Revolution brings change, and that is particularly true of the events that took place in Saint-Domingue at the end of the 18th century. As a French colony since the mid-1600s, Saint-Domingue's plantations produced tobacco, indigo, cotton, sugar, and coffee. In 1791, exports from Saint-Domingue totaled $14 million, making it the most profitable colony in the French empire.

The French Revolution in 1789 had inspired Saint-Domingue's free people of color and enslaved people to fight for their freedom, too. A former slave in the colony, François-Dominique Toussaint L'Ouverture, emerged as a leader of that independence effort in 1791. In 1794, the French Republic abolished slavery in its colonies.

After nearly 10 years of fighting against enemies that included the Spanish, the British, and local proslavery militia, Toussaint L'Ouverture became the governor of Saint-Domingue. He immediately set about writing a constitution. Although he did not declare Saint-Domingue independent from France, he also did not mention that it was a French colony. He sent the constitution to Napoleon
Bonaparte, the new ruler of France, in 1801.

When Napoleon read the document, he was furious. Saint-Domingue’s location in the Caribbean was important to his grand plan to reestablish French colonies in North America. He prepared to remove Toussaint L’Ouverture from power and to return Saint-Domingue to its former role as a plantation colony in the French empire.

Napoleon sent his brother-in-law, General Charles Leclerc, to Saint-Domingue. Leclerc’s orders were to seize the coastal towns, defeat any armed resistance, and restore slavery. Napoleon told Leclerc to use tricks and lies to achieve his goals.

Toussaint L’Ouverture was watching as Leclerc’s initial force of 67 ships and 21,175 troops approached Saint-Domingue in 1802. He saw that he was outnumbered and no match for the French, and he surrendered on May 7, 1802. But Leclerc did not believe that the great leader would quietly give up.

So Leclerc laid a trap. One of his generals invited Toussaint L’Ouverture to his headquarters for a conference. Toussaint L’Ouverture, who had always been one step ahead of his enemies, walked straight into the trap. He was arrested immediately and rowed out to a waiting ship that took him to France.

Eight months after arriving in France, Toussaint L’Ouverture died in prison of unknown causes in 1803. But less than a year later, the French were defeated, and Saint-Domingue declared itself an independent republic in 1804.

Renamed Haiti, it is the only nation to be established through a successful revolt of its enslaved population.

As for Napoleon, he saw the folly of his efforts years later. After the majority of the French troops in Saint-Domingue died from fighting or becoming ill with yellow fever, he lacked the manpower to reclaim Louisiana. Historians consider Napoleon to be a brilliant military leader, but in Saint-Domingue, Napoleon lost an army, France’s richest colony, and any hope of reestablishing French colonies in North America.