

Recueil de pièces relatives aux colonies, etc.

Introduction:

Despite its long colonization by the Spanish and French, Haiti was the first independent Caribbean nation and the first black republic. Due to the profitable sugar and coffee plantations, France sought to hold onto the country, which led to a series of conflicts between 1791 and 1804. The Haitian Revolution was inspired by the French Revolution. The first armies of slaves were established under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture. In an attempt to restore control of Haiti, the French government sent commissioners Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel who built an alliance with slaves and the “gens de couleur libres”, or free people of color. The commissioners abolished slavery in the country. In 1801, Toussaint declared himself governor general for life and Napoleon Bonaparte sent an expedition of 20,000 soldiers, under the command of his brother-in-law Charles Leclerc, to reassert French control. To slow down Leclerc, Toussaint, General Henri-Christophe, and other rebels set fire to Cap-Haitien. The struggle for independence continued, but in 1804, Haiti became the first nation to gain independence through slave revolt. Though seemingly insignificant, this letter, possibly sent from Honoré Latortue to Antoine-Emery Prud’homme, is situated during a critical time in Haitian history. It is dated from March 16, 1802, just a little over a month after Toussaint and General Christophe set fire to the city of Cap-Haitien, and gives a glimpse into the Haitian Revolution, as well as the lives of those living in Cap-Haitien. In addition to describing the 1802 fire, the letter reveals the local politics, laws, and business dealings during this time.

Translation:

[58r]¹ Monsieur,

I only have disastrous news to tell you, the arrival of the squadron² has caused all of our misfortunes. Toussaint³ rebelled against France, and when the ships were about to enter, he and Christophe⁴ along with their troop⁵, and a very large number of Brigand farmers set fire to the city of Le

¹ The original manuscript, dated 25 ventose X, the equivalent of March 16, 1802, in the French Republican Calendar, is housed at the Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS 6650, available online through Gallica

² The author refers here to the squadron of Charles Leclerc, commander-in-chief of the French expeditionary force of 1802, which was sent to restore slavery in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti), by order of his brother-in-law, Napoleon Bonaparte. Cf. “Charles Victor Emmanuel Leclerc”

³ Toussaint Louverture was a general and leader of the Haitian Revolution. Toussaint was born a slave in 1743 and freed at the age of 30. He was appointed governor by Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, a French Jacobin sent to end the revolution. Toussaint challenged Napoleon’s authority, appointing himself governor general for life in 1801. In 1802, Toussaint was deceived, taken prisoner, and then sent to France where he died. Cf. National Museum of African American History & Culture

⁴ Henri-Christophe was an important general in the Haitian revolutionary army under Toussaint Louverture, who later became King Henri I of Haiti after crowning himself sovereign of the northern region of Haiti in 1811. In 1802, Christophe had been placed in command of the city of Le Cap. When Leclerc’s expedition arrived to retake Saint-Domingue, Christophe threatened Leclerc that he would burn Le Cap to the ground. On February 4, 1802, Christophe set fire to Le Cap to prevent the arrival of Leclerc’s troops. Cf. “Henri Christophe, Revolutionary, and Haitian King”

⁵ Here, the author likely refers to the *gens de couleurs libres*. The *gens de couleurs libres*, or free people of color, were an intermediate class in Saint-Domingue between the enslaved blacks and the whites. They were distinct from freed slaves, as these people had mixed European and African ancestry, which was often result of sexual coercion and rape, sometimes generations back, between white land owners and their slaves. As an intermediate between classes, the *gens de couleurs libres* played an important role in the Haitian Revolution. They tended to have more wealth and were considered free, however they

Cap⁶ and nearby areas, without sparing any buildings. And for the height of our misfortune, the next morning, February 5⁷, they blew up the remaining houses spared from the fire with powder kegs, reducing them to dust.

And now for our other business. By the act of the Council's report [58v] dated December 18, 1975⁸, I had represented the interests of the Citoyenne⁹, Riproche¹⁰, a merchant woman of Le Cap, in securing a farm lease that went into effect on May 1, 1798, for your house located at the intersection of rue de Vaudreuil¹¹ and rue du Canard, which the aforementioned Citoyenne had rebuilt after the fire of June 20, 1793¹². This farm lease¹³ was for the price of eight thousand pounds a year, posting¹⁴ the commission of said amount to be satisfied with a sum of 19,399 pounds and 28 cents, which was due at this time for this reconstruction. At the same time, I likewise represented the interests of the Citoyen, Grand Jean, for your little [59r] house located on rue de Tarane¹⁵, of which the M. Grand Jean had been the reconstructor, this commission was for three years of use, fulfilling the price of the reconstruction. Today your two houses being once again burned, they find themselves victims, the loss is for them, and the greater loss since you were soon going to begin to benefit from your Revenues. It is a great

did not possess the same rights as the whites, so many *gens de couleurs libres* joined the revolutionaries to fight the French rule. Henri-Christophe, along with many *gens de couleur libres*, burned Le Cap to prevent the occupation of Leclerc in 1802. Cf. "Tearing the White Out: The Haitian Revolution: The Leaders"; "Free People of Color"; "The Free Men of Colour and the Revolution in Saint Domingue, 1789-1972"

⁶ Le Cap refers to what is now Cap-Haïtien in Haiti, formerly known as Cap-Français. Cap-Haïtien is a port city on the north coast of Haiti, rich in agriculture. The city is the second largest in Haiti, after the capital Port-au-Prince. The population of Le Cap reached 15,000 in the late 1780s. Cf. "The Slaves and Free People of Color in Cap"; "Simple Method to Develop Seismic Microzonation Maps for Cities in Northern Haiti and Elsewhere"; "Le Cap"

⁷ On February 5, 1802, Henri-Christophe burned the entire city of Le Cap to the ground in anticipation for Leclerc to land at the port. The town was demolished and many of the white colonist population died from the fire. Knowing the French troops outnumbered his own, Christophe retreated inland after setting fire to Le Cap, taking 2,000 white hostages. Cf. "The Haitian Revolution Timeline"; "Christophe, Henri 1767-1820"

⁸ Here, the date, 27 frimaire an 4, is the equivalent of December 18, 1975, on the Republican calendar. The author likely refers to the date of a law mentioned in a volume of legal acts. The law authorizes the family of emigrants whose property is sequestered to sell the portion of their property to pay off the loan. The sales require a signed certificate from three members of the department where the property resides and the express consent of the Commissioner of the Executive Board near the department. The sales will be paid to the receiver of the loan at the department. Cf. *Collection complète des lois, décrets d'intérêt général, traités internationaux, arrêtés, circulaires, instructions, etc.*

⁹ After the French Revolution, "citoyen" or "citoyenne" did not indicate French nationality, but was a term used instead of titles. During the Revolution, there was an insistence that titles no longer be used, but instead "citoyen," in order to promote democracy. Cf. "The French Revolution and the Invention of Citizenship"; "Citizens All? Citizens Some! The Making of the Citizen"

¹⁰ Scribal hand unclear; reading uncertain

¹¹ Rue de Vaudreuil is now rue 1 and rue du Canard is now rue 10. The area seems to be near Cluny Market in Cap-Haïtien (Le marché Clugny). Cf. "Les Rues du Cap-Haïtien"

¹² The fire of June 20, 1793, led to the destruction of Cap-Français. During this time, the white colonists were hostile to the civil commissioners, Léger-Félicité Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel. The general, François-Thomas Galbaud, became governor without the confirmation of the civil commissioners and declared his support for the white colonists. On June 13, 1793, the civil commissioners dismissed Galbaud. On June 20, 1793, Galbaud proclaimed that he was resuming office and called for assistance in expelling the civil commissioners. Galbaud landed in Cap-Français to take the city. Fighting ensued and fires broke out in the city. On the 21st, Galbaud was defeated by the supporters of the commissioners. Cap-Français was reduced to ashes and about 3,000 inhabitants died. Cf. "The Haitian Revolution Timeline"; "Un Aperçu Du Cap Historique : De Quelques Images D'archives, 1770-1803; "Étude sur l'histoire D'Haïti."

¹³ Here, the farm lease is a contract by which the agricultural owner makes land or buildings available to the farmer in return for rent or a share of the harvest. Cf. "Bail à ferme"; "Contrat de bail rural (ou bail à ferme)"

¹⁴ Scribal hand unclear; reading uncertain

¹⁵ Scribal hand unclear; reading uncertain

misfortune. M. must console himself and not lose courage and patience. The same people assist him again in restoring them and I will give them the preference, with the offers [59v] most advantageous for you.

I wish you good health and ask you to believe that I will not lose sight of your interests and¹⁶ the assurance of my sincere affection, as well as to M. your father.

I greet you very cordially,

Honoré Latortue¹⁷

At Cap Français on March 16, 1802

¹⁶ Scribal hand unclear; reading uncertain

¹⁷ Scribal hand unclear; reading uncertain

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