Designing Incendiaries: The Haitian Revolution and White Americans' Fears of Arson in Early American Cities.

Adele Louisa McInerney
Sydney, Australia

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The 1790s were a decade on fire.

A letter from the President of the French General Assembly sent to the Governor of Jamaica, dated August 14, 1791, and re-printed in an American newspaper in October contained an incendiary description: “Our possessions are become a prey to the flames. Our Negroes up in arms have embrued their hands in the blood of our brethren.” In a simultaneous letter to the General Assembly of Jamaica, P. de Cadusch lamented the widespread destruction: “In a short time this delightful country will be but a heap of ashes. Already the Planters have bedewed with their blood the land which they had fertilized with the sweat of their brow: at this moment, the flames are consuming those productions, which were the glory of the French empire. Principles, destructive of our property, have kindled a flame amongst us, and armed the hands of our own slaves.”[1]

It began on the French colony of Saint Domingue. On a Sunday evening, late August 1791, hundreds of enslaved people met in a clearing in the Bois Caïman forest. They agreed to wage war, and sealed the agreement by imbibing blood from a sacrificed black pig. Within days, thousands of slaves rose up in revolt. As Madame de Rouvray, wife of colonial military commander the Marquis de Rouvray lamented in a letter to her daughter: “We kill many of them, and they seem to reproduce themselves out of their ashes.”[2]

1 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 12, 1791.
2 Quoted in Laurent Dubois, *Avengers of the New World: The story of the Haitian Revolution* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004): 117.

Figure 1: Cap Français burning 1793.

Pierre-Gabriel Berthault, Jean Duplessi-Bertaux, and Jacques Swebach. *Incendie du Cap Français, le 20, 21, 22 et 23 juin 1793 ou 2, 3, 4 et 5 messidor an l'er de la République*. [1802] Print. Retrieved from BnF Gallica, http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b69502977.

The revolutionaries' strategy was simple: kill the whites and burn everything to the ground. Revolting slaves set fire to the island's fertile sugar plantations, leaving in their wake fields of grey. Civilization collapsed into an orgy of racialized violence, as each side sought to annihilate the other. One colonist described the destruction in haunting terms: "The country is filled with dead bodies, which lie unburied. The negroes have left the whites, with stakes &c.

driven 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."[3]

The fires of liberty soon spread south to the bustling city of Port-au-Prince. In December 1791, gens de couleur serving in the military clashed with white residents. In a running street battle, they retreated from the town; incensed whites turned on free black civilians. Amidst the chaos, fire broke out – consuming 800 buildings in their entirety. It seemed as though the war would reduce everything to smoldering ruins.

A Discursive War

Very little of the story told on the first pages of this essay accurately reflects the 1791 revolt. Violence toward whites was not in fact part of insurgents' strategy. Neither did they necessarily seek the destruction of colonial society. It does, however, accurately reflect white Americans' perception of these events. The red glow on the horizon and ash on the wind remained a constant in American press coverage. Slaves continually liberated themselves then vented their outrage with consuming fire. For the Haitian Revolution was as much a physical reality as a *discursive* war, fought primarily in the United States press.

The Haitian Revolution, in the words of Michel-Rolph Trouillot, was unthinkable. Not only could black slaves imagine themselves free, recognizing the true universality of French Revolutionary ideology, but could enforce that freedom through organized resistance.[4] The Haitian Revolution was all white slaveholders' worst nightmares made real. Moreover, insofar as the reality failed to match their nightmares—featuring bacchanalian violence and almost

3 *General Advertiser*, 11 October 1791.
4 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: power and the production of history* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995):73.

pornographic brutality—coverage of the revolt certainly did not. Tales from Saint Domingue often came to Americans in the form of letters published together in newspapers. In one edition of the *Philadelphia Gazette* alone readers heard that "The Negroes are destroying and burning every thing before them," "they have burnt and destroyed almost every sugar plantation in that part of the Island," and "numerous have been the most cruel murders and massacres, --- and numberless plantations, with the buildings and crops, destroyed by fire." Each from a different letter! A letter from a resident of Cap Francois to his friend in Philadelphia, dated August 14, lamented "To what length they will carry their rage God knows."[5] Both nervous American slaveholders and displaced Saint Domingue planters weathered this ontological shock with little grace or forbearance.

5 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 12, 1791.

Figure 2: Cap Français burning on June 21, 1793.

Jean-Baptiste Chapuy and Pierre Jean L. Boquet, *Vue de l'incendie de la ville due Cap Français, Arivée le 21 Juin 1793*. [1794] Print. Retrieved from BnF Gallica, gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b6946889b.

Even as the resurrection evolved into a familiar imperial war, observers noted the widespread use of fire by African and *gens de couleur* participants. Items from a Kingston newspaper, reprinted in the United States, described events: "the advanced guard of the French column fell in with a party from Leogane, sent out to lay waste the plantations in the plains; they had only set fire to that of Dauisan […] every thing on it was destroyed. This party was commanded by a free mulatto named Lafond, one of the worst subjects of Petit Guave […] On him was found an order signed Gautier, for him to go out of the city and set fire to the whole plain upon the appearance of the English."[6] Captain Mason, of the brig Phoenix, delivered to

6 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, June 1, 1796.

Savannah news from Kingson: the Military Court hanged "Isaac, *alias* Joseph Sasportas," as a spy "sent from St. Domingo by the French Agent, to foment an insurrection among the Negroes […] and the town set on fire, when a general massacre was to take place in the midst of the confusion."[7] Citizens of the fledgling United States looked on with trepidation, seeing France's jewel in the Caribbean became so much smoke and rubble. They read lurid accounts of the revolutionaries' violence in newspapers, and received frantic accounts in letters.

Multiple waves of refugees from Saint Domingue put human faces to imagined scenes of destruction. In Baltimore, "Citizen Moissonnier, Vice-Consul of the French Republic, returned to this town on Wednesday night last, from Hampton, where he had been to arrange the passage of about 1500 French inhabitants of St. Domingo, on board of the French Convoy, commanded by Vice Admiral Van Stable."[8] Further, for some of the rich white planters who fled Saint Domingue in droves, the United States was not their first port of call. They initially traveled to France; but finding themselves, in effect, on the wrong side of the French Revolution, turned tail and tried their luck in the United States. As much a part of their attempts to build a new life as securing housing, finance, and rebuilding trust networks, refugee slaveholders sought to secure the narrative.[9]

After France—newly a Republic—embraced the revolutionaries, Saint Dominguan refugees in Philadelphia attempted to distance themselves from "insane royalists, French West Indians" mourning the death of Louis XVI in a pamphlet entitled "Protestations des colons patriotes de Saint-Domingue, refugies a Philadelphie…" "Ever since we have opened our eyes to the cause of the people," they insisted, "the friends of the French constitution" suffered at the hands of "pretended defenders of the religion of their fathers" in Saint Domingue. Through

7 *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 12, 1800.
8 Reprinted in *Pennsylvania Gazette*, April 23, 1794.
9 Haitians might have been more successful in salvaging the narratives if they had killed all the whites, because then they would not be fighting a propaganda battle against all the very much alive white slaveholders.

"arbitrary orders executed by violence" enemies of France left "Saint-Domingue in ashes" and drove the refugees from their homes in Port-au-Prince through "fire and flame."[10]

In some sense, then, what actually happened in Saint Domingue is immaterial when considering what Americans believed and how that affected their understanding of domestic disaster. Nevertheless, in another sense it matters completely. Just as the continental press created a disjuncture between the reality and the discourse of black Haitians' revolution, the same thing happened regarding slave arson in the United States. A disjuncture perpetuated not just by contemporary sources but also in part by modern historians.

Further, one of the concepts that did make the jump from reality to mythology was fire as a tool of West Central African warfare.[11] A tool used highly effectively—as tactic and statement—by the participants in the 1791 revolt.[12] Fire as a tool of African war exploded in white Americans' consciousness at the same time as fire became an ever-present danger to the urban public. Historian Ada Ferrer describes the first years of the Haitian Revolution as "the largest and best coordinated rebellion the world had ever seen."[13] Between 80,000 and 170,000 slaves from the North Province reaved across the plantations. They made plain the targets of their ire, destroying sugar-processing equipment, slave quarters, and stores. The North Province was, after all, the center of Saint Domingue's sugar industry.

Insurgents in the North Province were willing to discuss terms by December 1791, within three months of fighting. Not easily put down, rebelling slaves sought to use their position of

10 "Depuis que nous avons les yeux ouverts la cause des peuples, depuis les premiers efforts de l'aristocratie contre la liberté, depuis notre journée du 29 au 30 Juillet 1790, depuis les premiers assassinats commis dans la ville du Port-au-Prince fur les amis de la constitution française, depuis que Saint-Domingue en cendre est victime des prétendus *defenseurs de la religion de leurs peres*; jusqu'au moment ou des ordres arbitraires exécutés par la violence, jusqu'au moment où le fer et la flamme nous ont eloignés de nos foyers, nous avons toujours lutté contre les manœuvres exécrables de ces pretendus amis des lois, de la religion et de leur patrie." *Protestations des colons patriotes de Saint-Domingue, refugies a Philadelphie, contre un ecrit intitulé Service funebre de Louis XVI, &c. imprimé et rendu public* (Philadelphia: Pierre Parent, 1794), 1.

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13 Ferrer, 2.

strength to negotiate rather than annihilate. The leaders did not initially fight for black freedom; they requested only amelioration of harsh conditions on plantations. These demands seem laughably minor in light of subsequent events. While the leaders of the revolt demanded freedom for themselves, they asked that masters give slaves three days per week to tend their own garden plots, and that plantation staff cease their use of the whip and *cachot* (plantation prison). Negotiations fell through, however, as the African masses were unwilling to yield their freedom, and white planters were unwilling to temper their authority. France formally decreed an end to racial discrimination in Saint Domingue in early April 1792.[14]

The 'slave revolt' portion of the Haitian Revolution ended very quickly. The French government emancipated slaves in the colony in 1793, legally safeguarding the freedom already achieved by revolutionaries. French colonial administrators attempted to put former slaves back to work on plantations as 'cultivators,' with varying degrees of success. France finally abolished slavery in her colonies in 1794. As for the free 'blacks' (*gens de couleur*, or free people of color[15]) elsewhere in Saint Domingue, they sought political rights and entry into mainstream French society. Their entreaties predated the 1791 slave uprising, though the leaders of this group pragmatically linked their concerns to the insurgents in December of that year. In the late 1780s, *gens de couleur* from the South Province of Saint Domingue entreated the Crown to grant them representatives in the States-General. As the French Revolution proceeded, across the island wealthy *gens de couleur* continued to petition for the same rights extended to white Saint Dominguan landowners and merchants.[16] *Gens de couleur* leaders were not inherently opposed to slavery and some colonial leaders were willing to extend citizenship rights to this population in

14 Christina Mobley, forthcoming manuscript.
15 Most historians use the term gens de couleur over free black or mulatto as it more accurately conveys the fluid and diverse nature of this group. They did not necessarily share common ground with enslaved people either culturally, ethnically, or politically.
16 Geggus, 57-8.

exchange for their support. Though beyond the scope of this essay, it is interesting to imagine a counter-factual history in which *gens de couleur* successfully partnered with white planters to safeguard slavery. Over the next decade, the allegiances of the different factions shifted and recombined; almost every major imperial power in the region made a play for control. For much of the 1790s, Africans and *gens de couleur* fought alongside white colonists to secure French hegemony against Spanish and British forces. Racialized violence only broke out again in earnest when Napoleon's brother-in-law, Charles Leclerc, arrived in 1802 with orders to remove the new Governor-for-life Toussaint L'Ouverture and his black officers.[17]

The slave revolutionaries of Saint Domingue stand unique in the Atlantic system, as befitting the uniqueness of their achievement. Appallingly high mortality rates in Saint Domingue yielded a young population of recently arrived slaves. In the middle 1780s, between 30-40,000 enslaved people arrived in Saint Domingue per year via the legitimate trade. In 1790, that number climbed as high as 48,000. From 1763-92, more than half of this trade came through West Central Africa. Over the same time span, nearly half of all the slaves sold in Saint Domingue were Kongolese.[18] The majority of people enslaved in Saint Domingue on the eve of revolution were born in Africa. In the northern and western plantations where the slave revolt began, 'Kongos' constituted over 40% of all slaves. Despite the name, they hailed from the coastal kingdoms of Loango and the Mayombe rainforest, located to the north of the kingdom of Kongo and Angola. In addition to language, their shared cultural referents included the use of fire as a tool of war.[19]

17 Mobley.
18 49.4%. The first statistic is up until 1792, the second until 1793. Mobley.
19 Mobley.

Cities on Fire

White Americans' fears of fire were not altogether unfounded. Fires were an ever-present part of life in early American cities. Broadly speaking, everything could catch fire and did so with alarming frequency. Keith Thomas argues that vulnerability to fire shaped belief in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England. He reminds us—we who in the twenty-first century rarely think of fire outside of tedious mandatory fire drills in schools and offices, and who trust implicitly in the efficacy of smoke alarms and fire-fighters wielding fire-hoses—that our ancestors possessed few of these modern tools of war against fire.[20] Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century towns and cities were particularly vulnerable, combining the risk factors of flammable construction, population density, and reliance on fire for heat and light. Not to mention, primitive fire-fighting techniques and inadequate equipment did little to check the spread of fires.[21] Little had changed to remedy this situation in American cities in the late eighteenth century.

To modern sensibilities, Americans living in cities tolerated an absurd level of risk. They hauled hot coals to and fro, over straw, carpet, and floorboards. Many of these coals ended up on said flammable floors. They toted candles around, at least when they were not allowing their candles to fall over, drip, or burn unsupervised. Americans needed fire to live. They used it to heat and illuminate their homes, and to cook their food. They heated water over fire or coals to keep their bodies and environments clean.

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20 There are of course some exceptions to this. Though I grew up in a city, bushland ringed my parents' home, conjuring the specter of bushfires. Few Australians, particularly those who live in rural or semi-rural areas, are ignorant of the devastating threat that bushfires pose. People who live in similar regions in the United States similarly fear brush-, forest- or wildfires. Nonetheless, fires are generally no longer an urban problem.

21 Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic: Studies in Popular Beliefs in Sixteenth and Seventeenth-Century England*, 19-20.

All of that if they stayed home! Thousands of Americans traipsed to work—at least those who worked outside their homes—carrying flammable objects past cities' many stables, storage yards, and piles of flammable rubbish. Many spent their days toiling away in veritable fire-traps. In a series of unfortunate accidents that should surprise no one, candlers, rope-makers and paint factories caused a great many fires during the decade. The *Philadelphia Repository, and Weekly Register* criticized Mr. Andrew Kennedy's Soap and Candle Manufactory in 1801:

> It is said that this is the fourth instance of fire in said manufactory,
> Such repeated instances, it is hoped will immediately claim the attention of the corporation, to adopt regulations for preventing the erection of similar manufactories in the settled parts of the city.--To those who live in the vicinity of such buildings, the risk from fire is not the only inconvenience they are subjected to…[22]

The newspaper clarified in their next issue that they had meant four fires in Mr. Kennedy's manufactories generally, rather than on that exact property. Nonetheless, the factory, located on Second Street between Market Street and Chesnut Street, did in fact burn down in 1793. Fortunately, Mr. Kennedy's neighbors, who included printer Thomas Dobson and the Philadelphia Gazette, escaped destruction the second time around.

Of course, for those residents who worked from home, the above risks compounded upon each other. A common kitchen fire could spread to industrial stores or a cramped workshop, wreaking far more havoc. Loose fiber detritus—such as from weaving or other textile production—could become explosive tinder for fires used for cooking, lighting, or heating. Fires sometimes appeared to spring from the ether, leaving victims fruitlessly conjecturing as to the cause. Commonly reporters identified the fuel but professed no theory about the ignition. Occasionally though, witnesses got lucky. On February 26th 1792, a "mahogany slab" caught fire in a house in Charleston "by means of a globular decanter accidentally placed near a window with a southern

22 *Philadelphia Repository, and Weekly Register*, February 28, 1801.

aspect;" the sun's rays refracted through the decanter, setting fire to the wood. Residents quickly extinguished the spark, preventing "serious consequences." The writer reflected that nobody could have ascertained the fire's original cause had it started without somebody present. A paragraph describing the scene appeared in Charleston's *City Gazette and Daily Advertiser* two days later. Newspapers in Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Connecticut and Vermont reprinted the paragraph several times between March and April of that year. The decanter, caught red-handed, offered readers a rare insight into the sometimes baffling but always troubling catalyst for urban fire.

Once ablaze, urban fires met with enthusiastic but technologically limited opposition. Large American cities did acquire fire engines and build fire-fighting infrastructure over the course of the 1790s, but these were not a panacea. Residents still primarily relied upon civilian bucket chains fed by municipal water sources. Even in situations where fire engines existed, functioned, and sought out fires to quench, much could go wrong. Mr. Kennedy experienced this in February of 1801, as his property burned for the fourth time. Not only did the city operate several fire engines—though in this instance they struggled to navigate the manufactory's cramped construction—but maintained a large number of water pumps—though unfortunately for the hapless Mr. Kennedy, the nearest was, on Thursday 26th, out of order.[23]

Even if burdened by a lack of knowledge and equipment, Americans did turn out en masse in defense of their neighbors. And, of course, in defense of their own property—for after all, fire was as much a public problem as a personal disaster. An inopportune blaze could destroy an artisan's entire wealth in mere hours, forcing them to rely largely on the charity of strangers. The threat of fire lay as much with its capriciousness as its destructiveness. No matter how prepared or careful one family could be, no matter how wary of candles or diligent in clearing

23 *Gazette of the United States, and Daily Advertiser*, February 26 1801.

away flammables, they could not defend themselves from a neighbor's carelessness. Nor could an individual defend themselves from the misfortune of a family halfway across the city. Contemporary newspapers evinced the burden borne by the families and friends of fire sufferers.

Few could rely on insurance to recoup their losses. Fire insurance was in its infancy in North America during the 1780s and 1790s. Insurers gradually accumulated knowledge about fire risk factors and best-practice safety measures. The earliest extant fire insurance map —"Ichnography of Charleston" by Edmund Petrie—represents Charleston in 1790. The Phoenix Assurance Company Ltd, based in London, commissioned this map following the end of the American Revolution. The map records each individual building, along with the locations of amenities such as wells and fire stations. Though few maps survive, London firms did offer fire insurance to other American cities from the 1790s onwards. Naturally, the War of 1812 put a significant dampener on this trade, and ultimately necessitated the formation of local insurance companies. From the 1820s onwards, small local companies began to offer fire insurance in Philadelphia, New York and other major cities.[24]

Despite these developments, the pages of American newspapers testify to the unanswered financial burden of fire. Americans supplemented the meagre commercial fire insurance available to them by forming mutual assurance societies and organizing mass donation drives. Newspapers facilitated this effort by printing and re-printing solicitations for aid up and down the Eastern seaboard. Large runaway blazes often attracted significant aid—but victims of contained fires often found themselves forgotten.

24 Diane L. Oswald, *Fire Insurance Maps: Their History and Applications*, 1997.

The Problem of Arson

Analysis of arsons and arson scares reported in American newspapers during the 1790s provides important context for understanding the handful of fires better known to historians. Considering only arson events that both spawned court cases and widespread pamphleteering, as well as raising the specter of Saint Domingue, yields an incomplete picture.

The press reported several cases of arson during 1791 and 1792. In one case, though reporters covered an incident as an accidental fire, one of the sufferers raised suspicion of arson. On Monday, May 9, 1791, around half past ten at night, residents of Philadelphia discovered a fire originating in stables on Dock-street near Third. The blaze soon incinerated eighteen to twenty buildings, leaping easily between wooden structures. *The Pennsylvania Gazette*'s initial coverage paired this account with news of a fire contained mainly to a kitchen on the Sunday previous. The author of the piece seemed satisfied that neither blaze demanded explanation.

Concerning both Dock-street and the kitchen fire, the newspaper praised the exertions of helpful citizens. Though the Dock-street fire proved destructive, never, the reporter stated, "did the citizens of this metropolis more generally turn out [to assist] nor were there ever greater efforts made to extinguish that destructive element." Newspapers in New York reprinted the piece several days later. On May 14, a follow-up article insinuated, "some circumstances […] allege strong suspicions of its originating in design." The author did not provide particulars. A Mr. I. Israel, "one of the principal sufferers" offered "One hundred dollars" for information sufficient to convict the perpetrator. As with most fires, however, newspapers primarily

publicized citizens' groups and charitable drives focused on helping the victims rather than apprehending the perpetrators.[25]

A nascent arson scare occurred in September of the same year in the city of New Bern, North Carolina. Interestingly, the suspected perpetrators were white tavern owners. At noon on Wednesday the 28th, flames erupted through the roof of a house owned by Philip Roche situated on the county wharf. Fueled by fodder stored in the loft and a brisk wind, the fire leapt first to several nearby stores, but ultimately reached buildings on Craven, Front, and Middle-street. Approximately 63 houses fed the blaze: constituting almost a third of the city. One resident, writing to an associate in another state, estimated the damages at £100,000. Authorities imprisoned Phillip Roche and his wife for the crime of arson on October 30th. Apparently, "many respectable inhabitants" feared the pair "would again attempt to burn the town."[26] Despite the rumors, it seems as though Philip Roche and his wife avoided trial for arson. The pair may be the same individuals involved in proceedings at the New Bern District Court from 1791 to 1794 for failure to pay a debt. Roche's wife Hannah Peddy incurred the debt prior to their 1791 marriage. They repeatedly petitioned the debtor, and subsequently the court, for extensions. If indeed Philip Roche the tavern-keeper reneged on this debt, no doubt the fire of 1791 negatively affected his finances. It is impossible to determine whether Roche burned his own tavern or not; regardless, the rumor and arrest did not apparently produce a "designing incendiary."[27]

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25 A reporter for *The Pennsylvania Gazette* noted "with pleasure" that "remarkably liberal" citizens raised sufficient charity to cover the expenses of the poor families affected by the Dock-street fire. Though the article claimed that contributors actions "in an uncommon degree display the philanthropy and humanity of our citizens," similar drives accompanied most of the large, destructive fires covered by the paper. "PHILADELPHIA, May 18. It is with pleasure we learn…," *The Pennsylvania Gazette* May 18, 1791.

26 News of the arrest came to northern newspapers via a letter from Newbern, penned Oct. 1. *The New-York Journal, & Patriotic Register* Oct 26 1791, *The New-York Packet* Oct 27 1791.

27 In *Pitt County genealogical quarterly* (Greenville, NC: Pitt County Family Reserachers, Inc) May 2004 Vol. XI, No. 2 p. 8.

Newspapers did report several arsons committed by black Americans in 1792. The first of these apparently accompanied mundane acts of criminality rather than politically motivated arson plots. On the night of January 2nd, in Georgetown, Maryland, a black slave apparently murdered Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Ward with an axe as they lay sleeping.[28] He then set fire to the house. Shortly afterwards, he fetched their neighbors and assisted the fire-fighting effort. Before the fire could incinerate the evidence, the neighbors discovered the Wards. Authorities arrested the slave for their murder. Several months later, in Middletown, Virginia, a "mulatto" servant named Dick Goold and two unnamed associates allegedly set fire to a house to conceal their burglary attempt. Goold, originally from New York, lived in the house briefly as a slave. Goold confessed to stealing $5 from the house, and to returning the night of March 19 with larcenous intent. Nonetheless, he alleged, he balked at the last moment, but his associates committed burglary then arson regardless. Goold apparently failed to provide sufficient evidence against the two, so he alone faced trial.[29] Neither of these cases inspired rumors of conspiracy in the press.

Little substantive evidence of paranoia about arson appeared in newspapers at the beginning of the decade. In some respects, the exceptions prove the rule. Several newspapers circulated a rapidly recanted rumor of slave revolt in New Bern, NC. A letter, penned July 26, from an unnamed correspondent appeared in several newspapers in mid-August 1792. While this rumor apparently fizzled absent any revolt, it foreshadowed the expansive and non-specific motivations assigned to arsonists later in the decade. The New Bern rumor may have revealed hostile intentions but lacked effective action.

Another event, by contrast, included conceivably hostile actions but lacked a clear motive. On September 28, 1792, black residents of Philadelphia engaged in actions that, as

28 Coverage of the murder does not specify the man's relationship to the Wards, other than that he was a "black fellow that lived in the house." I took this to mean a slave rather than a servant.

29 Newspapers in New York and Philadelphia covered the story.

portrayed by the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, can only be described as a minor riot. Approximately twenty individuals mustered on Catherine Street; several children built a bonfire on nearby Almond Street. The cacophony roused neighbors who observed the adults set fire to a stable. Nonetheless, the reporter seemed bizarrely blasé toward their exploits, praising nearby residents for rapidly containing the stable fire. Other newspapers neglected the story. The event generated no further coverage beyond this first report. Notably, while the Philadelphia rioters set small fires, these caused no significant damage to property or person. So, while the events could conceivably concern white citizens, the story lacked that essential spark needed to produce a true arson scare.

One of the most studied incidences of arson committed by black Americans occurred in Albany in 1793, a little over a year after the "riot" in Philadelphia. Winthrop Jordan attributes the Albany blaze to "slaves […] turned to arson" because of a "grudge against their owner." Jordan here repeats verbatim assertions made by earlier historians—particularly Edgar J. McManus—about the motivations of the Albany arsonists. Certainly, the authorities executed three blacks for the crime.[30] Don Gerlach provides a more nuanced take, noting that it did not affect the accused slaves' master and was relatively minor. Gerlach does not make strong conclusions about the import of these events. He notes that the source base is "fragmentary" and his account, while having "more detail and accuracy" than previous attempts, leaves many questions unanswered.[31] Douglas Egerton draws primarily from Gerlach and Shane White in his account, but does not translate their ambivalence into his own work. Egerton speculates that "[Pomp] decided to prod New York toward emancipation."[32]

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30 Jordan, *White Over Black*, 380-382, 392.
31 Don R. Gerlach, "Black Arson in Albany, New York: November 1793," *Journal of Black Studies* 7:3 (Mar. 1977): 301-310.
32 White. Egerton, *Death or Liberty*, 264-265.

Much of what historians know about the fire comes from the testimony of one of the executed, the freedwoman Bet. According to her account, Pomp approached her and another woman (Dean) and asked for their help in setting fire to the property of a prominent white merchant. She recalled that Pomp claimed to have received money from a white man who held a grudge against the merchant. Bet and Dean agreed without much resistance, and the trio successfully carried out their plan on November 17, 1793. The fire destroyed most of several blocks, including the offices of *The Albany Gazette*. Bet subsequently confessed her role in the fire to an acquaintance, who reported the three conspirators to the authorities. Officials delayed the executions of Pomp, Dean and Bet repeatedly for ambiguous reasons. A year after the fire, a French visitor recorded her exaggerated take on it, no doubt informed by the prevailing gossip: it was a mass rebellion, blacks set fires in twenty separate locations simultaneously, motivated by the failures of abolition, and the authorities executed seven slaves.[33]

From Bet's testimony during trial and from rumors spread afterwards, this seems fuel to the fire of arson paranoia. Newspaper coverage provides an alternate angle on the event. While some newspapers in New York and beyond did mention the arrest of several slaves, most coverage focused on the mundane facts of urban fire: the streets affected, the individuals and families left bereft, and initial damage estimate of £100,000. On Monday, Nov 18, the *Albany Register* provided an initial report, exhaustively detailing the exact path of the fire. The *Columbian Gazetteer* (NY), *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, *The New-York Journal, & Patriotic Register*, and *The Weekly Museum (*NY) reprinted all or part of this account between Nov 25 and November 30.[34] On November 25, the *Albany Register* updated readers with news of three additional alarms. The reporter mentioned particulars for one; fire broke out in the stable of Peter

33 Gerlach, "Black Arson in Albany," 301-310.

34 *The Daily Advertiser* (NY) covered the fire on Nov 22, noting that "[a] report circulates this city," likely referring to the *Albany Gazette* article. They did not directly reprint the article itself. *Columbian Gazetteer* Nov 25 1793, *The Pennsylvania Gazette* Nov 27 1793, *The New-York Journal, & Patriotic Register* Nov 30 1793.

Gansevoort on Friday 22nd.[35] They also noted that magistrates examined several female slaves (likely Bet and Dean) concerning the November 17 fire, and that authorities subsequently located an additional accomplice (Pomp). Far fewer newspapers picked up this article. *The New-York Journal, & Patriotic Register* alone reprinted it, combining it with the first *Albany Gazette* piece on November 30. Several newspapers that covered the fire did not bother to update readers with news of the three slaves' arrest.[36] Initial coverage of the Albany November 17 fire differed little from newspapers' coverage of large accidental fires; that the fire started maliciously seemed to matter little to reporters compared to its consequences.

Newspaper coverage also highlights that citizens responded to the Albany blaze differently than Albany's law-makers. The Albany Council responded with new laws restricting slaves' movements after dark. The Council also established a citizen's watch, seemingly designed with security rather than firefighting in mind.[37] On the other hand, citizen's groups sought to bolster Albany's fire-fighting capacities and to render aid to sufferers. *The New-York Journal, & Patriotic Register* published several brief items relating to the Albany blaze on December 4, 1793, noting both that Albany authorities arrested several blacks for arson and that Albany residents planned to raise money for additional fire engines and a dedicated fire service. Both items received occupied the same space on the page.[38] Several months into 1794, the Citizens of Albany presented the Mayor of Philadelphia with $866, raised to aid sufferers of an epidemic in

35 Given Pomp's story of arson-for-hire, this fire demands more attention from historians. Gen. Peter Gansevoort was the older brother of Leonard Gansevoort, the target of the Nov 17 arson. The courts took Pomp's story seriously at the time, given that officials repeatedly stayed his execution while investigating. The *Albany Register* does not report any suspicions of arson attached to this fire.

36 *The Albany Gazette* did, however, provide frequent updates on the developing court case. Residents apparently congregated expectantly when the three were executed.

37 Gerlach, “Black Arson in Albany,” 307.

38 Note, however, that it is unclear if these arrests related to the November 17 fire or subsequent fires. Given that no other newspapers mentioned additional black arson in Albany following the Sunday fire, this item probably describes the arrest of Bet, Pomp, and Dean, in the week prior. Albany citizens' fundraising stemmed not just from the November 17 fire, but also from the three fires that subsequently struck the city between November 17 and 25.

that city. In their letter, published in the press, the citizens begged forgiveness for the lateness of their effort:

> We should have addressed you at an earlier period, if we had not been prevented by the distresses of our fellow-citizens, occasioned by a fire, which has recently destroyed the most flourishing part of our city; and from its consequences, been the means of lessening the sum we expected to raise for the relief of the poor of Philadelphia.[39]

Citizens identified the source of their troubles as fire, rather than arson or slaves' perfidy. Months after the Albany arson, city residents worked to pick up the pieces and to restore a sense of normalcy. Regardless of its source, fire left long-lasting scars on the cities and people it visited.

Southern cities soon faced an explosion of incendiary activity. On Saturday night, December 13, 1794, residents of Augusta, Georgia, discovered Mr. Innes' warehouse and Mr. Birch's stables on fire. Their efforts quickly arrested the fire's spread, but not before the fire caused $1500 in damages. Residents apparently feared the worst; the local press described the blaze as "[a] most atrocious attempt to fire the town," and the State Legislature offered a $500 reward for information on the perpetrators. The local newspaper collected contributions toward this fund, raising another $350. Editors copied an article providing details of the fire and advertising the "EIGHT HUNDRED AND FIFTY DOLLARS REWARD" into newspapers in South Carolina, Pennsylvania, Maryland, New York, Rhode Island and Connecticut.[40] Unfortunately, the reporter did not explain why residents suspected "incendiaries" planning "to fire the town," beyond that fires appeared to start in two locations simultaneously. The State Legislature and individual citizens apparently found the idea credible enough to offer a reward.

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39 *The Albany Register* Mar 17 1794, *The Daily Advertiser* Mar 26 1794.

40 The original publication does not seem to have survived. The reprints do not specify the source of the article.

The same features prompted citizens of Charleston to offer a $1000 reward for information leading to the conviction of such “evil designing incendiaries” responsible for fires on November 1, 1795. In the early hours of Sunday morning, suspicious individuals apparently set fire to three buildings on King-street. If real, these incendiaries failed in their task, causing very little damage. According to Intendant of the City John Edwards, witnesses saw these individuals running from these buildings holding lights. First published in Charleston's *City Gazette & Daily Advertiser*, the Intendant's Proclamation appeared in a host of newspapers in states as far as Pennsylvania, New York, Maryland and New Hampshire.[41] Like the previous year's fire in Georgia however, newspapers did report any follow-up to this alleged arson. In both cases, the fires caused scant damage and no loss of life.

Charleston, though, quickly faced a far worse conflagration. A devastating fire raged through Charleston in the middle of June 1796. Initial reports estimated that the fire destroyed two hundred houses on the north side of Broad-street, between Jack's Shop and the State House. The fire also claimed structures on Church-street, between Queen- and Broad-streets; on Queen-street, between Meeting- and Bay-streets; and on Union-street. Newspapers reported three hundred families “rendered houseless” by the conflagration. Several people lost their lives or their health seeking to arrest its spread. Early coverage from Charleston noted that the devastation was so much worse because of the presence of large numbers of newly arrived migrants from Saint Domingue, who swelled the ranks of the homeless.[42]

Affected residents turned to their local newspapers to thank those who offered assistance, to inform friends and family of their temporary residences, and to request further aid. Alexander Alexander took out an advertisement in the *City Gazette & Daily Advertiser* a week after the fire

41 While most reprinted the entire Proclamation, the *American Minerva and the New-York Advertiser* and the *New-Hampshire Gazette* instead published a small item informing readers of the reward. Source.
42 Ashli White, *Encountering Revolution: Haiti and the Making of the Early Republic* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012): 126-39.

to thank “his numerous Friends, for their strenuous, though unsuccessful Exertions” in defense of his home and school-house, as well as to provide an address for the return of those “Furniture and Effects” his friends' “more fortunate Endeavors” saved. Several other citizens affected by the blaze likewise solicited the return of their property in the pages of the *City Gazette*. Businesses and aid societies—from as far away as Philadelphia and Baltimore—offered succor to sufferers in the form of charity and extensions on money owed.[43]

Charleston authorities rapidly raised suspicion of arson, suspicions that most newspapers conveyed. Most coverage explained the origins of the fire as follows:

> … a room in Lodge Alley was discovered to be on fire […] from the examination made on the spot, where it was said to have first began, by the Intendant, there is reason to suppose it was the work of some incendiary, but no proof is yet offered that will fix the crime on any person.

This article, first published in Charleston a day after the fire, appeared in newspapers in other states for a month or so afterward. Some newspapers paired this article with praise for the exertions of “a spirited Negro man,” whose actions saved St. Phillip's Church. Most newspaper coverage of this fire did not connect the perpetrators of this fire to Saint Domingue. Several newspapers circulated an announcement from “the Intendant of the city” offering “ONE THOUSAND DOLLARS” for the identity of perpetrators, as the “probability exists so strongly that origin of it was an [sic] premeditated design.” Authorities apparently did not succeed in identifying any perpetrators.

Throughout the 1790s, rumors of conspiracy circulated Charleston. Not all of these rumors postulated the existence of black incendiaries, but it seems that the city was on edge. Unlike in northern cities, residents of Charleston found themselves unwilling or unable to accept that so many fires could be of accidental rather than malicious origin. While newspapers in more

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43 Jun 23 1796, Jun 24 1796, Jul 19 1796, Aug 20 1796, Aug 25 1796.

northerly cities mainly postulated the existence of widespread villainy after 1796, the Charleston press suspected as much from the start of the decade. As early as 1790, *The City Gazette* reported "… it plainly appears from the situation of the building, and the placing of the fire, that it must have been committed by some evil-minded villain, with a design of consuming the same, and involving that part of the city in the dreadful calamity."[44] Further, Charleston reporters often rejected limited explanations of motive; arsonists must be incendiaries seeking to disrupt large parts of the city rather than petty criminals or the personally aggrieved.

One of the few explicit mention of black Americans setting fires in imitation of Saint Domingue to appear in newspapers occurred in Charleston in 1797. However, like in New Bern five years prior, authorities uncovered the alleged conspiracy before the city went up in smoke. On November 14th, magistrates arrested four alleged ring-leaders, all slaves belonging to French gentlemen: Figaro senior, Jean Louis, Figaro the younger, and Capelle. The four faced trial on the 20th, and two died at the hands of the court on the 21st. An article published in the *Charleston State Gazette* and subsequently copied in Pennsylvania, Georgia, New York and Kentucky alleged that these "French negroes [planned] to act here as they had formerly done at St. Domingo."[45]

This case, more than any other I have mentioned, demands the degree of skepticism cautioned by historians of black resistance. A letter from Charleston published in *The Pennsylvania Gazette* suggests certainty:

> On Saturday last a plot was discovered, which may have saved some lives and some property. Seventeen French negroes intended to set fire to the town in different places, kill the whites, and probably take possession of the powder magazine and the arms; but luckily one of them turned states evidence.

44 *The City Gazette, or the Daily Advertiser* Mar. 29 1790
45 *Charleston State Gazette*, November 22, 1797.

Accounts differed on the exact number of blacks implicated—ten to fifteen, seventeen, or several—but all confidently asserted "discovery" and "guilt." The authorities apparently delayed arrests until "the plan should be more matured." Witnesses "fully proved the guilt of the prisoners." Reading between the lines of these accounts suggests something different. They acknowledge that the suspects all denied any knowledge of the plot when arrested. The individual turned states' evidence—Figaro the younger—gave only a partial confession "after some time." Though newspaper reports do not expand upon the context for this confession, coercion likely contributed. Unfortunately, the authorities did not make public their reasons for suspecting the group in the first place.

The courts may have been entirely correct in their conclusion. I suspect, however, that design as well as discovery played a part here. Residents of Charleston had reason to resent French migrants and their slaves; their presence during 1796 made it harder for the city to recover from the June fire. As early as 1793, South Carolina faced unwelcome influxes of Saint Dominguans. In December of that year, the Governor ordered all "free negroes and people of colour, who have arrived there from St. Domingo," or elsewhere, to leave the state within ten days, for many were "deemed dangerous to the welfare and peace" of South Carolina.[46] They had ample reason to fear slaves from Saint Domingue. After all, Charleston newspaper accounts followed news of racial unrest on that island, describing black militias burning plantations and people of color razing cities.[47] The city had also weathered multiple catastrophic fires, many of them accidental.

Rather than accurate descriptions of black political activity in imitation of Saint Domingue, Charleston scares likely also reflected residents' material concerns. The city faced

46 A notice printed in *Pennsylvania Gazette*, December 4, 1793.
47 In addition, French, British, and Spanish armies burning all of the above.

overcrowding from the influx of refugees from Saint Domingue. These new arrivals taxed support networks already less well developed than those in Northern cities. While major fires in New York, Philadelphia, or Boston regularly yielded charity drives that spanned the entire northern seaboard, fires in Charleston rarely attracted as much grassroots organization. Further, Northern cities further along the urbanization and industrialization process invested heavily in fire-fighting technology. Public water pumps and city fire engines fared better when supported by dense populations and investment from industry.[48] Facing a population influx, and lacking the cultural and technological tools available to Northerners, residents of Charleston found their resources overburdened by urban fires. Racial tensions in the city provided fault lines for the expression of both grievance and anxiety.

On the flipside, just as instructive are the missing arson scares. Why, in one situation, did commentators interpret a black slave overturning a candle as a malicious attempt to fire the house, but in near identical circumstances, interpret that same action as mere carelessness, or even a tragic accident that could befall anyone?

Perpetuating Methodological Problems

Late eighteenth-century Americans lacked the methodological rigor to distinguish between fact and fancy regarding the troubles in Saint Domingue. Equally important, they lacked any motivation to do so. Saint Domingue as the ruin of civilization fulfilled too many discursive needs. So too should their pronouncements regarding the complicity of slaves or free blacks with

48 Though as previously mentioned, these municipal services did not always work as intended.

the enemy fire be subject to deep scrutiny. For all that, contemporaries showed a keen understanding that nature, largely, set fires, and that the built environment facilitated their spread. Rumors of designing incendiaries certainly surfaced with major fires, but did not necessarily supplant the dominant narrative that fire could oh so easily happen in a tinderbox city.

Historians cannot just search 'arson' in an online database or only look at the fires associated with black Americans by the courts. That only paints part of the picture. To do so condenses weeks, months, and years of toil and trouble into a handful of incidents; to do so skips over the lingering effects of fear and loss flowing in waves from the primary victim to their families and neighbors, their cities, and beyond to distant communities. Urban fire shaped the physical landscape of early American cities. It also shaped their emotional landscape. Taking white Americans' scapegoating of convenient local foes in the face of inexplicable and unpreventable fire, and merely flipping the narrative—to celebrate radical black resistance through arson—perpetuates the initial error.

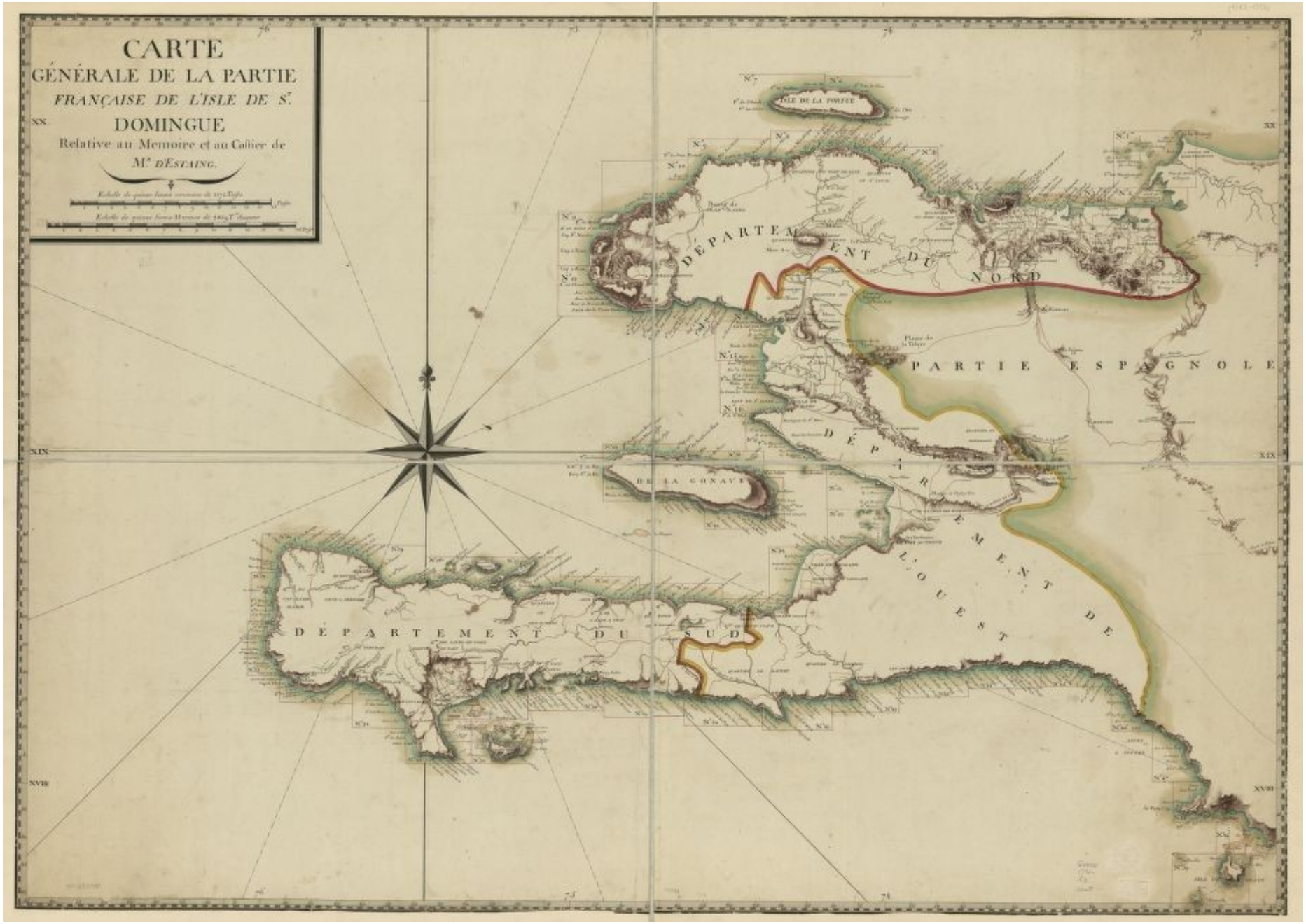

Figure 3: *The colony of Saint Domingue in 1776, showing the North, West, and South Provinces.*

Carte générale de la partie française de l'isle de St. Domingue. [1776] Map. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/74692178/.