

writings that have long circulated in the colony and that the negroes knew about, the very indiscretion of the planters who show no restraint in their actions or their statements, all these causes united have finally led the class of the slaves to revolt. . . .

We were attacked by a horde of assassins and could only offer meager resistance. After the first volley, we took refuge in flight. M. Odelucq, weakened by his age, by a wound he had already received, and weighed down by the boots he was wearing at the time, had the misfortune to fall under the daggers of these brigands. I owe my safety to a domestic servant who presented me with a horse at the moment when our resistance was becoming impossible. But, Monsieur, I saved myself wounded, with only the shirt on my back, having lost in an instant the fruit of nine years of work on your plantations; the other people employed on your properties are all more or less in the same situation. . . .

There is a motor that powers them and that keeps powering them and that we cannot come to know. All experienced planters know that this class of men have neither the energy nor the combination of ideas necessary for the execution of this project, whose realization they nevertheless are marching toward with perseverance. . . . we have executed many slaves, among them ten from your plantation; all have observed their obstinate silence when questioned about who armed them and incited this odious conspiracy,<sup>9</sup> though they admit to being guilty and having participated in it. . . .

Despite my wounds, I climbed up the highest hill bordering Le Cap, and from there with a telescope I could see your plantations perfectly well. All the bagasse houses have been destroyed, along with all the cane that was to be crushed between now and the end of the year. The main houses, the buildings, the sugar refineries are intact . . . but it is to be feared, and in fact it is probable and almost certain, that when these fanatics are attacked in their retrenchments, they will set fire to all the remaining buildings before retreating to the hills. If we are able to defeat them, we will have to resolve ourselves to the sacrifice of a large portion of the work gangs and establish the most severe discipline to control those people, who more than ever will be difficult to command.

<sup>9</sup>This word is unclear in the letter; it could be either *transe* (trance) or *trame* (conspiracy), but the context of the document makes it probable that it is the latter.

PHILADELPHIA GENERAL ADVERTISER

*Reports from the Insurrection*

*October–November 1791*

*The following reports from the Philadelphia General Advertiser provide interesting fragments of information about the insurrection, notably regarding the presence of some whites among the insurgents, the various roles played by free people of color in both supporting and resisting the insurrection, and the military tactics of the rebels. Newspapers captured only a small portion of information about the insurrection that spread to North America by word of mouth, including among communities of slaves to whom the news of insurrection was of particular interest. We have maintained the sometimes awkward punctuation of the original reports here. The first report is in the form of a journal, with the numbers at the beginning of each entry corresponding to the date of the month.*

PHILADELPHIA GENERAL ADVERTISER, No. 322, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 11

The following concise and connected account of the late disturbances at St. Domingo, from their origin down to the latest intelligence received from that island, is taken from a Journal kept there, handed to us by an obliging Correspondent, and translated for the GENERAL ADVERTISER. . . .

Sept. 1. There has been an engagement in the upper part of the Cape. About 60 negroes were killed. A mulatto and two negroes, after the engagement, advanced, and asked to parley with the General,—He came forward, and they were asked what they wanted. They answered that they required perfect liberty for all the negroes;—the two negroes were killed, and the mulatto was suffered to escape.

A free negro, named Cappe, made his appearance on the plantation *Lambert* near the city, to encourage the negroes to revolt. He has been seized, and it is expected much will be learned from him.

2. Two whites have been stopped, together with a Spanish mulatto. Their names were given up by Cappe; who has given an account of the

intended plot. He says that in the night of the 25<sup>th</sup> ult.<sup>10</sup> all the negroes in the plain were to attack the city in different parts; to be seconded by the negroes of the city, who were to set fire to it in several parts at once. Guards and vigilance has been doubled, and nothing has yet happened. . . . Cappe has declared that in every workshop in the city there were negroes concerned in the plot. For these two days past we have been engaged in making barricades for every possible entrance to the city. This will effectually prevent any attacks from the exterior proving successful.

3. At five in the evening the mulattoes of the army asked for permission to go against the negroes; they obtained leave, set off 100 strong, accompanied by 20 dragoons of the whites. They killed 100 negroes, took a small cannon, one white, and two negro chiefs.

4. Cappe has been broke on the wheel. He was possessed of an income of 30,000 livres,—all in town houses.

5. The negro army at *L'Acul* have taken a fort. In it there are six 24 pounders. They can have but little annuntion. Yesterday, being Sunday, the negroes celebrated two marriages in the church at *L'Acul*. On the occasion they assumed titles, and the titled blacks were treated with the greatest respect, and the ceremony was performed with great pomp. A Capuchin,<sup>11</sup> retained among them, has been obliged to officiate. Their colours were consecrated, and a King was elected. They have chosen one for each quarter. Cappe was King of *Limbé* and *Port-Margot*.

8. A detachment of 120 men of the army returned from *Mornet*, 5 leagues from the Cape. They brought with them several carts full of women and goods. On the way they had several engagements with negroes, in which they were generally successful. On the 7<sup>th</sup> they killed several negroes and a white chief, and also took a white man, who was said to be a deserter from the regiment of Port-au-Prince, and the son of a former President of Parliament<sup>12</sup> in France.

10. In the night the negroes set fire to an outhouse in the plantations *Breda*. They attacked the camp in three different places; they were with difficulty driven back—three whites were wounded. Ten of their number were killed, and fifteen taken prisoners. Two whites taken yesterday among the negroes at *Pont Margot* have been brought to town.

<sup>10</sup>August 25.

<sup>11</sup>A priest of the Capuchin order.

<sup>12</sup>This refers to the French "*Parlements*," or courts, of the Old Regime.

11. A negro taken yesterday in the heights of the Cape, has declared that the rebels in that quarter, have eight pieces of artillery.

The armed boat sent to dislodge the negroes who had taken possession of a battery on a seashore, returned today. She fired 250 times without effect, because her pieces were not of heavy metal enough. The negroes made use of the bullets fired at them—they fired them back from their 24 pounders, with effect, struck the armed boat, which was obliged to retire, in a very leaky condition. No lives were lost.

12. . . . M. de Rouvray writes that in an engagement he has killed a number of negroes, and among the rest one of their first leaders. He had him buried; but the negroes took him up and buried him again with great pomp. They were mourning. He thinks he will soon be able to overcome them entirely, in the place where he commands.

13. The General on the heights of the Cape has just written that his spies had informed him, that the chief of the insurgents in his quarter was determined to abandon them; but that he was detained among them, by main force. This gives hope that we shall be able to master them.

At this time, there have been about 150 sugar-houses entirely consumed, and 3000 negroes killed. These losses amount to about 6000.000 livres; but it will yet be necessary to destroy 1000 or 1200 negroes more.

The negro belonging to M. Lambert, who caused Cappe to be seized, has obtained his freedom from the Assembly, with a medal and an annuity of 500 livres. He refuses to quit his former master, convinced that he could not better his condition by a change.

PHILADELPHIA GENERAL ADVERTISER, No. 322, TUESDAY, OCTOBER 11

Boston, Nov. 3

St. Domingo Disturbances

Captain Bickford is arrived at Salem, from Cape-Francois. A Mr. Harrington, of this town, who resided there several years past, came as a passenger. He was one of their militia, and in several engagements. He came away at the risk of his life, as no resident is permitted to depart. He informs, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of September, 500 troops from Haut du Cap, and another 400 from Petite Ance, he saw attack a fortified camp of negroes on Galifaut's [*sic*; Gallifet's] estate, defended by 9 cannons. It began at 5 in the morning, and they gained possession at

9: the free mulattoes and negroes, chiefly mounted, first entered: a horrid carnage ensued, as they had orders to give no quarter to men, women or children; the slaughter finished at two, and the troops began then to plunder; they burnt everything they could not carry, and men could not be spared to retain the place: retook five white women, whose lives the negroes spared for wives. There were previous to the attack, about 6000 negroes in the place; but they secretly retreated, and carried off their effects to Red Bank,<sup>13</sup> and only 2000 remained when attacked. The main body of the negroes to that quarter, then established themselves at the Red Bank, a mountain steep and difficult of access, 30 miles from the Cape. Here they are 8 or 10,000 in number; including many whites, and a large proportion of mulattoes, of good property and information, who in revenge for the equality denied them, have inspired the negroes with ideas of liberty.

Besides Red Bank, the insurgents have possession of Limbe, consisting of 10,000, a strong fort, with heavy artillery, and amply provided with ammunition: they had also possession of D'Acul, and of Port-Francois. There is also a body at the mouth of Salt-river and the Bridge.

They are supposed to consist of about 80,000. They are masters of the country for 30 leagues, from Dimbe to Carricole, and also the country back of Port au Prince. . . .

In the beginning of the insurrection, the negroes made their attacks with much irregularity and confusion, and their weapons were mostly their implements of labor, but as they pay much attention to discipline, being daily exercised by their leaders (who now show themselves as white men and mulattoes) they now come on in regular bodies, and a considerable part of them are well armed with the muskets, swords, &c. which they have taken and purchased. They fight under a bloody flag, having on it a motto, denouncing death to all whites! They march by the music peculiar to the negroes, and begin an engagement with a considerable degree of order and firmness, crying out Victory! They are however soon broken, through want of discipline, and are never able to rally.—They throw obstructions of one kind and another in the roads, to impede the progress of the whites, and it was said had poisoned the water.

It is supposed the negroes are supplied with arms from the Spaniards, and the cannon and fusils<sup>14</sup> taken from them are Spanish,

<sup>13</sup>English translation of *Morne Rouge*.

<sup>14</sup>Muskets.

and in this respect, as well as in discipline, they were growing more formidable.

Mr. Harrington relates, that a flag [of peace] was sent in to the assembly from a body [of insurgents] near Haut-du-Cap, offering to return to their services upon the plantations, if they were assured of pardon, and be allowed three days in the week besides Sunday, for themselves; the assembly sent back seven men with answer of refusal, which on the leaders [of the insurgents] reading, they rushed upon the gentlemen with the flag<sup>15</sup> and killed six of them, the seventh (formerly of Philadelphia) made his escape with a wound.

According to all accounts, there is less prospect of peace and security than at the first moment of the insurrection. They have received no succor, except about 1500 stand of arms sent from Jamaica. . . . The country is filled with dead bodies, which lie unburied. The negroes have left the whites, with stakes, &c. drove through them into the ground; and the white troops, who now take no prisoners, but kill everything black or yellow, leave the negroes dead upon the field.

<sup>15</sup>Those sent with the assembly's message.

## 16

## JEAN-FRANÇOIS AND BIASSOU

*Letters to the Commissioners*

December 1791

*In late 1791, a new group of commissioners arrived in the colony, carrying a decree of general amnesty issued by the king meant to forgive political acts committed during the revolutionary turmoil of the previous years. Taking advantage of the decree, the rebel leaders Jean-François and Georges Biassou approached the commissioners with a set of proposals for ending the insurrection. If the French granted liberty to several hundred of the insurgent leaders, they promised, those who were liberated would oversee the return of their followers to the plantations. The negotiations ultimately fell through, in part because of the intransigence of*