

A Bench by the Road

In Memory of Louis Delgrès

1766-1802

The Toni Morrison Society will place its fourth Bench by the Road in memory of Louis Delgrès—insurgent, revolutionary, and freedom fighter—for his stalwart determination to prevent the re-enslavement and dehumanization of Guadeloupians by Napoleon Bonaparte’s military in 1802. During a pitched battle near the Guadeloupiian city of Basse-Terre, Delgrès and several hundred former slaves halted the advance of French soldiers by detonating powder that had been strategically placed around a stronghold on the slopes of the volcano at Matouba where they had taken refuge. The huge explosion that killed the revolutionaries as well as the enemy soldiers, proved their professed determination to “live in freedom or die.”

Delgrès, a Martinican, *homme de couleur*, rose to prominence in the French military during the 1790s when Britain and France fought over possession of the lucrative sugar plantations that dominated the islands of the Lesser Antilles. He was captured during a battle with the British on Martinique and was sent to England where he was held as a prisoner of war. Upon his release to France, he served as an officer in Batallion des Antilles where he earned distinction, rank, and the loyalty of his troupes during numerous campaigns against the British in Guadeloupe in 1795. One year prior, however, the French National Convention had voted to emancipate all slaves in its colonies. When Napoleon Bonaparte sought to reestablish slavery in the French Antilles, Delgrès led the resistance against General Richepanse in Guadeloupe as Toussaint Louverture led the resistance against General Leclerc in St. Domingue (present day Haiti).

When Richepanse’s troops descended upon the island, they began to disarm and arrest Black soldiers, who, having been free, were willing to fight to the death to assure their continued liberation. When fierce fighting decimated Delgrès’s troops and capitulation seemed inevitable, the freedom fighters chose death over surrender, believing that “Resistance to oppression is a natural right.” While Delgrès’s sacrifice did not deter the French invaders — slavery was reinstated at the cost of more than 10,000 Guadeloupiian lives—his actions landed a powerful blow against colonialism. His sacrifice and courage were duly honored in 1989, when Fort St. Charles, where Delgrès had fought Richepanse, was renamed Fort Delgrès. The Toni Morrison Society proudly honors the selfless commitment of Louis Delgrès to humanity, equity, and freedom. —Written by Deborah H. Barnes, Bench By the Road Committee.