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### Saint Dominguan Refugees in Charleston, South Carolina, 1791-1822: Assimilation and Accommodation in a Slave Society

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#### Date of Award

12-15-2014

#### Document Type

Open Access Dissertation

#### Department

History

#### First Advisor

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#### Abstract

During the 1790s and the first decade of the nineteenth century, nearly 20,000 refugees fled the French colony of Saint Domingue for asylum in the United States. They found new homes in such American port cities as New York, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Charleston, and New Orleans. This dissertation explores the experiences of the white planters, gens de couleur, and slaves who sought asylum in Charleston, South Carolina, and the effect their presence had on the city's long time residents. It might seem from first glance that finding acceptance in Charleston would be easy for them, but this was not the case. From the early days of the Haitian Revolution, South Carolinians struggled with how to relate to their newest residents. While an obvious kinship existed between the two slave societies, the violence of Saint Domingue raised difficult questions about how a society could maintain slaves in a place where the ideals of republican revolution were spreading to larger sectors of the population. Charlestonians had many reasons to be anxious about these new arrivals as Saint Domingue's experience represented the materialization of the state's worst worries. Concern that Saint Domingue's slaves would spread insurrection to the American South was ever present. South Carolinians attempted to reassure themselves that their own slaves would never rebel as they looked for explanations of why French slaves had turned violent.

In addition to these difficulties, white Saint Domingans also faced attacks by France's republican leaders, particularly Citizen Édmond Genet, France's ambassador to the United States from 1793 until 1794. He accused them of being royalists who actively worked to destroy France's colony instead of embracing the republican changes that were occurring in France. These charges and concerns about slave violence forced the refugees to seek ways to prove they held republican ideology. Over time, as they made their case for acceptance in economic, political, and religious realms, South Carolinians began to embrace them. In many ways, South Carolinians had few other options. The presence of these refugees on their streets highlighted the paradox under which southerners had lived since the signing of the Declaration of Independence, that of simultaneously holding men, women, and children in bondage while openly declaring allegiance to republican ideals of freedom and equality. The state's leaders and residents needed to enfold Saint Domingue's refugees into their definitions of republicanism in order to protect the institution of slavery in America. Unwilling and unable to turn from slavery, South Carolina's slave owners redoubled their efforts at patrolling and controlling their slave population for the next fifty years.

#### Recommended Citation

Gillikin, M. W. (2014). *Saint Dominguan Refugees in Charleston, South Carolina, 1791-1822: Assimilation and Accommodation in a Slave Society*. (Doctoral dissertation). Retrieved from <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/3040>

In nearly all societies possessing slaves, some slaves were found in what might be termed urban occupations ranging from petty shopkeepers to craftsmen. Thus, slave marriages were recognized in a number of slave-owning societies, including Carthage, Hellenistic Greece, late Byzantium, most of the Roman Catholic medieval world, Qing China, Hindu India, Thailand, the Tlingit and Kwakiutl, and Oregon coast tribes. Perhaps the most famous Caribbean rebellion, in Saint-Domingue, began in 1791 and was subsequently led to victory by the freedman Toussaint-Louverture; it produced the emancipation of its slaves while the French were preoccupied with their own revolution and ultimately led to the independent state of Haiti. The Catholic community in Charleston, South Carolina, found itself torn by competing identities and conflicting ideas about how to be Catholic in the new American democracy. During the late eighteenth century hundreds of refugees arrived more. During the late eighteenth century hundreds of refugees arrived in Charleston from France and Saint Domingue as a result of the French and Haitian Revolutions, and numerous immigrants from Ireland found their way to Charleston as well. Saint Dominguan Refugees in Charleston, South Carolina, 1791-1822: Assimilation and Accommodation in a Slave Society. [Bookmark](#). [Download](#).