

How Should We Remember Toussaint Louverture?

It helps to begin the story of Toussaint Louverture with a little geography. In 1492 Christopher Columbus landed on the large Caribbean island of **Hispaniola**. Two centuries later, in 1697, the French officially took control of the western half of the island and renamed it **Saint Domingue**. Saint Domingue changed its name to **Haiti** in 1804 and remains so today.

Behind the name changes, of course, is a much deeper history. Under French control, Saint Domingue became one of the richest colonies in the world. By the 1780s, its 8,000 plantations were producing 40 percent of the world's sugar and more than half of the world's coffee. The work was done by 500,000 slaves owned by several thousand rich white **planters**.

It was into this world that Toussaint Louverture was born, sometime in the 1740s. As a young slave, he served as a herder, then a coachman and, later, an overseer of fellow slaves in the field. Records suggest that during these years he was taught to read and write by his godfather. Granted freedom by his owner, Toussaint rented a small coffee plantation and acquired a dozen slaves of his own.

In the summer of 1789 news of the French Revolution swept across the island. Words like “Liberté” and “Egalité” were in the air. After white refusal to end slavery in Saint Domingue, thousands of plantations were burned and hundreds of whites and mixed-raced people were killed. In the midst of this struggle, Toussaint Louverture emerged as a leader. Though he was no longer a slave when the rebellion broke out, Toussaint worked behind the scenes to encourage slaves to fight for their freedom. By 1793, Toussaint commanded a rebel army of 4,000 troops against French forces on the island. When in 1794 the revolutionary government in France abolished all slavery in the French colonies,

Toussaint quickly pledged allegiance to France and was appointed commander-in-chief of the army in Saint Domingue. He was at this point the most powerful person on the island.

But then an unexpected change came about. Napoleon Bonaparte had risen to power in France and it was feared he was planning to **reinstate** slavery in Saint Domingue. Indeed, in 1802, Napoleon launched an invasion of 21,000 French troops. Toussaint and his fellow generals put up an impressive fight, but Toussaint was captured and taken to France. Surprisingly, at

this point Napoleon pulled his suffering troops out of Saint Domingue, giving up the fight. Ironically, just as Saint Domingue was celebrating victory, Toussaint was dying from pneumonia in a French jail. He never knew that Haiti, on January 1, 1804, would

become an independent nation.

The Task: You are working on a public radio documentary series *Revolutionary Leaders in World History*. Your producer calls you into her office and hands you six documents describing Toussaint Louverture's leadership during the Haitian Revolution. The documents fall into three categories: liberator of slaves, ruler of Saint Domingue, and military commander. Your job is to read the documents and write a short proposal on how to present the material. Your producer reminds you that you must follow the 30-20-10 program format. This means you must decide which of Toussaint's leadership qualities will get the most airtime. The most important role will get 30 minutes and the other two roles will get 20 minutes and 10 minutes, respectively. The goal is to make the radio program both interesting and balanced. The working title for the one-hour show is: *How Should We Remember Toussaint Louverture?*



Document A

Source: Created from various sources.

Note: In 1789, the total slave population in Saint Domingue was 500,000. The white population was 32,000, and the mixed-race population was 25,000.

Timeline of Abolition in Saint Domingue

- 1789:** The French Revolution begins.
- 1790:** Free men of color in Saint Domingue proclaim themselves French citizens; the French National Assembly grants full civic rights to free men of color.
- 1791:** A slave revolt begins in the north of Saint Domingue, Toussaint joins the revolution and serves as doctor to the troops; he also commands a small detachment of slave soldiers.
- 1792:** As a military commander, Toussaint gains a reputation for running an orderly camp and for training his men in both guerilla tactics and the European shoulder-to-shoulder style of war.
- 1794:** The revolutionary government in France under Robespierre abolishes slavery in France and all its colonies; Toussaint and his troops stop their revolt and now support the French against Spain and England.
- 1796:** Toussaint, General Dessalines, and General Christophe organize an army against the British, who are nervous about abolition spreading to their colony of Jamaica.
- 1798:** Toussaint defeats the British; he becomes ruler of Saint Domingue.
- 1801:** Toussaint conquers Santo Domingo, the Spanish portion of the island.
- 1802:** Napoleon sends 21,000 soldiers to Saint Domingue to reinstate slavery. Toussaint is tricked into a negotiation meeting, is captured and sent by ship to France.
- 1803:** Napoleon withdraws from Saint Domingue but Toussaint dies in a French jail.
- 1804:** Victorious over the French, a free Haiti declares independence.

CV

Document B

Source: Toussaint Louverture, "Letter to the French Directory, November 1797."

Note: The French Directory was the government that ruled France between 1795 and 1799. It replaced the government that had abolished slavery in France and its colonies. Back in Saint Domingue it was feared that this new conservative French government was about to reinstate slavery. Toussaint responds in this letter.

CV

Could men who have once enjoyed the benefits of liberty look on calmly while it is taken from them! They bore their chains when they knew no condition of life better than that of slavery. But today when they have left it, if they had a thousand lives, they would sacrifice them all rather than be subjected again to slavery. . . . But if . . . this were to be done, I declare to you that this would be to attempt the impossible: We have known how to confront danger to our liberty, and we will know how to confront death to preserve it.

Greetings and respect

Toussaint Louverture

Document C

Source: The Saint Domingue Constitution of 1801. Signed by Toussaint Louverture in July 1801.

Note: Toussaint Louverture assembled and headed the commission that created Saint Domingue's Constitution of 1801. While its citizens were now all free, Saint Domingue still remained a colony of France.

Title II: Of the Inhabitants

Article 3 There cannot exist slaves in this territory, servitude is therein forever abolished. All men are born, live and die free and French.

Title VI: Of Culture and Commerce

Article 14 The colony being essentially agricultural cannot suffer the least disruption in the works of its cultivation.

Article 15 Each plantation ... shall represent the quiet haven of an active and constant family, of which the owner of the land ... shall be the father.

Article 16 Each cultivator and each worker is a member of the family and is entitled to a share in the revenues.

Title VIII: Of the Government

Article 28 The Constitution nominates citizen Toussaint-Louverture, Chief General of the army of Saint-Domingue and ... he is entrusted the direction thereof for the remainder of his glorious life.

After having taken knowledge of the Constitution, I give it my approval.... I shall pass it to the French government in order to obtain its sanction.

The General in Chief
Signed: Toussaint-Louverture

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Document D

Source: Toussaint Louverture, "Proclamation, 25 November 1801."

As soon as a child can walk, he should be employed on the plantation according to his strength in some useful work....

Any individual ... tending to incite sedition [actions against the authority of the nation] shall be brought before a court martial [military court] and be punished in conformity with the law.

[A]ll male and female citizens ... must obtain a security card. Such card shall contain the family name, address ... age and sex of the person who bears it.

Any manager or driver of a plantation upon which a foreign cultivator [field worker from another plantation] shall have taken refuge shall denounce him to the captain or commander of the section within 24 hours under penalty of one week in prison.

Vagabond* cultivators arrested ... shall be taken to the commander of the quarter, who will have them sent to the gendarmerie [local police] on their plantation.

* vagabond: a person who wanders from place to place without a job or a home

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Document E

Source: Madison Smartt Bell, *Toussaint Louverture: A Biography*, 2007.

Note: Toussaint did not rule without resistance from the citizens of Saint Domingue. His own adopted nephew, Hyacinthe Moyse, believed that Toussaint was wrong to support plantation farming. Moyse challenged Toussaint's policies in agriculture and organized a rebellion.

In the fall of 1801, Hyacinthe Moyse became the focal point of a gathering of discontent with Toussaint's draconian [cruel] labor policy and gathering suspicion of his friendliness with the white planter class. As usual, there was tremendous . . . resistance among the African-born majority . . . to cooperating with the laborious requirements of the French-model society Toussaint and the other Creole black leaders were trying to create. . . . The more [Toussaint's] military had to [force] the former plantation slaves to do plantation labor, the more unpopular the army became. . . . Toussaint . . . made Moyse commander of all the Northern Department. . . . Moyse was inclined to allow the plantations of the north to be parceled out into small holdings [instead of large plantations]. . . .

On the night of October 29 [1801], a revolt broke out on the Northern Plain – whites were massacred from Fort Liberté to the gates of Cap Français. The new insurrection swept all over the Northern Department within two days. . . . The war cry of the rebels was “General Moyse is with us – death to all the whites.” . . .

. . . Toussaint himself was so enraged that when he passed through the rebel zone he ordered the mutineer regiments on parade and summoned certain men to step out of the ranks and blow their own brains out. . . . Toussaint ordered Moyse's arrest and had him confined in the fort of Port de Paix. . . . Brought before a firing squad, Moyse himself gave the order to fire.

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Document F

Source: William Wells Brown, "A Description of Toussaint Louverture," from *The Black Man, His Antecedents, His Genius, and His Achievements*, 2nd edition, 1863.

Note: Samana was a port city on the east side of Santo Domingo, the Spanish section of the island of Hispaniola. In 1801, Napoleon was determined to take control of Saint Domingue again, with the probable goal of reinstating slavery. Several ships left France between December 1801 and February of 1802, and with the help of a Polish division and a Dutch division, more than 30,000 troops landed on Saint Domingue.

CV

... Toussaint, by his superior knowledge of the character of his race, his humanity, generosity, and courage, had gained the confidence of all whom he had under his command. The rapidity with which he travelled from post to post astonished every one. By his genius and surpassing activity, Toussaint levied fresh forces, raised the reputation of the army, and drove the English and Spanish from the island. . . .

... [T]he fleet landed in Samana, where Toussaint, with an experienced wing of the army, was ready to meet them. On seeing the ships enter the harbor, the heroic chief said, "Here come the enslavers of our race. All France is coming to St. Domingo (Haiti), to try

again to put the fetters upon our limbs; but not France, with all her troops of the Rhine, the Alps, the Nile, the Tiber, nor all Europe to help her, can extinguish the soul of Africa. That soul, when once the soul of a man, and no longer that of a slave, can overthrow the pyramids and the Alps themselves, sooner than again be crushed down into slavery." The French, however, [landed], but they found nothing but smouldering ruins, where once stood splendid cities. Toussaint and his generals at once abandoned the towns, and betook themselves to the mountains, those citadels of freedom in St. Domingo, where the blacks have always proved too much for the whites.

Note: Two years and 23,000 French deaths later, Napoleon withdrew his troops from Haiti. Many of these troops had died of disease.