



Bookman and the 1791 Slave Revolt in Haiti: The Beginning of the Haitian Revolution

Anténor Firmin

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“Bookman and the 1791 Slave Revolt in Haiti: The Beginning of the Haitian Revolution” is a translated excerpt of an early 20th century work by Anténor Firmin (1850-1911, full name Joseph Auguste Anténor Firmin). Firmin was a Haitian writer, journalist, and politician. He was best known for his 1885 book “De l'égalité des races humaines” (“On the Equality of Human Races”).

This book was written to refute the famous racist 1855 book by the Frenchman Count de Gobineau, “Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines” (“Essay on the Inequality of Human Races”). Gobineau’s book claimed that the Aryan race was superior, while blacks and other races were inferior. Gobineau’s ideas would influence the 20th century Nazi movement in Germany.

The Haitian Revolution (1791-1804) transformed the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue into the independent nation of Haiti. Before the Revolution French planters in Saint-Domingue made huge profits by exploiting enslaved labourers on sugar and coffee plantations.

The Haitian Revolution, which brought an end to slavery in Saint-Domingue/Haiti, began with a slave revolt in the summer of 1791 on Haiti’s northern plain. The first leader of the rebellion was an enslaved man named Boukman Dutty (or Bookman), who had come to Saint-Domingue from Jamaica. Boukman was killed in battle in the fall of 1791, a few months after the revolt began.


The 1791 slave revolt began during a time of upheaval in Saint-Domingue that began with the 1789 French Revolution. After the French Revolution began, conflict broke out in the colony between various factions of whites and free people of colour. The people of colour, who had previously helped to maintain control over the colony’s enslaved majority, now demanded equal rights with whites. This led to fighting, including a 1790 revolt by free people of colour led by a merchant of colour named Vincent Ogé and Jean-Baptiste Chavannes.

After Boukman’s death the leadership of the rebel forces was taken over by two other men, Georges Biassou and Jean-Francois. Under their leadership the rebels allied themselves with Spain and Britain against the French Republic. Later on another man, Toussaint Louverture, emerged as the most powerful black military commander in Saint-Domingue.

Louverture defected to the French Republicans and helped them to defeat the pro-Spanish black armies and the British. Louverture then made himself governor of the colony, but was deposed in 1802 by an invasion force sent by Napoleon Bonaparte, and led by Napoleon’s brother-in-law Leclerc.

Leclerc had Louverture deported to France, where the former governor died in prison. But the colony’s black population, including Louverture’s former lieutenants Jean-Jacques Dessalines and Henri Christophe, fought against Leclerc and his successor Rochambeau. Eventually the French army was defeated, and Haiti declared its independence under with Dessalines as its first leader.

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