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Haiti's Founding Document Found in London

By DAMIEN CAVE

There is no prouder moment in Haiti's history than Jan. 1, 1804, when a band of statesmen-warriors declared independence from France, casting off colonialism and slavery to become the world's first black republic.

They proclaimed their freedom boldly — “we must live independent or die,” they wrote — but for decades, Haiti lacked its own official copy of those words. Its Declaration of Independence existed only in handwritten duplicate or in newspapers. Until now.

A Canadian graduate student at [Duke University](#), Julia Gaffield, [has unearthed](#) from the British [National Archives](#) the first known, government-issued version of Haiti's founding document. The eight-page pamphlet, [now visible online](#), gives scholars new insights into a period with few primary sources. But for Haitian intellectuals, the discovery has taken on even broader significance.

That the document would be found in February, just weeks after the earthquake that killed so many; that its authenticity would be confirmed in time for the donor conference that could define Haiti's future — some see providence at work.

“It's a strange thing in the period of the earthquake we find the first document that made the state,” said Patrick Tardieu, an archivist at the Library of the Fathers of the Holy Spirit in Port-au-Prince. “People were searching for this for a very long time.”

Indeed, decades ago, Haiti's leaders went hunting for a declaration they could call their own for the country's 150th anniversary. Researchers combed Haiti's libraries. Newspapers in the United States, which printed full versions of the declaration when it was made, were also considered a possible source.

But the originals seemed to have been thrown out or destroyed. In December 1952, the Haitian intellectual Edmond Mangonès wrote to his country's Commission of Social Sciences to report that “the mystery of the original of our national Declaration of Independence” had not been solved. “All searches to date have been in vain,” he said.

Enter Ms. Gaffield, 26. She said she fell in love with Haiti while at the University of Toronto. It was 2004, [Jean-Bertrand Aristide](#) had just been ousted, and after a trip to Haiti, where she worked with street children, she decided to study its origins as a nation.

That eventually took her to Duke University, and last year, to the National Archives of Jamaica in Kingston. There, she found a letter from a British official who had just returned from Haiti around the time of its revolution.

“He wrote a letter to the governor saying, ‘Here is this interesting document that I received when I was in Haiti,’ ” she said. “And he said the declaration ‘had not been but one hour from the press.’ ”

The document he mentioned, though, was missing. She headed for London. On Feb. 2, she found herself poring through the leather-bound binders of Britain’s National Archives. About 100 pages into the book of Jamaican records from 1804, she came across a delicate, yellowed set of pages.

“What I first noticed was across the top it said, ‘Liberté ou La Mort,’ ” she said. There were a few differences from the accepted text of Thomas Madiou, the 19th-century historian who wrote a definitive, multivolume history of the country. Haiti was spelled Hayti in the pamphlet, for example, and in one sentence, Mr. Madiou seemed to have seen “idéux” (ideals) when the print shows it to be “fléaux” (ills).

The bottom of the last page read “De l’Imprimerie du Gouvernement.” That made it the official declaration historians had been looking for. In the hushed London library — even cameras snapping photos of important documents must be on silent mode — Ms. Gaffield could only smirk.

“Being very excited in a document reading room is a bit of a challenge,” she said. “You have to keep it all inside.”

Later that day, she e-mailed her Ph.D. advisers at Duke. They were thrilled. “It is a lost treasure,” said [Deborah Jenson](#), a professor of French who has been overseeing Ms. Gaffield’s research. “This is really the first copy that is directly tied to the Haitian government.”

Professor Jenson said no manuscript version of the declaration with signatures — along the lines of the United States’ document — seemed to have existed. Jean-Jacques Dessalines, Haiti’s revolutionary leader, delivered the declaration as a speech on Jan. 1, 1804, and then had it printed over the next few months. Historians believe that he and others overlooked documentary preservation because they were too worried about another French invasion.

“They were building forts,” said [Prof. Laurent M. Dubois](#), a historian of Haiti at Duke. “It’s part of the larger story: that Haiti knew it was going to be isolated, it knew it was attacking this broader social order.”

He said the pamphlet showed that Haiti was intent on sending out the declaration to get the world to understand its position. “This was a gesture of reaching out, of saying, ‘We have these grievances, and we have decided we have to be independent, to refuse and resist this social order we have lived under,’ ” Professor Dubois said. “They wanted recognition.”

That is exactly what some Haitians hope Ms. Gaffield’s find will bring to Haiti today. Mr. Tardieu said he dreamed of seeing the document returned to its home — “it would be the greatest gift,” he said — while others are praying that its discovery alone will reawaken the world to Haiti’s strong sense of self-determination.

“In the context of the Haitian tragedy, it is important for Haitians and the rest of the world to remember the independence of Haiti,” said Leslie Manigat, a historian who briefly served as Haiti’s president in 1988.

“We must recover,” he said, shouting in order to be heard through a phone in Port-au-Prince that cut out repeatedly. “We must find an alternative to the traditional meaning of independence, now, in the new world.”