

Whose naive accents, the portrait of their souls,
Give more eloquence to this burning speech. . . .⁴
"This God who made the sun, who brings us light from above,
Who raises the sea, and who makes the storm rumble,
That God is there, do you understand? Hiding in a cloud,
He watches us, he sees all that the whites do!
The God of the whites pushes them to crime, but he wants us to do
good deeds."⁵
But that God who is so good orders us to vengeance;
He will direct our hands, and give us help,
Throw away the image of the God of the whites who thirsts for our
tears,
Listen to the liberty that speaks in all our hearts."
The oracle had spoken. . . .

The next day it was almost midnight when the bell gave the signal for the disaster. The insurrection exploded with such furor that it created the most sad of spectacles. The conjured gathered on the plain, dispersed themselves into groups, and carried the spirit that animated them everywhere: Horror preceded them, destruction followed them and left behind them the disastrous traces of their passage. "Liberty, vengeance," these were their rallying cries; they were the divinities to which they sacrificed.

⁴Dumesle provided two versions of this speech, one in Creole and one in French. We have translated primarily from the Creole version, though with some consultation of the French version he supplied.

⁵There are two possible interpretations of this very famous line. Dumesle's French version suggests that there are two different gods: "The God of the whites pushes them to crime, but our God wants us to do good deeds." But the Creole he provides could be read, as in the translation above, as suggesting that the same God pushes the whites and the slaves to different ends.

ANTOINE DALMAS

History of the Revolution of Saint-Domingue

1814

Dalmas was a colonist who emigrated from Saint-Domingue to the United States in 1793. Once there, he wrote an account of the uprising in the colony based in part on his own experiences, which was eventually published in 1814. Along with Dumesle's work, Dalmas's work provides us with one of the most detailed descriptions of the meetings and other organizational work that preceded the slave uprising of August 1791 as well as of the ceremony that accompanied these meetings.

It was on August 20, 1791, that the revolt of the blacks broke out on one of the plantations of M. de Galliffet [sic] known as *La Gossette*, with the [attempted] murder⁶ of M. Mossut, who was its manager. The following details are the core of the testimony of several *nègres* who testified the following day before the judge of Cap Français, who went to these places to investigate the guilty parties. They said that an old *nègre* called Ignace—who, it is interesting to note, was different from all the others in being exempt from any kind of work [and] by the individual care he received—kept for a long time the secret of the conspiracy. In a long meeting that he had had the very eve of the revolt with a free black of Grande-Rivière (one of those tried in absentia in the Ogé affair), this free black told him this: "The moment of revenge is coming; tomorrow night, all the whites must be killed. We are counting on your promises and your influence. M. Mossut will be one of the first victims, and you must convince Blaise⁷ to strike him down. No more delays, no more worries; the plot is too widespread to leave any refuge or security for the whites. They will all share the

⁶Although Dalmas uses the term *assassinat* (murder) here, he seems to have known that Mossut was wounded but not killed by the insurgents, as the remainder of the document makes clear. On Mossut's experience, see Document 14.

⁷The plantation's head slave or *commandeur*.

same fate, and if some of them avoid our daggers they will not escape the fires that will reduce the plain to cinders."

The specifics of this plan had been decreed several days before between the principal leaders on Le Normand plantation in Morne Rouge. Before carrying it out, they had a kind of celebration or sacrifice in the middle of an uncultivated woods on the Choiseul plantation, known as Caïman, where the *nègres* gathered in great numbers. A black pig, surrounded by objects they believe have magical power, each carrying the most bizarre offering, was offered as a sacrifice to the all-powerful spirit of the black race. The religious ceremony in which the *nègres* slit its throat, the greed with which they drank its blood, the importance they attached to owning some of its bristles which they believed would make them invincible reveal the characteristics of the Africans. It is natural that a caste this ignorant and stupid would begin the most horrible attacks with the superstitious rites of an absurd and bloodthirsty religion.

M. Mossut, who had been in Cap Français on business, returned that evening with one of his friends. As soon as the slaves thought they were both asleep, they went first to Mossut's bedroom, whose door was always left open. Awakened by the noise, he asked who was there. They responded: "We are here to talk to you." He tried to raise the mosquito netting around his bed. At that very moment, two machete blows cut it into shreds; a third struck M. Mossut in the shoulder and on the hand. He only had time to yell out and throw himself in the space between his bed and the wall. The height and size of his bed sheltered him from the blows they tried to strike. Thanks to the dim light, he was able to grab the spear of a slave who was waiting for him to come out and, with a kick, knocked him out into the veranda. Astonished by all this resistance, the others fled in fright. Then M. Mossut called his house slaves, ran to his friend's room, where he found him sleeping deeply, woke him up, and sent him to the large Galliffet plantation. Then, arming himself with a sword and a pistol, he swore to kill anyone who came near without having been called.

There were normally six whites on the large Galliffet plantation. M. Odelucq, who had managed all that family's property for fifteen years, went to the La Gossette estate, taking three whites. The *nègres'* cowardice, then as always, allowed three men, poorly armed but well-informed and determined to die fighting, to pass through one hundred fifty rebels who had decided to kill them, without any of them daring to make the slightest movement. Returning to the large plantation,

M. Odelucq and his companions found the gate open and the lock broken. This was the work of the rebel leader, who, seeing the failure at La Gossette, ran at top speed to hold back the other plotters. Despite his efforts, he could not prevent several fires that broke out in the neighborhood. The alarm bell rang several times. But instead of running to the fire, as one would normally do, M. Odelucq, fearing the worst, would not let the two slave crews go out and ordered the drivers to watch them scrupulously.

At daybreak he went back to La Gossette. There, before the assembled work crews, he arrested three slaves, relatives and friends of the driver, whose absence since the disturbances of the previous night raised justifiable suspicions about them. Then he left for Cap Français and returned with the local judge. Right away, they examined the evidence and interrogated the arrested slaves. Three hours elapsed before they knew the truth; it might have been a long time before they realized the extent of the conspiracy had it not been for a young house slave who admitted some specifics that put them on the right track. However, at six in the evening, one of the three prisoners, astonished by what the judge knew and believing that the two others, held separately, had betrayed him, confessed the specifics described above and moreover told them that Blaise, the driver at La Gossette, had guided the two assassins, and confirmed the plan of all the slaves: to fight to the death against the whites.

If the strong measures taken on the Galliffet plantations had been more widespread, it is likely that the revolt would have ended there. But in the time it took to extinguish the fires at the Petite Anse, another more powerful one broke out at Acul. A band led by Boukman* spread like a flood throughout this parish. With a torch in one hand and a dagger in the other, this *nègre* pitilessly massacred all the whites who escaped the flames. His own master was murdered in the arms of his weeping and dying wife.

The number of victims would have been even greater if Boukman had been able to be in more places. In spite of his orders and his example, several *nègres* spared their masters, even saved them. Others, flushed by the fire out of the cane fields where they were hidden, fell into the hands of the rebels; the most fortunate made it to Cap Français. Since the previous night, the townspeople had suspected the plot. The fugitives' reports of the horrors they had witnessed spread

*The insurgent leader Boukman is believed to have been one of the priests officiating at the Bois-Caïman ceremony described in Document 12.

panic throughout the city. Three cannon shots summoned a special session of the Provincial Assembly. Stores closed and house slaves were closely watched. People came and went, passing each other unrecognized, posing a thousand questions without waiting for an answer. Soon the call to arms was heard, echoed by everyone's voice. Eventually two or three hundred national guards, reinforced by a detachment of the Cap regiment and by three small artillery pieces, were dispatched to the Haut du Cap.* There they encountered the whites fleeing from Acul and neighboring parishes. The roads were filled with carriages, carts, women, children, the sick and the dying. . . .

During the night of Tuesday to Wednesday August 23, the rebels left the parish of the North Plain behind them and attacked Petite Anse. Their furor was exerted against the Choiseul plantation. Enraged at not finding the manager, they took his domestic slave, who they accused of helping him escape, and threw him into the burning plantation house alive, despite the prayers, sobs, and despair of his mother. From here they went to the plantation of the Fathers of Charity; some lit the bagasse houses† on fire while others pitilessly took the under-manager and killed him. The Bongars and Clericy plantations experienced the same horrors. The bodies of their manager and under-manager were displayed at the gate. Pushed away from the Quartier Morin by the resistance of the slave crews, the brigands retraced their steps and arrived as a group at La Gossette. M. Odelucq was there with all the whites. There were even fifteen or twenty national guardsmen who had arrived the previous day, but they were so poorly armed, so little accustomed to war that as the rebels approached, hearing the sound of their ferocious cries, they threw down their weapons and fled through the cane fields to the camp at the Cap Français Heights. M. Odelucq remained, almost alone, believing he could face down the brigands. He appeared before them; the most savage of all, named Mathurin, came up to him and plunged his knife into his chest. M. Daveiroult, the representative of Gros Morne to the new Colonial Assembly, was cut down at his side, as well as two men from the detachment that had arrived the previous day.

The *nègres*, emboldened by their success and rendered even more violent by their overindulgence in wine and strong spirits, advanced

*A small town one league from the city.

†These are vast barns used to store the sugarcanes after they have passed through the mill. They are kept to burn for heating [in the refinery].

toward the Haut du Cap. The cannon here stopped them. But the Denort, Decourt, and Vergennes plantations went up in flames, and before ten o'clock the three parishes of Acul, the North Plain, and Petite Anse were only a heap of cinders. . . .

The size and the number of establishments consumed by the flames created a spectacle that witnesses will never forget. The thick cloud of black smoke, which during daylight hung above the Cap Français horizon, after sunset took on the appearance of an aurora borealis situated above about twenty plantations changed into so many volcanoes. At midnight, fire appeared at the wharf of Limonade, announcing the appearance of the rebels in this district. And the next day, the two richest and most important parishes of the northern province were nothing more than a pile of ashes and ruin.

This was just the fourth day of the revolt, and already the whites of six parishes were either refugees, prisoners, or corpses. Flames had consumed one hundred sugar works; and twenty thousand slaves, once peaceful and submissive, were now so many cannibals, threatening Cap Français with the same fate.

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PIERRE MOSSUT

*Letter to the Marquis de Gallifet**September 19, 1791*

In this letter, plantation manager Pierre Mossut described the slave uprising to his absentee employer, the Marquis de Gallifet. Mossut blamed the circulation of abolitionist writings and the indiscreet conversations of planters for the revolt, but he also wrote that there was something driving the insurgents that he could not understand.

The varied writings produced in your capital [Paris] in favor of the Negroes, the unbelievable discussions that led to the May 15 decree,