

This entry was prepared for the Teaching Transatlanticism Digital Anthology by Alonzo Smith. teachingtransatlanticism.tcu.edu

Frederick Douglass (c. 1835-1895)

‘Haiti and the United States’ Parts I and II (1891)

Among nineteenth-century figures and thinkers, few are more respected and recognized than author, abolitionist, orator, and diplomat Frederick Douglass. Born in Tuckahoe, Maryland, to his mother Harriet Bailey and his first enslaver Captain Anthony, Douglass could not with certainty determine his birth date but surmises that it was ‘some time during 1835’ (*Narrative*, 1). Despite his early-life enslavement, as a transnational figure he eventually traversed significant parts of the world, including Egypt, France, Greece, Italy, Ireland, England, and Haiti in the Caribbean. In his initial journeys, he sought to promote the virtues of abolitionism and to procure funding for his noble cause. What may escape readers’ knowledge, however, is the disrespect and visceral inhumanity that followed this accomplished character late in his career during what should have been affirmed as President Benjamin Harrison’s magnanimous gesture to appoint the formerly enslaved leader as US Resident Minister and consul to Haiti.

Douglass’s 1891 two-part essay from the *North American Review* reflects this challenging time spent in the Caribbean. As the text shows, in his attempt to negotiate with the government of Haiti for a United States naval station at the Mole St. Nicolas, Douglass laments the treatment he receives not just from the hand of Rear-Admiral Gherardi and by extension the White House; he bemoans the complicit role that the United States press plays in assailing his character, in his estimation simply because he is Black: a response he suspects would have evaded a white man. Moreover, as we see below, he decries the idea of having to choose between his several identities as an American, African-American, and Black man. As Douglass

himself espouses in *Life and Times*, he self-identifies as a member of ‘the one race which exists’ and as part of a ‘brotherhood’ (622).

Answers, then, to why he is forced to choose between his transatlantic affiliation and his American allegiance escape him during his diplomatic mission in Haiti and even after he is forced to resign this post that he did not seek. In this two-part ‘statement’ about the ‘History of the Negotiations for the Môle St. Nicolas’, Douglass articulates the fraught relationship that he must navigate with Rear-Admiral Gherardi and the US Government simply because this determined diplomat-author recognizes the sovereignty of Haiti and insists that she be respected.

The version of the text presented below is Douglass’s own 1895 rendering from a collection of his work co-edited with George L. Ruffin.

‘Minister to Haïti’¹

“I propose to make a plain statement regarding my connection with the late negotiations with the government of Haïti for a United States naval station at the Môle St. Nicolas. Such a statement seems required, not only as a personal vindication from undeserved censure, but as due to the truth of history. Recognizing my duty to be silent while the question of the Môle was pending, I refrained from making any formal reply to the many misstatements and misrepresentations which have burdened the public press unchallenged during the last six months. I have, however, long intended to correct some of the grosser errors contained in these

¹ The original periodical version of this essay, published in the *North American Review* in two parts in 1891, was entitled ‘Haiti and The United States.’. See references list for full citations.

misrepresentations, should the time ever come when I could do so without exposing myself to the charge of undue sensitiveness and without detriment to the public interest. That time has now come, and there is no ground of sentiment, reason, or propriety for a longer silence, especially since, through no fault of mine, the secrets of the negotiations in question have already been paraded before the public, apparently with no other purpose than to make me responsible for their failure.

“There are many reasons why I would be gladly excused from appearing before the public in the attitude of self-defense². But while there are times when such defense is a privilege to be exercised or omitted at the pleasure of the party assailed, there are other times and circumstances when it becomes a duty which cannot be omitted without the imputation of cowardice or of conscious guilt. This is especially true in a case where the charges vitally affect one's standing with the people and government of one's country. In such a case a man must defend himself, if only to demonstrate his fitness to defend anything else. In discharging this duty I shall acknowledge no favoritism to men in high places, no restraint but candor, and no limitation but truth. It is easy to whip a man when his hands are tied. It required little courage for these men of war to assail me while I was in office and known to be forbidden by its rules to write or to speak in my own defense. They had everything their own way.

“Perhaps it was thought that I lacked the spirit or the ability to reply. On no other ground of assurance could there have been such loose and reckless disregard of easily ascertained facts to contradict them. It is also obvious that the respectability of the public journals, rather than the credibility of the writers themselves, was relied upon to give effect to their statements. Had they

disclosed their names and their true addresses, the public could have easily divined³ a motive which would have rendered unnecessary any word of mine in self-defense. It would have become evident in that case that there was a premeditated attempt to make me a scapegoat to bear off the sins of others. It may be noted, too, that prompt advantage has been taken of the fact that falsehood is not easily exposed when it has had an early start in advance of truth. As mindful of some things as they were, however, they forgot that innocence needs no defense until it is accused.

“The charge is, that I have been the means of defeating the acquisition of an important United States naval station at the Môle St. Nicolas. It is said, in general terms, that I wasted the whole of my first year in Haïti in needless parley⁴ and delay, and finally reduced the chances of getting the Môle to such a narrow margin as to make it necessary for our government to appoint Rear-Admiral Gherardi as a special commissioner to Haïti to take the whole matter of negotiation for the Môle out of my hands. One of the charitable apologies they are pleased to make for my failure is my color; and the implication is that a white man would have succeeded where I failed. This color argument is not new. It besieged the White House before I was appointed Minister Resident and Consul-General to Haïti. At once and all along the line, the contention was then raised that no man with African blood in his veins should be sent as minister to the Black republic. White men professed to speak in the interest of black Haïti; and I could have applauded their alacrity in upholding her dignity if I could have respected their sincerity. They thought it monstrous to compel black Haïti to receive a minister as black as herself. They

³ To discover by intuition or insight

⁴ Negotiation, discussion

did not see that it would be shockingly inconsistent for Haïti to object to a black minister while she herself is black.

“Prejudice sets all logic at defiance. It takes no account of reason or consistency. One of the duties of minister in a foreign land is to cultivate good social as well as civil relations with the people and government to which he is sent. Would an American white man, imbued with our national sentiments, be more likely than an American colored man to cultivate such relations? Would his American contempt for the colored race at home fit him to win the respect and goodwill of colored⁵ people abroad? Or would he play the hypocrite and pretend to love negroes⁶ in Haïti when he is known to hate negroes in the United States, — aye, so bitterly that he hates to see them occupy even the comparatively humble position of Consul-General to Haïti? Would not the contempt and disgust of Haïti repel such a sham?

“Haïti is no stranger to Americans or to American prejudice. Our white fellow-countrymen have taken little pains to conceal their sentiments. This objection to my color and this demand for a white man to succeed me spring from the very feeling which Haïti herself contradicts and detests. I defy any man to prove, by any word or act of the Haïtin⁷ Government, that I was less respected at the capital of Haïti than was any white minister or consul. This clamor for a white minister for Haïti is based upon the idea that a white man is held in higher esteem by her than is a black man, and that he could get more out of her than can one of her own

⁵ Nineteenth-Century American discourse permitted the use of this now-pejorative term.

⁶ Nineteenth-Century American discourse also permitted use of this term to describe present-day Blacks and African-Americans.

color. It is not so, and the whole free history of Haïti proves it not to be so. Even if it were true that a white man could, by reason of his alleged superiority, gain something extra from the servility of Haïti, it would be the height of meanness for a great nation like the United States to take advantage of such servility on the part of a weak nation. The American people are too great to be small, and they should ask nothing of Haïti on grounds less just and reasonable than those upon which they would ask anything of France or England. Is the weakness of a nation a reason for our robbing it ? Are we to take advantage, not only of its weakness, but of its fears? Are we to wring from it by dread of our power what we cannot obtain by appeals to its justice and reason? If this is the policy of this great nation, I own that my assailants were right when they said that I was not the man to represent the United States in Haïti.

“I am charged with sympathy for Haïti. I am not ashamed of that charge ; but no man can say with truth that my sympathy with Haïti stood between me and any honorable duty that I owed to the United States or to any citizen of the United States.

“The attempt has been made to prove me indifferent to the acquisition of a naval station in Haïti, and unable to grasp the importance to American commerce and to American influence of such a station in the Caribbean Sea. The fact is, that when some of these writers were in their petticoats, I had comprehended the value of such an acquisition, both in respect to American commerce and to American influence. The policy of obtaining such a station is not new. I supported Gen. Grant's ideas on this subject against the powerful opposition of my honored and revered friend Charles Sumner, more than twenty years ago, and proclaimed it on a hundred platforms and to thousands of my fellow-citizens. I said then that it was a shame to American statesmanship that, while almost every other great nation in the world had secured a foothold and had power in the Caribbean Sea, where it could anchor in its own bays and moor in its own

harbors, we, who stood at the very gate of that sea, had there no anchoring ground anywhere. I was for the acquisition of Samana,⁸ and of Santo Domingo herself, if she wished to come to us. While slavery existed, I was opposed to all schemes for the extension of American power and influence. But since its abolition I have gone with him who goes farthest for such extension. "But the pivotal and fundamental charge made by my accusers is that I wasted a whole year in fruitless negotiations for a coaling-station at the Môle St. Nicolas, and allowed favorable opportunities for obtaining it to pass unimproved, so that it was necessary at last for the United States Government to take the matter out of my hands, and send a special commissioner to Haïti, in the person of Rear-Admiral Gherardi, to negotiate for the Môle. A statement more false than this never dropped from lip or pen. I here and now declare, without hesitation or qualification or fear of contradiction, that there is not one word of truth in this charge. If I do not in this state the truth, I may be easily contradicted and put to open shame. I therefore affirm that at no time during the first year of my residence in Haïti was I charged with the duty or invested with any authority by the President of the United States, or by the Secretary of State, to negotiate with Haïti for a United States naval station at the Môle St. Nicolas, or anywhere else in that country. Where no duty was imposed, no duty was neglected. It is not for a diplomat to run before he is sent, especially in matters involving large consequences like those implied in extending our power into a neighboring country.

"Here, then, let me present the plain facts in the case. They, better than anything else I can say, vindicate my conduct in connection with this question.

⁸ Province in present-day Dominican Republic: a country that neighbors Haiti in the Caribbean

“On the 26th of January, 1891, Rear-Admiral Gherardi, having arrived at Port au Prince, sent one of his under-officers on shore to the United States Legation⁹, to invite me on board of his flagship, the Philadelphia. I complied with the invitation, although I knew that, in strict politeness, it would have been more appropriate for Admiral Gherardi himself to come to me. I felt disinclined, however, to stand upon ceremony or to endeavor to correct the manners of an American admiral. Having long since decided to my own satisfaction that no expression of American prejudice or slight on account of my color could diminish my self-respect or disturb my equanimity,¹⁰ I went on board as requested, and there for the first time learned that I was to have some connection with negotiations for a United States coaling-station at the Môle St. Nicolas; and this information was imparted to me by Rear-Admiral Gherardi. He told me in his peculiarly emphatic manner that he had been duly appointed a United States special commissioner; that his mission was to obtain a naval station at the Môle St. Nicolas; and that it was the wish of Mr. Blaine and Mr. Tracy, and also of the President of the United States, that I should earnestly co-operate with him in accomplishing this object. He further made me acquainted with the dignity of his position, and I was not slow in recognizing it.

“In reality, some time before the arrival of Admiral Gherardi on this diplomatic scene, I was made acquainted with the fact of his appointment. There was at Port au Prince an individual, of whom we shall hear more elsewhere, acting as agent of a distinguished firm in New York, who appeared to be more fully initiated into the secrets of the State Department at Washington than I was, and who knew, or said he knew, all about the appointment of Admiral Gherardi,

⁹ First American public property outside the United States, commemorates cultural and diplomatic relations between the United States and the Kingdom of Morocco

¹⁰ Composure, evenness of temper

whose arrival he diligently heralded in advance, and carefully made public in all the political and business circles to which he had access. He stated that I was discredited at Washington, had, in fact, been suspended and recalled, and that Admiral Gherardi had been duly commissioned to take my place. This news was sudden and far from flattering. It is unnecessary to say that it placed me in an unenviable position, both before the community of Port au Prince and before the government of Haïti. It had, however, the advantage, so far as I was able to believe anything so anomalous, of preparing me for the advent of my successor, and of softening the shock of my fall from my high estate. My connection with this negotiation, as all may see, was very humble, secondary and subordinate. The glory of success or the shame of defeat was to belong to the new minister. I was made subject to the commissioner. This was not quite so bad as the New York agent had prepared me to expect, but it was not what I thought I deserved and what my position as minister called for at the hands of my government. Strangely enough, all my instructions concerning the Môle came to me through my newly constituted superior. He was fresh from the face of our Secretary of State, knew his most secret intentions and the wants and wishes of the government, and I, naturally enough, received the law from his lips.

“The situation suggested the resignation of my office as due to my honor ; but reflection soon convinced me that such a course would subject me to a misconstruction more hurtful than any which, in the circumstances, could justly arise from remaining at my post. The government had decided that a special commissioner was needed in Haïti. No charges were brought against me, and it was not for me to set up my wisdom or my resentment as a safer rule of action than that prescribed by the wisdom of my government. Besides, I did not propose to be pushed out of office in this way. I therefore resolved to co-operate with the special commissioner in good faith and in all earnestness, and did so to the best of my ability.

“It was first necessary, in furtherance of the mission of Admiral Gherardi, to obtain for him as early as possible an interview with Mr. Firmin, the Haitian Minister of Foreign Affairs, and with His Excellency Florvil Hyppolite, the President of Haïti. This, by reason of my position as minister and my good relations with the government of Haïti, I accomplished only two days after the arrival of the admiral. Not even my accusers can charge me with tardiness in obeying in this, or in anything else, the orders of my superior. In acting under him I had put aside the fact of the awkward position in which the officious agent had placed me, and the still more galling¹¹ fact that the instructions I received had not reached me from the State Department in the usual and appropriate way, as also the fact that I had been in some degree subjected to the authority of an officer who had not, like myself, been duly appointed by the President and confirmed by the Senate of the United States, and yet one whose name and bearing proclaimed him practically the man having full command. Neither did I allow anything like a feeling of offended dignity to diminish my zeal and alacrity in carrying out his instructions. I consoled myself with the thought that I was acting like a good soldier, promptly and faithfully executing the orders of my superior, and obeying the will of my government. Our first conference with President Hyppolite and his foreign secretary was held at the palace at Port au Prince on the 28th of January, 1891. At this conference, which was, in fact, the real beginning of the negotiations for the Môle St. Nicolas, the wishes of our government were made known to the government of Haïti by Rear-Admiral Gherardi; and I must do him the justice to say that he stated the case with force and ability. If anything was omitted or insisted upon calculated to defeat the object in view, this defect must be looked for in the admiral's address, for he was the principal speaker, as he was also the principal negotiator.

¹¹ Annoying; humiliating

“Admiral Gherardi based our claim for this concession upon the ground of services rendered by the United States to the Hyppolite revolution. He claimed it also on the ground of promises made to our government by Hyppolite and Firmin through their agents while the revolution was in progress, and affirmed that but for the support of our government the revolution would have failed. I supplemented his remarks, not in opposition to his views, but with the intention of impressing the government of Haïti with the idea that the concession asked for was in the line of good neighborhood and advanced civilization, and in every way consistent with the autonomy of Haïti; urging that the concession would be a source of strength rather than of weakness to the Haïtian government; that national isolation was a policy of the past; that the necessity for it in Haïti, for which there was an apology at the commencement of her existence, no longer exists ; that her relation to the world and that of the world to her are not what they were when her independence was achieved ; that her true policy now is to touch the world at all points that make for civilization and commerce; and that, instead of asking in alarm what will happen if a naval station be conceded to the United States, it should ask, ‘What will happen if such a naval station be not conceded ?’ I insisted that there was far more danger to be apprehended to the stability of the existing government from allowing the rumor to float in the air that it was about to sell out the country, than by granting the lease of the Môle and letting the country know precisely what had been done and the reasons in the premises for the same ; that a fact accomplished carries with it a power to promote acquiescence ; and I besought them to meet the question with courage.

“In replying to us, Mr. Firmin demanded to know on which of the two grounds we based our claim for the possession of this naval station. If it were demanded, he said, upon any pledge made by President Hyppolite and himself, he denied the existence of any such promise or pledge,

and insisted that, while the offer of certain advantages had been made to our government, the government at Washington had not at the time accepted them. The letter in proof of the different view was, he said, only a copy of the original letter, and the original letter was never accepted by the American Government.

“This position of Mr. Firmin's was resisted by Admiral Gherardi, who contended with much force that, while there was no formal agreement consummated between the two governments, Haïti was nevertheless bound, since the assistance for which she asked had made Hyppolite President of Haïti. Without intending to break the force of the admiral's contention at this point, I plainly saw the indefensible attitude in which he was placing the government of the United States in representing our government as interfering by its navy with the affairs of a neighboring country, covertly assisting in putting down one government and setting up another; and I therefore adhered to the grounds upon which I based our demand for a coaling-station at the Môle. I spoke in the interest and in support of the honor of the United States. It did not strike me that what was claimed by Admiral Gherardi to have been done – though I did not say as much – is the work for which the United States is armed, equipped, manned and supported by the American people. It was alleged that, though our government did not authorize Rear-Admiral Gherardi to overthrow Légitime¹² and to set up Hyppolite as President of Haïti, it gave him the wink, and left him to assume the responsibility. I did not accept this as a foundation upon which I could base my diplomacy. If this was a blunder on my part, it was a blunder of which I am not ashamed, and it was committed in the interest of my country.

¹² François Denys Légitime was a Haitian general who served as President of Haiti from 1888 to 1889.

“At the close of this conference we were asked by Mr. Firmin to put into writing our request for the Môle, and the terms upon which we asked its concession.¹³

‘Continued Negotiations for the Môle St. Nicolas’¹⁴

“At a meeting subsequent to the one already described, application for a United States naval station at the Môle St. Nicolas was made in due form to Mr. Firmin, the Haiitian Minister of Foreign Affairs. At his request, as already stated, this application was presented to him in writing. It was prepared on board of the Philadelphia, the flagship of Rear-Admiral Bancroft Gherardi, and bore his signature alone. I neither signed it nor was asked to sign it, although it met my entire approval. I make this statement not in the way of complaint or grievance, but simply to show what, at the time, was my part, and what was not my part, in this important negotiation, the failure of which has unjustly been laid to my charge. Had the Môle been acquired, in response to this paper, the credit of success, according to the record, would have properly belonged to the gallant admiral in whose name it was demanded; for in it I had neither part nor lot.

¹³ The periodical version included this additional sentence, forecasting a subsequent installment:

‘What followed will be told here after’.

¹⁴ In the original periodical version, this text bore the same title as the first installment but with the added designation Part II’.

“At this point, curiously enough, and unfortunately for the negotiations, the Haitian Minister, who is an able man and well skilled in the technicalities of diplomacy, asked to see the commission of Admiral Gherardi and to read his letter of instructions. When these were presented to Mr. Firmin, he, after carefully reading them, pronounced them insufficient, and held that by them the government of the United States would not be bound by any convention which Haïti might make with the admiral. This position of Mr. Firmin's was earnestly and stoutly opposed by Admiral Gherardi, who insisted that his instructions were full, complete, and amply sufficient. Unfortunately, however, he did not leave the matter in controversy without intimating that he thought that Mr. Firmin might be insincere in raising such an objection, and that he was urging it simply with a view to cause unnecessary delay. This was more like the blunt admiral than the discreet diplomat. Such an imputation¹⁵ was obviously out of place, and not likely to smooth the way to a successful proceeding; quite the reverse. Mr. Firmin insisted that his ground was well and honestly taken.

“Here, therefore, the negotiation was brought to a sudden halt, and the question for us then was, What shall be done next? Three ways were open to us: first, to continue to insist upon the completeness of the authority of Admiral Gherardi; second, to abandon the scheme of a naval station altogether; third, to apply to the government at Washington for the required letter of credence. It was my opinion that it was hardly worth while to continue to insist upon the sufficiency of the admiral's papers, since it seemed useless to contend about mere technicalities ; more especially as we were now in telegraphic connection with the United States, and could in the course of a few days easily obtain the proper and required papers.

¹⁵ Attribute

“Besides, I held that a prompt compliance with the demand of the Haïtian Government for a perfect letter of credence would be not only the easiest way out of the difficulty, but the wisest policy by which to accomplish the end we sought, since such compliance on our part with even what might fairly be considered an unreasonable demand would make refusal by Haïti to grant the Môle all the more difficult.

“I did not understand Admiral Gherardi to combat this opinion of mine, for he at once acted upon it, and caused an officer from his flagship to go with me to my house and prepare a telegram to be sent to Washington for the required letter of credence. To this telegram he, two days thereafter, received answer that such a letter would be immediately sent by a Clyde steamer to Gonaïves¹⁶, and thither the admiral went to receive his expected letter. But, from some unexplained cause, no such letter came by the Clyde steamer at the time appointed, and two months intervened before the desired credentials arrived. This unexpected delay proved to be very mischievous and unfavorable to our getting the Môle, since it gave rise among the Haïtien people to much speculation and many disquieting rumors prejudicial to the project. It was said that Admiral Gherardi had left Port au Prince in anger, and had gone to take possession of the Môle without further parley; that the American flag was already floating over our new naval station; that the United States wanted the Môle as an entering wedge to obtaining possession of the whole island; with much else of like inflammatory nature. Although there was no truth in all this, it had the unhappy effect among the masses of stirring up suspicion and angry feelings towards the United States, and of making it more difficult than it might otherwise have been for the government of Haïti to grant the required concession.

¹⁶ City in western Haiti, on the northeastern shore of the Gulf of La Gonâve

“Finally, after this long interval of waiting, during which the flagship of Admiral Gherardi was reported at different points, sometimes at Gonaïves, sometimes at the Môle, and sometimes at Kingston, Jamaica, the desired letter of credence arrived. The next day I was again summoned on board the Philadelphia, and there was shown me a paper, signed by the President of the United States and by the Secretary of State, authorizing myself, as Minister Resident to Haïti, and Rear-Admiral Gherardi, as special commissioner, to negotiate with such persons as Haïti might appoint, for the purpose of concluding a convention by which we should obtain a lease of the Môle St. Nicolas as a United States naval station.

“It may be here remarked that the letter of credence signed by President Harrison and by the Secretary of State differed in two respects from the former and rejected letter under which we had previously acted. First, it charged me, equally with Admiral Gherardi, with the duty of negotiation; and secondly, it was an application for a naval station pure and simple, without limitation and without conditions.

“Before presenting to Haïti this new letter, which had the advantage of being free from the conditions specified in the old one, the question arose between the admiral and myself as to whether or not we should begin our new negotiations, under our new commission, separate and entirely apart from all that had been attempted under the instructions contained in the old letter. On this point I differed with the admiral. I took the position that we should ignore the past altogether, and proceed according to the instructions of the new letter alone, unencumbered by any terms or limitations contained in the old letter. I felt sure that there were features in the conditions of the old letter which would be met by the representatives of Haïti with strong objections. But the admiral and his able lieutenant insisted that the present letter did not exclude the conditions of the old one, but was, in its nature, only supplementary to them, and hence that

this was simply a continuation of what had gone before. It was therefore decided to proceed with the negotiations on the basis of both the old and the new letter. Under the former letter of instructions our terms were precise and explicit; under the latter we were left largely to our own discretion: we were simply to secure from the government of Haïti a lease of the Môle St. Nicolas for a naval station.

“The result is known. Haïti refused to grant the lease, and alleged that to do so was impossible under the hard terms imposed in the previous letter of instructions. I do not know that our government would have accepted a naval station from Haïti upon any other or less stringent terms or conditions than those exacted in our first letter of instructions; but I do know that the main grounds alleged by Haïti for its refusal were the conditions set forth in this first letter of instructions, one of which is expressed as follows : ‘That so long as the United States may be the lessee of the Môle St. Nicolas, the government of Haïti will not lease or otherwise dispose of any port or harbor or other territory in its dominions, or grant any special privileges or rights of use therein, to any other power, state, or government.’ This was not only a comprehensive limitation of the power of Haïti over her own territory, but a denial to all others of that which we claimed for ourselves.

“But no one cause fully explains our failure to get a naval station at the Môle. One fundamental element in our non-success was found, not in any aversion to the United States or in any indifference on my part, as has often been charged, but in the government of Haïti itself. It was evidently timid. With every disposition to oblige us, it had not the courage to defy the well-known, deeply rooted, and easily excited prejudices and traditions of the Haïtian people. Nothing

is more repugnant to the thoughts and feelings of the masses of that country than the alienation of a single rood¹⁷ of their territory to a foreign power.

“This sentiment originated, very naturally, in the circumstances in which Haïti began her national existence. The whole Christian world was at that time against her. The Caribbean Sea was studded with communities hostile to her. They were slave-holding. She, by her bravery and her blood, was free. Her existence was, therefore, a menace to them, and theirs was a menace to her. France, England, Spain, Portugal, and Holland, as well as the United States, were wedded to the slave system which Haïti had, by arms, thrown off ; and hence she was regarded as an outcast, and was outlawed by the Christian world. Though time and events have gone far to change this relation of hers to the outside world, the sentiment that originated in the beginning of her existence continues, on both sides, until this day. It was this that stood like a wall of granite against our success. Other causes co-operated, but this was the principal cause. Of course our peculiar and intense prejudice against the colored race was not forgotten. Our contrast to other nations, in this respect, is often dwelt upon in Haïti to our disadvantage. In no part of Europe will a Haïtian be insulted because of his color, and Haïtians well know that this is not the case in the United States.

“Another influence unfavorable to our obtaining the coveted naval station at the Môle was the tone of the New York press on the subject. It more than hinted that, once in possession of the Môle, the United States would control the destiny of Haïti. Torn and rent by revolution as she has been and still is, Haïti yet has a large share of national pride, and scorns the idea that she needs or will submit to the rule of a foreign power. Some of her citizens would doubtless be glad

¹⁷ A crucifix

of American rule, but the overwhelming majority would burn their towns and freely shed their blood over their ashes to prevent such a consummation.

“Not the least, perhaps, among the collateral causes of our non-success was the minatory¹⁸ attitude assumed by us while conducting the negotiation. What wisdom was there in confronting Haïti at such a moment with a squadron of large ships of war with a hundred cannon and two thousand men? This was done, and it was naturally construed into a hint to Haïti that if we could not, by appeals to reason and friendly feeling, obtain what we wanted, we could obtain it by a show of force. We appeared before the Haïtians, and before the world, with the pen in one hand and the sword in the other. This was not a friendly and considerate attitude for a great government like ours to assume when asking a concession from a small and weak nation like Haïti. It was ill timed and out of all proportion to the demands of the occasion. It was also done under a total misapprehension of the character of the people with whom we had to deal. We should have known that, whatever else the Haïtian people may be, they are not cowards, and hence are not easily scared.

“In the face of all these obvious and effective causes of failure, is it not strange that our intelligent editors and our nautical newspaper writers could not have found for the American Government and people a more rational cause for the failure of the negotiations for the Môle St. Nicolas than that of my color, indifference, and incompetency to deal with a question of such a magnitude? Were I disposed to exchange the position of accused for that of accuser, I could find ample material to sustain me in that position. Other persons did much to create conditions unfavorable to our success, but I leave to their friends the employment of such personal assaults.

¹⁸ Menacing, expressing or conveying a threat

“On the theory that I was the cause of this failure, we must assume that Haïti was willing to grant the Môle ; that the timidity¹⁹ of the Haïtian Government was all right; that the American prejudice was all right; that the seven ships of war in the harbor of Port au Prince were all right; that Rear-Admiral Gherardi was all right, and that I alone was all wrong; and, moreover, that but for me the Môle St. Nicolas, like an over-ripe apple shaken by the wind, would have dropped softly into our national basket. I will not enlarge upon this absurd assumption, but will leave the bare statement of it to the intelligent reader, that it may perish by its flagrant contradiction of well-known facts and by its own absurdity.

“I come now to another cause of complaint against me, scarcely less serious in the minds of those who now assail me than the charge of having defeated the lease of the Môle St. Nicolas; namely, the failure of what is publicly known as the Clyde contract. Soon after my arrival in Haïti I was put in communication with an individual calling himself the agent of the highly respectable mercantile firm of William P. Clyde & Co. of New York. He was endeavoring to obtain a subsidy of a half million dollars from the government of Haïti to enable this firm to ply²⁰ a line of steamers between New York and Haïti. From the first this agent assumed toward me a dictatorial attitude. He claimed to be a native of South Carolina, and it was impossible for him to conceal his contempt for the people whose good will it was his duty to seek. Between this agent and the United States Government I found myself somewhat in the position of a servant between two masters : either one of them, separately and apart, might be served acceptably ; but to serve both satisfactorily at the same time and place might be a difficult task, if not an impossible one. There were times when I was compelled to prefer the requirements of the one to the ardent

¹⁹ Lack of courage or confidence

²⁰ To keep furnishing or supplying something

wishes of the other, and I thought as between this agent and the United States, I chose to serve the latter.

“The trouble between us came about in this way : Mr. Firmin, the Haïtian Minister of Foreign Affairs, had objected to granting the Clyde concession on the ground that, if it were granted and this heavy drain were made upon the treasury of his country, Mr. Douglass stood ready to present and to press upon Haïti the payment of the claims of many other American citizens, and that this would greatly embarrass the newly organized government of President Hyppolite. In view of this objection, the zealous agent in question came to me and proposed that I should go to Mr. Firmin, in my quality of Minister Resident and Consul-General of the United States, and assure him that, if he would only grant the Clyde concession, I, on my part, would withhold and refrain from pressing the claims of other American citizens.

“The proposition shocked me. It sounded like the words of Satan on the mountain, and I thought it time to call a halt. I was in favor of the Clyde contract, but I could not see what I had said or done to make it possible for any man to make to me a proposal so plainly dishonest and scandalous. I refused to do any such thing. Here was my first offence, and it at once stamped me as an unprofitable servant. It did not seem to occur to this agent that he had made to me a shameful, dishonest and shocking proposition. Blinded by zeal or by an influence still more misleading, he seemed to see in it only an innocent proposal. He thereafter looked upon me as an unworthy ally, and duly reported me as such to his master and to other influential persons. He could not understand my conduct as proceeding from other or better motives than that of over-affection for the Haïtians. In his eyes I was, from that time, more a Haïtian than an American, and I soon saw myself so characterized in American journals.

“The refusal to compromise and postpone the just claims of other American citizens for that of his master's contract was not, however, my only offence. On obtaining a leave of absence from my post, in July, 1890, I, of course, as was my duty, called upon President Hyppolite before my departure, for the purpose of paying to him my respects. This agent at once sought me and desired me to make use of this visit of mere ceremony as an occasion to press anew the Clyde contract upon the attention of the President. This I could not properly do, especially as I had on previous occasions repeatedly urged its consideration upon him. The President already knew well enough my sense of the importance to Haïti of this measure, not only as a means of enlarging her commerce and of promoting her civilization, but also as a guaranty of the stability of her government. Nevertheless, my refusal to urge in so unbecoming a manner a demand already repeatedly urged upon the attention of the Haïtian Government was made use of by this agent to my injury, both at the State Department and with Mr. Clyde's firm. I was reported at Washington and to various persons in high places as unfriendly to this concession.

“When at last it appeared to the agent that the government of Haïti was, as he thought, stubbornly blind to its own interests, and that it would not grant the contract in question, he called at the United States Legation and expressed to me his disappointment and disgust at the delay of Haïti in accepting his scheme. He said he did not believe that the government really intended to do anything for his firm ; that he himself had spent much time and money in promoting the concession ; and as he did not think that Mr. Clyde ought to be made to pay for the time thus lost and the expense incurred by the delay and dallying²¹ of the Haïtian Government, he should therefore demand his pay of Haïti. This determination struck me as very odd, and I jocosely replied :

²¹ Act or move slowly

“ ‘Then, sir, as they will not allow you to put a hot poker²² down their backs, you mean to make them pay you for heating it!’

“This rejoinder²³ was my final destruction in the esteem of this zealous advocate. He saw at once that he could not count upon my assistance in making this new demand. I was both surprised at his proposal and amused by it, and wondered that he could think it possible that he could get this pay. It seemed to me that Haïti would scout²⁴ the idea at once. She had not sent for him. She had not asked him to stay. He was there for purposes of his own and not for any purpose of hers. I could not see why Haïti should pay him for coming, going or staying. But this gentleman knew better than I the generous character of the people with whom he had to deal, and he followed them up till they actually paid him five thousand dollars in gold.

“But compliance with his demand proved a woful²⁵ (sic) mistake on the part of Haïti, and, in fact, nonsense. This man, after getting his money, went away, but he did not stay away. He was soon back again to press his scheme with renewed vigor. His demands were now to be complied with or he would make, not Rome, but Haïti, howl. To him it was nothing that Haïti was already wasted by repeated revolutions; nothing that she was already staggering under the weight of a heavy national debt; nothing that she herself ought to be the best judge of her ability to pour out a half million of dollars in this new and, to her, doubtful enterprise ; nothing that she had heard his arguments in its favor a hundred times over; nothing that in her judgment she had

²² A metal rod with a handle, used for prodding and stirring an open fire

²³ A sharp, witty reply or answer

²⁴ To examine, inspect, or observe for the purpose of obtaining information;

²⁵ Woeful

far more pressing needs for her money than the proposed investment in this steamship subsidy, as recommended by him; nothing that she had told him plainly that she was afraid to add to her pecuniary²⁶ burdens this new and onerous one ; and nothing that she had just paid him five thousand dollars in gold to get rid of his importunities²⁷.

“Now, while I was in favor of Haïti's granting the subsidy asked for in the name of Clyde & Co., and thought it would be in many ways a good thing for Haïti to have the proposed line of steamers for which a subsidy was asked, I had, and I now have, nothing but disgust for the method by which this scheme was pressed upon Haïti.

“I must say in conclusion that, while, as already intimated, it does not appear certain that Haïti would have leased us the Môle on any conditions whatever, it is certain that the application for it was ill timed in more respects than one. It was especially unfortunate for us that the Clyde concession was applied for in advance of our application for a lease of the Môle. Whatever else may be said of the Haïtians, this is true of them: they are quick to detect a fault and to distinguish a trick from an honest proceeding. To them the preference given to the interests of an individual firm over those of the United States seemed to wear a sinister aspect. In the opinion of many intelligent persons in Haïti, had a lease of the Môle been asked for in advance of the concession to Mr. Clyde, the application for it might have been successful. This, however, is not my opinion. I do not now think that any earthly power outside of absolute force could have gotten for us a naval station at the Môle St. Nicolas. Still, to all appearances, the conditions of success were more favorable before than after the Clyde contract was urged upon Haïti. Prior to this, the

²⁶ Monetary

²⁷ Persistence, tenacity

country, weary of war, was at peace. Ambitious leaders had not begun openly to conspire. The government under Hyppolite was newly organized. Confidence in its stability was unimpaired. It was, naturally enough, reaching out its hand to us for friendly recognition. Our good offices during the war were fresh in its memory. France, England and Germany were not ready to give it recognition. In fact, all the conditions conspired to influence Haïti to listen to our request for a coaling-station at the Môle St. Nicolas. But instead of a proposition for a coaling-station at the Môle St. Nicolas, there was presented one for a subsidy to an individual steamship company. All must see that the effect of this was calculated to weaken our higher claim and to place us at a disadvantage before Haïti and before all the world.

“And now, since the American people have been made thoroughly acquainted with one view of this question, I know of no interest which will suffer and no just obligation which will be impaired by the presentation of such facts as I have here submitted to the public judgment. If in this my course is thought to be unusual, it should be remembered that the course pursued towards me by the press has been unusual, and that they who had no censure for the latter should have none for the former.”

Source Text:

Douglass, Frederick, ‘Minister to Haïti’ and ‘Continued Negotiations for the Môle St. Nicolas’ in Frederick Douglass and George L. Ruffin, (eds.), *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: His Early Life As a Slave, His Escape from Bondage, and His Complete History to the Present Time, Including His Connection with the Anti-Slavery Movement* (Boston: De Wolfe, Fiske, 1895), 727-52.

References

Douglass, Frederick, 'God Almighty Made but One Race: An Interview Given in Washington, D.C. on 25 January 1884', in John W. Blassingame and John R. McKivigan (eds.) *The Frederick Douglass Papers*, Vol. 5 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 145-7.

Douglass, Frederick, 'Haiti and the United States. Inside History of the Negotiations for the Môle St. Nicolas. I', *The North American Review*, 153.118 (September 1891), 337-45.

Douglass, Frederick, 'Haiti and the United States. Inside History of the Negotiations for the Mole St. Nicolas. Part II', *The North American Review*, 153.419 (October 1891), 450-9.

Douglass, Frederick, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (New York: Dover Publications, 1995).

Koenigs, Thomas, 'The "Mysterious Depths" of Slave Interiority: Fiction and Intersubjective Knowledge in The Heroic Slave', *J19: The Journal of Nineteenth-Century Americanists* 8.2 (2020), 193-217.