



Venerable Pierre Toussaint

1766-1853

Archdiocese of New York

Born on June 27, 1766 in modern-day Haiti, Pierre was the son of Ursule at the Artibonite plantation, and owned by the Berard family. The plantation was located on the Artibonite River near Saint-marc on the colony's west coast. His father's name is not known. He was known to have a sister Rosalie. His maternal grandmother, Zenobe Julien, was also a slave and was later freed by the Berard's for her service to the family. His maternal great-grandmother, Tonette, had been born in Africa, where she was sold into slavery and brought to Saint-Domingue (present day Haiti). He was reared as a Catholic.

Pierre was educated as a child by the Berard family's tutors and was trained as a house slave. The senior Berard's returned to France, taking Zenobe Julien with them, and their son Jean Berard took over the plantation. As the tensions rose which would lead to Haitian slaves and free people of color rising in rebellion, in 1787 Berard and his second wife left the island for New York City, taking five of the slaves with them, including Pierre and Rosalie.

Upon their arrival in New York, Berard had Pierre apprenticed to one of New York's leading hairdressers. The master returned to Saint-Domingue to see his property. After Jean Berard died in St. Domingue of pleurisy, Pierre, who was becoming increasingly successful as a hairdresser in New York, voluntarily took on the support of Madame Berard. His master had allowed him to keep much of his earnings from being hired out. Pierre's kindnesses to his

mistress were noted by one of her friends. Mrs. Philip Schuyler, whose notes were a source for the 1854 memoir of Toussaint. Madame Berard eventually remarried, to a Monsieur Nicolas, also from Saint-Domingue. On her deathbed, she made her husband promise to free Pierre from slavery.

As a very popular hairdresser among the upper echelon of New York society, Toussaint earned a good living. He saved his money and paid for his sister Rosalie's freedom. They both still lived in what was then the Nicolas house. He was freed at age 45.

Due to connections among the French emigrant community in New York, Toussaint met people who knew the Berards in Paris. He began a correspondence with them that lasted for some decades, particularly with Aurora Berard, who had been his godmother. The Berards had lost their fortune in the French Revolution, during which Aurora's father died in prison and her mother soon after. Her other siblings had married in France. Toussaint also corresponded with friends in Haiti; his collected correspondence filled 15 bound volumes, as part of documentation submitted by the Archdiocese of New York to the Holy See to support canonization.

In 1811 Toussaint married Juliette Noel, a slave 20 years younger than him, after purchasing her freedom. For forty years they continued to board at the Nicolas house. They adopted Euphemia, the daughter of his late sister Rosalie, who had died of tuberculosis, raising the girl as their own. They provided for her education and music classes. In 1815, Nicolas and his wife move to the American South. Together the Toussaints began a career of charity among the poor of New York City, often taking baked goods to the children of the Orphan Asylum and donating money to its operations.

Toussaint attended daily Mass for 66 years at St. Peter's in New York. He owned a house on Franklin Street, where the Toussaints sheltered orphans, and fostered numerous boys in succession. Toussaint supported them in getting an education and learning a trade; he sometimes helped them get their first jobs because of his connections in the city.

They also organized a credit bureau, an employment agency, and a refuge for priests and destitute travelers. Many Haitian refugees went to New York, and because Toussaint spoke both French and English, he frequently helped the new immigrants. He often arranged sales of goods

so they could raise money to live on. He was “renowned for crossing barricades to nurse quarantined cholera patients” during an epidemic in New York.

Toussaint also helped raise money to build a new Roman Catholic church in New York, which became Old St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Mulberry Street. He was a benefactor of the first New York City Catholic school for Black children at St. Vincent de Paul on Canal Street.

As Toussaint aged, he continued his charity. At his death, his papers included records of his many charitable gifts to Catholic and other institutions; his character was lauded by friends and acquaintances. He was “one of the leading black New Yorkers of his day,” but his story became lost to history.

Euphemia died before her adoptive parents, of tuberculosis, like her mother. Juliette died in 1851. Two years later, Pierre Toussaint died on June 30, 1853, at the age of 87. He was buried alongside his wife and Euphemia, in the cemetery of St. Patrick’s Old Cathedral on Mott Street.

Juliette Noel Toussaint was the wife of Pierre Toussaint and both consecrated their lives to helping the poor and doing charitable work. Juliette was born into slavery in 1786; she was held by a French family. Her freedom was purchased by Pierre before they married in 1811. They continued together the charitable works Pierre had begun. The couple helped refugees find jobs, cared for orphans, and opened a school to teach black children. They also provided financial help to the Oblate Sisters of Providence. When a plague struck the city of New York, they worked and cared for the victims. She died in 1851 in New York. Pierre was eighty-five years old at the time Juliette died. Some people support opening the beatification of Juliette, who they say served equally with Pierre.

After formal approval by the Holy See of the cause for Toussaint’s canonization, his grave was located and identified in the cemetery where he had been buried. His remains were transferred to the crypt of St. Patrick’s Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, which serves as the seat of the Archbishop of New York. Toussaint was the first layman to be honored by burial in the crypt below the main altar of St. Patrick’s Cathedral. The crypt is normally reserved for bishops of the Archdiocese of New York. In 1996 Toussaint was declared Venerable by Pope John Paul II, the second step toward sainthood.

Timeline

- July 27, 1766 Pierre Toussaint born in modern day Haiti
- 1787 As tensions rose which would lead to Haitian slaves and free people of color rising in rebellion, Berard and his second wife left the island for New York City, taking five of their slaves with them, including Pierre and Rosalie.
- 1807 Freed after the death of his mistress, Pierre took the surname of “Toussaint” in honor of the hero of the Haitian Revolution which established that nation.
- 1811 Toussaint was freed at age 45 and married Juliette Noel, a slave 20 years younger than him, after purchasing her freedom.
- 1853 Pierre Toussaint died on June 30, at the age of 87

Prayer for the Beatification of Pierre Toussaint

Lord, God, source of love and compassion, we praise and honor You for the virtuous and charitable life of our brother in Christ, Venerable Pierre Toussaint.

Inspired by the example of our Lord Jesus, Pierre worshipped You with love and served Your people with generosity. He attended Mass daily and responded to the practical and spiritual needs of friends and strangers, of the rich and the poor, the sick and the homeless of 19th century New York.

If it is Your will, let the name of Venerable Pierre Toussaint be officially raised to the rank of *Saint*, so that the world may know this Haitian New Yorker who refused to hate or be selfish, but instead lived to the full the commandments of heaven and the divine law of love- love for God and for neighbor.

By following his example and asking for his prayers, may we, too, be counted among the blessed in heaven. We ask for this through Christ our Lord, Amen.