

2011-J2296

LEGISLATIVE RESOLUTION commemorating the 268th Birthday of Francois Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution

WHEREAS, In the course of history, certain events have exemplified the power of the human spirit to overcome oppression; today we must remember such events, and pay tribute to the people involved who fought for the cause of freedom; and

WHEREAS, The citizens of this great Empire State are proud to recognize and commemorate the birthday of Francois Toussaint L'Ouverture, an observance that celebrates the many contributions of Haitian-Americans to New York State's unique heritage; and

WHEREAS, Attendant to such concern, and in full accord with its long-standing traditions, this Legislative Body is justly proud to commemorate the 268th Birthday of Francois Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution, celebrated on May 20, 2011; and

WHEREAS, The remarkable leader of this slave revolt was Toussaint Breda (later called Toussaint L'Ouverture, and sometimes the "black Napoleon"); slave revolts from this time normally ended in executions and failure; and

WHEREAS, It all began in 1791 in the French colony of Saint Dominique (later Haiti); although born on May 20, 1743, as a slave in Saint Dominique, Toussaint L'Ouverture learned of Africa from his father, who had been born a free man there; he learned that he was more than a slave, and that he was a man with intellect and dignity; and

WHEREAS, Toussaint L'Ouverture was fortunate in having a liberal master who had him trained as a house servant and allowed him to learn to read and write; Toussaint took full advantage of this, reading every book he came across; he particularly admired the writings of the French Enlightenment philosophers, who spoke of individual rights and equality;

and

WHEREAS, In 1789, the French Revolution overwhelmed France; the sugar plantations of Saint Dominique, although far away, would never be the same; spurred on by such Enlightenment thinkers as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the early moderate revolutionaries considered seriously the question of slavery; those moderate revolutionaries were not willing to end slavery, but they did apply the "Rights of Man" to all Frenchmen, including free blacks and mulattoes; plantation owners in the colonies were furious and fought the measure and the revolutionaries eventually gave in and retracted the measure in 1791; and

WHEREAS, On August 22, 1791, Haiti was the island nation where hundreds of thousands of enslaved persons initiated the most successful slave rebellion in history; under the military leadership of Francois Toussaint L'Ouverture, the grandson of an African chief, making the Haitian revolution a major turning point in the history of the world with repercussions extending far beyond the Caribbean nation; and

WHEREAS, By 1793, the revolution in France was in the hands of the Jacobins, the most radical of the revolutionary groups; this group, led by Maximilian Robespierre, was responsible for the Reign of Terror, a campaign to rid France of "enemies of the revolution"; and

WHEREAS, Though the Jacobins brought indiscriminate death to France, they were also idealists who wanted to take the revolution as far as it could go; so they again considered the issue of "equality" and voted to end slavery in the French colonies, including what was now known as Haiti; and

WHEREAS, There was jubilation among the blacks in Haiti, and Toussaint agreed to help the French army expel the British and Spanish; he proved

to be a brilliant general, winning seven battles in seven days, and became a de facto governor of the colony; and

WHEREAS, A short time later in France, the Jacobins lost power and people tired of the bloodshed, sent Maximilian Robespierre, the leader

of the Jacobins, to the guillotine, ending their Reign of Terror; and
WHEREAS, More moderate leaders came and went, eventually replaced by Napoleon, who ruled France with dictatorial powers; he responded to the pleas of the plantation owners by reinstating slavery in the French colonies, once again plunging Haiti into war; and
WHEREAS, The death toll climbed high for the French and Toussaint's forces eventually became utterly exhausted and on May 5, 1802, Toussaint accepted a peace treaty with General Leclerc which ensured Haiti's independence and allowed him to retire to his estates in peace, provided that the fighting ceased; and
WHEREAS, Betrayal was looming as General Leclerc, under Napoleon's orders, later invited Toussaint to a meeting where, despite General Leclerc's promise of safe conduct, the General had Toussaint captured, bound hand and foot, and put aboard a waiting ship; Toussaint was then transported to France and thrown into the dungeon of Fort de Joux in the Jura Mountains, and on April 7, 1803, he died of apoplexy, pneumonia, and starvation; and
WHEREAS, After Toussaint's death, Haiti was restored to French domination and slavery was reinstated; Toussaint's life seemed a failure, ineffective and useless, but as history reveals, this was far from the case; and
WHEREAS, The taste of freedom that Toussaint had enabled the Haitians to feel was not in vain; just six months later, Napoleon, preoccupied with wars in Europe, relinquished his holdings in the New World; having already lost thousands of soldiers in Haiti alone, the colonies proved too much work to be worth Napoleon's keeping; and
WHEREAS, Therefore, Napoleon allowed Haiti to regain its independence and sold his possession of the western North American continent to the United States in the Louisiana Purchase; Toussaint's life clearly was productive as his accomplishments remain visible today; his legacy will never be forgotten; now, therefore be it
RESOLVED, That this Legislative Body pause in its deliberations to

commemorate the 268th Birthday of Francois Toussaint L'Ouverture, leader of the Haitian Revolution.