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## Grad student uncovers Haiti's Declaration of Independence

By Siri Agrell

*Discovery ends decades of historical sleuthing and 'can unify Haitian people to start a new life'*

Sitting at a quiet table in the British National Archives in London earlier this year, Canadian graduate student Julia Gaffield opened a bound book of documents from 1804 and unearthed the only known printed copy of Haiti's Declaration of Independence.

"I was surrounded by complete strangers who were all very wrapped up in their own work," the 26-year-old said yesterday. "Inside I was bursting with excitement, but I'm not sure if anyone else in there would have been interested."

But her discovery, which comes more than 200 years after the document was signed and ends decades of historical sleuthing intent on its recovery, could not come at a more poignant moment for the nation of Haiti, still reeling from the latest blow to its national identity. Struck by a devastating earthquake in January, the country is struggling to rebuild, and historians say the document will serve as a much-needed reminder of what has already been overcome.

"It's something that can unify Haitian people to start a new life," said Patrick Tardieu, a Haitian archivist at the Library of the Fathers of the Holy Spirit in Port-au-Prince.

Haiti was the first slave colony to win independence when it fought off its French colonial rulers, culminating with its revolutionary leader, Jean-Jacques Dessalines, declaring independence on Jan. 1, 1804. In the weeks that followed, his statement and the Deed of Independence were printed in an eight-page brochure under the title "Liberté ou la Mort." But while the documents were widely distributed at the time, no copy was known to have survived until Ms. Gaffield's discovery in February.

Her quest began as a history student at the University of Toronto, where she was introduced to Haiti and inspired to visit the country as a volunteer after the fall of President Jean-Bertrand Aristide. She fell in love with its people, and was intrigued by its vivid history and ongoing political turmoil.

She focused her studies on the early years of Haitian independence and, after receiving a master's degree from York University, is now in the third year of her PhD research at Duke University in North Carolina.

While combing through the National Archives of Jamaica last year, she found a letter from a British colonial official in 1804, which referred to an enclosed copy of the Haitian declaration not "one hour from the press." But the included copy of the declaration was handwritten, and Ms. Gaffield suspected the original was held elsewhere.

During a research trip to England, she began searching through Jamaican colonial records, and found the original documents sent from Jamaican Governor George Nugent to Lord Robert Hobart on March 10, 1804, including the declaration.

"It's been incredible," she said of the find. "My life is not usually quite as exciting as Indiana Jones."

The language in the document has the fiery passion of a Hollywood script, calling on Haitians "to vow to ourselves, to posterity, to the entire universe, to forever renounce France, and to die rather than live under its domination." Far from a dull historical treatise, it calls on Haitians to "live independent or die."

Ian E. Wilson, president of the International Council on Archives, said he had expected the document to resemble the American declaration.

"I thought it would be a nice statement of founding principles," he said. "It's rather a strong piece of anti-colonial language. It indicates the kind of issues Haiti has been through, and it's been issue after issue for 200 years."

Ms. Gaffield's discovery received praise yesterday from the head of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, who also happens to be her father.

"I think it's amazing and I think a lot of credit goes to the historians she worked with at U of T, York and Duke," said Chad Gaffield. "It strikes me as a great illustration of how research and archival research ends up in unexpected ways relating to the headlines of the day."

Melanie Newton, an associate professor at U of T who first introduced Ms. Gaffield to Haitian history, said she hopes the declaration will remind those involved in the Haitian reconstruction efforts that the country's sovereignty is hard-won and must be respected.

"It's probably one of the most amazing coincidences in modern historical research that she should find that at this particular moment," she said. "I remember the first conversation we had about how she could continue her research. It's wonderful to think this is where that conversation led."

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