Dangerous Neighbors
EARLY AMERICAN STUDIES

Series editors: Daniel K. Richter, Kathleen M. Brown, Max Cavitch, and David Waldstreicher

Exploring neglected aspects of our colonial, revolutionary, and early national history and culture, Early American Studies reinterprets familiar themes and events in fresh ways. Interdisciplinary in character, and with a special emphasis on the period from about 1600 to 1850, the series is published in partnership with the McNeil Center for Early American Studies.
Dangerous Neighbors

Making the Haitian Revolution in Early America

James Alexander Dun

PENN
University of Pennsylvania Press
Philadelphia
For Kelly

In memory of our daughter, Josephine Ann Dun
Contents

Introduction
Making Revolution in Philadelphia
1

Chapter 1
France in Miniature: Naming the Revolution
27

Chapter 2
Unthinking Revolution: French Negroes and Liberty
56

Chapter 3
The Negrophile Republic: Emancipation and Revolution
87

Chapter 4
Making Places of Liberty: Emancipation and Antislavery
121
Chapter 5
Black Jacobins: Saint Domingue in American Politics
143

Chapter 6
Second Revolutions: Saint Domingue and Jeffersonian America
179

Chapter 7
Naming Hayti: The End of the Revolution in Philadelphia
209

List of Abbreviations
239

Notes
241

Selected Bibliography
321

Index
331

Acknowledgments
000
Introduction

Making Revolution in Philadelphia

Late in the morning of July 7, 1794, Friar José Vázquez arrived at the town of Fort Dauphin. Though he could not know it at the time, he came telling stories of the Haitian Revolution. Perched on the northern coast of French Saint Domingue, Fort Dauphin sat close to the border with Spanish Santo Domingo. Vázquez, in fact, came from the Spanish colony, from the interior town of Dajabón where he was a priest. What made his arrival noteworthy, however, was less his spiritual authority than his earthly influence. Insurgent ex-slaves had controlled the area since late 1791, and Vázquez was known to be an advisor to one of their leaders, Jean-François. After Spain and France declared war in 1793, the priest had become an intermediary between the insurgents and Spanish authorities. In spring 1793 Jean-François had been made a general and his troops declared auxiliaries of the Spanish army. Relying on these forces, Spain had nominally taken control of wide swaths of Saint Domingue’s North and West provinces. In January 1794 they secured Fort Dauphin, known to the Spanish as Bayajá, and began to mass Spanish and black troops in preparation for an attack against the French republican forces at Cap Français.¹

For the anxious inhabitants of Fort Dauphin, Friar Vázquez seemed like a safe source of information as they tried to make sense of this shifting ground. Many of them were planters, white French colonists of a royalist bent who hoped the fight against the Republic would ultimately bring stability back to the region, even if it also put the colony under foreign control. A sizable number among them had recently returned from the United States, having fled there during earlier moments of tumult in the colony. In American cities they had read an invitation addressed to all who opposed the “anarchy” of the French
2 Introduction

Revolution to rally to the Spanish flag.² By July 1794 that anarchy included the French decree made earlier in the year that abolished slavery in all French possessions. For the nervous French planters in Fort Dauphin, the question was whether Jean-François’s alliance with Spain would protect them as well. In reassuring them that it would, Friar Vázquez told of a revolution resisted.³ Yes, the Spanish had embraced troops of African descent, but, bound by a common commitment against the French Republic, the forces massing at Fort Dauphin would be acting to preserve, not overturn, the social order.

Any comfort provided by Vázquez’s vision was fleeting. When Jean-François entered Fort Dauphin around midday on July 7, his troops almost immediately began to kill the French émigrés, though it was not clear whether they did so by his orders or on their own. The Spanish soldiers, either complicit or fearful for their own safety, pointedly refused to intervene and, in some cases, actively gave the frantic French up for execution. More of the white colonists drowned as they tried to flee to the shipping in the harbor. By early evening between six hundred and eight hundred were dead.⁴ More than simply wrong, the story told by José Vázquez was outstripped—overtaken by events and derailed by more wide-ranging ideas about the change at hand.

Graced by the perspective offered by time, historians have produced more enduring narratives of the events at Fort Dauphin, usually casting them as a minor, if dramatic, example of the complex origins and motives behind like moments in Saint Domingue. As an episode among those other moments, the violence there evokes the tensions that arose as the slave rebellions of 1791 evolved and were inflected by imperial struggles. Rebel leadership had recently fractured, the French policy of emancipation playing a role in the decision of one of Jean-François’s subordinates, Toussaint Louverture, to switch his allegiance from Spain to France. The questions around Jean-François’s control over the violence signal divergences among different insurgents’ objectives: the general, as he had on other occasions, may have followed his fighters more than he led them. For historians, the bloodshed at Fort Dauphin in July 1794 was the product of the disruptions that accompanied competing agendas in and for Saint Domingue at the time.⁵ Over the next decade, such disruptions would produce what later interpreters could call the Haitian Revolution—the series of events in the French colony between 1789 and 1804 that culminated with the establishment of the second independent state in the hemisphere.

A decade, though, is a long time, and the impulse to craft narratives about the upheavals transpiring in Saint Domingue would not wait. For contempo-
rary Americans, who are the subject of this book, the events at Fort Dauphin were no prelude or sideshow; they were important news; they were meaningful, even profound. They were also confusing. Weeks after the violence took place, Philadelphia Quaker matron Elizabeth Drinker mistook the town of Fort Dauphin for an island in her diary, one in which the “French white people” had been massacred by “Negroes.” Others made different errors, telling that the violence had been committed by the colony’s “molottoes” and that it was part of their bid to take over. Such misperceptions would fade in time, subsumed within a broadly consistent, if similarly problematic, story in which the events of July 7, 1794, were connected to later developments in unsustainable ways. Especially as Toussaint Louverture rose to prominence in Saint Domingue, more than one author made the violence at Fort Dauphin a way to contrast Louverture’s wisdom with the treachery of the Spanish and the cruelty of ex-slaves such as Jean-François. Others turned to Fort Dauphin to connect Louverture’s emergence to the radicalism of white French republicans or, eventually, to the infidelity of Napoleon Bonaparte.

As anthropologist Michel-Rolf Trouillot reminds us, such narrative production, whether in the eighteenth century or the twenty-first, tends to flatten a history out, pushing aside inconvenient elements of “the story” in service of a coherence that follows the dictates and desires of those in positions of power. Recovering contemporary American stories of Saint Domingue as events unfolded adds a new wrinkle to Trouillot’s admonition. Most modern Americans only vaguely contemplate the Caribbean nation, commonly associating it with poverty, corruption, disease, and disaster. This book returns to a period when things were very different. The tales told of Fort Dauphin are examples from a long period of fascination among Americans toward Saint Domingue. Beginning in the late 1780s and continuing on into the early nineteenth century, they avidly followed developments there. They were transfixed.

To be sure, part of the reason for this interest was the dramatic nature of the changes that took place in the French colony over that span of time. By 1804 Saint Domingue, once the most prosperous plantation society in the western hemisphere, had ceased to exist. In its place was Haiti (known to most Americans as “St. Domingo” or sometimes “Hayti”), an independent nation in which slavery was forever abolished and citizenship was predicated on blackness. Along the way, a host of sensational developments unfolded, many of them brimming with the sorts of graphic turns, lurid details, and shocking violence witnessed at Fort Dauphin. Few at the time understood this as the “Hai-
tian Revolution,” but none missed its significance. More than mere voyeurism, American interest was driven by the sense that these events were globally important and locally relevant. The torches that incinerated Saint Domingue’s slave regime inflamed more than bodies, plantation houses, and sugar works. Tidings from the colony also fired imaginations, raising hackles in some and hopes in others. These events reverberated in America because of their capacity to provoke self-reflection. They stimulated connections and comparisons; they raised questions about Americans’ own revolutionary pasts and their current realities. In crafting narratives from and about Saint Domingue, Americans fashioned and refashioned their own stories.

This book recaptures and unpacks those interpretive moments. It does so by focusing on the phenomenon as it took place in the city of Philadelphia. By the last decade of the eighteenth century, Philadelphia was the leading metropolis of the newly United States. Long a seat of local political power, it was now the national capital and an important locus for regional and national politics. Its nearly forty-five thousand residents made it the largest American urban area; its political status made it the most cosmopolitan. Citizens from every state walked its streets; it was a requisite stop for foreign visitors, too, not to mention European diplomats. Mid-Atlantic geography and topography made the city a commercial center as well; grain was borne along the roads and rivers that connected it to its hinterlands in central Pennsylvania, southern New Jersey, and Delaware. These and other goods came to the stores of the city’s numerous merchants and traders, most of which were located just off of the Delaware River on Water Street.11 Jutting out from their backs was a thicket of wharves. Merchandise moved in and out of the city across those jetties, but so too did less tangible wares. Philadelphia’s theaters and museums were where elite Americans often first encountered European fashions and literature. A different public, meeting in the city’s streets, taverns, and coffeehouses, similarly encountered information and ideas from abroad.12 In many respects, Philadelphia was the new nation’s center of gravity.

Most significantly for this study, Philadelphia’s prominence also made it a hub, especially for domestic and international news. In 1794 thirteen newspapers were printed in the capital. Over the course of the 1790s, Philadelphia was home to forty-three newspapers, a number that outpaced that of all other American places.13 This dominance was no accident. Philadelphia’s commercial and political advantages were enhanced by structural decisions made in Congress as part of a concerted effort to ease communications in the new nation.
Figure 1. Map of Philadelphia and surrounding areas, by P. C. Varle, c. 1794. During the 1790s the Encyclopedia Britannica expressly identified Philadelphia as a leader in global efforts to better the human condition (Gary B. Nash, Forging Freedom: The Formation of Philadelphia’s Black Community, 1720–1840 [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988], 7). While observers could make reference to Philadelphian penal reforms, educational innovations, and ventures to improve public health, the campaign against slavery had a special resonance. 093:577 M, The Huntington Library, Art Collections, San Marino, California. Used by permission.
The post roads established after 1789 made the city central to a growing transportation network that linked it to places west and north via New York and south via Baltimore. The centripetal effects of this infrastructure were amplified by the Post Office Act of 1792, which, in addition to regularizing the postal service, allowed newspapers to move through the system at very low rates—and for free between editors. Before long, 70 percent of all postage by weight consisted of newspapers. Editors, who often also served as local postmasters, would lift and reprint the reports coming through the mail that they saw as interesting and important. These efforts combined to make newspapers a collective centerpiece of American cultural life. Read aloud in taverns and coffeehouses, they had a functional readership well beyond their modest circulation lists. Philadelphia’s editors worked at the heart of this system and at the eye of the public life it embodied. Their names (Fenno, Brown, Freneau, Bache, Cobbett, Duane) were on the lips of American readers; the writings they composed and printed were loud in American ears at a particularly raucous, and vital, period in the formation of American politics. As a place to explore Americans’ reception, and conception, of the burgeoning Haitian Revolution, therefore, Philadelphia offers a vantage point that is both exemplary and influential.

Even before disruptions began there, Saint Domingue’s economic importance made it a familiar place to Philadelphians, and Americans more generally. By 1789 the colony was the most successful European holding in the West Indies. Its thousands of plantations grew two-fifths of the world’s sugar and half of the world’s coffee. This bounty made it a centerpiece of the Atlantic economy. The colony’s export trade was more than triple that of the entire British West Indies combined. Nearly 1,600 vessels entered its ports in 1789 alone. Many of them were American, and many also traveled to Philadelphia.

This commercial prominence was fundamental to the ways the Haitian Revolution could be understood elsewhere. For Americans to be stimulated by events there, they had to be aware of them. The age of sail was one in which communication across space depended on the physical movement of human bodies, and trade was the reason that most bodies moved over any sizable distance in this period. Hundreds, if not thousands, of American merchantmen traveled from Saint Domingue between 1789 and 1804 with accounts of the various events that shook the colony. Over that span vessels coming from Saint Domingue made up nearly 20 percent of all arrivals to Philadelphia from foreign ports. At various points, that proportion was even greater.
This contact, however, did not produce a simple moment of reception or an objective movement of information. Knowing about Saint Domingue, rather, was an ongoing process, one in which an understanding of the changes occurring there was constructed and reconstructed over time. American narratives of the Haitian Revolution began as news; news consisted of relevant detail and developments, all of which were made intelligible by words and the ideas that they referenced. At every stage, different vessels contained and carried the stuff by which this act of creation took place. Seagoing vessels conveyed accounts over water to American shores, where they were transmitted into newspapers and moved between various nodes of news reception and production in the young nation. Like the boats, newspapers were vessels whose interests and assumptions shaped their contents. News from Saint Domingue was made part of other information, a forging that rendered it as part of discernible world developments. This was an active intellectual process, one in which putative descriptions of developments in Saint Domingue were actually acts of ascription—moments when their meaning and character were being determined. The discourse in which this meaning-making took place was another vessel, one whose operations were fundamentally external to the events in the colony; in explaining the revolution in Saint Domingue, Americans were explaining—and arguing over—their own Revolution and its implications. Over the course of these discussions, Saint Domingue itself emerged as a vessel, one that held American political ideas in succinct form. This study will show how those ideas, like the boats that initiated their travels, sometimes got lost, battered, or painted afresh along the way.

Tracing the movement of the events at Fort Dauphin into American minds and mouths offers a case in point. Numerous American vessels were in the harbor at Fort Dauphin on July 7, 1794. In addition to seeking to sell American goods and buy Dominguan sugars and coffee, many of their captains had brought the returning French colonists as passengers. Casper Faulk, captain of the schooner *Commerce*, was one. Faulk left Philadelphia for “Fort Dolphin” in early June, carrying flour, lard, beef, pork, “hamms,” and dry goods for sale, as well as “13 passengers trunks.” Massachusetts captain Thomas Roach carried others in the brig *Two Sisters*. The *Commerce* and the *Two Sisters* were among over 40 vessels that cleared Philadelphia alone for Saint Domingue in May and June 1794, to include 21 on the single day of May 26. One was reported as carrying 200 passengers.
The captains and crew of these vessels were eyewitnesses to the subsequent violence at Fort Dauphin. During the chaos, the terrified townspeople had flocked to the waterfront when Jean-François and his troops arrived, hoping that they might escape onto the shipping in the harbor. American mariners watched as they were cut down. Afterward, in what had become a common practice during such moments in the colony, officials closed the port, both to prevent unauthorized departures and to preserve an escape route if further violence took place. It was nearly two weeks before the first vessels were allowed to depart, carrying stories alongside the barrels of sugar and hogsheads of coffee in their holds.

This particular cargo reached the United States along one of five paths, each of which made up a vector of information moving outward from the colony to an array of American ports. Two of these reached the United States on the same day, August 9, when the schooner *Eagle* entered New York harbor and the brig *Paragon* moved up the Chesapeake to Baltimore. Within days New Yorkers were hearing the accounts of Fort Dauphin from the *Eagle*’s captain Brown and from a passenger named John Simon; in Baltimore the reports came from the *Paragon*’s captain Dashiell. Around August 15 accounts of the violence arrived at Boston via captain A. Billings. On August 18 a small group of French colonists disembarked at Norfolk and relayed their traumatic experiences. The final influx was at Philadelphia. On August 19 Captain Thomas Eggar arrived there in the schooner *Maria*. The brig *Franklin*, Captain Thomas Baker, came the following day. Such commercial rhythms were typical and were the means by which the Haitian Revolution was made available in America. Just over a month after Jean-François entered Fort Dauphin, Americans in spots up and down the eastern seaboard knew something about the violence that had taken place there.

What they knew, however, was by nature incomplete. Mariners such as Baker, Billings, Brown, Dashiell, and Eggar were hardly objective reporters. While the accounts they brought were more than scuttlebutt—captains understood their role as purveyors of firsthand information in the Atlantic littoral and took it seriously—theirs was a particular, and sometimes precarious, perspective. Tumultuous moments were difficult to follow, making “authentic information” hard to pick out. Language could be another impediment. One newspaper editor blamed the “frequent contradictory accounts received” from the colony in 1791 on “American Captains . . . who generally not speaking the language of the inhabitants . . . have not many opportunities of gathering information.” Even captains with impeccable French and shrewd vision, however,
had limited prospects. Their view was from the mastheads and piers of Saint Domingue’s ports. Events from the colony’s interior almost always came to them as rumors or via displaced colonists. Other information came from elsewhere in the colony. Captain Dashiell, traveling from the southern port of Jérémie, had not witnessed the violence at Fort Dauphin firsthand. The information he carried took the form of a letter from an American merchant there to his “friend” in Baltimore. Dated July 21, and written some 180 miles southwest of Fort Dauphin (and many more by water), it only briefly—and imperfectly—mentioned the events in the northern town. Thomas Eggar left the western port of Saint Marc on July 27 and similarly gave only a fleeting account of the events in the North province. Thomas Baker, who left Port-au-Prince on the same day, provided much more detail, probably because of the greater amount of information available in that busy trading city. The greatest precision, understandably, came from eyewitnesses to the violence. John Simon’s account, first heard in New York, was especially exhaustive. Captain Billings carried a letter to Boston from a writer who stepped over corpses on the wharves when he arrived in the town six days after the killings. The Norfolk émigrés’ tales of woe were similarly explicit.

Even though they included such moments of clarity and focus, the timing and content of these vectors bear witness to further convolutions at work as information moved between Saint Domingue and the United States. Winds and currents moved these vessels, but it was commercial concerns that pointed them; the dictates of commerce, therefore, not geography, determined how and where information traveled. Thomas Baker’s journey, for example, was directed in part by the Franklin’s owner, Philadelphia merchant Peter Lemaigre, who commissioned him to bring fifty-five passengers to the northern port of Môle Saint Nicolas in May. Baker returned from Port-au-Prince, where he had gathered other passengers and 70,000 “Spanish segars” to sell, in addition to the information from Fort Dauphin. American trading centers, because of their contacts—and in this particular case because they were also places in which French émigrés had congregated in the years before their return to the colony—were functionally closer to Saint Domingue than other areas. New York, lying nearly 1,500 miles from Fort Dauphin, received information from there before Norfolk, despite being 300 miles further away. Towns such as Savannah and Charleston, meanwhile, received no direct contact at all. Commercial cadences altered chronology as well. Direct and contemporaneous observances of the violence arrived interspersed among the impressions of those who had only
learned of events later and secondhand. It was a jumble of information from Fort Dauphin that arrived in the various American ports in mid-August 1794. American newspapers made what was piecemeal into a whole. Captains Eggar and Billings may have drawn crowds with the tales they told along the docks, and the shaken émigrés may have chilled listeners' blood in local taverns, but their accounts gained a broader force, and a particular cast, when they were printed. Newspaper editors in American ports had long sought out arriving seamen for information. Once they had heard their accounts or copied the letters they had ferried, editors moved these stories from the waterfront to their offices (which were often nearby). Thomas Baker, for example, would likely have drawn the *Franklin* up to the dock outside Lemaigre's store on Water Street between Race and Arch. From there it was only a few blocks to the offices of many of Philadelphia's printers. Baker's account was first rendered as news in Benjamin Franklin Bache's *General Advertiser* (at Franklin Court on Market Street, between Third and Fourth). In offices like Bache's, after painstakingly setting words into rows and columns of type, applying sticky ink, laying out sheets of paper, and twice pulling the press, editors landed such stories onto the printed page, stowing them in the well-established and important vessel that American newspapers were by the late eighteenth century.

Like their wooden counterparts, these paper vessels were fundamentally driven by mercantile concerns. To be sure, drawing on British traditions, American newspapers often adopted a particular political bent. Whether espousing Whig (or, less often, Tory) principles during the 1770s or Federalist (or, less often, antifederal) positions in the late 1780s, however, the vast majority of the nation's newspapers were shaped by commercial interests. To remain viable they needed revenue and so would typically include paid advertisements in the attempt to supplement their subscription payments. The first and last of the four pages of the *American Minerva and the New-York (Evening) Advertiser* that contained John Simon's account from Fort Dauphin, for example, were comprised of ads for soap and perfume, sugar and salt, wine and rum, books and speeches, and ropes and sail duck, as well as paid notices for a French school, vessels in search of cargoes, and offers of work for painters and glazers. To remain relevant, in between those pages its editor had gathered information in ways that were meant to be useful, recognizable, and consistent. The newspaper's second page was devoted to accounts from Europe. Three of its five columns were taken up with a May 2 debate in the British House of Commons over the alliance with Prussia against France. This was followed by reports in
London, as of June 7, of the progress of the war in Genoa, Charleroi, Valenciennes, Warsaw, Brussels, Flanders, and Ostend. Simon’s account from Fort Dauphin came on the following page, under the New York heading, which gathered reports that had entered there. Readers took in his tale alongside that of an embargo against American shipping at Halifax, the efforts at Boston to deal with a recent fire, the capture of several American vessels by the British navy in the North Atlantic, and an essay on the effects of tree shade on surrounding vegetation. Nearly four columns were then devoted to news that came from other domestic entry points, collected under the heading “By This Day’s Mail.” On this day the only mail worth noting had come from Philadelphia, which provided more reports from Europe.34

This configuration was generally consistent across American newspapers of the day. Even as local and national political divisions gained force, readers looked to “shipping news” that detailed maritime arrivals and clearances, and captain’s “reports” and “speakingsto” that recounted events that would impact markets and prices. Those portions less expressly tied to commerce, “foreign intelligence” and reports arriving “by this day’s mail,” were often deemed germane because of their implications for trade—not to mention, as we have seen, the extent to which their very presence was determined by trading patterns and contacts. “Numbers of Americans lost all their cargoes by having them on shore,” the letter carried by Captain Billings from Fort Dauphin to Boston told.35 In addition to reiterating the basic account, Captain Eggar explained that, because the British were likely to abandon Saint Marc, “in a few days an embargo would be laid upon all the vessels in port” and that Americans were finding no one to buy their goods.36 The information from Fort Dauphin, then, was worth printing not simply because it provided a sensational rendering of the fate of the French colonists but also because it was judged to be material to the fate of American commerce.

Given Philadelphia’s commercial, political, and journalistic sway, the fact that the Philadelphia heading was a prominent feature in a New York paper is not surprising. In printing reports from other American cities, American newspapers articulated the national polity and formed what one historian has described as a “terrain of public debate.”37 It was on that terrain that the disparate accounts of Fort Dauphin arriving at New York, Baltimore, Boston, Norfolk, and Philadelphia were woven together. In sifting through the various reports, editors noted features that were “confirmed” and corroborated in those they already had at hand. In the process, they transformed the information from Fort
Dauphin into news that, though it centered on an event in Saint Domingue, was American in its composition and orientation.\(^{38}\)

The volume and number of Philadelphia’s newspapers ensured that the city would function as an entrepôt and engine in the network of communication through which this composition took place. Information entering elsewhere moved to the capital quickly. Though vessels from Saint Domingue’s north arrived at Philadelphia later than other places in 1794, Philadelphians knew about the events at Fort Dauphin within a day of the first arrivals in the United States from the town. The account given by Simon (who was from Philadelphia) arrived in the city hours after being printed in New York, likely coming via the “New York Packet,” a water route so regular that it had its own dock between Market and Chestnut streets.\(^{39}\) The news items that came by way of Baltimore, Boston, and Norfolk were all current in Philadelphia by the time Captains Eggar and Baker arrived in the city with their own tales. The converse cannot be said for the other places where information from Fort Dauphin arrived. Boston’s news circulated readily across New England, ranging northward to Portland and inward to Catskill, New York. Boston itself, however, only received the single report via Captain Billings. Norfolk’s information was even more limited, though once it was reported in Philadelphia it moved as far as Rutland, Vermont, and Savannah, Georgia. Similarly, while Baltimore’s newspapers only printed the letter that arrived there directly, Baltimore’s news traveled in Philadelphia’s papers as far as Portsmouth, New Hampshire. While news from New York gradually moved up the Hudson and Connecticut rivers, New York City’s newspapers only reprinted the Boston report.\(^{40}\) No other American city’s newspapers were as capacious and as wide-ranging as those that came from the capital.

The commercial implications of the accounts from Fort Dauphin accounted for their inclusion in newspapers, but the travels of these stories were not over when they reached the page. The political and social interests of Philadelphia’s newspaper editors shaped the contents of their papers, as did their sense of the interests and needs of their readers. The stakes behind these choices were high. In an era when political culture was shaped by a faith in reason and the existence of truth, news was crucial: Possessing precise and accurate information would lead rational people to consensus and the republic would flourish; false information allowed tyrants to manipulate the public.\(^{41}\) News and newspapers, therefore, were understood as playing an essential role in maintaining the nation’s political health. Developments in Saint Domingue were more than simply
captivating; they deserved ink because they were deemed important to this broad project. As such—as “news” in this charged sense—accounts from Saint Domingue entered what historian Seth Cotlar has termed the “public political discourse” that stemmed from reading and discussing news in this period.\textsuperscript{42}

In the case of Fort Dauphin, this movement produced a tangible image. Late in August 1794 an engraver in Philadelphia advertised a mezzotint print of the “massacre” there. More commonly, such impressions were conveyed by words. John Simon, for example, described Jean-François as the “general of the banditti” and told of his orders to “kill without distinction all the French white people,” a depiction that seems to have penetrated Elizabeth Drinker’s diary. The newspapers that printed Simon’s story entitled it “An account of the Massacre which took place at Fort Dauphin.” The mezzotint massacre preserved Simon’s depiction, which had been largely substantiated by the letters and captains’ reports that had been printed around it: as presented in American newspapers, the violence at Fort Dauphin marked the ex-slaves who committed it as atavistic and anarchic agents, outside the realm of rational action.

In filling the void created by this elision of the rebels’ agency, the news from Fort Dauphin deployed common expectations and assumptions about the world’s workings. To explain the violence, the accounts looked to European actors. In addition to Vázquez’s perfidy, Simon blasted the “the unfeeling Spaniards” for their “indifference” to the plight of the French victims. This stance, he revealed, was more than simple callousness; it stemmed from their attitudes toward the French Revolution. Pushing the colonists away at bayonet point, the

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{“FINE ARTS,” Gazette of the United States Aug. 26, 1794. No extant copies of the print are available. Image courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society.}
\end{figure}
soldiers had proclaimed “loudly that [this] is what the French deserve” and had chanted “Long live the King!!!” while they were cut down. Subsequent accounts repeated this rendition. The “horrible massacre” was perpetrated on the “miserable aristocrats by order of the Spaniards,” one noted, who had commanded “the noted villain JEAN FRANCOIS” to kill them “without distinction of age, sex, or colour.”

This aspect of the story allowed American commentators to move the news from Fort Dauphin along the final leg of its travels, a voyage that brought it firmly into the domestic political sphere. On August 19, Benjamin Franklin Bache, an emergent leader among critics of President George Washington’s administration, introduced his printing of Simon’s account in the General Advertiser by emphasizing that the victims were “French aristocrats” who had been “deluded” by the Spanish monarch, an enemy of all republicans. Another writer took the episode as a direct opportunity to defend the French Republic. “Read the account, ye worshipers of tyrants,” he exclaimed, “of the massacres at Fort Dauphin.” While critics had maligned France and the violence of its Revolution as “cruel and barbarous,” he explained, this news proved that it was France’s royalist opponents who were truly vicious. Having received and made sense of the news, these writers were now deploying it as part of wider debates at home. In so doing, they explained the goings-on at Fort Dauphin as part of a revolution. Properly understood, the violence at Fort Dauphin served as a spotlight onto the true principles of those looking on in the United States; those who justified the cruelty were highlighted as “aristocrats, and the minions of Royalty.” Bache followed his renditions of this “interesting foreign intelligence” with a domestic report, that of the recent celebration in Philadelphia of the second anniversary of the declaration of the French Republic. That “death-blow to Royalism in France” had been honored in the American capital by the erection of a liberty pole, by a mass singing of the French Revolutionary anthem “La Marseillaise,” and by orations to and by the French minister. Finally, Bache rounded out his packaging of the day’s news with a letter facetiously comparing the effort to punish those who burned the British flag during the celebration with Washington’s recent neutrality proclamation. Aristocrats, it would seem, were at work in Philadelphia, too. Fort Dauphin, by this light, was one of several regions of the globe in which the forces of republicanism and monarchy were at war.

In the weeks and months after the initial flurry of information from Fort Dauphin, the violence there would continue to be referenced in Philadelphia
newspapers in service of identifying and developing instances of “tyranny” and “republicanism.” From the perspective of those like Bache, the former included the actions of the British privateers that were capturing American merchant ships at an alarming rate around the Caribbean. Those less sure tended to rely on the crop of French-language newspapers, often edited by Dominguan émigrés, who castigated the republican forces in the colony as licentious demagogues. Bache’s opponents soon got into the act as well. Over three years later, Federalist William Cobbett reprinted Bache’s compositions of August 19, placing the editor’s words and Simon’s depictions side by side so as to show Bache’s craven attempt to bend the news to his needs. By this point, the actual events at Fort Dauphin were less important than their capacity to serve domestic political ends.

Thus one episode of the unfolding Haitian Revolution took form in Philadelphia, having moved from mariners’ accounts to commercial news, and then to partisan bellwether. It was not the first, and the nearly constant travels of merchant vessels between Saint Domingue and the city ensured that it would not be the last. Beginning in the late 1780s and continuing on into the first decade of the nineteenth century, newspapers in Philadelphia contained accounts from or about the colony on nearly three-quarters of all days in which newspapers were printed. Hundreds of episodes like the “massacre at Fort Dauphin” were put before the American public over these years. Taken together, these accounts—complex, confusing, and opaque as they sometime were—constituted Philadelphia’s Haitian Revolution.

Around the time the news from Fort Dauphin was forming in Philadelphia, John Murdock wrote a play. Murdock was a hairdresser in the city, a profession, strange to say, that may well have led him to think particularly about revolutions, both near and far and past and present. Beginning in 1790, the arrival of émigrés from France and Saint Domingue brought elements of French and Caribbean culture into the capital. Years later, one young man remembered the time when Philadelphia was “thronged with French people of all shades from the colonies, and those from Old France.” Walking through the streets of this “great hotel,” he heard French spoken, listened to French music, saw French styles, and witnessed the adoption of French practices. He recalled the exotic beauty of the women of color, as well as the fact that they walked arm in arm with white men. Perhaps he tasted French cooking, saw French dancing masters, or sampled French wares. Hairstyles were only one of many pieces of evidence of this influx and influence.
While the ways John Murdock snipped and shaped hair may have shifted after 1790, the French presence seems to have led him to think afresh about the United States. Sometime during 1794 that tension became creative, leading him to write *The Triumphs of Love*, a play about his city and the changes it was experiencing. In lobbying the Chestnut Street Theatre to put it on he touted the play as a “native production” that would be “consonant with American ears.” The reception it met when staged in May 1795 seemed to bear this out. A reviewer in Bache’s *General Advertiser* felt that the “sentiments” that stood behind the plot “did honor to the writer’s heart as a man and a citizen,” though he also found them “rather trite.” If no literary triumph, *The Triumphs of Love* did successfully convey ruminations that were commonplace among the audience that Murdock spoke to and for. The frontispiece of its printed version showed an American veteran celebrating the late war as “a revolution which has given freedom to millions living, and will secure it to millions yet unborn.”55 The rest of the play addressed the scope of that “freedom.” Émigrés from France and the French Caribbean were key characters; people of color and refugees stalked the action. Murdock’s chief concern, however, was America, and here an important means of asking the question involved raising the issue of American slavery. Characters debated the meaning of “Liberty and Equality,” slaves were freed, “Citizen Sambo” danced the “carmagnole” and got drunk. While touting the basic fact of the American Revolution, *The Triumphs of Love* engaged in questions about that revolution’s terms.

That this was something of a hackneyed theme is precisely the point. Despite the hopes of the Federalists of 1788, the ratification of the American Constitution did not usher in a period of stability and consensus in the new nation. The 1790s were a tumultuous period in the United States, one in which the American Revolution’s meaning was very much up for debate. To be sure, few Americans would publicly argue that the Revolution that had created the nation was a mistake, but the space between voicing enthusiasm over the Revolution’s ideals and identifying specific markers of its promise could be vast. If the conflict, as one historian has aptly put it, “provided an ideological straight-jacket that no publically articulate American could or would overlook,” as a heritage, it pinched different people in different places.56 Murdock’s questions register that discomfort. How to gauge the freedom, liberty, and equality secured by the Revolution? Who were to be included in the unborn “millions” that would feel its blessings? The Revolution, as history, had supplied an end but left out the means. The tensions and anxieties that came as a result were the cruci-
ble in which American political culture developed. It did so not according to the dynamics of the clashing of pristine ideas or simply through the competition of prominent elites but through an unfolding process, replete with twists and turns, in which unforeseen contingencies could have a significant impact.57

Disruptions in Saint Domingue were among those contingencies. Stories from the French colony raised questions about slavery and rebellion, but they also gave rise to more fundamental queries about revolution—whether or not its principles operated universally, about the boundaries it established between race and citizenship, and over its anticolonial implications. Because Saint Domingue was a French place, developments there were connected to the ardent reactions Americans had to the French Revolution. But, as was the case with regard to France, the narratives of revolution stimulated by these ruminations were more about the United States than they were about the wider world. This study is organized around those narratives. It traces the phases of the Haitian Revolution that took form in Philadelphia, those moments in which blurry images and ideas streaming from Saint Domingue were brought into focus and resolved into telling episodes. The journeymen and apprentices who set and inked the type that conveyed these stories were engaged in a process that made them American, one in which the events that historians have only recently marked out as a Haitian Revolution were first organized according to domestic concerns. Analyzing this process of Americanization demonstrates the ways in which Saint Domingue was constitutive to American political culture as it developed over the early national period.

In Philadelphia, that process was particularly sensitive to the issue of the American Revolution’s meaning for the institution of slavery. When the curtain went up on The Triumphs of Love, Pennsylvania’s abolition act had been in operation for fifteen years. Over two thousand free blacks lived in the city, making it the largest such population in the nation.58 Pennsylvanian antislavery is most often noted for its moderation, and it does provide a useful demonstration of the limits of American Revolutionary-era abolitionism. To be sure, the 1780 act worked at a glacial pace, freeing children born to slave mothers after March 1, 1780, but requiring that those children serve a twenty-eight-year period of indentured labor.59 This mechanism was a nod to slaveholders’ demands for compensation for their lost property. If the struggle for liberty and independence prompted many to question slavery, the political demands of union—and an equally strong ideological commitment to the sanctity of property—attenuated the impact of that questioning. The problem that slavery posed for American
Revolutionaries, at least the white ones, could be resolved by positing a republic in which equality was for whites alone, blacks were outside the civic body, and slavery’s presence was variegated across the polity according to its economic viability rather than by any singular sense of its consistency with the Revolution’s logic.\textsuperscript{60}

Just as Murdock’s treatment reveals lingering anxieties over this schema, charting Saint Domingue’s shifting function in American discourse reveals this development to have been an evolution rather than a foregone conclusion. In changing ways over the decade, events in the colony evoked elements of American antislavery thinking, provoking actors to confront, and sometimes refine, their ideas about slavery’s fate in the Revolutionary polity. Many Americans in Philadelphia began the decade confident that their state was a harbinger of a world order in which slavery did not exist, and perhaps in which their city’s racially mixed population was a model for the future. This spirit stood behind the efforts of activists in rejuvenating the Pennsylvania Abolition Society, in pushing Congress to act against slavery, and in connecting their doings with like-minded laborers such as the Société des Amis des Noirs in Paris and the London Society. “The present age has been distinguished by a remarkable Revolution,” the Abolition Society wrote to the Marquis de Lafayette in mid-1788, “mankind begin at last to consider themselves as Members of one family.”\textsuperscript{61} It was a vision shared by British and French activists such as Thomas Clarkson, Jacques-Pierre Brissot, and others. Murdock’s “revolution” was potentially expansive and the “freedom” it was to provide possibly universal.\textsuperscript{62}

Developments in Saint Domingue channeled the anxieties slavery produced in American politics and ultimately fragmented ideas about a unitary revolutionary era, but the colony was not a simple presence. Even after moments of violence like that at Fort Dauphin, Americans found ways to voice support for the changes going on there. The colony’s fate offered a benchmark that worked across the political spectrum in the young American republic. Only in the early years of the nineteenth century would its meanings be effectively reduced to a singular equation with black violence.

The initial phases of Philadelphia’s Haitian Revolution, by contrast, contained moments of acceptance and optimism. Between the late 1780s and mid-1791 Americans confronted the colony’s reactions to the unfolding French Revolution and wondered if the “regeneration” of the kingdom would lead to the independence of its colonial holdings. This was a tripartite struggle in Saint Domingue, one mediated by the upheavals—and new possibilities—in Paris.
Self-proclaimed “patriots” looked for the Revolution to produce greater economic freedom and autonomy for the colony. Their adversaries were local authorities who sought to maintain their, and perhaps France’s, control. Representatives of Saint Domingue’s twenty-five thousand gens de couleur—free people of color—meanwhile, were spurred by hopes that the rhetoric of expanded rights in Paris would herald civic equality across racial lines among the un-enslaved.

While Americans in Philadelphia would learn of changes in Europe in broad strokes (and via news that came through London and was usually quite old), this was fresh, and pressing, information: the terms of the struggles led them to see Saint Domingue as a gauge of the French Revolution more generally. Receiving reports of rival assemblies, deposed governors, declarations of colonial rights, and violent clashes, they plumbed the colonial conflicts for clues to the extent of the universal claims to rights made in that Revolution’s name. This was at once an imposition on events—the so-called colonial question was of marginal importance in Paris—and a canny line of questioning, since the National Assembly itself repeatedly stumbled around the issue. Americans witnessed a succession of its decrees concerning the colonies, and their results in Saint Domingue, and wondered if metropolitan ideals or local interests would hold sway. The same questions prompted a group of free coloreds to try to force the issue in late 1790, violence that, in turn, spurred the National Assembly toward a halting expansion of civil rights across the color line in a decree made in May 1791. Whether judged as “lost” by independence or as undone by this egalitarianism, Saint Domingue’s fate suggested links between American and French revolutionary ideals. While whites in the American South may have been correct in their sense of this issue as alien to their own circumstances, audiences in Philadelphia, by then the site of perhaps the grandest state-sponsored experiment in racial equality on earth, discussed the advance of free colored equality as part of a conversation about revolution that gathered together news from France, Britain, and the West Indies and put it in line with happenings at home.

A next phase took shape after August 1791, when thousands of slaves in Saint Domingue’s North province rose in insurrection, killing hundreds of white colonists and sending many more scurrying to the relative safety of Cap Français (also known as “Le Cap”). Within weeks, a stalemate emerged in the region, as the insurgents formed into bands, consolidated their control of the rural areas, and defended themselves against the forays made by white and free
20 Introduction

colored troops that ventured out of the city. By late 1791, fighting had broken out in the West and South provinces as well, where it was shaped by the ongoing struggles by free coloreds to attain civic equality. These developments produced real limitations among some observers, but the essence of the cosmopolitan worldview already established endured. If slave violence was, for most, impossible to applaud, it was understood by many as endemic to slavery and as an expression of its evils. The achievement of a temporary peace in places through white acceptance of colored civil equality gave further force to the idea that revolutionary changes were at hand. The slave system, while not eradicated by any means, was significantly shaken across the colony. Further waves of violence would continue, with massacres meted out by all sides, into 1793 and beyond. While the true challenge being mounted to the slave regime in Saint Domingue escaped observers in Philadelphia, the actions that expressed it provoked much conversation about slavery (and antislavery) and revolution nevertheless.

These conversations were continued, but fundamentally altered, when events in the colony pushed Revolutionary France to the Left. News of the insurrections cemented the alliance between pro-revolutionary whites and free colored activists in the spring of 1792, leading to a decree granting full political rights to all free colored people in the colonies that was signed by the king on April 4. This established a tenuous equilibrium in Saint Domingue's coastal areas. That stability crumbled, however, between late 1792 and the middle of 1793, when the balance of power was altered by the presence of a new group of French civil commissioners, led by Léger Félicité Sonthonax and Etienne Polverel. They arrived in Saint Domingue in September 1792 with a mandate to enforce the April 4 decree, a measure that was to finally unify the colony's slaveholding classes behind the new French order and to allow them to end the insurrections. For Americans, this program served to organize the combatants in the colony into pro- and counterrevolutionary groupings. As Sonthonax and Polverel consolidated their power, they shunted aside various self-proclaimed "patriot" groups by tying themselves to free colored militia battalions. The stability this produced was shattered, however, by the arrival of a new governor-general, Francois-Thomas Galbaud, who attracted white support in opposition to the commissioners. Driven out of Cap Français and defended by a dwindling contingent of their free colored allies, Sonthonax and Polverel turned to the ex-slaves for support. Harried and desperate, they eventually offered freedom to all those who would fight for them, an offer taken up by several bands who
drove Galbaud out, burned Le Cap, and forced the governor and thousands of his supporters to evacuate the colony for the United States. By midsummer 1793 the commissioners had expanded their offer of freedom into an edict that freed all slaves who would side with France. On February 4, 1794, these actions were sanctioned, ratified, and extended to all French possessions by the National Convention in Paris.

While these developments only represent the gestures of French law toward a condition that many ex-slaves in the colony already possessed, a signal moment had indeed taken place, both on the ground in the colony and in the evaluations of American observers. The declaration of war between France and much of Europe, which in Saint Domingue led to an invasion of the colony by both Britain and Spain, intensified this feeling. Some saw the end of the colony in this development, but others found ways to embrace versions of the notion of black liberation. The tension between the twin expressions of that liberation over this period—that achieved by violence and that provided by Revolutionary principles—was visible in Philadelphia through the varying use of the term “French negro.” Witnessing, comprehending, and digesting the seismic changes in the colony was not the same as identifying those changes as distinct and meaningful on their own. Americans saw a French Revolution in Saint Domingue, not a Dominguian (let alone Haitian) Revolution. White Americans’ conceptual limitations—the constraints of what Michel-Rolph Trouillot terms their “discursive context”—thwarted their capacity to comprehend the truly radical changes going on in Saint Domingue.

The latter portion of this study examines the consequences of those limitations. Whereas events in Saint Domingue during the early 1790s imparted a new degree of intensity to American rhetoric and action, contributing to a high tide of Revolutionary-era antislavery sentiment and activity, the political divisions that developed in the American context after 1795 impacted those ideals in practice. In Philadelphia, though French emancipation empowered individual blacks to secure and preserve freedom, their experiences, and that of the city’s African Americans, reveal the limits of the cosmopolitan understandings of events in the colony. Rather than part of a universal trend, liberation was revealed to be a local, and particular, development. The American Revolution’s meaning for slavery had been altered, or at least constrained.

Events in Saint Domingue, meanwhile, had taken on a new cast. In many ways, the violence at Fort Dauphin served as a break of sorts. By mid-1795 the Spanish and British invasions had stalled, the Spanish having sued for peace
and the British having become hemmed in at a handful of coastal towns in each province. These events were the context for the emergence of Toussaint Louverture as a leader in Saint Domingue, a development that was vital to the ways that the Haitian Revolution unfolded thereafter and to the ways Americans understood it. After a protracted correspondence with the French general Étienne Laveaux, Louverture abandoned the Spanish in mid-1794. This shift, whether made to further his military ambitions, to advance a personal antislavery agenda, or because of the National Convention’s decree of February 4, was momentous. While Louverture was by no means unbeatable, his exploits were vital to France’s revived fortunes in the colony. They also provided an opening for his rise as Saint Domingue’s preeminent leader. In the spring of 1796 he rescued Laveaux from a plot by free coloreds at Port de Paix, prompting the grateful general and acting governor to name Louverture lieutenant governor. Between 1797 and 1799 he further consolidated his position, first by cannily negotiating agreements with the British and American governments, and then by outmaneuvering the metropolitan officials sent to maintain French control over the colony. In the late summer of 1797 he forced Sonthonax, who had returned to Saint Domingue in mid-1796, to leave through a combination of flattery and force. In October 1798 Sonthonax’s replacement, Gabriel Marie Théodore Joseph d’Hédouville, met the same fate. After a short but bloody conflict in which he defeated the free colored forces under André Rigaud in the colony’s South province in 1799, Louverture’s control was secure. Triumphant, he next invaded Spanish Santo Domingo, claiming it for France. He then imposed an agricultural regime that restricted laborers’ movements and allowed colored and white elites (and black army officers) to control them in the name of restarting the plantation economy. These actions created a loyal cadre for him to rely on, though they also produced considerable unrest, and even rebellion, among the rural workers. While the general continued to proclaim that his acts were in the name of France and to pledge his opposition to slavery, in the spring of 1801 he convened a special assembly to write a new constitution for the colony that made it all but independent, and Louverture governor for life.

For Americans in Philadelphia, these developments were integral parts of the heat of domestic politics, which, by the late 1790s, had cauterized fissures and catalyzed new realities, hardening them with the passion and warmth of the times. The changing capacity of the idea of Saint Domingue over this period was an important motor to a shift in weight behind the meaning of blackness in white minds and mouths, one that ultimately resolved the problems produced
for them by “French negroes.” The Federalist party, though presiding over a close diplomatic relationship with Louverture’s emergent Dominguian polity, did so by reducing Louverture’s meaning as a transcendent figure. If the “loss” of Saint Domingue under the general was acceptable because he was not “French,” he was also not permitted to be a representative of “negroes” elsewhere. From this perspective, Louverture’s polity was sui generis and therefore not threatening, though it was still something to treat carefully. The emergent Republican party, meanwhile, took advantage of this conception, invoking an American Revolution that all whites could embrace by ensuring the more radical challenges being offered—both at home and abroad—were put beyond the pale. Race, once a locus of ideological debate, was now merely an effective tool for use in arguments about politics. In this developing environment, African Americans continued to espouse alternative ideals, though the viability of using Saint Domingue to assert their agenda was increasingly unproductive and dangerous.

The final stage of the Haitian Revolution, as witnessed in Philadelphia, marked the triumph of the Republican conception. Louverture’s consolidation of power had rankled in France, where Napoleon Bonaparte’s temporary peace with the nation’s European neighbors allowed him to focus on the Caribbean. Early in 1802 the first consul sent a massive force to subdue the colony. The French invasion opened a new phase of the violence there. By late in the year Louverture had been captured and transported to a jail in the French Alps, where in 1803 he would die, claiming loyalty to France until the end. In the colony, however, the continuing resistance of ex-slave insurgents and the devastating effects of the fever season literally decimated the French offensive. In late 1803 the remaining French troops evacuated the colony. On January 1, 1804, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, who had emerged as Louverture’s successor, declared the colony’s independence. In Saint Domingue’s place was the new nation of Haiti.

Even as white Americans continued to strenuously disagree about the tenor of events in their own young republic, most of them acceded to a depiction of this new polity, which they persisted in calling “St. Domingo,” as an alien and dangerous place. More to the point, it was increasingly irrelevant to their discussions about race, slavery, and revolution. In reducing the intricate and nuanced revolutionary agendas at work in Saint Domingue over the period to a simple portrait of black violence, Americans pieced together a basic agreement about their own nation’s Revolution, one that marked it as complete. In thus ultimately denying the revolutionary character of the changes that had taken
place in the French West Indies, Americans had come together around a portrait of the Revolution they had accomplished at home.

Though Americans “made” a Haitian Revolution, they did not fabricate it. Between 1789 and 1804, events in Saint Domingue rocked the Atlantic world, dominating that portion of the “Age of Revolutions” to an extent that scholars have only recently come to appreciate. This book is less concerned with Haiti’s nature as an emblem or an anomaly in that age than it is with its function as a lodestar to American audiences. Still, by recognizing and studying that function, it shows that contemporaries experienced the same quandaries as historians in trying to make sense of events in the Caribbean as part of wider changes. Americans knew a revolution when they saw one, and they embraced the opportunity it provided to discuss themselves. Thinking about the (evolving) meaning of the Haitian Revolution this way reminds us that this period was constructed by its participants well before it became an historical “age.” As historian Ashli White observes in her study of Dominguan refugees and the political issues they raised in the early American republic, these Atlantic moments are best understood as connected by a web: later developments would shape and reshape the meaning of prior ones. The “age” would be “remade” several times over.

That remaking was a first go at historicization. And, like later analysis, it was shaped by the realities of power among its various participants. Whereas Atlantic historians have looked to discern Haiti’s impact elsewhere, this book’s focus suggests that its impact was molded by the sociopolitical dynamics at work in the various places—here, Philadelphia and by extension the United States—where it was received. The web was not neutral, nor did it operate with equal facility between its various nodes. It has been more than a decade since Michel-Rolph Trouillot gave his elegant paean against the “silencing” of the Haitian Revolution in history. Even the scholars who have since contested the idea that Haiti lay outside the capacities of European-American discourse accept the more essential point that Haiti, if noted, was a burr under the saddle. Recognizing that reactions to the Haitian Revolution in the United States were influenced more by American realities than they were by Haitian ones shapes how we understand the idea of “impact,” emphasizing the asymmetrical process by which the meanings that the Haitian Revolution could take on within a wider “age” were produced. At the same time, this approach allows for a Haitian role in the making of the American Revolution’s meaning. That
Revolution, by this understanding, was in flux; by looking at what is usually understood as its postlude, we can see how Americans regarding Saint Domingue were pushed to define its ideals. Saint Domingue’s presence did not fundamentally alter the trajectory of that meaning—the declension of the freedom and liberty it offered, for example, to being meant for white men alone—but it did impact the ways in which the radical edge of the American Revolution was defined. More important, considering this process over time reveals how, where, and when that edge endured. Scholars of both the Haitian and American revolutions continue to differ over the ideological imperatives behind each. This analysis suggests a complex dance, one in which Americans led and were humming their own tune. Furthermore, it helps highlight the changing tenor among the American pas de deux, a change that would ultimately produce the single note sounded after 1804.

But, before that point, Americans looked to Saint Domingue with more fascination than horror. In the process of enunciating that interest, they articulated ideas about rights and equality, slavery and antislavery, citizenship and race, and, eventually, independence and nationhood, all of which served to develop answers to their ongoing questions about the American Revolution’s meaning. Here is the essence of the Haitian Revolution’s impact in the United States. Vague misgivings and uncertainties fell away, leaving horror and hysteria as the sole expressions behind “St. Domingo.” This was a development that was neither natural nor predetermined. Rather than reflecting the innate flaws of the grand ideas of the American Revolution or the tragic failure of its promise, however, that this did take place shows that the racism of the early American republic was contingent. It developed through politics. It was shaped by commerce and trade. Ideals were transmogrified in the mouths of newspapermen, ship captains, activists, and merchants. Gambits to claim and define an American public by a set of universal ideals were cut down, leaving a union based on an acceptance of local differences and an American Revolution that was exceptional, and over. Through it all, the fate of Saint Domingue served as an intriguing and vital ground for discussion and debate. Parsing its meanings reveals as much about the observers as the observed.