Louis Léon César Faidherbe Biography

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Biography

Louis Léon César Faidherbe (1818-1889) was a French colonial governor. One of France's great military conquerors, he carved out the boundaries of contemporary Senegal.

Louis Faidherbe, the son of a poor enlisted man, was born in Lille on June 3, 1818. An engineering graduate of the famed École Polytechnique, he had a lengthy colonial experience in Algeria and Guadeloupe, where he participated in the emancipation of the slaves in 1848, before he was stationed in Senegal in 1852. For 2 years he completed many engineering surveys, gaining a detailed knowledge of the region before the administration named him governor of the area at the age of 36.

During Faidherbe's tenure as governor from 1854 to 1865 his major accomplishment was to create a vast colony dominated by Europeans. From 1854 to 1858 he subdued a number of tribes in the western African hinterland through a combination of military victories and negotiated treaties. His greatest opponent, al-Hajj Omar, was the leader of an Islamic holy war. Al-Hajj Omar was born into a noble and well-educated family, made the pilgrimage to Mecca, and sought to create a religious empire in West Africa.

To defeat al-Hajj Omar and secure the colony, Faidherbe recruited the first batallion of Senegalese troops, the origin of all the African soldiers that fought the wars of France. He also developed a system of administration that relied on indigenous personnel, a system designed to enable trade to prosper. An educational system, geared to accomplish the French goals of assimilation, included a school for the sons of chiefs. The encouragement of trade involving Africans as businessmen was a pillar of his policy, and for this purpose he developed Dakar into a great maritime city.

Faidherbe later served in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1871) in command of the Army of the North after the fall of Sedan. He won victories at Pont-Noyelles and Bapaune and suffered a defeat at Saint-Quentin. In 1872 he led a French government expedition to study monuments in Upper Egypt and as a result wrote a book on Numidian inscriptions. Other books treated of the campaign of the Army of the North (1871), of Senegalese languages (1887), and of Senegal (1889). He died in Paris on Sept. 29, 1889.

Faidherbe left a mark on Dakar and Senegal that has lasted to this day. The development of France's entire empire in West Africa was based largely on the foundations that he constructed.