



00:00 00:00

*Listen to the Story.**Audio Transcript:*

Anchor Marco Werman speaks with Julia Gaffield, a Duke graduate student who found a rare original copy of Haiti's declaration of independence in Britain's National Archive.

MARCO WERMAN: I'm Marco Werman and this is The World, a co-production of the BBC World Service, PRI and WGBH Boston. Haiti is broken as a nation. The January earthquake almost literally tore apart a country that was already poor and crippled. Even symbolically, Haiti was dealt a severe blow with government buildings lying in ruins. So this is a perfect time for a historic discovery that seems to reaffirm its nationhood. An original printed copy has emerged of Haiti's Declaration of Independence from France in 1804. Julia Gaffield is the Duke University graduate student who found the document in an unexpected place.

JULIA GAFFIELD: I found it in the British National Archives and it was part of my dissertation research. I was exploring some leads that I had found in Jamaica at the National Library of Jamaica. So I was looking through the Jamaican colonial records because the Governor of Jamaica and the first leader of Haiti, Jean Jacques de Saline were in communication and were undergoing negotiations for a possible diplomatic and trade agreements.

WERMAN: So this is the original Declaration of Independence of Haiti. It seems like a document that people would have kept under lock and key for all these years. But how did it go missing?

GAFFIELD: Well this was a document that was distributed widely across the Atlantic world and so various individuals might not have thought that it was worth keeping because there were many copies made. Or, I think, might have been a more possible explanation is that this document was often sent to newspapers. Newspapers often don't keep archival records. So that might have been why this document is rare.

WERMAN: So this is basically a press release from 1804 saying we're free.

GAFFIELD: Absolutely. Jean Jacques de Saline wanted the world to know that they were no longer a French colony.

WERMAN: And remind us who Jean Jacques de Saline is.

GAFFIELD: Jean Jacques de Saline is the first leader of Haiti. He was the one who declared independence and he later became Emperor of Haiti.

WERMAN: Now the U.S. Declaration of Independence is one of those documents that school kids here in the States learn to memorize, at least parts of, in terms of tone, I'm wondering how similar these two documents are.

GAFFIELD: The documents are very different. This is, in a way, a statement that the project of independence is not quite finished yet because the legacy of French colonialism still remained in the country. So it was an encouragement from de Saline to the people of Haiti that this was a project that would be ongoing.

WERMAN: Now you say they're quite different. Maybe you could just read the first few lines of Haiti's Declaration of Independence and we can get a sense of maybe the similarities, at least in tone.

GAFFIELD: "Citizens, it is not enough to have expelled the barbarians who have bloodied our land for two centuries. It is not enough to have restrained those ever-evolving factions that, one after another, mocked the specter of liberty that France dangled before you. We must, with one last act of national authority, forever assure the empire of liberty in the country of our birth."

WERMAN: That's powerful, poetic stuff.

GAFFIELD: Absolutely, and all I find the documents written by de Saline to be extremely poetic. He was a great author and statesman.

WERMAN: So what does this document actually represent to Haitians today? Is this a kind of news that will be really buoying for Haitians who are suffering quite a lot misery right now?

GAFFIELD: I obviously can't say how Haitians will feel about this, but I do know that their history is an important part of their contemporary identity. Historical memory is very prominent and it is such a powerful history and the Haitians that I have spoken with are very proud of this history. It's a strong history and this document was very cutting-edge and revolutionary at the time. It was an overt challenge to long established European traditions in the Caribbean slavery colonialism. This document rejects those to give freedom and independence to their citizens.

WERMAN: So archival, rare document reading rooms are staid, quiet places, not known for people shouting out with joy. How did you react when you realized what you were holding?

GAFFIELD: Absolutely. I'm looking at this document and bursting with excitement and all around me are other researchers, complete strangers, very intently focused on their own work. I basically had nobody to tell and - - .

WERMAN: You couldn't just grab one of those people and just say "look what I found"?

GAFFIELD: And I'm not, maybe I could have. These are not the type of scenes that you cause in archives. It's a quiet room and to the point where your digital camera has to be put on silent so that the beeping doesn't disturb other researchers. You are also not allowed to email from the archives. So I couldn't rush over to one of the computers to send an email home or anything. So I really just had to keep it all bottled inside and I was kind of smiling to myself and then feeling very embarrassed for smiling in the middle of the archives.

WERMAN: Julia Gaffield, Ph.D. candidate in History at Duke University, thank you very much and congratulations on this discovery.

GAFFIELD: Thank you very much.

[View the live stream schedule](#)
