

Republicans, Rivers, and Racism: The French Revolution and the Early American South

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The French Revolution ranks among the most thoroughly studied subjects in the history of the world. Its impact upon Europe and the ideological heritage it bequeathed have been the subject of intense scrutiny for two centuries. More recently, historians have begun to acknowledge that the Revolution's consequences extended far beyond Europe's boundaries. In a world as interconnected by empire and diplomacy as that of the late eighteenth century, the Revolution and its effects crossed oceans. The Revolution was, as Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson defined it, a "global event" that "transformed the Atlantic world." Adopting a global view allows for a more comprehensive picture of the Revolution's direct and indirect consequences.¹

The United States did not escape the reach of this "global event." The French Revolution occurred at a crucial time in the life of the young nation. The conflict it sparked with Britain became the first major test of American nation credibility and resolve. The Revolution, however, carried implications not only for the federal government and its struggle to establish an autonomous foreign policy but also for internal developments within the United States. French diplomats, French refugees, French colonists, and Americans of French descent all had a presence in or near the United States from its beginning. As much as anyone, these groups witnessed the republic's progress. Since the adoption of the Constitution, issues such as slavery, trade, commerce, and agriculture had divided a nation whose constituent states were not yet accustomed to thinking of themselves as part of a greater, more powerful whole. Not until Civil War did national unity finally become an unassailable reality, but as early as George Washington's administration, the battle lines of future conflicts came into focus. Even

¹ Suzanne Desan, Lynn Hunt, and William Max Nelson, eds., *The French Revolution in Global Perspective* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), 1-5.

then, among the starkest divisions were those separating the American South from the rest of the country.

In the decades surrounding the turn of the nineteenth century, the South was in the process of acquiring a sense of regional identity that marked it as the most self-conscious region of the country, a distinction that sowed the seeds of the Civil War.² Alongside this ideological development, a gradual territorial growth occurred. From its beginnings in the Southern colonies, the region grew by the movement of whites across the Appalachian Mountains, toward the Mississippi River, and the acquisition of Louisiana from France. These events expanded the South's land area as they simultaneously extended the reach of slavery, the region's most fundamental institution. Against this backdrop, the French Revolution influenced the South's development. The Revolution, and the South's reaction to its course and effects, strengthened the South's unique characteristics and contributed to the formation of American sectionalism. Specifically, the French Revolution exposed and reinforced three characteristics that came to define the antebellum Southern political culture: republicanism, expansionism, and white supremacy. These three features were deeply intertwined, and each had already begun developing in colonial times. The French Revolution's impact, however, can be discerned

² For the purposes of this study, the South is defined as the area encompassing the present states of Alabama, Arkansas, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia. These states eventually formed the Confederacy, with the exception of Kentucky, which is included because of its cultural, geographical, and political affiliation with the rest of the region. Although not all of this area was part of the United States at the time of the French Revolution, its effects described herein influenced the whole region. See Joseph A. Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad: The South and U. S. Foreign Relations, 1789-1973* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 2-3.

in the growth of each. Furthermore, the Revolution's influence helped the South to see itself as a coherent region with common interests and characteristics.

While the French Revolution influenced the United States in numerous ways, this study is concerned primarily with the political impact of the Revolution upon the American South. This means that less attention will be devoted to the Revolution's social, cultural, or economic impacts in America, except as those consequences relate to the political ones. Thus, the focus here falls primarily on the views and actions of the white men who constituted the main political actors in both nations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. A strong body of scholarship exists on the cultural impact of the French Revolution in America, but this study seeks to isolate the political aspects of its influence.³

In discussing the French Revolution's impact upon the American South, it is necessary to be aware of both the global perspective in the historiography of the Revolution and the development of the idea of the South's regional distinctiveness. The historiography of the American South has highlighted its early development as a unique region with particular interests apart from those of the nation at large. Southern historian Joseph Fry saw in the South a "self-conscious sectionalism derived from [unique] economic, social, and ideological perspectives" even before the ratification of the Constitution. Fry demonstrated that Southern statesmen such as James Madison, Patrick Henry, and George Mason all expressed an awareness of Southern "distinctiveness" from

³ For examples of the Revolution's cultural impact on America, see Alfred N. Hunt, *Haiti's Influence on Antebellum America: Slumbering Volcano in the Caribbean* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), and Frances Sergeant Childs, *French Refugee Life in the United States, 1790-1800: An American Chapter of the French Revolution* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1940).

the founding of the United States.⁴ Eugene D. Genovese, an eminent scholar of the slaveholding South, likewise found a Southern “uniqueness” built upon slavery, with the South’s political peculiarities arising primarily from the influence of the plantation slaveholders.⁵ Slavery was the fundamental distinction upon which the South’s uniqueness rested. While slavery had been present in other parts of the American continent, by the time of the founding it had become a predominantly Southern institution, and as Edmund S. Morgan had argued, the seemingly oppositional impulses of freedom and slavery became “the central paradox of American history” as these two concepts developed from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century. America’s framers trumpeted liberty as the foundational idea of the nation. Many of them, including Madison, Henry, and Mason, simultaneously held human beings in bondage.⁶

Historians have long examined how white Southerners fashioned their own unique ideology out of the twin concepts of slavery and freedom. Some, like Fry, have touched upon the French Revolution’s impact upon that development. Others, such as Alfred Hunt, have studied the South’s reaction to certain consequences of the Revolution, particularly the slave revolts and emancipation in the Caribbean. Hunt argued that Southerners sought to learn from events in the French Caribbean in order to “defend their economic, political, and social system.”⁷ What the historiography needs, however, is a more comprehensive treatment of the Revolution’s impact upon the South. By identifying several key Southern characteristics and studying the impact of the French Revolution

⁴ Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 11.

⁵ Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy and Society of the Slave South* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 13.

⁶ Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1975), 4.

⁷ Hunt, *Slumbering Volcano*, 107.

upon each, we can obtain a stronger concept of the Revolution's influence in America than has previously been demonstrated.

Central to the South's developing self-conception was the its adoption of a particularly regional version of republicanism. Republicanism, at least in theory, formed the cornerstone of the Franco-American relationship, but the term had no easy definition. No less a Southern Republican than Thomas Jefferson acknowledged the word's "vague application in every language." Certainly, the United States did not conceive of itself in a republic in quite the same way that revolutionary France did, a conflict that created trouble when France attempted to form a transatlantic alliance with the Americans. Jefferson's ideal definition rested upon self-determination: his ideal republic was one in which the government answers to "its citizens in mass" rather than to the whims of a despot or monarch.⁸

The South's conception of republicanism found its basis in Jefferson's vision. As historian Joseph A. Fry defined it, the Southern concept of republicanism rested upon "economic, social, and political freedom," an agrarian economic arrangement, citizens holding private property, and the preservation of "civic virtue" through "individual industry and frugality" along with economic development. Southern republicanism depended upon autonomy and "liberty," fostering a powerful distrust of the federal government among the region's white citizens. Consequently, Jefferson's Republican faction became Southern in its orientation, while the opposing Federalists, committed to a more commercial, urbane vision of America and less afraid of an activist government,

⁸ Thomas Jefferson to John Taylor, May 28, 1816, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Digital Edition, accessed April 6, 2017, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN.html>.

prospered in the North. Exceptions existed on both sides, and early American political factions remained a confounding muddle that constantly shifted based on political expedience and current events. Nonetheless, the identifiable uniqueness of Southern republicanism drew directly from the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal.⁹ Beneath this notion laid the foundation of Southern society: African chattel slavery, upheld through a system of white racial superiority. It was republican ideology, with its attendant implications for the South's relations with the federal government, which first fell under the influence of the French Revolution.

Southern republican ideology and that of revolutionary France, particularly as espoused by the Girondins, shared some important commonalities. Jefferson himself had been involved in writing the Revolution's greatest manifesto, the Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen. This document championed a government with limited power over the lives of its citizens and pronounced property "an inviolable and sacred right." Despite its eloquent invocations of all men as "free and equal in rights," the Declaration made no mention of slavery, thus allowing an interpretation that permitted its continued existence.¹⁰ As historian Harry Ammon noted, the Girondins, whose base of power came not from the industrial and cultural center of Paris but from more far-flung, trade-driven regions, felt skepticism toward a strong, centralized national government. In this, they shared the philosophy of those white American Southerners who felt increasingly alienated from their own federal government. Unlike their successors, the more radical Jacobins, the Girondins nursed an aristocratic suspicion of "mob rule," a

⁹ Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 9-10.

¹⁰ "Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen," in *The Constitutions and Other Select Documents Illustrative of the History of France, 1789-1907*, ed. Frank Maloy Anderson (Minneapolis: B. W. Wilson Company, 1908), 59-61.

suspicion that would have been attractive to the genteel, slaveholding Southern elites. Not all white Southerners supported the Revolution. Its more egalitarian principles held disturbing implications for the aristocratic Southern elites. These issues, along with the elements of the Revolution that challenged racial slavery, assumed more prominence after the Jacobins assumed power in 1793. The Declaration's ambiguities soon became a double-edged sword for those invested in a white man's republic. Until then however, the Revolutionary creed aligned nicely with the liberty-minded white Southern ethos.¹¹

That fact, combined with matters of national pride and partisan self-interest, gave Southerners ample reason to ally themselves with France in the early 1790s, as that country began its conflict with the hated British. The Southern colonies had suffered particular indignities at the hands of the Redcoats in the Revolutionary War, including the freeing of some of their slaves, and crop-producing Southerners dreaded the prospect of a British-dominated American economic order. Southern hatred of the British and affinity toward France lent the first American party system its geographic skew.¹² John Jay's 1794 treaty with the British heightened these divisions, seemingly conflicting as they did with the 1778 Franco-American Alliance. A wave of protest engulfed the South, from anti-British demonstrations in Charleston to Jefferson's denunciation of the "execrable" agreement that pitted powerful British and American political classes against the mass of the American people. The opposition to the Jay Treaty aptly demonstrated the battle lines that the Franco-British conflict had drawn on the American map.¹³

¹¹ Harry Ammon, *The Genet Mission* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1973), 14.

¹² Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 13.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20.

James Madison, Republican and slaveholding Virginian, in the spring of 1793 branded all opponents of the French Revolution “enemies of human nature.” Madison explicitly tied his nation’s hopes and aspirations to the progress of the French republican project, noting that American “disaffection to Republican government” seemed to ebb and flow in response to “prosperous and adverse” news out of France.¹⁴ As Southern Republicans saw it, the fate of the nation depended upon both the success of France’s revolution and Americans’ continued support for the cause. An alliance between these two emerging republics promised to serve as a bulwark against the resurgence of English tyranny, from which the French had already once helped deliver the Americans. This ideal clashed, however, with the parallel need to assert the nation’s independence and maintain some semblance of neutrality between the European belligerents. President Washington, caught between Jefferson, his Republican, Southern, pro-French Secretary of State, and Alexander Hamilton, his Federalist, Northern, pro-British Treasury Secretary, faced a monumental challenge in fulfilling his promise to maintain “a conduct friendly and impartial toward the belligerent Powers.”¹⁵

Americans, and Southerners in particular, had thus been closely watching the upheaval in France when Edmond Charles Genet disembarked in Charleston, South Carolina, on April 8, 1793. It was no accident that “Citizen” Genet, the newly appointed French minister to the United States, had first arrived on Southern soil rather than in Philadelphia. Though his ship was bound for what was then the nation’s capital, Genet

¹⁴ James Madison to George Nicholas, March 15, 1793, in *The Papers of James Madison*, Digital Edition, accessed March 27, 2017, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/JSMN.html>.

¹⁵ “The Proclamation of Neutrality, 1793,” in *The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History, and Diplomacy*, accessed April 3, 2017, http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/neutra93.asp.

opted to travel overland and see the country that he hoped to cultivate as a partner. Speculation persists as to whether the Girondins instructed Genet intentionally to arrive in a port where he could expect a warm reception. That remains a mystery, but if his arrival was accidental, it was remarkably good luck: Charleston offered Genet a hero's welcome. A parade of officials and prominent people greeted the minister. South Carolina Governor William Moultrie, Revolutionary War General Thomas Pinckney, and numerous others received Genet, expressing their enthusiasm and their sympathy with the French cause. So friendly were his hosts in Charleston that Genet remained there for ten days before setting out for Philadelphia.¹⁶ As his journey proceeded, Southerners in cities and towns along the way continued to lavish praise upon Genet and the country he represented.¹⁷

His reception in the South clarified the region's support of the French cause. In the mass of white Republican Southerners, Genet had located a promising constituency for closer American ties to France. Translating his Southern and Republican support into actual policy enacted by the Washington administration would prove a more daunting task. The hospitality he experienced presented Genet, a man notoriously susceptible to flattery, with a skewed sense of how easily he might bend the American government to his will. As the mercurial minister soon discovered, the federal officials in Philadelphia, the people who had to perform the actual task of formulating policy toward France, were heavily divided, and many held expectations at odds with his own. Southern

¹⁶ Robert J. Anderson, *This Bright Era of Happy Revolutions: French Consul Michel-Ange-Bernard Mangourit and International Republicanism in Charleston, 1792-1794* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2008), 21.

¹⁷ Ammon, *Genet Mission*, 46.

powerbrokers had their own interests that did not necessarily align with those of the federal government.

As they examined the state of Franco-American relations, the Girondins concluded that a dishonest Louis XVI, bent on stopping the rise of republicanism in Europe, had intentionally allowed the two countries' relationship to wither after the smashing success of the American Revolution, in which the French had aided the patriots in their struggle for independence.¹⁸ With the republicans whom the king had tried to stop now in power, the mission they set for Genet involved a rehabilitation of relations with the Americans. His task was twofold, and both prongs, when put into action, directly challenged fundamental ideas many Americans held about their country and their interests. They revealed the tensions inherent in the different interpretations of republican ideology and national interest made by the two nations. Each portion of this plan also entangled the South in national and international affairs. Genet's schemes inspired increased political participation and regional consciousness among Southerners, although the ways in which this occurred varied depending on his specific goals and methods.¹⁹

First, Genet was to convince the United States to establish a new "family compact" with France in order to bring the two countries closer economically and politically. While the Girondins did not expect the Americans explicitly to intervene in the war on the side of France, they did hope to secure an alliance that would spread the "empire of Liberty" and reinforce the notion of freedom across the world. Genet's quest for American friendship took the form of a request for the United States to pay an

¹⁸ Ammon, *Genet Mission*, 25

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

advance on its debt owed to France, an appeal that the Washington administration repeatedly rebuffed.²⁰

Genet, ignorant of American diplomatic mores and disrespectful of a presidential office that he regarded as lacking the ability to “bend existing treaties to circumstance,” quickly ran afoul of the Washington administration. In his zealous commitment to republican principles and skepticism of a centralized presidential office that struck his French sensibilities as overly monarchical, Genet placed in Congress, and by extension “the people,” all but the narrowest powers. His antics even incurred the ire of the sympathetic Jefferson, who preferred not a full alliance with France but a posture of pro-French neutrality.²¹ Frustrated by his inability to create change with the federal government, the French minister sought to rouse public opinion against the administration. Washington’s iconic stature and nationwide popularity doomed this strategy from the beginning, but Republicans and Federalists both attempted to seize on Genet’s activities for partisan gain. Both factions organized meetings in response to Genet’s actions. The Federalists’ conventions, mostly but not exclusively convened in the North, rebuked Genet. The Republican meetings occurred entirely in Virginia, and while most scrupulously avoided affirming Genet’s actions, they endorsed the French Revolution and slammed the Federalists as overly pro-British.²² These gatherings accomplished little except to frustrate Washington further, but they marked an early expression of Southern political distinctiveness.

²⁰ Edmond Charles Genet to Thomas Jefferson, July 25, 1793, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, Digital Edition, accessed April 4, 2017, <http://rotunda.upress.virginia.edu/founders/TSJN.html>.

²¹ Ammon, *Genet Mission*, 134.

²² Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 17.

Genet's other task, shrouded in secrecy when he landed in Charleston, involved the South more directly and, had it succeeded, would have presented a more pressing threat to national unity than his botched diplomatic scheme. Genet came to America with orders to raise forces for the planned invasion of Spanish-held Louisiana and Florida, as well as Canada.²³ Though it scarcely moved past its initial stages before Genet's recall rendered it abortive, this plan revealed the growing sectional tensions between Southerners and the federal government. It also illuminated the unique geographical and political interests that distinguished the South, particularly the Southwest, from the rest of the country.

Upon his arrival to America, Genet was presented a letter from George Rogers Clark, a Kentucky frontiersman who had gained fame in his Illinois Campaign during the Revolutionary War. Clark's letter proposed to raise 1500 men for an expedition down the Mississippi River to take Louisiana from the Spanish.²⁴ Clark couched his offer in terms that glowingly praised the French Revolution, although they obscured the fact that he had fallen on hard financial times and mostly saw the venture as a way to raise funds.²⁵ A similar plot to invade Florida, to be carried out by Revolutionary War veteran Elijah

²³ Frederick J. Turner, "The Origin of Genet's Projected Attack on Louisiana and the Floridas," in *The American Historical Review* 3, no. 4 (July 1898): 650-671, accessed March 28, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1834142>. Despite its age, Turner's article, based upon the original documents and communications from the Genet affair, remains the foremost detailed account of Genet's attempts to attack parts of the American continent.

²⁴ George Rogers Clark to Edmond Charles Genet, February 5, 1793, in "Selections from the Draper Collection in the Possession of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, to Elucidate the Proposed French Expedition under George Rogers Clark Against Louisiana, in the Years 1793-94," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for the Year 1896*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1897), 967-971.

²⁵ Ammon, *Genet Mission*, 165-166.

Clarke, was also attempted and abandoned, though not before Clarke raised a force of several hundred men. Clark and Genet's schemes never bore fruit, as Clark failed to recruit a sizable force or raise much money before Genet's recall, but the plan frightened the federal government and forced a nervous Washington to issue a proclamation forbidding Americans to take part. Genet's plot forced the federal government to assert itself in the face of possible open rebellion in the Southern states.²⁶

There was reason to believe that a mission against Louisiana could succeed, and indeed the possibility concerned Washington. Kentuckians, and Westerners in general, felt neglected by the remote federal government. Its seeming unwillingness to do anything about the Spanish restrictions on use of the Mississippi particularly rankled Western settlers. These restrictions stifled business in the economic hub of New Orleans, including the bustling slave trade. Some, like Kentuckian John Breckinridge, hinted at an open revolt if the government could not secure their unlimited navigation rights to the river: "patriotism, like every other thing, has its bounds."²⁷ Genet's designs on Louisiana and Florida, and the unrest his preparations for attack caused, thus demonstrated the feelings of skepticism toward the federal government held by many Southerners and the importance of the Mississippi River in the region's geography and economy.²⁸

While Genet's mission ended in failure and the plots to invade Florida and Louisiana never came to fruition, subsequent events solidified the importance of

²⁶ Ammon, *Genet Mission*, 167.

²⁷ John C. Breckinridge, "To the President and Congress of the United States of America. The Remonstrance of the Citizens West of the Allegheny Mountains Respectfully Sheweth, Library of Congress, accessed April 7, 2017, <https://cdn.loc.gov/service/rbc/rbpe/rbpe02/rbpe021/02100500/02100500.pdf>.

²⁸ Lowell H. Harrison and James C. Klotter, *A New History of Kentucky* (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 73.

territorial expansion and brought those areas into the United States. The American and French Revolutions had whetted Southern appetites for expansion. The opportunity for territorial growth materialized when the United States purchased Louisiana from France. During Jefferson's presidency, it became clear that Southerners had no intention of letting go the issue of access to the Mississippi. Their assertive stance reflected the national mood. Americans in all sections of the country grew hungry not just for the river but for the land it watered. Jefferson's private secretary, Virginian Meriwether Lewis, who led the famous expedition into the depths of this new territory, expected that soon "the whole of the immense country watered by the Mississippi and its tributary streams...will be propertie of the U. States."²⁹ In 1803, Napoleon Bonaparte sought to unload Louisiana in the wake of Caribbean revolts and renewed aggression against the British. France gave up on an American empire and transferred that opportunity to the United States. The Jefferson administration had proceeded cautiously throughout the affair, but matters resolved more favorably than anyone had expected. Napoleon stunned the Americans with an offer of a territory that doubled the nation's size for the low price of \$15 million. Only a hobbled Spain stood in opposition to the deal, an objection that soon crumbled and opened the gates for American expansion.³⁰

Southerners praised the acquisition of Louisiana and looked forward to an expanded American empire. Tennessean and future president Andrew Jackson hailed the purchase as a shining achievement that ensured the future prosperity of the United

²⁹ Alexander DeConde, *This Affair of Louisiana* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1976), 138.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

States.³¹ New Orleans, a crucial port city and a center of culture and commerce, now belonged to the United States, along with the coveted Mississippi River and half a continent of new territory, some of which seemed like fertile ground for slave-based agriculture. Thanks to the upheaval that followed Napoleon's rise to power in France, decades of Southern agitation for unobstructed access to the bounties of the Mississippi Valley had finally been realized.

The French Revolution and its consequences crystallized the conflicts over republicanism and territorial expansion that remained fixtures in antebellum America. These fixtures remained driven in large part by a third key component of Southern identity: white supremacy. While structural racism pervaded the entirety of a nation built upon slave labor and conflicts with Native Americans, the racial caste system that developed in the South was both more severe and more systemic than in the North, with slavery as the foundation upon which this difference rested. While the Genet affair did not directly touch upon issues of race and slavery, it revealed their influence. The Southern vision of republicanism relied upon the unspoken assumption that only white men qualified as proper citizens in the body politic. Likewise, the Southern appetite for expansion across the North American continent was driven in large part by the desire to preserve and spread the institution of racial slavery.³² Although the military actions Genet imagined never came to fruition, French designs on Louisiana and Florida revealed the potential for future conflict among Americans with diverging regional interests. The acquisition of Louisiana from a cash-strapped, war-ravaged France provided the ideological battlefield for the looming showdown over slavery's expansion.

³¹ DeConde, *This Affair of Louisiana*, 180.

³² *Ibid.*, 35.

The French Revolution, however, also exerted a more direct influence on the development of Southern racial ideology. As Genet caused trouble for Washington and his administration, the ongoing Revolution took some surprising new turns that affected the way Americans, especially Southerners, viewed the event. Many white Southerners, like those in Genet's welcome party in Charleston, found common cause with the French revolutionaries, but their affinities had a limit. The nature of that limit became clear in 1794, when the radical Jacobins wrested power from the more moderate Girondins. The Jacobins soon began implementing their expansive agenda, one facet of which called for the end of slavery in the French colonies. This action set in motion a series of events that heightened American racial paranoia, helped to solidify the developing racial caste system in the antebellum South, and contributed to the American acquisition of new territory into which slavery might expand its reach.

On February 4, 1794, the French National Convention overturned the system upon which transatlantic colonial power had been built when it decreed that "negro slavery in all the colonies is abolished" and pronounced "all men, without distinction of color, who are domiciled in the colonies" to be entitled to the full rights and protections of the national constitution.³³ This brief proclamation sent shockwaves through the Caribbean. It also contradicted the notions of white supremacy and white entitlement that formed the foundation of Southern American republican identity. Slave rebellion had rocked the French colony of St. Domingue since 1791 and put pressure upon the French to grant rights to colonial blacks, ultimately leading to emancipation. The most dramatic

³³ "Decree upon Slavery," in Anderson, *Select Documents*, 204.

result of French Revolution in the Caribbean was the Haitian Revolution, the transformation of St. Domingue into the independent black nation of Haiti.³⁴

Colonial emancipation and the revolts in the Caribbean upended white Southern views about the French Revolution and its effects. During the Revolution's early years, many Southerners, like other Americans, had watched the developments in France with interest and sympathy. There was, perhaps, some sense in which the distance between the two nations allowed this American support for revolutionary France to flourish. As long as the chaos of the Revolution did not threaten to spill over the Atlantic, and as long as Britain remained the prime enemy of American security and independence in Southerners' eyes, they could cheer the cause with little worry and cling to France as a bulwark against renewed tyranny. It surely helped that the revolutionaries were overwhelmingly white. The Declaration's claims on the equality of men aside, as long as the Revolutionary spirit remained confined to the European world, Southerners could approve of the Revolution without contradicting the racial caste system they were building in defense of slavery.

The increasing radicalization of the Revolution and the extension of its ideals to the French colonies removed both of these protections. When the Jacobins officially expanded the definition of the republic to include nonwhites, they unleashed a frightening new concept on many of their American sympathizers. As with Genet's troubles, the Southern reaction to the emancipation of French slaves revealed the extent to which revolutionary ideology and "spirit" alone was not sufficient to unite two countries with different interests and social systems. When France freed its slaves and Caribbean blacks

³⁴ Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 3.

took up the spirit of the Revolution to fight for their own liberation, Southerners lost the luxury of reconciling the republican spirit with their system of white supremacy.

The Caribbean was a familiar locale to the South, having long functioned as a hub of commerce, including the slave trade and the trade in crops produced on Southern plantations.³⁵ Only a few hundred miles of ocean separated the Southern coast from these islands, across which blacks and mischievous Frenchmen, real or imagined, threatened to flood into the region's ports. The French presence in the Caribbean fueled growing paranoia in 1798 when Southern Federalists, a perennial minority within their party and their region, seized upon the diplomatic fiasco of the XYZ affair and the Franco-American "Quasi War" to grow their numbers and influence. By this time, Southern support for the French, and for the Republicans, had begun to waver as the two countries moved closer to the possibility of open conflict. The Federalists, attempting to raise support for President John Adams's anti-French policies, invoked the possibility of a French invasion from St. Domingue, possibly accompanied by the inciting of slave rebellions in coastal Southern cities. Pamphlets warned panicked Southerners that "your negroes will probably be your masters" within a year unless they stood ready to defend themselves.³⁶ The surge of anti-French sentiment aroused by these events propelled the Federalists to a series of electoral victories in the South, although their revival proved short-lived.³⁷

³⁵ Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 20.

³⁶ DeConde, *This Affair of Louisiana*, 84.

³⁷ John W. Kuehl, "Southern Reaction to the XYZ Affair: An Incident in the Emergence of American Nationalism," *The Register of the Kentucky Historical Society* 70, no. 1 (January 1972): 34, accessed April 2, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23377328>.

The specter of violent black rebellion lived not only in imagined foreign invasions but also in the slaves already present in the country. The fear of rebellions that seemed certain to accompany the creation of a free, empowered black underclass formed a cornerstone of the proslavery argument.³⁸ If blacks and whites could never be assimilated into society as equals, the argument held, only continued bondage and repression could prevent a mass servile uprising. As the Southern way of life came increasingly to rely upon the forced bondage of human beings, the dread of mass revolt, or even the hint of its possibility, tightened its grip on slaveholders. The foiled Gabriel conspiracy in Richmond, Virginia, for example, had resulted not only in the execution of the plan's creators but in the brutal repression of blacks in the state.³⁹

An influx of migrants, both black and white, from the French colonies heightened these tensions. The French Revolution created a diaspora that scattered widely across the Western Hemisphere. Atlantic coastal cities such as Charleston and Philadelphia hosted large French populations that involved themselves in local and national affairs.⁴⁰ Many of these refugees came from France and did not settle permanently in America, choosing instead to return home once they deemed it safe to do so. Others, however, came from the upheaval in the French colonies. The possibility of rebellious blacks flooding into America particularly disturbed Southern whites. Southern state governments responded with predictable alarm. Every Southern legislature approved measures designed to curtail

³⁸ Larry E. Tise, *Proslavery: A History of the Defense of Slavery in America, 1701-1840* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 49.

³⁹ Tim Matthewson, "Jefferson and Haiti," in *The Journal of Southern History* 61, no. 2 (May 1995): 218, accessed April 2, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2211576>.

⁴⁰ Childs, *French Refugee Life*, 25.

the migration of blacks from the French Caribbean.⁴¹ William C. C. Claiborne, the governor of Louisiana, received a fearful petition from some of his constituents warning of the “spirit of Revolt and Mutyny” that they had detected in the slaves since the revolt in St. Domingue. Such paranoia heightened the urgency of repressing slaves and securing the continuation of white supremacy in the South.⁴²

At the center of the rebellion stood a powerful figure upon whom Americans projected their hopes and fears about the French Revolution. Southerners struggled with how to approach Toussaint Louverture, because he set their pro-French and white supremacist attitudes in conflict. No figure of the Revolutionary era attracted as much immediate interest or challenged American observers as thoroughly as the “Caribbean George Washington.”⁴³ Toussaint had brought the Revolution to America’s backyard, but he had done so in a manner that conflicted with the racial framework upon which the country had been built. Toussaint embodied both the ideal of liberty from oppression as well as the frightening prospect of black liberation and autonomy. He also inadvertently played a key role in expanding American territory and, by extension, slavery. Toussaint, and the colony he liberated, cast a shadow on American politics that lasted long after his death in 1803.⁴⁴

Some Southern whites admired Toussaint. As Hunt has argued, many saw in him a black man who “thought like a white man.” They pointed to the decreased agricultural production in Haiti after the strict Toussaint’s removal as evidence that blacks needed a

⁴¹ Hunt, *Slumbering Volcano*, 107.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 114.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

firm hand and stern oversight in order to be productive.⁴⁵ In the minds of many whites, the idea of Toussaint's tough love and the prosperity it supposedly inspired contrasted appealingly with the stereotypical view of lazy unsupervised blacks. White Southern respect for Toussaint, however, did not extend to the black nation he helped create. If the presence of nearby liberated slaves unsettled white Southerners, many found the notion of an independent black country even more startling. Southern members of Congress became the most forceful opponents of extending any sort of diplomatic recognition to Haiti.⁴⁶ Most Southern members of Congress backed the United States' decision to end trade with Haiti at a time when an embargo against France was already in place, thus enshrining American recognition of it as a French colony in revolt, not an independent nation. From the time of its founding until the Civil War, Haiti became a political prop that Americans used to support their views on slavery, black labor, and the possibility of black participation in the political process.⁴⁷

While the Haitian Revolution changed Southern attitudes toward France and influenced the arguments for white supremacy, it also played a role in the continental expansion of the country. White, slaveholding Southerners also began to see the barrier that the French presence in America, along with that of the Spanish, posed for their designs to spread the peculiar institution into new areas. Southerners, like most Americans, held certain ideals, but they also had a keen sense of their economic interests. The possession of Louisiana by Spain and, after the 1802 transfer of the territory, by

⁴⁵ Hunt, *Slumbering Volcano*, 89.

⁴⁶ Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 29.

⁴⁷ Donald R. Hickey, "America's Response to the Slave Revolt in Haiti," in *Journal of the Early Republic* 2, no. 4 (Winter 1982): 376, accessed March 31, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3123088>.

France, presented the main barrier to fertile new American lands.⁴⁸ The Haitian Revolution assisted in removing that barrier. Haiti's ultimately successful liberation from France ended Napoleon's hopes for a French presence in America. With no remaining expectation of major agricultural production in the Caribbean to fuel a transatlantic empire, he had little use for Louisiana, hence his hasty sale of the area to the United States.⁴⁹ Toussaint's actions not only complicated American racial politics, they also played a role in the nation's dramatic sprawl across the continent. The French Revolution helped to give Manifest Destiny a jumpstart.

In their attempt to navigate the Franco-British conflict while preserving some sense of "neutrality," Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton, and the other early American leaders discovered what became clearer as the nineteenth century developed: when it came to the French Revolution, neutrality was a difficult pose to strike. The development of a global perspective on the Revolution has unveiled a striking picture of its far-reaching impact. As Genet's mission demonstrated, the French revolutionaries worked to bring the United States closer to its republican brethren, rendering a neutral posture even more difficult to maintain. No part of the world escaped the influence of the events set in motion in 1789, least of all a young republic that owed French debts and resided in close proximity to French colonies.

The American South in particular felt the impact of the Revolution. Because of its unique, still-developing qualities during the time of the Revolution, the South was particularly tied to thorny issues of republicanism, race, territory, slavery, freedom, and the relationship of a people to their government. In the influence of Genet's quest and the

⁴⁸ DeConde, *This Affair of Louisiana*, 102.

⁴⁹ Fry, *Dixie Looks Abroad*, 27.

emancipation of French slaves, we can see the contribution of France, however inadvertent, to the South's development as a unique, autonomous region, set apart by its geographical location, its distrust of the federal government, and, above all, the presence of chattel slavery on its soil. The French Revolution revealed and reinforced the Southern brand of republicanism, the Southern appetite for territorial expansion, and the ideology of white supremacy that undergirded the region's entire social and economic system. The tensions created by this Southern distinctiveness continued to sharpen throughout the nineteenth century until they culminated, like those in France had done more than a half century earlier, in unprecedented violence and the transformation of a society.

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