

*The Free Men of Colour and the Revolution in Saint Domingue, 1789-1792**

by Robert STEIN**

The flame of civil discord seems to rage in this climate with a degree of inveteracy unknown in other countries. Nothing seems to satisfy a partisan but the sacrifice of his opponent's life and property.¹

The revolutionary period in Haitian history lasted from 1789 until 1804. It began as a political movement, with white colonists seeking the autonomy of Saint Domingue. It also ended as a political movement, with non-whites proclaiming the independence of Haiti. The political transformation, however, was accompanied by a profound social and economic revolution. I propose to discuss one aspect of that revolution, the role played by the free men of colour (*gens/hommes de couleur libres*), from 1789 until 4 April 1792, the date on which the legal category "free men of colour" ceased to exist. During this period, the free men of colour led an attack on the old social order and proposed a new one more adequately reflecting both the economic realities of the colony and the principles of the French Revolution. After this period, the new order was itself replaced by a third one which virtually welded together race, wealth and status, and which formed the basis of Haitian society until the twentieth century.

The free men of colour played a key role in the Haitian Revolution. As members of an intermediary group, they had unique ties with the other groups in the colony: the rich whites, the poor whites, and the slaves. This pivotal position makes an analysis of the free men of colour fundamental to an understanding of the Haitian Revolution, although historians have all too often interpreted the Revolution first and then assigned the free men of colour a role in it. Marxists viewing the early stages of the Haitian Revolution as a bourgeois revolution see the free men of colour as members of a bourgeoisie.² Such an interpretation, however, ignores the fact that the free men of colour derived their economic strength from the land and not from commerce, and that they never sought to overthrow

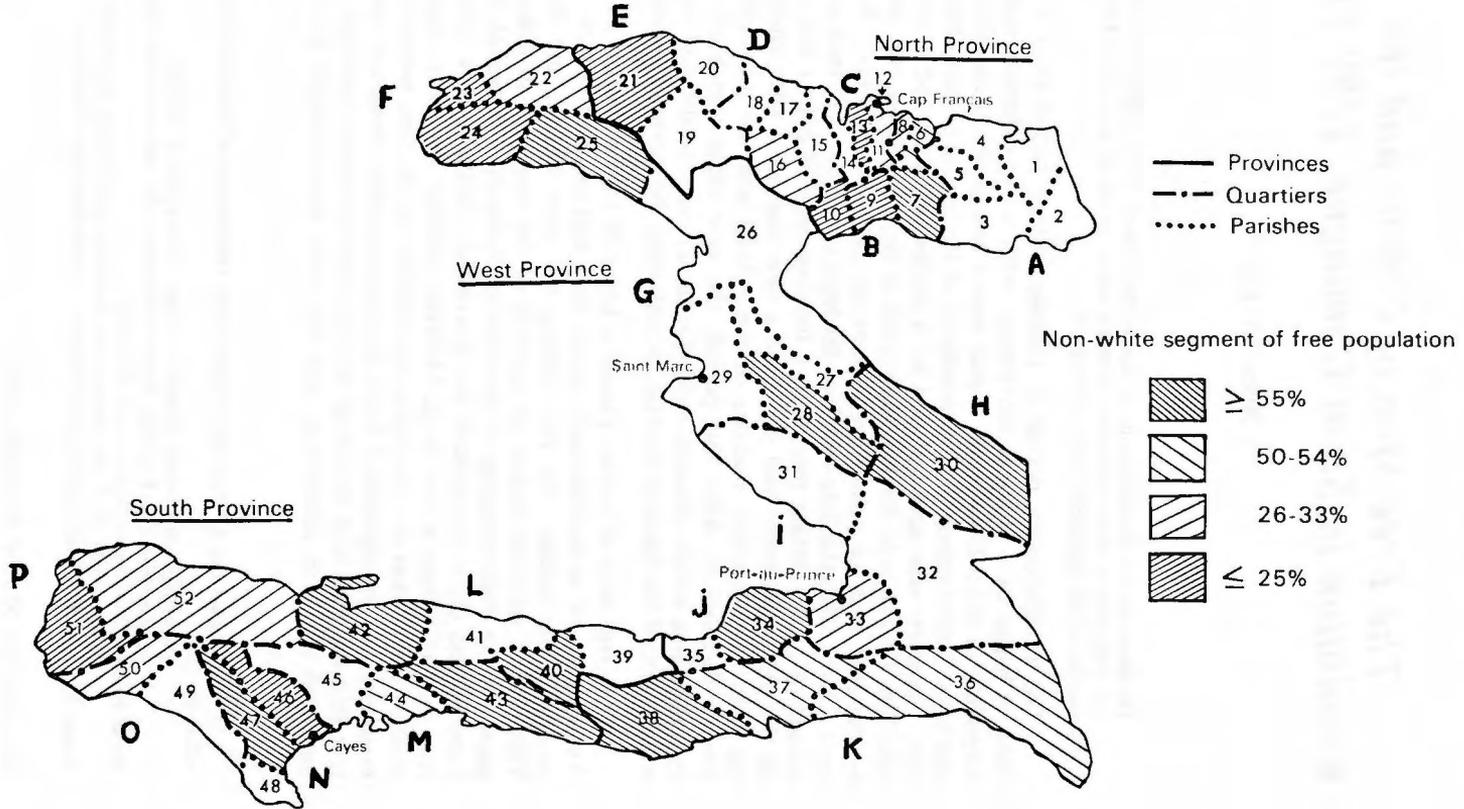
* I would like to thank the Graphic Arts Department of Erindale College for providing the Map.

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¹ A letter from Cap Français, dated 4 December 1791 and published 4 January 1792, in the *Philadelphia Aurora and General Advertiser*.

² For example, C. L. R. JAMES, *Les Jacobins noirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1949); and Edner BRUTUS, *Révolution dans Saint Domingue*, 2 vols (Belgique: Panthéon, n.d.).

SAINT DOMINGUE, 1789



LEGEND TO MAP: PARISHES OF SAINT DOMINGUE.

North Province	West Province	South Province
Quartier A: Fort Dauphin	Quartier F: Môle	Quartier L: Petit Goâve
1 Fort Dauphin	22 Jean Rabel	39 Petit Goâve
2 Ouanaminthe	23 Môle	40 Fond-des-Nègres
3 Vallière	24 Bombarde	41 L'Anse-à-Veau
4 Terrier Rouge	25 Port-à-Piment	42 Petit Trou
5 Trou	Quartier G: St. Marc	Quartier M: St. Louis
Quartier B: Limonade	26 Gonaïves	43 Acquin
6 Limonade	27 Petite Rivière	44 St. Louis
7 Grande Rivière (Sainte Rose)	28 Verrettes	45 Cavaillon
8 St. Louis du Morin	29 Saint Marc	Quartier N: Cayes
9 Dondon	Quartier H: Mirebalais	46 Cayes
10 Marmelade	30 Mirebalais	47 Torbec
Quartier C: Cap	Quartier I: Port-au-Prince	48 Port Salut
11 Petite Anse	31 Arcahaye	Quartier O: Cap Tiburon
12 Cap Français	32 Croix-des-Bouquets	49 Côteaux
13 Plaine du Nord	33 Port-au-Prince	50 Cap Tiburon
14 Acul	Quartier J: Léogane	Quartier P: Jérémie
Quartier D: Limbé	34 Léogane	51 Cap Dalmarie
15 Limbé	35 Grand Goâve	52 Jérémie
16 Plaisance	Quartier K: Jacmel	
17 Port Margot	36 Cayes de Jacmel	
18 Borgne	37 Jacmel	
Quartier E: Port-de-Paix	38 Bainet	
19 Gros Morne		
20 Petit St. Louis		
21 Port-de-Paix		

the traditional class structure of the colony. Nationalists who believe that the Revolution's goal was the establishment of an independent, non-white Haiti, view the free men of colour as leaders of a national movement.³ This is to confuse the civil warfare of the early period of the Revolution with the war of independence of the later period; it also overlooks the opposition usually displayed by the free men of colour to the abolition of slavery. Historians who interpret the Haitian Revolution as part of the French Revolution ask whether the free men of colour were pro- or counter-revolutionary;⁴ but such an imposition of French categories on the Saint Domingue situation does not work since local and not national issues determined political activity in the colony. Finally, those who see only race warfare in the Haitian Revolution call the free men of colour mulattoes who fought against both whites and blacks.⁵ This is to misunderstand the basic nature of the group "free men of colour": it was composed of blacks and mulattoes.

³ For example, Beaubrun ARDOUIN, *Études sur l'histoire d'Haïti*, 11 vols (Port-au-Prince: François Dalencourt, 1958, originally published in 1853-60).

⁴ Such interpretations are discussed in Gérard M. LAURENT, *Contribution à l'histoire de Saint Domingue* (Port-au-Prince: La Phalange, 1971), p. 33.

⁵ For example, T. Lothrop STODDARD, *The French Revolution in San Domingo* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914); and, to a lesser degree, Thomas O. OTT, *The Haitian Revolution, 1789-1814* (Knoxville, Tenn.: University of Tennessee, 1973).

Clearly, the Haitian Revolution was far too complex to have any simple interpretation, and the role of the free men of colour cannot be reduced to a narrow formula. Economic, national, ideological and racial conflicts were present throughout the revolutionary period, and they varied in relative significance as the Revolution progressed. Similarly, the free men of colour acted inconsistently. According to the time and to the region of Saint Domingue, they acted primarily according to interests of class, nationality, political philosophy, or race. From 1789 to 1792, questions of race and class dominated. The Haitian Revolution upset the equilibrium of colonial society, and especially the harmony which had prevailed between wealth, race and status; and in the early days of the Revolution there was a struggle between two conceptions of colonial society. The whites wanted race to remain the crucial factor in determining social and political status, while the free men of colour insisted that wealth should be the decisive criterion. The free men of colour won the battle on 4 April 1792, when racial considerations were officially eliminated from colonial lawbooks.

Saint Domingue was one of the largest of the European colonies in the West Indies, measuring about 12,000 square miles.⁶ However, only about one-fifth of the colony was inhabitable, as rugged mountain chains unsuitable for large-scale cultivation covered most of the surface area. Here runaway slaves, army deserters and impoverished free men of all colours eked out a miserable existence. The mountains divided Saint Domingue into three natural provinces which the French made into administrative districts: the North, the West and the South as shown on the Map. Communications between the three provinces were difficult, particularly between the North and the rest of the colony. Even the opening of a new road from Cap Français to Port-au-Prince in 1787 scarcely improved matters,⁷ a fact which the whites came to appreciate late in 1791 when they attempted with considerable success to prevent the slave rebellion in the North from spreading. In each province, population and the labour-intensive sugar industry were concentrated on plains, while the coffee industry, based on smaller plantations using fewer workers, was a feature of the hill-country.

The natural isolation of each of the three provinces encouraged the development of local political and social differences and fostered inter-provincial rivalries which could be intense.⁸ The North was the most prosperous province and it enjoyed natural and historic advantages. Blessed with naturally irrigated, fertile soil, and situated along a major Caribbean shipping lane, the North was invariably the first and frequently the

⁶ This section is based on Médéric-Louis-Élie MOREAU DE SAINT-MÉRY, *Description ... de la partie française de l'isle de Saint Domingue*, 3 vols (Paris: Société de l'histoire des colonies françaises, 1958, originally published in 1797), 1: 27ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 1: 118.

⁸ ARDOUIN, *Études*, 1: 22-25. Ardouin interpreted Haitian history in terms of regional conflict.

only stop for ships coming from Europe.⁹ The North was also the first part of the colony to be settled by Frenchmen, in this case piratical *flibustiers* and *boucaniers* who crossed to the Saint Domingue mainland from their den on Tortuga Island. Their successors in the North developed the most sophisticated farming methods on the island, and although it was the smallest of the three provinces, the North by the end of the old regime was producing more than three-quarters of Saint Domingue's clayed sugar and nearly half of its coffee (Table 1).¹⁰ In 1789, the North was the domain of great planters, merchants, and modest property-owners, and had relatively few poor whites or free men of colour (Table 2).¹¹ Both poor whites and free men of colour lived either in Cap Français, the largest city on the island, or in the coffee-producing hill-country beyond the sugar-producing Northern Plain. In spite of large numbers of poor whites in Cap Français, the town was still firmly controlled by planters and by the rich merchants who handled the colony's trade with France.

Table 1. — SAINT DOMINGUE PRODUCTION ON THE EVE OF THE REVOLUTION
(MILLIONS OF POUNDS).

<i>Province</i>	<i>Muscovado</i>	<i>Clayed Sugar</i>	<i>Coffee</i>
North	4	53	33
West	69	13	27
South	20	4	7
Total	93	70	68

Source: Archives de la Chambre de Commerce de Marseille, H 19.

The West was the largest province and was in an intermediate historic, geographic and economic position. Settled after the North, the West lacked some of the North's natural advantages, and particularly natural irrigation. It was nonetheless a prosperous area in 1789, producing nearly three-quarters of the colony's muscovado (an inferior form of raw sugar) and nearly two-fifths of its coffee (Table 1).¹² On the eve of the Revolution, the West had the most balanced mixture of free population in the colony, with almost equal numbers of whites and free non-whites (Table 2). The whites were evenly divided into rich, modest, and poor: the rich owned large sugar plantations on the plains; the modest had small sugar or coffee plantations on fairly good land; and the poor gravitated towards the towns, especially Saint Marc and Port-au-Prince, the capital of the colony. For their part, the free men of colour split into three main groups:

⁹ MOREAU, *Description*, I: 118-19.

¹⁰ Archives de la Chambre de Commerce de Marseille (hereafter ACCMx), H 19, Tableau des finances et du commerce de la partie française de Saint Domingue. Clayed sugar: 53 million pounds out of 70 million; coffee: 33 million pounds out of 68 million.

¹¹ All population figures are from MOREAU, on a parish-by-parish basis.

¹² ACCMx, H 19, Tableau des finances. Clayed sugar: 69 million pounds out of 93 million; coffee: 27 million pounds out of 68 million.

an urban one at Saint Marc, a rather poor coffee-producing one in Mirebalais Parish, and a fairly rich sugar and coffee-producing one in Léogane Parish. There were also a fair number of free men of colour in Port-au-Prince Parish, divided evenly between the town itself and the surrounding hills. Finally, there was the South Province, the last area to be settled. Although nearly as large as the West, the South produced only muscovado in any significant quantities (Table 1).¹³ Its distant location made it unattractive to French shippers, and residents of the South were rapidly earning a reputation for smuggling with nearby Jamaica. The South was settled primarily by *petits blancs* and free men of colour, and there were large concentrations of both in the western end of the peninsula (Table 2).

Table 2. — SAINT DOMINGUE POPULATION ON THE EVE OF THE REVOLUTION.

Province	Whites	Free Men of Colour	Slaves
a. Total Given by Moreau de Saint-Méry			
North	16,000	9,000	170-180,000
West	14,000	12,000	168,000
South	10,000	6,500	114,000
Total	40,000	27,500	452-462,000
B. Total Using Moreau's Parish-by-Parish Data			
North	11,176	6,637	140,166
West	13,764	10,952	180,452
South	8,713	5,835	104,528
Total	33,653	23,424	425,146

Source: M.-L.-É. MOREAU DE SAINT-MÉRY, *Description ... de la partie française de l'isle de Saint Domingue*.

Until the middle of the eighteenth century, there was little social conflict on Saint Domingue. For all practical purposes, the population was divided into two fairly homogeneous castes, with race, social status, economic position and political power in harmony. The inferior caste was composed of slaves; whether of mixed or pure blood, of African or creole origin, they were condemned by their colour to furnishing virtually all the manual labour in the colony.¹⁴ There were more than 400,000 slaves by 1789. The superior caste was white. Before the middle of the century, almost all whites were property owners and many belonged to the *grand blanc* class of wealthy sugar planters.¹⁵ Having few internal divisions, the

¹³ Ibid. Muscovado: 20 million pounds out of 93 million; clayed sugar: 4 million pounds out of 70 million; coffee: 7 million pounds out of 68 million.

¹⁴ For slaves in Saint Domingue, see especially Gabriel DEBIEN, *Les esclaves aux Antilles françaises (XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles)* (Basse-Terre, Guadeloupe: Société de l'histoire de la Guadeloupe, 1974), which has an extensive bibliography.

¹⁵ On the *grands blancs*, see MOREAU, *Description*, 1: 34-38; Gabriel DEBIEN, *Les colons de Saint Domingue et la Révolution* (Paris; A. Colin, 1953), pp. 40-44.

whites controlled the local economy and a rather aristocratic society without much dissent. The only problem was posed by the "French" group of whites, merchants and administrators whose first allegiance was to France. Conflict, however, was minimal in the first half of the century, primarily because warfare had not yet upset the fragile health of the colony's economy and because the numbers of *petits blancs* and free men of colour were still small.

After the War of the Austrian Succession and more particularly after the Seven Years' War, significant changes in the composition of the free population put an end to the *grands blancs*' tranquillity. One problem faced by free colonial society was the rise of a large *petit blanc* class,¹⁶ which was particularly numerous on Saint Domingue, forming in 1789 nearly half the white population instead of a third as in the Lesser Antilles.¹⁷ Coming to the island after 1763, they generally had little money and, although some were successful in establishing small coffee plantations in the more remote areas of the colony, most lived as artisans, shopkeepers, or day-labourers in the larger towns or as overseers on the larger plantations.¹⁸ The arrival of a significant number of "small whites" on Saint Domingue sharply increased class conflict: the *petits blancs* soon developed an intense dislike for their white superiors. They also developed an even more intense hatred for their non-white inferiors; and it was the intractability of the *petit blanc* class which helped shape the early days of the Haitian Revolution.

An even greater problem was posed in the second half of the eighteenth century by the great increase in the numbers of the free men of colour. This was a racially mixed group whose composition was defined by law. Composed of slaves set free by their masters, children of free white mothers and non-white fathers (whether slave or free), and all children born to free non-white mothers, the free men of colour included all persons who were free but who had some African blood.¹⁹ Even the slightest amount of black blood made for a man of colour; according to Moreau de Saint-Méry, some people never admitted "the possibility of the total disappearance of the trade of mixture", and claimed that even one part in 8,192 constituted colour.²⁰ By the eve of the Revolution, the free men of colour were exceptionally numerous on Saint Domingue, and their number had grown rapidly. In 1771, there were only 6,000 of them as opposed to 18,000 whites, but by 1789 they numbered 28,000 while the whites were but

¹⁶ A rather sympathetic picture of *petits blancs* is found in MOREAU, *Description*, 2: 1105.

¹⁷ Charles FROSTIN, *Les révoltes blanches à Saint Domingue XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles* (Paris: L'École, 1975), p. 68.

¹⁸ DEBIEN, *Colons*, p. 40; FROSTIN, *Révoltes*, pp. 68-69; Adolphe CABON, *Histoire d'Haïti*, 4 vols (Port-au-Prince: Édition de la Petite revue, n.d.), 1: 137.

¹⁹ *Code Noir*, articles 13 and 55, reprinted in Lucien PEYTRAUD, *L'esclavage aux Antilles françaises avant 1789* (Paris, 1897), pp. 158-66.

²⁰ MOREAU, *Description*, 1: 99.

30,000²¹ This increase was due both to a high rate of reproduction and to the more liberal use by the whites of their powers of enfranchisement.²²

The sharp increase in the numbers of both the free men of colour and the *petits blancs* led to social tensions on Saint Domingue. The fundamental problem was the almost obsessive hatred which the *petits blancs* developed for the free men of colour. Although some of the hatred was simply racial, much was economic: *petits blancs* and free men of colour competed for jobs in the towns, and whites resented losing out to free men of colour. Even more galling was the fact that some free men of colour had succeeded in amassing fortunes far greater than the modest holdings of the *petits blancs*. According to Julien Raimond, "deputy for the citizens of colour at the National Assembly", his people owned more than half the land and a third of the slaves on Saint Domingue.²³ Although this was probably an exaggeration, the free men of colour did make many land purchases late in the old regime, particularly in the less immediately attractive areas of the recently settled West and South.²⁴ There was thus a significant number of free men of colour who owned plantations and slaves, albeit for the most part coffee plantations with modest numbers of slaves. These free men of colour tried to imitate the life style of the white planters, sending their children to France to be educated and believing "strongly in their French culture".²⁵ They also performed important services to the colony, such as hunting runaway slaves.

With the economic problems came racial problems, as the *petits blancs* turned to racism to compensate for their own economic failings. They could simply not tolerate the success of what they considered an inferior race, and they developed elaborate racial arguments to prove their own superiority. Equality, they said, was fine for the men of France or Europe for, in spite of economic differences, they were all from the same race. "À Saint Domingue, au contraire, les hommes sont de deux espè-

²¹ FROSTIN, *Révoltes*, p. 28. In the Lesser Antilles, the 1789 figures were 24,000 whites and 8,000 free men of colour (ibid., p. 29). It should be noted that all figures are subject to debate, as most eighteenth-century authors probably inflated the number of whites and decreased the number of free men of colour and slaves (the latter for tax purposes). MOREAU, *Description*, 1: 119; 2: 722; 3: 1162, says that there were 40,000 whites and 27,500 free men of colour, but his parish-by-parish totals add up to 33,653 and 23,423, respectively. Finally, Jacques HOUDAILLE, "Quelques données sur la population de Saint Domingue au XVIII^e siècle", *Population*, 28 (1973): 60, says there were 28,000 whites and 30,000 free men of colour, but he gives no sources.

²² On reproduction rates, see Jacques HOUDAILLE, "Trois paroisses de Saint Domingue au XVIII^e siècle", *Population*, 18 (1963): 102-3. On the question of enfranchisement, see DEBIEN, *Esclaves*, pp. 368-91, and the same author's *Études antillaises* (Paris: A. Colin, 1956), pp. 116-17. See also François GIRON, *La vie quotidienne de la société créole* (Paris: Hachette, 1972), pp. 194-201; and Jacques BARROS, "De quelques documents inédits concernant Saint Domingue (1785-1793)", *Conjonction*, 118 (1972): 45-49.

²³ Julien RAIMOND, *Véritables origines des troubles de Saint Domingue* (Paris, 1792), p. 3 (Bibliothèque Nationale (hereafter BN), Lk12 401).

²⁴ Yvan DEBBASCH, *Couleur et liberté* (Paris: Dalloz, 1967), 1: 82-91, 121; GIROD, *Vie quotidienne*, p. 202; JAMES, *Jacobins noirs*, pp. 34-35; CABON, *Histoire*, 2: 546, says that the free men of colour probably owned one-fifth of the land.

²⁵ BRUTUS, *Révolution*, 1: 226.

ces différentes ... et ces deux espèces d'hommes ont donné naissance à une troisième espèce hybride."²⁶ This third type was free but certainly not equal; their black heritage rendered them incapable of assuming the responsibilities of full citizenship. Thus, the *petits blancs* defined the free men of colour in racial terms as halfbreeds or mulattoes, rather than in legal terms as a group including both mulattoes and blacks.

To counteract the economic gains made by the free men of colour, the *petits blancs* managed to have racial theory translated into practice in the second half of the eighteenth century.²⁷ With the support of the *grands blancs* — who could never overcome their racial prejudices to form a stable alliance with the richer free men of colour — the *petits blancs* humiliated the free men of colour and denied them their rights. In theory, the latter were fully equal to all French citizens. The foundation for their rights was article 59 of the *Code Noir* (1685): "Nous [Louis XIV] octroyons aux affranchis les mêmes droits, privilèges et immunités dont jouissent les personnes nées libres".²⁸ Thus, with some minor exceptions such as exclusion from noble status,²⁹ the law clearly considered the free men of colour to be the equals of other Frenchmen, and this remained true until the Seven Years' War. After the war, that is, when the numbers of *petits blancs* and free men of colour began to grow dramatically, the situation changed, and the free men of colour were subjected to a harsher legal regime. They lost the right to enter France without special permission; they were denied the right of assembly even in small groups for apolitical purposes; and they were required to perform military or police duty but without the hope of reaching officer rank.³⁰ These restrictions angered the free men of colour, and in the 1780s they began to make efforts to have them lifted.³¹ In effect, their goal was the opposite of the goal of the *petits blancs*: where the latter wanted a society ordered according to race, the former wanted wealth to determine social status, regardless of race.

Thus, on the eve of the French Revolution, there were important social problems in colonial society, but there was still little hint of a social revolution. Indeed, the only question which seemed at all likely to produce a major confrontation was a narrowly political one: who should govern Saint Domingue? And this seemed to foretell not a civil war but a war of

²⁶ Reprinted, among other places, in *Idées sommaires sur quelques règlements à faire par l'Assemblée Coloniale* (Cap Français, 1790), pp. 5-12 (BN, Lk12 265).

²⁷ DEBBASCH, *Couleur*, 1: 95-104. The free men of colour could be subjected to arbitrary physical punishment, too. See the report of an unprovoked caning meted out by a white to a free man of colour, in BARROS, "Quelques documents", pp. 37-39.

²⁸ Reprinted in PEYTRAUD, *L'esclavage*, pp. 158-66.

²⁹ Auguste LEBEAU, *De la condition des gens de couleur libres sous l'Ancien régime* (Poitiers, 1903), p. 25.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 11, 33-44. See also Abbé GRÉGOIRE, *Mémoire en faveur des gens de couleur* (Paris, 1789), pp. 5ff (BN, Lk9 70). The free men of colour fought — under white officers — in Georgia during the American Revolution; see CABON, *Histoire*, 2: 397ff. See also Archives Départementales de la Gironde (hereafter ADG), 6B 14, "Déclaration du Roi", 9 August 1777.

³¹ DEBBASCH, *Couleur*, 1: 126-27.

independence fought against France. Since its settlement, Saint Domingue had been the site of political conflict between the colonists and the French administration headed by the intendant and the governor.³² In the second half of the eighteenth century, the conflict centred on trading rights for foreigners. Since 1717, all direct commerce between Saint Domingue and foreign countries was prohibited. This made little difference to the colonists until first the War of the Austrian Succession (1744-48) and then the Seven Years' War (1756-63) interrupted communications with France and forced the colonists to buy slaves from, and sell sugar and coffee to, the British. After 1763, the government tried to re-impose the old system, but this met with stiff resistance from the colonists who believed that the French merchants' monopoly over trade served only to retard the development of the colony.³³ To circumvent the regulations, the planters developed a vast interlope trade with British North America and the British West Indies. Although the government wanted to eliminate this smuggling, it had to act discreetly; relations between colonists and France had become so strained by the 1780s that colonial administrators had to be content merely with keeping Saint Domingue French.³⁴

It was against this background of rising tensions that the French Revolution arrived in Saint Domingue. As in France, the pre-revolutionary period on Saint Domingue was characterized by widespread politicization, and interest in the meeting of the Estates-General and in the drafting of the *cahiers de doléances* was keen.³⁵ Also as in France, the political stage on Saint Domingue was dominated at first by the most prestigious class, in this case the *grands blancs*. The great planters were upset in 1789 because they were suffering from the effects of an overly rapid economic expansion.³⁶ Plantation revenues had not yet caught up with increased capital investment, and the planters were deep in debt to French merchants. The Revolution seemed to provide a quick way out for the planters, and they seized the opportunity to try to establish some sort of colonial autonomy. In concrete terms, they wanted an elected colonial government which would end the French merchants' monopoly over colonial trade and implement a policy of free trade with all nations.

The planters succeeded in destroying the authority of the French government in the colony but failed to create anything viable in its place. Like the nobles in France who subverted the royal power, the great planters opened a Pandora's box when they resorted to extra-legal means.

³² See Charles FROSTIN, "Histoire de l'autonomisme colon de la partie française de Saint Domingue aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles" (thèse de doctorat d'État, Université de Lille III, 1973).

³³ The government did allow the colonists a limited and tightly-controlled free trade, but this concession did little to satisfy colonial demands. On the problems of controlling colonial trade, see Jean TARRADE, *Le commerce colonial de la France à la fin de l'Ancien Régime*, 2 vols (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1972).

³⁴ DEBIEN, *Colons*, p. 34.

³⁵ On the opening phases of the Revolution, see CABON, *Histoire*, 3: 5-22; OTT, *Haitian Revolution*, pp. 28-31; and DEBIEN, *Colons*, pp. 54-78.

³⁶ See Robert STEIN, "The French Sugar Business in the Eighteenth Century: A Quantitative Study", *Business History*, XXII (January 1980): 5-17.

They blithely assumed that they could effect a political or administrative revolution without precipitating a social revolution.³⁷ Their first goal was gaining representation of the colony at the coming meeting of the Estates-General, a move vigorously opposed by the French administrators on the island whose powers would be usurped. After illegal elections, thirty-one deputies for Saint Domingue were named, sixteen from the island and fifteen from Paris. The appearance of the would-be deputies at Versailles in June 1789 focused attention on Saint Domingue and began a debate over the island's social order. Although Saint Domingue succeeded in having six of its deputies seated in the National Assembly on 4 July 1789,³⁸ the price was steep: the colony's internal regime became a matter of public discussion in France.³⁹ The arrival of the Saint Domingue delegation in Paris had been taken as a challenge to the principles of many French liberals and particularly the members of the *Société des Amis des Noirs*. The ultimate goal of these men was the abolition of slavery, with more immediate goals being the ending of the slave trade and the improvement of the position of the free men of colour. Since the last goal seemed to be the most practical, it was the one emphasized by the abolitionists and their allies during the early years of the French Revolution, so that, from 1789 to 1791, political life on Saint Domingue was dominated by the question of the status of the free men of colour.

Although largely ignored by whites, the free men of colour on Saint Domingue were also caught up in the wave of rising expectations which swept over the island in 1789. Like the whites, they submitted *cahiers de doléances* and sought representation in the Estates General/National Assembly. The goal expressed in the *cahiers* was simple: the free men of colour desired full equality with their white neighbours.⁴⁰ All legal restrictions should be removed, and free men of colour should be granted the rights to pursue any career, travel to France, and even marry white citizens. Like the whites, the free men of colour had a rather callous disregard for their social inferiors and requested the prohibition of cohabitation between free and slave, but they proved more humane in requesting that the offspring of such unions be free. These basic demands became the rallying cry for abolitionists in the National Assembly, and the plight of the free men of colour became a minor *cause célèbre* for liberals.

Fully aware of the hostile atmosphere on Saint Domingue,⁴¹ the free men of colour placed their faith in the National Assembly. Phrasing their

³⁷ See the *cahiers de doléances* of Saint Domingue, printed in Blanche MAUREL, *Cahiers de doléances de la colonie de Saint Domingue pour les États Généraux de 1789* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1933), pp. 263-82.

³⁸ *Archives parlementaires*, 8: 190.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8: 187, has remarks by Mirabeau about the structure of colonial society.

⁴⁰ *Cahier contenant les plaintes, doléances, et réclamations des citoyens libres et propriétaires de couleur des îles et colonies françaises* (n.p., n.d.), article 3 (BN, Le 24 203).

⁴¹ The condition of the free men of colour had deteriorated markedly on Saint Domingue since the beginning of the Revolution. See Michel MINA, *Adresse à l'Assemblée Nationale par les hommes de couleur libres de Saint Domingue* (n.p., n.d.), p. 5 (BN, Lk12 946); see also FROSTIN, *Révoltes*, p. 281.

argument in revolutionary rhetoric, they told the Assembly that they were appealing “au nom des droits sacrés de l’Humanité” against ministerial despotism, the remains of the feudal system, and inequalities among French citizens.⁴² They realized that their position caused a moral dilemma for the Assembly, particularly after the Declaration of Rights on 26 August 1789, and they were confident that the Revolution would ultimately benefit them. As their chief spokesman, Julien Raimond, put it: “La question est ... si la politique s’accorde ou ne s’accorde pas avec les principes, la justice et l’humanité”.⁴³

Although the free men of colour presented themselves as the only group in the colony truly loyal to France and to the principles of the Revolution, the National Assembly sided with the whites early in 1790. Subjected to intense lobbying by planters residing in Paris and organized into the Club Massiac, the Assembly refused in January 1790, to hear a credentials’ committee report favouring the admission of two free men of colour as deputies.⁴⁴ This first white victory was followed by a more significant one on 8 March 1790, when the Assembly endorsed the establishment of colonial self-government for internal affairs.⁴⁵ The 8 March Decree, especially as interpreted by the Instructions of 28 March,⁴⁶ was left vague enough in its particulars so that the white colonists could legally eliminate the free men of colour from the political life of the colony. Thus, the first phase of the Parisian side of the Saint Domingue Revolution ended with a complete victory for the whites. They had self-rule and racial domination, and they were thrilled when the news of the decree arrived.⁴⁷

If the issues in Paris led to clear-cut parliamentary battles for home rule and white superiority, things were more complex on the island itself. Here each of the three free groups wanted to take advantage of the fluid situation to gain its own ends. The *grands blancs* wanted colonial autonomy while retaining their position as the social élite of the island. The *petits blancs* wanted to establish a popular, racist state. They went beyond the *grands blancs* and supported the full independence of Saint Domingue; they also wanted a social revolution among the whites on the island. According to one *petit blanc*, the colony had three enemies: the philanthropists who supported the free men of colour and the slaves, the ministers who ruled the colony from Paris, and the aristocrats who dominated colonial society.⁴⁸ Finally, there were the free men of colour who had

⁴² *Réclamations adressées à l’Assemblée Nationale par les personnes de couleur* (n.p., n.d.), p. 1 (BN, Lk12 232).

⁴³ RAIMOND, *Véritables origines*, pp. 1-2.

⁴⁴ On the lobbying efforts of both whites and free men of colour, see GRÉGOIRE, *Mémoire*; RAIMOND, *Véritables origines*, pp. 18-19; DEBIEN, *Colons*, ch. 7; CABON, *Histoire*, 3: 34; DEBBASCH, *Couleur*, 1: 144-66.

⁴⁵ *Archives parlementaires*, 12: 72.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 12: 387.

⁴⁷ See the reaction of one merchant, dated 23 April 1790 in Archives Départementales de la Seine-Maritime, Fonds Begouen Demeaux (hereafter ADSM, BDM), L 50.

⁴⁸ M. BAILLOT, *L’anti-Brissot par un petit blanc de Saint Domingue* (Cap Français, n.d.), p. 1 (BN, Lk12 360).

little interest in the narrowly political revolution but who ardently desired a social revolution which would grant them equality with the whites. This revolution was to be limited by two considerations. First, there was no desire to abolish the class structure existing in the white community; they wanted merely to be integrated into that structure. Second, the free men of colour accepted the continued existence of slavery. Indeed, just as they had offered the Assembly the loyalty of the colony in return for legislative concessions, so did they offer the *grands blancs* the perpetuation of slavery in return for social justice. They claimed that they alone stood between the maintenance of slave society and complete anarchy; they were the only force which could contain the slaves.⁴⁹ The greatest fear of the free men of colour was assimilation into a mass of newly-freed slaves.

At first, the revolution on Saint Domingue itself was dominated by the whites' efforts to institute self-government, but soon the question of the free men of colour took precedence. Upon learning of the storming of the Bastille, the white residents of Saint Domingue were quick to attack royal power on the island, and in October 1789 the intendant was forced to return to France.⁵⁰ At the same time, the whites usurped many of the old administration's powers by establishing elected municipal and provincial governments; needless to say, these did not include free men of colour.⁵¹ Soon the various governments were taken over by either *grand blanc* or *petit blanc* factions and began to confront each other. By early 1790, Saint Domingue was in a state of near anarchy, and the spectacle of internecine fighting amongst the whites was followed closely by all non-whites.⁵²

Amidst the turmoil, the question of the free men of colour arose with urgency and even violence. The efforts of the free men of colour to gain admission into the electoral assemblies led to bloodshed late in 1789 and early in 1790, particularly in the West and South.⁵³ At Petit Goâve, *petits blancs* began a brief reign of terror over them,⁵⁴ while at Petite Rivière, the free men of colour staged an abortive uprising to protest the oath which local whites had tried to impose upon them. The oath was humiliating: "Je jure d'être fidèle à la nation, à la loi, et au roi, d'être soumis et respectueux envers les blancs, et de verser pour eux jusqu'à la dernière goutte de mon sang."⁵⁵ Rumours of uprisings abounded, and fear gripped large areas of the island. With tensions rising, all looked anxiously to

⁴⁹ RAIMOND, *Véritables origines*, p. 3.

⁵⁰ ACCMx, H 15, "Instructions pour mon successeur", October 1789. Barbois remained intendant-in-title until the office was abolished in June 1791.

⁵¹ See CABON, *Histoire*, 3: 30-37. In a few parishes, the free men of colour were allowed to participate in the primary assemblies.

⁵² ADSM, BDM, L 53, 4 January 1790.

⁵³ For the violence of late 1789 and early 1790, see ADSM, BDM, L 50, 13 October 1789; also DEBBASCH, *Couleur*, 1: 150, 173-74; ARDOUIN, *Études*, 1: 22-25.

⁵⁴ RAIMOND, *Véritables origines*, pp. 8-13.

⁵⁵ Quoted in M. GATÉREAU, *Histoire des troubles de Saint Domingue* (Paris, 1792), p. 43 (BN, Lk12 339); see also ADSM, BDM, L 50, 20 February 1790.

Paris for a definite statement on the status of the free men of colour. When the 8 March Decree was finally made known, it is small wonder that it was received with "la joie dans tous les cœurs des colons".⁵⁶

If the whites believed the decree to signify the dawn of a new era of peaceful white supremacy, the free men of colour took it as a challenge to their very existence. This led to further violence, at first sporadic and then organized under the leadership of Vincent Ogé.⁵⁷ A mulatto coffee merchant who owned half a plantation in the northern parish of Dondon, Ogé was in Paris on personal business when the Revolution began. He was soon caught up in the debates over the status of the free men of colour and became one of his people's leading spokesmen. After the publication of the 8 March Decree, Ogé apparently despaired of peaceful means and decided to return to Saint Domingue to fight violently for his goals. His voyage was well publicized, and news of his arrival in October 1790 spread quickly throughout the colony. The news roused fear in the whites who expected an uprising by the free men of colour if not by the slaves.⁵⁸ While the whites were refusing his offer to negotiate, Ogé organized a small army in Grande Rivière and tried without success to get the free men of colour in the West and South to join him. Significantly, Grande Rivière and neighbouring Limonade were the only two parishes in the North where the free men of colour outnumbered the whites.⁵⁹ They were like two coloured islands in a hostile white sea, for in the economic heart of the North — the Quartiers of Limonade, Cap and Limbé — the free men of colour formed only thirty-five percent of the free population. Deceived perhaps by their strength at home, Ogé's army attempted to march from Grande Rivière to Cap Français. This meant war with the whites.⁶⁰ After a quick victory, Ogé's troops were easily routed, with Ogé and other leaders fleeing to the Spanish end of the island. They were soon extradited, tried for rebellion, found guilty, broken on the wheel, and executed (26 February 1791).⁶¹ This was the last time the free men of colour in the Northern Plain would fight the whites. Ironically, both sides claimed to have the same reason for fighting, namely averting a slave revolution. The whites felt they had to suppress the free men of colour in order to set an example and scare the slaves; the free men of colour wanted equality in order to be able to act decisively against the slaves. The

⁵⁶ According to the North Provincial Assembly, ACCMx, H 16, 17 May 1790.

⁵⁷ On Ogé, see DEBBASCH, *Couleur*, 1: 179-84; RAIMOND, *Véritables origines*, pp. 25-26; *Discours historique sur les causes des désastres de la partie française de Saint Domingue* (Paris, n.d.), p. 10 (BN, Lk12 402); *A Particular Account of the Commencement and Progress of the Insurrection of the Negroes in Saint-Domingue*, 2nd ed. (London, 1792), p. 21 (BN, Lk12 1320); CABON, *Histoire*, 3: 44-46; OTT, *Haitian Revolution*, pp. 35-36; Bryan EDWARDS, *An Historical Survey of the French Colony on the Island of St. Domingo* (London, 1797), pp. 39-50; ARDOUIN, *Études*, 1: 32-38.

⁵⁸ For example, ADSM, BDM, L 50, 30 October 1790, 7 November 1790.

⁵⁹ All detailed population figures are from MOREAU's parish-by-parish data.

⁶⁰ For his early battles, see the *London Times*, 7 October 1791; also DEBIEN, *Études*, p. 158.

⁶¹ According to CABON, *Histoire*, 3: 45; OTT, *Haitian Revolution*, p. 39, says 9 March; ARDOUIN, *Études*, 1: 38, says 10 March.

whites won the battle, and their ideal of a political revolution without a social revolution was apparently realized. It seemed that, in the future, whites and free men of colour would join together under white rule to act against the slaves.

This, however, was true only for the North. In the South and West, the Ogé affair encouraged the free men of colour to unite and act violently. This occurred at a time when the whites were split into warring factions and when the influence of the French administration on the island was disintegrating. Since late 1789, Saint Domingue had been largely self-governing, a state of affairs recognized by the 8 March Decree. Still, the national government had retained some powers, particularly in the military sphere, and it was the aim of the national administrators left on the island to use those powers to keep the colony from drifting towards complete independence.

The primary scene of government activity was Port-au-Prince,⁶² and it was there that the fortunes of the free men of colour were played out in the most complex fashion. Although nominally the capital of the colony, Port-au-Prince was smaller and less important than Cap Français; it was, however, the largest city in the West Province, boasting a population of 2,800 whites (including 1,800 permanent residents), 400 free men of color, and 4,000 slaves in 1789.⁶³ Significantly, there were relatively large concentrations of free men of colour in the parishes near Port-au-Prince as well as in the rural parts of Port-au-Prince Parish itself.⁶⁴ Since the early days of the Revolution, the whites in Port-au-Prince had been badly divided; even before the Revolution, there were apparently more radicals there than in Cap Français.⁶⁵ With the advent of the Revolution, constraints on political activity were removed, and the whites quickly polarized along class lines into a radical and a conservative group. Although Cap Français' whites also split into two groups, they were of unequal strength, with the moderate "national" party always dominating the radical "anti-national" one;⁶⁶ this reflected the more developed and stable society and economy of the city. In Port-au-Prince — a city founded only in 1750 and situated in a relatively newly-settled province with a less sophisticated economy — the whites were more evenly divided, keeping the town in a state of constant ferment; as early as March 1790, an observer from the Cap predicted that Port-au-Prince would "tomber dans l'anarchie".⁶⁷ This prediction proved accurate. After a brief radical regime, a conservative alliance of rich merchants and *grands blancs*, backed by the French

⁶² On Port-au-Prince, see Georges CORVINGTON, Jr, *Port-au-Prince au cours des ans*, 3 vols (Port-au-Prince: Henri Deschamps, 1973), 2: 3-48.

⁶³ MOREAU, *Description*, 2: 1058.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2: 1058, 1110 (Léogane), 1142 (Cayes de Jacmel), 1147 (Jacmel); also, 913 (Mirebalais) and 861 (Varrettes).

⁶⁵ Witness the different reactions to the ordinance requiring absentee owners to return to Saint Domingue. It was laughed at in Cap Français, but warmly received in Port-au-Prince; ADSM, BDM, L 50, 14 April 1785.

⁶⁶ ACCMx, H 16, "Le moment de la crise", 15 June 1790.

⁶⁷ ADSM, BDM, L 50, 31 March 1790.

administration and the army, took power in Port-au-Prince in late July of 1790.⁶⁸ But, on 4 March 1791, the troops mutinied and radical *petits blancs* seized power.⁶⁹ This placed the free men of colour in a precarious position. Deprived of the moderating influence of the national government and confronted with increasing white animosity following the Ogé affair, they more than ever had to fend for themselves.

Ironically, just when the local French administration lost its power to help the free men of colour in practice, the National Assembly moved to support them in theory. Under constant pressure from the *Amis des Noirs* and their growing number of sympathizers, especially after the Ogé affair, the Assembly debated colonial affairs in May 1791, and on the 15th it explicitly ordered that all free men of colour born to two free parents should have the same political rights as whites.⁷⁰ The 15 May Decree represented a major change in the Assembly's colonial policy. Although the decree began with a promise never to consider the status of those free men of colour having at least one enslaved parent, it intervened directly in internal colonial matters, thereby negating the 8 March Decree. Revolutionaries in France were determined to introduce the ideals of the Revolution into Saint Domingue, although, as the Haitian historian Adolphe Cabon pointed out, the decree itself was a rather precarious compromise between principle and expediency.⁷¹ Ever since the promulgation of the Declaration of Rights, the status of the free men of colour had proved embarrassing for the Assembly. The Declaration made no provision for racial distinctions, and the wording of its articles implied equality for all citizens regardless of race. In order to reconcile white colonial demands with this universalism, the Assembly allowed on 15 May for the possibility of equality between the races. Instead of allowing the colonists to define political status exclusively by race, the decree defined it in terms of a mixture of race and legal inheritance or birthright. The vast majority of the free men of colour failed to meet the new criteria for full political rights; a few, however, did and theoretically became full French citizens.

When word of the 15 May Decree reached Saint Domingue, the whites were furious and even threatened to cut all ties with France.⁷² More importantly, they simply refused to obey the decree. Led by Governor Blanchelande himself, the colonists persisted in denying the free men of colour their rights, claiming that the National Assembly had exceeded

⁶⁸ "Relation de ce qui s'est passé à Port-au-Prince la nuit du 29 au 30 juillet 1790" (BN, Lk12 291); and "Preuves de la fausseté de la relation imprimée de M. Maudit" (BN, Lk12/292).

⁶⁹ The official *petit blanc* description of the event appears in ACCMx, H 17, 8 March 1791, Letter from the Municipality of Port-au-Prince to the National Assembly; see also ACCMx, H 17, Letter of 15 March 1791, from the North Provincial Assembly to the Marseilles Chamber of Commerce, for a critical account.

⁷⁰ *Archives parlementaires*, 26: 97.

⁷¹ CABON, *Histoire*, 3: 60-61.

⁷² For example, ADSM, BDM, L 50, 1 July 1790 [*sic*, should be 1791]; *London Times*, 30 August 1791; *Philadelphia Aurora and General Advertiser*, 20 July 1791.

its authority when it meddled in internal colonial matters.⁷³ The failure of the 15 May Decree to improve their position brought mixed reactions from the free men of colour. In the North, they were relatively docile. The older, more stable society of the North shielded the free men of colour from radical *petit blanc* belligerence; at the same time, the overwhelming display of white strength during the Ogé affair encouraged the free men of colour to accept the decree's failure with little difficulty.⁷⁴ In the West, they reacted more militantly. A traditional site of poor white radicalism, the West was the scene of great tension between the races, aggravated by the nearly equal sizes of the white and free non-white populations.⁷⁵ Here the free men of colour adopted a more aggressive policy to get their rights. In the area around Port-au-Prince, armed bands of free men of colour began to congregate under the leadership of Bauvais, a veteran of the American Revolution.⁷⁶ It seemed only a matter of time before serious racial clashes would occur. Indeed, only the anticipation of the 27 August opening of the General Assembly at Cap Français — adjourned after a brief session in Léogane — seemed to forestall hostilities, as both sides waited to see the official colonial response to the 15 May Decree.

By the time the General Assembly opened, the political situation on Saint Domingue had changed beyond all recognition. On the night of 22-23 August, the slaves of the North Province revolted. First reports indicated a massive and particularly bloodthirsty slave uprising,⁷⁷ and soon whites were speaking of 100,000 slaves in revolt.⁷⁸ Although some declared these reports to be exaggerations designed to convince the National Assembly to abandon its support for the free men of colour,⁷⁹ it appears that the destruction in the North Province was great; observers commonly mentioned the ruin of over 200 sugar and 1,000 coffee plantations.⁸⁰ The planters' worst fears were realized, and they described the scene in nightmarish fashion. Typical was the account given by Bryan Edwards, a British planter who visited Saint Domingue shortly after the rebellion began.

⁷³ RAIMOND, *Véritables origines*, pp. 30-31; CORVINGTON, *Port-au-Prince*, 2: 42-45; ARDOUIN, *Études*, 1: 41; DEBBASCH, *Couleur*, 1: 189.

⁷⁴ RAIMOND, *Véritables origines*, pp. 31-32.

⁷⁵ According to MOREAU, *Description*, there were 13,764 whites and 10,942 free men of colour in the West (parish-by-parish basis). Not counting urban Port-au-Prince, the figures were 10,964 and 10,552, respectively.

⁷⁶ CABON, *Histoire*, 3: 63; CORVINGTON, *Port-au-Prince*, 2: 46-47; ARDOUIN, *Études*, 1: 44-45.

⁷⁷ For example, Archives Départementales de la Charente-Maritime (hereafter ADCM), 4J 2914, Letter from a plantation manager to the owner in France, 3 September 1791; *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 22 and 29 September 1791; *Philadelphia Aurora and General Advertiser*, 21 September, 10 and 11 October 1791; *London Times*, 27 and 28 October, 2 November 1791.

⁷⁸ For example, ACCMx, H 18, Letter from the General Assembly to the National Assembly, 13 September 1791; also, *A Particular Account*, p. 9.

⁷⁹ This is the main argument in M. MILSCENT, *Sur les troubles de Saint Domingue* (Paris, 1791) (BN, Lk12 362).

⁸⁰ For instance, ACCMx, H 18, Letter from the General Assembly to the National Assembly, 13 September 1791; *A Particular Account*, p. 13; ADCM, 4J 2915, Letter from Macary to Belin heirs, October 1791; M. BAILLIO, *Un mot de vérité sur les malheurs de Saint Domingue* (Paris, 1791), p. 2 (BN, Lk12 371).

Upwards of one hundred thousand savage people, habituated to the barbarities of Africa, avail themselves of the silence and obscurity of the night and fall on the peaceful and unsuspecting planters, like so many famished tigers thirsting for human blood.⁸¹

The slave rebellion and the ensuing war between whites and slaves placed the free men of colour in a delicate but potentially advantageous position. Depending on the situation in each parish of the colony, they adopted different tactics, but always with the view of realizing their traditional goal of full equality with the whites in a slave society. In the central areas of the North where the slave rebellion occurred, the free men of colour had little room to manoeuvre and had to support either the slaves or the whites. They decided to aid the whites, believing that complete loyalty to the whites would be rewarded with political rights. They bore the brunt of the fighting against the slaves, just as in the old regime they had been assigned the task of hunting down escaped slaves. For all their efforts, the free men of colour never succeeded in gaining concessions from the whites in the North. At best, they managed temporarily to avoid being engulfed in the slave revolution.

If all out warfare in the North Province, together with fears of losing their privileged position in a slave society, encouraged the free men of colour there to join the whites, the lack of general slave uprisings in the West and South enabled local free men of colour to adopt more flexible policies. Particularly in the West Province where they formed nearly half the free population, the free men of colour did not intend to commit themselves without qualification to the whites. They claimed that their presence alone was responsible for the relative calm amongst the slaves,⁸² and they believed that they could invoke the threat of instigating slave revolts in order to gain concessions from the whites. They also felt that, if necessary, they could fight the whites while keeping the slaves from rebelling, or while controlling any rebellion which might occur. These various and not necessarily consistent policies were all pursued in late 1791 and early 1792 by the free men of colour in the West and South. In this way, the next stage of the Haitian Revolution, extending from 22 August 1791 to 4 April 1792, had two distinct branches: in the North, it was characterized by war between free men of all colours and slaves, while in the South and West it was dominated by fighting between whites and free men of colour.

The key to the West and South was Port-au-Prince, and this white stronghold in a predominantly free coloured area was the scene of almost continual fighting from August 1791 to July 1792. The actions and policies of the free men of colour throughout the West and South were influenced by events in Port-au-Prince and reflected to a large extent the frequent changes in the policies of the Port-au-Prince whites. As we have seen, Port-au-Prince was badly divided between rich and poor whites, and this prevented the whites from adopting a coherent policy towards the free men of colour. When the rich were in power, concessions were offered the

⁸¹ EDWARDS, *Historical Survey*, p. 63.

⁸² RAIMOND, *Véritables origines*, p. 36.

free men of colour; the merchants and planters urged conciliation because they had too much to lose in a general conflagration. When the poor were in power, they followed an aggressive policy towards the free men of colour; the *petits blancs* had little to lose and even tried to link racial warfare to class warfare. According to one moderate white, the poor whites

ne s'entretenaient que du gain qu'ils feraient sur les gens de couleur en pillant leurs maisons. Ils s'entendaient en propos les plus injurieux contre les pompons blancs, qu'ils regardaient comme des aristocrates.⁸³

Given the uncertain powers of the *grands blancs*, the belligerent intransigence of the *petits blancs*, and the aims of the free men of colour, war between the last two at least was inevitable. Legal equality could not be achieved peacefully because it implied a social revolution which would undermine the *petits blancs*' place in society. If wealth replaced race as the criterion for status, many free men of colour would rise above the poor whites, and all free men of colour would be at least equal to the *petits blancs*. Thus, legal equality could be achieved only by military victory.

The political instability of Port-au-Prince became clear late in 1791, as power in the city changed hands no less than four times from 22 August until 21 November. At first, the *petits blancs* were still in control following their *coup d'état* of March. When they received news of the slave rebellion in the North, they decided to attack the local free men of colour who had fled from the city fearing reprisals brought on by the 15 May Decree. After several skirmishes, a decisive battle was fought on 2 September at Pernier a few miles north of Port-au-Prince.⁸⁴ The whites were easily defeated, and the *petits blancs* fell from power. They were replaced by *grands blancs* and merchants who signed a concordat with the free men of colour on 11 September.⁸⁵ The whites promised to accept the Decrees of 8 March and 15 May, and agreed to the reorganization of the island's various assemblies to accommodate the free men of colour. The peace, however, lasted only until early October, when *petits blancs* regained the ascendancy in the town and refused to honour the terms of the concordat.⁸⁶

Within a week, the *grands blancs* seized power again in Port-au-Prince and began new negotiations with the free men of colour at nearby

⁸³ Public Record Office, High Court of the Admiralty (hereafter PRO, HCA), 30/381, "Un [*sic*] insurrection dans la partie de Port-au-Prince commencé [*sic*] le 28 aoust 1791", 31 August 1791. See also the letter from a planter quoted in DEBBASCH, *Couleur*, 1: 205, "This war is now becoming one of the worthless against the rich."

⁸⁴ For a first-hand description, dated 5 September 1791, see the one presented in Gabriel DEBIEN, "Nouvelles de Saint Domingue (1790-1791)", *Annales Historiques de la Révolution Française*, 32 (1960): 191.

⁸⁵ "Concordat de MM les citoyens blancs du Port-au-Prince avec MM les citoyens de couleur." (BN, Lk12 350).

⁸⁶ For the peace and its breakdown, see PRO, HCA, 30/381, 12 September to 11 October 1791; and accounts from 1 and 8 October 1791, in DEBIEN, "Nouvelles", pp. 193-94.

Croix-des-Bouquets.⁸⁷ This time, the negotiations involved representatives from all over the West Province. Unlike the poorer whites, the rich had not lost sight of the fundamental danger facing the island's free population: the threat of slave revolt. The planters realized that a major slave rebellion was a far greater worry than the granting of political equality to the free men of colour, and they knew that only the free men of colour could be relied upon to put down such rebellion. As one plantation director put it,

Si nous éprouvions une révolte de nos esclaves aussi décidée que celle de la province du Nord ... nous n'aurions aucun secours à espérer de ceux qui ont été envoyés de France pour nous protéger et qui n'ont cessé de fomenter les troubles et les divisions. Heureusement ... les citoyens de couleur nous aideront à repousser l'insurrection des noirs, si elle a lieu.⁸⁸

After a week of negotiations, representatives from fourteen parishes reached an agreement, and a "peace treaty" was signed on 23 October on the Damiens Plantation.⁸⁹ The treaty was basically a restatement of the 11 September concordat, and — on paper at least — the free men of colour gained full equality.

The peace began well, but foundered on 21 November, when *petits blancs* regained control of Port-au-Prince. Racial conflict ensued: white soldiers executed a free man of colour without trial, rioting broke out, and by the next day Port-au-Prince was in flames.⁹⁰ Most of the free men of colour fled to join their people in the countryside, but those who could not escape — mostly women and children — were ruthlessly massacred by the whites.

With the burning of Port-au-Prince and the slaughter of the free men of colour, the struggle entered a critical period which lasted until the Spring of 1792, when Saint Domingue whites accepted full political equality for the free men of colour. This was not achieved peacefully, but by acts and threats of violence. Indeed, in the one area where the free men of colour failed to adopt a violent posture, they failed to gain concessions. This was in the central area of the North, the site of the slave rebellion. In siding with the whites against the slaves, the free men of colour in the Northern Plain forfeited their political development and accepted the perpetuation of their inferior status. Greatly outnumbered by the whites, weakened by the Ogé affair, and afraid of losing their privileged position if the slave revolt succeeded, the free men of colour in the North made few demands on the whites and did not protest their refusal to grant

⁸⁷ PRO, HCA, 30/381, 13 October 1791; and account from 15 October 1791, in DEBIEN, "Nouvelles", p. 196. The chief negotiator for the Port-au-Prince whites was Caradeux, a rich planter (MOREAU, *Description*, 2: 950). He was assisted by, among others, Leremboure, a rich merchant (*ibid.*: 1031, 1032, 1034).

⁸⁸ Account from 15 October 1791, in DEBIEN, "Nouvelles", p. 196.

⁸⁹ "Traité de paix entre les citoyens blancs et les citoyens de couleur des 14 paroisses de la province de l'Ouest de la partie française de Saint-Domingue." (BN, Lk12 355).

⁹⁰ *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 22 December 1791, 5 January 1792; *Philadelphia Aurora and General Advertiser*, 28 December 1791, 20 January 1792; ARDOUIN, *Études*, 1: 61-62, blames the *petits blancs* for burning Port-au-Prince.

equality. This acquiescent attitude influenced future Haitian development: following independence, the North became the bastion of the black politician descended from the rebel slaves.

In the rest of the colony, the free men of colour used the threat of violence as an effective political weapon. Nowhere was this displayed better than in the outlying areas of the North itself. These areas were largely spared slave rebellions, and the free men of colour used the threat of instigating slave rebellions to support their demands for concessions. In almost all cases, property-owning whites preferred political defeat to utter ruin, and in a series of concordats signed throughout the Northern periphery, they accepted the demands.⁹¹ Only in Fort Dauphin was no concordat signed, and here the free men of colour burned down the plantations.⁹²

Similar events occurred in the West.⁹³ Without a general slave rebellion to make them timid, the free men of colour drove hard bargains and were successful in almost all instances. By early 1792, most of the West was covered by concordats, thereby signifying a major shift of power. White planters who dominated the countryside sacrificed racial and political superiority in order to retain their economic base, and the revolution was carried on in relative peace throughout most of the West. The threat of violence sufficed. Only Port-au-Prince, home of property-less *petits blancs*, held out and was the scene of almost constant fighting until, on 5 July 1792, an alliance of *grands blancs* and free men of colour finally took control of the city.

The South proved even more difficult than the West.⁹⁴ Lacking the moderating influence of a strong *grand blanc* class, the South experienced bitter fighting between *petits blancs* and free men of colour. The South was Saint Domingue's developing "frontier" and was largely devoid of stable political or social institutions. Before the Revolution, the *petits blancs* and free men of colour had competed there for new lands; in many places, the latter won the economic battle, leaving the former with only their feelings of racial superiority. Worse, in the parishes of Cayes and Torbec, exceptionally large concentrations of whites and free men of colour, respectively, faced each other, and it was there that war erupted once the Revolution began. It took a series of armed victories by the free men of colour, together with the proclamation of the 4 April Law and fear of spreading slave rebellions — rebellions which had originally been encouraged for partisan reasons by both camps — to bring the two sides into an uneasy peace. By mid-1792, the South was relatively quiet, mostly under the control of the free men of colour.

⁹¹ DEBBASCH, *Couleur*, 1: 213-15, lists these.

⁹² *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 22 March 1792. There was no general slave revolt in Fort Dauphin (CABON, *Histoire*, 3: 70-71).

⁹³ ARDOUIN, *Études*, 1: 66-72; *Boston Independent Chronicle*, 26 January, 16 February, 3 May, 5 and 16 July 1792; CORVINGTON, *Port-au-Prince*, 2: 63-81.

⁹⁴ On the South, see Bernard FOUBERT, "Colons et esclaves du Sud de Saint Domingue au début de la Révolution", *Revue Française d'Histoire d'Outre-Mer*, 61 (1974): 199-217; also, CABON, *Histoire*, 3: 86-88, 92-93; ARDOUIN, *Études*, 1: 67-69.

While the free men of colour were taking matters into their hands on most of Saint Domingue, the National Assembly made concerted efforts to regain control of the colony. On 24 September 1791, it suspended the 15 May Decree, in an effort to win back white allegiance.⁹⁵ A few days later, the Assembly sent three civil commissioners — Mirbeck, Roume and Saint-Léger — to implement its policies and bring peace to the island. The commissioners soon failed and prepared to leave the colony in mid-1792. By this time, the French were ready to try a different strategy based on support for the free men of colour. The newly-established Legislative Assembly, under the influence of Brissot and the abolitionists, declared on 28 March that all free men of colour had full rights and that new elections must be held.⁹⁶ Proclaimed law by the King on 4 April and published officially on Saint Domingue in mid-May, the new decree was a complete victory for the free men of colour. Coming after the free men of colour's military success, it was accepted at first by most of the colony's whites without great difficulty, thus ending for a while the war between the two groups.

With the publication of the 4 April Law, the free men of colour ceased to exist as a legal class. There were only free men and slaves. Although some skirmishes continued, all out warfare between the *petits blancs* and the "citizens of 4 April" temporarily ceased and in most areas the two united to suppress the slave rebellions which were spreading to the West and South. This proved a futile exercise, for slavery was abolished within seventeen months. In a last-ditch effort to keep Saint Domingue both French and "revolutionary", Saint-Léger Sonthonax, pre-eminent among the three civil commissioners sent by the Assembly to implement the 4 April Law, emancipated the slaves on 29 August 1793. Now the special class of free men of colour ceased to exist in practice as well as in theory, and the way was cleared for the establishment of a new social hierarchy based on race. Saint Domingue was divided in practice into whites, mulattoes, and blacks. Finally, shortly after proclaiming independence on 1 January 1804, Jean-Jacques Dessalines ordered the liquidation of Haiti's whites and the country belonged exclusively to mulattoes and blacks. For the next two centuries, skin colour, social status, political power, and wealth would be as closely aligned as they had been before the middle of the eighteenth century.

RÉSUMÉ.

Les gens de couleur libres jouèrent un rôle crucial aux premiers stades de la révolution haïtienne. Indignés de leur situation humiliante dans la société coloniale, ils appuyèrent la Révolution dans l'espoir d'atteindre l'égalité complète avec les blancs. Ils croyaient que la richesse et non la couleur de la peau devait déterminer le statut social et politique. En venant à bout de la résistance opiniâtre des blancs de la colonie, les gens de couleur libres l'emportèrent le 4 avril 1792, jour où fut proclamée une loi française leur garantissant tous les droits civiques. La société coloniale ne reconnut désormais que deux catégories d'hommes : les libres et les esclaves.

⁹⁵ *Archives parlementaires*, 31: 288.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 40: 575-76.