

justice, to help her escape a bondage that he has relaxed as much as he can. She is the mother of three children who have her color, which proves her wisdom and even her virtue. What female citizen could claim, like her, to have experienced only the caresses of those who resemble him? . . . Zaïre is therefore a model of virtue, and if she reaches her goal, she will be able to claim to be the foremost of all female citizens. Zaïre's beautiful soul would not be satisfied if she had to enjoy the new existence she desires alone; she also requests it for her children.

It is therefore up to you, citizens, to bring happiness to four people, in granting to Zaïre and to Jean-Laurent, Jean-Paul, and Jean-Marie, her sons, a state worthy of society.

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LÉGER FÉLICITÉ SONTHONAX

Decree of General Liberty

August 29, 1793

Two members of a team of commissioners sent to Saint-Domingue to enforce the Law of April 4, Léger Sonthonax and Étienne Polverel worked closely with the free men of color who were newly made citizens, promoting them in the armies that were fighting the slave rebels and their Spanish allies. In May 1793, angry white colonists in Cap François rallied around a new governor, Thomas François Galbaud, who was sympathetic to their complaints. When the commissioners placed Galbaud under house arrest, his supporters revolted. To regain control of the city, Sonthonax offered freedom to the rebel slave bands camped outside the city in exchange for a military alliance, and he prevailed over Galbaud's forces. He deported the governor, many of whose supporters fled to the United States. In the other regions of Saint-Domingue, counterrevolutionaries invited a British invasion from Jamaica, putting yet more pressure on Sonthonax and Polverel to extend their emancipation decrees to

H. Pauléus Sannon, *Histoire de Toussaint Louverture* (Port-au-Prince: Imprimerie Aug. A. Heraux, 1938), 1:146ff.

the rest of the colony, culminating in a decree of general liberty on August 29.

By declaring emancipation in the rapid way they did, Sonthonax and Polverel had taken an extremely radical step. Most antislavery writers and activists in Europe agreed that an enslaved population should be introduced to freedom only gradually. A rapid transition to liberty, they predicted, would make it difficult to "civilize" the former slaves. They were also concerned that the plantation economy would collapse if freedom arrived too suddenly. Although he did not provide for a transition period from slavery to freedom, Sonthonax did integrate such concerns into his decree.

Men are born and remain free and equal in rights; citizens, this is France's gospel. It is high time that it be proclaimed in all areas of the republic.

Sent by the nation to Saint-Domingue as civil commissioners, our mission was to enforce the law of April 4, to see it applied in all its force, and gradually, smoothly, without rupture, to prepare the general emancipation of the slaves.

Upon our arrival, we found a horrible division among the whites who, separated by interest and opinion, agreed only on a single point: to maintain the slavery of the *nègres* forever and therefore to prohibit any system of liberty or even improvement of their fate.

In order to foil malicious persons and to reassure everyone, since they all feared any sudden action, we declared that we believed slavery was necessary for agriculture.

What we said was true, citizens; at that time slavery was as essential to the continuation of work as it was to keeping the colonists faithful to France. A group of ferocious tyrants still ruled Saint-Domingue, men who publicly preached that one's skin color should be a sign of power or condemnation. These were men like those who condemned the unfortunate Ogé or the creators and members of those notorious military tribunals who filled the towns with gallows and torture racks in order to sacrifice Africans and men of color to their own foul pretensions. The colony was still full of these bloodthirsty men. If by some great foolhardiness, we had then broken the chains that bound slaves to their masters, undoubtedly their first reaction would have been to throw themselves upon their persecutors, and, in their justifiable rage, they might easily have confounded innocent with guilty

people. At that time, we did not have the legal authority to decide the status of the Africans; we would have been disloyal and in violation of the law had we done so.

Today the situation is quite different. The slave traders and cannibals are gone. Some of them have died, victims of their impotent rage, while others have sought safety by fleeing to foreign countries. Those whites who remain believe in France's laws and values.

The men of April 4³³ make up the majority of the [remaining] population; these are men to whom you owe your freedom, the first to show you what it is to have the courage to fight for natural and human rights. These men were so proud of their independence that they chose to lose their property rather than suffer the shame of putting on their old shackles. Never forget, citizens, that they gave you the weapons that conquered your liberty; never forget that you fought for the French Republic, that of all the whites in the universe, the only ones that are your friends are the Frenchmen of Europe.

The French Republic wants all men to be free and equal with no color distinctions. Kings can only be content when they are surrounded by slaves; they are the ones who sold you to the whites on the African coast; they are the tyrants in Europe who want this vile trade to continue. The republic adopts you among its children; these kings wanted only to load you down with chains or eliminate you.

The representatives of this very republic were the ones who rescued you by untying the hands of the civil commissioners and giving them authority to make provisional changes in the slave regime.

This regime is going to be changed; a new order of things will be born, and the old slavery will disappear. Yet do not think that the liberty that you will enjoy means laziness and inactivity. In France, everyone is free and everyone works; in Saint-Domingue under these same laws, you will follow the same model. After returning to your old work crews or your former owners, you will be paid for your work; you will no longer suffer the humiliating punishments previously inflicted upon you; you will no longer be property, as before. You will be your own master and live contented.

Since you have chosen to become citizens of the French nation, you must also be the zealous defender of its laws; you will undoubtedly defend the interests of the republic against kings, more out of gratitude for the benefits she has heaped upon you than to preserve your

³³The men of color given political rights by the April 4, 1792, decree.

own independence. Liberty has brought you from nothingness into existence; show that you are worthy of her. Renounce laziness forever as if it were a crime. Have the courage to want to be a people, and soon you will be equal to the nations of Europe. Your detractors and your tyrants maintain that an African who is set free will never work again. Prove them wrong. Work twice as hard to win the prize that awaits you. Let your activity prove to France that, by including you on her side, she has truly increased her capacities and resources.

And you, citizens misled by the vile royalists, you who took up the flags and uniforms of the cowardly Spanish to fight blindly against your own interests, against the freedom of your women and children, open your eyes at last to the enormous advantages that the republic offers you. The kings promise you liberty, but do you see them giving this to their subjects? Do the Spanish free their own slaves? No, surely not. To the contrary, they are likely to weigh you down with chains as soon as they no longer need your services. Aren't they the ones who turned Ogé over to his killers? What misfortune you suffer! If France returned to its kings, the [royalist] *émigrés* would turn on you. They flatter you today, but they would be the first to torture you.

Given this situation, the civil commissioner, reflecting on the petition signed by individuals assembled in a meeting, exercising the powers given him by Article 3 of the law passed by the National Convention last March 5:

Orders the following, to be carried out in the northern province [of Saint-Domingue].

First Article: The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen will be printed, published, and displayed everywhere it is needed.

2. All the *nègres* and mixed blood people currently in slavery are declared free to enjoy all the rights of French citizens; they are nevertheless subject to the regime described in the following articles. . . .

5. Servants of either sex can be hired by their masters and mistresses only for three months, and this for a salary that they will fix according to the wishes of each.

6. Former house slaves working for persons who are older than sixty, or sick, or for nursing infants less than ten years old, are not free to leave them. Their salary is set at 1 *portugaise* (8 *gourdes*)³⁴ per

³⁴The *portugaise* and the *gourde* were, respectively, Portuguese and Spanish coins that circulated widely in the Caribbean in the eighteenth century. Just before the revolution, one *gourde*, equal to 8½ colonial livres, would buy a medium-size table or rent a coastal trading boat for two days.

month for wet nurses and 6 *portuguaise* for the others, for men and women alike. . . .

9. The *nègres* currently working on the plantations of their former masters are required to remain there. They will work in agriculture.

10. The enlisted fighters who are serving in army units or in forts will be allowed to establish themselves on plantations for agricultural work by first obtaining a furlough from their leader or an order from us, to be delivered if they find a willing man to replace them.

11. The former field hands will be obliged to work for a year, during which time they can change plantations only by permission of a justice of the peace.

12. The profits of each plantation will be divided into three equal portions after taxes are deducted from the whole amount. One-third will remain with the owner of the land. He will have access to another third to cover the costs of planting. The remaining third will be divided between the field workers in a manner to be set . . .

In addition, the field workers will have their own provision grounds; they will be divided equally between each family, according to the quality of the land and the amount needed. . . .

27. Punishment by the whip is absolutely forbidden; for violations of discipline it will be replaced by the stocks for one, two, or three days, according to the severity of the case. The most severe punishments will be fines, up to complete loss of salary.

28. For civil crimes, the former slaves will be judged like other French citizens.

29. Field hands cannot be forced to work on Sunday. . . .

31. Women who are seven months pregnant will not work and will only return to the fields two months after their deliveries.

32. Field hands can change plantations for health reasons or for an incompatible personality at the request of the crew in which they work. These affairs will be subject to the decision of a justice of the peace and his counselors.

33. On the fifteenth day after the publication of this proclamation, all men who do not own property and are neither in the military, nor working in agriculture, nor employed in someone's home, within the time limits set above, or are found to be vagrants, will be arrested and put in prison.

34. Women who do not have an obvious source of income, who are not working in agriculture or employed in someone's home, within the time limits set above, or are found to be vagrants, will be arrested and put in prison.

35. The men and women imprisoned in these cases for the first

time will be held for a month. The second time they will be held for three months, and the third time they will be sentenced to a public work detail for one year.

36. Persons working in agriculture and household workers will not leave their employment for any reason without permission of the city or town government where they live. . . .

38. *The Code Noir* is provisionally repealed.

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Insurgent Responses to Emancipation

1793

After Sonthonax decreed general liberty in August 1793, some insurgents joined the French side. But many, including such leading generals as Jean-François and Georges Biassou, as well as Toussaint Louverture, decided to continue fighting with the Spanish. In this letter, Bramante Lazzary, one of the rebel leaders who had joined the French side, pleaded with Louverture to abandon the Spanish king and join the republic. It is not clear whether Lazzary was a slave or had, like Louverture, been freed before 1793, although the invocation of Ogé's killing suggests that he may have been a free man of color. Like many contemporary French writers, Lazzary equated royal tyranny with slavery. In Saint-Domingue, this equation was much more than a convenient form of symbolism: the French Republic, in Lazzary's opinion, represented liberty for all, while the royal government Louverture was fighting for would ultimately defend the brutal system of chattel slavery.

**Bramante Lazzary, Commander-in-Chief of the forces
of the Tannerie, made up of brave French citizens
of all colors without distinction**

To: Citizen Toussaint Louverture, supposed General of the Armies of His Most Catholic Majesty today, yesterday supposed General of the King . . . the chief disturber of the order and the tranquility of our brothers.