

Vestiges of Black Internationalism:

The Chasseurs Volontaires de Saint-Domingue in History and Memory

by Nicole Willson

Author Biography

Nicole Willson is a Black Atlantic scholar whose work engages with articulations of Black insurgency from the Age of Slavery to the present. She was the postdoctoral research assistant on the Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project “Our Bondage and Our Freedom: Frederick Douglass and Family, 1818–2018” at the University of Edinburgh and is now Leverhulme Trust Early Career Fellow at the Institute for Black Atlantic Research at the University of Central Lancashire, working on an independent research project titled “Fanm Rebèl: Recovering the Histories of Haiti’s Women Revolutionaries.” She serves as Co-Treasurer for the British Association of American Studies and sits on the editorial board for the *Journal of American Studies*.

Abstract

The siege led by the Continental Army to reclaim Savannah from British forces in the fall of 1779 is remembered as one of the most disastrous battles of the American Revolutionary War. However, greater carnage was circumvented by a legion of (largely) free Black *Chasseurs Volontaires* recruited from the colony of Saint-Domingue (modern-day Haiti). Their role proved strategically vital, and a monument erected in Savannah’s Franklin Square today pays homage to their contributions to the American project of independence. Indeed, the beguiling mythos of independence suffuses their historic legacy. Yet although their story is remembered in African

American histories from the nineteenth century to the present, they are systematically occluded, marginalized, and overlooked by the colonialist archive. This article interrogates the violence of archival erasure and demands interdisciplinary, multimodal, and collaborative modes of recreating and rehabilitating lost African Atlantic histories.

Keywords: Siege of Savannah; Chasseurs Volontaires; African American; hommes de couleur; American War of Independence; Haitian Revolution; history; memory; memorialization; archive

The siege led by the Continental Army to reclaim Savannah from British forces in the fall of 1779 is remembered as one of the most disastrous battles of the American Revolutionary War. Despite support from a French squadron assembled by senior naval officer Charles d'Estaing, the troops that led the assault were ill equipped to penetrate the British redoubt assembled in anticipation. The battle reached its conclusion on October 9 when, hemmed in by strong British defenses, the rebel combatants were mowed down by a volley of gunfire. The Continental forces were largely annihilated, and the French troops were forced to retreat.

However, while the abortive siege led to an unlikely British victory, the potential for further carnage was, according to early historical accounts, largely circumvented by a legion of *Chasseurs Volontaires*, an expeditionary corps composed exclusively of *hommes de couleur libres*, or free men of colour, recruited from the colony of Saint-Domingue. Totalling somewhere between 545 and 900 in number, the Chasseurs (led by the Vicomte de Fontanges and the Marquis de Rouvray) defended the French encampment against British counterassault and facilitated the safe retreat of French and Continental troops.¹ Their role proved strategically vital, and a monument erected in Savannah's Franklin Square today (partially completed in 2007 and unveiled with two additional figures in 2009) pays homage to their contributions to the United States project of independence.

The beguiling mythos of independence suffuses their historic legacy. According to the historical narrative, these *hommes de couleur* would return to Saint-Domingue following their tour in the Americas emboldened by the courageous pursuit of liberty that had captivated the Atlantic world during this revolutionary moment. As John Garrigus and Stewart King have acknowledged, the rhetoric invoked by d'Estaing during his Saint-Domingan recruitment campaign sought to galvanize these

sentiments, appealing to the legionnaires as “Citizens” and “Frenchmen” at a time when civil liberties for people of color were being increasingly eroded in French colonial law.² Just over a decade after the Savannah campaign, and after their return to Saint-Domingue, the Chasseurs led their own revolutionary anticolonial struggle, which resulted in the end of French rule in the colony and accelerated the abolition of slavery across the Americas. In the fierce and uncompromising Declaration of Independence penned in 1804 by Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the commander of the Black rebel forces that were consolidated into the *Armée indigène*, Saint-Domingue was renamed Haiti (after the Taino name for the island territory of Hispaniola, meaning “mountainous lands”). This act of unmaking and remaking represented a symbolic repudiation of the colonial order.³ The new nation became the first independent Black republic, with a resolutely antislavery constitution.

These accounts of Black revolutionary heroism have fortified the motif of the “Black Jacobin” popularized by the Caribbean scholar and dedicated pan-Africanist C.L.R. James.⁴ The legendary saga of the Chasseurs that is enshrined in this historiography thus celebrates the genesis of an early Black nationalism whose roots extended across the Americas. The internationalist legacy of the Chasseurs is seen, in this sense, as part not only of the Haitian story but also the larger revolutionary story of the Black Atlantic.

This heroic legacy was in part solidified by the nineteenth-century African American army chaplain and historian Theophilus Gould Steward. In an article titled “How the Black St. Domingo Legion Saved the Patriot Army in the Siege of Savannah, 1779,” Steward drew parallels between the Chasseurs and “the wide development of republican liberty on the Western continent.”⁵ He concluded his panegyric with the assertion that

the black men of the Antilles who fought in the Siege of Savannah, enjoy unquestionably the proud historical distinction of being the physical conductors that bore away from our altars the sacred fire of liberty to rekindle it in their own land; and also of becoming the humble but important link that served to unite the Two Americas in the bond of enlightened independence.⁶

In identifying the links between Haitian and American struggles for liberty, Steward made a significant intervention in early histories of modernity and the Atlantic world, paving the way for transnational, intersectional, and postcolonial understandings of the Americas that would later be theorized more fully by scholars such as Édouard Glissant, Edward Kamau Brathwaite, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, and indeed C.L.R. James. In this way, he also reinforced the notion that an “enlightened independence” was intertwined with the goals of Black internationalism: an idea which was repeatedly expounded by African American interlocutors such as David Walker and Frederick Douglass.⁷ In so doing, as George Clark notes, he “rendered genuine service to American historical writing” by giving voice to Black historical agents that the dominant white colonialist historical record so often denies, distorts, and silences.⁸ As C.L.R. James’s scholarship testifies, such inclusive and globalist histories shaped by Black interlocutors have invariably informed a transgenerational discourse of Black internationalism that strives to preserve the legacies of Black diasporic encounters in the Age of Revolutions.⁹ Steward’s attempt to rehabilitate the occluded voices of the Chasseurs within a larger Black internationalist revolutionary narrative therefore represents a powerful counterassault against the violence of archival erasure.

It is important to note, however, that many of the existing historical accounts of the Chasseurs, including Steward’s, are pervaded with inconsistencies, inaccuracies, and

omissions. Accordingly, their heroic story, much like that of the maroon and enslaved insurgents who sounded the clarion call for revolution at the Vodou ceremony that supposedly took place at Bois Caïman two weeks prior to the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution, is suffused with mythology. Speaking at a conference held in 1991 to commemorate the bicentenary of the Haitian Revolution, Léon-François Hoffmann interrogated the legitimacy of mythic narratives of the Black insurgency, demonstrating how the story of Bois Caïman, in particular, has been manipulated to serve a white colonialist agenda.¹⁰ While Colin Dayan notes that it remains a source of transgenerational pride in the Haitian popular imaginary, it has also been used to reinforce a white Western narrative of Haitian primitivism and degeneracy.¹¹ In the same vein, while the legend of the Chasseurs bolsters a narrative of Black international pride and reinforces the historical visibility of Black military agents across the Atlantic world, it is also constrained by the conservative discourse of revolutionary republicanism that would seek to moderate the limits of Haitian radicalism. Indeed, the romantic vision of a young “Henri” Christophe as a noble drummer boy among the ranks of the volunteer Chasseurs, as depicted in the Franklin Square memorial (Figure 1), subverts the radical proposition of King Henry, the revolutionary general and later monarch who oversaw the construction of the colossal Sans-Souci Palace and Citadelle Laferrière (Figure 2) in the sovereign Kingdom of Haiti. It also betrays the memory of the image that Christophe, as a strident Anglophile (who preferred the English to the French spelling of his forename), chose to create for himself, which is compellingly illustrated in the 1816 portrait that he commissioned by English painter Richard Evans that now hangs in the Musée du Panthéon Nationale Haïtien. In this portrait, painted in the Grand Manner style complete with baroque drapery, King Henry stands in the center foreground, his gaze

averted. Clasp ing a bicorn hat and cane in his right hand, his left hand is poised assertively on his waist. He wears a double-breasted military frock coat to which is pinned the Cross of the Order of St Henry. To his right, a crown rests on a cushion atop a plinth covered in luxurious, silk brocade fabric. Coupled with the background landscape, which gestures to the natural island ecology with hints of sea and tropical, tree-covered mountains, this symbol serves to reinforce a vision of proud, sovereign kingship and also positions him as a dominant imperial force within the nexus of Atlantic world power. That this portrait, as McIntosh and Pierrot have highlighted, was at the center of a diplomatic exchange that sought to raise the profile of the Haitian Kingdom in the British imagination (by way of William Wilberforce, who was gifted a copy of the Evans portrait) further lends credence to this idea.¹²

<Insert Figure 1>

Figure 1

Close-up of Henry Christophe statue from the Franklin Square memorial, Photo: courtesy of Julia Gaffield.

<Insert Figure 2>

Figure 2

Citadelle Laferrière. Photo: U.S. Army, via Wikimedia Commons.

As Garrigus and King have demonstrated, the heroic mythos surrounding the Chasseurs distorts the historical reality. Many of the legionnaires, after all, were not formerly enslaved men fighting against colonial injustice; rather, they were property-owning men of color who were corralled into military service by the metropolitan government and later conscripted into the regular infantry in an unscrupulous and exploitative attempt to merge the *maréchaussée* (the colonial slave-hunting constabulary) with the free-colored militia.¹³ That the volunteer Chasseurs were “not

to be employed [in Savannah] for more than trench work,” according to d’Estaing’s orders, is a reflection on the successive degradations to which they were subjected throughout the Savannah campaign and beyond.¹⁴ As King notes, moreover, “Colored martial patriotism was severely battered by the experience of the Savannah expedition.”¹⁵ These observations reinforce the need to look beyond the revolutionary encounter and beyond the heroic legacy of a singular historical event to consider the wider social, political, and economic context in which the Chasseurs came into being. Such scholarship engages in difficult but necessary reckonings which challenge accepted historical accounts that may have given rise (even inadvertently) to colonialist perspectives. It also helps to peel back the layers of mythology that pervade written accounts of the Chasseurs that might allow anticolonial scholars to get closer to authentic accounts of their lived experiences.

Ultimately, though, the archive remains a dubious source of reliable information pertaining to the Chasseurs. The few traceable references offer no qualitative insights into their experiences or their (possible) ideological motivations.¹⁶ As Leara Rhodes’s investigation of the journalistic record in revolutionary North America attests, contemporaneous news reports “suppressed all but the barest public mention of the Haitians who fought at Savannah.”¹⁷ Furthermore, while records concerning the numbers of Chasseurs who participated in the siege vary radically, the document that Steward claimed was “preserved in the Pennsylvania Historical Society,” purportedly linking key players in the Haitian revolutionary conflict such as André Rigaud, Louis-Jacques Beauvais, Jean-Louis Villatte, and Christophe to service among the ranks of the Chasseurs Volontaires, “cannot now,” according to Clark, “be located in the Society’s collection, nor does the library have any record of it ever having been acquired¹⁸ Although the more recent studies of Garrigus and King have brought to

light important primary sources from the Archives Nationales d'Outre-Mer, these sources are dominated by white colonialist bias. Testimonial accounts attributed to the volunteer Chasseurs remain virtually nonexistent.¹⁹ Consequently, attempts to rehabilitate their legacy must seek dynamic approaches that look beyond the archive and center African diasporic voices.

By rendering visible the occluded historical agents at the heart of this discussion and sustaining active momentum around it, scholars can begin to assemble constructive histories. In an address given to the U.S. Congress in 1943, at the height of World War II, Haitian president Élie Lescot sought to reinforce Haitian-American solidarity by invoking the memory of the Chasseurs, embracing his compatriots' ancestral descent from "those who took part in the expedition to Georgia, in the Siege of Savannah."²⁰ By using his platform to steer the dominant narrative within a predominantly white congressional space, he reasserted the link between established republican infrastructures in Haiti and the United States and reinscribed the achievements of the Chasseurs in the white popular imaginary. Successive Haitian and African American artists, activists, and community organizations have in similar ways sought to preserve the transgenerational revolutionary legacy of the Chasseurs.

While Savannah's Franklin Square memorial may tell an incomplete (and, in the case of Christophe's figuration as a drummer boy within the sculpture, misleading) story, it is an important focal node rendering visible the achievements of Black historical figures that the written history has forgotten and systematically disavowed. Its strategic placement opposite the first African Baptist church in the United States symbolically reinforces its integral importance to the cultural life of Savannah's African diasporic community. In a state still blighted by the traumatic prevalence of memorials dedicated to the Confederate cause, this symbolic resonance

is further compounded. Moreover, the very existence of the monument represents the culmination of prolonged campaign work by a number of Black diasporic interest groups and community organizations, not least the Haitian American Historical Society, whose contributions to the project are recognized on the plinth at the base of the monument (Figures 3 and 4). Each year around the anniversary of the Siege of Savannah, the Haitian American Historical Society holds the annual Haitian Caribbean Heritage Festival, which incorporates a series of events focusing local attention on the Franklin Square memorial and generating conversations around its genesis. Over the decade since the monument's unveiling, the festival has attracted a large number of followers from across a wide geographical trajectory. On the promotional webpage for the 2017 festival, the "daylong celebration of Haitian culture" is promoted as an event that "attracts thousands of people united in the celebration of Haitian culture and contribution to American history" and thus "create[s] a ripple effect felt throughout the year and throughout the Haitian and Caribbean communities."²¹ Such testimonies demonstrate the importance of such events for generating community uplift and developing engaged local responses to lesser-known histories from across the Black Atlantic.

<Insert Figure 3>

Figure 3

Image of Savannah's Franklin Square memorial to the Chasseurs Volontaires, courtesy of Julia Gaffield.

Figure 4

Close-up of plinth text from the Franklin Square memorial, courtesy of Julia Gaffield.

In the absence of a reliable historiography or a democratic and decolonial archive that offers a diverse range of historical perspectives, it is important for scholars,

heritage organizations, and community networks to continue the conversation, and to work together to locate the missing fragments. Effective and indeed *affective* memorialization that brings the Chasseurs and their legacy into sharp focus can only be fully realized, however, by uniting the broader knowledge bases and cultural resources that Savannah has to offer. Home to the Dr. Walter O. Evans Collection of African American Art and a vast archival repository of Black Atlantic artifacts housed by Evans and his wife, Linda, that contains, among other rare items pertaining to the Haitian diaspora, an obscure and lesser-known letter from the Haitian revolutionary general Toussaint Louverture, the city provides many opportunities for scholars and artists to support and supplement the brilliant work of local activists and interest groups.²² As memory studies scholar Karen E. Till asserts, such practices “challenge dominant regimes of memory by creating spaces that revisit historical social relations and imagine new possibilities.”²³ This work of collaborative and affective memorialization will help to ensure that the anonymized and invisibilized Chasseurs Volontaires are credited for their contributions to the inter-American project of independence and the advancement of powerful Black internationalist philosophies that transcended the dominant white colonialist narrative of revolutionary modernity. It will further ensure that new, creative, collaborative, multimodal, and interdisciplinary narratives of occluded African diasporic histories can be preserved for posterity.

Notes

¹ While historical accounts typically vary on this point, John D. Garrigus, whose figures are based on naval records from the Archives Nationales d’Outre-Mer, notes that “941 free men of color arrived in Cap Français during March and April 1779 to join the Chasseurs Volontaires” but adds that “545 free colored Chasseurs set sail with d’Estaing in August.” See John D. Garrigus, *Before Haiti: Race and Citizenship in French Saint-Domingue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 208.

² See Stewart King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig: Free People of Color in Pre-Revolutionary Saint-Domingue* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2001), 75; Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 206.

³ See Colin (Joan) Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 3; Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The Story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004), 13.

⁴ For more information, see C.L.R. James, *The Black Jacobins: Toussaint L’Ouverture and the San Domingo Revolution* (1938; repr. London: Penguin Books, 2001).

⁵ T. G. Steward, “How the Black St. Domingo Legion Saved the Patriot Army in the Siege of Savannah, 1779,” *Occasional Papers* (Washington, DC: American Negro Academy, 1899), 5:13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 5:15.

⁷ In David Walker’s incendiary *Appeal*, for example, published in 1829, he called on African Americans to “read the history . . . of Hayti” and follow suit in their quest for independence. Douglass frequently drew on the revolutionary example of Haiti in his speeches and writings. Perhaps most notably, in his “slumbering volcano” speech of

1849, he predicted that slavery would end violently in the United States through a large insurrection against slaveholders, in line with the example of Haiti. See David Walker, *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in Particular, and Very Expressly, to Those of the United States of America, Written in Boston, State of Massachusetts, September 28, 1829* (Boston: n.p., 1829), 21; Frederick Douglass, "Slavery, The Slumbering Volcano: An Address Delivered in New York, New York, on 23 April 1849," in *The Frederick Douglass Papers, Series One: Speeches, Debates, and Interviews*, ed. John Blasingame (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1982), 2:148–158.

⁸ George P. Clark, "The Role of the Haitian Volunteers at Savannah in 1779: An Attempt at an Objective View," *Phylon* 41, no. 4 (1980): 358.

⁹ While James stressed his allegiance to the pan-Africanist movement and his resistance to fascism and imperialism in his introduction to the first published edition of *The Black Jacobins* in 1938, the introduction to the second edition, published in 1963 (New York: Random House), was revised to speak back to the Civil Rights struggle. In this way, James asserted the continuing relevance of *The Black Jacobins* to Black diasporic struggles for liberty, justice, and autonomy.

¹⁰ Léon-François Hoffmann, "Un mythe national: La cérémonie du Bois-Caïman," in *La République haïtienne: État des lieux et perspectives*, ed. Gérard Barthélemy and Christian Girault (Paris: Karthala, 1993), 434.

¹¹ Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, 29.

¹² Tabitha McIntosh & Grégory Pierrot, "Capturing the likeness of Henry I of Haiti (1805–1822)," *Atlantic Studies* 14, no. 2 (2017): 127-151, 139-141. This article contains a full-color reproduction of the Evans portrait.

¹³ Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 211.

¹⁴ Quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁵ King, *Blue Coat or Powdered Wig*, 76. Garrigus also notes: “The 1779 Savannah expedition and its aftermath confirmed . . . that it was going to be very difficult for propertied men of color to use the government’s notion of ‘civic virtue’ to attain more respect.” See Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 224.

¹⁶ *The Siege of Savannah in 1779, as Described in Two Contemporaneous Journals of French Officers in the Fleet of Count d’Estaing* (New York: Joel Munsell, 1874), 20, 59.

¹⁷ Leara Rhodes, “Haitian Contributions to American History: A Journalistic Record,” *Journal of Haitian Studies* 7, no. 1 (2001): 47.

¹⁸ Steward, “How the Black St. Domingo Legion Saved the Patriot Army,” 12; Clark, “The Role of the Haitian Volunteers at Savannah in 1779,” 357.

¹⁹ Garrigus draws attention to a “sole notarial record left by a free colored Chasseur in the South.” See Garrigus, *Before Haiti*, 215.

²⁰ GovInfo, “Congressional Record—Senate, Friday October 15, 1943,” 8875, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/GPO-CRECB-1943-pt6/pdf/GPO-CRECB-1943-pt6-25.pdf>, accessed December 12, 2017.

²¹ Eventbrite, “2017 Haitian Caribbean Monument Festival,” https://www.eventbrite.com/e/2017-haitian-caribbean-monument-festival-tickets-37277253268?fbclid=IwAR1hf-UJecEsl0isFZy6U3aPGzJFeD8FulSJpi5Tf_2q43aHq-YjR2WdcEU#, accessed July 5, 2019.

²² Personal communication with Walter O. Evans, August 18, 2018.

²³ Karen E. Till, “Artistic and Activist Memory-Work: Approaching Place-Based Practice,” *Memory Studies* 1, no. 1 (2008): 104.