



BEN FRANKLIN'S WORLD

Episode 433: Ronald Angelo Johnson “Entangled Revolutions: Haiti, France, and the American Revolution”

[00:00:00] Announcer: You’re listening to an Airwave Media podcast.

[00:00:04] Ronald Angelo Johnson: White plantation owners said, “I fought in that war. I paid money in that war already. I have done my part. So if you need more, you should go and tax more and put more burdens on the people of color population, the Black population, because we gave at the office, right, using an idiom, we already gave.” It really was a, “we’ve done enough. Why do you keep coming to us for defeat that wasn’t our fault.”

And in some ways you do see a bit of that in British North America. Where the colonists have said, we’ve done our part already. Why are you making us pay? In Saint-Domingue, you had a population who could be burdened upon to say, “you should go burden them and not us.”

And that was a huge part of what was taking place in the post treaty years in Saint-Domingue, that white inhabitants were placing the burden for what happened, or at least the recompense for what happened, on the Black population.

[00:01:09] Liz Covart: Hello and welcome to episode 433 of *Ben Franklin’s World*, the podcast dedicated to helping you learn more about how the people and events of our early American past have shaped the present-day world we live in. And I’m your host, Liz Covart.

Over the last two episodes, we’ve explored some of the international dimensions of the American Revolution. First, we visited with John Ferling in episode 332, who showed us how European rivalries and French diplomacy shaped the outcome of the American War for Independence. Then we revisited the life of the Marquis de Lafayette, a young French aristocrat whose idealism and bravery helped turn those diplomatic ties into real support on the battlefield.

But France’s involvement in the American Revolution wasn’t limited to ships, treaties, or even Lafayette. It also came through the Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue, the island we now know as Haiti. Saint-Domingue was the wealthiest colony in the French empire. Its wealth came from the enslaved Africans who worked on its brutal sugar and coffee plantations.



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And yet, in 1779, more than five hundred Black soldiers from Saint-Domingue volunteered to fight for American liberty at the Siege of Savannah. So what did this moment mean for them, for France, and for the ideas of freedom and equality? Ronald Angelo Johnson, the Ralph and Bessie Mae Lynn Chair of History at Baylor University, joins us to answer these questions with details from his book, *Entangled Alliances: Racialized Freedom and Atlantic Diplomacy During the American Revolution*.

Now, during our exploration, Ron reveals why the American and Haitian revolutions should be studied together side by side, how French imperial policy reshaped Saint-Domingue's racial and social structures after 1763, and what the arrival of Black soldiers in revolutionary Georgia tells us about liberty, diplomacy, and revolution in the Atlantic world.

But first, are you ready to take your love of history to the next level? Join me and a vibrant community of fellow history lovers inside the History Explorers Club, a historian led online membership for curious adults who want to explore early America with more confidence, context, and community. Inside the club you can join live conversations with guest historians, bring your questions to our monthly calls with me, and build your skills in quarterly How Historians Know workshops. And because real life is real life, everything is recorded. So you can stay connected even if you can't attend live.

So if you're curious about early America, but tired of sorting fact from hot take, join the History Explorers Club at historyexplorers.club. That's historyexplorers.club. Alright, are you ready to take our exploration of the international American Revolution into the French Caribbean? Allow me to reintroduce you to our guest historian.

Our guest is the Ralph and Bessie Mae Lynn Chair of History at Baylor University and the co-editor of the *Journal of the Early American Republic*. His research expertise is in early American history, diplomatic history, the African diaspora, and Haiti. He's written two books, *Diplomacy in Black and White: John Adams, Toussaint Louverture, and Their Atlantic World Alliance*, which you may recall from episode 52, and most recently *Entangled Alliances: Racialized Freedom and Atlantic Diplomacy During the American Revolution*. Welcome back to *Ben Franklin's World*. Ronald Angelo Johnson.

[00:04:54] Ronald Angelo Johnson: Oh, Liz, it is so good to be back. Thank you so much for the invitation. This is one of my favorite things to do is talking with you about history.



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[00:05:00] Liz Covart: Well, Ron, I don't know if you remember the conversation that we had in episode 361, and that was where you were part of a panel of historians and we discussed what we'd hope we'd see for commemoration, celebrations and remembrances in 2026, and during that conversation you mentioned that you were working on your book *Entangled Alliances*. And that it was going to put the Haitian Revolution and the American Revolution side by side, so that we could see these two revolutions together.

Now that's exactly what we're here to do, is to discuss how these events took place, in some ways, simultaneously with each other.

[00:05:36] Ronald Angelo Johnson: I know, and that was just such a delightful panel talking about what it meant for the 4th of July in this moment. And I think it's still relevant. So I hope your listeners will go back and take a listen to it.

But yeah, the book we talked about, it's actually has a cover and you can actually hold it and you can actually buy it. It actually became a real book

[00:05:53] Liz Covart: And it's a good book. And what I found most interesting about it, what I found most interesting about *Entangled Alliances*, is it does, as you say it's going to do. You place the Haitian Revolution alongside the American Revolution, and this feels pretty novel when most scholars who compare these revolutions still talk about how the American Revolution came first, and inspired the age of revolutions of which the Haitian Revolution played a major role in.

So I do wonder if we could start by having you tell us how you came to your idea that these revolutions, the Haitian Revolution and the American Revolution, happened fairly concurrently with each other and therefore deserve to be discussed alongside one another.

[00:06:32] Ronald Angelo Johnson: Thank you so much for that question, and I'm going to try to keep this answer a little brief, but I have to make a confession here.

This book that I ended up, was not the book that I started writing. The book that I started writing was going to be a sixty year history of connections between the United States and Haiti.



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And you and I talked about my book that talked about connections in the 1790s. And so when I started writing this book, this sixty year compendium, right, I thought, I'm going to get there and I'm going to start writing, and I'm going to find all this historiography that I can bring together to talk about Haiti and the United States during the American Revolution.

And what I found, there wasn't any. Rayford Logan wrote a book on diplomatic relations between the United States and Haiti in 1941. And that was the last real treatment of connections between the United States and Haiti during this period. And so as I'm writing my sixty-year compendium, I realized I had about 50,000 words of fresh material that had not been published.

And I thought, I'm only on chapter two, because I'd had to write stuff from scratch. And so I realized you have a historiography or a historical literature of the American Revolution on one track, and then you have a historical literature of the Haitian Revolution or Haiti on this other track. And during the American Revolution, they don't connect with each other.

And I just found a fresh set of understanding to bring together, in a way that had not been done before. So in order to write that compendium that I was going to write, I literally had to write *Entangled Alliances* to even get me started.

And when I did that, when I just stopped for a minute and began to focus on the United States in this period, so many avenues of analysis and connections opened up that I had not imagined. And it really allowed me to see things. We all learned about the American Revolution, but I really began to see the American Revolution in a much different way by looking at it from this transnational approach.

[00:08:43] Liz Covart: Well, let's dig into the ways that these two literatures, these two tracks for the American Revolution and the Haitian Revolution, should really be on the same historical track.

So would you set the scene for us, Ron? It seems key that we understand the Treaty of Paris 1763. Because that treaty not only ended the Seven Years' War, but it also brought consequences that served as catalysts for these two revolutions. So what agreements were made in the Treaty of Paris 1763? And how did these European-made agreements impact the British North American colonies and the French Caribbean colony of Saint-Domingue?



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[00:09:21] Ronald Angelo Johnson: Liz, that was one of the fascinating parts of slowing myself down and looking at the American Revolution through a different lens. Because in the book, what I do is I take the reader from 1763 to 1783. I use a twenty year period here. And by doing that, it allowed me to really slow down and focus on this treaty. This treaty of 1763, that really doesn't get a lot of historical discussion.

We talk about the Seven Years' War, and that is an incredible period, but in the book, the treaty is really important to setting the stage for what's going to happen over the next twenty years. What's going to happen to bring about an American Revolution. What's going to happen to bring about revolts throughout Saint-Domingue during the same time period.

And that treaty was celebrated in both Britain and France in ways that we've just not captured. I mean, for instance, and I'm going to try to find it here in the book for just a second, because I opened the introduction to the book with a play that was written by a French playwright, Favart—Favart in English—and it's called *The Englishman in Bordeaux*, and it was to commemorate the Treaty of 1763.

And what this play did—and it was first performed in the Palais-Royal in Paris, it's going to be performed in London, it's going to be performed in Ireland. It becomes a success because it is about a romance between two fighting families. And you get the sense of a Shakespeare, Romeo-Juliet, when you read through the play. But what Favart is trying to do is show Britain and France, who had been warring and fighting against each other across the eighteenth century, he understood the Treaty of 1763 as a way to bring these two countries together.

And so the people of France and the people of Britain really went into the next decade thinking that this piece was going to hold. And I just want to follow up with that play. That play became so important that at the Treaty of 1783 that ended the US War for Independence, including France and Britain, that same play is going to be played in the Playhouse in Saint-Domingue in Cap-Français. So like this treaty that really divided, that really brought that war to an end, had incredible consequences in the Atlantic world over the next twenty years.

[00:11:47] Liz Covart: It's really fascinating to me that the treaty was celebrated and maybe even viewed by everyday Europeans as a treaty that would end all future wars. Because if you look at it from the diplomats point of view, the diplomats who negotiated the treaty of



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1763, it really seemed like they saw it as a stopgap or a pause in Atlantic imperial fighting. And that they didn't view the Treaty of Paris of 1763 as a piece that would end all wars.

[00:12:16] Ronald Angelo Johnson: That is a really great characterization of that, because one of the things the treaty did for British leaders, it emboldened them. Because Britain was the clear victor from the Seven Years' War, and the treaty made that very clear.

The massive land gains and territories in North America, in the Caribbean, in South Asia that Britain is going to get from this treaty really left the British leaders much more confident than they had been prior to the Treaty of 1763.

And one way to look at it is what begins to happen in North America. One, the British leaders draw out the proclamation line of 1763, right? Where they really begin to tell American colonists how far west they can migrate. And I mean, there are reasons for that, but they had not done that before. And those same reasons for doing it existed before the Treaty of 1763; it is that now the British government really felt emboldened by that new victory. And many of the taxes and things that I'm sure we're going to talk about later, are going to come out of this new emboldened, British imperial rule that came out of 1763.

And there were critics. There were critics in Britain that felt the treaty did not go far enough. They felt like the British negotiators in Paris let the French off too easy. And for the next ten years, they're going to criticize that treaty because they wanted Britain to get even more than what it did.

Now on the French side, the Treaty of 1763 was a mark of humiliation. It was a mark of defeat, and it was a mark of the weakening of the French Empire. And it left, in terms of the French leadership, the French crown, the French court, it sowed an environment and atmosphere of fear of what the British could do to them if they did not change the way the French Empire was operating.

So on one hand, the Treaty of 1763 left the British with a feeling of conquerors, of conquest, and on the French side of humiliation and defeat.

[00:14:29] Liz Covart: It also left both nations with a lot of war debt. And I do think we should talk about this debt, because I think we're familiar in the American case that there was



the Sugar Act of 1764, and the Stamp Act of 1765, and then of course the Townsend Duties of 1767 and 1768.

And these were all measures passed, not just as measures of trade, but it's taxes to help pay for the ten thousand troops that Great Britain stationed along its newly expanded North American boundaries. And the British American colonists felt that this was taxation without representation, and they protested these measures, the protests of which we're very familiar with.

But as we think about this expanded revolutionary moment, Ron, what happened in Saint-Domingue? We don't typically think of other Atlantic colonies being impacted by this taxation in the post-war period that we're talking about as impacting other colonies.

[00:15:26] Ronald Angelo Johnson: Yes. That really was a part of the book that I really enjoyed writing, because as you just mentioned, I had to learn a lot about how the French were responding to the defeat.

It was almost a mirror image of what was happening in North America. Because as you just stated, in addition to the loss, the British had to spend a lot more money on defense of a lot more territory. So yes, they got a lot of territory from the Treaty of 1763, but that came at a great deal of cost to protect that extra territory.

On the French side, because they lost so much territory they felt it necessary to defend what little territory remained in the French Empire, particularly in the French Caribbean. Because going back to that idea of fear, they were really afraid that if the British got the east part of Louisiana, Spain got the west part of Louisiana, the British got Quebec, so if, if the British could take that much land, how much easier could they take these small islands across the Caribbean?

And so what happened in France, you don't get those massive taxations that we get in British North America. What you get is a demand to produce more crops that can be taxed. That is where Saint-Domingue really becomes by the 1780s the "Pearl of the Antilles." It is because it is in the 1760s that you are going to see a massive increase in sugar and coffee production on the island to make up for the lost revenue in Quebec and Louisiana.



And to fuel that type of production, that okay when you have more production, the crown taxes more, and they get more, so there was an increase in production; the taxes were already there, but now they can get more because they're producing more than they had been forced to do before. But in order to do that, in order to have that kind of production, there was a massive increase in the importation of enslaved people from Africa to fuel the production on those coffee and sugar plantations.

[00:17:36] Liz Covart: And I want us to dig into this massive importation, and the story of the increased sugar and coffee production in Saint-Domingue because the importation of more enslaved people really led to a hardening of racial lines in Saint-Domingue. That isn't something we think about on the American side because at this particular moment in time, we don't happen to see a hardening of racial lines in British North America. It happens, but not necessarily in this early revolutionary period.

Now, as Ron was saying, one of the ways that the Treaty of Paris impacted Saint-Domingue was to increase the need to import more enslaved people to meet this increased demand for coffee and sugar. And this increased demand, this increased importation of enslaved people, contributed to a real hardening of racial lines that simply didn't exist in Saint-Domingue before the Treaty of 1763.

So Ron, would you tell us more about Saint-Domingue society, and how it was structured between 1763 and 1774? And also tell us about the change that was witnessed. What was society like before 1763, and what were the changes that Haitian society saw in its race relations?

[00:18:51] Ronald Angelo Johnson: Yes, and I'm going to back up just a couple years, right before 1763, because slavery had existed in Saint-Domingue, going back to when the French took it over with the Treaty of Ryswick in 1697.

So all across the eighteenth century you had had slavery in Saint-Domingue, so that wasn't new. One of the things you had before the Treaty of 1763 is you had this very loose manumission policy. Slaveholders, plantation owners could manumit enslaved people really at will, with just a signature on a document. And sometimes it wasn't even that, it was simply word of mouth. Because again, we we're talking about a small colony where people are really familiar with each other.



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And one of the things you have there, I won't say higher rates than you have in British North America, but in a more accepted rate, is interracial relationships. Whether they were sexual relationships, whether they were coerced relationships, or whether they were marital relationships. You have that in French Saint-Domingue. And it was a common part of Saint-Domingue society.

And so what you have is you have these three layers of populations. You have free white plantation owners, you have the enslaved Africans, which are the largest part of the population, but in the middle, because of interracial relationships, you have what's called *gens de couleur* or people of color. And in many times they would have been born free because they would've had a white French father and an African mother. And they are a vital part of French society.

But what you see after 1763, you see this hardening of racial lines. And it comes in response to that military fear. What France does after 1763 that is incredibly particular, is that they shift and they reorganize the militia in Saint-Domingue. For instance, in the Seven Years' War, you had Black officers that had power over a white French corporal. You had men of color who were officers in the French army.

And so there is these hierarchies that in British North America you would not have seen. You saw that in French Saint-Domingue, but then after that reorganization happens, it becomes racialized, where Black and free people of color are now stripped of their officer commissions and are forced to serve under white authority. This is a huge shift in the racial dynamics.

You have a tightening on slave owners being able to free their enslaved people. That's a huge shift. And then you have the increase in slavery at the same time, and so you have all of these different dynamics that are happening because of the Treaty of 1763.

And I have to throw in one more thing that changes the dynamic between 1763 and 1775, that was, I think, overlooked. But I really go into detail in the book here. It is, poor white French migration from France to Saint-Domingue. It is common knowledge that after wars, after these major wars, and we see it in British North America, there are generally economic depressions in the aftermath. And so you have, what Saint-Domingue experiences, is a influx of poor white men seeking employment in Saint-Domingue. And they confront for the first



time in their lives rich, affluent men of color who have as much money as any white Frenchman on the island. And they are very indignant toward that population.

And so between 1763 and 1775, you see an increasing racist and racialized policies to where men of color and Black men could have been French officers in French uniforms, by 1775 they can't even dress in French clothing, civilian clothing. They can't dress like a French man. They can't act like a French man. They can't live next to French inhabitants.

So the racial lines that begin with military distinctions find their way to dictating social life, which prior to 1763 would've been normalized in Saint-Domingue. It's a huge shift in those years after 1763.

[00:23:19] Liz Covart: That's really helpful to know because as I read *Entangled Alliances*, I kept thinking about the reverse processes happening in revolutionary America. So for example, during this same period in revolutionary British America, we see people of color living in a bit more hopeful times.

You know, they see the American Revolution as possibly leading to something like a pre-1763 society in Saint-Domingue where men of color could obtain a version of equality and wealth with their white counterparts.

But in Saint-Domingue, as you just told us, the opposite is happening. It went from a place where enslaved people might gain their freedom and where free people of color might come to own a plantation, because there was this path to economic success in pre-1763 Saint-Domingue, but that path shrunk drastically after the Treaty of Paris.

So Ron, I think we're all wondering, was it the treaty that caused these shrinking possibilities for people of color in Saint-Domingue, or was it really the new poor white population that's arriving from France that pushed back against these opportunities for Black people because they wanted more of this economic opportunity for themselves?

And I should say here that whether we're looking at Saint-Domingue or the early United States, it always seems to be the case that when one group receives more rights, another population views those rights as coming at their expense or the expense of their rights.



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[00:24:48] Ronald Angelo Johnson: Wow, that's such a great question, Liz. And I want to take the Treaty of 1763 off the hook here. I want to say that it was the French imperial reaction to the Treaty of 1763 that triggered these changes.

Because as the French Imperial government called for a reorganization of the military, called for fortification of the military, called for an increase in sugar and coffee production, it was the localized enactments of trying to satisfy the imperial government that led to these racialized policies, right.

So you have the treaty that humiliated France, French officials trying to find a way to overcome the fear and humiliation. They make demands on the local Saint-Domingue population. And when there's call for increased military engagement, the white slave holders and the white plantation will say, "well, that's something that Black people should do." When there is a need for more sugar, "well, we need to bring more Black people to Saint-Domingue." When there is a depression, at some level France was pushing those poor white men out of continental France to come to Saint-Domingue.

So you have this milieu. And I don't mean just racialized misunderstandings that did not exist there, but all of it, as I understand it. And I'd love to know what your listeners—when they read that part of the book—I'd love to know their reactions to it. But my understanding is all this is happening in response to what the French metropole is doing and forcing to happen in Saint-Domingue.

[00:26:33] Liz Covart: And maybe this is a bit of an oversimplification, but as you described what happened, it seemed to me that the white people of France thought that Black people should be the ones who should pay for their national humiliation.

That somehow by making free people of color serve in the militia and pay more taxes white French colonials at least could feel better about the big loss that France suffered during the Seven Years' War. Because it placed a lot of the tangible consequences of this defeat on the backs and shoulders of the Black people of Saint-Domingue.

[00:27:06] Ronald Angelo Johnson: One of the things that you see after the treaty, that you don't really see, it was a, "this is Black man's work. This is something Black people should do." When I'm using the term Black people, I'm talking about Black plantation owners who,



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some of them themselves were slave holders, right? But you really see when the French court as a whole was forcing these military enhancements, white plantation owners, they rebuffed that “like, this is not my responsibility.” This was their response. And thank you for bringing that up.

Because there in the book, white Plantation said, “I fought in that war. I paid money in that war already. I have done my part. So if you need more, you should go and tax more and put more burdens on the people of color population, the Black population, because we gave at the office,” right, using an idiom, “we already gave.” It really was a, “we’ve done enough, why do you keep coming to us for defeat that wasn’t our fault.”

And in some ways you do see a bit of that in British North America where the colonists have said, “we’ve done our part already. Why are you making us pay?” And in Saint-Domingue, you had a population who could be burdened upon to say, “you should go burden them and not us.” And that was a huge part of what was taking place in the post-treaty years in Saint-Domingue, that white inhabitants were placing the burden for what happened, or at least the recompense for what happened, on the Black population.

[00:26:36] Liz Covart: Now, when we spoke about your first book *Diplomacy in Black and White*, like 350 episodes ago, in episode 52, I believe we talked about how in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution, the young United States did not want to deal with Haiti.

That President John Adams was willing to negotiate and treat with Toussaint Louverture and other Haitian leaders, but President Thomas Jefferson was not. Jefferson really felt strongly that he did not want to reward Black people for overthrowing their slave regime, given how prominent slavery was in his life and the lives of many Americans.

And this is one of the reasons that scholars have argued that we don’t learn about or discuss the Haitian Revolution very much today in US classrooms. So it surprised me when I read *Entangled Alliances* that there was actually a lot of news circulating between British North America and Saint-Domingue during the Haitian Revolution. That Americans were actually paying attention to the hardening racial lines in Saint-Domingue, just as the people of Saint-Domingue were paying attention to the anti-taxation riots in Boston and other North American ports.



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So Ron, would you tell us about the flow of news, and how people in both places really learned about the events in the other place and then used that knowledge to their own advantage?

[00:29:57] Ronald Angelo Johnson: Thank you for that question, because the flow of news turned out to be one of my favorite parts, both to write and to learn about.

I want to give a shout out here to the late Julius Scott, his dissertation that became a book called *Common Wind*. And it talks about this flow of news, right, both formal and informal flow of news. But one of the things in this book we get is this formal flow of newspapers that were ridding those merchant ships up and down the East Coast and across the Caribbean, they were taking newspapers.

And also, I want to say to so many scholars, I don't want to name any right now because I would forget some, but there's so many scholars who've done such great work. And here again, the work has been on British newspapers, American newspapers, Haitian newspapers. And what this book allowed me to do is put them together in the way that the flow really connected with each other.

And as early as 1765 when the Stamp Act is being issued and British North Americans are rebelling against it, it shows up in newspapers in Boston, in Philadelphia, in London, but it also shows up in the newspaper in Port-au-Prince. And then that paper gets spread around the island. I just was amazed at the ways in which what was happening in Boston and Philadelphia was being read in Port-au-Prince and Cap-Français.

And then you see the reverse of that. What was happening in Port-au-Prince and Cap-Français was also being read in Boston and Philadelphia. And there's one particular revolt that I really would like to share with your listeners, and I really hope if they read the book, they'll find this as a fascinating as I did, because I did not know about this. And it's the revolt of 1769 in Saint-Domingue.

So before bullets are flying on King Street in Boston in 1770, before the Tea Party, before Lexington and Concord, you have in Saint-Domingue a multiracial revolt of colonists. It is led by men of color. Their subordinates are white men. And these colonists in Saint-Domingue are going to rebel against the French army in very similar fashion that the



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King Street riot is going to happen, in very similar fashion to Lexington and Concord. I'm not trying to say one-to-one, but I do want our listeners to understand is that colonists in North America read about the violent colonial revolt against an imperial army six years before Lexington and Concord.

And we also find that during that intervening period for between 1769 and 1775, you see an uptick in the amount of news that is flowing back and forth between these two colonies, because there is shared interest in what is happening, because they're experiencing similar tyrannical monarchical impulses in both colonies. And it is going to continue throughout.

Benjamin Franklin became a rockstar in Saint-Domingue because the people of Saint-Domingue couldn't read enough about him. I'll just stop right there, because I could go on about that, but I just found that fascinating.

[00:33:18] Liz Covart: Rightfully so Ron. I mean, the circulation of revolutionary news is fascinating, and it seemed to me like the people of Saint-Domingue had to get a bit creative in how they got their news.

Because as we learn in *Entangled Alliances*, there was basically one newspaper on the island and it was run by the French government. And of course, you know, the French government doesn't want to publish news about people in British North America trying to overthrow their monarch because that would set a really bad precedent.

So I wonder if you could tell us more about the flow of news, the circulation of news, and how the people of Saint-Domingue did get creative in learning about what was going on in British North America.

[00:33:58] Ronald Angelo Johnson: That's such a good question. Why would a state-run, empire-run newspaper want to report about the downfall and the violent uprisings and another empire? Right.

And so the *Affiches américaines*, right, the French newspaper there in Saint-Domingue. And for the most part, like many, many, many newspapers, it was there to do advertising, to talk about self-liberated fugitives from slavery, from the selling of human capital. I mean, you see very similar outlay in Saint-Domingue as you would a newspaper in British North America.



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And the way they would get this newspaper, and again, this is where Julius Scott's work really was helpful to me, is that much of that is coming from ships' captains, from ships' mates, right? Like you're getting it along the wharf as these ships are coming in. So while you have the state run newspaper, you also have this word of mouth spreading across the island.

And one of the things that I found ironic, and I want to use this word ironic intentionally here, is because France was in the business of trying to disrupt the balance of power in British North America. The French government, French spies, many of them that came from Saint-Domingue, when they've been to read about it and learn about the kind of uprising and tension and conflicts that are happening in British North America, they actually try to help them become more, they want to break out of a revolt.

They want the British North America to pull away from the British crown. And it's not out of spite, right, it'—okay, okay, maybe some of it is out of spite—but much of it is the enemy of my enemy is my friend. And the British crown—again, I want to remind our listeners that that fear that France had a British invasions was very real in the aftermath of the Treaty of 1763.

And so if France, French colonists, spies from Saint-Domingue could go and inflame an already increasingly rebellious atmosphere in British North America of these colonists against the British king. They went all-in on that. During the Stamp Act protests and the whole time that Benjamin Franklin was in London trying to mediate between the British Crown and the British colonists, the French foreign ministry is literally sending French spies to talk with Benjamin Franklin in London around the Stamp Act, around the Townsend Acts to get Benjamin Franklin on their side.

.So as you would think, as you're, I think your premise is correct that one crown would not want to have a rebellion in another, because it may give their own people ideas and incentives, which it actually does. But the French crown found it in the interest to hurt Britain by taking away one of its crown jewel colonies, the British North America.

But as they were doing that and that newspaper continued to flow back and forth, people in Saint-Domingue, upset French colonists in Saint-Domingue, were reading about that same



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riotous rebellious atmosphere, and they were having a different reaction to it than the French crown.

The French crown thought it was in their interest, whereas the French colonists in Saint-Domingue were being inspired by what was happening. And one of the things I argue in the book, long term across the book, is that engagement of Saint-Domingue with what British colonists were doing in the American Revolution will lead to the Haitian Revolution.

[00:37:33] Liz Covart: That's a really interesting point. And I think many of us do wonder how France became involved in the American Revolution, and not just France, but France's colonial territories as well. Because as we learn in Ron's book, *Entangled Alliances*, French colonies like Saint-Domingue, man answered the call and set meant to fight in the American Revolution.

So Ron, would you tell us how France became involved in the American Revolution and what its strategy was in deciding to assist the revolutionaries?

And actually, this is a big question, so let's hold that thought for a moment and take a moment to thank our episode sponsors.

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[00:39:21] Dynamic Ad Break: Audio varies and may shift timestamps in the second half of this episode by 1-2 minutes. Thank you for supporting *Ben Franklin's World*.

[00:39:23] Liz Covart: Ron, would you tell us how France became involved in the American Revolution and what its strategy was for deciding to assist the revolutionaries?

[00:39:32] Ronald Angelo Johnson: Yes. I'm so glad you asked this question because this was one of my favorite parts of the book to write. It had huge ramifications for the book as a whole because after I saw this lens, and I'm talking about chapters five and six here. And before I get to the official involvement, I do want to just remind our listeners that from the very beginning of British imperial frustration in North America, the Stamp Act and on, the French were already trying to tear British North American colonies away from there.

And they were doing all they can informally under the table, and spies continued to flow between France and Boston, France and Philadelphia across that ten year period from 1765 to 1775. But once the war kicks off, right, once war is declared, you know, okay, obviously the war is going to begin. We normally date it to Lexington and Concord with military activities. Then you have the Declaration of Independence in July 4th, 1776.

And in the book, I look at the Declaration of Independence as a foreign policy document, because France really could not engage in the war because as an empire, right, France did not want to actively go and send ships to a colonists, right. It would do things under the table, it would do things in espionage, but outright engagement in a war with colonists versus a crown? Like that was a bridge too far.

And the Americans understood that. John Adams, in particular understood that the United States as of July 4th, 1776, the United States could not win the war against Britain without France. They understood that. And so he began to talk about foreign policy, and he helped write and craft the Declaration of Independence with the clause, it's the penultimate sentence



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in the Declaration of Independence, and I'm going to paraphrase it, but he talks about the way in which now with the Declaration they can make alliances and they can act as other sovereign states act.

And again, we don't really talk about that. We talk about unalienable rights endowed by the creator, which is all really great language and very important. But my book really focused on that penultimate sentence, because without that Declaration, France could not have come to our aid. But with that Declaration, it allowed us to send Benjamin Franklin and two others that I talk about in the book, but I want to focus on Benjamin Franklin, I just think he's so crucial to the story. We send Benjamin Franklin with a model treaty to France. And we send him over there because he's well known.

And Benjamin Franklin's time in France is covered extensively in the Saint-Domingue newspaper. They follow him incredibly. We learn a lot about what the French thought through the French eyes by what they were writing about him in French in Saint-Domingue .

He goes there initially to say that we want your help in breaking away from Britain in exchange for our commerce. "We'll trade with you if you help us." And that just was not enough for the French. Right, because the French knew—as you said earlier in this episode, you talked about the ways in which French leaders saw the Treaty of 1763 as kind of a stopgap measure to the impending war that was going to come again. And France was looking at it that way.

And so they refused to recognize the United States and join in the US War of Independence without a pledge by the United States that the United States would in turn help France when, not if, but when, it was going to be in its next war with Britain. And they did that.

And it was that treaty, and this is the third treaty that I talk about in the book, and it's the Treaty of 1778. And this is the treaty that Benjamin Franklin signed with France, that committed France to the war. And to France's credit, when they came into the war, they'd already been giving money, right, they had been giving money to the United States since 1775, 1776, but it's another to commit troops. But now they have committed to committing troops.



And this is where the story you were trying to get me to get to comes into play. But I wanted to make it clear that this military story could not have happened without the diplomatic story. Because throughout this book, I really try to put diplomacy front and center because I do think it's an important part of the story.

Well, to carry out their pledge to the United States, by the treat of 1778, General Admiral d'Estaing leaves France with his armada. He didn't go directly to the United States. He first goes to the Caribbean, and he goes to Saint-Domingue, and he enlists men to fight in his expeditionary force in the United States. And part of that expeditionary force is a battalion called the Chasseurs-Volontaires. and we'll just call him Chasseurs for short here.

And this is a voluntary force. There's a call for enlistments in Saint-Domingue. And I do want to say the call for enlistment, it was for white and Black men. The call for enlistment for white men was really lukewarm. But when the Black men responded, here was so many that signed up, they couldn't even take them all. A thousand men, over a thousand Black men signed up voluntarily to fight in the American Revolution from Saint-Domingue.

About 545 get selected and they're in this battalion. And in August of 1779, they leave the port of Cap-Français and they sail north to Savannah. The British are in firm control of Savannah, and as I'm sure you've talked about this with other authors, throughout the America Revolution, the British were very powerful across the South, right. It was a loyalist stronghold throughout the South. And Savannah was no different.

And that was one of the first major engagements where the French are going to land in Savannah with this battalion of 545, 550 Black men. I'm just going to read this from the book for just a minute. I just found this to be an incredibly important piece here. Because I say in the book that the landing, and I'm reading from the book here.

"The Landing of the Chasseurs battalion was remarkable and remains historic. It marked the first time in the Atlantic world that hundreds of people of African descent landed together on North American shores as free people deployed to fight for the independence of others."

And this is how they got off the ship, right? Whenever we talk about Black people and ships in the eighteenth century, it is overwhelmingly referring to slave ships. It is referring to Black



people being denigrated by rags and sackcloth and containers, those types of things. And that was very, very real. But in September of 1779, 550 Black men got off of a warship.

And again, I'll read from the book here because I don't want to mess it up.

“The Chasseurs battalion was outfitted in a blue coat with a yellow collar, green cuffs, blue lapels, white buttons and green epaulettes, a white waist coat, pants, and a Black tricorn hat with a white and yellow plume.”

I really want the listeners, and I really want our readers, to really pause when they get to that and think about Black men getting off these ships in this way. And what they're about to do, Liz, when they get off, is that they are about to fight and die alongside white militiamen from Georgia.

On one particular instance, on the night of 23, September 1779, white men from Georgia and Black men from Saint-Domingue are going to be digging trenches together. They're going to be fired upon by British guns, and they're going to counter attack. And in that trench, men who would not have ever spoken to each other, are going to lay dead in their distinctive uniforms in the cause of American freedom.

Every time I think about that, it just reminds me of what the American Revolution brought together and what it promised. I agree with so many other scholars that in its end there were things about the revolution that did not come to fruition in the revolution's own time.

But what the Declaration of Independence bequeathed to us, what the sacrifice, the full measure of devotion that the Chasseurs battalion and those white Georgia militiamen gave on the night of 23 September, what they bequeathed us, with the possibilities of overcoming incredible, incredible disagreements that we have with one another for something larger, something more significant, and that is why I want to include the Chasseurs battalion and what they did in the book.

In the end, the Siege of Savannah, the Battle of Savannah, it was a British victory. So it was a loss for the American cause. But I think in the history of the United States, in the revolutionary spirit of the United States, what happened there in September and October of 1779, I think remains a lesson to each generation that follows about coming together across differences for the sake of our nation.



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[00:49:21] **Liz Covart:** Well, Ron, I think you achieved your goal because I did pause when I read that section of *Entangled Alliances*, because just the contrast, like you said, is the Middle Passage. I imagine that as enslaved people reached Western Atlantic shores, they disembarked those ships looking really poorly from mistreatment and malnourishment. They were dirty. They probably had their heads hung pretty low.

And here in this case of these Chasseurs, you have these Black men dressed in clean, very sharp uniforms, carrying muskets, heads held high, and with a look of determination that they were prepared to fight for things that they believed in, liberty and equality. So you painted a very powerful scene in your book, and like I said, I think you achieved your goal there.

Now, this scene also made me wonder how British Americans reacted when they saw these proud, determined, confident Black men coming off these French ships to help them. Because we know that George Washington and others in the Continental Congress, they didn't really want Black men serving in the Continental Army.

And the only reason they eventually let Black men into the Continental Army was fear that they go to the British. And New England regiments were already filling their ranks with Black men because it was easier than trying to fill them with white men.

So Ron, how are the Chasseurs received? How did British Americans react to their arrival?

[00:50:47] **Ronald Angelo Johnson:** That is a phenomenal question, upon which the archives and the English language newspapers at the time are fairly silent. I scoured newspapers from 1779 to, you know, across the 1780s.

When you find instances of the Chasseurs being mentioned, it's several years later. It's a New Jersey newspaper where you find it, and it is there, but it is a recap of a French newspaper. And so I want to say here is where looking at the American Revolution from a transnational approach, using multilingual sources really allow me to tell a story in a way that had not been told before.

Because in that Saint-Domingue newspaper, the *Affiches américaines*, they write a lot about the Chasseurs-Volontaires. What I learned from reading the French newspapers, what I learned from the commander, who was a white commander, who was a slave holder,



Lieutenant Colonel Rouvray, or Rouvray—let's just say Rouvray, right, because going between English and French, I really don't sound that good doing that.

But Rouvray really admired and respected those soldiers. And he wrote a lot. And I got this from the French archives in Aix-en-Provence, right? And you read about it. And again, it's all in French, so I can understand why it probably hasn't made it to US histories before now. But he writes extensively about how proud he was of the service of his men. He talks about their courage. He talks about their skill. He talks about the ways in which they honored France by their service.

But you also have Admiral d'Estaing also wrote in his reports about the Chasseurs-Volontaires, a section of them. I don't want to say a squad or something like that, but a number of them, right, a number of them actually go to Paris and meet the French king as a part of a commemoration, a celebration of their service. And when they end up back in Saint-Domingue, the Saint-Domingue newspaper does a huge spread on them and their journey to meet the French king, because they're very proud of their service.

I mean, I wish I could find a more erudite word here, but I just found it bizarre that French newspapers and sources wrote a great deal about these men, and when you read the English newspapers, when you read the English military reports, they're classified as just a number of, and for lack of a better word, because it's a word they used at the time, "a number of Negroes," right? They were just numbers.

It's the way we see Black people written about in plantation inventories and things like that; with no names, with no story, just a number and their color. And I just found it really, really bizarre. But it helped me understand, because I kept thinking, this is such a fascinating story. The Chasseurs battalion is such a fascinating story. Why don't we know more about it in scholarly written histories?

But I do think it's the lack of English language sources or their lack of appearance there. And again, I'm so glad to have had access to the French language sources so that I could bring this story to the eyes of our English readers because it is a fascinating story.



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And we talk a lot about archives when we're doing work like this. They were there, and I just happened to have a skillset that allowed me to bring forth, but I lean, as you'll see, those who examine my footnotes, I lean on a lot of scholarship to build this story.

So I don't want in any way take away from the scholars that came before me because I owe them a great deal. Methodologies and things have allowed me to do things that they were not capable of. But it really is a fascinating story and I would be just really curious to know what your listeners, if they pick it up, feel free to let me know if you find that as fascinating as I did.

[00:54:38] Liz Covart: Well, now that we are talking about your research at a higher level, when you look across your research Ron, how do you hope it will change our understanding of the American Revolution? How do you hope that placing Saint-Domingue and Haiti and its revolution side by side with the American Revolution will deepen our understanding of both revolutions and the broader age of revolutions?

[00:55:01] Ronald Angelo Johnson: Thank you for that question. And I really thought a lot about it as I was writing the book. And I don't know that I ever wrote a sentence about it in the book.

But I think there seems to be the perception right now that the America Revolution was kind of the ignition point, the igniting point for the Atlantic revolutions. And I understand that, and in some ways my epilogue does kind of affirm that a bit. But the story that is told within *Entangled Alliances*, I hope that we can see that revolutions, and almost every revolution, is not a nationalistic story.

What was happening in the United States was being informed by, and being influenced by things that are happening outside the United States. It is a back and forth of influences between the United States and Saint-Domingue that was fueling the American Revolution.

And then as we talked about in that early episode, the Haitian revolution was being influenced by what was happening in the United States. And colleagues who do work on Latin American revolutions would probably come on the show and say very similar things.

And so I would like for people coming out of *Entangled Alliances* to see the America Revolution as, yes, an incredible moment, an exciting and distinctive moment in



eighteenth-century Atlantic world history, but is one that is connected at every level to the rest of the Atlantic world.

Trying to pull out the American Revolution from what was happening all around it, I think in some level, does a sort of injustice to just how aware the founders of the United States were to what was going on. In real time, they were creating a nation that would fit within the Atlantic world, not one that would exist outside of it. And they could have only done that if they were intricately connected and in tune with what was happening across the Atlantic world through every stage of the American Revolution.

And so I want us to see this as more as a collaborative event, of America not being outside of humanity, but America really embracing the fullness of humanity to become the nation that it becomes.

[00:57:27] Liz Covart: Well, looking at this as a collaborative event, Ron is actually a really nice transition into our “Time Warp.” So as you may remember, this is the segment of the show where we ask you a hypothetical history question about what might have happened if something had occurred differently or if someone had acted differently.

In your opinion, what might have happened if the people of Saint-Domingue had not taken an interest in the American Revolution? How might the course of the American and Haitian revolutions have been different?

[00:57:55] Ronald Angelo Johnson: Okay. You’re putting me on the spot, Liz. But it is such a good question, and it’s a natural question that flows out of the book, and I appreciate that.

I’m going to start my answer at the Siege of Savannah, because a number of future leaders of the Haitian Revolution became combat veterans at the Siege of Savannah: André Rigaud, Jean-Baptiste Belley, Jean-Jacques Chavannes. All of these men, ten years later, are going to begin to play an incredible role in the beginning of independent Haiti.

And I keep thinking as I was writing about their experience in the Siege of Savannah, in the American Revolution that had to inform them. You know, I would love to have had a journal where Andre Rigo says, because of my experience in Savannah, blah, blah, I don’t have that, right. But I don’t think it is in any way coincidental that the experience that they got in Savannah is going to play out in their homeland ten years later.



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And so I keep thinking, what if those Black men had not come to the shores of the United States? What if those men had not fought side by side with people fighting for their independence? What if they did not demand their equality in their homeland?

So all these things come together in Savannah. All this is happening in Savannah, and ten years later it begins to play out. And so I keep thinking, maybe the Haitian Revolution would've still happened, but I'm not sure it would've happened within the next decade.

I came away from *Entangled Alliances* with a firm belief that that experience, the fighting experience, the revolutionary experience, all made the urgency. Martin Luther King used the "urgency of, now." André Rigaud, Jean-Baptiste Belley, Chavannes, they had all had this desire for equality going all the way back to the 1760s, but it's after 1779 where it becomes more urgent.

And I believe it, had they not had that experience to Savannah, I don't know if we would've had the Haitian Revolution beginning in 1789 and its military campaign kicking off in 1791.

[01:00:24] Liz Covart: Not to mention, you know, thinking more locally about the Siege of Savannah, if the Chasseurs hadn't been there to assist the revolutionaries that defeat could have been far worse than it actually was.

[01:00:36] Ronald Angelo Johnson: I completely agree with that. Like it would not have made into a win, but that defeat would've been even more demoralizing.

[01:00:43] Liz Covart: So Ron, when we started our conversation, you mentioned that you're working on the sixty-year compendium, a history of the diplomatic relations between the United States and Haiti, but that you found you really had to write this book, *Entangled Alliances* first, so that you would have a way to prepare your readers for this larger history.

Is this compendium, this larger history between Haiti and the United States, is that what you're working on now? Or did finishing *Entangled Alliances* or writing *Entangled Alliances* shift your focus?

[01:01:14] Ronald Angelo Johnson: Again, thank you so much for asking that question and allowing me to share. So what I've decided to do, and then this is as a result of *Entangled*



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Alliances. Is maybe I won't write a sixty-year compendium, but maybe I'll break it up into chunks, because I did 1763 to 1783.

The book that I'm working on now, it's currently titled *We Are All Equal* and it's under contract with Princeton University Press. And what it does, it takes us from 1783 to 1805. And in that book, what I'm looking at is not comparison, but the connections between the US Constitution and the first independent Haitian Constitution.

And what I hope my readers will see when that book comes out and they engage it, is that those connections that you and I have just spent this episode talking about, they only grow and become more engaged as both nations understand the need for a constitution, and how important it's to go from being revolutionaries to governing officials, which is going to happen in both the United States and Haiti.

And in this book, what I'm trying to bring about is that transition from revolutionary to government leader. It is not an easy transition. And both nations struggle with how to take that revolutionary zeal that created the nation, and somehow direct it in a way that impassions the citizens, but also limits them on how far they can push a government that is learning how to be a government.

And I've just found in my preliminary research and preliminary chapters of the book, I found there's much more connection between the early United States and early Haiti than what we have talked about before as historians.

[01:03:07] Liz Covart: You've mentioned several times now that you would love for us to read *Entangled Alliances* and reach out with our questions. How can we do that?

[01:03:15] Ronald Angelo Johnson: Yeah, so my Baylor website is a great place to just email me if you just type in Ronald Angelo Johnson at Google, so far I'm the only one on there. And when I do it, the first thing that comes up is my Baylor website. Feel free to reach out to me.

The book is now available. And I do hope that people will read the book. I hope they will reach out to me. One of the best parts of writing a book is when someone you've never met before reads it and wants to discuss something about it. Whether they agree or disagree with



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it. That's the best part when someone values my work enough to reach out to me about it, and I hope people will do that.

[01:03:49] Liz Covart: Ronald Angelo Johnson, thank you so much for joining us again, and for taking us through this really fascinating story that allows us to see the American Revolution is happening concurrently with the early days of the Haitian Revolution.

[01:04:01] Ronald Angelo Johnson: No, thank you, Liz. It is such a pleasure to always talk with you. You always value the work of your guests, and I love the way you really dive into what we've written and you push us, as you did me today. So this is one of my favorite conversations to have, and I hope we'll do it again.

[01:04:17] Liz Covart: Placing the American and Haitian Revolution side by side reminds us that revolutions are rarely confined by national borders. As Ron showed us, ideas about freedom, citizenship and power circulated around the Atlantic world. And what happened in Saint-Domingue shaped and was shaped by events in revolutionary North America.

As we discovered, the Treaty of Paris 1763 did more than just end a war. It restructured empires, deepened racial hierarchies in Saint-Domingue, and fueled tensions that led to revolutions in British North America, France, Saint-Domingue, and across Latin America.

All of these revolutions informed each other. And as we just heard, the American Revolution inspired men of color in the French Caribbean to fight for liberty, not just abroad in British North America, but also at home.

We also uncovered how diplomacy and information networks tied revolutionaries together across language and imperial lines. The American Revolution didn't just inspire other revolutions, which is a story we hear often. The American Revolution and the New United States were also shaped by other revolutions.

Look for more information about Ron, his book, *Entangled Alliances*, plus notes, links, and a transcript for everything we talked about today on the show notes page, benfranklinworld.com/433. You love this podcast, so why not share it with your friends. After all, friends tell friends about their favorite podcasts.



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Finally, how does thinking about the American Revolution alongside the Haitian Revolution change the way you think about these revolutions? Does thinking this way change the way that you understand freedom, revolution, or the founding of the United States? I'd love to know. So tell me, liz@benfranklinsworld.com.