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1776: Toussaint Bréda granted freedom from slavery. Toussaint remains on the Habitation Bréda under the beneficent direction of his former owner, Bayon de Libertat, while purchasing plantations and at least thirteen slaves of his own.

1782: Toussaint marries Suzanne Simon Baptiste.

1791:
15 May: French Assembly grants full political rights to mixed-race citizens.


24 September: Repeal of May 15 law, driving mixed-race citizens to join slave rebellion.
1791–93  Toussaint plays a fundamental, behind-the-scenes role in fomenting and radicalizing the St-Domingue slave rebellion.

1792
April:  Assembly again grants political rights to mixed-race and free black citizens of St-Domingue.

1793
February:  France declares war against Spain.
June:  Toussaint leads rebels fighting the French, repeatedly defeating French forces numerically far superior to his own 600 men. Toussaint controls Northeast St-Domingue, from Marmelade to Dondon.

August:  Commissioner Sonthonax unilaterally abolishes slavery, immediately and universally, in St-Domingue. Toussaint Bréda simultaneously issues a call to arms for ‘Liberty and Equality’, adopting the name Toussaint L’Ouverture and taking his place at the forefront of the movement to overthrow slavery in St-Domingue. Toussaint will continue to fight on the side of the Spanish until spring 1794, by which time he is certain the French Assembly has formally abolished slavery.

1794
March:  Toussaint ambushed by rival rebels Jean-François and/or Biassou; he narrowly escapes, but his brother Pierre is killed.

May:  Toussaint joins the French republican forces. Under General Laveaux, Toussaint’s 4,000 troops quickly secure St-Domingue’s Western Belt from Gonaïves to Dondon, defeating all Spanish troops in the region.

June:  Abolition of slavery by the French Convention (16 Pluviôse/February 4) officially decreed in St-Domingue.

July:  Toussaint defeats the rebel leader Jean-François, still siding with the Spanish.
September–October: Toussaint unsuccessfully fights troops of British Lieutenant Colonel Brisbane for control of St Marc.

1794–98 Toussaint maintains a voluminous correspondence with his principal protector and benefactor, General Etienne Laveaux.

1795
July: Treaty of Basel ends war between France and Spain, Spain ceding eastern Hispaniola (present-day Dominican Republic) to France. Toussaint promoted to brigadier general.

August: Thermidorian Constitution reaffirms abolition of slavery.

October: Napoleon Bonaparte made Commander-in-Chief of French Army.

November: Jean-François and Biassou abandon Hispaniola.

1796
March: Amid growing conflict between mixed-race and black troops, Laveaux is captured at Cap Français by colored officials, then freed by troops under Toussaint’s delegate Pierre Michel.

April: Laveaux proclaims Toussaint the ‘black Spartacus, the negro [who] Raynal predicted would avenge the outrages done to his race’. Toussaint is promoted to lieutenant governor.

July: Commissioner Sonthonax promotes Toussaint to general of division. Toussaint is now the most powerful commander in St-Domingue, controlling the entire Northern Department of the colony.

October: At Toussaint’s insistence, Laveaux returns to France as colonial representative to defend the cause of emancipation in an increasingly reactionary political atmosphere.

1797 Toussaint acts to instate paid plantation labour, encountering widespread resistance from former
slaves. Conflict develops between Toussaint and Sonthonax over Toussaint’s desire to restore property to white plantation owners who condemn slavery.

April: L’Ouverture recaptures Mirebelais from the British. A royalist majority is elected to the National Assembly. Representative Vincent Marie Vaublanc defends the return of the Ancien Régime order, and, implicitly, of slavery.

May: L’Ouverture promoted by Sonthonax to commander in chief of French army in St-Domingue.

August: Toussaint forces Sonthonax to leave St-Domingue and return to France.

1798 April: Toussaint negotiates with General Thomas Maitland for British withdrawal from St-Domingue. Toussaint takes over Port-au-Prince.

October: Toussaint expels French Commissioner Hédouville from the colony. Hédouville transfers his authority to the mixed-race general Rigaud, escalating a tense standoff with Toussaint. Toussaint successfully sends a trade mission to the United States, stoking suspicions that he seeks independence for the colony. St-Domingue is effectively under British and American naval protection from French warships.

November: Toussaint orders all non-enlisted adult blacks to return to plantations for obligatory wage labour.

1799 July: Toussaint and Rigaud enter into open conflict (‘War of the Knives’). Toussaint narrowly escapes multiple assassination attempts by Rigaud’s followers.

November: Siege of Jacmel by Dessalines. French Directory collapses, Bonaparte takes dictatorial power as First Consul in France. New French constitution declares the colonies to be ruled by ‘special laws’, implying the return of slavery.
1800
August: Rigaud, defeated by L'Ouverture, flees to France.
October: L'Ouverture decrees military-enforced obligatory labour policy. L'Ouverture's adoptive nephew Moyse calls for smallholding land reform, supporting blacks in a revolt against forced plantation labour and returning white landowners, claiming the life of Bayon de Libertat. Toussaint arrests and executes Moyse.

1801
January: Toussaint invades and takes control of Spanish Santo Domingo. He rules the island of Hispaniola unopposed. St-Domingue begins to return to economic prosperity.
May: Toussaint unilaterally promulgates a constitution for St-Domingue, codifying the universal abolition of slavery and prohibiting all racial discrimination, while simultaneously naming himself dictatorial governor for life.
July–October: Both the United States and Britain inform France that they are opposed to the independence of St-Domingue and will not interfere with an invasion to depose L'Ouverture.

1802
February: French fleet carrying 21,000 troops led by Emmanuel Leclerc arrives in St-Domingue. On Toussaint's order, Henry Christophe burns the capital city of Cap Français to the ground.
February–March: Fighting inflicts heavy casualties on both sides.
April: Henry Christophe joins Leclerc's forces with some 1,200 troops.
May: Toussaint offers to surrender to Leclerc. Napoleon promulgates the reintroduction of slavery in the French overseas colonies.
July: News arrives in St-Domingue of the reintroduction of slavery in Guadeloupe; a massive uprising follows against the French.

August: Toussaint is arrested by Leclerc in Gonaïves and deported to Fort de Joux, France.

September: General Caferelli interrogates Toussaint in his prison cell, hoping to gain information on riches Toussaint had putatively hidden in St-Domingue.

October: Leclerc dies of yellow fever, joining the 50,000 French troops lost since February – out of a total of some 80,000 – to fighting and disease in St-Domingue.

1803
January: Toussaint weakens and grows ill in his prison cell.

7 April: Toussaint L’Ouverture dies in prison in France from a respiratory infection, malnutrition, and exposure to the elements.

May: Britain declares war on France; the French position in St-Domingue becomes untenable.

June: British forces blockade St-Domingue.

31 December: Declaration of the independence of Haiti.
The correspondence of Toussaint L’Ouverture is vast, and remains to a great degree unpublished, dispersed across the globe in various archives and private collections, awaiting a critical edition (see David Geggus, Haitian Revolutionary Studies, Indiana University Press, 2002). The small selection of letters the editors of this volume have chosen seeks to present to the Anglophone reader a representative sample of L’Ouverture’s writings.

These letters testify to the leadership of Toussaint L’Ouverture in the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804), as well as describing one of the most astounding instances of political subjectivation in human history. Toussaint L’Ouverture started life as a slave, and after 1776 became a free and slave-owning black. In a few short years after 1789, however, he reinvented himself to become the world-famous figure who transformed what had begun as one more colonial revolt into a world-historical sequence that initiated global decolonization and the destruction of plantation slavery. By 1801 he had led St-Domingue to de facto independence, simultaneously inventing the concept of associated statehood.¹

The editors have chosen this selection of writings with an eye to conveying Toussaint’s rhetorical, theoretical and military genius. They bear witness to the manner in which he focused the Haitian Revolution around a single, non-negotiable struggle: the universal,