

Overlooked No More: Pierre Toussaint, Philanthropist and Candidate for Sainthood

He became wealthy working as a hairdresser in New York, then used his funds to free enslaved people, build churches and house orphans of color.



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This article is part of Overlooked, a series of obituaries about remarkable people whose deaths, beginning in 1851, went unreported in The Times.

In 1849, Mary Ann Schuyler, a wealthy New Yorker, was reminded fondly of her longtime hairdresser, Pierre Toussaint, while visiting a Roman Catholic chapel in Europe. “Send my love to him,” she wrote to her sister, Hannah Farnham Sawyer Lee. “Tell him I think of him very often and never go to one of the churches of his faith without remembering my own St. Pierre.”

By then, Toussaint, 68, had built a reputation as “the Vidal Sassoon of his day,” as Douglas W. Bristol Jr. wrote in “Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom” (2015): He had mastered the in-vogue hairstyles of the French — powdered hair, or false hair added on — as well as the newly-fashionable chignons and face-framing curls favored by the Americans.



A portrait of Mary Ann Schuyler, who was one of Toussaint's hairdressing clients. She wrote that she enjoyed their conversations as a "daily recreation."

Throughout his life, he was dedicated to the church and to others — donating to charities, helping to finance the original St. Patrick's Cathedral in Manhattan and risking his life during epidemics to tend to the ill.

In 1997, nearly 150 years after his death, Pope John Paul II proclaimed Toussaint “venerable,” the first step on the road to sainthood. Some disagreed with the move, however, because they felt Toussaint, born into slavery in Haiti, did not resist his enslavement either there or in New York, and was therefore a poor candidate for sainthood.

Records vary, but Pierre Toussaint is believed to have been born in 1781 on a sugar cane plantation in Saint-Domingue (now Haiti) owned by the Bérard family. His mother was Ursule, the mistress’s waiting maid. His father’s name is not known. Pierre was the name given to him by his owner’s father, Pierre Bérard.

In 1797, as an uprising against slavery became more violent, his owners fled for Manhattan, bringing along Toussaint, a teenager at the time, and several of his enslaved relatives.

A rendering of St. Peter's Church in Manhattan, where Toussaint attended morning Mass each day. C. Burton Engraved by Hatch & Smillie Printed by J. & G. Neale

Toussaint, who was literate, socially adroit and a talented fiddler, was apprenticed as a coiffeur and was permitted to keep some of his earnings; Schuyler and her sister-in-law, Eliza Hamilton — the wife of Alexander Hamilton — were among his earliest clients.

Male hairdressers were increasingly popular in France at the time, but in America, women's hairstyling for those who could afford it was largely the province of the lady's maid.

For Schuyler, chatting with Toussaint while he dressed her hair was always a pleasure. “I anticipate it as a daily recreation,” she told her sister, a well-known novelist of her day who would publish “The Memoir of Pierre Toussaint: Born a Slave in St. Domingo,” in 1854, the year after his death.

“The Memoir of Pierre Toussaint: Born a Slave in St. Domingo” was published in 1854, the year after Toussaint’s death. via The New York Public Library

Both Bérards were wealthy and had brought funds to live on for a year, entrusting them to financial managers. But calamities ensued. While Toussaint’s owner, Jean Jacques Bérard, was in Haiti, he learned his plantation was lost, and he was

planning to return to New York to tend to his remaining funds, unaware that they were gone. But he died in Haiti of pleurisy, an inflammation of the lungs. Soon after, Marie learned that she, too, was completely destitute.

Suddenly, young Toussaint was the only wage-earner in the household. For the next four years, he supported Marie, her new husband, her extended family and Toussaint's enslaved relatives.

Over time, as Marie's health began to fail, Toussaint encouraged her to entertain, knowing she was buoyed by guests. If she agreed, he would shop for treats like tropical fruits and ice cream before rushing back to style her hair. As a final touch, he added a flower, usually a japonica or a rose.

In 1807, while Marie was on her deathbed, she freed Toussaint. Now, with control over his time and money, he could shape his life.

Toussaint's freedom certificate. His owner, Marie Bérard, freed him on her death bed in 1807. via The New York Public Library

In 1811 he bought the freedom of his sister, Rosalie, and of a woman named Juliette Gaston, whom he married. A few years later, he purchased a home on Franklin Street in Manhattan. When Rosalie died, he and his wife raised Rosalie's daughter, Euphémie, as their own.

With his success, he became a philanthropist. He and Juliette opened their home to orphans of color, educating them and helping them get jobs. He donated funds to another Catholic orphanage, even though it did not accept children of color, and contributed funding to St. Patrick's and other Catholic institutions. He received requests for financial help from enslaved men wanting freedom, impoverished seminarians, friends back in Haiti and strangers in trouble. He was also generous with his godmother, Aurora Bérard, who lived in Paris with little money.

He tended to the sick during various epidemics; at least once he brought an ailing priest to his home to nurse him back to health.

A portrait from around 1825 of Juliette (Gaston) Toussaint. After Pierre Toussaint bought her freedom, the two married. via The New York Historical Society

A portrait of Toussaint's niece, Euphémie, whom he took in after his sister, Rosalie, died. via The New York Historical Society

New York allowed slavery until 1829; before then, as a young Black man on the streets of Manhattan, he risked being abducted by bounty hunters and sold into slavery in the South. He was prohibited from using public transportation, putting him at greater risk as he traveled on foot throughout the day to his customers.

Toussaint was not sanguine about his circumstances; he mentioned how hard he had worked to master his “quick temper,” and he suppressed his talent for mimicry, recognizing that it could be “dangerous.” He probably exhibited what W.E.B. Dubois later characterized as “double consciousness,” remaining aware of how he was seen through white eyes, according to Ronald Angelo Johnson, a professor at Baylor University and an expert on racialized Haitian American diplomacy in the Age of Revolutions.

In a 2020 article, “Enslaved by History: Slavery’s Enduring Influence on the Memory of Pierre Toussaint,” Johnson argued that throughout the 19th century and into the 20th, biographers concentrated disproportionately on Toussaint’s enslavement and appeared “unable to discuss Toussaint’s life as a husband, father, businessman and philanthropist.”

Toussaint in the 1850s. In 1997 Pope John Paul II proclaimed Toussaint “venerable,” the first step on the road to sainthood. Nathaniel Fish Moore photographs, Columbia University Archives.

What Toussaint said out loud was perhaps meant for white ears, particularly those of clients who had enslaved men and women in their households. And at least one comment suggested he was not entirely an abolitionist. Invited to lead a parade of men of color celebrating the passage of a law that would end slavery in New York, he declined, saying, “I do not owe my freedom to the state but to my mistress.”

During the 1990s, such a comment led some Black Catholics to oppose Toussaint's candidacy for sainthood, finding him to be an "Uncle Tom" and too accepting of enslavement to be a good role model.

And yet he did not adopt the usual practice of taking his owner's surname. Instead, after Marie Bérard died, he chose Toussaint, giving himself the same name (and presumably in honor of) Toussaint Louverture, who initiated the revolution that abolished slavery and would lead to an independent Haiti in 1804:

When it mattered, Toussaint spoke up. At Juliette's funeral in 1851, when it came time to transfer the coffin from the church to the adjoining graveyard at Old St. Patrick's on Mulberry Street, Toussaint forthrightly asked that only the Black attendees follow the procession, though white attendees were welcome at the graveside.

Toussaint died two years later, on June 30, 1853, at his home. He is now believed to have been 72. At his funeral at Old St. Patrick's, the attendees followed the same practice Toussaint had requested at Juliette's funeral.

A plaque for Toussaint's remains, which have been transferred to St. Patrick's Cathedral. James Estrin/The New York Times

St. Patrick's Cathedral and the crypt under the main altar. Toussaint is the only layman and the only Black man whose remains are kept there. James Estrin/The New York Times

Toussaint's story could have ended with his burial, but it did not. Fifty years later, Mary Ann Schuyler's granddaughter Georgina established the Toussaint archives at the New York Public Library, including "The Memoir of Pierre Toussaint." There his papers languished until the mid-1930s, when Garland White Jr., an African American student from Montclair, N.J., told his confirmation teacher, Charles McTague, "You can't name me one Black Catholic white people respected." McTague, who later became a priest, took the challenge, finding a Jesuit priest, John LaFarge, who recalled that his grandmother had told him about the devout man who had been her hairdresser for many years.

Toussaint's grave was found, and interest in him grew. It was eventually confirmed that the remains in the grave were Toussaint's when experts compared the skull with a photograph of Toussaint once taken by Nathaniel Fish Moore, the president of Columbia College, an amateur photographer and the brother of one of Toussaint's clients.

By 1990, Cardinal John O'Connor, who was archbishop of New York at the time, had Toussaint's remains transferred to the crypt under the main altar at St. Patrick's Cathedral on Fifth Avenue, where he is the only layman and the only Black man. A portrait of him by the painter Hunt Slonem has also been placed in the cathedral.

As yet, there is no Black North American saint; Toussaint is one of six under consideration.

Elizabeth Stone, an English professor at Fordham University, teaches the literature of immigration.

A correction was made on Sept. 24, 2024: An earlier version of this obituary misstated the given name of the author of "Knights of the Razor: Black Barbers in Slavery and Freedom." He is Douglas W. Bristol Jr., not Daniel. This correction was delayed because editors were only recently made aware of the error.

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