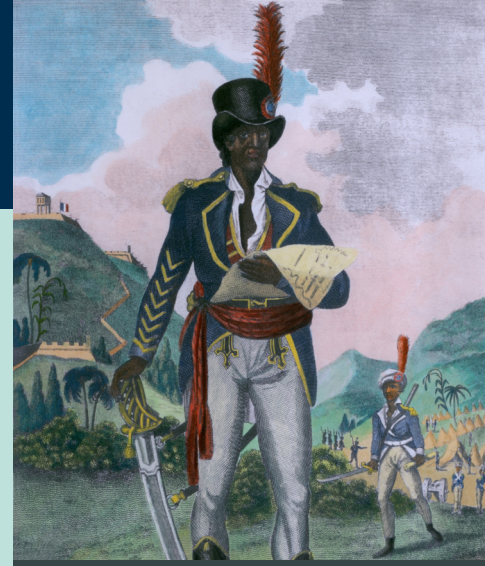


History Topic of the Month

Toussaint Louverture: “The Father of Haiti”

In the entire history of the world there has only been one slave revolt that created a new country. That was the revolt against the French in the colony of Saint Dominique, which became the country of Haiti. This revolution was inspired by Toussaint Louverture, a former slave who became a general, leader and finally martyr. His life changed the lives of hundreds of thousands of slaves. Today he remains an inspiration to millions.



Contributer: © Shutterstock / Everett Collection

Toussaint Louverture (1743–1803) leader of the Haitian independence movement during the French Revolution, ultimately died in 1803 in a prison in France.



Contributer: © Shutterstock/BOLDG

This Pacific Centered World map highlights the location of modern Haiti. You can see it is part of an island called Hispaniola that also contains the modern-day Dominican Republic.

French Saint Dominique

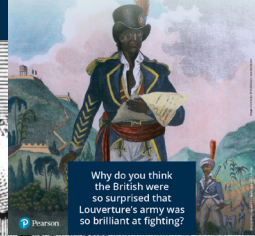
Saint Dominique (modern-day Haiti) was a French colony which produced large amounts of sugar, coffee and cocoa. It was the western half of the island of Hispaniola. The eastern half was a Spanish colony called Santo Domingo. It was one of the most profitable colonies in the world.

The 452,000 slaves on the island outnumbered the French ten to one. Most of the slaves had been captured in Africa (many from modern Nigeria). In 1787 alone about 20,000 slaves were taken to the island. Slaves were often worked to death and had no rights at all.

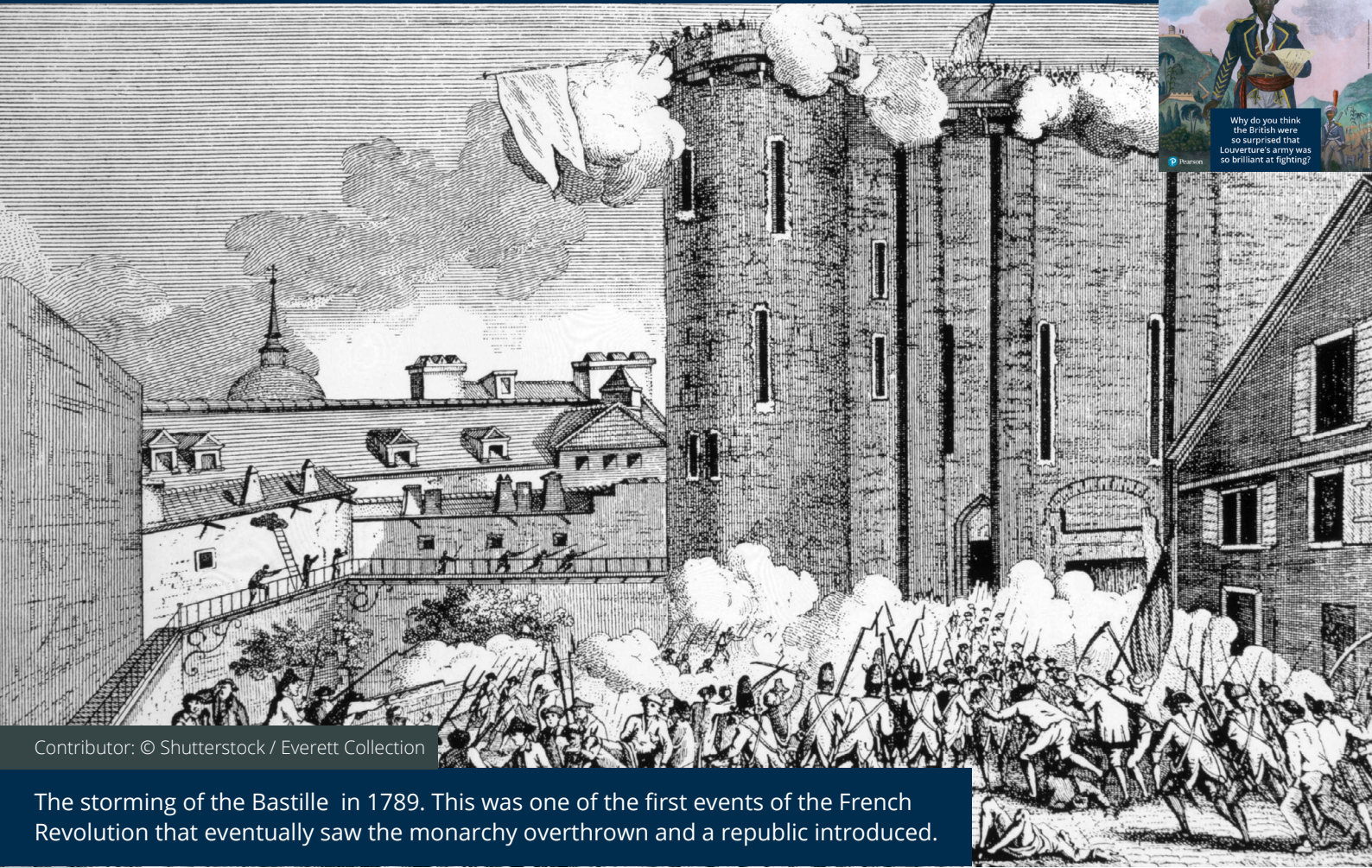
Toussaint's early life

We know very little about Toussaint's early life. He was born a slave on Saint Dominique at some point between 1739 and 1743. Even Toussaint was unsure and guessed he was about 50 in 1791. He was educated by his godfather, a freed slave, and learned about philosophy and medicine.

In 1776 Toussaint was freed. He continued working on the plantation he was born on eventually earning enough money to rent his own small plantation as well as owning a dozen slaves.



History Topic of the Month: Toussaint Louverture



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The storming of the Bastille in 1789. This was one of the first events of the French Revolution that eventually saw the monarchy overthrown and a republic introduced.

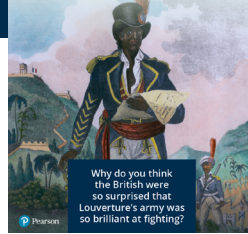
Revolution!

In 1789 everything changed. All laws in France had been made by the king. In the middle of an economic crisis, the representatives of the common people in the Estates-General (the French Parliament) demanded a new constitution. This quickly became the start of the French Revolution. The king was forced to accept the new constitution which declared all men were born free and equal. Within a few years the king was forced to abdicate and France became a republic.

Are all men free?

The new French constitution made both the free black people and slaves of Saint Dominique angry. If all men were born free and equal, why did the French have slaves? Even a freed black man did not have the same rights as a white man. The tensions on the island grew.

Although he had previously owned slaves, Toussaint realised he had been wrong. He now demanded an end to slavery.



History Topic of the Month: Toussaint Louverture

1791: The slave revolution begins

In August 1791 thousands of slaves revolted in the north of the island. They executed their owners, burnt plantations and took control of cities. By September, 100,000 slaves had joined the revolt, killing 4,000 slave owners and destroying over 1,000 plantations. They were led by a former slave, Georges Biassou. By 1792 they controlled a third of the island and were demanding independence. The Spanish – France's enemies, who wanted to make ruling the colony harder for the French – supported the slaves.



BIASSOU

Primer Jefe de los Negros de Santo Domingo.

Contributor: © The Print Collector / Alamy Stock Photo

Georges Biassou, early leader of the 1791 slave rising that began the Haitian Revolution, 1806.

Saint Dominique becomes a battlefield

War broke out in Saint Dominique. Several sides fought for control of the island:

- The former slaves, led by Georges Baissou, supported by Revolutionary France's enemies Spain.
- The Revolutionary French government, who were trying to win the support of the black population. They offered freedom to any slave who fought for them.
- The Royalist French slave owners, fighting the revolutionary French and the former slaves. They were supported by the British – who were worried successful slave revolts would spread to their own colonies.

Toussaint gets a new name

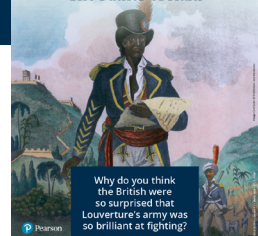
Toussaint joined Biassou's army, first as a doctor but quickly becoming one of their most important commanders. He was a natural military commander, with a brilliant understanding of tactics.

He also gave himself a new surname – Louverture. This name means 'opening' in French – and it referred to Toussaint's tactical ability on the battlefield and his skill in creating 'openings' for his troops to attack.

History Topic of the Month: Toussaint Louverture

History Topic of the Month

Toussaint Louverture
The Father of Haiti



Contributer: © Granger Historical Picture Archive / Alamy Stock Photo

Toussaint Louverture was made a General in the French army, leading the French-allied slaves to fight against their opponents.

Louverture changes sides

Desperate to hold onto the island, the Revolutionary French government tried to win the support of the black population by abolishing slavery in February 1794.

In June 1794 Louverture decided to switch sides and support the French Republic. Unlike them, the Spanish had not promised a full abolition of slavery. Not all of the slaves could stomach supporting their former French masters. Georges Biassou continued to fight alongside the Spanish.

Louverture wanted to rebuild the island and make it a stronger, free country – and he believed working with the French Revolution was the best way to do this. Toussaint Louverture was promoted to General. His army of French-allied free slaves were now fighting:

- The Spanish and their former slave allies.
- The Royalist French forces on the island.
- The British army who had seized control of the island's main port.

Louverture wins a great victory

Louverture's forces won several victories over the Spanish, who swiftly signed a peace treaty with France – Georges Biassou left with them. Louverture turned his attention to the British and Royalist French.

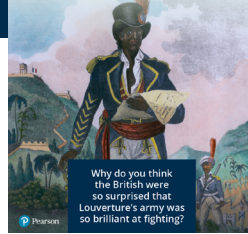
The British were amazed that Louverture had turned his former slave army into a disciplined fighting force. Through a mixture of guerilla war and battles, Louverture's army retook towns and land from the British. Thousands of British troops had died from yellow fever and in 1798 the British signed a treaty with Louverture and withdrew.

Louverture's government

Louverture became the leader of Saint Dominique, defeating his rivals in a civil war in 1799. He was willing to work with the French – but the interests of Saint Dominique came first. Louverture wanted to continue producing sugar, coffee and cocoa – but by paying the black workers.

Some in the French government were worried Louverture wanted full independence. Louverture had signed his treaty with the British without consulting them. He also signed a treaty with the United States.

While he refused to declare independence, Louverture was ruling Saint Dominique as if it was an independent country. However, he seemed willing to remain part of France – and still thought of himself as partly French.



History Topic of the Month: Toussaint Louverture

Napoleon vs Louverture

In France Napoleon seized power in 1799. At first he supported Louverture and the abolition of slavery. However, he ordered Louverture not to invade Spanish Santo Domingo (the Spanish half of the island), because of the French treaty with Spain.

But Louverture knew to make his country safe, he needed to control the whole island. In 1801 he invaded Santo Domingo. He abolished slavery there, introduced French law and worked to improve the lives of black people in the Spanish territory. Napoleon was furious that he had been disobeyed.

The Constitution of 1801

Louverture responded by creating a constitution for Saint Dominique. As well as making him Governor General for life, it banned slavery and guaranteed equal treatment under the law for all. It also said Saint Dominique would govern itself – not be ruled by French officials. However, it kept Catholicism as the public religion (not Vodou, which many former slaves followed) and accepted the country was still a part of the French Empire.

Louverture said he still thought of himself as a Frenchman – but Napoleon didn't believe him. The French Emperor sent 20,000 men to Saint Dominique to restore French government.



Contributor: © Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy Stock Photo

Toussaint Louverture's and his men fought many battles against the French, using guerilla tactics.

War with the French

The French claimed they were coming with peaceful intentions. In fact, they planned to arrest black army officers, restore French rule and reintroduce slavery. Fortunately, Louverture didn't believe them and prepared to resist.

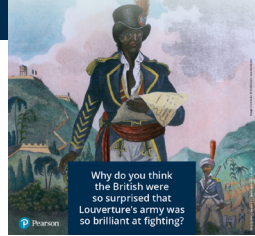
The war that followed was brutal. Louverture's plan was to burn crops – and even cities – retreat to the mountains and then use guerilla warfare. He believed yellow fever would break out in the French army and force them to retreat.

There were several months of fighting, but neither side could get a clear advantage. That changed when several of Louverture's generals switched sides to support the French, in return for promises of keeping their positions and not reintroducing slavery.

History Topic of the Month: Toussaint Louverture

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Louverture betrayed

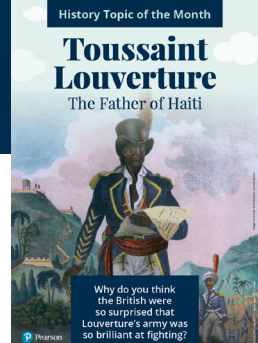
Louverture was forced to sign a peace treaty in May 1802. Within weeks he was arrested by the French and taken back to France as a prisoner. Napoleon had him locked up in a prison. Louverture wrote an autobiography in prison – but died in prison in April 1803. It's unclear what he died from – it could have been malnutrition, pneumonia or tuberculosis.

Louverture's legacy

On his arrest Louverture said “you have cut down only the trunk of the tree of liberty; it will spring up again from the roots, for they are numerous and deep”. He was right.

When it became clear the French forces did plan to bring slavery back, war broke out again. Louverture's tactics were proved right – yellow fever killed thousands of French soldiers. Eventually the Saint Dominique army led by the former slave General Jean-Jacques Dessalines defeated the French in 1803.

In 1804 the renamed Haiti declared independence from France. It was the first country in the world to abolish slavery and the only country in history formed after a slave revolt. Toussaint Louverture would be remembered as the father of the nation, and his legacy would influence people around the world for generations to come. He had helped show the world that black slaves could be as brave, organised, disciplined and successful as any white army.



Discussion points

- Thousands of African slaves died on their way to, and in, Saint Dominique. What can you find out about what the conditions were like for slaves in Saint Dominique?
- Toussaint at one point kept slaves – why do you think this former slave did that?
- The French Revolution declared all men were equal – do you think they meant the slaves as well?
- Think about what motivates people to fight. Why do you think the slaves were so committed to fighting the French, British and Spanish?
- Why do you think the British were so surprised that Louverture's army was so brilliant at fighting?
- Why do you think Toussaint Louverture made his own constitution?
- Toussaint Louverture fought for equal rights for all – but also believed he needed to be dictator for life to ensure this. Do you think this is a contradiction?
- Toussaint Louverture is an inspiration to many today – why do you think this is?
- Jean-Jaques Dessalines won more victories over Napoleon's army than any other general in the world – what else can you find out about him?

About the author

Alistair Nunn, Pearson's Senior Product Manager for Humanities Teaching and Learning resources, has a degree in History. He created this worksheet using various sources included below.

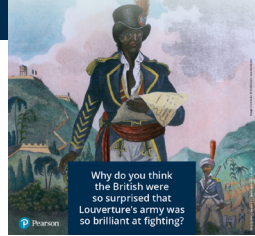
Take a look at [Pearson's Diversity and Inclusion in History](#) webpages for more great content.



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The Father of Haiti



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[Toussaint Louverture: The First Successful Slave Revolt Leader](#)

[Haiti's 'Black Spartacus': Toussaint Louverture and abolishing slavery](#)

Places



[Black prisoners of war at Portchester Castle](#)