WHERE WAS CHAMP D'ASILE?

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The French settlement of Champ d'Asile existed for only about five months in 1818, in east Texas, on the Trinity River. The knowledge of its exact location has been lost. There have been many theories and much speculation about the geographic location of the site.

Contemporary accounts of an event are the most generally acceptable historically, except where these accounts are deliberately fictionalized and romanticized as in L'Heroine du Texas! Hartmann and Millard's Le Texas published in 1819 is by contrast an obvious attempt to relate historical fact, although perhaps somewhat embellished, by men who were there.\(^2\) The travel journal of Captain Juan de Castañeda, who led the Spanish soldiers from San Antonio to apprehend the French and destroy their fortifications, is the best source for identifying the location of Champ d'Asile.\(^3\) Correspondence of the time also gives an accurate picture of the people and the places.\(^4\)

Hartmann and Millard located Champ d'Asile on the east bank of the Trinity River, referring to the river site at least six times in Le Texas. The map between pages 130 and 131 of their book labels the river "Trinite."\(^5\)

Indian informants told Captain Castañeda that the location of the French settlement was six or seven leagues below Atascosito, between the Trinity River and the mouth of a creek known as Cayo Gallardo. Castañeda said they crossed the Trinity River on October 12, 1818, and passed through Atascosito. The advance scouts of the Spanish sent back word that the enemy fortifications had been abandoned and were not at Cayo Gallardo as previously thought, but further down on the banks of the Trinity.\(^6\)

The site of Atascosito, well known today, is three miles northeast of the Liberty County courthouse in the town of Liberty, on Palmer's Bayou at Woods Springs (Atascosito Springs).\(^7\) Cayo Gallardo corresponds to the Redmond/Shilow Creek area.\(^8\) El Orcoquisac, an eighteenth-century site with a fort and a mission, was situated at present-day Wallisville.\(^9\) (See the map at the end of this article.)

An analysis of the estimated distances mentioned in the contemporary literature follows. It should be remembered that travelers in 1818 had no accurate way of calculating their journeys. Hartmann and Millard said that Champ d'Asile was about 20 leagues from the Gulf of Mexico.\(^10\) It was not stated whether this distance was by sea or by land or a combination of the two. Land and sea measures are sometimes widely different. Moss Bluff would have been 61 or 82 miles from the Gulf of Mexico using, respectively, the French land league of 3.05445 miles or the nautical league of 4.3 miles.\(^11\) In the nineteenth century, steamboat captains estimated the nautical distance from Galveston to Anahuac as 50 miles, from Galveston to Moss Bluff as 79 miles, and from Galveston to Liberty as 113 miles.\(^12\) The mileage overland on the modern highways from Anahuac to Moss Bluff is 21.9 miles; therefore Moss Bluff would be almost 72 miles from the Gulf of Mexico by land and sea. The difference of seven miles between land and river distances to Moss Bluff can be explained by the twisting and turning of the Trinity River channel.

Continuing to observe distances, it is interesting to note that the Indians told Castañeda that Champ d'Asile was six or seven leagues below Atascosito. If the Spanish league of 2.6 miles is used, that would be a distance between 15.6 and 18.2 miles. Moss Bluff is actually 17.6 miles from Atascosito by the present highway.

George Graham, a United States government envoy who visited Galveston, wrote to John Quincy Adams from Bayou Rapides (Opelousas), Louisiana, on September 9, 1818, "There is some question as to the exact location of the forts but they are probably located at the Orcoquisa Bluffs about 18 miles above the mouth of the Trinity."\(^13\)

Champ d'Asile colonists Jacobo Tournelle and Vincente Molina, natives of Spain, deserted the camp on April 9, 1818. They made their way to New Orleans where they told the Spanish authorities that they were misled about the purpose of the colony and that they never intended to fight against the Spanish. They also said that the encampment was 12 leagues from the mouth of the Trinity. At 2.6 miles to the league, that is 31.2 miles and compares favorably with the actual mileage of 29 river miles to Moss Bluff.\(^14\)

At the first bluff area upstream on the east bank of the Trinity is located the small community of Moss Bluff. The next bluff on the west bank is Moore's Bluff, once the home of William Moore and now a pumping plant for the city of Houston for obtaining water from the...
river. The third bluff is 63 miles upstream on the east bank at the sizable town of Liberty.

Moss Bluff, the first high ground on the bank of the river, would have been the natural selection of weary, hungry travelers, some walking and others rowing boats from the mouth of the river. Moss Bluff was probably called Orcoquisa Bluff in 1818 because the stream just to the east of the bluff was named Arroyo de Calzones (Shilow Creek). Calzones Colorado or Red Breeches was the chief of the Orcoquisa Indians in the 1760s during the years that the Spanish presidio and mission were on Lake Miller. Nathaniel Moss, a native of Louisiana for whom Moss Bluff was eventually named, did not come into the area until the early 1830s. A natural artesian spring flowing from sand at the base of the Trinity River terrace made Moss Bluff attractive for settlement. This spring still exists and flows freely today.15

Efforts were made by a historian to discredit Moss Bluff as the site of Champ d'Asile. Three reasons were given as proof.16

The first reason stated that Moss Bluff did not fit the distances from the mouth of the Trinity as described by the colonists Hartmann and Millard in 1819, but the foregoing information disproves this.

The second argument stated that Dave Tevis, an old-timer interviewed by Judge Price Daniel, said that R.O.W. McManus, an early resident of Moss Bluff, contended that the site of Champ d'Asile was at Liberty. McManus never lived at Moss Bluff. He lived at his plantation called Moss Point on the east bank of the Trinity close to Lake Charlotte. He immigrated to Texas in December of 1832 and died at his plantation in 1885.17 No citation for the Tevis interview is given other than "the Price Daniel file," and the written document has not been found. The interview also was said to have told the story of the "iron hole" where iron rails were buried from the railroad on the north side of the tracks at the Trinity River in Liberty. Tevis supposedly said that the Champ d'Asile site was located just south of where the railroad rails were buried. A limited archaeological survey and excavation were done in 1985 at or near this site by Sheldon Kindall and other members of the Houston Archaeological Society with negative results.18

The third argument stated that a noted French journalist found the site of Champ d'Asile near Liberty. The French journalist was Frederic Gaillardet who journeyed to Texas in 1838, twenty years after the demise of the French colony. What Gaillardet was shown, by an unidentified French Canadian, was a carving on a tree, "Honneur et Patrie," which he assumed or was told was the site of Champ d'Asile. In Gaillardet's words the site was "not far from Liberty." How far is "not far from Liberty" - one mile, five miles, fourteen miles, or more? Gaillardet does not state "at Liberty."19

Various published articles over the years have placed Champ d'Asile at or near Moss Bluff. J.O. Dyer, a physician and a correspondent for the Galveston Daily News, wrote many stories during the 1920s using information gathered locally from old settlers. Dyer, a consummate journalist who always endeavored to make a good story better, sometimes mixed his history with fantasy but was always entertaining. In a narrative about a paraplegic French soldier of Champ d'Asile, Dyer places the settlement "on the Trinity River, near the former site of the Orcoquisa village, now Moss Bluff."20

Harbert Davenport, an attorney and noted historian, practiced law at Anahuac, Texas, from 1908 to 1912. In an article published in 1947 Davenport wrote that Moss Bluff was the traditional location of Lallemand's short-lived Napoleonic [sic] Colony.21

Where was Champ d'Asile? Most of the contemporary and much of the later evidence indicates present-day Moss Bluff as the site of the French settlement.

What are the prospects in the future of finding archaeological evidence of Champ d'Asile? Some historians and others believe that the erosion of the Trinity River and the excavation of Lake Granada have probably obliterated all evidence of the settlement. A few optimistic people hope that some remnants of Champ d'Asile will be found one day.22

Notes
1. G...n and F...n, L'Heroine (Paris: Manuel des Braves, 1819), p. 29. The editor proclaimed that the story was not a novel, that the facts were true, but it was in reality a romanticized fiction.
3. Captain Juan de Castañeda to Governor Martinez, August 26, 1818, vol. 18, pp. 260-266, Nacogdoches Archives; Castañeda to Martinez, November 24, 1818. "Diary of the Journey to the Lower Trinity River," Report #5, pp. 117-119, Bexar Archives, Austin.

5. Fanny E. Rathford, ed., The Story of Champ d'Asile, pp. 129, 139-140, 147, and 149.

6. Castañeda, August 26 and November 24, 1818, Bexar Archives.


19. Frederic Gaillartet, Sketches of Early Texas and Louisiana (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), pp. 130-131. It has been suggested that Gaillartet's guide was Michel B. Menard, one of the founders of the City of Galveston.


22. Lake Granada was constructed in 1960 in the middle of the village of Moss Bluff. The lake covers 115 acres, and is surrounded by vacation homes and camp houses today. Interview with Mr. and Mrs. John Cave and Mr. and Mrs. Johnny Stove on August 29, 1997, and Mr. L.Q. (Bubba) Van Deventer on February 21, 1998.
General's Quarters

Artillery

Cavalry

Guard Post

Fort Stockade

Hospital
Harbert Davenport, Geographic Notes on Spanish Texas: El Orcoquisac and Los Horconsitos, "Southwestern Historical Quarterly" (February 1947), pp. 489-492.