

How Did Geography Affect the Haitian Revolution?

Jennifer Romine

Junior, History and Spanish

Haiti possesses a unique and difficult geography. Rough terrain, oppressive tropical weather, and uneven population distribution present challenges for its population. Many of these problems, especially those in the realm of economic and human geography, prominently stood out at the time of the Haitian Revolution. However, these geographic challenges would come to further, rather than hinder, the aims of the Haitian revolutionaries. During the period of the Haitian Revolution, Haiti's geography helped to facilitate the Haitian Revolution and contributed to its global impact.

Haiti presents geographic challenges to those living there. A 2009 NASA topographic map of Kiskeya (Hispaniola) shows the island's western half, including Haiti, scored by parallel ridges of mountains. In addition to land, water impedes movement across the island. According to Denis Diderot and Jean le Rond d'Alembert's *Encyclopédie*, the island is "arrosée par un grand nombre de rivières considérables (watered with a large, considerable number of rivers).¹ Sharply contrasting wet and dry seasons define Haiti's precipitation; Port-au-Prince receives, on average, 220 millimeters of precipitation in May but just 15 in January.² This however, only applies to the regions of

Haiti that experience rain at all. According to historian Laurent Dubois, one colonial-era writer described Haiti's Artibonite Plain, north of Port-au-Prince, as "Egypt" due to its aridity.³ At the close of the Eighteenth Century, according to the Nineteenth-century historian William Wells Brown, "seven hundred thousand Africans, sixty thousand mixed blood," and 140,000 whites lived in the French part of Saint-Domingue.⁴ Contemporary maps of colonial Saint-Domingue (Haiti) show this population clustered along the coast (see Appendix 2). Except for the urban agglomeration surrounding Cap-Français (Haïtien), virtually no settlements existed in the interior. The major islands of Gonâve and Tortue had no towns or cities. This light population, in combination with topographical difficulties, gave Saint-Domingue a remote and lawless character. On Saint-Domingue's southern peninsula, the populace traded "consistently and illegally with the British" in Jamaica rather than with the French.⁵ The *Encyclopédie*'s entry on "armed buccaneers" (*Armes boucanieres*) describes them as operating "principalement ceux de Saint-Domingue."⁶ The geographic situation in colonial Saint-Domingue seems, from a modern perspective, un conducive to the process of revolution and to the building of a new society.

For the revolutionaries of Saint-Domingue, however, the colony's geography proved a boon to their revolutionary project. Insurgents made extensive use of the country's rough and

inaccessible interior. Kongolese revolutionaries brought with them from Africa a style of fighting that frustrated European soldiers. A 1793 report from which Dubois quotes describes insurgents counterattacking “following their cowardly custom, *hidden*” in the mountainous terrain.⁷ Rather than confront the French head-on in an open plain, the revolutionaries moved “from ambush to ambush until they had reached some inaccessible rocks,” thus dealing as much damage as possible to the enemy while avoiding capture, despite their inability to win a pitched battle.⁸ Insurgents “camouflaged traps, fabricated poisoned arrows, feigned cease-fires to lure the enemy into ambush, disguised tree-trunks as cannons, and threw obstructions of one kind or another onto the roads.”⁹ A 1791 report on the Revolution from the *Philadelphia General Advertiser* described revolutionaries setting themselves up on “a mountain steep and difficult of access.”¹⁰ A contemporary engraving entitled *Toussaint Louverture Fighting the French in Saint Domingue* depicts a battle between revolutionary and French forces (see Appendix 3). It shows the former frustrating the latter. Operating irregularly from protected positions in the foliage, the insurgents fire upon the French, whom they force to stumble uphill. The Bonapartist General Jean-François-Xavier de Ménéard lamented in an 1802 after-action report that “as soon as they saw our troops, [the revolutionaries] retreated behind the St.-Louis River, whose wide crossing [...] was defended by two cannons,” a position which Ménéard could not capture.¹¹ From

accounts of the fighting of the Haitian Revolution, we see that revolutionary forces used the difficult geography of Saint-Domingue to their advantage. Their tactics took advantage of the remoteness and inaccessibility of the colony.

This strategy proved effective at repulsing counter-revolutionary forces. Throughout the Haitian Revolution, the revolutionaries maintained an advantage. As early as 1791, the insurgent leaders Jean François and Georges Biassou warned the new colonial commissioners that “When you arrived in Saint-Domingue, you doubtless were shocked by the disasters [...] but you will not succeed in re-establishing the disturbed equilibrium by searching for the authors or in deploying the troops that the nation has placed under your command.”¹² Transcripts of a 1797 dialogue between L’Ouverture and colonial commissioner Léger-Félicité Sonthonax show L’Ouverture displaying disdain for Sonthonax. When Sonthonax suggested “The blacks are worried for their freedom. We have here colonists of whom they are suspicious. They must all be slaughtered,” L’Ouverture balked: “What? You want to slaughter all the whites?”¹³ L’Ouverture “abruptly left,” frustrated and “with ill-humor” and no intention of carrying out Sonthonax’s plans.¹⁴ L’Ouverture held Sonthonax’s successor, Philippe-Rose Roume de Saint-Laurent, in even lower regard. In 1800, L’Ouverture dismissed Roume from his position despite lacking legal power to do so.¹⁵ Revolutionary resistance to French control continued after L’Ouverture’s

capture and death. Though Napoleon Bonaparte attempted to legally re-establish slavery in Saint-Domingue in 1802, the order never became enforceable.¹⁶ Ménard's report details revolutionaries exploding their powder stores, and themselves, rather than facing capture and re-enslavement.¹⁷ After a defeat at the Battle of Vertieres in 1803, the French gave up on their plans for Saint-Domingue and capitulated to the insurgents, paving the way for Haitian Independence in 1804.¹⁸ These events show that revolutionary forces continuously maintained an advantage from their initial uprising in 1791 through independence in 1804. They did this despite a numerical and practical disadvantage. L'Ouverture's army reached a maximum size of 20,000 by the end of the conflict, while Brown writes that the opposing French forces numbered "twenty-five thousand men."¹⁹ Brown continues, noting that the French employed "Fifty-six ships of war" in Saint-Domingue, while the insurgents had "no navy, and but little means of defense."²⁰ In addition to their disadvantage in numbers, revolutionary forces had a disadvantage in equipment. *Toussaint Louverture Fighting the French [...]* shows insurgents fighting out of uniform, some of them shirtless. Dubois recounts that revolutionaries "fabricated [...] arrows" and "disguised tree-trunks as cannons."²¹ A contemporary depiction of the 1795 Battle of Léogâne shows insurgent forces operating irregularly, producing less smoke than the British, and lacking cannons while the British have them (see Appendix 4). How, then, could the revolutionaries have maintained such a continual and

decisive advantage over the British, despite their disadvantages? The most plausible explanation lies in that their tactics leveraged the geography of Saint-Domingue against the British successfully.

The Haitian revolutionaries leveraged geography against their enemies successfully, but they achieved other leverages beyond this. Their use of geography to affect a slave revolution had a global impact as well as a local one. It made the entire world cognizant of the real possibility of slave revolutions and of black republics. It made the slaveholding classes in other parts of the world recognize the real possibility of a successful insurgency of the enslaved. The British General John Whyte wrote in 1794 that Saint-Domingue's "perfidious designs [...] have ever calumniated the British government."²² Thomas Jefferson quaked in his boots at the idea of enslaved Africans in the United States repeating the events of Saint-Domingue: "If this combustion can be introduced among us under any veil whatever, we have to fear it."²³ It also made the downtrodden classes cognizant of their real power. Afro-American civil rights advocate Frederick Douglass saw the Haitian Revolution as key to the end of the Atlantic Slave Trade: "Until Haiti spoke the slave ship, followed by hungry sharks, greedy to devour the dead and dying slaves flung overboard to feed them, ploughed in peace the South Atlantic, painting the sea with the Negro's blood."²⁴ The Brazilian historian Sérgio Figueiredo Ferretti wrote of the 1835 Malê Revolt in Bahia

“acontecimentos como a independência do Haiti, conseguida a partir de revoltas de escravos, eram do conhecimento geral conforme indicam diversos depoimentos (several testimonies indicate that events such as the independence of Haiti, learned of at the beginning of the slave revolts, were of general knowledge),” noting how knowledge of the Haitian Revolution emboldened the enslaved revolutionaries there.²⁵ On the eve of the American Civil War, abolitionist attorney Wendell Phillips lauded “the great St. Domingo chief, Toussaint L’Ouverture,” as “one of the most remarkable men of the last generation” alongside John Brown to great controversy.²⁶ The Haitian insurgents could never have achieved this world-shaking impact had they not successfully carried out their revolution, and they could not have successfully carried out their revolution without astutely manipulating Haiti’s geography. We must therefore see this

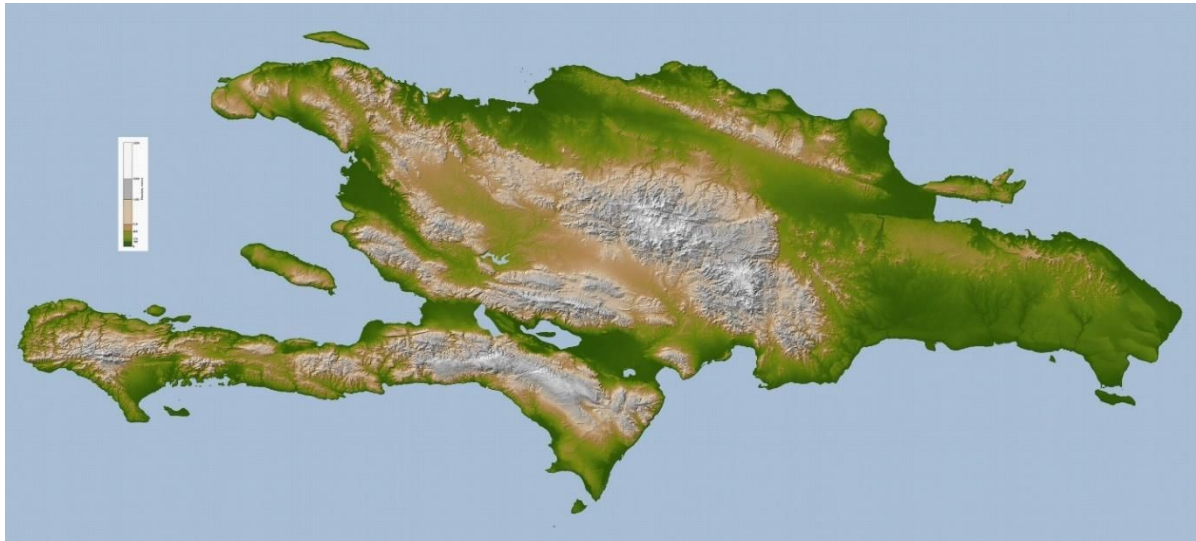
impact as a consequence of the successful use of Haiti’s geography by the Haitian revolutionaries. By making good use of its geography, Haiti taught the world that the enslaved could and would reform the rotten societies that exploited them.

The Haitian Revolution stands out as one of the most monumental events in world history. A whole people rose up and made themselves masters of an island upon which they had previously been slaves. The echo of this strike against colonialism and imperialism still rings today. In order to strike a blow that rings so loud and so clear, the Haitian revolutionaries developed a symbiotic relationship with the geography of Saint-Domingue. Geography functioned as the engine of the Haitian revolution, allowing the revolutionaries to beat back the French and re-chart the course of modern history.

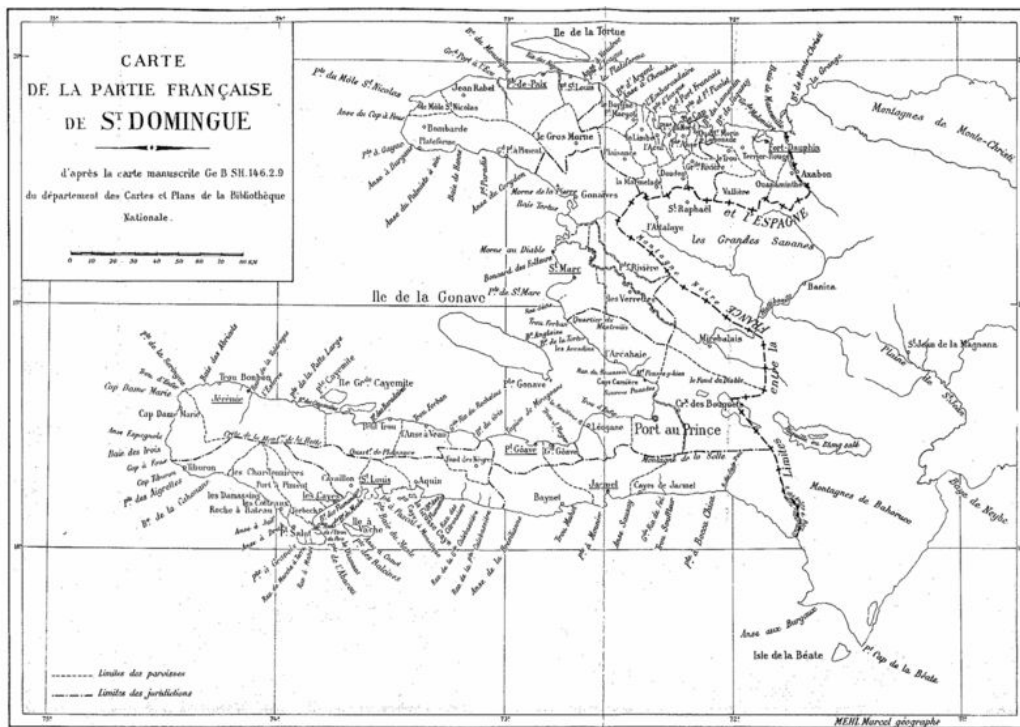
NOTES

- ¹“Domingue (Saint).” In Denis Diderot, and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, eds. *Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1772.) 33.
- ²“Climate Port au Prince”. August 09, 2015. Accessed February 02, 2018.
- ³ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World* (London: Belknap, 1971). 26.
- ⁴ William Wells Brown, “Toussaint L’Ouverture,” *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements* (New York: Thomas Hamilton, 1863).
- ⁵ Dubois, 28.
- ⁶ “Armes boucanieres,” in Diderot, 690.
- ⁷ Dubois, 109.
- ⁸ Dubois, 109.
- ⁹ Dubois, 110.
- ¹⁰ “St. Domingo Disturbances,” *Philadelphia General Advertiser*, Oct. 11, 1791. In Laurent Dubois and John D. Garrigus, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean* (Bedford St. Martins: Boston, 2006). 98.
- ¹¹ Jean-François-Xavier de Ménard to Napoleon Bonaparte, 1802, in Dubois, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, 174.
- ¹² Jean François and Georges Biassou to “the Commissioners,” in Dubois, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, 100.
- ¹³ Toussaint L’Ouverture and Léger-Félicité Sonthonax, ““Toussaint Dialogue with Léger Félicité Sonthonax.,”” Trans, by Mitch Abidor, 1797.
- ¹⁴ L’Ouverture and Sonthonax
- ¹⁵ Toussaint L’Ouverture to “his fellow citizens.” Trans. Mitch Abidor. 1800.
Napoleon Bonaparte, “Decree Re-establishing Slavery in the Colonies,” 1802.
- ¹⁶ Jean-François-Xavier de Ménard to Napoleon Bonaparte, in Dubois, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, 175.
- ¹⁷ “French Capitulation in Saint-Domingue,” 1803; Boisrond Tonnerre, “Liberty or Death” (Act of Independence), trans Mitch Abidor, 1804.
- ¹⁸ Toussaint L’Ouverture, *Memoir of Toussaint L’Ouverture, Written by Himself*, trans. Philippe R. Girard, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014). 83; Brown.
- ¹⁹ Brown.
- ²⁰ Dubois, *Avengers of the New World*, 110.
- ²¹ John Whyte, “Proclamation of his Excellency Brigadier General Whyte, Commanding His Britannic Majesty’s Forces in St. Domingo,” 1794.
Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 1799, in Dubois, *Slave Revolution in the Caribbean*, 161.
- ²² Frederick Douglass, “Lecture on Haiti,” (World’s Fair, Chicago, 1893).
Sêrgio Figueiredo Ferretti, “Revoltas de escravos na Bahia em início do seculo XIX,” *Cadernos de Pesquisa de São Luís* 4, no. 1 (June 1988): 82.
- ²³ Wendell Philipps, “Toussaint L’Ouverture,” (Anti-slavery Society, New York and Boston, 1861).

APPENDICES



Appendix 1: NASA - *Topographical Map of Hispaniola (Kiskeya)* (2009).

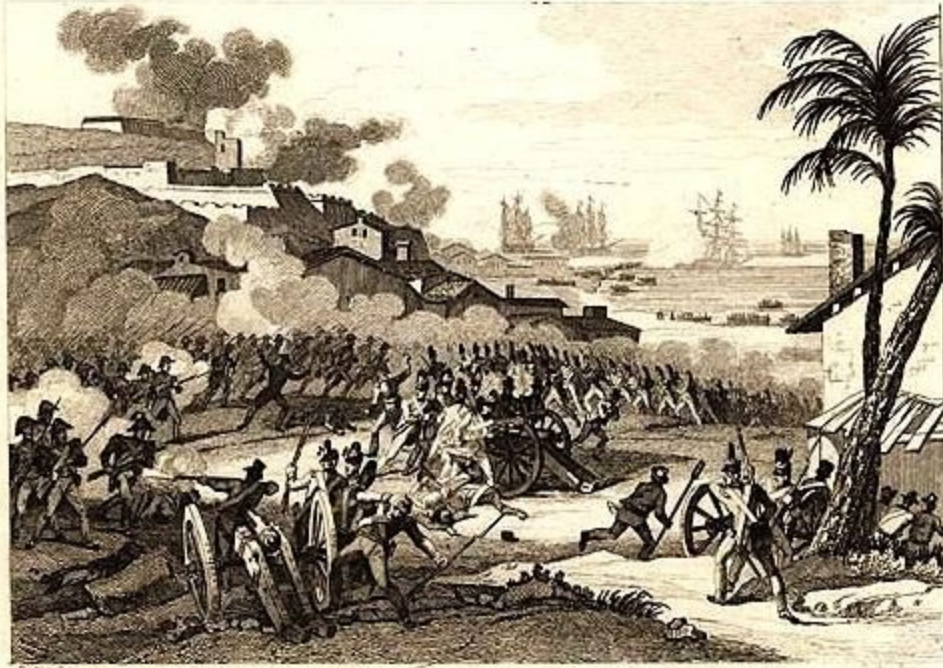


Appendix 2: Marcel Mehl – *Map of the French Part of Saint-Domingue* (1777)



Appendix 3: *Toussaint Louverture Fighting the French in Saint-Domingue. (Circa 1800)*

FRANCE MILITAIRE



Attaque et Combat de Léogâne. St. Domingue.

Appendix 4: *Attaque et Combat de Léogâne (Circa 1795)*