



LIBERTY OR DEATH

Exploring the
Haitian Revolution



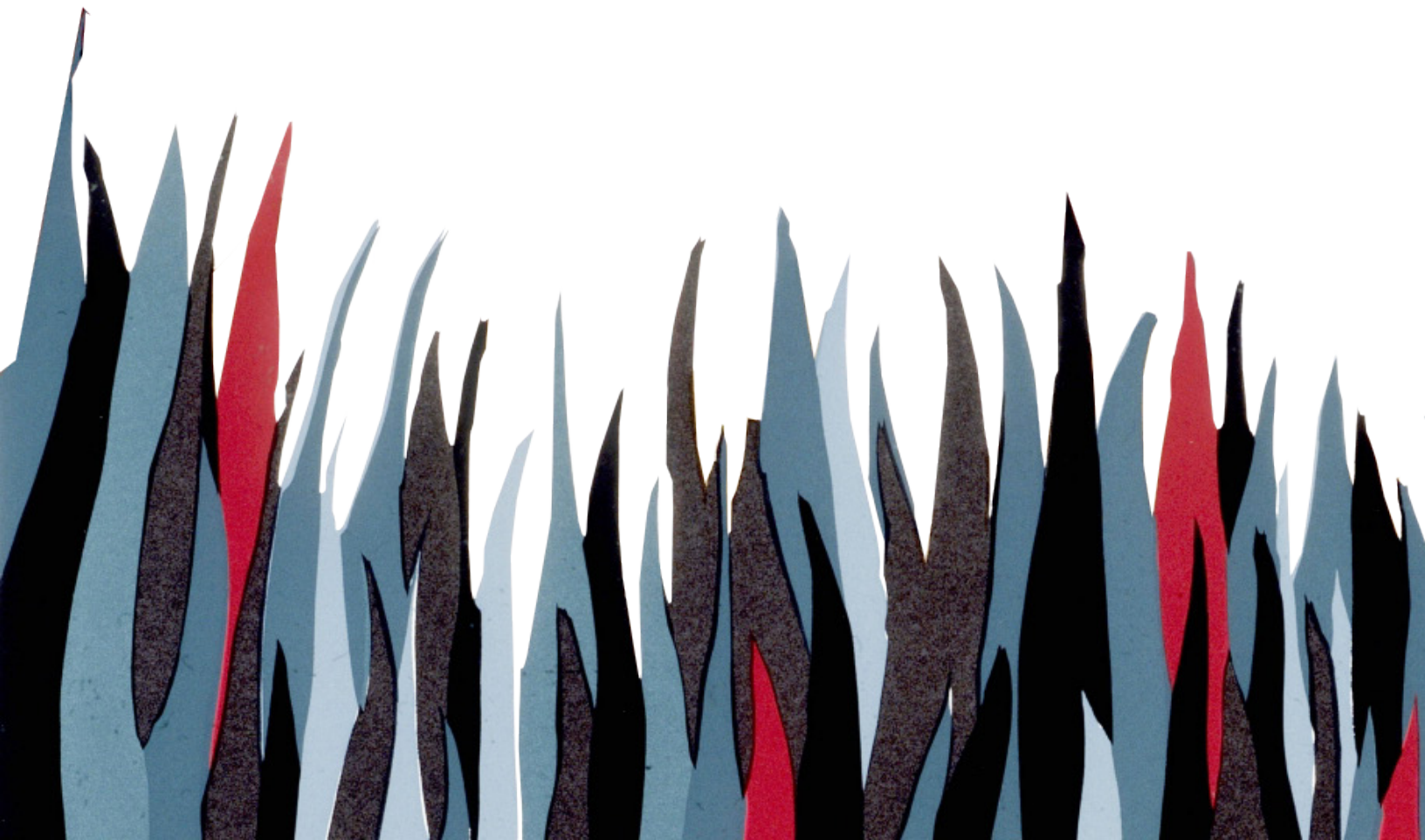


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WHO WE ARE

Woven Teaching is the human rights education practice of Woven Foundation. Through a combination of original programming and grantmaking, Woven Teaching advances the foundation’s focus on long term change towards a widespread acceptance of basic human rights for all.

Our programmatic work is dedicated to supporting classroom teachers with practical help for ethical and effective instruction. We believe that by weaving human rights education into the curriculum, educators can create socially responsible global citizens.

Woven Teaching envisions a world in which every student’s education includes:

- A sense of historical perspective;
- The development of critical thinking skills;
- A feeling of global citizenship;
- The ability to identify bigotry—understanding its negative effects on both individuals and society—and the analytical tools to combat it.

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Do you have feedback on this lesson or want to share how you implemented it in your classroom? We’d love to hear from you!

Please take our short evaluation at bit.ly/WT-eval or scan the QR code to the left.

Liberty or Death was first published in 2020. Woven Teaching is grateful to Susie Steinbach for her feedback on the original version of this lesson.

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CONTENT LEVEL

Ages 14-18 (Grades 9-12)

TIME

3 Hours

GUIDING QUESTIONS

- What was the Haitian Revolution?
- How was the Haitian Revolution different from the American or French revolutions?
- How does the French response to the revolution in Saint-Domingue in the decades following the revolution continue to affect Haiti today?
- Why is the Haitian Revolution not as widely known as other revolutions of the period?

DESCRIPTION

Students will...

- Work in small groups to analyze the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen
- Complete a K-W-L-H chart
- Learn about the Haitian Revolution by reading a summary or watching a video
- Design a project to teach their peers about a topic related to the Haitian Revolution
- Learn about Haiti's "double debt" and write a persuasive argument

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

At the end of this lesson, students will be able to...

- Identify the rights outlined in the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and who they applied to
- Summarize the events and outcomes of the Haitian Revolution
- Develop a project to teach their peers about a topic of interest
- Explain the significance of the Haitian Revolution
- Argue their position on the topic of reparations

MATERIALS

- Computer / projector
- Google Slides presentation
- Student handouts (also available via Google Docs)
 - » **K-W-L-H Chart**
 - » **Comparing Declarations (Handout A)**
 - » **What was the Haitian Revolution? (Handout B)**

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

Reading Informational Text

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.9-10.9
Analyze seminal U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (e.g., Washington’s Farewell Address, the Gettysburg Address, Roosevelt’s Four Freedoms speech, King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail”), including how they address related themes and concepts.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.11-12.9
Analyze seventeenth-, eighteenth-, and nineteenth-century foundational U.S. documents of historical and literary significance (including The Declaration of Independence, the Preamble to the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address) for their themes, purposes, and rhetorical features.

Speaking & Listening

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.SL.9-12.1
Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9-10/11-12 topics, texts, and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.

History/Social Studies

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.9-12.2
Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.9
Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

SOCIAL JUSTICE STANDARDS

Developed by Learning for Justice

Diversity

- DI.9-12.8
I respectfully express curiosity about the history and lived experiences of others and exchange ideas and beliefs in an open-minded way
- DI.9-12.10
I understand that diversity includes the impact of unequal power relations on the development of group identities and cultures.

Justice

- JU.9-12.13
I can explain the short and long-term impact of biased words and behaviors and unjust practices, laws and institutions that limit the rights and freedoms of people based on their identity groups.
- JU.9-12.15
I can identify figures, groups, events and a variety of strategies and philosophies relevant to the history of social justice around the world

INTRODUCTION

In 1804, revolutionaries on a small Caribbean island colonized by France (present-day Haiti) won their freedom. The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) shocked the world. According to historian Laurent Dubois, the Haitian Revolution is “the most radical (and therefore one of the most important) assertions of the right to have rights in human history.”¹ It was the only successful, large-scale slave uprising in history, and led to the abolition of slavery not just in Haiti but across the whole French empire.

The story of the revolution is a story of Black triumph: one in which enslaved people of color won their own freedom. Through their struggle, the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue overturned hundreds of years of racial oppression and demanded the full recognition of their humanity.

As in other revolutions of the period, the idea of freedom was central to the Haitian Revolution. But where the French and American revolutionaries fought for freedom only for white property-owning men, Haitian revolutionaries fought for freedom for all men. Women were not seen as equally deserving of rights and privileges in any of these revolutions.

The Haitian Revolution is a crucial and understudied part of Atlantic world history. It provides an early example of “people power” and demonstrates that no matter how overwhelming the oppression, liberation is possible.

¹ Laurent Dubois, “Atlantic Freedoms,” Aeon.com, <https://aeon.co/essays/why-haiti-should-be-at-the-centre-of-the-age-of-revolution>.

FOCUS ON HUMAN RIGHTS

Woven Teaching believes that **human rights education** is essential for students to understand and assert their own rights and to protect the rights of others. As a result, the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights** (UDHR) lies at the core of Woven Teaching’s materials. The document’s 30 articles outline fundamental human rights: basic rights and freedoms which every human being is entitled to, regardless of the person’s race, religion, birthplace, gender, sexual orientation, or other characteristics. Although its articles are not legally binding, the UDHR serves as the moral compass for the international community.

The activities in *Liberty or Death* connect directly to several UDHR articles, including:

- **Article 3:** Right to life, freedom, and safety
- **Article 4:** Right to freedom from slavery
- **Article 5:** Right to be free from torture or cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment
- **Article 28:** Right to live in the kind of society where your rights are respected

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING ETHICALLY AND EFFECTIVELY

- Center learning on students. If there are students of Caribbean heritage, invite their particular form of expertise into the conversation.
- Integrate human rights and history.
- Discuss the importance of language with your students. Consider suggesting terms such as “enslaved person” and “enslaver” over terms like “slave” and “slaveowner.” The former more accurately describe the brutality of the system and the humanity of those who were enslaved. More guidance on language can be found [here](#).²
- Avoid comparisons of pain; there is no hierarchy of suffering.
- Acknowledge the sensitive nature of the topic. Plan for a variety of emotional responses from your students.
- Complicate thinking and avoid oversimplification by avoiding stereotypes and asking students to be precise with their language.
- Promote student activism and action.
- Allow time to process the material. Provide space for reflection.
- Graphic text or images can trigger trauma, so be sure to question whether the educational outcomes are served by using certain materials. Preview all materials before sharing with students.
- Support students to work critically with source material, particularly on the internet. Recommend authoritative sources with factual, archival content.
- Support your students in making connections between historical events and contemporary issues, as well as local and international contexts.

² P. Gabrielle Foreman, et al. “Writing about Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help” community-sourced document, accessed 18 June 2024, <https://docs.google.com/document/d/1A4TEdDgYsIX-hlKezLodMIM71My3KT-N0zxRv0IQTOQs>.

DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN

35 MINUTES

Students will read excerpts from the U.S. Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, then discuss the concept of rights in revolutionary America and France.

MATERIALS

- Google slideshow (optional)
- Student Handout: Comparing Declarations (**Handout A**)

PROCEDURE

1. Distribute one copy of Comparing Declarations (**Handout A**) to each student. Explain that both the Declaration of Independence and the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen were written in the 18th century. Remind students that the American Revolution was fought from 1765-1783 and the French Revolution took place from 1789-1799.

During the American Revolution, the 13 colonies fought for their independence against Great Britain, their colonial ruler. During the French Revolution, the people of France overturned the monarchy and established a republic (a nation ruled by the people). Explain that in French and American cultures, these documents are viewed as being the foundation for the freedom of their citizens.

2. Students should read the document excerpts and answer the following questions in small groups:
 - a. What was the purpose of these documents? Why did the authors write them?
 - b. Both documents mention “inalienable rights.” What does “inalienable” mean? What are these rights? Do people still have these rights today?
 - c. Did the authors of these documents believe that these rights apply to everyone? If not, who did they mean? Who was excluded?
 - d. At the time these documents were written, slavery existed in both France and the United States. How do these documents address slavery?

*Note: Full text of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen and the U.S. Declaration of Independence are included in the **Appendix**, should you wish to have students conduct a more in-depth discussion comparing and contrasting the two documents.*

3. Debrief as a class by asking some students to share some ideas from their group.

OVERVIEW: SAINT-DOMINGUE 20 MINUTES

Students will begin a K-W-L-H chart and learn background information about Haiti through a brief lecture.

MATERIALS

- Google slideshow (optional)
- [K-W-L-H chart](#)

PROCEDURE

1. Begin this section by asking students: The American and French Revolutions that we just discussed may be familiar to you, but who has heard of the Haitian Revolution?
 - What do you know about Haiti?
 - Can anyone point Haiti out on a map?
 - Who has heard of Saint-Domingue (*sahn doh-MENG*)? What was it? Where was it?
2. Ask students to make a K-W-L-H chart in their notebooks and spend a few minutes filling out the K and W sections.

Woven Teaching's K-W-L chart includes an additional section (H) for students to describe how their learning adds to their understanding of human rights. In this section, students can connect their learning to current events, social justice movements, or other historical moments related to human rights. Teachers can provide extra prompts to stimulate ideas:

- How does the material deepen your understanding of human rights?
- Did anything from the lesson inspire you to take action?
- What information from this lesson will you share with their friends, families, and community? Why?

Printable K-W-L-H charts are available at woventeaching.org/teaching/kwllh-chart.

3. Provide students with background information on Haiti (see [pg. 9](#)). You may use the Google Slides presentation as you go through the brief lecture on Haiti.
4. Remind students that you will return to the K-W-L-H chart at the end of the lesson.

WHERE IS HAITI?

Haiti is on an island in the Caribbean region of the Atlantic ocean. The island was originally inhabited by the Taíno people, who called the island Ayiti ('land of mountains'). When European explorer Christopher Columbus arrived there, he claimed the entire island for Spain and called it Hispaniola ('little Spain'). In 1697, Spain lost the western portion of the island to France. The eastern side, controlled by Spain, remained Hispaniola (and later became the Dominican Republic). The French renamed their new possession Saint-Domingue, which would later become the nation of Haiti.

WHO LIVES IN HAITI?

The island of Hispaniola was originally inhabited by the Taíno, one of the Indigenous peoples of the Caribbean region. At the time of Columbus's arrival to Hispaniola in 1492, hundreds of thousands of Taínos lived on the island. But because of violence, disease, and slavery, by 1550 the Taíno population had dwindled to only 500 people. The Spanish colonists' solution to this population decline was to bring enslaved Africans to Hispaniola to work profitable plantation crops—sugar and coffee. Large numbers of people were needed to harvest and process these lucrative crops. The Spanish brought the first enslaved Africans to the island in 1517.

By the time of the Haitian Revolution, there were nearly 500,000 enslaved people in the colony of Saint-Domingue, and they made up 90% of the population. The other 10% of the population of Saint-Domingue were white colonist enslavers and free people of color. Planters in Saint-Domingue acted brutally toward the enslaved population. Death from violence or overwork was extremely common. In fact, the death rate for enslaved persons in Saint-Domingue was so high that the enslaved population could not reproduce quickly enough to sustain their numbers. For this reason, newly enslaved people from Africa were constantly brought to the island.

Today, 95% of the 10.7 million people who live in Haiti are Black. Most of the population speaks Haitian Creole, a language based on French mixed with Spanish, Portuguese, Taíno, and West African languages.

SLAVERY IN HAITI

At the time of the French Revolution in 1789, Saint-Domingue was the wealthiest European colony in the world. It produced approximately 40% of Europe's imported sugar and 60% of its imported coffee. This wealth production was wholly dependent on the colony's slave system.

Over the course of 100 years, nearly 800,000 Africans were brought to the colony—almost double the number of Africans brought to North America. Sugar was a very labor-intensive crop: the stalks were difficult to harvest and the sap had to be removed by hand. The climate of Haiti is hot and humid year-round, and enslaved persons often had to work many days in a row with little rest. Unlike other crops, sugar did not have a specific harvest season; it could grow throughout the year and had to be harvested quickly once ready. Many enslaved people died of exhaustion, and the life expectancy for an enslaved African in Saint-Domingue was very short.

WHAT WAS THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION?

50 MINUTES

Students will read a summary of the Haitian Revolution, then choose the subject of a research project based on their interests.

Note: Estimated time does not include project (see #3)

MATERIALS

- Student handout: What was the Haitian Revolution? (**Handout B**)

PROCEDURE

1. On their own, each student should read “What was the Haitian Revolution?” (**Handout B**) silently and actively, circling what they have questions about, underlining things that strike them as important, and highlighting anything that they find particularly interesting and want to know more about.
2. When all students have completed the reading, check for comprehension by discussing the following questions as a class:
 - a. Why did France consider Saint-Domingue to be its most important colony?
 - b. What were the different social classes in Saint-Domingue?
 - c. The enslaved rebels defeated which three European empires? Why do you think each European power had an interest in Saint-Domingue?
 - d. According to historian Jean-Claude Martineau, “The Haitian Revolution is probably the most profound revolution ever realized by human beings. The only place where slaves created a nation. But nobody wants to talk about it.”³ What are some reasons that the Haitian Revolution might not be taught in the United States alongside other revolutions of the 18th century, namely the American and French revolutions?
3. For homework or during the next class period, ask students to research a topic of interest related to the Haitian Revolution and prepare a project to teach their classmates about it. Potential projects include:
 - Create an informative post for social media
 - Design an infographic
 - Write a short essay
 - Create a slideshow presentation
 - Draw a comic book



TEACHING TIP

Should students find the summary included with this lesson too dense, they may read the **simpler, illustrated overview** by Rocky Cotard and Laurent Dubois or watch **Haitian Revolutions: Crash Course World History #30** to learn about the revolution’s key points.

³ Égalité for All: Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution, directed by Noland Walker, available at <https://youtu.be/IOGVgQYX6SU>.

Students should research any topic of their choice. Some possible options include:

- Slavery in Saint-Domingue (e.g. the Middle Passage, sugar production)
 - Resistance from enslaved people before the revolution
 - Unique conditions in Saint-Domingue that facilitated a successful insurrection by enslaved people
 - Marronage in Saint-Domingue and other slave societies
 - Different leaders of the Haitian Revolution – Dutty Boukman, Toussaint Louverture, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, etc.
 - U.S. or European response to news of slave uprising in Saint-Domingue
 - Slavery in France’s other Caribbean colonies (Guadeloupe, Martinique)
4. Students will present their projects during a future class session or can post them in an online gallery.

HAITI'S "DOUBLE DEBT" 60 MINUTES

Students will use an interactive timeline to understand the price Haiti had to pay for its freedom, then reflect on reparations from France in a short written response.

MATERIALS

- "Haiti's Lost Billions" Timeline via *The New York Times*

PROCEDURE

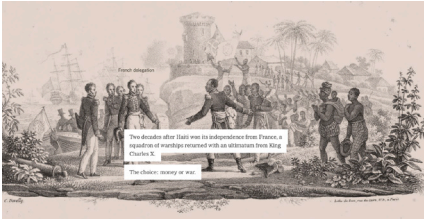

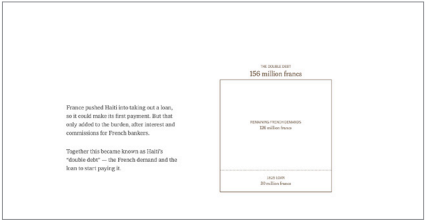
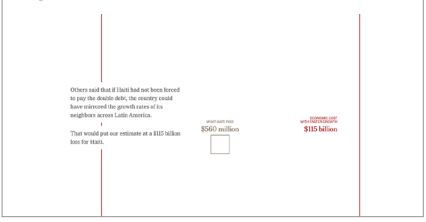

1. Explain that although Haiti was triumphant in its struggle for freedom, it has faced much hardship in the centuries since. Much of this hardship stems from a debt that France forced upon Haiti twenty years after independence (and that France continues to deny into the present).
2. Review "Haiti's Lost Billions" as a class. Stop periodically to check for understanding (see following page for suggested discussion points).
3. Allow students a few minutes to reflect on the presentation as a group. What thoughts and feelings arise from this information? Does this information change their view of Haiti? Of France? Of the United States?
4. Instruct students to respond on the following prompt in writing:

In April 2003, on the 200th anniversary of the death of Toussaint Louverture, President Jean-Bertrand Aristide of Haiti announced that the country would seek reparations from France as a result of the 1825 double-debt. His government proceeded to prepare a legal case. In February 2004, Aristide was ousted in a coup supported by France and the United States. His successor almost immediately dropped the case for reparations.




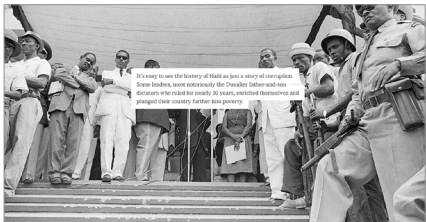
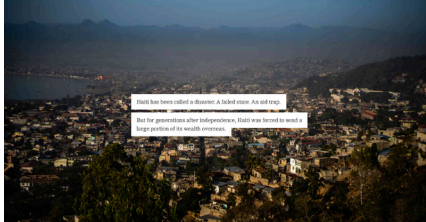
Do you think that France should pay reparations to Haiti? Why or why not? Why do you think France (and other western powers) would oppose reparations?

5. After students have finished writing, bring the class together and debrief by asking a few students to share their thoughts.



<p>Page 1</p> 	<p>In 1825, the French government sent a fleet of warships to Haiti.</p> <p>The French government said that it would recognize Haitian independence on the condition that Haiti pay France for enslavers' lost "property." If they did not pay, France would force them into war, and potentially re-enslavement.</p>
<p>Page 2</p> 	<p>To avoid war, Haiti agreed to pay.</p> <p>It had no powerful allies to come to its aid. The United States, for example, did not recognize Haitian independence until 1862.</p> <p>Question: Why do you think the United States (and other colonial and/or slave societies) would not recognize Haiti's independence? <i>Possible answer: Fear of promoting the success of a slave rebellion might lead to a revolution in their own country</i></p>
<p>Page 9</p> 	<p>Question: What is meant by the term "double debt"?</p>
<p>Page 12</p> 	<p>Because it had to send the \$560 million to France, economists estimate that Haiti actually lost approximately \$115 billion. Had it been able to invest the \$560 million in Haiti, it would be in a much stronger economic position today.</p> <p>Question: What could the government have done with this money to help develop the country? <i>Possible answers: invest in education, infrastructure, business development, health services, etc.</i></p>
<p>Page 14</p> 	<p>Questions: Haiti has experienced many natural disasters. How do natural disasters hurt a country's economy? How does the lack of infrastructure compound the problems of natural disasters? <i>Possible answer: Natural disasters can cause a lot of damage to buildings and repair is costly. Spending money on repairs means there is less money for other projects.</i></p>

*Note: The interactive timeline does not have page numbers. "Page" indicates the number of screen changes (or scrolls of the mouse wheel)

<p>Page 18</p>  <p>Haiti's economy was once controlled by a French bank. The Haitian government could not deposit or spend money without paying a commission. In later years, French profits enriched Haiti's elite public works budget.</p>	<p>Question: How did the development of the National Bank of Haiti hurt the country's economy further?</p>
<p>Page 24</p>  <p>In December 1914, the United States sent the USS Albatross to Port-au-Prince. The U.S. Marines on board were on a mission.</p>	<p>U.S. troops arrived in Haiti in 1914. The U.S. government wanted a naval base in Haiti, and it feared the country's instability would allow European powers to take control. The invasion ended with the Haitian-American Treaty of 1915, which gave the U.S. complete control over Haiti's finances and gave the U.S. the right to intervene in Haiti whenever it deemed necessary.</p>
<p>Page 26</p>  <p>Marines loaded onto their transport trucks and walked out with \$200,000 in gold. That gold was in New York within days.</p>	<p>\$500,000 in gold was stolen from the National Bank of Haiti and brought to the U.S. for "safe keeping." This money helped build Wall Street.</p>
<p>Page 31</p>  <p>It's easy to see the history of Haiti as just a story of corruption. Some leaders, some politicians, the President, the judges and even farmers who risked for security. At times, restricted transportation and plunged their country further into poverty.</p>	<p>Question: The western media often focuses on corruption in Haiti. What impact might this have on Haiti's economy in the present?</p> <p><i>Possible answers: It may stop people/businesses from investing in Haiti; it may be used as a reason to not pay reparations</i></p>
<p>Page 33</p>  <p>Haiti has been called a disaster. A failed state. An aid trap. But for generations after independence, Haiti was forced to send a large portion of its wealth overseas.</p>	<p>Question: In the west, countries in the Global South are often labeled "failed states." What does this mean? Why might this be an inaccurate label?</p> <p><i>Possible answers: Failed state means a government cannot provide safety for its people or meet their basic needs; there may be many causes outside of the government's control that make it difficult to function</i></p>

CLOSING

15 MINUTES

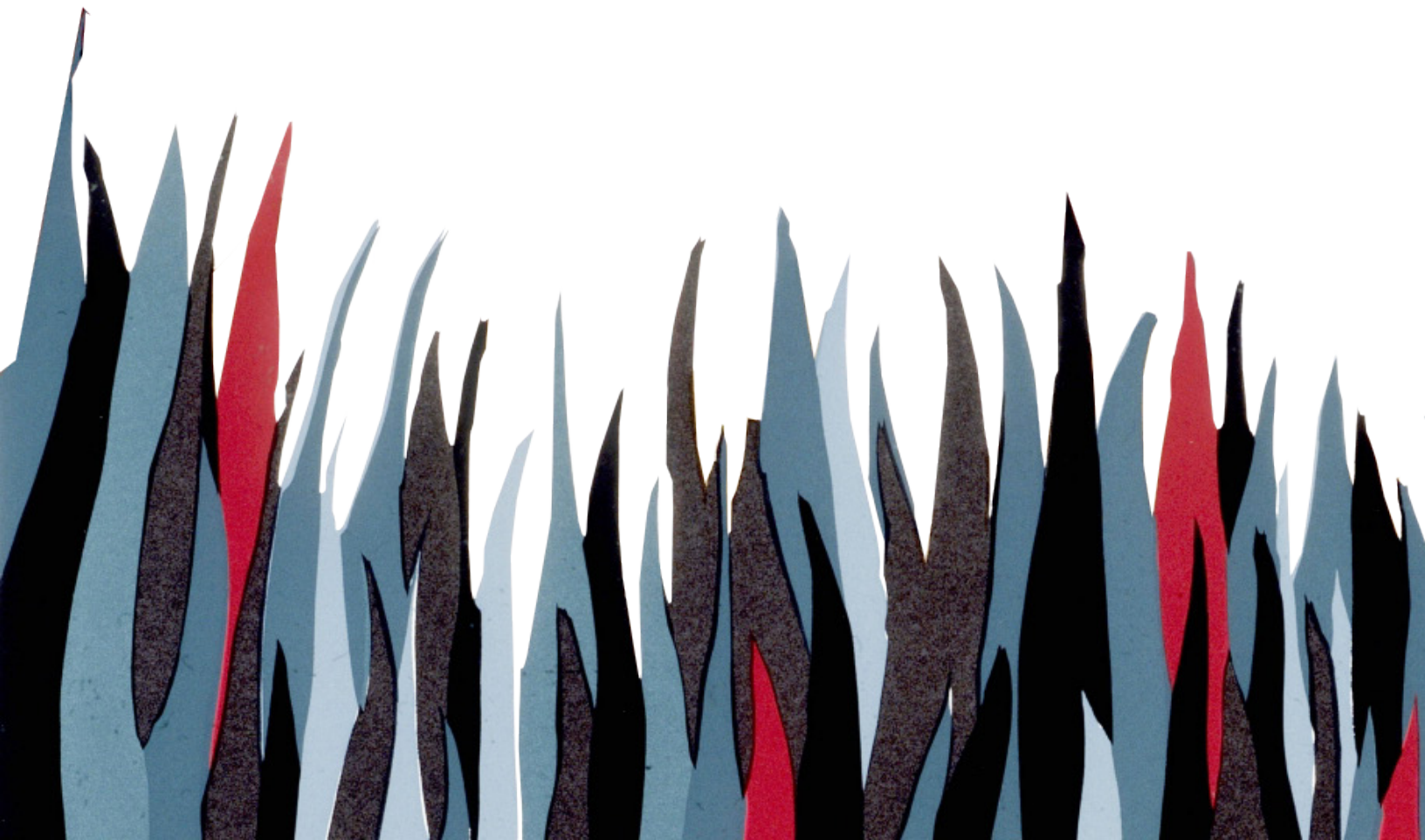
Students will return to their K-W-L-H charts and reflect on what they've learned.

MATERIALS

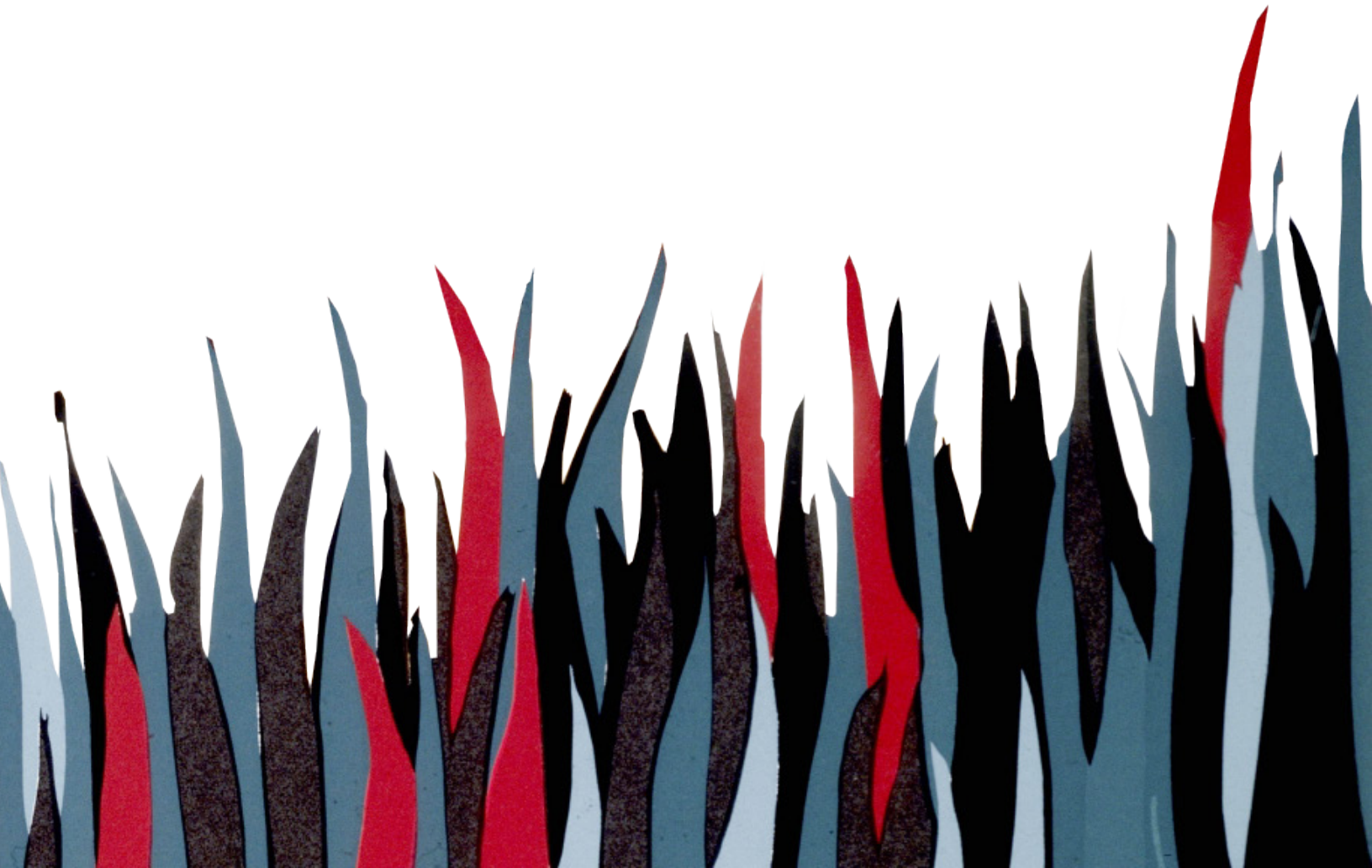
- K-W-L-H chart

PROCEDURE

1. Instruct students to complete the L and H sections of the K-W-L-H chart they began in a previous activity, then share their responses with a partner.
2. Bring the class together and ask for volunteers to share their responses. Close the lesson with the following questions:
 - What did you learn about the Haitian Revolution that really surprised you?
 - Is there anything you learned that you will share with your friends or family?
 - What topics related to the Haitian Revolution would you like to learn more about?



STUDENT HANDOUTS



COMPARING DECLARATIONS

Declaration of Independence (United States, 1776)

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, —That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.—Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government.

NOTES

Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen (France, 1789)

The representatives of the French people, constituted as a National Assembly, and considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and governmental corruption, have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable and sacred rights of man: so that by being constantly present to all the members of the social body this declaration may always remind them of their rights and duties; so that by being liable at every moment to comparison with the aim of any and all political institutions the acts of the legislative and executive powers may be the more fully respected; and so that by being founded henceforward on simple and incontestable principles the demands of the citizens may always tend toward maintaining the constitution and the general welfare.

In consequence, the National Assembly recognizes and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and the citizen:

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on the general good.
2. The purpose of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.
4. Liberty consists in the ability to do whatever does not harm another; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no other limits than those which assure to other members of society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by the law.
5. The law only has the right to prohibit those actions which are injurious to society. No hindrance should be put in the way of anything not prohibited by the law, nor may any one be forced to do what the law does not require.
17. Property being an inviolable and sacred right, no one may be deprived of it except when public necessity, certified by law, obviously requires it, and on the condition of a just compensation in advance.

NOTES

WHAT WAS THE HAITIAN REVOLUTION?

In 1776, the United States rebelled against British rule. In the Declaration of Independence, revolutionaries claimed that “all men are created equal” and have “unalienable rights;” however, the U.S. maintained a system of chattel slavery and racial segregation for almost two centuries following independence. Likewise, revolutionaries in France declared in 1789 that “men are born free and equal in rights” but advocated for the continuation of slavery in their overseas colonies. These revolutions were groundbreaking in many ways, but they only birthed equality for some men, not all.

Enslaved people in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (*sahn doh-MENG*)—now known as Haiti—pushed even further. Although it is often overlooked in textbooks, the Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) was one of the most important events in the history of the modern world. For the first and only time in history, enslaved people themselves brought an end to slavery. As a result of the revolution, Haiti broke free from colonial rule and brought down a brutal system of slavery and racial hierarchy. The Haitian Revolution was one of the most radical assertions of human rights in modern history.

Background

The Haitian Revolution occurred in the midst of the French Revolution (1789-1799). The same political ideas that influenced the American Revolution had also influenced the French. During the French Revolution, the people of France de-

stroyed the monarchy and built a republic. At the center of the revolution were three ideas: liberty, equality, and brotherhood. Some revolutionaries believed in the abolition of slavery, but even they believed that it should only happen gradually over a long period of time. From the very start of the French Revolution, even those who supported the gradual abolition of slavery supported the slave system in France’s overseas colonies, as the slave system created great wealth for France.

When the French Revolution began in 1789, Saint-Domingue, located in the Caribbean Sea, was France’s most profitable colony. It supplied 60 percent of the world’s coffee and 40 percent of the sugar imported by France and Britain. As a result, Saint-Domingue was a very important part of France’s economy. Crop production in Saint-Domingue was dependent on slave labor, as it was in colonies throughout the Caribbean. Cruel and violent treatment of enslaved people was common, and sugar in particular was a difficult and dangerous crop to grow, harvest, and process. Enslavers depended on the use of terror to ensure that enslaved people would not rebel.

The outbreak of the French Revolution—which focused on abolishing social hierarchies within France—sent shockwaves through Saint-Domingue. By 1791, people at all levels of society were unhappy with French domination and the colony was spiraling out of control.

SOCIAL HIERARCHY IN SAINT-DOMINGUE

White colonists

Population in 1791: 30,000, 5% of the total population

There were two groups of white people in Saint-Domingue, both of which were unhappy with the amount of control that the French government had over their daily lives in Saint-Domingue:

- Rich whites: Wealthy plantation owners and enslavers
- Poor whites: Artisans, laborers, and small business owners

The planters were largely concerned about restrictions on trade and increasing their wealth. By not allowing Saint-Domingue’s planters to sell their products to any country except France, the French government limited the planters’ earnings.

The poor whites wanted to improve their social and economic position in the colony; they wanted to have the same rights as the planters. Because most Europeans thought that white people were superior to people of color, the poor white population believed that they deserved more rights and power than the Black population of Saint-Domingue.

Free people of color

Population in 1791: 28,000, 5% of the total population

Free people of color in Saint-Domingue (also known as *affranchis*) were either formerly enslaved people who had bought or been granted their freedom or mixed-race individuals (most of whom were born to enslaved Black women who had been impregnated by white men). Most members of the group were prosperous, educated property owners. Many enslaved people; up to a quarter of all enslaved people in Saint-Domingue were owned by free people of color.

While they were not enslaved, free people of color did not have the same rights as white people of any status. As a result, they tended to draw distinct lines between themselves and enslaved people. As property owners, they wanted to maintain the plantation system. As wealthy, educated elites, they wished to gain entrance into the top levels of society—which were reserved for whites only.

As their population and wealth grew, free people of color faced increasing discrimination. The colony's white population felt that if people of color gained more power and resources, their own power and privilege would be diminished.

Enslaved persons

Population in 1791: 500,000, 90% of the total population

Conditions for enslaved people in Saint-Domingue and across the Caribbean were extremely harsh. Many enslaved Africans only lived a few years after their arrival in Saint-Domingue. Enslavers calculated that it was more profitable to work enslaved people to death and replace them rather than let them live long enough to procreate and grow their population. In the five years before the revolution, Saint-Domingue accounted for 37 percent of the entire trans-Atlantic slave trade.

Slave society included large numbers of Africans alongside those born in the Caribbean. This was very different from the North American colonies (later the United States), where by the eighteenth century the majority of enslaved people were born into slavery.

A small population of maroons—people who escaped from slavery—also lived in Saint-Domingue. Small maroon communities were known to attack enslavers, free loved ones, and pass messages between plantations. Marronage was a form of resistance to slavery.

Outbreak of Revolution

As the revolution in France continued, Saint-Domingue's free people of color became increasingly agitated that the National Assembly would not grant them equal rights. In 1790, Vincent Ogé led an armed uprising in an attempt to gain equal rights for free people of color in Saint-Domingue. His movement was quickly defeated by white colonial militias and participants in the uprising, including Ogé, were publicly executed.

Unrest among the enslaved population was also growing. In mid-August 1791, enslaved people from many plantations met at Bois Caïman for a vodou religious ceremony. There they committed to a coordinated uprising.

On August 21, 1791, the insurrection began. Over the next several weeks, enslaved people burned more than 1,000 plantations in northern Saint-Domingue; most white planters there were either killed or fled. By September, the rebel

forces had taken control of the entire Northern Province. The revolution had begun. The group soon became more militant and organized under the direction of Toussaint Louverture, a formerly enslaved person and gifted leader.

When word of the rebellion reached France, the French government sent troops to end the violence, but the French army failed to defeat the rebels.

At the beginning of the revolution, the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue were simply asking for more time to tend to their own plots, where they grew additional crops for food. The planters, however, would not make concessions to these modest demands. As a result, the enslaved population was soon fighting for the total abolition of slavery. By the end of 1791, nearly 100,000 enslaved people (20 percent of the enslaved population) had joined the rebellion. The French government sent thousands of troops to Saint-Domingue to stop the rebellion.

The Struggle Continues

The war continued for the next several years. By 1793, the British and Spanish were at war with France and were involved in the fighting in Saint-Domingue, both hoping to gain control of the Caribbean's most lucrative colony. The white colonists supported the British, hoping that they would maintain the island's slave system. Toussaint Louverture, the military leader of the enslaved revolutionaries, supported the Spanish, who promised freedom to any enslaved insurgents who fought on their side.

By 1794, the French Revolutionary government had entered a radical period. In February 1794, it abolished slavery in its colonies, making it the first European country to do so. It also granted men of color the same civil and political rights that white men enjoyed. These changes occurred not because the French government had gained a new perspective on the meaning of freedom, but because they hoped to return peace and control to the colony.

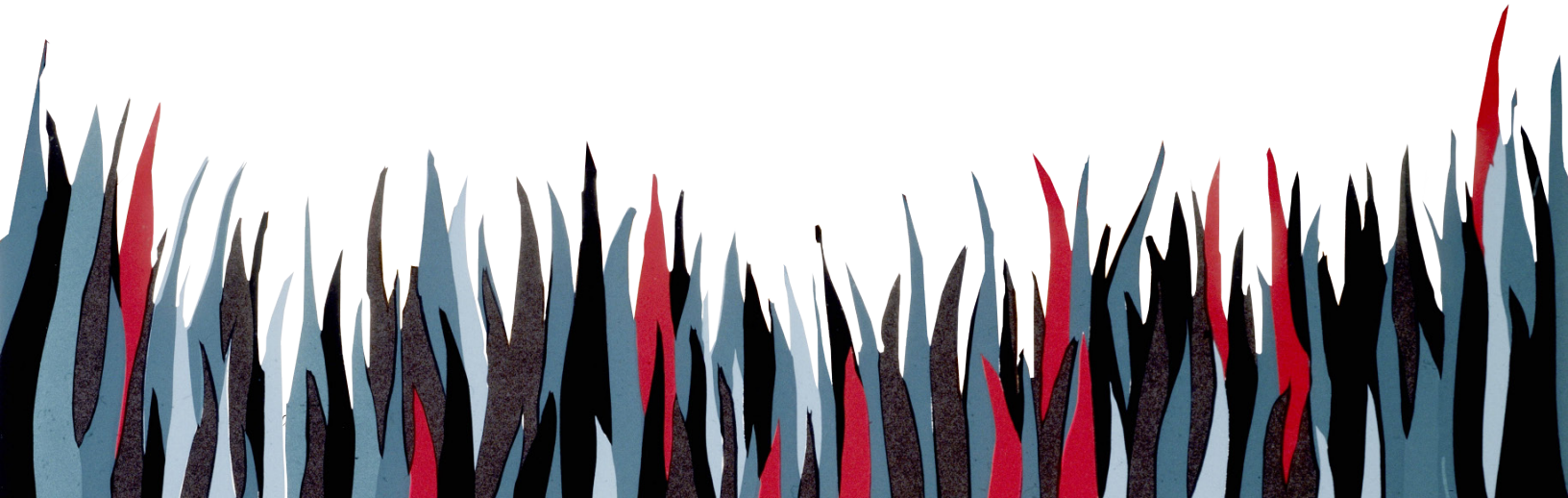
This announcement prompted Louverture and his soldiers to switch sides and fight against the Spanish alongside French soldiers. Defeated, Spanish troops withdrew from Saint-Domingue in 1796, and the British withdrew in 1798. Over the next few years, Louverture consolidated power while fighting continued internally. In 1801, he appointed himself "governor-general-for-life" of Saint-Domingue, which was still a French colony. During his time in power, he re-established the plantation system, urging formerly enslaved people to continue working on the plantations (although labor was now paid) in order to keep the economy of Saint-Domingue strong.

Back in France, Napoleon Bonaparte had taken control of the French government in 1799. He was eager to restore Saint-Domingue to its former status as the very profitable colony it had been ten years earlier. In 1802, he sent 22,000 French troops to invade Saint-Domingue, with the goal of removing Louverture from power and reinstating slavery. The colony was plunged into war once again.

Louverture was captured by the French and sent to France, where he died in prison in 1803. The Black population of Saint-Domingue, however, refused to give up. They continued fighting the French and by the end of 1803, the Black troops, now led by Louverture's lieutenant Jean-Jacques Dessalines, had defeated the French forces. On January 1, 1804, Dessalines declared independence for Saint-Domingue and renamed it Haiti (meaning "land of high mountains" in the language of the indigenous Taíno people).

By resisting their oppressors and demanding the recognition of their humanity, the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue created the first independent Black nation in modern history. Their revolution inspired others throughout the colonized world and showed what is possible when people demand their freedom and their rights.

APPENDIX



KEY TERMS

abolition: the act of putting an end to a system or practice; the movement to end slavery

Bonaparte, Napoleon: French military general and emperor of France from 1804 to 1814 (and briefly again in 1815). Bonaparte is responsible for re-establishing slavery in the French empire.

colonialism: the policy of acquiring and controlling territory outside of one's own country, usually for the purpose of economic exploitation

Dessalines, Jean-Jacques: military leader and first emperor of Haiti. Dessalines took drastic (and sometimes violent) measures to ensure that Haiti would remain independent. He was assassinated in 1806, just two years after declaring Haiti's independence.

“double debt”: the 1825 indemnity demanded from Haiti by France, plus the interest and commission on the loans required to pay it

hierarchy: a system in which people or groups are ranked above or below each other. A racial hierarchy is one in which a racial group is falsely believed to be superior or inferior to other racial groups.

indemnity: an amount of money paid as compensation (for example, money paid to the victor in a war)

insurrection: a violent uprising

Louverture, Toussaint: the most well-known leader of the Haitian independence movement and former slave. Under Louverture's leadership, the enslaved people of Saint-Domingue fought for (and won) their freedom.

maroon: a person who escaped from slavery and formed or joined in community with other escapees

natural rights: rights that are not dependent on law or custom (and so they cannot be taken away by the government)

Ogé, Vincent: a free person of color and leader of a failed uprising in Haiti

oppressor: a person or group that treats people in an unfair or cruel way, preventing them from having freedom or opportunities

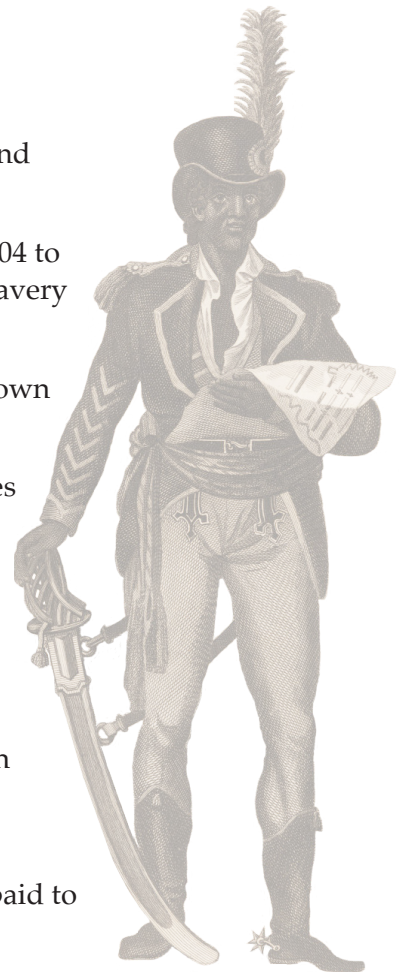
race: a concept that categorizes individuals based on the color of their skin. Race and racial differences are often presented as biologically-based but these “scientific” theories have been widely debunked.

republic: a state in which power is held by the people through their elected representatives

sovereignty: the authority of a state to govern itself without outside interference

universal human rights: rights that every person should have simply because they are human, regardless of their race, sex, gender, religion, nationality, or any other characteristics/status

vodou (also spelled ‘voodoo’): a religion influenced by religious practices from various African cultures and Roman Catholicism. Vodou was created by enslaved peoples in Haiti and is still practiced today.



IN CONGRESS, JULY 4, 1776.

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America.

When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation. — We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. — That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new

U.S. Declaration of Independence, 1776

U.S. DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE (1776)

In Congress, July 4, 1776

The unanimous Declaration of the thirteen united States of America, When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, --That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence, indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes; and accordingly all experience hath shewn, that mankind are more disposed to suffer, while evils are sufferable, than to right themselves by abolishing the forms to which they are accustomed. But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.—Such has been the patient sufferance of these Colonies; and such is now the necessity which constrains them to alter their former Systems of Government. The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States. To prove this, let Facts be submitted to a candid world.

He has refused his Assent to Laws, the most wholesome and necessary for the public good.

He has forbidden his Governors to pass Laws of immediate and pressing importance, unless suspended in their operation till his Assent should be obtained; and when so suspended, he has utterly neglected to attend to them.

He has refused to pass other Laws for the accommodation of large districts of people, unless those people would relinquish the right of Representation in the Legislature, a right inestimable to them and formidable to tyrants only.

He has called together legislative bodies at places unusual, uncomfortable, and distant from the depository of their public Records, for the sole purpose of fatiguing them into compliance with his measures.

He has dissolved Representative Houses repeatedly, for opposing with manly firmness his invasions on the rights of the people.

He has refused for a long time, after such dissolutions, to cause others to be elected; whereby the Legislative powers, incapable of Annihilation, have returned to the People at large for their exercise; the State remaining in the mean time exposed to all the dangers of invasion from without, and convulsions within.

He has endeavoured to prevent the population of these States; for that purpose obstructing the Laws for Naturalization of Foreigners; refusing to pass others to encourage their migrations hither, and raising the conditions of new Appropriations of Lands.

He has obstructed the Administration of Justice, by refusing his Assent to Laws for establishing Judiciary powers.

He has made Judges dependent on his Will alone, for the tenure of their offices, and the amount and payment of their salaries.

He has erected a multitude of New Offices, and sent hither swarms of Officers to harrass our people, and eat out their substance.

He has kept among us, in times of peace, Standing Armies without the Consent of our legislatures.

He has affected to render the Military independent of and superior to the Civil power.

He has combined with others to subject us to a jurisdiction foreign to our constitution, and unacknowledged by our laws; giving his Assent to their Acts of pretended Legislation:

For Quartering large bodies of armed troops among us:

For protecting them, by a mock Trial, from punishment for any Murders which they should commit on the Inhabitants of these States:

For cutting off our Trade with all parts of the world:

For imposing Taxes on us without our Consent:

For depriving us in many cases, of the benefits of Trial by Jury:

For transporting us beyond Seas to be tried for pretended offences

For abolishing the free System of English Laws in a neighbouring Province, establishing therein an Arbitrary government, and enlarging its Boundaries so as to render it at once an example and fit instrument for introducing the same absolute rule into these Colonies:

For taking away our Charters, abolishing our most valuable Laws, and altering fundamentally the Forms of our Governments:

For suspending our own Legislatures, and declaring themselves invested with power to legislate for us in all cases whatsoever.

He has abdicated Government here, by declaring us out of his Protection and waging War against us.

He has plundered our seas, ravaged our Coasts, burnt our towns, and destroyed the lives of our people.

He is at this time transporting large Armies of foreign Mercenaries to compleat the works of death, desolation and tyranny, already begun with circumstances of Cruelty & perfidy scarcely paralleled in the most barbarous ages, and totally unworthy the Head of a civilized nation.

He has constrained our fellow Citizens taken Captive on the high Seas to bear Arms against their Country, to become the executioners of their friends and Brethren, or to fall themselves by their Hands.

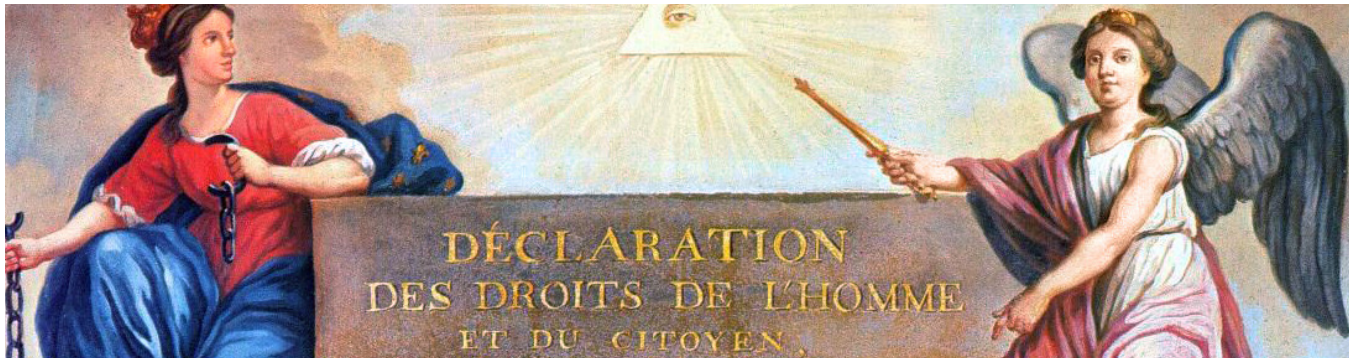
He has excited domestic insurrections amongst us, and has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions.

In every stage of these Oppressions We have Petitioned for Redress in the most humble terms: Our repeated Petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A Prince whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

Nor have We been wanting in attentions to our British brethren. We have warned them from time to time of attempts by their legislature to extend an unwarrantable jurisdiction over us. We have reminded them of the circumstances of our emigration and settlement here. We have appealed to their native justice and magnanimity, and we have conjured them by the ties of our common kindred to disavow these usurpations, which, would inevitably interrupt our connections and correspondence. They too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity. We must, therefore, acquiesce in the necessity, which denounces our Separation, and hold them, as we hold the rest of mankind, Enemies in War, in Peace Friends.

We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; and that as Free and Independent States, they have full Power to levy War, conclude Peace, contract Alliances, establish Commerce, and to do all other Acts and Things which Independent States may of right do. And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our sacred Honor.

Source: "Declaration of Independence: A Transcription," National Archives, <https://www.archives.gov/founding-docs/declaration-transcript>.



Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, 1789

DECLARATION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN AND OF THE CITIZEN (FRANCE, 1789)

The representatives of the French people, constituted as a National Assembly, and considering that ignorance, neglect, or contempt of the rights of man are the sole causes of public misfortunes and governmental corruption, have resolved to set forth in a solemn declaration the natural, inalienable and sacred rights of man: so that by being constantly present to all the members of the social body this declaration may always remind them of their rights and duties; so that by being liable at every moment to comparison with the aim of any and all political institutions the acts of the legislative and executive powers may be the more fully respected; and so that by being founded henceforward on simple and incontestable principles the demands of the citizens may always tend toward maintaining the constitution and the general welfare.

In consequence, the National Assembly recognizes and declares, in the presence and under the auspices of the Supreme Being, the following rights of man and the citizen:

1. Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on common utility.
2. The purpose of all political association is the preservation of the natural and imprescriptible rights of man. These rights are liberty, property, security, and resistance to oppression.
3. The principle of all sovereignty rests essentially in the nation. No body and no individual may exercise authority which does not emanate expressly from the nation.
4. Liberty consists in the ability to do whatever does not harm another; hence the exercise of the natural rights of each man has no other limits than those which assure to other members of society the enjoyment of the same rights. These limits can only be determined by the law.
5. The law only has the right to prohibit those actions which are injurious to society. No hindrance should be put in the way of anything not prohibited by the law, nor may any one be forced to do what the law does not require.
6. The law is the expression of the general will. All citizens have the right to take part, in person or by their representatives, in its formation. It must be the same for everyone whether it protects or penalizes. All citizens being equal in its eyes are equally admissible to all public dignities, offices, and employments, according to their ability, and with no other distinction than that of their virtues and talents.
7. No man may be indicted, arrested, or detained except in cases determined by the law and according to the forms which it has prescribed. Those who seek, expedite, execute, or cause to be executed

arbitrary orders should be punished; but citizens summoned or seized by virtue of the law should obey instantly, and render themselves guilty by resistance.

8. Only strictly and obviously necessary punishments may be established by the law, and no one may be punished except by virtue of a law established and promulgated before the time of the offense, and legally applied.
9. Every man being presumed innocent until judged guilty, if it is deemed indispensable to arrest him, all rigor unnecessary to securing his person should be severely repressed by the law.
10. No one should be disturbed for his opinions, even in religion, provided that their manifestation does not trouble public order as established by law.
11. The free communication of thoughts and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may therefore speak, write, and print freely, if he accepts his own responsibility for any abuse of this liberty in the cases set by the law.
12. The safeguard of the rights of man and the citizen requires public powers. These powers are therefore instituted for the advantage of all, and not for the private benefit of those to whom they are entrusted.
13. For maintenance of public authority and for expenses of administration, common taxation is indispensable. It should be apportioned equally among all the citizens according to their capacity to pay.
14. All citizens have the right, by themselves or through their representatives, to have demonstrated to them the necessity of public taxes, to consent to them freely, to follow the use made of the proceeds, and to determine the means of apportionment, assessment, and collection, and the duration of them.
15. Society has the right to hold accountable every public agent of the administration.
16. Any society in which the guarantee of rights is not assured or the separation of powers not settled has no constitution.
17. Property being an inviolable and sacred right, no one may be deprived of it except when public necessity, certified by law, obviously requires it, and on the condition of a just compensation in advance.

Source: "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, 26 August 1789," *Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité: Exploring the French Revolution*, <https://revolution.chnm.org/d/295>.

RESOURCES

Jacob Lawrence's The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture

Colby College Museum of Art

museum.colby.edu/collection/jacob-lawrence-the-life-of-toussaint-louverture

Jacob Lawrence, one of the most famous and influential African-American artists of the 20th century painted this series to honor the life of Toussaint Louverture. Lawrence later translated these into a series of silk screen prints.

Mapping the Haitian Revolution

Stephanie Curci and Chris Jones

mappinghaitianrevolution.com

This interactive map and timeline (available in English, French, Spanish, and Haitian Creole) was designed to help high school students understand the complicated history of the Haitian Revolution.

"The Ransom – The Root of Haiti's Misery: Reparations to Enslavers"

Catherine Porter, Constant Méheut, Matt Apuzzo and Selam Gebrekidan

nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-history-colonized-france.html

This in-depth project by *The New York Times* to uncover the true cost of Haiti's debt to France was years in the making. The articles are available in English, French, and Haitian Creole.

The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804): A Different Route to Emancipation

Jeremy D. Popkin

history.as.uky.edu/haitian-revolution-1791-1804-different-route-emancipation

Jeremy D. Popkin is a professor at the University of Kentucky. He has written numerous books on the Haitian and French Revolutions. This overview is an accessible way for educators to become familiar with the events in Saint-Domingue and their aftermath. It also includes source readings.

Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History

Michel Rolph-Trouillot (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015)

Michel Rolph-Trouillot was a Haitian anthropologist and historian. *Silencing the Past* investigates how history is recorded and by whom, challenging us to consider why the Haitian Revolution and other events are often not included in our study of history.

Timeline: History of Haiti, 1492-1805

Kona Shen

thehaitianrevolution.com

This detailed timeline began as a student project at Brown University. It includes major events in Haiti's history up to the ratification of the 1805 constitution. Students can use the timeline to gain a more detailed understanding of the events of the period.

IMAGE CREDITS

- Cover: Jacob Lawrence, *The March*, 1995 (Cleveland Museum of Art)
- Page 11: Lithograph of the 1825 landing of the French warships in Haiti (Bibliothèque Nationale de France)
- Pages 12-13: From “Haiti’s Lost Billions” (*The New York Times*)
- Page 22: Marcus Rainsford, *Toussaint Louverture*, 1805 (The JCB Library)
- Page 23: The U.S. Declaration of Independence (Wikimedia Commons)
- Page 26: Jean-Jacques-François Le Barbier, *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen*, 1789 (Musée Carnavalet)