

Oklahoma Bar Association Law Day 2026

*Successes of Freedom:*

**A comparison of the  
American and Haitian  
Revolutions**

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Two Revolutions, Two Visions of Law, Creating a Better Future

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## Abstract

*Welcome to World History,  
where the past still breathes today  
in every choice we make,  
in every path we try to pave our way.*

*As a 10th-grade student learning,  
we walked through centuries of time,  
discovering how old stories  
still shape the world we call "mine."*

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The American Revolution and Haitian Revolution both emerged from Enlightenment ideals and challenged imperial rule. Yet they pursued fundamentally different visions of equality and law for its citizens. This paper will compare the success of the American Revolution in establishing durable democratic institutions, but it continued to also preserve deep social inequalities. But, on the other hand, the Haitian Revolution achieved a far more radical transformation by abolishing slavery and redefining universal human rights. Together, these revolutions reveal contrasting paths toward liberty and the complex legacies of revolutionary change.

The late eighteenth century witnessed two of the most influential revolutions in the Atlantic world: the American Revolution (1775–1783) and the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) (Foner, 2011; Dubois, 2004). Revolutions often begin with the promise of freedom and equality, but the challenge lies in turning those ideals into lasting laws. The American Revolution and the Haitian Revolution each attempted to reshape society through legal frameworks. While the American Revolution built durable institutions that expanded political participation for some, the Haitian Revolution achieved radical equality by abolishing slavery and redefining citizenship for all. Together, they reveal two very different visions of what a revolution could accomplish.

The American Revolution created a stable constitutional democracy but left slavery and inequality unresolved, while the Haitian Revolution directly abolished slavery and established the first Black-led republic. In terms of achieving freedom and equality through law, the Haitian Revolution was more successful, though the United States built longer-lasting political institutions.

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For nearly eight years, the American Revolution (1775–1783) sought independence from Britain and the creation of a system of selfgovernment. (American Revolution, 2025). Its most significant legal achievements reflected this goal. The Declaration of Independence (1776) articulated ideals of natural rights and human equality, though in practice these principles applied primarily to white men (Foner, 2011; Hunt, 2007). The U.S. Constitution (1787) established a federal republic grounded in checks and balances, aiming to protect liberty through a stable legal framework. This structure was further strengthened by the Bill of Rights (1791), which guaranteed fundamental freedoms such as speech, religion, and the right to a fair trial. Yet the Revolution’s achievements were accompanied by profound limitations. Slavery not only persisted but expanded in the South, while women and Indigenous peoples remained excluded from political rights and full citizenship. In the end, the American revolution succeeded in building durable institutions for democratic governance, but its vision of equality was partial and deeply constrained (Foner, 2011).

The Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) was one of the most transformations of an uprising in world history (Dubois, 2004) and (Haitian Revolution, 2025). It was about law, liberation, and the struggle for equality. That is unlike many other contemporary revolutions that sought after political autonomy such as self government while preserving existing social hierarchies. The Haitian Revolution was unique because it aimed to put an end to something that was harming people. Enslaved Africans were in the French colony, located in the western portion of the Caribbean, Saint-Domingue rose up to claim freedom for themselves to redefine the meaning of human rights in the Atlantic world.

One of the Revolution’s most significant legal achievements was the abolition of slavery. Between 1793 and 1804, through a span of eleven years, Haiti appears to be the first nation ever to permanently put an end to slavery and to ensure that the emancipation could never be

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reversed. This achievement was reinforced by the Constitution of 1801, drafted under the leadership of Toussaint Louverture. The document declared that all citizens, regardless of race, were equal under the law, an unprecedented legal statement at a time when racial hierarchy structured nearly every society in the Americas (Dubois, 2004; Geggus, 2002). The Revolution culminated in Haitian independence in 1804, establishing the first Black led republic and the first state founded on the principle of universal emancipation.

Despite these groundbreaking accomplishments, the new nation faced severe limitations. Haiti encountered immediate economic isolation and hostility from slaveholding nations, which feared the spread of revolutionary ideas to their own enslaved populations (Geggus, 2002). This isolation, combined with the devastation of years of warfare, created longterm economic challenges. Political instability also followed independence, as leaders struggled to build a new state amid external pressure and internal divisions.

Thus far the successes of the Haitian Revolution remain profound. It achieved the most radical and immediate form of equality of any revolution of its era, directly fulfilling enlightenment ideals that other nations only applied selectively. Haiti's legal and political actions demonstrated that enslaved people could not only overthrow a colonial empire but also construct a new society grounded in universal freedom.

In comparing the Haitian and American Revolutions, the contrast becomes clear. The American Revolution built strong and durable institutions but compromised on slavery and limited equality to a narrow segment of the population (Foner, 2011; Hunt, 2007). The Haitian Revolution, by contrast, used law as a tool to abolish slavery and enforce racial equality, even though it struggled with external hostility and internal instability (Dubois, 2004; Geggus, 2002).

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Together, these revolutions reveal two distinct visions of how law can shape a new society focused on institutional stability, the other on radical social transformation.

The Haitian Revolution can be seen as more successful in fulfilling the immediate ideals of freedom. It brought slavery to a definitive end and established the first legal order in the Americas to permanently outlaw the institution. The Haitians ensured that the emancipation could not ever be reversed. Then it, Haiti, created a revolutionary model of equality that was could not be compared to any other country. However, both revolutions reveal that building fair and inclusive laws after having mayhem is amazingly difficult. There are diverse groups of people that hold competing interests and perhaps long-standing unfairness to some.

In conclusion, I think the Haitian Revolution was more effective in achieving freedom and equality through law. Nonetheless, the American Revolution did stand out in constructing long-lasting political structures that would continue even today. Both together, these revolutions highlight the enduring tension between the ideals of liberty and the complex realities of implementing just laws for all members of a society. To emphasize the outcome I think the American Revolution helped to create a stable and lawful constitutional order. But the Haitian Revolution changed the social order itself by transforming the country, ending slavery and challenging a more global system of racial domination. In contrast, these movements show both the successes and limitations of revolutionary lawmaking.

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*We studied many viewpoints  
even those that spark debate  
to learn that truth has layers  
and perspective shifts our fate.*

*So as we close this chapter,  
one message rings clear and bright:  
understanding yesterday  
helps us build tomorrow right.*

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