important as the Revolution continued.

To win rebel support, the Spanish promised land and freedom to all rebel soldiers and their families. In early 1793, many rebel leaders joined the Spanish against the French. Under the Spanish, a military leader named Toussaint Louverture rose to prominence. Louverture, who later became one of the central leaders of the Revolution, was a free black who had formerly been part of the slave elite. Known for his military and strategic brilliance, Louverture’s army grew to several thousand troops under the Spanish.

“You know, brothers, that I have undertaken this vengeance, and that
I want liberty and equality to reign in Saint-Domingue. I have worked since the beginning to make that happen, and to bring happiness to all. Unite yourselves to us, brothers, and fight with us for the same cause.”

—Louverture, August 29, 1793

While the Spanish focused their campaign in the western part of Saint-Domingue, near the border with Santo Domingo, British forces took over parts of the south and southwest. They allied with white planters. These planters believed that siding with the British was the only way to maintain slavery in Saint-Domingue.

In 1794, the French government abolished slavery in France and all French colonies. This was done, in part, to win the support of the rebels in Saint-Domingue. Later that same year, Louverture and his troops abandoned the Spanish to join the French. By 1795, facing mounting losses in both Europe and the Caribbean, Spain decided to sign a peace treaty with France. In the Treaty of Basel, Spain gave its colony Santo Domingo to France and withdrew its troops from the island.

Many historians mark Louverture’s volte-face (about-face) as a major turning point of the Revolution. Although many disagree about why Louverture chose to leave the Spanish and side with the French, his support of the French tipped the balance of power among the Europeans on the island. France was able to keep control of the colony, at least for the time being, and Louverture’s power in Saint-Domingue continued to grow.

Meanwhile, the British continued to occupy regions of the colony until 1798. In the areas they occupied, the British preserved slavery and kept the plantations in operation. But the costs of occupation were great. In 1797, Louverture and André Rigaud, an affranchi leader who controlled most of the south, united forces to push the British out. The departure of the British freed the last remaining slaves in the colony. But the alliance between Louverture and Rigaud proved temporary; by mid-1799 a new war had broken out between the two for control of the colony.

Civil War

By the time civil war broke out between Louverture and Rigaud, Louverture had established himself as Saint-Domingue’s most powerful leader. With France’s power in the colony weakening, in March 1796 the colony’s governor general proclaimed Louverture lieutenant governor of Saint-Domingue. In October 1796 Louverture became commander-in-chief of the colonial army.

Louverture’s authority was also acknowledged beyond Saint-Domingue’s borders. In 1798, he signed a secret alliance treaty with England and the United States against France. This was significant because European leaders
had recognized Louverture as a major player to be reckoned with.

**Why did war break out between Louverture and Rigaud?**

By 1799, Louverture controlled the north and west regions of the colony and Rigaud controlled the south. Although the two had enjoyed good relations and cooperated in the past, French colonial officials had attempted to sow division between them in order to weaken Louverture’s authority. Once the British left the colony, Louverture and Rigaud were the only significant sources of power in Saint-Domingue.

The civil war that broke out in July 1799 was a struggle to determine who would control Saint-Domingue and whose interests would be promoted in this new society. Some observers considered the war between Louverture and Rigaud to be a race war. This was because Rigaud’s officers were all mulatto (of mixed descent) and Louverture’s were all black. But the leaders in this conflict were not motivated by race as much as they were by their economic interests. Many of the mulattos—who had made up the bulk of the *affranchi* population in colonial society—had wealth and property. Before the Revolution, they owned as many as 25 percent of all slaves in the colony. They were concerned with preserving their political and economic privileges. Many black leaders did not believe that the *affranchis* would uphold the end of slavery and promote equality for blacks if they were in power.

The war between Louverture and Rigaud, known as the War of the Knives, lasted for a little more than a year. Each side used fierce violence against the other. Louverture’s troops blockaded the southern part of the colony for five months, pushing Rigaud’s army to the brink of starvation.

**How were foreign powers involved in the war?**

Louverture’s success against Rigaud was due in part to support from the United States and Great Britain. Louverture signed a trade treaty with both countries, which supplied him with the funds to feed and equip his troops. In addition, the United States provided ships to help Louverture blockade the south. This was the United States’ first armed intervention overseas.

Great Britain and the United States both hoped to take advantage of France’s waning power in Saint-Domingue and negotiate valuable trade concessions. Throughout the 1790s, despite the conflict, Saint-Domingue had purchased 10 to 15 percent of U.S. exports. In addition, both the United States and Great Britain were in conflict with France. They hoped that when Louverture defeated Rigaud he would declare independence, further weakening France’s position in the Caribbean.

In July 1800, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, one of Louverture’s top officials, defeated the last of Rigaud’s army. Rigaud left for exile in France. Louverture set upon rebuilding Saint-Domingue society after nearly a decade of fighting.

In Part II of the reading, you have read about the first ten years of the Haitian Revolution. You have explored how different groups in the colony were involved in the conflict, as well as the varying motivations of these groups. You have also considered the effect that European countries had on the conflict.

In 1800, Louverture faced the daunting task of charting a course for the future of Saint-Domingue. France too had to weigh its options. How would it respond to Louverture and a Saint-Domingue controlled by blacks? In the coming days you will explore the options considered on both sides of the Atlantic. The decisions made by people in both places would have serious repercussions for Saint-Domingue, for France, and for the world.
By the end of the War of the Knives, France had little authority in Saint-Domingue. In 1799 the French had appointed Louverture governor and by the end of the war he effectively controlled the entire colony. Louverture turned his attention to charting the future of Saint-Domingue. He had to weigh concerns such as the economic health of the colony, its relationship with France, and the threat of foreign invasion, as well as bring peace to a region that had been in conflict for more than a decade.

As Louverture consolidated his power in Saint-Domingue, events in Europe again put the future of the colony into question.

Who was Napoléon Bonaparte?

In 1799, political divisions in France’s revolutionary government were stark. France had been at war with the countries of Europe for more than seven years. Although France’s economy was beginning to improve, hardship continued for many.

In November 1799, a general named Napoléon Bonaparte disbanded France’s assembly, established a new government, and declared the French Revolution over. Bonaparte was ambitious and quickly worked to consolidate his power. Within a month he had issued a new constitution. According to the constitution, French colonies would be governed by “special laws,” different from those laid out in the constitution for France.

Rebel leaders watched events unfold in France with unease. French legislators had excluded the colonies from the constitution once before—in order to maintain slavery. Despite Bonaparte’s reassurances, many in Saint-Domingue worried that France would seek to reassert itself in the colony and re-instate slavery.

Louverture decided to strengthen his defenses. In 1800, he sent Moïse, one of his top military officials, to invade Santo Domingo. Although the Spanish had ceded Santo Domingo to France in 1795, France was too busy with its international and domestic wars to exert its authority in the former Spanish colony. In a bold move, Louverture decided that he would make France’s claim in the eastern part of the island. Louverture was worried that other countries, including France, might use a weak Santo Domingo as a staging ground for a new invasion of Saint-Domingue.

What economic pressures did Louverture face?

In addition to concerns over future European attacks, Louverture faced mounting economic problems. Years of conflict had left the economy of Saint-Domingue in shambles. By 1800, the plantations were producing just one-fifth of what they yielded in 1789. As many as one-third of former slaves had perished. In addition, the majority of white planters had fled, taking their money and business expertise with them.

In January 1801, the governor of Santo Domingo ceded control of the eastern side of the island to Louverture. The formerly oppressed of Saint-Domingue now controlled all of Hispaniola. Louverture’s first act was to abolish slavery on the island. He then called for the formation of a central assembly to write a constitution.

Napoléon watched events in Hispaniola closely. He was uneasy about Louverture’s growing power and he was unhappy about Louverture’s occupation of Santo Domingo. At the same time, he was concerned with events in Europe and the future of France’s colonial empire.

In the coming days, you will consider a variety of options for Saint-Domingue’s future in 1801. You will consider the perspectives of people on the island, including both revolutionary leaders and the general population. The aims of leaders were represented in Saint-Domingue’s 1801 Constitution. The masses made their views known in their actions throughout the course of the Revolution.
You will also consider the position of the French and the options that Bonaparte considered at the time. Historians today disagree as to whether Bonaparte was undecided about what policy to pursue in Saint-Domingue or whether he was keeping his true intentions hidden from Louverture for as long as possible. Today Bonaparte is known as the leader who rolled back the political reforms of the French Revolution and worked to extend the French empire. But in 1801 and 1802, he appeared to be conflicted about how to respond to Louverture.

As you explore the options, keep the following questions in mind: What were the interests guiding various groups on and off the island? In what ways would France’s actions affect people in Saint-Domingue? In what ways would the policies followed by Louverture affect France?

This painting shows Toussaint Louverture proclaiming the Saint-Domingue Constitution on July 1, 1801.