

What's in a Name? Slave Trading during the French and Haitian Revolutions

By Philippe Girard

Studying the slave trade during the era of the French and the Haitian Revolutions should be a contradiction in terms: from 1793–94 to 1802–3, slavery and the slave trade were banned by law in colonies such as Saint Domingue (Haiti), Guadeloupe, and French Guiana. Yet many forms of slave trading persisted in practice. Planters brought some of their slaves with them when migrating to other colonies and the United States; French officials deported black rebels and then sold them as slaves in the United States and Spanish colonies; Africans on board British slaving ships captured by French privateers were put to work on French plantations; black laborers were kidnapped in Saint Domingue and then sold in Santo Domingo (the Dominican Republic); black prisoners of war captured by the Spanish army in Hispaniola were sent to Spanish colonies and sold; colonial officials in the French Caribbean made plans to purchase African laborers directly from slave traders. Contemporaries described these de facto slave-trading practices with a rich array of terms that underlined their reluctance to treat people of African descent as citizens rather than commodities and paved the way for the eventual restoration of the slave trade by law in 1802–3.