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 “Égalité” 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.

1. Were there more slaves or rich, white planters in Saint Domingue in the 1780s?

2. After Toussaint was granted freedom, what did he do?

3. What happened when news of the French Revolution got to the island?

4. What did Toussaint do when the rebellion broke out?

5. What was feared when Napoleon got in power in France?

6. What happened to Toussaint?

7. What happened to Haiti?
Background Essay Questions

1. What is the difference between Hispaniola and Saint Domingue?

2. What is the difference between Saint Domingue and Haiti?

3. What evidence shows that Saint Domingue was an economically valuable colony?

4. The entire slave population of the United States in 1800 was about one million. What was the slave population of Saint Domingue in 1789?

5. In 1789, three major groups inhabited Haiti: whites, free people of color, and black slaves. About 32,000 were white and 25,000 were free people of color. Given these numbers, what percentage of Haiti’s population was slave?

6. What explains why Toussaint fought against the French as a slave rebel leader in 1793, was made commander-in-chief of the French colonial army in Saint Domingue after 1794, and then fought again against the French in 1802?

7. Why wasn’t Toussaint able to celebrate the independence of Haiti?

8. Define these terms:

   Hispaniola
   
   Saint Domingue
   
   Haiti
   
   planters
   
   reinstates

Timeline

1697 – Saint Domingue becomes a colony of France.

1743 – Likely birth year of Toussaint Louverture

1776 – American independence; Toussaint Louverture released from slavery

1789 – The French Revolution begins.

1797 – Toussaint is named commander-in-chief of the French army in Saint Domingue.

1804 – Haiti declares independence from France and joins US as the second independent country in the Americas.

1821 – Mexican independence